Introduction

HAMLET: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel?
POLONIUS: By th' mass, and 'tis: like a camel, indeed.
HAMLET: Methinks it is like a weasel.
POLONIUS: It is backed like a weasel.
HAMLET: Or like a whale.
POLONIUS: Very like a whale.

Shakespeare, *Hamlet* III.ii.365–70[1]

The subject of this book is the simile in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. For readers familiar with the epic similes of Homer, Virgil, or Milton this might seem an eccentric choice. The epic simile is defined through its grand lineage, deriving much of its force from the sweeping architecture of these epics, as it builds a superstructure of imagery that makes the cosmos reflect human fate, whether in mass scenes or in the concentrated psychology of a single hero. In comparison, Ovid's epic looks like a complicated tangle of tales that overwhelms the reader with the visual detail of mythical landscapes and bizarre transformations, threatening to render superfluous the similes' illustrating properties and drown their impact in episodes of limited reach. Parody and imitation, those banes of Ovidian scholarship, seem the only viable explanations for Ovid's use of the figure. For those not so easily satisfied, the problem may be turned on its head: how *does* the simile react with this new context? This epic which is not quite an epic, containing characters that transform into and not merely resemble animals, poses a unique challenge for the poet, as well as a chance for a reader to reflect on the essential aspect of the *Metamorphoses*: identity.

Simile and metamorphosis share obvious affinities in their preoccupation with manipulating shape, either physically or mentally. In finding similarities in disparate entities, in seeing one thing as another, both highlight the importance of surface impressions for construing identity.

[1] Wells, S. and Taylor, G. (eds.) *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd edn, Oxford, 2005.

Metamorphosis may even be seen as carrying simile to an extreme: if one thing can look like another, what keeps it from actually being another thing altogether, or prevents it from sliding from resemblance into sameness? While in metamorphosis the transformation is permanent and locked in the physical reality of the changed body, the suggestive power of the simile affects the perception of the thing compared without physically changing it. The relation of these two positions forms the core of this study that explores the status of the simile in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a poem about "forms changed into new bodies" (*In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas/ corpora, Met.* 1.1–2).

Forms and bodies, like style and substance, make an artificial conceptual pair that suggests the desire and even the possibility of separating one from the other. However, scholars such as Pianezzola, Rosati, Barkan, Schmidt, Tissol, and Hardie [2] have drawn attention to the link between the figurative language of the poem and some of its central problems. This book follows their lead, taking as starting point the structure of the simile itself, in the connection and divide between tenor and vehicle that captures a tension based on both similarity and contrast. While the simile seems at first to be concerned with likeness, it is as vital (sometimes even more so) to see the contrast, the difference that counteracts the tendency to sameness and closure.[3] Identity emerges as the central issue, of how it is construed and undermined, and what role likeness plays in its formation and perception. While the first two chapters deal with human and divine identity, and thus deal chiefly with the characters in the poem, the last two chapters concern the form of the poem itself in discussing its genre and its fictional status. The question of identity may then be asked not only of an individual but also of a genre or a poem: what constitutes epic, and do generic markers like the simile affect more than the surface? How do we discern the illusions of the fictional world from those of our own, and how does Ovid's fiction relate to our experience of reality given the poem's aetiological claims?

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a poem that rejects categorization at every turn, poses the unique challenge for interpreting the simile in context, and one that has hitherto defied attempts at offering a unified theory on its role. In contrast to the epics of his predecessors, Ovid's poem does not yield, or even make desirable, a consistent pattern. Models of reading the simile

[2] Pianezzola (1979), Rosati (1983), Barkan (1986), Schmidt (1991), Tissol (1997), and Hardie (1999, 2002, 2004).
[3] Feeney (1992), 36–7.

as expression of sustained imagery, as in Homer, Virgil, and Apollonius, may not be used in the context of the *Metamorphoses*. The absence of a single hero or sustained martial action precludes associations of specific animals with an individual or group (as in Homer's lion similes),[4] while the episodic structure of the narrative, with its variety of range and tone, precludes a consistent set of imagery being used to reinforce a moral message (as in the bestialization of Turnus).[5]

