



Metamorphoses: Some Mythological Images in Roman Art

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Abstract. The analysis of several Graeco-Roman myths, and the comparison of the images in ancient literary sources with those in visual art can help to discern the passions underlying them, mainly love and vengeance. The myths and images chosen in this article are restricted to the Maenads, Pentheus and Ambrosia, whose metamorphoses were the result of Dionysos' vengeance, whereas those of Adonis, Attis and Pithys were incited by other gods or goddesses. Furthermore, some visual images differ from the known literary sources, and thus it can be suggested that in their creative art, artists or artisans interpreted freely, using their imagination.

Keywords: Mythology; Images; Maenads; Pentheus; Ambrosia; Adonis; Attis; Pithys.

[es] Metamorfosis: algunos mitos y sus imágenes en el arte romano

Resumen. El análisis de varios mitos greco-romanos y la comparación entre las imágenes aportadas por las fuentes literarias y las proporcionadas por el arte permiten distinguir las pasiones subyacentes en los mitos escogidos, en especial el amor y la venganza. Los mitos e imágenes tratados en este artículo se limitan a las Ménades, Penteo y Ambrosia, cuyas metamorfosis resultaron de la venganza del dios Dionisio, mientras que las metamorfosis de Adonis, Attis y Pitis fueron instigadas por otros dioses o diosas. Además, las diferencias observadas entre las imágenes transmitidas por el arte y las aportadas por las fuentes literarias parecen derivar de la creatividad e imaginación libre de los artistas o artesanos.

Palabras clave: mitología; imágenes. Ménades; Penteo; Ambrosia; Adonis; Attis; Pitis.

Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. Ambrosia and Lycurgos. 3. The Maenads and the Punishment of Pentheus 4. Adonis. 5. Attis. 6. Pithys. 7. Conclusions. 8. References.

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*In nova fert animus mutatas dicere
formas corpora*

(Ov. *Met.* 1.1-2)

1. Introduction²

Metamorphosis may be extended beyond the change in form, to include a transformation or mutation of figures into different appearances, both real and imaginary. Often perhaps, this mutation can be considered as possessing a certain magical or mysterious quality.³ In some cases, the transformations can be temporary or ephemeral, and yet in other cases, imaginary or virtual.

In visual art, as in ancient literary sources, metamorphoses can be perceived as belonging to different categories: the first, as the name implies, a total or complete metamorphosis is one where the whole transformation has already taken place. The second, a partial or incomplete one is when the image is still in the process of change;⁴ occasionally it can only be completed in the imagination of the viewer. Yet a third type of metamorphosis occurs when, though described in literary sources, it is not actually represented in art. In such a case, only the informed viewer may create the image in his/hers mind's eye only, which may thus be considered a kind of imaginary or even virtual metamorphosis.⁵ It is important to remember the influence of dramatic performances on works of visual art.⁶

Numerous mythological figures in ancient literature underwent metamorphosis, yet only a few such as Actaeon, Daphne and Narcissos have been the object of detailed studies. The present article tries to fill in this lacuna in several ways: first by studying carefully and completing the study of six mythological figures which have been dealt with, but only briefly; secondly, by trying to show the connection between the literary sources and the iconographic aspects of the mythological subjects. This reveals some perplexing discrepancies, which this article tries to account for. The search for figurative models and variants is not the aim of this article and is therefore not undertaken hereby.

This article deals then, with the metamorphosis of the following mythological figures: Ambrosia, Pentheus, and the Maenads, Adonis, Attis and Pithys.⁷ It also

² My gratitude is due to my colleagues and friends: Asher Ovadia, Ana Shidlo and Ruth Bartal, who selflessly helped and supported me with their advice.

³ BARKAN 1986, 19: "(...) all changes in the world, whether natural or mysterious, have an element of magic".

⁴ SHARROCK 1996, 107, who studies very extensively the problems of metamorphosis, metaphor and hybrids, 103-130, nn. 1-47.

⁵ The informed viewer is a person who is familiar with the myth by oral tradition, and maybe also through written literary sources, but is probably a theatregoer and a free citizen too, who thus had the opportunity to see scenes on stage which may have appeared also in works of visual art. It is very important to remember the influence of dramatic performances on works of visual art. See for example, the Meeting of Elektra and Orestes at the tomb of Agamemnon, a scene probably shown in the drama of the Oresteia (458 BCE), and depicted on various vases, see CARPENTER 1999, 236, Fig. 352 (ca. 320 BCE). This certainly suggests that an earlier oral tradition existed.

