Punishment or Liberation?
Tracing Nonhuman Value in Metamorphosis

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Abstract:

This essay examines whether the human-turned-nonhuman is punished or liberated in four metamorphosis narratives. Beginning with the myth of Arachne and Minerva in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, I demonstrate how traditional definitions of human nature negatively shape human-to-nonhuman metamorphosis. Even though Minerva's actions save Arachne in the most literal way, her transformation is closely connected with a tradition of divine punishment – alluded to during the weaving competition – and hierarchy that situates Anthropos as superior to nonhuman (animals, insect, plants, etc.) life. This is then compared with Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915). While critics such as David Gallagher see a direct connection between it and paradigms of punishment in Ovid, I reframe traditional species distinctions to show how Gregor Samsa's life as an insect frees him from a debilitating (human) system. His journey towards "becoming-animal" beneficially alters his relationship to the world in ways his humanity could not. Considering human-nonhuman boundaries are still prevalent in each of these texts (though reworked in Kafka), I end by comparing my readings against the posthuman realities visible within Sarah Hall's short story "Mrs. Fox" (2017). As a retelling of David Garnett's *Lady Into Fox* (1922), I demonstrate how Hall reinterprets Garnett's narrative by positioning metamorphosis as an "act of will" rather than a punishment; humanity ultimately becomes a "disease" the human-turned-nonhuman is freed from, not a privileged form of existence.

Introduction

In her comprehensive introduction to the works of Franz Kafka, Carolin Duttlinger asks the following question of *The Metamorphosis* (1915): "is [Gregor Samsa's] change [from a human to an insect] for the better or for the worse?" (38). Though the answer may seem obvious considering Gregor's eventual death, Duttlinger's question expresses something deeply connected to the issue of human versus nonhuman value. Traditionally speaking, human-to-nonhuman metamorphosis has generally centered around the notion of *lost* humanity (Ditter 192). In texts such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, this loss is commonly (but not exclusively) positioned as a divine or supernatural punishment enacted upon a "victim;" in other words, when a human insults or oversteps with the gods, the gods have the option to transform them into a different form of life. However, for metamorphosis to effectively carry this sense of loss and retribution, it has had to be conceptualized according to strict human-nonhuman distinctions that separates species based upon value judgements – the transformed-human must be perceived as inferior when compared to their previous unchanged state (i.e. Anthropos), reinforcing views of nonhuman subordination.

While this framework has been influential since Ovid (Gymnich and Costa 68), this essay recognizes different approaches transformation narratives can be read by. After using the myth of Arachne and Minerva in book VI of the *Metamorphoses* to elucidate the traditional framework of punishment and nonhuman inferiority, I analyze Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* according to posthumanist principles. By "reframing" the position of the nonhuman, I uphold that Gregor's transformation is *for the better* and emphasize how his journey towards "becoming-animal" is a partial liberation from a constrictive human identity (Duttlinger 40). Though literary critic David Gallagher has linked Kafka directly to the punitive framework visible in Ovid, I read against his analysis and its reliance upon a hierarchy that diminishes nonhuman animal life. Following this, I compare features of Ovid's and Kafka's stories with the breakdown of human-nonhuman boundaries in Sarah Hall's short story "Mrs. Fox" (2017). Throughout the story, metamorphosis becomes an "act of will" rather than a punishment, and forms of life co-exist according to new differences based outside traditional species distinctions. David Garnett's *Lady Into Fox* (1922) will also play a significant role in my analysis, as Hall uses many of the story's features in her reinterpretation.

Overstepping Humanity: Arachne's Punishment

Divine retribution is a central theme of many Ovidian metamorphosis narratives. When a god is insulted or angered by a human, such as in the myth of Arachne and Minerva, they have the power to initiate a human's metamorphosis in response. For the transformation to carry its punitive force though, the "victim's" new form must emphatically be understood as inferior to Anthropos. Most of the time, nonhuman animal life has been able to serve this purpose quite easily. As Segal notes, "the classical definition of human nature [… has,] since Homer through Plato and Aristotle, [… been] founded on the antithesis of human and bestial" (Segal 10). In other words, whatever the human is *not*, the nonhuman *is.* Considering "Man" has held a prominent and privileged position in the world, the nonhuman has generally taken on its negative opposite (Braidotti 22-23).

