
Richard Buxton is the author of several significant studies of Greek mythology. The work reviewed here deals with a special field within the corpus of ancient myths, namely those that speak about the transformation of divine and human beings. Such unexpected changes prompt feelings of astonishment or, as the Greeks would have said, of *thámboς*. The aim of this book is to explore this *thámboς* and to understand better how men in the Classical Age responded to it.

The author of ‘Forms of Astonishment’ begins by asking what metamorphosis really is, a question which is open to a variety of different answers; Buxton’s approach comprises a set of remarks on six representative moments in the history of ‘transformation’: Ovid’s and Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, the Christian and medieval view of the phenomenon, Velázquez’s *Las Hilanderas*, the change of form in cultures alien to the Classical tradition, the concept of metamorphosis in the life sciences, and transformation in the cinema. Focusing on the Greek world, the author states his intention of studying the phenomenon of metamorphosis as it appears in mythological narratives, wherein «drastic, corporeal transformation» is involved (p. 20). It is claimed, perhaps surprisingly, that such mythical tales have not received enough scholarly attention thus far; moreover, according to B., scholars tend to address the subject from an Ovidian perspective, a strategy which he has decided to forego in his own analysis.

(Buxton’s interest in avoiding an Ovidian perspective is noteworthy; at the same time, however, it might have been useful for many readers had the author used Ovid’s poem more often as a final term of comparison.)

The main body of the book consists of two sections, ‘Narratives and their Contexts’ (27–153) and ‘The Logic of Transformation’ (155–252). The first adopts a diachronic point of view and reviews metamorphosis in the context of five literary and iconographical examples. The *Odyssey* comes first, and B. starts the chapter dedicated to it (29–48) by commenting on a passage (III 371–3) in which whether or not Athena adopts the appearance of a bird has been a matter of some dispute. The analysis of these lines and other similar passages helps B. to underline the centrality of transformation within this epic poem, an emphasis that runs counter to the arguments advanced by scholars who regard the anthropomorphism of divinity as an effect of Homer and Greek religion and, on that basis, have endeavoured to reinterpret examples in which a god takes on animal form. Two outstanding practitioners of transformation within the *Odyssey* are of course Proteus and Circe. When analysing these cases, B. emphasizes how, in spite of the supposed realistic tone of this major Homeric epic, metamorphosis is a common event in the poem: it can happen both in a place as remote and magical as Circe’s island or in a setting as familiar as Ithaca.

(Readers of Homer may have the impression that the *Odyssey* is more open to fantasy and folktale than the *Iliad*. A pertinent question in this regard concerns whether or not the poems differ in relation to metamorphosis. Might acceptance...

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1 Forbes Irving’s book (P. M. C. Forbes Irving, *Metamorphosis in Greek Myths*, Oxford 1990) is not regarded by B. as a satisfactory exception to the rule, but as a «point of departure» (21) for more detailed study.
of corporeal transformation be described as a distinctive feature of the *Odyssey*?
Buxton spends two pages arguing that the two poems are similar in this respect, although he is also forced to concede that there is a difference in degree between them. Perhaps this point should be analysed in more detail by B. or other scholars in the future.

A subsequent chapter focuses on transformation in Athenian drama (49–75); in this chapter, the author calls into question for the first time whether or not metamorphic events were taken seriously by spectators. The differences between tragedy and comedy in relation to metamorphosis are stressed. As B. notes, transformation is presented as transgression of normality in tragedy, as a means of escape from normal life which only a few people experience. This is clearly the case in works where change and metamorphosis play a distinctive role (*Bacchantes*, obviously; *Prometheus*, where the horned Io appears on stage; and *Hekabe*: think of the queen becoming a bitch according to Polymestor’s final prophecy). On the other hand, B. states that transformation enjoys a kind of normality in Aristophanic comedy and is easily accepted by both characters and audience. This is so in the *Birds*, the first play the author discusses; the many cases of ‘shape-shifting’ or ‘cross-dressing’ (men adopting the appearance of animals, gods, women...) found in the Old Comedy might also be read as further examples of the metamorphic nature of the genre.

(Some readers may object that disguise does not constitute «drastic, corporeal transformation», the narrative event to which B. promised on 20 to limit his study.)

In dealing with comedy, reference was made to two vases on which scenes taken from this literary genre are depicted (cf. 69–71). B. then turns to the question of how the visual arts handled the theme of metamorphosis. To ‘tell’ a process of transformation in images may be a challenge for the artists. In the case of well-known stories (Zeus approaching his lovers as a shower of gold or a swan), the task may be much easier; but Greek artists also developed strategies to represent evolving metamorphoses of a more complicated type, such as, for example, Ache- lous’s turning successively into several animals and hybrid creatures. Once again, we run up against the problem of the limits of normality and humanity; it is important to remember that the artists could choose from among a wide variety of different possibilities, ranging from monstrous hybrids to more humanlike representations, such as Niobe turning into stone from the feet upwards.

