Book Reviews / Comptes rendus

Leonard Barkan. *The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986. Pp. 398 \$30.00.

Although this study takes the idea of corporeal transformation as its principal subject, Barkan's investigation is focused on the work that stands "as the clear point of entrance"(1) into the topic, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. He offers an illuminating reading of this paradigmatic text and then proceeds to explore the way it - as a metonym for classical culture - was received, imitated, and transformed by theologians, philosophers, poets, and artists in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. As he asserts when he relates this book to his earlier study of the body in Western culture (*Nature's Work of Art: The Human Body as Image of the World* [1975]), the figure of corporeality remains relatively stable and its intellectual history can be divided into reasonably tidy categories, whereas metamorphosis, by its very nature, defies such easy compartmentalization. Barkan despairs of being able to contain its protean form within the boundaries of a scholarly historical study, but he has, nevertheless, managed to impose a structure on its shifting shapes. The book is thus organized by a reading of three central authors (Ovid, Dante, Shakespeare - with some attention to Petrarch, Ronsard, and Spenser), and an analysis of two principal artists (Titian and Coreggio); intercalated between periods, the transition from classical to medieval and from medieval to Renaissance culture.

This book is exemplary both in the erudition of its scholarship and in the scope and range of its critical insight. That it encompasses the French, Italian, and English traditions as well as the visual material makes it especially valuable and its appeal particularly broad. Barkan's ability to move from interpretations of individual texts or paintings to a historical analysis of Ovid's reception enriches both aspects of the book, and his account of metamorphosis in the Middle Ages is outstanding for its learning and lucidity. His reading of the *Metamorphoses* provides suggestive interpretations of several tales through his integration of anthropological perspectives; he argues that the rape of Europa (and by extension other narrative cognates) can be understood as a myth about the threshold of confrontation with an alien culture (Phoenicia to Crete). Metamorphosis becomes a figure for exogamy and all that it stands for: the initiation into sexuality, the discovery of passionate emotion, the first experience of the otherness of a foreign land. The discussions of ritual, whether as rite of passage or propitiation of the gods, introduces fresh understandings of the elastic and fluid relationship between divinity and humanity and between humanity and bestiality. His analysis of the Lycaon myth (which treats the various

transgressions of these categories) culminates in a meditation on cannibalism, a theme that re-surfaces at various crucial moments in the book, perhaps because the essence of the alimentary, like erotic desire, is to effect change, and both signify the inevitable conjunction between power and impotence. Cannibalism is, he asserts, "the ultimate extension of metamorphosis and its ultimate crime"(92), for it literalizes the concept of bodily transformation as incorporation, an understanding that Tereus achieves belatedly and to his horror only after he has ingested his son, Itys. That the reader of the poem cannot escape being implicated in the terrible consequences of these cannibalistic episodes is insured by Pythagoras' charge in Book XV that meat-eaters are cannibals, on the one hand, and that we are all victims of cannibalism, on the other, since time devours and transforms all things.

Barkan is equally instructive in his analyses of how metamorphosis operates textually, claiming persuasively that metaphor functions as a proleptic, linguistic version of corporeal transformation. The poem's language continually anticipates its narrative, or, as he puts it, "the business of metamorphosis, then, is to make flesh of metaphor"(23). There is often a psychological logic to the changes that bodies undergo in Ovid's poem, as, for instance, when the grieving Hecuba is transformed into a dog. The poem both describes this process and enacts it, weaving into the language images of savagery and inarticulateness that find their appropriate external embodiment in the canine form. Metamorphosis is, then, a complex mixture of change and identity, of violent alteration and the physical realization of a psychic state, and Barkan's comments on specular reflection, a prevalent motif in the poem, are particularly illuminating. But while he grapples with the shifting relationship between identity and transformation, he sometimes retreats from Ovid's radical relativity, suggesting that the poem provides a moral prescription for avoiding metamorphosis, which, in the poem's central books, involves proper distance between lovers. He reads the transformations of Narcissus, Myrrha, Byblis, Hermaphroditus, Philomela and others as violations of this ethic, since they involve incest, self-love, or homosexuality (all endogamous relations), and, while the argument for exogamy which subtends this prescription is a fascinating and persuasive one (particularly in his analysis of the Philomela myth), it accounts neither for the capricious justice in the poem nor for the plight of the powerless, often female victim (who cannot choose her ravisher). The gravitational pull towards the moral is symptomatic of a pervasive desire to locate stability in the Ovidian world of flux; this leads Barkan to privilege elements that transcend the metamorphic economy, most notably the realm of the aesthetic.

