

John Carey, A LITTLE HISTORY OF POETRY
9780300232226, March 2019, £14.99

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JOHN CAREY

A LITTLE
HISTORY
of



POETRY



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CAREY

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POETRY

YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS
NEW HAVEN AND LONDON

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Europe Office: sales@yaleup.co.uk yalebooks.co.uk

Set in Minion Pro by IDSUK (DataConnection) Ltd
Printed in . . .

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Gods, Heroes and Monsters

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

What is poetry? Poetry relates to language as music relates to noise. It is language made special, so that it will be remembered and valued. It does not always work, of course. Over the centuries countless thousands of poems have been forgotten. This is a book about some that have not.

The oldest surviving literary work is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. It was composed nearly 4,000 years ago in ancient Mesopotamia (roughly equivalent to where Iraq and eastern Syria are now). No one knows who wrote it, or why, or what readership or audience it was intended for. It is preserved on clay tablets in the earliest known alphabet, which is called cuneiform script because the scribes who wrote it formed the letters by making wedge-shaped (cuneiform) dents in wet clay with bits of reed.

For centuries the secret of how to read cuneiform script was lost. Then, in the 1870s, a self-taught, working-class Londoner called George Smith, studying clay tablets in the British Museum, cracked the code and brought the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to light.

The epic tells the story of a king, Gilgamesh, whose mother is a goddess. He rules the city of Uruk (now Warka in southern Iraq). He is a great warrior and builds a magnificent city using glazed bricks, a new technique. But he is lustful and tyrannical, seizing and violating brides on their wedding day. So the gods create a wild man called Enkidu to stop Gilgamesh oppressing his people.

Enkidu is made from the clay the mother goddess washes from her hands, and he is an animal rather than a human. He is covered in hair and lives with the gazelles, eating grass as they do. However, a votaress of the temple in Uruk seduces him, and after seven days and nights of fervent love-making he becomes human. She teaches him to wear clothes and eat human food.

Gilgamesh falls in love with Enkidu, caressing him like a woman. But when Enkidu tries to stop him violating brides, they fight. They turn out to be equally matched, so they kiss and make friends and embark on heroic adventures. Together they go on a quest to the Cedar Forest and kill the monster Humbaba who lives there. This angers the gods, since Humbaba was their monster. While Gilgamesh is washing after the fight the goddess Ishtar sees him, falls in love, and proposes marriage. But she is the goddess of sex and violence and all her lovers come to a bad end, so Gilgamesh rejects her. She is angry, and calls on her father, the sky god, to send another monster, the Bull of Heaven, to kill Gilgamesh. Instead Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the Bull, which angers the gods still more, and they sentence Enkidu to death.

Gilgamesh mourns him bitterly and sets off to discover the secret of eternal life. He is ferried across the waters of death and finds the immortal man Utnapishtim, who survived the great flood, in which all other humans died, by following the gods' instructions and building a boat. Gilgamesh dives into the ocean to find a plant that is said to make whoever possesses it young again. Though he finds it, and brings it to the surface, it is stolen by a snake, and Utnapishtim tells him that no one can defeat death. So Gilgamesh returns to Uruk, having learned that, though he is mighty and famous, he will be equal in death with all other human beings.

There are clear parallels between the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Homer's *Odyssey*. This may be the result of direct influence, or because some elements in the Gilgamesh story are common in myth and folklore worldwide. In many mythologies and religions gods favour or victimise human heroes, and human heroes fight with monsters and descend into the underworld, the realm of death, and then return to the living world. Through Homer, these motifs have become part of Western poetry's imaginative universe.

It is not clear that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was thought of as poetry in our sense of the word. It may have been thought a true account of the gods and their relation to humans. In *Gilgamesh* there is a chief god called Marduk, but there are many other gods and they quarrel, get drunk and make mistakes. They originally made humans immortal, but then they invented death, sending the flood to destroy the human race (except Utnapishtim), because they were noisy and kept the gods awake.

