

Ovid and the feminisms (abstracts)

Carole Newlands - The Teller of Tales: Hypsipyle and Christine de Pisan

Reception studies is a fairly recent field in Classics, but the terminology used to describe its processes was not. Thus ‘inheritance’ and ‘legacy’ with their patriarchal overtones have been set aside in favour of a variety of terms ranging from ‘chain’ (Martindale, 1993) and ‘fuzzy’ (Hardwick, 2011). Does remediation, perhaps, offer a more robust and at the same time fluid term, that can be applied to the reclamation and rehabilitation of women’s narratives, particularly when ‘received’ by women writers? My paper will explore this question through the case of Hypsipyle and her representation in the late Middle Ages.

Hypsipyle is scarcely a household name; she is overshadowed by her powerful counterpart Medea. Perhaps too Hypsipyle’s relative obscurity today derives from her fractured and paradoxical character; she occupies the oppositional roles of the good mother/the negligent nurse; the queen/the slave; the wife/the abandoned woman; and the virtuous woman/the deceiver. Geographically and temporally her career is divided in a space of twenty years between the island of Lemnos on the one hand and the Nemean grove on the other. One coherent thread, however, ties together Hypsipyle’s various instantiations, her voice, which is multi-faceted and is powerfully expressed in several genres, elegy, epic, and lyric. Her prominent role in Ovid’s *Heroides* and Statius’ *Thebaid* respectively has prompted the question of whether the stories that Hypsipyle tells of her complicated life should be dismissed, for she is an unreliable, deceptive narrator (Nugent, 1996); Casali, 2003).

My focus of inquiry is the late Middle Ages and a period of just over forty years when Boccaccio in his *De Claris Mulieribus* (1361), Chaucer in his *Legend of Good Women* (c. 1385), and Christine de Pisan in *The Book of the City of Ladies* (1404) claimed that they would restore the reputation of prominent women, mostly from pagan antiquity. Only Christine, however, provides a wholly positive response to Hypsipyle, making her a prime example of the loyal daughter. Hypsipyle is one of the first inhabitants of Christine’s ‘city of ladies’, one of whose founding stones represents Arachne, the skilled weaver. Can we then describe Christine’s reception of ancient texts as a form of remediation? On the other hand, unlike Boccaccio and Chaucer, Christine omits a good part of Hypsipyle’s life-story, including her narrative voice. Her approach is thus also reductive and raises a second question about reception posed so forcefully by Joplin (1984), does the act of remediation of ancient women’s stories necessarily include their fracturing?

Ellen Oliensis - Reading Ovid with Freud: the women of Metamorphoses 6

Psychoanalytically-inclined feminist readers have for the most part moved on from Freud, finding more of interest and promise in writers such as Irigaray, Deleuze, and Butler. This shift has been consolidated by the relatively new emphasis on gender fluidity and the inadequacy of the gender binary, which has relegated the dualism-obsessed Freud still more decisively to the sidelines. If I continue to read Ovid with Freud (more precisely, with Freud as filtered through Lacan), it is not because I believe that Freud brings us closer to the origins of gender (in)difference or the truth of gender (non)identity, but because Freud brings into focus in Ovid’s poetry some effects of the social reproduction of gender that, however contested and eluded, persist to this day. This paper will accordingly approach *Metamorphoses* 6 via the much-reviled concept of “penis envy,” aiming to show that Ovid not only anticipates this Freudian concept but also plainly reveals it to be a potent figure for, or

reflex of, women's resentment of the constraints and exclusions that define their "feminine" lot, or, as Gayle Rubin put it in her perennially-timely article of 1975, "the disquietude of women within a phallic culture."

Jacqueline Fabre-Serris - Desire and sexual violence in the Metamorphoses (Salmacis/Hermaphrodite; Arethusa/Alphaeus). How to read, and understand, Ovid in his/our social context?