⁶ ARNOTT 1989, 54; TRENDALL – WEBSTER 1971.

⁷ These mythological figures were chosen because, to my knowledge, they have not been studied thoroughly, and not from the aspects noted hereby. The metamorphoses of other figures have been extensively examined, such as the myth of Actaeon by LEACH 1981, 307-27, Pls. 131-41; SCHLAM 1984, 82-110, Pls.; LACY 1990, 26-42, Pls. I-III; Daphne and her transformation have also been studied, as well as of Narcissus and others; see also, COLPO – SALVADORI 2010; COLPO 2011; *Id.* 2012. BRUNEAU – VATIN 1966, 391-427, present a catalogue of most

tries to find or qualify the various types of metamorphoses that each of the figures undergoes.

Metamorphoses differ according to the gods involved in the process. First, we will deal with those connected with the god Dionysos: Ambrosia and Lycurgos, and the Punishment of Pentheus and the Maenads.

2. Ambrosia and Lycurgos

The myth of Lycurgos and his punishment is linked, as is that of Pentheus, to his rejection of the cult of Dionysos, as stated by Diodorus Siculus: “He [Dionysos] also punished (...) many men who were thought to be impious, the most renowned among the number being Pentheus and Lycurgos”.⁸

It is Dionysos himself who chastises Lycurgos by making the vine grow, and having its branches strangle Lycurgos to death, according to first century BCE poet Statius, as well as the third century CE, *Anonymous Hymn to Dionysos*.⁹ Ambrosia is mentioned briefly as one of the seven *nymphae*, nurses of Dionysos, who fled from Lycurgos, as told by Pseudo-Hyginus, citing Pherecydes the Athenian, a fifth century BCE mythographer. Ambrosia was the only one who did not flee from Lycurgos, according to Asclepiades, a third century BCE poet.¹⁰

Ovid asserted that “Pentheus thou [Dionysos] didst destroy, thou awful god, and Lycurgus, armed with his two-edged battle-axe (impious were they both) (...)”¹¹ Though the form of punishment differs, in both cases Dionysos overcomes his opponents by his power as well as by the magic influence of his wine.¹²

Nonnos narrates the myth: Lycurgos, who denied that Dionysos was a god, set out to attack him and the nymphs, his nurses, all of whom fled, except Ambrosia. He assaulted her with his battle-axe, but she “(...) prayed to Mother Earth to save her from Lycurgus. And the Earth, mother of all fruits, opened a gulf (...). The nymph disappeared and changed her shape to a plant – she became a vine shoot, which of itself coiled its winding cord round the neck of Lycurgos and throttled him with a tight noose, battling now with threatening clusters (...)”. Thus, Nonnos is the first known writer to include the complete myth of Ambrosia, and is also the only author who does not make Dionysos responsible for the growth of the vine, while adding the episode of Ambrosia and her metamorphosis.¹³

of the known representations of Lycurgos and Ambrosia, in mosaics, whereas here I examine only some works of art, focusing on Ambrosia’s metamorphosis.

⁸ D.S. 4.3.4 (60-30 BCE) (trans. C. H. Oldfather, London–Cambridge [Mass.] 1979).

⁹ Statius *Theb.* 4.383-384 (trans. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, Cambridge [Mass.]–London 2003); *Anonymous Hymn to Dionysos and Lycurgos* (third century CE) (trans. D. L. Page, *Select Papyri 3, Literary Papyri*, The Loeb Classical Library, 1962).

¹⁰ Pseudo-Hyg. *Astr.* 2.21 (second century CE mythographer), cites more ancient sources, see above, from www.theoi.com/Heros/Lykourgos.html.

¹¹ *Ov. Met.* 4.22-23 (trans. F. J. Miller, The Loeb Classical Library, 1-2, London–Cambridge [Mass.] 1958); *Fast.* 3.722-723, mentions: “(...) Lycurgus, whom frenzy drove to hack at his own knee” (trans. J. G. Frazer, The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge [Mass.]–London 1966). See also, n. a.

¹² OTTO 1965, 65.

