A Web of Fantasies

Salzman-Mitchell, Patricia B.

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Reading *Metamorphoses* is a constant challenge to our imagination. As readers we try to imagine and figure in our minds myriad transformations and fantastic chains of changing forms. In particular, imagining *Metamorphoses* is a process of visualization, and the visual component of the stories has often been recognized by the critic. Visual imagery is such a powerful component of the poem that even when Ovid presents abstract concepts like Hunger and Envy, he does so fundamentally through visual description. No wonder, then, that Ovid’s episodes have constituted favorite models for the visual arts. This quality of the Ovidian text has led critics to search for a direct connection between the text and contemporary pictures or sculptures. Ovid’s stories stimulate us to create visual representations and incite us to transform text into image. *Metamorphoses* is a visually charged text where the acts of seeing and representing images are widely exploited in the internal stories, in the relationship between characters, and in the effect that the text produces in the reader. Further, visualization is an intrinsic aspect of metamorphosis as not only are the changes impregnated with visual imagery, but also looking is often the trigger of transformation and is deeply entrenched in its meanings. This study examines the complexities, symbolisms, and interactions between gaze and image in Ovid’s hexameter poem from a gender-sensitive perspective. It proposes as a methodology of reading to envisage the poem as a mosaic of pictures woven in text. To do this, our reading resembles the viewing of a film that, often from text, brings images alive before the spectator’s eyes. It will not be surprising, then, that film studies and the visual arts considerably inform my theoretical approach. One of the great
insights of feminist film studies is the production of gender-aware readings of images. My work points in this direction. It is a feminist study of Metamorphoses, where discussions of viewers, viewing, and imagery strive to illuminate Ovidian constructions of the male and the female. However, I am more concerned with representations of femininity and thus the focus will lie primarily on images of women.

Visual imagery has been discussed by critics of Metamorphoses like Gianpiero Rosati or Nicolae Laslo who assume the position of viewers but without taking gender as a primary component of analysis. On the other hand, modern readers have addressed questions of gaze and looking as gender-connoted activities, but centering only on a few standard episodes, especially Pygmalion and Narcissus. This book combines both trends; it looks at gaze and visual imagery in the poem as a ‘whole,’ and at the same time it explores the gender implications of looking. The aim is, in particular, to expand the analysis of gaze and viewing to less commonly studied stories (like the tale of Aglauros and Envy and the love triangle of the Sun, Leucothoe, and Clytie) and to approach the poem through this theoretical prism in its totality rather than through ‘morselization’—a common critical fate suffered by Ovid’s “epic.” Though every single verse cannot be examined in detail, I will constantly “keep an eye” on the context from where the selected episodes are taken.

Ovidian studies have been greatly enriched by a recent wave of books on Metamorphoses. The present book follows and is inspired by this movement but wishes to add another feminist viewpoint. It hopes as well to encourage further debate on the subject, to stimulate future readings of the author, and to show how a new theoretical perspective can open the doors to productive and alternative readings of well-known and often visited episodes as well as of some more obscure, less studied passages.

The book also contributes to putting Latin literature on the map of gaze studies, against its common omission in comparison with Greece and early Christianity. This endeavor has recently been undertaken in a collection entirely dedicated to the Roman gaze. Of course, valuable work has been done in the area, but, as David Fredrick in the introduction to The Roman Gaze explains, historians of Western sexuality, like Michel Foucault and philosophers from Henri Bergson to Luce Irigaray, have tended to assimilate Rome to Greece, leaving the question of Roman differences unheeded. The Roman Gaze (2002) has opened an important area of research; my book owes a great deal to it and places itself in its line of inquiry. I hope that my study of the gaze and visual imagery in Ovid will encourage similar readings of other Roman authors.
In a broader sense, this approach to Metamorphoses offers another way to look at the meanings of myth, classical and beyond, and contributes to larger contemporary discussions on the vicissitudes of the act of looking in literature, art, the media, and popular culture. Ultimately, this book has a place in feminist studies, as understanding how the gaze works from a gender perspective raises further awareness of the complexities of gender.

Earlier I described Metamorphoses as a mosaic of pictures woven in text. While the text is the ‘material’ substance that we have, images are mental constructions, first of the author and then of the reader. Initially, the author forges visual images in her imagination and in the process of reading the reader creates her own imagined representations. The textual process that most explicitly reflects on this interaction between author and reader is description. We are facing the difficulty of how to reconcile text and image, for we are discussing with words an experience that has non-verbal aspects. The problem also involves thinking about both similarities and differences between the acts of viewing and reading. Ancient and modern theorists have debated these questions, focusing specifically on the multifaceted phenomenon of ekphrasis. While in modern terms we tend to understand ekphrasis as a textual description of a work of art, like Aeneas’ shield, for example, ancient writers understood the term as description in general. These ideas offer clues on how to approach issues of text and image, as it is said that ekphrasis bestows a voice on a mute picture. In the Progymnasmata (exercise manuals), Hermogenes, a second-century CE Greek rhetorician and a very influential rhetorical writer in imperial Rome, explains:

Ekphrasis is a descriptive account; it is visible—so to speak—and brings before the eyes the sight which is to be shown. Ekphrases are of people, actions, times, places, seasons and many other things. An example of people is Homer’s “he was bandy-legged and lame in one foot” [Iliad 2.217]; of actions, the description of a land or sea battle; of times, peace and war; of places, harbors, sea-shores, and cities; of seasons, spring, summer, and festival. You could also have a mixed ekphrasis—such as the night battle in Thucydides, for night is time and battle is an action. . .

