

PHILEMON AND BAUCIS

Met. VIII. 616–724

Ovid places this story of piety and loyalty to the gods immediately after a series of tales that illustrate how the gods reward or punish mortals through metamorphosis. At a dinner party where storytelling provides the evening's entertainment, Pirithous scoffs at the notion that the gods are powerful enough to change the shapes of things. Lelex, a companion of the hero Theseus, in direct response to Pirithous's remarks, tells of the transformations of Philemon and Baucis in order to demonstrate the power and justice of the gods. This story, in turn, is followed by another about Erysichthon's illicit love and consequent metamorphosis, with a long digression on his egregiously impious act of cutting down a tree sacred to the goddess Ceres.

We do not know the precise origin of Ovid's story of Philemon and Baucis. It is, however, one of a number of stories from the ancient world that illustrate the importance of the unwritten law of hospitality: hosts had a moral obligation to provide food, drink, and shelter to guests without questioning their identity. Stories of visits from divinities who test mortals' application of this rule appear in both Judaic and Graeco-Roman culture. In Genesis, for example, the stories of God's visit to Abraham and Sarah, Chapter 18, and the visit to Lot of two angels, Chapter 19, provide important variations of this story. We have no evidence that Ovid read Genesis; he, however, probably knew the *Hecale*, a lost poem by the Greek poet Callimachus that describes how a poor old woman gave hospitality to the hero Theseus. Ovid considered this basic story important enough to include additional variations of it in *Metamorphoses* I. 212ff. and *Fasti* V. 495ff.

Ovid's narrative of the pious Philemon and Baucis is enhanced through the emphasis of their simple home and humble food. He painstakingly lists the steps for preparing the meal and the courses served by the humble hosts to the great gods Jupiter and Mercury, who appear in human guise. This lengthy description highlights the spontaneous,

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unqualified generosity of the mortal husband and wife. The couple give all they have to their guests, long before they perceive that they are entertaining divinities. Their simple piety receives the highest reward: they are granted their request to die together. Their transformations into trees, she into a linden and he into an oak, assure for them a kind of immortality: the oak and linden will henceforth be reminders of the pious couple's generosity.

This tale portrays a kind of love rarely seen in the *Metamorphoses*, for just as Baucis and Philemon love and honor the gods without reservation, so do they love each other truly, faithfully, and unconditionally. The simple goodness of Philemon and Baucis was re-created by Rembrandt in his famous depiction of the story. Others, including Dryden and Swift, have chosen instead to write parodies of it.



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