In Greek and Roman history, the identification of what does and does not constitute a "human" dates back to Pre-Socratic philosophers and further. During Ovid's life, Stoicism would have probably proven the most prevalent body of thought. According to Robbins, "Stoicism in Ovid's day was well known at Rome, and Stoic sources were perhaps easiest of access to Ovid" (414). Some of the key features of Stoic thought on human nature, as laid out by Hubert Cancik in his analysis of Cicero's *de Officiis*, include the following: firstly, "the human mind (*ratio* – reason) constitutes the fundamental difference between man and animal;" secondly, "[the mind] is the foundation of moral decision (*honestum*) and behaviour (*decorum*);" thirdly, "Nature herself has imposed this *persona* (mask, role) [and] is common to all human beings;" fourthly, "[the mind] bestows excellence and distinction on man over all other living beings (*excellentia, praestantia*);" and lastly, "from [the mind], the dignity of man derives" (4).

Ovid's own cosmology in Book I of the *Metamorphoses* reflects many of these ideas. It sets forth a universal structure of being that situates gods as the mightiest powers, then humans as the beings closest to the divine image, and then nonhuman animal life as the least "intellectually capable" and responsible form of the three (lines 105-108). Importantly, the entitlement humans hold over animals also extends beyond the mind and directly to physical bodies – humans have "a face that is uplifted," whereas nonhuman animals "lean forward and look down toward the ground" (Ovid, lines 118-119). (This is an idea Robbins traces back to Pre-Socratics, though it is prevalent in other philosophical and religious traditions, as well.) In terms of metamorphosis then, the transformation from human-to-nonhuman form can easily be

used to represent the paradigms of loss and punishment discussed above. I now explore this more closely in the myth of Arachne and Minerva.

Beginning in Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the myth of Arachne and Minerva tells the story of an overstepping but talented weaver (Arachne) who upsets the gods by accepting "praise that set her above the goddess [Minerva] in the art of weaving" (lines 9-10). From Minerva's opening words (lines 4-7), it is clear that divine retribution is central to the story and that Arachne's eventual metamorphosis will be meant negatively. Though Minerva covertly gives Arachne the chance to repent (lines 38-48), Arachne is incapable of situating herself in her "rightful" position (i.e. Anthropos). She directly challenges the goddess to competition hoping to prove she has weaving abilities that are superior to the gods.

Before Arachne is turned into a spider, metamorphosis plays a significant role within the competition itself. Minerva's tapestry includes myths that depict different human-to-nonhuman metamorphoses. Conspicuously, each of the transformations revolve around the punishment of a human by a god, giving Arachne "an idea of the *reward*" awaiting her for inciting Minerva's anger (line 117, my italics). True to her character, Arachne's own tapestry also shows metamorphoses, but ones based in the gods deceitful and assaultive behavior. For example, the images of Io being tricked by Jupiter as a bull and Leda being raped by Jupiter as a swan both appear (lines 145-182). Arachne's tapestry is in itself another provocative challenge to the goddess, enraging Minerva to the point of punishment.

Interestingly, metamorphosis is only one of four punishments in this story. As literary critic Bryan Harries has pointed out, the first and most direct punishment is an assault on Arachne's body, quickly followed by the second punishment, the destruction of her artistic achievements (74). I would also like to include, as a third, the verbal and psychological assault which brings Arachne to the point of attempted suicide. Only after these three punishments is Arachne transformed into a spider. Though the narrator initially suggests this action is out of "mercy" (line 193), the warnings from Minerva's tapestry make such a reading implausible. As Gallagher writes, "It might save her human life by converting into arachnid form, yet this is not so much of a relief and […] consigns her to a miserable continuing existence. The metamorphosis is […] a cruel, vindictive act disguised [by Minerva] as a gesture of sympathy and empathy" (92). Thus, the fourth punishment.

