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Susan Wiseman
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Introduction: writing metamorphosis

This is a study of the English writing of metamorphosis from the Reformation to the late seventeenth century. It asks what work is done by the imagining of transformation in this period and explores events and creatures which may seem to us fantastic: animated stones, werewolves, wild children. Looking at a range of writing in English from literary texts to court records, *Writing Metamorphosis* argues that the seventeenth century is marked by concentration on the potential of the human, and indeed the very matter of the world, to change or be changed. Versions of the idea of metamorphosis were widely available and therefore the writing of metamorphosis discloses vernacular epistemologies as well as elite modes of knowledge.

The project began as a study of how the animal–human border was understood and written about in the English Renaissance. However, as I began to research the movement between beasts and humans the question of metamorphosis rapidly emerged as a possibility which fascinated and troubled the writers I was looking at.[1] As I read texts not usually placed together within disciplines, metamorphosis emerged increasingly clearly as a topic of cultural significance for Protestants, poultry-keepers, physicians, philosophers. It became evident that the idea of metamorphosis was pervasive in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and that it did significant cultural work in a range of texts which, under modern disciplinary dispensation, are rarely considered together. In using the concept or concepts, writers' unease was balanced by a sense that metamorphic stories expressed things that needed to be articulated – they were 'good to think with'.

The term 'metamorphosis' entered English very early, being among the earliest fifteen per cent of words in the *Oxford English Dictionary* with a citation as a noun by Geoffrey Chaucer in 1390. Coming from Greek and registered in France and Italy too, the term apparently derived simply from the name of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The basic meaning that readers put to

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work was 'the action or process of changing in form, shape, or substance' and especially doing so through supernatural agency.[2] Other senses exist within the word, such as the gospels' resonant use of a wider Greek sense which embraces ideas of transfiguration, and there are many related concepts or versions which cluster around the central term – metempsychosis (involving transformation after death) is one example. Moreover, once 'metamorphosis' is in the vernacular, meanings proliferate and migrate. One crucial characteristic suggested by the word's trajectory through the dictionary is that it is used to describe emergent fields of culture, such as a significant application to plant and animal development, dated by the dictionary to 1665. Because at the same time few meanings fell into desuetude, it seems that it was used increasingly widely and often during the period investigated here.

The context of shifting and sometimes accumulating meanings of metamorphosis in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writing has suggested the flexible rather than restricted definition of metamorphosis adopted here. Evidently, the idea of change of state was longstanding in English but, for all the apparent simplicity of the concept, it had a complex life in the understandings of readers and writers. Thus, when we find the substitution of an animal for an infant at the font addressing the question of the infant's transformation by baptism, the question of metamorphosis is present both in terms of the change of state in the infant and in the questioning of that change, using the substitution of animal for human. As Caroline Walker Bynum puts it, metamorphosis can indicate 'the substituting of one thing for another – sneakers for high heels – or it can mean that one thing alters its appearance or qualities or modes of being'.[3] Walker Bynum's description of the twin aspects of metamorphosis as blending and substitution is helpful to keep in mind when approaching the often very specific concerns of post-Reformation texts using metamorphosis. Both the changing, or blending, of states and substitutions feature in the stories that follow and, as this demands, the actual term metamorphosis is used in this study alongside change, transformation and other terms, but all used in relation to the possibility and actuality of a change of state.

Seventeenth-century ideas of change can seem unruly, even exotic to a late modern investigator; they were diverse and spread across a range of writings that are not readily mapped within modern taxonomies of knowledge. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was both a literary resource and a history of the natural world, and the view that such dual purposes are discordant or surprising is produced not in the seventeenth century but by the disciplinary expectations of our own scholarship. Unavoidably, and as a literary study this undertaking is no exception, pre-modern metamorphosis is at

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More information

present mainly interpreted through disciplinary protocols. The critical field of the study of metamorphosis includes, both in history of art and literary criticism, some strictly disciplinarily located studies that explore the relationship between Ovidian metamorphosis and mythography and allegory. In literary study such critical work focuses substantially on the poetic traditions usually tracked through the texts of Edmund Spenser and John Milton, particularly in relation to *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost*. Thus, for example, Louise Gilbert-Freeman writes incisively about Edmund Spenser's *Mutabilitie Cantos* in terms of the image of the divine and the perception of the viewer; she does so with consistent reference to the question of the nature and uses of allegory to accommodate and displace the elements of metamorphosis most troubling to Christian values.[4] Although such approaches can lead to substantial claims (such as Paul Barolsky's assertion that Ovid's bequest to the Renaissance was 'the very play of the imagination as it gave birth to the protean forms of art', and thus he was 'fundamental to the Renaissance idea of art, and to the very idea of art as metamorphosis'), they do so using a tightly defined corpus of material and a frame of reference that largely excludes the social world.[5]

