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Transposing Ovid's Story of Myrrha: The Ideology of the Woman-Tree Figure in Early Modern European Visual Arts

Anna Maria Cimitile♦

The image is the obviousness of the invisible.
It does not render it visible as an object: it accedes to a knowledge of it.
Jean-Luc Nancy

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was the most frequently illustrated book of classical antiquity in the modern period (Barolsky, 2014: 202).[1] This is perhaps no wonder, given the variety of stories and voices offered by the text, and a certain pictorial quality of the narrative of this epic poem. This essay discusses some early modern visual transpositions of one particular episode in *Metamorphoses*, the story of Myrrha's transformation into a tree and of the birth of her son Adonis, from Book X. I shall focus on the different ways in which artists combine the human and the vegetal in Myrrha's body, my prompting questions being: what can we make of the juxtaposition, in Ovid's story and in most of its visual renditions, of the metamorphosis of the body *and* the human—indeed *feminine*—act of delivering a child? Is the invention relevant for a reflection on the construction of femininity? Because the artists almost always focus on the process of transformation itself—and, it would seem, only sporadically on what,

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1 For the visual material discussed in this article, I have used mainly open access resources, including: the online collections of the British Museum (https://www.britishmuseum.org/), the Wellcome Collection (https://wellcomecollection.org/), *Ovid Illustrated: The Reception of Ovid's* Metamorphoses *in Image and Text* website at the University of Virginia (https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/about.html), the Glasgow University Emblem Website (https://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/), Bibliothèque nationale de France (https://demos.biblissima.fr/ovide-moralise/) and *Europeana* (https://www.europeana.eu/en). A web search by artwork title will respectively refer the reader to these among other possible website(s).

in Ovid's story, is its no less shocking cause—what seems worth exploring to answer those questions is the *stage* of the metamorphosis that is represented. We may be able to find hints about the interpretations of the myth—and their cultural and ideological biases—from the ways in which, in the selected artworks, the human and the vegetal are combined in Myrrha's metamorphosing body. Other prompting questions could therefore be: given that the metamorphosis comes after the realisation of an incestuous love, could its representation be in any way related to the perception and/or construction of woman and her sexual desire? How does the 'signifier' of the human-turning-into-vegetal relate to the early modern cultural construction of the female body? Finally, could we read the visual versions of the story of Myrrha in the light of the present interdisciplinary interest in the life of plants? Scholars have recently started to reassess even philosophy by 'lift[ing] the curtain on the significance of plants to the making (and growth) of thought' (Marder, 2014: xiv); could the study of visual artworks illustrating metamorphoses of humans into plants in general, and of Myrrha into a tree more specifically, be aligned with that approach and offer new insights into early modern culture?

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

As a literary text, *Metamorphoses* (2-8 C.E.) combines different genres while bringing together the unbelievable with details of great verisimilitude. The variety of stories, plurality of narrators and changes in narrative rhythm enhance the ambiguity typical of myths and make it impossible to detect a single narrative point of view: indeed, "[t]he *Metamorphoses* aim to portray the entirety of narratable tales that have been handed down by literature with all the force of imagery and meaning that tradition can convey, without privileging—as is only correct, according to the ambiguity typical of myth—any particular reading" (Calvino, 1999: 28-29). The poem, consisting of 15 books written in epic hexameter, is aptly self-reflexive, redoubling and literalising the figurative dimension of language. As noted by J. Hillis Miller:

> [A]n unsettling human truth is hidden behind these childish stories of boys turned into flowers, girls turned into trees. This truth is double. On the one hand, in the cruel justice of the gods we see the terrible performative power that figures of speech may have. Tropes tend to materialize in the real world in ways that are ethical, social and political. The *Metamorphoses* shows what aberrant figurative language can do. The power of the gods to intervene in human history is the allegorization of this linguistic power.
>
> (J.H. Miller, 1990: 1)

Allowing multiple interpretations at once, the poem, in its dense texture, "ceaseless movement, […] its fantasy, its conceits and shocks, its penchant for the grotesque and its blend of humour and grandiosity," has been defined as a "baroque" text (Wilkinson, 1955: 159).

