“materia conveniente modis”: Ovid and Drama

Colin Burrow's recent book *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*, describes Shakespeare as a “practical humanist” who looked to the Latin tradition as a resource for his own work. Following this insight and taking up some of the issues raised in our seminar’s description, this paper will investigate Ovid’s place and use in stage representation. Despite only one line of one play having survived antiquity, Ovid’s *materia* was clearly suited to the stage. This *materia*, as a long critical tradition shows, lies in good measure in the content of his poems, and I want to argue that it is also in the structure of those poems, structures playwrights as different in disposition as Jonson and Shakespeare both appropriate. I am interested both in Ovid's appearances as a character as well as in uses of his words and strategies in work for the stage. Where Jonson offers a direct incarnation of Ovid in his play, Shakespeare’s use of Ovid is more often indirect, working at the level of source and, most interesting to me, in his approach to narrative itself.

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> ergo etiam cum me supremus adederit ignis,
> vivam, parsque mei multa superstes erit.
> Ovid, *Amores* I.xv

Then, when this body falls in funeral fire,
My name shall live, and my better part aspire.
Ben Jonson, *Poetaster*

Then though death rakes my bones in funeral fire,
I'll live, and as he pulls me down mount higher.
Christopher Marlowe, “Ad invidos, quod fama sit poeta rum perennis” *All Ovids Elegies*
These lines from the end of the final poem of the first book of Ovid’s *Amores* introduce *Poetaster*, Jonson’s play on poetry. All three versions point to the poet’s triumph over death and envy. Jonson’s version of Marlowe’s translation emphasizes the endurance of the poet’s name and the aspirations of his “better part” (Ovid’s “mei multa pars”). In the play, they follow an induction in which Envy appears as a kind of interloping prologue.\(^1\) Envy’s hope is:

To blast your pleasures and destroy your sports  
With wrestings, comments, applications,  
Spy-like suggestions, privy whisperings,  
And thousand such promoting sleights as these (Ind. 23-26).

Envy’s agents attempt to use “spy-like suggestions” and “privy whisperings” to condemn Horace as a traitor and lead Augustus to the “feast of sense” whose outcome is Ovid’s banishment. In the Induction, Envy itself is suppressed by the play’s Roman setting, which, according to Envy, cannot be forced to represent “the present state” (Ind. 34).\(^2\) This is a peculiar (and incorrect) claim, as the play demonstrates by using Marlowe’s translations of Ovid’s poetry which place its poetics firmly in the present state (not to mention the array of topographical references that identify Jonson’s Rome with London).\(^3\) Envy’s followers populate the play, driving much of the action and the punishment of envious poets is the climactic

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1. I cite from Tom Cain’s Revels edition of the play (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).
2. That Envy is presented as so feeble that the mere setting of the play can drive its embodiment away is another interesting detail partly belied by the action of the play. Envy may be vanquished by the setting, but the envious require a bit more effort to dismiss.
Nonetheless, Envy’s hopes are dashed at the end of the play when the brief successes of delators like Lupus meet defeat in Augustus’ court and Virgil reads from the *Aeneid* while seated on Augustus’ throne. Ovid’s poem to the envious is thus an appropriate place for the play proper to begin, and that Jonson uses a slightly altered version of Marlowe’s translation offers a productive entry to the play.

Jonson aligns the Ovid of his play with Christopher Marlowe, a poet and playwright whose work Jonson treats much more appreciatively than that Dekker and Marston, his main objects of criticism in the play. Marlowe’s influence is at the same time a sign of Ovid’s, a poet to whose work the Horatian Jonson must also respond. Ovid’s better part appears in the Jonson’s deployment of the structure of *Amores* 1.15 as a sort of framework for *Poetaster*. The play as whole is a response to Livor—the Prologue makes this clear as Livor sinks beneath the stage. Moreover, the sequence of events offers a kind of mirror of the poem and that suggests that Ovid’s work is serving both the play’s content and its form.

