THE SNAKE SHEDS ITS SKIN: PENTHEUS (RE)IMAGINES THEBES

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WHAT ROUGH BEAST . . .

THE PENTHEUS-BACCHUS EPISODE in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* has not received much scholarly attention of late. A survey of the last thirty years (1967–97) of *L'Année Philologique* reveals only three articles that address the episode more than tangentially.[1] Many books on the *Metamorphoses* do not discuss the story at all, or confine themselves to a sentence or two of observation.[2] Franz Bömer's and W. S. Anderson's commentaries make conscientious and often imaginative efforts to give the story its due, but the surrounding silence is still puzzling.[3]

Perhaps the story's less-than-beguiling protagonist, the blustering martinet Pentheus, repels interest. Anderson articulates representative distaste for Pentheus when he characterizes him as a petty tyrant.[4] Nonetheless, his keen ear for Ovidian borrowings detects the distorted reflection of the *Aeneid* and its exemplars of governance in the story Ovid organizes around the Theban king.[5]

1. A. W. James 1975; P. James 1991–93; Feldherr 1997. Even among these, A. W. James' comparative study confines itself to comparing only the middle episode of the Pentheus-Bacchus story—Acoetes' tale of the Tyrrhenian sailors—with other versions of the myth.

2. Notable exceptions are Lafaye 1904, 144–46; Otis 1970, 139–41 and 371–72; Glenn 1986, 38–39; Spencer 1997, 41–63; Hardie 2002, 167–70.

3. Bömer 1969–86, 570–87; Anderson 1997, 388–409. Anderson 1993 also addresses the Pentheus-Bacchus episode briefly (114–17), but for the purposes of this essay I have generally preferred the more detailed reflections on the story contained in his 1997 commentary.

4. Anderson 1993 and 1997. Among the few authors who engage the Pentheus episode and the even fewer who record their opinions of the Theban king, nearly all disparage him. Edgar Glenn also finds Pentheus repellent ("[Pentheus] comes to seem insensitive, violent, inflexible and obtuse, and, hence, unlikable"—Glenn 1986, 38), as does A. A. R. Henderson, who summarizes the plot as "the bullying blasphemer gets his just deserts" and characterizes the king as "choleric and prejudiced" (Henderson 1981, 9, 112). Stephen Wheeler describes the king as "impious" and dryly notes his cruel orders to torture and kill Acoetes (Wheeler 1999, 182). Brooks Otis deplores Pentheus, but considers the god's punishment of the king "excessive" (Otis 1970, 140–41). Paula James offers an unusually sympathetic reading of Pentheus, seeing his obduracy and irascability as determination, albeit a determination misapplied (James 1991–93, 88, 92). Yet even she concludes that "the *ira* which gave him his initial strength threatened to turn him into a destructive force with no redeeming quality of joyous redemption. . . . he fulfills his hereditary potential as *contemptor superum*" (James 1991–93, 92). I have chosen to focus on Anderson's analyses of the Pentheus-Bacchus episode because they represent the fullest, most thoughtful, and most articulate summations of the case against Pentheus. What is maddening and repugnant about Pentheus is (I shall argue) the key to his significance in Ovid.

5. Spencer (1997, 8–9, 42–44) elaborates on the theme of Ovid's Theban cycle's replying to Vergil's *Aeneid,* but he makes few points not already observed by Anderson. None of these concerns the Pentheus-Bacchus episode's relation to the *Aeneid*.

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Both narratives are grounded in exile: Pentheus rules over a city established because its founder, Cadmus, and his followers, like Aeneas and his followers, were forced from their native land.[6] Cadmus' father, Agenor, sent him on an impossible errand: he ordered him to find his sister Europa after Zeus had abducted her, or to remain in exile if unsuccessful. When Cadmus failed in matching wits with Zeus, Apollo told him to follow a numinous heifer and found a city wherever she rested. As Philip Hardie points out,[7] this oracular command to found a city where an animal reclines mirrors the seer Helenus' prophecy in *Aeneid* 3 (388–93): through Helenus, Apollo informs Aeneas that he will found Alba Longa where he finds a newly farrowed white sow. The river god Tiber repeats and expands the same prophecy regarding Rome's precursor through a dream-revelation (*Aen*. 8.42–48). These resemblances between Vergilian Rome and Ovidian Thebes notwithstanding, Anderson considers Cadmus' descendant Pentheus to be "a Mezentius, not an Aeneas" who is "psychologically and morally warped"[8]—and not without cause. Anderson notes that Ovid avoids the tragic pathos embodied in Euripides' *Bacchae,* where the cruel god lures the arrogant but pitiably young king to his death.[9] Ovid's Pentheus is simply arrogant.

Indeed, Ovid veers from the tragic to the ridiculous when he has Pentheus attempt to turn his Thebans from worshipping Bacchus with an absurd harangue. Its absurdity lies in exhorting his frenzied subjects to forsake the new god in favor of another role model—the monstrous serpent that Thebes' founder, Cadmus, slew after it had killed several of his men and nearly prevented the city's founding (*Met*. 3.543–47):

> este, precor, memores, qua sitis stirpe creati,
> illiusque animos, qui multos perdidit unus,
> sumite serpentis! pro fontibus ille lacuque
> interiit: at vos pro fama vincite vestra!
> ille dedit leto fortes.
>
> I pray you, be mindful of the stock from which you were created! Take on the courage of that serpent, who, being one, destroyed many! He died for his springs and his pool; you, conquer for the sake of your reputation! He gave strong men over to death.

Pentheus' speech transforms the complex problematic of identity woven through Euripides' play[10] into the chief ideologemes of Augustan propaganda:

6. Anderson 1997, 392.

7. Hardie 1990, 226.

8. Anderson 1997, 392, 389.

9. Cf. William Arrowsmith's observations that preface his own translation of the play: "Yet as [Pentheus] makes his entrance, breathing fury against the Maenads, I think we are meant to be struck by his extreme youth. Just how old he is, Euripides does not tell us; but since he is presented as still a beardless boy at the time of his death (see ll. 1185ff.), he cannot very well be much more than sixteen or seventeen. And this youth seems to me dramatically important, helping to qualify Pentheus' prurient sexual imagination (for the voyeurism which in a grown man would be overtly pathological is at most an obsessive and morbid curiosity in a boy) and later serving to enlist our sympathies sharply on the side of the boy-victim of a ruthless god" (Arrowsmith 1959, 147).