It would render Ovid's multifaceted poem a disservice to conduct business as usual. Of the surprisingly few studies that have been undertaken, the earlier ones restrict themselves to classifying Ovid's similes according to his models and subject matter.[6] Even Brunner's study which attempts to find the difference between Ovid's epic and elegiac similes leans heavily on formal criteria, such as length and source material.[7] On a different plane, the idea of relating the poem's figurative language, including metaphor, to its subject, metamorphosis, led to the concept of protometamorphosis, a term coined by Barkan[8] and later developed fully in Kaufhold's study, which regards figurative language as a preliminary stage that prepares the reader for the ensuing transformation.[9] While the idea that metamorphosis is the result of reified figurative language has been accepted widely, the linearity of this argument misses the complexities and contradictions of the *Metamorphoses*. By considering metaphor, rather than simile, central to the interpretation of metamorphosis, previous scholarship has largely neglected the lack of resolution in the ambiguous nature of the transformed victim. The mismatched outside and inside of a person leads to conflicting emotions, social status, and behavior, all of them prolonged in perpetuity. The simile's openness offers a way to capture such contradictions and explore their meaning.

Instead of following more conventional treatments, it is profitable to look at simile as a key to the poem that opens new avenues of interpretation. To this end, the discussion clusters around four chapter headings, each representing a central issue in scholarship on the *Metamorphoses* today, showing how the flexibility of the figure adapts to a variety of purposes. In each, the simile functions as a point of departure for reading a particular episode in the light of wider debates. Close readings of a select

[4] Lonsdale (1990). [5] Hornsby (1970).
[6] Washietl (1883), Owen (1931), Wilkins (1932), and Richardson (1964).
[7] Brunner (1966, 1971) and von Albrecht (1999), 166–77 examine the function of the simile in its narrative context but view Ovid mostly through Homeric and Virgilian precedent.
[8] Barkan (1986), 20. [9] Kaufhold (1993, 1997).

choice of similes mark the simile as a unique place for reflecting on the issues of its immediate and wider context.

The first chapter looks at the phenomenon of metamorphosis through the lens of the simile as it brings out the lack of resolution and clarity in both the process and the end result of the transformation. Previous scholarship has linked the figurative language of the poem to its subject matter, as signaled by the considerable overlap of the vocabulary of metamorphosis with that of several rhetorical figures.[10] The privileged status of metaphor over the simile in this debate has created an imbalance that needs to be rectified. Noting the fundamental difference between metaphor and simile allows for a different perception of metamorphosis. Using metaphor as model reinforces the finality of metamorphosis, mirroring the distortion of the transformed body in the distortion of the language. Simile, by contrast, puts two shapes in relation to each other but leaves their essential identity untouched. The comparison "A (tenor) is like B (vehicle)" necessitates keeping both shapes in view. Thanks to its bipartite structure, simile captures the inherent tension in both the process of transition from one body to the other and the hybrid being that is part human, part non-human. As a result, metamorphosis may be viewed as a potentially open phenomenon that resists classification or closure.

This theoretical introduction prefaces close readings of episodes that highlight the tension inherent in metamorphosis through the use of simile. Three episodes stand out in which the perception of the body as marker of human identity for oneself and others is threatened by metamorphosis and dismemberment: Actaeon, Pentheus, and Orpheus. Actaeon undergoes metamorphosis as a deer, Pentheus is perceived as a boar by Agave, and Orpheus, despite being recognizably human, is torn apart by animal-like maenads. The dehumanizing treatment is countered by the simile, adding another visual dimension to scenes full of delusion and mental conflict as the reader recreates the scene before his inner eye. Layers of identity are equally central to the metamorphosis of Hyacinthus which refutes the theory of protometamorphosis (that is, simile as dress rehearsal for the later transformation). Rather than confirming an essential continuity between the victim and the later flower, the simile shows that the conventional markers of his person are not sufficient for establishing his individual identity. This latent instability also becomes palpable in instances in which the simile interferes at the exact moment of

[10] Ahl (1985), Hardie (2002), 228.

transformation, in which both the before and after shape are held in balance. The simile comments on three different ways (art, science, magic) to account for the mystery of metamorphosis.