Did this strange story have any effect on the development of modern beliefs and traditions? Possibly. In 597 BC Judah was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and its people were taken into captivity. Their exile is recalled in Psalm 137, 'By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered Sion.' For more than fifty years the people of Judah had to live in subservience to the triumphant Babylonians, and hear about their strange gods. But in 539 BC the Persians conquered Babylon, and the freed Jewish captives returned to Judah. It seems they then set about amalgamating their legends into a sacred book, the Torah, consisting of the first five books of what is now called the Old Testament. They tried, it seems, to keep their legends untainted by the Babylonian beliefs they had lived among. But the flood that destroys mankind in the Book of Genesis and the snake that tricks Eve in Eden, may derive from the flood and snake in *Gilgamesh*.

Most importantly, the Torah asserts that Yahweh, all-powerful and all-knowing, is the only true God, and all other gods, like those of Babylon, are false. This major change brought problems. For if God is all-powerful and all-knowing, why is the world full of misery and suffering? Why didn't God make things better? This

problem has been exercising the minds of theologians for centuries, and different religions have different answers.

In the Torah, man is to blame for the state of the fallen world with its misery and suffering, because Adam ate the apple, although God had warned him that if he ate it he would die. In Christianity this explanation is accepted, though usually with modifications that make the Adam and Eve episode a story, or ‘allegory’, rather than literal truth. But Christianity adds an extension to the story, which is that God sent his son, Jesus Christ, to redeem humankind by dying on the cross, so that all who believe in him will have immortal life.

A different answer to the problem of human suffering is found in some Eastern religions and relates to the idea of *karma*, according to which an individual’s good deeds and intentions lead to happiness, evil deeds and intentions to suffering. In many Indian religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, *karma* is linked to a belief in rebirth, and one’s deeds and intentions in this life affect the nature and quality of one’s future lives. Being born blind, for example, may be the result of sins in a previous life. The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) do not have the concept of rebirth, so this solution to the problem of divine justice is not open to them. But in the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna teaches that every creature in the universe is subject to rebirth.

As we shall see, some Western poets have been drawn to the idea of rebirth. But it is not present in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh thinks he can conquer death, but is mistaken. When Utnapishtim tells him that no one can escape death it is the earliest known literary statement of what will become one of poetry’s major concerns down the centuries – how to confront death, one’s own or other people’s, yet make something valued and beautiful out of it. Shakespeare does this in, for example, the song from *Cymbeline*:

Fear no more the heat o’ the sun,
Nor the furious winter’s rages,
Thou thy worldly task hast done,

Home art gone, and ta'en thy wages:
 Golden lads and girls all must,
 As chimney-sweepers, come to dust.

Fear no more the frown o' the great;
 Thou art past the tyrant's stroke;
 Care no more to clothe and eat;
 To thee the reed is as the oak:
 The sceptre, learning, physic, must
 All follow this, and come to dust.

There are, of course, religious poems that hold out hopes of an afterlife. But Shakespeare's poem does not. It presents death as an escape and a release.

Like death, love is one of poetry's perennial subjects, and it is already central to *Gilgamesh*, where love is presented as a civilising force, something that is needed to make you fully human. A week of love-making turns Enkidu from a beast into a man. Unlike the Adam and Eve story in Genesis, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* also celebrates deep, same-sex love between two males, and some of the greatest love poems we shall come across in this book are addressed by men to men and women to women.

There are other aspects of *Gilgamesh* that resonate in later poetry. Gilgamesh is a tyrant, and he is guilty, like Homer's Odysseus, of what was called in Greek 'hubris', meaning arrogance. The gods disapprove of this, and of his tyranny, which is why they send Enkidu to correct him. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is in this respect a political poem, carrying a reproof and a warning for tyrants. Generalisations about poetry are rash, but in the main poetry, especially modern poetry, is sceptical of power, wealth, luxury and celebrity, and sceptical, too, of people who admire them.

The Epic of Gilgamesh tells us nothing about what it sounded like when it was read or sung. So it lacks, for us, the vital dimension of poetry that relates to rhythm, metre and rhyme. As we shall see, poets differ about what poetry should sound like, and how much this matters. Some argue that sound is all-important, and meaning

negligible. Others consider meaningless poetry futile. Some believe that the sound of poetry, its beat and rhythm, relate to our earliest experience in the echo-chamber of the womb.