10. From the confrontation between Dionysus and Pentheus, *Bacchae* spins questions that fundamentally organize the play, such as, who (between the two enemy-cousins) is the "foreigner" (as Pentheus would characterize the Asiatic god whose first fiery "birth" was nonetheless from a Theban mother in Thebes), who the native son? When the bullheaded Dionysus impersonates one of his mortal followers in order to

manliness and martiality against effeminacy and demonism. But by what logic does he place the serpent who nearly destroyed Thebes' inception on the side of the angels?

Pentheus' speech generally repels those scholars who attend to it specifically.[11] Yet only Anderson and Andrew Feldherr articulate the unease the speech inspires as a specific function of its distorted relation to Rome. Feldherr, placing the speech in the context of historicizing Augustan rhetoric represented in Livy and Vergil, sees Pentheus as strangely mirroring both the exhortations of Livy's Roman generals to their troops to have contempt for their enemy's effeminacy, and the objurgations of the *Aeneid*'s Italians, who regularly take to task the Trojans—their future fellow Romans—for *their* effeminacy and lack of martiality.[12]

However, Feldherr's analysis does not engage as an oddity the weirdest feature of Pentheus' speech, the king's rehabilitation of the monstrous serpent. Rather, Feldherr glosses the snake as Pentheus' unwitting use of an oblique emblem of his future suffering, insofar as the snake's fate conforms to a general pattern of the *Metamorphoses*: victors become victims. His argument, though subtle and sharply observed, nonetheless falls into a pattern in *Metamorphoses* studies of "explaining away" the epic's most jarring features, including this embarrassing serpent icon.[13] The sheer *bizarrerie* of Pentheus' speech is (I shall argue) essential to its significance. For this reason, Anderson's pungent reaction to the speech usefully compels us to focus on its "shock value." He assimilates Pentheus' rehabilitation of the snake to a pattern of patriotic distortions the king visits upon Theban history. Recreating the monstrous serpent Cadmus slew as the Theban *beau ideal* is (for Anderson) still more evidence of the king's queer jingoism:

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beguile Pentheus, who is beast, who is god, and who is human? When the aggressively masculine Pentheus, mesmerized by the god, consents to dress in women's clothing in order to observe the Bacchants undetected, what do concepts such as "male" and "female" really mean? For more on the organizing ambiguities of *Bacchae,* see Segal 1997.

11. For example, Pentheus' wild assertion that he would rather see the city destroyed by war than submit to the god strikes Glenn as evidence that "Pentheus and Bacchus, or Liber, manifest the same aspect of the human psyche, its dark, bloody and irrational traits" (Glenn 1986, 38). Paula James concurs, seeing Pentheus' speech as an invocation of the serpent's spirit that manifests itself in the king's "lashing out blindly at all opponents and thrusting aside all obstacles in his rage" (James 1991–93, 87). Feldherr (1997, 50) notes that Pentheus ham-handedly manages to exhort his Thebans to mutually contradictory and equally bloody goals: the aged colonists who arrived as exiles are to defend their new land, while the younger natives must emulate their ophidian ancestor's slaying of foreign invaders. Which is the enemy in this paradigm, the Foreign or the Native?

12. Feldherr 1997, 44–46.

13. Kenneth Knoespel regards Pentheus' exhortation to his people to be more like the dragon that threatened their founder to be evidence that "a book that begins with coherence unravels into incoherence" (Knoespel 1985, 20). Richard Spencer considers the speech "marvelously shocking irony" that Ovid uses to ridicule Pentheus and to emphasize the dissimilarity between Pentheus and his grandfather, Cadmus (Spencer 1997, 48). Bömer takes no explicit exception to Pentheus' rehabilitating the serpent as a model of patriotism, but considers the parallels the Theban king draws between the serpent's behavior and the behavior he wishes from his subjects "eigenartig frostigen und auch gewaltsamen" (Bömer 1969–86, 580). Paula James takes partial and notable exception to the *communis opinio* on Pentheus' use of the serpent in his speech (James 1991–93). She sees Pentheus' redefinition of the snake as justified by the Theban king's groping for a role model of infuriated strength (James 1991–93, 86–91). Yet she never explains why the wrath is so important, or why the image of Cadmus' calmer, triumphant strength would not better serve his grandson (the serpent ultimately lost to Cadmus, after all).

> By turning the snake into the Founding Father of Thebes and urging the populace to be mindful of its heritage, Pentheus patently abuses Augustan rhetoric. It is as if a Roman orator should hail as a foundation-symbol the wolf that raised Romulus and Remus.[14]

Yet to this one might reply: precisely. As Hardie points out, what Anderson posits as the *reductio ad absurdum* of nationalist rhetoric is in fact elaborately realized in the *Aeneid:*

> Virgil's scenes of Roman history on the Shield of Aeneas open with Romulus and Remus and their "mother," the she-wolf, also an animal of Mars (8.630–34): what is it that they suck in with their mother's milk? This origin is not put away with childish things: at *Aeneid* 1.275 Romulus makes his entry into the poem in the disguise of the wolf, clad in his nurse's hide.[15]

On the Shield, the she-wolf not only demonstrates maternal tenderness, she measures the infants' native courage: they suck their foster mother's dugs "fearlessly" ("impavidos," 8.633); Romulus appears wearing her hide in Jupiter's first prophecy of the Romans' future greatness. In both instances, Ovid's chief predecessor in Latin epic deploys the wolf in contexts of proud reflection on Roman origins.[16] Orators may have scrupled to use the *lupa* as a sign of Rome's origins, but the *Aeneid*'s poet did not.[17]

By adducing the *Aeneid,* I do not mean to argue that Anderson's outrage is misguided—quite the opposite. Anderson is right to draw a difference: Vergil evokes *amor patriae* with the wolf, while Ovid, making the monster snake into a patriotic icon, stretches Pentheus' speech into satire. The king cites as a proud icon of Thebanness the beast that destroyed the first Thebans rather than fostering them, while the she-wolf nurtured Rome's founder. Yet it remains true that Pentheus' rehabilitation of the serpent is *both* scandalous *and* oddly in conformity with the Roman use of myth; the point of the snake-as-patriotic-symbol lies precisely in this tense duality.