The second chapter focuses on the divine in the poem and the question of both their disguise and true identity. Complementary to the first chapter, the role of appearance in construing and visualizing divine identity is explored. In particular, the collusion of divine and animal as non-human "other" forms the focus of a series of similes that have the god in the tenor of the simile. The first part of the chapter concerns the relation of gods and birds in sharing the air, an area that is taboo for humans, and in their close visual resemblance. As point of departure, the scholiasts' critique of the gods as birds in the Homeric poems marks the ambivalent status of these animals as potential manifestations of the divine which leads to a new reading of the Icarus episode. In the following section, a thematically linked series of similes about gods and bulls culminates in a discussion on the role of the god in sacrifice and the roles of man, animal, and divine in this triangle. The chapter concludes with a discussion of instances of epiphany in which the true form of the divine is approximated by the simile.

The third chapter concerns the intrinsic genre value of the epic simile. The simile as epic agent in a generically diverse poem accentuates the interaction of epic with other genres. The chapter shows the interaction of the epic simile with other genres, namely elegy and tragedy, as well its constitutive role for epic itself. The Ceyx episode examines how Ovid manipulates the form of the epic simile through exaggeration and reversal of tenor and vehicle. The Hecuba episode shows how tragic and epic elements reinforce each other as allusion through the simile works in guiding genre expectations. An examination of the episode of Apollo and Daphne shows the consequences of epicizing the erotic in the paradox of amatory epic, while Achilles' unsuccessful battle with Cycnus critically views the aesthetics of war as a key ingredient to the enjoyment of epic.

The fourth chapter examines how simile engages with the issue of fictionality. Since similes are the domain of the reader even when they are ostensibly focalized by a character inside fiction, they serve as a bridge between the inside and the outside of the poem. Similes are shown as a screen that both allows and withholds access to the image of Narcissus' subjective viewing. The mirror image poses an ekphrastic dilemma for the narrator and reader as sameness cannot be recreated by likeness. The following section on fictional belief discusses the dreams in the House of Sleep as a matter of depicting mental processes and analyses the reader's

gradual engagement with the fictional world. The ephemeral nature of the simile perfectly captures the illusionist character of dreams. A final discussion on anachronism in the simile notes the disruption of the fictional illusion as it reveals the contemporary reader as a presence in the text and highlights the effects of audience manipulation.

CHAPTER I

Metamorphosis and simile

At the end of his life and far from Thebes, the hero Cadmus ponders his misfortunes. He concludes that it might all be the result of the sacred serpent he killed at the founding of the city and prays to the gods to atone for his deed (*Met.* 4.584–6):

> 'Quem si cura deum tam certa vindicat ira
> Ipse precor serpens in longam porrigar alvum!'
> Dixit et ut serpens in longam tenditur alvum …

"If the care of the gods avenged it with such surefire wrath, I pray that I be stretched out into a long belly, a serpent!" He spoke and was stretched like a serpent into a long belly.

Cadmus' prayer is answered immediately through the near repetition in the next line as he is stretched like a serpent (*ut serpens*), beginning the gradual but unrelenting process of metamorphosis by an assimilation of form. There is a peculiar horror in witnessing this gradual takeover of the outer hide, for the bystander as well as for the victim himself. Metamorphosis plays what appears to be a cruel trick on the assured dominance of mind over body – and by extension human over animal. While Cadmus begs his wife Harmonia to touch whatever is left of him (*dumque aliquid superest de me, me tange*, 584), she protests in vain for him to shed his costume (*his exue monstris*, 591). Within a few lines, the human being Cadmus has slid from being like a serpent into actually being one and yet he/it does not behave like one, slithering into his wife's bosom as if it/he recognized her (*veluti cognosceret*, 596). Where is Cadmus, and what is he?