The special virtues of ekphrasis are clarity and visibility; the style should contrive to bring about seeing through hearing. (Progymnasmata 10, trans. Elsner [1995])
Although, as John Elsner notes, there are no descriptions of paintings in the rhetors’ examples of ekphrasis, there is, however, a strong emphasis on clarity (σαφήνεια) and visibility (ευαργεία), which constitute the “special virtues of ekphrasis.” “Ekphrasis is a description—which is to say, a reading—of a particular object or event so as to ‘bring it to sight,’ to make it visible. It is therefore a reading that is also a viewing. . . . To hear an ekphrasis is also to see what was described, and to write an ekphrasis is to make the description visible.”\(^\text{1}\) It is in this fashion that Ovid introduces visual imagery. One can make an ekphrasis out of a “real” image or work of art, but, as in Hermogenes’ passage, what the writer describes is a picture that he creates with his “mind’s eyes.” Even if one were describing a real, external, and tangible picture (say the images in the Ara Pacis Augustae), in the process of transforming image into text through description the author is always working on his own mental image of the work of art.

Technically, this ‘mental image’ is what the Stoics called phantasia, which is deeply linked with the idea of ekphrasis.\(^\text{1}\) Phantasia means “visualization” or “presentation,” and for the Stoics it came to mean “visualization” or “presentation” from an object. It is, by extension, “the situation in which enthusiasm and emotion make the speaker see what he is saying and bring it visually before the audience” (Longinus, De Sublimitate 15.1). As Elsner states:

> It was explicitly both a vision seen through the mind’s eyes which had been evoked and communicated in language and a mental vision which in its turn gave rise to language. In the context of descriptions of art . . . phantasia was the vision which gave rise to ekphrasis as well as being the vision which ekphrasis communicated to those who listened.\(^\text{1}\)

We thus see various levels of phantasia. The artist, whether a sculptor, painter, or writer, has a mental vision before creating his work. The writer, from the phantasia that he has created in his mind, constructs a text. The text in its turn stimulates the reader or listener to form her own phantasia and see the description with her “mind’s eyes.” In the case of a plastic work of art, the viewer sees the image with her own eyes. Even in this type of direct visual impression, although the concept is not applied specifically to this kind of viewing, we could talk of phantasia, as each viewer forms a particular image of the same object, which is transformed according to individual perceptions. Phantasia as a working concept of interpretation belongs to a reader/viewer-response-oriented approach, which relies on constructionism rather than essentialism.\(^\text{1}\)
From the previous discussions on gaze and phantasia one recognizes at least three types of gazes that will play out in the reading of the poem. First, there is the gaze of the characters who literally look. Second, when internal and external readers construct a phantasia from a narrative they hear or read, they are endowed with a mental gaze. Third, there is the gaze of the internal and external authors that is previous to the creation of visual images whether in art or text. These gazes are not to be taken only as physical, concrete ways of looking; they also involve metaphoric conceptions of seeing like knowing, realizing, and understanding.

But the concept of phantasia has larger implications for the ways in which we look at art. Phantasia is a more ‘idealistic’ way of viewing, based on the ‘idea,’ which gradually replaced, in Hellenistic times, the classical concept of mimesis, a representation of nature that aspires to realism. Phantasia, then, is a more creative and subjective process than imitation. As Garth Tissol states, “descriptions of phantasia depend on a metaphor of visual perception for an imaginative activity of the audience.” According to Rosati, it seems unlikely that Ovid would have consciously adhered to the aesthetic principles of phantasia; it is, however, possible to establish a connection with Ovid’s anti-naturalistic and anti-mimetic taste, which leads him to envision an autonomous space for literature, transcending the realistic mode. In this reader-response-oriented study of Metamorphoses, the concept of phantasia will be a key in defining what we understand by visual imagery.

There is, however, a problem that will pervade much of the present discussions. Although critics have used the postulate of the reader as a viewer, and so will I, it must be recognized that the reader’s approach to the text is essentially an act of reading and not viewing (despite the paradox that to read we need to ‘see’ the letters on the page), while viewing is an imaginary process that both critics and readers construct and undergo. I will, like many other critics, use terms like ‘reading’ and ‘viewing’ or ‘reader’ and ‘viewer’ as closely identified. Nonetheless, one should be aware that for all the similarities between reading and viewing there are still differences which one needs to be conscious of, especially when we apply theoretical strategies created with visual and not textual media in mind. The most obvious difference between reading and viewing is that viewing is a synchronic experience that perceives things all at once. Reading, on the contrary, is a diachronic process performed in time and which is carried out by appreciating one element after another. Some may find this distinction rather reductive, but it is still generally true, for while it is possible to view images or details of images one at a time, this would be a second step in the appreciation of a picture.
Feminism and the Gaze

The gaze has been at the center of feminist approaches to text and art for at least thirty years, and the role of looking in power issues is well established. The question sprang from gender concerns in film studies. Several critics were faced with the problem of how women viewed and were viewed on the big screen and in what ways power and gender ingrained themselves in the gaze. Laura Mulvey published a seminal article in 1975, in which she drew on Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical theory to analyze the erotic pleasure of viewing in film. One of the many pleasures of film is scopophilia, which Freud in *Three Essays on Sexuality* identified as one of the components of sexuality. In the pleasure of looking, Freud recognizes subjects and objects. Scopophilia begins with a pre-genital autoeroticism (narcissistic scopophilia) but afterwards, the look is transferred to others. Cinema uses the scopophilic instinct and turns the (male) spectator into a voyeur. Lacan gave theoretical entity to the “gaze” (*le regard*) and largely influenced film theory with his account of the mirror stage as a fundamental step in the formation of the subject. With this influence of Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage—which is closely linked to narcissism—screen theory suggests that self-recognition in the images projected is an important function of the gaze.\(^{20}\) Cinema explores the narcissistic type of visual pleasure by centering on the human body and thus offers two contradictory (yet overlapping) forms of pleasurable visual modes: As Mulvey states, “The first, scopophilic, arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the construction of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen.”\(^ {21}\) In the process of reading *Metamorphoses* as a web of visual images, these two modes, which we can dub ‘objectification’ and ‘identification,’ will prove instrumental.

