Reading Ovid in the Middle Ages

On 27 April 2016, the Department of Romance languages and literatures had the pleasure of welcoming Professor Frank Coulson (Ohio State University) for a guest conference on the Latin commentary tradition of Ovid.

By Laura EndrEss

For the past 25 years, Frank Coulson has devoted his research to medieval commentaries on the works of Ovid. Now Professor of Greek and Latin at the Ohio State University Classics Department, he also qualifies as a world expert of the so-called “Vulgate Commentary” of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. This daunting text (depicted in one of its manuscript witnesses above) was the topic of Coulson’s guest presentation, which was held within the framework of Prof. Richard Trachsler’s lecture *Ovide au Moyen Âge* at the University of Zurich. “Why the Vulgate Commentary?” – The following pages present a retrospect on the question.

Contextualizing the Vulgate Commentary

The works of Ovid were not unknown to the Middle Ages. In fact, the Classical Latin poet seems to have enjoyed such popularity during the High Medieval Period that the twelfth century has been labeled an *aetas ovidiana* (after Traube 1911). However, not only was Ovid read during this period, he was also fervently commented by medieval scholars, who enriched their manuscript copies of his texts with copious glosses. As Frank Coulson pointed out in his presentation, over 100 different commentaries of Ovidian works have been identified to date, transmitted in over 600 manuscripts, which today are scattered across libraries and archives throughout the world (see Coulson & Roy 2000, for an overview).

Within this rich tradition, the Vulgate may be considered “the most influential commentary”, as Coulson noted. Presumably written around 1260 in the French Orléanais region, the Vulgate has been handed down to us in some twenty French and Italian manuscripts of the *Metamorphoses* from the 13th and 14th centuries. Here, it consistently appears in the form of interlinear and marginal glosses that accompany Ovid’s poem (see Coulson 2011, 65-71, for more detail).

A glimpse into medieval schooling

The Vulgate Commentary transmits a vast amount of medieval scholarly knowledge. Its contents address
areas of knowledge ranging from the philological and grammatical to the literary and interpretative. Throughout his presentation, Coulson took his audience through a colorful tour of excerpts of the commentary, illustrating its multifarious nature. This textual journey began with examples reflecting the use of the commentary in medieval schooling. (Note that all citations and translations given throughout this article will be taken from Coulson’s presentation, unless indicated otherwise.)

The most basic elements of the Vulgate Commentary’s contents are found at the interlinear level. As customary in medieval glossing, the spaces between the lines of the commented text (in this case, the Metamorphoses) are dotted with grammatical elucidations (for instance, the term propter is noted to identify a word form as a ablative of cause), explicative paraphrases and alternative readings (characteristically preceded by the conjunction vel).

The marginal spaces of the manuscripts, in turn, have been filled with more lengthy and elaborate comments. These provide explanations of varied nature and provenance, which often seem to reflect, as Coulson puts it, the “voice” of the medieval teacher speaking to his pupils. Thus, the commentator offers analogies and mnemonic phrases in order to explain obscure concepts and to elucidate word meanings. To cite an example, the polysemy of the verb ardere (see Metamorphoses I, 258) is explained in the Vulgate Commentary by means of the following quote drawn from the grammatical poem Graecismus (XVI, 17-18):

Ardet mens, ardet clipeus, focus ardet et edes, Hec cupit, hic splendit, hic urit et uritur illa.

[Translation: “The mind burns, the shield burns, the fire burns and the temple burns, / The one desires, the one shines, the one burns and the other is consumed.”]

Such examples reflect the idea of shared authoritative knowledge transmitted in a scholarly context. Moreover, they emphasize the practical, pragmatic dimension of commentaries on Classical authors.

A font of mythographic information

Aside from its role in the medieval classroom, the Vulgate Commentary represents a key source of medieval mythography. As illustrated by Coulson, the commentator has drawn interpretations of Ovidian myths from a panoply of previous texts. These include late antique sources (such as Servius’ commentary on Virgil), earlier medieval commentaries (e.g. those of Arnulf of Orléans) and mythographic treatises (including the work of the Third Vatican Mythographer, which is cited verbatim in various instances).

Coulson noted, moreover, that the Vulgate Commentary displays affinities with the late 13th century Fabularius by Zurich mythographer Konrad von Mure. Coulson pointed to several verbal parallels between the two texts, suggesting that they may share a common source. For instance, a passage that elucidates the naming of the island Tenedos (see Vulgate on Met. I, 516) is similarly corrupted in both texts: both speak of the characters Tenes and Armenthes as being sons of Neptune, whereas in earlier readings (e.g. Servius on the Aeneid), Armenthes is presented as a female character, sister of Tenes. A more in-depth discussion of such examples is offered in the recent article by Coulson (2016).

In addition to integrating a wealth of earlier material into his text, the Vulgate commentator often did not, as Coulson observed, settle for single explanations. Rather, he compiled multiple readings taken from different sources in order to explain the Ovidian myths. His text thus offers a veritable florilegium of mythographic matter interwoven with materials taken from yet other sources, as we will see in the following.