Any society is structured by the division between the sexes in all the fields of public and private activity. Since the Ancients themselves seem to have used the masculine and feminine as social categories, applying the modern concept of genre in the study of Antiquity means to engage in a process not so much of reconstruction as of contextualization, which is illuminating for our knowledge of the past and of the roots of our society and culture. A key feature of Antiquity is that, especially in literature, the authors are trained to produce complex analysis resulting from their use of narrative and rhetoric techniques. My paper focuses on Ovid, the poet, who in Rome was most interested in the relations between men and women. Since the 1964 study of Hugh Parry ("Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Violence in a Pastoral Landscape") the topic 'violence and rape in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*' has received serious scholarly attention (for example Richling, 1992, "Readings Ovid's Rapes"). In the United States there is an ongoing debate on whether and how it is possible to teach Ovid today, since his vivid depictions of rape and sexual assaults may be potentially offensive, notably for some students. I agree that reading ancient texts can help us to identify the roots of our social system (in which a sex is oppressed by the other), but in my opinion we have to avoid simplistic readings, in the first degree. How to read, and understand, Ovid both in his and our social context? In my paper I would like to compare the stories of Arethusa and Hermaphroditus, respectively 'victims' of the violent desire of a man, Alphaeus, and of a woman, Salmacis. I will examine how Ovid's point of view can be hypothesized from the narratives he constructs as the principal narrator, from the feelings and speeches he attributes to female and male characters, and by contrast with the social and ideological context of Augustan age. I want to argue that the complexity of this point of view is always interesting for us to question and discuss.

Sara Lindheim - "Rethinking Repetition in the Heroides"

While we might lament the lost Callimachean model for *Heroides 2*, I suggest that the Ovidian Phyllis stands out not as a heroine without a source text, but instead as a hauntingly familiar heroine, her narrative and self-portrait recalling other abandoned literary heroines. She underscores the similarities between herself and Catullus' (and Ovid's own) Ariadne. She reproduces the behavior of Laodamia (*Heroides 13*), Oenone (*Heroides 5*), even girlishly innocent Medea (*Heroides 12*). Most of all Phyllis deliberately refashions the outlines of her entire narrative to replicate Dido's story (from *Aeneid 4* and *Heroides 7*).

What should the reader make of the persistent repetition, the incessant, disjointed looping, that emerges as Phyllis plays "the Dido (or Ariadne, or Laodamia, or Oenone, or Medea) card?" Why does she underscore the recurring sameness between her story and the narratives of other heroines in Ovid's epistolary collection (or of the heroines on which the Ovidian ones are based)? I suggest an explanation through a consideration of what queer theorist Lee Edelman has dubbed heteronormative reproductive futurism.

Drawing on Lacanian theory, Edelman argues that the Symbolic, the realm of language and law, rests on collective fantasies that impose stabilizing frameworks of coherence on normative thought and normative lived experience. A love story is an example par excellence

of such a fantasy – a narrative of heteronormative desire between subjects that develops along linear and chronological lines: love, marriage, family, happily-ever-after, repeat in the next generation. The fantasies require belief in a sustaining framework that must reproduce itself into the future, and this imagined future continuity reflects back and confers coherence and stability on present reality.

Edelman also interrogates the fantasies that sustain reproductive futurism. As subjects in the Symbolic, we are always already alienated from ourselves by the signifier, and thus we cling desperately to the governing fiction of our own wholeness and coherence within a stable and unified Symbolic. We dismiss, paper over, sublimate, but nevertheless a surplus always emerges from within (the subject/the Symbolic), capable of dismantling the subject and the Symbolic order. This surplus is a negativity, a disruptive force that threatens to disassemble carefully-sutured wholeness. Lacan calls this *jouissance*, an eruption of the Real, the death drive internal to and informing the social order. It makes its presence known in the Symbolic through insistent repetition and looping, its refusal of teleology, its resistance to intelligible meaning. Edelman suggests that the Symbolic order requires someone/something to step into the space of negativity – a “sinthomosexual,” positioned to represent all that is narcissistic, anti-social and refusing futurity, a queer embodiment of the death drive who preserves the fantasy of reproductive futurism for everyone else.

I suggest, through Phyllis, that the heroine of the *Heroides*, in her insistently iterative self-representation, a reprise of bits and pieces from other stories and selves, takes up this position as queer embodiment of the death drive. For Edelman this figure is almost exclusively a gay man; here we find a woman. While Edelman’s sinthomosexual preserves the fantasy of reproductive futurism for the rest of us, absorbing to himself all negativity, the heroine achieves something quite different; she draws our attention to the presence of the death drive at the heart of the heteronormative love story, embodying the disruptive force to issue a powerful critique of this fantasy. A coda, from the letter of Phyllis in *Fifteen Heroines* (2020), will support this reading.

