

### Ambiguity in Action: Defining *Rumor* in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

The importance of *rumor* is in the audience's response, not whether or not it is true. Mortals struggle to interpret ambiguous situations, but the structure and internal narratives of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* help train the reader to use rumors to his or her advantage instead of dismissing them too quickly or believing them too easily. The analysis of the myths connected by *rumor* encourages the reader to rise above worse readers whose reactions to *rumor* are not advantageous.

It has been recognized that the response of internal readers is useful for considering the role of the external readers (Heath 1991, Wheeler 1999). Readers, in a sense, are being trained on how to read and respond. Segal 1971 interprets mythology as a type of abstract thinking in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. An epic full of mythology can prove to be a useful tool for deep thinking, whether or not the stories are true. Similar is the function of *rumor* itself, as an analysis of the five occurrences of the word in the epic proves.

*Rumor* appears the first time when the story of Diana's actions against Actaeon are being debated (3.253-55). But the judgment of her judgment is *in ambiguo*, or causes a sense of unease among its listeners (3.253). This is neither the first nor the last time that an event in the *Metamorphoses* is uncertain. Some events are uncertain in terms of justice, but others are uncertain whether they even happen or not. Diana's actions have truly happened in the world, and they inspire Juno to get revenge on Semele: a bold response in the face of ambiguity, and only partially successful in as much as Bacchus survives to claim his divinity (3.256-72). Niobe is not as aware of *rumor* as Juno: in Book 6, the *rumor* of Arachne's defeat was not enough to alert her to the dangers of boasting against goddesses (6.146-56).

*Rumor* does not appear again until Book 10, breaking the structural pattern we may have expected—that the *Metamorphoses* can be arranged in five groups of three books. As Solodow 1988 and others have argued, there is not one consistent plan to the *Metamorphoses*, and here is one place where Ovid breaks his own design. Book 9 relies instead on *Fama* to seal Hercules' fate, when Hercules' wife Deianira does take the report of her husband's infidelity to heart and tries to win his love back through magic (9.89-158). The hero's death is due more to his wife's faith in the centaur's lies than her faith in the *rumor* of Hercules' infidelity.

When *rumor* itself returns in Book 10, Venus is assuring her young lover Adonis that the story (*rumor*) of Atalanta winning in races against men is not some false story (*fabula*) (10.561-562). The goddess Venus uses *fabula* as something idle or false, but *rumor* is a neutral word—it could be true or false. In Book 11, Morpheus in the guise of Ceyx assures Alcyone that Ceyx really is dead, and he claims that she should believe him because he is the very one reporting it, not something ambiguous or vague (11.666-67). The statement, of course, is heavy with irony, because the reader knows that the speaker is *not* Ceyx himself, but a god reporting a story. Morpheus, however, demonstrates awareness that mortals have a tendency to respond in the wrong way to *rumor*—such as Niobe and Adonis—so the perceived ambiguity is taken out of the scenario to get the desired result. Mortal audiences cannot be trusted to learn what they need from *rumor*.

This pattern of mortal inaction or misaction is reversed in the final appearance of *rumor*: the House of *Fama* at Book 12.39-63. The broad reach of *rumor* and the other residents of the House of *Fama* correctly informs the Trojans that the Greeks are beginning a war. The Trojans are able to prepare for war—unfortunately, their preparations are not enough, and *Fata* is stronger than *Fama*. Nevertheless, we know that the Romans are the descendants of the Trojans,

and perhaps the Trojans' good sense as the audience of *rumor* remains. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* presents many stories for his audience to test themselves about uncertain reports, and the diverse reactions from scholars and artists over the millennia perhaps prove that, for Ovid, whether something is true or false is less important than how the audience responds.

#### Bibliography

Heath, J. (1991) 'Diana's Understanding of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*', *CJ*, 86.3: 233-243.

Segal, C. (1971) 'Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Greek Myth in Augustan Rome', *Studies in Philology*, 68.4: 371-394.

Solodow, J. (1988) *The World of Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press).

Wheeler, S. (1999) *A Discourse of Wonders: Audience and Performance in Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).