

2026 Humanities Symposium Study Guide

Core Text: *Metamorphoses* – a play by Mary Zimmerman

Alternative Text: *Metamorphoses* – translation of Ovid by Stephanie McCarter

The questions are presented in the order in which the scenes are presented in the play

Midas

King Midas pleads with Dionysus (called Bacchus by the Romans) to grant him the power to turn everything he touches into gold as a reward for helping a satyr. The god grants his wish, but Midas soon realizes the curse when his beloved daughter turns golden and lifeless at his touch. Desperate and starving, Midas begs Dionysus for forgiveness, and the god mercifully removes the curse, allowing him to bathe in a river to wash away the golden touch.

1. Why does Midas desire the golden touch, and what does this reveal about human greed and the confusion between wealth and happiness?
2. What is the significance of Midas's daughter being the object that makes him recognize the horror of his wish, rather than his own suffering?
3. What does Midas's redemption (being freed from the curse) suggest about human nature?

Alcyone & Ceyx

Ceyx and Alcyone are a devoted couple deeply in love. Ceyx sets out on a sea voyage despite Alcyone's pleas, but he drowns in a terrible storm sent by the gods as punishment. Alcyone waits anxiously on the shore, and Morpheus, the god of sleep and dreams, sends her a vision of Ceyx's death. In despair, Alcyone throws herself into the sea, but the gods take pity on the couple's devotion and transform them both into halcyons (kingfishers), allowing them to be eternally reunited. Every year there are seven days of calm on the sea, called the halcyon days.

1. Why does Ceyx decide to travel by sea despite Alcyone's warnings and premonitions, and what does this reveal about the tension between fate and human will?
2. How does Morpheus's role as a messenger of Ceyx's death intensify Alcyone's grief, and why is the dream a particularly effective way for the gods to communicate this tragedy?
3. What is the significance of the couple's transformation into birds, and how does this ending reflect both punishment and reward for their devotion?

Erysichthon & His Daughter Mestra

King Erysichthon disrespects the goddess Ceres by cutting down her sacred oak grove, so she curses him with an insatiable hunger that no amount of food can satisfy. Desperate, Erysichthon sells his daughter into enslavement. The daughter is visited by Poseidon and transforms into a little girl. Despite her sacrifice, Erysichthon's hunger becomes so unbearable that he eventually devours his own flesh.

1. What is the connection between Erysichthon's initial sin (desecrating Ceres's sacred grove) and the specific nature of his curse (insatiable hunger)?

2. Why is Erysichthon's self-cannibalism the ultimate expression of his curse, and what does it suggest about the limits of physical appetite?

3. What role does the conflict between mortals, nature, and gods play in this myth, and what lesson might it teach?

Orpheus & Eurydice

The musician Orpheus falls in love with the nymph Eurydice, but she dies from a snakebite on their wedding day. Devastated, Orpheus travels to the Underworld and charms Hades and Persephone with his music, convincing them to release Eurydice on one condition: he must not look back at her as they ascend. Unable to resist the temptation to confirm she is following him, Orpheus glances backward at the final moment, and Eurydice vanishes forever into the realm of the dead.

1. Why does Orpheus's music have the power to move even the gods of the Underworld, and what does this reveal about the nature of art and emotion?

2. What does the condition placed on Orpheus (not to look back) test within him, and why does he ultimately fail this test?

3. What is the significance of Orpheus losing Eurydice twice—once to death and once to his own action—rather than simply failing to retrieve her?

Pomona & Vertumnus

Pomona is a nymph devoted exclusively to cultivating her fruit garden, rejecting all suitors and romantic attention to focus on her horticultural pursuits. Vertumnus, a god of seasons and change, falls in love with her but cannot win her heart through direct approaches, so he disguises himself as an old woman and gains her trust. In his disguise, Vertumnus tells Pomona the story of a vine clinging to an elm tree as a metaphor for how she should accept love and partnership, and he ultimately reveals his true form, winning her affection through wisdom rather than force.

1. How does Vertumnus's deception (disguising himself as an old woman) complicate the morality of his courtship especially in an epic poem featuring scenes of rape, and why does he resort to trickery rather than direct wooing?

2. What is the significance of the vine-and-elm metaphor that Vertumnus tells Pomona, and how does it persuade her to accept love and change?

3. How does Pomona's eventual acceptance of Vertumnus represent a balance between maintaining her independence and embracing partnership and transformation?

Myrrha & Cinyras

Myrrha is cursed by Aphrodite to fall in love with her own father, King Cinyras, creating an internal conflict between her desire and her horror at the taboo. With the help of her nurse, Myrrha deceives her father and has sexual relations with him in darkness. Myrrha begs the gods for mercy and is transformed into a myrrh tree.

1. How does the myth present Myrrha's predicament as both her curse and her responsibility, and what moral complexity does this create?

2. Why might Aphrodite curse Myrrha in this way, and what does this reveal about the goddess's power and vindictiveness?

3. What is the significance of Myrrha's transformation into a tree, and how does it resolve (or fail to fully resolve) the shame and trauma of her situation?

Phaeton

Phaeton, the mortal son of Helios (the sun god), begs his father to let him drive the sun chariot across the sky for a day to prove his divine parentage. Unable to control the powerful horses, Phaeton loses his grip on the reins, and the chariot plummets toward Earth, scorching the land and threatening all life. Zeus strikes Phaeton down with a thunderbolt, and he falls to his death in a river, where his grieving sisters transform into poplar trees.