Although allegory and mythography touch the project, the approach taken here is distinct from studies of the influence of Ovid on allegory and the focus is on the very diversity of the kinds of writing that feature metamorphosis and in shaping an understanding of metamorphosis which might take rise with Ovid but finds many textual and cultural manifestations. As it engages with Ovid's *Metamorphoses* what follows draws on the wider understanding of reception found in the work of Charles Martindale and, with regard to the Renaissance, Raphael Lyne.[6] From the point of view of this project's study of textual metamorphosis in a wider view, by far the most productive critical intervention with regard to classical metamorphoses is reception theory which takes a step back from studies of a single genre or tradition to examine the different forms of evidence about reception, most specifically changes in the thinking on the 'reception' of classical texts of transformation in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English thought and writing. As Jean Seznec and Malcolm Bull have argued, the reception of classical antiquity in the Renaissance is local, contingent and far from the sudden rediscovery claimed by some of its contemporary publicists, both drawing on medieval traditions and embracing commercial as well as philosophical imperatives. Thus, as the work of Charles Martindale and Philip Hardie suggests, classical texts are strongly mediated in culture, not only by being appropriated by writers and readers with distinct purposes but through less clear processes of cultural absorption. This study

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More information

takes up Martindale's invitation to study the potentially mixed and 'unclassical' reception of classical texts – particularly widely used texts such as the *Metamorphoses*.[7] A further critical development enables us to sharpen our understanding of these materials. Some scholarship within reception studies has begun to press 'reception' towards what might be called, by some measures, 'distant' reception; precisely the kind of use of classical material that may involve uncertain provenance of source. This kind of reception is discussed by Martindale in terms of Velásquez's painting known as *The Spinners*; he notes that not only is what is represented a puzzle (is it a genre painting, history painting, or a mythological painting? Can it be two or more? What is its relationship to Ovid?) but, also, there is no certainty that Velasquez turned to Ovid's texts as opposed to other sources for the image.[8]

Other disciplines, too, analyse change and transformation in the early modern period and this study is bordered by two bodies of such scholarship: the history of science, on the one hand, and, on the other, the multidisciplinary scholarship on animals in seventeenth-century writing. In discussion of generation and monstrosity, for example, this study is underpinned by the scholarship of those reconsidering the question of the discourses of 'science' or 'natural history' in the seventeenth century – as in the essays on animal generation collected by Justin Smith.[9] In thinking about the transformation of the human, and considering the nature of the animal–human border, this study, though not centrally located in the field of 'animal studies,' draws on the literary, historical and to a lesser extent philosophical work of scholars, such as Erica Fudge and Joyce Salisbury, who imagine what it might involve to write a history, or histories, of animals and of animal–human relations.[10]

Finally, some critical writing explores the concept of metamorphosis and the way it has been used in the world. Outside reception study, literary study of metamorphosis as a concept has often taken the concept far beyond a single period. The idea of transformation is analysed transhistorically in two such studies, by Caroline Walker Bynum and Marina Warner. Each takes the concept of change far beyond a single epoch, with Walker Bynum tracing transformation from Ovid, through Dante, to Angela Carter; and Warner canvassing material from the Renaissance to late modernity and ranging into modern science, on the one hand, and the Taino myths of South America on the other.[11] In the service of a study of metamorphosis and identity, Walker Bynum investigates the question of what might change and what endure as the human changes, blends with another, or is displaced. In exploring the tension between complete transformation and

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an 'unfolding kernal or essence' which endures through change Walker Bynum is drawn to the way in which 'the stories of the past – great stories like those of Dante . . . and Ovid . . . explore and comment on, elaborate and explode themselves'.[12] That Warner and Walker Bynum both ground their arguments in the world by exploring how metamorphosis challenges a sense of self or of place suggests the significance of metamorphosis as a cultural figure that troubles, or shows the troubledness of, the human and its others.

