

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



### Heyworth, Gregory. *Desiring Bodies: Ovidian Romance and the Cult of Form*

Sally Hickson

Volume 35, Number 1, Winter 2012

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1105898ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i1.19086>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Hickson, S. (2012). Review of [Heyworth, Gregory. *Desiring Bodies: Ovidian Romance and the Cult of Form*]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 35(1), 199–200. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i1.19086>

seventeenth-century history, both in England and abroad. This wide impact renders the book essential.

BENJAMIN WOODFORD, *Queen's University*

**Heyworth, Gregory.**

***Desiring Bodies: Ovidian Romance and the Cult of Form.***

Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009. Pp. 357. ISBN 978-0-268-03106-0 (paperback) \$38.

The premise of Gregory Heyworth's book is simple. He takes his title and his subject from the first line of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, "My mind is bent to tell of forms changed into new bodies," and tells us in his "Polemical Premise" what his book does not do: it does not contribute to "studies of classical influence in the traditional sense"; it does "not survey sources and analogues" or concern itself with "literary allusion"; instead, it investigates romance literature as a derivation of Ovidian metamorphosis in the sense of the struggle between "the love of the body as a material thing and as a synecdoche of the larger body of society" (p. ix). It is, therefore, not really about literature or about particular texts but about how a particular literary genre is generated by both the unifying illusion of desire and the ultimate dissociation of the self from the other. If the impetus of romance is to narrate separate entities into unions, such a desire inevitably ends (as in the *Roman de la Rose*) at the very moment of union itself — much like Calvino's Mr. Palomar, who died at the moment of supreme apprehension of the totality of lived experience. This is not to ignore Heyworth's profound engagement with the larger ideas that Ovid's statement at the beginning of the *Metamorphoses* acknowledges; the mutability of poetry as analogous to the mutability of society. But such a desire for "culture" or "civilization" subsequently distorts and mutates individuality and collectivity. We are left only with the desire, which we experience as bodies and express, however perfectly or imperfectly, in our literary forms. The idea seems to be that literary form mirrors civilization — its contents and discontents.

Heyworth is transfixed by the paradoxical: bodies and forms, time and timelessness, mutations wrought in rhyme — from lais to tales to sonnets

to cantos — and forms newly awakened by the trailing shadow of Orpheus descending and then ascending (as music is). There is a startling analysis of Orphism in Petrarch (219–27) that is crucial to Heyworth's analysis — although it could be greatly enhanced by musical metaphors — since it provides the turning point from the disunities of Ovid's "love plots" (229), sewn together in the *Metamorphoses*, to the romance of Chretien de Troyes, couched in Aristotelian tragic unity, both of which are then stretched to their limits by Petrarch in his sonnets. After Petrarch, the history of the romance form is a tale of discords. The new tensions between temporal forms and timeless poetic bodies that emerge from Petrarch are framed by Heyworth as the central poetic issues at stake in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. As Yeats put it, "the centre cannot hold." These fragmentations and refigurations are at the centre of Heyworth's analysis, which begins with Ovid, and then proceeds through Marie de France, Chretien de Troyes, Chaucer, Petrarch, Shakespeare, and, finally, Milton — whose graceful angels made graceless, rebellious haste towards their own formless fall.

I will say that the book is perhaps more difficult than it needs to be. It is clearly addressed to advanced literary scholars, particularly scholars who are able to extend to the full limits of its temporal scope from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries, and who can roam freely through Latin classicism, medieval French, trecento Italian, and into early English verse forms. One must also trust the translations. Such breadth and scope could be mistaken for formlessness were not the whole held together by the chronological arc of the texts subjected to analysis within the larger body of the book. I also have to say that the initial premise — that one line of Ovid could have spurred such a continuity and/or discontinuity of literature and civilization — seems a bit problematic. Historians of visual art have long recognized, through the works of Correggio and Titian — to name just two — that, in the words of Paul Barolsky in his "Ovid's Protean Epic of Art" (*Arion* 14.3 [2007], pp. 107–120), "Metamorphoses is also a history of desire, a multitude of stories of love, lust, passion and affection, a reminder that the intertwined histories of Western art and literature, enriched by Ovid, are the aggregation of such stories of desire." As he goes on to say, "Ovid is for everyone."

SALLY HICKSON, *University of Guelph*