Satire's efficacy lies in presenting to us a *verkehrte Welt* that, in its absurdity, reflects back to readers what is already "topsy-turvy" in the "normal" world they inhabit. Ovid's Pollyanna Pentheus merely foregrounds what is already present in the Augustan construction of the Roman national myth,

14. Anderson 1997, 392–93.

15. Hardie 1990, 229–30.

16. Not that Vergil was likely to be blind to the irreducible ambiguity of such a symbol.

17. Nor, for that matter, did Propertius: he hails the she-wolf as the nurse of Rome's walls ("optima nutricum nostris lupa Martia rebus, / qualia creverunt moenia lacte tuo!," Prop. 4.1.55–56). Yet the *Aeneid* holds pride of place for the *Metamorphoses,* as the only Augustan epic prior to Ovid's and as the definitive dramatization of the Augustan view of Roman history (albeit a view that Vergil persistently interrogates and problematizes). O. S. Due states the case most clearly: "No model, however, was more important to Ovid and his readers than Vergil, especially the *Aeneid.* As a matter of fact, Vergil is ubiquitous in the *Metamorphoses*. It seems impossible that he should not be. But the *Aeneid* was a unique achievement which could by no means be repeated. . . . The *Metamorphoses* recalls the *Aeneid* almost everywhere, but the Vergilian element seems always to be variated, surrounded by a different context, and given a new meaning so that the result is extremely Ovidian" (Due 1974, 36, 37). In support of these statements, Due cites Rosa Lamacchia, who writes, "L'imitazione di Vergilio, che si estende com'è noto al di là della sezione 'Virgiliana' del poema, fino a investire l'intera opera di Ovidio, assume tuttavia nelle *Metamorfosi* un carattere e un significato tutto particolare: essa risponde ad un intento programmatico da parte del poeta, ed è intesa a garantire dal punto di vista formale e tradizionale l'epicità stessa dell'opera" (Lamacchia 1969, 18). Vergil had defined what "epic" meant to the Augustans, Propertius had not; for that reason, I focus my attention on the *Aeneid*'s use of the wolf symbol.

to which Vergil's *Aeneid* was so crucial. As Hardie has valuably shown, the *Aeneid* sets the terms for a Latin epic tradition that regularly engages the slippery duplicity of violence.[18] Hardie reads the *Aeneid* and its successors through the lens of René Girard's idea of "sacrificial crisis," whereby a community's agreement to designate and sacrifice a victim circumscribes the breakdown of social order and the concomitant threat of rampant social violence. Ostensibly "good violence" combats "bad violence." But as Hardie points out, citing Girard's *Violence and the Sacred,* this "solution" is specious:[19]

> For Girard, the accepted practices of sacrifice, "beneficial violence," are a mask for the harmful violence that without sacrifice would rage uncontrolled. The killing of Turnus is the act on which the Roman cultural order is founded; Virgil narrates a senseless vengeance-killing which is masked, in the words of the killer, as a sacrifice, but whose true nature many readers experience as quite other.[20]

"Bad violence" and "good violence"—with which we may align the snake's carnage, respectively before, and after, its Penthean reconstruction—are the obverse and reverse of the same coin.

Girard's insight, as Hardie points out, is invaluable. However, the precise mechanism that converts rage into (apparent) redemption remains undertheorized in the Girardian paradigm. How exactly does Pentheus try to persuade his ensorcelled Thebans that Bacchus and his Bacchants are the enemy, ripe candidates for butchery to match the ancient serpent's carnage? Through impassioned rhetoric—through speech. Yet Girard's theory of "sacrificial crisis" takes no specific account of the role of language in converting bloody outrage to propriety. Such a theory can certainly shine light upon the operation of violence in epic, but cannot be adequate to a sophisticated linguistic artifact such as the *Metamorphoses*. Moreover, language is the material out of which intersubjectivity, and hence sociality, is necessarily constituted. In his parody of Roman patriotic oratory, Pentheus invokes an ideology of identity that only exists in and through the linguistic categories that make it possible.

Nevertheless, we can build upon Girard's model by retaining its roots in Hegel's notion of sublation (*Aufhebung*)—negation that retains the essential principles of the cancelled term in the negation—and articulating the role of language in this process.[21] Girard's contemporary, the psychoanalyst Jacques

18. Hardie 1993.

19. Girard 1972. As Carl Rubino points out, the theories articulated in *La violence et le sacré* were not new to Girard's work, only most fully elaborated there. They had been building in Girard's work for years, beginning with Girard 1961, and stretching through Girard 1963, 1968, and 1970 (Rubino 1972, p. 987, n. 4).

20. Hardie 1993, 21.

21. Rubino offers a particularly lucid sketch of the debt Girard's thought on violence owes to Hegel (Rubino 1972, 986–88)—most particularly to Hegel's analysis of the development of self-consciousness. Hegel plots a dialectic wherein each individual self-consciousness seeks to negate any rival claim to self-consciousness, sparking a life-and-death struggle to annihilate the other in order to assert the self. Similarly, Girard draws a theory of "mimetic rivalry" from his reading of the major characters of Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, and Proust (as articulated in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*). He sees the desire animating these characters as imitative rather than spontaneous or need-based, copied from another's

Lacan, elaborated his work around just this nexus of ideas. Like Girard, Lacan strove to account for both culture and cultural crisis, and did so from a polymath's vantage. He drew upon insights from philosophy, linguistics, literature, and even mathematics, in order to expand the field of psychoanalysis. In the discussion that follows, I shall focus particularly on Lacan's account of ideology as a linguistic function—one that both maps troublesome social reality and helps forge collective conscience. My explication also draws upon the work of Lacan's interpreter, Slavoj Žižek, who has clearly articulated the societal and cultural implications of Lacan's theories.

The satiric exaggeration of Pentheus' speech lays bare the fact that ideology is a function of language. Language grants us a representation of our selfhood, an "I"—and yet the subject who speaks is never exactly coincident with the subject of the speech. The person who says "I laughed" may or may not be laughing at the moment, and thus obviously differs from the subject, the "I," of the sentence. We are both constructed in and alienated by our relation to language.[22] Lacan points to this gap between speaker and subject of the speech as one axis of the split around which human subjectivity is organized, a gap that inspires the desire for "wholeness" and the endless, futile pursuit thereof. Hence the power of ideology, which promises to heal the subject's internal scission and render him whole, insofar as he identifies with some master signifier that guarantees his place in the interconnected symbols and meanings generated by his culture's institutions. He reconciles or opposes himself to what constitutes, for example, a "brave man," a "good warrior," a "true Theban," and the like. The divided psychoanalytic subject can thus function as a coherent whole (as "I"), but only via ideological commitments that make the various parts of being (anatomy, intellect, desire, cultural ideals) cohere in an apparently natural fashion. The signifiers that organize these commitments Lacan calls "quilting points" (*points de capiton*).[23]

The idea of the quilting point can illuminate Pentheus' seemingly backward method of rewriting "ideal Thebanness." Paradoxically, he focuses on the chief scandal of Theban history: this vicious, instinctively territorial, lethal serpent is literally the forefather of the Thebans. At Athena's instruction,

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longing for an object. Such triangulation necessarily draws both desiring subjects into competition for the fascinating object. In *La violence et le sacré,* Girard expands that model of longing based on rivalry into a general account of social violence.

