

# On the Gods' Revenge on Their Rivals in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by the Theory of Defamiliarization

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**Abstract:** This paper dwells on gods' revenge on their challengers in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by the theory of defamiliarization. Through stripping transformation and defamiliarization, this paper tries to reveal a series of stories about the defences of gods' authority at the cost of blood and violence. It also deals with deep social problems revealed by these stories.

**Keywords:** Metamorphoses; Defamiliarization; Revenge on challengers; Authority of gods

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Imperfection of gods in Greek and Roman myths is one of the greatest differences from those in eastern myths. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, gods and goddesses showed no tolerance when faced with rivals and took violent and cruel revenge on their challengers. Gods and goddesses have their own limitation and have the same desires and emotions like human being. They either changed their challengers into non-human or made troubles to cause the ruin of their challengers indirectly. By revenges on their rivals, gods and goddesses protected their divine status and authority which they considered to be sacred and inviolable. Compared with some related realistic problems, the revenges of the gods on their challengers are quite illuminating and worth studying. Furthermore, in these stories, the fairness and justice of these revenges on their rivals is a noticeable problem which needs careful thinking and has a profound realistic meaning.

In this paper, transformation is identical with metamorphosis in meaning. Both of them refer to the state of changing from one form into another. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, transformation is used as metaphors and it actually is a kind of defamiliarization. By defamiliarization, an alien and exotic effect can be created based on the fantastic understanding ability of people. Readers have an ability to restore some unreasonable artistic structure within certain range. Based on certain context, readers can re-organize, process, add to or delete something from the strange artistic structure, reviving the strange artistic structure into its normal work and getting a better understanding of both the artistic work and daily life.<sup>[1]</sup>

## 2. INTERPRETATION OF METAMORPHOSES IN REVENGES

### 2.1 Metamorphoses in the story of Muses and the Pierides

Pierus' daughters, the Pierides were conceited about their songs and challenged the Muses to a contest. They took the Nymphs as jurors. The Pierides sang about the war between gods and giants while the Muses sang about the stories about Ceres, Proserpina and Death with two interludes of Arethusa and Triptolemus. With the last words sung, all the Nymphs gave the honours to the Muses. The Pierides cursed and railed but were turned into talking crows by the Muses.

The Pierides thought they can compete with the Muses in all aspects, including their number, skills at poetry, song and dance. In the competition with the Muses, the Pierides sang about the transformations of gods in the war between the gods and giants, implying the cowardness of the gods and praising the giants' valour. Here is the description of the transformations of the gods in their song: "Jupiter became a ram, leader of sheep—Ammon of Libya wears his crooked horns—Apollo was a crow, Bacchus a goat, and Phoebus' sister then became a cat, and Juno a great cow, white as a snowdrift, Venus a fish and Mercury an ibis." [2] What the Muses sang was Ceres, Proserpina and Death. Ceres represented life and wealth; Proserpina, the daughter of Ceres, married Death by Venus and Cupid's trick which symbolized love, serving as a link between life and death. In the narration of story of Proserpina and death, the Muses had two interludes of Arethusa and Triptolemus inserted, praising the girl's chastity and showing the price paid for blasphemy and greed in the metamorphosis of lynx from Lyncus the king.

### 2.2 Metamorphoses in the story of Pallas and Arachne

Arachne was a girl who dared to rival Pallas at the loom and thought herself superior in art. The girl had neither family nor proper place. And she denied the goddess was her teacher. When Pallas in person disguised as an old woman to persuade her to accept her reputation among mortals but give the goddess grace, Arachne refused with blasphemous words and asked a competition with the goddess. Pallas wove the story of competing with Neptune to name the land in the centre. God of Ocean struck the cliff with his trident