¹³ Nonn. *D.* 21.25-32 (end of fourth-early fifth century CE) (trans. W. D. Rouse, The Loeb Classical Library, 1, 3 Cambridge [Mass.]–London 1955, 1956).

Although several depictions of this myth exist in visual art, I will examine here only some illustrating the metamorphosis of Ambrosia.

The scene on a floor mosaic from Delos of the Hellenistic period (**Fig. 1**)¹⁴ depicts Lycurgos attacking the nymph Ambrosia with his double-axe raised towards her. The nymph, a crown of leaves on her head, lies on the ground before him, and raises her right arm in a gesture of self-defense, as well as of fear;¹⁵ she is in the process of being transformed into a vine, a branch in her hand, it seems to be growing from her body and in the background. In this case Dionysos is absent from the scene. This mosaic, the earliest known to date, seems to have been inspired by the literary sources mentioned above, or by an oral myth.¹⁶ Ambrosia's metamorphosis, shown in an early stage of mutation, seems to evoke Mother Earth's response to her appeal.

Ambrosia holds one hand in front of her chest attempting to defend herself from Lycurgos and his double-axe as he holds it over her in a Roman mosaic from Herculaneum (**Fig. 2**).¹⁷ Dionysos is depicted standing behind her, his hand outstretched towards the attacker, as if to protect her, while a leopard jumps up to Lycurgos' legs. The vine branches sprout forth from Ambrosia's hand and cover all the background, also encircling Lycurgos' waist.

On a fourth century CE mosaic from Daphne, near Antioch (**Fig. 3**),¹⁸ Lycurgos is the sole figure appearing in the centre, his double-axe fallen on the ground nearby; the vine – growing from a large patch in the ground (a hole?) – covers all the space around him, entwining his arms and neck, and it is already strangling him. Ambrosia is here visually absent, but it is clear to the viewer that her mutation into a vine has already taken place.

A more complex scene is presented in the large mosaic in the south apse at Piazza Armerina (**Fig. 4**).¹⁹ Three Maenads attack Lycurgos, trying to prevent him from killing Ambrosia with his axe. She is reeling in front of him, her head crowned by leaves, her feet already transformed into stalks of vine, which are growing forth, its branches and leaves spreading all over the background, and encircling Lycurgos' legs and body. Ambrosia is still in the process of mutation; her metamorphosis is partial or incomplete. The tall figure shown behind them is probably Dionysos.

Ambrosia's metamorphosis is also depicted on a sarcophagus, of which only a drawing exists, from Villa Taberna, in Frascati; Ambrosia is partly transformed into a vine, while Lycurgos is being attacked by two Lyssai.²⁰

¹⁴ www.theoi.com, Z12.11; end of the second century BCE. Now exhibited in the Archaeological Museum of Delos. The study of BRUNEAU – VATIN 1966, 391-427, deals not only with this mosaic, but also with the other known depictions of Lycurgos and Ambrosia in Roman art; see also LIMC 6.1/2, No. 33.

¹⁵ As stated by Cicero, *Orat.* 1.128: "...gestus paene summorum actorum est requiendus" ("The delivery practically of the best stage-performer"), cited by GRAF 1991, 53, n. 5.

¹⁶ See BRUNEAU – VATIN 1966, 416.

¹⁷ See www.theoi.com, Z12.10. Now exhibited in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, inv. No. TBA, 9988; BRUNEAU – VATIN 1966, Fig. 7, No. 3; see also LIMC 6.1/2, No. 34.

¹⁸ See www.theoi.com, Z12.12. Now in the Antakya Museum, Inv. No. 844; BRUNEAU – VATIN 1966, 414, 18; LEVI 1971, 178-183, Pl. 28; LIMC 6.1/2, No. 77, third-fourth century CE.

¹⁹ GENTILI 1952, 33-46, Figs. 7-8; LIMC 6.1/2, No. 42, *in situ*, dated 300-330 CE.

²⁰ See MATZ 1969, No. 235.



Figure 1. Ambrosia, mosaic from Delos (www.theoi.com: Z12.11).



Figure 2. Ambrosia, mosaic from Herculaneum (www.theoi.com: Z12.10).



Figure 3. Ambrosia, mosaic from Daphne, Antioch (www.theoi.com: Z12.12).

