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The rewriting of hunting myths in medieval and Renaissance literature

Review of: Janis Vanacker, *'Non al suo amante piú Diana piacque'. I miti venatori nella letteratura italiana*, Roma, Carocci, 2009, 359 p., with 34 black and white figures, ISBN: 978-88-430-5150-2, € 37,20.

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This is an impressively wide-ranging survey of two classical hunting myths (that of Actaeon and that of Adonis) and of their various inflections in Italian literature from the middle ages (Dante) to the early sixteenth century (Marino). Apart from Dante and Marino, several other canonical authors are dealt with, including Petrarch, Boccaccio, Poliziano and Giordano Bruno, as well as a number of Italian translators of Ovid and other minor authors.

The volume is divided into six chapters, each of which is subdivided into helpful sub-sections. A number of critics have dealt with these tales in single articles or chapters but nobody (as far as I know) has offered us such a comprehensive, book-length account. The work also provides us with quite a high number of black and white illustrations of the two stories, from classical art-works through to paintings by Titian and Veronese.

The first chapter charts the development of the myths from the earliest fragmentary mentions of Actaeon in Hesiod to the extended narratives in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and to late antique writers such as Apuleius and Nonnus. On the visual side the chapter takes us from an image of Actaeon on a Greek vase from as early as the sixth century BC to a mosaic of the same tale from the end of the fourth century AD. The second (briefer) chapter takes us through the survival of the stories in medieval mythographers such as Arnulf of Orléans who offer tendentious Christian allegories of these metamorphoses.

Chapter three takes us to the start of the rewriting of the myths in the Italian literary tradition. The Actaeon story is a tacit subtext beneath the punishment of Pier delle Vigne and the *scialacquatori* in *Inferno* 13, but the chapter concentrates rightly on Petrarch's and Boccaccio's more radical reworkings of the tale. In *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta* 23, we find the poet devoting a whole stanza of this famous canzone to the myth, but the story is told in the first person, so that the poet himself becomes a kind of Actaeon who unlike his mythical counterpart deliberately not accidentally stumbles on a vision of his beloved naked in a fountain (though the description of Laura as 'quella fera bella et cruda' mixes up the elements of the

tale). In this shift of genre from epic to lyric, the poet becomes the hunter/hunted but the narrative remains in an eternal present with no final metamorphic closure. The other major Petrarchan rewriting is *RVF* 52, whose opening line ('Non al suo amante piú Diana piacque') provides the title of this book. Once again the poet here radically alters the Ovidian original, as Vanacker points out: 'trasforma un mito tragico in un'avventura galante' (p. 137). The story resurfaces once more in *RVF* 190 ('Una candida cerva'), but what unites all its appearances in the collection is the strong emphasis on the voyeuristic element and the wandering nature of the poet-lover.

The Actaeon story also turns out to be highly significant for the third member of the Tre Corone, so much so that Vanacker labels it Boccaccio's 'mito personale'. The early *Caccia di Diana* clearly owes much to the Ovidian version, though it reverses the finale: here the voyeur figure in the end turns out to be a stag which then is metamorphosed into a human being. The myth then reappears in the *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine* and in *Decameron*, 5.1, where Cimone comes across the sleeping Ifigenia and experiences the uplifting effects of love. As Vanacker rightly notes, in these three reworkings of the Actaeon story there is always a positive, educative dimension not a tragic one. Only in the *Ninfale fiesolano* does the myth have the same tragic outcome as in Ovid. Although in these four rewritings Boccaccio does not concentrate on the pursuit of Actaeon by hounds, this last motif does appear, famously, in the story of Nastagio degli Onesti (*Decameron*, 5. 8). What emerges here is the visual power of this novella, which is well illustrated by Botticelli's depictions of moments from Nastagio's story.

The brief fourth chapter deals with the Quattrocento, in particular showing how Poliziano's highly intertextual *Stanze per la giostra* draw on Ovid, Petrarch and Boccaccio's more uplifting versions of the myth. Chapter five moves to the Cinquecento, starting with three *volgarizzatori* of Ovid, Nicolò degli Agostini, Lodovico Dolce and Giovanni Andrea dell'Anguillara. Vanacker shows how the first relies on the earlier Trecento translation of Giovanni di Bonsignori and on Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato*, how the second makes his *Le trasformationi* conform to the 'romanzo cavalleresco' model as found in Ariosto, while the third offers the most creative translation of the original, adding many contemporary details not in Ovid: not for nothing was Anguillara called a 'traduttore-rimaneggiatore'. The chapter ends with a fine analysis of the reinterpretations of the myth in Giordano Bruno's *Degli eroici furori*, which looks back both to Ovid and to Petrarch but with Bruno adding his own original philosophical inflections of the Actaeon tale: 'Atteone significa l'intelletto intento alla caccia della divina sapienza...' is how one of his commentaries on a sonnet begins. The extraordinary fascination and flexibility of this myth is what comes across in this penultimate chapter.

The last chapter deals primarily with Marino, especially his *Adone* which gives the myth a full baroque rewriting. The lack of narrative detail in the Ovidian original is what allows Marino the scope for his extensive filling of all the gaps in his elaborate epic. Vanacker again is good on the similarities and differences between the various reworkings of the tale: for her, Marino's *Adone* is a perfect anti-hero and the poem represents a polemical engagement with the epic tradition. The chapter ends with some acute observations on various paintings of the story of Venus and Adonis (by Il Cavalier d'Arpino, Francesco Albani and Domenichino).

This is an extremely helpful and wide-ranging survey of the hold of these tales on the Italian medieval and Renaissance imagination. What emerges is the huge range of responses to them by Italian writers, from the serious to the comic, from the sacred to the erotic, from the narrative to the philosophical. If this book has a flaw, it is that such a comprehensive survey deserved a fuller conclusion (or fuller

conclusions to individual chapters). In addition the publisher has not been very generous in the size of the illustrations or attentive in checking for misprints. But these are minor quibbles when set against the many strengths of the book.

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