

ARGUS' WINK: ON THE ADVANTAGES OF READING
OVID'S *METAMORPHOSES*
WITH ONE HUNDRED EYES*

by

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ABSTRACT: The article discusses the episode in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which Hermes lulls Argus to sleep by telling him the story of Pan and Syrinx and then cuts his head off. The passage has often been read by scholars as a metanarrative joke that Ovid makes about tales that his readers may find too boring to follow. Argus is thus supposed to be a figure of a disengaged reader. As I argue, however, Ovid's text makes it clear that Argus was simply too naïve and too profoundly captivated by the story to resist its charm. Therefore, he should be taken as a figure of a childish listener, whom Ovid did not intend to exclude from enjoying his poem.

By the end of the first book of his *Metamorphoses* (667–722), Ovid presents a charming and terrifying story that has been rightly recognised as an implicit poetic manifesto. The wider context is provided by the myth of Io, who is transformed into a heifer and watched over by a monstrous cowherd Argus. Argus had one hundred eyes, which enabled him to keep a constant watch on Io because, as Ovid explains (625–627), even when some of his eyes rested, the others would remain open. Anxious to get rid of this guardian and to lay his hands on the lover (Io), Jove sent Mercury, disguised as a goatherd, who attracted Argus' attention by playing panpipes¹. Intrigued by this novel instrument, Argus invited Mercury to sit with him and pasture his goats on the nearby grazing. After an entire day of listening to Mercury's stories and music, when he was already

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¹ As an anonymous reviewer pointed out to me, the captivating power of music is much of a commonplace in antiquity. An iconic example is provided by Orpheus.