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Ingo Gildenhard, Andrew Zissos (ed.), *Transformative Change in Western Thought: A History of Metamorphosis from Homer to Hollywood*. London: Legenda, 2013. Pp. xv, 522. ISBN 9781907975011. \$89.50.

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[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review.]

This audacious volume, the outgrowth and augmentation of a workshop on “Myths of Transformation” at Durham University (fall 2008) is concerned with nothing less than the almost 3000-year metamorphosis of the concept of metamorphosis in the Western imaginary. The book, as editors Ingo Gildenhard and Andrew Zissos acknowledge, is a “hybrid between a monograph and an edited collection” (xii). That is, both a primer on how metamorphosis has been defined, deployed, and received from antiquity to modernity, and a collation of studies showcasing these developments. *Transformative Change in Western Thought* succeeds on both counts, due in no small part to the editors’ perspicacity (they have written some 170 pages of introductory material throughout, not including their own contribution on Medea) and their intelligent selection of outside contributors.

In their General Introduction, Gildenhard and Zissos validate their claim that metamorphosis is “an exceptionally malleable and persistent figure of thought for negotiating our ‘selves’ and our world throughout history and across a wide range of texts, discourses, and media” (2). Using Ovid and the Bible as touchstones, Gildenhard and Zissos marshal an impressive panoply of authors, thinkers, artists, disciplines, and trends, from Quinten Massys’ so-called “Ugly Duchess” to Nietzsche’s *Also sprach Zarathustra*, from Erika Sasaki’s genetically altered marmosets to Sister Simon-Pierre’s miraculous cure by the Beatus John Paul II, and from Alois Hahn to J. K. Rowling. Within the rubrics of semantics, ontology, anthropology, and ethics the editors underscore “problems of considerable complexity” (10) in attempts to define metamorphosis: differentiating and categorizing the seemingly endless kinds or modes, distinguishing between literal and metaphorical uses of the term, determining the causes of metamorphosis, and interrogating the conceptions of reality that classify it as real or imaginary. Two recurring themes keep the survey from veering into amorphousness. First, a helpful distinction between ordinary (or surficial or temporary) change and truly transformative change — the latter being a working definition of metamorphosis throughout the volume. Second, the notion of “continuity in

transformation” (15), an Ovidian tenet that clarifies the possible outcomes of metamorphosis, whether continuity in material, identity, or consciousness. The editors rightly observe that the “ability to conceive of metamorphosis” (22) is unique to humanity — which observation is demonstrated throughout this introduction and the collection at large.

From here the book divides into three chronological parts: “Antiquity and Archetypes” (I), “Christianity and Classicizing” (II), and “Science: From the ‘Post-Metamorphic’ to the Posthuman” (III). Each part has its own introduction, in which Gildenhard and Zissos chart the conceptual and theoretical progress of metamorphosis during the respective periods. Of immediate interest to classicists might be the Introduction to Part I, which discusses transformative change in Greco-Roman authors from Homer to Ovid (the task of discussing metamorphosis in Apuleius belongs to Robert Carver in Chapter 5). Gildenhard and Zissos describe not only the increasing interest in transformation stories — relegated to the “narrative margins” (45) of Homeric poetry and to the offstage world of Attic tragedy before they “went ‘viral’” (38) in the Hellenistic era — but also the tensions between fact and fiction that attend such stories. Both trends culminate in Ovid, who incorporates the entire Greek tradition, particularly Hellenistic aetiology, into his *Metamorphoses*, and whose universal history “deliberately (mis)represents fiction as fact” (72). The Introduction to Part II moves the reader into the post-classical, medieval, Renaissance, and Enlightenment eras, focusing both on metamorphoses sanctioned by Christian doctrines (e.g., Christ’s incarnation, transfiguration, resurrection; the transubstantiation of the Eucharist) and on approaches by Christian authors to metamorphosis in classical, now pagan, authors (treating them, e.g., as figments of the imagination, demonic influences, nuggets of truth, allegories). At the start of Part III Gildenhard and Zissos introduce the “post-metamorphic” age, wherein “a realm of transformative possibilities” — that is, the religious and the supernatural — “was effectively abandoned” (333) and new possible realms have been explored under the rise of empirical science. These include literature of the fantastic (per the structuralist work of Tzvetan Todorov) and associated genres such as magical realism (Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* receives extensive discussion) and science fiction. The last, predicated on “posthuman” matters of evolution, mutation, and genetic engineering, yields the concept of the technological posthuman — figures like robots, androids, and cyborgs that erode “the machine-human distinction in the technological imaginary of the early twenty-first century” (376). All in all, the editors’ introductions are robust in their breadth and depth, and they effectively contextualize the contributors’ chapters that follow.