Although *The Gods Made Flesh* is an undeniably important and monumental addition to Ovidian studies and to our understanding of the classical legacy in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the book never seems completely to reconcile itself to its central philosophical and methodological division: the recognition on the one hand of the immensity and fluidity of its subject, and on the other

its desire to schematize change and definitively explain the mechanism of metamorphosis. The potential force of its insights is somewhat constrained by the absence of a theoretical framework that would make fuller sense of metamorphosis as a rhetorical idea and allow Barkan to discuss the way transformation is thematized as intertextuality both in Ovid and his imitators. His interest in ekphrasis, as the intersection between the visual and the verbal, and in the petrifying power of the Gorgon's head as an image of rhetoric, provide a natural entry into the subject, but he does not integrate recent theoretical work on either of these subjects, nor does he make explicit the connection between Medusa and language. These are puzzling omissions, especially since some of the groundwork has already been laid, both in intertextual studies of Renaissance literature, in feminist criticism, and in Richard Lanham's persuasive reading of Ovid in *The Motives of Eloquence: Literary Rhetoric in the Renaissance* (1976). Lanham argued that Western metaphysics can be separated into two dominant modes of thought: the serious and the rhetorical, the serious mode championed by Plato, who relies on the idea of a central, fixed self, while Ovid, as defender of the rhetorical mode, denies the possibility of such stability. Where Plato seeks a transcendent referent beyond the linguistic, Ovid's poetry – lucid, ambiguous, and self-referential – provides the only sanctions he requires. This interpretation of Ovid pushes the thesis of Brooks Otis' seminal study, *Ovid as an Epic Poet* to its revelatory conclusion, allowing us to understand, for instance, Ovid's parodic recapitulation of the *Aeneid* in the last three books of the *Metamorphoses* as a subversion of epic and the Augustan and Virgilian conceptions of history on which it depends. Barkan seems to want to move in this direction (he suggests in an endnote that Ovid is the ideal subject for intertextual study, since he lived in an age dominated by the Virgilian aesthetic), but he never pursues the implications of his often brilliant and always learned insights. He continually searches for a still point in these transformations, and rather than exploring the dynamic interaction between texts, artists, or the human and the divine, he implicitly relies on the identity of the artist, the stability of the work of art, the immanence of divinity, or the static structure of the cosmos as categories that resist change. Despite his professed interest in metamorphosis, he is still hampered by a legacy of intellectual history as encyclopedic, cumulative, and teleological, and although frequently on the verge of radical perception, his emphasis is finally more on the product (aesthetic artifact) than the process.

For example, although Barkan notes that virtually all of the myths in the *Metamorphoses* existed long before Ovid's time, he does not capitalize on the idea that the Ovidian conception of authorship is necessarily a metamorphic one; that is, Ovid did not invent tales, but rather conflated, expanded, and generally transformed received mythic narratives. Thus Barkan takes the *Metamorphoses* as an unproblematic point of origin, and this leads him to elide the competitive, intertextual, and parodic nature of the poem. The metamorphic quality of the text lies not just in its subject, then, but in its aesthetic, and it is not accidental

that many of the tales are concerned with artistic competition. In a revealing analysis of the Arachne-Minerva weaving contest, he discusses Minerva's tapestry as dominated by images of stasis and divine justice, whereas Arachne weaves a mirror of Ovid's own text, imaging tales of transformation that flow seamlessly from one to the other in a narrative structure that continually transgresses and subverts hierarchical order. Barkan then turns to an artistic depiction of the weaving contest as it is figured in Diego Velasquez's *Las Hilanderas*, and in an illuminating discussion, he demonstrates how the three planes of the painting interact with one another. He identifies the tapestry in the background as Velasquez's rendering of Titian's *Rape of Europa*, then in the Spanish royal collection. Barkan's reads this "visual quotation" as homage to Titian, the great master of metamorphic subjects. But surely given the reference to the contest, in which artistic identity itself depends upon the outcome of the competition, we must see the allusion to Titian, especially given the Bloomian critical legacy of the anxiety of influence, as more complicated than a painterly tribute.

Barkan seems to be on the verge of recognizing here and elsewhere the genuinely metamorphic relationship between artists (or poets) and their predecessors, but his tentativeness about the politics of intertextuality means that his interpretations often stop precisely when they are becoming most interesting. This is especially apparent in the sections on Petrarch and Spenser, which are disappointingly schematic, but the final chapter on Shakespeare brings the book to a powerful conclusion. It opens with a provocative reading of *Titus Andronicus*, *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Cymbeline* that integrates the earlier analyses of Philomela and tapestries in a discussion of the thematics of reading. Although similar in some respects to Jonathan Goldberg's treatment of these texts in *Voice Terminal Echo: Postmodernism and Renaissance English Texts* (1986), Barkan's analysis culminates in an acute meditation on reading as voyeurism, a fitting theoretical transformation in this history of erotic and textual metamorphosis.

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Luciano Cheles. *The Studiolo of Urbino: An Iconographic Investigation*. University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986. Pp. 194. Pls. 8; Figs. 109. \$42.50.

Luciano Cheles has devoted a monographic study of two of the most fascinating private rooms of the Italian Renaissance, the *studiolo* in the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino, and its no less elegant counterpart in Gubbio. The book was published simultaneously in the United States and in Germany. It is based on the author's postgraduate thesis and some articles listed in the bibliography, and had in part