As we have seen, part of the wisdom of poetry is that it reminds us we must die. But poems, or some poems do not die, but survive far beyond the span of human life. Why this should happen is mysterious. How can it be that a poet can take a few words from the vast avalanche of language that hurtles past us every day, arrange them in a certain order, and make a deathless work of art? No one has ever been able to explain it. But that, it seems probable, is every poet's aim. Why else go to the trouble of creating a poem and labouring to perfect it, if it is to be instantly forgotten? Even when the poet tells us everything turns to dust, the poem is meant not to. Some poets, Shakespeare for example, in Sonnet 55, are outspoken about it:

Not marble, nor the gilded monuments
Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme . . .

Because no one knows what makes a poem immortal, it follows that the standards for judging poetry are subjective, not scientific facts. My preferences will not be yours, for we bring different minds and different pasts to what looks superficially like the same poem. There are no rights or wrongs in aesthetic judgement, only opinions. I hope you will find poems in this book that you did not know before, that they become part of your daily thoughts, and that you will trust your own judgement of them.



War, Adventure, Love

HOMER, SAPPHO

Who Homer was, and whether the Homeric epics were the work of one poet, is not known. They probably date from about 700 B.C. The *Iliad* is the first surviving war poem. It tells of the battles fought between Greeks and Trojans in the last few weeks of the ten-year siege of Troy, ending in the killing of Hector, leader of the Trojans, by the Greek warrior Achilles.

In its attitude to war the poem is contradictory. It presents war as both glorious and horrible. Cowardice is despised. Yet the brutality and futility of war are exposed. This contradiction is reflected in two contrasting styles that run through the battle scenes. The warriors address each other in formal, rhetorical terms, like orators. But they die like slaughtered beasts. A spear crashes into a mouth, shattering teeth and bones; a youth is plucked from his chariot on a spear's point, writhing like a hooked fish.

The divided feelings about war that the *Iliad* registers seem to be deeply embedded in human nature. Even today, celebrating the glory and lamenting the waste of war go together, as any Remembrance

Day ceremony shows. Exposing this rift within us is one thing that gives the *Iliad* its universality and depth.

Another thing is its portrayal of human feeling. The gods and goddesses who intervene in the action of the epic – Zeus, Apollo, Athena, Aphrodite and the rest – are presented as frivolous, malevolent, petty and quarrelsome. The effect is to make the human beings, by contrast, dignified and elevated. They feel real pain and grief, and are capable of heroism, as the gods, being immortal, are not.

One of the most famous scenes in the poem comes in Book 6, where Hector's wife, Andromache, is weeping as she tries to persuade him not to go out to battle. But Hector replies that he would feel 'deep shame' before the Trojan men and women:

if like a coward I were to shrink aside from the fighting.

He refuses to yield to his wife's pleas, though he knows that he is fated to die in battle and foresees that Troy will be destroyed along with his father, King Priam, and all his people.

A nurse is in attendance, holding their little son Astyanax, 'beautiful as a star'. The child screams with terror at the sight of his father's armour and the horse-hair plume nodding fiercely on his helmet, and nestles up against his nurse as if to get away. Hector and Andromache laugh at the sight of the boy's fear, but Hector takes his gleaming helmet off and places it on the ground. Then he takes the child, kisses him, and dandles him in his arms, praying as he does so:

Zeus, and you other immortals, grant that this boy, who is my son,
may be, as I am, pre-eminent among the Trojans,
great in strength, as I am, and rule strongly over Iliion;
and some day let them say of him: 'He is better by far than his father',
as he comes in from the fighting, and let him kill his enemy
and bring home the blooded spoils, and delight the heart of his
mother.

With that he gives the child to Andromache, who takes him 'to her fragrant bosom, smiling in her tears'. Hector pities her, strokes her

and speaks comfortingly, telling her that no one can send him down to Hades before his time comes.

Many thousands of words have been written about this short scene. It transfers to a family setting the divided reactions to warfare we noticed in the battle scenes. To us it seems horrible that Hector should want his little son to grow into a killer and come back from battle covered in someone else's blood. To pray for this to happen seems like the action of a brute. But we are made to see that Hector is not a brute. He loves his child tenderly, and tries to comfort his wife in her distress. He also foresees that fighting will not achieve anything. He knows that he and his father and Troy are doomed. So going back to re-join the battle does not make sense even on a practical level. It will do no good. Yet we can see why Hector feels he must do it.

