

The Muses' Playground: Metamorphosis

A) Metamorphosis before Ovid

- in epic e.g. Vergil's *Aeneid* (Trojan ships > nymphs cf. *Met.* 14.547-55: interest in before/after and continuity; Cygnus > swan) and Apollonius (Hesperides > trees)

1) "Each of the ships at once burst its bonds to the shore. Sinking their beaks like dolphins, they head for the depths of the sea. Thence do they return- a remarkable prodigy!- the same number of maidenly forms, and they are borne along the sea" (*A.* 9.117-22, ships > nymphs)

2) "The centre of the ship became a spine, / The rigging soft sleek hair" (*Met.* 14.552-4, ships > nymphs)

3) "They say that because of grief over his beloved Phaethon, Cygnus, while he was singing and with song was consoling his unhappy love amidst the leafy poplars ... put on hoary old age through his soft plumage, and he left the earth and followed the stars with his cry" (*A.* 10.189-93, Cygnus > swan, song continuity)

4) "He was a strange new bird, a swan, that fears / To trust the sky or Jove, remembering / The unfairness of that fiery bolt he hurled" (*Met.* 2.377-8, Cygnus > swan: continuity of existence)

5) "Hesperes became a poplar, Eretheois an elm, and Aegle the sacred trunk of a willow. After becoming these trees they were just as they appeared before" (*A.R.* 4.1427-30, Hesperides > trees)

- precedents for poems about metamorphosis (see Myers, *Ovid's causes*)
popular; now lost (NB *Metamorphoses* of Antoninus Liberalis (2nd C AD): prose versions of 41 stories of metamorphosis. Main sources= Nicander and Boios)
e.g. contemporary Aemilius Macer's *Ornithogonia* (model = Boios' *Ornithogonia*, about transformations into birds)

Nicander's *Heteroeumena* (2nd C BC; 5 book hexameter poem)

metamorphosis poems by Antigonus (*SH* 50), Didymarchus (*SH* 378A-B; at least three books), Theodorus (*SH* 749-50, with treatment of Smyrna and Alcione) and Parthenius (fr. 24 Lightfoot)
Also elegiac P. Oxy. LXIX 4711

B) observations on metamorphosis

- various levels of metamorphosis such as physical (change to vegetation etc; sex) and psychological

- flux on stylistic level: narrative disruption (tenuous transitions, shifting tone etc)

- metamorphosis as unifying principle (but often appears incidental: cf. way Phaethon's story has change of sisters into poplars just at end)

- Metamorphosis: from start (cosmogony) to end (Pythagoras' speech): frame of dynamic of creation / destruction

6) "O bodies changed to other forms I tell" (*Met.* 1.1-2)

7) "Nothing retains its form; new shapes from old / Nature, the great inventor, ceaselessly / Contrives. In all creation, be assured, / There is no death" (*Met.* 15.253-5, Pythagoras on cyclic nature of life processes)

- Order as well as flux: see e.g. tapestry of 6.5-145, weaving of Pallas Athena (showing order) v Arachne (showing disorder)

8) “[Arachne] added too / How Jove once in a satyr’s guise had got / Antiope with twins” (*Met.* 6.109-11, metamorphosis of Jupiter)

- “disorderly order” (Feeney); need some order to have disorder. boundaries established (e.g. cosmogony) and transgressed (e.g. men become animals; also moral chaos)

9) “in the sea / He set the shining fish to swim; the land / Received the beasts, the gusty air the birds” (*Met.* 1.74-5: gods/humans/animals in separate spheres)

10) “And while the other creatures on all fours / Look downwards, man was made to hold his head / Erect in majesty and see the sky” (*Met.* 1.84-5: humans separate from gods and animals)

C) Types of metamorphosis

- Animals and gods (apotheoses: Hercules, Aeneas, Romulus, Julius Caesar): no real sense of degradation / elevation

11) “Lest therefore [Augustus] be born of mortal seed, / His father must be made divine” (*Met.* 15.760-1, of Julius Caesar)

- metamorphosis and landscape: locus amoenus BUT backdrop to violence; victims become inscribed in the landscape (river, tree, flower etc) >unease when landscape is disturbed

- rape: itself a kind of metamorphosis and typically accompanied by metamorphosis (e.g. Jupiter > satyr; Io > cow): loss of humanity/identity (e.g. Callisto: former companion of Diana; gets and loses mother role; changed into bear; later constellation); disturbing

12) “Over those arms spread grisly fur” (*Met.* 2.478, Callisto being changed to bear)

13) “She was a bear, but kept her woman’s heart” (*Met.* 2.485, Callisto)

14) “[she] blamed, though wordless, Jove’s ingratitude” (*Met.* 2.486, from Callisto's perspective).

