

Variorum vitae: Theseus and the Arts of Mythography
in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

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Submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree
of D.Phil. in English Literature,
Trinity Term, 2013

ABSTRACT

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This thesis offers an approach to the history of mythographical discourse through the figure of Theseus and his appearances in texts from England, Italy and France. Analysing a range of poetic, historical, and allegorical works that feature Theseus alongside their classical and contemporary intertexts, it is a study of the conceptions of Greco-Roman mythology prevalent in European literature from 1300-1600. Focusing on mythology's pervasive presence as a background to medieval and early modern literary and intellectual culture, it draws attention to the fragmentary, fluid and polymorphous nature of mythology in relation to its use for different purposes in a wide range of texts.

The first impact of this study is to draw attention to the distinction between mythology and mythography, as a means of focusing on the full range of interpretative processes associated with the ancient myths in their textual forms. Returning attention to the processes by which writers and readers came to know the Greco-Roman myths, it widens the commonly accepted critical definition of 'mythography' to include any writing of or on mythology, while restricting 'mythology' to its abstract sense, meaning a traditional collection of tales that exceeds any one text. This distinction allows the analyses of the study's primary texts to display the full range of interpretative processes and possibilities involved in rewriting mythology, and to outline a spectrum of linked but distinctive mythographical genres that define those possibilities.

Breaking down into two parts of three chapters each, the thesis examines Theseus' appearances across these mythographical genres, first in the period from 1300 to the birth of print, and then from the birth of print up to 1600. Taking as its primary texts works by Giovanni Boccaccio, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Lydgate and William Shakespeare along with their classical intertexts, it situates each of them in regard to their multiple defining contexts. Paying close attention to the European traditions of commentary, translation and response to classical sources, it shows mythographical discourse as a vibrant aspect of medieval and early modern literary culture, equally embedded in classical traditions and contemporary traditions that transcended national and linguistic boundaries.

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	i
Table of Classical Sources on Theseus.....	xvi
Part One: Theseus and Mythography, 1300-1440	
One:	
‘Il buon Teseo’: Giovanni Boccaccio and the genres of mythography	2
Two:	
Chaucer, Gower and the Fate of Theseus: Ovidian poetic mythography in fourteenth-century England	65
Three:	
A Faulty Piece: the Collapse of Mythographical Genres in the <i>Fall of Princes</i>	134
Part Two: Theseus and Mythography, 1470-1600	
Four:	
Sorting the Rocks from the Trees: the <i>Metamorphoses</i> and mythology in the Age of Print	193
Five:	
Unbelievable Tales and the Morals of the Ancients: New Old Sources and the <i>Mythologiae</i>	228
Six:	
Antique Fables and Antic Fables: Thesean mythography in <i>A Midsummer</i> <i>Night’s Dream</i>	281
Conclusion	319
Bibliography:	
Primary Texts	322
Secondary Texts	329

INTRODUCTION

In 1396, Coluccio Salutati (1331-1406) wrote from Florence to his friend and protégé Jacopo Angeli dei Scarpì, then visiting Constantinople. Among other matters addressed, including efforts to persuade the Byzantine scholar Manuel Chrysoloras to accept the Chair in Greek at the University of Florence, Salutati sent Jacopo a list of books to buy for him. Along with historical works, metrical treatises, and the complete works of Plato, Plutarch and Homer, he asked that Jacopo make sure not to leave out ‘anything that discusses the fables of the poets’.¹ The various difficulties of reading ancient poetry were obviously preying on Salutati’s mind at the time, for the list ends by specifying that the Homer should be ‘in large letters’ and, again, that Jacopo should buy ‘anything mythological’ he could find.²

For a modern critic struggling to get to grips with the vast field of mythological references in medieval and early modern literature, the passage is reassuring. If anyone should have known their myths, it is Salutati, the leading humanist of his generation, who once described his first encounter with Ovid as like being given a gift by God.³ Greco-Roman mythology had already been a major source of themes and allusions in Italian literature for at least three generations, running through the works of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, and into Salutati’s own writing. And yet, it is clear that he still did not feel the easy familiarity with mythological reference that one might expect. More than that, he appears hardly even to have known where to start, or how to orientate himself in the vast field of texts and genres covered by ‘anything mythological’.

¹ ‘nullus qui reperiri queat fac desit [...] qui fabulas tractaverit poetarum’, *Epistolario di Coluccio Salutati*, ed. Francesco Novati (Rome: Forzani E.C. Tipografia del Senato, 1891), 3:131.

² ‘Homerum grossis litteris et si quem mythologum invenies emito’, *Ibid.*, 3:132.

³ See Ronald Witt, who identifies Salutati as the leader of ‘fourth generation’ humanism; *In the Footsteps of the Ancients: The Origins of Humanism from Lovato to Bruni* (Leiden: BRILL, 2003), 292, 294–5; Coluccio Salutati, *De laboribus Herculis*, ed. B. L. Ullman (Zurich: Theasauri mundi, 1951), 1:215.

Of course, Salutati was far from ignorant about Greco-Roman mythology, and in the middle of composing his *De laboribus Herculis* (which ranges far beyond its notional subject) he had good reason to expand his knowledge. But, at the same time, his letter points towards something that is easy to forget as a modern reader, with access to carefully annotated editions of classical, medieval and renaissance texts, to mythological encyclopaedias, and, of course, to the internet. The Greek myths were in equal measure a resource for and a challenge to writers and readers in the period covered by this study. As the main referential background to the classical texts that the humanists and their inheritors valued so highly, knowledge of the myths was a central requirement for Europe's cultural elites, but it was also a subject that, for a number of reasons, resisted easy familiarity. The size of the field, the existence of multiple versions of the same tales, the obscure and allusive nature of many of the classical texts that transmitted them, the questions hanging over authenticity and priority, all of these can be read into Salutati's 'anything mythological'.

The original impetus behind this study lay in my own encounter with such difficulties through debates about Theseus' role in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Depending on the critic, that role was taken as either overwhelmingly positive or overwhelmingly negative, and each study provided ample evidence for its standpoint, based on what Shakespeare's audience could reasonably be expected to know about Theseus beyond the play. Puzzled in particular by the opposing interpretations put forward by Paul Olson and D'Orsay Pearson, it struck me that neither they, nor the critics working in their footsteps were asking *how* audiences would have known about Theseus, how they perceived mythology more generally, and how that

would have affected the interpretative strategies they brought to the play.⁴ Delving into Theseus' backgrounds, these questions seemed to me more and more difficult to answer without a fuller sense of the challenges involved in getting to know a given myth or set of myths, and without a fuller sense of what audiences and writers felt one could do with those myths. Reconstructing what people knew is, in other words, only half the battle. In order to assess Theseus' place in a text like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, one would need to think less in terms of the audience's knowledge, than in terms of how they would have used that knowledge. And in order to reconstruct that, it would be important to consider the constitutive role of the ways in which Shakespeare and his audience came to know about Theseus in the first place.

To do this ambition justice, I had to engage in a broader and more diverse series of enquiries than had initially seemed possible. Though one of the results has been to provide new contexts for reading Shakespeare's Theseus, this thesis uses the Athenian hero to perform a more general analysis of the reception and reappropriation of Greco-Roman mythology in a range of medieval and early modern texts. Covering the period from approximately 1300 through to 1600, the six chapters that follow examine a series of Thesean texts from England, Italy and France alongside their classical and post-classical sources as a means of analysing the conceptions of the ancient myths that lie behind their uses of Theseus. Through those conceptions, I have then reconstructed the kinds of hermeneutics that writers were inviting by using mythology in their work. In this sense, what follows is less about Theseus himself than about what his presence in texts has to show about conceptions of mythology at different points in literary history, and about the kinds of interpretive strategy

⁴ See Paul A. Olson, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Meaning of Court Marriage', *ELH* 24, no. 2 (June 1957): 95–119; D'Orsay W. Pearson, "'Unkinde" Theseus: A Study in Renaissance Mythography', *English Literary Renaissance* 4, no. 2 (1974): 276–98. The second of these is discussed in more detail in Chapter Six, below.

that writers expected their audiences to follow when confronted by mythological allusions. This is a history of mythography written through Theseus, rather than vice versa.

My approach here is based on certain premises and terminological distinctions that relate directly to the vagueness surrounding mythology in Salutati's epistle. The first of these is the relationship between the familiar 'mythology' and the less familiar 'mythography'. Though 'mythography' remains a relatively uncommonly used term, there have been a number of studies on the subject, all of which implicitly or explicitly define it as describing the processes of allegorising the ancient myths. In one way or another, even when other words or phrases have been used for 'mythography', Jean Pépin, Jean Seznec, Don Cameron Allen, and Leonard Barkan's seminal studies all work from the distinction formulated by Jane Chance in her *Medieval Mythography*.⁵ In Chance's definition, "mythology" is a unified system of myth, often in narrative form, whereas "mythography" is an explanation and rationalization of one or more myths, often in didactic form'.⁶

I take issue with both sides of this definition. As Salutati's 'anything mythological' suggests, distinctions between narration and interpretation are by no means universal when it comes to mythology, and in a certain sense they are untenable. For Plutarch, in sharp contrast to Chance, a *muthographos* was a writer of legends who was actively uninterested in their rationalisation or explanation.⁷ For modern classicists, meanwhile, the term has been used to

⁵ Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, trans. Barbara Sessions (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1953); Jean Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie: les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes* (Paris: Aubier, Éditions Montaigne, 1958); Don Cameron Allen, *Mysteriously Meant: The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971); Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1986); Jane Chance, *Medieval Mythography: From Roman North Africa to the School of Chartres, A.D. 433-1177*, 2 vols. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994).

⁶ Chance, *Medieval Mythography: From Roman North Africa to the School of Chartres, A.D. 433-1177*, 1:1–2.

⁷ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives, with an English Translation by Bernadotte Perrin, Volume I*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914), 'Theseus', I.1. Plutarch's 'Theseus' is discussed Chapter Five, below.

refer to compilatory epitomes like the Pseudo-Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca*, Hyginus' *Fabulae*,⁸ and a range of what Alan Cameron terms 'mythographic companions' designed to accompany poems like the *Aeneid* and *Metamorphoses*.⁹ Texts like these, designed to set down the bare bones of the myths for the purpose of reference, do not partake of the kind of interpretative processes named by Chance, but they are nevertheless mythographical. As the term's etymology suggests, in its broadest sense, mythography refers to any writing of or on mythology, and, taken as such, it reveals itself as referring to a broad spectrum of linked but distinctive practices. Ranging from narration, to compilation, to interpretation in the sense specified by Chance, these are all in some sense interpretative, and all constitute departures from mythology itself.

The immediate impact of considering mythography in this broad definition is to return attention to the non-given nature of mythology and to the difficulties communicated by Salutati's epistle. Our own encounters with the Greek myths tend to be, as Timothy Gantz has noted, in synthetic versions, which inevitably promote a sense that the myths are more unified and whole than they really are.¹⁰ Modern handbooks, annotations to classical texts, and the mythological summaries to be found in encyclopaedias or online, all reinforce the false notion that Greek mythology is 'a relatively seamless whole'.¹¹ When considered across a number of texts, however, it quickly becomes apparent that Greco-Roman mythology is far from seamless, but is, instead, 'multifaceted, multifarious and multivalent, a fluid phenomenon', in a sense starkly distinguished from any idea of a 'unified system'.¹² Even when 'known', mythology never becomes fully stable, but, within certain limits, is always

⁸ Also discussed in Chapter Five, below.

⁹ Alan Cameron, *Greek Mythography in the Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), viii.

¹⁰ Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1:xvi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Roger D. Woodard, 'Introduction: *Muthoi* in Continuity and Variation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology*, ed. Roger D. Woodard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

open to variation, appropriation and reinterpretation. Rather than working on materials that are ‘given’ in the sense implied by Chance’s definition, the writers examined in the chapters that follow are each dealing in different ways with this fluid phenomenon, and that fluidity has direct and visible impacts on their uses of mythology.

These premises and my choice of focus are intended to situate this study so that it complements those studies named above, illuminating different aspects of mythology’s reception in the medieval and early modern periods. Pépin’s *Mythe et allégorie*, along with Don Cameron Allen’s *Mysteriously Meant*, and Armand Strubel’s more recent ‘*Grant senefiance a’: Allégorie et la littérature au Moyen Age* remain the key studies on mythological allegory in classical and medieval literature, and though allegoresis forms one area of my focus here, I cede to their greater breadth and authority. Similarly, Jean Seznec’s magisterial *Survival of the Pagan Gods* (first published in French as *La survivance des dieux pagans* in 1945), remains an unparalleled survey of the cultural significance of the pagan deities in the period covered here, but Seznec’s focus on allegory and visual symbolism restricts him from investigating the kinds of mythographical text at the heart of this study. Though I have offered occasional correctives to some of Seznec’s findings on this basis, my intention throughout has been to illuminate those aspects of mythographical practice that have, for one reason or another, not attracted the attention of critics. Through Theseus, I have attempted to shed light not only on the allegorical processes by which authors extract meaning from myths, but on the processes by which they implicate meaning into myths and imbue them with new significances.

Pursuing the sense of mythography as a spectrum of linked practices, the first chapter examines Theseus’ appearances in three works by Giovanni Boccaccio (*Il Teseida delle nozze*

d'Emilia, the *De casibus virorum illustrium*, and the *Genealogie deorum gentilium*).¹³ The key contention of this chapter, following on from the sense of mythology's fluidity, is that mythography is governed by what can be called complex textual contingency. Though myths exist outside and beyond the texts into which writers insert them, the fluidity of mythology means that it is, to a remarkable degree, open to appropriation and reinterpretation. That is to say that, though mythology might be called upon to bring a set of meanings to a text, those meanings are necessarily affected by and effected through that text. Thus, while the myth or mythical figure in question always remains in some sense itself (able to be recognised as 'from mythology') and brings significance to the text as such, its meaning is also contingent on that text.

This sense that the meaning of myths is to a large extent governed by the particular texts in which they are found, is directly related to questions of genre. Through Boccaccio's three Theseuses, it is possible to outline a set of related but differentiable mythographical genres which define the boundaries within which different kinds of mythography can work, and, in turn, the range of functions it can be called upon to perform. What is crucial here is that Boccaccio provides an example of a single author employing the same myths for starkly different purposes in different genres of text. Though, for obvious reasons, it would be wrong to presume complete identity of context for works written at different points in Boccaccio's career, the *Teseida*, *De casibus* and *Genealogie*'s singularity of provenance is intended to show the simultaneity of mythography's flexibility and breadth. Dependent upon the genre into which it is inserted, mythology reveals itself in the first chapter as a field of possibilities, simultaneously available for different ends. Open to redefinition in different contexts, these

¹³ Unless otherwise noted, all references to works by Boccaccio are to the texts given in Giovanni Boccaccio, *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. Vittore Branca, 10 vols., Classici Mondadori (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1964).

genres of mythography – poetic, moralising, historicising and systematising – provide an analytical framework for the chapters that follow.

The second chapter examines the openness of mythology and the theme of textual contingency through the question of sourcing. Turning to Geoffrey Chaucer and John Gower's versions of the tale of Theseus and Ariadne (in *The Legend of Good Women* and the *Confessio amantis*), I examine whether the abstract sense of mythology as an open field survives when writers work from an authoritative source such as Ovid. Conducting a survey of medieval responses to the *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* before turning to close readings of Chaucer and Gower, I follow a process closely allied to what Timothy Gantz terms 'uncompiling' the myths, as a means of emphasising the persistently polyvocal nature of mythology even in classical sources.¹⁴

As a major classical hero who does not belong to any one classical text in particular, Theseus is a good candidate for this process. Thesean tales are scattered in fragments and variant forms across texts by Ovid, Statius, Seneca, and Plutarch, along with a number of post-classical texts and paratexts, but they are nevertheless referred to by Chaucer and many modern critics as 'Ovidian'. As Alan Cameron notes, it is sobering to realise that 'countless details we take for granted are first mentioned not by Homer or Aeschylus or even Callimachus but by some anonymous Roman or even Byzantine hack'.¹⁵ In connection with the episode of the Minotaur recounted by Chaucer and Gower, it is striking to note the earliest mention of the Minotaur is not to be found in a poetic or dramatic text, but in a fourth century B.C.E. rationalising text, Palaephatus' *On Unbelievable Tales*, while the *Metamorphoses*, despite recounting the myth, does not name the Minotaur at all.¹⁶ For a

¹⁴ Gantz, *Early Greek Myth*, 1:xvi.

¹⁵ Cameron, *Greek Mythography in the Roman World*, vii.

¹⁶ On Palaephatus, see Chapter Six, Section II, below. On the *Metamorphoses*, see Chapter Two, Section I.ii.

fourteenth-century English author to name the Minotaur in a recognisably Ovidian context, is, therefore, already to engage in a process of compilation that forms a key aspect of their approach to the myths.¹⁷

Accordingly, rather than taking for granted a single outline of the Thesean myths, or attempting to work through a single classical source, I analyse Chaucer and Gower's writing of Theseus through Ovid's poetry and its medieval reception in a range of French and Italian commentaries, translations and responses. A broad survey of Ovidian materials in the period focuses attention on the fragmentary, allusive and variant ways in which Ovid's works transmit information about Theseus, and makes clear that Ovid's reception in translations and commentaries tended to multiply and diffract those aspects of his work. Reading the Ovidian tradition in this way, and returning attention to Ovid's use as a mythographical handbook, this second chapter contends that Ovid became for medieval writers and readers both the primary authority on mythology and an authority for the kinds of mythographical flexibility outlined in Chapter One.

Following on from this process of 'uncompiling', Chapter Three examines the problems of its opposite, the compiling of different versions of the myths from different genres of mythography. Here, I analyse John Lydgate's presentation of Theseus in the *Fall of Princes* through the multiple authorities that exert pressure on his writing of the poem. Paying particular attention to Lydgate's use of a French intermediary to translate Boccaccio's *De casibus*, alongside his relationships to Duke Humphrey of Gloucester and to Chaucer, this chapter approaches the breakdown of mythographical genres through a methodology drawn from Julia Kristeva's articulation of 'intertextuality'. The problems that arise in Lydgate's writing of Theseus appear here as symptoms of his attempt to combine different

¹⁷ See Chapter Two, Section II.i.

mythographical genres and to treat the Thesean myths as a single contiguous structure divided between many texts, rather than as the fragmentary and polymorphous set of variants laid out in the first two chapters. Drawing parallels between Lydgate's problematic treatment of Theseus and certain critical approaches to mythography, this chapter uses Lydgate as a means of reinforcing the need to consider mythographical texts through the notion of complex textual contingency.

The fourth and fifth chapters take the second part of the thesis into the period from approximately 1470-1600, examining shifts and continuities in mythography through the reception of texts examined in Chapters One and Two. Chapter Four extends the history of the *Metamorphoses*' reception into this later period by using new sources of bibliographical data, such as the Universal Short Title Catalogue, to collate figures on the publishing of the poem and a range of its associated texts. Through these figures it becomes possible to offer a corrective to some of the assertions made by Jean Seznec and others regarding the place of moralisation in Ovid's early modern reception, and, instead, to foreground the continuity of the *Metamorphoses*' use as a mythographical sourcebook. It also becomes clear that, though moralising approaches largely fade away, the earlier period's valorisation of additive and composite annotation lives on, in such a way as promote the interpretative autonomy of the poem's readers and reinforce the sense of mythology's textual contingency. This sense of the *Metamorphoses*' position in early modern mythographical discourse is further substantiated by analyses of translations from the same period, in Italian, French and English. As elsewhere in the reception of the poem, the Italian translations in particular show an implicit valorisation of interpretative autonomy, which echoes through the contemporary French versions, and, to a marginally lesser extent, Arthur Golding's English *XV Bookes of P. Ovidius Naso, entytuled Metamorphosis*.

Chapter Five follows a similar process in examining the links between new editions of Boccaccio's mythographical works and the publishing of recently rediscovered classical works on mythology. The central subject of this chapter is the dissemination of works by authors such as the historicising mythographers Palaephatus and Plutarch, and the systematising mythographer Hyginus, each of whose writings on Theseus become points of reference for Ovid and Boccaccio's sixteenth-century annotators. As a means of illustrating again the interpretative autonomy granted to readers, and the persistent sense of mythology's textual contingency, I set the publishing history of Palaephatus' *Unbelievable Tales*, Hyginus' *Fabulae*, and Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* alongside the conceptions of mythology visible in their versions of the Thesean myths. As in Chapter Two, a key area of focus here is the sense of how readers met the myths in their 'uncompiled' states, even, and perhaps particularly, in compilatory texts and collections.

Through this new history of the publishing of classical mythography it becomes possible to offer a corrective to the standard critical views (positive and negative) of the most famous of the new sixteenth-century mythographers, Natale Conti. Countering Sez nec's view of Conti as largely echoing medieval views on mythology, I distinguish him from both his predecessors and contemporaries by drawing attention to his closing-down of interpretative flexibility; a trait that marks him as less representative of sixteenth-century conceptions of mythology than has commonly been accepted. Portraying Conti as less influential in theoretical terms than has been suggested by his most recent editors, this chapter makes the case that it was his gathering of information and not his interpretative approach that garnered him such success among his contemporaries.

The final chapter turns back to my original point of departure and analyses the status of Thesean mythography in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Taking the *Dream* as a poetic

mythographical text, and examining critical approaches to Theseus against the findings of the previous chapters, Chapter Six makes a case for a new way of reading his role in the play. Set in its wider mythographical context, and read through the complex textual contingency elaborated in the preceding chapters, Theseus' role appears less as defining the play, than as being defined by it. One small portion of the *Dream*'s complex and eclectic intertextual web, Theseus nevertheless becomes a means of accessing the play's approach to its intertexts in a fashion that illuminates aspects that have, largely, remained unnoted. Taking the Athenian hero through the multiple senses of 'antique' that Shakespeare activates in the play, I suggest that a knowledge of the play's mythographical backgrounds makes it possible to sidestep debates over the positivity or negativity of Theseus, and, instead, to trace the workings of a subtle and complex form of 'antic mythography' that has far reaching and transformative consequences.

It will be clear from this outline, that this study takes on an ambitious task in attempting to cover so much ground. My aim throughout has been to illuminate an important part of the cultural background to medieval and renaissance literature, from angles that have previously been neglected. In that sense, this thesis is a methodological experiment, staking a claim for new ways of investigating a central aspect of medieval and early modern literary culture. When I first came to the questions at its heart, it was clear to me that other methods of investigating the reception of mythology would not shed light on the areas that it seemed most urgent to illuminate. In so far as mythology manifestly transcends the work of any one classical author, it struck me that I could not adequately trace its reception through, say, authors' responses to Ovid alone. Similarly, I felt that focusing on the place of mythology in a specific medieval or renaissance writer would end up by privileging an individual conception of mythology over wider cultural currents; a process which would, at best, restrict

any illumination to one author's work. In taking a single figure as a means of guiding my enquiry into mythology's presence in and through a much broader range of texts, I have attempted to avoid the pitfalls associated with either of these approaches. Theseus, through his presence in a range of important English texts, and through his particular qualities as a representative of Greek mythology, seemed to me a useful way of plotting a different path.

There are necessarily a number of texts and aspects of mythography that I have not been able to include here. Certain texts in which Theseus plays a key role, like the 'Knight's Tale', have been excluded in order to make space for less well known texts that, nevertheless, provide useful information about the history of mythography. The major aspect of mythography that I have not had space to attend to here, however, is in visual culture. Without wishing to fall back too easily on the excuse of disciplinary divisions, the rigours of time and space, combined with the sense that there are others better qualified to pursue that line of enquiry, made that exclusion easier to bear. Despite the occasional correctives I offer to some of Seznec's findings, his *Survival of the Pagan Gods* remains the seminal text on mythological iconography, and Malcolm Bull's *Mirror of the Gods* brings it up to date in ways which I could not hope to better.¹⁸

Whether or not I have avoided the pitfalls associated with this mode of enquiry is another matter. But the methodology I have used here does have important benefits in highlighting the necessity of crossing inter- and intradisciplinary boundaries in order to gain a fuller picture of particular cultural phenomena. In going beyond the boundaries of Chance's narrow definition of mythography in order to emphasise the contiguity of a range of mythographical practices, I have also been able to cross certain other boundaries and emphasise other contiguities. Theseus' presence in the English texts analysed here

¹⁸ Malcolm Bull, *The Mirror of the Gods: Classical Mythology in Renaissance Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

emphasises the necessity of reading those texts in their multiple defining contexts, and it is this that I have attempted at every stage to do. It is impossible to follow his traces without situating English literature in regard to wider European cultural trends, and without situating early modern literature in regard to its medieval heritage. Though the end-points of my readings lie for the most part in English texts, it would have been impossible to pursue those analyses without considerable reference to a wide range of French and Italian texts, as well as to Theseus' classical sources. I have deliberately avoided moving on too quickly from these continental intertexts in order to show that, in almost every case, writers' uses of them go far beyond any narrow definition of sourcing.

Similarly, though I make certain distinctions between medieval and early modern (or renaissance) approaches to mythology, I have tried as much as possible to void those terms of their old prejudices. This study is diachronic in nature, but it is emphatically not teleological. As Theseus' presence in the texts analysed here makes clear, difference and progress are two very different things. In teasing out distinctions between the texts examined in the chapters below, I have, I hope, made clear the presence of one important constant: writers' very persistent recognition of mythology's fecundity across time.

On a technical note, I have, in addressing these topics, attempted wherever possible to avoid needless multiplication of technical terms. Where they have proven necessary, I have attempted to employ them in precise and consistent senses. For the sake of convenience, I have largely used 'mythology' *tout court* to refer to Greco-Roman mythology, and I have tried as much as possible to restrict its use to the abstract sense defined above. Other terms, such as 'source', 'influence' and 'intertext' will all be found defined more precisely as and when necessary. In each case, I hope it will be clear that any terminological quibbles are intended to help clarify the workings of the texts being analysed.

In all the quotations that follow, I have either reproduced the orthography of the standard modern critical editions (as in the case of Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and the majority of the classical texts referred to), or of the most historically appropriate editions available. Only on points of substantive import have I noted differences between modern editions and texts from the relevant period. In the case of manuscripts and early printed texts, I have made no attempts to modernise or standardise spelling and punctuation. I have, however, silently expanded tittles and shorthand letters, for the sake of readability. Finally, for the French, Italian, Latin and Greek quotations that follow I have endeavoured to provide translations that are both accurate and readable. Occasionally, I have adapted an existing translation in order to draw attention to particular turns of phrase or uses of vocabulary; all instances where this is the case are identified as such in the notes. Elsewhere, unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Table of Main Classical Sources on Theseus Discussed in the Following Thesis

Author	Title	Composed	Circulating from and <i>editio princeps</i>¹⁹	See Chapter
Palaephatus	<i>Peri apiston</i>	340-330 B.C.E.	Late 1400s	5.II.i
			1505	
Diodorus Siculus	<i>Bibliotheca historica</i>	60-30 B.C.E.	Late 1400s	5.II.i
			1472 (partial Latin tr.); 1535 (partial Greek text); 1559 (full Greek text)	
Ovid	<i>Heroides</i>	25-16 B.C.E.	1100s	2.I.i
	<i>Metamorphoses</i>	8 C.E.	1471	2.I.ii
Hyginus	<i>Fabulae</i>	Late 1 st Century B.C.E.	1050s	
			1471	
	<i>Astronomica (epitome)</i>	2 nd Century C.E.?	1535	
			1535	
Plutarch	‘Vita Thesei’	1 st Century C.E.	1000s	5.II.ii
			1475	
Staius	<i>Thebaid</i>	80-92 C.E.	1400s	1.I
			1470 (Latin tr.); 1517 (Greek)	
Pseudo- Apollodorus	<i>Bibliotheca</i>	2 nd Century C.E.	Late 1400s	5.II.i
			1555 (Greek)	

¹⁹ Dates of renewed circulation in Western Europe are necessarily approximate; all dates are based on the indications concerning manuscripts given in the most reliable modern editions.

PART ONE:

THESEUS AND MYTHOGRAPHY, 1300-1440

ONE

‘Il buon Teseo’: Giovanni Boccaccio and the genres of mythography

Though Boccaccio has, in more recent times, been primarily considered in his role as a promoter and innovator of vernacular writing, a major aspect of his impact on successive generations of writers lies in the field of mythography. His interpretations of Theseus, found in three texts that span his literary career, show a writer equally concerned with the poetic possibilities of mythology, with its political, moral and spiritual uses, and with the basic difficulties of becoming conversant with it. Taken together, the accounts of the Athenian hero found in *Il Teseida delle nozze d’Emilia* (1339-41), the *De casibus virorum illustrium* (c.1356) and the *Genealogie deorum gentilium* (begun 1356-59; revised up to 1374) offer a unique opportunity to analyse, within a single author’s *oeuvre*, the different possibilities and problems that mythology presented fourteenth-century writers.

The fruits of that analysis are important to this study in two ways. In the first instance, few of the Thesean texts analysed in later chapters are free of the impact (direct or indirect) of Boccaccio’s representations of the hero. Along with Ovid and, later, Plutarch, Boccaccio’s work is a major source for writers approaching the Thesean tales, and this alone makes him an invaluable point of comparison for their texts. It is clear at the same time, however, that Boccaccio’s importance to medieval and renaissance mythographical writing goes far beyond the lone figure of Theseus. There is a study to be written on that larger role, and though this is not that study, it is important to the argument I trace through Theseus that Boccaccio’s work be understood both narrowly, as a source of information on the hero, and more broadly,

as an influence. That is to say, that Boccaccio's mythographical works presented his contemporaries and successors not just with specific things they could say about Theseus, but also with a set of modal and generic precedents for the ways in which they could say those things. Though the information Boccaccio's Thesean texts transmit about the hero is of some importance in the examinations below, it is the paradigmatic aspect that is primary. The analyses of the *Teseida*, *De casibus* and *Genealogie*'s different approaches to Theseus provide a means of outlining a set of mythographical genres through which to explore the possibilities and problems of mythography.

Moving in four sections, this chapter examines each text in turn in order to outline a set of related but distinctive mythographical genres, before bringing them together in a concluding section that highlights some of the tensions peculiar to mythographical writing across those genres. Used as a framework for discussing the Thesean texts examines in later chapters, these mythographical genres point towards a key aspect of the theme of complex textual contingency raised in the introduction. Set alongside one another, the analyses in this chapter show how closely the interplay of possibility and limitation associated with that contingency relates to the generic identity of each new mythographical work. Though the genres in question are to be taken as porous and flexible, they are, nevertheless, key to understanding the differing degrees of flexibility open to writers in their approaches to the Thesean myths.

It is indicative of the breadth of the mythographical spectrum that the generic differences between Boccaccio's three takes on Theseus should be so stark from the outset. The early poem *Il Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia* (1339-41) is an extended experiment in combining classical epic and medieval romance that presents Theseus

as a medievalised duke presiding over Athens and its lovers with supreme authority; the *De casibus virorum illustrium* (c.1356) is a mirror-for-princes moral treatise that takes Theseus as an ancient king exemplifying the fault of credulity; the *Genealogie deorum gentilium* (begun 1356-59; revised up to 1374) is a systematising compendium, with keys for the use and interpretation of mythology, that seeks simply to pool all the available information about Theseus.¹ Even defined so broadly, each can be seen turning mythology to its own purposes for different ends, according to the agendas of each text.

It is perhaps worth noting that it has proven natural for *boccaccisti* to put the differences between these texts down to a teleological interpretation of Boccaccio's literary and scholarly development. Scattered across his career, the three texts at the heart of this chapter have not, to my knowledge, ever been compared, thanks to certain deep-seated compartmentalisations of Boccaccio's output, and, of course, thanks to the narrow definition of mythography that prevails in much criticism.² In the context of this study, however, it is crucial, that the *Teseida*, *De casibus* and *Genealogie* be taken considered outside of the *boccaccisti*'s teleological framework. That Boccaccio should have written such different mythographical portraits of a single figure may correlate to biographical developments in his intellectual life, but it is also a testament to the wide spectrum of mythographical practices simultaneously open to a fourteenth-century writer and scholar. Taken within a framework that

¹ For further context on the composition of each work, see chapters 6, 14 and 17 in Thomas Goddard Bergin, *Boccaccio* (New York: Viking Press, 1981).

² See, e.g. the common compartmentalisations of *Boccaccio maturo* and *Boccaccio immaturo*, or of *Boccaccio latino* and *Boccaccio vernaculare* that persist in many studies of his work. On this point see Vittore Branca, *Boccaccio: The Man and His Works*, trans. Richard Monges and Dennis J. McAuliffe (New York: New York University Press, 1976), 172–3; Anna Cerbo, *Ideologia e retorica nel Boccaccio latino* (Naples: Editrice Ferraro, 1984), 48. Boccaccio's own thoughts on the topic can be found in his *Buccolicum carmen*, XII.

emphasises the generic components of their distinctiveness over biographical components, these three texts can be seen to represent the breadth of mythographical discourse, in its full generic variety and polymorphism. Working within three mythographical genres (poetic, moralising and systematising), while indicating the existence of a fourth (historicising mythography), the *Teseida*, *De casibus* and *Genealogie* articulate fully the sense that mythography is a spectrum of practices, ranging from the compilatory to the poetic, none of which is innocent of the processes of rewriting and reappropriating. For, as appears in the *Genealogie* in particular, even the processes of getting to know mythology and collecting it as a body of knowledge in textual form, are interpretive, exclusionary, and fraught with difficulties; difficulties that are in themselves central to understanding mythology's fecundity.

I. Poetic mythography: *Il Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia*

With epic ambitions, innovations and an elaborate apparatus of authorial glosses, the *Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia* is a landmark in Boccaccio's intellectual and literary development. His lengthiest and most elaborate work before the *Decameron*, it is unique in allowing us to analyse Boccaccio simultaneously as poet and glossator. The opportunity to do so has rarely been seized, however. Since the nineteenth century, the *Teseida* has, as David Anderson points out, laboured under the burden of being considered 'a conspicuously unsuccessful experiment in the imitation of classical epic', and, as such, has attracted little criticism.³ Never gaining the literary reputation of the *Decameron*, and never granted the historical importance of the Latin prose

³ David Anderson, *Before the Knight's Tale: Imitation of classical Epic in Boccaccio's Teseida* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 1.

works, it has been labelled at best a minor work, at worst a total failure. In the last twenty-five years three critics have produced extended investigations of the poem: Anderson, in his *Before the Knight's Tale*, James McGregor in his *The Shades of Aeneas* and *The Image of Antiquity*, and Barbara Nolan in her *Chaucer and the 'roman antique'*.⁴ It speaks volumes that Anderson and Nolan's studies, both of which direct their insights toward an audience of Chaucerians rather than *boccaccisti*, remain the most authoritative examinations of the *Teseida* to date. Among Italian critics, the poem continues to be largely passed over as 'a noncanonical work by a canonical author';⁵ to date, no book-length study of the poem has been published by an Italian critic, while discussions of the poem remain rare even in the pages of *Studi sul Boccaccio*.⁶

Setting aside the undistinguished critical reception carefully mapped out by David Anderson, my argument here accepts Anderson, Nolan and McGregor's arguments for the deliberateness with which Boccaccio recasts classical models in the poem, and for the success it met in and beyond Italy. Historically, whether we look to the numbers of surviving manuscripts and translations, or to visualisations and allusions, the evidence quickly shows that the *Teseida* should not be regarded as a 'minor' work in terms of its contemporary impact.⁷ And, as Anderson suggests, Boccaccio is far from fumbling in his use and transformation of classical materials in

⁴ James H. McGregor, *The Shades of Aeneas: Imitation of Virgil and the History of Paganism in Boccaccio's Filostrato, Filocolo and Teseida* (London: University of Georgia Press, 1991); James H. McGregor, *The Image of Antiquity in Boccaccio's Filocolo, Filostrato, and Teseida*, *Studies in Italian Culture—Literature in History* (New York: P. Lang, 1991); Barbara Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the 'Roman Antique'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁵ Carla Freccero, 'From Amazon to Court Lady: Generic Hybridization in Boccaccio's *Teseida*', *Comparative Literature Studies* 32, no. 2 (1995), 226-243: 226.

⁶ According to a search in the MLA International Bibliography.

⁷ For a survey of the numbers of surviving manuscripts, translations and allusions see Anderson, *Before the Knight's Tale*, 7ff.

the poem; it is instead a sophisticated and transformative *imitatio* of Statian epic that does much to explore the possibilities of bringing high mythological materials into the vernacular sphere.⁸

My argument follows on from this standpoint, in taking the poem on its own terms, as a mature work that uses classical materials to a well-conceived set of poetic ends. It is possible to investigate those ends through generic concerns (as Anderson and Nolan do), or through historiography (as McGregor does), but is also possible to see it as a mythographical experiment. Through Theseus, the *Teseida* tests the extent to which mythology, can be used, on the one hand, to imbue a new text with meaning, and, on the other, as a resource that can itself be imbued with meaning through expression within a new text. Analysis of Theseus' role in the poem allows us to trace the hand of Boccaccio working as a poetic mythographer, concerned with both of these actions: utilising and reworking mythology in order to invest his text with meaning, and, at the same time, elaborating a text capable of controlling mythology and altering its meanings in aid of a specific textual agenda.

The poem's centralisation and decentralisation of Theseus is symptomatic of this two-way process. From the title onwards, Theseus is called upon to define the poem, before being instantly redefined by it. Boccaccio's autograph copy gives the full title as *Il Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia*, with the short form *Teseida* used in the colophons to the twelve books. Critics have, as Anderson points out, seized upon the full title's combination of epic and romantic; but they have largely missed its simultaneous conventionality and oddness. Anderson is quick to point out the conventional aspect by noting the title's mimicry of medieval manuscripts of classical

⁸ See *Ibid.*, 140. Anderson focuses in particular on imitation of Statius' *Thebaid*, but his argument has broader implications.

epics, which is neatly instantiated in Boccaccio's own copy of the *Thebaid*. There, as in the *Teseida*, the title consists of the main noun, with an explanatory subtitle: 'Staius' *Thebaid*, the history of the destruction of Thebes'.⁹ What Anderson does not deal with is the fact that the *Teseida*'s full title, unlike the *Thebaid*'s, contradicts itself. In Boccaccio's Staius, the subtitle explains the term 'Thebaid', offering the additional information that the poem concerns that city's final fate. The epic convention of naming the poem for its central subject, if not already obvious, would have been known to Boccaccio from his copy of Servius' commentary on the *Aeneid* (to which he refers frequently in the *Genealogie*). There, the *accessus* points out that 'the title is *Aeneid*, a derivative noun from Aeneas, just as *Theseid* is from Theseus'.¹⁰

Il Teseida delle nozze d'Emilia does not, however, work in quite the same way; the title-subtitle relationship, and the title-subject relationship are disrupted. Instead of specifying how exactly the eponymous hero figures in the poem, the subtitle 'delle nozze d'Emilia' results in the semi-contradictory statement that this is 'The *Theseid* of the marriage of Emily'. Though the structure echoes that of Boccaccio's Staius manuscript, it does so in a way that points up its own strangeness: this is a poem about Theseus, which is actually about something different.¹¹ That distance from convention is furthered by the continuing lack of allusion to Theseus in the *Teseida*'s opening lines. Where in the *Thebaid* and the *Aeneid*, the poets' opening invocations

⁹ 'Staius Thebaydos ystoria destructionis thebarum', *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁰ 'titulus est Aeneis, derivativum nomen ab Aenea, ut a Theseo Theseis', Servius, *In Vergilii carmina commentarii*, ed. Georg Thilo (Leipzig: Teubner, 1881), 4. Codrus' *Theseid*, to which Servius refers, is lost.

¹¹ Pietro Andrea dei Bassi, commentator to the *editio princeps* of the *Teseida*, avoids the problem of the contradiction, by ignoring 'delle' and resolving the two parts of the title into a chronological statement of the poem's contents: 'questo titolo e iustamente facto. per che [...] lo auctore cominza a parlare de theseo. poi finisse ale amare e alegre noze de emilia' ['this title is justly made, because [...] the author begins by speaking of Teseo, then finishes with the bittersweet marriage of Emilia']. See Giovanni Boccaccio, *Teseide with Preface and Commentary by Pietro Andrea de Bassi* (Ferrara, 1475), f. 2^v.

act as a restatement of their subjects' centrality, in the *Teseida*, Boccaccio's invocation ignores Theseus altogether.¹² Evincing his desire to render in rhyme an ancient *istoria* that no Latin author has spoken of, Boccaccio sums up the content of the poem as 'the story of Arcita, and of good Palemone'.¹³ Rather than confirming Theseus' centrality, the opening clarifies the subtitle while ignoring the implication of the main title. Even when reference to Theseus does enter into the poem, in the form of the rubric 'Here follows the time when and the reason for which Theseus, Duke of Athens, went against the Amazon women', he is not centralised in the manner that the eponym would seem to suggest.¹⁴ Instead, his centrality is explicitly denied: Boccaccio's gloss to the stanza following the rubric admits that the reader might well ask why so much is being said of Theseus when 'it is the principal intention of the author [...] to treat the love [...] of [the] two young Thebans'.¹⁵ The focus on Theseus in the first book is, he explains, caused by nothing more than narrative exigency. It is, only to show how Emilia, Palemone and Arcita came together, and why; for if the reader understands that, the rest of the poem will be 'much clearer'.¹⁶ So too with Book II's description of the destruction of Thebes, headed with the rubric 'Digression from the proper subject'.¹⁷ Here again, a lengthy gloss reiterates that the section appears only in order to show how Palemone and Arcita come to Athens.

¹² See. e.g. P. Papinius Statius, *Thebaid*, Books 1-7, trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, Loeb classical Library 207 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), I.1-3.

¹³ 'd'Arcita i fatti e del buon Palemone', *Teseida*, I.5. Unless otherwise noted, all references to works by Boccaccio are to the texts given in Giovanni Boccaccio, *Tutte le opere di Giovanni Boccaccio*, ed. by Vittore Branca, Classici Mondadori, 10 vols. (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1964-1998).

¹⁴ 'Seguita il tempo e la cagione nel quale e per che Teseo, duca d'Attene, andò adosso alla reina delle donne amazone', *Teseida*, I, rubric.

¹⁵ 'che la principale intenzione dell'autore di questo libretto sia di trattare dell'amore e delle cose avvenute per quello, da due giovani tebani', *Teseida*, I.6, gloss.

¹⁶ 'molto più chiare', *Teseida*, I.6, gloss.

¹⁷ 'Transgressione dalla propria materia', *Teseida*, II.10, rubric.

Set against these, the contradiction of the title becomes even clearer and more curious. Rather than justifying the title with their focus on Theseus, the first and second books are framed in such a way as to insist again and again that the poem is really not about Theseus at all. Why it should have been termed a ‘Theseid’ is, in this light, bizarre. This is a poem about Theseus that keeps telling the reader that it is not about Theseus. The result, however, is not to draw attention away from the Athenian duke’s role in the poem, but to create an aporetic puzzle, in which Boccaccio brings the idea of writing of Theseus into question.

Among the ways in which it is possible to formulate that question, the most pressing in regard to the wider topic of mythography are as follows. What kind of figure is Boccaccio’s Theseus, and to what end, or ends, do the mythographical strategies involved in Boccaccio’s construction of him work?

What becomes clear from the first movement of the narrative is Boccaccio’s intention to associate Theseus with issues of male sovereignty and female agency, and to deal with him as a political figure more than as a hero of supernatural exploits. That much is concordant with Theseus’ presentation as a martial-political figure in the poem’s main source, the *Thebaid*. Theseus’ role in Statius’ epic is primarily that of a martial-political enforcer of the Greek religious laws and customs that Creon transgresses in refusing to allow his enemies the necessary funeral rites. Though, in the *Thebaid*, Theseus’ reputation as a slayer of monsters hovers in the background – most visibly in the Minotaur insignia of his shield (*Thebaid*, XII.672ff.) – and inflects his military and political actions, it is, finally, the military and political aspects of

Theseus that take centre-stage.¹⁸ In the *Teseida*, the monster-slaying aspect of Theseus' heroism is pushed further still into the background; Boccaccio goes one better than Statius by omitting Theseus' monster exploits from the poem altogether. Among these, the absence of the Minotaur is particularly striking, and is only more so when set against the *Thebaid* and contemporary Italian mentions of Theseus. Boccaccio was well aware of the importance of the Minotaur to Theseus' heroic reputation from his close reading of Statius, Ovid and Dante, and his omission of it can only be taken as a deliberate mythographical intervention.¹⁹

The Minotaur is not, however, a simple figure to omit. Though the chronology of Theseus' life is complex and often muddled, with the dating of events such as the Centauromachy or the descent to Hades relatively vague, the slaying of the Minotaur is consistently cast as a youthful exploit, followed closely by Aegeus' death. In Statius' Callimachian ekphrasis on Theseus' shield, the youthfulness of the exploit is figured in its distance from the present: it is a 'prelude to [Theseus'] fame'.²⁰ Given that the Theseus of the *Teseida* is a ruler at full maturity, whose father is very much alive, the monster's absence requires Boccaccio to reorder the chronology of the Thesean tales quite radically. Though the *Teseida*'s Theseus defeats the Amazons and conquers Thebes, Aegeus is still alive and Minos has yet to go to war against the

¹⁸ On the *Thebaid* as political epic, see Charles McNelis, *Statius' Thebaid and the Poetics of Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹⁹ See *Inferno*, XII.10-25 in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996). Cf., Boccaccio's commentary to the passage in his *Esposizioni sopra la Commedia* (1373-1374), XII, lit., 1.10-19. On Ovid's references to the Minotaur, see Chapter Two, below.

²⁰ *Thebaid* XII.665-76; see also XII.625-6 for reference to Aegeus' death. For a detailed reading of the shield passage, see McNelis, *Statius' Thebaid and the Poetics of Civil War*, 172ff. It is worth noting that Chaucer picks up on the Statian detail and includes it in the 'Knight's Tale', see *KnT*, 980 in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Dean Benson and F. N. Robinson, 3rd ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). All references to Chaucer are to the texts given in this edition.

Athenians.²¹ The alteration leaves us with a hero who has yet to perform his most mythic deed, and who, instead, has to prove his prowess in battle not against monsters, but against humans: first the Amazons, then Creon.

The second part of Boccaccio's mythographical strategy works in conjunction with this excision. With two campaigns to describe in two books of the poem, Boccaccio lends them dramatically differing amounts of attention: the campaign against the Amazons stretches across 122 stanzas; the campaign against Creon, just 33. Though the discrepancy partially results from the fact that the battle against Thebes already has its canonical description in the twelfth book of the *Thebaid*, the emphasis remains striking: Creon's role is minimised, leaving the reader with the impression that the Scythian Amazons are by far the more formidable foe. This impression is deepened by an account of the Amazons' origins that is fuller and bloodier than any given by classical or medieval sources before the *Teseida*. Ignoring the alternative origin-tale, in which the Scythian men die in battle in a foreign kingdom, leaving their wives to fend for themselves, Boccaccio portrays the Amazons as instigators of a merciless gynocratic revolution.²² They are 'cruel and pitiless women', who decide first to become 'sovereigns of their men', and then to exterminate them altogether.²³ One night, they gather secretly,

con sentienza altiera
dilaterar non esser soggiogate,
ma di voler per lor la signoria;
e trovar modo a fornir lor follia.

²¹ Minos is in fact one of the heroes who participates in the tournament; see *Teseida* IV.46 and gloss.

²² Cf. the more innocent accounts given in Justinus' epitome (II.1), and Brunetto Latini's *Tresor*: *M. Iuniani Iustini Epitoma historiarum Philippicarum Pompei Trogi*, ed. Franz Rühl and Otto Seel, Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1972); Brunetto Latini, *Li Livres dou tresor*, ed. Spurgeon W. Baldwin and Paul Barrette (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance, 2003), 23.

²³ 'donne crude e dispietate', *Teseida*, I.6.2; 'esser da' maschi lor signoreggiate', *Teseida*, I.6.4.

to decide with lofty judgement not to be subjugated, but to want lordship for themselves, and to find a way to bring about their madness (*Teseida*, I.6.4-8).

Boccaccio presents their decision as a unanimous and premeditated reversal of correct social order: an act of premeditated madness or *follia*. With the men slaughtered Scythia is a kingdom turned upside down: a social experiment that ‘could not be maintained’.²⁴

In contrast to the pitiless Amazons, Theseus is driven to war by his humanity. Hippolyta’s first act as queen is to lay down an edict that no man should enter her kingdom, resulting in the a number of shipwrecked Greeks being turned away from Scythia. The great duke is so ‘deeply pained’ by the plight of his countrymen that he sees no option but to remedy the situation by force; he calls together his barons and embarks for war.²⁵ From Theseus’ point of view, the campaign is one of humanity against inhumanity. From Hippolyta’s, it is an ideological struggle over the idea of male supremacy:

’l gran Teseo di venir s’argomenta
sopra di noi, avendoci moleste
perché nostro piacer non si contenta,
di quel che l’altre, ciò è suggiacere
a gli uomini, facendo il lor volere.

great Theseus decides to attack us, believing us disturbing because our pleasure pleases him less than that of other women, which is to be subject to men, doing their will. (*Teseida*, I.26.4-8).

Of course, Hippolyta’s anti-masculine reasoning only further reveals her and her kingdom to be contrary to the natural order of the world.

This is borne out in the consistently positive presentation of the androcratic Theseus, with his unwavering belief in male sovereignty. Confronted with the initial

²⁴ ‘mantenersi non potero’, *Teseida*, I.7.8.

²⁵ ‘in sé di ciò forte crucciato’, *Teseida*, I.13.7.

success of the Amazon beach defence, he taunts the men charged with making a beachhead with the thought of defeat at the hands of ‘soft women’; if they return home now, he says, the Athenians will point at them in the street and say, ‘See the sad knights who were beaten by the Amazons’.²⁶ For Theseus, it is natural that the Athenians would mock men who were beaten by women, because, by nature, men have sovereignty over women.

Theseus’ campaign is, then, one of humane against inhumane and natural against unnatural; the hospitable and merciful male Athenians destined to be in charge, against the inhospitable and merciless Amazons, raised to tottering pre-eminence only by unmitigated cruelty and treachery. In this, Theseus’ war against the Amazons becomes analogous to the much more literal clashes of human and inhuman staged in the monster battles that Boccaccio excises from the biography of his Theseus. As Giorgio Padoan notes in his discussion of the use of Theseus in Dante’s *Commedia*, the demon/monster analogy was a prime site of interaction between pagan myth and Christian iconography:

Italian figurative art tended to represent the demon as something that was, above all else, against the natural order, since it indissolubly united the human and the bestial: for this very reason the Centaur, union of two contrasting natures, often represented the demon: and the Centaurs and the Minotaur were demons – of definitively unnatural form – defeated by Theseus.²⁷

²⁶ ‘molli donne’, *Teseida*, I.61.6; ‘Vedi i cavalier dolenti, / che vinti fur dall’amazone genti’, *Teseida*, I.62.7-8.

²⁷ ‘l’arte figurativa italiana tendesse a rappresentare il demonio come qualcosa che era anzitutto contro l’ordine della natura, poiché all’umano univa indissolubilmente il bestial: proprio per questo ...[il] Centauro, unione di due nature contrastanti, stave spesso a rappresentare il demonio: e i Centauri, il Minotauro, erano demoni – dalla forma definitivamente snaturata – vinti da Teseo’, Giorgio Padoan, *Il Pio Enea, l’empio Ulisse: tradizione classica e intendimento medievale in Dante*, Interprete 5 (Ravenna: Longo, 1977), 141. Cf. the indication of such in Guido da Pisa’s commentary on *Inferno* XII: ‘By the Minotaur [...] you should understand the devil’; ‘Per Minotaurum [...] dyabolum intellege’; Guido da Pisa, *Expositiones et glose super Comediam Dantis*, ed. Vincenzo Cioffari (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1974), 222.

If the hero did anything in his killing of monsters, it was to set nature back to rights. By an analogy that becomes ever stronger in the *Teseida*, setting nature to rights is exactly what Theseus is doing in his campaign against the Amazons: they take the place of the monsters that Boccaccio has so carefully excised.

When Boccaccio does introduce the topos of monster-killing, it serves to reinforce the substitution and confirm the replacement of literal aberrations of nature with the social aberration represented by the Amazons. Still omitting any mention of monsters directly associated with the Theseus tales, Boccaccio has Theseus recall Hercules:

tornandoli a mente come Alcide
a l'Idra, che de' suoi danni crescea,
avea la vita tolta, seco vide
che là dov'era Ipolita volea
sua pruova far; perché, se lei conquide,
più contasto nessun non vi sapea

considering how Alcides took the life of the Hydra, that grew with its wounds, he realised that he must bring Ipolita to the test where she was; for, if he conquered her, no one would meet opposition there any more (*Teseida*, I.84.1-6)

Contained in Theseus' thought process is an implied simile between the Hydra and the Amazons. Having deprived Theseus of his literal monster-killing exploits, Boccaccio recasts the defeat of the Amazons, and Hippolyta in particular, as itself a form of monster slaying.²⁸ This mythographical manoeuvre bears an easily recognisable purpose. Theseus' role as hero centres squarely on the preservation of 'natural order', but it does so not with regard to the extermination of the supernatural, but instead with regard to the re-establishment of the accepted social structure. He

²⁸ The reference also performs the secondary function of suggesting the manner in which Theseus will finally defeat Hippolyta. In his gloss to the stanza, Boccaccio gives a version of the myth in which Hercules kills the Hydra not by cauterising the wounds he deals it, but by trapping it and lighting a fire beneath its belly; Theseus forces the Amazons to surrender by undermining their walls, and preparing to light a fire beneath their city. See the gloss to *Teseida*, I.84, and cf. I.95.

becomes the representation and instrument of androcracy's supremacy over gynaecocracy.

Pure conquest, however, would fail to re-establish that order in the fullest sense. For all their savagery, the Amazons remain women, and as Hippolyta tells Theseus, 'warring with women and gaining victory brings more blame than glory to the victor'.²⁹ The fullest confirmation of the naturalness of male sovereignty requires its recognition by those who have transgressed against it; it requires not that the Amazons be defeated, but that they surrender. Boccaccio presents the reader with exactly such a shift. When Hippolyta's defeat becomes inevitable, her experience of resistless *force majeure* results in the recognition of and surrender to male superiority, as embodied in Theseus. In a speech to her subjects she states,

Chiaro vedete donne, a quel partito
 ci abbian gl'iddii recate, e non a torto.
 Se da ciascuna qui fosse il marito,
 fratel, figliuolo o padre che fu morto
 da tutte noi, non saria stato ardito
 Teseo mai d'appressarsi al nostro porto

You can see clearly what a pass the gods have bought us to, women, and not wrongly. If the husband, brother, son or father of each one of us were still alive, Theseus would never have been so eager to approach our port (*Teseida*, I.116)

She then presents her audience with two options, either to be destroyed fighting

'manfully [*virilmente*]', or, better,

renderci a lui, che del valor mondano,
 per quel ch'io senta, ha il pregio e l'onore,
 e è, a chi s'umilia, umile e piano;
 e già non ci sarà e' desinore
 se vinte siam da uom così sovrano,
 perciò ch'ogn'uom per femine ci tiene,
 come noi siamo, e lui duca d'Attene.

²⁹ 'guerregiar con donne e aver vittoria / del vincitore è più biasmo che gloria', *Teseida*, I.104.7-8.

to surrender to him, who (as I hear) is of worldly worth, has value
and honour, and is humble and gentle with those who humble
themselves before him; and certainly it would be no dishonour to us
if we are defeated by such a sovereign man, since every man takes
us for women, as we are, and he is Duke of Athens. (*Teseida*, I.121)

In the final movement of the social order's re-establishment, that surrender reveals
itself to entail marriage, written into the peace treaty concluded between the Amazons
and Greeks.³⁰

The reintegration of the Amazons into the correct social order is nearly
complete, and requires only one more touch, that love accompany marriage. When the
Athenians enter the city, the language of the poem changes dramatically: the
description of Hippolyta is suddenly couched in the sweetness of love poetry,
transforming her warlike aspect to that of a 'morning star or fresh rose in the month of
May'.³¹ The change permits the legal foundation of the pact to find completion in the
emotional: Hippolyta and Theseus fall in love.³² The book ends with the return of the
Amazons to the natural order of things through marriage and all it entails. Epic
language cedes to legal, which gives way to *dolce stil nuovo*, which in turn morphs to
a euphemistically bawdy comic register:

le donne sapeano or che si fare,
sé ristorando del tempo perduto
mentre nel regno non era uomo issuto

then the women knew what to do, making up for the time lost while
no man had come into the kingdom (*Teseida*, I.138.5-8)

The one loose thread in the comic resolution of the first book is Emilia,
Hippolyta's beautiful sister. Unlike the other Amazons, she maintains her vow of

³⁰ The emphasis given to the conclusion of the treaties echoes Statius and Pliny. Pliny ascribes to Theseus the invention of treaties in Book VII of his *Historia naturalis*; Statius describes his Hippolyta as 'patient of the marriage bond' ('patiensque mariti / foederis'; XII.534-5). Boccaccio will go on to quote Pliny in this regard in the *Genealogie* X.xlix.3. See *C. Plini Secundi Naturalis historiae libri XXXVII*, ed. Karl Friedrich Theodor Mayhoff (Leipzig: Teubner, 1892), 2:51.

³¹ 'matutina stella / o fresca rosa del mese di maggio', *Teseida*, I.125.3-4.

³² Though the setting and ceremony of the marriage is pagan, the marriage clearly stands for a sacramental affirmation of Hippolyta's reintegration into androcracy in Christian terms.

celibacy. When the poem's focus shifts to its 'proper subject', Boccaccio's analogical imitation of the Theban political struggle in the love-struggle of Palemone and Arcita both generates the romance aspect of the *Teseida*, and also results in the tying-off of this loose thread.³³ Theseus, though no longer centre-stage, as it were, is vital to this resolution. Despite fading for a while into the background, the Duke remains an ever-present and final authority: the *deus ex machina* who presides over the poem's resolution. It is as if the title, rather than stating that Theseus is the poem's subject, does the reverse: pointing toward the status of all its protagonists as Theseus' subjects.

The space of this chapter does not permit any extended analysis of Theseus' role in regard to Palemone and Arcita – and to do so would be, essentially, to repeat the focus of much criticism on the 'Knight's Tale'.³⁴ It is worth indicating, however, the continuation and summation of the mythographical movement already outlined in the final section of the poem: Emilia's marriage. For all the complexities and vicissitudes of the action surrounding Palemone and Arcita, the comic resolution of the poem in the *nozze* relies on the unquestionable authority toward women that Theseus confirmed in the Amazonian campaign. On Arcita's death, Theseus orders Palemone and Emilia to marry; while Palemone is more than willing to obey, Emilia remains silent. In a moment of striking directness Theseus turns to her and says, 'Emilia, did you hear? You will see that what I want you to do is done'.³⁵ The poem has, by now, nearly come full circle: Theseus is doing exactly what Hippolyta had

³³ On Boccaccio's analogical imitation of Statius, see Anderson, *Before the Knight's Tale*, 140.

³⁴ See, for instance, Paul G. Ruggiers, 'Some Philosophical Aspects of the Knight's Tale', *College English* 19, no. 7 (April 1958): 296–302; W. F. Bolton, 'The Topic of the "Knight's Tale"', *The Chaucer Review* 1, no. 4 (1967): 217–27; R. H. Nicholson, 'Theseus's "Ordinaunce": Justice and Ceremony in the "Knight's Tale"', *The Chaucer Review* 22, no. 3 (January 1988): 192–213.

³⁵ 'Emilia, hai tu udito? / Quel che io vo' farai che sia fornito', *Teseida*, XII.38.7-8.

originally accused men of doing, wanting women only to accede to their will. When Emilia responds by laying out the case for maintaining her vow to Diana, Theseus even more directly states, ‘Saying this is nothing’.³⁶ The marriage goes ahead, drowning Emilia’s objections in the final movement of what Winthrop Wetherbee terms its ‘crescendo of ceremony’.³⁷ Through Theseus, the final wrinkle in natural androcracy is smoothed out, with as much force as it requires. He, even more than the gods whose temples feature so prominently, is the ultimate centre of power in the *Teseida*; within and beyond Athens, his control is complete.

Looked at from this point of view the contradictions of the poem’s title take on a different complexion. On one hand, ‘Il Teseida delle nozze d’Emilia’ marks the sense in which Theseus, even when he seems most marginal, exerts a constant control over the topic of the poem; the poem is named for him because his presence is the main engine for its pursuit of a particular moral agenda. On the other hand, the subtitle’s qualification of ‘Theseid’ marks out the poem’s Thesean character as subject to redefinition through the main topic of marriage. Taken together, these two views on the full title outline Boccaccio’s simultaneous use of Theseus to bring meaning to his poem, and of the poem, in turn, to inflect and reshape that meaning. Rather than taking the myths or his main poetic source as fixed and authoritative, Boccaccio treats them as alterable, plastic materials offered up for rewriting to his own poetic purposes, even as their existence beyond the poem is used to bring meaning to the poem. The significance of Theseus – as a pre-existing figure – and the poem’s

³⁶ ‘Questo dire è niente’, *Teseida*, XII.43.1.

³⁷ Winthrop Wetherbee, ‘History and Romance in Boccaccio’s *Teseida*’, *Studi sul Boccaccio* 20 (1992), 173-84: 179.

unfolding meaning are bound in a complex relationship of reciprocal contingency, each shaping the other through the mythographical strategies with which Boccaccio withholds and recasts information about the Athenian hero.

The nature of that contingency is expressed in the way in which Theseus' career as a killer of monsters is simultaneously excised and called into play. The excision of the Minotaur helps Boccaccio to emphasise the martial-political aspects of the hero he found in the *Thebaid*, but it does not prevent the motif of the hero's unnatural (or anti-natural) adversary from inflecting his clash with the Amazons. At the same time, the resolution of that clash in romance, followed by formalised combat, and, finally, ceremonial marriage is dependent on writing out the entailments of the Minotaur myth. As will become clear in the next chapters, Ariadne's role in helping Theseus, and his subsequent desertion of her on Naxos are almost inextricably linked with the tale, and frequently become the grounds for condemnation of the hero. It is, on this account, striking just how rigidly Boccaccio excludes Ovidian overtones from his presentation of Theseus. The moral and philosophical framework within which Boccaccio aligns Mars and Venus in his experimental marriage of epic and romance, requires Theseus, its lynch-pin, to be heroically and romantically unimpeachable, at least for the duration of the poem. This is not the case for Ovid's Theseuses, whose exclusion from the poem is complete. Building on the martial-political cues of the *Thebaid*'s mythography to write a poem in which Theseus stands for a political philosophy where marriage ensures social stability and natural order, Boccaccio must necessarily exclude parts of the wider mythographical background that might render such an association problematic.

The licence with which he does so is manifest, and central to poetic mythography. That mythology can be called upon as a means of imbuing texts with meaning does not prevent texts from adding, reshaping or controlling that meaning; rewriting and writing over mythology in order to prevent it from destabilising the very meanings it is intended to underpin. This combination of necessary dependency and necessary freedom is a facet of poetic mythography that will only become clearer in succeeding chapters.

II. Moralising mythography: the *De casibus virorum illustrium*

Before analysing the distinctive mythographical make up of the *De casibus*, it is important to recognise the ways in which it is, at a fundamental level, dealing with the same materials and participating in the same broad spectrum of mythographical discourse as the *Teseida*. Over the years, the compartmentalisations of the *boccaccisti* have tended to portray the two texts as radically divided, with the differences between them due less to generic concerns than to the vast increase in Boccaccio's classical scholarship in the fifteen years that separate their composition. Certainly, the interval that separates the two texts coincided with an expansion in Boccaccio's knowledge of the classical world, as his friendship with Petrarch had deepened his intellectual engagement with classical culture and its languages, and placed at his disposal a number of texts previously unavailable to him.³⁸ Certainly, too, the writing of Theseus in the *De casibus* differs significantly from the *Teseida* in appearing to pay greater heed to biographical accuracy, and presenting a number of facts and exploits absent

³⁸ See Cerbo, *Ideologia e retorica nel Boccaccio latino*, 48–9.

from the earlier poem. But to think of these differences as stemming only from an increase Boccaccio's knowledge of mythology is to ignore fundamental aspects of the *De casibus*' approach to mythology, and to risk missing the real nature of its distinctiveness from and similarity to the *Teseida*.

On this basis, the *De casibus*' focus on biographical information appears not as a reflection of Boccaccio knowing more, but as a reflection of its generic identity as a moralising treatise. This goes hand in hand with the seeming transparency with which the treatise presents and uses mythology. In the *Teseida*, though mythography fulfils a moral function, it is used as a poetic tool: a somewhat insidious controlling substrate to the main action, that disguises its operations in order to perform its task. In the *De casibus*, meanwhile, mythography is openly used as a means of drawing moral lessons and inculcating virtue, or in Anna Cerbo's words, as 'an instrument of wisdom and moral perfection'.³⁹ Theseus appears, alongside other mythological personages and with biblical and historical figures, in a set of 56 exemplary biographies, each of which draws a particular lesson from the actions and fate of its subject to illustrate a specific vice or shortcoming. In each case, mythology is presented with every appearance of simple, objective biographical enumeration, with the morals drawn having specific reference to matters of state.⁴⁰ The result is a work in which history and mythology are, in Hortis' words, much more openly 'enslaved to a system of morals' than they are in the *Teseida*.⁴¹ This openness, and its accompanying focus on factual enumeration, is part and parcel of the *De casibus*' generic identity as a moralising text.

³⁹ 'strumento di sapienza e di morale perfezione', Cerbo, *Ideologia e retorica nel Boccaccio latino*, 50.

⁴⁰ See, *De casibus*, I.Pr.1.

⁴¹ Attilio Hortis, *Studi sulle opere latine del Boccaccio, con particolare riguardo alla storia della erudizione nel medioevo e alle letterature straniere* (Trieste: Liberia Julius Dase, 1879), 124.

Allied to this apparently ‘factual’ treatment of mythology is the treatise’s implicit treatment of it as, if not identical to history, then at least something approaching history. History is central to the treatise’s treatment of mythology in a way quite different to mythology’s employment in the *Teseida*. Although the definition of *historia* and its vernacular cognates was notably broad in medieval usage, Boccaccio’s use of *istoria* in the earlier poem (*Teseida*, I.2.2) does not seem to imply any sense on his part that the poem is based on ‘real events’ in any substantial sense.⁴² Given the lack of any known source or authority for the main plot, it seems clear that Boccaccio was exploiting the possibility of inserting his own inventions into the world of mythology, treating it as medium or substrate for fiction. Aligned with the poetic form of the text, the lack of references to external authorities and the fantastic happenings of the *Teseida* (the divine interventions in particular) do not leave readers with the impression that it is to be treated primarily as an account of ‘real’ events. And though medieval literary convention might make such an assumption on the part of contemporary readers more likely, Boccaccio makes no effort to bring it into play in the poem.

The *De casibus* is different in this regard. The juxtaposed biographies set characters from Greco-Roman mythology side by side with figures whose historicity was taken for granted: biblical kings and heroes, and, later, famous persons from more recent European history. In Book I, Theseus is preceded by Adam and Eve,

⁴² This is not to say, however, that there were not certain widely accepted scholarly distinction between *fabula* and *historia*, and between the common third term *argumentum*. Though originating in Cicero’s *De inventione* (I.27), the classic medieval account is in Isidore’s *Etymologies: Isidori Hispalensis episcopi Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), I.xliv.5. See also Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953), 452–3; Päivi Mehtonen, *Old Concepts and New Poetics: Historia, Argumentum and Fabula*, Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum 108 (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1996), 13. As noted in the third section of this chapter, Boccaccio does not quite cleave to these neat distinctions, as becomes clear in Book XIV of the *Genealogie*.

Nimrod, Cadmus, Jocasta, and Atreus and Thyestes; he is followed by Priam, Agamemnon, and Samson. The implicitly accepted historical reality of the biblical figures leaves the sense that Boccaccio is treating his mythological subjects too as historical; a sense which, as will be seen in Chapter Three, deeply marks the reception of the *De casibus* over the next two centuries.

This historical treatment of myth is not allied to any particular attempts to historicise or rationalise the historically impossible elements of the myths recounted, but it does affect the stylistic choices of the text. In the Prohemium, Boccaccio distinguishes himself from the ‘sweetness of style and weightiness of sentences’ of ‘our elders’, by describing his own style as ‘a poor little voice’.⁴³ Though the content of the sentence is largely conventional, it also belies a deliberate stylistic choice: in a deliberate step away from literary classicism, Boccaccio relinquishes stylistic literary ambitions in favour of a brevity and directness more characteristic of prose history, stating his desire to set out his biographies ‘briefly’.⁴⁴ Though the work as a whole can hardly be accused of brevity, the individual biographies are models of concision, in which rhetorical elaboration is foregone almost entirely. Indeed, as Anna Cerbo has noted, the closest stylistic analogue for the biographies is the swift brevity of medieval chronicles.⁴⁵

The extent to which this is the case is only emphasised by the contrastingly dense and slow movement of the reflective sections of the text, interspersed with the biographies. Where the discursive moral sections embrace a more complex meditative style, the biographies upon which they comment prioritise conveying the facts above

⁴³ ‘maiorum nostrorum [...] stili suavitate et pondere sententiarum’, *De casibus*, I.Pr.4.

⁴⁴ ‘succincte’, *De casibus*, I.Pr.1.

⁴⁵ Cerbo, *Ideologia e retorica nel Boccaccio latino*, 55.

all else. In line with the ideal of brevity, Boccaccio does not leave room for multiple accounts or for the weighing of alternative versions: biographical coherence is prioritised and scholarly conscientiousness relegated to a secondary position. Where the later *Genealogie* is populated with references to textual authorities and frequently gives two or more versions of the same tale, the *De casibus*' biographies are constructed with an eye to internal coherence and self-sufficiency. It is almost devoid of direct citation, characterised by efficient and singular condensation of incident; all that is not relevant to the 'factum', in the sense of 'final result' (*De casibus*, I.x.14.) is eliminated.

In the case of Theseus, despite asking 'Who could enumerate his deeds abundantly enough [...]?', Boccaccio compresses those deeds into a very small space indeed: around a mere five pages in modern editions.⁴⁶ Though Boccaccio's conception of the mythological tales' ontologies is rather more finely balanced between myth and history than his readers tended to accept, it is symptomatic of the *De casibus*' generic markings that the tag *historiographus* and its vernacular cognates came to define its reception for the next two centuries.⁴⁷

The concision with which Boccaccio recounts his biographies is, importantly, not antithetical to mythographical intervention. Precisely in presenting Theseus' life as a simple set of consecutive deeds, Boccaccio is intervening in the corpus of sources from which he collects his facts. This mode of intervention is most visible in the biography's structuring; while forgoing the grand omissions of the *Teseida*, it too is informed by factors external to the basic narratives of the myths themselves. The

⁴⁶ 'Quis queat satis magna eius enumerare facinora', *De casibus*, I.x.7.

⁴⁷ For further discussion of the status of history and the *De casibus*' reception, see below, Chapter Three, *passim*.

overriding structural principal of the précis is the enumeration of Theseus' good deeds before his bad, with the two sets of deeds internally ordered, partially by date and partially with respect to an implicit moral hierarchy that prioritises political virtue. Since they have little to do with his moral agency or capacity to rule, the circumstances of Theseus' birth are omitted, and the biography begins with his first heroic feat: the killing of the Marathonian bull. After this, Boccaccio lists Theseus' good deeds as follows: participation in the expedition of the Argonauts; the subjugation, with Hercules, of the Amazons, followed by marriage to Hippolyta; the Centauro-machy; the killing of the Minotaur; the gathering of the Athenian demes into one city (the Synoikismos); and the destruction of Thebes in order to ensure the giving of funeral rites to the fallen.

Though less selective in its presentation of Theseus' biography than the *Teseida*, this is far from being a comprehensive summary of Theseus' good deeds. As in the *Teseida*, Boccaccio omits the legends surrounding Theseus' extermination of the criminals of the Isthmus – which he knew from Ovid's *Heroides* (II.69-70) and *Metamorphoses* (VII.433-7), and Seneca's *Phaedra* (1169), and which he lists in the *Genealogie*. The omission is curious given his use of the *Heroides* later in the biography, but it helps maintain the sense of a political crescendo. As the list stands, Boccaccio charts a progression from individual, and mythic, acts of heroism through to ones which benefit the city of Athens as a whole. Too definitively early and too public-minded to fit the political crescendo of the list, the slaying of the Isthmian robbers is silently left to one side.

Their omission leaves the focus on the later political deeds, as represented by the conquest of Creon at Thebes and the Synoikismos. Without the Synoikismos,

Athens would not have become the ‘eminent nurse of philosophers, poets and orators’ described in the opening sentence of the chapter; it is the concentration and stability gained by gathering the demes into a single town that allows the flourishing of philosophy and rhetoric.⁴⁸ Similarly, it is Theseus’ military imposition of Athenian moral values beyond the borders of Athens itself (the campaign to ensure the burial of the dead at Thebes) that takes prime place in qualifying Athens as ‘the second eye of Greece’: a military power capable of enforcing its will just as much as Sparta, the traditional first ‘eye’ of the region.⁴⁹ The Theseus of the *De casibus* becomes a political hero: the head of an Athenian city-state that exemplifies the benefits of a wise and strong ruler.

He cannot, however, be a perfect political hero. The overarching historical vision of the *De casibus* requires that Theseus fall ‘rightly [...] into deserved misfortune’ in such a way as to provide a salutary example to modern statesmen.⁵⁰ Boccaccio must recount the reverse side of Theseus’ heroism and extract from it the cause of his eventual overthrow. He enumerates Theseus’ bad deeds as follows: the killing of Hippolyta in a moment of anger; the abduction of the young Helen; the desertion of Ariadne on Naxos; the Katabasis, his expedition to the underworld in order to help Pirithous kidnap Proserpina (resulting in Pirithous’ death and Theseus’ imprisonment until freed by Hercules); and believing Phaedra’s accusation against Hippolytus, indirectly causing Hippolytus’ death. The result of this final mis-step is Theseus’ exile from Athens: the ‘ungrateful’ populace ostracising the very man ‘who had brought them back to their fatherland, who had made them free men, who had

⁴⁸ ‘phylosophorum poetarum et oratorum [...] egregia altrix’, *De casibus*, I.x.1.

⁴⁹ ‘alter Grecie oculus’, I.x.1. For Sparta and Athens as the two eyes of Greece, see *Genealogie*, V.Pr.6. and Justinus, *Epitoma historiarum*, V.8.

⁵⁰ ‘iure [...] in infortunium meriti’, *De casibus*, I.xi.17.

given them their form of government'.⁵¹ This final fate stands in direct counterpoint to the culmination of Theseus' earlier good deeds. Where the latter reach their acme with the formation of a *res publica*, the former end with Theseus closing out 'the last day of his unfortunate life as a private citizen'; a man of no public office, removed from the very republic he had once gathered and ruled.⁵²

Of the possible vices demonstrated by these actions, Boccaccio again gives most weight to the political: the fault of credulity, so frequently damaging for rulers. Passing over Theseus' libidinousness and tendency to unreasonable anger, Boccaccio sees his primary fault as an over-readiness to believe what he was told. In the following chapter's lecture 'Against excessive credulity', he even goes so far as to judge the Athenian hero 'an otherwise prudent man'.⁵³ His real fault was believing Phaedra's accusations against Hippolytus, when he should have known better. It is 'his unconsidered credulity', with its political repercussions, that really matters.⁵⁴

This choice of focus – taking and analysing a single fault for each of his illustrious subjects – is evidence of further mythographical intervention on Boccaccio's part. In the emphasis on credulity, the killing of Hippolyta or the kidnap of Helen are set to one side, and the negative moral status of Theseus' crimes against women is minimised. That minimisation is not simply relative to the focus on credulity, but a necessary part of the mythographical manoeuvre through which Boccaccio makes Theseus' belief in Phaedra as ridiculous as it is fatal. Boccaccio condemns Theseus' credulity both by pointing out the problem of uncritical belief *per*

⁵¹ 'Athenienses ingrati, eumque qui illos in patriam revocarat, qui liberos fecerat, qui formam illis civilitatis tradiderat', *De casibus*, I.x.30.