So the *Iliad* is a tragedy. But the *Odyssey*, though it is a sort of sequel to the *Iliad*, telling of Odysseus' ten-year voyage to reach his home on the island of Ithaca after the Trojan War, is a totally different kind of poem. It is an adventure story, and it introduces a type of fictional character that will appear in countless adventure stories down the ages. You could call this type the indestructible hero. Like James Bond or Tolkien's Hobbit – or Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*, who is an indestructible heroine, Odysseus survives every danger, however improbably. So compared to the grim realism of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* could be classified as a fantasy.

In the first part of the poem we learn what has happened in Ithaca while Odysseus has been away. His wife, Penelope, is being harassed by scores of unruly young men who, believing Odysseus dead, want to marry her. Odysseus' and Penelope's young son, Telemachus, cannot control these intrusive suitors and, helped by the goddess Athena, he sails to the Greek mainland where he learns that his father is being held captive by a nymph called Calypso who is in love with him.

The second part of the poem starts with Odysseus still on Calypso's island. But she finally agrees to let him go, so he builds a raft and sets off, only to be wrecked by the sea-god Poseidon, who has a grudge against him.

He swims to the nearest land, crawls ashore caked with salt, and falls asleep. The sound of girls laughing wakes him, and he emerges, naked, to find a princess, Nausicaa, and her maids, who have been washing clothes and are now playing ball. Because of its erotic charge, this is one of the poem's most famous scenes.

Nausicaa takes him to her parents' palace, where he is welcomed, and they ask him how he came to be cast up on their island. At this point Odysseus becomes the narrator, and the story he tells is weird and wonderful. It reads like a pack of lies dreamed up by a wily old wanderer who has to find some excuse for taking ten years to sail home, a distance of some 500 miles.

He left Troy, he says, with twelve ships, and landed on the island of the Lotus Eaters, who gave his men a kind of super-sedative fruit that made those who ate it forget their homes and families. Next, he and his men were captured by a one-eyed, man-eating giant called Polyphemus, but escaped by blinding him with a sharpened stake. Next Aeolus, god of the winds, gave Odysseus a leather bag containing all the winds. But his men foolishly opened it, letting the winds out, so that their ships were driven back even though they had already sailed within sight of Ithaca.

After that they sailed into a bay where giant cannibals sank eleven of their twelve ships by hurling rocks from the cliffs. Only Odysseus' ship escaped, and reached the island of the goddess Circe, daughter of the sun god, who turned half his men into swine. However, the god Hermes gave him a drug that made him immune to Circe's magic, and she told him how to reach the world of the dead on the western edge of the world. There he communed with various ghosts, including Achilles and Agamemnon, his comrades in the Trojan War, and his own mother.

Sailing back to Circe's island he passed the land of the Sirens, who lure sailors to their destruction on the rocks with their enchanting music. But he plugged his men's ears with bees' wax, and ordered them to tie him to the mast so that he heard the Sirens' sing, and survived. Nearby were a lethal sea-monster-cum-whirlpool called Charybdis, and another sea-monster with six heads, called Scylla. Successfully navigating the strait between them, Odysseus reached

an island where, while he was asleep, his men made the bad mistake of killing and eating some cattle sacred to the sun god Helios. As punishment, Zeus sent a storm that wrecked their ship, drowning everyone except Odysseus. He survived by clinging to some driftwood, and then was almost sucked down into Charybdis, but was washed up on Calypso's island, where the narrative of his adventures began.

Nausicaa's parents, having heard his story, help him to get back to Ithaca. He disguises himself as a beggar, and no one knows him except his old dog, which dies of joy on seeing him, and his old housekeeper who recognises a scar on his leg while she is washing his feet, but does not give him away. Choosing his moment, he reveals himself to his son Telemachus and to two of his former slaves, a swineherd and a cowherd, and together they take a terrible revenge, slaughtering the suitors and strangling twelve maidservants who had betrayed Penelope.

