**Mark:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Endless Knot Podcast,

**Aven:** where the more we know,

**Mark:** the more we want to find out.

**Aven:** Tracing serendipitous connections through our lives

**Mark:** and across disciplines.

**Aven:** Hi, I'm Aven.

**Mark:** And I'm Mark.

**Aven:** And today we're talking about Ovid. In fact, we're talking about Ovid with two separate interview guests. We're very happy that it just so happens that there are two new books coming out about Ovid. One has just come out, and one came out in the fall, and we have the privilege of speaking to both authors.

And so we've put them together into one big, Ovid-centric episode.

**Mark:** First of all, a content note because of the nature of the material. A content note for mention of sexual violence and also for brief descriptions of trauma. .

**Aven:** We also have some new patrons to thank. Alison s and Masha L are new patrons and we are very grateful for your support.

Woohoo[00:01:00]

**Mark:** Also, we will be participating in an event or a series of events, really in February. So first of all there is the LingComm2023 conference. And secondly, and sort of alongside that, there's also the Ling Fest fringe Festival, .

**Aven:** So this is the second international conference on linguistics communication ling com 23.

That is an online conference. We attended the first one and we took part in it, and it was amazing. It was a great conference. So this second one is taking place during the week of February 6th-10th, 2023. So just a couple of weeks. The times are sort of across the days. They're. Optimized for as many parts of the globe as possible.

I urge you to check it out online to figure out what the schedule is, but basically if you are interested in linguistics communication as a field, participating in it in particular I would suggest that you might wanna check [00:02:00] this out. You can check it out at a link that we're gonna provide in the show notes, or if you just search lingcomm with two M'S 2023, you'll find it. And there's a, conference fee, but there's also different levels for different income levels and ability to pay. So don't worry about finances being the block, if that's a particular concern for you.

We really enjoyed it last time and we will be doing a panel

**Mark:** and we will also be generally hanging around the conference. So we are absolutely open to being approached and asked questions or engaged in conversation. So please come and

**Aven:** check us out there And if you're wondering what it means to be hanging around an online conference, the conference takes place in the gather space for lingcomm, and that is an online forum, which allows little avatars of you to walk around and talk to each other.

It works really well. It sounds a little complicated or funny to [00:03:00] describe, but it actually allows for real kind of social interactions, very much more similar to real life social interactions than you might think is possible online. So yeah, come hang out with us at the conference, or if you either can't make that or that's not your cup of tea, join us on Sunday, February 12th at 1:00 PM Eastern, we will be doing a livestream q and a on our YouTube. And in

**Mark:** advance of that send in your questions and comments. Or of course ask them on the day. But if you already have a question you want to ask we are delighted to take those questions in advance.

You can send them to us through email or through our various social media. Accounts or even through comments on YouTube.

**Aven:** Yep. And especially if you have any questions that maybe we might need to do a little research on we'd encourage you to send those ahead of time. But Twitter, [00:04:00] Facebook Mastodon, which we are on, I don't know if that link is on our website, but I will find a way to try to add that, at least Instagram,

**Mark:** Tumblr, for those of a certain persuasion

**Aven:** So yes questions about etymology, but also about language about us. We don't promise to answer every question you might ask about us personally, but we're open to questions if you wanna know about career or background or education or what we do. Oh, my favorite socks, I don't know if you can answer that question.

You have a lot of socks. Very fancy socks. I see. Anyway. That's the live stream on Sunday the 12th. That is completely free and open to everybody, whether or not you've participated in the conference. And then the conference is from February 6th to 10th. So again, I'll put the links to all of that into the show notes and or you can just search for link com or Link Fest online and I'm sure you'll find them.[00:05:00]

So join us if you are able to. We'd love to meet and reconnect with old and new listeners. And now turning to Ovid. We have two interviews, so we will do one and then introduce our second guest and do the second. So to introduce the first, our first

**Mark:** guest is Stephanie McCarter, who is a classics professor at the University of the South in Suwanee, Tennessee, who enjoys writing on a range of subjects from the classical to the personal to the political. Her current interests lie mainly in literary translation from greco Roman literature, and we're talking to her today about her translation of Ovid's Metamorphoses, recently published by Penguin Classics.

**Aven:** So, hi Stephanie. Thank you so much for being here with us.

**Stephanie:** I'm so glad to be here. Thank you for having me.

**Mark:** Welcome. So I think [00:06:00] I'd like to start off with a question that, we usually ask our guests about are there any interesting or surprising connections in your work, in your life, in your interests?

**Stephanie:** Sure. Well, I mean, I think that some, a connection that I've had to hone the past few years since I started translation was to connect classics and creative writing, which is not something I think that's often connected in the minds of classicists, especially. I think that when we think about translation in the classroom as a trained classicist, we're doing a very literal kind of translation that is meant to demonstrate that you understand the grammar.

That, you know what an ablative absolute is, whereas creative writing is in some ways so nicely related to that and to you know, for me it's been nice to connect translation with a more creative kind of expression, which is something I was always really interested in doing.

But I was a, an English major, took creative writing classes when I was in high school. I always loved the idea of writing. But when I [00:07:00] became a classicist, I sort of had to move away a bit from that kind of creativity. And so it's been nice the past few years to embrace that a new, and I think that classicists have a lot to, they stand to benefit a lot from making those kinds of connections with creative writing, especially because that's the kind of writing that gets so many students into our classrooms and keeps them engaged in the long run in.Classics

**Aven:** I was just going to say that, that makes me think of the current, though, also perennial subject of the Discourse on Twitter right now, which is about the, the value and the place of retellings, of mythological stories in fictional forms. Which I think is a high value and an important place, but there was a, I don't know if you've been seeing this particular outbreak of it, but.

**Stephanie:** I have a little bit, I , I tweeted something about it myself. Yeah. Because I mean, that was the topic of my talk at the Society for Classical Studies. Exactly. It's just that we really need to hone this connection. I'm all, I love the [00:08:00] creative retellings. I actually, you know, I think that they each retelling sheds new light on the original in really interesting ways that classicists need to take account of more in our classrooms. You know, one of my favorite retellings is Nina MacLaughlin's Wake, Siren: Ovid Re-Sung. And I know that some of her rewritings really did affect the way I approached the Ovidian material.

She has this great rewriting of Juno's character. Juno you know, is often treated as just the perennially jealous wife , right? . And she gets kind of reduced, but Nina MacLaughlin really makes her motivated by power, and that really influenced the way I thought about Juno in the Metamorphoses.

So I think we have a lot, we, we can learn a lot from these readings that other people are doing. I just think that classicists need to open their minds a bit to think what are valid ways of reading the ancient world? There's not just a single way that is philology in the classroom.

**Aven:** Absolutely.

**Mark:** And I think, this is, one of the things I think makes it really hard to, to do a good [00:09:00] translation is you've got to. both feet in, in each camp, right? You've got to be able to you know, you have to know the material, you have to know the grammar and, and all of that.

But you know, it has to be well written. Students can, lose patience pretty quickly with a clunky translation or, or even just, you know, an older translation, right? If it isn't kind of contemporary sounding. . And so, you know, works need to be refreshed, every, few generations and they have to be good if you're gonna get your students to read it.

**Stephanie:** Absolutely. I mean, I think that the worst thing you can do in class is assign a translation that's just, you know, with Ovid in particular that uses dated language around sexuality and sexual violence. Students are so savvy about these things and often have remarkably great taste. Especially in literature.

I mean, my students... Sewanee is really heavy with the creative writing. I share a hallway with two creative writers, . They're both wonderful. The creative writers are sort of the stars on campus, and [00:10:00] so for my students, you know, we attract a lot of really great writers, great readers, and so if I'm trying to get a clunky old translation for my students to read, they are not going to respond well to that.

So in some ways, they're the ones who have actually pushed me to try to think a bit more about the sorts of translations that I'm using and to my own producing of them. Certainly. So,

**Mark:** continuing from this idea then what were your main goals in this translation? How does it, in what specific ways does it offer something different from, other translations out there, many of, many of which are, a little dated now.

Right. What, what sort of things were you thinking about when you set about this work?

**Stephanie:** You know, I guess it was a two-pronged well, multiple pronged, but the two main things I would bring out right now are, you know, I really wanted to produce lovely poetry. I love writing in iambic pentameter. I was really inspired by a lot of translators who are working in form right now.

So A E Stallings, Emily Wilson, [00:11:00] A M Juster, A M Puccigi, and these are great translators, Sarah Ruden, who are who've done a lot, I think, to bring form back into translation, which to me is so important, because these were heavily formal poems and it gives our students some sense of that. I love writing iambic pentameter.