⁵² 'privatus infelicis vite diem clausit extremum', *De casibus*, I.x.31.

⁵³ 'Against excessive credulity'; 'vir aliter prudens', *De casibus*, I.xi.5.

⁵⁴ 'suam inexcogitatum credulitatem', *De casibus*, I.x.27.

se, and through a misogynist polemic that mocks the idea of believing women at all. Theseus should have known from his own wit, and ‘by long experience, that women are a most pernicious race’.⁵⁵ A pernicious race, that is, both generally, and more specifically:

advertisset muliebri genus effrene infidum mobile mendax, et
insatiabili libidine semper urens; et si reliquas castissimas
extimasset, Cretenses extimasse non poterat, Pasiphis memor et
Adriane

he should have remembered that women are unbridled, unfaithful, shifting, liars and ever burning with insatiable desires; and even if he held all others to be entirely chaste, he could not believe Cretan women to be so, remembering Pasiphae and Ariadne (*De casibus*, I.xi.7)

Confirming the assumption of women’s untrustworthiness and libidinousness generally, and of Phaedra in particular, through Pasiphae is neither shocking nor unexpected. How could Theseus consider Phaedra to be reliable when she was the daughter of a woman so famously libidinous that she committed adultery with a bull?

Tarring Ariadne with the same brush as her mother is, however, a mythographical intervention of some originality. For Boccaccio’s hereditary reasoning to make sense, and for Theseus’ credulity to appear truly idiotic, both of Pasiphae’s daughters must suffer the taint of untrustworthiness. To criticise Ariadne in this way is, however, a stark reversal of the dominant strand in mythographical traditions concerning her fate. The best known source for the story in the fourteenth century was letter X from Ovid’s *Heroides*, an epistle that, allowing Ariadne to speak for herself about her betrayal by Theseus, unsurprisingly portrays him in an extremely negative light, as an ungrateful, oath-breaking traitor. As will be seen in the discussion of medieval Ovidianisms in Chapter Two, the *Heroides* had an enormous

⁵⁵ ‘Debuerat Theseus [...] exquisisse secum mores nati et ingenium; sic et mulierum perniciosissimum esse genus longa experientia cognovisse’, *De casibus*, I.xi.5.

impact on the reception of Ariadne and Theseus in the period, and it is rare to find her put in anything other than a positive light. In the *De casibus*, however, Boccaccio is careful to exclude the Ovidian background, replacing it with a web of negative implications about Ariadne. In an earlier passage in the treatise, she has already been linked to her sister as a cause of misfortune. As Minos passes through Boccaccio's study with a group of other unfortunate souls, he grieves for the betrayals that led to his downfall, among which is that of Ariadne and Phaedra: the Cretan king bewails 'the discovery of his dear wife's adultery, the liberation of Athens from [his] yoke by Theseus' victory, the flight of his daughters with the victor'.⁵⁶

Though Boccaccio does not explicitly draw out the thread of Ariadne's betrayal of Minos in Theseus' biography, it is clearly on his mind here. He goes further, however, in setting up the implication that Ariadne may herself have been morally culpable for being left on Naxos. Rereading his description of the incident in the light of Ariadne's condemnation here, Theseus' role in the abandonment can be recast as morally neutral. In the version of the story given in the *Metamorphoses* (VIII.176-7), Ariadne goes on to marry Bacchus; Boccaccio prefigures the union by making Ariadne over-indulge; when Theseus sails from Naxos, she is 'drunk and drowned in sleep'.⁵⁷ Her drunkenness is a Bacchic sign of inconstancy, which, Boccaccio implies, Theseus understood when he set sail and left her on the beach. Read thus, the sentence's main verb, 'liquisset', acts not in the morally negative sense of 'desert' but rather in the morally neutral sense of 'leave': Theseus leaves Ariadne because he recognises the dangerous flaws that Boccaccio's revisionist

⁵⁶ 'compertum predilecte coniugis adulterium indice partu, solutas Athenas a iugo virtute victoris Thesei, filiarum cum victore fugam', *De casibus*, I.vii.8.

⁵⁷ 'vinolentam et mersam somno', *De casibus*, I.x.14.

mythographical discourse builds into her; and since he has sensed the untrustworthiness of womankind once, it becomes even clearer that Theseus' belief in Phaedra was foolishly misplaced.

By the time Boccaccio concludes his excursus on credulity, the appropriation is complete, and Theseus becomes, unambiguously, one of its victims:

Nos autem, cum repentina credulitas sit mater erroris, noverca consilii, simultatum causa, precipitium obsequentis et semper penitentie proxima, si viri erimus, si oculati, si cauti venerandarum legum auctoritatem imitabimur, que in tantam festinantiam abhorrent credulitatis, ut ex consulto suis executoribus iubeant nil temere credant, nil ex abrupto agant, et ante iudicium semper, si possint, partem aliam audiant, ne properantes, dum Theseum redarguimus, iure eius in infortunium meriti incurramus.

We however – since sudden credulity is the mother of error, stepmother of debate, cause of enmity, yielding to ruin and close neighbour of repentance – if we will be strong, circumspect and cautious, we will conform ourselves to the authority of the venerable law, which so greatly abhors hurried credulity that it wisely orders its followers to believe nothing rashly, do nothing suddenly, and always, if possible, to hear the other side of the matter before judgement, so that we do not hurriedly run rightly into deserved misfortune, like Theseus when he was proven wrong (*De casibus*, I.xi.17).

In a further reflection of the way in which Boccaccio is able to turn mythology to his own ends, the appropriation of Theseus as an illustration of the dangers of credulity, and the concomitantly negative presentation of Ariadne, has repercussions beyond warning the reader to be wary of believing too easily. The untrustworthiness of women is the dominant linking theme for several of the biographies in the first book of the *De casibus*: Adam owes his misfortune to Eve; Agamemnon, to Clytemnestra; Samson, to Delilah. The book as a whole ends with the unambiguous excursus 'Against women'.⁵⁸ Within this framework, it is vital that the women in Theseus' life not appear too conclusively as victims. Though, as will be seen in later chapters, he is

⁵⁸ 'In mulieres', *De casibus*, I.xviii.

frequently condemned for his behaviour towards women, and in particular towards Ariadne, it makes sense within the context of *De casibus*' first book that Theseus should escape censure for his least chivalrous actions, and that, in turn, Ariadne should end up taking the blame for her own fate.

That this contradicts the *Heroides* and the myriad texts that take on Ariadne's condemnation of Theseus is not problematic within the flexible world of Boccaccio's moral mythography. The distortion of the classical and contemporary mythographical background involved here is striking, but it is crucial to recognise that mythology is, within certain bounds, impressively patient of multiple interpretations. Boccaccio is not doing anything out of the ordinary in restructuring and reinterpreting the materials available to him. Even within the supposedly inclusive biographical scheme of the *De casibus*, he exploits his licence to omit, reorder and appropriate mythology for his own purposes. As in the *Teseida*, however, the resulting portrait of Theseus plays on the partial nature of that licence. Boccaccio's interpretation of Theseus' life may be novel, but it relies on the supposedly venerable and semi-historical status of the hero's biography to stake a claim for the importance of its message. Even as Boccaccio alters and reappropriates the 'facts' for his own didactic ends, the *De casibus*' moral mythography works on the basis of presenting complete factual accounts of its subjects. At the same time, however, it is crucial that it never does simply present such an account; as will be seen in Chapter Three, the treatise's coherence is closely tied to Boccaccio's awareness of the generic distinctions between moralising mythography, and historicising mythography. What he has in mind, first and foremost, is the treatise's duty to its own aims, rather than to the materials of mythology it uses to further those aims.

III. Systematising and eclectic mythography: the *Genealogie deorum gentilium*

The theme of ‘aims’ takes on a different form in the final text to be considered in this chapter. Unlike either the *Teseida* or the *De casibus*, the *Genealogie deorum gentilium*’s whole end and purpose centres on mythology. For the two earlier texts mythology is a resource that can be selectively drawn upon in order to further textual agendas which are not, finally *about* mythology, but which can conveniently be furthered through mythographical strategies. The *Genealogie*, meanwhile, attempting to gather and summarise the Greco-Roman myths *in toto*, in a single systematic structure, and to offer keys for their use and interpretation, is concerned with and beholden to mythology in ways that go beyond the two other texts analysed here. It, unlike the earlier texts, attempts to deal with mythology on mythology’s terms, as ‘the thing in itself’.

As such, the *Genealogie* has a different relationship to mythology: one which is markedly tenser than those of the earlier texts; and which raises different kinds of questions about the nature of mythography. That sense of tension is key to the *Genealogie*’s usefulness here. The flaws and problems of the treatise exemplify important aspects of mythography as a spectrum of related practices (as did the earlier texts), but they also go further, providing insights into the nature of mythology itself, and the problems it presented writers and their audiences. On one hand, those problems and flaws illustrate from a different angle the textual contingency of mythology already seen in the *Teseida* and *De casibus*. But what the earlier texts show as a positive image, the *Genealogie* reflects in negative. Where the *Teseida* and

De casibus instantiate mythology's flexibility in the ease with which they manipulate it to their own ends, the *Genealogie* instantiates that same attribute in the difficulty it has in setting mythology down without manipulation. In the context of the treatise's attempt to gather, systematise and interpret mythology for the use of other readers and writers, the same attributes that make mythology such a useful resource for the *Teseida* and *De casibus* become sources of a continuous unease. Tasked with being faithful to mythology in and of itself, Boccaccio begins, for the first time, to find its plurality and non-contiguity an embarrassment: a cause of conflict, contradiction and tension. The ways in which these conflicts and tensions express themselves are complex, and require outlining with reference to the context of the *Genealogie* as a whole. This final section of the chapter breaks, therefore, into two subsections. The first provides an analytical description of the treatise's scope, aims and approach to mythology, before the second turns in more detail to the writing and interpretation of the Thesean tales.

A small amount of critical groundwork is necessary, however. As David Lummus has recently noted, despite its historical importance to the development of humanism and its accepted position as one of the most widely used texts of the late-medieval period, the *Genealogie* remains under-analysed and poorly understood.⁵⁹ The studies directly concerned with the treatise can be comfortably listed in a single, by no means lengthy, footnote, and tend, as Lummus points out, towards the descriptive rather than the analytical.⁶⁰ Further, of those, only a few have sought to

⁵⁹ Judging by ubiquity of citation (credited and uncredited), numbers of surviving manuscripts, and printed editions. Zaccaria lists 46 complete and a further 41 partial manuscripts; see his 'Nota al testo' in *Genealogie*, 1587-9. For a survey of printed editions up to 1600, see below, Chapter Five.

⁶⁰ David Lummus, 'Boccaccio's Poetic Anthropology: Allegories of History in the *Genealogie deorum gentilium libri*', *Speculum* 87, no. 03 (October 2012), 724-65: 725n.

engage with the mythographical body of the text; the main critical focus has concentrated instead on the theoretical defence of classical scholarship and poetry in the final two books.⁶¹

Two main factors are at play here, each of which is relevant to the *Genealogie*'s place in this study. The first is the simple fact of the treatise's scope and arrangement: elaborated over 25 years, running to 723 chapters, and covering in the region of 950 mythological figures within a complex and unwieldy genealogical structure, the *Genealogie* is a challenging text.⁶² Though that challenge is by no means insurmountable, a second factor at play in its reception has tended to discourage critics from making the effort: the treatise's designation as a reference book, and the place accorded to it in intellectual history. As is the common fate of reference works in fast-developing disciplines, the *Genealogie* was eventually superseded, at least in the eyes of later humanists and certain critics. From the sixteenth century onwards Boccaccio was granted the distinction of being an extraordinary scholar for his time, but, by the same token, a lesser scholar than his successors.⁶³ This is hard to deny: though he was groundbreaking in his use of direct citations from Greek authors, and pioneering in his call to use primary classical sources, his scholarship does fall far short of later humanists.⁶⁴ And from a

⁶¹ It is symptomatic of the theoretical focus that, until 2011, the only portions of the text available in English were the theoretical sections, published as *Boccaccio on Poetry: Being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio's Genealogia deorum gentilium in an English Version*, trans. Charles Grosvenor Osgood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1930). See also, more recently, James C. Kriesel, 'The Genealogy of Boccaccio's Theory of Allegory', *Studi sul Boccaccio* XXXVII (2009): 197–226.

⁶² For the scope of the work, see Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods, Volume 1: Books I-V*, ed. and trans. Jon Solomon (Harvard University Press, 2011), vii. For the composition (c.1350–1374) and details of its genesis, see *Genealogie*, XV.xiii and Zaccaria's bibliographical note (p.1593); Branca, *Boccaccio*, 88, 109; Hortis, *Studi sulle opere latine*, 158–61.

⁶³ For a survey of sixteenth-century views of Boccaccio's scholarship and Latin, see below, Chapter Five, I.

⁶⁴ See in particular *Genealogie*, XV.vii.

teleologically inflected viewpoint it has been easy to characterise the *Genealogie* as ‘outdated in the history of thought on myth’.⁶⁵

While there is not enough space here to offer a corrective to the more deeply lodged critical commonplaces about the *Genealogie*, it is important in the context of this study to set aside any sense of supersession within a scholarly teleology.⁶⁶ As Lummus makes clear, the *Genealogie* is a rich text when analysed on its own terms; here, it offers unique insights into the history of mythography, and in the nature of mythology itself. While stopping some way short of Lummus’ contention that the treatise is inflected by a ‘radical modernity’, my analysis here centres on the sense that the treatise’s faults and problems are not a product of its supposed ‘medievalism’, but are, by turns, symptoms of Boccaccio’s sensitive understanding of mythology, and of his confusion before it.⁶⁷ What follows is, accordingly, an attempt to tease out the separate threads of the *Genealogie* before noting the problems that characterise their interaction, and the image of mythology that the treatise would have passed on to its readers.

As the tag ‘systematising eclectic mythography’ suggests, the *Genealogie* is a pluralistic text. One way of conceptualising that pluralism is to think of the treatise, in a manner that Boccaccio invites in his introduction, as not one but three texts: the first concerned with collecting ‘the genealogy of the pagan gods and of the heroes descended from them, according to the fictions of the ancients’;⁶⁸ the second, with setting down ‘that which famous men may once have understood beneath the veil of

⁶⁵ Lummus, ‘Boccaccio’s Poetic Anthropology’, 728.

⁶⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 727.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 728.

⁶⁸ ‘genealogiam deorum gentilium et heroum ex eis iuxta fictiones veterum descendentium’, *Genealogie*, I.Pr.i.1.

fables’;⁶⁹ and the third with answering ‘certain objections made against poetry and poets’ and justifying the existence of the *Genealogie* itself.⁷⁰ Structurally, the first two texts run in parallel through the first thirteen books, while the third, tacked onto the end of the treatise, occupies the final two books. Of these three texts, my analysis here focuses on the first two. Though the closing theoretical sections contain clear statements about Boccaccio’s conception of mythology, those statements are often at odds with his actual interpretive practice elsewhere in the treatise, and it is that practice which is central here.⁷¹ In order to understand the sense of mythology the *Genealogie* handed on to its readers, it is necessary to think as much (if not more) in terms of what it communicates implicitly about mythology through the structure and practice of the first thirteen books, than through the explicit statements it makes in the closing two books. Though the first two texts – epitome and interpretation – are not separated, but mingle and interact, they are in a real sense separate, and promote quite different conceptions of mythology. Holding them apart for the purpose of analysis brings to the surface some of the tensions that Boccaccio is keen to avoid or sublimate, and, at the same time, makes it possible to delineate the attributes which are key to the treatise’s ability to hold contradictory viewpoints within one structure.

The first text is the source of the *Genealogie*’s structure, and of all the problems that attend on that structure. Where in his other encyclopaedic treatise of the same period, the *De montibus, silvis, fontibus, fluminibus, stagnis seu paludibus et de diversis nominibus maris*, Boccaccio orders the entries alphabetically, in the *Genealogie* he orders them according to what he perceives as their natural, inherent

⁶⁹ ‘hac quid sub fabularum tegmine illustres quondam senserint viri’, *Genealogie*, I.Pr.i.1.

⁷⁰ ‘quibusdam obiectionibus in poesim at poetas factis’, *Genealogie*, I.i.48.

⁷¹ On the oft-noted gap between theory and practice in Boccaccio more generally, see Kriesel, ‘The Genealogy of Boccaccio’s Theory of Allegory’, 202.

structure. As the title suggests, Boccaccio views that structure as genealogical: for him, mythology is a set of very literally related figures, with all the deities and heroes, descended from a single progenitor, and fitting into single family tree. Though the approach is not without precedent, Boccaccio's genealogy is far more ambitious than any that went before it: it is the only one to attempt to express all of mythology as a whole and singular genealogy.⁷² Earlier mythographical genealogies with which Boccaccio may have been familiar are little more than brief lists, extending to a few pages at most.⁷³ The *Liber genealogie tam hominum quam deorum* by Paolo of Perugia, copied by Boccaccio into one of his notebooks, fills only ten manuscript sides.⁷⁴ It is in no small measure dwarfed by the *Genealogie*'s thirteen books (each equipped with its own genealogical diagram), and 723 chapters.

Several problems attend on the genealogical approach. The first is the simple question of scope. As with any exponentially branching structure, the extent of Boccaccio's genealogy quickly becomes unwieldy; and its expression of mythology's unity comes at the expense of ease of access. As a reference work, the utility of the *Genealogie* lies in the ease with which it can be used to find information at will. But in carefully fitting all the figures of mythology into a single, contiguous structure, Boccaccio privileges unity over utility. Partially aware of the problem, Boccaccio

⁷² The main precedents that Boccaccio would have been aware of come from biblical history and writers such as Paolo of Perugia and the so-called Vatican Mythographers; however, the genealogical approach dates back at least as far as Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women* (6th century B.C.E.), and is also found in the pseudo-Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca* (2nd century C.E.), neither of which could have been known by Boccaccio. On the question of chronology and genealogy, which does not appear to have troubled the ancient mythographers overmuch, see Robert L. Fowler, 'How to Tell a Myth: Genealogy, mythology, mythography', *Kernos: Revue internationale et pluridisciplinaire de religion grecque antique* no. 19 (January 2006), 35-46: 42-3.

⁷³ Thomas Hyde, 'Boccaccio: The Genealogies of Myth', *PMLA* (1985), 737-745: 738.

⁷⁴ See the Zibaldone Magliabechiano (Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Banco rari 50) fols. 110^f-114^v or the transcription in Hortis, *Studi sulle opere latine*, 525-6. Paolo's larger mythographical handbook, the *Collectiones*, occasionally cited by Boccaccio, is now lost; it too may have been organised genealogically.

intended the book-divisions and rubrics, in conjunction with his genealogical trees, to provide a means of looking up specific figures.⁷⁵ Early readers, however, appear to have been frustrated by the difficulties involved. In order to clarify a particular classical reference, their only recourse would have been to scan the thirteen genealogical trees and the 723 rubrics until they found the desired entry. As one early reader puts it,

Quia istud opus genealogiae deorum gentilium est adeo prolixum: ut Rubricae ad unum ut supra patet in principio locum reducte etiam per se volumen videantur efficere. Ideo volenti alicuius historiam seu fabulam invenire etiam in rubricis est valde difficile: nisi quasi omnes legantur.

Because this work on the genealogies of the pagan gods is so copious (such that even the condensed rubrics to one book, as is clear at the beginning above, might seem to fill a volume by themselves) for that reason, it is extremely difficult for anyone who wants to, to find a specific history or fable even in the rubrics, unless they read nearly all of them.⁷⁶

In an effort to solve the problem, that reader, Domenico Bandini, indexed the *Genealogie*, providing an alphabetical table of its contexts.⁷⁷ Bandini was not alone in finding the treatise impractical, either; his index was one of the three that were added to the treatise within thirty years of Boccaccio's death.⁷⁸ Designed as a contiguous whole, the *Genealogie*'s unity exists in a tense relationship with its utility. Only able to fulfil its purpose as a reference work when read fragmentarily, it would have been

⁷⁵ See *Genealogie*, I.Pr.i.47. It is worth noting that Boccaccio was instrumental in the development of the genealogical tree, with his innovations spurred by the challenge of the *Genealogie*; see Christiane Klapish-Zuber, 'La Genèse de l'arbre généalogique', in *L'Arbre: histoire naturelle et symbolique de l'arbre, du bois et du fruit au moyen âge* (Paris: Le léopard d'or, 1993), 41–81.

⁷⁶ The section here is quoted from the *editio princeps* of the *Genealogie: Genealogiae deorum gentilium* (Venice, 1472), f.259^v.

⁷⁷ On the evidence available, Wilkins dates the composition of Bandini's index to 1376-90; see Ernest Hatch Wilkins, *The University of Chicago Manuscript of the Genealogia deorum* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1927), 24. Hortis and Wilkins catalogue that the index and its preface appear in four manuscripts of the *Genealogie* and in the first seven printed editions; *Ibid.*, 22; Hortis, *Studi sulle opere latine*, 223–4, 929.

⁷⁸ Wilkins, *The University of Chicago Manuscript of the Genealogia deorum*, 24.

experienced by its readers as both impressing upon them the unity of mythology and the necessity of breaking up that same unity.

Though the impracticality of the genealogical approach and its privileging of structural unity could be mitigated by Bandini and the other indexers, it is implicated with more fundamental problems in the epitome's conception of mythology. Boccaccio's privileging of unity stems from his understanding of the task before him as a challenge to reassemble a once whole and coherent structure; one which, although it is now fragmentary and dispersed, can in some manner be put together again. It is, as he puts it in his proem to Hugo IV of Cyprus, 'no different than if I were to collect from a vast shore the scattered remnants of a huge shipwreck'.⁷⁹ While Boccaccio admits that the remnants of mythology are almost irretrievably scattered, 'through a near infinite number of volumes', he yet conceives them as a formerly complete and coherent structure: a ship, or in the metaphor he chooses to repeat more often, a body (*corpus*).⁸⁰ Appropriately ready to revive the literal meaning of a dead metaphor, he states:

membratim discerptum, attritum et in cineres fere redactum ingens
olim corpus deorum procerumque gentilium nunc huc nunc illuc
collecturus et, quasi Esculapius alter, ad instar Ypolitii
consolidaturus sum.

I am about to collect, now from here, now from there, the once vast
body of the pagan gods and nobles, torn limb from limb, ground
down, and almost reduced to ashes, and, like a second Aesculapius,
I am going put it together again, just as he did to Hippolytus.
(*Genealogie*, I.Pr.i.50)

⁷⁹ 'non aliter quam si per vastum litus ingentis naufragii fragmenta colligerem sparsas', *Genealogie*, I.Pr.i.40.

⁸⁰ 'per infinita fere volumina', *Genealogie*, I.Pr.i.40.

Just as Aesculapius was able to reassemble and revive Hippolytus, torn apart across rocks by his own horses, so Boccaccio hopes he will be able to reassemble the body of myth.

The problem with this motif of reassembly is not the size of the task or the scattering of the remnants. Nor, as critics following in Jean Seznec's footsteps might have it, is it Boccaccio's uneven mix of classical and medieval sources.⁸¹ The fundamental problem is the assumption that mythology is, at base, a unified, coherent and singular structure. It is on this account that I have termed Boccaccio's approach 'systematising' rather than 'systematic': Boccaccio is systematising, or attempting to systematise, a collection of tales which are not by nature systematic. As modern classicists are aware, the Greeks and Romans understood that 'What we call "Greek myth" is [...] multifaceted, multifarious and multivalent, a fluid phenomenon'.⁸² This is, at the best of times, difficult to represent in epitomic form. As Timothy Gantz points out, in regard to earlier compilations, it is the standard tendency of mythographical epitomes to synthesise their materials as best as possible, and, in so doing, to promote 'the concept of the Greek myths as [...] the product of a unified Greek mind rather than contributions from many different tellers of tales in many different contexts over a great span of time'.⁸³ Mythology is, however, precisely that: a manifold and plural set of tales, often at odds with one another, incoherent and contradictory. When Greek mythology extends to become Greco-Roman mythology, and, as with Boccaccio, stretches to incorporate late-antique and medieval additions,

⁸¹ Seznec, *Survival of the Pagan Gods*, 220-21.

⁸² Roger D. Woodard, 'Introduction: Muthoi in Continuity and Variation', in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology*, ed. Roger D. Woodard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

⁸³ Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 1:xvi.

the pluralities multiply. Of necessity, expressing those tales synthetically involves some exclusion of pluralities, and, hence a misrepresentation of mythology's plurality.

When the idea of synthesis is allied with an attempt at systematisation, the problem of exclusion and misrepresentation of mythology becomes greater. In this light, Boccaccio's warning that the *corpus* he is (re)constructing will, of necessity, be in some way 'deformed', appears as a truth he was ill-equipped to understand.⁸⁴ For him, it alludes to the problem faced by all the king's horses and all the king's men in the nursery rhyme: how to reconstruct a shattered body correctly. From a mythographically sensitive point of view, it becomes clear that such a body would not be a reconstruction, but a construction, and the resulting body, in its structural singularity and unity, a deformation of the plurality that characterises mythology.

Boccaccio exacerbates the problems involved in systematising mythology according to genealogical principles by making his genealogy obey real-world principles of historical logic and possibility. Despite characterising his genealogy as constructed 'according to the fictions of the ancients' at the opening of the proem to Book I, he forces it to obey real-world laws of historical possibility and logic.⁸⁵ Though, as Vittorio Zaccaria notes, Boccaccio is not a Euhemerist in the truest sense, and the *Genealogie* is not predominantly interested either in historicising or rationalising its myths, Boccaccio is interested in situating the myths in history, and in

⁸⁴ 'Non expectes, [...] corpus huiusmodi habere perfectum; mutilum quippe' ('Do not expect [it] to have a perfect body in this way, but rather a deformed one'), *Genealogie*, I.Pr.i.41.

⁸⁵ 'iuxta fictiones veterum', *Genealogie*, I.Pr.i.1.

making his genealogy obey historical possibility.⁸⁶ Scattered through the first thirteen books are 93 references to Eusebius' *Chronicon*, each of which is used to situate the myth in question in historical time, and which, in turn, anchor the whole genealogical structure to historical time.⁸⁷ This historicising frame has deep structural effects that work against the unity of the genealogical structure by causing unnecessary proliferations of its branches. In line with the presumption that the gods cannot actually have existed in multiple countries at the same time, or have lived to impossible ages, Boccaccio settles on the widely held view that there were often several, homonymous personages behind each name. He counts five Joves, five Minervas, three Venuses, and so on, with few of the major deities escaping multiplication.⁸⁸ Once again, the systematising and unifying principle begins to counteract itself: historicisation leads to multiplication and fragmentation.

Boccaccio is, however, partially aware of mythology's recalcitrance in the face of his efforts. In a clear-sighted disclaimer about the content of the treatise, he tells Hugo that

nolo mireris aut errore meo contigisse putes (veterum crimen est),
quod sepiissime leges, multa scilicet adeo veritati dissona et in se
ipsa non nunquam discrepantia, ut nedum a phylosophis oppinata,
sed nec a rusticis cogitata putes, sic et pessime temporibus

⁸⁶ See Hortis, *Studi sulle opere latine*, 166. Euhemerus was the Greek author of the now lost *Sacred History* (c. 300 B.C.E.), a romance which put forward the thesis that the gods were merely long-dead kings and heroes whose reputations had raised them to a place in the pantheon. Though the *Sacred History* itself disappeared, Euhemerism held a central position in mythography throughout classical and post-classical Europe, transmitted in a number of key texts including Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliotheca historia* and Cicero's *De natura deorum*. For the classic account of Euhemerism's influence on late-medieval and early modern thought, see Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods: The Mythological Tradition and its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art*, trans. Barbara Sessions (New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1953), 11ff. A briefer summary of the tradition and its key texts can be found in Rhodri Lewis, 'Francis Bacon, Allegory and the Uses of Myth', *Review of English Studies* 61, no. 250 (2010), 360-89: 377-8.

⁸⁷ Figure taken from the index to the *Genealogie*; for particularly insistent usage, see the chapter on Cadmus at II.lxii. The text's previous editor, Vincenzo Romano, sets the figure at over 100; see Lummus, 'Boccaccio's Poetic Anthropology', 731.

⁸⁸ See Hortis, *Studi sulle opere latine*, 161; Lummus, 'Boccaccio's Poetic Anthropology', 755-60.

congruentia. Qui quidem et alia, si qua sunt a debito variantia, non est mee intentionis redarguere vel aliquo modo corrigere, nisi ad aliquem ordinem sponte sua se sinant redigi; satis enim michi erit comperta rescribere et disputationes phylosophantibus linquere.

I do not wish you to be surprised, or to put it down to error on my part (for it is an ancient fault) that you will very often read many things so at odds with the truth, and occasionally in disagreement with themselves, that you could not only not think them imagined by philosophers, but also not even by peasants, and very poorly consistent with the times. It is not my intention to refute these and others, if they are at variance with what should be, nor to correct them in some way, unless of their own accord they allow themselves to be reduced to a certain order; for it will suffice me to record what I have learned, and leave the disputes to philosophers. (*Genealogie*, I.Pr.i.48-49)

There is a catch-all quality to the passage that leaves the actual object of Boccaccio's excuse difficult to pin down – a difficulty which has bothered the two English translators, and which is as much symptomatic of mythology's own slipperiness as of the vagueness of Boccaccio's terms. At one level, the disclaimer works religiously, philosophically and morally: if the 'ancient fault/crime' is paganism, then 'truth', contradistinguished from it, takes on the sense of 'Christianity'. That Boccaccio contrasts *veritas* and *error* in a similar fashion, explicitly defined as Christianity and Paganism, only a few paragraphs earlier, would seem to reinforce that interpretation.⁸⁹ Read in that context, the 'times' of the final clause appear in the same sense as Cicero's 'O tempora, o mores!': the myths are 'very incongruous in these [Christian] times'.⁹⁰ At the same time, however, there is no indication that 'truth' does not have a more practical sense here: the myths are full of much that is historically implausible, and, what is more, are full of discrepancies on their own terms. As with the first reading, this too has parallel, and seemingly clarificatory passages elsewhere in the

⁸⁹ *Genealogie*, I.Pr.i.28.

⁹⁰ Solomon, in a reading that seems less justified by the context, but which remains plausible, takes 'times' in the same sense, but reads it as referring to ancient times, giving the loose reading 'hardly fitting even for the ancients'; see *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods, Volume 1*, 23.

treatise: in Book XIV's taxonomy of *fabulae*, the type which correspond to the ancient myths are defined as mixing 'true things with fabulous things'.⁹¹ Working on this interpretation, Osgood renders the final clause's 'temporibus' as referring to the problems of chronology: 'other inconsistencies you will observe in their chronology'.⁹²

Both readings are plausible because both refer to real and persistent problems for Boccaccio. Mythology is indeed at odds with Christianity, and, superficially at least, little fitting for the Christian era; it is also implausible, incoherent and chronologically muddled. And despite his final throwing up of hands to say he is only recording what he has learned, ordering only as it orders itself, and that he leaves any further quibbles to 'the philosophers', Boccaccio is being slightly disingenuous. As has already been seen, while certain portions of mythology settle of their own accord into genealogical structures, the overarching genealogical framework is at least as much imposed from without as drawn from within. And for the chronological difficulties implicated in that imposition, he has his Eusebius and his Cicero. Similarly, as will be seen, the interpretive discourse *proprement dit* has a small arsenal of rationalising techniques to employ against historical implausibility, which Boccaccio uses as and when they seem viable. And alongside such rationalisations he also makes repeated efforts to resolve the discord between pagan and Christian doctrine – a topic to which he devotes further room in Book XIV's defence of fable against the charge of being lies, even when 'it appears entirely contrary to truth'.⁹³

⁹¹ 'Secunda [...] species in superficie non nunquam veritati fabulosa commiscet', *Genealogie*, XIV.ix.6.

⁹² Boccaccio, *Boccaccio on Poetry*, 13.

⁹³ As in the case of humans turned to stone, 'quod omnino apparet veritati contrarium', *Genealogie*, XIV.xiii.1.

Despite their disingenuousness, however, the disclaimer and its final throwing up of hands are key to understanding the nature of the two discourses that run through the first thirteen books of the *Genealogie*. On one hand, they authorise the refusal to leap from a systematising to a truly systematic organisation of the myths; on the other, they permit Boccaccio to take an entirely eclectic and non-methodical approach to the interpretation of those myths. Leaving the quibbles to the philosophers (when he wants to), he opens up a space of play for structural and interpretive inconsistency. While the nature of the project is such that the amount of play for structural inconsistency is extremely constrained, the play of the interpretive discourse has no such problem. There, the field of play returns us to the theme of textual contingency, experienced in the *Genealogie* as a mercurial, superficially quite random approach to the question of what meaning can be extracted from under the ‘ridiculous bark of fable’.⁹⁴

One of the crucial aspects of the *Genealogie* in regard to the interpretation and use of mythology is the manner in which Boccaccio’s hermeneutic theories and hermeneutic practice – through equal measures of concord and contradiction – persistently maintain the openness of his interpretive field. Despite the treatise’s considerable amount of theoretical musing on the definition of mythology and the location of truth and meaning within it, what finally emerges from the text as a whole is a pluralist and flexible set of hermeneutic approaches that serve to reinforce the sense of mythology’s contingency on its interpretive contexts. As the ambiguities of the proem’s final disclaimer suggest, Boccaccio does not work from a singular definition of truth/meaning or on a well-defined ontology of fable, and even when he

⁹⁴ ‘sub ridiculo cortice fabularum’, *Genealogie*, I.Pr.i.16.

seems closest to doing so, he denies that he will proceed in accordance with it. Instead, what emerges is an investment in the idea of mythology (and, indeed, as James Kriesel points out, all literature) as fecund in its ability to produce meanings of use to the wise reader, and hence protected from the claims of those who would seek to portray it as meaningless or, worse, actively dangerous.⁹⁵

One facet of that polysemy arises from Boccaccio's refusal to outline an exact relationship between myth and history, leaving himself able to locate meaning, by turns, in the historical 'reality' behind fable, in authorial intention, and in the further levels of interpretation (moral, allegorical, anagogical) that each of those primary locations of meaning make available. The lack of definition given to the myth/history relationship stems partially from the split between the historicising genealogical frame and the practical treatment of mythology as fictive, and partially from a set of carefully unclosed theoretical positions laid out in the opening and closing books of the treatise. In the fourteenth book, *fabula* receives an extended analysis that reinforces mythology's fictive ontology, and locates authorial intention as the source of meaning, but which, finally, leaves history a role to play. Initially, it is the fictive that predominates, with a concomitant insistence on the author as primary source of meaning: 'A fable is an exemplary or demonstrative speech under [a bark of] fiction; when the bark has been removed, the author's intention becomes apparent'.⁹⁶ The taxonomy of different forms of *fabula* that follows slightly complicates matters, however, as Boccaccio subdivides it into four varieties, in each of which the *intentio auctoris* has a different degree of importance. The first is Aesopian fable, which

⁹⁵ Kriesel, 'The Genealogy of Boccaccio's Theory of Allegory', 197.

⁹⁶ 'Fabula est exemplaris seu demonstrative sub figmento locutio, cuius amoto cortice, patet intentio auctoris', *Genealogie*, IV.ix.4.

‘entirely lacks any truth beneath its bark’, but which is occasionally used even by Aristotle to demonstrate moral or philosophical points;⁹⁷ the second is mixed fable, which combines ‘on its surface some true things with fabulous things’, to the same end;⁹⁸ the third, which ‘is more like history than fable’, recounts things that are historically plausible, and can be used to inculcate wisdom, but which did not actually occur;⁹⁹ the fourth, are the ‘invention[s] of mad old women’, and contain no truth, ‘neither on the surface, nor hidden deep within’.¹⁰⁰

Of the four species it is clear that the second corresponds to the *fabulae* of the *Genealogie*, defining them as a mixed mode in which authorial intention is added to historical meaning in a flexible relationship. This designation allows them to be treated as fiction, but within an historically derived structure. And while it cannot entirely efface the tensions generated by historicising systematisation, it does point up an underlying coherence in Boccaccio’s concept of mythology. At the same time, it acts, in conjunction with earlier statements in the treatise, to maintain once more the breadth of play available to Boccaccio’s interpretive discourse. As a mixed mode, it is possible to treat mythology’s ‘meaning’ either as inhering in the author’s intention (and *auctoritas*) and the secondary meanings that author hid within the myth, or as inhering in the historical ‘reality’ behind the myth, along with the further meanings made accessible through interpretation of that historical ‘reality’.

This too, however, falls under another of Boccaccio’s catch-all disclaimers, which opens up the interpretive field even further. In the proem to the first book,

⁹⁷ ‘omnino veritate caret in cortice’, *Genealogie*, XIV.ix.5.

⁹⁸ ‘in superficie non nunquam veritati fabulosa commiscet’, *Genealogie*, XIV.ix.6.

⁹⁹ ‘potius hystorie quam fabule similis est’, *Genealogie*, XIV.ix.7. As noted in n.40, above, other medieval theorists, following Cicero tend to refer to this as *argumentum*.

¹⁰⁰ ‘nil penitus in superficie nec in abscondito veritatis habet, cum si delirantium vetularum inventio’, *Genealogie*, XIV.ix.8.

Boccaccio makes clear that he considers the intentions of the ancients beyond his grasp, but that this severance can become its own cause of fecundity:

sensus absconditos sub duro cortice enucleando procedam, non tamen ad unguem iuxta intentionem fingentium fecisse promictam. Quis enim tempestate nostra antiquorum queat terebrare pectora et mentes excutere, in vitam aliam iam diu a mortali segregatas, et, quos habuere, sensus elicere? [...] Veteres quippe, relictis licteris suis nominibus insignitis, in viam universe carnis abiere, sensusque ex eis iuxta iudicium post se liquere nascentium, quorum quot sunt capita, fere tot inveniuntur iudicia.

I will proceed, extracting the senses hidden beneath the hard bark; but I do not promise to do so minutely, according to the intention that the writers of fictions had. For who in our time could bore a hole in the breasts of the ancients to examine their minds – who are now long separated from mortal life in another life – and extract the senses that their works once had? [...] After all, the ancients, having left distinguished works inscribed with their names, went the way of all flesh, and left the meanings of those works to the judgement of those to be born after them; and there are almost as many judgements as there are people. (*Genealogie*, I.Pr.i.42-3)

One subtext here, recognisable in the context of this chapter's broader discussion of textual contingency, is the textual contingency of individual myths, illustrated by their simultaneous dependence on and freedom from authorial intention. It was the privilege of the ancients to add meanings to their mythology, and those meanings stem from the poets' intentions; but dissevered from those ancient intentions, a myth can become a receptacle for new intentions.

Just as readers are free to proceed according to their own judgement, so too can a modern writer. The plurality of judgements should not be considered surprising, Boccaccio points out, since it is the nature of interpretation to generate pluralities:

Nec mirabile; videmus enim divini voluminis verba ab ipsa lucida, certa ac immobili veritate prolata, etiam si aliquando tecta sint tenui figurationis velo, in tot interpretationes distrahi, quot ad illa devenere lectores.

Nor is that to be wondered at. For we see the words of holy scripture, clear by themselves, certain and putting forward unchanging truth (even if they are sometimes covered by a thin veil

of figurative language), drawn out into as many interpretations as there are readers. (*Genealogie*, I.Pr.i.43)

Boccaccio does not, therefore, see any need to circumscribe his interpretation of myth according to specific rules, but instead proceeds as he sees fit. He will, he says, appeal to ancient authorities first, but where they are absent, he will add his own opinions.

The precise nature of those opinions, and the kinds of meaning Boccaccio believes mythology can support are laid out in more detail near the opening of the first book proper. In order to explain more clearly his hermeneutics, Boccaccio devotes an aside to the definition of polysemy. In a passage that is worth quoting in full, he outlines both mythology's fecundity and his own selective, eclectic approach to expounding the meaning of individual myths:

sciendum est his fictionibus non esse tantum unicum intellectum, quin imo dici potest potius *polisenum* [sic], hoc est *multiplicium sensuum*. Nam sensus primum habetur per corticem, et hic licteralis vocatus est; alii per significata per corticem, et hi allegorici nuncupantur. Et ut quid velim facilius assumatur, ponemus exemplum. Perseus Iovis filius figmento poetico occidit Gorgonem, et victor evolavit in ethera. Hoc dum legitur per licteram hystorialis sensus prestatur. Si moralis ex hac lictera queritur intellectus, victoria ostenditur prudentis in vicium et ad virtutem accessio. Allegorice autem si velimus assumere, pie mentis, spretis mundanis deliciis, ad celestia elevatio designatur. Praeterea posset et anagogice dici per fabulam Christi ascensum ad Patrem, mundi principe superato, figurari. Qui tamen sensus et si variis nuncupentur nominibus, possunt tamen omnes allegorici appellari; quod ut plurimum fit. Nam *allegoria* dicitur ab *allon*, quod *alienum* latine significat, sive *diversum*, et ideo quot diversi ab hystoricali seu licterali sint sensu, allegorici possunt, ut dictum est, merito vocitari. Verum non est animus michi secundum omnes sensus enucleare fabulas que sequuntur, cum satis arbitrer unum ex pluribus explicasse, esto aliquando apponentur fortasse plures.

In addition to these, it is necessary to understand that there is not only one way of understanding these fictions, but rather they can better be called *polysemous*, which is to say, having *several senses*. For they have their first sense by the outer covering, and this is called the literal sense; they have other senses in the things signified through the outer covering, and these are called allegorical. And so that what I mean can better be understood, I will give an example. In the poetic fiction, Perseus, son of Jove, kills the Gorgon, and,

victorious, flies into the sky. This, when read through the literal, gives us the historical sense. If, from this literal level, the moral meaning is sought, it shows the victory of the prudent man over vice and his increase in virtue. If, however, we wish to understand it allegorically, it designates the ascent of the mind to celestial matters once it has spurned the delights of the world. In addition, the fable can also anagogically figure the ascent of Christ to the father, having conquered the prince of the world. However, even if these senses are called by different names, they could all be called allegorical – which is very frequently done. For *allegory* comes from *allon*, which signifies *other* or *different* in Latin, and therefore any senses different from the historical or literal can be justly be called allegorical, as has been said. In truth though, it is not my intention to explain the fables that follow according to all the senses, since I feel it is enough to have explained one out of many, even though I may add many sometimes (*Genealogie*, I.iii.7-10)¹⁰¹

The passage's significance lies in showing, in conjunction with his other theoretical statements, just how flexible Boccaccio's stance on the location of meaning in individual myths can be. Though, as Kriesel notes, he refuses to proceed along the traditional lines of fourfold Biblical exegesis, Boccaccio uses the widely-known but inherently flexible notion of fourfold polysemy to stake out a field in which, if he so wishes, he can perform several different interpretive leaps on each myth, none of which can be conceived of as the whole or only meaning.¹⁰² Following his partial investment in authorial intention, and the Macrobian definition of fable as a repository of hidden wisdom, he can seek out the author's intentions, and treat those as the location of meaning.¹⁰³ This occurs particularly with the physical interpretations of certain gods as natural phenomena.¹⁰⁴ Alternatively, having set authorial intention to

¹⁰¹ Cf. the exposition of polysemy and allegory in the Epistle to Can Grande, now of disputed authorship, but known to Boccaccio as Dante's *Dantis Alagherii Epistolae: The Letters of Dante*, trans. Paget Jackson Toynbee (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1920), X (XIII in other editions). On Boccaccio's reading of the epistle, see Kriesel, 'The Genealogy of Boccaccio's Theory of Allegory', 208 n.

¹⁰² Robert Hollander's collection of expositions on fourfold polysemy from commentaries on Dante (including Boccaccio's) illustrates the degrees of vagueness and flexibility involved; see Appendix I in Robert Hollander, *Allegory in Dante's Commedia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

¹⁰³ See *Genealogie*, I.iii.6 for direct citation of the *Somnium Scipionis*. Pace Kriesel, Boccaccio does not ignore Macrobius' attachment to historical readings of mythology; however, see Kriesel, 'The Genealogy of Boccaccio's Theory of Allegory', 209.

¹⁰⁴ See, e.g., the intentions of the poets in regard to the 'Older Venus', *Genealogie*, III.xxii.4-5.

one side as irreclaimable, he can move from the literal meaning to any allegorical interpretation that fits, according to his own wit. Alternatively again, he can work out, via various methods of rationalisation, the underlying historical ‘reality’ of the myth, and either leave it at that or move from there to moral-historical interpretation (as in the *De casibus*). And, again, he can reveal the spiritual-allegorical sense, or the rarer analogical (often Christological) interpretations.

Crucially, however, Boccaccio sees no need to do any more than provide exemplary interpretations along these lines. Having shown that the myths are by nature polysemous, and having given an exemplary key to that polysemy, he leaves readers largely to their own devices, promising only to tease out the secondary senses of mythology when he sees fit. That, as Henry Jocelyn has calculated, around half of the myths are left without secondary interpretations is symptomatic of Boccaccio’s sincerity on this point.¹⁰⁵

What is key here is that Boccaccio does not portray mythographical interpretation as hypostatising a myth’s meanings in any set fashion. Systematically laying out the multiple branchings of polysemy should not be taken as mapping out a systematic interpretive methodology which Boccaccio fails to follow. Instead, the methodological exposition is intended to ensure that the fecundity of myth is both recognised and preserved, with even the most specific and plausible of interpretations recognised as contingent and partial. As elsewhere, the apparently systematic framework is rounded off with an anti-systematic disclaimer. Beyond the straitened confines of the genealogical framework, he refuses any measure of systematic or

¹⁰⁵ See Henry David Jocelyn, ‘Giovanni Boccaccio’s Interpretations of the Graeco-Roman Myths’, in *Die Allegorese des antiken Mythos*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Horn and Hermann Walter (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997), 253–266: 260.

methodical consistency. As Boccaccio makes clear, the meanings he does offer are never intended to be comprehensive, but rather representative: keys to further interpretation, of the same myth, or of mythology in general.

It is in this context that the writing of the Thesean tales in the *Genealogie* should be understood. First, however, it is worth considering the process of looking up Theseus and the characters related to him, a process which will take on some importance in this study as a whole. Even in the comprehensive *Genealogie* the process of finding out about a figure like Theseus reveals itself as less simple than might be assumed. In an unindexed copy, a reader seeking Theseus' biography would have to scan through the rubrics listed together at the opening of the treatise until they found his entry, approximately three quarters of the way through Book X; having found it, they could skip to the main entry on Theseus with relative ease. An index like Bandini's would simplify that process in one sense, but also make clear that the main entry does not actually cover all that one might wish to know about Theseus. Though Bandini states that almost every thing written in other entries can be found in the main biography at X.xlix, he points to a further ten relevant chapters. It would be difficult, on this basis, not to be made aware of the combination of fragmentation and catenation that marks mythology: as the proliferation of relevant entries suggests, the mythological tales are simultaneously linked and split. As will be seen in later chapters, this combination is key to understanding the reception of mythology and the most fundamental process of mythography: getting to know a myth.

The chapter on Theseus shows Boccaccio at his most straightforward. It is a simple list of events, light on learned references, and with no secondary interpretations whatsoever. Having outlined Theseus' kinship (son of Aegeus and

Aethra) and his status as one ‘among several Hercules’ for his strength and generosity of spirit, Boccaccio does little more than enumerate his deeds.¹⁰⁶ The list given is follows: the defeat of the Amazons (with Hercules), subsequent marriage to Hippolyta (named as sister of the queen Antiope), and the birth of Hippolytus by her; the war against Creon (for which Statius is cited as a source); the killing of the Marathonian bull; the killing of the Isthmian robbers Sciron and Procrustes; the kidnap of Helen; the killing of the Minotaur and flight with Ariadne and Phaedra, with subsequent marriage to Phaedra; the Synoikismos; the ‘first invention of treaties’ (from Pliny);¹⁰⁷ the battle against the Centaurs at Pirithous’ wedding, with the Katabasis to kidnap Proserpina, and eventual rescue by Hercules; the death of Hippolytus; and, finally, Theseus’ exile and death on the island of Sciros. The summary ends with the reader being referred to the *Metamorphoses*’ panegyric for Theseus on his first arrival in Athens.¹⁰⁸ As noted, none of these events is given any manner of secondary interpretation, with any further conclusion left for the readers to draw as they see fit. What is also notable, in contrast to the account given in the *De casibus*, is the lack of particular concern for either chronological or any other form of order; without a specific textual agenda to further, Boccaccio does not make any attempt to structure Theseus’ life in either a meaningful or chronologically consistent fashion.

This schematic account of Theseus is not, as Bandini’s index notes, the only section of the *Genealogie* relevant to the hero. Without casting too far afield, a fuller sense of the hero’s life can be gained from reading the chapters on either side of Theseus’ life: Aegeus before, and Hippolytus after. In Aegeus’ life, a few more

¹⁰⁶ ‘inter Hercules plurimos nominetur’, *Genealogie*, X.xlix.1.

¹⁰⁷ ‘primus federa adinvenit’, X.xlix.3; for Pliny’s statement, see Pliny, *C. Plini Secundi Naturalis historiae libri XXXVII*, VII.LVI.202.

¹⁰⁸ *Metamorphoses*, VII.433ff.

details are given about the defeat of the Minotaur, but only a few. The cause of Minos' war against Athens is given, but the Minotaur's form and origins are left unspecified, as are the means of his defeat; on the latter Boccaccio only notes that Theseus left victorious 'by Ariadne's council'.¹⁰⁹ The reader does learn, however, of Aegeus' suicide as a result of Theseus' failure to change his ship's black sails for the white ones which were to signify his success and survival.

The chapter following Theseus' life is also characterised by very partial clarification of further questions about Theseus. Having given a fuller version of Hippolytus' death and Theseus' role in it (with reference to Seneca's *Phaedra*), Boccaccio notes the tradition that 'Theseus had, from his father, the power to choose three wishes, and that because he now chose to have his son killed, the seals [who startled Hippolytus' horses] were sent to the shore by his father'.¹¹⁰ Left un glossed, this tradition only makes sense if the reader is aware of the tales in which Theseus' father is not, in fact, Aegeus, but Neptune. Boccaccio does not, however, provide such any explanation; as more of the myth is set down, more appears to be absent.

Bandini's index also points to the obvious cross-reference with Ariadne and Phaedra (*Genealogie*, XI.xxix and xxx). Phaedra's brief biography does not offer many further details on Theseus; Ariadne's does. Here, though it is still not explained what the Minotaur is exactly, the full details of Ariadne's role in Theseus' victory over it emerge, and the story of her desertion on Naxos or Chios is given. Phaedra was, Boccaccio notes, taken on Ariadne's insistence, as a wife for Hippolytus. Whereas, in the sections just examined, Boccaccio sees no need to present secondary

¹⁰⁹ 'Theseus autem Adriane consilio victor', *Genealogie*, X.xlviii.2.

¹¹⁰ 'a patre habuisse ut ter posset optare quod vellet, et quia nunc filium optasset occidi, phocas a patre emissas in litus', *Genealogie*, X.1.2.

interpretations, in Ariadne's biography he offers a full, rationalising explanation of the fable in which Bacchus takes her as his wife. Making explicit the reasoning he had left implicit in the *De casibus*, he states, 'Naxos and Chios are islands abundant in the best wine, and I believe that Ariadne was taken in drink, and because of this left, drunk, by Theseus; and because she abandoned herself to drink, so is she said to have been Bacchus' wife'.¹¹¹ From this historicising interpretation, Boccaccio reaches the moral-allegorical conclusion that: 'because all the honesty of woman is washed away by wine, so was Ariadne given a crown by Venus, which is the emblem of wantonness, which was placed in the sky, which is to say brought to the knowledge of all people'.¹¹²

The most interesting of the secondary entries pointed to by Bandini's index is that on Pasiphae, where, though it is not mentioned in Theseus' life, the tale of the Minotaur receives a full allegorical reading appertaining to the well-being of the soul. Here Boccaccio gives a schematic version of the standard story, in which Pasiphae falls in love with a bull while Minos is away at war, and, through Daedalus' ingenuity, conceives the biform Minotaur. He then proceeds to both rationalise and allegorise the tale. First, Boccaccio notes that Servius tells us that the bull was, in fact, a scribe of Minos' court, called Taurus; Pasiphae slept with this Taurus in Daedalus' house, and conceived a son by him. When she gave birth it was to twins, one of which was clearly fathered by Minos, while the parentage of the second remained unclear. For this, the second twin, named after both possible fathers, became Minotaurus.

¹¹¹ 'Naxo seu Chyos insule sunt optimo adundantes vino, quo captam Adrianam puto, et ob id a Theseo temulentam relictam; et quoniam potationibus vacastet, postea Bachi dicta est coniunx', *Genealogie*, XI.xxix.4.

¹¹² 'quoniam a vino mulieris honestas omnis dissolvitur, ei a Venere corona, scilicet libidinis insigne donatur, quod in celum usque, id est in notitiam omnium fertur', *Genealogie*, XI.xxix.4.

Boccaccio does present this historicising explanation of the Minotaur as comprehensive, however; it might explain the myth, but it does not exhaust its signifying potential. In a passage which is worth quoting in full, he gives an ingenious allegory:¹¹³

Ego autem longe altiore sensum hac sub fabula tegi reor. Existimo quidem voluisse veteres ostendere qualiter vicium bestialitatis causaretur in nobis hac ratione. Pasiphem spetiosissimam feminam et Solis filiam credo animam nostram veri Solis, id est Dei omnipotentis, a quo creata est, filiam omni pulchritudine innocentie splendidam. [6] Hec coniunx efficitur Minois regis et legum latoris, id est rationi humane iungitur, que suis legibus eam habet regere atque in rectum iter dirigere. Huic inimicatur Venus, id est appetitus concupiscibilis, qui sensualitati adherens semper rationis est hostis; cui si adhererit anima, a ratione separetur necesse est, a qua semota, facile a blanditiis et suasionibus carnis se trahi permittit et sic precipitem se fert in concupiscentiam tauri a Jove dati, ut sibi ex eo Minos sacrum conficiat. [7] Quem ego taurum sentio mundi huius delicias prima facie pulchras et delectabiles adeo rationi concessas, ut ex eius moderamine certo vite nostre oportuna ministret; nam dum his debite utimur, rite ex eis Deo sacrum conficimus; sane dum eis iudicium sensualitatis sequentes abutimur aut abuti desideramus, in bestialem concupiscentiam devenimus, et tauro tunc obscene anima iungitur in lignea vacca, dum artificio ingenii nostri naturalibus preter nature leges innitimur. [8] Et sic ex appetitu illecebri et adoptione nepharie voluptatis causatur et nascitur Minotaurus, id est bestialitatis vicium. Huius autem Minotauri, hominis et tauri formam esse finxere, eo quod tali vicio laborantes intuitu primo videntur homines, si opera autem prospectemus et abscondita introrsum desideria, tales esse bestias cognoscemus. [9] Clauditur hic laberinto carceri circumitionum plurium implicito, et hoc ideo, quia fortissimum atque ferocissimum et furiosum esset animal, in quo ostenditur eum humano pectori, infandis desideriis intricato. [...] [11] Hic insuper a Theseo ab Adriana predocto occiditur, id est a prudenti viro cui virilitas, quam per Adrianam accipio, eo quod *andres* grece, *vir* sonet latine, ostendit detestabile tam scelesto vicio subiacere et quibus armis etiam conficiendum sit.

I, however, believe that a far deeper sense lies hidden under this fable. I think in truth that the ancients wished to show how the vice of bestiality is caused in us, according to the following account. I believe the very beautiful woman Pasiphae, daughter of Solis, to be our soul, daughter of the true Sun, all-powerful God, by whom the soul was created brilliant in all innocent beauty. [6] This soul is made wife to Minos, the law-giving king; which is to say, it is joined to human reason, which governs the soul with its laws and

¹¹³ The text's paragraph numbers have been inserted in square brackets for convenience.

directs it on the right path. Venus, which is the concupiscent appetite, is an enemy to this, which, in cleaving to sensuality, is always the enemy of reason. If the soul cleaves to it, it must be separated from reason, and being isolated from reason, it easily lets itself be drawn to the charms and persuasions of the flesh, and so is it carried headlong into the concupiscence of the bull given by Jove for Minos to sacrifice. [7] I understand the bull to be the delights of this world, at first sight beautiful and delectable, given to the reason so that it might through its trusty guidance furnish our lives with what is suitable. For when we make use of these things as we should, we duly make sacrifice to God from them; but when, following the judgement of sensuality, we misuse them, or wish to misuse them, we turn to bestial concupiscence, and then the soul in the wooden cow joins itself obscenely to the bull, while, supported by the artifice of our natural wits, we go beyond the laws of nature. [8] And thus, out of illicit appetite and criminal congress the Minotaur is conceived and born, which is the vice of bestiality. This Minotaur is said to be of human and bovine form because at first glance those who work for vice seem men, but if we consider their works, and the desires hidden therein, we will recognise them as beasts. [9] It is closed in a labyrinth of many complicated circuits because it is a very strong, very savage and furious animal; which shows that it is entangled with unspeakable desires in the human heart. [...] [11] After this, it is killed by Theseus – who was instructed in advance by Ariadne – which is to say, by the prudent man, to whom manliness shows it is hateful to submit to such a detestable vice, and with what arms it can be destroyed; for I take Ariadne [*Adriana*] to mean manliness [*virilitas*], since *andres* in Greek is *vir* in Latin. (*Genealogie*, IV.x.5-11)

The passage is a virtuoso performance of what has come to be seen as standard ‘medieval’ mode of Christianising the ancient myths.¹¹⁴ If it can, in this sense, be considered conventional, it is still worth examining with some care.

Two aspects in particular are of note. The first is the carefully marked subjective interpretative frame that accompanies Boccaccio’s intentionalist reasoning. Staking his allegory from the outset on an emphatically personal belief in an ulterior intention on the part of the ancients, Boccaccio continually reminds the reader of his subjective role in extracting that meaning. With the introduction of each new element in its spiritual framework comes another first-person verb of judgement: ‘Ego [...]

¹¹⁴ On this point, see in particular the discussion of the *Ovide moralisé* in Chapter Two, below.

reor', 'Existimo', 'credo', 'ego [...] sentio', 'accipio'. Bald statements without personal qualifications are only made either once the grounds of an interpretation have been laid through these constructions, or with regard to indisputable doctrinal matters. Though Boccaccio attempts to leave his allegorical reasoning as watertight as possible, he is keen to remind us that it is, finally, *his* attempt to extract the intentions of the ancients. As the earlier passage on intention in the proem suggests, Boccaccio is aware of the difficulty of reclaiming intention, and this is marked in the combination of minute reasoning and logical coherence with the first-person reminders of the author's role in reconstructing that intention. There is also no sense that the intentionalist reading is to exhaust the signifying possibilities of the myth. As Boccaccio was so careful to point out in the passage on Perseus, his readings are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather indicative.

The second point of note, which is of particular importance here, is the boundedness of the *fabula* in question, and of the interpretation that accompanies it. None of the figures have the symbolic content Boccaccio assigns them *per se*; they have that symbolic content through and in the context of the Minotaur's conception, imprisonment and defeat; and they are not portrayed or discussed as retaining it beyond that context. Any sense of a 'meaning' maintained on a biographical scale is altogether absent. Minos, though he is discussed as a law-giver and judge in his own chapter (*Genealogie*, XI.xxvi) is not interpreted there as figuring reason, and his symbolic content in the Minotaur story is referred to in that later context as an

altogether separate matter: ‘The things regarding the bull and Pasiphae, however, have been explained above, with regard to Pasiphae’.¹¹⁵

More strikingly, Ariadne can have a meaning conferred upon her through onomastic etymology (albeit spurious) in the context of the Minotaur myth, which is entirely at odds with the main episode analysed in her own biography. There, having abandoned herself to alcohol, her succumbing to vice is depicted as feminine in a way that would counter her identification with *virilitas* in the earlier passage, were it brought into account: ‘for under the influence of wine, a woman falls into the embraces of anyone whatsoever’.¹¹⁶ There is, however, no sense of contradiction raised between the two. Even the onomastic proof of Ariadne’s identification with *virilitas* in the Minotaur myth proves itself only locally applicable, relevant within the confines of a specific episode. In his own chapter, Theseus is also given no symbolic content on a biographical scale, and the discussion of his attempts to kidnap or rape (*rapere*) Helen and Proserpina are evidently not seen as interfering with his identification as the figure of the prudent man in the Minotaur episode.

Several important facets of mythology and mythography appear through an analysis of the Thesean tales in the *Genealogie*, all of which must be borne in mind in later chapters. The first is the difficulty of defining mythology as conforming to a single ontology or historical origin. Boccaccio is able to treat it as essentially fictive in the *Teseida* and as implicitly historical in the *De casibus* because it is susceptible to interpretation as both; but when confronted with the task of presenting mythology in a

¹¹⁵ ‘Que autem ad taurum spectant, supra ubi de Pasiphae explicata sunt’ (my emphasis), *Genealogie*, XI.xxvi.6.

¹¹⁶ ‘agente vino, mulier sese in amplexus quorumcunque dilabatur’, *Genealogie*, XI.xxix.4.

manner consistent with itself in the *Genealogie* he cannot make it fit either category. It remains, instead, suspended shiftingly between the two.

Allied to that suspension is the *Genealogie*'s revelation of the problem of presenting mythology both faithfully and systematically. Boccaccio's attempts to systematise mythology appear as interventions, and its resistance to them surfaces in the treatise's elisions and multiplications: attempts to maintain its own system that represent the failure of that system to accurately contain mythology. Even where that system represents accepted familial relationships within mythology (as in the Thesean tales) it results in narrative fragmentation, with the same tale splitting and multiplying across several different chapters, scattered throughout the book. Where one form of unity is superinduced in an attempt to systematise mythology as a whole, it comes at the expense of the smaller-scale, natural unity of individual tales. That these small-scale narrative unities could only be reconstructed with the aid of indexes such as Bandini's speaks volumes. In the give and take of systematisation and fragmentation inaugurated by Boccaccio's genealogical frame, the only practical way to use the treatise was by means of an index that allowed readers to cut across that frame and reconstruct the myths as they saw fit.

To use an index like Bandini's is, in this sense, an act of mythography itself. Finding out about a tale like the death of the Minotaur, or, on a slightly larger scale, a life like Theseus', is already an act of reconstruction, and of exclusion. Even in the context of a compendium like the *Genealogie*, it necessitates the combination of material from different points in the text, and the resolution of the chronological inconsistencies and multiple possibilities that go with such a process. Appealing to the *Genealogie* as a source for mythological knowledge enforces a recognition of the

sense in which mythology at the most fundamental level is never simply *given*, but exists as a fragmentary and plural set of possibilities.

On a less conceptually rarefied level, the *Genealogie* demonstrates important aspects of the use and interpretation of mythology in the late fourteenth century. First, as Boccaccio's reading of the Minotaur myth suggests when taken in conjunction with the biographies of its protagonists, moral and allegorical readings of the myths should be seen as operating both flexibly and episodically. It is possible, in the first place, to assign multiple meanings and kinds of meaning (historical, moral, spiritual) to a given mythological episode. The Minotaur can be taken historically, or through an intentionalist reading relying on its fictive ontology, and these neither contradict each other, nor exclude further interpretive manoeuvres. Implicitly, this permits the persistent reinterpretation, within certain bounds, of individual myths or mythical figures through recontextualisation. In other words, it recognises the complex textual contingency seen at play in the *Teseida* and *De casibus*. Polysemy is, as Boccaccio suggests, fundamental. In the second place, it is clear that the symbolic function assigned to characters within the bounds of a given myth was not seen as being called into question by contradictory actions elsewhere in their 'biography'. Within this episodic manner of assigning meaning, Ariadne can represent *virilitas* in the Minotaur myth and then become a figure of feminine concupiscence when in her cups on Naxos without any sense of contradiction or difficulty.

IV: Conclusion

The conception of mythography that needs to be borne in mind in the following chapters is, on this basis, an inherently flexible set of practices that all in some fashion constitute *rewriting*. These range from the most basic act of finding out about a specific myth, to ‘extracting’ meaning from it through a wide range of allegorising and hermeneutic techniques, to implicating it with new meanings in new textual surroundings. Each of these is, as Boccaccio and his contemporaries would have recognised, bound up to differing degrees with a complex textual contingency, that defines an extremely broad field of play for the kinds of meaning that can be extracted from or added to a given myth. What is not seen, on the other hand, is any sense of a need for consistency or singularity of interpretation: the writing of Theseus across Boccaccio’s career points strongly to a conception of mythology as a field of possibilities that are, within certain bounds, always susceptible to new meanings and new kinds of meaning.

One way of conceiving of the use of the suspended, non-given, non-crystallised possibilities of mythology to produce an almost unbounded set of mythographical statements is to think of mythology and mythography as related in a fashion analogous to the *langue/parole* relationship in Saussurian linguistics. As Gregory Nagy has suggested with reference to Greek lyric poetry, each written expression of a myth works on the level of *parole* or utterance: it belongs to the *langue* or ‘language system’ of mythology in so far as it obeys the possibilities permitted by mythology and works within a shared knowledge of those possibilities, but it constitutes, inevitably, an exclusionary set of choices, in an action made afresh

with each new mythographical utterance. As will be seen in the following chapters, the idea of mythology as exactly such a field of possibilities is crucial to the ways in which late-medieval and early modern writers use it in their works.

TWO

**Chaucer, Gower and the Fate of Theseus: Ovidian poetic mythography in
fourteenth-century England**

One important facet of mythographical writing left unaddressed in the last chapter is the question of sourcing. Deliberately set aside there in order to permit closer analysis of the generic spectrum of mythography, the use of sources is nevertheless a crucial aspect of mythography. There is, or may be, some difference between the notion of Greco-Roman mythology as an abstract system larger than any one source, and most writers' partial experiences of that system through particular sources. Given the frequent appeals to the authority of particular classical texts and authors found throughout medieval mythography, it seems obvious that the sense that Boccaccio's work gives of mythology as a non-given, suspended set of possibilities might not be universal. Invoking a particular authority when writing a version of a myth would seem to imply a very different conception: the reception of a given myth as precisely that, given; and taken as authentic on the strength of that source's authority.

On the assumption that what writers then do with that myth in poetic mythography is between them and their own conscience, this 'givenness' has proven productive in literary criticism. In canonical writers' dealings with mythology, such sources have often been taken as providing stable reference points through which critics can elaborate a calculus of difference upon which to base their discussion. Through source comparison, it becomes possible to assess what is being done to a particular myth, and what a writer might mean. The methodological ramifications of

this approach are complex, though. On one basic level, the historical specificities that affect the reception of classical sources are often only partially understood. As critics turn more often to the material aspects of textuality, the number of factors seen to be involved in reading a text has grown considerably, and it becomes increasingly difficult to employ simple comparative techniques with the same sense of analytical security.

At the same time, the complex routes by which classical authorities were mediated to their medieval readers take on such different forms in different contexts that it becomes difficult to account for them in any generalised fashion; each case demands new investigation before any comparative work can be done. On top of these, it is also the case that applying comparative techniques to mythographical texts already involves a particular set of problems. Though the use of a limited range of sources in the rewriting of a myth might seem to set up a very different paradigm to the open possibilities and polysemy sketched out in the last chapter, the situation is more complex. The rarity with which a single source, or single section of a source, can be relied upon to give all the information regarding a myth, tends to necessitate the use of multiple texts or of the wider mythological background, which opens that source up again to the multiple possibilities and suspensions of mythology in the abstract. Even when appealing to the authority of a single source, writers may be working from a functional understanding that mythological matters are not to be pinned down so easily.

With these problems in mind, it is clear that working out what is being done to a myth, even when a specific source is identified, presents a complex methodological challenge with ramifications for any discussion of poetic mythography. To address

some of the problems involved, this chapter turns to the place of Ovid in Chaucer and Gower's writing of Theseus. Re-examining the Thesean tales presented in the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Confessio amantis* against their Ovidian sources, it analyses what Chaucer and Gower do to Theseus through the historical specificities of their encounters with Ovid, before considering how their appeals to Ovid's authority interact with the broader notion of mythology given in Chapter One.

In doing so, this chapter breaks into three main sections. The first of these broaches the historical complexities of sourcing by placing Ovid in his medieval European context and examining the ways in which the Thesean tales in the *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* were mediated through the Latin commentaries, vernacular translations and vernacular responses that surrounded his corpus.¹ This first section moves toward a definition of 'Ovidian' that takes into account the effect of these associated texts in constituting his identity for medieval readers. With this groundwork in place, the second and third sections consider the ways in which Chaucer and Gower's Ovidian encounters are expressed and transformed in their writing of Theseus. Close attention to the traces of Ovidian texts to be found in the two authors' accounts of the same tale – Theseus' desertion of Ariadne – allows us to analyse their approaches to the Latin poet from a fresh perspective, bringing out the ways in which their reliance on and freedom from Ovid relate to the wider mythographical scope of this study.

¹ The division here between translation and response corresponds broadly to the distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' translations of classical texts defined by Rita Copeland in *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 94–5.

I. Chaucer and Gower's Ovidian backgrounds: the *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* between Latin and vernacular

As the intermittent use of inverted commas around 'Ovidian' suggests, the historical constitution of that term is an important issue here. Affected by a range of material and cultural factors, and filtered through a wide range of Ovidian texts, the fourteenth-century Ovid is not ours. Though for the sake of convenience those inverted commas will only appear occasionally in the rest of this chapter, it is important to recognise that when Chaucer and Gower name Ovid in their works, they are referring to an historically constituted authorial identity that is not the same as the Ovid constructed in modern editions of his poetry.

This has proven problematic for critics wanting to investigate the impact of the Roman poet on Chaucer and Gower's work. On Chaucer's side, though his regular name-dropping would lead us to think of Ovid as his favourite Latin poet, little compelling analysis has yet been given of the precise ways in which he encountered his ancient Roman counterpart. How Ovid gained such prominence in his literary consciousness and the specifics of the ways in which Chaucer read him, even when he was not aware of it, and believed he was reading him when, in fact, he was not, remain to be analysed. The two best-known studies on the subject – John Fyler's *Chaucer and Ovid* (1979) and Michael Calabrese's *Chaucer's Ovidian Arts of Love* (1994) – offer interpretations of the affinities between the two authors, but do little to

clarify the cultural and material circumstances within which Chaucer came across Ovidian texts.²

Gower's relationship to Ovid, meanwhile, seems more straightforward and direct. His close knowledge of Ovid's poetry is so amply evidenced in his own Latin poems that it caused his editor Macaulay genuine consternation. Noting that whole sections of the Latin *Vox clamantis* are centonically spliced together from different parts of the Ovidian corpus, Macaulay felt justified in accusing Gower of 'schoolboy plagiarism'.³ The charge is anachronistic, as Robert Yeager has pointed out, but it is nevertheless indicative of questions that have yet to be exhausted.⁴ And though it is clear that Gower dealt with Ovid in Latin, the extent to which his reading of the Latin was affected by a broader spectrum of texts that could reasonably be called Ovidian remains unclear.

For both poets, the question of what might have constituted an Ovidian text, and how their sense of Ovid was constituted through such texts, is complicated by the multilingual nature of their cultural milieus. Working at the cross-roads of several linguistically differentiated literary traditions, the two poets met Ovid as a figure filtered synchronically and diachronically through a wide range of texts in several languages. Though the Chaucer canon that has come down to us is exclusively English, it has long been accepted that the literature of the courtly, diplomatic and

² In Fyler's case, a focus on general poetic affinity leads to a study which now seems, at best, outdated; as Calabrese rightly notes, it was not the case that 'Chaucer took his Ovid straight', and one cannot consider Chaucer's relationship with Ovid as if he did; see *Chaucer's Ovidian Arts of Love* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), 2. In Calabrese's case, a restriction of focus to questions of love leads to a study which ignores the place of Ovid as the classical mythographer *par excellence*, and which relies on second-hand interpretations of the 'medieval commentary tradition' for evidence of 'the "medieval Ovid"'.
³ See his introduction to the Latin poems in *The Complete Works of John Gower*, ed. G.C. Macaulay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1899), 4:xxxii.

⁴ See Robert F. Yeager, *John Gower's Poetic: The Search for a New Arion* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1990), 46.

mercantile circles he moved in was predominantly French, Latin or Italian; and so too were his influences.⁵ Gower speaks even more forcefully to the multilingual context of English letters in the period by having written large-scale works in French and Latin as well as English.⁶ For both, it is clear that the spectrum of Ovidian texts that could affect their notion of Ovid extended far beyond the Latin corpus considered by Fyler and Calabrese.

The question is further complicated by the sheer profusion of Ovidian texts in the period. The so-called *aetas Ovidiana* of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries left

⁵ This is not to exclude the likelihood that Chaucer composed lost poems in French; for a summary of the evidence and discussion of a group of lyrics possibly attributable to him, see James I. Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the Poems of 'Ch' in University of Pennsylvania MS French 15* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1982). On the question of Chaucer's influences more generally, the critical corpus is huge; the following is a selective list of book-length studies only. On his Roman influences, see Edgar F. Shannon, *Chaucer and the Roman Poets* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1929); John M. Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven ; London: Yale University Press, 1979); Anderson, *Before the Knight's Tale*; Calabrese, *Chaucer's Ovidian Arts of Love*. For the French tradition, see Étienne Gustave Sandras, *Étude sur G. Chaucer: considéré comme imitateur des trouvères* (Paris: A. Durand, 1859); Haldeen Braddy, *Chaucer and the French Poet, Graunson* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1947); Charles Muscatine, *Chaucer and the French Tradition: a Study in Style and Meaning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957); James I. Wimsatt, *Chaucer and the French Love Poets: The Literary Background of The Book of the Duchess* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); Ardis Butterfield, *The Familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language, and Nation in the Hundred Years War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). The most studied of the three remains the Italian tradition; see, e.g., Peter Borghesi, *Boccaccio and Chaucer* (Bologna: N. Zanichelli, 1903); Hubertis M. (Hubertis Maurice) Cummings, *The Indebtedness of Chaucer's Works to the Italian Works of Boccaccio; a Review and Summary*. (New York: Haskell House, 1965); Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and the Italian Trecento* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Karla Taylor, *Chaucer Reads 'The Divine Comedy'* (Stanford University Press, 1989); Warren Ginsberg, *Chaucer's Italian Tradition* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); William T Rossiter, *Chaucer and Petrarch* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010); Kenneth Patrick Clarke, *Chaucer and Italian Textuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶ While Gower's relations to French and Latin traditions have yet to be treated in a book-length study they have been the subject of a wide range of articles; see, e.g., Götz Schmitz, 'Gower, Chaucer, and the Classics: Back to the Textual Evidence', in *John Gower: Recent Readings*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1989), 95–112; Ardis Butterfield, 'Confessio Amantis and the French Tradition', in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Sian Echard (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 165–180; Winthrop Wetherbee, 'Classical and Boethian Tradition in the Confessio Amantis', in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Sian Echard (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), 181–96. See also Elizabeth Dutton's introduction in John M. Bowers, 'Rival Poets: Gower's Confessio and Chaucer's Legend of Good Women', in *John Gower, Trilingual Poet: Language, Translation, and Tradition*, ed. Elizabeth Dutton, R. F. Yeager, and John Hines (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2010), 276–87. Though the title would suggest otherwise, the articles in the book do not substantially address the question of Gower's languages; the topic is more directly addressed (for Chaucer as well) in Robert F. Yeager, 'Learning to Read in Tongues: Writing Poetry for a Trilingual Culture', in *Chaucer and Gower: Difference, Mutuality, Exchange*, ed. Robert F. Yeager (Victoria, B.C: English Literary Studies, University of Victoria, 1991), 115–29.

behind it a mountain of texts ranging from annotated copies of the Ovidian corpus itself, commentaries, summaries, interpretations and literary responses.⁷ Those asking the unenviably broad question ‘How was Ovid read in the Middle Ages?’ are faced with an embarrassment of evidence scattered through European and American libraries in the form of thousands of rarely-edited, often ill-catalogued manuscripts.⁸ This corpus comes with demands that few scholars are equipped to meet, and as the few able to do so have delved deeper and deeper into the trove, it has been necessary for them to marshal increasingly specialised competences in their work. At the same time as uncovering a great deal about the study of Ovid in schools and monasteries across Europe, that increased specialisation has created a rarely-bridged gap between the work of the intellectual historians and that of literary scholars interested in vernacular traditions.