How far we are meant to assume that Odysseus' story is a pack of lies is impossible to say, and pointless to ask. For what the *Odyssey* does, far more than the *Iliad*, is open the door to the monsters, phantasms and nameless horrors that live on the far side of logic and reason. Entering this imaginary realm is something poetry has always done, and some of the *Odyssey's* creatures, such as Scylla and Charybdis and the Sirens, have become almost proverbial, referred to in later poems worldwide. That may mean that Homer was uncannily attuned to humanity's collective unconscious. But it may also be because his writing is so graphic that it stamps itself on the memory. He works through vivid, direct language – Odysseus grinding out Polyphemus' eye with an olive-wood stake, for example, or Scylla grabbing six men from his ship and whirling them in the air, shrieking, or the maidservants strung up by their necks and slowly choking (the first depiction of a hanging in world literature). Scenes like these are difficult to forget, even when you want to.

Unlike a lot of poetry, Homer's can survive translation into other languages, partly because of the simplicity, speed and directness of his narrative technique. There have been many English translations, but the earliest was by George Chapman in 1614. Its most

famous reader was the English poet John Keats, who knew no Greek, and whose sonnet – ‘Much have I travelled in the realms of gold’ – written in 1816, records his wonder on reading Homer in Chapman’s translation.

Sappho (c. 630–c. 570 BC) is the only Greek poet apart from Homer that most people have heard of today. In antiquity critics referred to her as ‘The Poetess’ as Homer was ‘The Poet’. She was born on the island of Lesbos (from which we get the word ‘Lesbian’). Most of her poetry is lost. Apart from one poem – an ‘Ode to Aphrodite’, in which she asks for the love goddess’s help – only fragments remain.

But enough survives to show why critics were so wild about her. Her poetry is clear, sensuous and passionate. The loved one is a ripe, red apple, high on a tree, out of reach. Or she is a mountain hyacinth, which the shepherds trample on with their clumsy feet, leaving a purple stain on the earth. In another poem she derides the Homeric gods for their callousness, and mocks those who worship them.

In a poem identified as ‘Fragment 31’, Sappho watches the woman she loves talking and laughing with a man, and she goes into shock. Her heart thumps, her skin seems on fire, she can’t speak, her eyes dim, her ears ring. Trembling, she breaks out in a cold sweat. It is the first description of the symptoms of passionate love by a woman in Western literature.



Latin Classics

VIRGIL, HORACE, OVID, CATULLUS, JUVENAL

Just before the beginning of the Christian era three poets were born whose writings were to become cornerstones of Western civilisation.

Not much is known about the origins of the oldest, Virgil (70 to 19 BC), but he probably came from a land-owning family near Mantua. According to legend he was shy and modest, and his schoolmates nicknamed him ‘the maiden’.

He grew up in turbulent times. Julius Caesar had put an end to the old Roman republic by seizing dictatorial power, and civil war raged both before and after his murder in 44 BC. Not until 27 BC did his adopted son emerge victorious, and establish himself as Caesar Augustus, the first Roman emperor. Virgil’s early poetry caught the attention of Augustus’ cultural adviser, Maecenas, and he recruited the young poet to what became, in effect, the emperor’s propaganda ministry.

Virgil’s masterpiece was his twelve-book epic poem, the *Aeneid*. He started it around 29 BC, and its political aim was to glorify

Augustus and legitimise the dynasty he founded. Its hero is a Trojan, Aeneas, briefly mentioned in the *Iliad*, who, in Virgil's reconstruction of history, is destined to become the ancestor of the Romans. Aeneas's mother is the goddess Venus, but his enemy among the immortals is Juno, who plagues him with disasters. He escapes with his band of followers from the sack of Troy, carrying his father Anchises, and accompanied by his little son, but his wife dies in the general carnage.

The first six books of the epic recount the adventures Aeneas and his men undergo prior to making landfall in Italy. The last six books tell of their wars against the native Italian tribes, culminating in Aeneas's defeat of Turnus, leader of the Rutuli. By writing about both adventure and warfare, Virgil intentionally challenges comparison with the Homer of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. His poem, like the empire it glorifies, aims to be a world-beater.