So to me it was just, you know, it was a kind of poetic pleasure of, of writing this. I never, I never did not enjoy working on the translation. I never once woke up and thought, I don't wanna do this today. , like I went to, I went to sleep thinking about it. I would get up in the middle of the night because I had finally arrived at the good translation for something.

I woke, woke up many mornings with like words scribbled on me on a sheet of paper I kept next to my bed . So it was, you know, it was just, it was about poetry, but it was also about the fact that I teach Ovid all the time and I teach a course regularly in women and gender in the ancient world, and. I teach a class on sex and sexuality in the ancient world.

And then I also teach Ovid in a humanities [00:12:00] class. I teach, I teach Latin classes on Ovid. I teach him in intermediate Latin. I'm teaching him all the time. And I'm always centering the stories of, or the theme of sexual violence and rape because to me it's such an integral part of the of the epic which is so centered around the theme of power.

and rape is an expression of power abuse. And and I never could quite get to that in the existing translations. They seemed as though they were either really dated. So you know, they had really archaic ways of expressing rape; the word ravish appears in all of the translations, or they just kind of dilute it and.

Where Tereus is raping Philomela, for instance, one translator says he "mounts her". And you know, to me that was just every time I would get to that, it was like my heart would stop and I would have to sort of explain to my students, well, this is the term that Ovid is really using. So I wanted to really interrogate the language around sexual violence.

And then as I was going through, I [00:13:00] was thinking, well, there's a lot to do with the body here as well that a lot of translators haven't really done well. In terms of the gendered body, especially the feminized body or the non feminized body and you know, words to do with clothing and dress.

And so, a lot of those were just informed by the fact that I teach this in courses that have to do with gender and sexuality, and I really wanted to reflect that well, in the translation.

**Aven:** Yeah. I'll pick up first on that, the poetic form comment, and then we can go on with the other one.

Cause that's a bigger discussion and I certainly wanna continue having it. I, I welcome, not that I'm teaching much anymore, but I welcome the poetic form resurgence, shall we say, in these translations. Partly because I too, you know, I just enjoy them. I find them more interesting to read. I like them, but also because the the realization that I came to, you know, after a few years of teaching, that for an awful lot of students, they didn't realize the epics were in verse Yes.

Because they'd read a Mandelbaum version or what, you know, whatever. And the, just literally, if the translation they're reading isn't in verse, it [00:14:00] doesn't stick in their head that the original was in verse. And that's not, that's not ridiculous, that's not a stupid approach. Right? I mean, they're not reading the original. When you're teaching it in translation, there's only so much you can do to talk about the.

You know, you'll talk about the verse stuff, but it's all very abstract because you can't really point to the line and explain it and everything. And so just that very simple thing that I really do want them to walk away from Ovid and know he's a poet . Absolutely. When you walk away from the Metamorphoses and think it was a novel, we have messed up

**Stephanie:** Absolutely. Some of the translations that exist, I mean you have Mary Innis's, she's the only other woman who's translated the whole thing. It's in prose. You have a lot of free verse. Lombardo's is not metrical. Mandlebaum's actually is yeah. His is many, many, many, many thousands of lines longer than Ovid's.

So he gives himself enormous flexibility with length. Yeah. But yeah, no, I mean, so often. Students saying that Homer and and Virgil and Ovid are writing novels and Yes. And I think a lot of that is to do with the form. I [00:15:00] also think some of it is to do with the ubiquity of novels in our own culture.

I mean, the, the Epic poem is such a foreign concept, I think, to so many of our students.

**Aven:** Yeah. I find that novel or play are the only two forms that students think in. Yeah. So everything is a novel or a play, right? At least on the exams I've read. . , absolutely. So that is a slightly separate issue, but still, at least if it's in verse, they do pause and think about whether it's a novel or a play.

**Stephanie:** At least . Absolutely.

Yeah. When I teach it to my students who are familiar with, who are familiar with dactylic hexameter. So my Ovid class, we can't read the whole thing in Latin. It gives me a chance to introduce them to iambic pentameter, because so many Latin students don't know anything about English meter.

Right. Yeah, . .

**Aven:** Yeah. Which is always, of course part of the classicist job is to sneakily teach people about English. . Absolutely. , yes. Both literature and language . Absolutely. So now to return to the other [00:16:00] question which you raised about the updating of the language in a more content form. I mean, there's, there's a number of things about updating language, some of which just has to do with basic, outdated slang in terms and all the rest of that. Right. But then the other stuff is, is more based on how our attitudes have changed and perceptions of the body and perceptions of sexuality and gender and sexual violence and all of those things. Right. You discussed this in your introduction fairly extensively.

In particular in relation to the controversies that there have been over using the Met in high school and university classes and because of its intense focus on rape, right? And contentions about whether, you know, whether one should read it, how one should read it, whether you need to give trigger warnings, whether you don't need to, you know, all of that stuff.

I know you do go into it extensively in the introduction, but maybe you could talk a little bit about it now, sort of, where you come down on those questions, but also how you think this, this translation can help or can, can intervene in those discussions.

**Stephanie:** Absolutely. You know, I think[00:17:00] so much of reading Ovid was wrapped up with the trigger warning debate a few years ago.

Yeah. and I do offer content warnings or content notes I should say. trigger warnings are something I'm still trying to wrestle with in my mind, the language of that particular word. . But at any rate, I think what to me matters even more than whether or not you offer a note about content or a warning about content is whether or not you're actually discussing sexual violence when you teach it.

Like it really needs to be central to the larger discussion and not just an acknowledgement because you know, to me so much of the epic is about the body, you know, it's right there in line two, right. "New bodies". What, does it mean to walk around in a world with a human body? And, you know, Ovid is very interested about the, the vulnerability and the penetra ability of the body.

And so, his scenes of war, it's all about who can get penetrated with a sword. the Trojan War becomes a series of stories about violent penetration in [00:18:00] war. And equally, so many of the stories about women are about violent penetration through sex. And and it becomes wrapped up in contests of power often between men.

You know, you have Apollo and Cupid who are arguing about who's the most powerful god, and this launches us into a set of stories about rape, but it's about, you know, who has power over the bodies of other people, and then who gets to have bodily autonomy. These are fundamentally important themes in an epic about metamorphosis, which centers the body.

. And so if you're not really discussing those themes and discussing the presence of sexual violence, then you're not really digging into Ovid in a way that I feel you should. You're treating it perhaps as a beautiful poem with really intriguing stories, but you're not really digging into some of the larger themes he's kind of begging you repeatedly to think about . . And I think, you know, for Ovid writing this in a period of time that is about freedom and how it. , it's transforming as Rome [00:19:00] transforms from a republic to an empire. he connects rape to that in a really interesting way. I mean, what is libertas but bodily autonomy? Freedom is kind of, you know, what you do with your body and and what others can do to your body. And so to me it's. It's important to the overall framework of the Metamorphoses, to his political moment and then of course to our political moment because we are reckoning with, you know, power and the body and gender and race and violence and really interesting ways that can connect to Ovid.

And I think that reading Ovid can help us better see how some of these things are working out in our own culture, you know, to to to see Ovid so clearly connect sexual violence to power abuse is a kind of galvanizing connection, I think both for me and my students and, to see characters who are nonconforming in terms of gender, who are non-binary, that that is also galvanizing.

And I think for a lot of students it, it means something very [00:20:00] powerful to see that, that some of the issues we're wrestling with today were not just invented 50 years ago or 20 years ago. . But they've actually been perennial questions that we've been thinking about over time. And they're questions that are fundamental to the human experience of the world.

Yes,

**Aven:** I just sort of wanna Amen. . I'm gonna try to keep this conversation about your translation of Ovid, because that's important and that's what we wanna talk to you about. But really all I wanna do is talk about Ovid for the next three and a half hours . That's fine. I will restrain myself to some degree, but yes, I mean, rereading Ovid as I read your translation just raises again, and because you are so very clear about it, it, it helps highlight, I think the way in which bodily autonomy, vulnerability, and gender, and status, though he's not as obvious about status as he might be. Like in a way, he sort of flattens the status of all the different people. Yes, that's true. They're all true. They're all kind of [00:21:00] aristocrats in the sense that they're gods and you know, like they don't, we don't really see the sort of enslaved people being more vulnerable than non enslaved and things like that, that are, are very true in his world around him.

But there's a bit of a flattening of that I think. in his epic, which is interesting.

