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TRANSFORMATIONS OF POWER: THE HIDDEN INFLUENCE OF OVID IN SHAKESPEARE'S HISTORICAL CHRONICLES

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Abstract

This paper examines the influence of Ovid's Metamorphoses on William Shakespeare's historical plays, focusing on King Richard II, The First Part of King Henry IV, The Second Part of King Henry IV, The Merry Wives of Windsor, and King Henry V. By analyzing the motif of transformation, both personal and political, the study highlights Shakespeare's adaptation of Ovidian themes to explore shifts in power, identity, and social dynamics. In King Richard II, the transformation of Richard from sovereign to mortal underscores the fragility and cyclical nature of power, while The First and Second Parts of King Henry IV follow Prince Hal's evolution into a responsible king, juxtaposed with Falstaff's refusal to change. The Merry Wives of Windsor uses comedic humiliation and disguise to depict social transformation, while King Henry V illustrates Hal's complete metamorphosis into a unifying leader. Through these works, Shakespeare reinterprets Ovidian metamorphosis to examine human vulnerability, change, and the impermanence of power within the context of Elizabethan drama.

1. INTRODUCTION

The dialog between classical texts and the Renaissance literature is a constant presence, particularly reflected in the works of William Shakespeare. Among the classical sources that greatly influence English playwright, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* stands out as one of the most significant. This epic poem, consisting of fifteen books, offers a vast collection of myths centered on physical, psychological, and emotional transformation. Shakespeare in Ovid, a rich resource to explore themes of change, power, and decline, particularly in his historical plays such as *King Richard II*, *The First Part of King Henry IV*, *The Second Part of King Henry IV*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *King Henry V*.

This essay focuses on these works, aiming to trace the references and reworkings of Ovid that Shakespeare incorporates into his texts. This analysis builds on my previous work, *A Thematic Study of Chimes at Midnight and Its Theatrical Predecessors* (2003), where I examined the character of Falstaff and his eventual rejection in Orson Welles' film. Now, we extend the study to include Ovidian influence, showing how ancient myths resonate within Shakespearean plots.

2. THE THEME OF METAMORPHOSIS IN THE FALL OF RICHARD II

In *King Richard II*, the notion of metamorphosis appears symbolically in Richard's political and personal transformation. The plot explores how the king is stripped of his power, status, and identity, reflecting the central ideas of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which characters often find themselves transformed into different forms owing to divine intervention or the inexorable course of fate.

2.1. The Transformation of Royal Power: From Absolutism to Fragility

One of the clearest scenes where the idea of the transformation of power appears is in Act III, Scene 2, when Richard reflects on his situation after his return from Ireland, where his forces have been defeated and Bolingbroke has seized much of the kingdom. In a moment of deep introspection, Richard speaks of how all kings eventually fall:

"For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings;
How some have been deposed, some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed,
Some poison'd by their wives, some sleeping kill'd;
All murder'd: for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits,
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,
Aling him a breath, a little scene,
To monarchize, be fear'd and kill with looks,
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,
As if this flesh which walls about our life,
Were brass impregnable, and humor'd thus
Comes at the last and with a little pin
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!" (Act III, Scene 2, 155-170)

This passage is essential for understanding the transformation of power in Ovidian terms. Richard uses the image of the "hollow crown" and the "mortal temple" to illustrate how kings are merely mortal figures who, despite appearing invincible, are ultimately subject to death and decline. This reflection on the ephemeral nature of power echoes the transformations in *Metamorphoses*, where characters are inevitably changed, whether into stone, animals, or other forms, by divine or fateful intervention.

Here, metamorphosis is not physical but rather a transformation of the very concept of royalty. Shakespeare reworks the idea that royal power, like any other form of power, is temporary and can be "transformed" or usurped, reflecting the fatality of Ovid's myths, where gods or destiny alter the form or status of individuals.

2.2. Richard's Change in Identity: From the Divine King to the Common Man

Another key moment resonating with Ovidian ideas is the passage in Act IV, Scene 1, when Richard abdicates the throne. In this scene, the king symbolically relinquishes his power and confronts a crisis of identity. This transformation is not merely political but deeply personal:

"Now mark me how I will undo myself:
I give this heavy weight from off my head
And this unwieldy sceptre from my hand,
The pride of kingly sway from out my heart;
With mine own tears I wash away my balm,
With mine own hands I give away my crown,
With mine own tongue deny my sacred state,
With mine own breath release all duteous oaths:
All pomp and majesty I do forswear;
My manors, rents, revenues I forgo;
My acts, decrees, and statutes I deny:
God pardon all oaths that are broke to me!
God keep all vows unbroke are made to thee!
Make me, that nothing have, with nothing griev'd,
And thou with all pleas'd, that hast all achiev'd!
Long mayst thou live in Richard's seat to sit,
And soon lie Richard in an earthly pit!" (Act IV, Scene 1, 203-218)

This scene reflects a drastic metamorphosis in which Richard moves from being the divine anointed bearer of sacred power, to a mere mortal. Richard's language is highly visual: "with mine own tears," "with mine own tongue," evoking Ovidian transformations where characters often undergo radical changes, not just physically but in their very essence. By casting off his crown and title, Richard sheds his identity as king, recalling the tragic transformations of figures such as Actaeon, who becomes a stag and is hunted by his own dogs, or Narcissus, who loses his identity by falling in love with his reflection.

