

Love, Desire and Transformation: From Ovid to Thomas Harris

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Abstract

There is a connection between identity, desire and transformation. In an effort to touch upon the surface of this connection and its implications I effected a reading of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and related it with Thomas Harris's *The Hannibal Lecter Trilogy* whose major topos is also metamorphosis. In both cases, the transformations are propelled by obsessive behaviour, by the character's passions which ultimately define them. Are we born with our identity or is it something we create and develop as we go along? Do our imaginations play a role in this endeavour at all? In my study of Ovid I found a link between one of his characters, Pygmalion, and Hannibal Lecter, particularly in their uniqueness and in their shared interest which is love. By bringing into focus the link between these two texts, I may be able to show, if nothing else, that some quests might very well be considered timeless, and that, if meaning is to be found, it must be made.

Keywords: Ovid; Thomas Harris; metamorphosis; desire; identity.

1. Chaos and Transformation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

For Ovid, chaos meant a blandness over things, a universe constituted by utterly indistinguishable elements; not a great confusion or disorder of these elements, as one might suspect, just a lack of differentiation (Feeney 21-2). For him, whose major topos in the *Metamorphoses* was the nature of life and the identity of its elements, based on Greek and Roman mythology, it seemed only to make sense to start from the very beginning, from the roots of creation, from chaos. This is to say, from an inherently homogenous and undifferentiated state of being, Ovid describes how God saw fit to break apart the mass into distinctive elements, which then with an awareness of themselves developed both a physical as well as a mental body and space, thus creating the very concept of identity. From chaos came uniformity, distinctiveness, a sense of order, life came into its own.

In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid traces history from the very beginning of time into his own time, making the book essentially an encyclopaedia of ancient myth. But it was his genius to link all the fragments of time and space, of narratives without apparent cause to be connected, by essaying on the notion of identity and what animates life, using the concept of metamorphosis.

In the poem, transformation can be a punishment as well as an attempt to rescue, it can bring out the essential quality of a character or fundamentally undermine it, it can even be senseless and it can certainly be cruel (Feeney 29). As Duncan F. Kennedy asserts, “metamorphosis as a trope explores: continuity and discontinuity; development; identity and identification; appearance and reality” (321). There is a general contemplation of desire, often sexual desire, and of excess, which tends to fuel these transformations. Evidence of this can be seen in the story of Lycaon, which I explore at greater depth in the actual chapter of my Masters dissertation, “Becoming: Metamorphoses in the Hannibal Lecter Trilogy”. As an allusion to my meaning, there is a particular passage from Andrew Feldherr’s essay “Metamorphosis in the *Metamorphoses*,” which addresses Lycaon’s fantastical transformation from bloodthirsty king, who craved power far beyond his station by explicitly challenging the authority of the Gods and therefore the natural order of things, to a savage wolf: “[j]ust as the creation of the world involved the separation of the lighter elements from water and earth, so here this wild beast who had somehow been grouped among men has finally been returned to his rightful category” (170). Thus is revealed his true nature as effectively a primitive beast that craves and lusts after more than he is able to think, which is shown in his failure to recognize divine power, as is the providence and duty of Humans who can employ reason and even then more so those of a nobler disposition.

2. The Link between Pygmalion’s obsession and Hannibal Lecter

Out of all the stories in the *Metamorphoses*, it is Pygmalion’s obsession with his own sculpted creation which strikes, I would argue, an eerie resemblance with the story of Hannibal Lecter and Clarice. Pygmalion was a sculptor. Apparently dissatisfied with real women, he decided to remain unmarried, until eventually he simply created one of his own, an “amazingly skilful / statue in ivory, white as snow, an image of perfect / feminine beauty” (Ovid 10.247-49). In this act of creation, he imprinted upon his object of desire everything he thought to be perfect and desirable. It was to be an extravagant beauty of the chaste kind, a shapely form of pearly white skin, and a demure persona that pleased his taste in all ways, and which appealed to his sense of tradition and beneficence. It was to be someone he believed to be truly his match, both physiologically, as well as morally, attached to him and animated by his will, someone who was worthy of him. It follows in the story that he recurrently shares his affections with that perfect being, who is a statue, all his kisses and exploratory caresses. He even clothes it in fashionable dresses of his choosing, and presents to his “idol the gifts which give pleasure / to girls, such as shells from the shore, smooth pebbles or tiny birds, / flowers of a thousand colours” (10.259-61), the kinds of things, in short, which a demure young woman might enjoy. The gifts he brings to the statue present a clue as to the kind of personality the “idol” is supposed to have, one of

