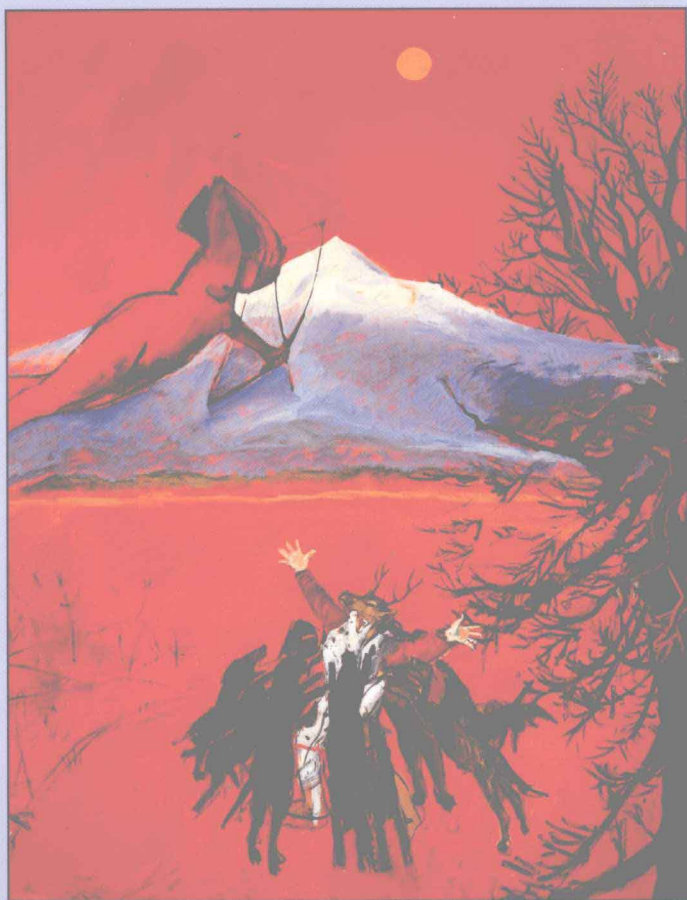


METAMORPHOSES

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TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY
CHARLES MARTIN

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Ovid

METAMORPHOSIS



CHARLES MARTIN

QUEENSBOROUGH COMMUNITY COLLEGE

CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



W. W. NORTON & COMPANY

New York • London

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First Edition.

The text of this book is composed in Fairfield Medium
with the display set in Bernhard Modern.
Book design by Antonina Krass.
Composition by TexTech International Pvt. Ltd.
Manufacturing by the Courier Companies—Westford division
Production manager: Eric Pier-Hocking.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ovid, 43 B.C.—17 or 18 A.D.

[Metamorphoses. English]

Metamorphoses : a new translation, contexts, criticism / translated and edited
by Charles Martin. — 1st ed.

p. cm. — (A Norton critical edition)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-393-92534-0 (pbk.)

1. Fables, Latin—Translations into English. 2. Metamorphoses—
Mythology—Poetry. 3. Mythology, Classical—Poetry. I. Martin, Charles,
1942- II. Title.

PA6522.M2M44 2010

873'.01—dc22

2009024625

W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 500 Fifth Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10110-0017
www.wwnorton.com

W. W. Norton & Company Ltd., Castle House
75/76 Wells Street, London W1T 3QT

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0

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To Johanna

Preface

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* presents itself as a unity, an epic-length poem in which we find considerable diversity: 250 variations on the theme of transformation that the poet speaks of in its opening lines. How is it to be read in our time? Critics who value unity will search, as Brooks Otis did, for "the plan of Ovid's epic," finding in it not only what Ovid said was there, "one continuous song (*carmen perpetuum*) going down from the world's beginnings to his own times,"¹ but also a good deal more that Ovid was silent about. The poet's own comments on such matters go only a little beyond admitting a temporal structure; in the *Tristia*, he speaks of having written a poem "of changed forms in three times five books (*ter quinque volumina formae mutatae*),"² and one might extrapolate from this remark a notion that each of these sets of five has its own kind of internal consistency, thematic or otherwise. Otis goes much further than this simple division and finds in the poem not only a temporal but an architectural structure as well, a significant and expressive arrangement of tales in a cunning strategy of balances and antitheses, an elaborate and well-mirrored auctorial funhouse that exhibits the formal unity he seeks.