2.3 Influence of Narcissus: The King Trapped in His Own Reflection

Ovid's figure of Narcissus, who becomes trapped in the adoration of his own image until he transforms into a flower, echoes in Richard's obsession with his status and power. Like Narcissus, Richard is in love with the idealized image of himself as king and the inviolability of his reign. However, his inability to adapt to the realities of power led to his downfall.

In Act III, Scene 3, Richard experiences a moment of recognition where he begins to understand that he no longer holds the control he once had:

"What must the king do now? Must he submit?
The king shall do it. Must he be deposed?
The king shall be contented. Must he lose
The name of king? A God's name, let it go." (Act III, Scene 3, 142-145)

Here, Richard's acceptance of his own fate recalls the tragedy of Narcissus, who ultimately becomes ensnared by his own vanity and loses his human form. For Richard, his crown and power are a kind of "reflection" that he must finally abandon.

2.4 The Political Metamorphosis: Bolingbroke and the Rise of a New Form

Just as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where gods and heroes change forms, in *King Richard II*, Bolingbroke transforms into a new figure of power, reshaping the kingdom's political structure. The metamorphosis here is dual: while Richard transitions from king to mere mortal, Bolingbroke assumes the role of the king, marking a political shift that, like in Ovid, is inevitable.

"I am coming to sue
My livery from the king." (Act II, Scene 3, 113)

Bolingbroke's rise is a form of political metamorphosis in which the kingdom's stability is altered and power shifts hands. This change reflects an ovary's natural and cyclical metamorphoses, where the change is constant and no state or form lasts forever.

2.5 Summarizing: Ovidian Cycle of Transformation

Ovid's metamorphoses influence*King Richard II* by focusing on the impermanence of power, the fragility of royal identity, and the inevitable political transformation. Richard transitions from an absolute king to a stripped, vulnerable figure, whereas Bolingbroke, like many of Ovid's heroes, ascends to a new form of power. Shakespeare reworks Ovidian themes of change and decay to craft a political tragedy deeply influenced by classical notions of metamorphosis.

3. THE FIRST PART OF KING HENRY IV

Ovid's influence in *The First Part of King Henry IV* is notably present in the transformation of power and in the development of characters embodying this transition. The play centers on the conflict between King Henry IV's established power and the forces seeking to challenge and alter it, represented by characters such as Hotspur and Hal (the future Henry V). The notion of "metamorphosis" or change, a central theme in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is reflected in both political transformations and the internal changes of the characters.

3.1 Hal's Transformation: From Rebel Prince to King in Formation

Hal's transformation is the core of *The First Part of King Henry IV*, representing one of the most Ovidian aspects of the play. At the play's outset, Hal is portrayed as an immature prince, distanced from the court's responsibilities and immersed in a world of revelry and disorder alongside Falstaff. However, as the plot progresses, Hal shows signs of internal transformation, culminating in his assumption of the throne.

Act I, Scene 2: Hal and His Promotion of Metamorphosis

Hal's famous soliloquy at the end of Act I, Scene 2, is one of the first indications of his transformation. In this monolog, Hal reveals that his debauched behavior is, in part, a calculated plan to surprise everyone when he eventually embraces his responsibilities:

"I know you all, and will awhile uphold
The unyoked humor of your idleness:
However, herein will I imitate the sun,
Who doth permit the base contagious clouds
To smother up his beauty from the world,
That, when he please again to be himself,
Being wanted, he may be more wonder'd at,
By breaking through the foul and ugly mists
Of vapors that did seem to strangle him."
(Act I, Scene 2, 193-201)

This passage recalls the Ovidian transformations where characters undergo sudden and unexpected changes, altering not only their appearance but also the way others perceive them. Hal compares himself to the sun, which hides behind clouds only to shine more brilliantly when it reappears, evoking the Ovidian idea of transformation as revelation. The metamorphosis here is both internal and external, as Hal plans to use his change of behavior to assume a power that still seems distant.