Eugene Webb notices Girard's obligation not only to Hegel, but even more particularly to Alexandre Kojève's interpretation of Hegel. In a personal conversation, Girard acknowledged to Webb that he was studying Kojève's *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* while articulating the idea of "mimetic rivalry" in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel.* Curiously, in the same conversation Girard denied that either Hegel or Kojève contributed to his theory that sacrifice—the elimination of a victim upon whom the whole community can agree—resolves violence, claiming that both Hegel and Kojève remain bound to the idea of a perpetual dialectic of violence (Webb 1993, p. 116 with n. 14). While that may be true, it is impossible to miss the fact that Girard's model of "bad violence" converted to "good violence" reproduces the logical structure of sublation, insofar as sacrifice combats destruction with destruction.

22. Cf. Lacan 1973, 127–30 = (trans.) 1981, 138–42, where Lacan illustrates this concept by means of the Liar's Paradox ("I am lying").

23. Lacan 1966, 793–827 = (trans.) 1977, 292–325; see also Žižek's lucid discussion specifically of the subject's political "quilting" (Žižek 1989, 87–129).

Cadmus had sown the dead serpent's teeth to produce the Spartoi, who immediately fell to killing one another until but a few were left alive. These warrior-fratricides were the first autochthonous Thebans; their strife marks the very origins of Thebes with the obscene antithesis to citizenship and to harmonious polity. The covetous territoriality and internecine strife that the serpent and the serpent-born embody eventually surfaces again between Eteocles and Polyneices; then it destroys the last mythic Theban dynasty, and soon Thebes itself.[24]

. . . ITS HOUR COME ROUND AT LAST . . .

Nonetheless, a few generations before Oedipus' sons, Pentheus succeeds in sloughing the symbolic burden of Thebes' history via an ideological sleight of hand: he does not deny Thebes' past, but completely transvalues its chief terms. Everything that ought to be a source of shame he transforms into a model for emulation: the one (the serpent) saved at the expense of many (Cadmus' followers),[25] and a multitude sacrificed who were fellow citizens, if (as Pentheus reasons) the serpent is the proto-Theban par excellence;[26] the bestial origin of the Thebans, and their internecine propensities; the supernatural powers that haunt their environs and make Thebes a noisome place. He makes the serpent the interpretive anchor of that revaluation. The ease with which Pentheus miraculously reverses the discursive field by adducing the monster points to the supremely convertible quilting point.

The usefulness of the quilting point's conceptualization lies in its having no intrinsic, stable value, and being therefore infinitely adaptable. It simply grants momentary coherence and stability to the other signifiers floating in the discursive field by "quilting" them into an intelligible unit—rather as punctuation marks can organize otherwise random words into comprehensible sentences.[27] The monster snake's facile conversion from bête noire to paragon points to its status as just such an "empty," but structurally crucial, element.

Strictly speaking, the serpent-as-quilting-point does not differ essentially in this respect from any other signifier: every signifier is empty of content before construed in relation to its context. Meaning is numinous and immanent in the concatenation of signifiers grasped as a whole.[28] Yet there exist

24. The mythic history of Thebes ends with her sack by the Epigonoi, the sons of the seven heroes who enlisted in Polyneices' cause to retake the city from his brother Eteocles. The "After-born" set out to finish what their fathers left incomplete at their deaths (Hom. *Il.* 4.405–10). Polyneices' and Eteocles' quarrel thus indirectly inspires this group's destruction of Thebes.

25. Spencer (1997, 48) notes the contrast between the serpent as one, his victims as many, but does not see this violence as a type of civil war.

26. "Many sacrificed for one" is, of course, the opposite of the *Aeneid*'s controlling formula of heroism, which emphasizes saving the collectivity even at the expense of the individual. See Quint 1993, 83–96.

27. For more on the concept of the quilting point, see Janan 1994, 25–26, with references.

28. Lacan arrives at this model of language by taking Ferdinand de Saussure at his word. Saussure argued that language was a purely differential system: every signifier gained its meaning only in relation to all other signifiers in the system (see, e.g., Saussure 1959, 120). Rigorously applied, that thesis contradicts Saussure's assertion that the relation between signifier and signified resembles that between two sides of a piece of paper—synchronically rigid and stable, though it may gradually change diachronically (Saussure

in discourse more explicitly symptomatic signifiers that draw attention to the arbitrariness of their own operation. For example, Tacitus famously "deconstructs" the way Augustus' ruthless and deadly pursuit of his enemies, and expropriation of their properties, is glossed as the supreme Roman virtue, *pietas*.[29] The *princeps*-to-be "avenged" his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, by hunting down Caesar's assassins[30]—and in the process conveniently eliminated many of his own potential rivals (*Ann.* 1.9–10).[31]

Pentheus' "magical inversion" similarly ameliorates the scattered and disorganized memories that chronicle the city's origin in bloodshed and shame. Without introducing any new evidence, without contradicting a single fact, he quilts them into a narrative that reconfigures the serpent. Now the beast is not only *not* anathema, but is in fact the very icon of Theban identity at its best. Most surprising of all, Pentheus fashions this national anthem out of the very data that spelled the rout of Theban pride before his intervention. In all this (as noted at the beginning of this essay) he merely retraces the process by which the wolf, her nursling fratricide Romulus, and his victim Remus become the icons of Roman identity and dignity.[32]

1959, 113). Lacan illustrates the way in which meaning cannot be assigned to individual signifiers, but only to the semantic unit as a whole, by analyzing a line from Victor Hugo's *"Booz endormi"*: "His sheaf was neither miserly nor spiteful" ("Sa gerbe n'était pas avare ni haineuse"). The word "sheaf" is a metaphor for "Boaz," yet bears no logical relation to "Boaz," no Aristotelian relation of similarity that legitimates the substitution. Only the line taken in its totality allows the substitution to work, making "sheaf" (as grammatical subject) produce "Boaz" (as conceptual subject). See Lacan 1966, 506–9 = (trans.) 1977, 156–58.

29. Tacitus records this as a division of opinion among the *prudentes* on Octavian's pursuit of his adoptive father's assassins. The meliorists' judgment is that "pietate erga parentem et necessitudine rei publicae, in qua nullus tunc legibus locus, ad arma civilia actum, quae neque parari possent neque haberi per bonas artis; multa Antonio, dum interfectores patris ulcisceretur, multa Lepido concessisse" ("filial duty and the needs of the Republic, which at that time had no room for law, had driven him to civil war—and that can be neither begun nor sustained by ethical means; for the sake of avenging himself upon his father's murderers, he had tolerated much in Antonius, much in Lepidus," *Ann.* 1.9). By others "dicebatur contra: pietatem erga parentem et tempora rei publicae obtentui sumpta" ("the opposite view was articulated—that filial duty and the exigencies of the Republic had been used as mere pretexts," *Ann.* 1.10). Vengeance is, in this view, an excuse to consolidate Octavian's power.