*Poetaster* opens with Ovid, Faustus-like, in his study, having settled his studies and made a decision to pursue a career in poetry. This profession might be

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5 This opening visually resembles the first scene of Marlowe’s play—a man discovered in his study with a choice of career as the stakes of the scene. That the first words are a version—a revision—of Marlowe’s translation of *Amores* 1.15 only reinforces the Marlovian mise-en-scene.
less dangerous in absolute terms than Faustus’ turn to magic, but Poetaster presents
poetry as not being without risk. Over the course of the play, Ovid comes to
represent one (perhaps, though not certainly, less than ideal) model of authorship,
and ends up being exiled for participating in a masque that Augustus takes as
blasphemous. Ovid’s reputation for license, based on his elegiac poetry, makes him
a kind of stand-in for Marlowe (as does Jonson’s use and revision of Marlowe’s
translations of the Amores).

Ovid writes the last words of Amores 1.15 (in Jonson’s revision of Marlowe’s
translation) in the opening scene and then revisits the whole of the text as a
preparative to correcting the “hasty errors of our morning Muse” (1.1.42). The first
scenes stage a confrontation between Ovid and his father about the value of poetry
as an occupation (drawn, as much else in the play, from Ovid’s work) with Ovid
unsurprisingly preferring poetry to the law. His statement at 1.2.235ff on the
lamentable place of poetry points to the way that poetry was once valued, but now
only money counts:

The time was once when wit drowned wealth: but now
Your only barbarism is t’ have wit and want.
No matter now in virtue who excels,
He that hath coin hath all perfection else (1.2.254-257).

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6 This trajectory too has a suggestive resemblance to Faustus’ fall—Tomis might not be Hell, but
Ovid’s laments from exile treat it as nearly as bad.

7 Shapiro, among others, notes the strangeness of Jonson’s including the whole poem in the
play, particularly in the very first scene. Poetaster ends with a reading from Virgil, but the whole
play builds towards that ending. That this scene is one of revision points to the kind of
relationship Jonson has to Marlowe and to Ovid.

8 These lines are a pastiche of sentiments from Horace’s satires and Ovid’s Fasti which indexes
some of the ways that the character Ovid differs from the historical poet—Jonson’s character is
a synthetic figure representing contemporary poetry.
His position here is not far from that of Jonson who himself privileged his poetic talent over his relative poverty, and demonstrates that while Ovid may be a problematic figure, he does not merit only attack. The remainder of the first act associates Ovid with Gallus, Tibullus, and Propertius and sets up a poetic grouping united by their focus on love and by their writing of elegy.\(^9\) Gallus and Tibullus appear in Jonson’s version of *Amores* 1.15:

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Till Cupid’s fires be out, and his bow broken,
Thy verses (neat Tibullus) shall be spoken.
Our Gallus shall be known from east to west:
So shall Lycoris, whom he now loves best.
The suffering ploughshare or the flint may wear,
But heavenly poesy no death can fear (1.1.69-74).
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These elegiac poets need not fear death because their works are “heavenly poesy,” not the product of the “adulterate brains” and “jaded wits / That run a broken pace for common hire” (1.2.240, 242-3) as Ovid puts it. Gallus and Tibullus spend more time on stage in the play than Propertius who has two brief speeches in 2.2 and then is reported to have retired to his Cynthia’s tomb in 4.3. This echoes, if it doesn’t duplicate, the poets’ presence in *Amores* 1.15.

Ovid begins poem by defending his time being given to writing. In Marlowe’s translation:

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Envy, why carp’st thou my time is spent so ill,
And terms’t my works fruits of an idle quill?
Or that unlike the line from whence I sprung,
War’s dusty honours are refused, being young? (1-4).\(^{10}\)
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\(^9\) Cain notes that this grouping echoes that of Quintilian in *Institutio Oratoria* 10.1.93 as well as what he describes as Ovid’s systematizing of their work in his *Ars Amatoria*.