**Stephanie:** That's a great point. . Yeah. Can I, can I reply? Can I respond to that too? Cause I've thought about, of course, this too, you know, you don't, you don't see a lot of enslaved people in this epic. But to a certain degree, I think that, you know, you certainly have the gods and humans, you have that hierarchy.

You have the, hierarchy of gender. But to me it's as though when someone's body is metamorphosed. when they are forcibly violated like that by another person, it's is, you know, that loss of bodily autonomy mimics in a lot of ways , the loss of bodily autonomy that comes about when somebody is enslaved.

And so to me, I think you can read enslavement into it a little bit because, you know, Ovid lived every day in a world where he saw people who had no bodily autonomy that were [00:22:00] treated as objects. And then he writes an an epic about people with no bodily autonomy who become objects. To me that that's actually an interesting connection you can make.

**Aven:** Yeah. And I, I mean, I think, you know, he presumably treated people right. Not just lived in a world like that, but unless Oh, sure. He was extremely exceptional. He presumably treated people around him that way too. Absolutely. although it hurts us in the soul to, to do this sometimes. I think we really have to remember that, that our, and I'm not suggesting you're not remembering that but we do have to remember that these writers undoubtedly beat their slaves and Yep.

Took sexual liberties, et cetera. Well, absolutely. And even if they didn't do horrible things in the, in our minds, I'm sure they still treated them like objects. Well, and they

**Stephanie:** may have done horrible things. I mean, , you know, and, and I, I completely agree. I mean, when, when you're writing an epic like Ovid's, I mean, part of it is, an elite freeborn male who is writing stories about the worst horror that they can imagine and the worst horror they can imagine is the sorts of things that they are. imposing on other [00:23:00] people all the time. Yeah,

**Aven:** exactly. to see themselves treated the way they have treated others is the worst they can handle.

Yes, absolutely. Yeah. And I, I think it's interesting. I'm sorry, I've sort of derailed what I was gonna talk about, but I'm gonna just follow this a little bit more. That's fine. when I say that I, I think there's some flattening of status. I wonder if some of that, because what I mean by that is that we don't see, we see everybody who's susceptible to these changes, as you say, kind of taking on that vulnerability and that lack of autonomy of the enslaved. And that does, and it's true whether it's a, a river God or a shepherd or a, you know, they all sort of are treated the same way. And so in that sense it kind of flattens those differences. They're all sort of on the same level. Right. But I wonder, part of me wonders a bit about, there's all that discussion of how, you know, the under Augustus, the sort of reshaping of, as you say, libertas and autonomy and status and masculinity as a kind of a flattening, like everybody under Augustus is -- subservient is not the [00:24:00] right word, but it to some degree vulnerable to Augustus in a way that at least ideologically they weren't under the republic. Yeah. And if that is, maybe part of it is, is a, you know, this is a totalizing narrative that also expresses the idea that everybody is vulnerable to this.

Yeah. That's, that's lack of autonomy is now uni is al either always has been or is now universal?

**Stephanie:** Yes, absolutely. That's a great point. I mean, the Romans did not you know, if you read someone like Tacitus, right? Yeah. You didn't really see gradations under the emperor. It was like everybody rushed into, everybody became a slave, right?

Yeah. Everybody took on that status and to some degree, under the gods in the Metamorphoses, everybody sort of does have Yeah, exactly. That's, you know, have, have that status because the gods can transform anybody. You know, Lycaeon is a tyrant, a king, and he's, he's the first human.

Yeah. Who's transformed when you have that kind of power. , you know, disparity than those [00:25:00] people who are living under someone like Jupiter. Their bodies become vulnerable. ,

**Aven:** and then at the end of the epic, Augustus is a God as well.

**Stephanie:** But so is Ovid!

**Aven:** Yes. Well, yes, fair enough. But , but if you, if you do the math, that means that everybody is vulnerable to Augustus.

Just like, oh yes. Everyone is vulnerable to the gods. Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

**Stephanie:** I mean, he makes that connection between Augustus and Jupiter so clear throughout. But you know, I do love Ovid's last defiant stance that Jupiter could never destroy my epic. I mean, it's, you know, very clear that he's talking about Augustus there to my mind.

**Aven:** Yeah. Oh yeah. No, no. What Ovid did not suffer from was false humility shall we say.

**Stephanie:** Yes. I always get

**Aven:** tickled when my imposter syndrome is not there in

**Stephanie:** obvious life. Not a big no, not a thing. I get very tickled when my students they, they, they get upset about the Romans being you know, lacking humility.

I'm like, you know, humility was not [00:26:00] something they considered a virtue necessarily,

**Aven:** so, nope, nope, not at all. All right. To return us a little bit to to translating of Ovid, when translating anything, of course you have to think very hard about your word choices and everything.

Right. But Ovid specifically is, known for, famed, for his word play, famed for the way he. goes down into the very details of words, pulls them apart, turns them around, loves his antithesis and all of that stuff. Yeah. So obviously that's both a joy, I'm sure, and a deep, deep iand abiding pain trying to translate all of it.

Do you wanna talk about that? Are there any particular puzzles or triumphs that you feel in particular moments where you just got something .

**Stephanie:** Yes. I mean, I, this was a very daunting task with the word play. And, you know, I think when you sign a book contract, you're just immediately saying, well, that's, that's gonna be fine.

I can't wait to do [00:27:00] this. And then, my husband would come home and I would just have been sitting at the table for the entire day wrestling with two words. and I'm sure I failed in so many ways to get across some people's very favorite instances of wordplay. And, and, and it is true. I mean, it's, some of it is very difficult. Wordplay with something like pietas is very tricky because, , there's no consensus on how to even translate that word to begin with. And piety was something I was really trying to avoid because it, it has a different I think, Yeah, meaning to someone who's, grown up in a kind of you know, with Christianity in the back of their minds at all. . But, there are some ways that Ovid has word play I was trying to capture. So, you know the golden lines, the silver lines, the very kind of stylized word order that you can achieve with Latin that you cannot achieve with English.

Hmm. I would be, I got very proud of myself when I managed to sort of reflect that with chiastic alliteration. Ah, yes. So I , yeah. So I would try to have like A, B, C, B A or A B, C, A B which is this word [00:28:00] order that Ovid and other Roman poets achieve with verbs and adjectives and nouns. I tried to achieve that with alliteration, that kind of thing.

here's one, I opened the book. Cause this, this is one I'm proud of. This is in Ceyx and Alceone, she uses the word fero, which means to carry, but it can also mean to like endure. Right. And so and then she also does the or so, so she uses this word very in a stylized way and but also, he has chiasm here as well.

. So I tried to achieve this and the word fero is being used in two different ways. So I have "together, we will bear whatever happens while borne together through the open sea". So that I have "together...bear...borne...together". So right. . Yeah. Those were some things you know, in Ajax in the the debate he has with Ulysses, the long debate in I guess it's book 13. Over who's gonna get to have the armor of Achilles. There are so many rhetorical devices at work in that [00:29:00] speech. I mean, it's just because it's influenced by Roman rhetoric. And so I became very pleased with myself when Ajax, Ajax speaks a bit more simply. And then Ulysses comes out and he has every kind of

**Aven:** rhetorical trick in the book, literally. Yeah,

**Stephanie:** exactly. And he plays on this refert and refert, . And I, translated that you have to discount his account. And so I did try, you know, so there were some things, you know, I did try to do.

Of course, when you feel like you've achieved a lot. When it's all said and done, you can really only focus on the things you failed to achieve . If I can just toot my own horn when it came to those two things, that would be great. .

**Aven:** Yeah. Well that's what I wanted to give you the opportunity to do. Cause I know that one must wrestle with such things.

**Stephanie:** Sometimes , what the classicists would want are different from what the creative writing poetry people want. So this is something that I put ...classicists want you to keep repetition, they want to make sure that you've translated every word [00:30:00] accurately.

They, you know, they have a different set of expectations from the poetry people who are interested in like the form and the English expressions that you're using. . So. , I felt like, you know, I was wrestling with a dual identity in some ways while doing this, because I'm trained as a classicist, but I was really trying to satisfy a creative impulse in doing this,

but, you know, other things you, so like a word in book three that's really important is "imago", image. Right? And it's really important in book three, it's in the first line. It can mean disguise, image, it can mean reflection and echo, which is really important when you have the story of echo in Narcissus.

. And she is offering him an imago of himself through echoing and he's also struck by his own imago, the reflection in the water. So, you know, it was really important to try to keep that consistently translated. And so I used the word likeness, , which I think worked, I tried to do it in a way that kind of worked and got that across.