30. It appears from Cicero's letters that Octavian swore publicly on at least one occasion to take revenge for Caesar as if it were filial duty. Cicero reports the following words from Octavian's November 44 B.C.E. speech: "iurat, ita ibi parentis [sc. Caesaris] honores consequi liceat, et simul dextram intendit ad statuam" ("He swears by his hopes of attaining to his father's honors, and at the same time stretches his hand toward the statue," *Att.* 16.15.3). As M. P. Charlesworth remarks, "the obvious protasis to the *ita* clause is some such phrase as e.g. 'ut eius mortem ulciscar' " (*CAH*[1] 10:7, n. 4). Among the other, older Augustan poets, Horace—with less obvious irony than Ovid—adopts this view of Octavian, and in *Odes* 1.2.44 portrays the *princeps* as "Caesar's avenger" ("ultor Caesaris").

31. See David Quint's illuminating discussion of the double perspective contained in *Ann.* 1.9–10 (Quint 1993, 80–81).

32. It may be alleged against this reading that Pentheus' oration does not, in fact, "work" at all: none of his subjects is persuaded to abandon the worship of Bacchus, and even those closest to him—his grandfather Cadmus, his uncle Athamas, his familiars—all try to dissuade him from his opposition to Bacchus (3.564–65). Whether the deference of the Thebans and the other Cadmeioi to Bacchus is a matter of free choice is unclear, though: in Book 4, we see the inhabitants of Orchomenos bullied into participation in Bacchic rites by the priests, who threaten godly wrath visited upon any abstainers—as indeed happens to the resolutely skeptical Minyeides (4.4–11, 389–415). There is no reason to believe that the Thebans need any less to fear divine wrath; quite the contrary, given the city's history.

All this notwithstanding, my argument does not depend upon the persuasiveness of Pentheus' speech; rather, it turns upon the way Pentheus' oration mirrors—albeit in absurdly exaggerated fashion—the rhetoric of Roman national identity and patriotism, as dramatized (and ironized) in the *Aeneid,* for example.

But Pentheus' "magical inversion" bears on more than Theban history and identity. Pentheus' speech sheds light on the dangerously plastic borderline between the Vergilian princes and leaders against whom Anderson quite naturally measures him. It illuminates the line between an Aeneas and a Mezentius—which is to say, between just and unjust rule—and discloses the different dimensions of the Law[33] that measures both. In Pentheus' speech, the serpent's slaughter of Cadmus' men becomes the paradigm for what is *dulce et decorum:* emulating his territoriality preserves what Pentheus calls the "honor of the fatherland" ("patrium decus," 3.548). Feral violence furnishes the paradigm for Law and the model for Pentheus' iron enforcement of "proper Thebanness." For example, once Pentheus' men have captured Bacchus' defenseless follower Acoetes, the king does not hesitate to "protect" Thebes by threatening his captive with torture and death. Before he has even heard what Acoetes has to say in his own defense, Pentheus offers him torture with iron and fire (3.692–98). These deadly punishments promise to be fully as gruesome as those Cadmus' men suffered when the serpent butchered and suffocated and poisoned them (3.579–80). I mentioned above how Pentheus' transvaluation of the Theban past exalts the murderous dragon as the paragon of the Theban citizen, and as the embodiment of the masculinist, martial values he believes constitute ideal Thebanness. But Pentheus himself adopts the serpent's sanguinary habits in his brutish summary judgment of Acoetes: he thereby also miraculously converts Crime into Law, by converting murder into "capital punishment."[34]

Pentheus' speech and his draconianism reveal Law's origin in Crime: Law constitutes the ultimate Crime insofar as its foundation is a form of radical violence. The Law demands our obedience regardless of our subjective appreciation of its rationality, morality, or utility.[35] Certainly, the idea of Law as radical violence paradigmatically controls Ovid's Theban narrative. For Cadmus' "crime" of killing the monstrous serpent, thereby defending himself and avenging his men, some unspecified divine power changes Cadmus and his wife Harmonia into snakes (4.563–603). For accidentally having stumbled upon her bath, Diana transforms Actaeon into a stag to be killed by his own hounds (3.138–252). For harboring his motherless infant nephew, Bacchus, Juno drives Athamas to murder his younger son, while his wife hurls herself and his elder son into the sea (4.420–542). In the Theban cycle, acts of self-defense, accident, or pity all regularly earn the same pun-

33. I capitalize Law in order to indicate that I refer here to the abstract principle of prohibition that animates all social constraints, not just to the specifics of any legal code. In the discussion that follows, I also capitalize Crime for the same reasons: to indicate the idea of transgression against which Law ranges itself, rather than particular infractions.

34. That Pentheus construes Acoetes' adherence to Bacchus' worship to be a crime is indicated by the facts that (1) Ovid describes him as barely able to put off the moment when he can extract a *poena* ("penalty") from Acoetes (3.578); *poena* can mean "recompense," but since Acoetes has not taken any physical object from Pentheus, his "compensation" has to be for crossing the king's will, *ipso facto* a crime in the eyes of the tyrant; and (2) Pentheus wants Acoetes' torture and death to be an example for others (3.579–80)—precisely the quintessential Roman rationale for capital punishment (as Anderson 1997 points out, 396), which in turn construes Acoetes' following Bacchus as a capital crime.

35. Cf. Žižek 1991, 34.

ishment: complete degradation, most often into animal form, usually followed by death. Ovid himself offers the reader a skeptical view of such precisianism when he exonerates Actaeon from blame: the Theban prince's story reveals a misdeed owed to chance, not to criminal intention ("fortunae crimen in illo / non scelus invenies," 3.141–42). Here Ovid lays down a principle—evaluation of intent—that, if applied categorically, vindicates nearly all the suffering Cadmeioi. He even evokes compassion for the less unwitting: just before Pentheus is torn apart by his own, the king tries to move his aunt Autonoë's pity by invoking her son Actaeon's near-identical fate (3.719–20). Conjuring up the explicitly exculpated Actaeon implies that even if Pentheus were guilty, he was (like Actaeon) punished far beyond his due.