Act III, Scene 2: Confrontation with Henry IV

Hal's transformation continues during his tense conversation with his father, King Henry IV, in Act III, Scene 2. In this encounter, Henry IV expresses his disappointment with Hal, comparing him unfavorably with Hotspur and suggesting that Hotspur is the son he should have had. Hal responded with a promise of change:

"I shall hereafter, my thrice-gracious lord,
Be more myself." (Act III, Scenes 2, 92)

This statement can be seen as the pivotal moment in Hal's metamorphosis, acknowledging his responsibility and vowing to his father to become the king that the realm needs. In Ovidian terms, this is akin to moments in the *Metamorphoses* when heroes, after moments of weakness or vulnerability, transform into powerful figures. Hal is in the process of leaving behind his former identity and embracing his rightful place as heir to the throne.

3.2 Falstaff: Figure of Falsity and Mutability

If Hal represents a character undergoing a transformative ascent toward power, Falstaff embodies the antithesis of responsibility and order. Although he does not experience literal metamorphosis, Falstaff is a changeable and adaptable character capable of transforming reality to suit his needs through lies, humor, and mockery. Falstaff is the Ovidian equivalent of grotesque and deceptive characters who distort reality to avoid accountability.

Act II, Scene 4: Falstaff's Sham Valor

A prime example of this is the scene where Falstaff blatantly lies about his conduct in battle, exaggerating his valor and falsely claiming the number of men he supposedly killed. Hal immediately described his deception:

"What trick, what device, what startinghole canstou now determine to hide thee from this open and apparent shame?" (Act II, Scene 4, 301-302)

Falstaff represents symbolic transformation through deception, a recurring theme in Ovid's tales, such as the myths of Jupiter, who transforms to seduce or manipulate, or Mercury, the god of deception and change. While Falstaff does not undergo a physical change, his ability to "transform" reality through lies and farces recalls the Ovidian power of mutability.

3.3 Hotspur: The Transformation of the Tragic Hero

If Hal is destined for transformation from a rebellious prince to a king, Hotspur is the tragic hero whose own transformation leads to his downfall. Hotspur is defined by action and pride, but his inability to adapt to political realities ultimately leads to his ruin. In this sense, Hotspur undergoes an inverse metamorphosis, where his quest for power results in his destruction.

Act V, Scene 4: The Fall of Hotspur

The final duel between Hal and Hotspur marks the culmination of both characters' transformations. Hal, having embraced his destiny as a leader, kills Hotspur, who, despite his military prowess and determination, is unable to change his fate.

"O Harry, thou hast robb'd me of my youth:
I better brook the loss of brittle life
Those proud titles thou hast won of me;
They wound my thoughts worse than thy sword my flesh." (Act V, Scene 4, 77-80)

Hotspur's final lament reveals his awareness of defeat and loss, a form of mental metamorphosis in which he accepts his downfall. Like many characters in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*,

Hotspur succumbs to his tragic fate, trapped by his inflexibility and inability to adapt. His transformation is from a brave warrior to a defeated figure destined to be replaced by Hal.

3.4 Summarizing:Political and Personal Metamorphosis in the First Part of King Henry IV

The influence of Ovid is evident in *The First Part of King Henry IV* through the transformations experienced by the main characters. Hal transitions from a dissipated prince to a leader in formation, a conscious change he articulates throughout the play. His metamorphosis mirrors many stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where characters undergo a complete transformation, not only in form but also in identity and destiny.

Conversely, Falstaff represents a more symbolic metamorphosis characterized by deceit and mutability. While Falstaff does not change his physical form, he constantly manipulates reality and transforms his surroundings through humor and lies, reminiscent of Ovid's deceptive and adaptable characteristics.

Finally, Hotspur underwent tragic metamorphosis, culminating in destruction. Like the heroic characters in Ovid's works, who cannot escape their fate, Hotspur's inability to change condemns him to defeat.

Shakespeare uses Ovidian transformation on multiple levels, exploring both the personal changes of characters and the transitions of power within the kingdom, crafting a narrative deeply influenced by *Metamorphoses*.

4. THE SECOND PART OF KING HENRY IV

In *the second part of King Henry IV*, Ovid's influence manifests profoundly in the themes of power transformation and character development. As in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, characters undergo profound changes in their status, identity, and relationship to power. The transformation in this play is evident both in King Henry IV's decline and Prince Hal's maturation, as well as in the tragicomic figure of Falstaff, who represents resistance to transformation.

This section explores how Shakespeare incorporates Ovidian ideas of transformation in this play, with key excerpts illustrating the metamorphosis of power and the main characters.