\(^{10}\) I cite from the Penguin edition of Marlowe’s poetry (Stephen Orgel, ed. New York: Penguin Books, 1971). Jonson’s version of these lines differs slightly—he changes a few words and reorders them—and the bulk of his translation is very close to Marlowe’s. I use Jonson’s version.
Defending his refusal to study the law, Ovid asserts that unlike a lawyer’s, his “scope” is “eternal fame” (in both Marlowe’s translation and Jonson’s revision) and that the “mortal” scope of the law is thus not for him (ll. 5-8). The poem then catalogues poets from Homer to Ovid’s contemporaries Virgil, Tibullus, and Gallus whose verse “shall ne’er decay” (l. 32). The lines that close the poem and open Jonson’s play include Ovid among those who are both safe from envy and immortal in fame after death. While the play cannot be said to mirror the precise sequence of the poem there are striking resemblances between the two works’ trajectories and, more importantly, their arguments.

Rather than offering a tightly structured narrative, Jonson’s play proceeds by accreting episodes that illustrate both the faults of Jonson’s London and an implicit poetics. Characters, to quote Augustus’ lines from the final act, appear to “envy and detract,” embodying ideas from *Amores* 1.15. Act 5 concludes with a trial scene where the envy-driven poetasters are finally judged, purged of their bad habits, and finally punished with a kind of educational program of reading the “best” authors. The trial articulates the difference between good and bad poetry and places good poetry out of the reach of Envy who, in Jonson’s version of *Amores* 1.15, “twitts’t”

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when discussing the play. Tom Cain’s note to the full version recited in 1.1 argues that Marlowe’s version was quite well known by the time Jonson wrote the play and that it makes sense to think the Jonson wanted his audience to recognize it as Marlowe’s and not as plagiarism. And, as he also notes, Dekker did not “accuse him of this theft” in *Satiromastix*. See page 80 of Cain’s edition.

11 That Marlowe is also among the dead seems to be part of the point.
12 The play also owes an important debt to Latin verse satire—directly as with the Horace episode and indirectly in the way that the play accretes incident more than it develops a plot—that complements the way it works with Ovid.
Ovid about wasting his time. Ovid’s work is not mentioned specifically in Jonson’s stage trial, but the play’s return to the castigation of Envy brings it back to the Induction. Augustus’ final lines make this explicit as he dismisses the poetasters:

But let not your high thoughts descend so low
As these despised objects. Let them fall
With their flat, grovelling souls: be you yourselves.
And as with our best favours you stand crowned,
So let your mutual loves be still renowned.
Envy will dwell where there is want of merit,
Though the deserving man should crack his spirit (5.3.605-611).

The poetasters will fall, like the ashes of the funeral fire in Amores 1.15, while the true poets remain and will “be still renowned.” Their better parts, in other words, go on to further aspire. In Jonson’s play, Ovid figures as both a character and as a kind of narrative framework and the “better parts” of both Ovid and Marlowe become a set of characters and a kind of poetic disposition. Shakespeare, to whom I turn now, is as deeply influenced by Ovidian poetics and my interest in what follows will be on Shakespearean deployments of Ovidian narrative.

II

Mota loco cur sim tantique per aequoris undas
advehar Ortygiam, veniet narratibus hora
tempestiva meis, cum tu curaque levata
et vultus melioris eris.

Ovid, Metamorphoses 5.498-501

[The right time will come for my narrating why I should have moved from my place and have been carried through the waves of such great seas to Ortygia when you will be relieved of care and are of a milder countenance.]