In a review of this length there is no room to discuss every individual contribution, at least not in a way that would do them all justice. Instead, let me single out a few for special notice, meaning no offense to the contributors whose chapters remain undiscussed. Indeed, no chapter of this book is less than worthy. The ones mentioned below are those that resonated most with this reviewer, and that most conveniently illustrate some of the methodologies in play.

Gildenhard and Zissos open with a thorough analysis (Chapter 1) of Ovid’s Medea narrative (*Met.* 7.1–424) as both featuring transformative changes (the rejuvenation of Aeson, for one) and exemplifying transformative change (Ovid’s renovation of his

sources). Like Carole Newlands¹ and Barbara Pavlock² before them, the authors explore the programmatics of Medea's own transformation from naïve maiden into sorceress and her notorious flying chariot rides over Greece and the Aegean. Goldenhard and Zissos propose that the spaces over which Medea flies, and the changes that occurred there, constitute a "metamorphic anthology" (114) subverting geography, chronology, and canonicity. The piece dovetails nicely with the authors' earlier work on tragic figures in Ovid,³ and is yet another showcase for their trademark interest in the poetics of form and genre.

Manuel Baumbach gives a metapoetic reading (Chapter 3) of Proteus in Homer's *Odyssey* and Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*. In the former work, Menelaus' consultation of the shape-shifter becomes a *mise en abyme* for the Homeric *nostos* epic, with Proteus' narrative of Odysseus and his whereabouts "traveling" to Ithaca from Menelaus to Telemachus to Penelope. At the same time, the encounter with the multiform Proteus and the multifaceted responses of Homer's characters to news about Odysseus encapsulate the multivalent interpretation of texts, oral or written. In the latter work, Nonnus appropriates Proteus as his muse, a source of poetic ingenuity and a symbol of semantic mutability, in an effort to surpass Homer's epic achievement.

Carlo Caruso traces (in Chapter 6) the development of the Adonis myth in the poetry of Italian humanist Giovanni Pontano (1426–1503), culminating in his brilliant, neo-classicizing *aition* in *De hortis Hesperidum* 1, where Venus transforms the corpse of her slain lover into an orange tree. Caruso uncovers many etymological and intertextual connections between Adonis, the Hesperides, their golden apples, and oranges; and he makes a convincing case for the orange tree, and garlands thereof, as new emblems of poetic creativity, supplanting the more traditional laurel.

Francesca Spiegel discusses (in Chapter 9) a passage from Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, in which the narrator imagines the transformation of aristocratic women and men, spectators at the Opéra Garnier in Paris, into Nereids and Tritons. This striking *mise en scène*, occurring during a performance of Racine's *Phèdre* and constituting a "displaced theatricality" (398), highlights the artificiality of the social order as mere role-play. Furthermore, the transformation is post-metamorphic, a triumph of modern imagination over the antiquated supernaturalism of classical authors, and therefore exemplary of Proust's "novelistic recreation of an era that has ended" (392). To drive the point home, Proust casts the passage as an ironic homage to the nineteenth-century Parnassian poets and their veneration of Greco-Roman antiquity.

