

Representing the Soul in Images of Mythical Metamorphosis

Metamorphosis involves transformations in which bodily appearance changes (e.g., into animals, plants, or new human forms), but the soul remains hidden. This occurs particularly during moments of "divine deception," when divinities descend from heaven to earth to test or seduce mortals. As other scholars have noted, ancient Greek literary representations of transformation usually emphasized the suddenness of an astonishing change (Gildenhard and Zissos 2017; Buxton 2009). With occasional exceptions (e.g., the poet Moschus, fl. 150 BCE), it was really with Ovid that metamorphic myths acquired a sustained psychological impulse. By the second century, Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* would push these psychological dimensions of metamorphosis nearly to their limits by making the inner psychological experience of the protagonist's self-metamorphosis its central theme. While iconographic studies of metamorphosis have provided useful typologies that help to understand how static images can represent transformation, they have yet to wrestle with the question of how the metamorphic image could use the visible appearance of the body to depict the hidden and invisible soul (Alexandridis 2009; Buxton 2009; Sharrock 1996). Indeed, such a representational ambition has been thought to be an impossibility for visual artists. As one author puts it, Ovid's poetry might easily portray Actaeon's inner psyche as his hounds attack him, but visual artworks could not simultaneously depict both the body and the inner soul since Actaeon "cannot be both invisible and seen" (Sharrock 1996).

In this paper, I will challenge this latter assessment. I argue that the metamorphic image can envision the paradoxes of transformation: the depiction of visible skins yet hidden souls, and unchanging identity within a world of changing forms. To do so, I draw upon ancient Greco-

Roman writings about physiognomy or the practice of discerning souls from outward bodily tokens. At the moment, the dominant scholarly approach to physiognomy and the arts has been given an anthropocentric focus, though discussions of animals are replete in physiognomic treatises (Elsner 2007). Starting in the third century BCE with the writings of Pseudo-Aristotle and continuing beyond Polemon's writings during the second century CE (indeed well into Islamic times), physiognomic inquiry was applied to understand the soulful proclivities of animals and humans. Physiognomists scrutinized outward bodily tokens, such as facial features, nails, blood vessels, and the eyes, as reflections of the soul's inner workings (Boys-Stones 2007). My artistic case studies focus on images of Jupiter's disguised descents from heaven that exemplify the artistic impulse to depict souls lurking within zoomorphic bodies. Such images, include sculptures, reliefs, and paintings that range from the first century BCE to the second century CE. In the end, this paper will help us understand the overlooked soulful aspects of metamorphic representation, as well as broader interconnections between art, myth, and philosophical inquiry.

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