Metamorphosis, the phenomenon at the heart of the poem, points to "things under way" (Bynum, 2001: 31), to the fluidity of the world, the universe and the realms that appear to be distinct. It challenges our philosophical notions by turning "being" into "becoming" and it could even be read "as a kind of natural law that different philosophical systems can make sense of" (Feldherr, 2010: 26). Metamorphosis can be associated with salvation (Daphne story, Book I) but also with retribution or punishment for previous acts, and with *justice*; and yet, because in the text transformation recurs, and in fact links one story to the next, this reiteration could be read as a comment on the impossibility to accomplish justice:

> Each metamorphosis is a change of shape that in its most general form can be defined as the literalization of a metaphor. In this change justice is done, an account paid off, a case closed. But there is always a remnant, some residue of unassuaged guilt or responsibility that leads to the next story, the next metamorphosis literalizing yet another figure, then to the next, and so on.
>
> (J.H. Miller, 1990: 1)

We could rephrase and say that it is as if the possibility for narration to carry on and move from one story to the next relied precisely on the unaccomplishment of justice. In the visual transpositions, artists have sometimes experimented with ways to render the enchainment of stories (as Titian does in his version of the story of Myrrha, as we shall see).

For some critics, change also has a political dimension. In a historicizing view of Ovid's poem, metamorphosis, being in turn "a tool for deception," "the immortalization of the subject," "justified punishment," or "cruel victimization," "confronts characters with the fact of their vulnerability or power and its conflicting meanings and consequences" and thus "facilitates the audience's reflection on and redefinition of the hierarchies operative within Roman society" (Feldherr, 2010: 7). The early modern visual versions of the story of Myrrha can reveal important political imports for their times, too.

The story of Myrrha in Early Modern Transpositions and Translations of *Metamorphoses*

From medieval times to the end of the seventeenth century, the stories from Ovid's poem inspired commentaries (Coulson, 2008) and translations across

Europe, and were at times transposed into operatic libretti and even emblems; the latter, in their special combination of written texts and image, mainly adapted Ovidian myths for their didascalic purposes. In early modern Europe the circulation of the stories revealed two main lines of interpretation. Some scholars "managed to give Ovid's abundant, sexy cornucopia of stories a lofty moral tone" (Warner, 2002: 41) and showed "a predilection […] for the Ovid of concealed meanings, rather than for the pagan wit and narrative artist" (Hardin, 1972: 49). In doing so, they repeated the Medieval approach to the text as *allegory*:

> Because metamorphosis expressed a profound and contrary position, and because Ovid's poem is filled with erotic, violent, even lurid stories evoked with consummate sophistication, a way had to be found to make reading Ovid permissible for good Christians, if he was to be read at all and his stories to continue to live.
>
> (Warner, 2001: 39)

In England, examples of this approach were Arthur Golding's translation *Metamorphoses* (1567) (Gibbs and Ruiz, 2008) and, later on, George Sandys' translation, *Ovid's Metamorphosis* (1626 and, expanded with annotations, 1632). At the same time, however, there emerged, especially in Italy after Boccaccio, another interpretation, which, according to some critics, was more faithful to the "'real' Ovid of pagan sympathies" (Hardin, 1972: 47), who presented even "Myrrha's plight without moralizing or faultfinding" (Flinker, 1980: 60). And, although there was a moment when a certain "harmony between Christianity and paganism" was achieved in Europe, this "could not maintain itself for long" (Wilkinson, 1955: 405) and, as a consequence, the allegorical interpretations of Ovid's text prevailed. In England, the non-allegorical interpretation never gained ground.