Bridging that gap is key, however. The interaction between Latin and vernacular responses to the Roman poet is central to Chaucer and Gower’s relationships with Ovid. As Kenneth Clarke notes in regard to Chaucer,

Ovid’s work forms a matrix of influence that is refracted, reflected, and deflected in many directions for many different purposes throughout medieval Europe, both for writers in Latin and in the vernacular. Chaucer’s [...] encounter with Ovid must be seen in a context of Latin and vernacular intertextuality, both a negotiation and a transformation of traditions.⁹

⁷ The phrase was coined by the German palaeographer Ludwig Traube at the turn of the twentieth century. Inevitably, the actual intensity of interest in Ovid during the period has come under scrutiny in a range of scholarship; see, e.g., Birger Munk Olsen, *La Réception de la littérature classique au moyen âge (IXe-XIIe siècle)* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, University of Copenhagen, 1995), 71–95.

⁸ For an idea of the materials involved and the concomitant scholarly difficulties, see Frank T. Coulson and Bruno Roy, *Incipitarius ovidianum: a finding guide for texts in Latin related to the study of Ovid in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Turnhout: Brepolis, 2000).

⁹ Clarke, *Chaucer and Italian Textuality*, 9.

Though there is no evidence to suggest that Chaucer was interested in the systematic study of the classics, he is still touched by the trickle-down effects of the academic and monastic traditions of commentary, redaction and interpretation. And as a non-systematic reader, reliant, in Derek Pearsall's words, 'on borrowing and chance recommendations', reading and writing long after the first flush of the *aetas Ovidiana*, Chaucer appears to have received his Ovid piecemeal, through contemporaries and close antecedents whose work sublimates medieval Ovidianisms after three hundred years of growth and interaction.¹⁰ The same can be said of Gower. Though it is clear that he is reading his Ovid in Latin, he is still reading it, like Chaucer, at this point of sublimation, when academic and vernacular discourses of Ovidianism are partaking freely of each other. At a time, in other words, when the Latin texts can no longer be 'taken straight'.

This point of sublimation is central to understanding Ovid's place in Chaucer and Gower's consciousnesses. As A.J. Minnis states in relation to the French reception of Ovid in the period immediately preceding Chaucer and Gower's, the vernacular responses to Ovid come from a time when he

has left the medieval schoolroom and joined the secular society of medieval aristocrats [... and when] the scholarly apparatus of *accessus* and glosses which accompanied his work in manuscript, and above all else the scholastic literary attitudes which permeated those hermeneutic procedures, have been adapted to suit the needs of a larger, and more heterogeneous interpretive community.¹¹

Gower and Chaucer were the English inheritors of this interpretive community. To understand the ways in which they received Ovid, one needs to delve back and trace

¹⁰ Derek Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer: a Critical Biography* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 32.

¹¹ A. J. Minnis, 'Latin to Vernacular: Academic Prologues and the Medieval French Art of Love', in *Medieval and Renaissance Scholarship: Proceedings of the Second European Science Foundation Workshop on the Classical Tradition in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Nicholas Mann and Birger Munk Olsen (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1997), 153-86: 153-4.

its development, considering how the hermeneutic procedures of the schoolrooms and monasteries of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are sublimated into the vernacular literary sphere; and how, in turn, vernacular readings impinge on their scholastic sources, and on the original Latin texts.

As the key passages for Chaucer and Gower's writing of Theseus are to be found in the *Heroides* and the *Metamorphoses*, my account of Ovidian textual transmission and vernacular absorption focuses on those two texts.¹² Taking Alastair Minnis' point of sublimation as a terminus, the following outlines trace the two texts from their rediscovery through to their entry into the vernacular discourses of thirteenth and fourteenth-century Italy and France.

i. The *Heroides*

The worst preserved of all Ovid's works, the earliest text of the *Heroides* dates only from the ninth century, preceding the next surviving witness by over two hundred years.¹³ That gap bears witness to an apparent lack of interest in the collection before the late eleventh century, when circulation appears to have gradually revived north of the Alps before trickling down into southern Europe. When interest did revive, however, the number of surviving manuscripts suggests that the *Heroides* joined the *Metamorphoses* as the most widely read of Ovid's works.¹⁴

¹² For a guide to the reception and translation of Ovid's corpus more broadly, see Ralph Hexter's article in Harald Kittel, Juliane House, and Brigitte Schultze, eds., *Translation: An International Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, vol. 2 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 1211–29.

¹³ See L. D. Reynolds, ed., *Texts and Transmission: a Survey of the Latin Classics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 268–9; *Heroides: Select Epistles*, ed. Peter E. Knox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 34–5.

¹⁴ The suggestion is Massimo Zaggia's, based on his identification of 235 surviving manuscripts of the poem; see his introduction to Ovid, *Heroides: volgarizzamento fiorentino trecentesco di Filippo Ceffi.*, ed. Massimo Zaggia, trans. Filippo Ceffi, *Il Ritorno dei classici nell'umanesimo 2* (Firenze: Sismel-Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2009), 148. All references hereafter to *Heroides*: Ceffi.

As is to be expected of a poorly preserved text, medieval manuscripts of the *Heroides* differ in some key details from modern editions of the poem. In modern texts, the collection consists of twenty-one verse epistles: fourteen letters of reproach, longing or seduction from heroines of Greco-Roman mythology addressed to the heroes who are or were the objects of their affections, plus a letter from Sappho to Phaon, and a group of six paired letters between Paris and Helen, Leander and Hero, Acontius and Cydippe.¹⁵ For medieval readers, the collection consisted of the first fourteen epistles and the three paired letters, omitting the ‘Epistula Sapphus’, which remained undiscovered until the fifteenth century.¹⁶

Happily, the textual tradition is stable for the three letters that concern Theseus. The key letter for the image of Theseus is *Heroides X*, addressed to the hero by Ariadne after he has abandoned her on Naxos. Heavily indebted to Catullus 64 (which was essentially unknown in the Middle Ages), Ariadne’s epistle paints the Athenian in an unremittingly damning light, and handed on to the medieval reader the image of the prince as a faithless oath-breaker that persists in the ‘Legend of Ariadne’ and the *Confessio amantis*.¹⁷ As Ariadne reports it, Theseus swore explicitly to marry her, should he survive: she quotes him as saying ‘I swear by these perils that if we both live, you will be mine’.¹⁸ The idea of the oath-breaking Theseus is reinforced by

¹⁵ Disputes continue over the authorship of Sappho’s epistle and the three paired letters; the authenticity of the former is now considered unlikely. Disregarding local arguments over certain lines, the authenticity of the remaining single letters is accepted; see *Heroides: Select Epistles*, 7–8; Reynolds, *Texts and Transmission*, 272.

¹⁶ Only few isolated verses from Sappho’s letter are known any earlier, appearing in the twelfth-century *Florilegium gallicum*; see Ralph J. Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling: Studies in Medieval School Commentaries on Ovid’s Ars amatoria, Epistulae ex Ponto, and Epistulae heroidum* (Munich: Arbo-Gesellschaft, 1986), 141, n.11.

¹⁷ For the text of the poem, see *Catullus*, ed. G. P. Goold, trans. Francis Warre Cornish, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995). For Catullus’ absence from the classical corpus until the fifteenth century, see Julia Haig Gaisser, *Catullus and His Renaissance Readers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 15–23.

¹⁸ ‘Per ego ipsa pericula iuro, / Te fore, dum nostrum uiuet uterque, meam’, *Heroides*, X.73–4.

allusions made by two of the other heroines, Phyllis and Phaedra, whose letters (II and IV) are to the most famous of his sons, Demophon and Hippolytus. Though they precede Ariadne in the sequence of letters, in *ordo naturalis* their events come after her desertion, and the two heroines freely recall Theseus' exploits in order to reinforce the rhetoric of their own complaints. Phyllis, having been abandoned by Demophon, accuses him of having been able to emulate only one of his father's acts: the betrayal of Ariadne. Where Theseus will be remembered for many deeds of valour alongside the desertion of his wanted bride, Demophon will be remembered only for an act of betrayal.¹⁹ Ovid raises the rhetorical stakes by giving a list of the deeds that would be inscribed on the base of Theseus' statue after his death, including the killings of the Isthmian robbers Sciron, Procrustes and Sinis, the Minotaur, the destruction of Thebes, the Centauromachy and the Katabasis. Against these, the desertion of Ariadne is adduced as the sole stain on a glorious career. In Epistle IV, it is Phaedra's turn to criticise the hero. Writing to confess her love to his son (her stepson) Hippolytus, she paints herself as the abandoned wife, and him as the abandoned child, and accuses Theseus of loving his firm companion Pirithous more than either her or Hippolytus.²⁰ Predictably, the desertion of Ariadne is cited as proof of his general faithlessness; less expectedly, the monstrosity of the Minotaur is suppressed in order to emphasise the fact that it was Phaedra's brother; and its death at the hands of Theseus is paired with the desertion of Ariadne to justify Phaedra's

¹⁹ *Heroides*, II.63-78.

²⁰ *Heroides*, IV.111-12.

animosity toward the hero.²¹ Finally, she accuses Theseus of murdering Hippolytus' mother – who remains unnamed in the text.²²

The evidence is rich for the exegetical tradition surrounding the text.²³ Like the rest of Ovid's works, the *Heroides* came to its first medieval copyists unaccompanied by any antique *scholia*. That nakedness spurred scholars to add their own introductions to the poems, occasionally with brief biographies of Ovid. The surviving examples of these *accessūs* provide useful evidence for the way in which the collection was read.²⁴ Under the common category of the author's intention (*intentio auctoris*) they concentrate on moral concerns, treating the collection as an exemplary repertoire of the different forms of love, licit and illicit. As one preface puts it: Ovid wished 'to treat of the morals and vices of women and to commend virtuous love and to censure sinful love'.²⁵ The *intentio* often returns in introductions to the individual letters, with many identifying the specific form of love praised or vituperated.

Such notes are, however, brief in the extreme. The main focus of the commentators in these letter-by-letter introductions is on their mythological content. The same concern is matched in the interlinear glosses; the main aim of both is to

²¹ *Heroides*, IV.115-16.

²² *Heroides*, IV.118-20.

²³ The following paragraph closely follows the survey and conclusions of Massimo Zaggia in his introduction to *Heroides: Ceffi*.

²⁴ For more on *accessūs* in general see A. J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scolar Press, 1984), 15–29; Vincent Gillespie, 'The Study of Classical Authors: I. From the Twelfth Century to c. 1450', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: The Middle Ages*, ed. A. J. Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 145–236: 146–7; Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter, eds., *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 125–6; Frank T. Coulson, ed., *The 'Vulgate' Commentary on Ovid's Metamorphoses: The Creation Myth and the Story of Orpheus* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1991), 13.

²⁵ 'tractare de moribus and vicii dominarum et de casto amore commendare et de incesto vituperare'; see M. Donnini, 'La "lectura Ovidii epistularum" nel cod. Asis. Lat. 302', *Giornale italiano di filologia* 33 (1979), 209–229: 212.

contextualise the letters and unpack the references they contain.²⁶ Such is the tendency replicated in the case of the Munich schoolroom commentary edited by Hexter and the twelfth-century scholarly Italian commentary edited by Donnini. Despite a considerable gap in sophistication, both concentrate on the difficulty of mythological reference, with Hexter's commentary consisting largely of interlinear notes on the myths, while Donini's provides lengthy mythographical introductions to each letter.²⁷ From the schoolroom to the monastic library, annotated *Heroides* manuscripts are so larded with explications of Ovid's allusions that the text becomes a surprisingly compendious guide to key tales in Greco-Roman mythology. Allegorical explanations of the myths, meanwhile, are extremely rare; the commentators are far more taken with immediate problems of obscure reference than they are with airier hermeneutic questions.

As such glosses suggest, the range of mythological references reported by the *Heroides* made them an important source of mythographical information for the middle ages. Their value as such was also necessarily amplified by the lack of access to Greek texts; as Massimo Zaggia notes, for instance, Penelope's letter to Odysseus began to fill the hole left by Homer's absence from medieval Europe, while other heroines answered the lacunae left by the absence of the Greek tragedians.²⁸ Thanks to this the *Heroides*' influence extends across a wide range of medieval literature, above all in France. Their influence has been traced as far as the emergence of the courtly love tradition, in particular the development of the *trobador* and *trouvère*

²⁶ Ovid, *Heroides: Ceffi*, 166.

²⁷ Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling*, 143; Donnini, 'La "lectura Ovidii epistularum" nel cod. Asis. Lat. 302', 214–15.

²⁸ Ovid, *Heroides: Ceffi*, 188–89.

epistolary love poems, the *saluts*,²⁹ while information from the epistles can also be found in the *Roman d'Eneas* and *Roman de Troie*, as well as in the key Ovidian text of fourteenth-century *francophonie*, the *Ovide moralisé*.³⁰

The letters' diffusion across vernacular texts was also accompanied by a French translation. Though no independent manuscripts of the text survive, a late thirteenth or early fourteenth-century French vernacularisation of the epistles has come down to us within the body of a larger vernacular work, the *Histoire ancienne jusqu'à César*. In an exemplary instance of medieval cross-fertilisation and textual nesting, translations of thirteen of the epistles are preserved in nineteen manuscripts of the second version of the *Histoire*, contained in the section relating to the fall of Troy – itself a late prose redaction of the *Roman de Troie*, known as *Prose 5*.³¹ Seemingly a product of the rich vernacular scholarship at the court of Robert of Anjou at Naples (where the young Boccaccio lived from 1326-32), the translation's presence within the *Histoire* is symptomatic of the extent to which the *Heroides* were considered a key source of historical and mythical information.³²

By that same fact, however, the relationship of the *Heroides* to the idea of 'reading Ovid' in the Francophone circles of Europe becomes weaker. The collection's widening diffusion into medieval French treatments of classical legend is necessarily difficult to trace. The manner in which the letters are subsumed into larger

²⁹ Ibid., 216–17; Jessie Crosland, 'Ovid's Contribution to the Conception of Love Known as "L'Amour Courtois"', *The Modern Language Review* 42, no. 2 (April 1947): 199–206; Francesco Carapezza, 'Raimbaut Travestito Da Fedra ("BdT" 389 1). Sulla Genesi Del "salut" Provenzale', *Medioevo Romano* 25 (2001): 357–95.

³⁰ For the *Ovide moralisé*, see below, p.87.

³¹ For a modern edition see *Les Epistres des dames de Grèce: une version médiévale en prose française des Héroïdes d'Ovide*, ed. Luca Barbieri (Paris: H. Champion, 2007).

³² For more on the letters' use in medieval histories, see J. Javier Puerto Benito, 'The Heroides in Alfonso X's General Estoria: Translation, Adaptation, Use and Interpretation of a Classical Work in a Thirteenth-Century Iberian History of the World' (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Kentucky, 2008).

texts and lose their relation to the name ‘Ovid’ marks a point of disjuncture after which it becomes difficult to talk in terms of ‘reading Ovid’ at all. Though Chaucer and Gower were familiar with the *romans antiques* that bear testimony to the letters’ influence, they would probably not have been aware that they were reading Ovid at several removes.³³

The same cannot be said of the first complete Italian translation of the *Heroides*, which makes a point of marking itself as a product of the Roman poet: Filippo Ceffi’s *Pistole d’Ovidio Nasone* (c.1325). In an article published in 1930, Sanford Meech pointed out compelling verbal parallels between sections of the *Legend of Good Women* and Ceffi’s translation, suggesting that Chaucer may well have read the Italian text alongside or in place of the original Latin.³⁴ The case has recently been reconsidered and substantially confirmed by Kenneth Clarke, who takes his analysis further than Meech in offering more sustained attention to the place of Ceffi’s translation in the literary culture of early fourteenth-century Florence. Ceffi’s translation, as Clarke notes, has attracted the attention of few Chaucerians after Meech, but is ripe for reconsideration.³⁵ Now available in a modern text edited from Ceffi’s autograph manuscript by Massimo Zaggia, the *Pistole d’Ovidio* provide a valuable insight into the interests of vernacular readers, including Chaucer himself.

Ceffi’s prose is lucid, his translations are accurate and largely free of additional material; the few alterations he does make to the letters are concerned with obviating the need for mythographical notes. He explains references to the gods,

³³ For Chaucer’s debts to the *romans antiques*, see Nolan, *Chaucer and the Tradition of the ‘Roman Antique’*.

³⁴ Sanford Brown Meech, ‘Chaucer and an Italian Translation of the *Heroides*’, *PMLA* 45, no. 1 (March 1930): 110–28.

³⁵ Clarke, *Chaucer and Italian Textuality*, 28.

unpacks the toponyms and patronyms of heroes, and generally provides a text which no longer stands in need of schoolroom cribs like Hexter's Munich manuscript. In addition, each letter is equipped with an introduction in which Ceffi outlines its mythological context. Among these the preface to Phaedra's epistle to Hippolytus stands out for its completeness. Acting as a double introduction to both Phaedra and Ariadne's epistles, the prologue gives only the briefest attention to the moral import of Phaedra's letter – 'to raise disgust at sinful love'³⁶ – and none at all to the moral import of Ariadne's. Instead, it summarises the Cretan cycle, from its origins in Androgeus' death in Athens, through Theseus' victory over the Minotaur, up to Hippolytus' death. Details otherwise absent from the *Heroides* include Androgeus' death at the hands of his fellow students on account of their envy for his learning,³⁷ the idea that Daedalus taught Ariadne how to defeat the Minotaur,³⁸ and the implication that Theseus planned his desertion of Ariadne and marriage to Phaedra in advance. On the last, Ceffi's explanation is damning:

Teseo non fue pur contento di menarne Adriana, ma elli ne menòe ancora Fedra, perch'era più bella, promettendole di darla per moglie a Ypolito suo figliulo.

Theseus was not happy just to take Ariadne from there, but he also took Phaedra, because she was more beautiful, promising them that he would give her as wife to his son Hippolytus.³⁹

Ceffi also mentions Aegeus' suicide as occurring because of Theseus' 'forgetfulness', adding yet another aspect to the hero's portrait.⁴⁰ All in all, it is not a summary calculated to put Theseus in a good light, at least insofar as regards the Cretan tales.

Whether or not that negative representation went beyond the boundaries of the

³⁶ 'per schifare il dishonesto amore', *Heroides: Ceffi*, 447.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 448.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 449.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ 'dementicanza', *Ibid.*

Heroides is another question, however. To answer that, it is necessary to turn to the *Metamorphoses*.

ii. The *Metamorphoses*

If the *Heroides* were received as a useful introduction to the world of mythology, the *Metamorphoses* were taken as encapsulating that world in its entirety. As the thirteenth-century Spanish *General estoria* puts it, Ovid's epic was taken as nothing less than 'the Bible of the pagans': the ur-text for understanding their myths and beliefs.⁴¹ Though critical attention has tended to focus primarily on the allegorising and Christianising efforts of commentators from the twelfth century onwards, it is clear that the poem's status as the most compendious classical source collection of myths was a continuous thread in its reception. No other classical source known to medieval Europe collected so many myths in a single volume, or offered so many insights into the lost world of paganism. The complex structure and dense allusiveness of the poem did, however, render its use as a source for later mythographers slightly complicated.

In the case of Theseus, the *Metamorphoses* is in certain ways a less rich resource than the *Heroides*, and it is certainly more difficult to use. Ovid recounts only a few episodes of the hero's life in the epic, which are scattered piecemeal through the seventh, eighth, twelfth and fifteenth books of the poem. Only Medea's attempt to poison the hero (*Metamorphoses*, VII.404-25) and the killing of the Minotaur (*Metamorphoses*, VIII, 152-82) are told in any detail, while Theseus'

⁴¹ 'el Ouidio mayor non es al entrellos si non la theologia e la Biblia dello entre los gentiles', 6.26 in Alfonso X, *General estoria*, ed. Ramon Martinez-Lopez, Biblioteca Castro (Oviedo: Universidad de Oviedo, 1963).

youthful deeds are summarised in the panegyric of the Athenian populace on his first arrival in Athens (*Metamorphoses*, VII.433-50). Elsewhere, only brief references remind the reader of his participation in the Centauromachy (*Metamorphoses*, XII.227-31) or of his role in Hippolytus' death (*Metamorphoses*, XV.497-500).⁴² The fragmentary and condensed nature of the *Metamorphoses*' accounts of these deeds makes the poem's common citation as a source for information on the hero slightly curious. If the poem provided more information on many myths, including the Thesean tales, than other classical sources, understanding those myths still required the broad knowledge of the mythological background that Ovid, writing for a sophisticated Roman audience, took for granted, but which few of his medieval readers shared.

Providing that mythological context became one of the primary tasks of the poem's early commentators, who, through their myriad paratextual additions to the poem, inaugurated a process of textual expansion that would reach its peak in the early fourteenth century, with the *Ovide moralisé*. Thanks to the profusion of manuscript evidence and the diligent work of scholars such as Frank Coulson, the history of that expansion is easy to follow. In the oldest surviving manuscripts (dating back to the second half of the eleventh century),⁴³ the only trace of antique commentary is a set of brief prose summaries, falsely attributed to one Lactantius Placidus.⁴⁴ Though these already give extra mythological background to the poem, they fall some way short of offering anything like a comprehensive guide to its

⁴² All references to the Latin are to the text given in Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Frank Justus Miller and G. P. Goold, 2 vols., 3rd ed, The Loeb Classical Library 42 (London: Heinemann, 1977).

⁴³ See Reynolds, *Texts and Transmission*, 257, 276; Coulson, *The 'Vulgate' Commentary*, 3. Reynolds dates the earliest manuscripts only to the second half of the twelfth century; Coulson's work on commentaries makes clear that the earliest complete texts are somewhat older.

⁴⁴ On the attribution and dating of the commentaries, see Alan Cameron, *Greek Mythography in the Roman World*, 4, 314ff.

difficulties, and were soon augmented by the efforts of new commentators. These early glossators surrounded the text of the poem with copious notes on local difficulties, concentrating on grammatical puzzles and obscure or incomplete mythological allusions, but left any larger interpretations to the broad brushstrokes of the *intentio* and *utilitas* portions of their *accessūs*.

When the allegorising commentaries hit the scene, they are never far removed from the same task of direct explication and mythographical illumination. The first, Arnulf of Orléans' (fl.1175) *Allegoriae*, was written as a companion piece to the grammatical and mythological glosses he drew up for the poem. Having noted in his *accessus* that the poem's primary use consists in the knowledge of myths, Arnulf does not make any attempt to subsume it to more abstruse interpretations in the *Allegoriae*.⁴⁵ The *Allegoriae* restrain themselves to brief, prosodic statements on the historical or moral import of the myths, which were designed, as Frank Coulson notes, to be read alongside direct glosses, in an approach that valorised the literal and the allegorical equally.⁴⁶ Following in Arnulf's footsteps, John of Garland's *Integumenta Ovidii* (c.1230) takes the allegorising process a step further, but still acts on one level as a brisk summary of the poem's main myths. Condensing the epic to 520 hexameters, Garland's poem, like the *Allegoriae*, non-systematically mixes historicising and physical explanations with moral and Christian interpretations of the myths. Both texts are notable for treating Ovid's poem as a compilation of myths that can be interpreted according to a range of methods, in whatever manner seems best

⁴⁵ 'Utilitas autem est cognitio fabularum compendiose collectarum'; Fausto Ghisalberti, 'Arnolfo d'Orléans: un cultore di Ovidio nel secolo XII', *Memorie del Reale Istituto Lombardo di scienze e lettere* 24, no. 4 (1932), 157-234: 181.

⁴⁶ Frank T. Coulson, 'Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in the School Tradition of France, 1180–1400: texts, manuscript traditions, manuscript settings', in *Ovid in the Middle Ages*, ed. James G. Clark, Frank T. Coulson, and Kathryn L. McKinley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 48-82: 51.

suiting to the tale at hand.⁴⁷ The usefulness of both as basic summaries of the poem, and their readers' acceptance of pluralistic interpretations of mythology can be seen in their manuscript history. More commonly paired with each other than with the *Metamorphoses*, they act as their own mythographical compilation and provide a range of alternative interpretations upon which readers could draw, as they would later draw upon the *Genealogie*.⁴⁸ The relationship of the two texts to the object of their explicatory intentions is also of note in regard to the historical constitution of Ovid. Though they are not Ovid's work, the *Allegoriae* and *Integumenta* were received as being able to stand in for it: in two English manuscripts from the mid-fifteenth century, the two are titled together as 'The Little Metamorphosis of Ovid'.⁴⁹

The mythological focus of John and Arnulf's allegories made them easily incorporable into the work of later commentators, bringing them back into the tradition of paratextual commentary. The so-called Vulgate commentary, produced c.1250 in the Orléanais, reabsorbs them into the most authoritative set of glosses on the poem to be found in the middle ages. Reserving larger matters of literary and mythographical interest for marginal comment, with interlinear glosses on grammar and syntax, it attempts to explain every aspect of Ovid's poem. The commentator incorporates mnemonic tags for points of grammar and syntax, turns to Isidore of Seville for etymologies, and plunders the *Allegoriae* and *Integumenta* for doctrinal matters.⁵⁰ In a key point for our discussion here, however, his *accessus* makes clear that he regards the *Metamorphoses* above all as a fount of mythological lore. He

⁴⁷ As Ghisalberti notes, John's prologue states quite clearly that he will treat the myths as distortions of real historical facts, but in practice his interpretations range more widely. See ll. 53-7, and Ghisalberti's introduction in John of Garland, *Integumenta Ovidii: poemetto inedito del secolo XIII*, ed. Fausto Ghisalberti, Testi e documenti inediti o rari 2 (Messina: G. Principato, 1933), 20.

⁴⁸ See *Ibid.*, 12-13; Coulson, 'Metamorphoses in the School Tradition', 51.

⁴⁹ 'Morphosis Ovidii parva'; see Bodleian MS Hatton 92 and BL Royal MS 12 E XI.

⁵⁰ For more details, see Coulson, *The 'Vulgate' Commentary*, 6-9.

broaches the topic of the poem's 'great utility' by stating that it consists in 'the knowledge of fables and of their telling, which the author collects compendiously in this work'.⁵¹

By this stage of the commentary tradition, however, it was not just the author who was compendiously collecting fables, but the commentators too. Their work took the mythographical remit of the *Metamorphoses* wider than ever before. Eclectic and compilatory manuscripts are, as Coulson and Roy's catalogue in the *Incipitarium Ovidianum* demonstrates, extremely common. In a manuscript such as the mid-thirteenth-century Italian copy of the poem preserved in the Copenhagen Kongelige Bibliotek, the Vulgate *accessus* is paired with an eleventh-century *accessus* by Manegold of Lautenbach, while the text of the poem is annotated with fragments from Arnulf and other commentators.⁵² Even in the limited space of the manuscript's quarto pages, the copyists have found room for between three and four separate levels of commentary, with interlinear vocabulary and grammatical glosses, and marginal summaries and explications of the myths in up to four different hands. Although the density is not constant throughout, there is a clear tendency to lend annotations to the annotations as much to the poem itself, with the different commentators engaged with and adding to each other's work.⁵³ A fourteenth-century manuscript preserved in the Vatican goes further in presenting Arnulf and John of Garland's allegories, reattached to the text of the poem, compiled together with sections from Fulgentius' *Mythologiae* and the entirety of the Vulgate commentary. A second scribe, unsatisfied by the

⁵¹ 'Vtilitas [...] est magna [...] uidelicet /cognicio fabularum et earum expositio quas compendiose / colligit actor iste in hoc opere'; ll. 109-12 in Coulson, *The 'Vulgate' Commentary*.

⁵² See entries 221, 257, 408, 421 in Coulson and Roy, *Incipitarium ovidianum*.

⁵³ See Copenhagen Kongelige Bibliotek MS GKS 2008; available online at <http://www.kb.dk/permalink/2006/manus/331/eng/> (accessed 16th August 2013). The library dates the manuscript 1150-1200; I follow Coulson's dating on the basis of the Vulgate *accessus*.

presence of only four alternatives has copied in further (largely historical) allegories from Giovanni del Virgilio's work (c.1330) on the poem.⁵⁴

This fabulous compendiousness defined the poem as it entered into the vernacular in the form of the *Ovide moralisé* (composed c.1316-1328). Not to be confused either with the *Ovidius moralizatus* of Pierre Bersuire (1340, revised 1350), or the much later *Ovide moralisé en prose* (1466), the *Ovide moralisé* marks the point at which the commentary tradition of the schools enters the sphere of the vernacular readers and writers identified by Minnis. Though it is often referred to as the first vernacular translation of the *Metamorphoses*, the term 'translation' can only be applied to the *Ovide moralisé* in the broadest sense. Instead it is a text that shows how fully it was possible to conflate Ovid *même* with the work of his commentators and produce a fully unified new 'Ovid' that reflected readers' expectations of mythographical compendiousness, and their desires to see paganism tamed to Christian virtue.

While critical references to the *Ovide moralisé* have tended to focus on the moralising motives indicated by its title, the operations it performs on the *Metamorphoses* are far more varied, and frequently centre on the poem's status as a mythological compilation. Incorporating materials from the whole preceding tradition of commentary and exposition, the French poem expands the original epic to approximately six times its original length.⁵⁵ And though some of this textual inflation is due to the translator's moralising, it is by no means the case that moralisation was

⁵⁴ See Vatican MS Ott. lat. 1294, and the analysis in Fausto Ghisalberti, 'Giovanni del Virgilio espositore delle "Metamorfosi"', *Giornale dantesco* 34 (n.s. 4) (1933), 3-110: 8. See also entries 257, 333, 421, 424 in Coulson and Roy, *Incipitarius ovidianum*.

⁵⁵ Approximately 72,000 octosyllabic lines compared to the approximately 12,000 hexameters of the Latin original.

his sole, or even primary, interest.⁵⁶ As Boccaccio would go on to do in the *Genealogie*, the poet of the *Ovide moralisé* denies any desire to explain or moralise all the tales, as ‘the matter would be too long’.⁵⁷ He promises, instead, only to exert his moralising bent on those which will be ‘good and profitable’ for the reader, ‘as briefly’ as possible.⁵⁸ Despite the length of the poem, that statement of purpose is not an entirely formulaic appeal to the brevity topos: a great number of tales are indeed left unmoralised and unhistoricised. Much of the added bulk of the poem comes not from moral or allegorical interpretation, but from narrative elaboration and addition.⁵⁹

That compendiousness is built on appeals to the full range of sources available to the French poet. Along with the information continuously imported from commentaries on the *Metamorphoses*— among which the *Integumenta* is dignified by being named (*Ovide moralisé*, I.3126) — are details that can be traced back to secondary sources such as Servius, Hyginus and Fulgentius — each of whom are used more than once to expand on myths to which Ovid only gestures.⁶⁰ At other times the author uses Ovid’s own poetry as a source of mythographical information: *inter alia*,

⁵⁶ Renata Blumenfeld-Kosinski estimates that the moral readings make up just over a third of the text, which leaves around half of the overall textual inflation unaccounted for; see ‘The Scandal of Pasiphae: Narration and Interpretation in the “Ovide moralisé”’, *Modern Philology* 93, no. 3 (February 1996), 307-326: 315. Working from her figure of 28,000 lines for the moralisations, a rough calculation can be made. The French poem is 60,000 lines longer than the original Latin text, which leaves 32,000 lines of expansion due to other factors. While a certain percentage of this growth is due to purely linguistic factors — the shift from hexameters to octosyllables, the lack of compression of French compared to Latin — it is clear that other forms of addition play a statistically important role in the make-up of the text.

⁵⁷ ‘Trop seroit longue la matire’, I.51, in Cornelis de Boer, ed., *Ovide moralisé: Poème du commencement du quatorzième siècle*, 5 vols. (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1915). All references are to this edition; hereafter *Ovide moralisé*.

⁵⁸ ‘bones et profitables’; ‘Au plus briement que je porrai’, *Ovide moralisé*, I.53, 55.

⁵⁹ This is not necessarily in contradiction to the professed moral purpose. As Rita Copeland notes, the opening scriptural reference of ‘Tout est pour nostre enseignement / Quanqu’il a es livres escript’ (‘Everything is for our teaching, whatever there is written in books’), *Ovide moralisé*, I.2-3 (quoting Romans 15.4) is both the standard justification for the study of profane books and ‘a commonplace appeal to the *utilitas* of *compilatio*’; see Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation*, 110.

⁶⁰ See de Boer’s note on some of the poem’s sources in his introduction to the first volume, *Ovide moralisé*, 1:22ff.

he expands on the tale of Jason and Medea in Book VII by importing material from *Heroides* XII, while the tale of Phrixus and Helle is inserted into from *Fasti* IV.iii. Moving beyond Ovid, the poet sees fit to insert a mini Thebaid into Book IX, using ‘Estace le grant’ (IX.1833), Statius, as his source. Elsewhere, details about the fall of Troy (at the end of Book XII) are inserted from the *Ilias latina*. At the same time, the author demonstrates his embeddedness in the vernacular tradition of the *romans antiques*: the tale of Philomela’s rape is taken, with due credit, not directly from the *Metamorphoses*, but from Chretien de Troyes’ translation of the same.⁶¹

Crucially, however, all the additional materials and elaborations are shoehorned into the poem’s original structure of fifteen books; though each book is considerably lengthened, the architectonic and content correspondences are clear. Whether one can deem it a translation or not, the text goes forth as such, under the banner of Ovid’s name. That no trace of the translator’s own identity should survive is a telling symptom of the French poem’s identification with the ancient poet. Under the translator’s hand, the poem turns, in Jeremy Dimmick’s words, from *Ovidius maior* to *Ovidius maximus*: ‘a vernacular *summa* of an entire tradition’, metonymically referred to by the name ‘Ovid’.⁶²

In the *Ovide moralisé*’s Thesean sections, the particulars of the poem’s summative approach are on full display. The first of these is the poet’s defining use of narrative as a means of glossing and explication.⁶³ Part and parcel of a method that

⁶¹ The *Ovide moralisé* is the sole textual witness for Chretien’s poem; see Chretien de Troyes, *Philomena, conte raconté d’après Ovide*, ed. Cornelis de Boer (Paris: Paul Geuthner, 1909).

⁶² Jeremy Dimmick, ‘Ovid in the Middle Ages’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, ed. Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 264-87: 279.

⁶³ Cf. Marylène Possamai-Perez, ‘*L’Ovide moralisé*’: *essai d’interprétation* (Paris: H. Champion, 2006), 238.

prioritises the audience's enjoyment as a first stage in their edification,⁶⁴ the translation and incorporation of commentary material are both pursued primarily through *enarratio* ('retelling').⁶⁵ In practice, this leads to a general preference for incorporating mythographical annotations by dramatising them, in ways which significantly disrupt the original structure of the poem.

In the case of Theseus, such techniques make themselves felt from his first appearance.⁶⁶ Where Ovid passes from Theseus' arrival in Athens to Medea's attempt to poison him in four lines, the French poet inserts a 400-line digression. The first thirty lines form a (badly garbled) list of deeds that fills out Ovid's statement that Theseus had 'through his strength brought peace to the Isthmus between two seas'.⁶⁷ The rest consist of a fully-fledged dramatisation of a deed which has no direct relation to the passage at all: Theseus and Pirithous' Katabasis. Its presence and bulk are explained by the poet's exertion of his narrative skills on a gloss that is itself responding to a gloss that had become a fixture in responses to the poem. In the *Metamorphoses*, Theseus' arrival is followed by Medea's attempt to poison him with aconite; Ovid then goes on to explain the origin of the aconites, which sprang from the ground touched by Cerberus' spittle as Hercules dragged him from hell.⁶⁸ The passage was ripe for mythographical glosses, which filled in the context for Hercules' descent to the underworld, and gradually expanded to note that, while there, he rescued Theseus. As the commentary tradition grew, it also became common to

⁶⁴ On which, see the opening declaration that the poet will proceed 'Pour plus plaire a ceulz qui l'orront, / Et maint profiter i porront' ('In order to please those who hear it more, and so that they will be able to profit from it in many ways'), *Ovide moralisé*, I.56-7.

⁶⁵ On *enarratio* more generally, see Peter Damian-Grint, 'Translation as Enarratio and Hermeneutic Theory in Twelfth-Century Vernacular Learned Literature', *Neophilologus* 83, no. 3 (July 1999), 349-67: 352; Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics and Translation*, 92.

⁶⁶ *Metamorphoses*, VII.404-40

⁶⁷ 'virtute sua bimarem pacaverat Isthmon', *Metamorphoses*, VII.405.

⁶⁸ *Metamorphoses*, VII.406-19.

explain how Theseus came to be in Hades in the first place. Thus, in the example cited by Paule Demats from Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS. 8011, the commentator gives a full account of the Katabasis, as if it were integral to explaining the origin of the aconites.⁶⁹ The *Integumenta*, meanwhile, summarises and interprets the episode as if it were actually part of the poem.⁷⁰

Under the French poet's hands, such glosses are integrated (however awkwardly) into the text of the poem, under the form of a mini *geste*, in which both the heroes are given voice. As will be seen, that tendency to dramatise, with an emphasis on direct speech, had an important impact on Ovid's reception. Though it has hardly gone down in history for its psychological sensitivity, the *Ovide moralisé's* narrative additions have a marked interest in character and motivation, that often expresses itself in freely elaborative speeches. In the Katabasis digression, the French poet picks up on the tradition of Theseus and Pirithous' friendship to transform them into emblems of knighthood, who descend to hell not to kidnap Proserpina, but to rescue her from Pluto. The bulk of the exposition is given in a 42-line oration by Pirithous, before the poet launches into a highly coloured narration of their journey and eventual fate, itself peppered with heroic dialogue.⁷¹

Elsewhere in the Thesean tales, it becomes obvious that the French poet's *enarratio* also results in the dramatic expansion of passages already in the poem. The section most directly relevant to Chaucer and Gower's writing of the hero is the

⁶⁹ See Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale MS. 8011, f. 57^r, transcribed in Paule Demats, *Fabula: trois études de mythographie antique et médiévale*, Publications romanes et françaises 122 (Geneva: Droz, 1973), 65.

⁷⁰ See *Integumenta*, 305-10.

⁷¹ 'Puisque nous ne trouvons sor terre / Aventure à nous esprouver, / En enfer la porrons trouver. / Alons delivrer Proserpine, / Qui là est prise et par rapine'; 'Since we can find no exploit to test us on earth, we can find one in hell. Let us go and rescue Proserpina, who was abducted and is kept there', *Ovide moralisé*, VII.1760-3.

episode of the Minotaur, with Ariadne's subsequent abandonment on Naxos. Where Ovid allows the story only 13 lines, his 'translator' dramatises and realises every moment of the episode in full detail, expanding it to over 10 times its original length. As before, the poet shows his predilection for direct speech and chooses to stage what Ovid preferred to narrate: Ariadne is given a 100-line monologue that reveals her as a model of feminine tenderness and prudence. Debating whether love is reason enough to betray her father, she finally decides to do so only on the condition that Theseus marry her:

Moult est mes cuers fol, esbahis,
 Quant un home d'autre pais
 Veuil amer et faire putage!
 Non fais! Quoi donc? Par mariage,
 Me prendra.

My heart is most mad, crazed, that it should want to love a foreigner, and whore itself to him! Do not do it! What then? He will take me in marriage. (*Ovide moralisé*, VIII.1197-201)

With evident pleasure in the dramatic irony of the sentiment, the author then allows Ariadne to set aside all her fear that Theseus might abandon her if he survives:

Certes, pour riens ne le ceroie
 Qu'il feist vers moi tel faintise.
 Il est plains de si grant franchise,
 Tant vaillans et tant gentis hom,
 Qu'il ne feroit pas traison.

Surely I couldn't believe for anything that he should trick me so. He is full of such great nobleness, such a valiant and honourable man, that he would never commit treason. (*Ovide moralisé*, VIII.1236-40)

With increasing ironic savour, the poet also makes Ariadne refuse to leave her sister behind. She becomes a perfect depiction of one who has lost her mind to love, while remaining within the bounds of virtue and prudence. She finally decides to help Theseus, who in turn pledges his faith:

Franche riens, cors et cuer vous don
 Et vostre liges hom devieng,
 Se vous m'aidiez

Excepting nothing, I will give you my body and heart, and become
 your liege man, if you help me (*Ovide moralisé*, VIII.1296-8)

Her response is to say that she wants nothing of the sort, but rather that he take her as wife, and become her 'lord, brother and [...] love'.⁷² In a detail that will become important for our reading of Chaucer, the author states that 'Theseus promises and swears it, pledging by his gods and his law'.⁷³

The detail of the oath is absent from the *Metamorphoses* account, and though it appears the *Heroides*, as well as in the *Fasti* and *Amores*, it is nowhere staged so emphatically as in the *Ovide moralisé*.⁷⁴ A tale that, in the *Metamorphoses*, barely amounts to much more than an allusion becomes a fully fleshed-out episode, with the psychological motivations of the main characters at its core. The poet is careful to round out the episode with a further section of complaint sourced from *Heroides* X, linking his own preference for direct speech back to into the Ovidian corpus, before embarking on the moral allegory through which readers might understand the tale.

One important thing to note here is the tendency to concentrate on episodic rather than biographical coherence. Even though the poet of the *Ovide moralisé* is interested in importing as wide a range of Thesean tales as possible, in order to fill out the hero's mythological background and biography, his writing and interpretation of those tales remains episodic. There is no sense that the chivalrous Theseus of the Katabasis, who goes to hell to help his companion in arms and rescue a damsel in

⁷² 'seignor, frere et [...] ami', *Ovide moralisé*, VIII.1299.

⁷³ 'Theseus li promet et jure. / Ses dieux et sa loi met en ploige', *Ovide moralisé*, VIII.1304-5.

⁷⁴ In each case the oath is implied by the attaching the epithet *periurus* ('foresworn') to Theseus; *Fasti*, III.416 and 473; *Amores*, I.7, 15; *Heroides*, X.76. See also Hexter's Munich commentary, which also specifies that Theseus agreed to marry Ariadne; Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling*, 269.

distress, should be set against or undone by his less chivalrous actions in the Minotaur episode and its aftermath.

What is crucial about both the Minotaur episode and the Katabasis, is the freedom with which the ‘translator’, as poetic and moral mythographer, approaches Ovid. Even without the accompanying historical, moral and Christian readings of the myths, the *Ovide moralisé* would be an Ovid substantially altered: an unrivalled repository of mythological knowledge filtered through vernacular poetics. As such, the poet’s ‘translation’ of the *Metamorphoses* constitutes a *mutacion* both of the poem and of the idea of what ‘Ovid’ meant for francophone readers in fourteenth-century Europe. Writing under the twin banners of Ovid’s mythographical authority, and Christian truth, he is able to take full pleasure in the narrative potential of mythology, excusing and authorising its fabulous aspects as if they came from Ovid himself, before returning his reader to the more serious matters of historical and religious truth. What is more, the poet authorises the courtly anachronisms of the classical *romans* by reattaching them to Ovid’s own name, placing Ovid’s heroes and heroines definitively in the world of *cavaliers* and *damoiselles*.

The *Ovide moralisé* as ‘Ovidius maximus’ makes its own case for being the key Ovidian text for medieval *francophonie*, but it did not halt the production of texts relating to the *Metamorphoses*. In France it was followed by the *Ovidius moralizatus* of Pierre Bersuire (Petrus Berchorius), a compressed summary and moralisation of the *Metamorphoses*.⁷⁵ The *Ovidius moralizatus*, produced in two redactions dated to 1340

⁷⁵ Bersuire (b. ?1290) was a Benedictine monk and scholar, in service at the Papal court at Avignon from the 1320s to 1342, before leaving for Paris, where he died in 1362. For further biographical details see *L’ ‘Ovidius moralizatus’ di Pierre Bersuire* (Rome: Ditta Tipografia Cuggiani, 1933); William Donald Reynolds, ‘The Ovidius moralizatus of Petrus Berchorius: An Introduction and Translation’ (Ph.D., University of Illinois, 1971).

and 1350, has proven a reliable source of scholarly puzzlement. Often confused with the *Ovide moralisé*, Bersuire's treatise is a quite different work altogether – one whose moralising purpose is undiluted by narrative interest. Though Bersuire incorporated material from the earlier French poem into the second redaction of his treatise, it has little in common with the *Ovide moralisé* beyond the myths recounted. Presenting a skeleton version of the *Metamorphoses*, stripped of all but the barest narrative details, which are then methodically moralised, Bersuire's treatise is designed for the library and pulpit rather than for the reader interested in the telling of fantastic tales. Prefaced by a chapter on the iconography of the pagan gods (known as the *De formis figurisque deorum*), both versions of the *Ovidius moralizatus* circulated throughout Europe, independent of the *Reductorium*.⁷⁶ Circuitously, the *De formis*, which also circulated independently, was translated into French and used as a commentary for the *Ovide moralisé*.⁷⁷

Frequently cited as one of the key mythographical texts of the late middle ages, it is clear that Bersuire's treatise found readers across Europe, having been distributed in a variety of states and under a variety of names.⁷⁸ But as Joseph Engels has pointed out, the nature of the text, with its very strict focus on moralisation over

⁷⁶ No modern edition has been completed on the basis of all the known manuscripts; the texts currently available are Ghisalberti, *L' 'Ovidius moralizatus' di Pierre Bersuire; Petrus Berchorius. Reductorium morale. Liber XV, cap. I. De formis figurisque deorum, naar de Parijse druk van 1509*, ed. Joseph Engels, *Werkmateriaal 1* (Utrecht: Instituut voor Laat Latijn der Rijksuniversiteit, 1960); *Petrus Berchorius. Ovidius moralizatus. Reductorium morale. Liber XV, cap. ii-xv.*, ed. Joseph Engels, *Werkmateriaal 2* (Utrecht: Instituut voor Laat Latijn der Rijksuniversiteit, 1962).

⁷⁷ See Jeannette van't Sant, ed., *Le commentaire de Copenhague de 'L'ovide moralise': avec l'ed. critique du septieme livre* (Amsterdam: H. J. Paris, 1929). The text is reprinted without introductory matter in Boer, *Ovide moralisé: Poème du commencement du quatorzième siècle*, 5:388–429.

⁷⁸ The textual history of the *Ovidius moralizatus* and the *De formis* is notoriously complicated. Thanks to the two redactions by Bersuire himself, as well as widespread excerpting and alteration by scribes and scholars, and simultaneous circulation together, separately, and within the *Reductorium morale*, it is difficult to estimate the exact number of surviving manuscripts. The survey given by Joseph Engels counts 62, though this should not be regarded as an exact figure. See Joseph Engels, 'L'édiction critique de l'*Ovidius moralizatus* de Bersuire', *Vivarium* 9 (1971): 19–24.

everything else, makes it likely that Bersuire's audience was largely composed of preachers and scholars.⁷⁹ It is indicative of an audience primarily interested in the utility of the text that only one surviving manuscript of the *Ovidius moralizatus* is illuminated.⁸⁰ Where the *Ovide moralisé* is a text equally interested in delighting and teaching, the *Ovidius moralizatus* is only interested in the latter.

It has been suggested that Chaucer knew at least the *De formis figurisque deorum*, and that it influenced his treatment of pagan iconography in the temple murals of the 'Knight's Tale'.⁸¹ He is, however, as likely to have come across all but one detail of his presentation of the gods in the version of Bersuire's text attached to the *Ovide moralisé* – an hypothesis that is made more likely when one analyses the extent to which features of the *Ovide moralisé* appear to have shaped Chaucer's writing of the *Legend of Good Women*.⁸²

A last text worth considering in regard to the Ovid's reception in Chaucer's work is Giovanni Bonsignori's *Ovidio Metamorphoseos vulgare*, composed between 1370 and 1377. The *Metamorphoseos vulgare* met with some success in Italy, eventually entering into print in 1497, and providing the basis for the first printed verse translation of Ovid's epic.⁸³ Though largely derivative, it represents an interesting alternative to the hyper-compendious *Ovide moralisé*, the compressive

⁷⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁸⁰ Gotha, Landesbibliothek, Cod. Membr. I, 98; see Erwin Panofsky, *Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art*, 2nd ed. (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wicksells, 1965), 80 n. It should be made clear, however, that the *De formis figurisque deorum* – not included in the Gotha manuscript – is regularly illustrated, and, as Panofsky notes, lies at the root of most visual representations of the pagan gods right into the sixteenth century.

⁸¹ John M. Steadman, 'Venus' Citole in Chaucer's Knight's Tale and Berchorius', *Speculum* 34, no. 4 (October 1959): 620–24; Meg Twycross, *The Medieval Anadyomene: a Study in Chaucer's Mythography* (Oxford: Blackwell for the Society for the Study of Mediaeval Languages and Literature, 1972).

⁸² The detail in question is Venus' 'citole', discussed in Steadman and Twycross' studies.

⁸³ See Chapter Four, II.i, below.

summary of the *Allegoriae* and *Ovidius moralizatus*, or the clutter of an annotated manuscript. Following Giovanni del Virgilio in dividing each book of the poem into its individual transformations, Bonsignori gives a prose narrative of each tale, with an attached allegory, largely of the historicising variety. The interest of Bonsignori's work lies in its expression of an investment in *enarratio* that stops far short of the *Ovide moralisé* while providing brisk and detailed retellings of the myths. With engaging narrative details and direct speech, Bonsignori's accounts of Ovid's myths go beyond summary in a way that caters to readers equally thirsty for brevity and narrative interest.

In the case of Theseus' encounter with Ariadne and the Minotaur, it is easy to see the reason for Bonsignori's success. Bonsignori neatly expands on the *Metamorphoses*' compressed account of the episode, importing key information from *Heroides X*, seasoned with small elaborations, to produce a pithy version that gives its own narrative satisfactions. Like the poet of the *Ovide moralisé*, he dramatises Ariadne's falling in love with Theseus, but, unlike him, has her share her thoughts with Phaedra:

Sì come Adriana vidde Teseo fu subito de lui innamorata, e si chiamò una sua sorella, chiamata Fedra, e si li disse: 'Io volentieri operaria che quel giovano campasse, perciò che io hu udito ch'elli ha um [sic] bel figliuolo, e se lui volesse togliare noi doi, una per lui l'altra per lu figliuolo, io li 'nsegnaria modo ch'elli camparia'. [...] Allora ordinarò per la sera si che lli parlaro, e Teseo promise de fare ciò ch'elli volevano; appresso mandaruno per Dedalo, el quale aveva edificato el laberinto, e dissero a llui che trovasse modo tale che Teseo al tutto campasse.

As soon as Ariadne saw Theseus, she fell in love with him, and called one of her sisters, called Phaedra, and said to her: 'I would willingly ensure that that young man escapes, since I've heard that he has a handsome son, and if he should wish to take us both, one for him and the other for his son, I will show him how to escape.' [...] So she arranged to speak to him that evening, and Theseus promised to do what she wanted; afterwards they sent for Daedalus,

who had built the labyrinth, and they told him to find a way for Theseus to escape.⁸⁴

The involvement of Phaedra through the dialogue allows Bonsignori to convey the same point that Ceffi notes in his introduction to *Heroides X*, that Phaedra was supposed to marry Hippolytus.⁸⁵ Like the *Ovide moralisé*, however, he does not leave the impression that Theseus set out, from the beginning, to abandon Ariadne for her more beautiful younger sister. Bonsignori postpones that realisation to the trio's arrival on an unnamed island, where Ariadne, exhausted, falls asleep, and Theseus, 'looked and saw that Phaedra was more beautiful than Ariadne, whereupon he slept with her, and fell in love with her'.⁸⁶

Like the poet of the *Ovide moralisé*, Bonsignori feels free to elaborate, and such elaborations are a means of mythographically 'annotating' the poem via *enarratio*; unlike the poet of the *Ovide moralisé*, however, Bonsignori reigns his *enarratio* back to the scale of the Lactantian summaries. Where the *Ovide moralisé* presents the *Metamorphoses* as an unmanageable 'Ovidius maximus', the *Metamorphoseos vulgare* succeeds in both expanding upon and compressing its object, to produce an *Ovidius major minor*. As the epic's first sixteenth-century translator, Niccolò degli Agostini, would demonstrate, the *Metamorphoseos vulgare* was an ideal source of 'Ovidian' poetic inspiration, without any of the difficulties associated with the *Metamorphoses* itself, or many of its medieval responses.

⁸⁴ Giovanni Bonsignori, *Ovidio Metamorphoseos vulgare*, ed. Erminia Ardissino (Bologna: Commissione per i testi di lingua, 2001), 388.

⁸⁵ Ovid, *Heroides: Ceffi*, 448.

⁸⁶ 'Teseo guardò e vidde Fedra più bella che Adriana, onde andò e giacque con Fedra, de cui se 'nnamorò', Bonsignori, *Metamorphoseos vulgare*, 388–9.

What is clear in the fourteenth-century responses to the *Metamorphoses* is the extent to which ‘Ovid’, through the poem’s reception, becomes almost synonymous with mythology itself. Where later responses to the epic’s *carmen perpetuum* (‘continuous song’), have tended to emphasise the theme of artistic unity imposed upon the disparate narratives of mythology, medieval readers took that same term as a sign of inclusive compendiousness: a song without end or boundary, there to be added to, elaborated upon, and mined as the source *par excellence* for the myths of the pagan ancients.⁸⁷ The ease with which the epic could support copious and manifold annotation, be summarised, or be prised open to admit further mythographical material made Ovid the ultimate authority on the world of mythology.

By the same token, Ovid was an authority that authorised variation. Whether through the example of mythological variants between the *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses*, or through the multiple different commentaries and interpretive paratexts compiled together in manuscripts of the poem, or through the different narrative and elaborative strategies of his summarisers and translators, the Ovidian texts of the middle ages present mythology, even when anchored to authority, as an open and suspended set of possibilities for retelling and reinterpretation. In particular, as he entered the vernacular, Ovid became a broad, plural, and embracing construct that, rather than closing down mythology’s field of possibility, could authorise exactly the kind of freedoms associated with mythography *per se*.

⁸⁷ For *carmen perpetuum*, see *Metamorphoses*, I.4. For a representative twentieth-century discussion of the topic, see Brooks Otis, *Ovid as an Epic Poet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), chap. 3.

II. Chaucer and Gower as Ovidian Mythographers

Though the sublimation of Ovid and his commentators into the vernacular, and the impact of the mediated medieval Ovids on Chaucer and Gower, has been the object of some critical attention, critics have only rarely seized the opportunity to directly compare the two poets' presentation of the same tale.⁸⁸ Since Bech's 1883 study of the relationship between the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Confessio amantis*, only Katherine McKinley has attempted a direct comparison of Chaucer's 'Legend of Ariadne' with the relevant portion of Gower's *Confessio amantis* (V.5231-5499).⁸⁹ McKinley's study, though a useful introduction to the two poets' reception of Ovid, remains essentially descriptive. My approach here differs from hers in moving through a more forensic procedure of source-tracing in order to understand what the two poets do to the myth, and how their reappropriations of it fit into the textual agendas of the *Legend* and *Confessio*, before turning to the broader issues raised for poetic mythography.

i. Chaucer

Before analysing the presentation of Theseus in the 'Legend of Ariadne' it is worth briefly considering his relationship to the better-known Theseus of the 'Knight's Tale'. It has often proven natural for critics to attempt to relate the two poems via their shared hero, reading the two Theseuses against, or more often, into, each other.

⁸⁸ For a summary of the available studies, see Kathryn L. McKinley, 'Chaucer and Gower: Readings of Ovid in Late Medieval England', in *Ovid in the Middle Ages*, ed. James G. Clark, Frank T. Coulson, and Kathryn L. McKinley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 197-231: 199-200.

⁸⁹ See M. Bech, 'Quellen und Plan der Legende of Goode Women und ihr Verhältnis zur Confessio Amantis', *Anglia* 5 (1882): 313-82; McKinley, 'Chaucer and Gower: Readings of Ovid', 215-21.

Such tendencies have been strengthened by Chaucer's inclusion of the *Knight's Tale* ('the love of Palamon and Arcite / Of Thebes') in Alceste's catalogue of his works in the prologues to the *Legend of Good Women* (*LGW*, F, 420-21; G, 408-9).⁹⁰ It is not uncommon, therefore, to find critics struggling with the idea that, in Kathryn Lynch's words, 'The Theseus of the story of "Palamon and Arcite," [...] becomes the sneaky lout of the tale of Ariadne',⁹¹ or to suggest that 'Theseus, even at the time of [the *Knight's Tale*] was possessed of those frailties that in later life caused him to be damned'.⁹²

As the episodic nature of mythographical interpretation in the *Genealogie* and *Ovide moralisé* suggests, however, this need not be a problem. Though such relational readings seem natural, Boccaccio's approach to mythology, so strongly echoed in the Ovidian allegorising tradition, suggests they can, and should, be separated. My contention here is that they are not one figure present in two poems, but two figures, who, despite sharing a single name and certain 'biographical facts', are endowed with independent textual existences. The confusions that arise when one attempts to treat the two Theseuses as one, which are not broached in this chapter, are amply illustrated in the following chapter's discussion of Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*. One way of considering the distance between these two Theseuses is precisely through the Ovidianism discussed in this chapter. Though there is not space here to engage in any extended discussion of the 'Knight's Tale', or to answer the arguments of critics who do see it as in some sense Ovidian, it is worth noting that its few apparently 'Ovidian'

⁹⁰ Fortunately the reference obviates the need to enter into the vexed question of dating the two poems here. Despite 'scholarly consensus', the dating of Chaucer's poems has come under renewed scrutiny that has done a great deal to re-open questions once considered closed; see Kathryn L. Lynch, 'Dating Chaucer', *The Chaucer Review* 42, no. 1 (January 2007): 1–22.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹² Henry J. Webb, 'A Reinterpretation of Chaucer's Theseus', *The Review of English Studies* 23, no. 92 (October 1947), 289-96: 289.

citations, do not affect Theseus' characterisation, and can, in any case, largely be traced back to other sources than Ovid.⁹³ Instead, freely adapting the *Teseida*, the 'Knight's Tale' presents a portrait of the hero that, like the *Teseida*, quite radically excludes Ovidian overtones.

It would, by contrast, be wilful *not* to think of the 'Legend of Ariadne' as an Ovidian text. Couched within a larger work with an evident debt to the *Heroides*, the 'Legend of Ariadne' has, for its most obvious sources, the *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides* X – to the latter of which Chaucer refers the reader in the poem's closing lines. The exact nature of the poem's Ovidianism does, however, remain in need of definition. Though the 'Legend of Ariadne' itself superficially displays a straightforward use of the *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides*, the composition of the *Legend of Good Women* as a whole suggests that something more complex and transformative is occurring. As critics have been led to note, the *Legend* is marked more by difference from than similarity to any of its sources; each point of commonality between the *Legend* and its intertexts exists within a larger context of difference. Thus, its major source is identified as the *Heroides*, but the heroine's letters become non-epistolary narratives, and are organised into an exemplary story collection along the lines of Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris*.⁹⁴ Then, for the pseudo-penitential narrative frame, Guillaume de Machaut's *Jugement dou roy de Navarre* is

⁹³ See, e.g., Richard Lester Hoffman, *Ovid and the Canterbury Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1966), 39. This is particularly true of the temple murals in the tale's third section (*KnT*, 1914-2088) which contain Ovidian tales that can easily be traced back to the *Teseida* and the *De formis figurisque deorum*; while a mention of the Katabasis (*KnT*, 1198-200) can be traced back to the variant version given in the *Roman de la rose*, 8119-23; Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la rose*, ed. Félix Lecoy, 3 vols. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1976). For a general overview of the tale's sources see Helen Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 64–73.

⁹⁴ See, e.g., the introductory note by Shaner and Edwards in *The Riverside Chaucer*.

cited.⁹⁵ At the same time, though large portions of the text have close parallels in the *Heroides*, similarly large portions do not. And though all but three of the titular good women are present in the *De claris mulieribus*, actual verbal echoes and correspondences of detail are rare. And, though the frame of penance for having impugned women and love is present in the *Jugement dou roy de Navarre*, the *Jugement* takes the form of a debate between Guillaume and his Lady, while the *Legend* has no such device.⁹⁶ Taken with the numerous articles that demonstrate Chaucer's use of other sources at various points in the poem, observations like this mark out the *Legend of Good Women* as mosaic text, put together from many sources, each appropriated and reconfigured according to the poem's frame and design.⁹⁷

The 'Legend of Ariadne' reflects this same quality on a smaller scale by incorporating a number of different sources in its 340 lines, in a fashion that uses the full breadth of 'Ovidian' sourcing to effect its presentation of Theseus. Kathryn McKinley points to the poem as a tale of two halves, that moves from the *Metamorphoses'* account of the victory over the Minotaur to the *Heroides'* account of Theseus' desertion of Ariadne in order to complete its story.⁹⁸ Broadly speaking, this is true, and a procedure entirely in line with the commentary traditions on both texts.

Looked at more closely, however, Chaucer's use of sources reveals itself, on a line by

⁹⁵ See, e.g., Pearsall, *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 191. The supposed context of the *Legend* is that Chaucer is tasked with writing it as a penance to the God of Love and his queen for having translated the *Romance of the Rose* and written *Troilus and Criseyde*.

⁹⁶ For a modern edition of the French text with an English introduction, see Guillaume de Machaut, *The Judgment of the King of Navarre*, ed. and trans. R. Palmer (New York: Garland, 1988).

⁹⁷ John Livingston Lowes, 'The Prologue to the Legend of Good Women Considered in Its Chronological Relations', *PMLA* 20, no. 4 (January 1905): 749–864; John Livingston Lowes, 'Chaucer and the Ovide moralisé', *PMLA* 33, no. 2 (January 1918): 302–325; Willard Connely, 'Imprints of the Heroides of Ovid on Chaucer, the Legend of Good Women', *The Classical Weekly* 18, no. 2 (October 1924): 9–13; Sanford Brown Meech, 'Chaucer and the Ovide moralisé - A Further Study', *PMLA* 46, no. 1 (March 1931): 182–204; Meech, 'Chaucer and an Italian Translation of the Heroides'; Robert M. Estrich, 'Chaucer's Prologue to the "Legend of Good Women" and Machaut's "Le Jugement dou Roy de Navarre"', *Studies in Philology* 36, no. 1 (January 1939): 20–39.

⁹⁸ McKinley, 'Chaucer and Gower: Readings of Ovid', 215.

line basis, as more complex, compilatory and transformative, and indicates some of the ways in which Ovid provided a platform for strikingly original poetic mythography.

Those complexities reveal themselves from the opening onwards. In his opening invocation Chaucer is evidently indebted to the kind of mythological contextualisation favoured by the *Heroides*' commentators, but with a number of curious additions. Rather than beginning with the heroine or (anti-)hero, Chaucer invokes Minos, 'Juge infernal, [...] of Crete kyng' (*LGW*, 1886-93), with an apparent confusion about whose legend he is writing:

Now cometh thy lot, now comestow on the ryng.
 Nat for thy sake oonly write I this storye,
 But for to clepe ageyn unto memorye
 Of Theseus the grete untrouthe of love
 [...]

Now I thy lyf begynne.
 (*LGW*, 1886-93)

The whole opening is digressive. Where the other legends open with relatively direct *laudatio* of their heroines (as in the 'Legend of Lucrece') or *vituperatio* of the men who betray them (as in the 'Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea'), Chaucer introduces the 'Legend of Ariadne' as if he were about to recount Minos' life. Though the *vituperatio* of Theseus is present, it is definitively secondary: the *but also* to Chaucer's 'Nat [...] oonly'. Theseus only enters the poem in its fiftieth line, after Chaucer has told, in condensed form, the story of Minos' victory over Alcathous and then over Athens. The eponymous good woman, Ariadne, does not appear until the poem's seventy-fifth line.

The false start stems from a concern to provide the causal background for Theseus' presence in Crete: before he can come to the tribute of Athenian youths to

the Minotaur, Chaucer is keen to explain how the tribute came about. McKinley and other critics are right to point out that the broad outline that Chaucer gives comes from the *Metamorphoses*: Minos goes to war against the Athenians to avenge the death of Androgeus, who was ‘slayn, lernynge philosophie, / Ryght in that citee, nat but for envyee’ (*LGW*, 1898-9). It would have to be an attentive reading, however, as the *Metamorphoses* militates against such attempts to retrace the origins of specific myths. Implicating the Cretan cycle in the structural complexities of his *perpetuum carmen*, Ovid mentions Androgeus in one line, some 600 lines before he arrives at the Minotaur.⁹⁹ The *Ovide moralisé*, complicating matters further with all its additions and expansions, expands the same gap to around 2,500 lines.

What Chaucer is doing here has more in common with the compressed contextualising narratives found in commentaries to the *Heroides*. Like the school commentary edited by Hexter, Ceffi’s introductory letter to *Heroides* IV and X is clear in pinpointing the death of Androgeus as the point of origin for the Cretan cycle.¹⁰⁰ Where the contextualising commentaries on the *Heroides* are able to mark the point of origin with laconic clarity, the *Metamorphoses* and *Ovide moralisé* situate it in the intricate ensemble of mythology in a way that makes it difficult to trace and extract.

If starting with Minos’ war and Androgeus’ death appears to stem from encounters with introductory contextualisations like Ceffi’s, the details of Chaucer’s invocation mark out the full breadth of Ovidianism available to him. Minos’ hundred cities (*LGW*, 1895) are taken directly from *Metamorphoses*’ description of him as ‘the

⁹⁹ ‘bella parat Minos [...] / [...] [Androgei] necem iustis ulciscitur armis’ (‘Minos was preparing war [...] to avenge with just arms the murder of Androgeus’), *Metamorphoses*, VII.456-8.

¹⁰⁰ See Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling*, 269; *Heroides: Ceffi*, 448.

ruler of a hundred excellent states'; a detail absent from Ceffi, as from the other *Heroides* commentaries I have examined, and the *Ovide moralisé*.¹⁰¹ At the same time, however, the lines that follow, on Androgeus' death, appear to draw directly on the *Ovide moralisé*, which also specifies that Androgeus was slain out of envy for his talents as a student of philosophy; a fact the French poet mentions a total of three times.¹⁰² While the detail of envy is common, present in both Ceffi's introduction and in Boccaccio's *Genealogie*, as well as in *Metamorphoses* commentaries, the further specification that Androgeus was studying philosophy is less so.¹⁰³ And while it is by no means certain that Chaucer is referring to the *Ovide moralisé* here, later parts of the poem make it more likely. That breadth can be extended even further by reconsidering the epithet 'Juge infernal' that Chaucer gives Minos. Though not a role directly given to Minos in the *Metamorphoses*, it was certainly associated with him, and could well, as Sanford Meech suggest, come from a commentary that reported the tradition.¹⁰⁴ As the *Integumenta* proves, it was a common enough detail.¹⁰⁵ But, if Chaucer is taking it from an Ovidian gloss, it is a rather non-Ovidian moment of Ovidianism: Ovid himself makes no mention of Minos' role in the underworld. Boccaccio (working from Vergil, Statius and Servius) mentions it in the *Genealogie*, which Chaucer may have known.¹⁰⁶ It is just as likely, however, that Chaucer is recalling Dante here: the opening of *Inferno* V is dedicated to an extended description of the Cretan king's performing his duties in hell. Given Chaucer's close knowledge

¹⁰¹ 'rector populorum talia centum', *Metamorphoses*, VII.481.

¹⁰² *Ovide moralisé*, VII.2203 and 2261, and once again at VIII.942.

¹⁰³ Ceffi states that Androgeus was killed 'per invidia dagli studianti d'Athene'; Ovid, *Heroides: Ceffi*, 448. Boccaccio has 'ab [...] invidia'; *Genealogie*, XI.xxvi.1. Cf., Kongelige Bibliotek MS GKS 2008, f.69^r gloss: 'ob invidiam'.

¹⁰⁴ See Meech, 'Chaucer and the *Ovide moralisé* - A Further Study', 185.

¹⁰⁵ John of Garland, *Integumenta Ovidii*, ll. 201–3

¹⁰⁶ *Genealogie*, XI.xxvi.4.

of the *Commedia*, it is easy to imagine Dante's vivid treatment of Minos pushing his role as infernal arbiter to the forefront of Chaucer's mind, despite its minor status in the Ovidian traditions and irrelevance to the tale at hand.¹⁰⁷

There is, of course, something counterintuitive about this mode of approach, with its multiplication of possible sources for a few lines of poetry; Occam would not approve. But it is important to recognise the breadth of ground that might be covered by 'Ovidian' here. Though Chaucer's attention to Minos, and the details he recounts, are Ovidian, they are by no means purely so. The narrative outline is from the *Metamorphoses*, but while certain details come from the poem, others are either from commentary, the *Ovide moralisé*, or even further afield. At the same time, the starting point, confusion of purpose and narrative condensation recall the commentaries on the *Heroides*, but further associations may be occurring to Chaucer as he writes.

A similar process appears to occur with the next section of the poem, where Chaucer turns to Minos' victory over Alcahous, aided by the treachery of Scylla, the king's daughter. This too is Ovidian, but oddly transformed. It is not, for a start, the logical next step in Chaucer's tale. Where Ceffi cuts directly to Minos' victory over Athens and the exaction of the tribute of youths, the *Metamorphoses* and *Ovide moralisé* turn to Minos' encounter with Aeacus, at the end of their seventh books. Chaucer has jumped forward to the beginning of *Metamorphoses* VIII, apparently because he is taking his invocation of Minos seriously and wants to give the next important event in his life. Here, Chaucer owes everything to the eighth book of the *Metamorphoses* or *Ovide moralisé*: Minos' victory over Alcahous and the betrayal of Nisus by his daughter Scylla are not standard elements of glosses on the *Heroides*,

¹⁰⁷ See *Inferno*, V.4-20 in *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Inferno*, ed. Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

since they are not particularly relevant to the Athenian defeat; and though there are no direct verbal echoes, it is possible to trace the influence of the *Ovide moralisé*'s medievalised account of the tale in Scylla's infatuation with Minos 'for his chyvalrye' (LGW, 1912).¹⁰⁸ Whether he is following the *Metamorphoses* directly or the *Ovide moralisé*, however, Chaucer is happy to write against his sources. Unlike the *Ovide moralisé* or the commentators, he refuses to condemn Scylla's betrayal of her father and her city for the love of Minos.¹⁰⁹ Instead he turns his censure instead on Minos for how 'wikkedly he quitte hire kyndenesse' (LGW, 1918). The *Metamorphoses* makes no such judgement – as is Ovid's wont. And though the *Ovide moralisé* allows Scylla a lengthy tirade against Minos (*Ovide moralisé*, VIII.256-325), the French poet makes his own opinion clear when he states that she did not deserve to be saved from drowning by the intercession of the gods (*Ovide moralisé*, VIII.343). If Chaucer is recalling the *Ovide moralisé* in his condemnation of Minos, it is Scylla's tirade and not the poet's aside that has stuck with him.

The move highlights a paradox that marks Chaucer's writing of the 'Legend of Ariadne' as a whole. Despite having talked of 'confusion of purpose' and noted its likely root in the influences exerted by contextualising commentary on the *Heroides* and the texts of the *Metamorphoses* / *Ovide moralisé*, it is also clear that the Minos-Scylla episode foreshadows the main events of the 'Legend of Ariadne'. For Chaucer, in contrast to the *Ovide moralisé* or other interpreters of the passage, Scylla is a helpful maiden and Minos an ungrateful man. The only reference to her transformation implies that she is worthy of our sympathy ('Nere that the gods had of

¹⁰⁸ *Ovide moralisé*, VIII.1-351.

¹⁰⁹ The opinion that Scylla deserved her fate as a traitor appears to have been common; cf. Bonsignori (who is reporting Giovanni del Vergilio), *Metamorphoseos vulgare*, 386.

her pite', *LGW*, 1920), just as we will be encouraged to sympathise with the wronged Ariadne later in the poem.¹¹⁰ The parallels between the pair and Theseus and Ariadne are clear. On one hand it seems clear that Chaucer's sources counterbalance his control of the narrative, but, on the other, he re-exerts his control over those sources and transforms them to his own purpose.

As he finally turns to that purpose, coming to the Minotaur and the tribute of children exacted by Minos upon the defeated Athenians, Chaucer exerts his control more fully. He omits all mention of the Minotaur's origins in order to cut to the chase and describe the tribute itself. The *Metamorphoses*' reference to the tribute is dense and easily misreadable, but defines it as exacted by lot once every nine years; twice the Minotaur feeds on Athenian blood; the third time brings his death.¹¹¹ Ovid sees no need to specify the number of children, nor even to name Theseus and Ariadne. The *Ovide moralisé* leaves the interval and number of victims unspecified,¹¹² while Ceffi's prologue specifies a yearly tribute of an unknown number of men.¹¹³ Only Bonsignori agrees with Chaucer in specifying every third year, with lots drawn to decide which children are to be sent to their death at the monster's hands.¹¹⁴ Chaucer is alone in implying that only a single youth is sent (Theseus has no companions) and, further, in implying that the tribute goes on far longer than a mere three repetitions: 'This wiked

¹¹⁰ Cf. the similar manoeuvre Chaucer performs when he tells the story of Ceyx and Alcyone in *The Book of the Duchess*, 216.

¹¹¹ 'Actaeo bis pastum sanguine monstrum / tertia sors annis domuit repetita novenis' ('twice the monster was fed on Athenian blood / the third lot, repeated every nine years, defeated it'), *Metamorphoses*, VIII.170-1.

¹¹² 'tout jors mais, à certain terme / Un ou plusieurs' ('forever, at a certain interval / One or several'), *Ovide moralisé*, VIII.1106-7.

¹¹³ 'ogni anno gli dovesse mandare certo numero d'uomini' ('every year they had to send him a certain number of men'), *Heroides: Ceffi*, 448.

¹¹⁴ 'ogni capo de tre anni li erano dati sette corpora de uomini' ('at the end of every three years, seven bodies of men were given to him'), Bonsignori, *Metamorphoseos vulgare*, 386. Bonsignori's use of 'corpora' follows that of the Vulgate commentary, as given on f.76^v of the Copenhagen MS.

custom is so longe yronne, / Til that of Athenes kyng Egeus / Mot senden his owene sone' (*LGW*, 1943-45). While the drawing of lots is an accepted part of the myth, and the three-year interval can be explained by a misreading of Ovid's *tertia sors*, Chaucer's choice to let the lot run until there is no-one left but Theseus is original. The image is of a city exhausted of children, finally forced, *in extremis*, to send its future ruler. The detail's effect cuts two ways. It evokes sympathy for the plight of the Athenians under the Cretan yoke, but it also contains an implied criticism of Theseus. The causal link between the 'so longe yronne' and Theseus' being sent to Crete weakens the egalitarianism of the version given by Ovid and his commentators. By implication Ovid's image of Theseus as an unbowed and willing participant in a comprehensive *sors* is diminished. Though Chaucer has yet to water it, he has planted the seed of Theseus' eventual character assassination.