One of Mulvey’s greatest steps was to expand the psychoanalytic ideas about the objectifying power of the gaze to viewing Woman as object and Man as bearer of the look. Woman as visual object will have various positions in film and in narrative. She is an eroticized image for the characters within the screen or story, but she is also an erotic and visual object for the spectators (and readers in this case) within the audience. Woman thus becomes spectacle, a spectacle controlled by the power of the male gaze. In the narcissistic or ego-building mode, the spectator “identifies with the main male protagonist, ‘he’ [my emphasis] projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look.”\(^ {22}\) In simplifying terms, this is what happens in the Apollo-Daphne story of
Metamorphoses

The external male viewer/reader projects his gaze on Apollo's and by seeing through his eyes, he gains the power of objectification and control over Daphne. However, the story is more complex than it seems because the god is at some level de-masculinized in his elegiac stance and cannot 'actually' rape. In every act of male visual control, as Mulvey explains, this reification of Woman as icon has a provocative side. If, following Freud's ideas, Woman is an emblem of "what is missing" in Man's body and embodies the threat of castration by her very appearance, her entrapment as visual object adds some sense of discomfort to Man's visual pleasure.

Mulvey's ideas of Man and Woman should be taken as gender categories and not as strictly biological, in accordance with the distinction of sex as biological and gender as a social construction. Although usually 'female gender' coincides with the biological entity 'woman,' there is no obligatory correlation between biology and gender. Gender, of course, is in direct relationship with power. In the same way, talking about 'male gaze' or 'female gaze' does not imply that the actual eyes belong to a man or a woman, but they are rather positions of power from where the act of looking is performed. Some would say, for example, that phallic women like Salmacis assume a 'male gaze' or that the girl in the mirror, making herself pretty for a male viewer, looks at herself with a 'male gaze' while the eyes are still female. Conversely, a woman who has a powerful gaze is still not in the same position as a man, as she cannot stop being a woman and, like Salmacis, loses even her own identity.

Illuminating as Mulvey's article was, it still left central issues of gender and viewing unresolved, in part because they discomfited her neatly shaped model. What she left unexplored was what happens when the viewer, spectator (or reader) is a woman and what the outcome is when the creator (i.e., the film director in her case) and the main characters are women. Mulvey is aware of the last question, but does not answer it; instead, she quickly, in a footnote, directs the attention of the inquisitive reader to other texts. The other two questions she leaves untouched at this moment.

Mulvey's ideas were seminal and incited further contributions that critiqued her and attempted to fill in gaps. Kaplan, among others, asked some crucial questions. She starts by stressing that objectification in itself may not be a serious problem, as the capacity to reify may be a component of both men and women who look. The problem is that men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and of possession that is lacking in the female gaze. Women receive and
return the gaze but cannot act on it. Second, the sexualisation and objectification of women is not simply for the purposes of eroticism; from a psychoanalytic point of view, it is designed to annihilate the threat that woman (as castrated, and possessing a sinister genital organ) poses.24

This statement, which agrees fairly well with Mulvey’s views, is rather reductive, for it precludes any possibility of women acting upon their gazes. While it is true that women cannot respond with violence to the penetrative male gaze, they can still find alternative ways to act upon what they see, especially by narrating and becoming witnesses, as in the cases of Iole, Alcmene, and Arethusa, among others. Further, Kaplan questions whether the gaze is necessarily masculine, or whether it would be possible to structure things so that women may own a gaze. She also inquires if women would want to own a gaze, were it possible, and what it would mean to be a woman spectator.25 Kaplan does not answer all these questions successfully, but in this case and for such a complex issue, which cannot have a monolithic answer, formulating them might be almost as productive as answering and in fact, a straightforward answer would even be self-defeating.

To some of the criticism of her earlier arguments, especially to her assumption of the spectator as he, Mulvey responded with a new article in 1989.26 To the question “What about the woman in the audience?” she envisions two possible female spectators. The first does not partake at all in the pleasure that is on offer and thus the “spell of fascination is broken.” The second finds “herself secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that the identification with the hero provides.”27 This is what Mulvey calls trans-sex identification; she recognizes that the process in popular cinema is inherited from traditional forms of storytelling. But this is still problematic. If one follows Mulvey, the female spectator is either assimilated to the gaze of the male or if not, she is simply deprived of all pleasure and participation in the aesthetic process. Furthermore, the model of trans-sex identification seems to confirm rather than challenge the system where the male is the only possible position for power. So, to return to the example of Metamorphoses, the only possibility for a woman reader/viewer to gain power and enjoyment would be to identify with Apollo’s desire, which in itself is not only restrictive but also problematic.