In *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus tells the story of Myrrha, the beautiful great grand-daughter of Pygmalion and daughter of King Cinyras. It is one of the longest stories and it has been read as "one of many instances of disordered love and its consequences on the female body" (Miller, S. A., 2010: 47), indeed as the climax of a series of tales (including those of Byblis and Scylla) recounting perverse love and sexual desire, written in a mode that is "more melodramatic (the horror is 'stagey') than real" (Otis, 1970: 353). Myrrha falls in love with her father but, because she cannot satisfy her love, attempts suicide by hanging herself. Her trustworthy nurse prevents her from accomplishing the act and, having learnt the cause of the girl's despair, finds a way to make her lie with Cinyras without his knowledge. Man and daughter lie together for several nights, until Cinyras manages to see the face of the young woman and, speechless at the discovery, takes a "rapier" to kill his daughter. Myrrha escapes; she leaves the country and, pregnant with her father's child, wanders for nine months until the day when,

tired, she stops in Sabaea (South Arabia) and, repenting the incestuous love, prays to the gods for a punishment that "deny too mee both lyfe and death" (Golding, 1904: Book X, l. 559). Her prayer is heard and she is promptly transformed into a tree. Her tears come out of the trunk that was once her body and, like the tree itself, they are called myrrh. The time comes when the child is due. The goddess Lucina, who takes pity on her, assists Myrrha, in her new form, aided by the Naiads, who take the newborn and "uppon the soft sweete hearbes the chyld did lay, / And bathde him with his mothers teares" (Golding, 1904: Book X, l. 589-90).

The metamorphosis is Myrrha's invoked punishment for her deed. But is it punishment proper? Myrrha repents her act, perceived to be so abominable that she can no longer be among human beings, be they living or dead, lest she "contaminate" them with her presence. In Ovid, the Latin verb is "*violem*," from *violare*, violate, contaminate, profane:

> Sed ne violem vivosque superstes / mortuaque extinctos, ambobus
> pellite regnis, / mutataeque mihi vitamque necemque negate!
>
> But lest, in living, I offend the living, / Offend the dead in death,
> drive me away / From either realm, change me somehow, refuse
> me / Both life and death!'
>
> (Ovid, 1955, 2018: Book X, l. 484-89)

In her prayer she shows concern for the human community as a whole, for the human dimension that she, having lost it, wants to preserve in others and dreads that her proximity might corrupt. The transformation into a plant is the godly solution: with it, she is no longer among living human beings yet she is not among the dead either. The change, granting survival in an altogether new form of life, seems to be beyond the logic of punishment as a conclusion to her story.

This is a matter of interpretation, of course. There is an interesting Italian transposition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by Gabriello Simeoni, entitled *Vita et Metamorfoseo d'Ovidio* (1559). This is an illustrated edition of the poem, which is adapted to convert the narrative flow of the Latin text into a series of self-contained poems, indeed emblems: epigrams written in Italian *ottave* with illustrations, each one with a title that is also a synthesis of the adapted Ovidian story (Simeoni, 1559). In an anonymous English translation of the text, published in 1689, the epigram on Myrrha's metamorphosis reads as follows:

> *Myrrha into a Tree*
> While Myrrha dos her angry father flee,
> and dos in vain repent of what is passt,
> her body sole cause of her infamy
> she harder grow perceives and to be rais'd,

so now she's chang'd to and appears a tree,
which opes and makes the looker on amaz'd,
because, when cleaving so, it dos effund
beauteous Adonis, and Him lays on ground.
(https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/english1689.html)

Here, the change is clearly presented as a punishment and her female body as the "sole cause of her infamy". The condemning, patriarchal vision of the corrupted and corrupting female desire, which an "angry father" cannot stand and which is implicit in the verse, is repeated, I think, in the illustration representing the woman-tree with a body that is mainly human, the transformation limited to the extremities of the body, *i.e.* the hands and the head transformed into branches and leaves. As she gives birth to Adonis, Myrrha is shown in all her female sensuality; all she can do to detach herself from her human body seems to be to avert her all too human face and eyes from the child.

Simeoni's Italian emblem, with its moralising interpretation, leads me to the following discussion of early modern visual versions of the myth.