Up to this point, Chaucer's points of reference are recognisably Ovidian, but with Theseus' arrival and imprisonment in Crete he turns toward another intertext: the *Teseida*. Chaucer's use of Boccaccio's poem in the prison scene was pointed out by Jonathon Lowes in 1905, but has not been given substantial reconsideration since then.¹¹⁵ The parallels are striking, though it is Chaucer's slip of stating that Ariadne and Phaedra's chambers look onto 'the mayster-strete / Of Athenes' (*LGW*, 1966-7) that really gives it away. The impression given by the lapse is that Chaucer has failed to digest his borrowings. This is not the case. The debt to the *Teseida* in the 'Legend of Ariadne' is expressed through a top-to-bottom reconfiguration of its first prison scene and the love story that develops from it. Where Palemone and Arcita are placed under guard in a high chamber overlooking the garden where Emilia walks each day

¹¹⁵ Lowes, 'The Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* Considered in Its Chronological Relations'.

(*Teseida*, II.98; III.11), Theseus is placed ‘Doun in the botom derk and wonder lowe’, in a dungeon that bathetically adjoins ‘a foreyne’ or privy (*LGW*, 1961-2). Set against each other, the parallel scenes – in which Arcita falls in love with Emilia, and Ariadne falls in love with Theseus – present comical mirror images.

In the *Teseida*, Arcita is drawn to the window by the sound of Emilia singing below:

Al suon di quella voce grazioso
 Arcita si levò, ch’era in prigione
 allato allato al giardino amoroso,
 [...]
 e una finestretta disioso
 aprì per meglio udir quella canzone,
 e per vedere ancor chi li cantasse.
 tra’ ferri il capo fuori alquanto trasse.

At the sound of that voice, gracious Arcita – who was in prison side by side with the lovely garden – got up [...] and, desirous, opened a small window to hear that song, and to better see who might be singing it, he thrust his head some way through the bars. (*Teseida*, III.11)

In the ‘Legend of Ariadne’, the same scene is transformed into its opposite. It is the woman who is on high, while the man is below, and the woman hearing the man rather than vice versa; and the voice is no longer a lovely song but ‘compleynyngē’ (*LGW*, 1971). The cell is still a cell, but rather than being beside a lovely garden, it gives onto the privy ‘longynge to the doughtren tweyne / Of Mynos’ (*LGW*, 1962-70). In the Italian poem, Emilia’s angelic voice drifts up to the high chamber on spring air in sunlit blossom time (*Teseida*, III.6, 10); in the English poem the voice is one of complaint, drifting up a privy shaft at night. When Chaucer states ‘Noot I not how’ Ariadne and Phaedra heard Theseus, it is a winking gesture to the low-comic physics of the situation; it is entirely clear how the two sisters come to hear him. And in contrast to the fulgurant moment of love-recognition that occurs as the climax of the

Teseida's scene (*Teseida*, III.12), the two Cretan sisters are merely filled with pity and a sense of injustice: 'of his wo they hadde compassioun' (*LGW*, 1974). Chaucer is also careful to keep sight out of the equation until much later in the poem. Unlike Arcita, Ariadne's response is based her hearing, combined with her knowledge that Theseus is 'A kynges sone' (*LGW*, 1975). Understandably, her reaction is somewhat less hyperbolic than Arcita's: 'Now, certes, it is routhe' (*LGW*, 1982).

It must be noted, however, that Chaucer's use of the *Teseida* here does not involve or invoke the *Teseida*'s Theseus; the intertextual relationship is between the Chaucer's Theseus and the *Teseida*'s Theban knights. Though the Italian poem becomes a textual presence in the 'Legend of Ariadne', its version of Theseus does not. Chaucer is accessing it instead as a kind of textual toolkit: it provides a particular situation, vocabulary and spatial configuration that happens to be ripe for subversion. That subverted episode provides a textual fulcrum around which his negative presentation of Theseus is able to turn.

Having established that fulcrum Chaucer returns to his Ovid, with a dramatisation of the encounter between Theseus and Ariadne that is reminiscent of the *Ovide moralisé*. Where, as has been noted, the *Metamorphoses* sums up the defeat of the Minotaur and Ariadne's part in it in a mere four lines, the *Ovide moralisé* gives considerable space to Ariadne's musings on the rights and wrongs of helping Theseus, and allows direct speech to drive the tale from Theseus' arrival in Crete until he enters the Labyrinth. This, rather than the *Metamorphoses* or *Heroides*, is the Ovidian precedent to Chaucer's decision to advance the plot of the *Legend* almost entirely

through dialogue, and give slightly more than half of the poem over to direct speech.¹¹⁶

Within that similarity, however, is a set of differences, which centre on the presentation of Ariadne's attraction to Theseus. The Ariadne of the *Ovide moralisé* is motivated by three factors: Theseus' appearance and valour;¹¹⁷ her sense of justice;¹¹⁸ and pity.¹¹⁹ Chaucer's Ariadne is driven by pity, combined with a sense of personal and political opportunism. The French poet devotes the first part of Ariadne's monologue to Theseus' 'fame', 'valour' and 'goodness', and has her bewail the possible loss of his 'handsome body [...] and noble face'.¹²⁰ Chaucer, by contrast, suppresses all mention of Theseus' valour, and restricts physical description to the laconically conventional phrase, 'A semely knyght was Theseus to se' (*LGW*, 2074). Where the author of the *Ovide moralisé* takes pains to remind his readers of Theseus' bravery and beauty, Chaucer omits all such mentions; he replaces the mythographical certainty of the *Ovide moralisé* with silence. Though it is often assumed that Chaucer's omissions point to an assumption that the reader already has a developed awareness of the myths, we are clearly expected to regard Theseus as an unknown quantity. As Phaedra puts it when she devises the plan to provide him with a weapon, 'he shulde save his lyf. / *If that he be a man*, he shal do so' (*LGW*, 2001-2; my emphasis). And as Theseus is for the sisters, so is he for the reader. Even when he finally defeats the Minotaur, Chaucer's silence continues: instead of offering any

¹¹⁶ Though the case has been made that the *Heroides* are monologues, the epistolary form is quite different, and involves a necessarily retrospective mode that is absent from the dialogue of the *Ovide moralisé* and the 'Legend of Ariadne'.

¹¹⁷ 'Ariadne a celui veu [...] / Sa biauté plaint [...] / Sa valour et son hardement' ('Ariadne saw him [...] she felt compassion for his beauty [...] his valour and his courage'), *Ovide moralisé*, VIII.1139-43.

¹¹⁸ 'Ce sera perte et grant pechié' ('This would be a loss and a great sin'), *Ovide moralisé*, VIII.1162.

¹¹⁹ 'Pitié grant ai de ton meschié' ('I have great pity for your misfortune'), *Ovide moralisé*, VIII.1163.

¹²⁰ 'renommee', 'valour' and 'bonté', *Ovide moralisé*, VIII.1145-6; 'biau cors et [...] face gente', *Ovide moralisé*, VIII.1154.

praise he states that ‘by the techynge of ths Adryane / He overcom this beste’ (*LGW*, 2147-8).

Just as Chaucer’s exertion of control over the materials he draws from the *Ovide moralisé* and his other sources changes Theseus’ role, so too does it change Ariadne’s. Key to this is Chaucer’s decision to ascribe all the detailed machination to Phaedra. Though Chaucer could have gleaned the details of the plan from any of the available sources and their commentaries – including the balls of wax to throw into the Minotaur’s mouth – the sources are unanimous in having Ariadne come up with the plan.¹²¹ Chaucer’s ascription of it to Phaedra absolves Ariadne of intellectual responsibility, and partially of moral responsibility. The shift distances Ariadne from the theme of daughter-father betrayal that draws together the versions of the Scylla and the Ariadne stories given by the *Ovide moralisé*.¹²² In recounting the former, Chaucer has already diminished the sense of culpability attaching to Scylla, and deprived her of her metamorphosis as a means of invoking the reader’s pity. In recounting the latter, Chaucer reconfigures the tale in such a way as to do the same for Ariadne, handing the burden of machination on to her sister. In response to Ariadne’s pity for Theseus, it is Phaedra who elaborates the plan for his victory and escape (*LGW*, 1987-2014); and at the two vital points where Ariadne is to propose and propound the plan to Theseus, Chaucer employs brevity formulae and passes on: ‘What sholde I lenger sermoun of it make’, ‘shortly of this mater for to make’ (*LGW*, 2025, 2136).

¹²¹ Though Ceffi bears witness to a tradition in which Dedalus helps Ariadne to do so; see *Heroides: Ceffi*, 449.

¹²² The them is even clearer in Bonsignori, *Metamorphoseos vulgare*, 386–8.

What Chaucer cannot change, of course, is the love-pairing central to the tale. His writing of it, however, replicates the same pattern of reliance and reconfiguration that mark his earlier borrowings from the *Teseida*. As has been noted, the concept of staging a dialogue between Theseus and Ariadne is directly drawn from the *Ovide moralisé*, and its particulars mark that dependence out clearly.¹²³ But, as before, the echoes take place within a context of substantial reconfiguration. In the *Ovide moralisé*, Ariadne speaks first, and the initiative comes from her; she leads the conversation and Theseus follows. In the ‘Legend of Ariadne’, Chaucer replaces Ariadne’s preamble with a brevity formula and allows Theseus to speak first. Though Ariadne is in the position of power, it is Theseus who leads the conversation. Where in the *Ovide moralisé*, Theseus’ part in the dialogue is restricted to two and half lines, Chaucer gives him more than half the dialogue. In the *Ovide moralisé*, Ariadne has decided on her intention to marry Theseus before speaking to him; in the *Legend*, it is prompted by Theseus’ exaggerated love rhetoric. And while placing the conversational initiative with Theseus, that rhetoric emphasises afresh the desperation that marks the prison scene. In doing so, Chaucer once again leans heavily on the tools provided by the *Teseida*; the ‘lover’s plight’ picture that Theseus paints corresponds nearly point for point with Arcita’s storyline in the Italian poem. But where Arcita is willing to risk death to be by his love’s side, Theseus is making a

¹²³ Cf. Theseus’ promise to ‘profre yow in low manere / To ben youre page and serven yow’ (*LGW*, 2060-1) with ‘Franchie riens, cors et cuer vous don / Et vostre liges hom devieng’ (‘Excepting nothing, I give you my body and heart, and become your liege man’, *Ovide moralisé*, VIII.1296-8); and Ariadne’s reply ‘were it betere that I were your wyf, / Sin that ye ben as gentil born as I’ (*LGW*, 2089-90) with ‘Je vous retieng / A seignor, frere et à ami’ (‘I take you as lord, brother and friend’, *Ovide moralisé*, VII.1298-9).

bargain to avoid death by remaining by Ariadne's side.¹²⁴ With his promise to forsake his kingdom and live as a lowly page, Theseus' speech is exemplary, as Chaucer has Ariadne remind us, of what a man will do to save his own skin. Having heard his offer, she replies, 'what is that man nyl don for drede?' (*LGW*, 2095).

Ariadne's mistake consists in taking Theseus at his word. She fails to understand the size of the gap between what a man will promise to when overcome by fear and what a man will do once he is free of fear. Following the *Ovide moralisé*, Chaucer has Ariadne make Theseus to swear to marry her, and has her ensure Phaedra's safety by making him betroth her to Hippolytus. The *Ovide moralisé*, however, contents itself with the report that 'Theseus promises and swears it, pledging by his gods and his law'.¹²⁵ Chaucer's innovation is to put the actual oath on the page, and have Theseus swear by his life, his blood and his favoured god in order to convince Ariadne of his good faith. The painful irony of Ariadne smiling 'at his stedefastnesse, / And at his hertely wordes' (*LGW*, 2123-4) could hardly be better drawn.

For the next section, Chaucer takes a freer hand with the narrative, including a number of details not obviously due to any of the sources identified so far. The sojourn in Oenopia, 'There as [Theseus] hadde a frend of his knowynge' (*LGW*, 2155-56), does not come up in the *Ovide moralisé*, Ceffi or any of the original Ovid texts.¹²⁶ It is engineered, however, to exacerbate the pain of Ariadne's eventual desertion by allowing her to spend time as Theseus' betrothed in the company of

¹²⁴ Chaucer takes the idea of Theseus entering into Ariadne's service in disguise from Arcita's return to Athens as Penteo in *Teseida* IV. The reliance on Arcita's story is further evidenced by Theseus' invocations of Arcita's favoured god, Mars, at *LGW* 2063 and 2109.

¹²⁵ 'Theseus li promet et jure. / Ses diex et sa loi met en ploige', VII.1304-5.

¹²⁶ Chaucer's mention of the 'frend' may owe something to the alliance between Athens and Oenopia mentioned at *Metamorphoses*, VII.472.

other nobles. They feast and dance, and sleep together, before Theseus acquires a more impressive ship and they set sail, supposedly for Athens.¹²⁷ Only then does Chaucer return to the standard outline of the desertion, and rejoin the tale as it is given in the *Heroides*, and, more briefly, in the *Ovide moralisé*. His detailing of it, however, is reliant on Ceffi's double preface to *Heroides* IV and X. As noted above, Ceffi specifies that Theseus took Phaedra with him because she was more beautiful than her sister; the assertion finds its echo in Chaucer's 'For that hire syster fayrer was than she' (*LGW*, 2172). Similarly, though neither the *Metamorphoses* nor the *Ovide moralisé* mention Aegeus' subsequent death by drowning, Ceffi does. Though the incident is present in numerous commentaries, Chaucer's mention of it seems likely to have come from Ceffi himself.

In the passage that follows (traditionally identified as dependent on *Heroides* X) two close verbal echoes confirm the debt to Ceffi's translation over the original. The first of these is the detail of the moon still being visible at dawn when Ariadne wakes: where Ovid has 'luna fuit', Ceffi gives 'Ancora luceva la luna', accurately translated by Chaucer as 'and yit shynded the mone' (*LGW*, 2194).¹²⁸ A few lines later, when Chaucer tells us that Ariadne 'kyssted, in al hire care, / The steppes of his fet ther he hath fare' (*LGW*, 2208-9), it is not as the Riverside editors suggest a mistranslation of Ovid's 'And in your place, such as I can, I touch your imprints [in the bed], and the covers', but of Ceffi's version.¹²⁹ The kissing detail is explained by one of Ceffi's rare additions to his translation: 'And in your place, such as I can, I

¹²⁷ 'There feste they, there daunce they and synge; / And in his armes hath this Adryane', *LGW*, 2157-58.

¹²⁸ *Heroides* X; *Heroides: Ceffi*, 520.

¹²⁹ 'et tua, quae possum pro te, vestigia tango / Strataque', *Heroides*, X.53-4.

touch your imprints and kiss the bed'.¹³⁰ Revealing the Italian source casts the idea of mistranslation into some doubt, however. Though, like Ovid's *vestigium*, Ceffi's *orme* commonly means 'footprint', the context makes it clear that Ariadne is talking of her and Theseus' bed. Ceffi's prose is lucid, and Chaucer's Italian – up to the task of accurately translating Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio – is more than a match for it. Rather than accidentally misunderstanding, Chaucer appears to have used a deliberate misreading in order to produce one of most affecting images in the poem.

The legend draws to a close, famously, with Chaucer directing the reader towards *Heroides* X, Ariadne's epistle, where Ovid 'telleth al' (*LGW*, 2220). Rather than leaving it there, however, he feels the need to add in a moment of reward for Ariadne and briefly outlines the legend of her crown being placed among the stars 'in the signe of Taurus' (*LGW*, 2223). Even here, in the briefest of endings, Chaucer picks his phrasing carefully. Where the sources agree that the stellification is the work of Bacchus, who takes Ariadne as his wife, Chaucer omits the god of wine altogether; no overtone of the Bacchant is allowed to taint Ariadne's reputation. Instead, as with Scylla, 'the goddes han hire holpen for pite' (*LGW*, 2222). Theseus, meanwhile, is left exemplary of false lovers; his heroic reputation demolished.

What arises from this reading of the 'Legend of Ariadne' is a snapshot of the mosaic or collage nature of a piece that can justly be called Ovidian while bearing little unequivocal trace of material directly drawn from original texts of Ovid's work. Chaucer is manifestly working from a variety of sources – either from memory or, as the final section's engagement with Ceffi suggests, from books open on his desk.

¹³⁰ 'io in tuo scambio, sì come io posso, tocco le tue orme et abbraccio il lecto', *Heroides: Ceffi*, 521.

Commentary, translation or response, each of those sources is at one or more removes from Ovid's work. Without resorting to source-led determinism, close examination of the *Legend* suggests that the origins of almost all its elements can be found in a pair of medieval 'Ovidian' sources, reorganised within a narrative that is at liberty to suppress and eliminate, add and emphasise as it pleases. Drawn into alignment around heterogeneous material drawn from Boccaccio, each Ovidian element of the story undergoes substantial reconfiguration, revealing Chaucer's exertion of control over a tale which is, finally, not meant to be his to rewrite. The precision with which Chaucer picks material, suppresses and eliminates or adds and emphasises within the broad outline of the myth leads to a picture of him as working within the frame of an 'Ovidianism' in which the idea of Ovid means much more than the words of Ovid, but which remains, none the less, Ovidian. It makes clear that, even when drawn from well-defined sources and narrative outlines, mythology was indeed Chaucer's to rewrite; however Ovidian the results remain. Like Boccaccio in the *Teseida* and *Decasibus*, Chaucer too is compiling and eliding with an impressive freedom, that is not only left unaffected by his appeal to Ovid's authority, but actively reinforced by it.

ii. Gower

Though Gower does not refer to Ovid by name in his treatment of Theseus and Ariadne in the *Confessio amantis*, his relationship with the Latin poet seems, at a glance, more straightforward than Chaucer's. With the *Vox clamans* leaving no doubt about Chaucer's familiarity with Ovid's poetry in its original tongue, it is natural to assume that Gower, unlike Chaucer, did 'take his Ovid straight'. His familiarity with Ovid is clear across the *Confessio* too: the story of Ariadne is one of around thirty

identifiably Ovidian tales in the poem;¹³¹ and though Gower only occasionally signals the provenance of his tales, he names Ovid more than any other source, a total of 22 times across the *Confessio*.¹³² The preponderance is striking: Chaucer, across the entirety of his works, names Ovid only 15 times.¹³³ It is not surprising, from this point of view, to see Gower referring to Ovid as a sort of archetypal figure at the beginning of Theseus and Ariadne's story, naming him simply as 'the Poete' (*Confessio*, V.5231), in a manner that implies his total authority in the matter of ancient tales.

Though Gower's knowledge of Ovid in his original tongue is not at issue, it remains to be seen whether the Theseus and Ariadne of the *Confessio amantis* exhibit any evidence of having been taken 'straight'. It is, in any case, clear that the Latin Ovid already came equipped with enough paratextual mediation to affect any notion of a one-to-one relationship with the ancient poet. On top of that, it has long been accepted that Gower may well have used works like the *Ovide moralisé* alongside the original Latin. In his 1971 article, 'John Gower's use of the "medieval Ovid"', Conrad Mainzer briefly examines a representative cross-section of Ovidian tales in the poem, and finds a number of plausible echoes of vocabulary and detail in Bersuire's *Ovidius moralizatus* and the *Ovide moralisé*. He concludes that Gower's Ovidian tales, 'stand in the direct line of descent from these moralizing interpretations'.¹³⁴ It is no surprise that 'moral Gower', as Chaucer called him, should

¹³¹ See Eugen Stollreither, *Quellen-Nachweise zu John Gowers Confessio amantis* (Munich: Kastner und Lossen, 1901), 34–6.

¹³² Statius is absent; Vergil is mentioned three times; see Dawson and J. D. Pickles, *A Concordance to John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1987).

¹³³ Although, of course, the politics of naming authorities is a factor here; Chaucer never names Boccaccio, for instance.

¹³⁴ Conrad Mainzer, 'John Gower's Use of the Mediaeval Ovid in the "Confessio amantis"', *Medium Ævum* 41 (1972), 215-29: 224.

bear the traces of medieval moralising commentary on Ovid.¹³⁵ But what it might mean to say that Gower's treatments of Ovid 'descend' from 'moralizing interpretations' remains slightly vague. As with Chaucer's 'Legend', it is important to know what sources Gower is using, before one can see what he is doing with them, and how he stands in relation to them.

Understandably there are striking similarities between Gower and Chaucer's telling of the tale, which express themselves in the structuring of the story as much as in its details. Just as Chaucer does, Gower begins his narrative with Androgeus' death and Minos' subsequent war on Athens, and continues with the terms of the tribute before coming to Theseus' arrival in Crete. Like Chaucer's version of events, Gower's ends with a passage inspired by the *Heroides*: Ariadne on the empty shore bemoaning her lot, while Theseus sails into the distance with Phaedra. Broadly, the arcs of the two texts are identical, both in terms of narrative and in terms of their trajectory from material rooted in the *Metamorphoses* to a scene taken from the *Heroides*. Unlike Chaucer, Gower sticks to the main topic, and does not stray onto extraneous material, but he shows a similar debt to the main currents of the commentary tradition. Like Chaucer, it appears that Gower is working less from Ovid than from a set of 'Ovidian' texts that allow him to construct a coherent narrative from a single fugitive moment in the *Metamorphoses* and the related epistles in the *Heroides*.

What distances the two poets' accounts of the same tale is not detail, but a difference of approach. Where the 'Legend of Ariadne' rewards patient source analysis by revealing close relationships to specific Ovidian texts, Gower's version of

¹³⁵ See *Troilus and Criseyde*, V.1856

the story contains little to link it concretely any texts at all. Mainzer's suggestion that the main source is the *Ovide moralisé* alongside a glossed *Metamorphoses* (and, possibly, the *Ovidius moralizatus*) hangs, finally, on three details, each of which is relatively controvertible.¹³⁶ The first is Gower's use of 'pelote' for the ball of pitch thrown into the Minotaur's mouth (*Confessio*, V.5349), which echoes the *Ovide moralisé*'s 'poleton' (VIII.1308), but which, as Mainzer acknowledges, also echoes a good number of commentaries. The same can be said of Gower's identification of the island where Ariadne finds herself abandoned as 'Chio' (*Confessio*, 5413), which again echoes the *Ovide moralisé*'s 'Chie' (*Ovide Moralisé*, VIII.1332), while the *Metamorphoses* has Dia (i.e. Naxos; *Met*, VIII.174). 'Chiam' for 'Diam' is, however, is an extremely common variant in medieval copies of the *Metamorphoses*.¹³⁷

Mainzer's final detail linking Gower to the *Ovide moralisé* is his statement that Phaedra is Ariadne's 'yonger Soster' (*Confessio*, V.5395); Ovid does not state which sister is older, while the French text refers to Phaedra as younger (*Ovide moralisé*, VIII.1336). Again, however, this is a common detail in commentaries to the *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides* alike. Although taking the three details together strengthens the suggestion that Gower may have had recourse to the *Ovide moralisé*, none provides anything resembling a concrete link.

Mainzer's analyses are forensic and careful, but what they show more than anything else is the slightness of the evidence left for him to uncover. What Robert Worth Frank calls 'a rather routine performance' on Gower's part is actually a sign of

¹³⁶ Mainzer, 'John Gower's Use of the Mediaeval Ovid in the "Confessio amantis"', 221.

¹³⁷ A far from exhaustive survey of medieval manuscripts shows the commonness of the variant. Among the digitised complete *Metamorphoses* manuscripts from the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, those with the 'Chiam' reading predominate; see, e.g., Clm 28504, f.52^r (France, late 13th century); Clm 209, f.97^v (late 15th century), Clm 6715, f.108^v (15th century), Clm 179, f.98^v (Italy, 15th century); reads 'Chion'). The Kongelige Bibliotek MS. GKS 2008 has been corrected from 'Chiam' to 'Diam'; f.76^f.

how fully he is in charge of his materials, in a quite different way to Chaucer.¹³⁸ Where Chaucer effects his appropriation of Ariadne and Theseus through minute reconfigurations of his sources, suppressing some details while he emphasises others, but leaving a continual trace of textual relation, Gower effaces almost every trace of textual relation, reshaping and rephrasing his materials in such a way that their sources become almost impossible to trace. Through this, Gower's technique seems to echo that of Chaucer's Manciple, who declares, 'I am a man nocht textueel, / I wol nocht telle of textes never a deel; / I wol go to my tale'.¹³⁹ Though Gower's tale is necessarily dependent on Ovidian texts – whether they be the works of Ovid himself, or medieval descendents of them – it is not, in the body of his own poem, their textuality that interests him, but the tale they have in common.

Gower fits that tale to his purpose, the illustration of the vice of 'unkindeschipe' in love (*Confessio*, V.5207), with a single-mindedness that is alien to Chaucer. Though the *Legend of Good Women* is a collection of exemplary figures, the specificity of what makes them good is left rather vague. Neither on a case-by-case basis, nor over the course of the whole poem, does Chaucer attempt to illustrate systematically the virtues that could characterise goodness. If his Ariadne is exemplary of a specific quality, it is not quite clear which. Kindness? Only if her kindness can be accepted as exemplary when diluted with a certain amount of political canniness.¹⁴⁰ And if she is to be an example of political canniness, she can only be so if the reader ignores her credulity. Nor, conversely, does Chaucer make

¹³⁸ Robert Worth Frank, *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972).

¹³⁹ *The Canterbury Tales*, IX (H), 235-37.

¹⁴⁰ On this point, see what Frank diagnoses as the 'antiromantic attitude' of the 'Legend'; Robert Worth Frank, *Chaucer and the Legend of Good Women*, 119.

any effort to illustrate systematically the vices of the bad men who throw his heroines' goodness into relief. Theseus is evidently a craven villain, but his villainy does not illustrate much more than a quite mundane species of commonplace cowardice and sexual greed.¹⁴¹ The *Confessio amantis*, meanwhile, proceeds systematically, moving sin by sin and vice by vice through a set of lessons designed to show the lover how not to behave; a progression quite different to the *Legend's* apparent scramble for exemplary figures according to no particular plan.¹⁴²

The tales on either side of Theseus and Ariadne demonstrate how carefully their story is placed within the structure of the *Confessio's* fifth book. The main topic of the book is avarice, the vices that relate to it, and their relations to the comportment of lovers. Theseus appears after the Confessor's treatment of general ingratitude in the figure of 'unkinde' Adrian (*Confessio*, V.4937ff.), and before his retelling of the tale of Tereus, Procne and the rape of Philomela (*Confessio*, V.5550ff.). Ingratitude relates to avarice by being a refusal to give that which should be given willingly in return for help already proffered. The rich Roman Adrian presents a lesser form of ingratitude in refusing to fulfil his promise to give half his fortune to the man who saves his life; Theseus is worse in the first instance because his 'unkindeschipe' relates to love. He is still worse again because, unlike Adrian, he takes something from the object of his ingratitude; Gower is careful to make clear that he robs Ariadne of her virginity: 'sche to him was abandouned, / In al that evere that sche couthe' (*Confessio*, V.5378-9). In this, Theseus' vice is more vicious than Adrian's, but rather

¹⁴¹ On the topic of male infidelity in the *Legend of Good Women* as a whole, see R. M. Lumiansky, 'Chaucer and the Idea of Unfaithful Men', *Modern Language Notes* 62, no. 8 (December 1947): 560-2.

¹⁴² On the plan of the poem, see G.C. Macaulay, 'John Gower', in *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, ed. A. W. Ward and A. R. Waller, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), 147.

less vicious than Tereus', who follows, representing avarice under the form of 'rapine'. Theseus' vice consists in taking what is given, with no intention of following through on his promises of gratitude; Tereus is offered nothing and takes everything. The rape of Philomela is grotesque and appalling in a way that Theseus' desertion of Ariadne cannot approach. Situated within a spectrum of related and differentiated *exempla* of vice, Theseus' moral shortcoming is, by necessity, defined with some specificity and subtlety; much more so than in the 'Legend of Ariadne'.

As a result, Gower's characterisation of Theseus is both slighter and more even-handed than Chaucer's. Where the 'Legend of Ariadne' carefully suppresses any narrative details that might portray Theseus as brave or worthy, the *Confessio* lets them stand. When the lot falls on his Theseus, Chaucer notes twice how 'woful' the young knight is (*LGW*, 1948, 1952). Gower's Theseus, meanwhile, 'a worthi kniht withalle', 'ferde as thogh he tok non hiede' (*Confessio*, V.5315, 5317). Unlike his Chaucerian counterpart, he rushes off to Crete 'al that evere he mihte spiede' (*Confessio*, V.5318). Absent are the implications of foot-dragging and self-pity with which Chaucer lards the 'Legend'; Gower's Theseus takes his lot, as it were, on the chin. Where Chaucer's Theseus is 'lad [...] / Unto the court of kyng Mynos', and 'fetered' lest he escape (*LGW*, 1948-50), Gower's takes himself to Crete, seeks out Minos and 'profreth all that he him oghte / Upon the point of here acord' (*Confessio*, V.5321-3). And though Gower's Confessor only ventures relatively conventional formulae such as 'worthi' and 'lusti' to characterise the young Athenian (*Confessio*, V.5315, 5336), he is clearly admired by those around him. At Mynos' court, he is received not as a prisoner but as a guest, and he is so favoured, even by the 'sterne [...] cruel' Minos, that he is 'kept til ate laste' (*Confessio*, V.5324-9). Unlike

Chaucer's Theseus, Gower's is a figure who attracts 'worthi los' (*Confessio*, V.5335); one is pitied, the other praised. And when Ariadne falls in love with Gower's Theseus, it is for his qualities, not his blandishments or political status. It is she who declares her love to Theseus first, not vice-versa, as it is in Chaucer: 'Hire hole herte on him sche leide, / And he also of love hir preide' (*Confessio*, V.5337-8).

This helps account for the difference between Gower and Chaucer's treatments of the moment at which Ariadne falls in love with the Athenian hero. Gower's is entirely without dialogue, while Chaucer's is effected entirely through dialogue. In this, Gower's account has more in common with the *Metamorphoses* itself, while Chaucer is taking his cues from the *Ovide moralisé*. As has been noted, however, Chaucer's dialogue is inspired by the French poem, but fulfils quite a different purpose. In the French text, Ariadne has already fallen in love with Theseus, and her internal debate and subsequent dialogue with Theseus provide the foundation of reason that allows her to act on her love and save him. In the 'Legend of Ariadne', Ariadne is driven by pity, which could not alone lead to the necessary completion of the tale with her betrayal. Ariadne has to fall in love with Theseus, but, since Chaucer has suppressed the heroism that conventionally explains that love, he has to seek some other means of doing so. From this problem comes the reconfiguration of the *Ovide moralisé*'s dialogue, in which Theseus' exaggerated love rhetoric and promises of marital security and status ensure Ariadne's attachment and, hence, the sad denouement of the tale in her betrayal. The *Legend*'s richness of characterisation in comparison to Gower's telling of the same tale springs from this necessity; Chaucer, unlike Gower, has a narrative problem to solve. The dialogue with which he solves that problem has the secondary effect of giving both Theseus and Ariadne a depth of

psychological characterisation absent from Gower's account. Though it is entirely possible that Gower also read the *Ovide moralisé*, he does not replicate its use of direct speech because he is not faced with the same narrative exigencies as his friend and colleague. His account bears fewer traces of its possible Ovidian intertexts than Chaucer's does because, paradoxically, it is closer to them in its essential details.

It is only after the defeat of the Minotaur, when he comes to the heart of his tale, that Gower begins to distance himself from those intertexts. Ovid is quite clear about the haste with which Theseus makes his escape, taking Ariadne with him against Minos' will: 'taking Minos' daughter, the son of Aegeus immediately set sail for Dia'.¹⁴³ In the *Ovide moralisé*, Ariadne waits for Theseus at the mouth of the Labyrinth, ready to make the speediest escape possible.¹⁴⁴ In the *Confessio amantis*, meanwhile, there is no hurry at all. Theseus' victory over the Minotaur is actually feted by the Cretans, and brings the enmity between the two cities to a conclusion. Instead of needing to escape the island, Theseus 'duelt a dai or tuo / Wher that Mynos gret chiere him dede' (*Confessio*, V.5374-5), and it is during this interval that Theseus has his way with Ariadne, 'in a prive stede' (*Confessio*, V.5376). This being the true subject of his tale, Gower exerts his influence more strongly than at any other point.

As he recounts events:

[Theseus] Hath with this Maiden spoke and rounded,
That sche to him was abandoned
In al that evere sche couthe,
So that of thilke lusty youthe
Al prively betwen hem tweie
The ferste flour he tok aweie.
For he so faire tho behihte
That evere, whi he live mihte,
He scholde hire take for his wif,
And as his oghne hertes lif

¹⁴³ 'protinus Aegides rapta Minoide Diam / vela dedit', *Metamorphoses*, VIII.174-5.

¹⁴⁴ *Ovide moralisé*, VIII.1327-8.

He scholde hire love and trouthe bere;
 And sche, which mihte nocht forbere,
 So sore loveth him ayein,
 That what as evere he wolde sein
 With al hire herte sche believeth.
 And thus his pourpos he achieveth
 (CA, V.5380-93)

As in Chaucer and the *Ovide moralisé* the marriage oath left unmentioned by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses* becomes central. The context and origin of the oath are, however, quite different. In both Chaucer and the *Ovide moralisé*, the oath is Ariadne's idea; Theseus swears in order to make sure that she will help him survive the Labyrinth. Nor is seduction Theseus' real motive for swearing fidelity. In both texts, winning Ariadne's love happens to be the only means through which Theseus can ensure his survival; when she produces the idea of betrothal he readily swears by all he holds dear. Though Chaucer strengthens the negative implications of the situation, he is largely in agreement with the French poem. In the *Confessio*, meanwhile, the initiative is entirely with Theseus, and his sole 'pourpos' is seduction. The changed context of the oath makes the motivation clear: no longer in fear of his life, Gower's Theseus has no other end than bedding his Cretan saviour.

Similarly, while Chaucer moves away from the *Ovide moralisé* by implying that Theseus has sex with Ariadne, he does not make it anywhere near as explicit as Gower. Whatever our standard assumptions about the relative reticence of the two poets may be, Chaucer's '[Theseus] in his armes hath this Adryane' (*LGW*, 2158) sounds coy against Gower's double statement of abandonment and deflowering. Gower is also more careful to draw out the causal sequence: the reader cannot miss the link between what Theseus says and Ariadne abandoning herself to him.

It is notable, however, that Gower, like the *Ovide moralisé*, is content to report the oath. This is part and parcel of the Confessor's narrative voice – he prefers reported to direct speech – but it is perhaps also symptomatic of the narrower range of intertexts that Gower is drawing on here. Chaucer takes the idea of the dialogue from the *Ovide moralisé*, but the rhetoric of love-declaration that he inserts is taken from Boccaccio. Gower has no such recourse; Theseus' oath remains reported, as in the *Ovide moralisé*. If Gower is drawing on and elaborating the French poem, he does not see fit to put words into the treacherous lover's mouth by bringing heterogeneous materials to bear on the episode as Chaucer does.

Up to this point the image of Gower's relationship with Ovidian texts remains vague. The 'Legend of Ariadne' is larded with details, echoes and reconfigurations of Ovidian texts that show Chaucer either recalling those texts with impressive accuracy, or actually working with them open on his table. Gower's telling of the same tale, meanwhile, gives almost none of its intertexts away until Ariadne has been abandoned. Then *Heroides* X becomes audible. In an elegant reversal of Ovid's 'I have found every kind of wild beast meeker than you', the Confessor pronounces Theseus 'more than the beste unkinde' (*Confessio*, V.5424).¹⁴⁵ Though it is the first moment in which Gower actually echoes Ovid, the line forms a set of puns that activate meanings beyond its original. The first is the play created by using *kind* to translate *mitis* ('meek/mild'); the reader can hardly miss the reminder of the Confessor's theme of 'unkindeschipe'. Simultaneously, the use of 'beste', singular, is a reminder of the Minotaur's place in the story. The sole beast actually present in the tale, it is monstrously 'unkind' in both senses of the word: it is as unnatural as it is

¹⁴⁵ 'Mitius inveni quam te genus omne ferarum', *Heroides*, X.1.

cruel. It is, though, 'kinder' than Theseus in that it, unlike him, is kin to Ariadne. The two changes insert into the line the kinship recognised by Ariadne elsewhere in *Heroides* X, and by Phaedra in *Heroides* IV when they refer to the Minotaur as their brother.¹⁴⁶ Through its puns, Gower's reconfiguration of the line accesses a level of Ovidian intertextuality more deeply embedded in the Roman poet's work than that which would have been given by a more direct translation. Yet the line is also a key point of intratextual reference: the beast/man comparison recalls the preceding tale of Adrian and Bardus, where Adrian's unkindness is compared unfavourably with the kindness displayed by an ape and a snake. Both animals handsomely repay Bardus for saving their lives, while Adrian refuses to render up his promised reward. The amazed peasant has 'gret wonder in his wit / Hou that the beste him hath aquit, / Wher that the mannes Sone hath failed' (*Confessio*, V.5073-5). Theseus is, of course, less kind still than either Adrian or the beasts who shared his pit.

Heroides X continues to exert its influence over Gower as he permits himself the first direct speech of the tale. Standing alone on the shore, Ariadne has a seventeen-line speech of complaint against the departed Theseus (*Confessio*, V.5444-61). Superficially similar to the Latin text, and certainly inspired by it, the monologue in fact bears only a general resemblance to the letter itself. Rather than translating or paraphrasing Ovid, Gower has Ariadne reinforce the moral of her tale. Unlike the Ariadne of *Heroides* X, and unlike Chaucer's Ariadne, Gower's abandoned heroine is less emotional than she is analytical. The speech used as a vehicle for emotional distress in Ovid and Chaucer becomes a wounded but dispassionate dissection of the unfairness of the situation:

¹⁴⁶ *Heroides*, IV.115; X.74.

I wende I hadde his love boght
 And so deserved ate nede,
 Whan that he stod upon his drede,
 And ek the love he me behihte.
 [...]
 Bot after this whan it is couth
 And drawe into the worldes fame,
 It schal ben hindringe of his name:
 For wel he wot and so wot I,
 He yaf his trouthe bodily,
 That he myn honour scholde kepe.
 (*Confessio*, V.5448-61)

Ariadne is busy weighing her deserts, rather than bemoaning her lot. Though the surrounding details make it clear that Gower has *Heroides* X in mind here, the speech is much more informed by the immediate moral purpose of the tale as example.

Where Chaucer accesses the reader's sympathy through the vivid emotional plight of his Ariadne, Gower need only access their understanding. Where the *Heroides*-inspired speech acts as the emotional climax of Chaucer's telling of the tale, in Gower the *Heroides*-inspired speech takes a largely didactic turn. Only once Ariadne has done the maths does she react to her situation: 'with that word sche gan to wepe' (*Confessio*, V.5462). In Ovid, merely finding Theseus gone from her bed is enough to cause Ariadne to tear out her own hair; in Gower, Ariadne does the same, but only after the speech (*Confessio*, V.5464).¹⁴⁷ In Ovid, Ariadne's emotional reaction is enough to cloud almost all reason; she merely wants her beloved to return, even if he should do so after her death. In Gower, moral reason permits the reaction; it is not Theseus' absence that wounds her, but his ingratitude. Gower's Ariadne, unlike Chaucer's, is not about to kiss the Athenian's footprints on the beach.

¹⁴⁷ *Heroides*, X.16.

III. Conclusion

There are obvious parallels between Boccaccio's approach to poetic mythography and what Chaucer and Gower do to Theseus and Ariadne. Like Boccaccio, they are compiling and excluding; repeating and appropriating; following and transforming.

Both poets must appeal to at least two texts to reconstruct a full and coherent narrative from Ovid's own fragmentary and allusive versions, and they each go further in their uses of commentary or synthetic texts like the *Ovide moralisé* and Ceffi's *Pistole*.

Like Boccaccio, they have no hesitation about reshaping their source materials into a form that best suits their purpose. This sense of reshaping and reappropriating, filling in blanks, elaborating and modernising is, however, built into the Ovid they knew.

Ovid is, in this sense, an authority in a different way to how he is often construed. To look at Chaucer and Gower's Ovidian performances of Theseus and Ariadne in this somewhat laborious way is to see how Ovid authorised not just the narrative details of their accounts, but also the freedom that each poet displays in interpreting the myth. Looked at under a magnifying glass, Chaucer and Gower's versions of the tale show them treating 'Ovid' as a platform for the same kind of appropriative poetic mythography that Boccaccio pursued in the *Teseida*. It is clear from the sources visible in their writing that they had each read a variety of Ovidian texts, at various degrees of remove from Ovid himself; and that, taken together, those texts authorised poetic reappropriation of the ancient myths as much as they authorised particular accounts of those myths. The flexible and appropriative poetic mythography pursued by Chaucer and Gower, rather than being at odds with the traditions of glossing, allegorising and interpreting that construed Ovid for the middle

ages, is a natural development of them. In taking Ovid as the ultimate authority on mythology, his commentators, interpreters and translators had expanded and multiplied his authority into a manifold and plural construction that authorised, in every genre of mythography, variation as much as consistency. To attempt to read Ovid 'straight' as a source for mythographical information was to recognise that even the *Metamorphoses*, the Bible of the pagans, is allusive, incomplete; a text that required mythographical glossing through Ovid's other poems, and through more distant sources. To come into contact with a manuscript that brought such sources together was to trace variations within Ovid's own *oeuvre*, between him and other classical authors, and between his commentators; it was to see the plural and open nature of mythology played out on the manuscript page.

Whether or not Chaucer and Gower saw or owned such compilatory manuscripts, it is clear they come into contact with Ovid in a number of different forms, and were aware of the kinds of possibility the Roman poet represented. Further, through his uptake into vernacular texts known to the two poets, Ovid had proven his adaptability to different genres and settings: by the time of his arrival in fourteenth-century England, he was as much medieval, French and Italian as he was Roman, even if he remained pagan. He was, himself, as textually contingent as the myths he rewrote.

Taken as such, the metaphor of the source is less appropriate for the Ovid of the middle ages than the metaphor of the delta: 'Ovid' is a site for the confluence and splitting, mingling and separation of different mythographical streams, and was taken as such by readers like Chaucer and Gower. If 'Ovidian sourcing' represents a narrower field of mythographical suspension and openness than mythology taken in

the abstract, it yet remains, as Chaucer and Gower demonstrate, a privileged site of possibility and variation.

THREE

A Faulty Piece: the Collapse of Mythographical Genres in the *Fall of Princes*

*Whoever thinks a faultless Piece to see,
Thinks what ne'er was, nor is, nor e'er shall be*
Alexander Pope

The issues raised by mythographical genre, freedom and the use of sources come together with some complexity in John Lydgate's writing of Theseus in the *Fall of Princes* (1431-1439). Just as Boccaccio's writing of Theseus in the *Genealogie* presents a negative image of the freedom and flexibility open to him in the *Teseida* and *De casibus*, so does the *Fall of Princes* present a negative image of the freedom and flexibility seen in the Ovidian 'Legend of Ariadne' and *Confessio amantis*. But where the *Genealogie* largely diffuses the difficulties it faces by taking an eclectic and flexible approach within its systematising framework, the *Fall's* writing of Theseus does not: it is marked by inconsistencies, contradictions and errors. Those faults, however, contain important information about the nature of mythography as a privileged site of intertextual entanglements, and about the modes of criticism that can be employed to understand writers' uses of mythology. When read through and across the poem's intertexts the problems that mark the *Fall's* account of Theseus' life provide evidence about the kind of exclusionary and appropriative procedures that need to be employed for mythology to bear and be imbued with meaning – and, further, about the kinds of procedures that should be employed to understand those meanings.

Though Pope's *Essay on Criticism* suggests that a poem's 'faults' may be beside the point, here they provide a means of analysing how Lydgate's writing of

Theseus functions (or fails to function) as an example of late-medieval mythographical writing. This focus on wrongness or faultiness is not intended to retread the accusations of poetic incompetence or dullness that have long been a central theme of Lydgate criticism.¹ Recognising and analysing the faults in Lydgate's writing of Theseus need not lead back to the critical position that largely dismissed Lydgate from critical enquiry until the second half of the twentieth century. Instead, the problems and inconsistencies of the *Fall's* Theseus are used here as a means of identifying the interactions between the literary, scholarly and political spheres that governed the poem's production and Lydgate's writing of myth within it. Where the two preceding chapters investigated the processes by which Boccaccio, Chaucer and Gower exerted control over and reappropriated their sources, this chapter takes the opposite approach, investigating the failures of control that mark Lydgate's writing of Theseus, and the faults generated by such failures. Through these faults, the *Fall's* intertextual background and the forces that shape and inform its presentation of the Thesean myths become visible, providing evidence of the ways in which mythographical discourses were received and transmuted in fifteenth-century England.

This process of intertextual tracking follows on from the source-based approach of the preceding chapter, but differs in two ways. The first of these involves a reconsideration of what is meant by terms like source, influence, authority and intertext. Where Chaucer and Gower's writing of Theseus was analysed through its textual sources and appeals to authority, this chapter approaches Lydgate's writing of the hero through a definition of 'intertext' that opens the *Fall* up to other kinds of

¹ For an overview of the critical heritage see Nigel Mortimer, *John Lydgate's Fall of Princes: Narrative Tragedy in its Literary and Political Contexts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 1–25.

formative influence, and which broadens the role of ‘authority’ in the writing process. In this sense, drawing on the outline of intertextuality originally articulated by Julia Kristeva in 1968, the term expands to cover what she terms ‘the whole social set’ of influences on a given text.² Tracing the intertexts of the *Fall*’s Thesean sections therefore involves resituating the poem and its author within the historically specific sphere of competing literary, discursive, political and economic demands that informed their development and production. The effects of these demands and the authorities that attach to them on the poem’s presentation of Theseus become a means of understanding how Lydgate encountered mythology as a loaded cultural phenomenon, entangled with associations and obligations quite different to the intentionalist notion of ‘textual agendas’ used in the first two chapters. Part and parcel of this reconsideration of intertextuality is a reversal of the analytical basis on which Chaucer and Gower’s Theseuses were considered. Where Chapter Two used sources as a means of tracing the control the two poets exerted over the myth and the ways in which they used and reconfigured Ovidian authority in their writing of Theseus, this chapter investigates the control exerted on Lydgate by his intertexts and by the different kinds of authority involved in his writing of Theseus. Through this, it analyses not the freedom associated with mythography, but its opposite.

Accordingly the chapter falls into four sections: the first outlines the context of the *Fall of Princes* by relating it to its patron, Humphrey Duke of Gloucester, and its primary source, the *Des cas des nobles hommes et femmes*, a free French translation of the *De casibus virorum illustrium*. The second section introduces the conceptual outline of intertextuality that will be used, before the third outlines the

² See ‘Problèmes de la Structuration du Texte’, in *Théorie d’ensemble*, Collection Tel Quel (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1968), 297–315. For further details see section II, below.

intertexts that exert pressure on Lydgate's writing of Theseus; the fourth and final section turns to the interactions of those texts in the *Fall* itself.

I. One man, four masters: the *Fall* in context

The prologue to the *Fall of Princes* situates Lydgate between four different figures of authority, taken in the widest sense of the word. The first rubric names two: 'Bochas' (Boccaccio), and that 'worthi prynce Humfrey duk of Gloucestre', at whose 'commaundment' Lydgate is working.³ As Lydgate's 'auctour' and patron respectively, Boccaccio and Humphrey are the two figures to whom, according to his own account, he most owes fealty. Towards the end of the prologue they are bound up together as the twin authorities that preside over the poem:

This book [I] translate [Humphrey] to do pleasance,
[...]

And with support off his magnificence,
Vndir the wyngis off his correccioun,
Thouh that I haue lak of eloquence,
I shal proceed in this translacioun,
Fro me auoidyng al presumpcioun,
Lowli submytting eueri hour & space
Mi reud language to my lordis grace.

And as I haue o thyng weel in mynde,
He bad me I sholde in especiall,
Folwyng myn auctour, writen as I fynde,
And for no fauour be nat parciall –
[...]
But the sentence of myn auctour saue.

(*Fall*, I.433-48)

³ All references are to the text given in *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen, 4 vols. (London: Published for the Early English Text Society by H. Milford, Oxford University Press, 1924). Hereafter, *Fall*.

The image of Lydgate submitting his ‘reud language’ to Humphrey’s ‘correccioun’ and ‘grace’ is a powerful, potentially exaggerated, portrait of the poet-patron relationship, which requires some scrutiny. As will be seen, Humphrey’s role in shaping the *Fall* was active and significant, in a way characterised by one critic as more closely resembling a collaborator’s input than a patron’s.⁴ Suggestive of Humphrey’s influence over the poem, the image Lydgate gives of him as a diligent scholar, ‘Off hih letrure [*sic*]’ correcting and controlling the text (*Fall*, I.384) expands the patron’s economic and political authority into the literary and intellectual sphere to which Boccaccio, as Lydgate’s ‘auctour’, belongs.

If the idea of a translator saving the ‘sentence’ of his ‘auctour’ seems uncontroversial by comparison to the claims for Humphrey’s input, it too requires scrutiny. Lydgate is open about working not from the *De casibus* itself, but a French intermediary, named in the first stanza of the prologue as the work of ‘Laurence’ (*Fall*, I.4). The Laurence in question is the most important of Boccaccio’s French translators, Laurent de Premierfait (1365-1418), who produced two versions of the *De casibus* (in 1400 and 1409), along with a version of the *Decameron* (1411-14) and numerous other translations of contemporary and classical texts.⁵ It is his 1409 translation, the *Des cas des nobles hommes et femmes* (hereafter, *Nobles hommes*), that Lydgate is following – as the rest of the prologue makes clear. Paraphrasing and reporting what Laurent ‘In his prologe [...] doth express’, Lydgate gives an important

⁴ Jennifer Summit, *Memory’s Library: Medieval Books in Early Modern England* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 29.

⁵ For a full biography of Laurent, see R.C. Famiglietti, ‘Laurent de Premierfait: the career of a humanist in early fifteenth-century Paris’, *Journal of Medieval History* 9, no. 1 (March 1983): 28. For a brief conspectus of his works and numbers of surviving manuscripts, see Mortimer, *Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, 30–31. The most recent study (with a focus on manuscript culture and illumination) is Anne Hedeman’s *Translating the Past: Laurent de Premierfait and Boccaccio’s De casibus virorum illustrium* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2008).

hint of the impact that Laurent's work had on him. As the views on translation and the translator's licence 'to-amenden, correcten and declare' (*Fall*, I.86) that Lydgate takes from Laurent suggest, the *Nobles hommes* is a far from literal translation, and its mediation of the Latin text leaves the identity of Lydgate's 'auctour' ambiguous in a way that has important consequences for the *Fall*. As will be seen in the analysis of the *Nobles hommes* below, the ways in which Laurent impinges upon the *De casibus* mean that the status of 'auctour' is not reserved for Boccaccio alone, but divided between him and his French translator.

The final figure of authority to enter the prologue is Chaucer. Searching for a suitable muse for his poem, and deciding that his subject is too 'compleynyng' (*Fall*, I.245) for the Greek muses, Lydgate turns to his 'maistir' Chaucer, 'of makyng souereyne', 'lodesterre' of the English tongue (*Fall*, I.245, 250, 252). Chaucer heads up and rounds off a list of other precedents for Lydgate's treatment of Fortune's vicissitudes (Seneca, Cicero, Petrarch and Boccaccio), and is dignified with more space and praise than any of them, taking up 90 lines (*Fall*, I.246-52, 273-357) to their shared 20 (*Fall* I.253-73). The eulogy of the man who was Lydgate's 'maistir in his daies' (*Fall*, I.351) both situates Lydgate as Chaucer's worthy successor in his treatment of 'Pitous tragedies' (*Fall*, I.350) and constructs Chaucer as the *Fall*'s fourth figure of authority.

Of these four 'authorities' it is Humphrey and Laurent who stand in most need of critical reconsideration. Though we are in possession of a wealth of evidence concerning Laurent's *Nobles hommes*, and though Lydgate is open about his use of it, little attention has been paid to the relationship between the two texts. Critics have found a number of ways of sweeping Laurent to one side in order to attend to Lydgate

himself, with a lack of interest in or attention to the French text seeming to be par for the course.⁶ The index to Larry Scanlon and James Simpson's 2006 collection of essays on Lydgate is educative in containing only four entries for 'Laurent' and one for the *Nobles hommes*.⁷ When critics do address the use of the *Nobles hommes*, they tend to do so only to set it aside and move on. Deemed of little interest on its own terms, it can be made to account for the 'disproportionate size and certain other shortcomings' of the English poem, but is otherwise of little interest.⁸ This is, to an extent, comprehensible. Firstly, Lydgate's approach to translation is so liberally paraphrastic as to place the *Fall* some distance from its immediate source and soften the necessity for critical reference to Laurent. Secondly, Laurent has a reputation for extreme prolixity and prosaicism which has dissuaded critics from spending much time on his work. Though his translations were widely disseminated in manuscript form and saw a number of printings in the sixteenth century, the *Nobles hommes* has been condemned as 'inept and colourless', filled with 'inexcusable verbiage and pedantic diction',⁹ while his 'remarkable capacity for making interpolations' only serves 'to impair the literary value of the original'.¹⁰ This has led to a concomitant assumption, partially reliant on critical dogma about the relative cultural cachet of Latin and vernacular texts in fifteenth-century England, that the *Nobles hommes* was not the desired object of Lydgate's efforts, but simply a convenient or necessary

⁶ This is a point also noted by Nigel Mortimer; see Mortimer, *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, 155, n.11.

⁷ See the index to Larry Scanlon and James Simpson, eds., *John Lydgate: Poetry, Culture, and Lancastrian England* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

⁸ Walter F. Schirmer, *John Lydgate: A Study in the Culture of the XVth Century*, trans. Ann Elizabeth Keep (London: Methuen, 1961), 209.

⁹ Florence A. Smith, 'Laurent de Premierfait's French version of the "De casibus virorum illustrium", with some notes in its influence in France', *Revue de littérature comparée* 14 (1934), 512-26: 515.

¹⁰ Bergen, in *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, 1:xvi.

proxy for the more desirable, more impressive Latin original.¹¹ There is, however, no evidence to support this, and even less to suggest that Lydgate was interested in ‘smoke-screening’ his vernacular source.¹²

Though there is little to be gained from attempting to rehabilitate Laurent, he is worthy of more attention than he has been given. Understanding the *Nobles hommes*’ presentation of the Theseus myths provides important evidence about some of the characteristics that mark Lydgate’s presentation of the same tales. Laurent’s extensive alterations of the *De casibus* not only affect Lydgate’s writing on the level of its content, but also have a range of formal and generic consequences that help form the *Fall*’s approach to the Theseus myths. Moving beyond that, re-examining the standard assumptions about the *Nobles hommes* allows a reconsideration of Humphrey’s role in the production of the poem and about the *Fall*’s cultural context more generally, which in turn allows a different light to be cast on Lydgate’s presentation of the Thesean myths.

Accustomed to reading between the lines of the praise directed at patrons by artists, critics have only occasionally taken Lydgate’s claim to be working under the wings of Humphrey’s correction seriously. Lydgate is, however, not the only one of Humphrey’s beneficiaries to make such claims; his are, in fact, rather less bold than those of the anonymous translator of Palladius’ *De rustica* (translated c.1440) who went so far as to write that the duke ‘taught [him] metur make’ and corrected his

¹¹ On the assumption that is the case in the *Fall*, see, Mortimer, *Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, 40. See also, Rosamund Allen’s proposal that Lydgate disguised his use of a vernacular source in the *Siege of Thebes*; ‘The Siege of Thebes: Lydgate’s Canterbury Tale’, in *Chaucer and Fifteenth-Century Poetry*, ed. Julia Boffey and Janet Cowen, King’s College London Medieval Studies V (London: Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 1991), 122-42: 126.

¹² Mortimer’s argument centres on the paucity of direct reference to Laurent in the body of the *Fall*; Mortimer, *Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, 40–1. There is, however, no reason to suppose that Lydgate had any intention of dissembling his use of Laurent, as discussed below.

verse as he received it.¹³ Whether or not the two poets' statements can be taken at face value, it is clear that Humphrey took a more active role than the average patron. The prologue to the *Fall*'s second book demonstrates that Lydgate was given clear structural specifications for the poem, with Humphrey directing him to 'sette a remedie' to every fall, 'With a lenvoie conueied be resoun' (*Fall*, II.144-50), while the body of the poem is sprinkled with evidence of Humphrey's demands that works from his library be incorporated into the text. Directions such as the command to include the tale of Lucrece, 'Folwying [*sic*] the traxis of Collucyus' (*Fall*, II.1009), demonstrate Humphrey's willingness to intervene in the poem and have Lydgate write it according to his desires. Where Lydgate had decided that 'It nedith nat rehearsyn the processe' of her death, since Chaucer had already written 'a legende soueraryne' recounting it (*Fall*, II.980), Humphrey both commanded him to include the story, and gave him a specific text to follow in doing so: Coluccio Salutati's *Declamatio Lucretie* (1367).¹⁴

The command to include the tale, and to do so from the *Declamatio Lucretie*, indicates the degree and kind of control Humphrey exerted over the *Fall*'s production. Though some historians have professed scepticism about the true depth of his scholarship and interest in learning, it is indisputable that Humphrey had collected at considerable expense of money and effort a library more impressive than any other in England, and that he was interested in using it to build and maintain his political

¹³ See Pr. 109 and I.1183-201 in *The Middle-English Translation of Palladius' De re rustica*, ed. Mark Harvey Liddell (Berlin: E. Ebering, 1896). See also, Daniel Wakelin, *Humanism, Reading, and English Literature, 1430-1530* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 43-56.

¹⁴ Humphrey's copy of the *Declamatio* is preserved in Chetham's Library, Manchester (MS. A.3.131).

prestige.¹⁵ Engaged in correspondence with a number of Italian scholars, and employing humanist secretaries whose knowledge and contacts could help him, he acquired copies of contemporary and classical texts that were otherwise almost impossible to find in England, and went so far as to offer his patronage to Italian scholars making new translations from Plato.¹⁶ The *Declamatio* was only one of many humanist works in a library stocked with books that ran the gamut of medieval and classical writing, from which Humphrey was able to make three large, impressive and public donations to Oxford in 1439, 1441, and 1444 – a total of 274 books all told.¹⁷ Whether or not he can be taken as the ‘father of English humanism’, or as, in David Rundle’s opinion, its ‘fairy godmother’, Humphrey was heavily invested in book collecting and patronage as a means of gaining political prestige, and the evidence for his close engagement with the production of the *Fall* is clear.¹⁸

It is, on this basis, strange that scholars have not addressed Humphrey’s choice of the *Nobles hommes*. That the Duke knew what he wanted and made sure that his poets provided it makes the use of the *Nobles hommes* look less like the mere accident of historical circumstance that it is often presumed to be. Procuring a copy of

¹⁵ E.g., Weiss, who suggests the possibility that Humphrey ‘preferred to look at rather than read his books’; Roberto Weiss, *Humanism in England During the Fifteenth Century*, ed. David Rundle and Anthony John Lappin, 4th ed., Medium Aevum E-texts 1 (Oxford: Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature, 2009), 108.

¹⁶ The translations in question are Piercandido Decembrio’s *Republic* (completed 1440) and Leonardo Bruni’s *Politics* (completed 1437). For the latter, see Alfonso Sammut, *Unfredo Duca di Gloucester e gli umanisti italiani*, Medioevo e umanesimo 41 (Padua: Antenore, 1980), 147–8; Weiss, *Humanism in England*, 76–7. Decembrio’s autograph copy of the first five books, sent to Humphrey in 1438, is British Library MS. Harley 1705. For transcriptions of the correspondence between Humphrey and Decembrio as well as Decembrio’s dedicatory epistles to Humphrey in the translation, see Sammut, *Unfredo*, 180–215. See also, Weiss, *Humanism in England*, 85ff. For a summary of rare and recently-discovered Latin texts in Humphrey’s possession, and a fuller list of translations from Greek authors, see *Ibid.*, 98–102.

¹⁷ For transcriptions of the university’s indentures for the donations see Sammut, *Unfredo*, 60–84.

¹⁸ See David Rundle, ‘Humanism before the Tudors: On Nobility and the Reception of the Studia Humanitatis in Fifteenth-Century England’, in *Reassessing Tudor Humanism*, ed. Jonathan Woolfson (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 22–43: 23.

the *De casibus* proper for Lydgate to translate would have presented Humphrey with little difficulty – if, that is, he did not already own one. We know for certain that he owned several of Boccaccio’s Latin works, including the *De casibus*, and that he also possessed a narrow selection of his vernacular writing in Latin and French translations,¹⁹ but the earliest record of Humphrey’s *De casibus* is the indenture for his 1443 donation to Oxford, four to five years after the *Fall*’s completion.²⁰ Whether or not Humphrey was already in possession of the *De casibus* when he commissioned the *Fall*, it would be (and for most critics has been) natural to assume that more cultural and political cachet would have attached to the Latin text. The openness with which Lydgate broadcasts his working from the *Nobles hommes* runs counter to such assumptions, especially as they interact with Humphrey’s public presentation as a man of letters. To be seen as the patron of an English poet newly translating an important Latin tract is one thing; to be seen as the patron of an English poet translating an already relatively well-known French text is another. For a figure often accused of adding to his own magnificence by trumpeting classical learning he did not necessarily have, it seems curious that Humphrey would allow Lydgate to be so explicit about his vernacular source unless he, and others, regarded that text as the equal – or even, better – of the Latin text; unless, that is, the *Nobles hommes* had qualities to recommend it that were not shared by the *De casibus* itself.

¹⁹ The sole representatives of Boccaccio’s vernacular works in Humphrey’s library appear to have been a Latin version of the *Corbaccio* by Antonio Beccaria (a later transcription of which survives in the Bodleian; M.S. Lat. misc. d. 34) and Laurent’s version of the *Decameron* (of which Humphrey’s copy survives in the BNF, [12421]); see Sammut, *Unfredo*, 22, 121.

²⁰ The *De casibus* MS was accompanied by one of the *De claris mulieribus* and two copies of the *Genealogie deorum gentilium*; see Mortimer, *Lydgate’s Fall of Princes*, 58; Sammut, *Unfredo*, 45.

It is beyond question that among Francophone readers like Humphrey, Laurent was the main conduit for Boccaccio's dissemination beyond Italy.²¹ From the number of contemporary references and surviving manuscripts (approximately 65), it is clear that the *Nobles hommes* was a popular text, and the provenance of its most impressively illuminated manuscripts suggests particular success among the nobility of France.²² Thanks to the existence of Laurent's own earlier version, it is also clear that the *Nobles hommes*' popularity was not simply due to its being in the vernacular: the earlier translation met no such success and survives in a mere seven manuscripts.²³ The survival of the earlier translation does, however, offer the opportunity to analyse the qualities that made Laurent's second attempt so popular.

The 1400 text is, as Laurent notes in his preface to the 1409 text, almost a word for word rendition of the Latin, with 'the sentences taken precisely and exactly from the author's own language'.²⁴ Highly Latinate, with a large number of calques and Latin idioms carried directly over into the French, the 1400 translation also shies away from unpacking or explaining any of the mythological allusions, patronyms and toponyms characteristic of Boccaccio's Latin. Very occasionally, Laurent ventures to add a little explanation, but such moments are brief and rare. Laurent discovered, however, that his potential readers were largely ill-equipped to deal with the text as he presented it, since 'the Latin books [...] written by philosophers, poets and historians well learned in all human knowledge are far beyond the understanding that mother

²¹ On the topic of Humphrey's languages, see Alessandra Petrina, *Cultural Politics in Fifteenth-Century England: The Case of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 264.

²² See Patricia M. Gathercole, 'The Manuscripts of Laurent de Premierfait's "Du cas des nobles" (Boccaccio's "De casibus virorum illustrium")', *Italica* 32, no. 1 (March 1955), 14-21: 14. The exact number is, however, open to question; see Mortimer, *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, 32, n.41.

²³ See Mortimer, *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, 30.

²⁴ 'ont este precisement et au iuste les sentences prinses du propre langage de l'acteur' *Nobles hommes*, sig. a2^v. Given the lack of a reliable modern edition, all references are taken from the text given in *Boccacce des nobles maleureux* (Paris, 1494).

nature commonly gives men'.²⁵ In other words, *ad verbum* translation solved only one problem of comprehensibility; it could not help readers as ignorant of history and culture as they were of Latin. Starting afresh, Laurent therefore decided to clarify the *De casibus* in more than linguistic terms:

conuient ce me semble que les livres latins en leurs translations
soyent muez et conuertuz en tel langage que les liseurs et escouteurs
diceulx puissent comprendre de la sentence sans trop grant et trop
long trauail de entendement ie doncques [...] ay nouuellement fait ce
present liure de boccace selon lentendement commun [...] affin que
de tant qu'il sera plus cler et plus ouuert de sentences et en parolles

it seems necessary to me that Latin books in translation should be
changed and converted into such language that the readers and
listeners can comprehend the sense without too great or long a
labour of understanding [...] I have therefore translated this book of
Boccaccio's anew, according to the common level of understanding
[...] so that it should be clearer and more open in sense and words.
(*Nobles hommes*, f.a2^v)²⁶

Clarifying his clarifications, Laurent gives a more detailed explanation of the process that Lydgate summarises as 'to-amenden, correcten and declare' (*Fall*, I.86), which accounts for many of his substantive departures from the Latin:

ay fait mettre en cler langage les sentences du livre et les hystoires
qui [...] sont si briefuement touchees quil nen mect fors seulement
les noms / ay fait assouir selon la verite des haulx hystoriens qui au
long les escriuient affin que le liure ait toutes ses parties et soit
complait en soy

I have put the sentences of the in book clear terms, and I have filled
out those histories that [...] are so briefly touched upon that only the
names are mentioned, according to the truth of the high historians
who wrote them out fully, so that the book should have all its parts
and be more complete in itself (*Nobles hommes*, f.a2^f)

²⁵ 'les liures latins [...] escriptz par les philosophes poetes et hystoriens bien enseignez en toutes sciences humaines sont moult loign de lentendement que dame nature donne communement aux hommes', *Nobles hommes*, sig. a2^v.

²⁶ Like its Middle English and Latin equivalents, the Middle French *sentence* covers a broad set of significations, ranging from the moral import of a given text to its semantic content; see the entry in the *Dictionnaire du Moyen Français* (DMF) at <http://www.atilf.fr/dmf>. Though Laurent's use of the term remains ambiguous, the pluralisation seems to be indicative of a bias toward the second meaning.

Laurent's transformation of Boccaccio's Latin into 'clear language', and his expansion of Boccaccio's text so that it may be 'more complete in itself', radically affect the 1409 translation. Laurent's linguistic clarifications result in habitual double translation of ambiguous or polysemous terms, along with an unpicking of syntax that considerably lengthens most sentences. At the same time, his devotion to putting down the whole 'truth, according to the high historians' leads to an almost compulsive tendency to provide the reader with as much information as possible.

Set against the exclusionary procedures that mark Boccaccio's moral mythography in the *De casibus*, Laurent's investment in 'completeness' leads to radical changes in the character of the 1409 text. So his readers will understand the full context of each story, Laurent refuses to allow Boccaccio's glancing details to survive as such. Where he finds an unexplained toponym or patronym, he sees the need to explain it, often in considerable detail, and whether or not he has already done so. Such additions mean that sentences quickly grow obscure by mere dint of length. In recognition of this, Laurent makes sure the reader can follow by introducing formulae for internal referencing that are largely absent from the 1400 text; the 1409 version is marked by persistent and repetitive multiplication of expressions such as 'the aforesaid' and 'of whom we have spoken'. Passages originally notable for their brevity become bloated versions of their former selves, and what were once allusive rhetorical flourishes are smothered in explanation.

The changes that occur can be seen most clearly in an example like the following. Bemoaning humanity's lack of obedience, Boccaccio exclaims,

O stolidi! An ut Chimeram liciam subigamus, ut Colcis aureum vellus eripiamus, ut Minotaurum agonibus superemus, aut quos Euristeus labores iniungebat Alcidi perficiamus, imperat Deus? Absit!

Fools! Does God order us to vanquish the Lycean Chimera, to steal the Golden Fleece from Colchis, to overcome the Minotaur in contest, or to accomplish the labours with which Eurystheus charged Alcides? Certainly not! (*De casibus*, I.ii)

In the 1400 version, Laurent adds in a certain amount of information; we are told the forms of the monsters and the location of the Golden Fleece, but no more. In all the passage becomes 87 words compared to the original 26.²⁷ The 1409 text expands to 200 words. We learn the forms of the monsters, their locations, the circumstances of their deaths, the names of their vanquishers and more. To quote only one sentence:

Dieux ne nous commande pas que nous desconfisions par luicte cel horrible monstre appelle Minotaurus, qui par moitie eut la figure d'omme et de toreau, lequel Minotaurus fut filz de Pasiphe femme du roy Minos, lequel monstre fut desconfit et tue par le vaillant chevalier Theseus moyonnant le conseil de Adriana fille du roy Minos et amye du dit Theseus

Nor does God command us to vanquish that horrible monster called Minotaurus by wrestling it, which had half the figure of a man and half of a bull, which Minotaurus was the son of Pasiphae, wife of king Minos, which monster was defeated and killed by the valiant knight Theseus, by means of the advice given to him by Adriana, daughter of Minos and beloved of the said Theseus (*Nobles hommes*, f.iii^v)

Here in a nutshell are all the characteristics of Laurent's book as a whole. With a particular focus on the genealogies and relationships of those involved, Laurent inserts the arguably salient facts regarding the Minotaur. At the same time, he feels the need to let the readers know exactly what we are dealing with in qualitative terms, inserting the stock epithets 'horrible monstre', 'vaillant chevalier'. The proper nouns pile up, and the referents of pronouns run the risk of becoming lost, requiring the

²⁷ Text of the 1400 translation taken from Giovanni Boccaccio, *De la ruyne des nobles hommes et femmes*, trans. Laurent de Premierfait (Bruges, 1476), 12.

referential formulae ‘lequel’, ‘du dit’.²⁸ And, having already added in similar amounts of information in the preceding sentences, Laurent is forced to repeat the translation of ‘An ut [...] imperat Deus’ that neatly bounds the Latin. The textual growth spirals outward, and it does so throughout the book.

The significance of this textual growth lies in how it alters not just the size of the *De casibus*, but also its character. Laurent receives the *De casibus* as a work of history in a more clear cut fashion than the treatise actually is. And as the prologue’s ‘according to the truth of the high historians’ suggests, Laurent is invested in an historiographical model that differs quite widely from Boccaccio’s construal of history and mythology as equally valid sources of *exempla*. Hence, though Laurent remains keen to preserve the book’s *sentences*, he focuses his attention on the expansion of the *De casibus*’ historical content:

la ou lacteur ne touche a plusieurs hystoires que deux ou trois parolles en brief / ledit translateur les a voulu descripre et mettre en forme *auctenticque* si distinctement et en si beau stile que facilement les lisans ou escutans qui les ignorent les pourront sans trop long trauail dentendement comprendre.

it is to be understood that where the author touches on several histories with only two or three brief words, the aforesaid translator wanted to describe them, and to put them in their *authentic* form, so distinctly and in such beautiful style that the readers or listeners who do not know them can understand them without too long a labour of comprehension (*Nobles hommes*, sig.a6^v; my emphasis)

Under the influence of Laurent’s conception of historical authenticity, the treatise no longer has much right either to selectivity or obscurity. Though the Middle French ‘auctenticque’ is etymologically balanced between personal authority and impersonal authenticity, Laurent decisively tilts it toward the impersonal. Boccaccio’s authority

²⁸ Such formulae are also evidently inserted to aid those absorbing the text aurally rather than visually: Laurent’s references to listeners as well as readers suggest that he is writing so as to facilitate comprehension for those hearing the text read aloud; who cannot simply glance back and remind themselves of the referent at a given point.

as writer makes way for what is for Laurent the more important historiographical ideal of factual authenticity, licensing Laurent to add any information he considers necessary.

Since the manner in which Boccaccio restricts the flow of information is vital to the structuring of the *De casibus*, Laurent's additions have a number of important consequences. On the level of the individual falls, the factual insertions frequently cloud Boccaccio's original point; where Boccaccio is unafraid to suppress biographical details which would either distract from or contradict the specific moral lesson he is conveying, Laurent refuses to distort or omit facts as far as he can establish them. On another level, the sense of duty to history undoes the modal cycling that structures the *De casibus*' alternation between the chapters of frame narrative, the falls, and Boccaccio's moral addresses to the reader. Where Boccaccio excludes informative, factual digression from the frame narrative and moralising addresses, Laurent takes every opportunity add and expand, inserting extra information wherever possible.

In combination with the stylistic flattening caused by Laurence's desire to be linguistically clear, that flood of information almost entirely effaces the differentiations that originally marked the *De casibus*' three modes of writing. The *Nobles hommes*, in contrast to the Latin text, becomes a solid textual block in which attention to fact becomes the most striking stylistic element. Further, that attention to fact distorts the mythographical genre of the original. Though history and mythology's relevance to moral learning still holds an important place in the *Nobles hommes*, Laurent's attempts to make the book 'complete in itself' tilt it towards something more closely resembling systematising mythography: Laurent is focused,

as far as he can be within the limits of faithfulness he imposes on himself, on turning the *De casibus* into an historical reference book.

That split in mythographical genre is at the root of an internal contradiction, which bears direct relevance to Lydgate's writing of the *Fall*. In line with Laurent's investment in 'authentic' history, his mythographical additions show a marked preference for rationalised, historically viable accounts of the myths. He does not, however, alter or efface any of the supernatural elements already present in the *De casibus*. As a result, the *Nobles hommes* contradictorily alternates between the historical and the fabulous. That contradiction is deepened by Laurent's refusal to signal his additions in any way. Prizing factual completeness as an objective good, he sees no need to alert the reader to his interventions, and they are silently integrated into a text that, beyond its preface, makes no mention of or reference to its translator.²⁹ It is, incidentally, this absence, rather than any smoke-screening on Lydgate's part, that explains the paucity of reference to Laurent in the *Fall*. When Lydgate refers to his 'auctour' he is in no position to be aware that the *Nobles hommes* is as much Laurent's book as Boccaccio's.

Though they destroy much of what is characteristic about the *De casibus*, the differences between the *Nobles hommes* and its original are concordant with what we know about Humphrey from his interventions in the *Fall*. Though the *Nobles hommes* looks, from a modern point of view, like the lesser text, it is, in real terms, a greater text: longer, more compendious, and much more informative than the *De casibus*. Set against what we know of Humphrey's character and interests, and against the

²⁹ A silence carried over in the rubrics in manuscript and printed editions alike, which refer to Boccaccio, but not to Laurent; for a representative fifteenth-century manuscript, see Bodleian MS. Bodl. 265.

evidence of his additive interventions in the *Fall*, the qualities that mark the *Nobles hommes* seem likely to have worked in its favour. They also, however, left deep impressions on the writing of the *Fall*.

What arises from this brief sketch of the *Fall*'s immediate context is an image of Lydgate working under at least four different influences. Appealing to Humphrey as patron, Chaucer as master, and Boccaccio as 'auctour', Lydgate is consciously negotiating between three authorities; and, through Laurent's alteration of the *Decasibus*, he is unconsciously reacting to a fourth. As a result, the structure, form, genre and matter of the *Fall* end up being dictated less by Lydgate's own textual agenda or compositional strategies than by the demands and pressure placed upon him. In the context of the limited space between these authorities, Lydgate's writing of Theseus in the *Fall* is formed and deformed by the complex, and often non-harmonious, interactions between the pressures they exert.

II. Textual Correctness: taking intertextuality from Kristeva to Lydgate

Context is not necessarily the most helpful term that we could use in conceptualising the space within which Lydgate produces the *Fall of Princes*, and the ways in which his writing of Theseus comes about. Superficially, the senses of authority invoked here are, along with their concomitant demands, different in kind; but through their interaction in the text of the *Fall*, they can each be treated as intertexts. The use of this short conceptual leap lies in what, through it, the *Fall*'s Thesean sections can tell us about mythography as a privileged site for intertextuality in a sense that goes beyond

allusion or reference, and which also goes beyond the boundaries of what would traditionally be defined as a ‘text’.