Aeneas is depicted as an ideal leader, and characterised as *pius*. This is not quite the same as the English word 'pious'. It includes duty to family and nation, as well as obedience to the gods. His test comes when he and his men are cast up on the African coast near Carthage, and Dido, the queen of Carthage, offers them hospitality. It is to her that Aeneas recounts the destruction of Troy and the perils he and his men have been through. She falls in love with him, and he is touched by her sympathy. While sheltering in a cave during a hunting trip, they make love. But Jupiter sends Mercury to remind Aeneas of his destiny and, though torn, he forsakes Dido and sails away. Furious, she builds a funeral pyre and stabs herself, vowing eternal enmity between Carthage and Aeneas's descendants. Out at sea Aeneas and his men see the blaze of the pyre that consumes her.

The Dido episode had a political purpose. The great maritime empire of Carthage had been the rival of the Roman republic in its early days, and there had been three horrendously costly wars between the two powers. At the end of the third, Carthage was burnt to the ground. The Dido episode puts these tragedies into the context of divine destiny.

The most politically significant part of the poem, from the viewpoint of Augustan propaganda, comes in Book 6 where Aeneas,

with Venus's help, finds the magic golden bough that admits him to the underworld. There, among the souls of the dead, he encounters his father Anchises, who foretells the future of Rome, including the advent of the divine Augustus and the emperors that will follow him.

For posterity, however, the epic's vividness and emotional depth mattered far more than its politics. Its incidents etched themselves on the European imagination – not just the sensational highlights, such as Aeneas's flight from Troy and Dido's operatic death, but relatively minor episodes like the crushing of Laocoon and his sons by sea-serpents during the siege of Troy as described by Aeneas. The poem has, too, been quarried for wise sayings, for example Aeneas's words to his men in the midst of their afflictions (*Aeneid*, 1.203), which translate roughly, 'Perhaps one day it will give us pleasure to remember even these things.'

The second of the three great poets, Horace (65 to 8 BC), was the son of a freed slave, but had an expensive education, partly in Athens. He served as an officer in the republican army that Augustus defeated at the Battle of Philippi in 42 BC. After that he decided to throw in his lot with the winning side. Maecenas rewarded him with a farm in the Sabine hills, and wangled him a civil service job. In return, Horace's poetry lavishes praise on Augustus as a divine ruler.

He has been criticised as a time-server. But his easy-going nature is one factor that gives his poems their charm. There is no point, he advises, in fighting against the inevitable. He preens himself on his prowess as a lover, while admitting that age has blunted his ardour. He seems to have kept going as long as he could, though. The Roman historian Suetonius alleges that he had his bedroom walls covered in obscene pictures, with mirrors positioned so that pornography met him wherever he looked.

Like Virgil and Ovid, Horace wrote poetry in several forms. But he is chiefly remembered for a single masterpiece, the *Odes*, consisting of just over a hundred shortish, personal poems. Their subjects are various, and they obey no particular order. Some congratulate Augustus on his victories, some hymn the coming of springtime or celebrate the delights of country life on his Sabine farm, with its lovely

fountain, deliciously cool even on torrid days. Some sing the virtues of wine, and invite friends to come and share it. He condemns avarice and luxury, in line with Augustus' plans to reform public morality, and recommends a return to the pure, simple ideals of ancient times. His poems to women are frank, teasing them or telling them off as he thinks fit. He pays due reverence to the Roman gods – Apollo, Venus, and the rest – and honours them with simple sacrifices. Be content with your lot is his advice.

All this may sound rather humdrum. But it is the brilliance of his writing that has secured his immortality – as he knew it would. 'I have built a monument more permanent than bronze', he boasted (*Odes*, 3.30). The effect is one of brevity, elegance and extreme cleverness. This is poetry for the educated, not the mob. 'I hate the unholy rabble', he admitted (*Odes*, 3.1). Yet several of his taut, pregnant phrases have passed into common English usage, most famously *carpe diem*, meaning 'seize the day' (*Odes*, 1.11).

Ovid (48 BC to AD 17), the youngest member of the great trio, belonged, like Virgil and Horace, to Augustus' circle of poets. He enjoyed a scandalous reputation, writing impudently immoral poems describing his love affairs (called the *Amores*) and an instruction manual on seduction (the *Ars Amatoria*). He married three times and divorced twice before he was thirty. Nine years before his death Augustus exiled him (no one knows why) to Tomis on the Black Sea, and he wrote poems about that.

