Threshold and Frame: Imagining the Structure and Goals of the *Database Of Ovid on the Renaissance Stage (DOORS)*

It is difficult to measure the importance of Ovid in renaissance literature. While it is clear enough that he is profoundly important, as evidenced by the wealth of recent and ongoing scholarship devoted to the topic, ascertaining the full depth and breadth of his influence on the period remains challenging. We have excellent monographs on Spenser and Ovid, Shakespeare and Ovid, Milton and Ovid; we have an exciting new account of the Ovidian Vogue of the late Elizabethan period; we have dozens of articles providing dozens of illuminating close readings of dozens of individual allusions.¹ There are two significant problems with even such a rich critical status quo: first, the mandates of logistics limit even the most ambitious individual study’s scope, resulting in accounts that show variation across time but not between authors (e.g. Pugh, Bate, and Kilgour), or between authors but not across time (e.g. Moss). Second, the natural impulse of every critic to highlight the best, most exciting, most dynamic aspects of a text – emphasized by the fact that the texts under consideration are undeniably rich in interpretive bounty – threatens to erase distinctions among different historical approaches to Ovidian appropriation by treating whatever text happens to be under consideration as an especially illustrative example; when everything is special, nothing is. As surprising as it is considering the variety of Ovid’s poetic works and the renaissance responses to

¹ Syrithe Pugh, *Spenser and Ovid* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2005); Jonathan Bate,
them, there has long been a critical tendency to treat the word Ovidian as though its meaning is obvious, to collapse the complexity and diversity of text, context, and intertext into single, increasingly vague referent.

Having long grappled with these problems in my own scholarship, I have become increasingly desirous of a method for studying renaissance allusions to Ovid that emphasizes their diversity of form and purpose, that allows for objective comparisons of intertextual practice between authors, that brings both the breadth and depth of Ovid’s presence in this period into clearer focus. As no such comprehensive resource currently exists, I propose creating a database that will catalogue every Ovidian allusion in early modern drama: the Database Of Ovid on the Renaissance Stage, or DOORS. In the pages that follow, I will briefly describe my incipient vision for what this database will include, how it will be constructed, and why it will be a valuable resource to scholars, students, and anyone interested in understanding the crucial and complex role that Ovid plays in renaissance culture.

While the aim of the proposed project is simple – to create a comprehensive collection of Ovidian allusions – this simplicity quickly gives way to several major theoretical and terminological questions: What is an allusion? What qualifies as Ovidian? What criteria will be used to determine a potential allusion’s inclusion or exclusion from the database? At the present stage these questions remain intentionally unanswered, and it is a central goal of the present document to elicit discussion on these and other areas that will help codify the project’s parameters. That said, I do have one set of possible answers in mind that, I believe, should
provide a reasonable starting point for envisioning an eventual identity for the project's dataset.

Charting the full critical debate over the definition of an allusion would far exceed the scope of the present discussion, so I will instead jump to the practical endpoint: I propose working from William Irwin's 2001 definition, which manages to be both clear and open-ended: "[a]n allusion is an intended indirect reference that calls for associations that go beyond mere substitution of a referent."\(^2\) This definition appropriately embraces the multiple contingencies inherent in allusion – i.e., there must be an author who intends to make extra-textual "associations" possible, a reader capable of making these associations, and an alluded-to text that provides the source for associations. For the purposes of DOORS, then, I propose that the database compile any moment where a text calls on its reader to think about the Ovidian context of said moment. Importantly, I want to clarify that I do not take Irwin's use of the word "indirect" to preclude the inclusion of explicit references to Ovidian material. Quite the contrary, in fact, as while such a reference many be direct in terms of a particular character, myth, or text, it is also necessarily indirect insofar as it necessarily requires its reader to consider the "associations" that go along with the referent. This emphasis on the interpretive work demanded by an allusion is also usefully described by Jonathan Bate: "What I mean by allusion is that the source text is brought into play (from Latin al-ludo, to play with); its presence does significant aesthetic work of a sort which cannot be performed by a

submerged source.” What we are looking for, then, are all the moments where renaissance plays bring Ovid into play. I do not think, though, that all allusions are created equal.

While every allusion can be the site of critical debate as to the precise interpretive effect that it brings to the text, I would like to suggest that it may be possible to categorize allusions in (relatively) uncontroversial and objective ways that will nevertheless provide significant insight into a given text's overall interpretive engagement with the its source text. Just as dramatic texts include both language and action, allusions can be either verbal or visual. Each of these broad categories of allusions can, in turn, be subdivided into different types of specific allusions based on their relative levels of indirectness: verbal allusions can be either explicit, indirect but independently apparent, or indirect and dependent on an earlier allusion having already brought the source text to mind. Visual allusions can never be as explicit as verbal ones, of course, but they too can be either independent or dependent. I propose, then, a five-level taxonomy of allusion, with every allusion in the database tagged as belonging to one of these levels. To clarify, let us look at examples of all five types as found in Shakespeare’s various engagements with the Diana and Actaeon episode from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

1. Explicit Verbal Allusion: an allusion naming the source text, or a specific feature of the source text, such as when Tamora responds to Bassianus's taunts in *Titus Andronicus*. After being ironically compared to the virgin goddess Diana, the

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3 Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 10, emphasis Bate’s.
lusty queen of the Goths demonstrates how that explicit reference brought a larger narrative context to mind, allusively responding:

Had I the power, that some say Dian had,
Thy Temples should be planted presently.
With Hornes, as was Acteons, and the Hounds
Should driue vpon his new transformed limbes,
Vnmannerly Intruder as thou art.\(^4\)

This passage demonstrates the way that even a vague classical allusion, such as the one to the Roman goddess Diana, can immediately transform into a more focused allusion to a specific Ovidian text, and the rest of the play demonstrates the ways in which such a connection, once made, can ripple through the text and add deeper meanings to words and images that would otherwise lack apparent allusive power. But that’s another type of allusion.