Visual Transpositions of the Story of Myrrha from the Sixteenth to the Eighteenth Century

In early modern Europe, stories from *Metamorphoses* were popularly transposed into visual artworks: not only paintings, drawings, engravings (Barolsky, 1998) but also embroidered pictures; and they were used for decorating everyday objects, like coins, medallions and plates, as testified, for example, by the paintings on a *cassone* (marriage chest) attributed to Titian, or by a grisaille plate now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The fact that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is also a meta-textual work, in the sense that, by telling of transformations, it repeats at the level of content what the creative process always does, *i.e.* transforming any given reality into something new, has possibly made its stories even more alluring for the early modern visual artists (Barolsky, 2014). The artworks I shall focus on are mainly by Italian and French artists and they are: 1. Titian, *The birth of Adonis* (oil on panel, *cassone*, c. 1506-1508; Musei civici in Padua); 2. Bernardino Luini, *Birth of Adonis* (fresco, 1520-23; Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera); 3. workshop of Jean de Court, *The birth of Adonis* (oval dish, c1560; National Gallery of Art in Washington); 4. Michel Faulte, *Myrrha, being transformed into the myrrh tree, gives birth to Adonis* (engraving, 16th century; Wellcome Collection); 5. follower of Luigi Garzi, *Myrrha, being transformed into the myrrh tree, gives birth to Adonis* (oil painting, 16th century; Wellcome Collection—Fig. 1); 6. Philips Galle (after Anthonie Blocklandt van Montfoort), *Birth of Adonis* (engraving, c1579; the British Museum); 7. Marcantonio Franceschini, *The birth of Adonis* (oil on canvas, after 1692; Liechtenstein Museum of Vienna); 8. Louis Desplaces



Fig.1: Follower of Luigi Garzi, *Myrrha, being transformed into the myrrh tree, gives birth to Adonis*, oil painting, Wellcome Collection, https://wellcomecollection.org/works/ehwhbjd9. Public domain mark.



Fig. 2: Louis Desplaces, *Myrrha, being transformed into the myrrh tree, gives birth to Adonis*, engraving, 1736, after Carlo Cignani (1628-1719), Wellcome Collection, https://wellcomecollection.org/works/k4qnsvgn. Public domain mark.

(after Carlo Cignani), *Myrrha, being transformed into the myrrh tree, gives birth to Adonis* (engraving, 1736; Wellcome Collection—Fig. 2).[2] In the artworks, I read the representation of Myrrha's metamorphosis as a multi-layered signifier which, revealing each artist's interpretive engagement with the Ovidian myth, is also the *locus* of a stance taken with respect to early modern cultural meanings constructed around women and female desire, the notions of guilt or sin and punishment, and the very idea of justice.

Most of the selected visual representations juxtapose the two events of metamorphosis and delivery of a child, to enhanced dramatic effect. In the chosen visual transpositions, the body of Myrrha is alternatively: basically human, with only some vegetal features (Faulte, Franceschini); half human, half vegetable (de Court, Garzi, Galle, Franceschini, Desplaces); or, a tree with no human features left (Titian, Luini). Already in antiquity there were visual renderings of metamorphosis, which scholars have classified in three ways of representations that can also work for the visual transpositions made in early modern times:

> In Type A, metamorphosis is represented serially, i.e. as a sequence of several discrete stages; in Type B, metamorphosis is already complete, so that the only way of deducing its previous occurrence is by reference to the context; in Type C, an image of a hybrid form may need to be interpreted (again this has to be deduced from the context) either as representing an as yet incomplete transformation, or as alluding in some other way to a transformation.
>
> (Buxton, 2009: 76)

With respect to the artworks under analysis: Titian and Luini could fall into both Type A and B whereas all others could belong to Type C (images of hybrids). Transformation "under way" is a challenging subject in painting, given the fixity of the image. As philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy states: "[the image] is immobile, calm and flat in its presence, the coming-together and co-inciding of an event and an eternity. […] the exemplarity of the visual domain lies in its first being the domain of immobility as such" (Nancy, 2005: 10). Images of metamorphosis are paradoxical in that they immobilise movement, which is turned into a 'permanence' of one moment of a flux, even as they succeed in representing it. As for the meaning of the metamorphosis, the choice of how much of the human body is still retained in the artworks, alongside other aspects, may have to do with the ideological envisioning of female desire.