Hellenistic literature is dealt with next. In this period, many writers were fond of *aitia* which explained a changing present in the light of mythical transformations achieved in the past. From this field of literary production, B. chooses to speak about two Hellenistic collectors of myths (Nicander of Kolophon, Boios) and two poets, Apollonius of Rhodes and Moschos. These poets try to rival their predecessors in the ways they retell metamorphic stories, as is the case with Apollonius, for example, when his Argonauts come to the island of Circe. On the other hand, Moschos elaborates his *epyllion* about the metamorphosed Zeus raping Europa with a marked Hellenistic flavour; he reminds us that it is not only the father of gods who undergoes a transformation: the young girl we find at the beginning of the poem will be converted into a wife and mother, as the last verse implies.
The final chapter in the first section of the book is dedicated to ‘Post-Hellenistic Narratives’, represented by authors such as Pausanias, Plutarch, Artemidoros and Nonnos. The first discusses and rationalizes some myths involving the transformation of humans into non-human forms (cf. the cases of Kyknos or Lykaon). In relation to Plutarch, B. addresses his *Gryllos*, where the boundaries between humans and animals are explored. Artemidoros also plays a role in this review of Greek metamorphosis because conversion into another form is a recurrent theme in the dreams of which this author spoke. The case of Nonnos, as B. states, is different. Metamorphosis is a principal theme of his poem as of Ovid’s; however, his position is notably different given that he presents transformation not as an astonishing event but as something that can happen and, indeed, that usually does happen among his gods.

(As B. reminds us, scholars have sometimes suspected that Nonnos may have known the mythological poetry of Ovid; in addition to the bibliography he cites, cf. G. D’Ippolito, ‘Nonno di Panopoli e i poeti latini’, in Á. Sánchez-Ostiz et al. (eds.), *De Grecia a Roma y de Roma a Grecia: un camino de ida y vuelta*, Pamplona, 2007, 311–331).

The second section, ‘The Logic of Transformation’, aims to discern transversal features in narratives of metamorphosis. In line with this approach, B. focuses on topics such as the forms adopted by the gods. This is the subject of the first chapter in the new section of the book; the author analyses the reasons why gods change their shape, the *thámbos* that the possibility of divine change produces among bystanders, and the supposed more metamorphic nature of some gods or heroes, the so-called ‘shape-shifters’. A further aim of these pages is to answer a question already raised in relation to the *Odyssey*: how anthropomorphic was Greek religion? The author concludes that Greek religion was basically anthropomorphic in spite of significant departures from the norm, and that stories of divine transformation are not exceptions in this regard because the metamorphosed divinity returned to the anthropomorphic shape in the end. The argument then turns to metamorphic myths that bridge the divide between the animate and the inanimate, as is the case in stories that tell of men or women who are changed into a river, a spring, a mountain or an island.

(Many people associate mythology with constellations; it might have been valuable, therefore, to discuss catasterism, a topic to which B. only alludes incidentally in other parts of the book.)

In relation to transformation into features of the landscape, B. again calls into question the extent to which the Greeks really believed in such stories. The same could be said about the narratives the author handles in the following chapter, which deals with the boundaries between anthropomorphic beings and floral elements. Of course B. provides some account of nymphs who live associated with trees, and the belief that some plants spring from the generative force of tears (Aphrodite crying over the dead Adonis and so making the anemone grow) or blood (the paradigmatic cases of Hyakinthos and Narkissos).

The subject of the challenges faced by the tellers of metamorphic stories in the Classical Age is discussed on 231–247. The question here is not if the Greek people really believed that laurel (dáphne) had been once a nymph called Daphne; the concern is not disbelief but the opposition to this kind of narratives. Such
opposition existed in the ancient world, and was articulated by philosophers among others. It may be traced, for instance, in the case of the Platonic Socrates when he speaks about the characteristics of divinity in Rep. 380 d. Although Palaiphatos may have been a disciple of Aristotle, he himself is not regarded as a philosopher; nevertheless, he also discussed and attacked myths about human transformation, trying to show their impossibility. Moreover, the reflections on transmigration found in the works of philosophers such as Pythagoras or Plato may be also read as a correction to traditional metamorphic myths.

(A Christian thinker like Origen also believed in transmigration according to B., 244; but this position may not be as clear as the book supposes: cf. Origenes, Comm. in Eu. Matt. XIII 1.)

The last chapter presents some ‘Final thoughts on contexts’. The relevant question here is how such astonishing stories as metamorphic narratives may be understood within their contexts. Should we charitably indulge every belief and hold that every conviction, no matter how absurd, be accepted within its own context? After weighing up different attempts to find an answer to this question, B. frames a compromise: «My aim throughout this book has been always to take notice of the context, but to do so appropriately» (251). When coming to a final conclusion about metamorphosis in the last paragraph, B. proposes that tales of transformation may also be seen as a kind of compromise, «a way of articulating, and perhaps even partially coping with, the astonishing strangeness of life’s outcomes» (252).

In this review, I have offered some commentaries or objections to several points dealt with in Forms of Astonishment. An overall conclusion regarding the book may be formulated as a question: was it really necessary to employ a two-fold structure in the work, first contextualizing the narratives and, thereafter, de-contextualizing them? My reading of the book was marked by doubt in this regard. However, in the end, this structure would appear to make good sense as it highlights the problematic key points of the subject matter, key points that have not been (nor ever were intended to be) dealt with exhaustively in Buxton’s book. The major contribution of this very readable and fascinating book is to have mapped the contours for future research in the always astonishing field of ancient metamorphosis.

Pamplona

José B. Torres-Guerra

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Questo saggio ampio e articolato prende le mosse da una dissertazione dottorale discussa a Regensburg nel 2008 e si propone di affrontare una visibile lacuna dell’attuale pubblicistica a proposito del Coro nel teatro greco, dove negli ultimi tempi sono apparsi importanti contributi riguardo la funzione di esso nel teatro di Sofocle, Euripide ed Aristofane. La prima parte (pp. 1–102) è dedicata

1 Cf. Aelius Theon, Progymnásmata II 96, 4 s. Spengel.