Given that the gods exact the punishments I have mentioned, we might conclude that they demonstrate nothing more than the generally petty and vengeful nature of Ovid's divinities.[36] But that would ignore the fact that the gods' inflexible defense of their own prerogatives conforms precisely to the chief principle of juridical thought: that Law is an absolute, and must be obeyed without question. Ancient philosophers and moralists regularly offer evidence of this. For example, in the fourth century, Plato has Socrates articulate this principle in the *Crito;* roughly three centuries later, it echoes in Cicero's *De officiis;* in the next generation, it finds expression in Livy's *Ab urbe condita*. Socrates refuses the chance to escape from his prison and to evade the punishment Athens has pronounced upon him. He defends his obedience to the laws that have condemned him to death, but not on the grounds that they are correct—that they realize some insight into Socrates' dangerous and pernicious character, some rational reason why Socrates should be eliminated. He alleges merely that the laws are necessary: the state would collapse without unswerving adherence to them (*Cri.* 50a–b). In essence, Socrates says that we must obey the Law on the basis of a tautology: we obey not because the Law is true—not because it embodies principles of goodness or wisdom or beneficence or fairness—but solely because it is the Law. Cicero similarly praises Regulus for honoring his oath to return to Carthage to submit to torture and death, even though the oath was given to an enemy and under duress. He commends Regulus' self-destructive choice because it protects the sacredness of oath taking, which Cicero regards as fundamental to Law (*Off.* 3.102–11). Livy offers Lucretia as a similarly unswerving paragon. Praised as surpassing her peers in womanly virtue,[37] Lucretia exacts from herself after being raped by Sextus Tarquinius the punishment the Law would exact from adulterous women; lack of consent offers no amelioration of the facts in her eyes. Such arbitrary violence visited upon innocent

36. As Otis does: he includes the Theban cycle within a chapter entitled "The Avenging Gods" (Otis 1970, 128–65). In the *Metamorphoses* stories the chapter analyzes, Otis states that "the problem of theodicy is seen, largely, from the human side" and that Ovid's gods are "types of puritanical severity, unbridled jealousy, or merciless power" (Otis 1970, 128, 165).

37. A surprise visit from the Roman princes to their wives reveals all but Lucretia engaged in dissipation; she alone is found working chastely at woolmaking: "muliebris certaminis laus penes Lucretiam fuit" ("The victory in their contest of wives belonged to Lucretia," Livy 1.57.9).

persons makes the Law that Plato, Cicero, and Livy revere substantively, if not formally, indistinguishable from Crime in its mindless cruelty.[38]

The authoritarian gesture that conceptually founds the Law accomplishes what Pentheus' speech regarding the monster snake had earlier effected: a chiastic exchange of properties between putative antipodes. Just as the snake's odious qualities are transformed into patriotic beatitudes, so the "absolute" criminal gesture that subtends the Law excludes all other, specific crimes. The implied imperative, "obey without regard for justice!" exchanges these particular crimes against the universal crime that pertains to Law itself and makes them into its supposed opposition.[39]

Illuminated by this perspective on juridical thought, Pentheus' savage and arbitrary behavior toward those who oppose his will can be seen to embody, not an aberration from the Law, as Anderson declares ("he abuses the true values of Vergil's poem"[40]), but rather its purest embodiment, Law that reveals its origins in Crime. Poor unlovely Pentheus becomes thereby Roman epic's one "honest politician": his behavior transparently reflects the savage and secret commerce between seeming opposites on which the very idea of the polity—of the lawfully ordered human community—ineluctably rests.

. . . SLOUCHES TOWARD BETHLEHEM . . .

The Theban king is inspired to such savagery by the contemplation of his antithesis, the god Bacchus and his worship. The austerely masculine, The-

38. One might allege against reading Socrates, Cicero, and Livy as aligning Law implicitly with Crime that juridical constraint is only criminal from the perspective of its effect on individuals, as opposed to the larger group. However, to say so does not reduce the brutality of the Law. When Socrates rejects the possibility of escaping his condemnation by going into exile, he does not refute the injustice or cruelty of his sentence, or deny its sequelae—that his children will grow up without a father, that his friends will be both bereft and contemned for having failed to save him (*Cri.* 45c5–46a8). Rather, he defends his decision to stay and be executed via a two-pronged argument. First, he agreed to abide by Athens' juridical precepts in deed if not in word by the mere fact of having lived all his life in Athens; accordingly, he must now accept the consequences (51c6–53a7). Second, outside the community ruled by legislation, no life exists worth living for any human being (53c2–54a1). This "social contract" model makes no brief for the Law's beneficence even for the group; it only points to worse terrors howling round the anarchic city's borders.

Cicero evidences greater discomfort than Socrates when facing the logical extrapolation of the Law's absolute status. For example, he praises Manlius Torquatus Imperiosus as "one of the greatest of the great" ("magnus vir in primis," *Off.* 3.112), yet concludes his portrait on a more qualified note. We know from other sources that Manlius executed his son while campaigning against the Latins, because he had disobeyed his father's orders not to attack the foe—this despite the youth's triumph over an enemy commander in a bravely fought single combat (cf. Livy 8.6.1–7.22, Sall. *Cat.* 52.30–31, August., *De civ. D.* 1.23). Even a strict constructionist such as Cicero cannot quite stomach so strict an application of the Law; he concludes that Manlius was "cruelly severe to his son" ("acerbe severus in filium," *Off.* 3.112).

Far more than either Cicero or Socrates, Livy dramatizes the inherent cruelty of the Law by spelling out the consequences of strict interpretation. For example, while Rome's Twelve Tables of laws are being written and the decemvirs rule, the ten governors are praised as most just when they soften the law, but cursed as "ten Tarquins" once they begin to interpret it strictly. The quintessential example of such self-serving literalism allows the archvillain among the decemvirs, Appius Claudius, to gain power over the freeborn Verginia while her father is abroad on military duty. Diabolically, he does so not by abrogating the law, but by following it to the letter. He takes advantage of the fact that Verginia herself has no legal status whereby she may plead her case; the decision goes by default to the plaintiff, a creature of Appius'. See Janan 2001, 150–51, for a fuller discussion of the skepticism towards the Law sketched in the Appius-Verginia tale.

39. On the conceptual equivalence of Law and Crime, see Žižek 1991, 29–31, 37–38, 40–41.

40. Anderson 1997, 392.

ban adult despot man rails against the perfumed effeminacy of the Asiatic boy-god. Bacchus (in Pentheus' eyes) offends against Thebes' protocols of manly belligerence (3.553–56), and he offends the gods: Bacchus commits sacrilege by pretending to a divinity he does not in fact possess (3.557–58). Pentheus broadly represents himself and Bacchus as Law ranged against License. Yet when Bacchus' devotee Acoetes narrates his conversion to Bacchus' worship, he reveals the conceptual ground on which Pentheus and Bacchus meet and uncannily mirror one another (3.582–691). Both god and king again enable the wondrous transformation of one conceptual element in the discursive field into its contrary.