Critics who read the poem for its variety will have little or no sympathy for Otis's activity or his conclusions, and will see *Metamorphoses*, as the distinguished poet and translator Daryl Hine does, as "a loosely affiliated farrago of generally discreditable stories about the Greco-Roman gods . . . a skewed and partial compendium of classical mythology. . . ." ³ Hine's vigorously stated position is not original with him: in the late nineteenth century, J. W. Mackail described Ovid's technique as yielding us "a vast mass of multifarious stories, whose only connection is the casual fact of their involving or alluding to some transformation of human beings into stones, trees, plants, beasts, birds and the like. . . ." ⁴

1. Brooks Otis, *Ovid as an Epic Poet* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1966), 45.

2. Arthur Leslie Wheeler, trans. *Ovid Tristia Ex Ponto* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1924), *Tristia* III, xiv, 19, p. 154.

3. Daryl Hine in *Poetry: The Translation Issue*, Vol. CXCII, Number 1, April 2008, 32.

4. J. W. Mackail, *Latin Literature* (London: J. Murray, 1895), 140.

Though I myself feel more comfortable among the "*ter quinque*" crew, in truth, most of us begin reading Ovid's *Metamorphoses* not as literature but as a collection of detachable tales dealing with those absorbing myths of the Greek and Roman past. Whether we first read it in the original or in translation, in prose or in verse, we will likely be oblivious of (or at least indifferent to) any evidence of its unity and coherence. My own first reading of Ovid was actually a reading of Thomas Bulfinch's bowdlerized adaptation of Ovid's stories, hammered out in Bulfinch's undistinguished prose. I had no idea that I was missing something, and even later, when I read Horace Gregory's translation, I cannot say that I was aware of a great poem embodying the fascinating stories. Ovid's work has often been seen as detachable, and the interest it arouses is often an extraliterary interest: T. S. Eliot's comment in *The Waste Land* on Ovid's account of Tiresias's sex change is typical and unexceptional: "The whole passage from Ovid is of great anthropological interest."

But if we read enough of the poem in the original or in a translation at least as good as Horace Gregory's, we will become aware of an Ovidian voice, of the way in which the narrator of the poem is shaping the stories that he tells to create certain effects. We will also become aware of the protean shiftiness of that voice, discovering in it various levels, shallows and depths, commitments and evasions that seem to reveal the complexity of the person behind the poem. Ovid could say as Walt Whitman did, "Who touches this book touches a man." And yet, if we ask what *kind* of man, the book may yield contradictory answers. (It may be helpful to recall that Whitman also said, "Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself. [I am large, I contain multitudes]") Is Ovid, as Italo Calvino argues, the poet who does not take sides, the poet who is always searching for the unknown god, so as not to offend any of them? Is he the dutiful supporter of the Augustan regime, or the subtle antagonist, the antimilitarist described by Diane Middlebrook, with his own agenda for showing in poetry the triumph of Venus over Mars? Could he possibly be all of these things at once?

The issue of Ovid's sympathies is not easily settled. One of our most basic human needs is to believe that there is justice in our relationships, yet so many of the stories that Ovid tells have characters unequal in their powers and conclusions that are blatantly unjust: Callisto, raped by Jove, is transformed into a bear. The innocent Itys is butchered and cooked by his own mother, Philomela, and served by her as a dish to his father, Tereus, as Philomela's revenge for violating her sister Procne. Dryope, after having been raped and discarded by Apollo, innocently picks some lotus flowers to delight her infant son and is turned forever into a tree by a nymph hidden in the flowers; some in our time argued that she should have known better,

but none that I know of has argued that her punishment was proportionate to her offense.