Instead, various situations may be recognized for the woman viewer. She may well identify with the woman in the film or narrative, and thus locate herself as erotic fantasy and erotic recipient in a somewhat masochistic stance. But she is also often encouraged by Hollywood to
identify with the star and then buy associated merchandise. An alternative would be to identify with the male gaze, in which case the woman would be placed in a slightly askew position. This enjoying and identification with the male allows the female spectator to revert, at least imaginatively, to the active independence of what Freud termed the female child's early masculine phase.28 But she could also position herself as a woman watching a woman who is a passive recipient of male sexual activity. She can even be a woman watching a man who is looking at a woman, or in fact, she can place herself as an observer of the whole process that takes place between male gaze and female visual object without focalizing29 with any of the participants in particular. This capacity of the gaze of women to serve as 'witness' is, this study suggests, an important element in the search for a female gaze, which will be discussed in depth for the cases of Iole, Cyane, Philomela, and others. In brief, the possibilities for the gaze of a woman are more complex than Mulvey suggests.

An important question that Kaplan raises is “when women are in the dominant position, are they in the masculine position? Can we envisage a female dominant position that would differ qualitatively from the male form of dominance? Or is there merely the possibility for both sex genders to occupy the positions we now know as masculine and feminine?”30 (original emphasis). All these questions are extremely important for any gendered discussion of the gaze and are specifically crucial for Metamorphoses. We will encounter these problems in several women who possess a gaze in the poem, Medea, Scylla, and Salmacis being clear examples. Does the fact that women hold the gaze necessarily mean that there is a ‘gender reversal’? What femininity is left in their gazes? While much ‘masculinization’ is seen in the ideology of these episodes, this study will show how these cases are problematic, as women can never stop being women, even when they occupy the position of men. No human female viewer of a man triumphs completely in Metamorphoses; on the contrary, they are normally punished and abandoned and their gazes are not as paralyzing and controlling as those of men. The exception, however, could be made for women who witness events that happen to others or themselves and can, in some way, triumph by telling the stories.

Kaplan ends her article with an attempt at suggesting an alternative gaze for women. Though not completely convincing, her example of the mother and child exchanging gazes is a promising effort, for in this bond there appears to be a mutual gazing not based on a subject-object relationship.31 It is in this exchange of looks that Kaplan challenges us to search for a different path in the power struggle of looking. This study of Metamorphoses assumes this enterprise, if not specifically focusing on the
mother-child bond. But despite the strong patriarchal weight of the subject-object implications of looking, Ovid’s poem offers fissures from where unconventional possibilities for the gaze, especially among women, can emerge. In Book 13, for example, Scylla shares Galatea’s story while combing her hair, in an intimate situation where neither gaze is dominating or paralyzing.

Reaction to Mulvey from male viewers and critics was also constructive. Edward Snow objected to the apparent narrowness of the subject-object, male-female dichotomy. As a sympathizer with feminism Snow felt that the power relations in the gaze as established by critics like Mulvey might undermine the very project of exposure of patriarchal strictures. Snow worried that such a theory can—and in practice often does—become an unwitting agent of the very forces of surveillance it wishes to oppose. Crucial as the unmasking of patriarchal/ideological/pornographic motives may be, the demystifying project runs the risk of occluding whatever in the gaze resists being understood in those terms. . . . Nothing could better serve the paternal superego than to reduce masculine vision completely to the terms of power, violence, and control, to make disappear whatever in the male gaze remains outside the patriarchal, and pronounce outlawed, guilty, damaging and illicitly possessive every male view of woman.32

Snow examines several paintings, especially Velazquez’s *The Toilet of Venus*, and explores images of women and the power of reflections in mirrors. He concludes that, at least in these particular paintings, there are more nuances to the gaze at play and that there is a downplaying of nudity and the female body that precludes a view of woman as object. Likewise, through the reflection of Venus in the mirror we may well see an interior and introspective image rather than a framed spectacle for the male eye, although he admits that other, conventionally feminist readings are possible.33 The value of Snow’s discussion is that it puts the hegemony of the male gaze under suspicion and opens up the spectrum of possibilities for a gendered conception of the gaze.

Approaching the issue from the philosophical viewpoint of aesthetics, Mary Devereaux reminds us that the gaze can never be neutral and that every act of seeing involves a “way of seeing.” She also notes that talking about the “male” gaze does not necessarily imply a man looking. For example, a woman beautifying herself and spending great amounts of time, money, and energy “making herself pretty” for a man, is looking at
herself with a male gaze, as an object of desire and not a subject. “In this sense, the eyes are female but the gaze is male.” While this statement is interesting as it gives another dimension to the male gaze, placing it beyond the male eyes, it is still rather reductive, as women are still women even when they look with a somewhat ‘masculine’ gaze—or rather a masculine perspective. The problem is that *Metamorphoses* also features males in the mirror like Narcissus and Polyphemus. So how does the Cyclops look at himself? Is he adopting a male gaze to objectify himself when the prospective viewer is actually a female?

Another of Devereaux’s points which will be of use in this analysis of *Metamorphoses* is the recognition that even when films feature women characters who are alternative and depart from societal norms, their independence is somewhat limited and they need to (and usually do) undergo a process of re-education into ‘proper’ femininity, otherwise they end up dead or outcast. This is mostly true for Ovid’s epic, where characters like Scylla, Arachne, or Salmacis lose themselves through transformation, which is a metaphorical—yet paradoxical—form of death of their identity as women. But perhaps the most emblematic example of a female that needs to be ‘domesticated’ in *Metamorphoses* is the wild and independent goddess Thetis, who is finally forced into passivity by Peleus, who has the support of Jupiter. Another observation about film, which applies quite well to *Metamorphoses*, is the idea that when men are positioned as objects of the gaze one normally sees them in action, chasing the enemy, fighting, riding horses, and so on. Women, instead, are pictured as static. Finally, Devereaux observes that the audience is not a uniform entity and that it entails multiple audiences. Talking about “male spectator” or “female spectator” is in itself reductive, as perceptions and readings may well vary according to whether the viewer is a black, white, poor, rich, conservative, liberal, homosexual, heterosexual, man, or woman, and as many varieties of readership that this world has to offer. This is one criticism to be raised to Wheeler’s illuminating recent thesis on *Metamorphoses*, namely, that he treats the audience as a fairly homogeneous whole, a criticism that has already been raised by reviewers. Nonetheless, we cannot do without some generalization, or we would be talking about individual experience only and criticism, being a “communal activity”—as Stanley Fish recognizes—wishes to go beyond the purely personal.