The poetic vein of the Vulgate commentator

A further characteristic of the Vulgate Commentary is its author’s apparent “literary sensitivity”, to quote Coulson. Thus, the commentator appears to display an interest in stylistic aspects of Ovid’s poems, and his remarks often provide cross references between sections of the text that share structural and thematic parallels. He furthermore refers to passages from other literary sources in order to illustrate similarities of a poetic nature. Coulson listed an impressive
quantity of authors in this context, ranging from Classical Latinity (Virgil, Lucan, Statius, etc.) to the Late Latin Period (including Boethius and Isidore of Sevilla) all the way to the High Middle Ages (with figures such as Walter of Châtillon and Bernard Silvester).

The Vulgate commentator’s references to writers of the twelfth century is particularly interesting, as they provide metalinguistic evidence of Ovid’s influence on poetic works of the aetas ovidiana. As Coulson pointed out, Walter of Châtillon’s 12th century Alexandreis is repeatedly cited in the commentary.

To give but one example, the commentator illustrates a nuanced parallel between Ovid on the deterioration of man in the mythological Silver Age (on Met. I, 128) and Walter on moral decline (see Alexandreis IV, 195-197):

Memoriter tenens verba Ovidii magister,
Galterus similia hiis dixit:
Pululat humanum genus et polluta propago. [...]  
[Translation: “Recalling the phrasing of Ovid, master Walter speaks similarly, ‘A polluted race and offspring springs forth’ [...]”]

This and many other similar instances illustrate how the Vulgate commentator and his contemporaries made use of subtle intertextual cues and references, reworking these within their own compositions.

The Vulgate and the vernacular

The Vulgate commentator has undoubtedly cited a great many previous texts. Was he in turn used by later writers as an authoritative source? Coulson reminds that the claim has been made with regard to Dante, who may have read Ovid through the prism of this commentary. He further suggests that the Ovide Moralisé may draw from the Vulgate Commentary for a number of its allegorical interpretations.

The fact that the Vulgate remains largely unedited seems to have deterred scholars from exploring the questions at hand. Nevertheless, Coulson emphasizes that present-day research is shedding new light on the possible influence of this commentary on the Ovide Moralisé. The renowned Classics professor has himself transcribed the interpretations of an allegorical nature found in the Vulgate and is currently in collaboration with scholars of the research group Ovide en Français (including Richard Trachsler in Zurich), who are studying the textual tradition and preparing a new edition of the Ovide Moralisé.

Coulson observed that, indeed, the two texts share a number of textually similar passages. He illustrated this by way of a further excerpt from the Vulgate, which elaborates on the metamorphoses of the Heliades, mourning for their brother Phaeton, into poplar trees and their tears into amber. The Vulgate commentator provides (on Met. II, 240) an analogy from the natural world for this metamorphosis, describing trees that grow along the river Eridanus:

Arbores [...] de quorum ramis quedam gummi defluunt in Eridanum que frigiditate aque durescunt in lapidem electri

[Translation (slightly adapted): “Trees [...], from the branches of which a gum flows into the Eridanus and hardens into amber due to the coldness of the water”]

In the Ovide Moralisé (ed. De Boer 1915-1938, II, 1114-16), one similarly reads of the “tears” cried by the trees:

Ces lermes, quant elle endurcissent,
Deviennent gomme: “electre” a non,
Si flote par Eridanon [...]

Parallels of this type provide a promising basis for further source studies, and may ultimately allow researchers to identify relationships between individual manuscripts of the texts in question.

Why the Vulgate Commentary?

Returning to the title question of Frank Coulson’s presentation: Why is it important for scholars, both of Classical and of Romance philology, to study the Vulgate Commentary? Coulson’s presentation left no doubt that the reasons are manifold, like the commentary itself: The Vulgate offers a conglomerate of scholarly, mythographic and literary materials, drawing upon a vast number of sources. In establishing parallels between its source texts, it forms an intricate network of textual cross references around the Metamorphoses – references, which were likely taken up by later authors who rewrote and refashioned the Ovidian mythological matter.
In some respects, the Vulgate may give the impression of being a mythographic “work in progress”. In the discussion following his talk, Coulson emphasized, however, that this commentary, despite its patchwork nature, presents surprisingly little variation within its manuscript tradition. It is, according to the expert, indeed possible to identify manuscripts containing the Vulgate Commentary as such, among the hundreds of glossed witnesses of Ovid’s Latin poems.

This idea of textual stability, presumably tied to the authoritative status of the Vulgate, establishes this commentary as an important reference point for research into Ovid in the Middle Ages. The likelihood that the Vulgate acted moreover as a source text for vernacular authors further highlights this aspect. One should consider that medieval writers were more likely to have worked with a small number of manuscripts containing compilations of heterogeneous information, rather than having consulted each cited authority separately.

In this same line of thought, one must note, however, that the Vulgate Commentary was not necessarily the direct source of a text such as the Ovide Moralisé. The author of the latter was perhaps more likely working on the basis of an “Extended Vulgate Commentary”. As it is, there is only one way to pursue this question, and that is to venture into the folios of yet unexplored Ovid commentaries.

Laura Endress is a doctoral student at the University of Zurich, under the supervision of Prof. Richard Trachsler. She is working on a dissertation about Hercules in medieval mythography and historiography, including a partial edition of the Middle French Ovide Moralisé.

**Bibliography**