Where do the poet's sympathies lie? With a writer like Chekhov, one can see through whatever ironies may present themselves to grasp the author's feeling for his suffering characters. Ovid is simply not like that, and when he is—as in the narrator's overwhelming outpouring of grief for the death of Orpheus in Book X—the reader may suspect that Ovid is putting us on. There is a moment in his description of the aftermath of the helpless Callisto's rape by Jove when the poet seems to be the world through her eyes, but there is no such moment for helpless Itys, and Ovid appears to be viewing the banquet scene through lenses provided by the boy's deranged mother and aunt. Some have argued that Ovid is trying to show us such horrors not only from a human perspective, but even as the gods see them; that is to say, without undue emotion, and this coolness in the presence of suffering is actually meant to say to us, "See? This is how the gods and bosses behave. We can't say it too openly, but I know it and you do too."

Perhaps that is why other artists have felt intuitively that Ovid was on their side, especially those who, like Ovid, suffered political repression at the hands of an autocratic regime: the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam took Ovid's title *Tristia* for one of his own books, apparently finding in Ovid's situation vis-à-vis Augustus, an analog for his own with Joseph Stalin, who also took a very personal interest in *his* poets. It may be that Augustus truly thought that Ovid was of his own court, an Augustan at heart, and so the poet's betrayal was wholly unforgivable. (If Stalin had read Ovid, perhaps he would have thought him a Stalinist.) But wouldn't Augustus have seen through the excessive flattery in the hymn of praise to his rule that ends the *Metamorphoses*? Perhaps not. It appears that if we think well of ourselves, nothing is easier to believe than that Ovid is on our side.

The voice of the Ovidian narrator is rich in ironies, ambiguities, and contradictions, scripting its various scenarios of commitment and evasion: if his poem is indeed more than "a loosely affiliated farrago" of stories, its structure would likely exhibit patterns of commitment and evasion similar to those we find in that voice. The clearest example of these is surely Ovid's elastic notion of the possibilities latent in the word *book*. The first book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* gives us a beginning and the last book gives us a conclusion, but the first book ends with a continuation to the next, and the last book begins with a continuation from the one before; the thirteen books in between are both continuous and inconclusive. The relationships that they exhibit between "stories" and "books" display shifting patterns of commitment and evasion, as themes emerge

from their context and then dissolve back into it, only to reappear, subtly changed—or to disappear completely. The model for this continual transformation within and between books seems less like the elaborate and static structure described by Otis than the dynamic motions of an actor or dancer performing one role and then transforming himself (while still onstage) to perform another. One is tempted to paraphrase T. S. Eliot and say that the structure of this poem (rather than its meaning) is a bone thrown by a burglar to distract the mind's watchdog while the poem goes about its own deeper business.

What that business may be is difficult to define, but easy enough to illustrate. Book XIII of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* begins with an outgrowth of the account of Achilles's death that closes Book XII. This is a lengthy debate between Ulysses and Ajax—brains versus brawn—over the armor of the fallen hero. Brains triumph, as Ulysses walks off with the coveted booty and Ajax kills himself. The hypermasculine self-aggrandizement of their argument segues into a consideration of Hecuba and the women of Troy, who after the fall of the city have been reduced to yet another form of plunder, erotic rather than martial. We move from an imitation of speeches and arguments heard in a Roman law court to scenes from Greek tragedy: Ovid's treatment of Hecuba follows Euripides's eponymous play. Hecuba is being tormented by the shade of Achilles, who demands the death of her last surviving daughter, Polyxena, as a funeral sacrifice. Polyxena goes to her fate with a courage that none of the men portrayed in this book can match or even come near in showing, and a new theme, the bravery of women, is introduced and will be developed in two of the next stories of the book. First we see the goddess Aurora mourning the loss of her mortal son Memnon, much as we have seen Hecuba grieving for her lost children. In the tale of the daughters of Anius that follows, we continue with life after the Trojan War: the character of Aeneas is introduced and we have, told as an ecphrasis, the story of the heroic, self-sacrificing daughters of Anius. Time moves back to the period before the Trojan War for the next tale, that of the daughters of Orion, who are betrayed by male cowardice. The story of Ajax's loss to Ulysses is revisited when the one-eyed monster Polyphemos vies with the adorable if ineffective (typically male!) Acis for the love of the beautiful Galatea. Here Ovid imitates two genres, the epic and the pastoral: Homer had represented Polyphemos as a violent monster, and the poet Theocritus represented him as a comical lover in his *Idylls*. Polyphemos succeeds in eliminating his rival but loses the prize he has sought. Now the theme of unrequited love rises again to the surface (literally) to be developed in the last tale of the book, "Scylla and Glaucus," in which another nymph is pursued by a different kind of monster, a

tale that will continue on past the physical ending of Book XIII and into the beginning of Book XIV.

