

REVIEW ARTICLES

METAMORPHOSIS: THE CHANGING FACE OF OVID

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- 396** ALISON KEITH AND STEPHEN RUPP (EDS.). *Metamorphosis: The Changing Face of Ovid in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Publications of the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, Essays and Studies, 13. Toronto: CRRS, 2007. Pp. 350.

In 1925, E.K. Rand dubbed the literary culture of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries the 'Age of Ovid.' But which Ovid? There were two Ovids in the medieval and early modern worlds. One is the author of the books on loving: *Amores*, *Ars amatoria* and *Remedia amoris*, urbane advice and pseudo-advice on loving, seduction and relinquishing love, leavened with social commentary; *Heroides*, imagined poetic letters from mythological heroines; and *Tristia*, the poet's writing in exile in a small port on the Black Sea after 8 CE. When reintroduced into twelfth-century northern Europe, these Latin poetic texts and their vernacular paraphrases provided students, readers and writers with straight and ironic vocabularies, metaphors, models for affective discourse, and formulas and social attitudes for what was shaping up as the new, dominant discourse of love and vernacular writing.

The other Ovid is the writer of the *Metamorphoses*. Published just as Ovid was exiled, the *Metamorphoses* has been a very productive mine of models and intertexts in western writing, an archive of not only pagan mythological stories but also ways of telling stories in narrative, lyric, drama and the visual arts. Ovid's multiple narrative strategies, shifting narratorial viewpoint and temporal switches construct complex, disturbing, sometimes contradictory stories of the risky adventures, seductions and missteps of deities and humans.

While the first Ovid has received much attention from critics and historians of romance, courtly love and chivalric writing, the second Ovid has been studied more

in the context of visual arts (especially following Jean Seznec's research on Italian humanism and the revival of paganism). *Metamorphoses*, a new collection of essays edited by Alison Keith and Stephen Rupp and based on papers presented at a University of Toronto conference in 2005, remedies that imbalance, offering analyses of and ruminations on the many versionings and intertextualities of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The Ovid commentary tradition provides a continuous thread among the essays: Latin commentaries began with Arnulf of Orléans' influential commentary (1180) and include the Vatican Mythographers, Bersuire, and John Waleys; vernacular commentaries and rewriting began with the *Ovide moralisé* (c. 1200). A few essays pay attention to Ovid in the visual arts, but most focus on literary and other kinds of texts—narrative and lyric poetry, prose fiction, allegoresis, textual commentary, alchemy and demonological writing. Christine de Pizan, Chaucer, Gower, Dante and Petrarch are the most frequently discussed writers, with one essay each devoted to Cervantes, Gongora and Scève. Nothing on the *Metamorphoses* and drama, and with one exception (Fumo), nothing on how Ovid's mock-epic super-narrative was read or received or simply not noticed by late medieval and early modern readers of the mythological stories.

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Introductory essays to collections are usually given over to a review of what we are about to read. But in their opening essay, Keith and Rupp do something more helpful. They concisely summarise the reception of Ovid's work up to the twelfth century, then cede the floor to Frank Coulson, who gives us an overly structured but magisterial account of how Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was received and reframed in the Latin commentary tradition centered around Orléans in northern France (1100-1350). Drawing on his extensive manuscript experience, Coulson selects both familiar and not-so-familiar Latin texts to illustrate the range of reading practices in medieval commentaries: allegorical (ethical), utilitarian (paraphrase, textual construal) and grammatical (aka literary critical).

Six essays discuss different aspects of the Ovidian tradition in Latin and the vernaculars in the later Middle Ages. Complementing Coulson on the Latin tradition, Marilyn Desmond's "The Goddess Diana and the Ethics of Reading in the *Ovide moralisé*" discusses the vernacular tradition of reading the *Metamorphoses* in late medieval France through and against the Latin mythographers. The *Ovide moralisé* (*OM*), probably the single most important mediating text in the medieval Ovidian archive, repeatedly wrangles with many of Ovid's female-centred narratives. Chaste Diana, for example, creates problems for Christianity. Desmond explores this clash by differentiating Christian allegorical reading (hermeneutic imposition) from ethical reading (engagement) (65). In the *OM*, the story of Diana and Actaeon manifests a different kind of virginity and violence story for Christian audiences, one with more homoerotic possibilities. Trinitarian theology and the tradition of spiritual and physical virginity produce a strange Diana, connected in the text and manuscript images both with the Virgin Mary and with exclusive groups of loving women.