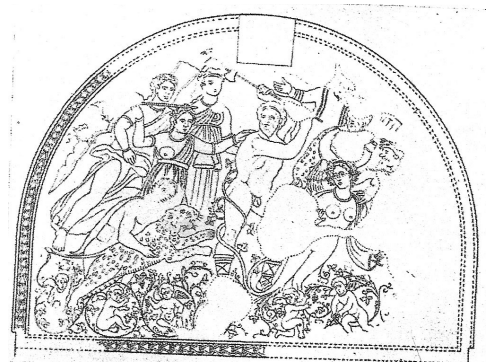


Figure 4. Ambrosia, mosaic in Piazza Armerina (GENTILI 1952, Fig. 7).

3. The Maenads and the Punishment of Pentheus

The Maenads or Bacchantes offer striking examples of undergoing a total, albeit transient, metamorphosis. As a result, they were subject to Dionysos' divine power in various ways: not only by becoming drunk, but also by undergoing transformation resulting from *enthousiasmos*, frenzy, and madness, and finally by losing their mental equilibrium²¹ and frequently by experiencing hallucinations. Thus, having lost some of their human qualities, they were transformed into creatures of a different kind and appearance, depicted nude or scantily clothed, their hair disheveled. Thus, their image was changed. Curiously enough (and to the best of my knowledge), this important facet has been mostly overlooked.

Euripides described them as rushing "(...) to the mountain, (...) the throng of women, driven by Dionysos in madness from their looms and shuttles".²² Like Euripides, Apollodorus mentioned the god compelling the women to leave their civilized life: "(...) he forced the women to abandon their houses and rave in Bacchic frenzy on Cithaeron".²³ Unlike Euripides, who noted especially the madness of women, Ovid claims that it was a mass phenomenon, independent of gender, age or class: "The people rush out of the city, in throngs, men and women, old and young, nobles and commons, all mixed together, and hasten to celebrate the new rites".²⁴

The visual image of Maenads is well known and frequently shown in various media, and may be considered as a temporary metamorphosis, which is imaginary or virtual too. The Maenads figure frequently not only as part of various Dionysiac scenes, but individually as well. When a viewer sees a Maenad playing her instruments and dancing in complete abandonment, her body nude, her head thrown back, he or she cannot recognize her as the clothed, composed and rational woman she was before (**Fig. 5**).²⁵

Another metamorphosis of a different kind, affecting Pentheus, ensues the inner metamorphosis undergone by the Maenads and his mother. Invisible to the viewer, this metamorphosis occurs only in the deranged mind of the Maenads and of his mother; they perceive Pentheus, in their imagination, not as a man, but as a lion, which they are then driven to kill. Presumably, they are also experiencing hallucinations or have become insane. Dionysos is the deity who causes "a state of half-prophetic, half-destructive madness".²⁶ The madness of the god's cult induces a state of absolute frenzy in the Maenads, his followers.²⁷

Pentheus, King of Thebes, repudiated the god Dionysos, in spite of various admonishments, such as for example, by Euripides: "So, receive this god into the city (...) he gave to mortals the vine that puts an end to pain. If there is no wine, there is no Aphrodite or any other pleasure for mortals".²⁸ Euripides in *The Bacchae* tells: "She [Agave, his mother] seems to think it is some mountain lion's head

²¹ BURKERT 1985, 109-110.

²² *Eu. Ba.* 117-119 (trans. D. Kovacs, The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge [Mass.]-London 2002).

²³ *Apollod.* 3.5.2 (first or second century CE). (trans. J. G. Frazer, the Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge [Mass.]-London 1976).

²⁴ *Ov. Met.* 3.529-530.

²⁵ Detail of the Dionysiac *thiasos* at the mosaic in Sheikh Zouède, see OVADIAH *et alii* 1991, Taf. 25c.

²⁶ BARKAN 1986, 38.

²⁷ OTTO 1965, 133.

²⁸ *E. Ba.* 770-774.

which she carries in triumph (...)”²⁹ Even though Pentheus dresses as a Maenad, thus changing his appearance, as stated by Euripides in *The Bacchae* (825-857), this transformation is not real, but can be considered as an imaginary or virtual metamorphosis.