Whether one can call it a structure or not, there is something created by the continuity of Homeric references, the variety of literary genres illustrated, and the thematic twists and turns, like Proteus moving from one figure to another, as the Book progresses. And whether the “structure” of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is as real as Brooks Otis believed or as illusory as the extended vistas of Roman wall painting in Ovid’s time, those metamorphic patterns of commitment and evasion in the telling of the stories seem to me to reflect something that is real in the poem, something one can actually feel in reading it.

Consideration of structure yields, or perhaps drives us back to, a consideration of voice, and that may lead us to see the poem, as Diane Middlebrook argues, as an epic whose only hero is its all-knowing narrator. That narrator will never replace the stories for us, but the “Ovid” whom we hear when we read his poem is at least as protean as his poem is. He seems to point the way from the definable epic of his time to its distant future, when, in the hands of Wordsworth and Whitman, Eliot and Pound, Louis Zukofsky and David Jones, it would be as indefinable as he perhaps imagined it could be, a poem of varied experiences filtered through a single, expansive sensibility, describing its own process, celebrating itself, serving as a means of transmission for stories that its author wants to tell, while perhaps repeating the words of the poet Nennius, “I have made a great heap of all I have found.”

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the editors of the following publications, in which portions of this work have previously appeared:

Arion: "The Wrath of Juno," "Deucalion and Pyrrha," "Medea,"
"The Plague at Aegina," and "Cephalus and Procris"

Barrow Street: "The House of Rumor"

Cumberland Poetry Review: "Tereus, Procne, and Philomela"

Eclectic Literary Forum: "The Sun and Leucothoë"

The Formalist: "The Mortal Child of an Immortal's Lust"

Parnassus: "Polyphemus, Galatea, and Acis"

Pivot: "The Daughters of Pierus"

The Tennessee Quarterly: "Echo and Narcissus"

TriQuarterly: "Of Praise and Punishment: Arachne"

I am grateful for the frequent PSC-CUNY Research Awards that have given me time to work on this project.

I have benefited greatly from the very close attention that two advisory editors gave to earlier versions of this translation. Bernard Knox's enthusiastic encouragement for this undertaking has been a source of inspiration from the beginning, and his comments on that earlier text were invaluable to me. I am similarly indebted to John Hollander, whose superb ear helped me find my way into Ovid's verse; his conversations on Ovid and on translation are warmly recalled.

William S. Anderson's two-volume commentary on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* has been my constant companion in this venture, a treasure for any reader of the poem.

Over the years, friends have offered advice, suggestions, solutions, partial solutions, and venues wherein I have had the chance to talk (formally or informally) about my work and read from it: my thanks to John Gery, Dana Gioia and Michael Peich, Rachel Hadas, Emily Martin, David Mason, Wyatt Prunty, Mark Rudman, Nigel Thompson, Rosanna Warren, and the late Katharine Washburn.

In preparing this Norton Critical Edition, I was given similar opportunities to talk about Ovid and about translating him by my colleague at Syracuse University, Dymphna Callaghan; by Isaac Cates

at Long Island University; by Paula Deitz of *The Hudson Review*, Wyatt Prunty at the Sewanee Writers' Conference, and Deborah Warren at the Nicholas Roerich Museum. I must thank Christopher Brunelle, of St. Olaf College, not only for inviting me to speak to his students, but also for the thoroughness with which he read my text. His corrections have been incorporated in this edition.

John Mardirosian first welcomed me to Norton; my manuscript and I both learned much from Ann R. Tappert's thoughtful copyediting of the trade edition, and it is a pleasure to acknowledge the continuing helpfulness of Rivka Genesen, Ben Reynolds, and Brian Baker. I am most grateful to Carol Bemis, whose enthusiasm, dedication, and patience have done much to make these remarks both possible and necessary.