Such a literal analysis is not the only approach to punishment and nonhuman inferiority in this story. Bryan Harries's approach, for instance, revolves around possible political or societal messages allegorized behind it. Comparing this myth directly to Ovid's own exilic situation at the time (8 C.E.), Harries suggests that Arachne's proposed challenge and eventual demise represents Ovid's experiences with the Roman emperor Augustus (65, 77). After successfully maneuvering civil war and regaining control of the Roman Empire in 31 B.C., Augustus attempted to organize society by implementing new laws targeted towards family unification; during this time, procreation for married couples was encouraged and acts such as adultery became punishable by exile (Puchner et al., 1091). In 2 A.D., Ovid – whose work generally did not align with these conservative values – responded with the publication of his provocative *Ars amatoria*, a narrative that criticized some of Augustus' positions to the point of seeming "deliberately calculated to enrage the emperor" (Puchner et al., 1091). Whether *Ars amatoria* directly contributed to Ovid's exile cannot be said, but the dynamics between the emperor and Ovid demonstrate the general clash of two unequal powers (i.e. gods and humans in the myth) that eventually result in the inferior's punishment. Nevertheless, nonhuman animal life still represents Otherness and subordination in this reading.

To be fair, some critics have recognized more dynamic features of metamorphosis in Ovid's work than yet described. In his analysis of Ovidian bodies, Charles Segal points out a fluidity that disrupts the classical definitions of human nature (10). Though the gods can keep their divine qualities and change forms freely without problem, some humans who are transformed (often permanently) into a nonhuman form still hold onto features of their humanity. Io, for instance, cannot speak in her mother tongue as a cow but is still able to spell words out in the sand with her father, and Arachne (assumedly) still holds onto the memory of her alleged transgressions. In terms of the Stoic definitions discussed earlier, this fluidity blurs species distinctions – are these transformed "victims" ever fully nonhuman? Are they part-human, part-nonhuman? Nevertheless, narratives of metamorphic punishment, as I have shown, still directly rely upon the inferiority of the nonhuman. This reinforces a boundary between humans and nonhumans that might, at times, technically blur certain traditional species distinctions, but still upholds the superiority of Anthropos.

Reworking Humanity: Gregor's Liberation

The paradigm of loss, punishment, and nonhuman subordination as described in Ovid has had a significant influence on transformation narratives in preceding centuries. The 1915 novella, *The Metamorphosis*, by Franz Kafka serves as a prime example. Recognized as Kafka's most famous work (Duttlinger 33), it tells the story of Gregor Samsa's spontaneous transformation into a giant insect (or "vermin" in Corngold's translation). Though there are no insulted or angered gods explicitly visible here, critics such as David Gallagher insist there are punitive forces similar to the myth of Arachne dictating the narrative. In my reading of Kafka, I discuss how Gallagher's approach ultimately relies on classical conceptions of human nature embedded in hierarchy. By reframing this hierarchy, I emphasize the positive features of Gregor's transition, even though it results in his death.

On the relationship between Arachne and Gregor Samsa, Gallagher writes, "both transformations […] are punitive ones that have occurred because of an attempt […] to usurp the functions of a superior" (124). I have emphasized the aspect of insult in my reading of Arachne's transformation, but Gallagher's comment appropriately responds to her desire to surpass Minerva's weaving abilities (which causes the insult). In Kafka's story, however, Gallagher's interpretation of punishment heavily relies on a psychoanalytic approach posited by Hellmuth Kaiser. According to Kaiser, *The Metamorphosis* represents an oedipal father-son conflict that results in Gregor's transformation and later death (Corngold 94). Gallagher explains further: "Prior to the transformation, Gregor has taken on the responsibility as the family's breadwinner and gone to work as a salesman while his father stayed at home. For his attempt to usurp the patriarchal function, his fate is like Arachne to be punished and to wake up transformed" (125). But by making this comparison, Gallagher ignores the explicit expression of anger from the goddess in Arachne's myth and the formal initiation of metamorphosis (i.e. pouring the hectare juice on Arachne) that does not occur here. Gregor is transformed when he wakes up without an explicit explanation of why or how. Moreover, Ovid's carefully established hierarchies in Book I establish gods as the mightiest power, whereas Gallagher's interpretation relies on the deification of the "patriarchal function," an idea that is questionable and challenged elsewhere in the narrative (i.e. the executive voice of Gregor's sister who both takes charge of Gregor's care and decides when it is time for him to die).

