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## Book Review: Ovid, the Humanities, and the Collapse of Civilizations

*On Ovid's "Metamorphoses"* by Gareth Williams

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Why do civilizations decline and fall? I asked myself that very question soon after a newly published book, *On Ovid's "Metamorphoses,"* (2023; \$14.95) by Gareth Williams—a Columbia professor of Latin language and literature—arrived for review at *Caveat Lector*. I opened the paperback immediately and read it twice, taking notes and underlying passages as though I was back in college, only 70 years later, with more information and knowledge about literature, history and the classics than I had at 19 and 20.

Williams' book underwhelmed me. Let me explain why.

Over the last few decades, dozens of books about the Roman poet and his masterpiece, the *Metamorphoses* have been published, reviewed and read. After all, Ovid belongs to the ages;

future scholars will likely return to him and his classic and interpret it through the prism of their own lives and times. But Williams' book is a unique cultural artifact. It arrives at a supercharged moment when the humanities as a discipline and English departments in particular are in crisis, though they have been in crisis for almost as long as I can remember.

In 1968, the German-born Jewish intellectual, Hannah Arendt—the author of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), a classic in its own right—wrote and published an essay called the “Crisis in Education.” Today, no academic seems to remember it or to know anything about it, though it's well worth reading and remembering. More timely now than when it was first published, *Origins* laments the collapse of boundaries that once separated private and public spheres and describes the inevitable harm to education.

Arendt argues that parents and teachers ought to respect the past, prepare students and the young for the future, and, at the same time, leave ample space so that students and the young have the “chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us.” Guidance and restraint are both needed, Arendt insists.

I remember my own college experience as a time when I resisted what I thought of as indoctrination. My professors wanted to win undergrads over to their way of looking at the world, and that I didn't want to do.

Half-a-decade later, in the late 1960s and early 1970s when I was teaching English literature, students were calling for curricula that were “relevant” to their lives. The words and concepts, “relevant” and “relevance,” echoed across campuses from coast to coast, though they were relative terms, not absolutes, subjective not objective. I found that one person's idea of relevance wasn't necessarily another person's idea of relevance, especially when race, class and gender—subsumed these days under the umbrella of “intersectionality”—entered the picture.

Just what was relevant and why, varied from the Ivy League to the Big Ten, the American South and beyond, though students often called for areas and topics that had been excluded, ignored or downplayed: Black studies, Chicano studies, women studies and Native American studies. I also recall the early 1960s when I was an undergraduate, and when education often suffered from the miasma of the Cold War, when Marxism was a dirty word and Freudian concepts were sometimes pounded into students' heads.

At Columbia in New York in the 1960s no women authors and no Black authors appeared on any reading lists. No Jewish authors and no authors who ascribed to Buddhism, Hinduism, and the teachings of Mohammad. On the frieze above the library's colonnade are inscribed to this day the names of the writers, philosophers, and thinkers, taught in the core curriculum: Homer, Herodotus, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Cicero, Virgil, Cervantes, Shakespeare, Milton, Voltaire, Goethe, Horace, Tacitus, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and Dante. Ovid didn't make the cut. At least Cervantes, the father of the novel, appears on the frieze. In a time of Netflix, Amazon Prime and other venues where new products stream almost all the time, I can appreciate the appeal of a core curriculum that doesn't change, though I also long for flexibility without chasing after fads.

The Beat writers, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, who had been students at Columbia in the 1940s, and who were ignored when I was an undergrad in the 1960s, finally made their way into the English Department in the 1980s, most notably in courses taught by the eminent

scholar and popular teacher, Ann Douglas, who went against the grain and found eager followers.

When I taught English back in the late 1960s on the campus of a state university, I created two popular courses for graduate students that I thought of as innovative: “literature and revolution,” which a colleague ridiculed as “Commies 101”; and “pornography and literature,” which yet another colleague dismissed as “Dirty Books 101.”

Now, in the second decade of the 21st century, the crisis in English and the humanities has come back to bite colleges and universities big time. Jobs in the humanities are fewer and farther between than they have been for a long time, and teachers and scholars have developed their own specialized vocabularies and stale preoccupations that don’t appeal to students. A recent article in *The New Yorker* titled “The End of the English Major,” which has been widely read and widely discussed, noted that it isn’t as necessary as it had once been to write well. In the age of the computer that’s often true. Articles in other publications, and on websites, too, including one from the graduate center at the City University in New York, have pushed back against the piece in *The New Yorker*, and have argued that the end of English departments has been greatly exaggerated and that the humanities still have immense cultural value.

Academics are fighting for funding, jobs, status and for their very existence; they’re not about to go down to defeat without a battle. As long as professors such as Gareth Williams write books about the classics, as long as publishers put them into print, and as long as students read them, Homer, Virgil and Ovid, will continue to be taught in colleges. The classics are a cottage industry that will perpetuate itself until it runs out of cottages.

Professor Williams does not directly tackle the fight over the humanities in his 175-page book, *On Ovid’s Metamorphoses*, which is meant to be a “brisk companion piece” to Ovid’s epic. Still, Williams has one eye on the current status of the classics and the humanities. In the brief Epilogue, he writes that “in recent decades, the surge of interest in philosophy as a way of life has drawn a more popular audience to writers such as Seneca, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius in the first and second centuries CE.”

That’s mostly wishful thinking, though Princeton University Press has published a series of newly retranslated books that are meant to introduce contemporary readers to those three authors. Columbia University Press is planning a series about authors such as Machiavelli, Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, whose work is assigned to undergraduates. The bibliography at the back of Williams’ introduction to Ovid, lists two dozen books about the Roman poet and his world, many of them published by university presses. Most likely, they’re aimed at students of the classics, not the “common reader,” as Virginia Woolf called her.

