

## ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON OVID

MARTELLI (F.), SISSA (G.) (edd.) *Ovid's Metamorphoses and the Environmental Imagination*. Pp. xii + 250, ills. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Cased, £85, US\$115. ISBN: 978-1-350-26894-4.

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As an unprecedented poetic work shaped by the precedents of earlier works, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* defies easy categorisation even as it relies on categorical thinking to make its many transformations count as changes from one form to another. At any given moment, the work's meandering storyline can be observed ambling into known generic forms – cosmology, didactic epic, tragedy, comedy, elegy, mime etc., forms that tease at the idea of knowability, then quickly evanesce, functioning as mere throughways to something else. Much the same can be said of the human characters who are featured as stars of the individual stories, many of whom take on non-human forms, whether as hybrid creatures, animals, plants or other features of 'The Big All Else', which we, for better or worse, have named 'Nature'.

For the authors of this volume, all of whom are well versed in modern ecocritical thought, such repackagings of old and ongoing selves into new forms do not just entertain by drawing readers into a world of fantasy where everything is not what it seems. Rather, they directly challenge, to the point of playing havoc with, the basic structures of knowledge that we humans rely on to establish ourselves as exceptional and to position ourselves as creatures who stand apart from a 'Nature' that we have deprived of living substance by slicing it into manageable categories of animals, plants and things, assigning values to those items based on how human-friendly the inhabitants of each individual category seem to us and how compliant they are to our demands. But as these studies consistently point out, everything changes drastically if the others who are made to inhabit those categories are allowed to have their ways of being, doing and experiencing left to mean for themselves, and if all of their multifarious individual *corpora*, for as hard to delimit and keep separate as they certainly are, are thought of as members of some bigger lifeworld that has meaning, agency and purposes of its own; a lifeworld of which humans are an integral, but by no means exceptional, part.

It is here, in the ongoing encounter of unstable and evanescent forms that defy being disentangled from other forms, in flowers that desire and rocks that cry, that Ovid's meandering premodern poem about the world's everything resonates powerfully with posthuman environmental thought. It is the project of this book to draw those connections unabashedly and (as if to steal a page each from both Ovid and Bruno Latour) to muddy the easy binaries that we have long relied on to separate the superstitious and fantastical old from the enlightened and scientific new.

In the book's introduction Martelli and Sissa lay out some of the basic theoretical givens explored by the various contributions to the book. I resist describing these givens as fresh theoretical insights gained because the book's primary purpose is to locate ecocritical and posthumanist possibilities in Ovid rather than to propose new directions and/or critiques of ecocritical thought, and because so much of what we tend to think of, and label, as ecocritical theory amounts to variations on a few basic themes that constitute the founding ideas of the field, a field that is less a discipline *per se* than it is a set of provocations that add up to a different and helpfully reactionary way of looking at the world.

Sissa's opening chapter on 'The Fluidity of Life in Ovid's Metamorphic World' treats the philosophical background of the speech of Pythagoras in *Met.* 15 within a larger study of meat-eating, vegetarianism and blood sacrifice in the *Metamorphoses* (along with frequent glances towards the *Fasti*). The principles espoused by Ovid's Pythagoras, Sissa shows, although they rhyme powerfully with the tenets of numerous earlier philosophers of nature (including Pythagoras himself) depart from them significantly by constructing a world where 'everything is under the sway of metamorphosis' (p. 48) and therefore deeply inscrutable and insecure (whether as food, animal, human or anything else). M. Formisano's chapter on 'Ovid's Gaia: Medea, the Middle and the Muddle in the *Metamorphoses*' offers an allegorical reading of the epic's central myth, treating Medea's failure to align with Graeco-Roman values as both a symbol of Gaia's alienation from humanity in the Anthropocene and of the failures of alignment and epistemic murkiness of Ovid's metamorphic discourse.

S. Butler's chapter on 'Animal Listening' offers an ecocritical close reading of an anonymous 72-line Latin poem from the tenth century known as the 'Elegy of the Nightingale' and ascribed to a certain suggestively named Albus Ovidius Iuuentinus. The poem catalogues the calls and sounds made by 22 different birds, giving articulate literary representation in Latin to what humans tend to register as confusing and inarticulate. For Butler, the assigning of human sounds (meaning-suggestive syllables if not entire words), voicings (songs, calls, shrieks) and attitudes (laments) to non-human voices identifies in the thought world of the 'Elegy' a certain willingness to consider birds like us and us like them, and it unsettles any supreme confidence that we humans might have in our own exceptionalism. Martelli's chapter on 'Multispecies Temporalities and Roman *Fasti* in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*' explores episodes in the poem where animals can be seen living in different time worlds than humans, keeping to calendars of their own and, by so doing, helping humans see and keep time differently. Much as in the previous chapter, birds are humanised by the prescient, time-sensitive behaviours that they are credited with in the poem, causing distinctions between human and animal to blur.