Warner's study of metamorphosis and the world it creates an effervescent exploration of where the cultural power of metamorphosis is to be found. Starting with Ovid, Warner explores metamorphosis as 'ways of telling the self' through the processes of metamorphosis that she defines as mutating, hatching, splitting and doubling.[13] For Warner, metamorphosis begins with Ovid where nothing interrupts 'the vital continuum of all phenomena', and in this spirit metamorphosis for her can have the political inflection of a struggle to be free, from Ovid's ancient tales to the stories of the double so characteristic of modernity.[14] The Renaissance, for Warner, is represented by the lost golden age of Hieronymous Bosch and, for all that the metamorphoses that happen between the Reformation and the Royal Society are inflected by serious, even punitive, consequences, in the texts that follow we can see, with Warner, that the idea of a changed state is an imaginative resource at times pressed into service by those who most need change.

The conceptual insights of Walker Bynum and Warner concerning the ability of metamorphosis to trouble the human self's claim to centrality inform this study. Yet, at the same time, the sheer range of material covered in transhistorical studies inevitably over-rides local contexts in favour of a bigger picture and tends to be drawn back to the great (and powerful) texts of metamorphosis at the heart of the European cannon – Ovid, Dante, Bosch, Leonardo da Vinci. *Writing Metamorphosis*, contrastingly, works with a relatively small timescale and geographical range to examine texts in context and even in close, sometimes symbiotic, relationships to one another in their use of change. Where Bynum and Warner illuminate Europe and beyond and work from the medieval to the modern, this study takes as evidence a wider range of kinds of texts from the English vernacular and a specific time-frame. Its central time-frame is bookended by the confirmation of the vernacular as an official language of liturgy and worship at the Reformation and the late seventeenth-century responses to Descartes' changing of the terms on which human and animal exist. Thus, this study seeks to illuminate the place of metamorphosis in a shorter

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temporal sweep but across a wider, but defined, set of kinds of writing. In distinction to both reception studies and transhistorical discussions, it is the study of the writing of metamorphosis in something which can, roughly and raggedly, be seen as an epoch.

Turning to an example of the uses of metamorphosis, we find an inventory of 1601 gives an example of the place of metamorphosis in the world. It tells us that Bess of Hardwick filled her new dwelling with embroidery and needlework including tapestries of Ulysses in the High Great Chamber and long cushions using the *Metamorphoses* stories include Actaeon and Diana and a version of Europa and the Bull modelled on a woodcut from a Latin edition of the *Metamorphoses*.[15] If the elite used the cushions to slump upon after hunting a beast, then not only they, but their servants, handled and arranged them. The very process of making them involved the acquisition of the book, making of patterns from the illustrations, movement from one to the other. The making of a metamorphic cushion is emblematic, perhaps, of a space being made for transformation in the intellectual, political and wooded location of the estate house, but that reception involves thinking of an intellectual, aesthetic and practical nature. These cushions and hangings are deliberately classical and the cushions were probably designed for Hardwick. In 1551 Bess of Hardwick had ordered several yards of fine linen damask for a 'table clothe with the story of Abraham' and Isaac.[16] This story of substitution and transformation marked typologically for Christians the potential transition to Christianity in foretelling Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The coexistence of Christian sacrifice at dinner and Ovidian ladies squashed under head and elbow after dinner suggests a familiarity with stories of transformation as part of the furniture.[17] About 100 years later, unable to be at her husband's bedside when he died in Sandown prison in 1664 Lucy Hutchinson wrote that 'God had removed me that I might not tempt him to look back upon this world as a flaming Sodom.' Hutchinson is thinking of Genesis 15–19 but also recalling Orpheus and Eurydice in Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses*, which in Arthur Golding's translation reads 'when Orphey did begin / To doubt him lest she followed not; and through an eager love, / Desirous to see her, he his eyes did backward move'.[18] Hutchinson's sad final experience calls up both Biblical and Ovidian metamorphosis and has suggestions of the sense of transfiguration. As these uses imply, metamorphosis was amongst the seventeenth-century resources available for thinking and use by elites but also, potentially, by others of low status. Natalie Zemon Davis has written of 'beliefs, literary and visual works, practices and festivities widely dispersed in society and in their appeal often . . . jumping