Sarah Annes Brown offers a survey (Chapter 12) of science-fiction stories and novels, as well as several television series and films, that exhibit anxiety over humanity's evolution in its current state to the next, posthuman phase. Reimagining the traditional *scala naturae* as the top of a parabola, Brown posits that evolutionary progress might also constitute regression. Examples of this paradox include Bulwer-Lytton's subterranean Vril and the Borg collective of the *Star Trek* franchise, whose hive mind opens up a fruitful discussion of "the ostensibly more attractive face of ant society" (444) in science fiction (including Heinlein's *Starship Troopers*). Brown concludes where the editors began, with the uniquely human conception of metamorphosis, which both defines our humanity and heralds its eventual loss.

As the preceding suggests, a strong metaliterary thread — transformation as complicated analogue for artistic or literary innovation — ties many of the chapters together. Other threads emerge as the reader moves through the book. Some examples: a literal Proteus (Chapter 3) versus figurative Nereids (9); the comparable demonologies of Augustine (5) and Weyer (8); the notion that the dryad of Hans Christian Anderson’s fairy tale (4) would be well situated on Brown’s parabola (12). None of the chapters feels out of place. All contribute to the story of transformative change, and the book is all the stronger for the multidisciplinary approaches on display.

Sometimes the project feels too large for a single volume. As noted earlier, Robert Carver’s overview of Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* appears in Chapter 5, that is, in Part II. The material is deployed effectively here, forming a useful preface to Carver’s comparison of Apuleian and Augustinian demonologies even as it provides background on the author whose “influence on Western conceptions of transformative change has been second only to” Ovid’s (212). Nevertheless, the background might have been more at home in Part I, perhaps in the Introduction (though its inclusion there would have made a long essay even longer). This trifling organizational issue aside, more significant is that all the chapters traffic, by and large, in textual analysis and stand in sharp contrast to the editors’ introductions, which incorporate both visual arts and, in the last, film (which accounts for the *Hollywood* of the volume’s title). On the one hand, the non-textual media feel isolated from the text-heavy chapters. On the other hand, when other media are brought to bear, they are handled little differently from texts — especially films, which are treated as stories without true consideration of their cinematic modalities. This is perhaps surprising, since Gildenhard and Zissos are sophisticated interpreters of genre, yet not completely unexpected given the physical constraints of the book. All of this is to suggest that the project could continue in a form more amenable to placing individual studies of film and visual art, and even music and dance, alongside those of texts.⁴

In the meantime, the present volume is a most compelling entry in the history of ideas. In their preface, Gildenhard and Zissos hope to appeal to “the general reader...beyond academia” (xi). This might be too much to ask, given the book’s high scholarly timbre, but *Transformative Change in Western Thought* can be profitably consulted by undergraduate and graduate students, not to mention professional scholars, particularly those who hear in metamorphosis a call to collaborate within and across disciplines.

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Notes:

1. Newlands, C. (1997) “The Metamorphosis of Ovid’s Medea,” in *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art*, edd. J. J. Clauss and S. I. Johnston: Princeton University Press, 178–208.

2. Pavlock, B. (2009) *The Image of the Poet in Ovid’s Metamorphoses*. University of Wisconsin Press.

3. (1999) “‘Somatic economies.’ Tragic Bodies and Poetic Design in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*,” in *Ovidian Transformations: Essays on Ovid’s Metamorphoses and Its Reception*, edd. P. Hardie, A. Barchiesi, and S. Hinds: Cambridge Philological Society, 162–81; (2000) “Ovid’s Narcissus (*Met.* 3.339–510): Echoes of Oedipus,” *AJPh* 121: 129–47; (2007) “Barbarian Variations: Tereus, Procne and Philomela in Ovid (*Met.* 6.412–674) and Beyond,” *Dictynna* 4: 1–25.

4. One could imagine, for example, a peer-reviewed website or cyberjournal that expands the horizons of the present volume: not only multidisciplinary approaches to a full array of multimedia, but also efforts to bring non-Western traditions of metamorphosis into the conversation (a project the editors “gesture towards” in their Preface, xii).

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