Suzanne Akbari and Patricia Zalamea discuss Christine de Pizan's writings in the

context of the *Metamorphoses* and the *OM*. In “Metaphor and Metamorphosis in the *Ovide moralisé* and Christine de Pizan’s *Mutacion de Fortune*,” Akbari uses intertextual theory to argue that Christine’s depiction of metamorphosis and her use of *methafore* and other figurative language in *Mutacion* owe more to the *OM* than to Ovid: “metamorphosis is presented not as a change from one thing into another, but rather a change where the outside comes to resemble the inside” (86). In *Mutacion* the writer/narrator Christine is physically transformed from a woman into a man, making her outward appearance more consistent with her inner, ‘masculine’ mind/soul. Christine then complicates this amazing transformation by declaring that it is ‘true’ only insofar as it is *methafore*, that is, *poesie*, the truth of poets. Akbari might have mentioned that the truth of metaphor was also Arnulf’s way of reading the *Metamorphoses*.

398 Zalamea’s “At the Ovidian Pool: Christine de Pizan’s *Fountain of Wisdom* as a Locus of Vision” also uses the *OM* to analyse Christine’s *Livre du chemin de long estude* (*Book of the Path of Long Study*), focusing on the Fountain of Wisdom, the gaze and poetic activity. The Fountain of Wisdom and Mount Parnassus, home of the Muses, are popular images in late medieval vernacular poetry (Guillaume de Lorris, Dante, Christine de Pizan, Gavin Douglas). Christine’s gendered rewriting foregrounds the female wisdom (Sibyl) and merges male poetic authority with the female Muses as poetic inspiration. Zalamea argues that *OM* manuscript illustrations were important sources for Christine’s rewriting of feminine knowledge and for the *Chemin* manuscript illustrations, which closely identify the writer/reader Christine with the Muses and feminine creativity (103). These intertextual studies show how the Ovidian tradition has never been anchored in Ovid’s “restricted text” but in Ovid’s “elaborated text” and Ovidian reading formations.

Kathryn McKinley and Jamie Fumo take up Ovid in fourteenth-century English writing. McKinley’s “Lessons for a King from Gower’s *Confessio amantis* 5” continues her smart work on Gower’s relation to Latin and vernacular Ovidian commentaries and paraphrases. She posits Amans as alternately a lover and a representative of the king in the *Confessio* (110), then reads Gower’s versions of the Tereus/Philomela and Jason/Medea narratives against earlier Latin and vernacular versions. Departing from others in this collection, McKinley argues that Gower owes more to the “restricted” Ovid text than to the “elaborated” Ovid. In Gower’s narratives, the male lover or rapist violates trust, promising and loyalty, while the violated or betrayed female characters voice their anger and sorrow or enact their revenge. McKinley cannily connects Gower’s texts with the metaphor of marriage between sovereign and the people, especially during the reign of Richard II. She points out how Gower’s narrative discourse coincides with that of English chronicles, which sort out abuses of power from proper kingship. The *Confessio*, then, is an advice to princes with object lessons on proper moral royal behaviour drawn from negative *exempla* based on Ovid. But, as McKinley also notes (120-25), oathtaking, oathkeeping and oathbreaking were also on the minds of fourteenth-century English chroniclers.