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barriers of birth' and status; examples of metamorphosis are often such phenomena.[19]

Sacred and secular transformation

The 1601 inventory makes it clear that stories of metamorphosis were lodged deeply in English society. However, for all their equalising presence as furnishing, it is hard to imagine that the story of Actaeon and Diana and Abraham and Isaac were similarly understood as metamorphoses. Liturgical and classical discourses both engaged with the concept of transformation, but in distinct ways that underpin the material discussed. The advent of the vernacular *Book of Common Prayer* (1549) and Arthur Golding's verse Englishing of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1565, 1567 and in eight editions to 1612) are significant moments in shaping English vernacular understanding of metamorphosis.[20] Let us turn first to change in the reformed liturgy and thought.

'Metamorphosis' is not a property readily claimed by the church in the English Reformation, but versions of change were present in scripture, had long played a crucial role in church thinking and were reactivated by the vernacular texts of the Reformation. Transubstantiation had been the established doctrine of the Roman church since 1215; the idea of transformation of substances was deeply rooted in church practices.[21] A reader might very readily find transformation in her English Bible, or, made up of words from that Bible, the 'revolutionary' *Book of Common Prayer* in English from 1549. *The Book of Common Prayer*'s controversial path is indicated at once by its Englishings and revisions – in 1552 and 1559, with alterations in 1604, replacement by the *Directory of Worship* in 1645 and reissue, revised, in 1662.[22] Obviously, Christ's miracles were one form of transformation about which the simple read and heard, but other instances lacked the explanatory framework of the life of Christ. How, for example, was a reader to understand what had happened to Nebuchadnezzar in all those years as a beast? This story was a topic of controversy for medieval and Renaissance writers from Gervase of Tilbury to James VI and I.[23] More familiar, perhaps, was the Reformation person's encounter with the claim in I Corinthians that '[a]ll flesh is not the same flesh; but, one is the flesh of men, another of beasts', a text hard to square with Nebuchadnezzar's experience, unless, and this became a key point, that experience was illusory. Indeed, I Corinthians seems to imply a definitive separation between beast and human not only at the level of soul but also in terms of the very composition of their being – such a sentence seemed to make

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the human not only the noblest amongst God's creation and so the one chosen to be endowed with reason and the soul which allowed promise of the hereafter, but also to separate the human from the rest of creation in physical makeup. More elaborately, I Corinthians also promised the faithful 'a mystery' whereby, 'in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall again rise incorruptible; and we shall be changed'.[24] The promise of the resurrection, strange enough in itself, was God's alone to give and keep and although it was felt to require that the baptism service indicate clearly that it did not challenge that the authority to change substances was God's alone, this fantastic promise was housed safely in Christian orthodoxy. Perhaps the most profound concern about transformation was experienced in relation to the liturgy, especially with regard to the two English sacraments that remained from seven. Most obviously controversial was the status of the communion bread and wine, but in terms of social impact the issue of what changed, or what was changed, in the infant by the service of baptism was a visible and live social issue.

The situation from 1549 onwards, when parishioners gained ever-increasing access to controversy, was underpinned by an explicit statement of the church on transformation. A formal ruling, the *Canon Episcopi*, stated:

> Whoever therefore believes that anything can be made, or that any creature can be changed to better or to worse or transformed into another species or similitude, except by the Creator himself who made everything and through whom all things were made, is beyond doubt an infidel.[25]

This ruling impacted on understandings of metamorphosis most significantly in the debates on witchcraft. It is heretical to believe, for instance, that the devil can take witches from their bodies and return them, or that he can turn a man into a wolf.[26] Accordingly, in one important strand of thought, such experiences were to be understood as dreams and belief in them was to be condemned as heresy. However, at the same time as condemning beliefs in transformation as heretical (and therefore to be rooted out) the canon explicitly acknowledged, as Robert Bartlett and Hans Peter Broedel note, that the women who imagined themselves transported were indeed perverted by a devil.[27] Denial of actual transformation was far from a denial of witchcraft belief or activity. However, by the fifteenth century theological writers had begun to assert positions that implied literal transformation.[28] Thus, by the Reformation, the situation was confused. Luther, for example, seems to have believed in transformation.[29]

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More information

The Latin endorsement of shape-changing, *Malleus Maleficarum*, had to be weighed against Reginald Scot's rare voice of scepticism in his *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, in which he used Ovid to question the power of witches to change shape.[30] Thus, the English interest in witchcraft kept shape-changing on the national agenda. At the same time the vernacular sacraments, liturgy and Bible made available an apparently contradictory literature of metamorphosis on which people expected, or were expected, to base their everyday and eternal lives.