2. Independent Verbal Allusion: an indirect but self-evident reference to a source text. Whereas Tamora mentions Actaeon by name, Orsino accomplishes a similar evocation of the famous Ovidian myth in *Twelfth Night* without explicitly pointing out that his lovesick self-image has been inspired by a specific literary antecedent:

O when mine eyes did see Oliuia first,
Me thought she purg'd the ayre of pestilence;
That instant was I turn'd into a Hart,
And my desires like fell and cruell hounds,
Ere since pursue me.\(^5\)


\(^5\) *Twelfth Night*, 24-9.
Orsino need not mention that he is comparing himself to Actaeon, as anyone familiar with the story will recognize the similitude and make the requisite associations.

3. Independent Dramatic Allusion: a visual reference to a source text that self-evidently brings the source into play. The clearest example of this type of allusion comes at the end of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where Falstaff dons a pair of antlers and is pinched by fairies just as Actaeon was transformed into a stag and worried by his hounds. While the townsfolk may refer to this disguise as Herne the Hunter, all audience members familiar with the *Metamorphoses* will immediately recognize the allusion to Actaeon, with no verbal explanation required.

4. Dependent Verbal Allusion: an indirect reference to a source text that is only recognizable as such because of its proximity to an explicit or independent allusion. Once a source text has been brought to mind by a self-evident allusion, it remains more readily available as a site for readers’ interpretive associations. Therefore, textual moments that would not carry allusive meaning in isolation can in fact function just like more obvious allusions in terms of conveying contextual meaning. For example, Tamora’s invocation of the Actaeon myth turns the play’s many comparisons of Lavinia to a doe or prey into insistent reminders of her Ovidian model. Similarly, Orsino’s reference to the same myth provides added allusive weight to Malvolio’s promise at the play’s end to “be reueng’d on the whole packe of you,” as he unconsciously reminds the audience that he has suffered a similar fate to Actaeon after having suffered a similar lovesickness to Orsino, the play’s first Actaeon figure.6

6 *Twelfth Night*, 2548.
5. Dependent Dramatic Allusion: an indirect visual reference to a source text that is only recognizable as such due to its proximity to more self-evident types of allusion. Examples of this type of allusion include both the tragic rape and mockery of Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* and the comic torturing of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*. Both scenes make perfect sense within the context of their own plays, but take on additional interpretive depth when understood in light of those plays’ pre-existing allusive connections to Ovid. By tagging allusions according to these types, *DOORS* will allow scholars to analyze plays, playwrights, genres, companies, and historical periods not just according to frequency of allusion by also in terms of relative depth of allusive engagement.

Collecting such a comprehensive set of allusions will be no small task, and I plan to utilize as many avenues of data collection as possible. Existing criticism provides an excellent initial step, with hundreds of allusions of all types having already been identified and analyzed by scholars over the past century. This method, though, will necessarily privilege canonical texts. To achieve the central goal of providing a more holistic image of Ovid’s place in literary history than currently exists, we will have to dig deeper. The availability of searchable full-text databases such as *EEBO* and *Literature Online* will greatly aid the search for explicit allusions, and once these are found it will be necessary to read all texts with these Type 1 allusions to confirm or disconfirm the presence of other types. This method will provide much more comprehensive coverage than will existing scholarship, but will still leave out many non-canonical texts containing only non-explicit allusions. Further database searching for keywords likely to be associated with specific Ovidian texts (e.g. “stag,” “hound,” “transformed,” etc when looking for Actaeon resonances) could help unearth some of these obscure allusions, but
ultimately it will be necessary to read all extant texts that fail to register hits during the initial search phase. This is by no means an insurmountable challenge, and will be made much more manageable through effective use of crowdsourcing.

Once the planning phase is complete, the project website will provide an easy way for scholars, students, and any amateur Ovid enthusiasts to submit any uncatalogued allusions they find, whether they be from little-read plays or oversights in texts already represented in the database. My hope is that scholars who find DOORS to be a valuable resource will help make it more valuable still, both as a research aid for their own work and potentially as part of student assignments. I have had success in the past tasking students with exploring various Ovidian allusions as they function across a given author’s works, and once the database project is up and running I will design comparative assignments asking students to look at how a single Ovidian source text provides allusive material for both canonical and non-canonical renaissance works. Such assignments will help both the database and the students grow, providing the latter with tangible sense of ownership over their research and a legitimate claim to furthering scholarly knowledge.

In addition to providing a way for contributors to help the project grow, the DOORS website will also give scholars free access to the database as it progresses – initially as a spreadsheet or CSV file readable by data analysis programs such as R, and eventually with a more advanced online GUI. All submissions to the database will be encoded so as to provide a uniform, highly searchable dataset alongside (wherever possible) direct links to online editions of both the classical and renaissance texts.

As DOORS becomes more and more exhaustive, it will open more and more pathways for scholars to pursue analyses of Ovid’s profound, multifaceted, and diverse
set of impacts on renaissance drama. We will finally be able to ascertain just how distinctive – if distinctive at all – Shakespeare’s engagement with his favorite classical author was. We will be able to see immediately whether certain Ovidian texts rose or fell in popularity over time or between companies, and will be able to begin to posit correlations with events in social, theatre, or print history. We will be able to see which playwrights used allusions with greatest frequency, as well as those who used it with greatest depth. Opening new digital doorways will take us further than ever on our journey into the textual networks of the past.