Thea S. Thorsen - Ovid's Subtle Pandora: The Mother also of Man

This paper argues that Ovid’s reception of Hesiod in his *Metamorphoses* includes a subtle evocation of Pandora as the earth (*tellus* 1.80, 1.364, *formatae ... terrae*) and hence the mother of man as well as of woman. The confusion between Pandora as earth (“giver of all”) and Pandora as Zeus’ contraption (“all-given”) to punish the humans who are exclusively designed as male by becoming the first woman and hence the mother of all subsequent women (thus Hes., *Theog.* 509–514, 562-593; *Op.* 53–105) is manifest in several vase paintings of archaic and classical date in which she emerges from the ground. The confusion arguably culminates in a cup presently in the [British Museum](#) where she is called «Anesidora», a noun defined in *LSJ* as «sending up gifts», an epithet for earth. Ovid, who otherwise reworks much from Hesiod, especially in the beginning of this *Metamorphoses*, explicitly omits Hesiod’s Pandora, yet implicitly includes her through Deucalion’s interpretation (*magna parens terra est* 1.393) of Themis’ command to him and Pyrrha to throw the bones of the great parent behind their backs to recreate humanity (1.383). For Pandora *is* the parent of Pyrrha and possibly also Deucalion with the fathers Prometheus and Epimetheus respectively, and –allegorically or perhaps even metonymically – earth. Based on these observations, this paper concludes that Ovid subtly evokes Pandora in a way that corrects Hesiod, who claims that Pandora is the mother only of women, by making her the mother also of man: *inque brevi spatio superiorum numine saxa/ missa viri manibus faciem traxere virorum/ et de femineo reparata est femina iactu./ inde ... sumus* (1.411-415, “in a

short while the stones thrown by the man's hands carried the look of men and the woman was restored by the female throw. From this, we are ...").

Simona Martorana - A "Metamorphic" Medea in Ovid's Heroides 12

Ovid focuses on Medea's narrative (at least) three times: *Heroides* 12, the *Metamorphoses*, and the almost entirely lost drama, *Medea*. While the Heroidean Medea has been interrogated prevalently through intertextual approaches (e.g. Jacobson 1974; Davis 2012), the more comprehensive account of Medea in the *Metamorphoses* has given rise to various interpretations (Verducci 1985; Gildenhard and Zissos 2012), including a recent ecocritical reading that reconsiders Medea as an articulation of "the intrusion of Gaia" in the *Metamorphoses* (Formisano 2023). Building upon this hermeneutical path, in my paper I draw on ecocritical and posthuman theory (particularly Albrecht's *Earth Emotions*, 2019, and Braidotti's *Metamorphoses*, 2002) to uncover Medea's metamorphic identity in *Heroides* 12.

Ovid's epistle resituates Medea at a very liminal and ambiguous point in her mythological narrative. The Heroidean Medea is suspended between past and present, epic and tragedy, masculinity and femininity, barbarity and civility, weakness and violence, and maternal love and infanticide. Medea's narrative before and during her meeting with Jason in Colchis is characterized by references to an untouched natural landscape, which is consistently violated by the intrusion of Jason. Together with the Argonauts, Jason is the first man who travels the sea by ship, thus enacting a transgression of both natural and spatial boundaries (*Her.* 12.7-13); the uncontaminated, quasi-sacred place of Medea and Jason's meeting antithetically sets the stage for his highly rhetorical and false speech (67-88).

As Medea recounts her experience in Corinth, the natural surroundings are replaced by more 'urban' architectural features. This 'urbanization' of the landscape is marked by Medea's motherhood, which enhances her involvement and coercion into social and familial hierarchies. It is one of her children who looks at, and describes, Jason's triumphal procession from the entrance door of their house (147-152); earlier in her letter, while indicating Jason's house and her union with him, Medea uses legal vocabulary and concepts (133-134, with Alekou 2018), thus enhancing her temporary incorporation into Roman cultural and social rules.

