



## **A tribute to the world of myth: Ovid and Holkham Hall**

*Ovid's 'Metamorphoses'*

### **Suzanne Reynolds:**

This manuscript in a way, even though it was written in the 1490s and therefore in an age when humanism and printing were established, is actually a resolutely and deliberately mediaeval manuscript.

### **Jeremy Dimmick:**

One of the sides should feel smoother than the other. This is the flesh side, and this is the hair side, where all the hair of the animal has been scraped away.

### **Suzanne Reynolds:**

It sticks to the format of displaying the text in a single column, and then a commentary surrounding it in the margins in a slightly different script.

### **Jeremy Dimmick:**

Ovid manuscripts were produced at lots of different levels for lots of different kinds of consumer. There were schoolbooks, for example, which would have lots of glosses and commentary, but they certainly wouldn't have pictures, so this is an aristocratic one.

### **Suzanne Reynolds:**

This manuscript was commissioned by someone called Raphael de Marcatelis, who was one of the illegitimate children of the Duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, and who had a very successful but rather greedy ecclesiastical career.

### **Jeremy Dimmick:**

As a courtier, Raphael de Marcatelis is somebody who would have used his books partly as a way of displaying his wealth and influence, as well as an undoubted personal love of them as objects.

### **Suzanne Reynolds:**

This is typical of the kind of book he commissioned, very large scale, lavishly illuminated, and bearing his coat of arms and this monogram LYS, 'lys', which comes at the end of his surname and R, 'Raphael', M 'Marcatelis'.

In some ways, the manuscript emphasises continuity with the classical world.

### **Jessica Hughes:**

You definitely get the sense as you look through mediaeval or Renaissance illuminations that the artists are taking these myths from the text and they're making them their own, and they're making them relevant to a contemporary audience.

### **Jessica Hughes:**

This is an image of episodes from the life of Cadmus. At this point Cadmus has been sailing round the ancient world looking for his sister, with no luck, and he doesn't really know what to do so he goes to the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi. This is Cadmus and it's interesting that he is represented in the attitude of a Christian worshipper, so on his knees with his hands clasped in front of him. Something else I noticed was how the figure of Cadmus slaying the dragon is very evocative of representations of St. George killing the dragon.

### **Jessica Hughes:**

Now when we look at these narrative scenes what's very interesting is that they're not really portrayed in classical drapery or classical landscapes, there's very much this sense that it's mediaeval costumes and architecture that are being depicted, and I find that as a classical art

historian I find this absolutely fascinating that there wasn't really this visual demarcation between the past and the present.

Jessica Hughes:

I don't know whether the mediaeval artist would necessarily have thought through all the consequences of this anachronistic portrayal but one effect that it has is showing very much the continuity between the world of classical mythology, and the contemporary world in which this representation was made.

But there were some theological differences between the two eras.

**Jeremy Dimmick:**

The Middle Ages didn't on the whole like to exaggerate a sense of rupture with the classical past. I think they often felt that mediaeval culture really grew out of classical culture, rhetoric, learning, philosophy, but of course there's one great sticking point with that, which is religion.

**Jeremy Dimmick:**

We're looking here at the beginning of the twelve of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the Trojan War, and what's depicted is really the origins of the war. Hecabe, Queen of Troy, has a dream of a burning brand, which is interpreted as meaning that the son she's pregnant with is going to be this cause of the destruction of Troy. The child is therefore exposed and is meant to die, but in fact it survives, grows up, and as a young man is told that he will win the love of the most beautiful woman of the world, Helen. We see Helen in the temple of Venus. She is kind of carried off by Paris, taken by boat to Troy, and the vengeful Greek fleet is going after her.

**Jeremy Dimmick:**

So we're looking here at Calvus, the high priest who, according to mediaeval convention, is actually dressed up as though he were a Christian bishop. It's interesting that the commissioner of the manuscript, Raphael de Marcatelis who of course was an abbot, had also by this point been appointed to a bishop clerk, so he's almost seeing himself in this pagan world.

**Jeremy Dimmick:**

When you look at the architecture the buildings, in particular this big kind of chapel-like building in the bottom left really does look like a late mediaeval church, but it has a pagan idol in it so there's a very interesting collision here, I think, between pagan religion and Christian religion. I think that's quite important to the meaning of this picture. One of the things that the Christian Middle Ages were very clear on is that back then they were pagans and now we are not, and pagan religion was felt to be misguided at best, demonically inspired at worst. These statues, according to St. Augustine, had little demons living in them, giving out, leading people to their doom.

For a Christian audience, this tension was something that had to be resolved.

**Jeremy Dimmick:**

One of the strategies for dealing with Ovidian mythology is to find moralisations within them, and in both French and Latin versions you find retellings or presentations of the Ovidian stories, accompanied by sometimes quite unexpected morals.

**Suzanne Reynolds:**

Pierre Bursuire's *Ovidius Morisatus* was written in the middle of the 14th century and was the standard christianising work on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* so, for example, it starts here and quotes from the Ovid text in larger script and underlined in red, and then explains the text and gives moral or christianising readings of it.

Some of Ovid's writings presented even more of a challenge to a Christian reader.

**Jeremy Dimmick:**

This is the first of a pair of images in which we're going to see Ovid not the mythographer of the *Metamorphoses*, but the teacher of the art of love, and also what to do when you don't

want to be in love any more. In the first one Ovid is teaching at a kind of a lectern with his book in front of him, in a garden of love, like something out of a mediaeval love allegory, like *The Romance of the Rose*, and he's got around him an audience of these courtly figures, young couples on the left, to the right probably a couple of children, I think, rather than grown ups far away, and interestingly bottom right an old couple, an old man who's clearly, he's still avidly listening. There's probably a kind of a story here but there's an expectation that the old will grow out of love but, in fact, love still retains its power into old age.

**Jeremy Dimmick:**

I'm going to turn now to the remedies for love in which apparently older, bearded Ovid is again teaching, but this time what he's doing is repackaging the heroes of classical mythology, some of them we meet in the *Metamorphoses*, as exempla, that is stories you can learn from, about what goes wrong if you don't learn the art of falling out of love. For mediaeval readers sometimes uncomfortable with teaching the art of sexual love, one of the ways you could justify that was to say well, look at the way that Ovid himself almost retracted it in a later work, and for a lot of mediaeval biographers of Ovid, they claim that he actually wrote the remedies after he'd been exiled by Augustus, as a way of making up for having really annoyed the Emperor Augustus with his earlier poem, *The Art of Love*.