4.1 The Decline of Power at King Henry IV

The transformation of power in *The Second Part of King Henry IV* is symbolized by the physical and emotional decline of Henry IV. The king, who usurped Richard II's throne in the first part, now finds himself in a state of constant fatigue and weakness, reflecting an Ovidian transformation in which power itself erodes and changes hands. As in Ovid's stories, where powerful characters are transformed into vulnerable beings, the king undergoes an irreversible decline.

Act III, Scene 1: Henry IV's Insomnia Soliloquy

One of the most powerful moments symbolizing the transformation of power in Henry IV occurs in Act III, Scene 1, when the king, unable to sleep, reflects on his plight. This soliloquy illustrates how power, once a symbol of greatness, now burdens and weakens him:

"How many thousand of my poorest subjects
Are asleep at this hour! O sleep, O gentle sleep,
Nature's soft nurse, how have I frighted thee,
That thou no more wilt weigh my eyelids down,
And steep my senses in forgetfulness?
Why rather, sleep, liest thou in smoky cribs,
O uneasy pallets stretching thee,
And hush'd with buzzing night-flies to thy slumber,
Than in the perfum'd chambers of the great,
Under the canopies of costly state,
And lull'd with sound of sweetest melody?
O thou dull god, why liest thou with the vile,
In loathsome beds, and leav'st the kingly couch
A watch-case or a common 'larum-bell?" (Act III, Scene 1, 4-17)

This lament echoes transformations of power in *Metamorphoses*, where characters, often powerful or divine figures, suffer changes that render them vulnerable and exposed. Despite being king, Henry IV cannot enjoy the privileges that come with power. Like in Ovid's myths, power is not a guarantee of stability or peace but a burden that transforms the king's life into a weighty one. Henry IV's insomnia serves as a metaphor for his deterioration, foreshadowing his eventual death and the impending shift of power.

Act IV, Scene 5: Henry IV on His Deathbed

The climax of Henry IV's transformation occurs in Act IV, Scene 5, when the king faces the imminent loss of all his power and the transfer of the kingdom to his son, Hal. This is an inevitable metamorphosis in which power changes hands, reflecting the cyclical and transformative nature of political power explored by Ovid.

"This sleep is sound indeed; this is a sleep
That from this golden rigol hath divorced
So many English kings. Thy, owing from me
is tears and heavy sorrows of the blood,
which nature, love, and filial tenderness
Shall, O dear father, pay thee plenteously:
My due from thee is this imperial crown,

which, as immediate from thy place and blood,
Derives itself to me. Lo, where it sits,
Which God shall guard: and put the world's whole strength
Into one giant arm, it shall not force
This lineal honor from me: this from thee
Will I mine leave, as 'tis left to me." (Act IV, Scene 5, 23-34)

In this passage, Hal (now Henry V) takes up the crown while his father sleeps, marking the point of transition in the play. This scene recalls the shifts in power and displacement common in Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* where form and substance change but power continues, transferred from one figure to another. The "divorcing" of kings from their crowns symbolizes inevitable change, a continuous cycle of death and renewal that reflects Ovid's dynamic of transformation.

4.2 Hal's Transformation: From Dissolute Prince to King

Hal's transformation from a rebellious and carefree prince into a responsible and worthy king is one of the central narrative arcs in *The Second Part of King Henry IV*. As in Ovid's stories, where characters undergo internal and external changes to assume new identities, Hal experiences a total metamorphosis that makes him Henry V.

Act II, Scene 2: Hal Rejects the Tavern World

Throughout the play, signs indicate that Hal is leaving behind his dissolute life and preparing to assume the throne. In Act II, Scene 2, Hal shows signs of readiness for transformation, distancing himself from Falstaff and the tavern world he once frequented:

"I know thee not, old man: fall to thy prayers;
How ill white hairs become a fool and jester!
I have long dreams of such a kind of man,
So surfeit-swell'd, so old and so profane;
However, being awak'd, I do despise my dream." (Act II, Scene 2, 127-131)

In this passage, Hal marks his distance from Falstaff and, by extension, from the life of irresponsibility that he represents. This rejection is part of his metamorphosis, a kind of "awakening" in which he leaves behind his former identity, similar to characters in Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* who are transformed by fate or gods.

Act V, Scene 5: Hal Coronation

The climax of Hal's transformation occurs at the end of the play when he is crowned King Henry V. This is the culmination of his metamorphosis, transitioning from a rebellious prince to a responsible king, worthy of the throne he inherits:

"My father is gone wild into his grave,
For in his tomb lie my affections;
And with his spirit sadly I survive,
To mock the expectation of the world,
To frustrate prophecies, and to raze out
Rotten opinion, who hath writ me down
After my seeming." (Act V, Scene 5, 41-47)

In this passage, Hal expresses his determination to be a different king than expected. His transformation is complete; he has shed his former self and assumed a new identity as Henry V. This metamorphosis is similar to the characters in Ovid's works, who, after enduring trials and changes, emerge as new beings with new forms and purposes.