Pentheus remonstrates, asking his subjects: “What madness, (...) has dulled your reason? (...) clashing cymbals (...) the shallow tricks of magic, women’s shrill cries, wine-heated madness”.³⁰ In retaliation, Dionysos punishes Pentheus by causing madness to befall on him, his mother and her sisters, who kill him mistaking him for an animal.³¹ Ovid in his *Fasti* describes him as: “(...) him who fell a mournful prey to his own Theban mother (...)”.³² His mother believes that “he is a huge boar prowling in our fields”.³³ Thus, in her mind, and only in her mind, as well as in that of the Maenads, he has undergone an imaginary or virtual transformation. Several Roman artisans represented this terrible and incredible scene. Numerous works of art depict Maenads, but a single one suffices to illustrate their frenzied state and its tragic effects. The scene on the Roman wall painting at the House of the Vettii in Pompeii, VI.15.1,³⁴ (**Fig. 6**) seems to echo these words. It depicts several women, transformed from their earlier form of traditional, quiet restrained women, into wild Maenads who surround Pentheus; he kneels in the centre in supplication, his face displaying despair and suffering. On one side a Maenad pulls his arm, while on the other, another Maenad holds him by his hair and attacks him with her *thyrsos*. They seem to be Pentheus’ mother Agave and one of her sisters. Behind them other Maenads assault him with their *thyrsoi*, and yet another holds a large rock over her head, and is about to throw it at him; it is possible that two figures who hold torches in the corners above are Furies.³⁵ The Maenads’ hallucinations have led them to perceive him as a beast, and as such they tear him to pieces. As Euripides explains, Agave was “(...) not in her right mind, but possessed by the Bacchic god (...)”³⁶ It is only when Pentheus’ mother returns to her senses that she grasps that the severed head she is holding is in fact that of her own son.³⁷

Ovid describes how Pentheus’ mother Agave and her sisters tear him apart: “(...) Pentheus torn limb from limb (...)”.³⁸

The scene shown on the fourth century CE mosaic found under St. Peter’s in Rome is exceptional, for it shows an earlier stage of Pentheus’ punishment: as in Euripides’ drama, Dionysos transformed Pentheus into a Maenad, so that he could spy on the Maenads in the forests; his garments are shown hanging on a tree nearby. Dionysos’ panther jumps up at Pentheus, while the Maenads are about to attack him. It seems possible that one of the figures is Dionysos, for he is wearing a crown of leaves (**Fig. 7**).³⁹

²⁹ E. Ba. 1140-1143.

³⁰ Ov. Met. 3.531-537.

³¹ Ov. Met. 3.529-530.

³² Ov. Fast. 3.721-722.

³³ Ov. Met. 3.714-715.

³⁴ Cf. LING 1991, 195, Pl. XI B, *tablinum, in situ*, east wall; dated to ca. 62 BCE. CLARKE 1991, 226-227, Pl. 15.

³⁵ LIMC 7.1, No. 28.

³⁶ E. Ba. 1123-1124.

³⁷ E. Ba. 1282-1289; CLARKE 1991, 226-227.

³⁸ Ov. Met. 3.722-725, 731.

³⁹ LIMC 7.1.2, No. 4.



Figure 5. Maenad, mosaic *in situ*, Sheikh Zouède, Egypt (OVADIAH *et alii* 1991, Taf. 25c).



Figure 6. Pentheus, wall painting, House of the Vettii, Pompeii (LING 1991, Pl. XI B).



Figure 7. Pentheus, mosaic, below St. Peter's, Rome, 4th century CE (*LIMC* 7.1/2, No. 4).



Figure 8. Pentheus, sarcophagus, Palazzo Giustiniani, Rome (MATZ 1969, No. 231).



Figure 9. Pentheus, cover of sarcophagus, Camposanto, Pisa (*LIMC* 7.1/2, No. 30)

Philostratus includes a chapter entitled *Bacchantes*. He describes a painting of the Bacchantes, and among them Pentheus' mother Agave, and her sisters, ripping him apart.⁴⁰

This scene, with small variations, is depicted on several sarcophagi of the second century CE. In one of these, from the Palazzo Giustiniani, Rome, Pentheus has already collapsed onto the ground, while the Maenads are still pulling his head, arms and legs, tearing him apart (**Fig. 8**). The gestures of the Maenads express their state of mind, their madness. On the cover of another sarcophagus from Camposanto, Pisa, the scene resembles this one (**Fig. 9**).⁴¹

Pentheus appears in these visual representations in his human form, and not as the beast the Maenads mistook him for. We may conclude that these scenes present two

⁴⁰ Philostr. *Im.* 1.18 (second century CE) (trans. A. Fairbanks, the Loeb Classical Library, London–New York, 1931).