A Note on This Translation

Ovid ends the *Metamorphoses* with the word *vivam*, which I have unremarkably translated as “I will live.” A poet survives only if his poem does, and if his poem survives, it does so either in its own language or in translation; there are no other possibilities. In our time, the *Metamorphoses* has many more readers in English and in other living languages than it has in the Latin in which Ovid composed it: this does not mean that it is less alive in Latin than in translation, only that it is less frequently alive in Latin. The loss of Latin as a living language makes translation essential if most of us are to enjoy Ovid’s work at all, but it also means that an entire world of connotation and association has been lost with it.

In his time, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* was centered in a web of cultural and political relations to which it was bound by allusions of various kinds. For Ovid’s first readers, his brief introduction—the first four lines of his poem—not only set out his own intentions for it, but referred to two of his own earlier works in a very different genre and illustrated in verse his turn from the elegiac couplets he had previously written to the hexameter lines proper to the Latin epic. Not only personal history but cultural: the reader of his time would have also noticed allusions not just to Ovid’s earlier work but also to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the *Argonautica* of Apollonius, and to the issue of whether the poet should write a traditional, chronologically arranged epic or the more refined variety preached and practiced by the Alexandrian Callimachus and his later Roman followers.

What Ovid’s Pythagoras would call “the gnawing tooth of time” has left us the poem intact but has fragmented the web surrounding it: Ovid’s personal history and the larger cultural issues of his day have little resonance in our age; if a translator could bring across those allusions into modern English, a contemporary reader would still have little or no idea what was at issue; in that sense, they are lost to translation. Throughout the *Metamorphoses*, for example, Ovid is engaged in a complex and competitive relationship with the poet Virgil and with the *other* epic of the Augustan era, Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Many contemporary readers will have their first hint of this in Book XIII, when Aeneas himself makes his appearance; unlike Virgil’s Aeneas, however, Ovid’s hero bumbles along like a celebrity tourist on a

guided tour, opening his mouth only to get in trouble for saying the wrong thing and otherwise avoiding memorable speech and action. Very odd indeed for an epic hero, and in the past, his behavior in the poem has often been seen as ineptitude on Ovid's part rather than as a clever element of a deliberately parodic strategy.

Other, more subtle allusions to Virgil's poem may be misunderstood or lost entirely. In Book III of the *Metamorphoses*, the goddess Juno bitterly complains about her husband Jove's affair with Semele and is about to launch into a great tirade when she stops to remind herself of her own importance and to threaten vengeance on her enemy:

*"profeci quid enim totiens per iurgia?" dixit,
 "ipsa petenda mihi est; ipsam, si maxima Iuno
 rite vocor, perdam, si me gemmantia dextra
 sceptrā tenere decet, si sum regina Iovisque
 et soror et coniunx—"*

"But when have I won anything by shouting?" she asked. "No: I must attack and ruin her, if I am rightly styled as almighty Juno, if it is right for me to bear the scepter, if I am certainly the queen of Jove, his sister, his wife—"

Part of the fun in this passage is that Ovid has taken a speech of Juno from Book I of the *Aeneid*, in which she laments her inability to prevent Aeneas from reaching Italy, an issue of cosmic importance, and applied it to the rather more comical situation of the latest infidelity of her perpetually straying husband, Jove, the omnipotent ruler of heaven; Ovid's last phrase in this passage, "*regina Iovisque et soror et coniunx*," "the queen of Jove, his sister and wife," is taken directly from Virgil; to it Ovid adds one more phrase, deflating Juno's epic dignity just as surely as Groucho Marx did Margaret Dumont's: "*certe soror*," "well, certainly his sister."

This is not to say that Ovid is completely without respect for Virgil; his borrowing and echoing of Virgilian phrases throughout the *Metamorphoses* indicate that he clearly realized the older poet's genius; but to Virgil's gravitas he opposed that "thoughtful lightness" that Italo Calvino finds in his work; to Virgil's single story of how one man, Aeneas, refused to be sidetracked from coming to Italy and establishing a dynasty that led to the rule of Augustus, Ovid opposes so many stories told by so many voices that it is hard to be sure we have counted them accurately.