In book five of the Metamorphoses, Ovid coins the word “narratus” as part of Arethusa’s explanation to Ceres of how she knows of Proserpina’s fate in the Underworld. The “right time” for this story comes about 70 lines later, once Ceres
has recovered her daughter and she has a “milder face.\textsuperscript{13} Arethusa’s deferral here produces Ceres’ desire to hear the story, a desire that takes precedence over any other responsibilities she might have towards restoring the natural world disturbed by her grief over and quest to find the lost Proserpina. It mirrors (and enacts) a similar gesture made by the Muses in the frame narrative when they disingenuously suggest that Minerva may be too busy to hear their song, saying “sed forsitan otia non sint, / nec nostris praebere vacet tibi cantibus aures” [But perhaps there is not leisure, nor is there time to offer our songs to your ears] (5.333-334).\textsuperscript{14} The Muses’ suggestion encourages Minerva, if it doesn’t actually coerce her, to invite a full (and word for word) recounting of Calliope’s song. There is no actual deferral of the tale, only this effort aimed at eliciting the audience’s desire for a song she might not otherwise wish or need to hear.\textsuperscript{15} The layering of tale within and around tale in the Orpheus materials in books ten and eleven serve probably as the most extended version of this double emphasis on tale-telling in the poem, but the whole of the \textit{Metamorphoses} works in the same way. Shakespeare picks up and, appropriately, transforms the self-consciousness of Ovid’s narrative about narrating and narrators in his plays and poems as much as he does the content of the many stories.

\textsuperscript{13} Most translators do not use “narrating” or “narrative” for the participle narratus here, preferring various circumlocutions that use “story” or “telling” or other cognates for the word. Golding’s translation does not: he translates “narratibus” as “to tell.”

\textsuperscript{14} In the introductory material, the Muses use cantus (a song) to describe their story, not narratus or some other word for story.

\textsuperscript{15} Alessandro Barchiesi’s “Narrative technique and narratology in the \textit{Metamorphoses}” (in the \textit{Cambridge Companion to Ovid} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002):180-199) provides an excellent and succinct discussion of this. He discusses the Arethusa episode as well, and his work has influenced mine.
Here I want to focus on a more narrowly confined example that clearly articulates its narrative strategy: Arethusa’s report of her sighting of Proserpina in the Underworld as “regina” and “inferni pollens matrona tyranni” (5.507, 508) and her subsequent explanation of how she came to see Proserpina. This report itself appears in a tale being told to Minerva about the Muses’ song-contest with the Pierides and is thus wrapped in several layers of narrative. Calliope’s narrative begins with a disingenuous introduction suggesting that Minerva might not have time to listen and this prefigures the deferral of Arethusa’s tale to a “tempestiva hora” when Ceres might have both time and leisure to listen. In other words, not only does Ceres need to have a milder countenance, but she must also have leisure to listen, a leisure she lacks given the exigencies of her search for her daughter.  

In Calliope’s song, Arethusa first delivers vital information about Proserpine’s whereabouts, information that she gains during her journey from her native place to Ortygia, then as a result of this information, Ceres recovers her daughter and only then does Arethusa relate her own story. Arethusa appears without much introduction (save a reference to the location), surprising the reader/hearer and begging the question of where she came from. That question is suspended by Ovid and by Arethusa herself in her own story until a more opportune time. Within the narrative, Arethusa appears to calculate the relative importance of the stories she can tell here, deciding (probably correctly) that Ceres will be more immediately interested in the news of her daughter’s location than the tale of how

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16 Paulina’s desire that Hermione delay the telling of the whole tale for a later (never seen) moment seems to me a related strategy, of which more below.
she came to acquire this knowledge. Once Ceres has recovered her daughter,

Arethusa’s opportunity to talk arrives. Calliope says:

Exigit alma Ceres, nata secura recepta,  
quae tibi causa fugae, cur sis, Arethusa, sacer fons.  
Conticuere undae: quarum dea sustulit alto  
fonte caput viridesque manu siccata capillos  
fluminis Elei veteres narravit amores (5.572-576).

[Fruitful Ceres, free from care, having recovered her daughter,  
demanded ‘What is your cause of flight, Arethusa, why are you a  
sacred spring?’ The waters fell silent: from the deep spring the  
goddess lifted her head and drying her green hair with her hand, she  
narrated the ancient loves of the Elian river.]