In 1567 the 'single work' which is chronologically 'the clear point of entrance' into written metamorphosis and whose title seems to have established the word in England, was translated into the English vernacular and made known to those who could read or be read to in English.[31] As we have seen, the text had long had a presence in English culture. However, the Englishing of the *Metamorphoses* was undoubtedly a significant event in the extension and shaping of transformation in English texts, and following Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid we can begin to track the integration into English post-Reformation culture of these unruly stories which are, as Marina Warner notes, so deeply different from Judaeo-Christian modes of thought.[32]

The full text of the *Metamorphoses* was translated in 1567. Famously, Golding considers his reader to need guidance in approaching Ovid, and the 1567 version has an epistle addressed to the Earl of Leicester as well as a practical address to the reader, aimed at the 'simple sort'. Golding works hard to frame Ovid's 'philosophy of turnèd shapes' as potentially beneficial, if not benign, in offering 'the praise of virtues and the shame / Of vices'.[33] The epistles aim to offer a path between diverse kinds of readers and Ovid's potentially explosive material. Golding is concerned to emphasise the value of his source text; he acknowledges that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is inevitably problematic, because the 'true and everlasting God the paynims did not know' and explains to audiences that they are reading about a time when man's sin had led God to 'give him over to his lust to sink or swim therein'.[34]

Golding introduces the book by clarifying the status of the human and thereby sets the terms on which transformation amongst states takes place:

> . . . Three sorts of life or soul (for so they termèd be)
> Are found in things. The first gives power to thrive, increase and grow;
> And this in senseless herbs and trees and shrubs itself doth show.
> The second giveth power to move and use of senses five;
> And this remains in brutish beasts, and keepeth them alive.
> Both these are mortal, as the which, receivèd of the air

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> By force of Phoebus, after death do thither eft repair.
> The third gives understanding, wit and reason; and the same
> Is it alonely which with us of soul doth bear the name.
> And as the second doth contain the first, even so the third
> Containeth both the other twain. And neither beast, nor bird,
> Nor fish, nor herb, nor tree, nor shrub, nor any earthly wight
> Save onely man can of the same partake the heavenly might.
> (32–44)[35]

Here we can see the Aristotelian three-soul model of the natural world unambiguously stated at the start of the period under consideration and in one of the study's key texts. This model was influential and widely considered as true.[36] Golding's comment that 'nothing under heaven doth aye in steadfast state remain' is aligned with both an Aristotelian understanding of a vital universe and with a Christian understanding of the mutability of God's creation. The startling Pythagorean migration of souls represents an extension and changing of this concept to express souls 'removing out of beasts to men, and out of men / To birds and beasts both wild and tame'.[37]

The English life of the *Metamorphoses* is traced throughout the chapters that follow. It was not, however, the only way in which metamorphosis was received in seventeenth-century secular thought but, in 1605,was joined by Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*. *De Sapientia Verterum* followed, in Latin in 1609, Englished in 1619.[38] Bacon's use of classical texts is a study in itself and his texts are not central in the diet of most of the writers and readers analysed here. However, the fact that he used classical myth to discuss the world and the way in which he did so, are both significant. Bacon secured the place of classical metamorphic fable at the heart of learning about the natural world, putting stories of Proteus, Primavera and others to work in imaginative language and similitudes that expressed his desire to intervene in the natural processes at their origin. Writing about the relationship between nature and art, Bacon insisted that, rather than being nature's 'liberators and champions' because they produce order in nature, the arts aim to bend nature to their ends. 'I do not much care for such fancy ideas and pretty words' he wrote, 'I intend and mean only that nature, like *Proteus*, is forced by art to do what would not have been done without it; and it does not matter whether you call this forcing and enchaining, or assisting and perfecting.'[39]

Bacon's discussion of the power of man to change nature was centrally concerned with metamorphosis, in terms of the ability of matter to change or be changed, and expressed the possibility of change using the classical vocabulary of transformation. As Charles W. Lemmi has noted, Bacon

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