[00:31:00] But you know, some of the wordplay is just impossible and you have to come up with the best compromise that you can. , classicists, I think are in some ways the hardest to please, because when you're ri riding, and I say this as a classicist, so I'm not trying to take a swipe at classicists. I, I am one.

But you know, we want. We often, when we're writing monographs or academic papers, we can point out ambiguity and and move on. Right. We don't have to decide . Yeah. We can just, this imago means two different things here. Let me just explain that to you, but you don't have to come up with exactly the right translation that can achieve the thing you've just pointed out, right?

That's the really, really hard stuff that translators have to do, that classicists can, can just,

**Aven:** yeah, can get away with not actually coming down on. Yeah. Yes.

**Stephanie:** Just leave that italicized. Right.

**Aven:** just give the two possible options and move on. Yeah. I mean, I noticed that one of the ways, so, you know, a, [00:32:00] a particular type of wordplay that ubiquitous in Ovid, in the Met in particular, everywhere. But in the Met in particular is etymological stuff, right? Stuff, because that's with the idea, the origin stories, which of course, maybe half at least of the, of the Met transformations are. Yeah, this is where this flower came from. This is where this bird came from.

This is where whatever this spring I mean, I haven't sat and looked at the Latin, but I'm going to guess that in almost every single one of them, there's at least some etymological, wordplay, or even just something so basic as like, and then he turned into the bird that carries his name and you're like, yes.

What bird is that? ? Yeah, that is so,

**Stephanie:** I mean, it is. So I can come up with a few different examples of this. Yeah, you know, like Syrinx, right? Yes. Her, her name means pan pipe and Yes. So do I call her pan pipe ?

**Aven:** You know, , exactly. It doesn't quite work.

**Stephanie:** Absolutely, absolutely. Well, you know, one of the ones that that I found for this was the Tale of [00:33:00] Scylla and Nisus , Ovid says she cut her dad's hair, and, and handed it to Minos. And this was a purple lock of hair that kept this kingdom safe. And she fell in love with Minos and cut her father's hair and handed it and gave it to him. And he thought she was horrible and left her, and she transforms into a bird.

And the bird that she turns into in Latin, the word means to like, to cut,

**Aven:** like, you know. The shearer or whatever.

**Stephanie:** Yeah. The shearer. Exactly. . And so I was like, well, I don't know, know what kind of bird this is and I, I need to keep that in there. So I ended up, I called the bird a snip. I thought, that sounds vaguely bird-like to me, but you know, if it's not a real bird then I don't have to deal with it.

But then, you know, he has so many different stories of people turning into swans. Cygnus. And I think there are three different stories of that. And you know, do I call them Swan Man one, Swan Man two, and Swan Man three ? No, but you know, we do, we just have to lose a lot of that, unfortunately.

**Aven:** Well, and the way you've, dealt with it at least to some extent of course, is through notes, [00:34:00] right? Yes. So you've got, just for those who haven't looked at the translation yet, you do have fairly extensive footnotes. .Or, end notes. End notes. To be specific. Which is fine cuz I do realize that if you're doing, going for poetic form, putting footnotes really does break that that flow pretty extensively.

Yeah, I was looking,

**Stephanie:** you know, it's 60 something pages of notes at the back. Yeah, but I, I like to, I do, I go to the notes a lot cuz I, I'm a classicist. It's the classicist impulse. There was some debate with my editor, you know, about whether we could break Penguin's normal, thing of putting them in the back and, you know, we considered it for a bit because Sarah Rudens' translation of the Aeneid, the new edition they just released of that actually has footnotes at the bottom, but they're not very extensive, and so we just decided to keep them at the end. So

**Aven:** there no, I, I think, I mean, much as I in general prefer footnotes to end notes I think that's more true for, for a scholarly work Yes. Than it is for, you know, if you want, because you want to give people the option of reading the [00:35:00] poetry as poetry.

Yes. And if you put the footnotes in, it becomes, . Like for me as a textual person, it becomes essentially impossible for me not to read the footnotes if they're on the page. Absolutely. Whereas I can not read them if I wish to if they're end notes. Yeah. But I mean, there is where you get to say this word in Latin means, you know,

it's, it's a totally impossible conundrum. Nobody can fix it. It's just that Ovid makes it the hardest things like his big, long list of Actaeon's dogs. Yes. And like, do you translate the names of the dogs because all of them have speaking names or do you leave them

**Stephanie:** with, with those I did, I tried to translate them in some way. I mean, cause that, that to me was.

**Aven:** That's point of them. Yeah. Yeah. And

**Stephanie:** they're cute. I mean, you, you're like, oh, what are, what are dog names and antiquity? And you know, if, he's playing on, contrast. So he'll use like one word that, you know, suggests that the dog has dark fur and another word that suggests the dog has light fur.

Yeah. And he's clearly playing on a contrast. You can't just get that by keeping the Greek names in because [00:36:00] 99% of the people who are gonna read it aren't gonna catch that. Yeah.

**Aven:** And with dogs, it doesn't feel weird to have them called Racer or Snappy or something like that, where if you translate a person's name way it's gonna be a little strange.

**Stephanie:** Exactly, exactly. But you're getting to some of the, I mean, really nicely, getting to some of the hard choices that again, if you're a classics person and you're writing you know, a monograph or even a fairly literal translation like the Loeb, I don't think you have to face them to the same degree that you would to do creative writing. I think every classicist needs to try to do a kind of creative project where they're forced to make some of these hard choices. And, you know, I translated Horace before. There are a lot there, but Ovid is just like, you know, a smorgasboard of hard,

of hard choices.

**Aven:** It's essentially, It's not the only point of Ovid's writing, but it's, it's kind of the point of Ovid's writing a lot of the time, right? Yes. Is the word play and not just the, like, I like your idea, like when you were talking about doing the golden [00:37:00] lines as alliterative chiasmus or something. Right. That's nice because it's saying I'm taking a formal stylistic device right? In one language. And I am making an equivalently difficult formal stylistic device in my language. It's not the same device because yes, we can't put our words in different orders and we can't, like, you can't do it. You cannot create a golden line in English without ruining the sense . It doesn't make any sense anymore.

So I like that. And, and that's, you know, that's because again, when I think about teaching with these texts, If I'm gonna stand up in front of the class and be like, okay, here's the thing you need to know about Ovid, his mastery of language and rhetorical devices and you know, stylistic devices and clever wordplay is beyond par, like no other writer bests him on it. They may equal, but they do not best. Right? If I'm gonna say that to my class, and then they're gonna read a text that doesn't have any wordplay in it, [00:38:00] right? Like, it doesn't matter if it's the same wordplay, right? In fact, they're gonna read a, a text that doesn't have wordplay in it and doesn't have stylistic devices and doesn't have, you know, isn't clever

Essentially . Then they're gonna be like, . I mean, I guess I'll take your word for it, but, there's no way they can possibly internalize that, whereas at least if they read something that has equivalent, if not exact matches that also finds playing with words fun . Right. You know?

Right, right. At least they can get some of the spirit of the Ovidian poetry. Absolutely. It's really important

**Stephanie:** and there's, so there's somevtimes where I have to put that in English where there's not as much play in Latin. If I saw an opportunity to try to, I mean, I was aware I was, I'm writing English poetry here.

And sometimes, you know, if Ovid has a line and a half of verse that I thought made a really great line of iambic pentameter, I didn't try to stay line for line. I thought, well, I'm just gonna grab that and make [00:39:00] a really snappy line of I am pentameter because I'm writing English poetry here.

You know, there were times when I did get, I tried to do alliteration even if it wasn't in Ovid because it worked in that

**Aven:** particular line. Yeah,

**Stephanie:** yeah. It worked well. And there was this, one of my favorite lines that to me was like, oh, that works better in English than it even does in Latin.

was when Ovid is describing the spectres of the underworld in book four, and he says that they're wandering around and they don't have blood. They don't have bones and they're without bodies. And it wasn't very parallel the way he said it, but I thought, you know, I can say boneless, bloodless bodiless and I'lI have alliteration and and a nice little tricolon and I grabbed the opportunities where I saw them to, create my own poetry , if, if it worked in the, in the circumstance.

**Aven:** Yeah. And I think that's keeping the spirit of , you're going to inevitably have to lose. One of the ways that you know, I, cause I noticed it in your translation, I think you did it well, but I noticed it [00:40:00] because it's essentially an intractable problem, is Ovid loves those repetitious lines where he says, yeah, he did this once.