While much of the feminist critique has tried to ‘(re?)appropriate’ the act of looking for women in more positive and meaningful ways, Alison Sharrock wonders whether significant advances have been made. Commenting on her interest in Burgin’s experiment to coalesce and blur the distinctions between object and subject (the male photographer appears
also as object in the photos), she sees that there is still a difference between women looked at and men looked at. Men in pictures are viewed as exhibitionist, while women are objects of the gaze; their exhibitionism becomes spectacle and men seem to hold a more powerful position nevertheless. Likewise, Sharrock agrees with Devereaux in that there is a “tendency for men as-viewed-as-objects (whether overtly erotic or not) to be portrayed as doing something, and men who are portrayed not ‘doing something’ to be read as ‘feminine’ (depowered, deviant).”40 Finally, to Caws’s question, “Is there some way of looking that is not the look of an intruder, some interpretation from which we would exempt ourselves as consumers?” Sharrock responds negatively.41 For even when the pattern male as active viewer and woman as passive object is destabilized as in the Narcissus story, it seems that “the dominant mode of reading is enhanced by the very awareness that these cases involve such a paradigm shift” and that “there is no way of presenting women . . . that is not at least partly repressive.”42

Nonetheless, some feminists seem to have been successful in discovering an alternative to the monolithic male gaze. A good example of its deconstruction is Eva Stehle, who argues for a non-possessive gaze in Sappho. She does this by avoiding or breaking down the sharp opposition between the viewer and the object of the gaze. In poem 31 (Voigt), for example, the focus is placed on the effects of love on the viewer rather than on the viewed. Likewise, Sappho achieves a blurring of the distinction of viewer and object by unspecific description. In other poems, the beauty of the woman viewed is displaced onto the surroundings like songs, scents, flowers, rich cloths, and enclosed places that reflect the woman’s sexual attractiveness. This dilution of the boundaries between self and other brings forth a blurring of the traditional male/female visual hierarchies and precludes a specific place for the phallus.43

While some of their most useful points for my reading of Metamorphoses have already been outlined, critics of the monolithic ‘male gaze’ are too numerous for a full account of the debate in this introduction.44 Approaching Metamorphoses from this complex framework of theories is a challenging task. In accordance with its protean nature, the poem cannot be framed in only one way of understanding the gaze. While, in principle, the male gaze seems to be an overarching concept which matches the patriarchal ideology of Rome, there is much room for alternatives. On the one hand, in the episodes of Daphne and Pygmalion the woman appears as visual object. But many women do the looking, too, for example, Scylla or Medea, who may appear to appropriate the male gaze. Yet this gaze is not entirely male, as it lacks the power to control and win that a male
viewer holds. Women with penetrative and performative eyes seem to be punished or destroyed in the poem. However, there are certain episodes where the concepts of male gaze and female object cannot be applied in the same way. When Arachne weaves her beautiful tapestry, for example, a crowd of women looks. The viewers do not objectify or control the image (Arachne) and the weaver is in full action rather than the usual immobility of the object. Yet the viewers gain pleasure and enrichment from the act of looking.

**Metamorphoses and the Gaze**

Adding to the traditional literature on *Metamorphoses* by critics like L. P. Wilkinson, Hermann Fränkel, Karl Galinsky, Otto Due, Brooks Otis, and Joseph Solodow, among others, a more recent burgeoning interest in the poem is reflected in studies that strive to apply modern literary theories and tools. Most illuminating are those of Stephen Hinds, Leonard Barkan, Garth Tissol, Sara Myers, and, more recently, Stephen Wheeler’s study on audience and performance and the collection of essays on *Ovidian Transformations* edited by Philip Hardie, Stephen Hinds, and Alessandro Barchiesi. All these books touch at some point on issues of visual imagery and some of them make specific allusions to power relations and gender. Additionally, many revealing articles deal directly with these matters. Indeed, scholars of a previous generation who did so much to begin the modern studies of Ovid were already remarking on the power of images and the gaze. As is always the case, however, they make gender(ed) assumptions, often taking them as objective truths. Otis, for example, referring to the Apollo-Daphne episode, notes that “we watch the lover’s eye devouring the girl” and comments on Apollo’s “undignified desire to see more.” Piquant as well is Otis’s recognition that “Daphne is really nothing but the determined virgin whose single role is to thwart the infatuated lover. It is on him that our attention is focused: his thoughts and words that we share.” Otis is here focalizing. He embodies the stereotype of a male voyeuristic reader who identifies with Apollo’s male intrusive gaze, who shares the god’s “thoughts and words” and even probably his desire.

Attention to the meanings of art was raised particularly by Rosati in his *Narcisso e Pigmalione*, and earlier on by others like Laslo. But while these critics focus on questions of art, nature, and representation, providing insightful comments on specific episodes, neither uses feminist approaches nor are they particularly interested in gender/power relationships in the act of looking. I shall here re-address the material that these
critics examine with the tools provided by gaze theory and feminist film studies.

