

# Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the Internet

## The Myth of Transformation and the Cult of the Personality in Blogs

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### I. *Homo Fictus* and The Web of Stories

In *The Storytelling Animal*, human beings are classified as *homo fictus*, because, 'we are, as a species, addicted to story'.<sup>1</sup> Defined as the 'quintessential story',<sup>2</sup> myths have fascinated us and resonated with us across cultures and centuries.

Demythologization seeks to limit myth as 'being opposed to reality (myth is fiction) ...and to what is rational (myth is absurd)'.<sup>3</sup> But any attempt 'to chase myths like moths, and fight them with a pin',<sup>4</sup> is a flawed and futile exercise. Myths are better understood as 'containers of universal truth': Mircea Eliade defined it as 'true history' and Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell regarded it as the product of the 'collective unconscious'.<sup>5</sup> Myths open up to reveal multiple meanings, and 'can be made to mean whatever the myth teller wants them to mean, and their rhetorical power can be subjected to the prevailing modes of discourse of a particular era or power elite'.<sup>6</sup>

This paper attempts to establish the valence of myth in the post-modern, Internet-enabled 21<sup>st</sup> century, with special reference to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the 'encyclopaedia of myth' of Latin Literature of the Golden Age.<sup>7</sup> Ovid's poem was ambitious in scope, covering the entirety of time from 'the world's beginning' to his 'own lifetime'.<sup>8</sup> The universality and comprehensiveness of Ovid's canvas and the poly-vocality of the mindboggling array of inter-connected characters in his poem seem to be a fore-shadowing of the Internet, with its promised network of 'a thousand voices' that would 'flourish, communicate, connect'.<sup>9</sup>

In *Metamorphoses VI*, Ovid describes a weaving competition between the goddess Minerva and the mortal Arachne.<sup>10</sup> Minerva's tapestry arranges its material in a 'formal and balanced way':<sup>11</sup> with the 'twelve Olympians, Jove in their midst', sitting in 'august dignity'.<sup>12</sup> The corners depict myths of thwarted ambition where humans are transformed into inanimate/bestial forms. These transformations are disciplinary, and, along with the central figure of Minerva subduing Neptune, the entire tapestry justifies singular dominance and authority. In contrast, Arachne's tapestry is a riotous abundance of myths depicting amorous love, where gods transform themselves into beasts/humans.

The mighty Jove becomes, by turn, a bull, an eagle, a swan, a satyr, a human, a shower of gold, a shepherd, and a serpent, recklessly abandoning control for carnal satisfaction and procreation. Neptune and Apollo follow suit, and the entire tapestry, bordered by ‘flowers all interwoven with tendrils of ivy’ suggests a carnivalesque, de-centred expressiveness.<sup>13</sup>

The competing tapestries symbolise two contrasting worldviews: classical vs. romantic; order vs. plurality, planning vs. profusion, causality vs. carnality; narratives of power as punishment vs. narratives of power as pleasure. This also symbolises the dynamic opposition between the Age of Print/Broadcast media and the Age of the Internet. ‘We have moved from a culture dominated by mass media, using one-to-many communication, to one where participatory media, using many-to-many communication, is becoming the norm.’<sup>14</sup>

Whereas cultural production in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was controlled by elite editorial cliques, the Internet was a game-changer in the way we produce and consume culture, as it gave a ‘new freedom to publish at will’,<sup>15</sup> replacing control with an abundance of stories and story-tellers, where the ‘ivy’ has run over the ‘flowers’, as in Arachne’s tapestry.

Minerva’s punishes humble-born Arachne by transforming her into a spider, who, from her abdomen, ‘continues to spin/ her thread and practise her former art in the web of a spider.’<sup>16</sup> This prophetically foreshadows the World Wide Web. When Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web in 1990,<sup>17</sup> it opened up the Internet for the common people. The web-image is exceedingly appropriate for the open-access network of the Internet, as its fluid spinning mirrors the ‘ease and spontaneity of self-expression that blogging, Twittering and posting on social media sites like Facebook allow.’<sup>18</sup>

In its prolific creativity, Arachne’s web microcosmically contains Ovid’s own ‘continuous poem’,<sup>19</sup> and also fore-shadows the post-modern flux and uncharted frontiers of the ‘wild, wild, web’.<sup>20</sup>

## **II. ‘Changes of Shape, New Forms, Are The Theme’<sup>21</sup>**

The myriad myths that Ovid chooses to weave together have one theme in common: metamorphoses or ‘change of form’.

Going back to the contrasting/contesting tapestries of Minerva and Arachne, it may be noted that the transformations in Minerva’s tapestry are done to passive victims, to

punish/censure/impose, whereas the transformations in Arachne's tapestry are active transformations by the agents, for the purpose of disguise/role-play/satisfaction/fulfilment.