Though in critical discourse ‘intertextuality’ is generally limited within those precise boundaries, the original articulation of the term, put forward by Julia Kristeva in 1968, stakes out a field of reference which is broader and which has deeper implications for understanding the production of texts than the standard critical usage would suggest.³⁰ Eagerly seized upon by a critical community who took it to name allusion and source study, however, Kristeva’s *intertextualité* was quickly voided of its technical relation to the set of processes and relationships that Kristeva intended it to denote. This emptying-out of specificity is comprehensible, given the gap between the term’s superficially self-evident meaning and the technical complexities of Kristeva’s first article on the topic – which has yet to be published in an English translation.³¹ The distance between Kristeva’s definition and how intertextuality came to be understood after its rapid uptake across the academy can be seen in Kristeva’s own quick surrender of intertextuality to the ‘banal sense of source study’ and her turn to other ways of expressing the processes in question.³²

Kristeva’s original formulation comes into play here not, however, as part of an attempt to re-anchor intertextuality to its point of origin, but as a means of identifying and analysing the processes at work in the *Fall*’s Thesean sections.

Intertextuality’s origin lies in the productive analogy that Kristeva sees between the

³⁰ For the French text, see Kristeva, ‘Problèmes’. A revised and simplified version of the essay (re-titled ‘Le texte clos’) is printed in Julia Kristeva, *Séméiôtiké: Recherches pour une sémanalyse*, Points (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1969). This later version has been translated into English, under the title ‘The Bounded Text’; see Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora and Alice Jardine (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981).

³¹ The grittiest theoretical details of the original essay are excised from ‘Le texte clos’, and hence also from ‘The Bounded Text’.

³² Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1974), 59.

processes of textual production analysed by literary scholars and the processes of sentence or phrase production analysed by linguisticians. Considering texts as analogous to sense-units in speech permits the insight that the production of texts is also governed by structural rules: just as sense-units being produced in speech are assessed in regard to structural rules which define them as valid or non-valid (correct or incorrect), so too are texts. In sense-unit formation these rules are, of course, known by the general term ‘grammar’; there is no ready equivalent term for the analogous rules in text-formation, but they are, nevertheless, present. The analogy is strengthened further by Kristeva’s appeal to the generative grammar put forward by Noam Chomsky. Generative grammar takes into account the manner in which speakers, rather than consciously using rules of grammar, use a corpus of valid utterances known to them in order to generate rules governing and permitting the production of their own, new, ‘grammatical’ utterances. Under this definition grammar is not prescriptive, but transformational or generative. As Chomsky puts it, grammar ‘project[s] the finite and somewhat accidental corpus of observed utterances to a set (presumably infinite) of grammatical utterances’.³³ It is key to Chomsky’s model that grammar is a structural phenomenon, and that, ‘grammatical’ cannot be identified with either ‘meaningful’ or ‘significant’.³⁴ The famous example he uses is that of the two sentences, ‘Colourless green ideas sleep furiously’ and ‘Furiously sleep ideas green colourless’; neither makes semantic sense, but the former can be recognised as correct in a way in which the other is not: it is ‘grammatical’.³⁵ The axiomatic grounds of Chomsky’s investigation are, therefore, that grammar is

³³ Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures* (The Hague: Mouton, 1957), 15.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

independent of semantic content; grammar is continuously generated rather than given.

This conception of grammar feeds directly into Kristeva's approach to texts during the late 1960s. Like Chomsky she is concerned not with content, but structure, and with the generative nature of rules governing the way in which a text is produced by reference to other texts and discourses. Just as a speaker uses a grammar drawn from a corpus of phrases known to be grammatical in order to produce new grammatically correct phrases, the author of a new text projects rules of what one might call 'textual correctness' from a corpus of available texts and constructs his text accordingly. That construction of rules is not deliberate in the sense in which, for instance, one might enter into deliberation on the definition of 'pastoral', instead it is an inevitable and largely unconscious act born out of active participation in a corpus of known texts, each of which is an object lesson in 'textual correctness'. 'Text' is, however, for Kristeva, a term that can apply equally to written and unwritten forms of communication, leaving room in the intertextual corpus for the social text, or texts, within which the life of the author is implicated.³⁶ As Kristeva articulates it, the notion of intertextuality arises from the conclusion that any given author is transforming such texts into his own:

the different sequences (or codes) of a precise textual structure [...] are] so many 'transforms' of sequences (or codes) taken from other texts. Thus the structure of the fifteenth-century French novel can be considered as the result of the transformation of several other codes: scholasticism, courtly poetry, the oral literature of town-life (hawkers' cries), carnival. The transformational method leads us, then, to situate the literary structure in the whole social set,

³⁶ For a lucid discussion of the expansion of 'text' beyond its traditional bounds, see Fredric Jameson, "Après the Avant Garde." Review of *Histoire de "Tel Quel", 1960-82*, by Philippe Forest, *The Time of Theory: A History of "Tel Quel" (1960-83)*, by Patrick Ffrench and *The Making of an Avant Garde: "Tel Quel"*, by Niilo Kauppi', *London Review of Books* 18, no. 24 (12 December 1996), 5-7: 6.

considered as a textual set. We will call this textual interaction, which is produced within a single text, *intertextuality*.³⁷

Intertextuality is the socio-textual interaction that is always present, coded into an individual text by its necessarily transformational relationship to a corpus of precedent 'texts'. In writing a text, a writer is unconsciously using the 'whole social set' of texts to project a 'grammar' which governs the production of his text. As a result, intertextuality exists with or without the knowledge of the author and beyond the bounds of their intention. In this sense it is closer to influence than allusion or reference, but seeks to be a more comprehensive and abstract descriptor of text-production than either influence or allusion. The formulation 'beyond the bounds of intention' is, however, exact in that intertextuality exceeds intention without excluding it: it incorporates influence and allusion within a concept broader than either of those ideas.

Problematically, however, Kristeva's definition is neither entirely clear nor entirely consistent. Intertextuality is, on one hand, said to be expressed within the text, while on the other, it is said to precede the text. It is unclear from Kristeva's formulation whether intertextuality belongs to what generative grammarians would term the level of competence (i.e. preceding the text), or to performance (the text). Rephrasing the competence/performance distinction as that between *genotext*, ('the level at which the text is thought, transformed, produced, generated'), and *phenotext*, ('the level of the accomplished text, of the textual phenomenon'), Kristeva places

³⁷ 'les différentes séquences (ou codes) d'une structure textuelle précise [...] sont] autant de 'transforms' de séquences (de codes) prises à d'autres textes. Ainsi la structure du roman français au XVe siècle peut être considérée comme le résultat d'une transformation de plusieurs autres codes: la scolastique, la poésie courtoise, la littérature orale (publicitaire) de la ville, le carnaval. La méthode transformationnelle nous mène donc à situer la structure littéraire dans l'ensemble social considéré comme un ensemble textuel. Nous appellerons *intertextualité* cette interaction textuelle qui se produit à l'intérieur d'un seul texte', Kristeva, 'Problèmes', 311.

intertextuality on the level of the genotext.³⁸ As such it is only partially expressed in the phenotext, ‘the residue into which the process of production topples, and which is always *less* than the process of transformation anterior to the product’.³⁹ The main phenomena that betray the role of intertextuality in forming the phenotext are what Kristeva refers to as ‘plagiaristic citations’, references or allusions.⁴⁰ These leave intertextuality ambiguously split between preceding the text and flowering within the text. And since citational efflorescences of intertextuality within a given text take place at the level of content rather than structure, they undo the axiomatic divide between the two that Kristeva takes from Chomsky’s division between grammar and semantics. The importance of that problem seems amply illustrated by the fact that it is precisely reference, allusion and sourcing that have come to define intertextuality as it is commonly understood. The abstract notion of an intertextuality that is continuously present, and therefore not conspicuous, is occluded by concrete instances of intertextual interaction that are only intermittently present but immediately conspicuous.

In the case of the *Fall*’s Thesean sections both the content-centred notion of intertextuality and the structural notion of intertextuality come into play. Kristeva’s articulation of intertextuality becomes useful for analysing the *Fall*’s writing of Theseus when reinserted into the idea of ‘textual correctness’ to which intertextuality owes its origin. The *Fall*’s Thesean sections can be analysed through the pressures exerted upon them by competing notions of correctness, certain of which govern the

³⁸ ‘le niveau où le texte est pensé, transformé, produit, généré’; ‘le niveau du texte accompli, du phénomène textuel’, Ibid., 309.

³⁹ ‘ce résidu dans lequel bascule le processus de production et qui est toujours *moins* que le processus de transformation antérieur au produit’, Ibid., 309.

⁴⁰ ‘citations plagiats’, Ibid., 309.

structure and form of his account of the myths, and certain of which govern the content of account. These formal and content correctnesses, stemming from Lydgate's interactions with his intertexts, become, in this model, as responsible for the deformation of his Thesean tales as they are for their formation.

III. Theseus' Intertexts

The four intertexts construed as authorities in the prologue to Book I are only the most prominent of a set of intertexts whose influences come into play in the Thesean sections of the *Fall*. The challenge of laying out the interactions between the intertexts which affect Lydgate's writing of Theseus is considerable, because, as the complexities of Kristeva's article suggest, such interactions tend to be compound, reciprocal and dynamic; and they exceed the actual text that bears their traces. Before moving on to the close readings designed to demonstrate the complexities of those interactions, it will be useful to have some sense of the intertexts at play in the Thesean sections of the poem, along with the forces and sequences of association that draw them into alignment as an intertextual set.

In a schema that should be understood as provisional, Lydgate's intertexts can be outlined in ranks, constituted according to the order in which they enter the intertextual set and affect the production of the *Fall*. The first rank of intertexts affecting the *Fall* is formed by Humphrey's commission and the *Nobles hommes*. Humphrey's commission, in its primary aspect, acts to define the primary notion of content correctness: the duke specifically commissioned a translation of the *Nobles hommes* rather than any other text. It can also be inferred from the evidence of

interventions like the reinsertion of Lucretia, that Humphrey's laying down of content demands went further on occasion: he wanted his poet to surpass the completism of the *Nobles hommes* by incorporating extra materials and by adding moralising sections in a manner not dissimilar to the *Ovide moralisé*, but in envoy form (*Fall*, II.144-50).⁴¹ In the envoys, Humphrey's content specifications meet his structural (formal and generic) specifications: the regular cycling between what Lydgate takes to be 'tragedies' and the moralising envoys is a change in structure from the *Nobles hommes*, as is the command to render the prose treatise in verse.

Through Humphrey, the *Nobles hommes* becomes the *Fall*'s primary source of content-correctness, but it also carries structural correctnesses, the most striking of which are historicisation and completism. The latter of these is in its abstract aspect a structural notion, and becomes a powerful imperative in Lydgate's poem. Along with Humphrey's interest in having Lydgate incorporate extra material, the *Nobles hommes*' investment in authenticity and completeness leads, at times, to Lydgate going beyond his immediate source, and incorporating new material, at the expense of the original structure of the text. Similarly, the *Nobles hommes*' historicising bent defines certain content-correctnesses, but interacts with other intertexts to complicate Lydgate's inference of both content and formal correctnesses.

The degree to which these interactions affect the poem can be seen in the interaction between the completist structural imperative drawn from the *Nobles hommes*, and the formal specifications given by Humphrey. The particular way in which Lydgate adds to the *Nobles hommes* shows the French text's drive to

⁴¹ Lydgate's use of the term 'remedie' for the envoys also suggests a kinship to Petrarch's *De remediis utriusque fortunae*, which he names in the prologue to Book I as 'a book [...] / Off too Fortunys' (*Fall*, I.257-9).

completism carried over, but altered through contact with the verse texts drawn into the intertextual set by Humphrey's commission. Where the French text's mythographical insertions are historicised, the poetic texts of which Lydgate is aware tend to recount non-historicised versions. By drawing the *Fall* into alignment with such poetic intertexts, the formal correctness laid down by Humphrey reinforces the authority of their non-historicised accounts with regard to content-correctness. This relates directly to Chaucer's status as Lydgate's master. Writing in Chaucer's footsteps, Lydgate takes Chaucer as a key source of structural correctneses, which quickly bleed out into content-correctneses. As Chaucer (along with certain other poetic intertexts) preserves the supernatural content that Laurent effaces in his additions to the *De casibus*, the content trait of historicising mythological information comes to be associated with the formal trait of writing in prose.

In a process of association by contrast, the distinction between historicised and non-historicised accounts of myth maps onto the distinction between prose and poetry. Familiar with the verse accounts of Theseus' exploits in the *Legend of Good Women* and the 'Knight's Tale', Lydgate turns to Chaucer as an authority for content correctneses that appear congruent with the formal correctness laid down by Humphrey.⁴² Since Chaucer does not recount Euhemerist versions of the tales, the appeal entrenches the mapping of the prose/poetry distinction onto the history/fable distinction, encouraging Lydgate both to incorporate fabulous materials into the *Fall's* Thesean sections, and to do so while suppressing Laurent's Euhemerist versions.

⁴² Lydgate also evidently considered the 'Knight's Tale' to be a tragedy: the short poem 'Thoroughfare of Woe' ends with the statement that its refrain comes from one of Chaucer's 'tragedyes made ful yore ago'. The reference is to Egeus' statement at *KnT*, l.2847: 'This world nys but a thurghfare ful of wo'. See *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken (London: Published for the Early English Text Society by the Oxford University Press, 1962), 2:828. See also, Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 211–12.

Though it has often been assumed that Lydgate adds information into the *Fall* ‘in much the same manner as Laurent’, as Derek Pearsall puts it, this is not the case. In line with the intertextual pressures upon him in the *Fall*’s mythographical sections, Lydgate actually often expands *contra* Laurent, replacing historicised myths with non-historicised myths.⁴³

That prose-history, verse-fable mapping is not, however, entirely simple. Thanks to the complexities of the interactions between Lydgate’s authorities, Boccaccio, the fourth of the four main authorities named in the prologue, joins Chaucer in the second rank of intertexts. The prose-history, verse-fable distinctions are complicated by the profoundly uneven way in which the *De casibus* is subsumed into the larger body of the *Nobles hommes*. Since, as noted above, Laurent does not interfere with fabulous information already present in the Latin text, his rationalised additions give rise to a troubling heterogeneity that complicates the inference of textual correctnesses for the English translator. The contradictory mingling of the historicised and rational with the unaltered mentions of the supernatural preserved from the original text cause patterns of interference that radiate throughout the Thesean sections of the *Fall*. A similar process takes place with the dichotomy between Laurent’s completism and Boccaccio’s selectivity: beneath Laurent’s completism, Boccaccio’s selectivity can still occasionally be heard, emitting a contradictory whisper only partially muffled by the translator’s padding of fact. Unevenly subsuming the *De casibus*, the *Nobles hommes* broadcasts mixed messages of textual correctness. Intermittently, therefore, Lydgate can be seen responding to the Italian’s *sotto voce*, over and against the dominant French voice. As and when he sees

⁴³ Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 232.

fit, he shortens, excises and suppresses facts and details in a way which, again, shows his willingness to work against his main source.

The persistence of the *De casibus* within the *Nobles hommes* is, however, only one aspect of the Latin text's intertextual influence on the *Fall*; the *De casibus* also helps strengthen and define Chaucer's position as a source of content and structural correctnesses. This occurs through the presence of *de casibus virorum illustrium* as a formal tag for the tragedies contained in Chaucer's 'Monk's Tale'. Whether or not Chaucer himself was responsible for the association (the question remains open), fifteen of the tale's manuscripts bear the rubric, 'Heere bigynneth the monkes tale / De casibus virorum illustrium'.⁴⁴ Lydgate was evidently familiar with just such a manuscript, and when he reminds us that Chaucer too 'made ful piteous tragedies; / The fall of pryncis he dede also compleyne' (*Fall*, I.248-9), 'of the falls of princes' and 'tragic' are taken as synonymous.⁴⁵ The association also explains Lydgate's adoption of 'tragedy' as the *Fall*'s main generic tag, despite the fact that the term does not appear as a generic marker in either the *De casibus* or the *Nobles hommes*.⁴⁶

The *de casibus*/tragedy association, and its uptake into the *Fall* is further strengthened by the interaction between Humphrey's specification that the *Fall* should be in verse. Charged with rendering the French prose into English verse, and

⁴⁴ For information on the text of the tale, see the relevant notes in Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Text of The Canterbury Tales: Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts*, ed. John Matthews Manly and Edith Rickert, vol. 4, 8 vols. (Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 1940). For a summary of debates on the authority of the *explicit*, see Cooper, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, 328–9.

⁴⁵ As critics have noted, the Monk's definition is indebted to the definition of tragedy given by Nicholas Trevet in his commentary on Boethius' *De consolacione philosophiae*. For a general study see Henry Asgar Kelly, *Chaucerian Tragedy* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000). For the Chaucer's use of Trevet more specifically (and a reasoned nuancing of some of Kelly's earlier contentions), see A. J. Minnis, ed., *Chaucer's Boece and the Medieval Tradition of Boethius* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1993), 88–9, 107–8.

⁴⁶ See Mortimer, *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, 153. The *Nobles hommes*' paratextual apparatus refers to the biographies as *histoires*; Boccaccio uses the formula *de* + ablative to indicate the subject of each biographical section.

with the knowledge that Chaucer has already treated the falls of princes, it is natural for Lydgate to take the 'Monk's Tale' tragedies as his generic model. The monk's tragedies are, however, uniformly far briefer than any of Lydgate's accounts of the *Nobles hommes*' biographies, and the Chaucerian corpus holds a tragedy far closer in scale to the *Fall*'s individual sections: *Troilus and Criseyde*.⁴⁷ Taking its central generic tag from one and its form from the other, the *Fall* therefore takes on rhyme royal as the natural form for extended verse tragedy in English. In terms of the intertextual method, this first aspect of tragedy's absorption into the *Fall* can be described as follows: the social intertext (Humphrey's commission; Lydgate's self-positioning as Chaucer's follower) inaugurates a turn away from the immediate intertext (the *Nobles hommes*) toward a secondary intertext which appears generically appropriate, and which is also partially formally congruent with Lydgate's project. The generic kinship in its turn inaugurates a turn toward another tragic intertext in the Chaucerian corpus which is even more formally congruent.⁴⁸ On a smaller scale, the same process can be seen with Humphrey's request that Lydgate add an envoy to each 'tragedy': with Chaucer's short poems drawn into the intertextual set, Lydgate's moralising relies on precedent set by the moral ballads of his master.

The third rank of intertexts is bound up with Lydgate's Chaucerian debts and the re-fabulising movement that they reinforce. The de-historicisation authorised by Chaucerian poetic precedent cannot be completed by reference to Chaucer's writings alone, but Chaucer's habit of directing his readers to his sources (and pseudo-

⁴⁷ Famously sent into the world with the words, 'Go, litel bok, go, litel myn tragedye', *Troilus and Criseyde*, V.1786.

⁴⁸ It is tempting to consider a further dimension of imitation here. As Pearsall suggests, Lydgate is quite possibly not only writing in imitation of Chaucer, but of Chaucer's monk, the dignified churchman, with a hundred tragedies in his cell. See Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 43.

sources), provides a ready-made set of texts to add to Lydgate's intertextual ensemble. Foremost among these is Ovid, whose persistent, named presence throughout Chaucer's work, pulls his poetry into sharp relief against the background of classical culture.⁴⁹ The presence of *The Legend of Good Women* as an intertext for the Thesean sections of the *Fall* means that the *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* become important too.⁵⁰ The references to the *Metamorphoses* scattered throughout the *Confessio amantis* provide corroboration for the authoritative status that Chaucer grants Ovid, ensuring his position at the centre of the third rank of the *Fall*'s intertextual set. As before, Ovid's prominence in the Thesean sections of the *Fall* is due to both formal and content congruence with Lydgate's task. As a source of content-correctness, the *Metamorphoses* assumes its familiar role of mythological repository and becomes a source of material not found in Lydgate's other intertexts. Formally, the *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides* gain intertextual congruence through Chaucer's indication that classical tragedies 'ben versified communely / Of six feet, which men clepen *exametron*' (*MkT*, 1978-9). Fitting Lydgate's generic model, they become further authoritative precedents for the association of verse tragedy with fabulous content over and above historicised content.⁵¹ In a further compounding of the intertextual pressures, Ovid and Chaucer interact synchronically: the classical poet gains his prominence in Lydgate's intertextual set through Chaucer's insistent

⁴⁹ Symptomatic of Ovid's prominence in Lydgate's reading of Chaucer is the nested reference in the prologue's Chaucer eulogy: '[Chaucer] made a compleynt [...] off the broche which that Vulcanus / / At Thebes wrouhte, ful dyuers of nature, / Ouide writith' (I.321-4). The reference (*The Complaint of Mars*, 245-62) is actually Statian; Lydgate's eagerness to ascribe the story to Ovid is symptomatic of his would-be post-Chaucer Ovidianism.

⁵⁰ Perhaps less important, but also present here is Gower, who is, with Ovid, the source for Lydgate's writing of Canace's epistle (*Fall*, I.6882-7021).

⁵¹ As Kelly points out, 'Chaucer probably considered the *Thebaid*, the *Pharsalia*, parts of the *Aeneid*, and parts of the *Metamorphoses* to be tragedies'; Kelly, *Chaucerian Tragedy*, 6. Chaucer is certainly likely to have been aware of Dante's description (through the mouth of his Virgil) of the *Aeneid* as an 'alta [...] tragedia' (*Inferno*, XX.113).

referencing of his work; Chaucer, in turn, gains authority via that referencing. Lydgate's Ovid is an Ovid mediated by Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*; but the *Legend of Good Women* and 'Knight's Tale' are also reciprocally mediated to Lydgate through Ovid. When contradicting versions of the myths emerge between and within the works of the two poets, those contradictions are entrenched and deepened by the circular amplification of each writer's authority. In Lydgate's writing of Theseus, such contradictions are directly expressed in an inconsistency of characterisation and moral judgement only partially present in the corresponding sections of the *Nobles hommes*.

In a final complication of Lydgate's Chaucerianism, one of Lydgate's early works necessarily enters into the third rank of intertexts: his own Canterbury Tale, *The Siege of Thebes*. In writing Theseus, Lydgate is also rewriting his earlier self, rewriting Chaucer. The *Siege* is in turn responsible for the composition of the fourth rank of intertexts. Set as a prequel to the 'Knight's Tale', the *Siege* is the product of intertextual negotiations between the 'Knight's Tale' and a lost prose descendant of the *Roman de Thebes*, which takes up residence in the fourth rank.⁵² But Lydgate is unaware that the 'Knight's Tale' is Chaucer's rewriting of Boccaccio's *Teseida*; the Italian poem too takes up residence as an influential intertextual trace in Lydgate's writing of Theseus without the Lancastrian ever becoming aware of its importance to his work.⁵³

⁵² See Erdman's introduction in John Lydgate, *Lydgate's Siege of Thebes*, ed. Axel Erdmann and Eilert Ekwall (London: Published for the Early English Text Society, 1911), 1:6.

⁵³ The question of any debt to Statius (which naturally raises itself in regard to the Theban cycle) is moot; no compelling evidence in the *Fall* would suggest that Statius was a direct source for Lydgate, an inference reinforced by the *Siege's* use of the vernacular source instead of the *Thebaid*.

The fourth and final rank of intertexts in the intertextual set is composed of those texts whose relationship to the Thesean sections of the *Fall* expresses itself purely in terms of content correctness. These are the historical compilations and humanist texts that are largely brought into Lydgate's orbit by Humphrey's library directly, and indirectly by Laurent's use of them in his expansion and historicisation of the *De casibus*. In the Thesean sections, we can, for instance, trace moments when the formal imperative toward completism drives Lydgate to turn to works such as the *Genealogie* and, possibly, Plutarch's *Lives* in his search for missing data. It will be apparent that for the most part, their interactions with the *Fall* are far simpler than the compound and reciprocal interactions between the intertexts in the first, second and third ranks.

IV. The Duke's Mutability: the *Fall's* Thesean tales

The most superficial analysis of Lydgate's presentation of Theseus and his associated tales in the *Fall of Princes* reveals the kind of fault for which critics have lambasted the Lancastrian. Theseus appears twice: first in a long digression on the Minotaur (*Fall*, I.2647-884), then in the section properly reserved for his biography and its related moral (*Fall*, I.4243-816), into which a summary envoy is inserted (*Fall*, I.4530-57) and to which an envoy on hasty judgement is appended (*Fall*, I.4816-44). Though deeper problems reveal themselves on closer inspection, the fault that becomes evident on a first reading of the *Fall's* two Thesean sections is the extent to which the second repeats without any acknowledgement material that has already been covered in the first. With repetitions that extend to verbal echoes and parallel

syntax, Lydgate tells the reader twice about the death of the Minotaur, Theseus' desertion of Ariadne and marriage to Phaedra, the Katabasis, and the subsequent unhappy fates of Phaedra, Hippolytus and Theseus himself.⁵⁴ Such repetitions are, to some extent, symptoms of the period's non-linear reading practices, but they also betray the extent to which the Lydgate's writing is dependent on and deformed by his intertexts. Within them is a number of contradictions and inconsistencies that betray Lydgate's lack of control over his subject matter, and his susceptibility to the pressures of his intertexts.

The way in which Lydgate's intertextual entanglements express themselves can be revealed most clearly through a two stage comparison, setting the relevant passages of the *Nobles hommes* against those in the *De casibus*, and those in the *Fall* against the *De casibus*. As in the *Fall*, Theseus enters into the original text of *De casibus* twice: once in relation to Minos (*De casibus*, I.vii), then as one of the chosen subjects for the lengthier biographical sketch and moral disquisition (*De casibus*, I.ix-x) discussed in Chapter One. In contrast to the *Fall*, however, the *De casibus*' first mention of Theseus is just that: a mention. The Athenian appears by report in one of the frame-narrative sections, as Minos, passing with other unfortunates through Boccaccio's study, bewails his misfortunes. The information given about Minos is recounted in the most compressed form possible (condensed into 180 words), while the story of his downfall and Theseus' role in it are distilled to a few words of reported complaint: 'Minos bewailed [...] the discovery of his dear wife's adultery, the liberation of Athens from the yoke [of tribute] by Theseus' victory, the flight of

⁵⁴ Cf., for example, the first section's statement that Phaedra 'ful oncleene, / Loued hir stepsonne callid Ypolitus. / But [...] he was to hire daungerous' and the second section's 'Loued ageyn kynde his sone Ypolitus; / But he to hire was contrarious' (I.2812-14; I.4449-50).

his daughters with the victor'.⁵⁵ These two final clauses are the full extent of Theseus' presence before the section properly devoted to his biography; a far cry from the two hundred lines that Lydgate devotes to him in the *Fall*'s first Thesean section.

Laurent is partially responsible here, having considerably fleshed the passage out. With the familiar pattern of growth, Boccaccio's 180 words on Minos become 350 words in the 1400 translation, before expanding to 950 in the *Nobles hommes*. The Latin's reported complaint becomes an account of all the relevant stories, through which Theseus enters into the passage far more fully than before; inserted by Laurent in a manner that pre-empts material the *De casibus* reserves for the biography proper. Laurent gives the origin of the Minotaur, the story of Ariadne's advice to Theseus, her flight with Theseus and Phaedra, and the subsequent trajectories of all three, up to the deaths of Phaedra and Hippolytus. Determined to trace the fates of all those closely associated with Minos, Laurent goes so far as to touch on Ariadne's marriage to Bacchus, Theseus and Perithous' attempted kidnapping of Proserpina, and the tragic tale of Phaedra's love for Hippolytus.

Simultaneously bloated and compressed, the French passage demonstrates the persistent paradox of Laurent's writing. Determined to replicate the structure and boundaries of the Latin text, Laurent follows a procedure of expansion without elaboration, nesting all of his insertions as far as possible within the original sentence's structure. Each addition is expressed as concisely as possible, dissolving the syntactic compression of the Latin text while increasing the density of information to an extraordinary level. With the blurring of modes characteristic of Laurent's translation, it is no longer evident that the section was originally part of the frame-

⁵⁵ 'querebatur Minos [...] compertum predilecte coniugis adulterium indice partu, solutas Athenas a iugo virtute victoris Thesei, filiarum cum victore fugam?', *De casibus*, I.vii.8.

narrative, and stylistically distinct from the biographical chapters. Isolated from the Latin, Laurent's rendering of the three sub-clauses presents itself not as a prolix expansion of a biographical moment contained in the frame narrative, but instead as a set of biographies itself. At the same time, however, those biographies (of Minos and Theseus) are markedly briefer and more compressed than the main biographies. Keeping his insertions strictly bounded by the tricolonic structure of the original Latin sentence, Laurent lends his prose a compression that leaves its account of Theseus' dealings with the Cretans looking schematic and curt. Though the passage now resembles the biographical sections more closely than before, it remains incomplete from a biographical point of view. The reader gets little information about Theseus beyond the exploits directly relating to Minos and the Cretan dynasty, the sense of a whole life with a fatal arc is missing entirely, and no moral lesson is extracted from the hero's downfall.

Lydgate's dealings with this tautly distended passage demonstrate his dependence on and dissatisfaction with the French text. Following Laurent, Lydgate diverges from the figure of Minos to recount the origin and end of the Minotaur, along with Theseus' dealings with Ariadne and Phaedra. Unlike Laurent, Lydgate fleshes out the tales through elaboration as well as insertion, and sets about adding both mythographical information and poetic colour to the *Nobles hommes*' colourless and schematic account. Uncertain as to whether or not he is dealing with a digression or a biography proper, Lydgate errs on the side of elaboration, importing materials from his intertexts in an effort to work the passage progressively closer to the biographical mode. The Lancastrian has the sense, evoked by the muffled persistence of the *De casibus*' biographical mode elsewhere within the *Nobles hommes*, that the

passage should be more biographically expansive. He also has the sense – evoked by Chaucer’s treatments of the Athenian hero – that Theseus is a major figure whose exploits beyond Crete deserve recounting, even in brief. Thanks to Chaucer (and Gower), Theseus looms exaggeratedly large on the horizon of mythology in the English context, an exaggeration of status which is reinforced by Lydgate’s own treatment of him in the *Siege of Thebes*. Having already responded to a Thesean lacuna once, Lydgate does so again, and when the lot condemning the youth of Athens to death at the hands of the Minotaur falls on ‘Kyng Eges sone’, Lydgate breaks off from the Cretan story in order to situate the hero:

Which Theseus, for his worthynesse,
 And off his knyhtod for the gret ences
 Thoruh manly force, & for his hih prowesse
 Whilom was callid the seconde Hercules,
 Mong Amazones put hymselff in pres,
 Weddid Ypolita, as bookis specefie,
 The hardi queen [callid] of Femynye.

And afftirward to Thebes he is gon,
 Halp there the ladies in especiall,
 Which that compleyned vpon the kyng Creon,
 Which hem destourbed, lik ther estat roiall
 To holde and halwe the festis funerall
 Of ther lordis, as queenys & pryncessis,
 Off wifli trouthe to shewe ther kyndenensis.

For whan this Duk the maner hadde seyn,
 And off Creon the grete iniquite,
 To the ladies he made delyuere a-geyn
 Ther lordis bonys, off routhe & off pite.
 Yit in his youthe out of his cite
 He was delyuered, bi statut ful odible,
 To be deuoured off this beeste horrible.

(*Fall*, I.2731-51)

Moving from primary to secondary intertext, the three stanzas are emphatically Chaucerian. The title of ‘king’ is dropped as Theseus is transformed from Laurent’s ‘roy’ to the ‘noble duc’ of the ‘Knight’s Tale’, while ‘Femynye’ and ‘hardy queen’

are also plucked from the tale (*KnT*, 866, 877, 882). So too with the emphatic statement that Theseus went to war against Creon to help ‘ladies in especial’, which recalls Chaucer’s depiction of Theseus’ reaction to the Argive widows: ‘Hym thoughte that his herte wolde breke, / Whan he saugh hem so pitous and so maat’ (*KnT*, 954-5). And so too with the detail of the kings’ bones being returned to their wives; as Chaucer has it, ‘to the ladies he restored agayn / The bones of hir freendes that were slayn’ (*KnT*, 991-2).

In their turn, these Chaucerian echoes are figurations of Lydgate’s own career: the three stanzas reprise his insertion of himself into the *Canterbury Tales* with the *Siege of Thebes*; the third rank of intertexts becomes involved. The choice of representative exploits is restricted to events recounted in the grand narrative formed by the *Siege* and the ‘Knight’s Tale’ taken together. Lydgate is thinking both of Chaucer’s ‘his herte wolde breke’, and his own, ‘whan he herd hem speke, / For verray routhe felt his herte breke’ (*Siege*, 4525-6). To complicate matters further, however, another intertext, of which Lydgate is ignorant, lies behind these citations: echoing himself echoing Chaucer, Lydgate is unwittingly echoing the *Teseida*. The title of duke is Boccaccio’s innovation; Chaucer’s ‘hardy queen’ is Boccaccio’s ‘reina vigorosa e forte’ (*Teseida*, I.36.8); Chaucer’s nearly breaking heart on hearing the queens is Boccaccio’s ‘greve duol nel cor gli venne quando / udi’ (*Teseida*, II.36.6-7).

Taken apart from the rest of the Thesean tales, the fact that these three stanzas are so heavily indebted to Boccaccian Chaucer has little importance; taken in context that debt becomes the source of a set of unresolved contradictions surrounding the split between Boccaccian Chaucer and Ovidian Chaucer noted briefly in Chapter Two. When Lydgate turns away from the ‘Knight’s Tale’ and starts to use

information from the *Legend of Good Women* (alongside Ovid), matters become more complicated.

Alongside the debt to the ‘Knight’s Tale’ and its tangle of associations with texts in the fourth rank, is a sign of the impingement of other intertexts: the detail that Theseus was known as ‘the seconde Hercules’. It is clear that Lydgate is using another source here, as the detail is present in neither the French text, nor Chaucer. The sources that do recount the Hercules parallel are few, and belong to the fourth rank of intertexts: Boccaccio’s *Genealogie*, Diodorus Siculus’ *Bibliotheca historica* and Plutarch’s ‘Life of Theseus’. The first, already extensively used by Lydgate in the *Siege*, notes that Theseus ‘was named one among several Hercules’;⁵⁶ Diodorus, meanwhile, recounts that Theseus ‘emulated the Labours of Hercules’;⁵⁷ Plutarch gives a closer parallel in stating that the phrase ‘Another Hercules’ was often used of the Athenian hero.⁵⁸ The closeness to Plutarch may suggest the influence of Humphrey and his library. Latin translations of Plutarch were extremely rare in fifteenth-century England, but we know that Humphrey was in possession of at least some of them, as evidenced by the presence of a manuscript of ‘vitas triginta virorum illustrium’ (identified as a Latin version of Plutarch by its *incipit*) in his final donation of books to Oxford in 1441.⁵⁹ Though the volume does not survive, it is likely that it included a ‘Life of Theseus’: Humphrey was in correspondence with two translators of Plutarch, Antonio Pacini and Lapo da Castiglionchio the Younger, both of whom

⁵⁶ ‘inter Hercules plurimos nominetur unus’, *Genealogie*, X.49

⁵⁷ ‘τῶν Ἑρακλέους ἄθλων’, IV.59.1, in Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliothèque historique*, ed. François Chamoux and Pierre Bertrac, trans. Yvonne Verniere, Collection des universités de France (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1972).

⁵⁸ ‘Ἄλλος οὗτος Ἑρακλῆς’, ‘Theseus’, XXIX.3, in *Plutarch’s Lives, with an English Translation by Bernadotte Perrin, Volume I*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914). All references to Plutarch hereafter are to this edition, unless otherwise noted.

⁵⁹ Transcribed in Sammut, *Unfredo*, 84.

produced versions of the biography.⁶⁰ Lapo's translation, with the reading 'alter hic herculis' offers a closer parallel for 'a seconde Hercules' than any source that Lydgate is known to have used.⁶¹ Though any suggestion of a specific source must, for obvious reasons, remain tentative, Lydgate's 'seconde Hercules' is evidence of another intertext impinging upon the production of Lydgate's Theseus.

Taken together, the three stanzas speak for a poetic production hedged in by its intertexts, and readably directed by textual correctnesses drawn from them. Driven by the modal indeterminacy of the passage presented by Laurent, Lydgate seeks to summon up from his favourite authority everything he believes relevant to the noble figure who will shortly defeat the Minotaur. The result is a Theseus fleshed out to such an extent that the scribe of one of the best manuscript authorities fails to note that he is not, for the moment, actually among the crowding unfortunates in Boccaccio's study, and gives the section the rubric 'A processe of Oetes kyng of Colchos, Iason, Medee, Theseus, Scilla, Nisus, and other moo'.⁶²

Lydgate's alteration of the passage does not stop there, however. Turning back to Laurent, the next biographical detail that faces him is the aftermath of the Minotaur's defeat. Laurent's rendering is expectedly schematic: having slept with and promised to marry Ariadne, Theseus escapes from Crete with her and Phaedra, who is to be betrothed to Hippolytus.⁶³ On the way to Athens they stop at Chios, or, as others

⁶⁰ The dedicatory epistle for Lapo's translation of the 'Life of Artaxerxes', addressed to Humphrey in December 1437, lists the *Vita Thesei* as one of eight lives collected in a volume sent to him by Zanone di Castiglione, bishop of Bordeaux. For the full text of the dedication see *Ibid.*, 170–1. See also Marianne Pade, *The Reception of Plutarch's 'Lives' in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, *Renæssancestudier* 14 (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2007), 292.

⁶¹ See, e.g., MS GKS 2145 4^o at the Copenhagen Kongelige Bibliotek, f.21^r. The digitised manuscript is available at <http://www.kb.dk/permalink/2006/manus/86/> (accessed 2nd September, 2013).

⁶² Bergen prints the rubric in *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, 62. The rubric appears on f.12^r of Manchester University, John Rylands Library MS. Crawford English 2.

⁶³ *Nobles hommes*, f.ix^v.

have it, Naxos, where Ariadne falls prey to the dangers of drink and lust, and gives herself to several men; Theseus leaves her passed out on the shore and continues on to Athens with Phaedra.⁶⁴ The traditional coda to the tale is given in its Euhemerised form: Bacchus (who is not the god of wine, but merely king of Thebes) rescues Ariadne and marries her; later he tires of her and lifts the crown from her head as a ceremonial gesture of divorce.⁶⁵ Lydgate's version differs considerably. Rather than simply adding detail and poetic amplification, as earlier, he systematically alters Laurent's account:

By [Ariadne and Phaedra] he scapid, wheroff he was ful fayn
 Lad hem with hym, toward his contre.
 And bi the weie, deuoid off all pite,
 Adriane he falsi hath forsake
 A-geyn his surance, & Phedra he hath take.

Amyd the se lefft hir in an ile,
 Toward no parti she knew no declyn;
 She crieth, wepith, allas, the harde while!
 For off hir fate this was the mortal fyn,
 That for pite Bachus, the god of wyn,
 Took hir to wyue, whose crowne of stonys fyne
 Doth now in heuene with the sterris shynne.

Thus off Theseus ye may beholde and see
 To Adryane the gret onstedfastnesse,
 The grete ontrouthe, the mutabilite,
 The broke assurance and newfangleness;
 But celi women keepe ther stedfastnesse;
 Ay ondefouled, sauff, sumwhile off ther kynde,
 Thei must *hem* purueie, when men be founde onkynde.

Off Theseus I can no more now seyn
 In this mater to make off hym memorie,
 But to kyng Minos I will resorte a-geyn
 (*Fall*, I.2671-82)

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid. The Theban kingship derives from Ovid's use of the rare epithet 'Ogygio' ('Theban') as an epithet for Bacchus in *Heroides* X; otherwise, Laurent appears to be working from *Fasti* 3.459-516 and *Genealogie*, XI.xxix.

Suppressing Laurent's statement of Ariadne's drunken lustfulness, Lydgate reinserts the tale's supernatural elements, and adds an apostrophe to the reader, condemning Theseus in no uncertain terms. Each change can be read across Lydgate's inference of textual correctnesses from several different sources. As before, he is drawn to add and amplify by his perception of the passage as biographical; as before, the additive impulse is confirmed by the pressure exerted by his English forebears. Unlike before, the information present in the French text is not simply found in more expansive form in other accounts, it is contradicted by those accounts, in particular the 'Legend of Ariadne', the *Confessio amantis*, and *Heroides* X. Unanimous in their condemnation of Theseus, they exert a pressure that has Lydgate reverse Laurent's account, and take Chaucer, Gower and Ovid's word for the alternate version.

As before echoes of the poetic intertexts are audible: 'Amyd the se lefft hir in an ile' returns us to the Chaucer's 'in an ile amyd the wilde se' (*LGW*, 2163), while 'onkynde' echoes Gower's much-repeated *mot clef* for his exemplum (*Confessio*, V.5207ff.). The pressure of the poetry-fable association is, however, more clearly marked in the return of Bacchus' divinity and of the stellification. Going with the supernatural version of events recounted in his poetic intertexts, Lydgate suppresses Laurent's Euhemerist explanation in favour of the fabulous and mythic. In order to do so, he goes beyond Chaucer, Gower and the *Heroides*, to incorporate material from the *Metamorphoses*: the detail is absent from the *Heroides* and Gower's *Confessio*, and while Chaucer mentions the constellation, he neither names Bacchus nor refers to Ariadne's marriage. In doing so, Lydgate shifts from the Chaucerian first line of the second stanza above to condensed translation of *Metamorphoses* VIII.176-81. The supernatural is reincorporated from the poetic intertexts, and Theseus' character

decisively turned toward the negative interpretation given in the *Heroides*-related English poems.⁶⁶

That negative interpretation is made explicit, and rendered more problematic, by Lydgate's addition of a moral apostrophe. With the *De casibus*' clear structural pattern of biography followed by moral judgement and exposition only partially obscured by Laurent's additions, what now appears in the French text as a biographical passage appears, also, to be missing its structurally necessary moral coda. Though he stops short of inserting an envoy proper, Lydgate still seeks to add the missing correctives; and as before, they are couched in Chaucerian terms. Chaucer's ironic use of 'stedfastness' in the 'Legend' seems to have spurred Lydgate to remember two of his master's moralising ballads, 'Lak of Stedfastness' and 'Against Women Unconstant'.⁶⁷ The 'onstedfastnesse' / 'stedfastnesse' rhyme echoes the refrain of 'Lak of Stedfastness', while Lydgate's 'broke assurance' picks its specific theme of complaint against the fact that 'mannes word' has changed from 'obligacioun' to something 'fals and deceivable'. The closely associated condemnation of 'newfangelness' points toward 'Against Women Unconstant', where

⁶⁶ The suppression of the rationalised versions is not always so clean-cut; cf. Lydgate's double account of the Minotaur's birth (*Fall* I.2696-706), which uses both Laurent and Ovid, though Ovid is given precedence.

⁶⁷ 'Lak of Stedfastness' is attributed to Chaucer on the testimony of Lydgate's close associate John Shirley, in Trinity College, Cambridge MS. R.3.20. For Shirley's relationship with Lydgate, see Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 73-8. Though 'Women Unconstant' is not attributed to Chaucer in any of its three surviving manuscripts, in two of them it appears in close proximity to 'Lak of Stedfastnesse', suggesting the possibility that Lydgate's apparent association of the two poems is due to a similar grouping in a now lost manuscript. In BL MS. Cotton Cleopatra D. VII the poem appears in a group of four poems copied by the same scribe, in which 'Lak of Stedfastnesse' and 'Truth' ('Bon Conseil') immediately precede it; in BL MS. Harley 7578 it follows 'Lak' directly. The third manuscript, Bodley MS. Fairfax 16 also places it at the end of a Chaucerian group (not including 'Lak of Stedfastnesse'); it has been suggested that this manuscript may be a descendent of a lost Shirley manuscript, which would help to account for Lydgate's use of the poem. See, Linne R. Mooney, 'John Shirley's Heirs', *The Yearbook of English Studies* 33 (January 2003), 182-98: 197.

the word appears in the first line, rhymed, as in the *Fall*, with ‘unstedfastnesse’.⁶⁸

Lydgate’s own addition, in which he uses the tale as an occasion, uncharacteristically, to exonerate womankind as a whole of all taint (‘celi women keepe ther stedfastnesse / Ay ondefouled’) finds its place as a final rhetorical amplification of his damning verdict on Theseus. The defence is Lydgate’s own addition; a characteristically literal response to the collective title of Chaucer’s legends, which will, however, sit awkwardly with Phaedra’s ‘entent [...] ful oncleene’ toward Hippolytus, to be recounted only thirty lines later.⁶⁹

The conflation of the two ballads makes for a moral which fits the desertion of Ariadne very nicely, but which serves to point up the conflict between this Theseus and the Theseus described only a little earlier in the *Fall*. That Theseus is the hero of the Theban cycle as filtered through Chaucer and the *Roman de Thebes*, a champion of women; this Theseus is the villain of the *Legend of Good Women*, the *Confessio Amantis* and the *Heroides*, a callous womaniser. Drawing Boccaccian Chaucer together with Ovidian Chaucer (along with Gower and Ovid himself), Lydgate enters into a contradiction that finds itself emphasised by the moralising impulse. Lydgate’s responsiveness to the pressures of Chaucer and English Ovidianism generates a faultline at the heart of a passage now distorted beyond recognition from its original state.

⁶⁸ *The Riverside Chaucer*, 657. A further allusion to the ballad occurs in the sixth book of the *Fall*, where Lydgate makes use of the colour association of blue with steadfastness and green with inconstancy in Chaucer’s refrain to describe the cloak of the inconstant woman *par excellence*, Fortune herself; see *Fall* VI.43-46. In the French, her cloak is merely ‘de maintes et diverses couleurs’, after the Latin’s ‘varia vestis’; *De casibus*, VI.i.2; *Nobles hommes*, f.clxxvii^r.

⁶⁹ Lydgate’s defence of women is a thread that runs throughout the *Fall*, engaging him in a strange dialogue with the misogyny of the original text. See, in particular, the lines excusing Boccaccio’s writing against women, inserted in place of an envoy at *Fall*, I.6707.

The closing of the episode with the sort of brevity topos that Lydgate likes so much would seem, for the moment, to put an end to such problems; back to Minos. It is not quite so. The shape of the passage is still controlled to some extent by the original Latin sentence. The double bloating, from Boccaccio's Latin to Laurent's French, from Laurent's French to Lydgate's English, has obscured but not changed the fact that the passage's purpose is to outline Minos' misfortunes through the king's reported complaint. Thus far, Lydgate has added, elaborated and moralised within the syntactic space of Laurent's additions to the original sentence, and he has yet to arrive at the point of saying what it is that Minos is bemoaning: the flight of his daughters with the Athenian victor. Finally re-coinciding with both the French and the Latin, Lydgate is led back again to Theseus. Following Laurent's additions once more, the Lancastrian dutifully gives the tale of Theseus and Phaedra (albeit with greater brevity than Laurent), and even preserves the French text's historicised version of events. Characteristically, the re-insertion of fabulous elements is neither systematic or complete: without a pressing counter example in the English tradition, Lydgate happily refers to the Katabasis in its Euhemerist form, as a journey to Sicily (*Fall*, I.2808-9).⁷⁰

The only addition that Lydgate permits himself here is another moralisation. Ignoring the fact that Phaedra's actions would seem to be in direct contradiction of the earlier exoneration of 'celi women', Lydgate turns his attention to Theseus again. The contradictory champion of women who is also a faithless womaniser now becomes an emblem of credulity and hasty judgement: his misguided faith in Phaedra becomes occasion to counsel

⁷⁰ Laurent gives the location as a 'certain pays bas de sicille', *Nobles hommes*, f.x^f.

eueri man tak heede,
 In such materis as stonde in noun certeyn,
 From hasti doomys his tunge to restrain
 (*Fall*, I.2882-4)

Though the moral directly anticipates the moral that will later be given to Theseus' full biography, it presents itself not as deliberate prolepsis, but as the elaboration of a poet-translator uncertain as to the nature of the passage he is dealing with. There is no trace of recognition that Theseus will be dealt with again, no gesture forward to the lengthier passage on credulity to come. It is as if Lydgate believes his dealings with Theseus are over, the biography finished.

A sense of uncertainty remains, however. Though the appended moral shifts the passage decisively toward the mode of exemplary biography, Lydgate does not attach the expected envoy, but moves on to the next figure in the 'processe'. Despite the move away from the compressed expansions of the French passage, the account of Theseus' role in the Cretan tales remains ambiguously trapped between the frame narrative and moral biography. Lydgate's efforts – *ad hoc* and unsystematic, passively susceptible to intertextual pressures – only exacerbate the blurring of narrative modes that Laurent initiated.

The *ad hoc* and non-systematic, the elaborative, repetitive and contradictory come to the fore again when Lydgate arrives at Theseus' true biography and its moral interpretation. As commonly occurs at new chapter openings in the *Fall*, Lydgate sets out translating Laurent closely, before his elaborations dislocate him from the French anchor point and he runs into problems created by editing on-the-hoof. The opening of Theseus' biography illustrates this pattern in all its awkwardness. Lydgate transforms Laurent's 'Athens, which was once a noble city, nurse of philosophers and poets and orators, was the sole and singular eye of Greece' into a model exercise in

verse translation (*Fall*, I. 4243-9).⁷¹ He then strays into a three-stanza excursus on the origin of the liberal arts, tangentially relevant to Athens' role as the cradle of learning, before actually turning to Theseus. When he does so, Lydgate once again falls prey to the mixed messages of Laurent's translation. Altering the biography as he goes, he conflates and confuses its incidents, and falls prey to the same errors and tendencies as before.

Boccaccio begins his biography by stating how the adolescent Theseus' manifest nobility gave hope to the 'war-weary' Athenians, and then turns to the killing of the Marathonian bull.⁷² Laurent takes care to expand on 'war-weary' by inserting a clause explaining which war left the Athenians weary, but then he too quickly moves on to the Marathonian bull.⁷³ Lydgate does not. Taking Laurent's cue to tell how the Athenians were freed from their tribute to Minos, Lydgate is drawn to the Minotaur:

such [af]fiaunce
 [Theseus] gaff to hem bi his expert prowesse,
 Off his triumphes so gret habundaunce,
 And speciali ther renoun to auauance,
 He made hem fre ther truage for to lete
 Ageyn Mynos the myhti kyng off Crete.

For bi his force, the story is weel kouth,
 Them to fraunchise and al that regioun,
 The Mynotaur he slouh in tendre youth;
 And afftirward he off deuocioun,
 Taquite hymself[e] lik a champion,
 Theroff made solempne sacrefise
 To Iubiter in most humble wise;

And in a theatre callid Maratoun,
 Duk Theseus hadde this victorie.

⁷¹ 'Athenes qui iadis fut noble cite: nourrice de philosophes: et de poetes: et orateurs fut seulle et singuliere lumiere de grece', *Nobles hommes*, f.xiii^v.

⁷² 'tantam sue indolis fessis bello civibus spem prebuit, ut futurus crederetur qualis postea visus est' ('his qualities gave the war-weary citizens such hope that they [already] believed he would become that which he was afterwards seen to become'), *De casibus*, I.x.2.

⁷³ *Nobles hommes*, f.xiii^v.

(*Fall*, I.4279-93)

The movement that Lydgate traces is symptomatic of the intertextual pressures impinging on him. Laurent's gesture toward the war with Minos and its consequences allows Lydgate to fall prey, again, to the gravitational pull of the Minotaur. As he does, the sense of prolepsis disappears. The chronological clarity of the *Metamorphoses* and the 'Legend of Ariadne' in situating the victory as an exploit of youth leads Lydgate to take Minotaur's defeat as 'the firste emprise that he vndirttook' (*Fall*, I.4432). The tale (originally listed by Boccaccio as the third of Theseus' exploits) now takes up residence in the hero's 'tendre youth'. But Lydgate is aware of just how 'weel kouth' the tale is, not least of all because he has already recounted it in the first Thesean section of the *Fall*, and so he attempts to précis it in as few words as possible. In his haste, however, he conflates the Minotaur and the Marathonian bull; the bull disappears altogether, and instead it is the Minotaur that Theseus sacrifices to Jupiter. Marathon comes as an afterthought, and with a further Chaucerian association: the 'theatre' that Lydgate uses to translate Laurent's 'field [...] where in ancient times great efforts and games at arms were made by the country's nobles', takes on Chaucer's term for the arena constructed in the 'Knight's Tale'.⁷⁴ In conflating the Marathonian bull and the Minotaur, meanwhile, Lydgate manages to contradict both the 'weel kouth' version of events given by Chaucer and Gower, and his own version, given a thousand lines earlier.

The same pattern of précis, repetition and contradiction occurs with the tale of the Amazons; here, as before, Lydgate's expansion of biographical details in the 'Processe of unfortunates' causes him to contradict himself. In the *De casibus*,

⁷⁴ 'ung champ [...] ouquel anciennement estoient faiz kes grans efforts et les ieux darmes par les nobles du pays', *Nobles hommes*, f. xiii^v.

Boccaccio talks of Theseus' battle with the Amazons as a joint campaign with Hercules; Laurent faithfully follows Boccaccio; and Lydgate, for once, follows Laurent. In doing so, however, he fails to note that he is contradicting himself: the version of the story given in the 'Processe of unfortunates' has no mention of Hercules. As in the 'Knight's Tale' and the *Teseida*, Theseus is the only hero involved.

The next contradiction centres on Lydgate's re-fabulising impulse, which rears its head once again with the entrance of Perithous. In the earlier Thesean section, Perithous entered in the Euhemerised Katabasis given by Laurent and preserved by Lydgate; in the biography proper, he appears twice, first in the Centauromachy, and then in the Katabasis, told for a second time. The Centauromachy brings out Lydgate's re-fabulising impulse at its most scholarly. Unexplained by the *De casibus*, the Centaurs fall prey to another of Laurent's rationalising glosses, which directly translates part of the account given by Boccaccio in the *Genealogie* (IX.xxvii.9): they were Ixion's personal guards, a troop of 100 mounted soldiers.⁷⁵ Lydgate, meanwhile, returns the Centaurs to their supernatural form, 'Halff man, halff hors, [de]partid thus on tweyne' (*Fall*, I.4327), citing Servius as his authority (*Fall*, I.4307), and devotes five stanzas to their origins. Interestingly, however, Lydgate's source, despite the dash of scholarly authority gained by referencing Servius, is exactly the same as Laurent's: the *Genealogie*. The poetic flourish of 'There were off hem an hundred [as] in noumbre, / Swifft as the wynd' is a translation of the alternative etymology that appears only in the *Genealogie*: 'There were called *Centaury*, which is almost *centum armati*, or *centum Martes* [...] or, better, *centum aure*; for as swifftly as the wind

⁷⁵ *Nobles hommes*, f.xiv^r.

blows, so too were this troop of a hundred seen to run'.⁷⁶ Where Laurent cherry-picks the rational portion of the *Genealogie's* account, (the *centum armati* etymology), Lydgate takes the fabulous portion, uses it to re-fabulise Laurent's account and employs the *centum aure* etymology to power a moment of mythographically enriched poetic dash.

Having re-fabulised the Centauromachy, however, Lydgate does the same to Laurent's rationalised version of the Katabasis, unaware that he is contradicting his own earlier account of the same tale. This time, instead of going to 'Cecile', 'For to rauysshe Proserpyna the queene' (*Fall*, I.2808-11), the two heroes actually go down to hell. And, laying the ground for a further contradiction, Lydgate has Theseus' trapped there, while 'Pirotheus, to fynden a reles, / The cas declared onto Hercules' (*Fall*, I.4360-1).⁷⁷ Only a hundred lines later, however, Lydgate tells the reader that Pirithous was 'Slayn with a beeste, [...] Kyng Orchus hound, which hadde a treble hed' (*Fall*, I.4474-7).

As before, the presence of different sources of content-correctness and formal correctness, encourages Lydgate to rewrite his sources *ad hoc*; this time, however, he ends up contradicting himself, as well as Laurent. An intermittent consciousness of such dangers is visible when he skirts the tale of Ariadne in a single verse, but he cannot do the same with the tale of Phaedra and Hippolytus. As the final section of the *De casibus'* original biography of Theseus, and the key to its moral import,

⁷⁶ 'Centauri dicti, quasi *centum armati*, vel *centum Martes* [...] seu potius *centum aure*; nam sicut ventus velociter evolat, sic et hi centum velociter currere videbantur', *Genealogie*, IX.xxviii.1. Servius' commentary to the *Aeneid* gives the myth of origin, while another on *Georgics* III makes reference to the swiftness of the Centaurs, but only Boccaccio gives both the story of Juno's rape and the *centum aure* etymology. See the glosses to *Aeneid*, IV.286 and *Georgics*, III.115 in Servius, *In Vergilii carmina commentarii*.

⁷⁷ Though Lydgate cites Ovid as his source here, this version does not occur in Ovid's works; Lydgate must have sourced it from a commentary or summary that I have been unable to trace.

Lydgate cannot cut the tale. He repeats, over the course of over 50 lines (*Fall*, I.4443-96), the story he has already elaborated from an aside to a fully formed narrative in the ‘Processe’. By the time he finally reaches Theseus’ exile from Athens, the repetitions, contradictions, contractions and expansions have entirely obscured the carefully established political parabola built into the *De casibus*. The chapter is distorted beyond recognition.

The structural difficulties, tensions and faults do not finish with the chapter’s end, however. The envoy shows just how distorted Lydgate’s version has become. After the traditional opening pieties on ‘ioie transitorie’ and ‘sugre [...] meynt with bittir gall’ (*Fall*, I.4530, 36),⁷⁸ it becomes clear that Lydgate has conceived the chapter not as a biography of Theseus, but as a double biography of Theseus and Perithous: ‘This tragedie maketh a memorie / Of dukis tweyne’ states Lydgate, boasting that he has ‘off ther loue writ a gret historie’ (*Fall*, I.4544-46). With the double downfall, the moral centre of the chapter can no longer reside in Theseus’ credulity; the moral focus of the original is blurred beyond recognition, and nothing concrete is given in its stead. Forced to insert the envoy by the terms of Humphrey’s commission, Lydgate appears to be grasping at straws: with no moral applicable to both heroes, he has only the traditional mutability of fortune to fall back on. The ballad-form’s quadruple repetition of the phrase only serves to highlight the emptiness of Lydgate’s conclusion that, ‘Off frowardnesse [Fortune] will, what-so be-fall, / Ay with hir sugre off custum tempore gall’ (*Fall*, I.4556-7). When the envoy ends and Lydgate moves onto Boccaccio’s own moral excursus (left largely unaltered by Laurent) it inevitably sounds hollow, having no focused and coherently constructed

⁷⁸ Cf., ‘The Monk’s Tale’, ‘ay Fortune hath in her hony galle’, *CT*, VII, 2347.

biography to fall back on. What is more, with Lydgate's envoy taking on the burden of moralisation, the original moral excursus is dislocated from its natural place in the poem. Even as Lydgate attempts to preserve its end-purpose, the original structural articulation of the *De casibus* disappears more and more definitively.

V. Conclusion

On the strength of the readings above, it would be easy to draw the more or less traditional verdict on Lydgate's writing. The faults of the Thesean sections of the *Fall of Princes* can be interpreted as evidence of a writer unable to exert control over his materials, too incompetent to construct a coherent narrative, let alone to write an aesthetically engaging one. With or without the methodology and language of intertextuality, it is tempting to restate the case that Lydgate is 'prolific, prolix and dull' without extracting any more important findings.⁷⁹ What arises from the Thesean sections of the *Fall*, however is an image of the intertextual pressures exerted on a poet rewriting mythology at the meeting point of three different mythographical genres – poetic, moralising and systematising – and at the meeting point of intertexts that pull him now towards one of those genres, now towards another. Even in the apparently well-delineated space of a commission to translate the *Nobles hommes*, Lydgate could not help but write from within a broad and complex intertextual set, the complexities and contradictions of which inevitably exerted a deforming influence on the *Fall*. Close reading of the *Fall*'s Theseus demonstrates how intricately the task of translating the *Nobles hommes* was bound up with the dynamic interactions between

⁷⁹ Pearsall, *John Lydgate*, 14.

Lydgate's sources of formal and content-correctness, and how much the faults traceable in his writing of Theseus stem from and return us to those sources.

Producing the *Fall of Princes* was not simply a question of translating Laurent's version of the *De casibus* while poetically tailoring it to the personal tastes of Duke Humphrey, but of continuously reproducing and transforming codes and content from 'the whole social set' of intertexts generated by the specific historical circumstances in which Lydgate's writing took place. Given the contradictions between those intertexts, it is hardly surprising that a work as large as the *Fall* should quite visibly bear their traces.

What is at stake here, however, is more important than shifting the blame for the *Fall*'s faultiness from Lydgate to his intertextual set. Lydgate's Theseus allows us to draw broader conclusions about what it meant to read and write mythological materials in fifteenth-century England. The Thesean sections show the intertextual problematic writ large: the Athenian exacerbates the tensions and contradictions between intertexts because, as a mythological figure, he does not belong to any one of those texts. Whether the content in question be narrative or interpretive, no single text can have complete authority. Paired with a primary intertext in which completism is the most striking formal characteristic, Humphrey's commission inaugurates a synthetic, quasi-systematising completist approach that cannot help but counteract its own ambitions. It is precisely because Lydgate's situation and personal tastes compel him to collect all the facts of Theseus' career from his various authorities that Lydgate fails to make a coherent narrative of Theseus' life and draw coherent conclusions from it. Though Lydgate's own negligence is to blame too, it is the act of synthesis itself that lies at the root of the problems in the *Fall*'s Thesean sections. Too indebted

to Chaucer to ignore his authority, and too tied to the *Nobles hommes* to efface its authority, Lydgate only highlights the fact that there is no coherence in the disparate interpretations of Theseus life. The contradictions exist not just between the *Nobles hommes* and Chaucer, but between Chaucer's own works. Ill-equipped to understand Chaucer's ingenious use and abuse of sources, Lydgate's juxtaposition of heterogeneous Ovidian and Boccaccian materials mediated by Chaucer serves to demonstrate the impossibility of a mythography at once completist and coherent, at once poetic, systematising and moralising. Without the careful selection and suppression of detail seen in the original *De casibus*, the use of mythological materials as exempla becomes impossible.

In this, Lydgate is in a position analogous to the modern critic. The temptation to synthesise a so-called 'mythographical tradition' for a given figure as opposed to a given tale leads inevitably to a problematic situation. Either one ignores contradictory materials in order to maintain interpretive coherence, or one sacrifices interpretive coherence to the necessarily incoherent mythographical 'facts'. As will be seen in the following chapters, it is with this warning in mind that the early modern reception of Theseus, and of mythology more generally, should be considered.

PART TWO:

THESEUS AND MYTHOGRAPHY, 1470-1600

To pick up the traces of Theseus in mythographical writing in the sixteenth century, it is necessary to consider the influence of print on the world of classical letters. The impact of the press on the material circumstances in which readers and authors came into contact with mythology is a vital part of understanding the ways in which mythography did and did not change in the second period covered by this study. The standard narrative of changes in literary and scholarly cultures moving into the sixteenth century focuses on the vast increase in the availability of classical texts, and the spread of classical scholarship. Thanks to such developments, a century and a half after Boccaccio had written that it was ‘Foolish to seek in the streams what can be found in the source’, his inheritors were finally in a position to do what he could not: hold true to the principle.¹ Printing helped make that possible. The narrative of how the situation changed in the century after the *Genealogie deorum gentilium*’s first manuscript circulation is familiar: the expansion and consolidation of humanist networks among Europe’s political, economic and religious elites saw scholars bringing ever wider knowledge and philological acuity to the study of the Latin classics; in the fifteenth century, Greek gradually regained its place as a necessary accoutrement for the serious humanist, equipping scholars to read the oldest classical sources on myth.² It only remained for the spread of printing to lessen the practical and economic difficulties associated with manuscript dissemination of classical learning, and scholars would be working in a new world of riches, able, at last, to take their researches to the oldest sources of mythology. Increasing the availability of

¹ ‘Insipidum [...] ex rivulis querere, quod possis ex fonte percipere’, *Genealogie*, XV.vii.1.

² For an overview of the revival of Greek learning, see N.G. Wilson, *From Byzantium to Italy: Greek Studies in the Italian Renaissance* (Duckworth, 1992), chap. 1 and 2.

classical texts, decreasing the time and costs involved in their dissemination, printing handed humanism the possibility of holding true to its own principles.

In line with this narrative, it would be natural to expect developments in the thread of classical learning represented by mythography. But if it is clear that developments in printing offered readers the possibility of purifying their classicism through contact with the oldest classical texts, it is less clear that readers actually did so. As Jean Seznec pointed out over seventy years ago, the users, collators and interpreters of mythological knowledge in the sixteenth century were influenced by the new availability of texts in ways far more complicated than any notion of a ‘break’ with the pre-print world of scholarship could suggest. As well-known and rare classical texts alike entered into print so too did the medieval mythographies, and they took up residence on readers’ shelves just as they had in the medieval libraries. To focus narrowly on humanist printing when it represents only a small percentage of the material leaving the presses would be to misrepresent print’s impact on the world of mythography.³ Readers in the early sixteenth century had medieval sources to hand as much as, if not more than, classical texts and the learned humanist works drawing on them, and they often appear to have used them with little critical differentiation.

Getting to grips with the impact of print on mythographical writing is, then, a complicated task. Seznec’s survey and summary of the evidence remains influential in its sensitive understanding of the marketplace’s mixed dissemination of classical and medieval mythographical texts, but is in now need of reconsideration. Thanks to the

³ It is also the case that classical and humanist books were far outnumbered in the presses by works of devotional and legal literature, along with works of medicine, natural philosophy and editions of the old *romans*. Howard Jones estimates that devotional literature constituted around 45% of press output prior to 1500; legal literature, between 14 and 20%; medicine and science (including medieval encyclopaedic works) a further 30%. While ‘humanist’ literature extended far beyond classical texts, it is striking that of the 26,500 editions listed in the ISTC only 1514 are classical works. See Howard Jones, *Printing the Classical Text* (’t Goy-Houten, Utrecht: Hes & de Graaf Publishers, 2004), 9–14.

recent establishment of a number of online databases relating to the early book-trade it is now possible to bring more quantitative evidence to the table and adjust some of Seznec's assertions. With the Universal Short Title Catalogue (USTC) and the Incunabula Short Title Catalogue (ISTC), along with new digital collections at major European libraries (gathered together through the Europeana research portal), it is now much easier to collate data, examine the relevant editions, and give a more detailed picture of the relative distribution of texts useful to mythographers.

In part, doing so consists in continuing the story of the reception of texts analysed in the first three chapters: the *Metamorphoses*, the *Teseida*, the *De casibus* and the *Genealogie*. At the same time, the appearance and uptake of texts unknown to Boccaccio, Lydgate and Chaucer needs to be considered. Key among these are Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, which assume a position of almost unparalleled importance in the fifteenth and sixteenth-century historical canon. Alongside that of the *Lives* runs the reception history of the newly discovered classical mythographers, Palaephatus and Hyginus, both of whom found their own markets among the scholarly book-buyers of Europe. Finally, the sixteenth century brought its own mythographical compendia, among which Natale Conti's *Mythologiae* figures as the most comprehensive and almost certainly the most widely-read.

Tracing the reception of each of these texts, the second part of this study splits into three chapters. The first of these picks up the reading of the *Metamorphoses* as it passes into print, re-examining its reception through the editing and annotating practices of its publishers and translators. The second considers the fortunes of the *Teseida*, *De casibus* and *Genealogie*, before turning to the printing of classical mythographers, with particular focus on Palaephatus and Plutarch. In the final section

of that chapter, I turn to Natale Conti's *Mythologiae*, to examine the impact of the new sources on his account of the Thesean tales in contrast to the works already discussed. The final chapter turns to a closing example of poetic mythography and examines the role of Theseus in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a means of considering ways in which the Shakespearean stage absorbed and transformed the mythographical discourses considered in earlier chapters.

FOUR

Sorting the Rocks from the Trees: the *Metamorphoses* and mythology in the Age of Print

I. Latin *Metamorphoses*: the myths between moralisation and annotation

The way in which the *Metamorphoses* entered into print has been characterised as symptomatic of the mixed marketplace identified by Sez nec. Though Ovid was among the earliest classical poets to be printed in his own tongue (with Franciscus Puteolanus' 1471 edition of his works), it has often been suggested that the *Metamorphoses* remained better known in its medieval forms.¹ As Ann Moss puts it, 'The sixteenth century inherited the medieval response to Ovid's fables [...] in the precise form this response had taken in the late Middle Ages in the French verse *Ovide moralisé* and the Latin *Ovidius moralizatus*'.² In Sez nec's words, the book market across Europe was 'inundated' by the old *moralisés*, in all their guises.³

Despite the complexities of the early book market, the short answer to the claim that the early editions of the *Metamorphoses* proper were drowned in a flood of *Ovidés moralisés* must be in the negative. The data on printings up to 1500 puts the relative figures at seventeen stand-alone editions of the Latin poem to three of an

¹ Printed at Bologna; ISTC no. io00126000.

² Ann Moss, *Ovid in Renaissance France: a Survey of the Latin Editions of Ovid and Commentaries Printed in France before 1600* (London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1982), 23.

³ Sez nec, *Survival of the Pagan Gods*, 226.

Ovide moralisé (in Colard Mansion's prose adaptation).⁴ Adding complete editions of Ovid's works increases the imbalance to 27 editions of the original poem against the moralisation's three. Moving into the sixteenth century, the contrast continues: between 1500 and 1550 there were 90 editions of the original to four of Mansion's prose *moralisé* and seven of Bersuire's *Ovidius moralizatus*; a steady ratio of between nine and ten 'straight' *Metamorphoses* to every one moralised version.⁵

The moralised editions also appear to have suffered a marked decline in popularity during the first half of the century. The last printing of Bersuire's treatise was in 1521 and the last of Mansion's *Bible des poetes* in 1531, marking the last point at which an *Ovide moralisé* of the type identified by Seznec left a sixteenth-century press. When the Lyon printer Romain Morin produced his edition of the Mansion text, he kept the narrative additions, but purged it of allegory and moralisation. Renamed *Le Grand Olympe des histoires poétiques*, with a corresponding shift in emphasis towards narrative compendiousness over moral edification, Morin's version was reprinted under that title at least thirteen times before 1550, and twice more in 1576

⁴ Figures taken from the ISTC. Mansion's adaptation was first printed as *Metamorphose* (Bruges, 1484; ISTC no. io00184000), and reprinted as *La bible des poetes Metamorphose* twice in Paris before the turn of the century (1493/4 and 1498/99; ISTC nos. io00184200 and io00184300). Mansion's adaption is of the second prose version of the *Ovide moralisé*, attributed to Chretien li Gois, to which he adds material drawn from Bersuire's *Ovidius moralizatus*.

⁵ All post-1600 data is taken from the USTC and comes with the attendant limitations. The figures given here should be taken as lower estimates, excluding all partial editions of the poem but including editions of the complete works. *La Bible des poetes* was reprinted in Paris in 1503, 1520 and twice more in 1531. Bersuire's treatise was first printed by Josse Bade (misattributed to Thomas Walleys) as *Metamorphosis Ovidiana moraliter a Magistro Thoma Walleys [...] explanata* (Paris, 1509). It was reprinted again by Bade the same year and three more times in 1511, with two more editions at Rouen in 1515 and 1521.

and 1583.⁶ There was, it seems, a market for the mythographically omnivorous text as long as its clutter was narrative rather than moral.

Despite the disparity in the numbers of editions, there is evidence to suggest that moralisation and allegorical reading remained a force in Ovid's reception, and some well-known contemporary testimonies point to the persistence of moralising traditions. They do so, however, in a way that marks such hermeneutics out as old fashioned and outmoded. Moss cites the negative opinions of Erasmus and Luther,⁷ but no mud sticks better than that slung by Rabelais in the preface to his *Gargantua*, where he lampoons the very idea that 'Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* [would ever have dreamed of] the evangelist's sacraments, which a Friar Lubin – a proper bacon-picker – endeavoured to demonstrate, in case, perchance, he should meet folk as mad as he'.⁸ Read in the light of bibliographical evidence, however, Rabelais' jibe can be seen less as a response to a continued widespread dominance of moralising approaches in Ovidian materials, than as evidence of their survival now as a marginalised mode, eminently open to ridicule.

⁶ These are lower estimates again; Morin's version was printed equally, if not more, frequently under variations on the title *Les XV livres de la Métamorphose* or *La Métamorphose*. These translations are catalogued in the barest detail by the USTC, without attribution or further information, but it is likely that they are reprints of the Morin version. I have, however, only been able to examine one of these (1574) and confirm that it is an edition of the *Grand Olympe*; a further two are catalogued in full as such at the Bibliothèque Nationale Française (1554, 1570).

⁷ See Moss, *Ovid in Renaissance France*, 26–7.

⁸ '[ses allégories] aussi peu avoir esté songées d'Homere que d'Ovide en ses *Metamorphoses*, les sacremens de l'evangile: lesquelz un frere Lubin vray croquelardon s'est efforcé demonstrier, si d'avanture il rencontroit gens aussi folz que luy' (my translation), François Rabelais, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Mireille Huchon and François Moreau, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade 15 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 7. 'Frere Lubin' is a term of abuse for a debauched monk and is generally glossed as referring to Bersuire, or, as far as Rabelais would have been concerned, Thomas Walleys. Pace Grafton and Maréchaux there is no compelling reason to assume that the Frere Lubin is Pierre Lavin; however, see Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science, 1450-1800* (Harvard University Press, 1994), 26; Pierre Maréchaux, 'D'un sens à l'autre: continuité et rupture à travers des commentaires des Métamorphoses d'Ovide du XIVE siècle', *Textuel* no. 33 (September 1997), 19-31: 27.

Similarly, though printers commonly recycled earlier commentaries, and though new commentators inherited a great deal from their predecessors, to characterise medieval approaches as univocally ‘moralising’ is less than accurate. As Chapter Two demonstrated, medieval commentary and translation of Ovid was not the monolithic or simple corpus that Moss’s use of the phrase ‘the medieval response to Ovid’ suggests. If the popularity of moralising commentary, epitome and translation in the period before print should not be taken as evidence of a single-minded ‘medieval response’ to Ovid, nor should it be taken as such later. Moralisation remained a thread in Ovidian commentary, but it was one thread among many. And, as with the medieval moralisations, titles can be misleading. In 1510 the Lyons printer Gueynard printed an edition of the poem under the banner *Metamorphoseos libri moralizati*, which compiled the poem with the Lactantian summaries, the annotations of Raphael Regius (first published Venice, 1492-3) and new annotations to Book I by the Lyonnais monk Pierre Lavin (Petrus Lavinius). It is Lavin’s tropological commentary that earns the book its moralising tag, though his annotations go no further than line 451 of Book I. Certainly Lavin’s interpretations assert the significance of the poem in a manner reminiscent of certain medieval modes of interpreting it; but, covering only a tiny portion of the whole, his work can hardly be taken as indicative of a widespread inheritance of Bersuirian moralisation. Nor do Lavin’s annotations seem to reflect a marketplace demand for moralisation: though they were printed alongside Regius’ annotations in the majority of French editions up to around 1530 and in Italian editions from 1517 to 1540, the *moralizati* tag appears

on the title pages of only thirteen editions of the poem, and disappears from the presses in 1525.⁹

This marks as doubly curious the decision of the Council of Trent to include in its 1559 *Index of Forbidden Books* a comprehensive edict against ‘Commentaries on Ovid’s books of Metamorphosis, whether [with] allegorical or tropological interpretations’.¹⁰ What exactly the Council intended to ban with this edict is unclear. The medieval allegorised texts had disappeared from the presses nearly 30 years earlier, and none of the contemporary commentaries appears to have been withdrawn from the market as a result of the *Index*. The only evidence that any commentator took it into consideration it is to be found in the Jesuit Jacobus Pontanus’ 1618 expurgated text of the poem, to which the Antwerp Catholic censor lends his stamp of approval.¹¹ Given that Pontanus limits himself to explicating mythology and drawing out the exemplary nature of the chosen excerpts, with only occasional reference to the Bible, it seems that the church censors were happy for commentators to moralise the text, but not for them to interpret it as presenting historical prefigurations of Christian history as presented in the Bible.