4.3 Falstaff: Resistance to Change

While Hal and Henry IV undergo radical transformations, Falstaff represents resistance to change. Throughout the play, Falstaff remains unaltered, clinging to his dissolute lifestyle and constant deception. Like Ovidian characters, who refuse to accept metamorphosis, Falstaff is a tragicomic figure unable or unwilling to adapt to the new order.

Act II, Scene 4: Falstaff's Pretended Valor

In Act II, Scene 4, Falstaff continues to deceive himself and others, creating a false reality in which he is a brave and deserving man. However, his lack of transformation condemns him to be left behind when power ultimately shifts hands:

"If I do grow great, I'll grow less; for I'll purge, leave sack, and live cleanly, as a nobleman should do."
(Act II, Scene 4, 368-370)

This sarcastic comment reflects his unwillingness to truly change. Falstaff is destined to be a marginal figure, out of place in the new order that Hal will establish as Henry V. His lack of transformation contrasts with the profound metamorphoses experienced by Hal and Henry IV, and his eventual rejection symbolizes the necessity of leaving behind the old to consolidate new power.

4.4 Summarizing: The Metamorphosis of Power in the Second Part of King Henry IV

In *the second part of King Henry IV*, the transformation of power is articulated through changes in the main characters, particularly Hal and Henry IV. As in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, power inevitably changes hands, and the characters undergo deep metamorphoses that either prepare them for new roles or doom them to failure. Henry IV, in his decline, shifted from a strong

king to a weak and defeated figure, whereas Hal emerged as the new king, transformed and ready to assume power. Falstaff, as characters who resist change, represent the inability to adapt and the eventual exclusion from the new order. Shakespeare explores the cycle of power transformation with a depth that echoes Ovid, using metamorphosis as a metaphor for political and personal change.

5. THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Shakespeare plays with Ovid's influence, particularly concerning the theme of power transformation, although he does so in a more comedic and lighthearted tone than in his historical plays. The play does not directly address the struggle for royal or political power but focuses on social dynamics and the power between genders, class, and authority figures, such as Sir John Falstaff, who attempts to manipulate and deceive the women of Windsor for personal gain. However, the "merry wives"—Mistress Page and Mistress Ford—are the ones in control of the situation, and throughout the play, Falstaff is repeatedly humiliated and symbolically transformed by his actions.

The transformation of power in this play is reflected in the changing power dynamics of the characters through situations of deception and disguise. One could also argue that Falstaff, as a comic and buffoonish figure, undergoes both physical and social metamorphosis on several occasions, evoking the idea of transformation explored in Ovid's myths, although here, the transformation is comedic rather than tragic.

5.1 Falstaff's "Transformation": From Noble to Ridiculous

The falsestaff is at the center of the plot of deception in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, where his attempts to seduce Mistress Page and Mistress Ford fail repeatedly and he becomes the victim of humiliating situations. The "metamorphosis" of Falstaff here is primarily symbolic: his status as a knight initially places him in a position of power, but his dishonorable behavior degrades him into a figure of ridicule. This shift in social status, where the noble knight is transformed into a laughable figure, recalls the ironic and grotesque transformations in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Act III, Scene 3: Falstaff Hidden in the Laundry Basket

One of the first scenes in which Falstaff is humiliated occurs when the woman tricks him into hiding in a laundry basket to escape Mistress Ford's husband. This act reduces his dignity as a knight and symbolically transforms him into something insignificant:

"I will hug this greasy old woman to get me out of danger. [He hides in the basket.]
Mistress Ford: How now, my sweet Sir John?

Mistress Page: Have with you. You'll come to dinner, George? Look who comes yonder: she shall be caught in her own basket!" (Act III, Scene 3, 107-109)

The fact that Falstaff is treated like dirty laundry and then thrown into the river highlights his loss of power and dignity. In Ovidian terms, this is a comedic form of metamorphosis, where Falstaff, initially regarded as a superior knight, is degraded and humiliated as part of a vengeful comedy. This type of degradation and transformation mirrors the punishments in Ovid's stories, where characters are often transformed into inferior forms as a consequence of their arrogance.

Act IV, Scene 2: Falstaff's Second Attempt and Disguise as a Woman

In a second attempt at seduction, Falstaff disguises himself as the Old Woman of Brentford, only to be beaten and humiliated once more by Ford, who does not recognize him in disguise. This is another example of a transformation resulting in Falstaff's degradation:

"There is an old woman, a fat woman, gone up into his chamber: I will be so bold as stay, sir, till she comes down; I come to take her to the justice." (Act IV, Scene 2, 134-136)

Here, the use of disguise transforms Falstaff not only in terms of appearance but also in terms of social power. While Falstaff attempts to use disguise to deceive and manipulate, his farce is quickly revealed, and his plan to gain power over the women of Windsor fails. This transformation into a grotesque female figure evokes Ovidian metamorphoses, where characters are often transformed into absurd or ridiculous forms as punishment for their behavior.