Between Minerva's and Arachne's tapestry, there is a power shift and a paradigm shift. This parallels the shift from the 20<sup>th</sup> century Age of Entertainment to the present Age of Transformations. Instead being fed entertainment from television/cinema screens, we now have bloggers or reality-television show participators transform their existing identity into something else. The lean-back, passive consumer of culture has become a sit-forward, active and inter-active user of cultures. 'When consumers become producers, one of the objectives of their creative activity is the construction and multiplication of new selves....Individuals interested in *transformational opportunities* will produce and consume startling cultural departures. Entertainment bent us back toward the centre of our culture. Transformation will take us away from it.'<sup>22</sup>

The Internet catalysed this shift from the centralised, standardised print and broadcast media. Through its dispersed, dynamic, interactive, *user-generated* content it offers 'transformational opportunities' that allow for the construction of multiple identities: personal/ethnic/sexual/social. Maximal heterogeneity was till now only possible in art, for instance, in the linked yet chaotic overabundance of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It has now become possible in reality: a post-modern, *virtual* reality.

One of the most obvious transformations is played out in the virtual world of gaming portals. MUDs (Multi-user domains) like *Dungeons and Dragons* and MMORPs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games) like *World of Warcraft* provide immersive platforms where the players 'slay monsters, explore a fantasy world, complete quests, go on adventures, create a story by role-playing, and advance the created character.'<sup>23</sup> The role-play in mythic settings explores the transformations into the 'second person' inside the player's real-life personality: diverse personas such as explorer, achiever or socialiser.<sup>24</sup>

User profiles on Facebook, Twitter and other social-networking and micro-blogging sites incorporate role-playing through carefully-constructed online identities. Status updates and tweets offer multiple ways for users to explore identities. The ease of access and the option to keep the 'real self' anonymous on the Internet allows relatively consequence-free experimentation that helps to shape our 'core self' or social identity.<sup>25</sup>

Online identity-constructions erode boundaries between public/private, as even the most trivial aspects of the users' personal lives are played out and recorded for posterity

in Facebook/Twitter through status updates, tweets, and photo galleries. Social networking has an obvious self-publicising aspect: 'The Daily Me'.<sup>26</sup> Such legitimized self-absorption is cautioned in Ovid's re-telling of the Myth of Narcissus, who falls in love with his own image – 'a shadow mistaken for substance' - in the water and is transformed into a flower by the waterside.<sup>27</sup>

Post-modernist culture studies, however, validates the personal/trivial/domestic as identity-discourses embedded with meanings. The scope for personality-exploration is probably the widest in blogs. Blogs serve to facilitate identity construction through self-reflection and social interaction. The chief features of blogs are a near-total authorial control, and infinite space to write. A blog may, thus, be a 'tabula rasa', a whole new world where the identity may be transformed and reshaped at will.

### III. 'Clay...Was Metamorphosed to Assume the Strange New Figure of Man.'<sup>28</sup>

Ovid's poem depicts the creation of Man as an act of transformation from inanimate clay to sentient being. This paper looks at some blogs from the Indian blogosphere to examine how bloggers negotiate transformations through the creation/perpetuation of their blogger identities. The paper will also attempt to link them to the transformation-myths narrated by Ovid.

I start with a blogger I personally know. Suranga Date began her blog, *Gappa*, in 2006, after retirement and the demise of her parents.<sup>29</sup> As she says, 'Blogging... to me is therapeutic, sometimes I celebrate, sometimes I console my self, sometimes I share, and sometimes I cannot help crack up as I go tongue in cheek about something or someone....Yes, earning prizes in blogging competitions has brought back those days of school and college, and the delight is the same and unchanged.'<sup>30</sup>

Like Philemon and Baucis, the old couple who were transformed into the long-living oak and linden trees in Ovid,<sup>31</sup> blogs confer a degree of permanence. The transformative potential of blogs is like a 'therapy' for Suranga, and for other marginalised senior citizens who 'look back' and 'make friends' through their blogs to counter looming loneliness and mortality.

Blogs are spaces where the ordinary transforms into the extra-ordinary. First-hand blogs-posts of important events by chance witnesses transform them into citizen-journalists. *India Uncut*,<sup>32</sup> arguably India's most popular blog, transformed blogger Amit Varma into a celebrated gate-watcher after he blogged eye-witness posts on the tsunami of December, 2004. As he says, 'I returned home to find that my posts had

been linked to ...across the world, and the traffic was stratospheric.... And as I continued to blog steadily, it continued to grow. It didn't matter that I was nobody, that I was new to this...As long as I consistently put out compelling content, I would have readers. The only limit on me was me.'<sup>33</sup> Like Ovid's mythic Phaethon, who journeys into the sky to 'question the sun god himself',<sup>34</sup> the blogger with his participatory/immediate/interactive civic journalism and fresher/deeper/wider insights challenges and transforms mainstream media.