Fumo in “Argus’ Eyes, Midas’ Ears, and the Wife of Bath as a Storyteller” examines how Chaucer’s Alisoun strategically revises the Ovidian myths of Argus and Midas in ways which ‘foreground the power—and danger—of the female voice.’ The fictional Alisoun also displays in her Prologue and Tale a substantial debt to Ovidian narrative techniques (131). Fumo’s provocative comparative reading of the stories of Io, Mercury-Argus and Pan-Syrinx as told by Ovid and retold by Alisoun via Chaucer emphasises the thematic and narratological functions of rape in Ovid’s narratives. (Reference to *Representations of Sexual Violence in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Elizabeth Robertson and Christine Rose [2001] would have bolstered Fumo’s analysis.) Fumo reads the Wife’s storytelling strategies—dilation, deferral, impersonation—differently to Lee Patterson and Michael Calabrese. Her analysis is distinctly intertextual and narratological, but I would like to have read more about how Chaucer’s text and the Ovidian hypotext inflect narrative theory. Short references to Ross Chambers’ *Story and Situation* are just the edge of the story. The larger question, which Fumo doesn’t really address, is, How did Chaucer access Ovid’s narrative strategies and models she claims he deployed? Did Chaucer read Ovid directly? through a vernacular paraphrase? If so, which ones? How might contemporary narratology and intertextual reader-oriented theories address historical reading practices? Fumo suggests that Chaucer’s likely reading of the *OM* gave him such access, but if so, how might Chaucer have extracted narrative strategies from the allegorised versions? What does *influence* mean within the Ovidian archive, the restricted and the elaborated Ovid text?

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The second half of the collection, made up of eight essays on Italian Renaissance and early modern writing, seems more disjointed. We have Petrarch’s fourteenth-century rewritings of Ovid and various sixteenth- and seventeenth-century rewritings and echoings of Ovidian myths in Spanish, French, Italian and English literature. This group of essays could have benefited from a critical synopsis of post-1500 receptions of Ovid, similar to Coulsen’s essay. Instead, the second half leads off unsteadily with Thomas Willard’s “The Metamorphoses of Metals: Ovid and the Alchemists” (he cites the title later as “The Metamorphosis of Metals”; 161). Willard details how alchemical writers from the fifteenth to the early seventeenth centuries regularly quoted Ovid to confirm their interpretations of ancient poetry as revealing divine truths under the veil of allegory, dark conceits and natural symbols. Science and the Book of Nature were synchronous with revealed scriptural truth. After 1600, Rosicrucians such as Count Michael Maier were promoting alchemy as the key to all mythologies. Ovid’s change narratives lent ancient authority to the contemporary, alchemical interpretations of the language of symbols. But exactly what Willard wants to argue from his brief survey is not clear. How does he account for the relations between religion and science in the sixteenth century? Or the present? Whose side are the alchemists on? And where’s Ovid?

Cora Fox’s “Authorising the Metamorphic Witch: Ovid in Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft*” sets a more pointed, and provocative, question: “Both

Ovidianism and writings on witchcraft share an interest in the metamorphic body, and particularly the female body, and yet they are rarely connected or discussed together” (165). Fox argues that Ovid’s change narratives, and especially the story of Medea, helped perpetuate the witch as a type in literary discourse. Her essay continues the analyses of Ovid, Ovidianism and female authority in earlier essays in this volume and brings the story forward into the age of full-blown witch hysteria. The reception and translation of Ovid on the continent both supplemented English demonological writing and at the same time was refuted by Reginald Scot’s sociological thesis that, contrary to what Catholics and many Protestants believed, “witches are silly old women who are victims of their own and their neighbours’ errors” (170). According to Fox, Scot reads Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as expressing contradictory views: on the one hand, the possibility that women like Medea can possess supernatural powers capable of transubstantiating (Scot’s word) themselves and others; on the other, that transforming female characters such as Daphne are more likely to be

400 victims of masculine rivalries and desires. Scot also offers a psycho-social explanation for why some accused women might ‘confess’ to being witches: they rationalised the chance to seize a reputation for supernatural power and the ability to accomplish their desires and control people and things. Scot does not approve of such claims and motives, and his accounts square with contemporary anthropological, sociological and historical analyses of early modern witchcraft discourse. Fox’s comparison is savvy and readable, with a low-key but effective intertextual theory to bring it all together.