5.2 Social Transformation of Power: The "Merry Wives" Control

The most significant aspect of power transformation in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is how the women of the play, Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, assume control over the situation. Throughout the play, these women, initially seeming to be victims of Falstaff's advances, are revealed to be the true manipulators. They use their wit to transform the dynamics of power, exposing Falstaff as a fool and altering traditional gender roles in the comedy.

Act V, Scene 5: Falstaff Disguised as Herne the Hunter

The climax of the play comes in Act V, Scene 5, when Falstaff, following instructions from the women, disguises himself as Herne the Hunter for a supposed romantic meeting in Windsor Forest. In this scene, Falstaff is deceived once again and, instead of achieving his desires, is attacked and humiliated by a group of children disguised as fairies. This final transformation of Falstaff reduces him from a would-be powerful figure to a ridiculous spectacle:

"Divide me like a brib'd buck, each a haunch:
I will keep my sides to myself, my shoulders for the fellow of this walk, and my horns I bequeath your husbands." (Act V, Scene 5, 17-20)

Falstaff, adorned with horns, is transformed symbolically into an animal, a hunted stag, directly echoing Ovidian metamorphoses, particularly the myth of Actaeon, who is transformed into a stag and devoured by his own hounds after seeing Diana bathing. Here, Falstaff's punishment for his lust and arrogance is to be treated as prey, a degradation reminiscent of divine retribution in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The figure of Herne the Hunter, associated with the supernatural and hunting, adds a mythic dimension to this scene.

5.3 The Mutable Power of Deception and Disguise

One of the most important elements in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is the use of disguise and deception to transform social power. Throughout play, characters manipulate identity and appearance to gain power or revenge, reflecting transformations in *Metamorphoses,* where gods and mortals often disguise themselves to alter their destinies or punish others.

Act III, Scene 3: The Women's Plan to Transform Falstaff

Mistress Page and Mistress Ford use deception and disguise to turn the situation in their favor. Rather than being victims of Falstaff's seduction scheme, they manipulate him, making him the object of their ridicule:

"We'll leave a proof, by which we will do,
Wives may be merry, and yet honest too:
We do not act that often jest and laugh;
'Tis old but true, Still swine eats all the draff." (Act III, Scene 3, 219-222)

This statement from women reflects their power over Falstaff. By manipulating him through their plan, they transform the power dynamics and expose him as a pathetic figure. This use of deception and disguise to alter power dynamics echoes Ovid's tales, where characters change form or appearance to gain an advantage over others.

5.4 Summarizing: The Metamorphosis of Power in The Merry Wives of Windsor

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Ovidian influence manifests primarily through the use of disguise, deception, and comedic humiliation as mechanisms of transformation. While there are no physical metamorphoses such as those in *Metamorphoses*, the symbolic transformation of Falstaff from knight to buffoon—from a figure of power to an object of ridicule—demonstrates how social power can be mutable and reversible. The women of Windsor, through their cleverness, take control of the situation, transforming gender dynamics by exposing the weaknesses and vanity of figures such as Falstaff.

The use of Herne the Hunter's disguise, the fairies, and the constant degradation of Falstaff recalls the comedic metamorphoses found in Ovid, where characters are transformed owing to

their behavior. Shakespeare employs these ideas to create a comedy where power constantly shifts, and women, who are traditionally marginalized, assume control over men, exposing the flaws and hubris of figures such as Falstaff.

6. KING HENRY V

In *King Henry V*, the transformation of power is a central theme developed around the figure of Henry V (formerly Prince Hal). Shakespeare explores how Henry assumes power, leaving behind his identity as a rebellious youth to become a respected monarch, military leader, and symbolic figure of England. This transformation of power, both political and personal, reflects the ideas of metamorphosis present in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where characters undergo profound changes in form, status, destiny, and character.

This section explores aspects of power transformation at *King Henry V*, identifying key excerpts that demonstrate Ovidian influence in play and how Shakespeare employs the concept of metamorphosis to narrate Henry V's evolution as king.

6.1 The Metamorphosis of Henry V: From Dissolute Prince to the Powerful King

The central transformation in the play is that of Henry V, who, as Prince Hal in *Henry IV*, was a rebellious and irresponsible youth but has now left his former life behind to become a decisive and capable king. This personal and political metamorphosis recalls stories from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which characters often transform into new beings after undergoing trials, assuming new purposes and statuses. Henry V experiences a similar change, evolving from a disinterested prince into an absolute leader.