The shape-shifting blogosphere also allows reverse-transformations of the extraordinary into the ordinary, just as *Metamorphoses* describes myths where gods like Jupiter, Apollo and Neptune, transform into mortals. This is exemplified in actor Amitabh Bachchan's blog, *BigB@bigadda.com*: in his daily posts and the deluge of comments generated.<sup>35</sup> With erasure of celebrity/commoner boundaries, the celebrity can connect to his fans without media-intervention. He transforms himself from a remote, media-created hero-figure to a more accessible, self-created persona. Simultaneously, the fan becomes a lean-forward more-equal participator who can directly interact with the celebrity with a voice and choice of his own.

In *Metamorphoses IV*, the three daughters of Minyas resist the rule of Bacchus by continuing their assigned women's tasks of spinning and weaving, and by *choosing* to 'relieve the toil of our hands by telling stories of different kinds', all involving transformations.<sup>36</sup> Blogging offers a free and accessible self-publishing platform to any woman who chooses to step outside her the confines of her patriarchy-assigned role as mother/cook/homemaker to share/connect with feminine networks and find her own voice. Each food-blog/mom-blog is underpinned by a story of metamorphoses. These blogs validate cooking/house-keeping/child-rearing from a domestic chore to a self-fulfilling activity worthy of documentation and distribution: from feminine subservience to female identity-realisation.

In *The Bong Mom's Cookbook*, blogger Sandeepa, a Diaspora Bengali working-mother of two, negotiates her multiple identities of 'A Bong, A Mom, A Cook', connects with her fore-mothers through inherited recipes, which are a 'legacy' she intends to pass on to her daughters, and also defines her own individual space through her 'innovations' of 'authentic recipes'.<sup>37</sup>

Even hitherto silenced categories of women, like Muslim housewives, are writing new identities through their blogs. In India, their disempowerment is caused by lack of 'knowledge... economic power...and autonomy'.<sup>38</sup> In her blog, *Zaika*, Mona – an

Indian Muslim mother/homemaker - identifies herself as a 'Hyderabadi foodie muslimah, a home cook, mother, writer and blogger' and she intends to 'inspire all Hyderabadis to share their tried and tested recipes with the world'.<sup>39</sup> Her self-transformation inspires her to encourage others to transform.

Sometimes, women-bloggers are successful in transforming further into published authors. Alamelu Vairavan, who learnt cooking after marriage and migration and who blogs about Diaspora Indian food at *Curry on Wheels*,<sup>40</sup> published the regional cuisine cookbook, *Chettinad Kitchen*, as a record and validation of her cultural identity.<sup>41</sup> Ovid narrates the story of the daughters of Pierus, who challenged the Muses to sing better and were transformed to magpies for their temerity.<sup>42</sup> In the Indian blogosphere, such temerity and transformations lead to empowerment, not punishment.

The myths of self-metamorphosis and sex-change narrated by Ovid (for instance, Caeneus and Periclymenus),<sup>43</sup> can be related to the opening up of marginalised LGBT voices in the Indian blogosphere. Stigmatized groups like homosexuals often feel safer in their on-line identities than in normal social interaction, especially in a traditional, relatively conservative society like India. Malika, in *Malika's Indian Transgender Blog*<sup>44</sup>, is one of many such who speaks up: 'I am an Indian transgender woman.'

**The myth of Medea depicts how she uses her magical and transformative powers to help Jason.<sup>45</sup> Bloggers also often consciously use transformation as an activist-tool to help their causes. In *The Uniform Project*, Sheena Matheiken pledged to 'wear one little black dress for 365 days' to explore 'sustainability' and as a 'fundraiser to support...underprivileged children'. She 'reinvented her uniform' and transformed not just her self but the world beyond that.**

The privileging of individual transformations in blogs has a 'liberatory potential'.<sup>46</sup> Read individually, blogs offer transformation-narratives of post-modern fragmentation and fluidity. Read together, blogs function as collective memory that re-imagines culture in diverse ways to shape the present and the future.

#### **IV. The Poet Who 'Spins a Thread'**

In his Invocation, Ovid prays for divine inspiration to 'spin me a thread' to shape and link the plethora of mythic, transformative experiences.<sup>47</sup> The figure of the poet as an inspired creature was a traditional Homeric epic convention. Ovid, however, continues

to privilege the poet throughout his narrative through a number of poet-surrogates. Arachne with her tapestry is a weaver, Orpheus with his lyre is a bard; and others are inspired/transformed by circumstances to verbalise outbursts of poetic creativity.

