

An illustrated edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with translations by Addison, Congreve, Dryden, Pope, and others.

Garth, Samuel, editor. *Ovid's Metamorphoses in fifteen books*. London: Printed for Jacob Tonson at Shakespear's-Head over-against Katharine-Street in the Strand, 1717. 15 3/4 inches (400 mm), 578 pp., [18] leaves of plates.

Ovid (45 B.C.–17 A.D.) was a youthful prodigy. He claimed to have been reciting his *Amores* in public when his beard was new; he married three times and was much in demand as a conversationalist. His *Ars Amatoria*, written around 1 B.C., was a poetical textbook for the voluptuary. Like St. Augustine, with his volume of errata, the *Retractatio*, Ovid soon produced something of a palinode in the *Remedia Amoris*, but even this did not staunch criticism. In 8 A.D. Augustus banished Ovid to a frigid spot on the Black Sea, remote from metropolitan comfort and conviviality for reasons that continue to mystify, but that apparently involved this (or another) *carmen* (or poem)—at least in part.

Between the composition of the *Ars Amatoria* and his final years of exile, Ovid had turned from elegiac meters to hexameters to compose his masterwork, the *Metamorphoses*. This long narrative poem in fifteen books derives its title from the fact that its every episode involves some sort of transformation of a human into another shape or form. Since much of the reported interaction of the classical gods with mankind involves such metamorphosis—Io into a cow, Daphne into a laurel—the poem also serves as an enticing mythological handbook. Poets and painters ever since have borrowed from it freely. It is hardly too much to say that, even now, an acquaintance with the *Metamorphoses* is more useful to those who frequent libraries and museums than more comprehensive modern guides to myth that swell their pages with much legendary and ethnological material

Ovid was a favorite author for illustrated editions, and “moralized” versions were available for the Christian reader since the late Middle Ages. In English literature, Ovid

has been an influence since Chaucer and Gower. William Caxton's translation of the *Metamorphoses* was the first into English, but it remained in manuscript and was not printed until the 20th century. Only individual tales from the poem had appeared in English verse translation in the Elizabethan age until Arthur Golding produced the first complete rendition, followed by George Sandys' version in 1616.

The illustrated edition of the *Metamorphoses* here reproduced was a collaborative effort, edited by the physician Sir Samuel Garth (1661–1719), a charitable, humorous, kindly, convivial man, but negligible as a poet. Appropriately, his chief work was a medical poem with Ovidian conceits and overtones. *The Dispensary* (1699) commemorated (in mock-heroic style) the opening by the Royal College of Physicians (at his urging) of an institution to provide free medical advice (and cut-rate medicaments) to the poor: inevitably, when an Ovidian war erupts between doctors and pharmacists, the contest can only be concluded with an appeal to William Harvey in the Elysian fields.

Garth himself translated the penultimate book in this edition of the *Metamorphoses*. The other contributors are more plausibly “the most eminent hands” of the title-page, but they were Garth's friends, which says much for the man: Joseph Addison, William Congreve, Alexander Pope, John Gay, and John Dryden (posthumously—Garth had taken care of his funeral when the poet died, destitute, in 1700). The table of contents (**Spreads 18–20**) identifies the authors and their contributions.

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