Ceres demands (exigit) that Arethusa tells her tale, a story only marginally related to  
the overall plot of Calliope’s song, demonstrating the success of her tactic from two  
hundred or so lines earlier. Ceres’ desire to hear the story delays Ceres’ delivery of  
seeds to Triptolemus and the restoration of the land’s fertility, both important  
actions needed to restore the disruptions caused by her search for Prosperpina.17

Ovid does not represent narrative economy, dramatic concision, or rapid pacing as  
being particularly valuable. Instead, nuanced fitting of story to hearer and occasion  
trumps the value of forward movement. As often, Ovid depicts a series of efforts at  
careful calibration of story to occasion, of the needs or desires of the audience to

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17 Barchiesi makes a case for the relevance of the tale arguing that it has a “threefold bearing on  
the threefold narrative frame: (i) it introduces a story which commands attention because of its  
parallelism with the Prosperpina story, (ii) a story which is of interest to the nymphs and also (iii)  
a story which is of interest to Pallas” (191). None of these reasons are directly related to  
narrative economy, but instead speak to a desire to appeal to the multiple audiences for the  
story. Perhaps, if the Muses deserve their victory it is less due to the excellence of their story as  
story than to its careful calibration to its audience, a calibration that the Pierides fail to make  
and that results in their transformation into magpies.
those of the teller, calibrations that both narrate and imitate narration in ways that later readers of Ovid likewise imitate.

IV

“A sad tale’s the best for winter”

_The Winter’s Tale_

Ovid is, of course, a clear presence in the _The Winter’s Tale_ at the level of plot—the statue scene being the most clear example—but the play’s attention to tale-telling in the final scene also seems strikingly Ovidian in the way that it suggests a kind of nesting of sometimes competing narratives, narratives best suited for particular times. The story of Perdita’s return, how she was carried “per aequor is undas” (if I may) back to her parents, is staged for the audience, but withheld, if only temporarily, from Hermione and Leontes. Leontes, in the final lines of the play, turns to Paulina and asks her to:

Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely
Each one demand and answer to his part
Performed in this wide gap of time since first
We were dissevered (5.3.153-156).

The stories, of which there are several, are to be told at a time when there is leisure—the otium, perhaps, that Minerva has when listening to the nested narratives of Calliope in _Metamorphoses_ 5, and it is not coincidental that these are tales of a daughter lost and found.

Stories told offstage—in the form of reports of those stories—are a recurring feature of the play and many of those stories are of moments a theatre audience
both could and would want to see. Here, rather than being deferred, the narrative is related at a remove as so often happens in Ovid. To take one example from the end of the play, in 5.2, Autolycus asks to hear a story:

**AUTOLYCUS**: Beseech you, sir, were you at this relation?
**FIRST GENTLEMAN**: I was by at the opening of the fardel, heard the old shepherd deliver the manner how he found it: whereupon, after a little amazedness, we were all commanded out of the chamber; only this, methought I heard the shepherd say he found the child.
**AUTOLYCUS**: I would most gladly know the issue of it.
**FIRST GENTLEMAN**: I make a broken delivery of the business; but the changes I perceived in the king and Camillo were very notes of admiration (5.2.1-11).

R. Rawdon Wilson points out that using “fardel” (a bundle, a collection of things, a burden (sometimes of troubles as in *Hamlet*)) to refer to the story indicates a high level of self-consciousness that underscores the assembled nature of the story. The First Gentleman’s “broken delivery” is then supplemented by two other gentlemen’s additions, both of whom call attention to the inadequacy of their delivery of the tale. The Second Gentlemen says that “the king’s daughter is found: such a deal of wonder is broken out within this hour, that ballad-makers cannot be able to express it” (5.2.23-25) and goes on to say “This news, which is called true, is so like an old tale that the verity of it is in strong suspicion” (5.2.27-29). The tale is delivered in fragments and the whole of the reunion scene is recounted second hand,