Though described as "fearless" ("metu vacuus," 3.582) before the seething and formidable Pentheus, Acoetes nonetheless describes a preconversion apprehensiveness that verged on paranoia. A poor fisherman who has learned navigation, he and his crew bound for Delos are forced one day to land on Chios. When Acoetes sends the others to find water, they lead back to the ship a pretty but inebriated young boy they plan to kidnap. Acoetes assumes this little boy to be a god, though he gives us no specific reason why he should think so. He claims that the boy's appearance and gait do not seem compatible with mortality ("nil ibi, quod credi posset mortale, videbam," 3.610), but does not specify why; no other member of the crew notices such signs. He argues vigorously against the sailors' plans for abduction, but they repulse him with near-murderous force. When they insist that he steer away from Naxos (the boy's requested destination), he refuses to have any part in guiding the ship; another sailor takes the helm (3.644–49). Bacchus meanwhile plays cat and mouse with the sailors ("inludens," 3.650). Pretending ignorance of their plan, he then feigns tearful helplessness when he "discovers" their intentions. Eventually he terrifies the sailors by causing tigers, panthers, and lynxes to appear on the ship. The sailors leap overboard, maddened either with fear or by the god, and are changed into dolphins. Bacchus spares only Acoetes; he encourages ("firmat") the trembling sailor, directing him to "expel fear from his heart" ("excute / corde metum") and sail to Naxos, where Acoetes becomes an initiate (3.688–90).

What Acoetes witnesses on the ship transforms him from a timid soul to a calm believer who can confront a raging king without fear. Prior to the signs and wonders Bacchus performs on the ship, the violence his fellow sailors offer Acoetes reduces him to no more than passive resistance (e.g., refusing to steer). Afterwards, Bacchus' command to be fearless has preternatural effect: even Pentheus' threats of death and torture leave Acoetes undisturbed (3.579–82, 694–95). Though supernatural forces eventually free Acoetes from Pentheus' bonds, his recitation before the king indicates no prescience of rescue that might calm the captive. Nowhere in the *Metamorphoses* does Bacchus promise his adherents protection.

A divinely catalyzed, radical change in perspective is familiar to classical readers from various initiation tales (of which we can see some reflection—albeit second order and artistically elaborated—in such examples as the *Odyssey*'s "Telemacheia," the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter,* and Catullus

63).[41] However, Ovid here puts this mechanism to specific ideological usage by unfolding the logic that makes the convert Acoetes' bravery possible. The same logic allowed Pentheus to use Thebes' noxious original serpent as the rallying cry for Theban identity; both conversions depend on the operation of the quilting point. Acoetes' tale reveals that the god in whom he reposes his faith as the worthiest object of worship bound Acoetes to himself precisely by demonstrating his divine monstrosity. Bacchus does not simply punish his would-be persecutors, but toys with them by feigning helplessness at the very moment he plans to terrify and madden them, then degrade them into beasts. Beside Bacchus, all other monsters pale into nothingness.

Acoetes' tale shows Bacchus undergoing a transformation similar to that of the monstrous serpent: the "jovial sower of the grape" ("genialis consitor uvae," 4.14) splits between himself and his shadow-self, the terrifying monster who is Bacchus' dark underside. Bacchus-as-feline-sadist cancels Acoetes' earthly misery by showing him that behind the multitude of earthly horrors gleams the infinitely more frightening horror of divine wrath. Earthly terrors transubstantiate into so many manifestations of divine anger.[42] Even a seemingly spontaneous demonstration of evil—the sailors' plans to profit from kidnapping a child—assumes its place in the divine order as a pretext for manifesting the god's wrath. Suddenly, "it all makes sense": the *facta bruta* of existence have meaning and conform (reassuringly) to an order, an order anchored by Bacchus as quilting point.

. . . To Be Born?

Though not tightly connected by plot to the Pentheus' episode, Cadmus' encounters with godhead frame Ovid's Theban cycle both formally (they begin and end the cycle) and conceptually (their content sets the terms for Thebes' history, as revolving around intimate conflict and divine vengeance). His experiences resonate particularly with his grandson Pentheus' that center the cycle and are its longest subsection, insofar as Cadmus' relations with the divine paradoxically combine the logic of Pentheus' story with that of Acoetes'. He reaps punishment such as rewarded Pentheus' militant atheism, but receives it for an act of faith comparable to Acoetes' conversion. After Cadmus has killed the monstrous serpent and stands contemplating its immense body, a voice admonishes him, "quid, Agenore nate, peremptum / serpentem spectas? et tu spectabere serpens" ("Why, son of Agenor, do you stare at the slain snake? You, too, will be gazed at as a snake," 3.97–98).

41. In the first four books of the *Odyssey* (often called the "Telemacheia"), the goddess Athena arranges and oversees the experiences that sweep Telemachus over the line between self-concious boyhood and commanding maturity; the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* has the diguised goddess reveal herself to Metaneira, converting the mortal's fears that the "stranger" was trying to kill her baby son into devotion to the goddess' mysteries (*Hom. Hymn Dem.* 242–300); Catullus 63 narrates the Greek boy Attis' spurning of his former privileged and urbane life, flight from home, and self-castration under the goddess Cybele's influence.

42. Cf. Žižek 1991, 17.

Years later, reviewing the misfortunes of his city and family, Cadmus comes to regard his sorrows as divinely caused, punishment for his having killed the monstrous serpent (4.563–73). Cadmus exclaims, "quem si cura deum tam certa vindicat ira, / ipse precor serpens in longam porrigar alvum!" ("if it is the gods' concern to avenge this with their inexorable wrath, may I be stretched out at length upon my belly as a snake!" 4.574–75). He immediately is so transformed, as is his wife Harmonia.

This transformation retrospectively darkens the already grim view adumbrated in Acoetes' tale, of divinity as the malign *primum mobile* of existence (a malevolence of which the poor sailor appears serenely unaware). Cadmus' "conversion experience" reaps him nearly as much sorrow as Pentheus' belligerent incredulity earned him. Moreover (as Stephen Wheeler notes), Cadmus' theodicy is entirely erroneous. Thebes' catastrophes have nothing to do with the slain snake; they result from other causes—quarrels between Juno and Jupiter, Diana's prickly modesty, and Bacchus' savagery against unbelievers.[43] Yet the fact that Cadmus' prayer brings about his and his wife's metamorphoses speciously confirms his assumption that the various human miseries visited upon Thebes and the Cadmeioi avenge the snake's death. Now the overall order of things appears intelligible: the metamorphoses "prove" Thebes to be the victim, not of random malevolence, but of comprehensible (if ferine) retribution. In that respect, Cadmus' disastrous prayer functionally and structurally mirrors Acoetes' conversion tale and Pentheus' exhortation to the ecstatic Thebans: each takes disparate, terrifying phenomena and "quilts" them into a comprehensible and ameliorating narrative.