Petrarch’s connections with Ovid are discussed in the essays by Gur Zak and Cynthia Nazarian. Zak’s “A Humanist in Exile: Ovid’s Myth of Narcissus and the Experience of Self in Petrarch’s *Secretum*” interprets Ovid’s story of Echo and Narcissus as the intertextual key to reading Petrarch’s text. In the dialogue between Augustinus and Franciscus, Petrarch rejects the Augustinian model of self alienation in favour of Ovid’s more ‘narcissistic’ model of selfhood based on identification, inner-exile and adherence to earthly rather than sacred values and authority. In Zak’s closely argued reading, the Ovidian self is realised in the writing subject’s relation to his mirror image or, in Petrarch’s case, the image of his beloved. Putting all his poetic fame into the Laura basket, Petrarch the poet must identify with the beloved as both poetic referent and transformation of himself (“Quidni enim in amatos mores transformarer?” [Why shouldn’t I be transformed into the character I loved?]). [TRANSLATED DIFF IN ZAK—186]. Franciscus also asserts his desire, love for intense study and poetry writing. Love in the *Secretum* is both a way forward and an obstacle, depending on whether you are Ovid or Augustine. Of course, the converted and ‘corrected’ Augustine of the Confessions (who Zak refers to as the “corrected Narcissus”) also believes that love is the way to salvation, just not the carnal kind. Petrarch’s relation to Ovid thus indexes his relation to any sense of ‘modernity.’ The inner exile of the poetic self is always situated in relation to the writer’s social, material and ethical worlds. Exile must be distantiating from somewhere. That’s the lesson

Zak draws from Ovid and Petrarch. I'm not so sure it isn't Augustine's lesson too. Nazarian in "Actaeon *ego sum*: Ovidian Dismemberment and Lyric Voice in Petrarch and Maurice Scève" argues that the figure of the doomed Actaeon, gazing on naked Diana before being hunted and torn apart, is the Petrarchan hypotext for the *Canzoniere* and the *Délie*. Nazarian reads the poems closely, sometimes to the point where I lose the context. Nonetheless, she draws a compelling, detailed contrast between Petrarch and Scève. The Italian writer abolishes the narrative of Actaeon and Diana, with its subtext of female dominance and silenced masculinity, and substitutes that of Apollo and Daphne, "with himself in the male leading role, as the platform on which to base a poetic voice that posits itself as stable, eternal and tinged with the divine" (208). Nazarian's reading of the poems adds nuances and details to the rather familiar picture of Petrarch the self-constructing poet. In the sixteenth century Scève, Petrarch's self-styled successor in another language, actually identifies Actaeon with the figure of the poet in *Délie*. Scève thus rewrites his intertextual relations with both Ovid and Petrarch. This is a more complicated reading of Scève than we usually get. Scévian speechlessness represents a loss of poetic self-confidence, but the silence enforced by his beloved *Délie* gives birth to the interior voice of the lyric I. Like Orpheus, the dismembered Scévian lyric poet continues to sing, if only in print. Scève's textual self-consciousness is notable in the lyrics, for example:

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E così tristo standosi in disparate,
 tornar non vide il viso che laudato
 sarà, s'io vivo, in più di mille carte (#43, ll. 9-11)

[And thus staying sadly off by himself, he did not see that face return which shall be praised, if I live, on more than a thousand pages.]

Nazarian's subtle essay leaves Ovid behind, but we shouldn't really care.

Julia Perlman's "Venus, Myrrha, Cupid and/as Adonis: *Metamorphosis* and the Artistry of Incest" compares Ovidian narrative imagery with Italian Renaissance painting, specifically Michaelangelo's "Venus and Cupid" (c. 1532-33). Like Plato, Horace, Petrarch, Castiglione and da Vinci on *paragone*, Ovid addressed the relations between visual and verbal arts in his depictions of Venus and Cupid. Perlman argues that Ovid's shifting narrative viewpoint in the story (flashback, inner speech, metadiscourse) links the incest motif in the Myrrha narrative with that in the Cupid narrative. Like others in this collection, Perlman makes good use of the *Ovide moralisé*, Latin mythographers and Italian translations of Ovid as ways to understand the reception of the *Metamorphoses* in Michaelangelo's circle. She also neatly inverts the presumption that an illustration clarifies textual ambiguities. What exactly is Cupid doing with Venus' body in Michaelangelo's painting? Venus and Cupid are both equally "seducer-agent and recipient of partially-visible, partially-concealed arrows...In contrast to the [Ovid] poem, the picture is never neatly resolved" (237).