But his masterpiece was the *Metamorphoses* (meaning 'Transformations'). It is a fifteen-book epic covering the history of the world from the creation to the deification of Julius Caesar (which happened the year before Ovid's birth). But this historical framework is no more than a carrier-bag. The *Metamorphoses* is really a glorious medley of myths, over two hundred and fifty of them, some tragic, some comic, some grotesque. Ovid jumps from story to story with scarcely any attempt at connection, but all the myths are about love, and they all involve someone being magically turned into someone or something else. Humans are turned into animals or birds or plants or stars; gods take on ungodly shapes to seduce nymphs or maidens. Jupiter becomes a swan to woo Leda

and, disguised as a white bull, swims out to sea with the beautiful Europa on his back; Pluto, god of the underworld, drags Proserpina down to his dark realm. Sometimes their prey changes shape to save herself. Chased by Apollo, Daphne becomes a laurel bush.

Gods and goddesses are shown as not just lustful but horribly vindictive and vain. A flute-player, Marsyas, dares to challenge Apollo to a musical contest and is flayed alive by the god for his effrontery. A shepherd's daughter, Arachne, competes at weaving with the goddess Athena, and wins. But Athena, in jealous rage, rips her work to pieces and turns her into a spider. Offending the immortals, even by mistake, earns fearful punishment. The huntsman Actaeon comes upon Diana bathing, and, turned into a stag, is torn to pieces by his own hounds.

Some stories have moral meanings. Greedy Midas turns all he touches to gold, and starves to death. Vain Narcissus pines for his reflection in a pool. Overweening Phaeton tries to drive the chariot of the sun and plunges to destruction. But the myths feed a hunger for the marvellous that is deeper than morality. There are monsters – the bull-man Minotaur lurking in his labyrinth; the Gorgon, Medusa, slain by Perseus to save Andromeda. There are sex-changes. A beautiful boy and a nymph unite to form the bisexual Hermaphroditus. The prophet Tiresias lives for seven years as a woman, marries, has children, then becomes a man again. (Asked whether men or women got more pleasure from love-making, Tiresias replied that women did – ten times more. Juno blinded him as punishment.)

The influence of the *Metamorphoses* spread much wider than literature. Countless paintings and sculptures in the Renaissance took their inspiration from the stories Ovid tells – Cellini's *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, Bernini's *Rape of Proserpina*, Titian's *Actaeon Surprising Diana* and *Rape of Europa*, Veronese's *Venus and Adonis*, and many more. To say that the Renaissance would not have happened without the *Metamorphoses* would be going too far. But not much.

Two other great Latin poets have left their mark on world literature. Catullus (84 to 54 BC) lived in the last days of the Roman

Republic, before Augustus came to power. His poetry influenced Virgil, Horace and Ovid, and was influenced by Sappho. His *Carmina* consist of 116 mostly short poems, some homosexual, some obscenely vituperative, some explicit enough to shock the faint-hearted. Many are about a real-life love affair and reflect its ups and downs, from tenderness to jealous fury. He calls the loved woman 'Lesbia', but her real name was Clodia. She was married, promiscuous, and came, like Catullus, from a high-ranking family. Two of his poems that have proved popular with later poets are about her pet sparrow (a bird that, some think, has an improper double meaning).

Almost nothing is known about the life of Juvenal (c. AD 55 to c.138), but he wrote sixteen *Satires*, and said that their subject was 'whatever men do – prayer, fear, rage, pleasure, joy, running about'. They are sometimes scathingly comic and, taken together, amount to a blistering denunciation of the public and private life of first-century Rome. They have been eagerly translated, adapted and imitated down the ages, which suggests that human vices have not altered much over time, nor our pleasure in reading about them. The *Satires* are the source of several common sayings, for example, 'bread and circuses' (meaning the kind of pleasures the mob chases after), 'a sound mind in a sound body', and 'who will guard the guards?' (meaning who will keep an eye on those who are supposed to keep an eye on us?). That said, the *Satires'* treatment of women, gays, Jews, foreigners, and other people the author regards as social deviants, is deeply repellent to us nowadays. Some prefer to read them as ironic, meaning the opposite of what they say.

‘Will make you writhe, ripple
and froth with pleasure.’

Stephen Fry



‘Brilliant, irresistible: a
wonderful surprise.’

Philip Pullman

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