Act I, Scene 2: Henry's Determination

In Act I, Scene 2, Henry demonstrates his new identity as a firm and resolves the king by consulting his nobles and clergy about his right to claim the French throne. This scene marks the beginning of his metamorphosis as a leader, making it clear that his reign will be active and aggressive rather than passive or indifferent. Henry displays a deep understanding of his power and authority:

"We are no tyrant, but a Christian king;
Unto whose grace our passion is as subject
As are our wretches fetter'd in our prisons:
Therefore, with frank and with uncurbed plainness
Tell us the Dauphin's mind." (Act I, Scene 2, 241-245)

Here, Henry portrays himself as a king whose passion and emotions are controlled by his sense of Christian duty, emphasizing his transformation from an impulsive youth into a self-

controlled and just monarch. This metamorphosis echoes the heroes of Ovid's tales, who, after trials, emerge with a new sense of identity and purpose.

Act III, Scene 1: The Speech at Harfleur

One of the most iconic moments of Henry V's transformation occurred in Act III, Scene 1, during the famous speech at the walls of Harfleur, where Henry inspires his troops before assaulting the city. This speech exemplifies the new power and leadership that Henry has assumed, with language that reflects his transition from a doubting youth to a strong and decisive military leader:

"Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more;
Or close the wall up with our English dead!
In peace there's nothing so becomes a man
As modest stillness and humility:
However, when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then, imitate the action of the tiger;
Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favor'd rage;
Then, lend the eye a terrible aspect;
Let it pry through the portage of the head
Like the brass cannon; let the brow o'erwhelm it
As fearfully as doth a galled rock
O'erhang and jutty his confounded base,
Swill'd with the wild and wasteful ocean." (Act III, Scene 1, 1-14)

This passage encapsulates Henry's transformation into a military leader. His call to "disguise fair nature" suggests that he is asking his men to transform themselves, adopting a fierce and terrifying aspect, such as a tiger. This symbolic metamorphosis reflects how power transforms both individuals and nations in times of war. The use of disguise and the adoption of a new identity to confront battle echoes Ovidian transformations, where characters must assume new forms to fulfill their destinies.

6.2 The Transformative Power of Kingship

Henry's transformation is not solely personal but also represents a shift in the nature of royal power in England. Throughout the play, Henry fully embraces his role as king, and his identity as monarch becomes a symbol of the unity and strength of the nation. This idea of transforming identity through power echoes the divine transformations in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where mortals are often elevated to a new level of existence through a change in form or status.

Act IV, Scene 3: The St. Crispin's Day Speech

One of the most powerful illustrations of Henry's transformation as a leader occurs in Act IV, Scene 3, during the famous St. Crispin's Day speech before the Battle of Agincourt. In this speech, Henry transforms the perception of the battle, presenting it as a glorious opportunity where even men of low birth can be ennobled by their participation:

"We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition:
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accurs'd they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day." (Act IV, Scene 3, 60-67)

This passage reflects a symbolic transformation of the nation and the individuals fighting alongside Henry. The power of the king has a transformative effect, capable of elevating common men to a noble status. This idea of war as a means of ennoblement is a metaphorical version of transformations in Ovid's works, where characters often undergo a dramatic change that redefines their identity. Henry's power not only transforms his soldiers but also reconfigures the concepts of power and leadership in the English monarchy.

6.3 Inner Transformation: Henry's Conflict with Power

Despite his transformation into a powerful king, Henry also grappled with internal conflicts over the weight of power and the responsibilities it entails. These moments of introspection reflect a subtler metamorphosis, in which Henry struggles with the burdens of leadership, akin to characters in Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* who find themselves torn between their former identities and the new forms they must assume.

Act IV, Scene 1: The Soliloquy on the Eve of Battle

On the eve of the Battle of Agincourt, Henry disguises himself as a common soldier to mingle with his troops, giving him a chance to reflect on the burdens of kingship. In this soliloquy, Henry explores how power has transformed his life, making him a solitary and burdened figure:

"What infinite heart's ease must kings neglect,
That private men enjoy!
And what have kings that privates have not too,
Save ceremony, save general ceremony?" (Act IV, Scene 1, 239-242)

Here, Henry laments how "ceremony"—the symbol of power and kingship—has transformed him into a figure who is distant and isolated from common men. This internal conflict over power reflects Ovidian transformations, often marked by characters facing unexpected challenges or isolation as a result of their new forms. While Henry has embraced the throne's power, this transformation also separates him from the freedom he once knew as a prince.