naivety and beautiful simplicity and wonder, as opposed to scandalous and greed-ridden, too material and base for his taste. He treats her with adoration. Eventually, the time for a festival dedicated to Venus arrives and he offers the proper sacrificial rites, imploring the goddess to provide him with his ivory statue transformed into an actual, breathing woman. The goddess does grant his wish and beneath the pressure of his fondling and caresses she is moulded once again by his hands, moved once again by his insatiable desire and love, into a living woman who immediately sees him as her lover who is meant-to-be. Venus blesses the union and they are married, and together they have a child, Paphos, and seem to live happily ever after.

Recurrently, the notion of the object possessed by an unyielding and dominant passion seems present, but more than what the object of desire itself may be feeling, I am interested in the act of creation. He created her for his own pleasure, to signify both his dislike of the real world, his idealised passion, and his superior taste. Once conscious, she accepted her purpose willingly, although Ovid doesn't even bother to give us her name (Galatea).

I find in Pygmalion's character a very great parallel with Hannibal Lecter. They are both men of distinction who have gone beyond the reach of society because of who they are. Ovid's Pygmalion is a man who has chosen to forego the comfort of society in search of his own personal ideals. We are aware that, "[s]ick of the vices with which the female sex / has been so richly endowed, he chose for a number of years / to remain unmarried, without a partner to share his bed" (10.244-6). This shows us his exclusive mentality, which I find is indicative of his taste and intelligence, his willingness to keep to his own thinking. That he then creates a statue that is "an image of perfect / feminine beauty" (10.248-9), and so "appeared to be real; you'd surely suppose her / alive and ready to move, if modesty didn't preclude it" simply goes to show that his sensibility is matched with great skill as an artist (10.250-1). These characteristics separate him naturally from society, a fate which he embraces gladly. He is also endowed with great passion, and it is the expression of this passion for beauty that allows his creation to become distinct, and eventually to actually come alive. As Ovid states, "Pygmalion's / marvelling soul was inflamed with desire for a semblance of a body" (10.252-3) a *simulacrum*¹ which only he could provide for himself. This ability marks him as someone who is powerful enough to create the very image which his soul craved, and powerful enough to persuade a goddess to transform his passion's whim into a reality. The evidence of his talent has shifted his life accordingly. The metamorphosis of the object, designed towards his pleasure, has allowed him to become, himself, an object of love, a husband, a father, an artist whose art has created life, whose "art was concealed by art to a rare degree" (10.252).

3. Hannibal Lecter as Monster, Artist and Creator

Similarly, Hannibal is a character whose apparent genius defies the conventional definition of man. The other characters in the trilogy struggle to make sense of him in his indefinability, as the third book explains:

Dr. Lecter does not require conventional reinforcement. His ego, like his intelligence quota, and the degree of his rationality, is not measurable by conventional means. In fact, there is no consensus in the psychiatric community that Dr. Lecter should be termed a man. He has long been regarded by his professional peers in psychiatry, many of whom fear his acid pen in the professional journals, as something entirely Other. For convenience they term him “monster”. (Harris 877)

They fear him, the book explains, because he is different, as well as dangerous, and what makes him so different is his taste. One finds in Hannibal characteristics that identify him with the aesthetes, namely a propensity for elegance, for the refined things in life, such as creams and delicate smells, great food and a passion for ideas and art. Perhaps what best summarizes his taste is his sojourn in Florence, Italy, where he has been appointed curator of the Capponi Library, which after his confinement provided him with great pleasure (877). Specifically, I am thinking of the episode where he visits the *Farmacia di Santa Maria Novella*, “one of the best-smelling places on Earth” (Harris 927), and buys a very special gift for Clarice. This provides us with a practical example of his character’s sensibility. And so, upon entering the *Farmacia*,