It is natural to draw a number of conclusions from the data thus far. First, in comparison to editions of the poem itself, the medieval moralisations appear in relatively small quantities. Second, their disappearance from the presses in 1521 and 1531, along with that of copies of the poem under the *moralizati* banner in 1525,

⁹ According to the survey conducted by Ann Moss. See her *Ovid in Renaissance France*, 66–79; *Latin Commentaries on Ovid from the Renaissance* (Signal Mountain, Tenn.: Published for the Library of Renaissance Humanism by Summertown, 1998), 107. The second of these is seriously under-referenced and should be used with caution.

¹⁰ ‘In Ouidij Metamorphoseos libros Commentaria, siue Enarrationes allegoricae, vel tropologicae’; see *Index auctorum, et librorum, qui ab Officio sanctae Romae Inquisitionis caueri ab omnibus et singulis in uniuersa Christiana Republica mandantur* (Rome, 1559).

¹¹ Ovid, *Ex P. Ouidii Nasonis Metamorphoseon libris XV. electorum*, ed. Jacob Pontanus (Antwerp, 1618).

suggest that the market for new copies of ‘moralised’ Ovids had all but died out by the time that Rabelais took up his pen against them, and had certainly disappeared by the time of the Council of Trent.

This still leaves open the questions of how Ovid *was* mediated to his sixteenth-century readers, what place moralisation may have had in that presentation, and whether other continuities with medieval approaches to the poem can be traced. Of the available commentaries on the poem, Raphael Regius’ is the best placed to provide evidence on these counts. Until 1542 it was the only complete commentary to the poem on the market, and continued to be regularly printed in Italy until 1586.¹² Some idea of the scale in which Regius’ annotations were read can be gained from his own estimate, on the publication of an updated and expanded version of the commentary in 1513: ‘Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* [...] after being illustrated by my expositions, is so commonly read wherever the Roman tongue is used, that it is now said to have been copied in fifty thousand or more examples’.¹³ If the figure of 50,000 seems outlandish, it is not entirely implausible, given Regius’ unique status on the book market. As the most influential and widely read of Ovid’s commentators during the sixteenth century, it is his perception of the moral relevance of Ovid’s epic that readers were most likely to encounter when they came to the poem.

Regius’ preface to the text does make a clear case for moral readings, but in a manner quite distinct from both Bersuire and the moralising sections of the *Ovide moralisé*. Specifically, he leaves scriptural and Christological readings aside in favour

¹² Over a third of the editions between 1492 and 1550 are catalogued by the USTC as including Regius’ annotations; many more still do so without the USTC taking note.

¹³ ‘Ouidii Metamorphosis [...] posteaquam enarrationibus nostris fuit illustrata, sic, ubicunque Roman est in usu lingua, lecticatur, ut in quinquaginta milia exemplarium & amplius iam dicatur fuisse descripta’; Ovid, *P. Ouidii Metamorphosis cum luculentissimis Raphaelis Regii enarrationibus*, ed. Raphael Regius (Venice, 1513), f.1^r.

of moral interpretations focused on correct manners and comportment within society. The poem, Regius states, ‘seems to be a complete exemplar for human and civil life’,¹⁴ and there is ‘no author in whom you will more easily find rules for living in a civilised manner’.¹⁵ Rather than Christianising Ovid, what Regius recognises is the claim of the ancients to expertise in what might be called civil morality, moral philosophy conceived as a category of thought equally open to pagans and Christians. Importantly, too, he does not see any need to include moral exegesis in his commentary; having asserted that the poem contains moral truths he turns his attention to other matters.

If Regius can be seen as providing a link back to medieval traditions, it is not through his assertion of the *Metamorphoses*’ moral relevance. Where he echoes his predecessors is in his view of Ovid as a comprehensive guide to the world of Greco-Roman mythology and other subjects of worth to the scholar. As Ovid treats all subjects, so is he a guide to all subjects: ‘he who is well versed in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, will have the easiest way into all disciplines, and will have scarcely any difficulty with other poets’ work’.¹⁶ Regius then lists the names of over fifty Greek writers, major and minor, before adding ‘[whatever they] and other ancients, both poets and historians, set down in books, all of it is to be found transported by Ovid into his *Metamorphoses*’.¹⁷ This is the aspect that figures most visibly in the annotations themselves. Having complained of the medieval commentators’ ‘inane

¹⁴ ‘Exemplar [...] totius humanae & ciuilis uitae esse uidetur’, Ibid., sig. A3^v. A partial translation of the preface can be found in Moss, *Latin Commentaries on Ovid from the Renaissance*.

¹⁵ ‘ciuiliter vivendi rationes, unde facilius sumamus autorem inuenies neminem’, Ovid, *P. Ouidii Metamorphosis cum luculentissimis Raphaelis Regii enarrationibus*, sig. A3^v.

¹⁶ ‘cui Ouidii metamorphosis bene pecepta fit, facillimum ad omnes disciplinas aditum habiturus, neque difficultatis quicquam in ullo fere poeticorum operum inuenturus esse uideatur’, Ibid.

¹⁷ ‘[Quiquid] aliique prisci & poetae & historici litterarum monumentis commendarunt, id omne Ouidius in suam metamorphosin transtulisse uidetur’, Ibid.

nonsense’,¹⁸ Regius annotates ‘quite briefly those things that seemed necessary’, restricting himself to matters of vocabulary, grammar and, most of all, mythological reference.¹⁹ The ratio of annotation to text is almost as high as in medieval manuscripts but what is there is more accurate, relevant and direct.²⁰

What marks Regius out from his medieval predecessors more than anything else is his desire to be brief and relevant, and his scholarly investment in the *ad fontes* principle. In contrast to earlier commentators, Regius’ key touchstones for the Thesean tales are primary sources such as Diodorus Siculus, Pausanias and Plutarch, and in general no Latin authority is cited where a Greek antecedent can be found. All in all, it is a model exercise in glossing that would only be rendered less useful as the philological aspects of Latin scholarship advanced enough to produce better texts of the poem itself.

It is little wonder that Regius remained the standard authority on the *Metamorphoses* for nearly a century after his commentary first appeared. He would only be improved upon by Jakob Moltzer (Jacob Micyllus) in 1543, who stated his intentions to do no more than reproduce Regius’ notes with additional references to sources that either pre-dated Regius’ authorities or which provided different and equally plausible explanations.²¹

Not all sixteenth-century *Metamorphoses* came with commentary, however: alongside the folios crammed with Regius and other commentators’ notes, booksellers

¹⁸ ‘totique librorum margines inanibus nugis impleant’, Ibid.

¹⁹ ‘pauce admodum quae necessaria uidebant, in metamorphoseos expositionem deduxi’, Ibid.

²⁰ See, e.g., Regius’ note on the origin of the aconites in Book VII, which avoids the standard medieval digression on the Katabasis; Ibid., f.lxxi^r.

²¹ ‘relictis integris iis, quae à Regio composita atque edita habentur [...] ego si qua à me aliunde animadversa, quae uel ab illo praeterita, aut alias parum satis explicata uiderentur, ea quasi quandam appendicem interpretationibus illi subieci’; Ovid, *P. Ouidii Nasonis Metamorphoseōs libri quindecim*, ed. Jacobus Micyllus (Basle, 1543), sig. B5^r.

did a healthy trade in small, minimally annotated volumes.²² Following the example of the Aldine edition (Venice, 1502), the French printers Simon de Colines, Sebastian Gryphe (Gryphius) and Jean Raynier (Raenerius) answered the demand for more manageable texts of the poem with twenty-five printings of it in octavo and sextodecimo between 1529 and 1588.²³ The success of the smaller format editions was pan-European: when a Latin text of the poem was finally printed in England in 1582, it was a reprint of Victor Giselin and Andrea Navagero's octavo, first published in 1566 in Antwerp.²⁴

Though the popularity of small format editions is (as Moss points out) evidence for a reading public less and less interested in hyper-annotation, it is not by extension evidence for a move away from using the poem as a mythological dictionary.²⁵ The folios, octavos, duodecimos and sextodecimos alike bear the trace of instrumental and non-linear reading practices in the form of their indexes. Virtually omnipresent in sixteenth-century printings of the poem, these tables speak directly to readers' desire to tame the *Metamorphoses*' sequential idiosyncrasies to the needs of the reference library. Where Regius' 1492 edition contents itself with a book-by-book summary of the poem's contents, subsequent printings take care to include an *index rerum et fabularum*, which as often as not precedes the text.²⁶

The logical extrapolation of that utilitarian vision of the poem is to be found in the epitomes that appear in the latter half of the century. Two of these are notable for their return to moral questions, but again in the broadest sense of the term. Marcus

²² For discussion of these see Moss, *Latin Commentaries on Ovid from the Renaissance*, 134–6.

²³ See Moss, *Ovid in Renaissance France*, 37.

²⁴ Ovid, *P. Ovidii Nasonis Metamorphoseon libri XV*, ed. Andrea Navagero and Victor Giselin (London, 1582).

²⁵ Moss, *Ovid in Renaissance France*, 37.

²⁶ See, e.g., the indexes in Ovid, *P. Ovidii Metamorphosis cum luculentissimis Raphaelis Regii enarrationibus*; Ovid, *P. Ovidii Nasonis Metamorphoseon libri XV*.

Tritonius' *Mythologia* approaches the poem as a compendium of exempla and *loci communes* relating to the vices and virtues. These he gathers not only for the moral edification of the reader, but also 'so that they can be used by almost anyone to write poetry'.²⁷ A would-be writer seeking to lard their work with appropriate classical references would have found the characters in the epic grouped under headings appropriate to their attributes ('Daring', 'Chaste', etc), or as a function of their experiences ('Immoderately affected by grief'). Under each grouping appears a list of characters, whose relevance to the given trait is explained in two or three lines, with references to the poem by book and fable number. Theseus figures among the lists of the 'Fortes' (for his heroic deeds) and among the 'Ungrateful' and 'Perfidious' (for abandoning Ariadne), while Ariadne's role in saving him puts her among the 'Ingenious'. Equipped with the references one can then turn to the epitome with its summaries of each book, split into their constituent tales, numbered and summarised for ease of digestion.

One-dimensional though it may have been, Tritonius' conception of mythology was shared by important contemporaries. His crib was joined by that of Johannes Spreng (Sprengius), whose *Metamorphoses Ovidii argumentis quidem soluta oratione, enarrationibus autem et allegoriis elegiaco versu accuratissime expositae* appeared at Frankfurt in 1563, with a German translation the following year. Like Tritonius, Spreng is interested in the poem's moral import, but from a Euhemerist point of view. Each fable, based on history, 'derives from the actual truth

²⁷ 'ut in scribendis carminibus ad omnia fere possint adaptari', Marcus Tritonius, *Mythologia* (Bologna, 1560), sig. A5^r.

of things'; and like all historical truths each fable can provide a moral lesson.²⁸ Once again, Ovid's strength lies in his scope; the *Metamorphoses* contains 'the more famous and select fables of all the ancient poets [...] as it were in a single bundle', to provide 'an illustrious mirror of all human life'.²⁹

Sprengh proceeds by summarising each tale in prose, following the summary with an *enarratio* and *allegoria* in verse. In the allegories, each tale's 'true interpretation' is normally given as its moral content, occasionally with its convergence or disagreement with scriptural history. When tempted, however, Sprengh is happy to digress from his theoretical basis and provide the kind of typological or Christological reading favoured by Bersuire, as is the case for his explication of Theseus' adventures in Crete. The possibility of the tale being interpreted as an historical *exemplum* disappears, and Theseus becomes Christ, while the Minotaur is the Devil and the Labyrinth, Hell.³⁰ That this is Bersuire's reading of the tale repackaged in Latin verse for the sixteenth-century reader should not, however, be taken as marking Sprengh out as the closure of a full circle in Ovidian commentary. Though echoes of Bersuire's approach to moralising the poem appear in Sprengh's epitome, its central foci are still summary and moral interpretation on an historical and ethical basis.³¹

The points of contact between Sprengh and Bersuire provide a microcosm of the broader relationship between Ovid's reception in the age of print, and his

²⁸ 'ex ipsa rei veritate origo dependet', Johann Sprengh, *Metamorphoses Ouidii, argumentis soluta oratione, enarrationibus autem & allegorijs elegiaco uersu expositae* (Frankfurt, 1563), sig. +5^f.

²⁹ 'insigniores & selectiores ueterum Petarum omnium fabulae [...] tanquam uno quodam fasciculo continetur: adeo, ut totius uitae humanae illustre quasi speculum uideatur', *Ibid.*, sig. +5^{r-v}.

³⁰ 'Fert Minotaurus Sathanae simulachra ferocis', 'Aegidis Christus grandia facta notat [...] qui lustrat Auerni', *Ibid.*, f.94^v.

³¹ Cf., however, Pierre Maréchaux, who contends that Sprengh's epitome represents exactly that; Maréchaux, 'D'un sens à l'autre: continuité et rupture à travers des commentaires des Métamorphoses d'Ovide du XIVe siècle', 29.

reception in the medieval period. There is, as has long been accepted, no radical break dividing the pre-print interpretive strategies and narrative agglomerations from the world of sixteenth-century readers, but there are real differences and developments. It is, moreover, necessary to understand those continuities and differences in relation to the polyvocality of commentary and response traditions in both eras. As the medieval moralisations fade from the market, it is clear that the new commentaries and epitomes focus more strongly on the poem as a secular source of historical and poetic wisdom, applicable to civil life; but, just as before, the poem remained open to further, disparate interpretations by its readers. Moving away from typological and Christological readings himself, Regius was prepared to let readers come to their own conclusions on the moral import of the epic's myths, and provided them with the necessary grammatical and mythographical materials to do so. The extraordinary success of his commentary is a testament to the willingness of readers to proceed with less and less guidance, and to respect the integrity of Ovid's epic on its own terms; a tendency that reaches its logical extreme in the octavo and sextodecimo editions.

At the same time, however, the poem's usefulness as a guide to the world of mythology remains a central thread in its reception. From the omnipresent indexes, to epitomes like Tritonius and Spreng's, it is clear that readers still used the *Metamorphoses* instrumentally, as a key to mythology, and as a means of deepening their understanding of mythological reference in classical and contemporary texts. The flipside of that instrumental approach to the *Metamorphoses* as a key to mythology is the continuing market for the compendious *Grand Olympe*, weighted towards the pleasures of mythology as a collection of tales. Set alongside the

translations considered in the next section, it shows how much of a market remained for Ovids adapted to vernacular entertainment and recreation.

II. New vernacular *Metamorphoses*: the myths in translation

i. Italy

The century's first new translation of the *Metamorphoses* is, like the *Grand Olympe*, based on an earlier vernacularisation, and deals with its source text in similar ways. Printed at Venice in 1522, Niccolò degli Agostini's *ottava rima* version of the epic is based on the *Ovidio Metamorphoseos vulgar* by Giovanni di Bonsignori, discussed in chapter Two.³² His treatment of Ovid is formed, accordingly, not in Ovid's image, but in Bonsignori's. Where the *Grand Olympe* filters its source through French prose romance, Agostini is in thrall to its poetic Italian counterpart: Boiardo's chivalric mode.³³ Transposing Bonsignori's prose summaries of the myths into the *ottava rima* form that Boiardo had popularised, Agostini retains their medieval settings and terminology, presenting an Ovid that fits perfectly into the contemporary vernacular tradition of fabulous verse. Though Agostini himself makes no prefatory comment on the moral worth of reading the poem, his verse *Metamorphoses* remains firmly rooted

³² Ovid, *Tutti gli libri de Ouidio Metamorphoseos: tradutti dal litteral in uerso uulgar con le sue allegorie in prosa*, trans. Niccolò degli Agostini (Venice, 1522). The text was reprinted a further five times, each time in Venice: 1533, 1537, 1538, 1547 and 1548. All references below are to the 1538 Bindoni printing (the only version to which I have had access): Ovid, *Di Ouidio le Metamorphosi, cioe trasmutationi, tradotte dal latino diligentemente in volgar verso, con le sue allegorie, significatione, & dichiarazione delle favole in prosa*, trans. Niccolò degli Agostini (Venice, 1538).

³³ Like Boiardo, Agostini was a product of the Ferrarese court, and based his literary career on tracing Boiardo's footsteps. In addition to the verse *Metamorphoses*, he composed a three-book continuation of the *Orlando innamorato*, as well as romances on Lancelot and Guinevere, and Tristan and Isolde in imitation of it. For the scarce information that exists on Agostini and his career, see his entry in the DBI, and Bodo Guthmüller, *Ovidio Metamorphoseos vulgare: forme e funzioni della trasposizione in volgare della poesia classica nel rinascimento italiano* (Florence: Cadmo, 2008), 205–6.

in Bonsignori's moralising approach: the new *ottava rime* replace Bonsignori's prose summaries in a book which is otherwise a reprint of the old *Metamorphoseos vulgar*, complete with its prose allegories, and the woodcuts from its first printing.³⁴ And in line with his chivalric interests, Agostini is selective in his choice of tales to render in verse: the creation myth and the ages of Gold, Silver, Bronze and Iron are left in prose, and the new *ottava rime* enter with the first of the epic's battles, between the Gods and the Titans.

In the Thesean tales, it is clear that Agostini does little more than versify and elaborate Bonsignori's summaries, without troubling himself with reference to the *Metamorphoses* itself.³⁵ Though the *rime* revitalise and bring up to date Bonsignori's summaries in the day's dominant vernacular mode of poetic entertainment, they remain fundamentally identical, unchanged enough to still fit with the original allegories. With six printings of Agostini's version to one of Bonsignori's, however, it seems clear that the main selling point of the book was its vivid verse elaborations of the tales themselves.

The hybridity of Agostini's text instantiates similar aspects of Ovid's enduring 'medievalism' to the early French printings. As in the reprints and adaptations of the *Ovide moralisé*, the basis is an old text, rewritten with an emphasis on incident and narrative over moralisation and allegory. Where the French printers excise moralisation to reduce the medieval text to a core of prose romance, Agostini's *Metamorphoses* preserves the old allegories, but demotes them to a secondary role in a text whose selling point is its presentation of the narratives in the established high-populist poetic form of the moment. In a further parallel, like the vernacular French

³⁴ Giovanni Bonsignore, *Ovidio methamorphoseos vulgare* (Venice, 1497).

³⁵ Ovid, *Di Ovidio le Metamorphosi*, f.85^r.

moralisations, Agostini's *Metamorphoses* disappears from the market before 1550 to make way for new vernacular treatments, in which moralisation gives way entirely.

Those new versions, by Ludovico Dolce and Giovanni dell'Anguillara (published in their complete forms in 1553 and 1561 respectively) confirm the romantic tastes of Ovid's Italophone readers.³⁶ Bringing the epic more definitively into the romantic mode, both found an extensive public, with Anguillara in particular meeting an impressive level of success. Dolce's *Trasformationi* were printed seven times between 1553 and 1570, Anguillara's *Metamorfosi* 25 times between 1561 and 1600.³⁷ Like Agostini, both were engaged with the vernacular romance tradition represented by Boiardo and Ariosto: Dolce's staggering output as an editor included a version of Ariosto's *Orlando furioso* that appeared in 62 editions at Venice alone,³⁸ while Anguillara published *argomenti* to the *Furioso* in 1563.³⁹ Immersed in that tradition, Dolce and Anguillara's texts conform even more nearly to the chivalric mode than Agostini's, despite being directly based on Ovid. Like Agostini, they use *ottava rima*, and Dolce even goes so far as to recast Ovid's fifteen books as thirty *canti*. Unlike Agostini, they desert the textual apparatus of summary and allegory and leave their translations to stand alone. Though Dolce's dedicatory letter to the bishop of Arras contains the standard commonplace that the reader who seeks 'will see beneath the bark of such pleasant fictions [...] all the sap of moral and divine

³⁶ Ovid and Lodovico Dolce, *Le Trasformationi di M. Lodovico Dolce* (Venice, 1553); Ovid, *Le Metamorfosi d'Ovidio, ridotte da di G. A. dell'Anguillara in ottava rima*, trans. Giovanni Andrea dell'Anguillara (Venice, 1561).

³⁷ Figures from the USTC.

³⁸ Lodovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso di messer Lodouico Ariosto con la giunta, nouissimamente stampato e corretto. Con vna apologia di m. Lodouico Dolce contra ai detrattori dell'autore* (Venice, 1535). For more information on Dolce's career, see Ronnie H. Terpening, *Lodovico Dolce: Renaissance Man of Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

³⁹ Lodovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso, con gli argomenti di Gio. Andrea dell'Anguillara, et con l'allegorie di Giosepe Horologio*. (Venice, 1563).

Philosophy’, he makes no effort to strip that bark anywhere in the text.⁴⁰ Anguillara does not even go so far; his translation came with no preface, and with no appeal to the utility of poetry’s hidden meanings.

Even when published with the addition of Giuseppe Orologgi’s annotations and Francesco Turchi’s summaries (from 1563), Anguillara’s text remains a far cry from the heavily annotated and allegorised versions of the first third of the century.⁴¹ Both translations speak to a reading public that valued the *Metamorphoses* as a collection of tales that could be easily assimilated to the well-established corpus of vernacular fabulous poetry. Corresponding to a horizon of expectations shared by Italian readers, shaped by the popularity of the vernacular romances that owed so much to Ovid in the first place, Dolce and Anguillara’s translations had no need of prefatory materials and reading guidelines.⁴² Ovid had already been Italianised, and the sixteenth-century translations are less a cause of that process than a symptom of it.

Mythographically, it is clear that while Dolce and Anguillara are keen to elaborate on Ovid in the chivalric mode, they are not interested in incorporating extra fables or material from the commentary tradition into their texts.⁴³ At the same time, however, it is clear that the Italian translations remained a useful source of

⁴⁰ ‘vedrà, sotto la scorza di tali piacevoli fingimenti contenersi tutto il sugo della morale e divina Filosofia’, Ovid and Ludovico Dolce, *Le Trasformazioni di M. Lodovico Dolce* (Venice, 1553), sig.*2^v.

⁴¹ The first edition with Orologgi’s annotations is Ovid, *Le Metamorfosi di Ovidio, ridotte da Giovanni Andrea dell’Anguillara in ottava rima di nuovo dal proprio autore rivedute, & corrette; con le annotationi di m. Gioseppo Horologgi*, trans. Giovanni Andrea dell’Anguillara (Venice, 1563).

⁴² The term ‘horizon of expectation’ is taken from Hans Robert Jauss; see *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), chap. 1. The Ovidian debts of Boiardo, Tasso and Ariosto are widely noted; see, e.g., Daniel Javitch, ‘Rescuing Ovid from the Allegorizers’, *Comparative Literature* 30, no. 2 (April 1978): 97–107. For an example of the process noted above, cf. Anguillara’s version of Ariadne’s abandonment on Naxos (Ovid, *Le Metamorfosi d’Ovidio, ridotte da Di G. A. dell’Anguillara*, f.126^vff.) with Ariosto’s Ovidian account of Bireno’s desertion of Olimpia at X.xv-xxxv in Lodovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, ed. Marcello Turchi (Milano: Garzanti, 1974).

⁴³ See, for instance, their swift dealings with the Aconites, where all mention of the Katabasis is absent, despite the commentary tradition; *Le Trasformazioni*, 159; *Le Metamorfosi[...]in ottava rima* (1561), f.111^v.

information: the only indispensable piece of apparatus remains the index. One was added to Dolce's *Trasformationi* in their second edition, and remained as standard from then on, while one was included in every printing of Anguillara's *Metamorfosi*.⁴⁴ As for Orologgi's annotations to Anguillara's translation, though they provide interpretations of the myths, they make clear that the flexibility of the medieval traditions still persisted. Before a reading of the Minotaur's birth taken largely from the *Genealogie*'s biography of Pasiphae, Orologgi writes, 'whether it be history or fable, that is not to say that one cannot draw a very beautiful allegory from it'.⁴⁵ Medieval traditions do live on in the Italian translations, but it is the medieval tendency to assimilate Ovid to contemporary tastes, to use him as a sourcebook, and to provide readers with the keys and examples for making their own interpretations that survive, not the so-called 'moralising tradition'.

ii. France

The context of the new French translations in the same period was quite different, and produced a different approach to the *Metamorphoses*. Though the medieval French romances had their public in sixteenth-century France, there was no equivalent to the courtly vogue that the newer chivalric romances caused in Italy. With no analogous high-popular poetic tradition in which to work, and with no ready-made reading public for whom to write, the French translators had more groundwork to do. Unlike their Italian counterparts, they needed to provide a path towards reading the pagan

⁴⁴ For more information on Anguillara and Dolce in the broader context of mid-sixteenth century translation, see Guthmüller, *Ovidio Metamorphoseos vulgare*, 261–80.

⁴⁵ 'ò sia historia, o sia fauola, non è che non vi si possi trarre vna bellissima Allegoria', Ovid, *Le Metamorfosi di Ovidio*, trans. Giovanni Andrea dell'Anguillara (Venice, 1587), f.113^v.

poets as well as the translations to read.⁴⁶ The need for such groundwork may have been one of the factors that delayed the appearance of a complete new translation of the *Metamorphoses* until 1554, when François Habert published his version.⁴⁷ Until then, apart from the prose adaptations of the *Ovide moralisé*, only isolated sections of the poem appeared: Clément Marot's renderings of Books I and II (1534 and 1544 respectively), Barthélemy Aneau's version of Book III (appended to Marot's translations in 1556), and Habert's Books III, IV, V, VI, XIII and XIV (1549).

Like the Italians, the French translators show a clear interest in the *Metamorphoses* as an unparalleled collection of fables; unlike them, they are keen to replicate the aesthetic experience of the *Metamorphoses* as closely as possible in the vernacular. As Marot notes in his preface to Book I, the *Metamorphoses* 'seemed [...] the most beautiful [of all the Latin classics], as much because its great sweetness of style, as because of the great number of matters, falling one into the other by such artful connections that there seems only to be a single one; and it would not be easy (or perhaps even possible) to find a book that recounts such a diversity of things'.⁴⁸ In offering the first book to François I, he hoped 'to make those who do not have the Latin language understand and know better how [Ovid] wrote', and to spread the knowledge of the ancient myths, so prevalent in 'myriad passages' of contemporary

⁴⁶ See, e.g., the 'préparation de voie à la lecture & intelligence des Poetes fabuleux', given by Aneau in Ovid, *Trois premiers livres de la Métamorphose d'Ovide, traduitz en vers françois, le premier et second par Cl. Marot, le tiers par B. Aneau*, trans. Clément Marot and Barthélemy Aneau (Lyon, 1556).

⁴⁷ Ovid, *Les Quinze livres de la metamorphose d'Ovide interpretez en rime françoise, selon la phrase latine*, trans. François Habert (Paris, 1557).

⁴⁸ 'entre lesquelles, celle la Metamorphose d'Ouide, me semble la plus belle, tant pour la grande douceur du style, que pour le grand nombre des propos tumbans de l'ung en l'autre par lyaisons si artificielles, qu'il semble que tout ne soit q'ung: & touteffois, aiseement (& peut estre, point) ne se trouuera liure, qui tant de diuersitez de chose racompte', Ovid, *Le Premier livre de la Métamorphose d'Ovide, traduité de latin en françois, par Clément Marot, de Cahors*, trans. by Clément Marot (Paris, 1534), sig. a2^v.

poetry, but still ‘quite far from the mind’ of many readers.⁴⁹ As a whole the translation will be ‘very profitable to vulgar poets and to painters, and also a great decoration to our tongue’.⁵⁰ The former point is by now familiar: Ovid is the key source for understanding mythological references in the works of the learned. The latter point is the symptom of a vernacular literary culture several decades behind its Italian counterpart in the task of carving out its own niche in courtly and intellectual circles. Marot’s two books reflect a desire to do the opposite of the Italian translators: to assimilate French poetic forms and genres to the Latin poem, rather than vice versa. As he puts it at the end of his prefatory epistle, ‘At this much, I will be silent; Ovid wishes to speak’.⁵¹ A clear and largely accurate translation of the Latin into French couplets, his Books I and II break off cleanly from the old traditions, refusing to import material from commentaries or mythographies and avoiding the anachronistic cultural transformations favoured by the Italian Ovidians.⁵²

On Marot’s death in 1544, the task was assumed in much the same vein by Barthélemy Aneau, whose *préparation de voie à la lecture* prefaced the 1556 publication of his Book III, appended to Marot’s I and II. The *préparation* broaches theoretical questions that Marot had avoided, touching on all the standard justifications for the reading of the ancient poets. Poetry’s primary justification lies in the familiar idea that it was a medium in which the ancients outlined ‘their natural religion, or equally their Pagan superstition, and then all moral and natural

⁴⁹ ‘pour mieux faire entendre & sçauoir a ceulx qui n’ont la langue Latine, de quelle sorte il escriuoit [...] Oultre plus, tel lit en maint passage les noms de Apollo, Daphe, Pyramus, & Thisbee, qui à l’hystoire aussi loing de l’esprit, que les noms pres de la bouche’, Ibid., sig. a3^r.

⁵⁰ ‘ceste belle Metamorphose, aux poetes vulgaire & aux painctres seroit tresprofitable: & aussi decoration grande en nostre langue’, Ibid.,

⁵¹ ‘a tant me tairay, Ouide veult parler’, Ibid., sig. a3^v.

⁵² For further analysis see Ghislaine Amielle, *Recherches sur des traductions françaises des Métamorphoses d’Ovide, illustrées et publiées en France à la fin du XV^e siècle et au XVI^e siècle* (Paris: Jean Touzot, 1989), 137–40.

Philosophy, and consequently all the liberal arts under a miraculous fiction, and unlikely narration of elegant and joyous fables'.⁵³ Rich in natural and moral philosophy, classical poetry will enrich the faith of the Christian reader. At the same time, however, Aneau stakes the worth of studying fables on their distance from Christianity: by *contremise*, the Christian reader's faith will shine all the more resplendently when set against the 'confused shadows' of ancient myth.⁵⁴ Here, as elsewhere, classical mythology is prized for its moral content, but through a frame that simultaneously recognises its concordance with and distance from Christian wisdom. That view also becomes a means of staking a claim for the *Metamorphoses* as a particularly worthwhile object of study. No poem can provide a better point of comparison for the Christian faith, because 'among all the Latin poems there is not one so ample, so rich, so various and so universal as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which contains [...] all the fabulations (or nearly all) of the ancient Poets and writers'.⁵⁵ So comprehensive is it, Aneau notes, that even 'the arrogant Greeks, who disprized every language and art [...] as Barbarian in regard to their own, deigned to translate [it] into their tongue', as worthy of study.⁵⁶

Aneau is also careful to outline how readers should go about interpreting the myths, in a way that speaks directly to the flexible interpretive mode assumed by

⁵³ '[Ils ont] adombré premierement leur reliquon naturelle ou bien superstition Gentile, & puyt toute la Philosophie morale, & naturelle, & consequemment toutes les ars liberalles soubz une fiction maraculeuse, & non vray-semblable narration de fables elegantes, & ioyeuses', *Trois premiers livres de la Métamorphose*, sig. a5^r.

⁵⁴ 'affin que par contremise de leurs confuses tenebres plus resplendisse & mieux apparaisse la lumiere de notre verité', *Ibid.*, sig. b5^r.

⁵⁵ 'entre toutes les Poésies Latines n'en y a point de si sample, ne de tant riche, si diuerse, & tant vniuerselle que la Metamorphoses d'Ouide qui contient [...] toutes les fabulations (ou à peu pres) des Poetes, & scripteurs anciens', *Ibid.*, sigs. b5^{r-v}.

⁵⁶ 'tel, que les superbes Grecz qui toute autre langue & art [...] desprisent comme Barbare au regard de la leur: Toutesfois ont bien daigne translater la Metamorphose', *Ibid.*, sigs. b5^v-b6^r. Aneau is referring not to a classical translation, but to Maximus Planudes' late thirteenth-century version of the poem.

Boccaccio in the *Genealogie*, but with rather more clarity. For Aneau, the poets' truths are necessarily mixed in nature, and can be of several kinds:

TOUTE fable Poetique se doibt, & peut r'apporter par allegorie, ou à la Philosophie Naturelle donnant enseignement, & doctrine, ou à la Philosophie Moralle ayant commandement, & conseil, ou à l'histoire, baillant memoire & exemple: & quleque fois à deux, & quelque fois à toutes trois

EVERY Poetic fable must and can return us by allegory either to Natural Philosophy, giving teaching and doctrine, or to Moral Philosophy, having commandment and advice, or to history, giving memory and example; and sometimes to two, and sometimes to all three.⁵⁷

In the examples Aneau gives, the pagan gods can be physical, metaphysical or anagogical allegories representing celestial bodies, or spirits and higher powers, or time, or the elements; and, equally, they can be moral examples or historical figures. Some gods can be interpreted via one sort or allegory, others by another, and a given god will need to be interpreted through different frameworks in different texts; no one schema fits all recurring entities or all pagan texts. By way of example, Jupiter may be the soul of the world, and he may be the upper ether; or he may be the figure of the good prince who punishes the overambitious for the sake of his people; and at the same time, of course, he was also the historical third king of Candia.⁵⁸ Each of these true senses is activated at different times, and none need interfere with or contradict the others.

Finally, it must be understood that fables are by their nature flexible, non-systematic, and not necessarily coherent:

tousiours ne fault exactement chercher es fables Poetiques, raison, suycte, & Lyaison convenante & consequente, en une chescune

⁵⁷ Ibid., sig. a6^v. Aneau admits his debt to Philip Melanchthon ('le Chevalier de Terre noire'), specifically the remarks on poetry in his preface to the *Works and Days*; see Hesiod and Philip Melanchthon, *Opera et dies* (Haguenau, 1532).

⁵⁸ *Trois premiers livres de la Metamorphose*, sigs. a7^r, a8^v-b1^v.

menue partie d'icelles, mais sufict aucunement avoir trouvé & monstre ce que en somme les Poetes ont voulu en toute la fable signifier. Car comme en la pincture, a laquelle Horace dict la Poesie estre semblable, ne fault enquerir les raisons, pourquoy oultre la principale image du tableau le Peinctre y a pourtraict des arbres, ou il pouvoit bien pourtraire des rochiers, & des airs ou bien il pouvoit faire des prairies: ainsi es mythologiques expositions des fables ne fault trop scrupuleusement chercher [*sic*] les Allegories menues par celles, qui par aventure ne conviendroient aucunement à la principale allegorie de toute la fable laquelle sans plus de scrupule doibt suffire'

one must not always exactly look for reason, sequence and fitting, well-ordered series in Poetic fables, [or] in each ordered part of them, but it is enough to have found and shown in some way what the Poets wanted to signify in the whole fable. For, just as in painting – to which Horace says Poetry is similar – one should not ask the reasons why, beyond the picture's principal image, the Painter has portrayed trees where he could well have portrayed rocks, and flowerbeds where he could have put meadows, so in mythological expositions of fables, one should not search too scrupulously for the Allegories drawn by them, which would not, perchance, fit the principal allegory of the whole fable at all – which should suffice without further scruple.⁵⁹

In Aneau's intentionalist understanding of mythology as poetry, the reader is directed to search out the meaning intended by the pagan poet, rather than getting bogged down in irrelevant or contradictory details. The background rocks omitted from the analogy's painting become the details or variations of a given tale, omitted by the poet; we are not to enquire into their omission, but to look at the central subject and consider the meaning with which the author has imbued it. Myth's promiscuity – in all its senses – should not distract us from the poet's meaning.

The commentator is, however, free to follow his own knowledge and common sense. In his annotations, Aneau anticipates Orologgi's *bellissima allegoria* with his own, promising to accompany his translation with 'beautiful Allegorical mythologies and fitting interpretations of the fables, taken from the best Mythologues of Greece and Rome'. And in doing so, he arrogates to himself a licence to adjust those

⁵⁹ Ibid., sigs. c5^v-c6^r.

interpretations according to his own ‘judgement and natural sense, following reason’.⁶⁰ After all, he states, such licence should be permitted to him ‘no less than to the first authorities, who mythologised from their minds without [other] author’.⁶¹ Nor is there any sense that his annotations are intended to be comprehensive, or to equally represent all possible approaches to the poem: he refuses to adduce tropological and anagogical allegories (for fear of ‘mixing Heaven with earth’), or alchemical allegories, since he neither understands them, nor has ever seen evidence that Ovid or any Greek author ‘ever thought about them’.⁶² He does not, however, suggest that such interpretations are, by extension, necessarily invalid or illicit; that is up to the reader. What is important, however, is the sanctity of the text: following in Marot’s footsteps, Aneau sticks close to the Latin, continuing the work of letting Ovid speak for himself, albeit in the vulgar tongue. The brief annotations, meanwhile, are separated from the poem by each page’s decorative border.

As he notes in the *Préparation*, Aneau stopped his work after Book III, having heard about the more advanced efforts of his Issoudunais contemporary François Habert.⁶³ Habert’s full translation was finally published in 1557, though he had been working on the *Metamorphoses* since some time before 1549 (when he published his preliminary selection of six books).⁶⁴ Following Marot’s approach even more closely than Aneau, Habert leaves aside the theoretical reasoning embraced by Aneau, and

⁶⁰ ‘belles mythologies Allegoriques, & convenantes interpretations des fables extraites des meilleurs Mythologes de la Grece, & Rommanie [...] en y adioustant ce que de mon iugement & sens naturel ie y puy approprier en suyvant la raison’, *Ibid.*, sig. c5^v.

⁶¹ ‘ne me devoir estre moins permis que aux premier autoritez qui sans auteur ont de leur esp’rit mythologizé’, *Ibid.*

⁶² ‘mesler le Ciel avec la terre’; ‘pource que ie confesse voluntiers ne l’entendre pas, & n’ay leu ancien auteur Grec ne Latin qui en tel sens l’ayt prinse, & ne say si Ovide, & les vieux Grecz [...] iamais y penserent’, *Ibid.*, sigs. c5^{r-v}.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, sig. b6^v.

⁶⁴ For a bibliography of Habert’s works see August Leykauff, *François Habert und seine Übersetzung der Metamorphosen Ovids* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1904), 105–23.

considers only the most basic level of allegory. Just as Regius stated more than 75 years earlier, the poem's hidden sense is there to teach the reader how to '*vivre civilement*'.⁶⁵ The lengthy list of examples demonstrating how to draw moral lessons parrots Regius' own examples, and betrays Habert's lack of personal interest in allegorising the poem. Except for marginal notes of the subjects treated in particular sections, the translation is unglossed. Nor are interpretations incorporated into the poem itself; Habert's French follows the Latin text as closely as his often awkward couplets will allow, without any intrusive incorporation of earlier commentaries.⁶⁶ Though August Leykauff shows that Habert owed certain debts to *Le Grand Olympe*, these are minor in the extreme, and the additions and changes represented are not designed to follow the compilatory method of the medieval translators.⁶⁷ The general movement away from instrumental reading of the poem is clinched by the lack of indexes in the first edition.⁶⁸

It is noteworthy that Habert's version, despite being the only available verse translation of the *Metamorphoses* in French, does not appear to have been very successful. Habert's biographer Leykauff records a total of only eight editions, with the last in 1587; the USTC records a further three (although it does not record two of the editions identified by Leykauff as being Habert's translation), giving a grand total of eleven editions altogether, the last in 1590.⁶⁹ These are respectable figures, but

⁶⁵ Ovid, *Les Quinze livres de la metamorphose d'Ovide interpretez en rime françoise, selon la phrase latine*, sig. A3^v.

⁶⁶ For more exacting analysis of elaborations, omissions and simplifications, see Leykauff, *François Habert und seine Übersetzung der Metamorphosen Ovids*, 61–73.

⁶⁷ See *Ibid.*, 75–103.

⁶⁸ A sparse table is printed in the Rouen edition printed by Georges Loyselet (undated, c.1590); I have not been able to examine the other printings.

⁶⁹ 1557, three times, 1573, 1574, 1582, 1587, all at Paris; see Leykauff, *François Habert und seine Übersetzung der Metamorphosen Ovids*, 120–121. The additional USTC editions are 1579, Paris, and two at Rouen, 1590 and undated.

lower by some way than those for the *Grand Olympe*, which had already gone through nineteen editions by 1557, and which went through a further nineteen before 1600.⁷⁰ It appears that Habert's translation fell between two stools: it did not fulfil the functions of either the popular, prose-romance *Grand Olympe*, and nor did it let Ovid speak for himself, as Marot would have wished.

Given the nature of the evidence, any inferences regarding the reading of the translated *Metamorphoses* in sixteenth-century France must be read as provisional. However, the contrasts between the French and Italian situations seem clear. A ready market of vernacular readers in Italy, with clear expectations and predilections, formed Ovidian translation in its own image. The diminution of textual apparatus and the disappearance of moralising or allegorical commentary suggests that Italian readers were less interested in such accoutrements than in the tales at the poem's heart. For all the defences of poetry's moral value occasioned by debates on the subject in the mid-sixteenth century, Italian readers seem to have valued the translated Ovid for the same reasons that they valued Boiardo and Ariosto: narrative richness, fantastical adventure, and poetic readability. Targeting the same market, the competition between Agostini, Dolce and Anguillara's translations came down to their capacity to offer in greater or lesser measure versions of the ancient myths that catered to one, quite clearly defined, set of consumer desires; a contest that the market decided in Anguillara's favour.

In France, meanwhile, no such ready-made market existed. The fall in interest for allegorical or moralised *Metamorphoses* evidenced by the disparaging contemporary references and bibliographical evidence appears to have led initially

⁷⁰ As either *Le Grand Olympe* or *Les XV livres de la Métamorphose*. Again, these figures are conservative, given cataloguing inconsistencies in the USTC.

only to adaptation of the available late-medieval translation. The *Grand Olympe*, purged of the *Ovide moralisé en prose*'s moral and allegorical content, represents less a new trend in the reading of Ovid in France, than a retrenchment to the often ignored central support of his medieval popularity: his value as a storehouse of mythology. Meanwhile, Habert, following the path laid down by Marot, was catering to readers whose interest was in Ovid proper, but who did not have the Latin to grasp the *Metamorphoses* in their original tongue. Though *Le Grand Olympe* appears to have met with more success, the two complete translations were not in direct competition – unlike Dolce and Anguillara's versions. Instead they were catering to two different subsections of the book market, and representing two different tendencies in how readers approached the *Metamorphoses*: one interested in the tales but uninterested in their form of expression and relation to Ovid's cultural context; the other interested in precisely that, anxious to find the classical Ovid speaking contemporary French, but otherwise unaltered.

iii. England

Lagging some way beyond the continent, England produced only one complete translation of the *Metamorphoses* in the sixteenth century: Arthur Golding's *XV Bookes of P. Ovidius Naso, entytuled Metamorphosis*, first published in its complete form in 1567.⁷¹ Fixed in literary-critical consciousness by its influence on Shakespeare, Golding's Ovid has attracted more scrutiny than its continental cousins. Yet little has been done to consider the conception of mythology promoted by it, beyond likening its moralising approach to that of the *Ovide moralisé*, or,

⁷¹ With a further four editions before the close of the century (1575, 1594, 1587, 1593).

alternatively, staking a claim for its originality in breaking from such traditions.⁷² It is clear, however, that Golding's translation has its roots in the continental reception of Ovid, and that the mythographical practices reflected in his version of the poem provide evidence for the ways in which continental trends were taken up and transmuted in the English context.

In brief, the absorption and alteration of those trends in Golding's work are as central to his methodology of translation as they are to his conceptualisation of mythology. Generally, the arguments over Golding's approach have reprised those that stake a claim for the continuation of 'the medieval tradition' in Ovid's sixteenth-century reception more generally. As Raphael Lyne notes, the *XV Bookes* are 'often seen as a remnant of a tired medieval moralizing tradition', and though Lyne himself is quick to defend Golding from that charge, he does so by exaggerating the persistence of that tradition.⁷³ For Lyne, Golding represents a radical departure by demoting his moralisations to paratextual status (in the translation's two prefaces) in a manoeuvre that 'completes the separation of text and paratext and provides thereby a new relationship between Ovid and the moralizing tradition'.⁷⁴ While this provides a basis for painting Golding as a more progressive translator than he is generally construed as being, the picture looks different when the continental editions and translations are taken into account. Given the reliance of English readers on imported printings of Ovid, it cannot really be said that 'the prehistory of the Elizabethan Ovidian paratext lies in the medieval tradition of moralizing Ovid, and specifically in

⁷² On either side of the argument, see Richard F. Hardin, 'Ovid in Seventeenth-Century England', *Comparative Literature* 24, no. 1 (January 1972), 44-62: 46; Raphael Lyne, *Ovid's Changing Worlds: English Metamorphoses, 1567-1632* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 40.

⁷³ Lyne, *Ovid's Changing Worlds*, 29.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

the variants of the *Ovide moralisé*'.⁷⁵ The influence of the continental editions can, meanwhile, be traced quite easily in Golding's preface, and doing so leads to different conclusions about Golding's approach to the poem, and to mythology in general.⁷⁶

Such debts are seen at their clearest in the prefatory epistles, where Golding sets out his approach to the poem and guides his readers toward the correct modes of interpreting it. The way he does so resembles Regius and Habert's prefaces, but has certain important differences. Providing a careful grounding for the means by which the poem can provide moral teaching, Golding elucidates its four central meanings: 'that nothing under heaven dooth aye in stedfast state remayne'; 'that nothing perisheth'; that 'the soule of man from dying [is] free'; and that only those who are ruled by reason within 'vertues law' can be called human.⁷⁷ The first three of these, under the banner of natural philosophy, are messages of the poem as a whole, and Golding is content to assert their importance with brief proofs. The last, appertaining to moral philosophy, is communicated example by example, in a long list that follows in the footsteps of Regius and Habert.⁷⁸ But Golding goes further than his immediate precedents. Where they give only a select few examples, he delimits the interpretive field more carefully, and gives an exemplary reading of at least one tale from each of the poem's fifteen books. He stops short of explicating every fable, on the basis that 'that were labor infinite and tediousnesse not small', but Golding is obviously keen to

⁷⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁷⁶ On the debts to Regius, see Grundy Steiner, 'Golding's Use of the Regius-Micyllus Commentary Upon Ovid', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 49, no. 3 (July 1950), 317–23: passim.

⁷⁷ Ovid, *The XV Bookes of P. Ouidius Naso, Entytuled Metamorphosis*, trans. Arthur Golding (London, 1567), sig. a2^r.

⁷⁸ Cf. Ovid, *Les quinze livres de la metamorphose d'Ovide interpretez en rime françoise, selon la phrase latine*, sig. A3^v; Ovid, *P. Ouidii Metamorphosis cum luculentissimis Raphaelis Regii enarrationibus*. sig. AA3^v. Though Golding's list is largely original in content, by dint of going so much further than his predecessors, he replicates Regius and Habert's shared reading of Daphne's metamorphoses and Habert's reading of Phaeton's death.

make clear exactly how the reader should go about extracting the pith from the beneath the fabulous bark.⁷⁹

That the English author should be more concerned with the thoughts of an audience ready to take Ovid in the wrong way than the Italian commentator or the French translator suggests the presence of a vernacular reading public following in the footsteps of their continental peers, but lagging some distance behind, and needing to be led by the hand; at least as far as Golding was concerned. It does, however, remain clear that the reader is to take Golding's examples as exactly that: 'Theis fables out of euery booke I have interpreted,' Golding states, 'Too [sic] shew how they and all the rest may stand a man in sted'.⁸⁰ He is keener than his continental counterparts to ensure that his audience reads aright, but Golding's preface nevertheless grants them a measure of interpretative autonomy.

One area in which Golding differs from his closest predecessors is his concern to lay out the ontology of the *Metamorphoses*' myths for the reader. Stating that many men 'as haue of godlynesse and lerning good report' believe that 'the Poets tooke their first occasion [...] from holy writ', Golding confirms that he agrees: 'What man is he but would suppose the author of this booke / The first foundation of his woorke from Moyses wryghtings tooke'.⁸¹ He then draws the parallels between Genesis and the first book of the epic, and ascribes to Ovid a confused Christian intention: 'although he knew [God] not', 'partly in the outward phrase, but more in verie deede / He seemes according too the sense of scripture to proceede'.⁸² Here he is harking back to the approaches of fifty years earlier: Lavinius had also suggested that Ovid

⁷⁹ Ovid, *The XV Bookes of P. Ouidius Naso, Entytuled Metamorphosis*, sig. b1^r.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., sig. b1^v.

⁸² Ibid., sig. b2^r.

knew the Pentateuch, whether directly or indirectly.⁸³ Nor does Golding think that Ovid was the only poet to have taken his inspiration from the Bible: in his role as the compiler of all the classical poets, Ovid's concordance with the Pentateuch becomes a means of proving 'That Poets tooke the ground of all their cheefest fables out / Of scripture'.⁸⁴ As Lavinius appears to have found out, however, that approach works far better for the first book than for any other part of the poem, and Golding ceases to draw any further parallels once he has 'shewd sufficient' proof.⁸⁵ In feeling the need to stake his claim for the *Metamorphoses*' worth through scripture, Golding marks himself out as a much more old-fashioned translator than any of his French and Italian predecessors. He harks back, in fact, to the same method that Rabelais had so effectively skewered thirty years earlier.

To Golding's credit, the fictionalised-scripture conception of mythology does not intrude into his translation. In the case of Theseus, though he is an 'unkinde / And cruel creature' in his desertion of Ariadne, Golding does not insert any more elaborate interpretive readings into the poem. He is, instead, invested in bringing Ovid himself into English, without unnecessary additions, just as Marot, Aneau and Habert were interested in bringing him into French. This affects the hermeneutic that can be brought to the myths. As one of the poem's key qualities is its structural unity, it is the myths' articulation within that structure that lends them their meanings:

And even as a cheyne eche linke within another wynds,
 And both with that that went before and that that followes binds:
 So every tale within this booke dooth seeme too take his ground
 Of that which was reherst before, and enters in the bound
 Of that that followes after it; and every one gives light
 Too other: so that whoo so meenes too understand them ryght,

⁸³ Ovid, *P. Ovidii Nasonis metamorphoseos libri moralizati* (Lyon, 1513), sig. a4^f.

⁸⁴ Ovid, *The XV Bookes of P. Ouidius Naso, Entytuled Metamorphosis*, sig. b3^f.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

Must have a care as well too know the thing that went before⁸⁶

Though Lyne sees this as an approach that is ‘rarely attempted in the period and hinders the creative exegesis of single examples’, it actually draws Golding together with his predecessors and near contemporaries.⁸⁷ Like them, he is promoting the idea of textual contingency that is at the heart of creative exegesis. A return to the prefaces of Marot and Aneau shows them considering the *Metamorphoses* as a unified whole, in which meanings accumulate by the joining of one tale to another; and Aneau speaks in terms that closely resemble Golding’s.⁸⁸ Rather than effecting a radical break with standard reading practices of the period, the English translator is following the way already prepared long before. And seeing the whole picture, to use Aneau’s analogy, need not exclude or complicate the possibility of attaching meanings to the tales independently of one another: if the *Metamorphoses* myths are to mean one thing in context, they can be made to mean other things in other contexts. While Tritonius and Spreng, along with the careful indexing of the Latin edition, show that many readers were happy to split the poem into discrete episodes, there is no reason to imagine that a reader with a copy of the whole poem in his hands had to choose between the two modes of reading as if they were mutually exclusive.

III. Conclusion

The combination of guidance and freedom found in Golding is emblematic of the *Metamorphoses*’ reception in the age of print. As Pierre Maréchaux has pointed out,

⁸⁶ Ibid., sig. A3^v.

⁸⁷ Lyne, *Ovid’s Changing Worlds*, 46.

⁸⁸ See, Ovid, *Trois premiers livres de la Métamorphose d’Ovide, traduitz en vers françois, le premier et second par Cl. Marot, le tiers par B. Aneau*, sig. b5^v.

there is a sense in which a survey of tendencies in the reception of the poem is, by necessity, an ill-fated exercise: ‘the specific characteristics of each edition [...] are not easily accommodated to a globalising reading’, and any examination of specific editions tends to give the lie to the taxonomic classifications of hermeneutic approaches that critics are often tempted to use as shorthand in their work.⁸⁹ Nothing proves the difficulty of such approaches better than the *Index librorum prohibitorum* itself. The prohibition on ‘allegorical’ readings of the poem is the globalising reading *par excellence*, and yet every extant contemporary edition seems to have slipped through its net, even where Catholic censors were active.

The vagueness and permeability of hermeneutic categories such as ‘allegorical’ and ‘moral’ was accompanied by the apparent absence of any desire on the part of commentators and translators alike to constrain readers to a single interpretive framework, and still less to define orthodox readings for individual passages or tales. Just as a close examination of a text like the *Ovide moralisé* alongside contemporary Ovidian commentaries shows it to be a complex and flexible work, containing a number of different approaches under a title that names only one, so too with the sixteenth-century Ovidian texts. A survey such as the one I have given here shows those same approaches diffracting out across a broad spectrum of materials, a spectrum which is indicative of the freedom of reader-response invited by the *Metamorphoses* in the sixteenth century. Some points on the spectrum were evidently brighter than others, but each approach to the poem, and to mythology, can

⁸⁹ ‘les caractères spécifiques de chaque édition [...] s’accommodent mal d’une lecture englobant’, Maréchaux, ‘D’un sens à l’autre: continuité et rupture à travers des commentaires des *Métamorphoses* d’Ovide du XIV^e siècle’, 19.

be found somewhere, and readers would have been able to read and use the poem as they saw fit.

It is, for instance, evident that the *Metamorphoses* were frequently read with moral edification in mind. But the major mode in such readings was quite different to that found in Bersuire or in the typological sections of the *Ovide moralisé*: practical or civil morality, rather than revelatory typology. It is evident too, that typological approaches could hardly be excluded from the minds of readers, and their occasional resurfacing in Spreng shows that they never died out altogether. Readers could, if they so wished, take Ovid just as Bersuire had taken him. Ovid remained mediated, of course, whether by means of digestion into epitomes and emblem books, or through elaborate scholarly paratexts, or even simply through an index; but such mediations both individually left a greater and greater degree of freedom to readers, and were surrounded by other mediations offering different modes of reading.

What does appear to have been at the core of almost all the interpretations offered, however, is the sense carried over from the medieval precedents, of the *Metamorphoses* as the ultimate sourcebook of pagan myth, a key to the references of other ancient authors, and an unparalleled cornucopia of tales, ripe for interpretation. The dominance of Regius' magisterial commentary in the larger format printings of the poem, with their compendious indexes, indicates a continuing widespread use of the poem as the mythographical reference book *par excellence*. If it no longer transformed the poem from *Ovidius maior* to *Ovidus maximus*, as in the *Ovide moralisé* and its prose descendants, the Regius edition of the poem is still impressively bulked out by the addition of references that turn it into a near-comprehensive library of mythology. Even in the popular small-format editions that

appeared, the ever-present indexes mark the poem out as a work that readers expected to be able to read piecemeal, as their curiosity or necessity dictated. Of all the interpreters, it is Golding who sums it up most eloquently; for him the *Metamorphoses* is at the same time, an ‘Ortyard of Alcimous in which there wants not any / Herb, tree, or frute’, and a ‘plenteous horne of Acheloy which iustly dooth deserue / Too beare the name of treasorie of knowledge’.⁹⁰ Even as scholars came more and more to respect the priority of Greek sources, the *Metamorphoses* remained the only text that brought them all together, presenting the closest thing there was to a coherent overview of the world of Greek myth.

Meanwhile, the publishing history of the poem’s vernacular translations suggests that it was regarded as a uniquely fertile source of pleasurable narratives, ripe for harvesting and preparing according to the dominant cultural idioms of a given country or subset of readers. From the prose romance of *Le Grand Olympe*, to the nascent neo-classicism of Marot, Aneau and Habert, to the Italians working in the wake of Ariosto and Boiardo, to Golding’s Tudor fourteeners and dialectal Anglicisms, each country made it their own in a different way. The varying values placed on edification alongside pleasure and the varying degrees of defensiveness with which translators and commentators chose to outline the poem’s moral rectitude should not mask the fact that the *Metamorphoses* was open to several different modes of reading at once, each of which coexisted happily on the sixteenth-century scene. That the Tridentine interdiction against allegorical exposition should have had so minimal an impact on the printing of the poem would seem to indicate that the interpretive schemas within which the poem could be read were so loosely defined as

⁹⁰ Ovid, *The XV Bookes of P. Ouidius Naso, Entytuled Metamorphosis*, sig. b4^r.

to resist censorship. Readers and commentators alike could pass from one porous category to another other as they saw fit.

FIVE

**Unbelievable Tales and the Morals of the Ancients: New Old Sources and the
*Mythologiae***

The variety of functions that the *Metamorphoses* fulfilled as a mythographical text in the sixteenth century makes clear that readers across Europe remained as well accustomed to defining and using mythology in a broad spectrum of ways as their medieval predecessors. And even as the additive tendencies of the poem's pre-print reception diminished, the poem retained its pre-eminence as a source on mythology, by dint of comprehensiveness. Readers looking for information on Theseus, and ways to interpret him, could still turn to Ovid for help. At the same time, however, it is possible to trace a certain anxiety about the differing degrees of primacy among classical sources: the *Metamorphoses* may have remained the most comprehensive single source available, but it was far from the oldest. The rising number of older Greek authors populating the margins of the *Metamorphoses* in Regius' commentary (which rose again in Micyllus' edition) show how the belief in the primacy of older primary sources that Boccaccio had voiced in the *Genealogie* was increasingly widespread.¹

The grounds of that belief were not always well understood, however, and nor was it uniformly taken up. It remains to be seen how far the rising investment in mythographical 'authenticity' went, and how far it affected readers' interpretation of the Thesean tales. The claims that Aneau and Habert make about the mythographical worth of the *Metamorphoses* through its translation into Greek show how ready

¹ *Genealogie*, XV.vii.1-2.

readers were to see ‘Greek’ as a badge of authenticity, regardless of actual age or primacy.² That the thirteenth-century Maximus Planudes could hardly be called a Greek or claim much continuity with ancient writers in the sense Aneau and Habert would have liked does not appear to have been something they enquired into; writing in Greek was enough. It is, at the same time, clear that readers were not only willing to trust what they perceived as older sources – Greek or otherwise. Even as previously rare classical mythographical works entered into print, Boccaccio’s *De casibus* and *Genealogie* continued to find an audience, and early modern mythographers were publishing their own new studies of the subject.

Following the publishing history of Boccaccio’s work, before moving on to analyses of more newly rediscovered classical texts, it becomes clear that readers’ greater investment in authenticity need not be taken as antithetical to the mythographical freedom and pluralism seen in earlier chapters. Instead, examining sixteenth-century editions of Boccaccio, and analysing the presentation of Theseus in contemporary editions of classical mythographers, it becomes clear that the eclectic openness of medieval mythography persisted, albeit in different forms. Tracing that argument and outlining those forms, this chapter breaks into three sections. The first continues the story of Boccaccio’s reception through the work of his sixteenth-century editors and their annotations to the *De casibus* and *Genealogie*. As with the previous chapter’s discussion of the *Metamorphoses*, my aim here is to give a sense of how the material circumstances through which readers encountered Boccaccio affected their conceptions of his mythographical works, and of mythology more generally. The

² See Ovid, *Trois premiers livres de la Métamorphose d’Ovide, traduitz en vers françois, le premier et second par Cl. Marot, le tiers par B. Aneau*, sig. b5^v; Ovid, *Les quinze livres de la metamorphose d’Ovide interpretez en rime françoise, selon la phrase latine*, sig. A5^v.

second section follows the lead of sixteenth-century annotations on Boccaccio and Ovid, and turns to Theseus' presentation in Palaephatus' *On Unbelievable Tales* and Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*. Here, I bring together the texts' content with their publishing history in order to show the different levels on which they fostered ideas of mythographical flexibility and freedom. The final section then turns to the best known of the new mythographical compilations, Natale Conti's *Mythologiae*. Analysing Conti's presentation of Theseus against the background of the first two sections, it becomes possible to suggest that his work is less representative of early modern perceptions of mythology than has been supposed. Rather than echoing a generally held set of views, Conti's conception of mythology appears, in the context of this study, to have been somewhat at odds with wider trends in sixteenth-century mythography.

I. Boccaccio

With a larger and more various oeuvre than either Dante or Petrarch, Boccaccio was by some way the most widely printed of Italy's *tre corone* across Europe.³ Every area of his output was well represented in the presses, with his Latin works printed in and outside of Italy, and numerous translations of both the Latin and vernacular works

³ A survey of the USTC brings back results of 388 and 487 separate editions for Petrarch and Boccaccio respectively, to 118 for Dante.

appearing across the continent.⁴ The question of how exactly Boccaccio was received as a mythographer through the texts examined in Chapter One is, however, still open. The multifarious debts of English authors in particular to the *Genealogie* have long been known, but less is known about the broader context of Boccaccio's reception as a mythographical scholar, historian and poet.⁵ How those reputations interacted with each other, what early modern readers made of his authority as an expert on the world of myth, and what status the presses and their customers granted the *Teseida*, the *Decasibus* and the *Genealogie*, remains to be seen.

In the case of the *Teseida* these questions are easy to answer. Despite its popularity in medieval Italy and France, the long sixteenth century saw only six published versions of the poem.⁶ Despite the unusual distinction of being translated into modern Greek, the *Teseida* does not appear particularly to have appealed to readers. The scattered Italian editions show no evidence of popularity, and the 1597 French translation by the unknown 'C.D.C.' is unique among contemporary French translations of Boccaccio's vernacular works in having only a single printing. While it

⁴ The key audience for the vernacular works beyond the Alps appears to have been in France. During the sixteenth century the numerous editions of Laurent de Premierfait and Antoine le Maçon's *Decamerons* were joined by versions of the *Fiametta* (tr.1531), *Filocolo* (as *Le Philocope*, tr.1542) and *Il Corbaccio* (as *La Laberinte d'amour*, tr.1571). The same texts were translated into Spanish, but appeared in fewer editions, none of which is later than 1552. In England, meanwhile, only the *Filocolo* appeared as a stand-alone translation (*A Pleasaunt Disport of Diuers Noble Personages Entitled Philocope*, 1566; with a further four editions), while selected tales from the *Decameron* made up portions of William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure* (also 1566, with subsequent expanded editions). That is, of course, not to take into account the market for those same works in their original tongue, imported for small but influential coterie of Italian readers such as that in 1530s and 40s Lyon, or in London from the 1570s onwards. For editions and translations of the Latin works considered here, see below.

⁵ See for instance, Jean Seznec, 'Les manuels mythologiques italiens et leur diffusion en Angleterre à la fin de la Renaissance', *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire* 50, no. 1 (1933): 276–92; DeWitt T. Starnes, *Classical Myth and Legend in Renaissance Dictionaries: a Study of Renaissance Dictionaries in Their Relation to the Classical Learning of Contemporary English Writers* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955).

⁶ Ferrara, 1475; Naples, 1490? (with commentary by Andrea dei Bassi, but without Boccaccio's own glosses); Venice, 1528; Venice, 1529 (in Greek translation); Lucca, 1579 (in a prose version by Niccolò Granucci); Paris, 1597 (in a new French translation by 'C. D. C.').

should be assumed that from the late fifteenth to the early sixteenth century those printed editions may have been accompanied by manuscript copies, the figures are suggestive.⁷ Though, as will be seen, the poem continued to exert an influence in England, by means of Chaucer, it had ceased to have much impact on readers elsewhere in Europe.

The *De casibus* and the *Genealogie* were more popular. Again counting translations and originals, the *De casibus* was published seven times before 1500, and approximately a further twenty-three times before 1600; the *Genealogie* eleven times before 1500, and approximately a further twenty-two times before 1600.⁸ The apparent popularity of both texts is comprehensible. The *De casibus* remained a unique combination of the edifying and sensational. Combining its often gory tales of downfall with a clear moral line, it catered to the same thirst for exemplary history that helped grant Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* their extraordinary popularity, as we will see below. The *Genealogie*, meanwhile, remained unequalled in its comprehensiveness until the second half of the century, despite the appearance, in the meantime, of handbooks such as Hermannus Torrentinus' *Elucidarius carminum ac historiarum* (1498) or the ever-expanding versions of Estienne's *Dictionarium historicum, geographicum, poeticum* (from 1553). Even works such as Giraldi's *De deis gentium varia et multiplex historia* (1548) and Cartari's *Imagini colla sposizione degli dei degli antichi* (1556) could not compete. Where they limit themselves to the gods alone, Boccaccio's appreciation of Greek mythology's dependency on the trickle-down effects of divine promiscuity meant that the *Genealogie* still covered

⁷ This was certainly the case in France, as Hauvette demonstrates; see Henri Hauvette, 'Les plus anciennes traductions françaises de Boccace', *Bulletin italien* VIII, no. 3 (1908): 189–211.

⁸ All figures from the USTC, with the addition of editions I have examined but which are not recorded in the USTC database and editions examined and recorded by Hortis.

more ground than any other treatise. Not until the appearance of Natale Conti's *Mythologiae* would it be outdone – and then only arguably.

It was with good reason, then, that the *Genealogie* should be the only modern text recommended by Erasmus as a worthy guide to mythology in his *De ratione studii* of 1511. The recommendation is, however, marked by an ambivalence that is reflected elsewhere in the reception of the *Genealogie* and *De casibus*, and which has direct relevance to Boccaccio's authority as an advisor on mythology. Having said that a knowledge of the pagan genealogies is vital for the schoolmaster, Erasmus states that 'After Hesiod, Boccaccio treated that more successfully, according to the standards of his time'.⁹ The sentence holds in suspension the ambivalence that characterises approaches to Boccaccio's Latin treatises at the opening of the sixteenth century. For all the respect accorded to the Certaldan for being a groundbreaking scholar of Latinity, Boccaccio's readers and editors felt that his place in literary and scholarly history had as many negative implications as it did positive. Even when credited with mapping the descent of the gods more successfully than Hesiod, Boccaccio remains a prisoner of the concessive 'according to the standards of his time'.

That ambivalence is reflected in the history of both treatises' printing and dissemination in the sixteenth century. Judging by numbers of editions, the *De casibus* was the most popular of Boccaccio's Latin works throughout Europe, rivalled only by the *De claris mulieribus*, but the majority of its readers came to it in their own vernaculars rather than in Latin. Over the course of the sixteenth century, translations

⁹ 'Ediscenda & deorum genealogie, quibus undique refertae sunt fabulae. Eam post Hesiodum foelicus, quam pro suo saeculo, tradidit Boccacius', Desiderius Erasmus, *De ratione studii, ac legendi, interpretandique auctores libellus aureus* (Strasbourg, 1513).

in Spanish (dating from the mid-fifteenth century; first printed 1495), Dutch (1525) and Italian (1545) issued from the presses of their respective countries, while in England and France, the old renderings by Laurent de Premierfait and John Lydgate each saw several editions, with the *Nobles hommes* regularly in print until 1538,¹⁰ and *The Fall of Princes* until 1554.¹¹ Even in the great French and Italian centres of Latin printing, Latin editions of the *De casibus* are outnumbered by translations, with the imbalance growing over the course of the century. While Betussi's *Casi degl'huomini illustri* remained in print until 1600 (and beyond), and France saw a new translation with Claude Witart's *Traité des mésaventures de personnages signalez* in 1578, the last sixteenth-century Latin printing of text was in 1535.

The trajectory of the *Genealogie* follows the same pattern. Up until 1531 it was regularly printed in Latin (in editions that occasionally drop the theoretical musings of Books XIV and XV),¹² and in the anonymous fifteenth-century French translation occasionally attributed to Laurent de Premierfait (which also dropped the same books).¹³ After Jakob Micyllus' Basle edition of 1532, however, there are no more Latin editions before the end of the century. Giuseppe Betussi's 1545 translation, the *Della genealogie de gli dei gentili*, meanwhile, saw sixteen editions before 1600.

Evidently enough, the cutoff in printing of Latin editions of the *Genealogie* and *De casibus* would not have meant a cutoff in their use; at the least, library copies

¹⁰ Printed ten times, all at Paris: 1494 (twice), 1506, 1515, and 1538 (seven times). There were also three printings of the 1400 translation: Bruges, 1476; Lyon, 1483; Paris, 1483.

¹¹ Printed four times at London: 1494, 1527, 1554 (twice).

¹² Eleven printings: Venice, 1472; Louvain, 1473 (twice); Reggio Emilia, 1481; Vicenza, 1487; Venice, 1494-5, 1497, 1507, 1511.

¹³ The French text was printed five times, all at Paris: 1489-99, 1498 (twice), 1531 (twice).

would still have been available to scholarly readers.¹⁴ But the printing data remain indicative of an important aspect of Boccaccio's reputation in the sixteenth century which has been ignored by critics: the influence exerted on sixteenth-century writers by his Latin treatises largely came through the mediation of their translators. Early in the century, the vernacular versions outnumber Latin printings; after the 1530s, for both the *De casibus* and *Genealogie*, they are the only new copies available. This is perhaps easier to swallow for Giuseppe Betussi's elegant and accurate Italian renderings of the two texts than for the anonymous French *De la genealogie des dieux* or Laurent and John Lydgate's awkward and antiquated *De casibus* translations, but it points towards something important in the reception of Boccaccio as mythographer. Moving through the second quarter of the sixteenth century, his Latin works appear only to have been prized by vernacular readers.

That inference is substantiated by the testimony of Ziegler, Micyllus and Betussi, who each share, to a greater or lesser degree, Erasmus' ambivalence. Micyllus knows that it is difficult to understand ancient poetry without an intimate knowledge of mythology, and like Erasmus, he is aware that 'no one among the Italians has treated them more fully than Boccaccio'.¹⁵ It is, however, a question of understanding that Boccaccio's treatise is of worth 'even if' touched by the imperfections of its original context.¹⁶ The *Genealogie* is a useful but faulty text (further marred by imperfect textual transmission), the editing of which Micyllus

¹⁴ It is clear, for instance that, copies of the *Genealogie* remained current enough in England in the mid-late sixteenth century to be referred to in the annotations to Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar* (1579); see Starnes, *Classical Myth and Legend in Renaissance Dictionaries*, 50.

¹⁵ 'Nam cum veterum fere scripta, praecipue autem poetarum, absque fabularum cognitione, intelligi recte nequeant, apud Latinos, quod ego sciam, nemo praeter Boccatium, de iis plene quicquam tradidit', Giovanni Boccaccio, *Joannis Boccatii Peri genealogias deorum libri quindecim*, ed. Jakob Micyllus (Basle, 1532), sig. aa2^r.

¹⁶ 'etiamsi, temporum suorum infoelicitate alicubi barbaris, quam Latinis similior videatur', *Ibid.*, sig. aa2^v.

describes as an object lesson in the difficulty of delivering on one's promises.¹⁷ Micyllus presents himself as a latter day Sisyphus, battling uphill to correct the treatise's faults with editorial interventions that range from correcting the spelling and structure of Boccaccio's old fashioned Latin, to deleting entire tales and replacing them with versions witnessed by more trustworthy sources.¹⁸ And all that before annotating each section with references to alternative versions available in the Latin and Greek texts unknown to Boccaccio. One senses that he is not being falsely modest when he warns his printer that some faults are more than likely to remain – 'many, even'.¹⁹ The epistle is hardly calculated to sell the reader on the reliability of the *Genealogie*. Even with Micyllus' scrupulous annotations and additional references to a wide range of Greek and Latin texts, it is hard to escape the editor's own impression that Boccaccio's great compilation has outlived its usefulness, too faulty even at the level of its Latin to act as a support for more up to date scholarship.

A similar mood of academic resignation obtains in Hieronymus Ziegler's dedicatory letter and preface to his 1544 Augsburg edition of the *De casibus*. What begins as a staunch defence of the *studia humanitatis* soon turns into a series of excuses for Boccaccio's treatise. Counting the book among the ancient works it is useful to rescue from oblivion, Ziegler states that no treatise is 'more useful to the human condition, and more pleasant, than this same work of the most famous historian Boccaccio, concerning the falls of illustrious men – because, indeed, it has

¹⁷ 'Saepe equidem audivi Hervagi charissimi facilius multo esse promittere, quam quod promiseris, praestare', Ibid., sig. aa2^r.

¹⁸ 'Non enim modo voces hic atque illic quasdam explevimus, aut immutavimus, id quod in aliis plerumque fieri solet, sed totas alicubi fabulas retexuimus, suisque veris, & à doctis ac veteribus traditis, capitibus, ac locis restitutas rescripsimus', Ibid., sig. aa2^v.

¹⁹ 'Tametsi fateor, ne sic quidem omnes ubique mendas, omniaque vicia sublata aut restituta esse, etiamque multa restare', Ibid.

lain hidden for so long, despite the efforts of the studiosus'.²⁰ The task of rescuing the *De casibus* from obscurity is, however, represented as one of rectification, a question of cleansing the text of 'the innumerable faults with which it swarmed everywhere', thanks to the inadequacies of previous editions, the vicissitudes of manuscript transmission, and the character of the text itself.²¹ The faults were so many, in fact, that Ziegler, if we are to believe him, devoted a full two years of his life to expunging them, without feeling that he had cleansed the text of blemishes.²² Aside from the damages of time and incompetent copyists, the reader is warned that 'you will find many things used against the common customs of the Grammarians'.²³ Eventually, we are warned not to carp, for such is the text, and Ziegler holds 'that it is not the office of the good man to blame the positions of others rashly'.²⁴ It is better, he states, 'if you cannot praise, to pretend'.²⁵

The final admonition to dissemble rather than dispraise is, like Micyllus' caution to expect errors, hardly a resounding affirmation of the book's worth. Though the *De casibus*, by dint of its selective and exemplary *modus scribendi*, remained less open to claims of faulty scholarship than the *Genealogie*, Ziegler's preface still marks it as falling between two stools: not modern enough for the sixteenth century, and not

²⁰ 'nescio, an quicumque modo posset prodire hominum conditioni magis utile, iocundumque, quam hoc ipsum Bocatii historici clarissimi, de casibus virorum illustrium opus. Quod quidem non sine dispendio studiosorum, tam diu delituit', Giovanni Boccaccio, *De casibus virorum illustrium libri novem*, ed. Hieronymus Ziegler (Augsburg, 1544), sig. α3^r.

²¹ 'Hic liber iam olim etiam, sed antiquissimis, incultisque characteribus impressus, & nunc primum ab innumeris, quibus passim scatebat, mendis [...] repurgatus', Ibid., title page.

²² 'in hoc Bocatii opere expurgando biennium fere consumpserim, tamen mihi ipsi satis fecisse non videor', Ibid., sig. α3^v.

²³ 'invenies in hoc opere multa, contra communem morem Grammaticorum usurpata [...] In quibus ego quicquam mutare non debui', Ibid.

²⁴ 'Neque ego arbitror boni hominis esse officium temere aliena repraehedere', Ibid.

²⁵ 'Satiis igitur est, si laudare nequeas, simules', Ibid.

old enough to inveigle itself among the genuine ancients. Either way, it was apparently no longer attractive as a sales proposition for publishers of Latin texts.