Following Albrecht's theorization of "solastalgia" as "the lack of a solace, namely of a place of peace of mind and body" (Albrecht 2019: 37-38), one can say that the loss of the Colchian natural landscape means for Medea the loss of her identity as an alterity, that is, a sorceress, a quasi-preterhuman being. The Colchian Medea is linked to chthonic forces and deities; yet, she rejects her identification with the traditional notion of a nurturing 'Mother Earth', thus embodying an alternative idea of earthly goddesses. While in Colchis, Medea embraces a form of immersion and participation in the natural world (*Her.* 12.28; 66-70; 99-100; 166-167), thereby collapsing the distinction between herself and non-human entities, and establishing a "symbiotic" relationship with the natural world. As this distinction is re-established, once in Corinth, Medea loses her identity as a human-nature continuum (Braidotti 2002). Her forecasted infanticide (211-212) at the end of the letter keeps Medea in a liminal position between past and present, and nature and civilization, thus stressing her transitional, nomadic, and metamorphic identity.

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Alison Sharrock - Melior Natura, Tellus, Creation, and Nurture: Ecofeminism in Ovid's Metamorphoses

Ecofeminism began in the 1970s and 80s as a movement committed to social action with a view to promoting respect for both women and the more-than-human world ('nature'), by elucidating and confronting the long history of connection between women and nature, with the concomitant oppression of both. That connection is a cultural imaginary in which men implicitly stand outside 'nature' and are thus in a position to judge and to exploit it. While ecofeminism today takes many forms which are different in detail, the notion that the causes of women and of the more-than-human world are better together permeates both theory and practice. When it comes to literature, Timothy Clark has argued that 'the majority of ecocritics see their intellectual work as a kind of worthwhile activism, committed to the argument that a change in cultural values can lead to less destructive forms of life.'¹ But what contribution can pre-modern texts bring to the conversation regarding the contemporary climate crisis and its attendant injustices, of which the ancient world can had no direct prescience? My contention is that classical ecocriticism is a two-way street, in which not only does the contemporary situation require us to read all literature through a changed lens, but also Latin literature presents a valuable site for the exploration of contemporary issues. This is because it is, on the one hand, imbued with a creative imagination innocent of the ideologies that infect contemporary debate, while being, on the other hand, formative in the development of Western thought. Feminism has for many years played a particularly important role in modern interactions with Ovid's work. The ecological inflection of feminist reading is only just starting to explore the vast world of Ovid's creative Nature, his abused female trees and pools, and his oppressive deforesters. At least, it has only recently begun to do so with an explicitly ecofeminist theoretical awareness: there have been studies which could nonetheless fit under the banner, and might benefit from being reinterpreted in that way. I propose in this paper to explore the activity of personified Nature and related female characters in the *Metamorphoses*, those whose role in the creation and nurturing of the world is both celebrated and sometimes occluded, to see how far they can be rescued (and if they need to be) from the accusation of a romanticised 'new age' essentialism which can backfire against both scientific environmentalism and contemporary feminism.

¹ Timothy Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism*, Cambridge 2019: 4.

Alison Keith - Over Her Dead Body: a postcolonial/transnational feminist reading of the representation of women in Ovid's Metamorphoses

This paper explores the implication of key female figures in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – from Daphne (1.553–65), Callisto (2.409–531), and Medusa (*Met.* 4.614–20, 772–803) early in the poem to Cybele (14.530–65), Pomona (14.622–771), and Hersilia (14.829–51) in the penultimate book – in the artistic, literary, political and religious discourses of Augustan Rome. Drawing on postcolonial theory and transnational feminist criticism, I argue that these characters are central to the poet's construction of Roman hegemony over the Mediterranean world in the teleological arc from Jupiter's "Palatine of heaven" (*Palatia caeli*, 1.176) to the emperor Augustus' apotheosis at the conclusion of the epic (15.869–70). My argument takes its bearings from the geographical sweep around the Mediterranean of the early books and the symbolic connection of woman with landscape and civic territory reflected in the classical iconography of nations as feminine figures. I document the deployment of the emblems of these mythological women in the service of Roman civic, military, and religious discourses and trace the close connection between Jupiter, Apollo, and Augustus, on the one hand, and the many metamorphosed female figures on the other. The intricate interconnections of geography and gender in Ovid's mythography reflect the contradictory and conflictual articulations of ethnicity and class, sex and gender in the larger Roman imperial context. Viewed through a transnational feminist lens, the *Metamorphoses* lays bare the violence inherent in Roman imperial rule, and not just in conquest; and it illustrates the delicate, or not so delicate, negotiation of gendered and ethnic hierarchies, rules, and restrictions in both the colonial hinterland and the imperial metropole.