The story of Myrrha was already circulating in different versions in antiquity (a feature shared with all myths). In Robert Graves's collated account of Greek mythology, Cinyras runs after the girl and cuts her body in half at the precise

2 From now on, references to the artworks will be to their authors and will be given in parentheses in the text.

moment when it is changing into a tree; as a consequence, Adonis tumbles out of the trunk (Graves, 1955, 1960: 69). This detail is not in Ovid's poem, in which Cinyras, upon discovering that she is his daughter, only manages to grab his weapon: "Then hanging by he drew a Rapier bryght" (Golding, 1904: Book X, l. 545). In the poem, however, there is an interesting anticipation of the girl's change into a tree and of Cinyras' act as reported by Graves; at one point, of Myrrha (who, before the incest takes place, is sleepless and lusting after her father) it is said:

> And like as when a mightye tree with axes heawed rownd,
> Now reedye with a strype or twaine to lye uppon the grownd,
> Uncerteine is which way to fall and tottreth every way
> Even so her mynd with dowtfull wound effeebled then did stray
> Now heere now there uncerteinely…
> (Golding, 1904: Book X, l. 420-424)

I have not found any visual transpositions that reproduce Cinyras' violent severing of Myrrha's body-trunk. The only visual reference I have found to Cinyras pursuing Myrrha with a spade is in Micyllus' illustrated edition of *Metamorphoses* (Micyllus, 1582), but in the picture Myrrha is a girl and there is no sign of the transformation into a tree and of its being cut in half. The version of the story that makes it most evident that Myrrha deserves and gets punishment, and which tacitly stresses that her punishment is part of patriarchal rule (her father, victim to her desire, inflicts it), is not the one endorsed by Ovid, and it is therefore not reproduced by early modern artists. Yet some do still represent the transformation in a moralising light.

But what does it mean to be turned into a tree? Ovid offers a dramatic description of the metamorphosis; in a twentieth-century translation:

> There was a god to listen;
> Her last petition had its gods to answer,
> For even as she spoke, the earth closed over
> Her legs, and slanting down between her toes
> A root took hold, supporting the tall trunk,
> The bones were stronger, and their central marrow
> Suffered no change, but the blood was lymph or water,
> Or watery sap, and the arms became long branches,
> The fingers twigs, the skin rough bark. The tree
> Had bound the pregnant belly, held in tight
> The swelling breasts, was on its way to cover
> Shoulders and neck, and she could not bear the waiting,
> Bent her face down to meet it, plunged her features

> Into the bark, until her human senses
> Had vanished with her human form, but still
> She weeps, and the warm tear-drops trickle down,
> Not without honor, for that distillation
> Still keeps her name; men call it myrrh, no age
> Will ever forget the word. "Within the wood
> The child, conceived in guilt, had grown toward life,
> Sought its way out; the swollen bole dilated
> Under the strain of the weight, and with no voice
> To call Lucina: like a woman in labor
> The tree, contorted, cried and wept; the goddess
> Stood near in pity, reached out helping hands,
> Sang charms to aid the birth, and the tree cracked open,
> The bark was split, the burden loosed, a baby
> Gave his first cries, and naiads cradled him
> On the soft leaves, and used his mother's tears
> To wash him. Even Envy praised his beauty,
> He looked so much like Cupid in a painting
> (Ovid, 1955, 2018: Book X, ll. 489-518)