Bound up with Micyllus and Ziegler's ambivalence toward Boccaccio's treatises is the fact that, even as they re-edit Boccaccio for new readers, they do not give those readers any sense of his authority as a scholar. In the wake of Micyllus' preface, the editor's over-scrupulous annotations to every section of the *Genealogie* reinforce the impression that Boccaccio is far from the most reliable of sources. With marginal tags and footnotes continuously alerting the reader to the myriad other possible versions of the tales and the vast number of texts not consulted by Boccaccio, it is made abundantly clear to the reader that the *Genealogie* on its own will not suffice as a reference book. As a whole, Micyllus' edition is less a further stage of the treatise's dissemination than an extended argument for its obsolescence. Though the title page chooses to partially translate and transliterate the title into Greek, the copious annotations make it abundantly clear that Boccaccio made little use of the Greek sources made available by print. A reader coming to Theseus' life in Micyllus' edition might still find it useful, but, directed away to sources like Plutarch, Diodorus Siculus, Hellanicus and scholia to Homer, would hardly be able to view it as the comprehensive guide it once seemed.²⁶

The *De casibus* is, as noted, more resistant to claims of obsolescence, but Ziegler's edition nonetheless casts a shadow over Boccaccio's worth as the 'most distinguished historian' that the title page purports him to be. There is also the continued sense that the *De casibus* is so textually faulty that it may no longer be trustworthy. Even the commendatory poems by various hands tend to be more

²⁶ Boccaccio, *Peri genealogias deorum*, 259.

forthcoming in their praises for Ziegler's editing than for Boccaccio's writing. It might be accepted, for instance, that no one is more learned in history than Boccaccio, but 'this your work, and lofty force of mind, would bring no worthy benefit to us or to you, if Ziegler had not restored you – dirty, torn, and stuffed with faults – with his learned power.'²⁷ Another of the commendatory poems describes Ziegler as having performed a labour as great as cleaning the Augean stables.²⁸ Closer to the bone of Boccaccio's status as an historian however, is the same problem of Ziegler's annotations undermining the original text by supplementing it so visibly. Theseus' biography has a full page of attached notes that direct the reader to sources even more various than those cited by Micyllus, from well-known texts like Seneca's tragedies and the *Metamorphoses* to Greek sources like Plutarch, Palaephatus, Diodorus Siculus and Strabo.

Despite the apparent hyperbole, then, it was with some justice that Giuseppe Betussi described himself in 1547 as 'giving new life, and bringing back to light the works [of Boccaccio] that have already lain buried in the shadows for so many years'.²⁹ Betussi evidently believed that Boccaccio's Latin works had endured an unjustly prolonged period of obscurity, and disrespect, and it is with a certain defensiveness that he justifies his position. The *Genealogie* takes its place among a select group of works that are of 'greater use to the world, perhaps, than the actions of

²⁷ 'Historiam: Bocati: licet haud te doctius alter, / Maiori in lucem vel gravitate dedit. / Non tamen ille tuus labor, & vis ardua mentis / Vel tibi, vel nobis commoda digna ferant. / Ni te squallentem [sic], lacerum, medisque refertum / Zieglerus docta restituisset ope', from Georgius Laetus' commendatory poem in Boccaccio, *De casibus virorum illustrium*, sig. a4^r.

²⁸ 'Augiae stabulum labore multo / Zieglerus nitidum pereruditus / Fecit', Ibid.

²⁹ 'donar novella vita, & ritornare in luce l'opere di lui già tanti anni nelle tenebre sepolte', *Della genealogia de gli dei di M. Giovanni Boccaccio libri quindici*, trans. Giuseppe Betussi (Venice, 1569), sig. *2^r. All quotations are from this edition, the only copy I have been able to examine, in a digitised version from the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek (Res/Ant. 447 h). The biography printed in the 1545 *Della genealogia* and subsequent editions is an expanded version of that first composed to accompany Betussi's translation of the *De claris mulieribus*.

many living men, not little praised and held in esteem among us'.³⁰ The treatise's importance and utility, however, appear to have been recognised only rarely, or rarely enough for Betussi to suggest that only those who know the book can make any sort of judgement about it. Only those who have read the *Genealogie* can know 'that in those books is included the greater part of the things useful and necessary not just for poetry, but also for the other sciences, that one could [only] find with great difficulty in many other poetic books'.³¹ One would, he goes on to state, be foolish to mock such a work.

That said, he still goes on to broach the same territory as Erasmus. There is no dispute over the accusation that the fourteenth century was not the ideal time to be an ambitious Latin scholar, but Betussi impresses on the reader the sense that Boccaccio's merits should be considered in relation to his contemporaries, rather than to scholars of the sixteenth century; only then can his qualities be understood.

Regarding his Latin, for instance:

considerandosi quei tempi, che anco erano infettati dalle relique d'i Gothi, & gli altri Barbari, non poco si vede lui essere stato eccellente, perche se riguardaremo al Petrarca, & a gli altri scrittori del suo tempo, vedremo la latinità del Boccaccio (come in tutto perfetta non sia) senza dubbio essere stata la migliore dell'altre, essendo anco di havere compassione a i loro giorni, i quali mancavano di molte commodità a cio necessarie, ne quella copia di libri, havevano, ch' hora si ritroviamo noi.

considering those times – which were still infected with the remains of the Goths, & of the other Barbarians – one sees to no small extent that he was excellent, for if we look at Petrarch, and at the other writers of his time, we will see that Boccaccio's Latinity (for all that it is not perfect in every way) was without doubt better than the others, it also being necessary to have compassion for those times, which lacked many of the conveniences necessary for that, and

³⁰ 'maggior utile al mondum che forse non sanno le attioni di molti vivi tra noi non poco istimati, & havuti in pregio', Ibid.

³¹ 'che in quelli vi è incluso la maggior parte delle cose utili, & necessarie non solamente all' poesia, ma anco alle altre scienze, che a gran fatica in molti altri poetici libri si potrebbe ritrovare', Ibid., sig. *6^v.

which did not have the variety of books that we have recovered now.³²

The defensiveness is familiar by now. But where Micyllus and Ziegler were being defensive of their own status as scholars – anticipating and neutralising any guilt by association with Boccaccio’s medieval Latin and medieval scholarship – Betussi defends Boccaccio himself. He was, we are asked to remember, not just of his time, but ahead of it.

It is slightly ironic that the reader should be called upon to reconsider the merits of Boccaccio’s Latinity in the paratext to an Italian translation of his most ambitious Latin work. The invitation suggests, however, that Betussi believed the translation would be read by competent Latinists as well as those expert only in the vernacular. If so, the mixed composition of the audience would have meant that Betussi’s translation was as much about relieving Boccaccio himself of his burdensome and imperfect Latinity as it was about relieving his readers of it. That the translation is from Latin to Italian should not disguise the fact that it is also from ‘medieval’ to ‘renaissance’. In the shift from one tongue to the other, the text is made readable as much for those *cognoscenti* acute enough to be offended by its original departures from the ideals of sixteenth-century Ciceronian prose as for those unable to read Latin with any degree of fluency at all. It seems likely that the new lease of life given to the *De casibus*, the *De claris mulieribus* and the *Genealogie* by Betussi’s translations is owed in part to Betussi’s effacing of the most egregious markers of Boccaccio’s age, by doing what his Latin editors had not: turning his fourteenth-century prose into sixteenth-century prose; restoring to him the air of authority he once had.

³² Ibid., sig.*6^v.

That restoration is aided by choosing at the same time not to do what Micyllus and Ziegler had done: annotating. Without the implicit criticism of all those addenda and without the linguistic markers of an age not quite bygone enough to have acquired the status of the ancients, Betussi's translations of Boccaccio's treatises came to their readers as texts in which they could have confidence. As such, they were in a position to disseminate Boccaccio's versions of exemplary mythography and systemising mythography to new generations of Italian readers. Whether or not a portion of that Italian-reading public was to be found in England is another question – but given the vogue for Italian poetry among the Tudor elite it is not unlikely.³³

Given the split between a scholarly Latin-reading audience, made aware of the two treatises' shortcomings, and directed away to primary sources on mythology, and a vernacular audience of those who still found much of use or interest in Boccaccio's work, the effect of the *De casibus* and the *Genealogie* on conceptions of mythology in sixteenth-century Europe also appears to have been split. For those happy to trust Boccaccio as a worthy guide to mythology, history and their interpretation, the conclusions of the first chapter hold: mythology remained a flexible and open body of knowledge, offered up for re-use and re-interpretation. For those with scholarly scruples (or pretensions), meanwhile, it is the impact of primary sources and their reception that must be considered, especially newer, less familiar figures like Plutarch and Palaephatus, whose printing brought with it its own implications for the consideration of mythology.

³³ For useful overviews of cultural exchanges with Italy, see Jason Lawrence, *'Who the Devil Taught Thee So Much Italian?': Italian Language Learning and Literary Imitation in Early Modern England* (Manchester University Press, 2005); Michael Wyatt, *The Italian Encounter with Tudor England: a Cultural Politics of Translation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

II. New Old Sources

Readers who came to the Thesean tales in Micyllus' editions of the *Metamorphoses* and *Genealogie* or in Ziegler's *De casibus*, were referred away to a number of sources which show just how diffuse the reception of mythological information could be, even in texts that seek to pool that information. Ziegler and Micyllus harvest their notes as much from works of history, geography, biography and paradoxography, as from poetry, appealing to both Latin and Greek texts in the process. Notes to the 1532 *Genealogie* direct readers, unsurprisingly, to the *Metamorphoses*, but also to commentary on the *Iliad*, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, and to Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliotheca historica*.³⁴ To those, the combined Regius-Micyllus commentary to the 1543 *Metamorphoses* adds Pausanias' *Description of Greece*.³⁵ Ziegler's even more generous annotations to the *De casibus* name, in addition to the sources already mentioned, the *Genealogie*, Justinus (*Epitoma historiarum Philippicarum Pompei Trogi*), Solinus (*De mirabilibus mundi*), Seneca (*Phaedra*), Strabo (*Geographica*), Herodotus (*Histories*), Hyginus (*Fabulae*), Pomponius Mela (*De situ orbis*) and Palaephatus (*On Unbelievable Tales*).³⁶

The wide range of different genres (from history to tragedy) and classes of texts (from epitomes and compilations, to plays and school-texts) being referred to here is matched by the variation in their ages. Readers of the first-century *Metamorphoses* and fourteenth-century *De casibus* and *Genealogie* are being referred to texts that between them cover a period of around 700 years, from the fifth century

³⁴ Boccaccio, *Peri genealogias deorum*, 259.

³⁵ Ovid, *P. Ouidii Nasonis Metamorphoseōs libri quindecim*, 167, 183.

³⁶ Boccaccio, *De casibus virorum illustrium*, 17–18.

B.C.E. (Herodotus), all the way to the second century C.E. (Pausanias). The proliferation of *fontes* that the notes display is not, in spirit, all that different to the additive medieval approach to annotation. Even though, with the exception of Ziegler's references to the *Genealogie*, all the texts in the editors' annotations are classical, the annotations still work within a 'more is better' mode that reinforces the sense of mythology's fragmentary pluralism. As more and more texts were brought to bear on the elucidation (and amelioration) of authors like Ovid and Boccaccio, more and more conflicting versions of individual myths appeared, and the less ancient mythology appeared as a once-coherent body of knowledge awaiting reconstruction. Every rediscovered text and scholium tended to lead to a proliferation of the editorial *seu ut aliis* ('or as others have it') that litter the notes to Boccaccio and Ovid, and brought with it a growing need to reconceive the idea of mythology itself.

How readers were expected to consult such a wide range of sources is another question. The printing and diffusion of the new classical sources that were to be picked over for alternative narratives and viewpoints on mythology is key to understanding the effects those texts could have had on readers' and writers' conceptions of the ancient fables. While there is not space here to give a detailed account of the printing and reception of each of the texts named above, it is worth considering in some detail the texts most important to the reception of Theseus. Far ahead of the other rediscovered texts in providing raw information on the Thesean tales, and, simultaneously, in providing means of conceptualising mythology, are two of the Greek works named by Micyllus and Ziegler: Palaephatus' fourth-century B.C.E. *On Unbelievable Tales* (*Περὶ ἀπίστων*) and Plutarch's first-century C.E. *Parallel Lives* (*Βίοι παράλληλοι*). Composed four centuries apart, for very different

purposes, the two texts met with very different receptions on the revival of Greek learning in the early modern world, but each provided sixteenth-century readers with classical precedents for mythology's translation into other modes of discourse. To these can be added Hyginus' late first-century B.C.E. *Fabulae*, a compilation of around 300 myths that was rediscovered and edited by Micyllus himself.³⁷ Together, these texts and their publishing histories show just how fully the *ad fontes* principle could serve to contradict any notion of stability or singularity in the world of mythology.

i. Palaephatus and the compilations

The *On Unbelievable Tales* is a little known and rarely read work by a writer of whom we know almost nothing, but it appears to have met a certain amount of success in the sixteenth century. Printed more frequently than either the *De casibus* or *Genealogie*, the brief treatise's inclusion in compilations of mythographical works (discussed below) gave it an important place in sixteenth-century mythographical discourse. Eagerly seized upon by scholarly printers as a valuable addition to the canon of classical mythography, it was first printed in a 1505 Aldine anthology of fabulous and mythographical texts, and went on to see a total of 37 printings before 1600, as a stand-alone text and as a part of mythographical compilations.³⁸ Though it

³⁷ Hyginus, *C. Iulii Hygini Augusti liberti fabularum liber: ad omnium poëtarum lectionem mire necessarius & antehac nunquam excusus*, ed. Jakob Micyllus (Basle, 1535). Unfortunately Micyllus destroyed the only manuscript witness to the *Fabulae* in transcribing it, leaving subsequent editors to work on the evidence available from his own *editio princeps*.

³⁸ Figures from the USTC. The Aldine printing (discussed further, below) is Aesop, Palaephatus, and Cornutus, *Habentur hoc uolumine haec, uidelicet. Vita, & Fabellæ Aesopi cum interpretatione Latina: ita tamen ut separari a graeco possit pro uniuscuiusque arbitrio. quibus traducendis multum certe elaborauimus. nam quae ante tralata habebantur, in fida admodu[m] erant, quod facillimum erit conferanti cognoscere.*, ed. Aldo Manuzio (Venice, 1505).

regularly appeared in Greek, it also spawned two Latin translations,³⁹ with another into Italian,⁴⁰ and one into French.⁴¹

The text itself is a fragmentary remnant of a longer work that the tenth-century Byzantine encyclopaedia the *Suida* describes as consisting of five books (a statement substantiated by the references found in Eusebius' *Chronicon* and Orosius' *Historiae*, among others).⁴² What remains are 52 rationalising accounts of myths and mythological figures, seven of which are generally accepted to be Byzantine additions. Of Palaephatus himself, it appears that he was an Athenian denizen (though not necessarily a native), most likely active in 340s-330s B.C.E.

The significance of the *On Unbelievable Tales* lies in its being the earliest surviving ancient testimony available to renaissance readers of the rationalising and etymologising approach to ancient myth that found favour with later Christian writers like Constantine's religious advisor Lactantius,⁴³ Fulgentius and Isidore. Though he is not, strictly speaking, a Euhemerist, by dint of not being atheistic in his approach, Palaephatus represents a similar strain of Greek rationalism, which also found a place in Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliotheca historica*.⁴⁴ As he states in his preface, the myths

³⁹ Palaephatus, *Fragmenta Palephati De historiis incredibilibus*, trans. Angelo Cospi, 1511; Palaephatus, *Palaephati scriptoris Græci Opusculum De non credendis fabulosis narrationibus*, trans. Filippo Fasianini (Bologna, 1515).

⁴⁰ Palaephatus, *Opra bellissima, quale narra le Historie, e veri successi di tutte le fauole, che antichamente si sono fatte, e dimostra la uerita di ciascuna fintion de Poeti*, trans. Anonymous (Venice, 1545).

⁴¹ Palaephatus, *Le premier liure des Narrations fabuleuses avec les discours de la verité et histoires d'icelles*, trans. Guillaume Guérout (Lyon, 1558).

⁴² The following account is drawn from the Jacob Stern's introduction to Palaephatus, *On Unbelievable Tales (Peri Apiston): With Notes and Greek Text from the 1902 B.G. Teubner Edition*, trans. Jacob Stern (Wauconda Il.: Bolchazy-Carducci, 1996), 4. Boccaccio cites Palaephatus once, in his discussion of Phrixus and Helle; a reference that comes courtesy of Eusebius; see *Genealogie*, XIII.lxviii.3.

⁴³ Frequently confused with the supposed author of the so-called Lactantian summaries of the *Metamorphoses*.

⁴⁴ For discussion of the relations between Euhemerus, Palaephatus and Diodorus, see Don Cameron Allen, *Mysteriously Meant: The Rediscovery of Pagan Symbolism and Allegorical Interpretation in the Renaissance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 53–61.

must contain historical truths, because there is no possibility that they could have been invented from scratch: ‘My own belief is that there is a reality behind all stories. For names alone without stories would hardly have arisen: first there must have been deeds and thereafter stories about them’.⁴⁵

It is on these real, historical events that the first mythographical writers worked: ‘the poets and early historians in order to astonish people have turned certain past events into unbelievable and wonderful tales’.⁴⁶ It is possible, Palaephatus believes, through judicious application of etymology, old-fashioned common sense, and local knowledge to re-ground the myths in reality, ‘according to the probable’ (*το εἰκός*).⁴⁷ If he occasionally stretches the definition of ‘the probable’ by applying his ingenuity to tales that resist it with all their might, he maintains a veneer of plausibility by stating that his conclusions are based on a form of environmental anthropology:

I visited many lands and inquired of the older people what knowledge they had about each of these tales, and I am here writing down what I learned from them. I myself saw the condition of each place and in what follows I have written not merely what I was told, but after going myself and making inquiry.⁴⁸

These local geographical and environmental aspects of mythology, that Palaephatus (along with Pausanias) helped introduce into sixteenth-century mythographical discourse, represent a genuinely fresh current. At the same time, however, his

⁴⁵ ‘ἐμοὶ δὲ δοκεῖ γενέσθαι πάντα τὰ λεγόμενα (οὐ γὰρ ὀνόματα μόνον ἐγένοντο, λόγος δὲ περὶ αὐτῶν οὐδεὶς ὑπῆρξεν· ἀλλὰ πρότερον ἐγένετο τὸ ἔργον, εἶθ’ οὕτως ὁ λόγος ὁ περὶ αὐτῶν’, Palaephatus, *On Unbelievable Tales*, 29, 91. All quotations from Palaephatus are given in Stern’s translations.

⁴⁶ ‘γενομένων δὲ τινα οἱ ποιηταὶ καὶ λογογράφοι παρέτρεψαν εἰς τὸ ἀπιστότερον καὶ θαυμασιώτερον, τοῦ θαυμάζειν ἔνεκα τοὺς ἀθρώπους’, Ibid., 29, 92.

⁴⁷ Jacob Stern, ‘Rationalizing Myth: Methods and Motives in Palaephatus’, in *From Myth to Reason?: Studies in the Development of Greek Thought*, ed. R. G. A. Buxton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 215-22: 215.

⁴⁸ ‘ἐπελθὼν δὲ καὶ πλείστας χώρας ἐπυνθανόμην τῶν πρεσβυτέρων ὡς ἀχούοιεν περὶ ἐκάστου αὐτῶν, συγγράφω δὲ ἅ ἐπυθόμην παρ’ αὐτῶν. καὶ τὰ χωρία αὐτὸς εἶδον ὡς ἔστιν ἕκαστον ἔχον, καὶ ψέγραφα ταῦτα οὐχ οἷα ἦν λεγόμενα, ἀλλ’ αὐτὸς ἐπελθὼν καὶ ἱστορήσας’, Palaephatus, *On Unbelievable Tales*, 29, 92.

methodology is often much the same as the etymologising and explanatory tactics seen in the *Genealogie*, *Ovide moralisé* and *Nobles hommes*. Less distant from the origins of mythology than they are, he has the benefit of providing Christian-friendly accounts of the myths that have the authority of an actual Greek behind them, but his significance lies less in radically altering mythographical discourse than in providing authoritative substantiation for one of its main currents. At a point when the *ad fontes* principle was assuming such importance, it was one thing to find such approaches in the *Genealogie*, and quite another to see them at work in a Greek author.

Palaephatus' standard procedure can be seen in his discussion of Pasiphae and the birth of the Minotaur. Starting with a bald summary, he goes on to outline the Minotaur's impossibility within the laws of nature. This he does trenchantly, from several different angles. With or without Daedalus' wooden cow, Pasiphae could not have copulated with a bull because it is impossible for animals of different species to mate if their genitalia do not match; nor could one species breed with another anyway; and nor, again, would a bull mount a wooden cow. Finally, even if one put aside all these difficulties, a woman would never 'be able to bear an embryo with horns'.⁴⁹ Having demolished the idea that a monster like the Minotaur could ever have come to be, Palaephatus then states what really happened. Pasiphae seduced a handsome attendant of Minos, called Taurus, and fell pregnant. Unfortunately, Minos had been 'afflicted with a pain in his genitals' when the child was conceived, and so quickly realised that he had been betrayed by his wife and attendant.⁵⁰ Sparing the child, Minos sent him to wait on the shepherds in the mountains, where he became first disobedient and then entirely feral, living off sheep and digging a deep burrow to

⁴⁹ 'οὐδε φέρειν δύναται γυνή ἔμβρυον κέρατα ἔκον', Palaephatus, *On Unbelievable Tales*, 32, 96.

⁵⁰ 'ἀλγοῦντα τὰ αἰδοῖα', *Ibid.*

avoid capture by those sent to arrest him. Finally, the bastard reached such a point of depravity that whenever Minos wanted to punish anyone, he sent them to their deaths at the bastard's hands, in his tunnel retreat. 'Such was the event', states Palaephatus, 'but the poets turned the account into a myth'.⁵¹

On the authority of a genuine ancient Greek, it is easy to imagine sixteenth-century readers giving Palaephatus' rationalisations some credence. But it is not really possible to assess Palaephatus' possible impact on early modern mythography in isolation. Only eight of the *On Unbelievable Tales*' editions present it as a stand-alone text; the other 29 present it alongside other mythographical and fabulous texts in compilations. The composition of these anthologies points toward important facets of mythology's reception in the sixteenth century. The Aldine edition, printed twelve times in total, with editions at Venice, Louvain, Basle, Paris and Lyon, set a precedent by appending Palaephatus' treatise to a hodgepodge collection of texts very loosely united by their connection to the fabulous. There, the *On Unbelievable Tales* appears alongside Aesop's *Fables*, a further 43 versified Aesopian fables ascribed to 'Gabrius' (today more generally 'Babrius') and a mixed set of other texts that included proverbs, further Aesopian fables, a treatise on hieroglyphs, extracts from Philostratus, and Cornutus' *Compendium of Greek Theology* (as *De natura deorum*), and the *Homeric Questions* ascribed to a certain Heraclitus.⁵² In 1535, after four printings at Basle, the Aldine compilation was joined in the presses there by another mythographical compilation, gathered around Micyllus' *editio princeps* of Hyginus' *Fabulae*. Printed nine times before 1600, largely at Basle, but with two editions at

⁵¹ 'τοιούτου δὲ τοῦ συμβάματος γενομένου, ἐπὶ τὸ μυθῶδες οἱ ποιηταὶ τὸν λόγον ἐξέτρεψαν' Ibid., 32–33, 98.

⁵² For the full contents, see the title page in Aesop, Palaephatus, and Cornutus, *Vita, & Fabellæ Aesopici cum interpretatione Latina*.

Paris and one at Geneva, the Micyllus compilation was marginally more cohesive than the Aldine. Here, Palaephatus' treatise was appended to Hyginus' *Fabulae* and *Astronomica* alongside Fulgentius' *Mythologiae* and *Expositio sermonum antiquorum*, Albricus Philosophus' *De deorum imaginibus*, Aratus' *Phaenomena*, and a brief treatise *De sphaera* misattributed to Proclus, as well as Cornutus' *De natura deorum*. Later editions included the pseudo-Apollodoran *Bibliotheca* and Giraldi's short treatise on the Muses.⁵³

The composition of the two compilations points to a crucial aspect of mythographical discourse in the sixteenth century. It was, in its own ways, as eclectic, additive and non-systematic as medieval mythographical discourse had been. In the Aldine compilation the mixture of material is striking: most of the texts are linked by similarities that can be termed tenuous at best. Aesop's fables are also *muthoi* in Greek, but they make strange bedfellows for Palaephatus' historicised myths. Where Aesop deals in a radically fictive form of *muthos*, designed with edification in mind, Palaephatus sees the *muthoi* as truth distorted merely in order 'to amaze men'.⁵⁴ It is pragmatic to assume that the intended audience of a Greek edition at the beginning of the sixteenth century would have been able to differentiate between different types of *fabula* / *muthos*, but that neglects the question of why Aesop's fables should find themselves alongside treatises on mythology, let alone a disquisition on hieroglyphs. There is the sensation that the obscure writings of the ancients, however various they might be, form a single area of study, despite the different ontologies that lay behind them. The one thing that the texts can be said to have in common fundamentally is that they are all in Greek, which is, one suspects, the point of the compilation. This is

⁵³ See, e.g., the 1578 Paris edition.

⁵⁴ 'τοῦ θαυμάζειν ἕνεκα τοὺς ἀνθρώπους', Palaephatus, *On Unbelievable Tales*, 29, 92.

less a mythographical collection than a set of texts suitable for the dedicated student of Greek.

Different problematic assumptions underlie the composition of Micyllus' anthology. Here the title page's claim that the works have similar subjects holds true: all the texts treat astrology, mythology or the links between the two, and they often do so with similar methodologies. But a different form of incoherence has crept in: temporal. The dates of composition range from the third and fourth centuries B.C.E. (Palaephatus, Aratus), through the first, second, fifth and sixth centuries C.E. (Hyginus, pseudo-Apollodorus, pseudo-Proclus and Fulgentius),⁵⁵ right up to the fourteenth (Albricus) and, eventually, the sixteenth (Giraldi). If the *ad fontes* principle is meant to be at work here, Micyllus' anthology falls short by some distance, placing its genuine ancients alongside texts that, as in the case of Albricus' Latinised excerpts from the *Ovide moralisé*, are working at best at second or third hand, if not worse.⁵⁶ Nowhere is this range noted, however; Micyllus reserves his introductory remarks for Hyginus, leaving texts of widely varying origins, reliability and approaches to mythology on a par with one another.

The result of the eclecticism of the Hyginus anthology and its descendants is a mounting juxtaposition of different versions of individual myths and different views

⁵⁵ On the dating of Hyginus, see Hyginus, *Fabulae*, ed. Peter K Marshall, Bibliotheca scriptorum Graecorum et Romanorum Teubneriana (Leipzig: Teubner, 1993). For the *Bibliotheca*, see Aubrey Diller, 'The Text History of the Bibliotheca of Pseudo-Apollodorus', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 66 (January 1935): 296–313; Apollodorus, *The Library*, trans. Sir James Frazer (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1921), xi. On the pseudo-Proclan *De sphaera*, see 'Geminus' in Virginia Brown, James Hankins, and Robert A. Kaster, *Catalogus translationum et commentariorum, vol. VIII* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2003), 8. On Fulgentius and the *Mythologiae*, see Fabius Planciades Fulgentius, *Virgile dévoilé*, ed. and trans. Etienne Wolff (Villeneuve d'Asq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2009); Fabius Planciades Fulgentius, *Mythologies*, ed. and trans. Etienne Wolff and Philippe Dain (Villeneuve d'Asq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2013).

⁵⁶ On Albericus/Albricus' *De deorum imaginibus*, its date and relationship to other medieval mythographical treatises, see Allen, *Mysteriously Meant*, 167n, 213; Ernest Hatch Wilkins, 'Descriptions of Pagan Divinities from Petrarch to Chaucer', *Speculum* 32 (1957): 511–22.

on their origins and nature. In the 1535 printing, a reader looking for information on Theseus would find it scattered through Hyginus' two treatises and Palaephatos' *On Unbelievable Tales*, and reconstructing the hero's life would necessitate hopping from fable to fable using Micyllus' index, before reordering the results into something resembling a coherent biography. Given, on one hand, the frequently unreliable index, and, on the other, the scattered and contradictory details found at different points in the *Fabulae*, the *Astronomica*, and the *On Unbelievable Tales*, the exercise offers as many problems as it does solutions. To begin, the hero's ancestry would (as in the *Genealogie*) be dubious: in the *Fabulae* he is generally named as Aegeus' son, and once as Neptune's, but then again, he is omitted from the list of Neptune's sons given in Fable 157.⁵⁷ If one were to turn to the index and find Aethra, Theseus' mother, the situation would be slightly clarified: she is said to have slept with Neptune and Aegeus on the same night, leaving the situation unclear for everyone involved.⁵⁸ In the *Astronomica*, however, a long passage deals with Theseus precisely as the son of the sea god, giving a tale in which Minos challenges him to prove as much, and he does so, by rescuing Minos' ring from the sea, and returning with a god-made crown as an extra bonus.⁵⁹ As for Theseus' deeds, in addition to killing the Minotaur, the *Fabulae* informs us about his disposal of the Isthmian thieves,⁶⁰ places him among the Argonauts,⁶¹ and recounts, briefly, his kidnapping of Helen, as well as (uniquely) stating that he kidnapped the beautiful boy Chrysippus.⁶² Theseus' companionship with Pirithous is mentioned several times, but the Katabasis in search

⁵⁷ Hyginus, *C. Iulii Hygini Augusti liberti fabularum liber*, 65.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 65.

of Proserpina is recounted not as the result of their sexual audacity, as is commonly the case. Instead, Jove, having witnessed the two heroes' bravery, orders them in a dream to go down to Hell and claim Proserpina's hand in marriage.⁶³ For the most famous deed of all, more doubt reigns. In the *Fabulae*, Theseus escapes the Labyrinth using Ariadne's twine, but it is suggested in the *Astronomica* that he does so by means of the light glittering from the divine crown he rescued from the deeps while proving to Minos that he was indeed Neptune's son. Theseus then gave that divine crown to Ariadne, and on her desertion it became the constellation Corona.⁶⁴ In the *Astronomica* version, no mention is made of Ariadne having any part in helping Theseus kill the Minotaur and escape, though it is perhaps to be presumed that the reader already knows that part of the tale.

Of course, moving on a little further in the compilation, the reader would come to Palaephatus' rationalisation of the Labyrinth, which does away with the need for balls of string or glittering crowns altogether.⁶⁵ Incidentally, in the same passage from the *Astronomica*, the hero indicted in the *Fabulae* for the impious deed of kidnapping the virgin Helen from the altar of Diana fulfils a role as protector of vulnerable virgins.⁶⁶ When Minos takes a shine to one of the seven Athenian maidens on their way to the Labyrinth, Theseus interposes himself, which leads to Minos' challenge to prove his divine parentage in the first place. This might sit ill, however, not only with the kidnap (*raptus*) of Helen, but also with the *Fabulae*'s listing of Theseus among the heroes guilty of killing their wives, for having killed the Amazon

⁶³ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 117.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 65.

Antiope (*seu, ut alii*, Hippolyta).⁶⁷ We are, however, not told when or why he did so, and searching through the volume for further information on the Amazons would not clarify very much. As far as Palaephatus is concerned an army of female warriors is so unlikely as to be impossible; they were obviously clean-shaven and long-haired men, who favoured clothing that reached their feet, and so resembled women.⁶⁸

The tail-chasing process of flicking back and forth between the index entries for Theseus and the figures associated with him in order to collate something resembling a coherent narrative of even a single episode in his life becomes even more problematic with the inclusion of further mythographical works in the 1549 and 1579 editions of the compilations. Indeed, it is probably for the best that the surviving text of pseudo-Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca*, included in the latter, ends abruptly a short way into Theseus' life.

It is easy, once again, to postulate simple pragmatism on the part of the reader looking for mythographical information. The obvious response is to pick and choose, refer to other authorities (Ovid or Boccaccio, for instance), restrict the quest for coherence to specific actions or episodes, decide whether to view the fables as fiction or history, or some mixture of the two. What is key, however, is that such pragmatism, itself an interpretive stance, is forced upon the reader by the nature of the source-compilation. In seeking information on a figure such as Theseus, the reader of a compilation like Micyllus' is, by engaging with the ancient mythographers, forced to engage in a mythographical process himself. The situation is similar to that for early readers of the *Genealogie*, as discussed in Chapter One, but considerably exacerbated. The so-called *fontes*, rather than offering the secure anchor of an origin

⁶⁷ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 126.

for the myths, tend to multiply them into a proliferating forest of *seu ut aliis*. It is by no means impossible to construct a narrative of Theseus' life from the pages of Micyllus' compilation in any of its three versions, but doing so is, of necessity, an interpretive mythographical act. The nature of the material, exacerbated by different mythographies being gathered in a single volume, is such that the reader is faced with two choices: either to construct his own narrative by ordering known events according to his perception of historical, narrative or mythological chronology and likelihood, eliminating coexistent contradictory narrative details or mutually exclusive interpretive frameworks as he goes along; or to read in suspended contradiction and variety, leaving mythology in its natural state.

ii. Plutarch

Readers seeking to follow up on annotations to the Thesean tales in the *Metamorphoses*, *De casibus* and *Genealogie* would not inevitably have been led to compilations like Micyllus' *Fabulae* et al. The pre-eminent source on the Athenian hero in the sixteenth century was Plutarch's 'Life of Theseus', the only comprehensive classical account of Theseus' life to have survived. Commonly cited by critics as the main source for renaissance references to the hero, the 'Life' is also an important document for renaissance approaches to mythography. And if the audience directly reached by authors such as Hyginus and Palaephatus was almost certainly small, scholarly and rarefied, Plutarch's audience was vast and various. Translations included, approximately 190 complete editions of the *Parallel Lives*, in

Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, German, and English appeared between 1470 and 1600, reaching every corner of the continent.⁶⁹

The *Lives* was also one of the relatively small number of Greek texts to have been widely disseminated before the rise of the presses; a factor that reinforced its uniquely influential position in the long sixteenth century. The collection's popularity had its origins a century before the birth of print, in the overlapping circles of humanist scholars who learned Greek at the knees of Emmanuel Chrysoloras and his pupil Guarino da Verona. The *Lives*' central place in their curricula led to the production of numerous and widely disseminated Latin translations by their pupils and their pupils' pupils over the course of the fifteenth century.⁷⁰ Vernacular translations also appeared impressively early: by 1379 the *Lives* had been translated into a hybrid blend of Aragonese and Catalan Spanish by the Dominican Bishop Nicolas of Drenopolis, with a Tuscan translation following soon after.⁷¹ It was the Latin versions that had the greatest impact, however; the scattered translations made in the Chrysoloras and Guarino circles were gradually collected into imposing complete editions that could be found in scholarly and aristocratic libraries across the continent.⁷² It was these vulgate collections, as Vito Giustiniani terms them, that eventually entered print in 1470 at Rome, and which became the base texts for most

⁶⁹ I am grateful to Dr. Freyja Cox Jensen for sending me an advance copy of her article 'Circulation of Printed Roman Histories in Sixteenth-century England', in *Rome in Early Modern England*, ed. Paulina Kewes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). Cox Jensen's survey of the *Lives* records 182 editions of the *Lives*, ranking it the fourth most printed work of Roman history before 1600; my own survey found 190, a difference which is indicative of some of the shortcomings of the USTC.

⁷⁰ For the place of Plutarch in Chrysoloras' curriculum and his role in the revival of Greek learning more generally, see Marianne Pade, *The Reception of Plutarch's 'Lives' in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, *Renæssancestudier* 14 (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2007), 1: 88–96.

⁷¹ See *Ibid.*, 1: 76–9, 82–3.

⁷² Three representative mid-fifteenth-century manuscripts can be found in the Bodleian as Auct. F.1.7 and Canon. Class. Lat. 172 and 173.

of the subsequent vernacular translations until that of Jacques Amyot in 1559.⁷³ Even before the end of the fifteenth century, a Catalan translator of the *Lives* writes of vernacular versions circulating in Italian, French, German, English and even Hungarian.⁷⁴ The success that it continued to have in the next century is all the more striking when one considers the size of the *Lives* as a whole collection and the material investment that would have been required for a press to produce an edition. As Freyja Cox Jensen's survey shows, when editions of the *Lives* are ranked against those of other works of Roman history, only one work of comparable length and scale appears to have been printed more frequently.⁷⁵

By the same token, although the influential status of the *Parallel Lives* cannot be doubted, Plutarch's work is not commonly classed as a mythographical text. The 66 paired biographies of personalities from Greek and Roman history largely treat figures that are historical in the modern sense of the term, and Plutarch's humanist readers ring his praises as a writer of history, not of fables. For his fifteenth and sixteenth-century audience, he was the classical writer who best embodied the Ciceronian maxim that history is the ultimate source of wisdom in life: *historia magistra vitae*.⁷⁶ That Plutarch himself explicitly distinguishes the writing of lives from the writing of history was not, of course, problematic within the regiminal

⁷³ Vito R. Giustiniani, 'Sulle traduzioni latine delle "Vite" di Plutarco nel Quattrocento', *Rinascimento*, n.s. 1 (1961), 3-62: 4. With two or more translations of around a quarter of the lives circulating simultaneously, the *vulgate* editions are found in various different permutations, commonly displaying some confusion over who exactly translated which lives. Misattributed translations can be found in the Bodleian MS Auct. F.1.7 and in most of the printed editions following on from Ulrich Han's 1470 *editio princeps* edited by Giovanni Antonio Campano, who attracted the ire of Francesco Filelfo for the misattributions, detailed in a letter quoted at length by Giustiniani (Ibid., 15).

⁷⁴ Plutarch, *Translacion de Las Vidas de Plutarco de latin en romance por Alfonso de Palencia*, trans. Alfonso Fernandez de Palencia (Seville, 1491), sig. a1^v.

⁷⁵ The *Lives* are only outnumbered at the presses by Sallust's *Cataline* and *Jugurtha* and Livy's *Ab urbe condita* in the same period; only the latter is comparable in size and printing cost. See Cox Jensen, 'Circulation of Printed Roman Histories in Sixteenth-century England'.

⁷⁶ Pade, *The Reception of Plutarch's 'Lives' in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, 1:16. The maxim comes from Cicero's *De oratore*, II.9.

conception of history that governed the *Lives*' reception.⁷⁷ As Jacques Amyot, the most influential of Plutarch's sixteenth-century translators and editors put it, if history is to be considered 'la maistresse des Princes', then surely Plutarch must be awarded 'la palme d'excellence' among all writers of history, because no text contains more exemplary wisdom than the *Lives*.⁷⁸ At the same time, however, the *Lives* does not entirely exclude the mythical or fabulous. Alongside personages from the era of more or less reliable written record, the collection includes a select few mythical and prehistoric lives, among which 'The Life of Theseus' is particularly prominent.

Further, since the standard humanist ordering of the lives followed the chronological order of their Roman subjects, the mythical and semi-mythical lives take up position at the head of the collection. The manuscript collections and printed editions begin with Theseus and Romulus, followed by Numa Pompilius and Lycurgus, inducting readers into Greek and Roman history at the point where it came closest to mythology.⁷⁹ Several illustrated editions that appeared from the late fifteenth century mark out the porous relationship between *historia* and *fabula* all the more clearly by prefacing Theseus' life with an illustration of his most mythical feat:

⁷⁷ The distinction in Greek is between *historia* and *bios*; see, 'Alexander', I.2 in Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives, with an English Translation by Bernadotte Perrin, Volume VII*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1919).

⁷⁸ Amyot takes Plutarch's *historia/bios* distinction into account by defining biography as a subspecies of history; see Plutarch, *Les Vies des hommes illustres, grecs et romains, comparées l'une avec l'autre, par Plutarque de Cheronnee*, trans. Jacques Amyot (Paris, 1565), sig. A7^r. All references to Amyot's translation are to this second edition, revised and corrected by Amyot. The preface is translated accurately and in full in North's English translation, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians & Romans Compared Together, by That Grave Learned Philosopher and Historiographer Plutarch of Chaeronea*, trans. Thomas North (London, 1579).

⁷⁹ It is unclear what order Plutarch wrote the lives in, and the standard order passed on from the fifteenth century to the sixteenth arranges each pair in chronological order by the dates of the Roman subjects – despite occasional clear indications that certain pairs were composed before others.

victory over the Minotaur.⁸⁰ If he is not considered a mythographer in the narrowest sense of the term, Plutarch should be considered one in the broader sense; and the ‘Life of Theseus’ was probably the single most widely disseminated piece of mythographical writing of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Moreover, with Thomas North’s 1579 translation of Amyot’s French version, the ‘Life of Theseus’ remains the only text in which English readers could have found sophisticated ancient mythographical discourse presented in their own vernacular. If it is a key text for the development of historicising and moralising mythography elsewhere in sixteenth-century Europe, it is even more so in England.

The ‘Life of Theseus’, taken together with the ‘Life of Romulus’ and the moral comparison between them, is particularly important because, unlike the *On Unbelievable Tales*, its approach to historicising and moralising mythology is clearly distinct from the medieval traditions and the majority of their renaissance successors. Compared to the *De casibus*, Plutarch is doing in one text what Boccaccio had divided across two. Like the *De casibus* biographies, Plutarch is concerned with revealing the interaction between Fortune and character in the shape and trajectory of a great man’s life; unlike the *De casibus*, however, Plutarch tends to avoid strategic selectiveness and restructuring in order to drive home a specific moral point. As he states in the comparison of Theseus and Romulus, ‘if the misfortunes of men are not entirely produced by the goddess [Fortune], it is necessary to inquire into the variance of different characteristics [*ēthicas*] and passions within them’, and to do so through

⁸⁰ It is possible that the illustrated Plutarchs were a largely Italian phenomenon; see, e.g., the 1491 and 1496 Venice Latin editions printed by Giovanni Ragazo and Bartholomaeus de Zannis, the 1516 Venice Latin edition printed by Melchiorre Sessa and Pietro Ravani, and the 1537 Venice Italian edition printed by Bernardino di Bindone.

as complete a knowledge of their deeds as it is possible to gain.⁸¹ He aims, therefore, as Boccaccio does in the *Genealogie*, to provide a complete account of a great man's deeds, and only then does he begin to draw out the life's potential moral lessons.

In regards to the life itself, Plutarch's consciousness of the distinction between myth and history and his choice of Theseus as a biographical subject reinforces his unique position. He is both the sole source of a complete biographical portrait of the hero and a unique classical example of the processes necessitated by attempting to construct such a portrait from the scattered materials and contradictory traditions available. Rather than disguising the mythographical processes of collection, selection, and ordering, he lays them out for his readers to see, informing them at each stage of any variants he has come across, and writing out his reasoning on matters of chronological uncertainty.

This openness about the mythographical process also extends to the question of mythographical genre. Though Plutarch is, in broad terms, working towards a rationalised and historically plausible version of the myths, just as Palaephatus is, he is careful to note the sources of fabulous versions too. While his interest in Theseus depends on grounding him as much as possible in a reality purged of those elements that would render his deeds unbelievable, Plutarch is open about taking his information about Theseus from a variety of sources in a variety of genres. He is careful to note and distinguish between the testimonies of tragic and lyric poets,

⁸¹ 'δεῖ [...] τὰ δυστυχηθέντα μὴ παντάπασιν ποιεῖσθαι δαίμονος, ἀλλ' ἠθικὰς καὶ παθητικὰς ζητεῖν ἐν αὐτοῖς διαφορὰς', 'Comparison of Theseus and Romulus', III.1 in *Plutarch's Lives, with an English Translation by Bernadotte Perrin, Volume I*.

historians and geographers, to the point that his scrupulousness verges, at times, on turning the biography into a compendium of mythographical genres and techniques.⁸²

The notion of mythography as a set of contiguous practices taking place in a variety of genres is, accordingly, central, and the ‘Life of Theseus’ is as much about mythographical processes as it is about Theseus himself. As Plutarch puts it in the opening paragraphs:

Just as in works of geography [...] historians crowd on to the outer edges of their maps the parts of the earth which elude their knowledge, with explanatory notes that ‘What lies beyond is sandy desert without water and full of wild beasts,’ or ‘blind marsh,’ or ‘Scythian cold,’ or ‘frozen sea,’ so in the writing of my *Parallel Lives*, now that I have traversed those periods of time which are accessible to probable reasoning [*eikoti logōi*] and which afford basis for a history dealing with facts, I might well say of the earlier periods: ‘What lies beyond is full of prodigies, dispensed by tragic poets and writers of myths [*muthographoi*], and has nothing clear or trustworthy in it.’⁸³

In Thomas North’s emphatic rendering, the final sentence becomes ‘beyond this time, all is full of suspicion and doubt, being delievered vs by Poets and Tragedy makers, sometimes without truth and likelihoode, and always without certainty’.⁸⁴ Plutarch states his intention to deal with that inevitable untrustworthiness as far as he can, but only up to a certain point:

May I [...] succeed in purifying myth, making it submit to reason and take on the semblance of history. But where it obstinately refuses to accept being mingled with the probable [*pros to eikos*], I

⁸² Pace Colin Burrow, Plutarch is careful to distinguish between types of source, and does not treat the tragic poets as historians; see, Colin Burrow, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*, Oxford Shakespeare Topics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 205.

⁸³ ‘ὡσπερ ἐν ταῖς γεωγραφίαις [...] οἱ ἱστορικοὶ τὰ διαφεύγοντα τὴν γνῶσιν αὐτῶν τοῖς ἐσχάτοις μέρεσι τῶν πινάκων πιεζόντες, αἰτίας παραγράφουσιν ὅτι "τὰ δ' ἐπέκεινα θῖνες ἄνδρῳ καὶ θηριώδεις" ἢ "πηλὸς αἰδνῆς" ἢ "σκυθικὸν κρύος" ἢ "πέλαγος πεπηγός," οὕτως ἐμοὶ περὶ τὴν τῶν βίων τῶν παραλλήλων γραφήν, τὸν ἐφικτὸν εἰκότι λόγῳ καὶ βάσιμον ἱστορίᾳ πραγμάτων ἐχομένη χρόνον διελθόντι, περὶ τῶν ἀνωτέρω καλῶς εἶχεν εἰπεῖν· "τὰ δ' ἐπέκεινα τερατώδη καὶ τραγικὰ ποιητὰ καὶ μυθογράφοι νέμονται, καὶ οὐκέτ' ἔχει πίστιν οὐδὲ σαφήνειαν” (Perrin’s translation adapted), ‘Theseus’, I.1-2 in *Plutarch’s Lives*. All references to the ‘Life of Theseus’ hereafter are to this edition unless otherwise noted.

⁸⁴ Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians & Romans*, sig. A1^r.

shall pray for kindly readers, and such as receive the tales of antiquity favourably.⁸⁵

On this point, Plutarch's particular brand of historical rationalisation is distinct from Palaephatus'. Though he takes *to eikos* as his benchmark, like Palaephatus, Plutarch is rightly conscious of the difficulty of making myth 'submit to history', and will go no further than attempting to 'mingle it with the probable' – or 'according to the probable'. The tentativeness implied by the phrase *tēn pros to eikos mixin* is matched by Plutarch's refusal to take a rigid position on the question of what exactly constitutes 'the probable' as opposed to 'the mythical'.

In the life itself it becomes clear that Plutarch is willing to accept a certain amount of fabulous material, and has little confidence about the recoverability of historical 'fact'. Though he attempts to reconstruct a coherent biographical narrative of the hero, in which chronological sequence is deduced and maintained, he does so in full recognition of the inextricable mingling of myth and history. The net result, as the illustrated editions' Minotaurs suggest, is a biography that transmits as much mythical information as it does historical rationalisation, and which proceeds in full consciousness of the difficulty of each stage of the process, from data collection onward. In order to find the scattered episodes and possible historical traces that could come together to form a life, Plutarch has to trawl a wide range of sources, which commonly give contradictory versions of the same tale, or which present chronological problems for the assembly of a coherent biographical narrative.

⁸⁵ 'εἴη μὲν [...] ἡμῖν ἐκκαθαίρομενον λόγῳ τὸ μυθῶδες ὑπακοῦσαι καὶ λαβεῖν ἱστορίας ὄψιν, ὅπου δ' ἂν αὐθαδέως τοῦ πιθανοῦ περιφρονῆ καὶ μὴ δέχεται τὴν πρὸς τὸ εἰκὸς μίξιν, εὐγνωμόνων ἀκροατῶν δεησόμεθα καὶ πρῶως τὴν ἀρχαιολογίαν προσδεχομένων' (Perrin's translation, adapted), 'Theseus', I.2-3.

Among the sources cited are lyric and tragic poets (the latter largely disparagingly), historians, and geographers, and Plutarch makes much use of regional religious practices and folk traditions as repositories of memorable events. Though specific sources are not always given, Plutarch takes care to note instances of disagreement, and rather than collapsing contradictory sources into a single probable version, as Palaephatus might, he gives multiple versions and explanations of the same tale and leaves the reader to make up his own mind. Now and then, the greater or lesser reliability of a source is noted, with an occasional pronouncement that one version or another is ‘particular’ (*idios*), but in general the emphasis is on the inconclusive nature of the evidence.⁸⁶

This approach is particularly marked for the tale of the tribute to Crete and Theseus’ victory over the Minotaur. In Chapter XV of the life, Plutarch gives a summary of the tale that conforms closely to the main tradition, with Minos’ war on Athens, and the Athenians’ tribute of seven youths and seven maidens every nine years, to be killed by the Minotaur (for whose biform monstrosity we are referred to Euripides).⁸⁷ The next chapter, however, gives a rationalised version, taken from Philochorus’ *Atthis*, which departs from the fabulous version not just in being historically plausible, but also on substantive points of narrative structure. For Philochorus, it is not death but slavery that awaits the youths of the tribute; the Labyrinth was merely a prison in which they were held before being given as prizes to victors in funeral games held to honour Androgeus. The Minotaur arises from some confusion over the identity of the first, and cruellest, winner of these games: the

⁸⁶ See, e.g., ‘Theseus’, XIX.4; XX.2.

⁸⁷ ‘Theseus’, XV.1-2. The Euripides tragedy cited does not survive.

Cretan general Taurus.⁸⁸ This, Plutarch suggests, is evidenced by Aristotle's testimony, in the 'Constitution of Bottiaea', to the survival of descendents of a party of those Athenian slaves. This, he states 'was the reason why the maidens of Bottiaea, in performing a certain sacrifice, sing as an accompaniment: "To Athens let us go"'.⁸⁹ This, with its reliance on double testimony and evidence drawn from local ritual, does not constitute an historicisation of the myth, properly speaking. Plutarch is not working back from mythology into plausible history, but setting historical testimony alongside mythological testimony as two related but separate types of evidence for Theseus' deeds and character.

This is not all, however; Plutarch has further versions to give, and is keen to lay every possible variation out for his readers. We are introduced to the debates over the means of selecting of the youths (lot, or selection by Minos), and over whether or not Theseus went of his own free will, and even over the question of whether Theseus departed with a black sail or a scarlet sail. Delving into details as minute as the possible names and ancestry of his pilot, each of which is witnessed by one authority or another, Plutarch sets out a wide field of possible variants, which extends into the main narrative of the myth.⁹⁰ When the reader and Theseus finally reach Crete, we are given three separate iterations: the standard tale of Ariadne helping Theseus escape the deadly maze, followed by Philochorus' historical version, followed by a more 'particular and uncommon' historicising account by Cleidemus.⁹¹ In Philochorus' version, Theseus entered the games against Taurus and wins, to the delight of all

⁸⁸ 'Theseus', XVI.1.

⁸⁹ 'διὸ τὰς κόρας τῶν Βοττιαίων θυσίαν τινὰ τελούσας ἐπάδειν· "ἴωμεν εἰς Ἀθήνας."', 'Theseus', XVI.2.

⁹⁰ 'Theseus', XVII-XVIII.

⁹¹ 'Ἰδίως δέ πως καὶ περιττῶς' (translation adapted), 'Theseus', XIX.4.

involved, including Minos, to whom Taurus' overweening ambition and intimacy with Pasiphae had become hateful.⁹² Cleidemus, meanwhile, gives an involved account in which the whole tale is a distortion of a naval battle between Theseus, Minos and Minos' son Deucalion, over the Cretans pursuing Daedalus in warships.⁹³ Apart from signalling the peculiarity of Cleidemus' account with the ambiguous adverbs *idiōs* and *perittōs*, the latter of which covers a full range of meanings from 'exceedingly' to 'superfluously', Plutarch makes no explicit statement on the worth of any version over the rest. The reader is left to make up their own mind, while Plutarch himself practically throws up his hands and admits defeat, stating, 'There are many other stories about these matters, and also about Ariadne, but they do not agree at all'.⁹⁴

What is apparent, however, is Plutarch's trust (following in the footsteps of Palaephatus, and anticipating Pausanias), in the evidence of local religious practices and festivals. Plutarch gives a great deal of attention to the various local sacrifices and festivals that seem to bear traces of Theseus' return to Athens from Crete.⁹⁵ Similarly, in the war with the Amazons, Plutarch puts the better part of his faith in temple names and in the sacrifice still offered to the Amazons before the festival of Theseus.⁹⁶

The same procedure is followed for most of the major incidents in Theseus' life. The biography gathers the incidents commonly found in other sources, giving some more and some less attention, but generally giving two or more possible versions. Plutarch is happy to note that the 'best told of these mythological tales are in

⁹² 'Theseus', XIX.1-3.

⁹³ 'Theseus', XIX.4-7.

⁹⁴ πολλοὶ δὲ λόγοι καὶ περὶ τούτων ἔτι λέγονται καὶ περὶ τῆς Ἀριάδνης, οὐδὲν ὁμολογούμενον ἔχοντες', 'Theseus', XIX.1.

⁹⁵ See, e.g., 'Theseus', XXII.3, XXII.4-5, XXIII.2, XXIII.3.

⁹⁶ 'Theseus', XXVII.5.

the mouths of all men', without granting the best-known versions any particular priority over more *recherché* accounts.⁹⁷ Rather than allowing the problematic processes of mythographical data retrieval to retreat into the background, behind a polished narrative, the 'Life of Theseus' holds them up to the light. Among the conflicting versions, for instance, it remains unclear whether Theseus married the Amazon Antiope after having been given her by Heracles, whether he kidnapped her during an expedition of his own, or indeed whether she was, in fact, called Hippolyta.⁹⁸ Even if the reader is told that the version given by the author of the lost *Theseid* 'has every appearance of myth and invention', it is by no means clear which of the alternatives could be considered more trustworthy.⁹⁹ It is not surprising, we are told, that history, 'dealing with events of such antiquity, should wander in uncertainty'.¹⁰⁰

For Plutarch's judgement of Theseus and its possible impact on the hero's reception during the sixteenth century the same sense of uncertainty obtains. Setting Theseus side by side with Romulus, he sets to analysing their respective characters. Broadly, the comparison is decided in favour of Romulus, but there is no strong sense of Theseus becoming an exemplar of a particular failing. He is given much credit for his bravery and his desire to help the weak, and at the same time he is found wanting in his treatment of women. Having given particular attention to the kidnappings ascribed to the hero (Ariadne, Antiope, Anaxo of Troezen, Helen), Plutarch states that they 'admit of no plausible excuse', but carry 'a suspicion that they were done out of

⁹⁷ 'ἅ δ' ἐστὶν εὐφημότατα τῶν μυθολογούμενων, πάντες ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν διὰ στόματος ἔχουσιν' (translation adapted), 'Theseus', XX.2.

⁹⁸ 'Theseus', XXVI.

⁹⁹ 'περιφανῶς ἔοικε μύθῳ καὶ πλάσματι', 'Theseus', XVIII.1.

¹⁰⁰ 'ἐπι πράγμασιν οὕτω παλαιοῖς πλανᾶσθαι τὴν ἱστορίαν', 'Theseus', XXVII.5.

violence and for lust'.¹⁰¹ The judgement sits neatly with the strong medieval tradition of following the *Heroides* and condemning Theseus for his ingratitude, faithlessness or lust, as Chaucer or Gower did, but is couched, thanks to Plutarch's sense of duty to balance and historical accuracy, in a broader context of praise for an illustrious hero.

Plutarch does not want to illustrate the ill effects of one overriding passion or characteristic, but rather the *diaphora* – disagreement or variance – between several positive and negative attributes. Like Boccaccio in the *De casibus*, Plutarch is interested in the interactions between vice, virtue and Fortune in the downfalls of great men, but unlike Boccaccio, his investment in historical reconstruction means that his biographies tend not to lead to the identification and condemnation of single fault that undermines the whole life. The real importance of Theseus' lustfulness is not to do with particular moral scruple on Plutarch's part, but rather with its political fallout. Romulus also kidnapped women; indeed to Theseus' four victims he had nearly eight hundred. But, in marrying them off to the best of the Roman citizens, Romulus joined two peoples together and strengthened the state. Theseus' kidnappings brought only trouble: 'from the marriages of Theseus the Athenians got no new allies at all, nor even any community of enterprise whatsoever, but enmities, wars, slaughters of citizens'.¹⁰² Finally, despite concluding that Theseus was a less politically productive leader than Romulus, Plutarch weights the two leaders' virtues evenly.

¹⁰¹ 'ἂ δ' ἐστὶν εὐφημώτατα τῶν μυθολογουμένων, πάντες ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν διὰ στόματος ἔχουσιν'; 'ταῦτα μὲν ὑποψίαν ἔχει πρὸς ὕβριν καὶ καθ' ἡδονὴν πεπερᾶχθα' (translation adapted), *Plutarch's Lives, Volume I*, 'Comparison of Theseus and Romulus', VI.1-2.

¹⁰² 'ἀπὸ δὲ τῶν Θησέως γάμων Ἀθηναίοις φιλικὸν μὲν οὐδὲν οὐδὲ κοινωρικὸν ὑπῆρξε πρὸς οὐδένα συμβόλαιον, ἔχθραι δὲ καὶ πόλεμοι καὶ φόνοι πολιτῶν' (translation adapted), 'Comparison of Theseus and Romulus', VI.4.

With biographies that are designed to show them as multifaceted and complex beings, the moral lessons drawn differ visibly from the mode of exemplary closure found in the *De casibus* or the *Fall of Princes*. As the life is revealed in increasing fullness, with an increasing multiplicity of possible exploits, the prospect of making a simple, single judgement cedes further and further from view.¹⁰³ The net result, despite the pronounced emphasis away from the appearance of myth and the inventions of the tragic poets, is that the outline of a life and the judgement of that life emerge as the wavering products of a series of alternative possibilities. Taken as examples of historicising and moralising mythography, the ‘Life of Theseus’ and the ‘Comparison of Theseus and Romulus’ present as much a portrait of the difficulties implicated in making myth submit to the laws of coherence, chronological sequence, and historical reason as with a portrait of Theseus. They become a performance of the mythographical choices implied in their own construction. Even as Plutarch gathers and interprets his sources, the pluralities of the myths remain a vital aspect of his writing.

III. Natale Conti’s *Mythologiae*

It is against the background of mythographical materials such as these that the sixteenth century’s most comprehensive mythographical manual must be considered. Natale Conti’s (Natalis Comes) *Mythologiae, sive explicationem fabularum, libri decem* (first published in 1567, revised 1581) has been termed by its most recent

¹⁰³ ‘ἐκεῖνο [...] ἐπιεικείας δοκεῖ καὶ φιλανθρωπίας εἶναι’, ‘Comparison of Theseus and Romulus’, II.2.

editors ‘the standard reference work on classical myth during the Renaissance’.¹⁰⁴ Though a slightly more reserved verdict would seem closer to the truth, Conti’s treatise was clearly widely read, with sixteen editions appearing between 1567 and 1600, including four in the last three years of the century of the French translation by Jean de Montlyard (first published, Lyon: 1597).¹⁰⁵ It was also considered authoritative enough for Conti’s introductory notes on the nature of fable to be excerpted for inclusion in at least two 1580s printings of Sabinus’ epitome of the *Metamorphoses*, including the 1584 Cambridge edition – despite the fact that Conti himself excluded discussions of metamorphic tales from the *Mythologiae*.¹⁰⁶ There is good evidence, too, for the *Mythologiae*’s influence in a broad range of other late sixteenth and seventeenth-century European texts. As Jean Seznec noted as early as 1933, Conti’s was one of the three books that sprang to John Marston’s mind when he lampooned the idea of reaching for a ‘poet’s index’ in order to understand the allusions of his learned contemporaries in his second *Satire*,¹⁰⁷ and Conti’s traces have been found in Spenser, Jonson, Bacon and Milton, to name but four major English figures.¹⁰⁸ Even such an authority as Joseph Scaliger, who pronounced Conti

¹⁰⁴ Natale Conti, *Natale Conti’s Mythologiae*, ed. and trans. John Mulryan and Steven Brown, Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies 316 (Tempe, Ariz.: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance, 2006), 1:xi. All translations are taken from this edition unless otherwise noted; references to the Latin text are to Natale Conti, *Natalis Comitis Mythologiae siue Explicationum fabularum libri X: in quibus omnia prope naturalis et moralis philosophia dogmata contenta fuisse demonstratur* (Venice, 1581).

¹⁰⁵ Natale Conti, *Mythologie, c’est à dire explication des fables*, trans. Jean de Montlyard (Lyon, 1597).

¹⁰⁶ Georgius Sabinus, *Fabularvm Ovidii interpretatio, ethica, physica et historica, tradita in Academia Regiomontana à Georgio Sabino, & in vnum collecta & edita studio & industria T.T.* (Cambridge, 1584); Georgius Sabinus, *Metamorphosis, seu fabulae poeticae: earumque interpretatio ethica, physica et historica Georgii sabini, poetae nostri seculi fere principis* (Frankfurt, 1589).

¹⁰⁷ Seznec, ‘Les manuels mythologiques italiens et leur diffusion en Angleterre à la fin de la Renaissance’, 289. Also quoted in *Natale Conti’s Mythologiae*, 1:xxxvii..

¹⁰⁸ For more detail on specific borrowings and other writers indebted to Conti, see the brief summary given in *Natale Conti’s Mythologiae*, 1:xxxvi–xxxviii. For Bacon’s use of the *Mythologiae* more specifically, see Lewis, ‘Francis Bacon, Allegory and the Uses of Myth’, 370–1.

‘a completely worthless man’,¹⁰⁹ appears to have made more use of him than he admitted, as Anthony Grafton as noted.¹¹⁰

Despite being used by such notable figures, however, and despite the recuperative enthusiasm of Mulryan and Brown, Scaliger’s verdict has stuck. Though he puts it in gentler terms than Scaliger, Sez nec finds Conti similarly wanting: the *Mythologiae* does not present ‘a really decisive advance over the earlier treatises’, and nor does it contain ‘anything essentially new’, apart from a broader palette of sources and a certain confidence in its own erudition.¹¹¹ Certainly, when seen in the light of the mythographical texts examined here, and above all in comparison to the *Genealogie*, Conti does not appear particularly groundbreaking. He does, however, cast a light on the subtle changes that occurred in the conception of mythology and its significance between the appearance of the *Genealogie* and the second half of the sixteenth century.

Certain key aspects of Conti’s work set him apart from both the *Genealogie* and contemporary manuals like Giraldi’s *De deis gentium varia et multiplex historia* (1548) or Cartari’s *Imagini colla sposizione degli dei degli antichi* (1556). Unlike Giraldi and Cartari, Conti goes beyond the pagan gods in his search for the allegorical wisdom of the ancients, and he has little interest in the visual and iconographical modes of mythography that are central in their treatises – though, as Mulryan and Brown note, this did not stop printers from inserting Cartari’s illustrations into editions of the *Mythologiae*.¹¹² While such works formed Conti’s immediate

¹⁰⁹ ‘homo futilissimus’, quoted in Lewis, ‘Francis Bacon, Allegory and the Uses of Myth’, 370.

¹¹⁰ Anthony Grafton, *Joseph Scaliger: a Study in the History of Classical Scholarship*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 2:605-7.

¹¹¹ Sez nec, *Survival of the Pagan Gods*, 233–4.

¹¹² *Natale Conti’s Mythologiae*, 1:xxxiii.

background, and while they too were widely cribbed by poets and artists, the *Mythologiae* goes further than them. Far from exclusively concerned with the gods, Conti's treatise contains information on a much wider selection of mythical figures.

In Book VII in particular, it is clear that though Cartari and Giraldi's manuals are kindred works in some sense, the only compilation comparable to the *Mythologiae* in scope is the *Genealogie*. Taking the reward and punishment of valour and villainy as its themes, Book VII mazes an idiosyncratic skein through 18 chapters on a selection of heroes, villains, and monsters, that includes, among others, Hercules, Orpheus, the Muses, the Calydonian boar, the Gorgons, the Harpies, Daedalus, and Pelops. It is here that Theseus appears, sandwiched inexplicably between Atalanta and Tereus.¹¹³

If Conti's approach is not so ambitious as Boccaccio's, the *Mythologiae* remains the closest thing that the *Genealogie* would have to a direct successor in the sixteenth century: a new systemising mythography. Conti comes to the ancient myths from a different angle from Boccaccio, however. Where Boccaccio, in line with Hugo IV's commission, was intent on a complete and systematic gathering of the ancient tales, and relegated interpretation to a matter of secondary importance, Conti is interested only in gathering those myths that offer philosophically significant allegories. Where Boccaccio evinces a carefully reasoned belief in the allegorical nature of all literature, but elects only to explicate certain senses of certain tales, and warns the reader not to expect him do so according to the irreclaimable intentions of their authors, Conti offers the reverse. He views only a select number of tales as

¹¹³ *Natalis Comitum Mythologiae*, 484; *Natale Conti's Mythologiae*, 2:625.

usefully significant, but intends to ‘reduce these fables to their genuine meaning’.¹¹⁴

As he states in the *Mythologiae*’s opening chapter,

nullas hominum in arbores mutatorum, aut in corpora vel sensu vel ratione carentia afferemus interpretationes: nisi quae vtiliter afferi poterunt; nullamque habebimus fabularum illarum rationem, quae insulse fuerant a nonnullis excogitatae. [...] cum eas tantum fabulas simus explanaturi, quae homines ad verum coelestium cognitionem erigunt; quae instituunt ad probitatem; quae deterrent ab illegitimis voluptatibus; quae patefaciunt arcana naturae; quae vel ad scientias denique rerum necessariarum humanae vitae, vel quae ad integritatem perducant, et quae plurimum faciunt ad optimos quosque scriptores rectè intelligendos.

We will not bother with interpretations about men changed into trees or bodies devoid of sense or of reason, unless they have some demonstrable worth. We won’t provide any accounts of those stories that some have foolishly invented, [...] since we intend to gloss only those stories that raise men to the heights of celestial examination, that counsel proper behaviour and discourage unlawful pleasures, that reveal Nature’s secrets, that ultimately teach us all we absolutely need to know to lead a decent human life, and which most allow the best writers to be correctly understood.¹¹⁵

The remit of the *Mythologiae* is, accordingly, narrower than that of the *Genealogie*.

Though it is of comparable size, it covers a narrower range of tales, and gains its bulk from Conti’s far greater concern for exhaustively cited primary evidence.

The sense that the *Mythologiae* is in some way a mirror image of the *Genealogie* extends to Conti’s stances on systematising and interpreting the myths. Unlike Boccaccio, Conti shows no concern for deducing the structure of mythology. Though he occasionally produces historicising explanations for individual myths, the *Mythologiae* is not subjected to the historicising principle that renders the *Genealogie*’s structure so problematic. Instead, Conti loosely fits those myths worthy of his consideration within a programme for the ethical improvement of the reader; an aspect which, as Mulryan and Brown note, joins the treatise to the courtesy book

¹¹⁴ ‘fabulas has ad veram interpretationem deducimus’, *Natalis Comitum Mythologiae*, 6 (my translation).

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2; *Natale Conti’s Mythologiae*, 1:3 (translation adapted).

tradition as much as to mythography.¹¹⁶ What the exact logic of Conti's 'moral organizational model' is, however, remains unclear. Conti does not explain the treatise's structure, and at no point is there any sign of the structural problems that characterise the *Genealogie*. In sidestepping the notion of a once-coherent *corpus mythologicus* that dominates the *Genealogie*, the *Mythologiae* becomes a notably more coherent work.

The key difference stems from Conti's stance on the ontology of the myths, which lies behind another inversion of the *Genealogie*. Conti is able to place his own flexible structure on the materials of mythology because a conception of the myths as primarily fictional and the product of many hands does not lead to any sense that they should be corporately anchored to a particular structure. At the same time, however, Conti's clarity on the fictive ontology of the myths precludes the multi-layered and flexible freeplay that characterises interpretation in the *Genealogie*. Where Boccaccio escapes from the structural straitjacket of the historicising genealogical system through his eclectic approach to interpretation, Conti pairs structural freedom with an interpretive narrowness that is alien to the other texts considered in this study. Though Conti's statements on authorial intention are more oblique, and superficially weaker, than Boccaccio's, it is clear that his investment in it is greater. Where for Boccaccio authorial intention assumes a central position in justifying the study of fables but becomes marginal to the actual studying process (both out of simple pragmatism and in order to open up a greater field of interpretative play), for Conti it is equally central to both. Unlike Boccaccio, he has an implicit faith in the reclaimable nature of authorial intention. He might be working to Christianise his pagan authors' intentions,

¹¹⁶ *Natale Conti's Mythologiae*, 1:xxxvi.

but it is those intentions that are, finally, his object. Despite the many variants of fable that existed in the ancient world, ‘on one point all the poets are in agreement, that they all have the same task, and they are all bending their minds to one end: to make men better’.¹¹⁷ And as Conti’s statement that he will reduce or lead back (*deducere*) the myths to a singular true or genuine interpretation (*ad veram interpretationem*) suggests, the *Mythologiae* lies at some distance from the multi-layered textual contingency of the *Genealogie*.

Conti’s theoretical stance on the kinds of meanings myths can contain is, in line with this, taxonomically divisive. As opposed to the multiple, coexistent levels of allegory found in the *Genealogie*’s discussion of the topic, Conti puts forward a definition of interpretation that is steadfastly singular. Conti does not speak of each myth’s allegories, but each myth’s allegory: ‘we should give that interpretation its own name; but up until now it has gone without one, unless we call it “allegory”’.¹¹⁸ For Conti, unlike Boccaccio or Aneau, only three forms of allegorical reading are profitable, and they exist as either/or alternatives. The ‘doctrines of philosophy’ contained in the ancient myths are ‘either revealing the powers and actions of nature, or shaping morals and establishing an honest way of life, or leading to an understanding of the forces and movements of the stars’.¹¹⁹ Though this bears an obvious relation to the earlier theorists’ statements on the kinds of meaning mythology can contain, it is much narrower in pertaining only to physical and moral

¹¹⁷ ‘In hoc [...] hi poetae omnes conueniunt, quod omnibus idem est scopus, & ad vnum finem omnes animum intendunt, vt homines meliores efficiant’, *Natalis Comitum Mythologiae*, 5 (my translation).

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6 (my translation).

¹¹⁹ ‘philosophiae dogmata’, ‘aut ad vires actionesque naturae patefaciendas pertinentia, aut ad mores informandos, vitamque rectè instituendam, aut ad vires motusque astrorum intelligendos’, *Ibid.*, 2; *Natale Conti’s Mythologiae*, 1:2 (translation adapted).

interpretation, and implies an exclusivity absent from the other texts examined in this study.

The implicit dissatisfaction with his precedents that Conti displays in settling on ‘allegory’ as his term for the myths’ meanings is explicit in this earlier passage. Having defined the remit of the ‘most elevated and hidden secrets of the fables’, Conti states that ‘until now no one acceptable, as it seems to me at least, has revealed them’.¹²⁰ As far as he is concerned, in fact, ‘hardly anyone has noticed’ that the ancient poets were philosophers who ‘related [their philosophy] under a certain dark covering’.¹²¹ Conti is, of course, not without precedent. The terminology of hidden meanings, dark coverings and fabulous bark, is the same as that of the *Genealogie*’s Books XIV and XV, of Regius and Aneau, among many others. What sets Conti apart is a narrowing of the interpretative field, and a clear desire for allegory to work monovalently.

Of course, such a position is hard to maintain in the face of mythology itself, and Conti pragmatically makes room for a certain flexibility. Drawing on the taxonomy of fables in Aphthonius of Antioch’s *Progymnasmata* (which he had translated in 1550, and which also appears on the first page of the Aldine Aesop) Conti admits that the stories he is about to explicate ‘do not fall simply into any one of these classifications, but are a complete mix of almost all of these forms’.¹²² He recognises, therefore, that it is necessary to employ different interpretative manoeuvres at different times: ‘Evidently, since their subjects may include the origin

¹²⁰ ‘adhuc repertus est nemo, vt mihi quidem videtur, tolerabilis’, *Natalis Comitum Mythologiae*, 2 (my translation).

¹²¹ ‘tamen nemini fere est perspicuum’, ‘obscure sub quibusdam integumentis traderentur’, *Ibid.*, 3, 1 (my translation).

¹²² ‘Illae, quas explicaturi sumus, fabulae, ac figmenta antiquorum sapientum, in nullum horum generum simpliciter incidunt, sed uirtute cum omnibus his fere commistae sunt, atque ex omnibus generibus aliquo facto constant’, *Ibid.*, 4; *Natale Conti’s Mythologiae*, 1:5–6.

of natural things, or the nature of the immortal gods, or the power of the planets, or the proper way people should arrange their lives, we will explain each story or fiction individually'.¹²³ It should be noted, however, that we are still a considerable distance from the light-footed flexibility embodied by Boccaccio, and more clearly explicated by Aneau. Where they make clear that each myth has multiple, simultaneously viable interpretations, Conti will only go as far as stating that different myths can contain different sorts of meaning. The notion of layered simultaneity that Aneau in particular lays out as the property of myth has disappeared.

This narrowing can be seen at work throughout the biography of Theseus that forms Chapter IX of Book VII. Indeed, despite the impressive array of Greek sources that Conti brings to the table, it is the only element that fundamentally marks Conti out from his predecessors. In methodological terms, Conti's technique is closest to Plutarch's. Rather than providing a simple summary of Theseus' deeds, like the *Genealogie*, or a crafted platform for a particular moral point, he gathers a wide range of sources, with direct quotations in Greek and Latin, to give a full biography before turning to moral interpretation. Though the *Mythologiae* makes no methodological statement on its use of sources, Conti wears his humanist credentials on his sleeve, and Greek texts dominate. He is not unimpeachable in his references, however. Among the mentions of Pausanias, Strabo, Herodotus, and Euripides, Plutarch, the major source, is explicitly referenced somewhat less than he is actually relied upon. At the same time, Conti considers Ovid's mythographical credentials authoritative enough for *Heroides* X to be used, over Plutarch, as evidence of Theseus' divine

¹²³ 'Quippe cum vel generationem rerum naturalium contineant, vel agant de natura Deorum immortalium, vel de vi planetarum, vel de vita himonum recte instituenda, quarum singularum natura paulo post à nobis explicabitur', *Natalis Comitum Mythologiae*, 4; *Natale Conti's Mythologiae*, 1:6 (translation adapted).

heritage, while *Heroides* XVII (from Helen to Paris) confirms that Helen survived her kidnapping, maidenhood intact.¹²⁴ Nor is Ovid the only Latin source to make its presence felt. Conti ascribes the tale of Theseus retrieving Minos' ring from the sea, and returning with the ring and Amphitrite's crown, to Theopompus, who does not recount it. Though, as Mulryan and Brown note, Pausanias does, he does not give the full version found in the *Mythologiae*.¹²⁵ Conti's version of the tale ends with the stellification of the crown; a detail that comes from the section of Hyginus' *Astronomica* examined above.

Such small lapses are minor problems, however; Conti undeniably gathers a wide range of sources and references them for the most part with reliable accuracy. Where his shortcomings begin to be felt is in his interpretation of the myths. Having gathered his sources, Conti concludes that 'the few things that are sung of Theseus by the poets [...] are more like fabulous narrations than true history', and moves on to explaining what the ancients wished to signify by such tales.¹²⁶ In comparison to the breadth displayed in his use of sources, the narrowness of Conti's interpretations is striking, as is their conventionality. We learn that the ancients named Theseus the son of Neptune, because any man who was exceptionally strong, or who was lucky at sea, was called such; and by naming him and describing their deeds in their writing, such writers 'bring together and drive many to the imitation of great men'.¹²⁷ For the Labyrinth, Conti states that it symbolises 'the numerous difficulties and frustrations that always mess up our lives', and that just as Theseus needed 'Daedalus' expertise'

¹²⁴ *Natalis Comitum Mythologiae*, 484, 486; *Natale Conti's Mythologiae*, 2:627, 629.