1. What warnings does Helios give his son before allowing him to drive the chariot, and why doesn't Phaeton heed them?

2. How does Phaeton's pride or ambition lead directly to his downfall and the destruction of the land?

3. What is the significance of Phaeton's sisters transforming into trees as a response to his death?

Eros & Psyche

Psyche, a mortal princess so beautiful that she accidentally angers the goddess Aphrodite, is whisked away to a hidden palace where she marries the god of love, Eros, under the strict condition that she must never look upon his face. Psyche betrays his trust and looks at him, causing a wounded Eros to flee in heartbreak. To win him back, Psyche must endure a series of seemingly impossible trials forced upon her by Aphrodite, ultimately proving her devotion and earning immortality to live happily ever after with Eros on Mount Olympus.

1. Why must Psyche suffer through trials and even face the Underworld before she is allowed to be with Eros permanently?

2. Why must Eros remain invisible to Psyche at the beginning? What commentary does this make on how physical appearance can distort true emotional connection?

3. When Eros flees, he declares that love cannot survive where trust does not exist. Do you agree with his reaction, or was Psyche's curiosity justified given the circumstances?

Echo & Narcissus

Echo, a nymph cursed by Hera to only repeat the words of others, falls desperately in love with the beautiful Narcissus but cannot express her feelings due to her curse. Narcissus, vain and indifferent to her affection, rejects her cruelly, and Echo wastes away until only her voice remains. In punishment for his cruelty, Narcissus is made to fall in love with his own reflection in a pool and dies pining for an image he can never possess, transforming into a flower.

1. How does Echo's curse prevent her from pursuing her love, and what does this say about the limitations placed on her agency?

2. What is the connection between Narcissus's treatment of Echo and the punishment he receives from the gods?

3. How do Echo and Narcissus represent two different forms of suffering, and what does each teach about human desire?

Baucis & Philemon

An elderly married couple, Baucis and Philemon, live humbly in a small cottage and are the only mortals in their town who show hospitality and respect to two strangers who appear at their door (the gods Jupiter and Mercury in disguise). Despite their poverty, they offer the travelers their finest food and shelter. In gratitude, the gods reward the couple's virtue by saving them from a great flood that destroys their town, transforming their cottage into a golden temple and granting them the wish to die together so neither has to live without the other.

1. What values does Baucis and Philemon's hospitality represent, and why does their humble charity earn them divine reward while others in their town perish?

2. How does the couple's poverty contrast with their spiritual richness, and what does this suggest about the true measure of wealth and worth?

3. How does this myth differ from other transformation tales in the *Metamorphoses*, and what unique message does it convey about virtue, community, and divine justice?

Larger Questions about *Metamorphoses*:

1. **What does transformation reveal about identity?**

When a person or being changes form, what remains constant, and what is lost? Is identity located in the body, the mind, memory, or something else?

2. **Is transformation a form of power or a loss of power?**

In Ovid, transformations are sometimes voluntary, sometimes imposed, and sometimes divine punishment. Who controls transformation, and what does that control reveal about power?

3. **Why do characters transform into particular things?**

What is the significance of becoming a tree, animal, stone, plant, constellation, or another human? How does the new form reflect or comment on the character's experience?

4. **Does transformation represent escape, punishment, or renewal?**

How does Ovid complicate the idea that change is either positive or negative? Can transformation simultaneously be a form of violence and a means of survival?

5. **What does *Metamorphoses* suggest about the nature of change itself?**

If everything in the world is constantly changing, what does Ovid suggest about permanence, stability, and the boundaries between humans, animals, nature, and the divine?

6. **How should we understand the relationship between desire and violence in *Metamorphoses*?**

Does Ovid distinguish clearly between erotic desire and sexual violence, or does the poem sometimes blur that distinction? What are the consequences of that ambiguity?

7. **Can transformation be understood as a metaphor for trauma?**

How might physical transformation represent the way sexual violence alters a person's identity, body, social position, or relationship to the world?

8. **How should contemporary readers approach Ovid's treatment of sexual violence?**

What tensions arise when a text presents sexual violence as mythology, poetry, erotic spectacle, or entertainment? How can we appreciate the literary complexity of the work without minimizing the violence it depicts?

Resources for teaching *Metamorphoses*

1. *Metamorphoses* in painting
<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/learn-about-art/ovid-s-metamorphoses>
2. See How Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' Inspired Centuries of Artists—From Caravaggio to René Magritte
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/see-how-ovids-metamorphoses-inspired-centuries-of-artists-from-caravaggio-to-rene-magritte-180988224/>
3. The Theme of Transformation in Poetry: Ovid's Metamorphoses
https://www.getty.edu/education/teachers/classroom_resources/curricula/poetry_and_art/lesson06.html
4. Interview with Mary Zimmerman by the Folger Library about adapting Ovid's *Metamorphoses*
<https://www.folger.edu/podcasts/shakespeare-unlimited/mary-zimmerman/>
5. Mary Zimmerman: Chicago Ideas Presentation on translation/adaptation
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9yYLqtp2fo>
6. Mary Zimmerman: Lecture on creating the visual elements of the play
https://mediacentral.princeton.edu/media/Fagles+Lecture+-+Mary+Alice+Zimmerman/1_82lahg91/170813341
7. Bates College: article on how they created the production with photos
<https://www.bates.edu/news/2025/12/04/everybody-in-the-pool-the-making-of-metamorphoses/>