‘They engage in a lament (Narcissus), deliver a powerful monologue (Medea), act as a dramatic storyteller (Achelous and Orpheus through his own surrogate narrator, Venus), deliver a persuasive speech in competition (Ulysses), and, in the manner of Arachne, produce a material work that has a close affinity with the design of Ovid’s epic (Daedalus).’<sup>48</sup>

The image of inspired poet-figures expressing the ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’<sup>49</sup> has been reiterated in literatures down the centuries: Shakespeare’s ‘poet’s eye, in fine frenzy rolling’ that ‘gives to airy nothing/ A local habitation and a name’;<sup>50</sup> Coleridge’s poet-prophet with his ‘flashing eyes’ and ‘floating hair’ who had ‘drunk the milk of Paradise’;<sup>51</sup> Shelley’s poet-visionary who creates ‘forms more real than living man/ Nurslings of Immortality.’<sup>52</sup> This exalted image of the poet was the key to the Romantic cult of Personality, with its emphasis on imagination, subjectivity, spontaneity, self-expression, personal emotions and experiences.

A line of development may be traced from this Romantic cult of personality to the Cult of the Amateur in the Internet Age. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism, the poet was privileged by virtue of his imagination, and from this vantage point, he would poeticise ‘incidents and situations from common life...in a selection of language really used by men’.<sup>53</sup>

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these people from ‘common life’ are writing their own stories. Andrew Keen notes that there has been a ‘blurring of lines between audience and author...between amateur and expert.’<sup>54</sup> This is the Romantic cult of Personality taken to its fragmented, individualised, post-modern extreme: every person is a potential author as well as a reader. Every person is embryonically ‘automythological’: they can find and live their own myth and create their own ‘individual mythostory’.<sup>55</sup>

Myths are cosmogonic narratives that engage with creations and cultures. Claude Levi-Strauss uses the image of the bricoleur to explain the process of myth-making, where ‘fragments which at first seemed disparate, once they found their appropriate place and the correct relationship to their neighbours, come together to form a coherent picture.’<sup>56</sup> Structurally, the swollen narrative of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* links together myth, history, inserted stories, interludes, catalogues, and ecphrases through the motif

of transformation. Ovid's work is the mythic archetype for the web of cosmogonic narratives linked together by the distributed network of the Internet. Bloggers create communities by linking to each other, by commenting on other blogs, through blog-forums and cross-posting on social networks. In this way, discrete posts and blogs come together like a bricolage of 'networked publics',<sup>57</sup> which transforms individual mythostories to cultural zeitgeist.

India has several such very active blog-directories and blogger networks that encourage blogger-interaction through online discussion forums and real-life blog-meets; like Indiblogger.in (<<http://www.indiblogger.in/>>) and BlogAdda.com (<<http://www.blogadda.com/>>). The Indiblogger membership widgets/badges – with categories like IndiWriter, IndiMommy, IndiChef and others - emblemize the sense of belonging and identity. IndiBlogeshwari, a discussion forum exclusively for women bloggers, creates a sisterhood that reinforces the sense of empowerment which blogging gives to women in India. As new bloggers join the blogosphere, their new narratives transform not just their own identities, but also the processes of cultural production and consumption.

#### **V. 'The Finer Part of Myself Shall Sweep Me Into Eternity'<sup>58</sup>**

Myth is understood through 'paradigm, perfection and possibility'.<sup>59</sup> This is as true of Ovid as it is of the Internet. Even as *Metamorphoses* examines the concept of identity and change - pre-figuring the Internet's identity-explorations - its ambitious sweep of fifteen books in dactylic hexameters aims to expand the possibilities of the epic as written by Homer and Virgil. The search for perfection, both in the transformations narrated and the poet's own quest, is never complete. Ovid suggests in *Tristia* I.7, a poem written after his exile, that the *Metamorphoses* was not quite finished.<sup>60</sup> In a sense, the theme of transformations and identity construction that he explored is still an unfinished project, being carried forward by the Internet today and tomorrow.

Ovid concludes with the prophetic claim that: 'My name shall never be forgotten. Wherever the might of Rome extends in the lands she has conquered,/The people shall read and recite my words.'<sup>61</sup>This prophecy could well extend to all those seeking fame through self-transformations on the Internet. The reach of the Internet, increasing exponentially by the minute, is indeed mighty. Although millions of bloggers/gamers/social-networkers/tweeters languish in obscurity, they are still frozen in time in the virtual world. And those who succeed are assured of both eternity and readership (actual and potential) of proportions measurable only through the parameters of myth.

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