¹²⁵ *Natalis Comitum Mythologiae*, 485; *Natale Conti's Mythologiae*, 2:627; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, trans. William Henry Samuel Jones, Henry Arderne Ormerod, and Richard Ernest Wycherley (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1918), I.XVII.2.

¹²⁶ *Natalis Comitum Mythologiae*, 486 (my translation).

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 486–7 (my translation).

to escape, we too need ‘a combination of divine assistance and spectacular human creativity’ to escape life’s difficulties.¹²⁸ Finally Conti offers a brief note on the possible historicity of the Katabasis, before moving on to his next topic, Tereus.

These interpretations are extremely familiar. Though Conti refers us to Plutarch and Pausanias for the historicisations of the Katabasis, he is not saying anything that has not already been said in the *Ovide moralisé*, where we also find his interpretation of the Labyrinth anticipated. What is different, however, is the sense Conti promotes that these are *the* valid interpretations: ‘They wished to signify *nothing else* by that labyrinth’; ‘This was *the one reason* why we hear so much of Theseus in all the writers’ (my emphases).¹²⁹ Gone is the sense of flexibility conveyed by Boccaccio and Aneau, and summed up best in Orologgi’s description of Boccaccio’s reading of the Labyrinth as a ‘beautiful allegory’ that ‘can be made’ whatever one believes the origin of the myth to be.¹³⁰

If he is the best informed and most humanistically rigorous of the mythographers examined in this study, Conti is also the most narrow, and the furthest from understanding the natural fecundity of mythology. It is not quite true to say, as Seznec notes, that the *Mythologiae* does not represent ‘a decisive advance over the earlier treatises’; that verdict demands positive and negative qualification in equal measure.¹³¹ In terms of classical scholarship the *Mythologiae* certainly represents exactly the kind of decisive step forward that one would expect from an excellent Hellenist with the resources of sixteenth-century scholarly printing at his fingertips.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 487; *Natale Conti’s Mythologiae*, 2:630.

¹²⁹ ‘Nihil aliud significare voluerint per illum labyrinthum’, ‘Haec vna causa fuit cur tot de Theseo apud omnes scriptores audiantur’, *Natalis Comitis Mythologiae*, 487 (my translation).

¹³⁰ ‘ò sia historia, o sia fauola, non è che non vi si possi trarre vna bellissima Allegoria’, Ovid, *Le Metamorfosi di Ouidio*, f.113^v.

¹³¹ Seznec, *Survival of the Pagan Gods*, 232.

At the same time, however, it represents a shrinking of mythographical possibilities. Conti's treatise is a step back from the multi-layered fecundity and appreciation of textual contingency that can be seen in Boccaccio, and which echoes through the sixteenth-century reception of Ovid. In these terms, the *Mythologiae*, rather than representing the culmination of sixteenth-century mythography is, in a certain sense, the odd text out; and the fact that writers across the continent found it a useful source of raw mythographical information should not be taken to imply that Conti's views on mythology were universal.

IV. Conclusion

Looking back at Boccaccio's decline among scholarly readers, and Conti's status as the most successful of the new sixteenth-century mythographers, it would be easy to see an increased investment in authentic sources as tending to stabilise mythology and shut down its ability to generate multiple meanings. This cannot be said to be the case. Though Boccaccio's place in the book market may have diminished, and though that diminution can be linked to the availability of new mythographical sources, it would not be correct to think of those sources as stabilising mythology, either by giving 'authentic versions' or 'authentic interpretations' of the old tales. To look at the newly published old sources on Theseus, whether through Regius, Micyllus and Ziegler's annotations to Ovid and Boccaccio, or directly, in their sixteenth-century printings is to have mythology's fluidity and fecundity reaffirmed. Taken against that background, Conti appears not as a representative of wider trends in conceiving the

ancient myths, but as an outlier, steadfastly attempting to shut down the polymorphousness confirmed by the ancients.

Thus, though even Boccaccio's editors are quick to distinguish medieval mythography from the kinds of mythography that were possible in the age of print, it should not be assumed that the target of their criticism was Boccaccio's interpretative eclecticism. As scholars like Miccyllus knew, multiple coexistent versions and eclectic interpretative strategies were part and parcel of ancient mythography; and the sixteenth century inherited that sense twice over, once from forebears like Boccaccio, and from the newly published ancients. As will be seen in the next chapter, rather than dying off as the ancients were revived, eclecticism and appropriative licence flourished on contact with them.

SIX

**Antique Fables and Antic Fables: Thesean mythography in *A Midsummer
Night's Dream***

That *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is in some way commenting upon mythology, and that Theseus' role is important to understanding that comment, has been an assumption at the heart of much of the criticism on the play. In this sense, though the term is generally absent from that criticism, the *Dream* has long been regarded as a mythographical text, and the critical difficulties it has generated are a potent reminder, *contra* Conti's attempts to tame mythology, of how complex a resource the world of mythology remained for sixteenth-century authors. A long series of studies that draw particular attention to Theseus have variously portrayed the *Dream* as engaging in imitative, agonistic or 'metamorphic' relationships with other mythographical texts,¹ as performing an 'apotropaic' warding off of mythic danger,² and, more simply, as depending on a shared knowledge of mythology and classical culture in its audiences.³ These standpoints, assumed by a number of eminent critics over the years, have highlighted important aspects of the *Dream*'s relationship to mythology, but in the context of this study they present certain methodological problems. What is lacking, at a number of levels, is any real consensus on how we

¹ See, for example, Leonard Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1986), 251–270; Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 131; Helen Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2010), 205, all of which are discussed further below.

² A. D. Nuttall, 'A Midsummer Night's Dream: Comedy as Apotrope of Myth', *Shakespeare Survey* 53 (March 2007): 49–59.

³ D'Orsay W. Pearson, "'Unkinde" Theseus: A Study in Renaissance Mythography', *English Literary Renaissance* 4, no. 2 (1974): 276–298; Laurie E. Maguire, *Shakespeare's Names* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 74ff.

might go about reading Theseus, and how, in turn, we should read the *Dream*'s relationship to mythology.

That lack of consensus and the methodological problems attaching to it can, however, be used to address the ways in which the *Dream* works as a mythographical text, and, more broadly, as a means of highlighting the pitfalls associated with reading early modern literature against its mythographical backgrounds. This final chapter takes Theseus' position in the play and in its critical corpus as a way of opening up some of these problems and exposing them to scrutiny. Re-examining the main critical viewpoints on Theseus against the findings of the preceding chapters, it takes a fresh look at the *Dream*'s mythographical techniques, and at the implications they hold for readings of Theseus, and of the play as a whole. Breaking into two sections, it analyses the two main modes of critical approach to the play's engagement with mythology before outlining a methodologically distinct stance that takes fuller account of the mythographical backgrounds to Shakespeare's writing, and which proposes a new mode of reading the play in relation to those backgrounds.

I. 'Antique fables': interpretive contexts in text and tradition

Attempts to read the *Dream* against its mythological background have been encouraged not just by Theseus' presence in the play, but also by what appears to be a curiously reflexive reference to mythology, uttered by him at the beginning of Act V. Having heard the lovers' accounts of their confused wanderings, the duke returns to the stage to dismiss those accounts as 'antique fables', a category that, he witheringly

suggests, he ‘never may believe’ (V.i.2-3).⁴ As Leonard Barkan puts it in his analysis of the *Dream*, Theseus’ choice of words amounts to ‘a self-conscious retrospective’ that defines ‘the entire previous action of the play as “antique fables,” that is, classical myth’.⁵ At the same time, however, in punning on ‘antic’, Theseus is condemning those same myths: ‘the lovers are telling silly old stories, familiar, grotesque and untrue’.⁶ The influential gloss by Harold Brooks, which Barkan is following here goes, slightly further: the fables in question are antique in so far as ‘nowadays recognizably absurd’.⁷ Coming from the mouth of the mythical duke, the irony of the phrase seems clear. In hearing both senses at once, the audience is aware of something that Theseus is not: that the joke of his dismissal is, finally, on him. Writing off mythology as much as the lovers’ tales, Theseus is accidentally condemning the very world to which he belongs. For Barkan, and a number of critics since, the *Dream*’s comment on mythology has resided somewhere in the hermeneutic gap generated by the ironies here. In having Theseus consign the play and himself to the category of these silly old tales, Shakespeare is making a serious point about the *Dream*’s relationship to mythology, and about Theseus’ role in shaping that relationship.

What exactly that point is, is less clear. In the ongoing debate that has crystallised around Theseus, it would be wishful thinking to talk of anything resembling a critical consensus. Though many critics have approached the play through the myths upon which it seems to be calling, their conclusions about Theseus,

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all references to the *Dream* are to the text given in William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Peter Holland (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

⁵ Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh*, 252.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Harold F. Brooks (London: Methuen, 1979), V.i.3, n.

and about his role in our understanding of the play, have been widely variant. At the same time, despite the differing conclusions reached, it is possible to trace two underlying approaches, which attempt to broach the question of mythology in two distinct ways. The first and most common approach deals with Theseus and the play's 'antique fables' through the lenses of specific mythographical intertexts, reading him against the textual sources from which he is presumed to have come. The second approach also attempts to read Theseus against his origins, but does so through carefully reconstructed mythographical 'traditions', or 'backgrounds', that cut across and join individual intertexts in a synthetic fashion.

Each of these has produced careful and sensitive analyses of the play; but, for different reasons, neither mode is entirely equipped to deal with the methodological difficulties presented by the *Dream*'s use of mythology. In the case of analysing the play through the specific textual sources of its mythological references, the major methodological problem is the tendency to centralise a posited 'primary intertext' at the expense of other intertexts. In work on the *Dream*, the two texts used in this way most commonly are the *Metamorphoses* and the 'Knight's Tale'. Each has its partisans, and though Ovidian studies of the play heavily outnumber Chaucerian studies, they can be seen, within their own argumentative frameworks, to be presenting equally cogent arguments, in which the notion of intertextual primacy plays an equally central role. Once a particular intertext's primacy is posited, it can then be used as an anchoring reference point for critical analysis of the myths in the play; and the differences in the materials shared by it and the *Dream* then become a productive means of staking claims about the play's dealings with its 'antique fables'.

For Barkan, despite his even-handed recognition of the *Dream*'s complex intertextual background, admitting that the *Metamorphoses* 'is primary', allows the critical insight that the *Dream* represents

Shakespeare's fullest attempt to respond to the inspirations afforded by Ovidian materials and to translate them into his own mythic language. [...] The play is crowded with explicitly named figures of myth; it reenacts (in 'antic,' but fundamentally faithful, fashion) a famous episode from the *Metamorphoses*; it takes place in some kind of classical Athens; its action is both explicitly and implicitly based on Ovidian metamorphosis.⁸

This point of view, reformulated many times since,⁹ has led, in one particularly influential study, to the *Dream* being characterised as 'a displaced dramatization of Ovid' in which Shakespeare engages in a complex *imitatio* of his Roman forebear.¹⁰ On the other hand, it is equally possible to make similar claims for the 'Knight's Tale'. For Helen Cooper, following in the footsteps of Dorothy Bethurum and E. Talbot Donaldson, 'whatever other sources may have fed into [*A Midsummer Night's Dream*], the play seems to be above all directly inspired by Chaucer, as a metatheatrical response to the metanarrative of the *Canterbury Tales*'.¹¹ Cooper too sees an act of *imitatio*, crafting a 'Chaucerian Shakespeare [...] defined not by homage but by challenge'.¹²

⁸ Barkan, *The Gods Made Flesh*, 252.

⁹ See, e.g., Charles Martindale and Michelle Martindale, *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity: An Introductory Essay* (London: Routledge, 1994), 64; A. B. Taylor, 'Ovid's Myths and the Unsmooth Course of Love in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', in *Shakespeare and the Classics*, ed. Charles Martindale (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 51; Madeleine Forey, "'Bless Thee, Bottom, Bless Thee! Thou Art Translated!": Ovid, Golding, and "*A Midsummer Night's Dream*"', *The Modern Language Review* 93, no. 2 (April 1998), 321-29: 322.

¹⁰ Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 131.

¹¹ Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, 209. See also, Dorothy Bethurum, 'Shakespeare's Comment on Mediaeval Romance in *Midsummer-Night's Dream*', *Modern Language Notes* 60, no. 2 (February 1945): 85-94; E. Talbot Donaldson, *The Swan at the Well: Shakespeare Reading Chaucer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

¹² Bethurum, 'Shakespeare's Comment on Mediaeval Romance in *Midsummer-Night's Dream*', 86; Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, 205.

In each case, we are presented with an image of Shakespeare engaging in a fruitfully agonistic *imitatio* of a forebear; and in each case the fight is meant to be one-on-one. Even critics as sensitive to the wide range of intertexts called upon by the play as Barkan and Cooper, can be seen performing manoeuvres designed to prioritise their chosen intertext, and at the same time to minimise or exclude the possible impact of others.¹³ This process, which is visible despite occasional explicit denials of any such strategy, has the unintended consequence of obscuring certain facets of the *Dream* even as it reveals others.¹⁴ When juxtaposed, the overt and covert exclusionary tactics used by the Chaucerians and Ovidians to reinforce their positions serve, more than anything else, to highlight the *Dream*'s resistance to being pinned to a 'primary intertext'. Indeed, the *Dream* seems designed almost precisely to resist any such singularity. Certainly, it is filled with what appear to be walking citations of the *Metamorphoses*: Pyramus and Thisbe enter out of the epic as if out of the hawthorn brake that serves for the mechanicals' tiring house; 'Titania' is an Ovidian epithet for Diana; the metamorphosed Bottom is, well, *metamorphosed*. But, even if they are less explicit, the *Dream* also has its walking citations of Chaucer's tale: Theseus' characterisation and title, combined with the presence of Hippolyta and Philostrate are reasonable grounds for suggesting that Shakespeare's royal couple are, at some level, Chaucer's Theseus and Hippolyta.¹⁵ One can add to this the parallel between the tale's Mayday hunt (*KnT*, 1673-95), where Theseus and Hippolyta discover Palamon

¹³ This is particularly visible in Bate's account of Bottom; Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 142. See also, however, Cooper's discussion of the Plutarchan background to Theseus (*Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, 212), or Forey's setting aside of Chaucer ('Bless Thee, Bottom, Bless Thee! Thou Art Translated!', 323 and n.).

¹⁴ See, e.g., Bethurum, 'Shakespeare's Comment on Mediaeval Romance in *Midsummer-Night's Dream*', 96.

¹⁵ Philostrate (who disappears in Q2 and F) is the name taken by Chaucer's Arcite when he returns, disguised, to the Athenian court (*KnT*, 1428).

and Arcite fighting in the woods, and the discovery of the play's lovers by a similar royal hunt in IV.i; a parallel which is considerably strengthened by Theseus' confusing conflation of Mayday and Midsummer's Night (IV.i.133). And, on a structural level, as Cooper points out, the Chaucerian parallels allow us to see the four lovers as a structural transformation of the Knight's love triangle, permitting a benign resolution of the semi-tragic original.¹⁶

It is clear that Cooper's argument for the *Dream*'s structural debt to Chaucer is convincing, and the 'Knight's Tale' is in some way the presiding informing text for the play. This cannot efface the Ovidian parallels entirely, however. Shakespeare is meeting Ovid in his moonlit glade, then, but he is also meeting Chaucer. And that the kinds of intertextuality at play here are distinct should not, in the context of this thesis, obscure the similarity of the points being made by both sides, or be used to mark one side's contentions as more plausible than the other's. What this points to is the recurring problem with attempting to work through a 'primary intertext'. The critical tendency to stake and re-stake claims for the primacy of particular intertexts stems from the fact that the play has no primary source, in the sense that, for instance, *Romeo and Juliet* does. It is not merely a question of deciding between Chaucer and Ovid, either. The *Dream* calls on a bewilderingly broad spectrum of intertexts at different times and in different ways, holding them apart and compounding them in a fashion that leaves little of the solid ground often found in 'sources'. Indeed, the arguments for the primacy of one source or another can be taken as symptoms of just how difficult those arguments are to substantiate; the same situation that makes it exigent to craft and restate claims for intertextual primacy also makes such claims,

¹⁶ Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, 205, 211.

however critically productive they might be, hard to defend. Looked at closely, such discussions tend to point up what Peter Holland has called ‘the extraordinary weakness in our *conventional* critical use of the term [‘source’] and consideration of its meaning and function’.¹⁷

One response to the problem of prioritising a single intertext in readings of the play has been to see Theseus as a figure who, in trailing associations from a whole range of sources, becomes his own intertext. As Peter Holland puts it, ‘The mere presence of Theseus [...] makes the whole of the Theseus myth available’, and through that availability, ‘Theseus [...] constitutes a source of allusion, opposition and difference, a source of threat and terror, a source that the play, for all its wonderful assuredness in its happy ending, cannot really eliminate’.¹⁸ In IV.i, for instance, where the presence of the ‘Knight’s Tale’ is most keenly felt, local details in the royal couple’s praise for their hounds recall the *Metamorphoses* and Seneca’s *Phaedra*, the latter of which carries particularly threatening associations for Theseus.¹⁹ With the *Phaedra* rearing its head too in Oberon’s description of Cupid missing his mark in II.i, Holland builds an argument for the presence of Theseus’ unfairly doomed son Hippolytus. Though he never appears, and is never mentioned, Theseus’ doomed son-to-be constitutes ‘an unavoidable future for the marriage so richly, lengthily and apparently gloriously celebrated at the end of the play’.²⁰ Importantly, however, Holland is not staking his claims around the *Phaedra* so much as around Hippolytus and his tragic death; what he is appealing to is the ‘whole of the Theseus myth’. In his

¹⁷ Peter Holland, ‘Theseus’ Shadows in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’, *Shakespeare Survey* 47 (1994), 139-52: 140.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 143, 151.

¹⁹ See Brooks’ notes and appendix in the 1979 Arden edition.

²⁰ Holland, ‘Theseus’ Shadows in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’, 144.

reading, the *Dream* is making use of a vein of Thesean details that go beyond the ‘Knight’s Tale’, the *Metamorphoses*, or the *Phaedra*, and which allow Theseus’ presence to pervade the whole play. When Oberon accuses Titania of leading Theseus ‘through the glimmering night / From Perigouna, whom he ravished’, and making him ‘with fair Aegles break his faith, / With Ariadne and Antiopa’ (II.i.77-80), we are being pointed to Plutarch’s biography of Theseus, and to *Heroides* X.²¹ In a further extension of the Ovidian Theseus references, it has also been suggested that Bottom’s transformation constitutes a burlesque reference to the Minotaur, and to the adventure that best encapsulates Theseus’ heroism and his faithlessness.²² The end result is a synthetic Theseus who is at once Chaucerian, Senecan, Plutarchan and Ovidian.

Though Holland is alert to some of the difficulties implicated in referencing the ‘whole of the Theseus’ myth, he is largely following in the footsteps of an earlier and less subtle study, D’Orsay W. Pearson’s “‘Unkinde Theseus’: a study in renaissance mythography’. For Pearson, Theseus’ eclectic sourcing marks the *Dream* out as appealing to a ‘Renaissance stereotype’ of the Athenian hero.²³ The intermittent gestures toward Theseus’ heroic career outside the play act as reminders that Theseus does not, properly speaking, belong to the *Dream*, but to a world of myth that endowed him with a ‘historical existence’, and a pre-defined reputation. With an awareness of Theseus’ ‘reputation for unfaithfulness and unnatural patterns of affection’, Shakespeare’s audiences would not have seen the play as the hymeneal

²¹ Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 137.

²² David Ormerod, ‘A Midsummer Night’s Dream: The Monster in the Labyrinth’, *Shakespeare Studies* 11 (1978): 39–52; M. E. Lamb, ‘A Midsummer-Night’s Dream: The Myth of Theseus and the Minotaur’, *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 21, no. 4 (December 1979): 478–491.

²³ Pearson, “‘Unkinde’ Theseus: A Study in Renaissance Mythography’, 294.

comedy it superficially appears to be.²⁴ Nor would it be unreasonable for Shakespeare to expect as much of his spectators:

the Renaissance image of Theseus as the unfaithful lover and husband, the abandoner of women, and the unnatural father was relatively widespread even in vernacular literature. A play-goer did not have to be a classical scholar to know that the Theseus of classical legend was not an icon of reason triumphing over sensuality but was instead very poor husband material.²⁵

Anyone who did know who Theseus really was would have found the *Dream* poisoned by the ‘image of [Theseus’] viciousness’.²⁶ And at the play’s end,

an audience aware of the remainder of Theseus’ history, [would know] the play has not ended. Unlike the non-legendary characters in a comedy like *Much Ado About Nothing*, characters who have no existence outside the play world of which they are a part, Theseus possessed that legendary-historical existence which made it impossible for an audience to walk away from *MND* with the euphoric notion that ‘they lived happily ever after’. That audience, at least in part, knew better.²⁷

The idea of an audience ‘knowing better’ through participation in a shared knowledge of mythology has proven influential. Since Pearson’s article, a number of critics have focused on the interactions between what an audience could reasonably be expected to have known of Theseus outside the play and his representation within the play. How, Jonathan Bate asks, can we take Theseus seriously as a presiding figure for lasting marriages, when ‘any half-way educated person in the Renaissance could tell you, [that he] was a notorious rapist’?²⁸

Moving from the *Dream*’s eclectic invocation of Thesean source materials to what Pearson calls a ‘composite portrait’ of Theseus is, however, as problematic in its way as focusing discussions of the play’s Thesean intertextuality through a

²⁴ Ibid., 293.

²⁵ Ibid., 281.

²⁶ Ibid., 293.

²⁷ Ibid., 281.

²⁸ Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 136.

supposedly primary intertext. What lies behind phrases such as ‘a play-goer did not have to be a classical scholar to know that ...’, and ‘any half-way educated person would have known ...’ is the assumption that the central question that needs to be brought to bear on the *Dream* is, ‘What would audiences have already known about Theseus?’ This is, however, less central than it might seem. Given the textually contingent, flexible and polyvalent nature of mythography, it is hard to draw a straight line from a shared knowledge base to a shared interpretive stance in the way that Pearson, Bate, and (to a lesser extent) Holland do.

In arguments of this type, two problematic assumptions need to be dealt with. The first is the idea of audiences instinctively taking a synthetic biographical approach to figures such as Theseus; the second is the supposition of concomitant, fixed judgements and moral stances attaching to those same figures. As has been noted in previous chapters, Theseus’ biography is an object lesson in mythology’s resistance to such coherent and singular biographical syntheses. The open discussion of such difficulties in the ‘Life of Theseus’, and the ways in which Plutarch deals with them there does not leave the ‘Life’ suitable to fulfil the role of such a synthesis in the way that certain critics have suggested.²⁹ And when the ‘Life’ is set side by side with the various fragmentary and contradictory accounts of Theseus’ deeds available from other classical and post-classical sources, such difficulties only become more apparent. As the examples of the mythographical compilations and close reading of the ‘Life of Theseus’ show, knowing more about Theseus not only does not contribute to the formation of such a ‘composite portrait’, it tends, instead, to counteract such processes. Discouragement from regarding such portraits as a natural outcome of the

²⁹ See, e.g., Maguire, *Shakespeare’s Names*, 79.

myths is encoded in the very mythographical texts that would have been known to 'half-way educated' early modern audiences.

Similarly, on the question of moral judgement, the 'Life of Theseus' is something of a lone voice in putting forward a moral interpretation for Theseus' whole life; something from which even Conti restrains himself. That sort of judgement is, in the first place, quite different from the free interpretative responses to specific mythical episodes that one sees in medieval and renaissance mythography. In the second place, the distinctly political colouring of Plutarch's judgement on Theseus' dealings with women is far from the image of viciousness put forward by Pearson, and even further from Bate's anachronistic use of the term 'rapist'.³⁰ Plutarch is, of course, interested in moral conclusions, but overarching, biographical judgements of the kind made by Pearson and Bate should be recognised as peculiar to regiminal, moralising mythography, and as quite different to the flexibly episodic interpretations of particular tales found throughout Ovidian commentary and poetic mythography.

Discouragement from attempting to form anything resembling a coherent biography of Theseus, and from using such a biography to make easy moral conclusions, is present on a number of levels in the *Dream* itself. Biographical coherence is brought into question by the moments at which the play alludes to Theseus' life. The most commonly noted of these is Oberon's accusation that Titania led Theseus from Perigouna, 'whom he ravished' and made him 'break his faith' with Aegles, Ariadne and Antiopa (II.i.78-80). The conjunction of the four names and the

³⁰ The crime of *raptus*, which Theseus certainly committed, might include rape in the modern sense, but is neither strongly implied by, nor synonymous with it. Theseus' kidnapping of Helen was often specified precisely as not including a rape in the modern sense; see, e.g., *Heroides*, XVII.23-30.

use of Aegles for Aegle point straight to the ‘Life of Theseus’, the only source where Shakespeare would have found them together, and the only place he could have come across Aegle(s) and Perigouna at all.³¹ Though each is mentioned several times, one passage that brings them together sheds light on the problematic nature of the allusion:

It is very true that after the death of *Antiopa*, *Theseus* married *Phaedra*, having had before of *Antiopa* a sonne called *Hippolytus*, or as the Poet *Pindarus* writeth, *Demophon*. And for that the Historiographers doe not in any thing speake against the tragicall Poets, in that which concerneth the ill happe that chaunced to him, in the persones of this his wife & of his sonne: we must needs take it to be so, as we finde it written in the tragedies. And yet we finde many other reportes touching the mariages of *Theseus*, whose beginnings had no great good honest ground, neither fell out their endes very fortunate [...] For we reade that he tooke away *Anaxo* the Troezenian, & that after he had killed *Sinnis* and *Cercyon*, he tooke their daughters [Perigouna and Alope] perforce:³² and that he dyd also marye *Peribaea*, the mother of *Ajax*, and afterwards *Pherebaea*, & *Ioppa* the daughter of *Iphicles*. And they blame him much also, for that he so lightly forsooke his wife *Ariadne* for the love of *Aegles* the daughter of *Panopaeus*, as we have recited before. Lastly he tooke away *Hellen*: which ravishment filled all the Realme of Attica with warres, & finally was the very occasion that forced him to forsake his countrye, and brought him at the length to his end³³

Set side by side with this passage, Oberon’s accusations seem somewhat tamer than either Pearson or Bate suggest. Even discounting his belief that Titania was to blame in each case of abandonment, Oberon’s list of Theseus’ bad deeds towards women is much shorter and far less serious than it could be.

More importantly with regard to the idea of a synthetic biographical approach, the allusion is also contradictory. As Plutarch notes in the passage directly preceding

³¹ Neither figure is often mentioned either in classical or early modern texts. Of the English books transcribed by EEBO, North’s Plutarch is the sole witness to either name, while both are absent from Conti’s *Mythologiae* and contemporary editions of Estienne’s *Dictionarium*.

³² It is worth noting that Plutarch does not actually mention Alope when he recounts Theseus’ victory over Cercyon, and that he does not portray Theseus as raping Perigouna but as persuading her to have sex with him; see Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians & Romans*, 5–6.

³³ *Ibid.*, 16.

this, Antiopa and Hippolyta are different names for the same figure, witnessed with equal reliability by various sources.³⁴ Oberon, however, speaks as if they are separate figures; or, more confusingly, as if the events of the play are long finished, and Theseus has already broken faith with his Amazon bride. Neither makes an easy fit with the *Dream* if one thinks in the synthetic biographical terms suggested by Pearson. If the passage does bring Theseus' biography into play in that sense, it does so in a deeply problematic fashion. To see it as a 'a deliberate reminder of Theseus' traditional infidelity', directed to knowledgeable auditors, or to see it as coherently aligning the play with Plutarch's 'Life', is to ignore the contradiction that knowledgeable auditors would, were they thinking in Pearson's terms, have stumbled over.³⁵ If one treats the play as if it were in some sense contiguous with a whole and pre-existent biography of Theseus, following the logic of such a relationship leads to mazy wanderings not unlike those of the lovers in the wood. It is perhaps the case that any 'half-way educated' audience member would have been reminded that Theseus' marriages tended to end badly, but it is also the case that the more one knew about Theseus, the more one would have been puzzled by the referential status of Oberon's list.

This does not, of course, change the fact that an explicit allusion to Theseus as having ravished and/or abandoned four women might work to undermine the happily hymeneal quality of the *Dream*'s conclusion. Certainly, accounts of Theseus' less gallant deeds were widely available, and a good percentage of the audience was likely to have been aware of them. On the other hand, a wider awareness of mythographical

³⁴ 'peace was taken betwene them by meanes of one of the women called *Hyppolita*. For this Historiographer calleth the AMAZONE which *Theseus* married, *Hyppolita*, and not *Antiopa*'; *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁵ Pearson, "'Unkinde" Theseus: A Study in Renaissance Mythography', 280.

discourse in the sixteenth century suggests that the knowledgeable play-goers at the centre of Pearson, Bate and Holland's arguments would not have conceived mythology in general, or the Thesean myths in particular, as coherent, singular and monovalent. The textual contingency that marks mythography throughout the period examined here is at odds with drawing a direct line between a text and its mythographical background. As the preceding chapters show, individual texts tend to define their own mythographical modes and to activate particular interpretations within those modes.

In Oberon's accusation a similarly complex and flexible kind of textual contingency is at work. It is left unclear, in the to-and-fro of his tiff with Titania, which versions of the tales alluded to we are to recall, what we are to make of Titania's insertion into them, and whether or not, in any case, we are to treat the accusations as 'forgeries of jealousy' (IV.ii.81). That lack of clarity is, however, part and parcel of the *Dream*'s participation in the mythographical discourses of its age. Rather than being taken as bringing clarity to the play, the 'Life of Theseus' should be seen as further evidence that such clarity is hardly to be expected where mythology is concerned, unless it is deliberately crafted by the procedures of elision and exclusion that mark texts like the *Teseida*, *De casibus* and *Mythologiae*. Neither Shakespeare nor Plutarch embrace such procedures, however. Instead, they create two distinct forms of mythography that seem equally intent upon reminding the audience and the readers that 'there is no trothe nor certeintie in it'.³⁶

This sense of instability in the *Dream*'s relationship to Thesean mythography is corroborated by the play's fierce vexation of time and sequence. If we follow the

³⁶ Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians & Romans*, 13.

‘Life of Theseus’ and the other source-texts in taking Hippolyta and Antiopa as one and the same figure, Oberon’s reference to Antiopa turns the play’s past into its present and its future. To take the fairy king at his word, Theseus has already married and abandoned his Amazon bride; but that same marriage is precisely what frames the play’s present, and the abandonment lies beyond the final scene, in the play’s future. In the final act, a similar looping occurs. Theseus is invited to watch a re-enactment of ‘the riot of the tipsy Bacchanals’, but rejects it because ‘it is an old device, and it was played / When I from Thebes came last a conqueror’ (V.i.48-51). As Helen Barr has noted, the ‘Knight’s Tale’ would place the return from Thebes after Theseus’ marriage to Hippolyta; the *Dream* reverses the order, to create an effect that Barr terms ‘polysynchronicity’, in which ‘Neither Theseus, nor [the] *Dream*, can define the play’s own moment’.³⁷ It might be added to Barr’s observation that Theseus’ use of ‘last’ opens up a grammatical space for that polysynchronicity, within which the single victory over Thebes found in the ‘Knight’s Tale’ shades into a potentially habitual, repeated action. The defeat of Thebes is in the play’s past, but the implication of ‘last’ is that another such defeat may lie in its future.

The chronological difficulties of these references are, to an extent, hidden: knowledge of the Thesean myths, or of specific texts, is what reveals their trespasses against coherent sequence. At the same time, however, the *Dream* problematises time on a more fundamental level, through a series of contradictory temporal references that resist logical resolution. With critics finding various ways to set aside the pedant’s problem of good time-keeping, these have largely been portrayed as errors on Shakespeare’s part, and not worthy of further consideration. There is, however, an

³⁷ Helen Barr, “‘Wrinkled Deep in Time’: Emily and Arcite in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”, ed. Peter Holland, *Shakespeare Survey* 65 (December 2012), 12-25: 12, 14.

underlying consistency to issues of time and sequence in the play: they arise only when Theseus is on stage, and they condense around his presence. From the opening scene onward, the duke has an anxious and confused relationship with time's plasticity: his is a world in which time can pass both fast and slowly, at once. Thus, on one hand, his and Hippolyta's, 'nuptial hour', set for the evening of the new moon, 'Draws on apace', but on the other, the moon itself wanes with painful slowness, 'Like to a step-dame or a dowager / Long withering out a young man's revenue' (I.i.1-6). Despite Hippolyta's assurance that time will fly by, Theseus remains unconvinced, and at the end of the play his impatience persists: a 'long age of three hours' leaves him wanting some 'abridgement' to 'beguile / The lazy time' (V.i.33, 39, 40-41). He is, however, unaware that the four nights' space specified in the opening scene have already been abridged into a single night. And as temporal interval is called into question, so too is temporal sequence. In the morning of Act IV, even if it seems unexceptionable enough that 'Saint Valentine is past' (IV.i.138), Theseus' suggestion that the lovers were observing the 'Rite of May' (IV.i.132) can make no sense on Midsummer morning.

The lack of temporal logic can also be seen in the selection of names Shakespeare imports from classical sources. While it seems logical that Theseus and Hippolyta are in some way contiguous with the Theseuses and Hippolytas of mythology, the status of other characters' names is less clear. As Hermia's father rather than Theseus', the play's Egeus is evidently not contiguous with the Aegeuses of myth; but can the name be taken as a referential reminder of Theseus' role in Aegeus' death? There is nothing in the script to suggest such an activation of the

name's referential potential; it is, instead, left curiously inert.³⁸ It is similarly unclear what we would make of the possible background presence of Helen of Troy in 'Helena', despite the similar Thesean connection there. But if we do see these names as weaving a referential Thesean web, we are constrained to an overly narrow exclusivity in our following of onomastic threads.³⁹ Like Theseus, Lysander and Demetrius share names with subjects of Plutarchan biography; why not see them as equally referential? They, like Egeus and Helena, are evidently not contiguous with their namesakes, but if 'Egeus' and 'Helena' are patient of being read as referential, why not 'Demetrius' and 'Lysander' too? The answer to this has, by implication, been that the play is obviously activating the referential potential of a great deal of its Thesean materials, and that it does not appear to be activating any of the similar potential in the historical Demetrius and Lysander. And, of course, belonging to a different age, it would not make sense to attempt to construe them as if they could have interacted with Theseus.

Such anachronisms, so perturbing for critics attempting to resolve them within temporal logic or through a whole and singular 'Theseus myth', are however, concordant with contemporary views of the relationship between time, poetry, and its pre-existing narrative materials. As Tasso suggests in his *Discourses on the Heroic Poem* (c.1592; published 1595), the poet has licence to change mythical or historical occurrence as he sees fit:

if there should be any event in the material [the poet] intends to treat that could be more marvellous, or more true to reality, or for whatever reason might be more delightful if it happened differently [...] without any care for truth or history, [those events may be] changed according to [the poet's] will, and changed again, ordered

³⁸ Cf., however Maguire, *Shakespeare's Names*, 4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 74ff.

and reordered [...] in the way he judges best, mixing the true with the fictional, but in such a way that the truth should be the foundation of the fable⁴⁰

Part and parcel of this is the licence to break the standard rules of time. Though, for instance, it is not possible, in historical time, for Aeneas and Dido to have loved one another, as they lived centuries apart, in the *Aeneid*, it is.

[Vergil] mixes the order of time in Dido across so wide a space, using the figure which is called *anachronismos* by the Greeks, or rather with the licence that first belonged to Plato and the Greek Poets, who introduced people who had lived in different centuries to speak together⁴¹

This, Tasso continues, was the same licence that permitted Ovid to bring Pythagoras and Numa together at the end of the *Metamorphoses*, and which, allied to the mixing of truth and fiction, can be seen in Horace and in Plutarch, ‘at the beginning of the “Life of Theseus”’.⁴²

The radical anachronism of the *Dream*, with its medieval Athenian setting, its early modern mechanicals, time slippages and awkward references to Theseus’ career, and its mix of Greek, English and Roman names, is not, in this sense, problematic. It is, instead, part and parcel of the play’s relation to mythology. The *Dream*’s allusions to myths that lie beyond its borders should not be taken as an invitation to hypostasise the ‘Thesean myth’ as a solid point of comparison for the play. To do so is both to

⁴⁰ ‘se nella materia, ch’egli prende à trattare, sia avvenimento alcuno, ilquale altrimenti essendo succeduto, fosse più meraviglioso, ò verisimile, ò per qualsivoglia altra cagione portasse maggior diletto, e tutti i successi che si fatti troverà, cioè, che meglio in un’altro modo potessero essere avvenuti, senza rispetto alcuno di vero, ò di historia, à sua voglia muti, e rimuti, ordini, e riordini, e riduca gli accidenti delle cose à quel modo, ch’egli giudica migliore mescolando il vero col finto, ma in guisa, che’l vero sia fondamento della favola’, Torquato Tasso, *Discorsi del poema heroico*. (Naples, 1595), 56.

⁴¹ ‘Egli in Didone confuse, di tanto spatio l’ordine de tempi con quella figura, che da Greci è detta, *ἀναχρονεισμος* ò più tosto con quella licenza, che fù prima di Platone, e de Poeti Greci, ch’introdussero insieme à ragionare persone vissute in secoli differenti’, Ibid., 57.

⁴² ‘questa licenza fù parimente d’Ovidio nelle sue trasformationi, nel fine delle quali Pitagora Italiano filosofo ammaestra Numa Rè de’ Romani: quantunque si più certa opinione, che Pitagora nascesse doppo qualche centinaio di anni. La medesima dottrina, ò’l medesimo artificio del mescolare il vero co’l falso, ò co’l finto, si può raccogliere da Horatio, e da Plutarco nel principio della vita di Theseo’, Ibid.

ignore the evidence of mythographical discourses in the period and to miss something vital about the status of mythology in the *Dream* more specifically. Treating the ‘whole of the Theseus myth’ as a fixed point of comparison for the play is to see the play as contingent on an intertext, when the situation is substantially the reverse. Rather than selectively repeating Thesean mythology, the *Dream* is actively participating in the mythographical discourses about Theseus. In Oberon’s allusion to Plutarch, Shakespeare is not directing his audience away to their expensive folio of North’s *Lives*, but rewriting Plutarch in such a way that the reference becomes partially contingent on its new context. That new context makes use of the ‘Life of Theseus’, but is by no means dependent on it. To refer to deeds beyond the play in the way that Oberon does is less to contextualise the play in a pre-existent, known biography of Theseus, than to construct the shadowy sense of such a biography and leave it, suspended and unfixed in a relationship of mutual contingency with the play. Understanding the unfixed and plural nature of Theseus’ biography, as Plutarch does, allows us to view that biography and its interpretation as being as contingent upon the play as the play is on them. Undeniably, the pre-existent materials affect the play, but sixteenth-century mythography makes equal space for the play to affect them.

What neither of the critical approaches outlined here is quite able to articulate is that the *Dream*’s mythographical procedures cannot quite be defined as either, on the one hand, simply transformative of given textual materials, or, on the other, as ‘dependent upon’ similarly given, shared mythographical traditions. In regard to the former, the *Dream* is clearly too eclectic in its intertextual relations (and in the kinds of intertextuality of which it makes use) to permit the standard critical manoeuvre of granting any one intertext primacy. In regard to the latter, the recognition of

mythology's inherently plural and textually contingent nature within sixteenth-century mythography makes it clear that the *Dream* is dealing with mythographical traditions, but that those dealings go far beyond appeals to shared knowledge of a 'Renaissance stereotype' of Theseus, or a known biographical outline.

Recognising such difficulties does not, however, lock the *Dream* into a cycle of referring only to itself. Instead it paves the way for a mode of reading the play that takes into account contemporary audiences' awareness of mythology's textual contingency, and the licence granted to Shakespeare within sixteenth-century mythographical and dramatic discourses. It remains possible to refer auditors to myths that lie beyond the bounds of the *Dream* while maintaining the ambiguous primacy of the play to its own interpretation. But staking out the area within which such interpretations might move is another task. In order to try and understand the degree to which the play is controlling or being controlled by its mythographical sources, it is necessary to look beyond those sources and consider the other intertexts and discourses that inform the play, and which, in their turn, affect the hermeneutic stance that should be taken on its mythographical elements.

II. 'Antique fables' as 'fairy toys': moving beyond mythography

If it is clear that much of *A Midsummer Night's Dream's* intertextual relations are focused around classical mythology, it is equally clear that classical mythology is not the only background to the play. Folk-ritual, marriage law, fairy lore and early modern theories of love psychology and the imagination all exert strong formative

influences on the play, and have been studied in some detail.⁴³ In order to consider the role that mythological reference can be called upon to perform in our interpretation of the *Dream*, its mythographical elements must be read against these other intertexts and their interactions with the play. After all, when Theseus dismisses ‘antique fables’, he also dismisses ‘fairy toys’ (V.i.3), in a way that suggests a level of similarity beyond that which has generally been accepted by critics. Despite the numerous studies of the play’s non-mythographical intertexts, and of fairy lore in particular, few critics have sought to bring the *Dream*’s different backgrounds together as Theseus himself does.

This separation is in some measure due to a general critical trend to privilege classical intertexts in our reading of Shakespeare,⁴⁴ but it is also due to the sense that the two types of material are so heterogeneous that they are difficult to read against one another. One of the implications of the standard reading of Theseus’ ‘antique fables’ as meaning ‘classical myths’ is that they are placed on a level with, but starkly differentiated from, his ‘fairy toys’. In Harold Brooks’ gloss, as perpetuated by Barkan and the critics who follow in his footsteps, Theseus views both as equally ridiculous but is by no means implying a deeper similarity. Another reading is possible, however, in which the two are not only juxtaposed but actively mingled, in the line as in the play. Through this, it becomes clearer that the play’s relationship to mythology has to do not only with the complexities of mythology itself, but also with

⁴³ See, e.g., Minor White Latham, *The Elizabethan Fairies: the Fairies of Folklore and the Fairies of Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930); Katharine Mary Briggs, *The Anatomy of Puck: An Examination of Fairy Beliefs Among Shakespeare’s Contemporaries and Successors* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959); Katharine Mary Briggs, *The Fairies: in English Tradition and Literature* (London: Bellew, 1989); Mary Ellen Lamb, ‘Taken by the Fairies: Fairy Practices and the Production of Popular Culture in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51, no. 3 (October 2000): 277–312; Michael Hattaway, ‘“Enter Cælia, the Fairy Queen, in Her Night Attire”’: Shakespeare and the Fairies’, *Shakespeare Survey* 65 (December 2012): 26–41.

⁴⁴ As Helen Cooper notes; *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, 210.

Shakespeare's mingling of these apparently heterogeneous materials within a single space. On closer inspection, the *Dream* reveals itself as bringing together 'antique fables' and 'fairy toys' in such a way that their heterogeneity is broken down and diffused. This sensation, which is so visible across the play as a whole, is found condensed in the phrase 'antique fables' itself. Though it is very rarely discussed as such, Theseus' choice of words is a crux in the fullest sense of the term: it is both a rare moment of textual indeterminacy in the *Dream* and a crossing point, where meanings meet and pass through one another.

The textual aspect of the crux is, from one angle, minor; so minor in fact that modern editors have largely considered the choice of Q1's 'antique' over Q2 and F's 'anticke' entirely obvious. With the lone exception of Anne Barton (in her 1997 Riverside edition), they are unanimous in following the authoritative Q1 text. As the standard reading of the phrase goes, 'antique' gives the resonant reading of 'classical myths' gloss, which is lent further irony by the derogatory pun on 'antic', as in 'grotesque'. This is a richer reading than that which would be given by cutting straight to 'antic', and on the strength of Q1's authority, it would seem perverse to reject it. At the same time, however, that standard reading tends to miss an important aspect of Theseus' words. For the characters on stage, it is demonstrable that the primary reading is, in fact, 'antic'. After all, in the bounds of the play, the lovers' tales are neither 'classical' nor 'old'. Unlike the audience, Hermia, Helena, Demetrius and Lysander (and, in turn, Theseus) are not privy to the metamorphic elements that lend Acts I to IV the mythic tint of 'ancient tales'. From their point of view, confusing as it may have been, the play's night contained neither fairies nor gods nor metamorphoses; and without these, it loses much of its mythic tint. Without its beastly

translations and fairy gods, the night matches much more closely the confusions of Plautine comedy than the Ovidian scenes the audience are privileged to witness. If the audience is privy to a cluster of mythological overtones in acts one to four, Hermia, Helena, Demetrius, and Lysander are not; nor, reliant on their accounts, is Theseus. Nor, by the same token, can the lovers' accounts be considered 'old', even in the radically anachronistic world of the *Dream*. Discovered in the dawn, the foursome are only a few hours from their wanderings; strange those wanderings may have been, but old they are not. 'Antic', yes, but 'antique' no.

This literalist reading does not need either to founder on the rock of Q1's authority or to muffle the classical resonances of the phrase. As far as the textual difference between 'antique' and 'anticke' goes, the choice is minor: though semantically differentiated, the two terms were identically pronounced as trochees and only unreliably distinguished orthographically. Even if 'antique' is to be taken on Q1's authority, 'antic' may still be the primary sense. More importantly, 'antic' has senses, endorsed by contemporary poetic and dramatic usage, which open up further resonances for the phrase. Though Brooks and, subsequently, Holland, both take the adjectival sense of 'antic' as 'grotesque' in the modern sense (following *OED*, B), it is also clear that in the sixteenth century, 'antic' was frequently used in a non-pejorative sense. As the *OED* notes, the term appears to have entered into English from Italian discussions of decorative *grottesche*, associated in Italian texts with the *antichi* (the ancients) through their pervasive presence in Roman decorative art, and in

particular in Nero's Domus Aurea (rediscovered 1480).⁴⁵ Though these were frequently grotesque in the modern sense of the word, they were also considered one of the highest expressions of the decorative arts. Vasari states that contemporary painters, taking the art further than the Romans, 'have adorned with the utmost grace and beauty the most notable works in all Italy'.⁴⁶

In Elizabethan usage, 'antic' kept this decorative sense, with its potential for positive and negative connotations. In the *Faerie Queene*, it is used three times, each in relation to the decorative arts: once negatively, once quite neutrally, and once as part of the elaborate portrait of Belpheobe.⁴⁷ This last, in the second canto of Book II, is notably reminiscent of the *Dream*. Spenser's presentation and naming of the virgin huntress necessarily calls to mind Diana (alternatively named Phoebe and Titania), and the Amazons. Like Hippolyta, Belpheobe appears 'buskin'd' (II.i.71), and

her streight legs most brauely were embayld
In gilden buskins of costly Cordwaine,
All bard with golden bendes, which were entayld
With curious antickes, and full faire aumayld.⁴⁸

As the context suggests, there is no need for 'antickes' to be taken negatively; like the 'curious' that modifies it here, 'antic' can go either way in sixteenth-century usage.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Vasari's definition of grotesques as 'una spezie di pittura licenziose, & ridicolo molto fatte da gl'antichi' ('a type of licentious and ridiculous painting much done by the ancients'). According to Vasari, the art of grotesque was so widespread that 'in Roma, & in ogni luogo, dovi i Romani risedevano, ve n'è ancora conservato qualche vestigio' ('there are still some traces of it in Rome, and in every place the Romans resided'), Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de' piu eccellenti pittori scultori, e architettori* (Florence, 1568), 56.

⁴⁶ 'i quali [moderni] con somma grazia, e bellezza hanno adornato le fabbriche piu notabili di tutta l'Italia', Ibid.

⁴⁷ See the description of Mammon's gilded iron coat at II.vii.4, 'Woven with antickes and wild Imagery', and the depictions of Cupid's deeds in Busyrane's house, 'Wrought with wilde Antickes' at III.xi.50. Though Mammon is evidently not to be taken in a positive light, the antics in question need not be taken as part of his negative presentation; the coat they decorate was once 'of rich entayle'. All references are to the text given in *The works of Edmund Spenser: a variorum edition*, ed. Edwin Greenlaw, 6 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1958).

⁴⁸ *Faerie Queene*, II.iii.27.

Belphoebe's 'curious antickes' exemplify the elaborately wild sumptuousness of her costume: they are wild figures, but intricate, fascinating and rich.

They are also, as Belphoebe's Diana-like presentation suggests, frequently associated with the world of the forest. Florio's use of the phrase 'antike Boscage or Crotesco' in his 1603 translation of Montaigne, though a little later than the play, suggests an equally strong association with woods and caves.⁴⁹ Closer to Shakespeare's theatrical home, the term was used to mean 'dance' or 'show' and by extension the dancers who take part in such a show; and at the same time, it maintained its potential sylvan associations. As such, an 'antic' or 'antique' was by no means considered a lower form of entertainment. If it is not on a level with masque, it is nevertheless fit courtly entertainment; in *Love's Labours Lost*, for instance, Armado is called upon to 'present the Princesse [...] with some delightful ostentation, or show, or pageant, or antique' (*LLL*, V.i.104).⁵⁰ More strikingly, in at least two works from the same period as the *Dream*, 'antique' is applied to specifically to fairy dancers. In the anonymous *Wisdom of Doctor Dodypoll*, the Enchanter refers to his accompanying fairies as 'Antique flames', while in Greene's *Scottish Historie of*

⁴⁹ Michel de Montaigne, *The Essayes or Morall, Politike and Millitarie Discourses of Lo: Michaell de Montaigne, Knight of the Noble Order of St. Michaell, and One of the Gentlemen in Ordinary of the French King, Henry the Third His Chamber. The First Booke.*, trans. John Florio (London, 1603), 89 (I.xxvii).

⁵⁰ Modern editions largely give 'antic'; in the 1598 quarto, the spelling is 'antique'. See l. 1709 in the Oxford *Complete Works: Original-Spelling Edition* (Oxford: 1986). See also, the use of the term in this sense later than the *Dream*, in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, where the Jailer's Daughter intends to 'daunce an Antique fore the Duke', IV.i.75; l. 1887 in the *Original-Spelling Edition*, reprinted from the 1634 quarto (the scene appears to have been Fletcher's).

James IV, the same tag is attached to the troupe of fairy dancers that wait on no less a personage than Oberon himself.⁵¹

That Theseus sets ‘antique fables’ alongside ‘fairy toys’ is, in this light, less surprising; the two are juxtaposed in a relationship of similarity as much as of distinction. Taken as such, Theseus’ ‘antique’ is itself a curious and elaborate knot. The literalist ‘antic’ reading makes more sense of what Theseus intends by the phrase, and how those on stage understand it, but leaves the ulterior and deeply ironic ‘antique’ reading in place, and maintains the pun to which Shakespeare would return in more serious circumstances later in his career.⁵² Certainly, there is nothing to suggest that Theseus need have the sort of temporal perspective on classical myth necessary to Brooks, Barkan and Holland’s reading of ‘antique’ as the primary sense, but relegating it to a secondary position is not to deny its importance. The ‘antic/antique’ homophony, combined with its collocation with ‘fables’ still allows the sense of ‘antique’ as ‘classical’ to come out, and recall the ancient myths; Theseus is still condemning his own world, only he is doing it unwittingly. At the same time, however, the broader contextualisation of ‘antic/antique’ though its use in decorative art and theatre reveals the phrase’s deeper relation to the double matter of the play.

For regular theatre goers, the dramatic associations of ‘antic’ with its link to the sort of comedic dances and high-spirited entertainments performed by Titania’s

⁵¹ See Anonymous, *The Wisdome of Doctor Dodypoll* (London, 1600) sig. E2^r; Robert Greene, *The Scottish History of James the Fourth, 1598*, ed. Adriaan Ernst Hugo Swaen, Malone Soc. Repr. (London: Printed for the Malone society by F. Hall at the Oxford University Press, 1921), passim. *Dodypoll* has clear thematic and textual links with the *Dream*, though thanks to the problems of dating, it is unclear which influenced which; for a summary of the debates, see Michael Shapiro, *Children of the Revels: The Boy Companies of Shakespeare’s Time and Their Plays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 189–91. *The Scottish Historie* was written and performed some time prior to 1592, before being entered on the Stationers Register in 1594; it does not, however, appear to have been printed until 1598. For the text and introduction see Greene, *The Scottish History of James the Fourth, 1598*.

⁵² *Hamlet*, V.ii.325.

fairies, would have been apparent. They, unlike Theseus, would have known how close the lovers came to meeting the real ‘antics’ of the play. What is vital, however, is that the two major uses of ‘antic/antique’, etymologically linked, but separated in usage, are brought together again and activated on different levels in such a way that Theseus’ dismissive phrase becomes a summary of Shakespeare’s *modus operandi* in the play as whole. The triple reading catches Theseus doing what the *Dream* itself has done: bringing the antic and the antique together in such a way that they are mingled and suspended in a space where both can remain at play.

This mode of mingling and suspension points to a key aspect of the *Dream*’s approach to its sources and cultural contexts, which has yet to be fully articulated by critics addressing the play’s relationship to the world of mythology. Beyond specific characters and visible moments of intertextual contact, this mingling and suspension can be seen acting on the larger, structural level, controlling the play’s movements between the Athenian court and forest, and their partial confluence in the final act. The division marked out by Lysander and Hermia’s flight from one to the other is, in that final act, disrupted by the mechanicals’ intrusion into the court. Existing on the border between Athens and the forest, the mechanicals bring their liminality with them into the court, both in their own persons and by ham-fistedly representing the wild extra-urban space of ‘Ninny’s tomb’ (V.i.200) on the court stage.⁵³ Thanks to the presence of the mechanicals, that space comes to be contained in the court, but is not contained by it. As their persistent failures to respect the conventional boundary

⁵³ The position of Ninus’ tomb outside the town and at the edge of a wood is clear in the *Metamorphoses*: Pyramus and Thisbe plan ‘domo exierint, urbis quoque tecta relinquunt’ (IV.86); the lion appears to drink, then ‘redit in silvas’ (IV.103). As Golding renders it, the lovers agree ‘To steale out their fathers house and eke the Citie gate’, ‘without the town’; the lion comes ‘all foming from the wood’; Ovid, *The XV Bookes of P. Ouidius Naso, Entytuled Metamorphosis*, 44.

between audience and actors suggest, the mechanicals are unable to understand the kind of boundaries and separations the courtiers take for granted; even when they are trying to be their most courtly, the rustic players still represent a heterogeneous intrusion that the court is unable to neutralise.

When the mechanicals are not breaking off to speak through the chinks in the fourth wall, the same suspension and mingling is expressed in the ‘tragical mirth’ and ‘tedious’ brevity of their entertainment (V.i.56-7). Its rustic take on high mythology places and misplaces high-register language in low-status mouths, while placing and misplacing those mouths in the ultimate high-status context of the court. The mechanicals’ version of the Pyramus and Thisbe tale generates mirth on the part of the *Dream*’s nobles, and the off-stage audience, but that mirth does not efface the tragic quality of the source material. As they play their piece, the cruel edge of the nobles’ commentary generates a tragic counterpoint out of the gap between the serious manner in which the play is tendered, with ‘simplesness and duty’ (V.i.83), and the mirthful manner in which it is received.

If the mechanicals’ presence in the court is in some way the culmination of the play’s approach to heterogeneity, it is, elsewhere, most visible in Titania and Oberon, and in Bottom, who perform a vital function in bringing together and embodying the mingling process of Theseus’ ‘antique fables’. As a pair, Titania and Oberon’s clearest precedent is in the Pluto and Proserpine of Chaucer’s ‘Merchant’s Tale’: pagan gods turned fairies; a married couple on similarly poor terms; the husband similarly over-invested in the marital affairs of humans.⁵⁴ Like Chaucer’s pair, too, Shakespeare’s brings together classical backgrounds with humbler traditions from

⁵⁴ See the ‘Merchant’s Tale’, 2038ff.

closer to home. In Shakespeare's case, the marriage of the two traditions is literalised by naming the king from romance and the queen from classical poetry. Titania, as has been noted, is named after Diana, while Oberon comes (directly or indirectly) from the Charlemagnian romance *Huon of Bordeaux*.⁵⁵ Alluding to different traditions, with very different textual lineages, it is no surprise that their marriage should be so uneasy. Though the actual resemblances between Titania and Diana are few, the name roots Shakespeare's fairy queen in classical, pagan tradition, strengthening the play's air of Ovidianism.⁵⁶ Oberon's background, meanwhile, is, as has rarely been noted, marked by its strong Christianity. In *Huon*, as presumably in the lost play of the same name performed at The Rose in December 1593 and January 1594, the fairy king acts as a defender of the Christian faith.⁵⁷ He lends supernatural aid to the knight Huon in his crusade against the Saracens, and insists upon the proper solemnisation of his marriage to Esclaramonde.⁵⁸ Throughout the romance, his aid is contingent on Huon's strict obedience to Christian doctrine and moral codes. So Christian is the fairy king, in fact, that on his death his soul is instantly 'borne into paradyce by a greate multytude of angelles sent fro our lord Iesu chryst'.⁵⁹ Though there is as little sign of Christianity in Shakespeare's Oberon as there is of the pagan Diana's chastity in

⁵⁵ See Laura Aydelotte, "A Local Habitation and a Name": The Origins of Shakespeare's Oberon', ed. Peter Holland and Peter Holland, *Shakespeare Survey* 65 (December 2012): 1–11.

⁵⁶ While Titania, like Diana, spends her time in the forest, she is conspicuously unchaste, not least of all in having a husband. If Oberon's forgeries of jealousy have any truth in them, she is also interested in men, which sets her as far apart from Diana as possible. Cf., however, Briggs, *The Anatomy of Puck*, 45.

⁵⁷ See Philip Henslowe, *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. R. A. Foakes, 2nd ed.. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 20. *Hewen of Burdoche* took an impressive 70 shillings on opening, but quickly tailed off; it appears only to have been performed three times.

⁵⁸ When Huon and Esclaramonde fail to comply with Oberon's command to wait until they are married in Rome before they have sex, Oberon punishes them with shipwreck; he only forgives them at the behest of his two closest fairy knights, ensuring that they are shriven and married properly. See Anonymous, *The Boke of Duke Huon of Burdeaux*, ed. Sidney Lee, trans. John Bouchier Berners, 2 vols. (London: Published for the Early English Text Society by N. Trubner, 1882), 1:152-4, 214-16, 257-60.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:605.

Titania, he remains invested in the rightful pairing off of the lovers, in concordance with natural law. He is as instrumental in the play's hymeneal resolution as he was in generating the complexities of its plot, and his first act on restoring concord with his own wife is to give his benediction to the 'faithful lovers', by 'solemnly, / Danc[ing] in Duke Theseus' house triumphantly, / bless[ing] it to all fair prosperity' (IV.i.88-91).

For all this, however, the presentation of both the fairy royals leaves their sources suspended and unresolved. Titania is not the chaste Diana, but it is never made clear precisely how unchaste she is. Whether or not we are to believe Oberon's 'forgeries of jealousy' (II.i.81) is left open, but even under the influence of the love-in-idleness Titania does not get to act on her libidinous urges. Oberon, meanwhile, for all his investment in human marriage, has no overt hint of the *Huon* Oberon's Christianity. That he and his queen are 'spirits of another sort' (III.ii.388) is clear enough, but Shakespeare's refusal to resolve their mixed classical and romantic lineages into a coherent whole leaves the question what sort they might be unanswered. At the most, we are able to say that they are 'antique', in the full sense the *Dream* lends the word.

This same lack of explicit resolution is perhaps most clearly laid out in Bottom's transformation, which has been at the heart of debates about the play's relationship to its antique and antic intertexts. As the comic centre of the play, Bottom is a fittingly ridiculous and endearingly bathetic character, but his presence has been taken to represent a serious point about, in particular, the play's relation to myth. The suggestion that he is a Minotaur in burlesque form is worth taking seriously. As M.E. Lamb has pointed out, the link seems particularly to be strengthened through the pun

built into Bottom's name: a 'bottom' was a 'bobbin' or 'clew' on which to wind thread, as Caxton's translation of *Aeneid* witnesses.⁶⁰ While 'clew' was the more common term for Ariadne's ball of thread, eventually giving rise in the seventeenth century to its figurative use as the modern 'clue', the pun on Bottom is convincing. The burlesqued presence of the Minotaur aligns so neatly with Theseus, and with the broader Ovidianism of the play, that it would be implausible to ignore it as accidental. Indeed, Bottom is, as it were, *more* Ovidian than the Minotaur, because he, unlike the Minotaur, is metamorphosed into his monstrous shape. Moving from this, it is possible, as both Lamb and David Ormerod do, to build arguments concerning the play's treatment of love around current allegorical interpretations of the Labyrinth, and as Laurie Maguire does, to see another reminder of Theseus' anti-heroic treatment of his saviour, Ariadne.⁶¹

It is equally clear, however, that Bottom is more than simply a comedic Minotaur. For Jonathan Bate, his metamorphosis is Ovidian in another way: 'it is the play's most remarkable "higher imitation" of Ovid'.⁶² Bringing together the ass's ears with which Midas is punished for misjudging the singing competition between Pan and Apollo (*Metamorphoses*, XI.172-193) with 'a piece of vernacular folklore, probably derived from Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, about the power of witchcraft to give a man an ass's head', Bottom conflates Ovid with humbler sources to effect a true 'translation in the higher Renaissance sense'.⁶³ The textual clues on which Bate builds his argument for Midas are somewhat slim – Bottom's 'fair large

⁶⁰ See *OED*, 'bottom' 15a, and Ormerod, 'A *Midsummer Night's Dream*: The Monster in the Labyrinth', 480.

⁶¹ Maguire, *Shakespeare's Names*, 78.

⁶² Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 142.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

ears,' and his ironic 'reasonable good ear in music' (IV.i.4, 28) – but the parallel is by no means impossible. The passage of Scot that Bate cites is also a reasonable parallel, as is a second passage about a young sailor turned fully into an ass by a Cypriot witch.⁶⁴ For Bate, Shakespeare is proving that he is Ovid's equal, able to effect a metamorphosis not only of Bottom into an ass, but of Ovid into drama: 'Shakespeare's capacity to metamorphose Ovid into a different medium is what makes his art *imitatio* of the highest form'.⁶⁵

This transformative *imitatio* is, however, quite clearly not the sole point of Bottom's translation, any more than his capacity to recall the Minotaur is. Beyond the Minotaur, Midas, Scot's young sailor, and possible lost or oral folkloric sources, Shakespeare's Bottom owes a great deal to the *Golden Ass*, probably in William Adlington's 1582 English translation. As the subtitle of Adlington's translation testifies, Ovid did not have a monopoly on metamorphosis in the Renaissance; and the unfortunate Lucius' transformation illuminates important aspects of the *Dream*'s dealings with love through early modern theories of the imagination, 'common sense', and rational appetite. Though Bottom is only physically half-transformed, he actually becomes more asinine than Lucius in the matter of sense and appetite. Lucius is very much a man trapped in an ass's body, who 'notwithstanding [his] shape of an Asse, [...] had the sense and knowledge of man', and his desire to eat human food and have sex with women is key to the book's plot.⁶⁶ Bottom, meanwhile, with the ears, eyes and tongue of an ass takes on the sense and appetites of an ass. Unlike

⁶⁴ Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London, 1584), 315–16, 94–6.

⁶⁵ Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid*, 144.

⁶⁶ Apuleius, *The Xi. Bookes of the Golden Asse: Containing the Metamorphosie of Lucius Apuleius, Enterlaced with Sundrie Pleasant and Delectable Tales, with an Excellent Narration of the Marriage of Cupid and Psyche, Set Out in the Iij. V. and Vi. Bookes.*, trans. William Adlington (London, 1582), f.106^v.

Lucius, who finds provender ‘a sower kinde of meate’, and goes to every length to find other, human, food, Bottom is interested only in what asses eat.⁶⁷ Implicitly offered all the delights of fairyland by Titania, he pronounces himself hungry for ‘a peck of provender’, ‘good dry oats’, ‘good hay, sweet hay’, or, at a push, ‘a handful or two of dried peas’ (IV.i.31-3, 36).

He is also, *pace* critics who see the relationship as bestially eroticised, sexually uninterested in Titania.⁶⁸ The opening of Act IV recalls a parallel scene in the *Golden Ass*, where Lucius aids a young woman in her escape from a gang of thieves and rapists. Where Titania offers to ‘coy’ Bottom’s ‘amiable cheeks’, ‘And stick musk-roses in [his] sleek smooth head, / And kiss [his] fair large ears’, before sending a fairy to ‘seek / The squirrel’s hoard, and fetch [him] off new nuts’ (IV.i.2-4, 34-5), the young woman promises Lucius that she will

I will bravely dresse the haire of thy forehad, and then I will finely
combe thy mane, I will tie up they rugged taile trimly, I will decke
thee round about with golden trappes, in such sort that thou shalt
glitter lyke the Starres of the Skie, I will bring thee dayly in my
apron the kirmels of nuts, and will pamper thee up with deintie
delicates⁶⁹

It is worth noting that Titania’s musk-roses recall the roses that Lucius is told he must eat in order to return to human form. But where Bottom is immune to the fairy’s blandishments, Lucius is already in love with the girl he rescues. She is unaware that the ass she is riding to safety is so sexually attracted to her that he keeps reaching round to ‘kisse her tender feete’ under the pretence of licking at fleas on his body.⁷⁰ That Bottom is prey to no such feelings of lust is concordant with the way in which

⁶⁷ Ibid., f.66^v.

⁶⁸ See in particular Jan Kott’s influential essay ‘Titania and the Ass’s Head’, in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1967).

⁶⁹ Apuleius, *The Xi. Bookes of the Golden Asse*, f.106^t.

⁷⁰ Ibid., f.105^v.

the *Dream* time and again turns to the ability of sensory organs (in particular the eyes) to control sexual appetites, and forms a key part of its dealings with lust and imagination. The parallel between the two texts points to a vital aspect of the *Dream*'s underlying philosophical framework in a way that makes the *Golden Asse*'s presence as an intertext clear.

Bottom's intertextual relationship with and difference from Lucius helps illuminate these dealings in way that, for all their resonances, the links to Ovid and Scot do not. This is not to say that Apuleius is a dominant source for Bottom; Ovid's Minotaur, Ovid Midas, Scot's sailor and his ass-faced victims of magic may all be at play here at different times, and in different ways. Bottom is certainly, in some sense, the textual offspring of Lucius, but this need not efface his link to the Minotaur. As elsewhere in the play, Bottom's intertexts can be seen to contain the seeds of their own union. Towards the end of the Latin novel, a 'noble and rich matron' who has seen Lucius performing tricks in public

conceived much delight to behold me, and could find no remedy to her passions and disordinate appetite, but continually desired to have her pleasure with me, as Pasiphae had with a Bull.⁷¹

Like the half-man, half-bull Minotaur, Bottom is a beast of fractions; they are simply smaller and more various, and their resonances are activated in different ways at different times.

It is worth noting, too, what the above quotation marks out so clearly: that the *Golden Ass* exists perfectly in the category of the 'antic'. It is an ancient text full of the wild, bawdy and grotesque, that takes the materials of myth and brings them into a burlesque world of magic and folklore. What the *Dream* is doing is related, but

⁷¹ Ibid., f. 179^v.

crucially different. Apuleius' sophisticated and knowledgeable bawdy brings its materials over entirely into the world of the grotesque; a wild world of comical sex and violence where everyone, including Lucius' 'noble and rich matron', is brought down to the same level of ridiculousness and lustfulness. The *Dream*, following its double suspension of 'antique fables' and 'antic fables' within the romance worlds of Chaucerian Athens and the fairy wood, which are simultaneously ancient Athens and the Ovidian glade of Diana, promotes a mode in which the antique and antic interact without any need for one to cancel the other out.

Where, then does this leave Theseus, and his place in our interpretation of the play? He (like Hippolyta) is only very ambiguously made to enter into the antic world of the fairies: his only contact with it comes by report in Oberon and Titania's argument; and he retains his ties to Plutarch and Ovid as much as to Chaucer. He is not wildly transformed or severed from either his classical sources or his medieval sources, but nor does Shakespeare seek to root our reading of him in any particular one. Instead, the *Dream*'s Theseus remains balanced between the play and his sources, and our interpretation of him cannot be wholly informed by either alone. In this, he should not be made to bear the kind of interpretive weight that he is so often made to bear by critics seeking to understand the play through its mythographical background. Despite his commonly central role in readings of the play, Theseus is actually quite marginal, and his marginality makes an important statement about the role mythography can be called upon to perform in our interpretation of the play.

Though it is Theseus' refusal to hear out Hermia and Lysander's case in the opening scene that provides the initial impetus for the development of the *Dream*'s action, and his overbearing of Egeus' will at the end of Act IV that permits the final,

legal resolution, it is the fairies that truly set the plot in motion; and it is through them that the lovers are resolved into their rightful pairs. Theseus' role at each end of the plot is one of voicing and enforcing the law upon the evidence presented to him, and doing so with the weight of ducal authority behind him. In neither case is he actually altering the state of affairs beyond giving it his legal recognition.⁷² He plays, in this sense, a necessary role, but far from the only or most necessary role. That is up to forces stronger than him: love, law, and fairy magic.

Just as he is only one element of the play's plot and resolution, so too can he only be one element of its interpretation. To read the play *through* Theseus is a strategy discouraged, on the one hand by the methodologies of sixteenth-century mythography, and on the other, by the play itself. Like all mythographical texts, it has the privilege of defining its own interpretive framework and hermeneutic approach; unlike most mythographical texts, the *Dream* does so by marginalising the very myths with which it starts. Theseus has a role to play in our interpretation of the *Dream*, as does the wider background of his mythographical sources, but that role is, finally, only one among many.

In the end, Theseus himself expresses this more clearly than any critical summary could. At the opening of Act V, in response to the lovers' 'antique fables' and 'fairy toys', he launches into his famous speech on the imagination. Confronted

⁷² It is, for instance, key to the resolution of the play that Demetrius was actually already betrothed to Helena, *per verba de futuro*, before falling in love with Hermia and becoming Egeus' favoured choice for her husband. It is his admission that 'To her, my lord, / Was I betroth'd ere I saw Hermia' (IV.i), that allows Theseus to overbear Egeus' will and marry the lovers off as they desire. For the relationship between sovereigns and written law, see Pierre de La Primaudaye, *The French Academie, Wherin Is Discourst the Institution of Maners, and Whatsoever Els Concerneth the Good and Happie Life of All Estates and Callings, by Preceptes of Doctrine, and Examples of the Liues of Ancient Sages and Famous Men: By Peter de La Primaudaye Esquire Lord of the Said Place, and of Barree, One of the Ordinarie Gentlemen of the Kings Chamber: Dedicated to the Most Christian King Henrie the Third, and Newly Translated into English by T.B.*, trans. Thomas Bowes (London, 1586), 584ff.

with material he is ill-equipped to understand, and unaware of the incompleteness of his knowledge, Theseus nonetheless assumes he can explain away the action of the play with his neo-Platonic discourse on the ‘shaping fantasies’ of lovers and poets. The speech is deeply sophisticated in its understanding of neo-Platonic theory, and it is a poetic *tour de force* in its own terms; but it is beside the point. Despite the best efforts of critics to apply it to the play’s persistent fascination with the ‘fancy’, ‘fantasy’ or ‘imagination’, and its role in love, Theseus is talking at cross purposes with the discourse of the play.⁷³ Just as in his use of ‘antique fables’ and ‘fairy toys’ he is unconscious of how right and how wrong he is, so too in his analysis of imagination. Though lovers’ imaginations can act in the ways he describes, they have not quite done so in the play. That Q1’s mislined verse in the speech strongly suggests the presence of later, marginal insertions in Shakespeare’s foul papers only reinforces the sense that Theseus is, quite literally, not with the plot here. Critics who seek to understand the play through Theseus alone, with or without a sophisticated knowledge of wider practices in sixteenth-century mythography, are doing something not that different from Theseus himself: talking at cross purposes to the play, on the basis of incomplete knowledge. Any account of the *Dream*’s mythography must move beyond ‘antique fables’ to account for the way in which the mingling and suspension of the antic and antique is its primary means of effecting its own formation.

⁷³ See in particular, R. W. Dent, ‘Imagination in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (April 1964): 115–129.

CONCLUSION

The concept of complex textual contingency that rules Theseus' appearances in the texts examined here is necessarily hard to define. At its heart lies a tension that is key to the history of mythographical discourse. It is clear, on one hand, that, in every instance examined here, the Athenian hero's existence beyond the specific texts in which readers are encountering him at any one moment is a constitutive part of readers' experiences of those texts. If the Greek myths could not hold quite the same place in the cultures of medieval and early modern Europe as they had in the cultures of ancient Greece and Rome, they were still a set of shared tales used as a medium of communication, and writers depended on that commonality in their uses of the tales. The sharers in that set of traditions may have been fewer, and more elite, but they were nevertheless sharers. To read a text such as the 'Knight's Tale', or to witness a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and not know 'who Theseus is', is evidently to miss out on an immensely significant field of reference for those works. Yet, on the other hand, it is clear that the writers examined here, with the notable exception of Natale Conti, felt licenced to rewrite the myths in quite radical ways. Altering and reshaping those shared tales according to their own purposes, they rendered their meanings contingent on new contexts.

Defining the point at which that contingency halts is where the complexity lies. Mythographical texts must in some sense be dependent on that act of recognition, and on the sense that the myth, by exceeding the boundaries of individual texts, is able to help them transcend those boundaries, and signify in ways not available to

non-referential texts. For a myth to fulfil that role, it must always remain, in some sense, itself, no matter what context it is placed into. At the same time, it is evident from the analyses presented above, that a central aspect of mythology's power to bring meaning to texts is its flexibility: its openness to rewriting, reinterpretation, and appropriation. Whether writers were thinking in terms of extracting those meanings from or adding them to the myths in question, the Thesean tales' ability to support new meanings and interpretations is a central thread here. And the practices through which mythology turned into mythography were widely conceived in exactly those terms, across the period examined here. In the bounds of this thesis, at least, the point at which the relationship expressed by complex textual contingency would be broken cannot be identified.

Thanks to its fecundity, mythology is often the source of its own explanatory metaphors, however, and the life of Theseus is no different. In the 'Life of Theseus', Plutarch reports the origins of a famous philosophical paradox which, though it cannot dissolve the complexity of mythology's complex textual contingency, at least puts a finger on the nature of the problem:

The ship on which Theseus sailed with the youths and returned in safety, the thirty-oared galley, was preserved by the Athenians down to the time of Demetrius Phalereus. They took away the old timbers from time to time, and put new and sound ones in their places, so that the vessel became a standing illustration for the philosophers in the mooted question of growth, some declaring that it remained the same, others that it was not the same vessel.¹

At what point the relationship between a myth and its rewriting breaks down is, like the identity or non-identity of Theseus' ship, impossible to pinpoint. Even when all

¹ 'Τὸ δὲ πλοῖν ἐν ᾧ μετὰ τῶν ἠϊθέων ἔπλευσε καὶ πάλιν ἐσωθη, τὴν τριακόντορον, ἄχρι τῶν Δημητρίου τοῦ Φαληρέως χρόνων διεφύλαττον οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι, τὰ μὲν παλαιὰ τῶν ζύλων ὑφαιροῦντες, ἄλλα δὲ ἐμβάλλοντες ἰσχυρὰ καὶ συμπηγνύοντες οὕτως ὥστε καὶ τοῖς φιλοσόφοις εἰς τὸν ἀνζόμενον λόγον ἀμφιδοξούμενον παράδειγμα τὸ πλοῖον εἶναι, τῶν μὲν ὡς τὸ αὐτό, τῶν δὲ ὡς οὐ τὸ αὐτὸ διαμμένοι λεγόντων', 'Life of Theseus', XXII.1 (Perrin's translation).

the original timbers have been replaced, the ship remains at some level Theseus' ship, at least through the group agreement called tradition. As long as it is recognisable as Theseus' ship, it remains Theseus' ship; and so too with the Thesean tales.

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