In his introduction to an Italian edition of the poem, Italo Calvino wrote that metamorphosis is ruled by a law of the greatest internal economy, which demands that all new forms retain or recycle as much as possible the materials of the old ones (Calvino, 1999: 32). And Marina Warner writes that: "from the perspective of creation and the life force, the shape into which they [the characters in *Metamorphoses*] shift more fully expresses them and perfects them than their first form" (Warner, 2002: 4). The tree *recycles* and even *perfects* the human (we may ask: in body *and* mind/soul?). Myrrha's change relies on the idea that objects (both animate and inanimate), are but "'different combinations of a relatively small number of basic, very simple elements'"; this is ultimately "the only incontrovertible philosophy in the poem, namely 'that of the unity and inter-connectedness of everything that exists in the world, both things and living creatures'" (Calvino [quoting Shcheglov], 1999: 33); or, the great chain of being adapted to mythology. More specifically, the notion of the kinship between humans and trees circulated widely in classic texts from Sappho to Virgil:

> Trees are like people. They have a head (*vertex*), a trunk (*truncus*), arms (*bracchia*). They stand tall like a soldier, or look as slender as a bridegroom (Sappho, 115 L-P). Their life moves in human rhythms, which in their case may be repeated: sap rises and falls, hair (*coma*) luxuriates, withers, drops off. Sometimes they are superior and aloof, sometimes they go in pairs, whether as comrades-in-

> arms (Hom. *Il*. 12.132ff., Virg. *Aen*. 9.679ff.) or husband and wife (Ov. *Met*. 8.720). They whisper like lovers (Ar. *Nub*. 1008), embrace, support, cling […] and […] may also bleed and die.
> (Robin Nisbet quoted in Liveley, 2011: 95-96)

Myrrha's metamorphosis, like many others in Ovid's poem, is both respectful and disrespectful of the order of things advanced in the great chain of being, for her change at once relies on a "universal contiguity" (Calvino, 1999) *and* defies the principle of gradual continuity according to which "nature does not pass from extreme to extreme *nisi per medium*" (Albert Magnus, 13th century, quoted in Lovejoy, 1971: 79). The similarity between the human body and the tree makes Myrrha's change still plausible within the early modern "episteme of similitude," to recall Foucault's definition, notwithstanding the "leap" to the vegetal realm. Visual transpositions modulate on this idea in ways that have ideological significance.

The selected early modern images deal with the metamorphosis in different ways. Those that represent a smooth passage from girl to tree more evidently fall within the episteme of resemblance (Galle, Desplaces); those representing the woman-tree as a hybrid, by combining two shapes otherwise far apart, seem to point to the monstrosity of the metamorphosis (Garzi, Franceschini). The difference between the two interpretations is not only epistemic; if the Ovidian erotic body may be read as "the site for the inscription of ideology" and early modern writers manipulated Ovid's stories "in order to develop new arguments about bodies and sexualities" (Stanivukotic, 2001: 4), in the visual representations one may detect meanings and values ascribed to the woman's body and female desire which are alternately aligned with or opposing the culturally dominant ones.

In Galle and Desplaces, the female body already has the 'pose of a trunk': the curves of the female figure are not accentuated and the girl's body is already within the tree form. However, this shared feature seems to assume different meanings. In Galle, Myrrha's changing body is still very similar to the many nude or half-nude bodies of the Naiads, who with Lucina (*i.e.* Juno as goddess of childbirth) have come to help her in the delivery of Adonis. The arrangement of the figures makes the nymphs' bodies look like the humanly-shaped forest surrounding Myrrha. Some Naiads look at Adonis' birth; the gaze of others is lowered or averted, and the facial expression is mainly gloomy, just as Myrrha's is—at least from what we can see of her face, which is also turned away from the viewer of the image. The resemblance of shapes establishes continuity between those around her and the woman-tree; the metamorphosis does not mean separation from all: Myrrha is still surrounded by the likes of her. This, together with the gloomy, seeming serenity of the scene, makes the metamorphosis, if not a relief, an unavoidable event, which can only be accepted, more than a