The fifth chapter by E. Gowers takes a different approach to the question 'Are Trees Really Like People?' by focusing on the many ways in which trees defy the comparison despite traditional commonalities that find them standing upright with feet on the ground, arms outstretched from a trunk, and occasionally nodding at us with their leafy tops. It is their differences from us (their immobility and rootedness, their cycles of dormancy/death and renewal, their sturdiness and potential for great age, and so on) that, Gowers convincingly argues, make trees good to symbolise with, allowing them to function as unnatural – which is to say amazingly rooted, long-lived and regenerative – humans in the stories where the tree's commonalities with humans are invoked.

M. Griffin's 'The World in an Egg: Reading Medieval Ecologies' explores Ovid's reception as a sage with deep knowledge of the created world in a cluster of medieval manuscripts devoted to the study of plant and animal life, the natural world and humanity's place within it. The *Metamorphoses*' representation of creation as a divinely enacted process of separating and ordering elements into four layered zones gave rise in medieval manuscript illustrations to depictions of Ovid holding up an egg (a play on his name) as a model of the cosmos, gazing at it as if from a godlike perspective. By connecting Latour's trope of the world as a 'metamorphic zone' to medieval illustrations of nature's confusions, intertwinings and hybridity, Griffin argues that, thanks in part to the categorical transformations and confusions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the environmental imaginations of medieval thinkers were far less rigidly zonal and totalising than one might think.

J.R. Lupton's 'The Titania Translation: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Two *Metamorphoses*' argues that the imagery and metaphorical energy of Ovid's

*Metamorphoses*, especially its several descriptions of living forests, are the background to the Orphic forest where Shakespeare's Bottom experiences his famous dream, and that the dream itself is built from multiple mystic visions of the cosmos as a living world soul that were known to Shakespeare not only from Ovid but also from Apuleius, especially the vision of Isis in Apul. *Met.* 11. C. Zatta's 'Metamorphosis in a Deeper World' explores the ways in which emotional, perception-related assessments of things in nature (our sense of them) are as much a part of what those things are in the *Metamorphoses* (their ontology) as is their matter, shape, colour and so on. This subjective and relational approach to nature, carried by stories connecting humans to their natural surroundings and warning against objectifying the world as meaningless, incommunicative and/or inert, finds Ovid sharing much common ground with the environmental thought of Arne Naess, the founder of deep ecology, who questioned the very possibility of a dispassionate detachment of human observers from our natural surroundings, insisting that attitudes are inseparable from the essence of the observed.

D. Spencer's 'Language, Life and Metamorphosis in Ovid's Roman Backstory' explores the concept of metamorphosis in its various manifestations before Ovid. Through a series of brief case studies of late Republican sources (Cicero, Varro, Lucretius, Catullus and early Virgil) Spencer locates an appreciation of nature's agency, sentience and ongoing mutability that emerges from the disruptive political and cultural upheavals of the period. Lastly, in 'Who Can Impress the Forest?' S. Fluhrer puts a close reading of the Cadmus episode in *Met.* 3 alongside Macbeth's many references to animate landscapes that feel and react to their violation in order to identify a common thread in both Shakespeare and Ovid connecting warfare to agriculture and theatre. Each work, Fluhrer argues, speaks to a time when deforestation was a given of imperial expansion, trees needing to be cleared not only for agricultural development, but to provide materials for building ships, homes, theatres and machines of war. The book ends with an epilogue by J. Shoptaw that serves as a commentary on a lengthy, Ovid-inspired poem ('Whoa') that is situated between the book's general introduction and its first chapter. The poem is a timely re-telling of the Phaethon myth that figures the boy's hybriatic wild ride in terms of the reckless violence that we moderns have inflicted on our natural surroundings.

The book is provocative throughout, offering a rich sampling of modern perspectives on Ovid's genre-defying poem. The chapters that make their points via practical demonstration and serious engagement with Ovid's Latin are regrettably few. Some take time to introduce and explain the complexities of modern ecocritical thought, while others dangle too many difficult provocations in quick succession or indulge too happily in ethereal 'insider' language that dazzles without clarifying, and that might easily be judged too happy in its own superiority. Two things that the book could have benefited from are: (1) a deeper and more consistent engagement with previous scholarship, especially with P. LeVen's *Music and Metamorphosis in Greco-Roman Thought* (2020) and with any number of studies connecting the *Metamorphoses* to Magical Realist discourses and modes of thought; and (2) a deeper and far more sensitive engagement with fundamental concepts that structured Roman ideas about their natural environs (e.g. *religio* as a feature of landscapes, humans categorised according to their *genera*, the idea that plants, animals and people are invested with *generositas* and so on), but that have no obvious counterpart in our own deeply damaged thinking about our place in this world.

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