Yet unlike king or sailor, Cadmus' "narrative" expels him from the human sphere of existence and agency. Cadmus' self-indicting wager with the gods evidences the "third turn" of the quilting mechanism: in the logic of his prayer and its answer, the quilting point takes the form of the scapegoat—the single explanation for evil that can and must be banished, unlike the avenging god or numinous serpent. Like the alchemy that converts Bacchus' savagery into a world order apparent only to the faithful and the serpent's violence into the originary lineaments of ideal Thebanness, Cadmus' transformation converts the heterogenous data of cruelty and violence at Thebes into a sensible narrative. Now firm orientation replaces bafflement. The scapegoat becomes the poisonous figure who has brought evil upon the land, and (like Bacchus, like the snake) thus constitutes the supplementary fear that banishes fear.[44] Indeed, Cadmus' self-designation as scapegoat appears to bring post-transformation peace to himself and to his wife (if not to Thebes). They are described as "peaceful" because they "remember what they were before" ("quidque prius fuerint, *placidi* meminere dracones,"

43. Juno avenges herself on Jupiter's paramour Semele, her family, their progeny and familiars (3.256–312, 4.420–562); Diana destroys the accidentally intrusive Actaeon (3.138–252); Bacchus retaliates against any who challenge his godhead (3.511–731). See Wheeler 2000, 96–97.

44. Cf. Žižek 1991, 16–18.

4.603).[45] By making himself the retrospective object of fear—even on false premises—Cadmus has banished his own fear.

Cadmus' metamorphosis curiously recapitulates and extends the principles behind the iron Law sketched in his nephew Pentheus' tyranny. The axiom that Law requires obedience without regard for our subjective appreciation of its justice, and is therefore a special instance of Crime, is most purely realized where punishment accrues to the blameless. Cadmus is just such an innocent victim, all the more a martyr in that he believes himself guilty and derives comfort therefrom.

For that reason, however his transformation may impress Cadmus, it should disturb us, Ovid's readers: we know no causal connection exists between the killing of Mars' serpent and Thebes' disasters. For us, Cadmus' and Harmonia's transfigurations evidence a universe inhabited by a nameless divinity far more malevolent than any we have yet seen in the Theban cycle. This *numen* doubly punishes humans by letting them believe their animal transformations were caused by their own guilt. Moreover, Ovid's refusal to specify what divine power changes the couple into snakes robs the transformation of any intelligible motive, making the act appear pure malice.[46] The petty infighting of the gods in and around Thebes suddenly is dwarfed by this maleficent anonymity. Thebes is even more poisonously haunted than we had thought.

The last we hear of the Cadmeioi is the "great consolation" Bacchus' expanding worship offers his grandparents Cadmus and Harmonia for their changed shape: he has defeated now-worshipful India, and his temples are thronged in Greece (4.604–6). One wonders why the former king and queen of Thebes would rejoice in yet another territory besieged and forcibly subdued by divinity as their city has been. But then, it is hardly less wondrous that Vergil's king should rejoice in the violent deeds of *his* offspring: lifting Vulcan's shield anchored by the she-wolf and her feral nurslings, Aeneas unwittingly rejoices in a Roman future charged with various versions of the

45. When used of animals, *placidus* means "tame, quiet, friendly"; but Cadmus and Harmonia retain their human memory and remain both gentle and fearless with people. This vestigial humanity implies that, when applied to them, the word also connotes what it regularly does when used of human beings: "free from stress, quiet, peaceful" (*OLD*, s.v. *placidus* 2a, 4c).

46. At the beginning of Book 3, Ovid had called the serpent "Mars' snake" ("Martius anguis," 3.32), elliptically evoking the tradition that makes the snake sacred to the war god and its death a source of anger to him (attested by, e.g., a scholion to the *Iliad,* ΣA *Il.* 2.494 = 4F51, and Euripides' *Phoenissae,* 931–35). Nonetheless, he nowhere specifies that the divine voice that predicts Cadmus' transformation after he has slain the snake belongs to Mars. Moreover, mythic tradition offers no evidence of a causal connection between the serpent's death and Cadmus' transformation. Our evidence is admittedly imperfect: of the extant sources that precede Ovid, Euripides' *Bacchae* has Bacchus cryptically refer to Cadmus' and Harmonia's changing into snakes as "what the oracle of Zeus says" (χρησμὸς ὣς λέγει Διός, *Bacch.* 1333), whereas Ares appears as the savior who will eventually convey them to the Fields of the Blessed (1338–39). A long lacuna precedes this prediction; it is just possible that the missing lines contained a reference to Ares' wrath. Apollodorus offers no explanation as to why Cadmus and Harmonia change into snakes, but has Zeus convey them to the Elysian Fields (Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.5.4); Hyginus states that Ares destroyed Cadmus' children out of anger at his snake's death, and may imply—given that he mentions Cadmus' and Harmonia's transformation into snakes—that they also owe their transformations to this cause (Hyg. *Fab.* 6). However, he does not say so explicitly. It must be noted that as Apollodorus certainly, and Hyginus probably, postdate Ovid by nearly two centuries, both mythographers' evidence regarding what versions the Roman poet may have known is open to question.

brothers' originating fratricide (*Aen*. 8.729–31).[47] That—as Ovid's Thebes demonstrates—is the alchemy of ideology: it converts what contradicts its claims into evidence that appears to support them.[48] Ultimately, Ovid scrutinizes Thebes' history of internecine strife, juridical cruelty, and religious terrorism not for its own sake, but as the "mirror of Rome," illuminating Rome's patriotism as the darkest of conspiracies. Like the Thebans, Romans can come to self-recognition as the subjects of their own savage history only by seeing the snake in the glass.[49]

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47. Aside from the battle of Actium—a civil conflict presented with the trappings of a foreign war (*Aen*. 8.675–728)—Vulcan's Shield portrays the kind of internal conflicts that will rend the Roman Republic in such vignettes as the punishment of the traitor Mettus (8.642–45) and the infernal sufferings of the conspirator Catiline (8.668–70). See Quint 1993, 21–31, for a full explication of the polarities recorded on the Shield, and their implications for Rome's cohesiveness.

48. As Slavoj Žižek has observed: "An ideology is really 'holding us' only when we do not feel any opposition between it and reality—that is, when the ideology succeeds in determining the mode of our everyday experience of reality itself. . . . an ideology really succeeds when even the facts that at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favor" (Žižek 1989, 49).

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