By calling potential punitive features of Gregor's transformation into question, I am also directly interrogating the traditional human-nonhuman binary such readings rely upon. Gallagher – who has emphasized Gregor's punishment – finds the juxtaposition that privileges Anthropos under a framework of "regressive metamorphosis." He writes, "[Gregor's transformation] encapsulates the fear of [… a return to a primitive animal state or] an earlier form of existence that had been conquered by evolution" (40). This is particularly interesting because there is no indication that the insect he turns into is not an evolved form of life. The primary problem is that Gregor's transformed body is *not* purely anthropocentric and therefore represents a fearful (nonhuman and subordinate) reality.

Theodore Salkowski's review of Gallagher's work calls attention to some of the "uncomfortable" assumptions Gallagher makes, including those surrounding Kafka's actual familiarity with Ovid (509). The suggestion that Kafka was likely influenced by the myth of Arachne is heavily shaped by Gallagher's own approach to Kafka, Ovid, and (more generally) human nature. Singling out his approach highlights the point I am trying to make about interpreting metamorphosis; but to be fair, this is not solely done by him either. Many other interpretations of Kafka have used the (traditional) inferior status of the nonhuman to highlight metamorphosis's punitive purposes. By considering Kafka's Jewish identity, for example, some critics have related Gregor's transformation to narratives of transgression in the Jewish literary tradition (Bruce 109); others, in a similar vein to Harries's approach of Arachne, have looked at it as an alienation from a capitalist society (Straus 128). Common to all of these different formulations of punishment is still the reliance on the inferiority of the nonhuman and the entitlement of Anthropos.

Nevertheless, some critics have more recently upset the emphasis on punishment and nonhuman subordination by reconceptualizing traditional species distinctions. Rather than focusing on an alleged *loss* represented in metamorphosis, nonhuman life represents an emancipation from the confines of human frameworks. In her analysis of *The Metamorphosis,* Duttlinger looks closely at the benefits of Gregor's new form, saying, "to read Gregor's transformation as a punishment would be to simplify what is a much more complex issue. […] Gregor's transformation brings with it a great sense of liberation. Wedded to his gruelling routine, Gregor initially, absurdly, plans to catch the next train, but soon he settles into his new state and learns to control his animal body" (Duttlinger 38). The control he gains over his new

body is representative of new freedoms and joys. This includes an "almost happy absent-mindedness" from hanging on the ceiling and being able to fall down back to the ground without hurting himself.

Learning to control his new form becomes even more radical when examined under Gilles Deleuze's theory of "becoming-animal." Theorized in his work *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Deleuze discusses Gregor's gradual movement towards a state of existence outside the confines of human identity (Duttlinger 40). With the "gruelling" aspects of his job in mind, this can even be understood as an escape from "the direct, the business, and the bureaucrats." (Deleuze 13). As Gregor accepts the joys and revelations his new form introduces him to, he participates in a "deterritorialization" from human meaning, or a journey "to reach the region where the voice no longer does anything but hum" (Deleuze 13-14). Of course, Gregor is regularly brought back into human frameworks (in the words of Deleuze, "re-Oedipalized") by his family. In light of this, Duttlinger returns to the question of Gregor's death by emphasizing the role of the family's response over the role of the transformation. She writes,

> In [his] state of happy solitude, Gregor seems invincible, and it is only when he makes contact with his family that his body turns out to be vulnerable. In fact, Gregor's story is punctuated by a succession of progressively more serious, and eventually lethal, injuries. […] Arguably, the true horror of *The Metamorphosis* lies not in Gregor's transformation but in his family's response (38).

By reframing traditional distinctions between species, Gregor's transformation becomes a representation of liberation; nonhuman life does not represent a subordinate or inferior mode of existence but the escape from human frameworks that are frustrating and confining (such as his work). The new possibilities available for him as a metamorphosed insect can be considered beneficial, and the only thing holding him back from committing to his new reality is his humanity itself.