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18 Could in the sense that these scenes would be easily stageable (unlike, say, the bear eating *Antigonus* earlier in the play) and would in the sense that such affecting scenes have considerable emotional power.
20 Wilson 782.
21 That Autolycus the ballad-monger is part of the onstage audience adds another layer of self-awareness about narrative to the scene.
heightening both the on- and offstage audience’s interest in and desire for the full tale. When the Second Gentleman confesses to not witnessing the meeting of the two kings, the Third tells him that he has “lost a sight that was to be seen, cannot be spoken of” before going on to try to speak of it. Throughout this scene, the Gentlemen describe events at a remove and consistently remark on the power of the sights that they describe, sights that the audience never sees. At the close of this part of the scene, the Third Gentleman offers a closing appreciation of the events he has been describing:

One of the prettiest touches of all and that which angled for mine eyes, caught the water though not the fish, was when, at the relation of the queen’s death, with the manner how she came to’t bravely confessed and lamented by the king, how attentiveness wounded his daughter; till, from one sign of dolour to another, she did, with an 'Alas,' I would fain say, bleed tears, for I am sure my heart wept blood. Who was most marble there changed colour; some swooned, all sorrowed: if all the world could have seen ’t, the woe had been universal (5.2.81-91).

He recalls one of “prettiest touches,” how during the “relation” of Hermione’s death, Perdita weeps and even the most “marble there changed colour” at her sorrow. It is difficult not to see this as a kind of prefiguring of the Ovidian transformation to come in the play’s final scene. I want to suggest that 5.2 prepares the audience for the statue scene by whetting its appetite for seeing reconciliation scenes with these reports—framed as inadequate—and by hinting at the color change of the marble allegedly sculpted by Julio Romano.

After she steps down from the plinth and is embraced by Leontes, Paulina tells Hermione that her lost daughter has been found and Hermione responds:

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22 Paulina says that were this story to be told (like, say, the stories told in the preceding scene), they’d be “hooted at, like an old tale” (5.3.116-117).
You gods, look down  
And from your sacred vials pour your graces  
Upon my daughter’s head! Tell me, mine own.  
Where hast thou been preserved? where lived? how found  
Thy father’s court? for thou shalt hear that I,  
Knowing by Paulina that the oracle  
Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserved  
Myself to see the issue.

PAULINA
There’s time enough for that;  
Lest they desire upon this push to trouble  
Your joys with like relation. Go together,  
You precious winners all; your exultation  
Partake to every one. I, an old turtle,  
Will wing me to some wither’d bough and there  
My mate, that’s never to be found again,  
Lament till I am lost.

Winter’s Tale 5.3.122-136

In a moment laden with Ovidian resonances, Paulina intervenes before Perdita can offer any answers to her long-missing mother’s questions. “There’s time enough for that,” she says, deferring Perdita’s tale (which, of course, the audience already knows) until a better time—which does not come within the confines of the play. Here is a narrative deferred beyond the boundaries of its own narrating. More interesting than the unvoiced dramatic reason for the deferral is the suggestion that to begin Perdita’s tale would be to invite interruption by “like relation.” To begin the story at this time would preclude its telling, because an unspecified “they” would insert their own similar stories.23 Paulina’s concern about “like relation” is borne out by the confusion of stories throughout the play—most immediately in the preceding scene—and leaves the tales to be told and retold in private and thus in the

23 This seems unlikely, given the story that Perdita has to tell, but it speaks to the ways that stories proliferate and interrupt each other in this play and in Ovid’s poem.
imagination and memory of the audience. Stories told, untold, or presented (or not) on stage, all combine to offer a picture of events, a picture that is not ever fully narrated, or even narratable. To return to the beginning of this essay, I have attempted to demonstrate that the self-conscious narrative style of these plays owes something to the narrative strategies of Ovid’s poem, strategies designed to engage audiences within and outside the poem. Were there more time (and space!) for narrating, this essay would touch on *Hamlet*'s repeated recourse to narratives deferred or foreclosed, but that too is a tale for another time.