punishment proper. In Desplaces, however, there seems to be a more judgmental view. Myrrha's body is quite different from that of the Naiads: she is already as one with the tree and her skin is of the hue of bark, in contrast with the nymphs' white skin. Her eyes, the mirror of the soul in human beings, are almost vanquished, overwhelmed by the tree branches that spring from her head and forehead (this absence is also found in Franceschini). Three Naiads out of five, those closer to Myrrha, are dressed and look with great curiosity at her body-trunk, pointing to the genitalia from which Adonis has just been born and a sprig has sprung up, too. Three satyrs are also in the scene, among the shrubs behind Myrrha; one of them smugly stares at the woman-tree as he appears to be advancing towards her. In mythology, satyrs used to pursue nymphs and women in woodlands and they were associated with uncontrolled sexual desire; in Desplaces they are placed close to Myrrha, and their presence may allude to her past, excessive sexual desire as being what has led to her metamorphosis. Amoral mythological figures serve a moralising and patriarchal interpretation of female desire, as even the lustful satyrs can cast a judgmental gaze—and, therefore, induce viewers to do the same. Female desire, from Ovid onwards, is portrayed in illicit forms. The two stories of incestuous lust found in *Metamorphoses* are centred on female desiring subjects: Byblis and Myrrha; but Ovid's gaze is more sympathetic towards the two girls, whereas in Desplaces the moralising intent is underlined by the presence of two *putti* attending to the newborn Adonis. In the early modern visual arts the mythological *putti* were also used to portray cherubim, *i.e.* religious figures, so their presence within the image guides the transition from the depicted myth to the religious gaze on it. Unlike most of the other visual transpositions (Titian, Luini, de Court, Faulte, Galle), in Desplaces (as in Franceschini) Adonis is already separated from his mother's body-trunk; this enhances Myrrha's separation from the human dimension. In Desplaces, the smooth transition from the human to the vegetal shape, by signifying a moralising view and judgement on the story, keeps distinct the aesthetic continuity between realms, evident in the image and derived from the epistemic framework of resemblances, and ethics.

There is another, possibly more disturbing aspect of the transformation from woman to tree. Since antiquity plants had been regarded as the medium between the inanimate and the animate world:

> [nature] passes so gradually from the inanimate to the animate that their continuity renders the boundary between them indistinguishable; and there is a middle kind that belongs to both orders. For plants come immediately after inanimate things; and plants differ from one another in the degree in which they appear to participate in life.
>
> (Aristotle quoted in Lovejoy, 1971: 56)

Myrrha's transformation would bring her closer to inanimate things and, in a period when Latin commentaries on Aristotle abounded (Kuhn, 2018), the visual renditions of the woman-tree possibly brought that idea to mind, at least for some viewers. Adonis's birth out of a figure that partakes of the inanimate realm exposes a short circuit that was always there in the idea of the great chain of being, but which is made more immediately evident by visual renditions of the myth; for a birth necessarily exalts life, even when that birth is from a tree, as in Titian and Luini (and, before them, in the illuminated *Ovide moralisé* [edition published by Antoine Vérard in Paris, 1493]). Indeed, the Myrrha story contains a *marvellous* event, the strangeness of which was well rendered by Sandys's line: "The tree, according to the time of women, is deliuered of Adonis" (Sandys, 1632). Titian and Luini seem to insist on the marvellous and suspend the moralising judgment. (This is so even if both images, in their narrative impulse, depict different moments of the story within the same space and landscape, including figures that may represent the past illicit couple of Myrrha and her father, alongside the future lover of Adonis, Venus.) Let me recall that in Ovid's tale the change, if it disrupts the epistemic order of the great chain of being, is also the gods' pious answer to Myrrha's prayer:

> O Goddes, if of repentant folke you any mercye take,
> Sharpe vengeance I confesse I have deserved, and content
> I am to take it paciently. How bee it too thentent [*sic*]
> That neyther with my lyfe the quick, nor with my death the dead
> Anoyed bee, from both of them exempt mee this same sted.
> And altring mee, deny too mee both lyfe and death.
> (Golding, 1904: Book X, ll. 554-559)