One of the most stimulating early studies is Charles Segal’s discussion of landscape in *Metamorphoses*. Although Segal does not position himself consciously as viewer and despite the fact that he does not attempt to write a gender-sensitive piece, landscape is inseparable from viewing. Since many of my discussions deal with description, and especially with descriptions of landscape from a gender perspective, Segal’s book has definitely been thought-provoking. Segal’s main thesis is that landscape conveys a sexual metaphor and that its intrusion and disruption can tell us much about the symbolism of sexual violence in the poem. Further, Segal observes how Ovid innovates in the use of landscape with respect to his predecessors in pastoral poetry, Theocritus and Virgil. While the bucolic landscape is in general pleasant in these authors, Ovid makes it the theater of sexual violence. Finally, Segal even proposes that landscape is a unifying leitmotif of many books of *Metamorphoses* and that it stages an insecure world which points to the lack of a clearly defined order of nature and reveals no reliable moral structure.

Barkan also offers a particularly interesting insight into some highly visual episodes. Although his is not an explicit gender-directed analysis, he recognizes that metamorphosis is a particularly female experience and that to believe in characters like Arachne and Europa is to believe “in an antiheroic upside-down world of flux characterized by a reaction against the masculine-dominated world of stability. It is to believe in an aesthetic that is personal, non linear and fluid.” More specifically, he analyzes the episodes of Tiresias, Cadmus, and Actaeon—with further references to Pentheus and Narcissus—and concludes that “metamorphosis is, at the deepest level, a transfiguration of the self,” exercised in these episodes through the eyes. All these characters reach a point in their stories where they gaze at something sacred and in it they perceive a mirror image of themselves. The encounter with their own identity through viewing produces such a deep impact that the only possible outcome seems to be transformation; thus physical metamorphosis is a literalized symbol of inner change. Yet, unlike these characters, Perseus seems to be a master of both mirror and the sacred being, which Barkan identifies with the serpent. He never looks at his own image, but instead learns to look at the Gorgon only through her reflection on his shield. Perseus, according to Barkan, has a special ability with shadow and reflection. Barkan’s ideas are relevant because he explores the act of looking and its links to power and transformation. However, he does not place the accent on the female; the characters he is interested in are mainly men, including problematic
males like Narcissus. Even when he discusses Actaeon or Pentheus his eyes are aligned with those of the male characters while the females who are vital actors in these stories are left somewhat in the dark.

Tissot, in his study of wit and narrative in *Metamorphoses*, makes some acute observations about *phantasia* and visualization. He analyzes the process of bringing abstract concepts “before the reader's eyes” in the *prosopopeiae* of Invidia, Fames, Somnus, and the house of Fama. He recognizes that Ovid “took this form of imaginative actualization far beyond its origins, making it a thematic principle, an embodiment of transformation itself. . . . Personification embodies the transformative nature of Ovidian language in an especially extreme form, and nothing could be more closely bound up with Ovidian metamorphosis.”52 Again, change is tightly entwined with visual imagery.

Sharrock’s *Womanufacture* offers an illuminating analogy between Pygmalion’s creation of his own object of love and the elegiac poet who construes a fictitious *puella* to fall in love with her, a reading that takes into account the identification of woman as visual object and text and the artist as poet and reader.53 In 1991, Elsner and Sharrock offered some interesting reflections on the myth of Pygmalion from two different yet complementary viewpoints. Traditional criticism tended to view Pygmalion as an alter-ego for the poet Ovid, where Pygmalion’s “success” as artist serves as a “most celebrated exemplar of the potentialities belonging to the fine arts.”54 But Pygmalion had also been seen as an episode of artistic failure.55 Elsner’s new perspective does not take Pygmalion as a myth of the artist but rather sees the sculptor as viewer. This has important repercussions for reading *Metamorphoses*. Pygmalion the artist is suggestive of the writer (whether this implies Ovid or Orpheus or both); Pygmalion as viewer can function as a myth of the ideal reader. The ivory statue, which can be taken as a metaphor for the poem, was created by Pygmalion the sculptor but turned him into viewer-lover. Elsner’s juxtaposition of viewer and reader, which extends in much of this study to internal and external viewers, is compelling. Elsner shows that Pygmalion’s supremacy as an artist has to do with his preponderance as viewer—he is actually the only one who ever sees his statue. Pygmalion as viewer embodies a metaphor for the reader as creator of his own narrative.56 Sharrock also sees Pygmalion as reader and the ivory statue as art-text, but she focuses on the male creative activity as erotic. She believes that “like Ovid in *Amores* 1.2, Pygmalion is in love with love rather than with a love-object: he is in love with his own creative and erotic process. Such are the erotics of the art-text. As ‘reader’ of his own art-text, Pygmalion is seduced by it and enticed to penetrate its meaning.”57 However,
unlike Genevieve Liveley, Sharrock assigns no subjectivity or self-agency to the statue.  

In his article on Narcissus in Sexuality in Ancient Art, Elsner focuses on the late antique interpretations of pictures of Narcissus in Roman art by Philostratus and Callistratus. But while doing so, he investigates the articulation of the viewer’s desire with the object of the gaze. Although Elsner does not analyze Ovid’s episode directly, his comments on the myth of Narcissus are enlightening for readers of Metamorphoses. He explores issues of objectification through the gaze of the viewer and applies it specifically to the effects of self-objectification. He concludes that Narcissus is a perfect viewer of art in the mode of naturalism and offers some cogent remarks about gender issues and the gaze. He suggests that Narcissus looks at his image as a man would look at his eromenos or at a woman; but he also looks at himself as a woman in a male-dominated society would look at herself or as a boy in a homosexual culture. That is, he looks at himself as one who is being looked at. From subject, Narcissus has turned himself into a kind of object.