Williams offers plot summaries galore and a great deal of character analysis, but not nearly enough attention to big cultural and political topics that might illuminate ancient Rome and the fate of Roman civilization. Still, he aims to situate Ovid in his own time, from 43 BCE, when he was born, to 17 CE, when he died in exile in what is now Bulgaria, a long way from his home in Rome. Williams’ second objective, which often takes over the book, is to show that Ovid is “relevant” today. Shades of the 1960s.

Again and again, time after time, Williams looks at the *Metamorphoses* through the lens of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He does this in the introduction, then all the way through his guidebook, and extensively on 11 different pages. On page one and in the first sentence, he lists the murder of

George Floyd, COVID, 9/11, the global financial crisis of 2007 and 2008 and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

“Where to look for guidance in these uncertain times?” Williams asks rhetorically, and adds, “We could do a lot worse than turn to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.” “Could do a lot worse” sounds tentative and less than enthusiastic. No doubt, other scholars and teachers of the classics will suggest that we turn to Homer and Virgil in these “uncertain times.” But aren’t all times uncertain?

Williams offers several ways to make Ovid relevant to “this modern age of the #MeToo movement” and “in this age of increased action against sex trafficking, on-campus sexual assault, and harassment and discrimination in the workplace.” In his view, the *Metamorphoses* is “empowering even despite its accent on violence.” Maybe it’s empowering because of its accent on violence.

Williams describes the poet, Orpheus— a main character in the *Metamorphoses*— as a “mystical Elvis Presley.” He calls Daedalus—the artisan who invented the maze that contained the Minotaur—“the Thomas Edison of his mythical times.” He suggests that Orpheus suffers from “PTSD born of post-Eurydice shellshock,” and he writes that portions of the epic are written with “Dali-like surrealism and touches of Pythonesque absurdity.” I suppose he means Monty Python.

While these comments might excite some undergraduates at colleges like Columbia— where Williams teaches— they also come across as pandering to “the peanut gallery.” And, while he aims for what he calls “balance” and nuances, he often writes with blandness and clichés. “We follow Ovid’s example,” he writes, “by reading with an eye on ourselves.” But he doesn’t focus a close eye on himself or say what the *Metamorphoses* means to him as a reader and as a citizen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He tries, too, not to offend students on subjects such as sex, gender, rape and incest which appear in Ovid’s epic. Williams’ language reflects a Puritanical sensibility, as when, for example, he describes some of the stories in the epic as “weird, even salacious and kinky.” By whose standards? Those of Ovid, Augustus, or Williams himself as gatekeeper, scholar and critic.

Williams does look back at Augustus, who helped to transform Rome from a republic into an empire, crowned himself its first emperor, limited the expression of ideas and values and emphasized family values and social stability after a protracted civil war.

Williams is careful about the language he uses. He points out that parts of Ovid’s epic are lost in translation, and that English words are only a rough approximation of the original Latin. Still, words and phrases he uses, such as “outsiders,” “misfits” and “persecuted artists,” seem more appropriate for modern times than ancient times. Surely, the Roman notion of the “outsider” isn’t identical to the way the word is used in, say, 2023, or in Colin Wilson’s 1956 benchmark book *The Outsider* that takes an existentialist approach to the subject.

In 1959 and 1960 when I was a first-year student at Columbia I felt like an outsider in the world of the classics. No one explained why we were required to read the ancients or how they formed the basis of what our teachers called “western civilization.” How civilized were the Greeks and the Romans, I wondered? They had slaves (as Williams points out), they made war, and they punished citizens like Socrates. (The Roman economy was also based on agriculture, on the cultivation of olives and the production of olive oil.) Ovid, the greatest poet in Rome some

2,000 years ago, was driven into exile, along with Augustus' daughter and granddaughter. How civilized was that? To be ostracized was cruel punishment indeed.

As an undergrad, I didn't enjoy Homer's *Odyssey* until I read James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Simone Weil's 1945 essay on the *Iliad* as a "poem of force" enabled me to appreciate that war-torn epic. Also, I didn't appreciate the value of the classics until I read T. S. Eliot's seminal 1919 essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," in which he writes about "the pastness of the past, but also its presence," and that "the past and the present have a reciprocal relationship." No one defines a classic better than Eliot.

Williams takes a stab in Eliot's direction, though he doesn't seem to appreciate the value of the cross-cultural and the interdisciplinary, which are more than buzz words. Sadly, he doesn't mention *The Metamorphosis* (1915), by Prague's preeminent Jewish author, Franz Kafka, in which a young man named Gregor Samsa wakes up and finds that he's been turned into an insect. Nor does Williams mention the Brazilian classic, *Black Orpheus* that reinterprets the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Also, he doesn't look to the contemporary film, *Ovid and the Art of Love*, which is set in Detroit and that juxtaposes the problems faced by ancient Romans and contemporary U.S. citizens. Williams might have talked less about the 21<sup>st</sup> century and more about Augustus' Rome, a society that sought control over private and public lives and that ostracized citizens.

One hopes that the forthcoming books in the core curriculum series from Columbia will learn from Williams' flaws. One hopes, too, that future generations of college students will do what the current generation of undergraduates isn't doing nearly enough: reading books.

The crisis is bigger now than it was in 1968, and it's not the fault of students who have wanted education to be relevant to their lives. Go into the homes or the apartments of a student who graduated in '68, '69 or '70 and you're likely to see a shelf or two with copies of well-worn paperbacks about Vietnam, Black power, women's liberation, American history, spirituality, existentialism and modern movements in art and music.

Civilizations decline and fall when they abandon democracy and turn to autocracy, when they exile writers and put citizens into moralistic straightjackets that prevent freedom of thought, action, expression and movement.

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