As "[t]he Goddes did graunt her this request, the last that she should make" (Golding, 1904: Book X, l. 561), the notion of "retribution" seems to be inadequate to describe the metamorphosis; Myrrha acknowledges her "faults," but her request is made out of consideration for others more than the expression of what she wants for herself. The story offers another possible response to Myrrha's abominable act, one which presents an idea of justice that is beyond punishment. In the visual transpositions, the metamorphosis—in the degree of continuity between shapes, and in the stage of the transformation—tells of an interpretation of the change—as punishment, relief, or something else—that can be related to a vision of Myrrha's past incest. In Titian and Luini there seems to be the idea that the events in the life of Myrrha happen according to an almost natural course, something beyond punishment or relief; even the couple that may represent Myrrha and her father are not depicted in their abject act (possibly, this complies with *decorum* norms; in Titian the male figure holds the woman in his

embrace, but this could represent innocent fatherly affect). The tree behaving like a woman is almost a kind of destiny.

In other images Myrrha's changing body is intensely sensual (Faulte, Franceschini). Franceschini's image, in particular, like Desplaces's, contains satyrs and shows both their and the Naiads' curiosity for the woman-tree's body, especially the part corresponding to the woman's genitals. Myrrha, one time subject of illicit desire, shows her naked human torso in three quarter pose to viewers of the image, an abject object of desire for the gaze (the gaze of male viewers, if we endorse John Berger's view of the female nude's presence in painting to please the male gaze [Berger, 1972: 55], to which the gaze of women has traditionally adapted in the ideological construction of the female sinful body). Biased as they may be, as background to such visual Myrrhas are, of course, the Renaissance nudes. The human body was the preferred subject among early modern visual artists, it was "the most expressive visual form" and a factual truth:

> [D]uring the Renaissance every eyelid, breast, wrist, baby's foot, nostril, was a double celebration of fact: the fact of the miraculous structure of the human body and the fact that only through the senses of this body can we apprehend the rest of the visible, tangible world.
>
> (Berger, 2018: 103)

Franceschini's viewers are drawn into the image by Myrrha's body, but also by the metatextual element of newborn Adonis staring at us from a Naiad's arms. Adonis' stare is dramatic, remindful of the vast iconography of the infant Christ held by the Madonna and looking from the canvas at the viewers of the painting; the cherub-angel in the sky, placed in vertical correspondence with the newborn, as if it were an angel announcing the birth, seems to confirm the Christian undertone to the image. The effect is unsettling. First, a woman-tree is depicted as an erotic body: if the intended effect may well be that of reminding the viewers of Myrrha's past sin and of moralising on the excesses of female sexual desire, the image also draws the viewers to its erotic dimension. Secondly, the image at the same time checks the viewers' gaze, which it has allured in the first place, through the gaze of the Christ-like Adonis, a *memento* that instils self-restraint in the viewers of the image.

As transpositions of a literary text that, from antiquity, came to early modernity with centuries-long cultural overdetermination and moralising *addenda*, in their apparently straightforward transposition of the Ovidian story, the artworks discussed here are sometimes bearers of more than one meaning or interpretation. Some images challenge the dominant vision of the Myrrha myth as a story of deserved punishment. In this, they possibly share some ground with

complex visual textualities circulating at the time, such as emblematic images, visual "writerly texts," to adopt Barthes's definition (Barthes, 2002), which were most popular around Europe:

> [Emblematic images are] a form of rhetoric both silent and eloquent. They are codified items the sense of which requires the reader's capacity to recall texts pertaining to a cultural preconstruct. They belong to the *artes memoriae* tradition used from Antiquity as a means of organizing memory and serving as a prop for some forms of Christian meditation. […] Emblematic images also problematize the connection between signifiers and signifieds.
>
> (Chardin, 2016: 95)

The visual versions of the Myrrha story problematise the interpretation of the myth, at times overlapping the classical and the Christian vision in ways that may not have been anticipated by the artists. In their renditions of Myrrha's body, the images interact differently within their cultural context; by refusing to offer a unified narrative of the myth, they prove the early modern period to be a rich, non-homogeneous cultural space.

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