Forgetting Humanity: Sophia's Return

By focusing on the benefits of Gregor's transformation, I have reframed traditional species distinctions and revalued the role of the nonhuman when compared to the human. In general, this

represents a movement towards the posthumanist commitment of "displacing the human subject from the position that s/he has long held at the centre of western thought" (Martelli 34), though imperfectly. As Deleuze has demonstrated, Gregor's new form *is* liberatory, but he is unable to fully commit to the process of "becoming animal," letting the traditional boundaries between human and nonhuman remain somewhat visible; he dies without experiencing all of the possibilities available to him in his new form, and the family returns to an apparent "normalcy." The return to "normalcy" post-metamorphosis is a major question in Sarah Hall's "Mrs. Fox" and David Garnett's *Lady into Fox* (from which Hall's story is inspired). After introducing Garnett's story, I show how Hall's reinterpretation redefines the "normal" in ways that disallow a return to traditional human-nonhuman boundaries and celebrates the new differences created in a posthuman world.

David Garnett's *Lady into Fox* tells the story of Sylvia Tebrick's spontaneous transformation into a fox while on a walk with her husband, Richard. Importantly, the story is primarily focalized through Richard's eyes (the first major difference from Kafka's and Ovid's stories) making the reader see his "vision" of the events. Not knowing at first what to do, Richard brings Sylvia home, fires the housekeeper, and decides he will take care of his newly transformed wife. According to Richard, Sylvia holds onto many human characteristics and practices in the early stages of her transformation – such as putting on her nightgown (17) and wanting to play cards (22) – which is vaguely reminiscent of Gregor's metamorphosis. Nevertheless, this slowly fades throughout the story, and Richard struggles to deal with Sylvia's apparent deterritorialization from the human world. Succumbing to physical violence as a means to keep her confined to the human world, Richard wonders when she will return to a "normal" state. When he finally understands this will not happen, he lets her free to live in the woods, but continues to struggle with the question of whether or not he can accept the loss of humanness she represents. After some time, Richard finds Sylvia (and her new fox family) in the woods and attempts to have an inter-species relationship with them. When this fails, he is forced to leave and go back to a life of isolation. In the story's final scene, Richard is at his home wondering about Sylvia when he looks out his window and sees her being chased by hunters. Richard runs out to her, but not in enough time to save her life. With the tragedy of her death, Richard at first despairs, but ultimately gains the closure he needs to return back to "normal life." He is said to live for a long time in a way that can only be assumed as comfortable.

The positive aspects of Sylvia's "becoming animal" in this story are heavily affected by Richard's own contemplation of human and nonhuman nature. For Richard, Sylvia as a fox represents an (almost Ovidian) Otherness of "gender, species, language, and natural order" (Baker 83). Wanting back the "normalcy" he had before his wife's transformation, Richard is forced to question whether he can somehow bring his wife back to humanity or step out of his own humanity into an animality that adequately meets her – in essence, a similar process Gregor goes through while dealing with his new form as an insect. Richard's first attempt at keeping his wife in the human (patriarchal) order ends poorly as he resorts to physical violence; this then results in his attempt to form a relationship with her and her new fox family in the woods (i.e. Richard's own attempt at "becoming animal"). When this also does not work, it is the death of Sylvia that allows him to avoid the Otherness his transformed wife embodied for him and seemingly unlearn any beneficial lessons from his journey.

Richard's vision of metamorphosis situates it under the more punitive frameworks described in Ovid (Ditter 193). Though he contemplates his own metaphorical transformation by wondering whether or not he can become more animal, his return to "normal" humanity – especially when juxtaposed with Sylvia's death – represents a return to a dignified form of living. The Otherness attributed to Sylvia's nonhuman animal life helps reinforce an image of anthropocentric superiority in both mind and body. Though Sylvia (allegedly) holds onto pieces of her humanity, she slowly loses them and becomes more "bestial" until her demise.