where salt water gushed and Pallas pierced earth with her spear where a silver-glancing olive tree shot up heavy with olives on its boughs. In the four corners Pallas sketched in four trials of Rhodope, Pygmy's queen, Antigone and Cinyras who were punished and transformed for their blasphemy. Arachne wove the story of Jove with Europa, Asteria, Leda, Alcmena, Danae, Aegina, Mnemosyne and Deo's daughter. After Jove came Neptune who took Canace, Theophane, Ceres and Melantho. Together with these stories were those about Apollo, Bacchus and Saturn's love affairs. The result was that not even Pallas nor Envy could damn Arachne's work. Pallas raged at the girl's success, struck through her loom, tore down the scenes of wayward joys in heaven, and with her shuttle slashed the girl's face. When the girl tried to hang herself rather than bow her head, Pallas transformed her into a spider. Pallas took her revenge on Arachne by transforming Arachne into a spider "to swing, to live now and forever, even to the last creature of your kind"<sup>[2]</sup>, which implies that Arachne was ruined in her social status and popularity after the competition with Pallas, reducing to a humble and isolated existence keeping weaving.

### **2.3 Metamorphoses in Story of Niobe and Latona**

Niobe and her husband both claimed kinship to gods and they ruled Cadmus' kingdom. Except for her noble origin and wealth, she had seven boys and girls, which made the brightest joy for her. Niobe bragged of her richness in origin, her wealth and her progeny, mocked at Latona's barrenness and dismissed the people on the street to make prayer to Latona. Indignant Latona returned to Diana and Apollo to tell them of the insult she received from Niobe. The two deities wasted no time taking revenge on Niobe by killing all her sons and girls. In great grief and shock, Niobe turned into a stone on a mountaintop with tears keeping falling from her eyes into a rivulet. By turning into a statue, the effect of tragedy on readers and the warning is lengthened, arousing a novel cognition in readers and leading them to deep thinking. Faced with the disaster like this, a woman would either kill herself immediately or wither in suffering the sorrow of losing her children and hopeless life. Through transformation of Niobe, the ending of the heroine was instilled a perceptive and imaginable connotation. Readers can associate the petrified and lifeless state of a statue with the state of a woman who lost all her children in real life. The processing in readers' mind lengthens perception time and arouses greater aesthetic feelings in readers.

## **3. The Deep Psychological and Social Reasons for Revenges of Gods and Goddess on Their Challengers**

### **3.1 The Defence of Authority by the Gods in These Stories**

The gods and goddesses were mercy when they were properly worshiped and satisfied. However, when their authority was challenged, they would take another look and have their merciless and even bloody revenge on their rivals. Among these gods and goddesses who took fierce revenge on their challengers, Latona, Apollo and Diana were the most vindictive, especially Diana, who brought about savage damage and disaster to Oeneus and his kingdom just because she was neglected in the worship by Oeneus the king. Therefore, the reasons for their revenge on their rivals largely can be attributed to their strong sense of unsafety.

### **3.2 Jealousy of gods and goddess towards the rivals**

One of the main characteristics of western myth is that the gods and goddesses are not as perfect as those in eastern myth. Pallas' case serves as a good example. Through the description of Arachne's brilliant weaving skills and her transformation imposed by Pallas, the sympathy for Arachne, especially for the spirit of her pursuit of independence was shown to the readers. In contrast, the envy and jealousy of the goddess were also revealed. It is a thought-provoking problem how to deal with such cases when a mortal's skill can outplay their patron god. Mythology is a kind of literature form of social consciousness which makes the power of nature exist in the images through imagination. It reflects original thoughts and ideas of ancient human beings to the whole nature and social life.<sup>[3]</sup>

## **4. Conclusion**

Metamorphoses in all these revenge stories are means of defamiliarization. The transformations of the challengers were the physical or social changes they suffered from the anger of gods and goddesses. Revenges of Pallas, the Muses and Apollo on their challengers involved their authority on their skills whereas revenges of Latona and Diana came from their defence of their status. Gods and goddesses could be both beneficent and cruel. Whenever their authority was challenged, their cruelty would be aroused and they would become vindictive.

## **References**

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