

Stephen M. WHEELER
Who Speaks in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*?

Over the past decade, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* has moved toward the center of Latin literary studies. One of the strengths of recent criticism has been a *pars pro toto* approach to the poem, which has enabled a new generation to read selected passages of the text closely and to pose new questions about poetics, politics, narratology, and gender. One of the shortcomings of this method of reading, however, is that results of local investigation are often isolated and inapplicable to a global interpretation of the poem. The purpose of this paper is to describe an obvious but unpublicized global feature of the *Metamorphoses* and to explore its ramifications for our understanding of the poem. The paper begins with a simple question. Who speaks in the *Metamorphoses*? Analysis of the distribution of discourse between the primary narrator and characters reveals a set of striking patterns in the poem. The conclusions to be drawn from this data are: (a) the primary narrator is prominent at the beginning of the poem and each pentad; (b) as the poem continues, he gradually recedes into the background and allows his characters to narrate in his place.

What are the implications of the shifting distribution of narrative discourse in the *Metamorphoses*? First it may prompt us to reexamine the common claim that the poet's voice and personality dominates, informs, and unifies the whole of the *Metamorphoses*. The importance of the Ovidian narrator, especially in the early books and the beginning of the second and third pentads, is indisputable. But the assumption that the narrator Ovid is present everywhere guiding the reader through the vast confusion of the world should be qualified. By speaking less and less in his own voice, Ovid ironically fulfills Aristotle's prescription that the epic poet should be a *mimetes* (cf. *Poetics* 1460a7-11). However, the primary narrator's impersonations do not always foster credible dramatic realism, but lead to questions about narrative authority and reliability. This paper investigates what types of characters become narrators. Does the gender of an internal narrator make a difference? Why does the primary narrator yield the stage to his characters in the final books? How do the primary narrator's impersonations affect "our" reception of the narrative? I will present some preliminary answers to these questions and offer suggestions for further research and discussion about narratorial voices in the *Metamorphoses*.