And then he, like he says the same thing twice in the Latin. Very frequently he does it by having the word order one. and then the next line is the same words, but in a different order. Yeah. And in Latin it, it's not as repetitious. because there's this variation, right? And in English, you, you simply can't, like we can only, there's , there's only one order. Those words can go in and mean the same thing, right? And so I saw that sometimes where you, you, you know, I see these repetitions and I'm like, yeah, I know exactly what's going on there.

It's not that it reads badly, it's just that right? I know what's behind it. And there's really, I cannot think of a single way you could,

**Stephanie:** yeah. Well, you know, but there are times I think, and I'm trying to remember this, I was asked about this one line. I mean, I, I, I love chiasm and I love the way that Ovid does that. I tried to work it in as much as I could and, and I'm thinking like, you know, lines where I have. This is in book three, the story of Acoetes, which is where [00:41:00] the men turn into dolphins and Yes, and I, and I did, you know, I said, "I do not know what God is in that body, but in that body there's a God". And so you now would try to keep the chiasm as much as I could, but you know, it is a, it's balancing act between totally awkward English or English that just sounds like something that stands on its own. Yeah, absolutely. Because you need to, you don't wanna constantly hit your readers over the head with the fact that they're reading a translation

You know, it needs to kind of work on its own. Whether I achieve that is not for me to say , but you know, that was a goal. ,

**Aven:** I. I've found it easy to read. . Thank, I liked it. .

**Stephanie:** Well, thank you. . Go on. I'm

**Aven:** just kidding. . And, and, I mean, Ovid can be like, he's great, but he's also, He's weird too. Like, yeah, I think that's, and I think that's part of what, what is good.

Like your translation doesn't try to hide the fact that sometimes the transitions, for instance, from story to story Yeah. Bizarre like the, the flow from one thing to another can be abrupt sometimes he describes one thing [00:42:00] in extensive detail and then he like mentions an entire epic cycle in five words and moves on like, you know, . Right? Yeah. And those things are there too. And I, I, I like that you didn't try to, I mean, you, you have the notes for explaining the bits, right? Where he doesn't explain it and that's fine.

Right. But you don't try to sort of explain it in the text. . That's

**Stephanie:** true. And, and I think there might be some translators who like have a little italicized introduction or something. , you know, with the new, with the news sections. It was not my choice. It was, I mean, the book designer's choice to bra, you know, kind of separate each story out and Right.

Put the title really big. . I, I . You know, I think in some ways you can, it's nice cuz it helps you isolate the stories. But it is, you know, we do have to remember that Ovid does cleverly I would say, you know, really cleverly, sometimes frustratingly, but cleverly it attach one story to the next.

Yeah. You know, sometimes it's thematically related. Sometimes, yeah. It's like a little character that might have appeared in one instance and he's picking up on them. I mean, one of my [00:43:00] favorite transitions is, In book, just book one where he's going from the story of Daphne to the story of Io and he's like, well, everybody came to console Daphne's father except for Io's dad.

And so now let me tell you why ,

**Aven:** you know, so, but, but, but one river was too sad to come and see the other river. I know. I was just, as soon as you start to say that, that was the one I was thinking of too. I always, I I love that one where yeah, like, I mean, these are connected, but also not Right, but also

**Stephanie:** Or where he, you know, he's, he's basically promising you a story that he never tells, which is, you know, he gets into the Trojan War and you're like, okay, finally we're, it's entire war. Exactly. The whole war. It's just not there, it's just replaced. It's replaced by the Centauromachy. Yeah. Which is great. And then I, one of my favorite things ever is, So cleverly acknowledges the fact that he's done this because Nester, and basically he tells the Trojan War as they were all sitting around talking and Nester told a bunch of stories about the Centauromachy and that fighting stands in for [00:44:00] the Epic fighting.

And after Nester has delivered this set of stories somebody complains to him and says, well, you left out a whole bunch of stuff. And he's like, So what , it's sort of like I get to tell the story the way I want because I'm the person who tells the story. And you can really see Ovid there saying, well, so what

**Aven:** You wanna hear about it, go read Homer . Exactly,

**Stephanie:** that's right. .

**Aven:** Yeah. Yeah. And then, and then we flip over to, and then he is like, well, okay, fine. I'll tell you the story of the Trojan. By Ajax and Odysseus retelling their events. exactly. Like it's, it's the two bookends. Yeah.

**Stephanie:** But, but even that, like, to get so many of the jokes, I mean, and there are a lot of jokes in that retelling and Odysseys just flat out lies in so many of the ways he looks back, you know, and he's like, I, I volunteered to fight that duel with Hector and , that kinda stuff.

**Aven:** But I'm like, I didn't see that in the .

**Stephanie:** So he's telling it to you, but he expects you to know it too. I mean, that's you know, that's also, that was the most difficult footnoting I did because I [00:45:00] felt like I had to explain a lot about those speeches.

And you don't know to what degree you need to assume that the person reading it has any familiarity with Homer and I didn't really wanna assume any, but you know, that that was a tricky,

**Aven:** tricky Yeah. But you also can't actually tell the entire Iliad and Odyssey in the notes. Yeah, right. . Yeah. Well, I mean, and that's, that's always the, trouble with Augustan poetry in general, right?

Yeah. Is, you know, teaching Virgil, you're, you've just ripped your hair out because you're like, well can we spend the 12 years reading , the Iliad and Odyssey. Argonautica, yeah. And then can we turn to, because otherwise I don't know how to tell you any of this stuff. Absolutely. And then Ovid just, it's another order of magnitude because he does all of the assumptions that Virgil has and then he assumes you also know Virgil.

Exactly.

**Stephanie:** doesn't help. And, and often the stories that he's telling are , like they're, they're less well known, or sometimes he's alluding to alternative stories. I, I find this is true for a lot of the poets who are trying to be really [00:46:00] clever, like Propertius as well. Yeah. It's like, I'll allude to a myth, but not the version that you know, but I'm gonna expect you to know this alternative version as well.

And some of it is the, the delighting in their own cleverness and And, you know, as a student, as a teacher, , that can get very frustrating. .

**Aven:** One last little thing that I just I is not even, this is more of a comment than a question. ,, I just had to raise it because it made me laugh. I realized that of course, one of the things about writing it in English and writing the poem out in English, in good typography and all the rest of it is that you put quotation marks in, of course.

Oh yes. Because English uses quotation marks. Yeah. And then I got to one point, it must have been, I think it was when the, the Muses were telling one of their stories. When I looked and I realized there were four nested quotation marks. Yeah. At least. And I think there was maybe a fifth at one point. And I just and it, as I said, it's not really question, but it, it just made it, it makes it so much more obvious that there's these nested, nested, nested narratives.

and then I [00:47:00] my, I guess my only question is like, did you and did the copy editor just wanna kill you? Like, did you have trouble sometimes keeping track of how many you needed to have? Because it's somebody telling a story about somebody telling a story about somebody telling a story about somebody who's speaking

**Stephanie:** Yes. And it was, I, I will laugh about it now, but at the time, . But I, I had like a chart that I had to make, especially in book, in book five, because you have. Minerva is listening to the Muse who is retelling the story. That they told in the contest of the Pierides, , so the Muse is speaking recounting an old story, and then as part of that story, you have the story of Arethusa, and I mean, it's just, it's like nested, nested, nested. So I have, and then

**Aven:** somebody within that story speaks just to, yes, exactly. Oh,

**Stephanie:** that's exactly right. Yes. Yeah, so I had this all kind of charted out, and when my copy editor got it back, she changed some of that and she wrote me a note and she was like, I'm so confused with the quotation marks.

I was like, I managed to defeat the copy [00:48:00] editor for Penguin. I was like, . Well, it wasn't me, it was Ovid. Yeah.

**Aven:** Let's give credit where credit is, is credit? Exactly. Blame is due, I dunno, .

**Stephanie:** So that was, that was pretty good. But the, yeah, but I must say the reader who, I mean, it was not just read that one time and, and, and they, they caught, they caught a lot of things like that that I, that I've messed up on.

But yeah. I didn't know I would have to become an expert in nested quotations when I became a classicist. .

**Aven:** Yeah. . Well, Ovid'll do that to you. My goodness. Absolutely. He really, really delights in that. The Orpheus section too, gets really out of hand at Yes. At some points. .

**Stephanie:** That's true. Absolutely.

Yeah.

**Aven:** As I said, it was a really question, but it just really, really made me laugh when I was reading through it. I, I have just recently been editing a book. It has nothing like that. It's just scholarly. So it doesn't have any of those kinds of complicated things.

But even so, I found tracking quotation marks and going through and figuring out where they went in sentences was the bane of my entire editing project, and I'm so glad that I was only [00:49:00] ever looking at most at two .