Ovid's choice of metamorphosis as the dominating feature of his poem may be called an inspired narratological device for organizing the heterogeneous corpus of Greek and Roman myth, with the theme of perpetual change making it possible to connect disparate subjects, perspectives, and modes. In addition, the dynamic of these continuous transformations helps to propel the narrative forward by seemingly natural association

rather than a coherently constructed plot.[1] Besides its usefulness as an organizing idea, however, the ubiquitous role of metamorphosis in the poem as well as its adaptability to almost any myth poses the challenge of interpreting the phenomenon itself. Hermann Fränkel was the first to suggest that metamorphosis should be read psychologically as the expression of a "wavering identity" whose root he saw in the conflict between pagan and Christian belief,[2] and other attempts at defining the significance of metamorphosis in terms of psychology and philosophy continue to be made. Solodow for example proposed metamorphosis as the expression of inner psychological states, a position that is found in much of current literature. He writes:

> It is – and this constitutes a central paradox for the poem – a change which preserves, an alteration which maintains identity, a change of form by which content becomes represented in form.[3]

For Solodow, metamorphosis brings out the essential nature of the human being, a clarification of his or her most prominent characteristic. And yet, for every raising of content to the surface, the human identity of the victim is also erased, leading to a loss of individuality. Solodow's thesis, like the more encompassing thesis of Schmidt that sees metamorphosis as metaphor for the human psyche,[4] has the disadvantage of working mostly for established characteristics of non-human objects. Thus the characteristic nature of a wolf, a rock, a spider maps easily onto the fates of Lycaon, Niobe, and Arachne, whereas the change of shape for Daphne, Callisto, or Arethusa, for example, seems random and reveals nothing about the person underneath. The relation of content to surface remains ambiguous, as appearances can be as deceiving as they are clarifying.

The simile deals in the polyvalence of appearances, with the tension between tenor and vehicle[5] in the simile illuminating the inherently ambiguous state of metamorphosis. Simile, like metamorphosis, connects two shapes by proposing a likeness – while retaining the identity of both. Simile can thus be used as a model to investigate the central question of metamorphosis in the poem.

The idea that Ovid's use of figurative language is related to the phenomenon of metamorphosis has found growing acceptance among scholars in

[1] Wheeler (2000).
[2] Fränkel (1945), 21 and notes, 73, 79–85, 88–9, 99. For a detailed critique, see Schmidt (1991), 48–55.
[3] Solodow (1988), 174.
[4] Schmidt (1991), esp. 56–70.
[5] *Tenor* and *vehicle* refer to the thing being compared and to the thing to which it is being compared, respectively (*sic* vs. *ut*).

recent years. In talking about the way in which metamorphosis affects language, Hardie uses Ahl's work to draw attention to the overlapping Latin vocabulary for both metamorphosis and such tropes as simile, metaphor, and allegory.[6] From the opening lines the poem sets up an intricate correlation between its theme and its linguistic expression, both constantly changing. Pianezzola first proposed the idea that metamorphosis is "narrativised metaphor."[7] In a poem in which people can be literally transformed into animals, trees, or rocks, figurative and literal levels of language coincide in an ambiguity which mentally prepares the reader for the transformation. Thus Niobe's psychological state of shock at the death of her children is narrated in figurative language that anticipates her subsequent transformation into a rock (*deriguit malis*, *Met*. 6.303; *congelat*, 307; *intra quoque viscera saxum est*, 309).[8] Schmidt inverted these terms and proposed to see metamorphosis as metaphor for the human psyche with the result that the "whole world becomes an anthropomorphized mirror of human nature."[9] A similar argument had been made by Barkan who argued that the similes in the poem function as "protometamorphoses" anticipating in figurative language the subsequent literal transformation.[10] The idea of the reification of figurative language was further developed in Kaufhold's 1993 dissertation.[11] Following this line of interpretation metamorphosis may be construed as a kind of release, or expression of human emotion in an outward change of shape.