⁴¹ MATZ 1969, 414, No. 231, Rome, Palazzo Giustiniani; *LIMC* 7.1/2, No. 31; MATZ 1969, 413-414, No. 230. Pisa, Camposanto; *LIMC* 7.1/2, No. 30.

different types of metamorphoses: one, a complete mutation, when the women are transformed into Maenads; the other, an imaginary metamorphosis, resulting from the mirage in the minds of Pentheus' mother and aunts, which tragically transforms him into a lion. In fact, the informed viewer can perceive Pentheus' metamorphosis, as it occurs only in her/his mind.

Observing the scene before him or her, the informed viewer may perceive that these transient metamorphoses are presented on different levels: one, the women transformed into Maenads; the second, Pentheus; and the third, the illusory, imaginary, virtual metamorphosis that led solely the Maenads and Pentheus' mother to perceive him as a wild animal. These metamorphoses may be thought to present also a psychotic state induced by Dionysos and his cult, characterized by the strange and ecstatic behaviour of the Maenads.

4. Adonis

Many authors praised the beauty of Adonis. When he was born, Aphrodite, because of his beauty, hid him in a chest, which she entrusted to Persephone. But when Persephone saw him, she was unwilling to return him. So as to settle the dispute between the two goddesses, Zeus decided that Adonis would spend one part of the year with Aphrodite, another with Persephone and the third one as he preferred. Adonis chose to stay with Aphrodite during the third part.⁴²

Bion had already referred in his poem to "(...) the beauteous Adonis lieth low in the hills, his thigh pierced with the tusk (...)".⁴³ In addition, he mentions that "(...) the flowerets flush red for grief (...)", a clear reference to the red anemones that sprang up from his blood.⁴⁴

Antoninus Liberalis, remarks: "Aphrodite fell utterly in love with him because of his beauty".⁴⁵ His beauty is alluded to by Hyginus: "Youths who were most handsome, Adonis (...) whom Venus [Aphrodite] loved".⁴⁶

According to Ovid, Eros, Aphrodite's son, when kissing his mother touched by chance her breast with his arrow, and thus caused her to fall in love with Adonis.⁴⁷ The goddess becomes his lover and companion, hunting animals in the woods, but she warns Adonis to keep away from wild boars, bears and lions. "O rash and overbold why didst thou go a-hunting? Wast thou so mad to pit thee against a wild beast and thou so fair?"⁴⁸ "Boars have the force of a lightning stroke in their curving tusks (...)".⁴⁹ But he did not heed her advice and following his hounds, he comes upon a wild boar and wounds it with his spear. The fierce boar, wild with pain, pursues the

⁴² Apollod. 3.14.4.

⁴³ Bio *Adonis* 1.3.8, *passim* (late second and early first century BCE) (in *The Greek Bucolic Poets, The Lament for Adonis*, trans. J. M. Edmonds, The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge [Mass.]-London 1912).

⁴⁴ *Id.*, 1.40.

⁴⁵ Ant.Lib. *Metamorphosis* 34 (second century CE Greek mythographer) (trans. Celoria, www.theoi.com/Olympios/AphroditeLoves2.html#Adonis).

⁴⁶ Hyg. *Fab.* 271 (Greek mythographer of the second century CE) (*Fables* (French), trans. J.-Y. Boriaud, Paris 2003 [repr. 1997]).

⁴⁷ Ov. *Met.* 10.524-526.

⁴⁸ Bio *Adonis* 1.3.40.