**Stephanie:** Right. Well, now you have me wondering if when the UK version comes out, if it's going yes,

**Aven:** they're gonna to change all of the change, all

**Stephanie:** of that ,

**Aven:** that's it.

Cause I was editing for, for a UK press and, and I had to do it, make sure I put the punctuation outside the. Quotation marks. Yes. That's how it goes for the UK .

**Stephanie:** Oh, that, that's fun. I hadn't thought about that. Wow. .

**Aven:** Look, you're, it may not yet be over .

**Stephanie:** I may have, I may have defeated more people with the quotation marks.

**Aven:** Well, I could talk about Ovid for the rest of the day, but we should probably let you, you know, go on with your life instead of just pinning you down and saying, okay, but what about the next story? ? . But I really, I, let me just say, I didn't say that at the beginning that I really enjoyed the translation and I think it's really good to have out there.

I think the I don't even wanna say sensitivity with which you approach the rape stuff, because I [00:50:00] don't like, may think that's part of it, but I don't actually think that's the word. I think it's the clarity, right, is really what I found the most important. It's not whether or not you're sensitive to it, it's whether you're clear about what is happening and who's doing what to what, whom right, and what their reactions are.

Right. You know, in a way that is allows you then to have those discussions about what's happening and why, and why are these stories being told? I think that's really valuable and really necessary right now. So thank you for doing that.

**Stephanie:** Well, thank you. Thank you. And I'm, I'm glad and hope I achieved that clarity and that's certainly what I was going for.

And I hope that, you know, I really wanted to, to get that kind of, Stylistic Clarity across the epic. It was really important to me. It's that, I mean, Ovid has, he's gonna make you puzzled and wonder what's going on . In lots of different ways but for the most part, I didn't want the puzzlement to come from my choices as a translator.

I wanted them to reflect Ovid's own playfulness and wit and obscurity and that, and that sort of thing.

**Aven:** . Yeah, exactly. Yeah. . Well, thank you very much and we recommend [00:51:00] this to anyone who's looking fo r Ovid translations for class, but I also really do think that anyone who's just interested in reading the Met or having it to dip into, or, you know, having it on their shelf so that when that story comes up and they can't remember where it comes from and what it's about, , because that's one of the other things Ovid is great for.

I really recommend this translation and I think it'll be very useful.

**Mark:** And we'll include all the appropriate links. In the show

**Aven:** notes. . But is there other places or ways that you encourage or allow people to contact you in the, in

**Stephanie:** the wider world? Oh, if anybody wants to email, I mean, I, I, I delight in answering questions via email.

People wanted to do that. They can they can find my faculty page on Sewanee. There's a link to it through my own webpage, which is stephaniemccarter.com. Right. I express opinions on Twitter. Sometimes , not, not very often, but sometimes. So those are all good places you can find me.

I'm trying to Instagram, but I am pretty sure that's gonna just turn into a bunch of bird photos before, before too [00:52:00] long.

**Aven:** So, There's nothing wrong with that. . Very Ovidian after all. .

**Stephanie:** Well, birds in Ovid. There you go. There's a reason I became interested in bird photography while I was translating the Met.

So .

**Aven:** Well, there you go. Speaking of connections, we'll end with that. There you go. Sounds good. Thank you again. Thank you.

**Mark:** Next up, we're speaking with Gareth Williams, who is the Anton Professor of the Latin Language and Literature at Columbia University. He has published extensively on Ovid, Roman philosophy and classical reception. Today we're talking to him about his newest publication On Ovid's Metamorphoses, published just this month by Columbia University Press in their new Common Core series.

**Aven:** So, hi Gareth. It's great to have you with us.

**Gareth:** Thanks very much, Aven. It's a pleasure to be here.

**Mark:** Welcome.

**Gareth:** Hi [00:53:00] Mark as well .

**Mark:** So I, I wanna start off with a question that we always ask our guests and we've in fact given you a bit of an advanced warning that we were gonna ask this. So could you tell us about an unexpected connection in your life?

Something that connects perhaps Both your work and your non-academic life or some other surprising connection.

**Gareth:** Well, I've got a number of possibilities on that front. One interesting one is when I first moved to New York City from England that's more than 30 years ago now. And I first went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and probably the first or second day I was actually in New York City.

I was walking around the gallery and I was looking innocently at various pictures that caught my eye and looking back in time, I saw a wonderful landscape painting called Landscape Near Rome during Storm by Simon Denis, a 19th century artist. .The most beautiful thing. And I spent a wonderful afternoon at the Met and left [00:54:00] and frequently went back to the Met. Many years later I wrote a book about the Roman philosopher Seneca, a book about his writings on the natural environment and rainbow and theories of rainbow are one such phenomenon that he talks about. And this book evolved and it got to the stage it was going to be published. I needed a cover image for it, and my mind started, this was now 2012.

My mind started going back all those years since I'd arrived in New York City and the perfect image for the book was the painting I saw on my second day in the city. It was the most remarkable circular travel back in time moment. And a very eerie experience. It couldn't have been better made because of an appeal to the sublime in the landscape picture.

Right. Quite uncanny looking back on it. ,

**Aven:** That's great because it connects not only a moment in time back with itself, but also of course different media, shall we say, and [00:55:00] different areas of of artistic expression. Seneca does talk about an awful lot of things, so to be fair, they're probably quite, quite a few paintings out there,

Exactly. Applicable. Yeah, exactly. That's very interesting. Thank you. So let me ask you then, turning from the previous work to this work we're talking about today. How did you come to do this particular I don't wanna call it a commentary or an intro, but the, this particular book on Ovid.

What, what's your history with Ovid in particular?

**Gareth:** Oh, well it's actually a lovely story because way before I got interested in things like Seneca, when I was a graduate school student in the UK I wrote a PhD on Ovid. Ovid was exiled from Rome by the Emperor Augustus in eight CE and ended up on the western coast of the Black Sea, what is now modern Romania in a resort called Constanza.

And there he wrote a series of books of poetry on his exotic experience and I wrote a PhD on that. That was in the late 1980s. Then I came [00:56:00] to Columbia and the States and I wrote a couple of books on Ovid and his exilic phase. And then I drifted from about 1996 onwards into other areas that interested me.

Along the way I was teaching in the Columbia Core curriculum, which is a mandatory set of courses for every incoming student at Columbia and Ovid's Metamorphoses was one of the set books every so often on the great books list at Columbia. And so, after many years of teaching literature humanities as it's known the idea occurred to some colleagues of mine to set up a book series whereby books connected to the core curriculum would be authored by teachers within the core or professionals who understood very well what the core curriculum was all about. . And so after this venture was set up about 18 months ago, I volunteered really as a Guinea pig, if nothing else, , to try to write a book on Ovid to see how the series might begin. And so I sat down and I started thinking, conceptualizing, playing with [00:57:00] ideas.

Of how Ovid's Metamorphoses might be delivered to a modern audience of Columbia alumni, a more general public who might be interested in Ovid, don't know too much about him, but are curious to find out. And the further I got into the enterprise, the more I came to understand that Ovid's Metamorphoses really is a text of our time.

So useful to think with in a modern context of political concerns now and existential concerns. We live in an age of great change, convulsive change every single day. Technology, the ways our lives are turned upside down by covid, et cetera. It's a text of our time.

**Mark:** So that actually kind of leads into a question that I, I was meaning to ask you. You know, how, how does Ovid specifically speak to our current moment, as you say, and, and you know, what is the Metamorphosies in the 21st century?

**Gareth:** That's a great general question to raise with all sorts of permutations to it.

In a way, I [00:58:00] wonder if the flow is bilateral. Ovid speaks to us, but we also speak to Ovid in the sense that when we do think about just changefulness in our own lives, we can then go back to an Ovid and see lots of the changefulness of our lives reflected and refracted in the text he wrote 2000 years ago.

A great example of this is how fortunes have suddenly shifted in Ukraine, for example, how covid transformed everyday life overnight in ways that were completely unexpected or unanticipated. Ovid's book is very much about the sting in the tail, how the unexpected nature of change can come at any time in ways that are entirely unpredictable.

And so it's a, a wonderful resource to go back to, by which we can measure our human experience against a catalog of experience provided by Ovid. And the Ovidian theory in that respect is that change is not an option in life. It is an inevitable requirement of life that is gonna come to us, whether we want it or not.

And an [00:59:00] eye for how change can benefit us seems to me to be so important for adapting to circumstance in an age when perhaps modern lives are very regimented. We rely so much on technology, we rely on reliability of technology, and in these ways to be ready for the unexpected is a very useful lesson in life.