[h]e stood for some minutes with his head back and eyes closed, taking in the aromas of the great soaps and lotions and creams, and of the ingredients in the workrooms. The porter was accustomed to him, and the clerks, normally given to a certain amount of hauteur, had great respect for him. The purchases of the courteous Dr. Fell over his months in Florence would not have totaled more than one hundred thousand lire, but the fragrances and essences were chosen and combined with a sensibility startling and gratifying to these scent merchants, who live by the nose. [...] For him the air was painted with scents as distinct and vivid as colors, and he could layer and feather them as though painting wet-on-wet. (927-8)

Despite the popular tendency to see Hannibal as just a manipulative monster, this is not evidence of his manipulative power in regards to other characters, this is no dissimulation; instead, this is evidence of the power of his senses, which brings him close to Pygmalion. Clarice also notices this when, in the third book, she attempts to develop a method to catch Hannibal based on his taste. She perceives his taste to be what might truly differentiate Hannibal from other people:

Taste. The wine, the truffles. Taste in all things was a constant between Dr. Lecter’s lives in America and Europe [...]. His face may have changed but his tastes did not, and he was not a man who denied himself. [...] The first step in the development of taste is to be willing to credit your own opinion. (Harris 964-5)

Critical thinking, then, and an acute sense of self-awareness and determination characterize him, so much so that it clashes with other characters’ sense of conventional morality and understanding, and even precludes the need for such things.

Hannibal not merely feels different, more sensitive and self-reliant, in relation to the other characters: he *is* different.

But to truly link Hannibal with Pygmalion one must think of the concept of creation. Pygmalion created the ultimate embodiment of female beauty and grace with his extraordinary sculpting. Hannibal has to use other tools to carve his muse, Clarice, into a shape which pleases him, and he chose psychiatry for the purpose. Yet Hannibal is presented with Clarice already made, he has to shape her against her tradition, her mould, he has to make her anew. For this reason, he breaks her down to her most primordial self, into an infant condition, and then builds her up again, now unburdened of her childhood trauma. With Hannibal, as opposed to Pygmalion, there is the element of extreme control and awareness. He knows that he is changing her, and he does so with extreme care, his efforts culminating in her rebirth, a woman unimpeded by family trauma and cultural trauma, which had been inculcated unto her by the prejudices of her upbringing. It may be that Hannibal can be seen as part therapist, part mentor. In his essay “Murder and Mentorship: Advancement in *The Silence of the Lambs*”, Bruce Robbins makes an interesting case for the presence of eroticism in mentorship as a driving mechanism, which is conditional for the success of the mentorship itself and which links with Ovid’s conception of identity as it is driven by desire. Now, Hannibal had certainly mentored other characters before in the books, but with Clarice, we might argue, he had found his most significant case.

There is certainly significance in Pygmalion’s act of creation, of devising his own object of passion, which I find mirrored in Hannibal Lecter. Hannibal is presented to us not as an average man, but as something else entirely, as something Other, which seems to escape definition. And his partner must share his fate, fully, without compromise. By tracing the story as it unfolds, and boiling it down into a few very significant events, one can understand the way his influence on her shapes her and transforms her according to his own experience, which is a remarkable skill, for Hannibal had no Venus, and had to sculpt all the harder for it.