⁴⁹ Ov. *Met.* 10.550.

hunter and kills him with his tusks.⁵⁰ In her grief, the goddess poured nectar on his blood, and a red flower, the anemone, sprouted from it.⁵¹

Various scenes presented in wall paintings,⁵² mosaics⁵³ and sarcophagi⁵⁴ show Adonis' farewell and leave-taking, or the lovers seated together. Allusions to the ensuing metamorphosis are absent in these representations. In fact, to the best of my knowledge, it seems that the only scene where a hint of the metamorphosis may be perceived is the scene depicted on the upper panel of the mosaic of the "Hippolytus' room" in the Church of St. Mary at Madaba, Jordan (**Fig. 10**). The two lovers are depicted seated, while Aphrodite, with a slipper in her hand, seems to be spanking the bottom of an Eros, who has fled into a nurse's arms. Another Eros holding her foot has, perhaps, taken off the slipper from her foot. Adonis is seated holding his spear, in a pose implying that he will at any moment rise and leave. However, a curious detail deserves the viewer's attention: in the ground below Adonis, an Eros has his head and arms stuck into an overturned basket, and strewn below, small forms on the left which have been identified as bees.⁵⁵ Other small forms perceived on the right part of the ground, below Adonis, seem different from those on the left. Can it be surmised that these are red flowerets,⁵⁶ the anemones that will sprout as a result of the metamorphosis of Adonis' blood? Thus, this may also be a sort of premonition, as well as an imagined metamorphosis, created in the viewer's eye and mind.

The scene of "Adonis' Farewell" shown on the mosaic of the House of the Red Pavement (Room 1), from Antioch, is restricted to the two main figures and an Eros (**Fig. 11**).⁵⁷ The goddess raises her right hand towards him, in a gesture maybe intended to warn her lover of the danger of the boar hunt, or perhaps predicting his death. He stands before her, his elbow on a rock, as he holds his spear resting on his shoulder.

Some literary sources, such as Servius, stated that the boar was none other than Ares, furious with jealousy: "(...) *cum ira Martis ab apro esset occisus, sanguinem eius vertit in florem qui numquam vento decuti dicitur (...)*".⁵⁸ Nonnos also mentions this episode: "(...) in the shape of a wild boar, Ares with jagged rusk and spitting deadly poison was destined to weave the fate for Adonis in jealous madness".⁵⁹ But there are versions: according to Pseudo-Apollodorus, Artemis becomes the boar, which wounds Adonis, maybe because she was offended by his boast of his superior hunting prowess.⁶⁰ However, other literary sources mention a different version of the myth, identifying the boar as Apollo, who had changed himself into a boar, to revenge his son Erymanthos whom Aphrodite had punished because he had reported her union with Adonis.

⁵⁰ *Ov. Met.* 10.710-716.

⁵¹ *Ov. Met.* 10.728-736.

⁵² *LIMC* 1.1/2, Nos. 22, 30, 36; REINACH 1970, 64, Nos. 2, 6, 35, 65.

⁵³ *LIMC* 1.1/2, Nos. 23, 24, 31, 32.

⁵⁴ *LIMC* 1.1/2, Nos. 38-39-39g.

⁵⁵ BUSCHHAUSEN 1989, 168-169, Pl. IX, upper panel; end of the sixth century CE.

⁵⁶ For similar flowerets, see OVADIAH – OVADIAH 1987, No. 87, Pls. LXV.2, LXVI.1 (mosaic at Hamath Tiberias) and floral motifs, type F3.

⁵⁷ LEVI 1971, 80-81, Pl. XIIb; *LIMC* 1.1/2, No. 31, mid-second century CE.

⁵⁸ *Serv. Aen.* 5.72 (*Servianorum in Vergiliū*, in A. F. Stocker and A. H. Travis, *Carmina Commentariorum*, Oxoni 19, 3, MDCCCCLXV).

⁵⁹ *Nonn. D.* 41.208-211.

⁶⁰ See theoi.com/Olympios/Artemiswrath.2.html.

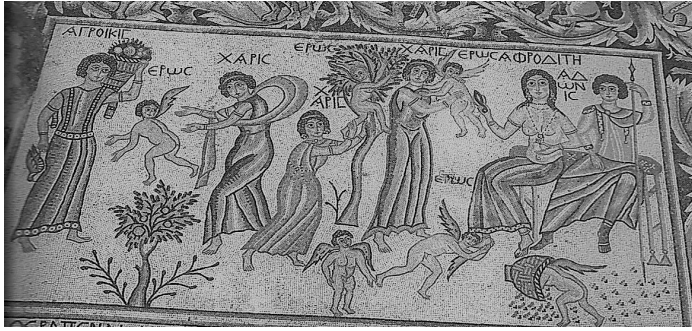


Figure 10. Adonis, mosaic of the Hippolytos' Room, in the Church of St. Mary, Madaba, Jordan (BUSCHAUSEN 1989, Pl. IX, upper panel).