And it seems to me that we've been very fortunate in our 21st century lives to have programming predictable systems of management of life banking, for example. Mm. Medicine. To be ready for the unpredictable is no bad thing, and Ovid is one excellent resource to remind us of the need for readiness.

**Aven:** Unfortunately, he's not always comforting in expressing what might happen if either you're not ready for it or as a result, no matter how ready you are. But I, but I, I take your point, definitely. He, he is giving us a vision of a world in which it, it actually doesn't matter whether or not you're ready for it, it will [01:00:00] happen anyway.

And therefore the psychological point, I suppose is what do you do when it happens Exactly. As opposed to how, you know, how can you stop it or how can you manage it.

**Gareth:** Exactly.

**Aven:** Ovid is so capacious that as soon as you start talking about him, it's very hard not to just want to talk about Ovid more. I did my dissertation on late Republican and early Augustan poetry, but I excluded Ovid intentionally. I see. Because I thought I can't possibly, if I'm gonna do one theme in, in a number of different poets, Ovid's just too much. I can't, he needs his own , he needs his own approach. I can't possibly just stick a little bit of Ovid in. It's not, it's not doable. So, no, that's very true. I was more happy to put all of Virgil in than all of Ovid, frankly.

Yeah.

**Gareth:** No, that's the thing about Ovid, Ovid is so slippery. Yeah. That as soon as you push in one direction with one emphasis, other emphases then slide out at the other end in a very disconcerting way. Very difficult author to try to find any control over, rather like trying to nail down a blacmange. [01:01:00] Yeah.

**Aven:** that is punning at you as you do so. Yes, exactly. . So turning back to the book specifically in terms of its this origin in the core curriculum at Columbia. So what do you see as the main goals of this book, in particular, and of the series as a whole? Is this then the first in, in the series? I wasn't quite sure about that when I was reading your introduction.

**Gareth:** Yes.

Two books are coming out more or less at the same time. Right. Another book is coming out on the philosophy side of things, a book on John Stewart Mill by the very eminent philosopher, Philip Kitcher. And so the idea was to start off the series with one book going in more of a philosophical direction, and then my own book going very much in a literary direction.

And we would see how growth might happen from

**Aven:** there.

Right. And so how do you see this book being used? I could imagine it being used within the core curriculum, but I don't know, maybe, I don't know whether you work with a lot of secondary sorts of material in that, [01:02:00] in those classes. who do you see reading it? .

**Gareth:** Yeah. It's not really designed to be a textbook in any way, and it really is designed ideally to get a readership that is professional. Obviously, lives are very busy and people have a limited amount of time they can spend on a book like this, but I think the symbol of the book is how education and interest in these authors is permanent, not just temporary. It's just like a dog in that way that you get for Christmas. . The idea is dog is for life. Yes, dog is for life. And to show that the education one receives at a place like Columbia. We can grow with it and later in life. What is the function of a great literary work?

It could be a work in any tradition, as far as I'm concerned. A work that stays with us in life and grows with us, in that what I found in my own personal experience is that , the Ovid I read at say, 20 is different to that at 30, at 40, at 50. And you grow and change. And I found personally great interest and stimulus in the idea of going back to a book [01:03:00] every so often and seeing how it changes and how I've changed, how the quality of reading changes and if I can just therefore offer something that shows how a book read many years before at Columbia can grow with us as we move through life. That's a wonderful thing. And I also want to show the spark of interest. I want to show what literature can do in whatever small way I can as something that is so relevant and helpful to modern lives. We are becoming increasingly automated. We rely on so many systems as I said before, thank goodness for the human element that's put back into life by intense concentration on literature. Ovid is only one way in which we could approach that emphasis, but I think it's a very useful and important way.

**Aven:** and not to be crass, but also given the popularity of mythology and of mythological retellings right now a nice entryway for people who are interested in Ovid as a source of [01:04:00] myths who I think your book will open up a little bit more, you know, if somebody is interested, and I think many people are in Ovid as, oh, here's where there's a lot of interesting stories in here. Yes. It gives them a, a, a step to go beyond that in

**Gareth:** it. I, yes, I hope so. That it's one thing to read Ovid for the stories and of course they're wonderful stories in and of themselves and really entertaining. Some of them are very disturbing, of course, and I don't ignore that for one moment and very upsetting.

Many of the stories fascinate purely from a narratival point of view. What I would like to urge is what do we do with the product? Once we've read through the storyline, how do we contextualize it both in its historical time and in a modern context? What can it do for us now? What did it do for past generations of readers over 2000 years?

What is modern relevance and how do we think about the ongoing longevity of a work like

**Aven:** this.

I really liked the way you so for listeners who [01:05:00] haven't of course read this yet the book is divided into four main chapters along with the introduction and in each of the chapters, you'll forgive me if I say that it, it struck me as, as very good lecturing technique.

Here's what I'm gonna say. And now I say it, and here's what I have said. And it works very well, and I think given how slippery and how huge the Met is I think that's very helpful when trying to sort of like break off a piece. Let's talk about some element of it, which may be the whole thing in microcosm, but nonetheless we have to zero in on something in order to be able to talk about anything. But I particularly like the way you kind of took little case studies. So in each of the chapters you have a couple of the stories that exemplify the overall theme you're talking about. Yes. Was it particularly difficult to choose how to narrow those down?

**Gareth:** yes. It was enormously difficult to choose, but you're quite right. You know? Sitting down thinking about how to frame a piece of writing on the Metamorphoses is so daunting, . All you can do [01:06:00] is even if you spent a lot of time and you so deeply admire the Metamorphoses, humility very quickly kicks in and you understand that you can only take small particles from the great tapestry and you try to use small threads and work up to bigger ideas from case studies in smaller threads and in that respect, my approach was governed by a certain intimidation of understanding the true dimensions and the impossibility of really grasping the, the big plates of the poem, the tectonic plates.

So my choice was to go local, build up blocks of sense and to see how they would develop from there. A top down approach is simply beyond my capabilities in that way, and therefore I chose a bottom up reading taking case studies and of course looking then into the characterization the players in the poem and seeing how the interest like a Rembrandt portrait is in the detailed bringing out of character at the grassroots [01:07:00] level. Ovid had such a good eye for psychological penetration and that's why indeed I really wanted to spend time going into detail just to show how the psychological depth of so many of his characters is quite extraordinary.

**Aven:** And I also liked that you were able to bring in a little bit of the Latin, I mean, obviously in a book like this, it doesn't make sense to focus very much on Latin. That's not the audience you're, you're writing for. Yeah. But you did bring in a few, you know, here's, here's a couple of sound effects. Yes.

Here's a little bit of how he, you know, does these sort of chiastic things or, or whatever. And, you know, again we spoke as you know, to Stephanie McCarter about translation and, and the, the sort of ongoing deep abiding frustration that I've always had when talking about any Latin poetry, but Ovid's particularly bad for this to people who haven't read it in the Latin.

And just wanting to say, look at how clever, and then realizing that there's no way I can explain it. Yes. So

**Gareth:** Yeah, no, it is a frustration in a way, but at the same time, , [01:08:00] you know, I quite realize the realities out there. I feel very fortunate that I can, you know, understand Ovid's Latin and to a certain degree.

I understand. I can and Yeah, I understand that I'm indeed that I'm very fortunate in having that capability. . The fact is, I think it far better to read Ovid than not to read Ovid. And the, yes, obviously I think there are advantages in Latin, but I want Ovid to be out there. Ovid is so good a writer, so wondrous, so broad in psychological depth and relevance. Just the importance of having Ovid available to a public. That's the bottom line. Yeah. And that's why Stephanie McCarter's translation is so usable. And evidently so valuable because it is reaching out in such an effective way.

**Aven:** Yes, and I agree wholeheartedly. I mean, absolutely better to read it in English than not read it at all. And in fact, You know, reading it in Latin is a huge undertaking that I have not read the [01:09:00] whole work in Latin. I will admit that right here. It wasn't my, my main focus. I've read parts of it. No, but not all of it.

Yeah. but I still think you did a nice job of, of at least giving a glimpse of, you know, how does, how does some poetic effect work in Latin? So even if one doesn't have the language, you can, you can have a sense of, you know, what does poetry look like. Yeah. Thanks. I also wanted to ask about, You know, in terms of choosing which themes you have many, many themes to choose from.

perhaps the last two chapters, or at least the last chapter as one, I'd maybe like you to talk a little bit about the, the choice of talking about. the ways the gods' Justice? Yeah.