The building scholarly consensus around this line of interpretation is not without problems. The studies concentrate generally on metaphor and take this as the explicit or implicit model for interpretation. Simile, when examined at all, is subsumed in the argument by use of the inaccurate term "figurative language,"[12] or simply treated as interchangeable with metaphor. For example, in a discussion about the simile that introduces Hyacinthus' transformation into a flower, Sharrock's formulation reveals this underlying assumption: "The simile *is clearly a metaphor*

[6] Hardie (1999), 90.
[7] Pianezzola (1979). The exact term is "metafora narrativa."
[8] See especially Haege (1976), 85–93 for a sensitive analysis of the interplay of figurative and literal expression in this passage. The scene explicitly recalls its parallels in visual arts (*nihil est in imagine vivum*, 6.305), especially the popular groups of sculpture that depict Niobe with her children: Hardie (2002), 183.
[9] Hardie (1993), 264 in a review of Schmidt (1991).
[10] Barkan (1986), 20–1.
[11] Kaufhold (1993).
[12] Brooke-Rose (1958), 287 already calls for greater precision regarding this term, as well as the related "imagery."

for the subsequent metamorphosis."[13] In treating simile as metaphor, these studies distort our picture of the unique relationship of simile and metamorphosis.

To be fair, the notion that simile and metaphor are essentially the same reaches back to antiquity and is still the prevalent view in scholarly literature today. Beginning with Aristotle, simile and metaphor are discussed together. Even though Aristotle considers the simile to be "poetical,"[14] he does not discuss it in the *Poetics*. In his work on rhetoric, Aristotle states repeatedly that simile is a kind of metaphor:

> ἔστι γάρ ἡ εἰκών, καθάπερ εἴρηται πρότερον, μεταφορὰ διαφέρουσα προθέσει· διὸ ἧττον ἡδύ, ὅτι μακροτέρως· καὶ οὐ λέγει ὡς τοῦτο ἐκεῖνο· οὔκουν οὐδὲ ζητεῖ τοῦτο ἡ ψυχή.
>
> For the simile, as we have said, is a metaphor differing only in the addition of a word, wherefore it is less pleasant because it is longer; it does not say that this is that, so that the mind does not even examine this.[15]

Aristotle's notion of connecting the two figures, viewing simile as expanded metaphor, or as Cicero and Quintilian,[16] metaphor as condensed simile, continues to dominate the discussion today. Thus in an issue of *Poetics Today* devoted to the subject of metaphor, the editors state that "similes are metaphors."[17] Dissenting voices are few and far between.[18]

The automatic coupling of simile and metaphor blurs the profound differences between the two, viewing them as interchangeable when in fact they are not. Let us focus on the "slight" difference between the two, most notably simile's refusal to "affirm that this *is* that" and the preposition "like" on which this difference hinges. Metaphor can replace the literal meaning of a word without a change in syntax, thereby forcing an instant switch from literal to figurative. The effect of metaphor depends on mimicking literal expression. Thus "Niobe is a rock" may mean that she is petrified emotionally and therefore does not move (metaphor) or that she has changed shape. While outwardly the sentence looks the same, the semantic value of the replaced element turns the sentence into a figurative expression. The analogy of metaphor and metamorphosis is exceptionally close. Metaphor distorts the literal meaning of language, while

[13] Sharrock (1996), 127 (emphasis mine). For my own interpretation, see below.
[14] Arist. *Rh.* III.4.1406b7.
[15] Arist. *Rh.* III.10.1410b21–4, translation Freese (1994). Cf. *Rh.* III.4; III.11.11. See Kirby (1997) for a detailed discussion of Aristotle's views and the enormous literature on this subject.
[16] Cic. *De or.* 3.39.157; Quint. *Inst.* VIII.6.8. According to McCall (1969), 229–36, Latin writers seem to privilege comparison over metaphor.
[17] Fludernik *et al.* (1997), 385.
[18] Brooke-Rose (1958), Hornsby (1970), Brogan (1986), Ben-Porat (1992), Bethlehem (1996).