



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

Exploring myth at Holkham Hall

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I'm Paula James, I lecture in the Classical Studies department of the Open University, and I've written on Ovid in Block 3 of A330.

Holkham Hall is the estate of Thomas Coke who lived in the 17th century, and he collected classical statues and paintings, but illuminated, illustrated medieval manuscripts of Latin texts. So this house is one man's passionate vision of cultural beauties of the past, and because he was an avid reader of Greek and Roman authors, we find this wonderful manuscript of Ovid's works in the library, and also paintings and sculptures which are depicting myths which Ovid narrates in the *Metamorphoses*.

I think what's special about Holkham Hall is it's not just a statement, or perhaps it isn't even a statement about conspicuous wealth and aristocratic status with this wonderful collection, artworks, I mean the sentries, statues, all kinds of different representations of classical figures, and sometimes Christian saints as well, so it's not just about how Thomas Coke wants to present himself to the world in terms of his status and his badge of culture, if you like, it shows that Thomas Coke has a great scholarship and love of the classical past. He's collected artefacts but he also commissions contemporary artists to paint mythical themes. He actively encourages a reconstruction, a retelling, a re-presenting of the legends and myths that are found in Roman epic writers and sometimes, as often happens with myth, there's a personal resonance and, in fact, there's a lovely moment in the tour where Jess talks about Thomas Coke's loss of his father and this was perhaps something that resonated in the picture of Virgil's Aeneas and Aeneas visiting his father in the Underworld. So myth always has that personal as well as that cultural impact, I think.

There's a very direct connection with Ovid in Holkham in the Manuscript that I mentioned earlier, which is a medieval illuminated so it's kind of decorating the text of Ovid, and in doing so the artists brought into play their own kind of cultural context, and indeed their own religious context, so they would superimpose upon Ovid's narrative and Ovid's sequences, mythical sequences, perhaps medieval architecture, medieval, religious costume, for example, so an ancient priest, a priest from the classical past, suddenly looks like a bishop, and I think this is absolutely fascinating because it shows that whilst Ovid is very, very influential he doesn't dictate the way a myth is going to go in any particular era. In, in some ways maybe Ovid kind of releases the ability to refashion the myths in the most adventurous ways.

I suppose what's interesting about how myths that Ovid tells insinuate themselves through Holkham Hall, is it's in very different ways, so looking at the Manuscript you've got the whole narrative, and you've got the illumination and the pictures around that narrative done by the medieval artists, but you might look at a sculpture, say Marcyas, the Flaying of Marcyas is a famous myth, Marcyas is there as a statue but the, the sculptor can pick a moment in the myth, they don't have to give you the whole narrative, they don't have to give you the terrible, violent consequence of Marcius challenging the god Apollo, for instance. Other artefacts like paintings might be crowded out with figures and trying to represent more than one part of the narrative, in fact, or at least to allude to more than one part of the narrative, so you've got a real mix and match of Ovidian narrative throughout the house in different forms, and it's fascinating to think back to the way Ovid was telling the myths and what might happen if you freeze a moment in time from one of the narratives.

I think I'd advise students when they watch this album that they should sit back and enjoy the visual feast, that's the first thing to do. But then with regard to Holkham there's plenty to sit up and think about, and take notice of, because what we have here is yet another way of

looking at the function of myth in general, Ovid's engagement with myth in particular, and how his imaginative recreations are not slavishly adhered to, but have the potential to be refashioned further, to be cut in different ways perhaps, and presented in different ways, sequenced in different ways. I think because Ovid demonstrates myths' multifunctionality he does kind of liberate artists, and also subsequent authors, to do all kinds of exciting things with myths, to psychologise them, to personalise them, especially the way Ovid looks closely into the predicament and suffering of mythical figures, the choices of heroes, all those kinds of things, so it's just absolutely fascinating to see here that in medieval times they found it quite easy to moralise the tales, I think because of the way Ovid brings an ethics dimension to them as well.