Georgia Nugent re-appraises the story of Hermaphroditus from a feminist perspective. In her analysis she makes acute observations on the gaze and the use of mainly Freudian but also Lacanian psychoanalytical approaches. Nugent understands that while in appearance this is a story of blurring and inversion of sexual differences, the text refuses to upset in any fundamental way the axis of masculine and feminine. She sees that Salmacis’ relation to herself is specular and her nymphomania can be linked to psychoanalytic views of female narcissism where the woman knows herself as the image others perceive. Nugent seems to suggest a gender inversion in Salmacis’ gaze and she also relates her ocular desire to possess Hermaphroditus to the fantasy of penis envy.

Amy Richlin’s article on Ovid’s rapes also addresses issues of gaze, pornography, and problems of gender and reading. Richlin focuses on the spectacle of violence in rape and shows how characters like Daphne and Philomela are turned into visual objects. Against critics who see the stories as sympathetic pictures of rape, Richlin shows that the text conveys a sense of pleasure in violence.

But one of the most direct applications of gaze theory to Metamorphoses is seen in Segal’s 1994 article on Philomela, which raises some of the same issues as Richlin. Segal observes that in the case of Tereus the “tyrannical’ assertion of male domination over the female body”—which later culminates in rape and mutilation—is enacted “symbolically through the aggressive penetration of the male gaze,” which combines fetishistic scopophilia and sadism. Segal not only recognizes Tereus as a tyrant who
holds a powerful male gaze in the terms of Mulvey, but he also sees a female reader in Procne when she decodes her sister's weaving. Segal also adopts a reader-response approach when he inquires about the possible reactions of the external reader to Philomela's cloth: it may invite the male reader to voyeuristic complicity in the crime or the female reader to complicity in the vengeance. Issues of gaze, gender, art, and power are also discussed in his 1998 analysis of Pygmalion, Andromeda, and Philomela: “If the female body in the *Metamorphoses* is characterized by its status as a visual object, its passivity, its appropriation by the male libidinal imagination, and its role as vessel to be ‘filled’ by male seed to continue a heroic lineage, the ideal of the male body is impenetrability.” While there is much truth in Segal’s statement, such gender pigeon-holing runs the risk, as Snow warns us, of undermining the very project of patriarchal exposure that it tries to carry out by limiting the options for men and women.

**Ways of Reading**

The focus of this study is deeply linked with issues of readership and narrative. The viewer will be frequently identified with the reader and the image with the text. But the author as 'plastic' artist, through the use of *phantasia* to construct visual images, is also a reader and a viewer. The range of reading strategies that most suits inquiries about the reader is that of reader-response criticism, though concerns about the role of the audience and their response to a text are already present in the works of ancient literary critics like Plato, Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus. Reader-response theory is broad and by no means uniform, but its common aim is to ask about the reader's role. It gives pre-eminence to the eyes of the reader rather than to the text as sacrosanct voice. In essence, “reader-response critics would argue that a poem cannot be understood apart from its results. Its ‘effects,’ psychological and otherwise, are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of the reader.” In this sense, reader-response criticism questions the status of the text and its objectivity and poses for the reader an active role whereby he participates in the production of meaning. For many reader-response theorists like W. Iser, this does not imply the death of the text, but “the range of interpretations that arise as a result of the reader's creative activity is seen rather as proof of the text’s ‘inexhaustibility.’” Furthermore, Iser states that it is precisely “the convergence of the text and the reader” that
“brings the literary work into existence.” This kind of approach opens up to a multiplicity of readings and viewings, which is more appropriate to the nature of *Metamorphoses.* While the reader holds some independence and participates actively in the creation of meaning, the text still stands. For Stanley Fish, the act of literary criticism becomes the description of the act of reading. This redefines literature, not as an object but as an experience, because it makes the responses of the reader, rather than the contents of the text, the focus of critical attention. For reader-response critics, then, talking about reading is also part of the act of reading and this forms part of the present project. As a general caveat, then, whenever I refer to “Ovid,” the “author,” or the “text,” what I am implying is the reader’s perceptions of them. But Fish’s definition of interpretation removes the text from the center of attention almost completely. I want to stay somewhere in the middle, for I recognize that through interaction between the properties of the texts and readers, different meanings can be uncovered for and by different readers. I also combine reader-response approaches with gaze theory, a task that has been successfully undertaken for readings of classical antiquity by Helen Elsom, Segal, and Sharrock.

But if one is describing the experience of the reader, how is it possible to approach this mainly individual experience in a meaningful way without falling into indiscriminate generalizations? Following Devereaux (above), in strict terms there is no general reader and there are as many readings as readers. This said, generalization is at some level necessary. Here, the concept of ‘interpretative communities,’ which plays a crucial role in recent theories of reading, is relevant. Stanley Fish first insinuated it in 1980 with “Literature in the Reader” and then fully developed it in “Interpreting the *Variorum.*” He implied that since sign systems are basically social constructions that individuals share, a reader’s perceptions and judgments are a function of the assumptions shared by the communities he belongs to. This same problem was faced by Due in his study of *Metamorphoses,* where he attempted to read the poem “through the eyes of ancient readers” and to expose “why and how” ancient readers understood *Metamorphoses.* While it may be questionable to what extent this enterprise is feasible or useful, Due argues the problem of readership in a convincing way. He believes that only when a reading can be shared by others does it have some objective value and that the experience of the audience has points in common even when we cannot agree on the analysis of a work. However, Fish’s concept of interpretive communities is not without its problems, for the response of the reader may be seen to be unpredictable at some level and ‘like-mindedness’ is not sufficient to
account for the experience of each individual reader. Thus, the following readings of *Metamorphoses* do not claim to be common to the whole Ovidian audience; rather my hope is to present some features that readers will recognize that they share and to stimulate them to create new, ever-changing readings of this ever-changing poem.