Ovid's relationship with Virgil, important as it may have been for him in staking out his poetic turf, is impossible to convey in translation, since the existence of Virgil himself largely depends

on translations. Unless there were a translation of the *Aeneid* so distinctive in its diction or rhythm that the translator of the *Metamorphoses* could count on his readers recognizing an allusion to it—but even to suggest this is to recognize its unlikelihood.

And what of Ovid's relationship to Augustus himself, the "first citizen" of the Roman state and the official sponsor of Virgil and his literary vision? In Book I, Ovid describes a boisterous convocation of the Olympian gods in which an obstreperous Jove lords it over the other gods and decides to wipe out the human race altogether, for . . . its cruelty! Ovid explicitly compares Jove to Augustus in this scene, and then goes on to show Jove, in the remainder of Book I and subsequent books, as a successful rapist and clumsy seducer of essentially defenseless women. In Book XV, Ovid again compares Augustus to Jove and praises him so extravagantly, in a tone so different from anything else in the *Metamorphoses*, that it is hard to believe Ovid is being serious. "Praise undeserv'd is scandal in disguise," said Alexander Pope, and this seems almost a formula for what Ovid is doing here. Between these episodes are others in which Ovid appears to raise serious questions about the character of Augustus and the legitimacy of his reign. If the Olympian gods often seem in Ovid's treatment of them to be the spoiled members of a dysfunctional family, then Ovid's comparison of Augustus to Jove becomes an act of political subversion, and the *Metamorphoses* may be read as a social and political commentary, an allegorical reflection of its times, and not—it never was intended to be—a timeless and canonical collection of myths.

The translator may suggest such things, but they must be left for the critic to develop: they belong to what has already been lost, that world of context in which Ovid's poem once moved. What the translator can hope for is to bring over as best he may those elements of Ovid's style that *can* be translated. Chief among these would be that "thoughtful lightness" that Italo Calvino has spoken of in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*.¹ One can see it in the irony that so often undercuts the noble and the heroic, either by an inappropriate admission (as in Juno's monologue cited above) or by a simile that brings us from tragedy to comedy with no stops in between, as when Pyramus (in Book IV) nobly decides to take his own life in emulation of his beloved Thisbe:

"'Drink *my* blood now,' he says, drawing his sword,
and thrusting it at once in his own guts:
a fatal blow; dying, he draws the blade

1. Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988).

out of his burning wound, and his lifeblood
follows it, jetting high into the air,
as he lies on his back upon the ground.

"It was as when a water pipe is ruptured
where the lead has rotted, and it springs a leak . . .

The reader is torn from the world of undying love and thrown into one in which we are trying to find a twenty-four-hour plumbing service.

So then, there is the speed of the narration, the casualness of tone, the rapid changes in point of view, the alternation between apparent sympathy for his characters and apparent indifference to their fates; there is the wordplay, the elaborate rhetorical and prosodic figures, the whimsical erudition, and the coining of new words: more than enough to keep a translator busy. If the translator cannot reproduce one of Ovid's jokes, he may perhaps substitute one of his own in a different place to give a sense of Ovid's playfulness.

Other effects are impossible to reproduce. Latin allows the poet the liberty to create lines, such as the so-called Golden Line, which Virgil and Ovid both employed, in which a pair of adjectives and their respective nouns at either end enclose a verb in the middle. English will rarely stand still for this sort of thing, but occasionally something like it may occur to the translator, as in the passage in Book I where Io's poor father laments her having been discovered in her current condition as a heifer:

"Lost, you were less a grief than you are, found!"

Though this is not a reflection of the metrical arrangement of the original lines, I used it anyway, since the artificiality of the arrangement tells us something about the way in which we are to understand Io's (temporary) metamorphosis.

When I began my own process of translation, I set out in medias res, with the opening of Book III, to see what doing Ovid would be like:

*Iamque deus posita fallacies imagine tauri
se confessus erat dictaeque rura tenebat,
cum pater ignarus Cadmo perquirere raptam
imperat et poenam, si non invenerit, addit
exilium, facto pius et sceleratus eodem.*

My first question was, what kind of meter will work for this? My earliest version used a line whose length and irregularly placed stresses would seem, I hoped, analogous to Ovid's dactylic hexameter:

And now, no longer misrepresenting himself as a bull,
Jove in his own form arrived at Crete, while the captive