- metamorphosis particularly associated with the female (see McAuley): e.g. (ex-)virgins; mothers (e.g. Dryope, breastfeeding mother > tree; Myrrha who gives birth after her change into a tree)

15) “In so many of Ovid’s stories, what is transformed is the female body; indeed its very porousness and permeability, and its capacity for mutation and multiplication, make it stand for the very principle of transformation itself.” (McAuley 2012)

16) “the pregnant, birthing or nursing maternal body ... is also a morphological paradigm for the terror and monstrosity of the poem’s multiple mutations, a reference point (along with sex and death) for the violations and dissolutions of bodily unity that characterize Ovidian metamorphosis: doublings, splittings, incorporations, enclosures, boundary-crossings, hatchings, liquefactions, gender transformations, bestializations and ... apotheosis.” (McAuley 2012)

- sex-changes (Iphis *Met.* 9.666-797 who becomes male on wedding-day; Caenis/Caeneus *Met.* 12; Tiresias man>woman>man in *Met.* 3, Sithon 4.279-80); Salmacis/Hermaphroditus> hermaphrodite; gender-bending. Maleness a question of constant construction or biological essentialism? Or both (Iphis)?

D) aspects of metamorphosis

▪ Metamorphosis can be punishment (Lycaon) or reward (Baucis and Philemon) BUT typically apart from moral judgements. Meaning of change can be unclear (e.g. Daphne > laurel)

17) “Lycaon, rest assured, has paid the price / Of sin” (*Met.* 1.209, Jupiter)

18) “Hither ... assemble the neighbouring streams doubtful whether to console / Daphne’s fond parent or congratulate” (*Met.* 1.577-578)

▪ Metamorphosis as clarification: characteristics made manifest: e.g. Lycaon (name from “wolf”) and Daedalion

19) “With rabid mouth he turned his lust for slaughter / Against the flocks, delighting still in blood. / His clothes changed to coarse hair, his arms to legs - / He was a wolf, yet kept some human trace, / The same grey hair, the same fierce face, the same / Wild eyes, the same image of savagery” (*Met.* 1.233-9, Lycaon)

20) “Perhaps you think this bird that lives on prey, / The terror of the sky, has always had / Feathers. It was a man and - character / So constant-- harsh and warlike then and prone to violence” (*Met.* 11.291-5, Daedalion)

21) “And now as a hawk, / Benign to none, he vents his savagery / On every bird and, as in grief he goes, / Ensures that others grieve and share his woes” (*Met.* 11.344-5, Daedalion was naturally warlike then beset by grief > as hawk attacks others)

▪ Keeping something: e.g. Tereus (>hoopoe, sword/crest), Procne and Philomela (> birds which live near humans, swallow and nightingale (not specified who turns into which))

22) “And he, grief-spurred, swift-swooping for revenge, / Is changed into a bird that bears a crest, / With, for a sword, a long fantastic bill - / A hoopoe, every inch a fighter still” (*Met.* 6.671-4, Tereus > hoopoe, keeps appearance)

e.g. Anaxerete herself (not father, as in Hermesianax's version) rejects Iphis (who > hangs himself): “hard” mistress turns to stone

23) “Gradually the stone, / That all along had lurked in her hard heart / Spread and possessed her body” (*Met.* 14.757-58, hard Anaxerete > stone)

e.g. Daphne/laurel: shining of her beauty > leaf

24) “all that remained / Of Daphne was her shining loveliness” (*Met.* 1.552)

▪ Exception: Atalanta and Hippomenes (10): lions drawing Cybele’s chariot. Explains why lions draw the chariot

▪ continuity: characteristics can last through metamorphosis (exceptions: e.g. daughters of Anius into doves 13.671-2)

25) “Their build you saw; / Their traits they keep, a thrifty toiling lot, / Grasping their gains and hoarding what they’ve got” (*Met.* 7.655-57, Aegina people from ants)

- changes usually permanent (exceptions e.g. Io becomes human again)

- Transition

26) “as they grew and felt / A gentler nature’s touch, a semblance seemed / To appear, still indistinct, of human form, / Like the first rough-hewn marble of a statue” (*Met.* 1.404-6, stones > men)

- Loss: e.g. speech (Io, Actaeon etc); NB link between speech and creation of identity

27) “He longed to shout, I am Actaeon....’ / Words failed his will” (*Met.* 3.229-31)

28) “Her words, her life, together ceased to flow” (*Met.* 9.392, Dryope > tree)

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