

## BOOK REVIEW

*Ovid's Metamorphoses and the Environmental Imagination*. Edited by FRANCESCA MARTELLI AND GIULIA SISSA. London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Pp. 264. Hardback, \$103.50. ISBN: 9781350268944.

Ovid is a writer of great subtlety and complexity, encyclopedic, philosophical, a keen observer of the human condition and a deft wordsmith. Ovid's corpus has something to offer everyone, including historians of Natural History, a fact that has not gone unnoticed.<sup>1</sup> The volume edited by Sissa and Martelli seeks to address another trajectory of Ovid as Natural Philosopher, that is to say, the poet's environmental awareness.

In the Introduction, the editors set out the volume's over-arching themes, essentially the transformative effects of human beings on the material biosphere, how Ovid demonstrates the dangerous consequences of human interference with that material biosphere, and how the poet engages with disparate visions of ecology: one, of symbiotic balance; the other, of threats and destruction between lifeforms.

Following the introduction, ten chapters are organized into four thematic sections: the whole is framed by John Shoptaw's poem *Whoa!* and his reflective epilogue. We start with Shoptaw who reframes the Phaethon episode as an allegory of global warming, in response to events of 2016-2017. Shoptaw provides two points of view: the foolhardy, posturing, cowardly Phaethon (recast as "Ray"), myopically entrenched within the Anthropocene (the current geological age, wherein human activity is the dominant influencer of climate and the environment) and joyfully ignorant of the damage caused by his joyride gone wrong; Shoptaw also gives voice to Gaia in a heart-wrenching retort to the devastation that she suffers.

<sup>1</sup> For example: Gee, Emma, (2000), *Ovid, Aratus, and Augustus: Astronomy in Ovid's Fasti*. Cambridge; Ham, Charles T., (2013), *Empedoclean Elegy: Love, Strife and the Four Elements in Ovid's 'Amores', 'Ars amatoria' and 'Fasti'*, Thesis (Ph.D.), Philadelphia, PA; Volk, Katarina and Gareth D. Williams, eds., (2022), *Philosophy in Ovid, Ovid as Philosopher*. Oxford.

The first section, “Anthropology/Dark Ecology,” explores the tension between humanity and nature out of balance. Giulia Sissa (“*Cuncta Fluunt: the Fluidity of Life in Ovid’s Metamorphic World*”) examines metamorphosis as a force of renewing and refurbishing against the backdrop of Pythagoras’ speech in *Metamorphoses* 15, which emphasizes the interconnectedness and interchangeability of human and non-human creatures. Marco Formisano then analyzes the Medea episode (Book 7), in which Medea is presented as an allegory of Gaia who becomes alienated from humanity with the advent of the Anthropocene.

The three chapters in the second section, “Cross-Species Encounters,” scrutinize anthropomorphism and animalization/vegetization. Shane Butler (“Animal Listening”) applies Uexküll’s methodology (to consider lived experiences from the point of view of creatures inhabiting their own *umwelts*) to interrogate what birds (specifically nightingales, i.e., Philomela in the pseudo-Ovidian *Elegy about Philomela*) say and hear.<sup>2</sup> Francesca Martelli (“Multispecies Temporalities and Roman *Fasti* in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*”) then considers how several bird transformations are chronologically/calendrically interlocked: e.g., the unusual breeding and birth practices of the halcyon. Emily Gowers (“Are Trees Really like People?”) surveys Ovid’s tree-transformations (Daphne, the Heliades, Philemon and Baucis, etc.) and tree-imagery (e.g., the “graft-like” connection of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus).

The three chapters of the third section, “Science/Wisdom Traditions,” take the discussion beyond Ovid. Miranda Griffin (“The World in an Egg: Reading Medieval Ecologies”) investigates the egg as a stratified symbol of the created universe and a metamorphic force of imagination in Ovid and his Medieval exegetes (especially *Ovide moralisé*, a 14<sup>th</sup> century French Christianizing translation). Julia Reinhard Lupton (“The Titania Translation: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and Two *Metamorphoses*”) observes the geographical sweep, environmental attentiveness and biodiversity that Shakespeare employs in the play’s metamorphic episodes. Claudia Zatta (“Metamorphosis in a Deeper World”) interrogates Ovid’s environmental awareness against the backdrop of Arne Naess’ “deep ecology,” where interconnectedness to nature is inherent for all living beings by virtue of their existence.<sup>3</sup> In Ovid, Zatta observes, just as metamorphic events are

<sup>2</sup> Uexküll, J. von, (1956), *Streifzüge durch die Umwelten von Tieren und Menschen: Ein Bilderbuch unsichtbarer Welten, Bedeutungslehre* Hamburg.

<sup>3</sup> Naess, Arne, (2008), “An Example of a Place: Tvergastein.” In A. Drengson, B. Devall, eds, *The Ecology of Wisdom. Writings by Arne Naess*. Berkeley, CA.

connected, so too are living beings deeply embedded within their environments, and they interact and react with each other sensorily and emotionally, as, for example, in the story of Dryope (*Metamorphoses* 9).

The fourth section, "Agriculture," features two chapters that situate Ovid's *Metamorphoses* within Roman agricultural tradition. Diana Spencer ("Language, Life, and Metamorphosis in Ovid's Roman Backstory") considers three questions: how agricultural identity is embedded in patriotic Roman mythmaking in Vergil's *Georgics* and Cicero's *On the Agrarian Law*; the metamorphic properties of grafting (which, like the transformations in Ovid, disrupts the environment while creating something new) in Varro's *On Rustic Matters*, and the hidden processes through which perceptual reality can take shape in Vergil's fourth Eclogue and Catullus 64. Sandra Fluhrer ("Who can Impress the Forest? Agriculture, Warfare and Theatrical Experience in Ovid and Shakespeare"), returning the discussion to Shakespeare, explores the connections between agriculture and warfare in Ovid and *Macbeth* with a close analysis of the Cadmus episode (*Metamorphoses* 3) and the many allusions to Cadmus in *Macbeth*.

The scholarship throughout is situated firmly within recent studies (in the Classics and beyond) on the Anthropocene, environmentalism, anthropology, plant and animal studies. Many of the authors (Sissa, Formisano, Gowers, Griffin, Zatta), moreover, cycle back to Pythagoras' resonant plea for vegetarianism in Book 15, giving the volume a welcome thematic unity and harmony of purpose that is often absent from contributed collections.

One question remains: exactly how do the authors define "environmentalism" or "environmental imagination" (taking the lead from the editors in their Introduction, I assume, human engagement with the "material biosphere"). Consequently, some of the chapters in this collection usefully explore what I might (narrowly) consider environmental questions; others, though worthy in their own way, do not. In the former category, the most compellingly useful *environmental* studies of Ovid are those by Zatta, Butler, Martelli, Spencer, and Gowers. Generally, however, the authors take little notice of real-world environmental awareness in antiquity. In many cases, the ancients knew what they were doing to the environment, and consequently instated legislation to regulate air and water pollution, water rights and even mining.<sup>4</sup> But that would be a very different book.

<sup>4</sup> See Pliny, *Natural History* 33.74-78; see also Cordovana, O. D. and G. F. Chiai, eds., (2017), *Pollution and the Environment in Ancient Life and Thought*. Alte Geschichte. Geographica Historica; Bd 36. Stuttgart.

Finally, while this volume is a fine addition to literary critical studies of Ovid, and every effort has been made for accessibility (all non-English passages are translated), the collection's style tends to be densely packed, rendering the study far more useful to the Ovidian scholar than the casual reader.

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