I have previously discussed the question of female viewers and female creators of film. The same question must be addressed for the reader: In what ways do a female and a male reading differ and how can a woman read a text? This issue has a long history in the scholarly debate, which exceeds the limits of this introduction. Nonetheless we may begin with two modes of reading that are particularly useful: resisting and releasing. Reading as resistance began with Judith Fetterly’s *The Resisting Reader*, where the author attempts to appropriate a feminine reading by questioning the authority of the male author and critic and by exposing the patriarchal strategies of the texts. Fetterly also recognizes that the woman reader is forced to adopt a male point of view for male-biased texts and that readings of texts tend to present the masculine experience as universal. This ‘immasculation’ of the female reader can be equated with the visual experience of the woman viewer who is forced to adopt a masculine gaze in Mulvey’s model. Thus Fetterly’s strategy seems complementary to Mulvey’s in the field of reading.

To escape this bind, critics like Devereaux—who also claims for “reading against the grain, re-reading or revision” of traditional male texts—remark that to react against patriarchal conceptions of art and art products, two solutions are possible. On the one hand, feminists have created ‘counter-cinema,’ a strategy that strives to create a ‘female voice.’ On the other hand, one can develop methods of dealing with existing texts by ‘resisting’ them. Or, as Richlin puts it, there are three things that one can do with male-authored/biased texts: “throw them out, take them apart, find female-based ones instead.” The strategies of the resisting reader have the aim both of critique and re-appropriation, thus providing an alternative to the male gaze. But this mode of reading, as sympathetic to feminism as it appears, is not entirely unproblematic. Criticisms were raised because Fetterly’s project risks replacing one monoview with another and does not give “sufficient credit to the multiplicity of perspective in the act of reading.”

An alternative way of reading would be releasing. This strategy essentially allows women’s voices to speak despite the author. It is a reading of the female voice in male-authored texts as independent from the voice of the male authorial intention. This is a more recuperative method that subordinates the authority of the author to that of female characters,
which is well exemplified by Efrossini Spentzou's reading of the *Heroides* as women writers and critics who awaken from their literary lethargy and assume their own artistic voices. Releasing is, in essence, a shift of focus away from the author that allows agency to the female (and male) characters.\textsuperscript{85}

Students of *Metamorphoses* have gone in both directions. Richlin is an obvious resisting reader and so is Leslie Cahoon; but while Richlin sees an intrinsic misogyny in Ovid, Cahoon takes the richness and multiplicity of voices and female characters in *Metamorphoses* as a sign that the poem is open to multiple perspectives, including that of a female reader.\textsuperscript{86} Clara Shaw Hardy's piece on Arachne also follows this critical direction.\textsuperscript{87} She maintains that although Ovid is being sympathetic to women and female victims, we actually see an erasure of them in favor of the transformed gods. Therefore, Arachne's voice is somewhat silenced even before metamorphosis. A fine reading, but does this mean that Ovid or "the author" is suppressing Arachne's voice? How does this fit with the common identification of the girl with the poet himself, later silenced by a "god"? Finally, Patricia Joplin resists the "misogyny" of psychoanalysis and sees in Ovid and some of his interpreters a "silencing" of women in the tale of Philomela that feminists must fight and expose.\textsuperscript{88}

Liveley's approach to Pygmalion and the *Propoetides* is both resisting and releasing.\textsuperscript{89} While at first she unmasks the male bias in the apparent authorial (of Ovid, Orpheus, and Pygmalion) judgment of them in the poem, she proceeds to analyze the episode from a feminine perspective. She allows the ivory maiden some subjectivity and female agency. Also, a rather recuperative approach can be found in Elissa Marder's work on Philomela. Marder sees that in the silence of Procne and Philomela and their vengeance there are a refusal to speak the language of the father and a violation of his laws. Likewise, she likens the women in the tale striving for an alternative, "disarticulated" language with the struggles of feminism "to find a discursive vocabulary for experiences both produced and silenced by patriarchy."\textsuperscript{90}

This study will not adopt a one-way reading strategy for *Metamorphoses*. There is indeed a powerful male pen behind the poem, but I still want to let the female voice and image speak for themselves. In a poem that is in constant flux and where the voices of characters and author(s) are in constant movement and cannot (are not meant to) be sharply distinguished, a unique critical positioning will only lead to the impoverishment of the reading. I am then consciously opting for eclecticism, because the very nature of the poem claims it and deserves it. Although I try to bear in mind that the visual images are constructed by a male viewer/
artist and that they are intended—for the most part—for a masculine viewer/reader (this would fit quite nicely with Mulvey’s model), if this were the only perspective, it would simplify the wealth of meanings and possibilities that Metamorphoses offers to a modern reader. I also intend, to some extent, to de-historicize the poem and read it as a work open to modern audiences, which include women readers. Likewise, while I discuss the possible male authorial “intentions” (or rather the reader’s perceptions of what the “authorial intentions” are) and gaze behind the construction of a certain episode, I also allow agency to female characters, because Metamorphoses lets women act and become central actors in the stories, even when their achievements are restricted. My method is therefore not entirely resisting but also not only recuperative, and in many episodes I try to explore the outcomes of examining a story from both perspectives.