Sarah Hall's short story "Mrs. Fox" follows a similar pattern to Garnett's story but radically reinterprets the Otherness Sylvia represents. Sophia Garnett (her last name as a hint to Garnett's novella) is transformed into a fox while out on a walk with her (unnamed) husband. Focalized through the vision of the husband, he takes Sophia home and struggles, just like Richard, to know what to do. Nevertheless, the husband radically differs from Richard in two important ways: firstly, he does not resort to the same sense of violence and lets Sophia free much more peacefully; and secondly, when the husband eventually finds Sophia in the woods with newly born fox pups, he commits to engaging with them regularly. Rather than giving up on an inter-species companionship, as in the case of Richard, Sophia's husband develops a radical relationship with the foxes that help tear down the traditional human-nonhuman binary (Ditter 193). She will continue to play a role in his life for the future, and the story ends without the loss of any life.

Critics such as Ditter have proposed readings of Sophia's transformation that revolve around the notions of "return" and self-liberation. Throughout the story, there is the subtle suggestion that Sophia was once a fox and is in fact returning to her fox form. As a human, for instance, Sophia has "subterranean dreams, of forests, dark corridors and burrows, roots and earth" (Hall 49) that might come from a previous fox-existence. A "return" to the fox form makes the Ovidian punishment narrative questionable. Additionally, the text emphasizes the "act of will" embedded in her transformation. Considering her sense of suppression by her husband – who can be dominating, patriarchal, and Othering towards her at times – Sophia's transformation can be seen as a *choice* that is self-liberatory. Just as with Gregor, nonhuman life represents freedom from the confines of humanity here, but this time it is explicitly initiated by Sophia herself.

An important addition to this story – that does not occur in the other stories I have analyzed – is the positive relationship Sophia and her husband share after the metamorphosis. The interspecies relationship they foster "manages to call into question the nature of the borders we construct, and invites us to look across the epistemological divide between humans and animals to develop a new ethic for approaching animal others" (Ditter 189). In other words, the relationship between Sophia and her husband can no longer be understood within the "traditional" terminology of human or nonhuman. The differences shared between them do not align with the definitions of human nature posited by early Greek and Roman and other humanist thinkers. The husband, of course, will keep his anthropocentric form and Sylvia her fox form, but the metamorphosis is used to help facilitate a relationship between human and nonhuman life based upon differences outside the humanist tradition. Reason, moral decision, behavior, excellence, etc. are no longer characteristics that separate humans from nonhumans. In the terms of Rossi Braidotti, this can be understood as a step towards a species egalitarianism based in life (*zoe*) (32). This radical reinterpretation of interspecies relationship revalues the nonhuman to a point where it can in no way be considered inferior to Anthropos.

Conclusion

In my reading of Arachne's metamorphosis in Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, I laid out the traditional framework of loss and punishment that keeps the nonhuman in a position of subordination. Whether read as an allegory for society or not, nonhuman life takes the form of an

inferior Other to Anthropos. This type of reading has had a hold on interpreting metamorphosis in other stories, such as Gallagher's approach to Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. By focusing on an alleged punitive force behind Gregor's transformation, Gallagher sees nonhuman life as a representative of an inferior Other that is similar to Arachne. Nevertheless, I demonstrated how nonhuman life can be revalued and rid of its inferior status by reframing traditional distinctions between the human and the nonhuman. In my reading of *The Metamorphosis*, I showed how Gregor's transformation can be understood as liberatory and beneficial when compared to humanity – by "becoming animal," he is freed from a debilitating system defined by frustration and confinement. Though Gregor is unable to fully commit to "becoming animal," I compared his situation with Sarah Hall's "Mrs. Fox," revealing a more complete realization of a posthuman world. As a reinterpretation of Garnett's *Lady Into Fox*, Hall's story positions metamorphosis as an "act of will" and a self-liberatory practice that frees the nonhuman Other from the confines of humanity. The differences between species do not rely on traditional value judgements that privilege Anthropos and work towards a world based in species egalitarianism. In an era of climate crisis and ecological disaster, such reinterpretations are vital literary representations for human and nonhuman life alike. If humanity is to successfully co-exist with other forms of life, it must first be willing to "transform" itself from a position of superiority to equality.

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