There's large air quotes around that word is played out in the stories and also the, the emphasis on sexual violence and on. You know, assault and violence in all of its forms. When we talk about how Ovid fits into the 21st century classroom, how it fits into people reading it, that topic of course comes up like talking about the Metamorphoses without talking [01:10:00] about the rapes in the Metamorphoses is, is impossible.

Yes. So I wondered if you wanted to talk about approaching those topics.

**Gareth:** What I would want to say about that is, first of all, I think it very important to acknowledge that there are many parts of the Metamorphoses that are deeply disturbing in a modern context. And I think to try to absolve Ovid is not really to my mind the right approach.

The material is troubling in many ways, and that has to be acknowledged frankly and openly. And I don't want to avoid that for one moment. . What I would want to suggest is that those aspects of violence, et cetera, it, it's important not necessarily to assume that Ovid would endorse the impulses behind that violence in any way.

And one thing that I am keen to push is the amount of condemnation there is of characters who do carry out such practices in the poem. Right? It's truly, it can be soft condemnation in that when Apollo chases Daphne in book one, for [01:11:00] example, it is a very harrowing scene and Daphne is traumatized by it.

Ovid's technique of condemnation of Apollo is based on allowing Apollo to talk himself into his own very deep pit in that Apollo comes over as a buffoon, and in that sense he is self condemnatory. The point is though that that delivery of condemnation is subtle and not necessarily straightforward.

And the signs have to be read carefully. But I do feel that there's a very powerful sense of judgment being passed. I also think it important to stress that there is great empowerment in parts of the poem. While there are terrible things that do go on, such as the maiming and raping of Philomela in book six by Tereus, he does get his comeuppance in a most awful way, . And in that respect, there is a very interesting stress on violence countered by judicial violence because the gods cannot be relied upon to offer any kinds of weights and measurement justice [01:12:00] system.

In that sense, there's very strong empowerment going on, so, It's not for a moment to ignore the macabre aspects of the Metamorphoses, but to contextualize them in a certain way that to isolate and see the the harsher parts of the poem on their own can perhaps be a little bit misleading in itself.

**Aven:** I thought that was a really good point you'd made in that last chapter. I think it was last chapter about, as you say, the the lack of retribution, I mean, the gods often carry out retribution, but they carry out retribution for. Petty reasons, essentially.

Yes, yes. Essentially always, even, even Zeus going after Lycaeon, who is obviously a terrible person who did a terrible thing he doesn't seem particularly concerned that it's a terrible thing. As much as he didn't take me seriously as a God, that's yes, really the underlying problem. So they, they carry out retribution, but for petty and silly reasons and very rarely, if at all, for anything we might consider a moral condemnation. [01:13:00] Yes. While the mortals don't always, but sometimes manage to carry out retributative justice is again a strong word, but at least retribution for what we would consider more immoral actions. And to be honest, I hadn't quite put that together. In my mind as, as a pattern. I mean, obviously we always think of the gods as being petty.

Sure, yes, yes. But the complete absence of sort of judicial responses to, the bad actions of, people in the Metamorphoses is really interesting, especially of course as you bring out in the book when we start to think of it in the Augustan context, and in the Jupiter is Augustus. Yes.

Augustus is Jupiter

**Gareth:** context. Yes. In that sense, the poem is extremely edgy. With obvious implications then for how we think about Augustan retribution and the whole process of the Augustan judicial apparatus. And this then comes round reflexively to impact our thinking about, Ovid's own exile, of course, late in his life, and the extent to which he was [01:14:00] fairly treated or basically persecuted by the regime at the end of his long career. But more generally, I think that the Metamorphoses obviously is feeding upon a tradition of reflection on these themes. Very powerfully radiated obviously through Virgil's Aeneid. But Ovid's own rumination on these themes does in many ways qualify the Metamorphoses, not just as a very entertaining, in many ways, disturbing poem, but a very philosophical poem and a theological poem of genuine probing inquisitiveness into thinking about big aspect, frameworks of life. There's a very, very serious demeanor, just always under the surface of this text. And even though there is a certain measure of comedic slapstick, a measure of horror and a measure of magical realism to it, there is a very stern very careful and probing view and testing of Augustan certainties in [01:15:00] the Augustan facade.

**Aven:** Yeah, I think it can be easy to see the. Brilliance, and I mean that in the metaphor of the surface shine, the brilliance of the Metamorphoses and the word play and all of those things. And not see past it and Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And he, you know, he he makes that really easy by making it very brilliant indeed.

**Gareth:** Yes, that's true.

**Aven:** Exactly. But yes, and, and people are more willing or find it easier to see that in Virgil, for instance, who also has, you know, extreme levels of, of, shallow isn't the right word, but surface level wordplay and, and poetry and all the rest of it. But people seem very much more willing to, to see the deeper messages there.

Yes,

**Gareth:** yes, exactly. . .

**Aven:** I do love Virgil, even if I am using him as, as a contrast to Ovid, but I just , I feel like sometimes anyway people, I think the tide has turned on that I think people take Ovid very seriously now, or at least pay a lot of attention to him. But there has been times in [01:16:00] the past when he has been mined for stories and taken much less seriously, I

**Gareth:** think. Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. And so we are very much in an Ovidan age it seems to me, and , and of course it's very hard to read the Metamorphoses without reading very much against the Aeneid as well. Yes. And the two texts are intrinsically very, very closely related and feed off each other.

And there was no greater admirer of Virgil and no more sensitive reader of the Aeneid than Ovid. Of course. Yes. So subtle in his responses to the many aspects of Virgilina Poetics.

**Aven:** , I always feel when I read Latin poetry, pretty much all the poets that have survived to us very much like I cannot possibly measure up to their expectation of me as a reader, that they just, they are, are so willing to believe that I am going to be able to understand and catch and notice, and see references and interplays that.

That I might get to in the end, but boy oh boy, , I have to work a lot harder than I think.

**Gareth:** I, I fully agree. You know, I [01:17:00] thought in my twenties I could do it, and then I got to 30 and I knew less and then 40 than 50. Yeah. It's been downhill all the way .

**Aven:** It's all right. It's all just flux. It's all just change.

Exactly. Well, what I maybe want to ask as a final question to, to sort of round off this conversation is do you, in which way do you see this book as doing something different than other approaches to Ovid have been? Then I guess a second question, do you see yourself as doing one of these for somebody else or is Ovid your contribution to this series?

**Gareth:** Ovid is my contribution for now to this series, and all I would say is I hope the book interests a few readers. I hope it might interest many readers.

I offer it very humbly in the sense that I know that I cannot possibly do justice to a writer as capacious as Ovid. All I can offer is a little snapshot of my enthusiasm [01:18:00] and my gratitude to Ovid for opening my eyes on so many aspects of life. And if in any way I can convey to those readers who might care to have a look at my book, the Sheer Excitement, enthusiasm, and Open Windows of Life that Ovid has revealed to me, that would be sufficient. And in that sense, it's not so much the substance of the poem that I want to convey. It's not even the themes of the poem that I want to convey as much as an attitude of mind, a feeling, a stimulus an excitement, an intellectual spark. And what I admire endlessly in Ovid is not something that is his alone, of course, but just the sheer imaginative force. That Ovid brings to bear to the pen. At every moment there is something happening, a new coloration, a different way of seeing the world an inspired thought, a different angle of approach. [01:19:00] And it's that liveliness to experience that I so admire. And so that's why I say if I can bring that out even in one little scintilla I would feel tha Ovid has been worth conveying to a wider audience in so far as I can do that, and also in the manner of writing, hopefully trying to write in a way that is attractive to a reader. Ovid writes, not just with a pen, he writes with a smile, , of course, he writes with, deep concern about the human condition and about the cruelty of the human condition in places.

But there are times when he writes with such open humor, goodwill, liberal instinct. And if a writer in the modern age can capture something of the ethos of Ovid it seems to be beneficial to bring out not just the substance of the Metamorphoses, but the spirit perhaps, in which it was written as well.

It was meant to educate to entertain to create a

**Aven:** smile. [01:20:00] Well, I think it does that very well and I think joy is a part of the Metamorphoses as well as pain and there's a lot of joy in the reading and in the writing and I think that that comes through and is conveyed in your work. So I thank you for it,

**Gareth:** Well, it's very kind of you to give me some time and to talk about the book this evening. And I'm very, very

**Aven:** I will always talk about Ovid, given any excuse, any Latin poet, but Ovid always, always . Thank you so

**Gareth:** much. Okay. Thank you so much.

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**Mark:** Bye.