6.4 The Political Transformation: From Conquest to Diplomacy

The transformation of power at*King Henry V* extends beyond personal change to include political and diplomatic shifts. By the play's end, Henry uses marriage to Princess Catherine of France as a means to consolidate his power and establish peace between England and France. This reflects another facet of metamorphosis in power, where the king transforms from conqueror to diplomat, employing marriage as a tool for political consolidation.

Act V, Scene 2: Wooing of Catherine

In Act V, Scene 2, Henry awkwardly courts Catherine, but his proposal is more than a personal gesture; it is a political strategy to secure his dominance over France. This shift in the nature of his power underscores the metamorphosis of his leadership:

"I know no ways to mince it in love, but directly to say, 'I love you': then, if you urge me further than to say, 'Do you in faith?' I wear out my suit. Give me your answer; i'faith, do: and so clap hands and a bargain: how say you, lady?" (Act V, Scene 2, 131-135)

This passage shows Henry in a new form of power, using diplomacy and marriage instead of war to achieve his goals. This change in the nature of his power reflects the Ovidian theme of transformation, where characters must adapt to new forms or means to achieve their objectives.

6.5 Summarizing: The Metamorphosis of Power at King Henry V

In *King Henry V*, Shakespeare explores the transformation of power on multiple levels, from Henry's personal metamorphosis from a rebellious prince to a determined king to the political transformation of England and France through war and marriage. Ovidian influence is evident in the way Henry assumes new identities and roles throughout the play, reflecting the dramatic changes that characters in *Metamorphoses* undergo.

Power in *King Henry V* is not static or fixed but is constantly transforming, adapting to circumstances and the needs of the moment. Shakespeare uses Henry's figure to illustrate how power can transform both individuals and nations, a theme that resonates deeply with the stories of change and metamorphosis that Ovid narrates in his epic work.

7. CONCLUSION AND FINAL REFLECTIONS

Throughout this essay, we have analyzed how Shakespeare reworks the themes of transformation present in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, applying them to his historical dramas and comedies. In each of the examined works—*King Richard II*, *The First Part of King Henry IV*, *The Second Part of King Henry IV*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *King Henry V*—the notion of metamorphosis is central, both in the personal and political realms, reflecting the profound intertextuality that Shakespeare establishes with Ovid's work.

In *King Richard II*, Richard's fall from absolute power to utter destitution reflects the cyclical and tragic nature of Ovidian metamorphoses. Richard is a king trapped in his own vanity, incapable of adapting to the changing realities of his kingdom, which condemns him to an inevitable transformation from sovereign to mere mortal. This decline, paralleled by Bolingbroke's rise, resonates with the power transformations in Ovid's stories, where heroes and gods undergo radical changes in form or status.

In *the first part of King Henry IV* and *the second part of King Henry IV*, we observe Hal's gradual metamorphosis as he leaves behind a life of excess to take the throne as Henry V. This transition from irresponsibility to kingship, a recurring theme in Ovid's tales of growth, is intertwined with the decline of figures such as Falstaff and Hotspur. While Hal adapts and flourishes, characters such as Hotspur, who fail to change, are doomed to tragedy. Falstaff, on the other hand, symbolizes a comedic resistance to transformation, ultimately marginalized for his inability to adapt to the new order of power.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Ovidian influence appears in a lighter, more comedic context, as Falstaff is repeatedly humiliated and "transformed" through various situations of ridicule. This plays toys with disguise and deception, causing social power to shift hands in unexpected ways, with the women of Windsor taking control and exposing the patriarchal weaknesses embodied by Falstaff. Here, metamorphosis serves as a powerful tool to explore mutable power dynamics in social relationships.

Finally, in *King Henry V*, Hal's transformation culminated in his consolidation as a strong and unifying king, leading his people into war and using marriage as a diplomatic strategy to establish peace. Shakespeare employs transformation as a metaphor for leadership, demonstrating how power can change individuals and nations. Through Henry's personal metamorphosis, he becomes a symbol of legitimate and transformative power, guiding his people toward glory.

In conclusion, the influence of Ovid's *metamorphoses* on these Shakespearean works not only enriches the themes of change and transformation but also allows Shakespeare to explore the nature of power, identity, and human vulnerability. As in Ovid, power in Shakespeare's works is unstable, mutable, and ultimately transient. The intertextuality between these two literary giants shows how classical myths continue to resonate and find new expressions in Elizabethan theater,

deepening our understanding of the human condition in the context of power and transformation. This essay has examined only a portion of the vast influence of Ovid on Shakespeare's work, focusing on a specific set of historical plays that, together with *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, form the narrative thread of the film *Chimes at Midnight*, directed and starring Orson Welles, with Sir John Falstaff as the common character in all the analyzed works. However, the dialog between Ovid and Shakespeare remains a fertile ground for future studies.

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