4. The Essence of Becoming: Desire

There is in the story of Leda and the Swan the representation of an essential aesthetic component which is emphasized and sublimated in the very final dinner scene of the book and which, I argue, stands as a symbol for the sexual charge inherent in the savage dynamics between Hannibal and Clarice; Love as devouring, as cannibalism, sometimes literal, sometimes metaphorical. It is metamorphosis propelled by desire. To paraphrase Georges Bataille with a twist, community is found in the act of killing and cannibalism, which is to say eating together; the dinner scene where Hannibal and Clarice share human flesh on porcelain plates and fancy silverware parallels a long and storied tradition of families sharing a meal at table, a tradition we can all appreciate, and not unlike wolves having a go at a carcass. This sculpture and scene reminds one of those secretive lines from Yeats:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still

Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

But why Clarice? Apparently, in their conversations, she made Hannibal laugh with delight. This is evidence which leans towards the idea that, no matter how deadly the relationship between them might become, it has as its source pleasure and a level of empathy and emotion which is only human. This complicates the vision of Hannibal as merely an unfeeling psycho-killer. Barney, Hannibal's former keeper at the asylum, says of them:

"I can just repeat what he told me - he could see what she was *becoming*, she was charming the way a cub is charming, a small cub that will grow up to be - like one of the big cats. One you can't play with later. [...] And he said once that she was '*cursed with taste*'" (1014; my emphasis)

She is "cursed with taste," and this vital clue allows us to imagine very well that Hannibal sees in Clarice the potential for an equal. Hannibal is cursed with taste himself, and, in a tasteless world, he feels alone. Much like Pygmalion, he feels alienated from the common world, and needs to create a retreat within himself from which to escape the boredom and blandness which surrounds him, which was especially true in the psychiatric prison, hence the famous passage "Memory, Officer Starling, is what I have instead of a view" (406).

By the end of the third book, there is a moment where Hannibal manages to rescue Clarice from peril and has to administer medical care to her; this he does extremely well. As she is recovering while in a position of vulnerability, he performs psychiatric manipulations on her with the sole purpose of setting her free from her trauma, and of showing to her what he perceives to be a true vision of the world: a reality free of conventional morality, a world of desire and appetite that cannot and should not be bound by the slave-mentality of servitude. He connects the idea of dinner with that of being, just as there is 'no pity at his table', so there must be no pity, or remorse, in the way a creative being lives. He successfully brings her out of her trauma and fixation with the image of her father and has her eat some of Krendler's brain, Krendler being the very personification of patriarchal oppression and incompetence which haunted Clarice so, for 'Krendler could be blamed'. By consuming human flesh, she accelerates her change from a self that is crippled into something else. Hannibal has managed to free her from what he terms her "low-ceiling life".


We come now to the dessert portion of the dinner, back in the drawing-room by the fire in the hearth, where they discuss precisely these finer points of identity and resurrection. Clarice ponders his suggestion, that she might be the perfect vessel of return for Mischa, Hannibal's sister who died when he was very young, considering that such a transformation would require Clarice to die so that his sister might come alive in her stead. Instead, she retorts that Hannibal should pay heed to his own lesson: if there was space inside her for her father, why would not there be a place inside him for his sister? In other words, why not make peace with the loss and move on? That she

replies in such a way shows that she is capable, intellectually and emotionally, of making interpretations and decisions which contradict her maker's expectations, but which indeed creatively re-imagine his original premise. Dr. Lecter seemed pleased with this, and "perhaps he felt a vague concern that he had built better than he knew" (1213). Clarice then is brightened with an idea that might motivate Lecter into understanding, from her point of view, that together they might move on into something grand. This I believe is signified by her question about breastfeeding and the act of showing her breast to him, giving it to him, her nipple showered in Château d'Yquem, which he takes swiftly into his mouth, but not to bite. He acknowledges his consent to this new state of affairs where together they are more than when separated. By offering her breast to him, she imposes upon him a structure, a hierarchy, not unlike divine worship, which he ought to practice to her, a price to pay, a price which he would want to pay: submission. He takes her breast in his mouth and signals a surrender which only true passion can provide, and also marks the real beginning of her rebirth: she is now essentially someone else, she has come into herself.

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¹ "Desire is born of *simulacra*, incorporeal images that tease the mind and are easily snatched away by winds. [...] [I]n his Pygmalion episode he gives a very novel twist to the notion that *simulacra* are



inevitably incorporeal as Pygmalion's beloved woman-statue actually comes to life. Yet this fundamental sense of unattainability is central to so many Ovidian descriptions of pursuit, especially in the *Metamorphoses*" (Schiesaro 70).