R. John McCaw and Sanda Munjic take up Ovidianism in seventeenth-century Spanish texts. McCaw's "Transforming Phaeton: Cervantes, Ovid, and Sancho Panza's

Wild Ride” argues that Cervantes’ use of the journey is derived from Ovid’s Phaeton story. The two narratives share a common frame, a young man’s search for his father and therefore himself. McCaw interprets Sancho Panza as seeking for, among other things, social upward mobility and, what amounts to the same thing, greater power and authority. Cervantes uses the Ovidian intertext as a counterpoint to Sancho’s social aspirations. Whereas Phaeton famously flames out before being transformed, Sancho Panza is transformed into a squire, author and governor and comically displaces his lord, master and father-figure, Don Quijote. Munjic, in “A Reflection on Greed through Bird Imagery: An Ovidian Pre-text in Gongora’s *Solitudes*,” reads Gongora’s *Solitudes*, a Spanish Baroque sequence, through the Ovidian lens. Gongora’s poetry is known for its difficult style, intertextual density and insistently playful creative imitation. Focusing on bird imagery, Munjic shows how Gongora’s text intertextually puns across Latin and Spanish while redeploying some of Ovid’s associative images. Munjic makes a nice case for Gongora’s intertextual etymologizing. For instance, describing the owl’s eyes, Gongora uses the Latinised Spanish form *invidiado* (‘envied’) rather than the Romance *envidiado*, thereby stressing the Spanish word’s etymological relation with Lat. *invidia* (‘envy’), from Lat. *invidere* (‘look at askance,’ ‘to envy’). For Munjic, Gongora’s poetic sequence also deploys Ovid’s avian imagery of greed and envy to indict seventeenth-century Spain’s imperial aspirations.

Maggie Kilgour’s “Changing Ovid” partly provides the kind of framing essay the second half of this collection needs. She examines Milton’s textual and ideational engagement with Ovid on the nature of change. Kilgour frames Milton’s writing on change by reading episodes from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, mythographic commentaries and poetic texts (Petrarch and Spenser, “Mutabilitie Cantos”) as they might have shaped Milton’s understanding of Ovid’s poem. (Don Cameron Allen’s *Mysteriously Meant* [1970] would have helped this argument.) She argues that Milton “departs from this tradition that identifies change generally with the consequences of the fall. In fact, for Milton the fall is a metamorphosis of the nature of change that *inhibits* real change” (271). Milton associates the fall with narcissism and therefore with a kind of misrecognition, while he represents and narrativises change as part of nature. Change, then, is part of the “life-world” (to borrow in that term) which makes possible improvement and the promise of perfection even as it undermines those aspirations. What we can’t hope for is permanent change, at least not in the utopian sense. Working out from this reading of Milton’s later poetry, Kilgour associates literary transformation and intertextuality with the concept of social change and hope and with Miltonic Sin. All are founded on the possibility of being different than we are. There is a flexibility and contingency of alternatives: “Here Milton imagines as alternative *aition*: a myth of origination which does not involve fixing” (283). If there can be change, there is hope. Still, I don’t completely go along with Kilgour’s homology between literary transformation and social or spiritual transformation. What we hope *for* is just as important as *the fact of* contingency itself.

Collectively, these essays articulate a literary theory of Ovidian intertextuality from 1200-1670. They also demonstrate the importance of the *Ovide moralisé* as a major mediating vernacular text in late medieval culture. One notable omission is any extended discussion of Caxton's 1480 prose version of the *Metamorphoses*. Rosemund Tuve famously declared that Caxton's text had "no currency," but the essays in this collection might make a different case. Some essays explicitly deploy intertextual theory (*hypotext*, *intertextual*, *sign chain*), while others rely on more general literary analysis via verbal association, echo and parallels. Almost all the essays are of high quality, carefully organised and referenced, with good knowledge of the commentary traditions. A few critics in this volume (Desmond, Fumo) rightly refrain from accepting wholesale the standard translations of Ovid's texts. Collectively, these essays demonstrate the need to make the Ovid commentaries and mythographic tradition more accessible to literary and historical scholars, through English translations and annotated Latin texts. This is a book with rich materials and provocative questions to keep asking.