Figure 11. Adonis, mosaic from the House of the Red Pavement, Room of Adonis' Farewell (LEVI 1971, Pl. XIIIb).



Figure 12. Adonis, mosaic, from Antioch (www.theoi.com: Z.10.8).



Figure 13. Adonis, sarcophagus from Palazzo Rospigliosi (*LIMC* 7/2, No. 39e).

The hero is depicted attacking the wild boar hidden in the bush in a section of the mosaic from Yakto, Antioch, where he is identified by his name in the inscription above him (**Fig. 12**).⁶¹ This scene presents two metamorphoses. The first concerns only the wild boar: as implied by Servius, Pseudo-Apollodorus and Nonnos, this boar may be perceived as the metamorphosis of Ares, Artemis or Apollo, as the case may be. The second metamorphosis relates to the scene as a whole. If we accept the proposal that the informed viewer would perceive this as a premonition of Adonis' death and the ensuing metamorphosis, we could then consider this scene as an imagined or imaginary metamorphosis. The episode following the one just discussed appears in a fragment of a wall painting with small variations, clearly suggesting its impending outcome.⁶² Aphrodite supports the dying Adonis, while the boar, after inflicting the mortal wound on the hero, is shown running away. In Pompeii, this scene is shown on several wall paintings but, interestingly, without the boar's presence.⁶³

This myth is frequently depicted on Roman sarcophagi, such as the one from Palazzo Rospigliosi (**Fig. 13**).⁶⁴ Several of these follow a similar composition on the main panel: the scene of the boar attacking Adonis is placed at the centre of the panel, thus becoming the most important and main crucial theme. Adonis' companions are depicted trying to help him and kill the boar. In some cases, as in this one, the scene of Aphrodite' and Adonis' leave-taking is presented on the left part of the panel, with the goddess entreating the hero to refrain from dangerous hunting. On some sarcophagi this part shows the dying hero. The scene on this part of the sarcophagi varies: in one case, Aphrodite appears aided by some Erotes, trying to treat Adonis' wounded thigh.⁶⁵ But in several instances, this scene is lacking.

If we accept the statement of the literary sources that the boar was Ares, Artemis or Apollo, we can see the god changed into a boar in the works of art, while Adonis appears in his own image and not yet transformed into a cluster of anemones.

⁶¹ SEYRIG 1935, 42-47; LEVI 1971, 338, Pl. LXXVIIb; *LIMC* 1.1/2, No. 32, second half of the fifth century CE; see www.theoi.com/Olympios.Loves2.html#Adonis, Z10.8.

⁶² *LIMC* 1.1/2, No. 36; the fragment, whose origin is not mentioned (end of the first century CE), is nowadays in the Louvre Museum, Inv. No. 1999.

⁶³ REINACH 1970, 64-65; *LIMC* 1.1/2, No. 35.

⁶⁴ *LIMC* 1.1/2, No. 39e, here Fig. 14, Palazzo Rospigliosi, Rome, end of the second century CE; see also *LIMC* 1.1/2: Nos. 38, 38a, 39a-e.

⁶⁵ *LIMC* 1.1/2, No. 39c, fourth century CE, nowadays in the Vatican.

Attis, like Adonis, is yet another mythological figure whose beauty aroused a goddess' passionate love – a love that similarly led to his death and metamorphosis.

5. Attis

There are several versions of the life of Attis, a beautiful shepherd loved by Cybele. In one version, Cybele made him her priest on condition that he would remain chaste. After he broke his promise, the goddess threw him into a state of madness, causing him to castrate himself, and become a fir tree,⁶⁶ or pine tree, which became sacred to Cybele. The priests of her cult had to be eunuchs, and the goddess decreed that Attis' death would be commemorated every year with solemn lamentations.⁶⁷

The episodes of Attis' myth presented in the works of art mostly focus on the scenes evoking his death caused by emasculation. On the wall painting in the Casa di Pinario at Pompeii (**Fig. 14**),⁶⁸ Attis is presented as a shepherd, standing with legs crossed, holding a *pedum* in one hand, as he looks sadly at the curved knife in the other hand, with which he will emasculate himself. He leans on a large tree, perhaps a fir tree, placed in the background. It is possible that this scene depicts Attis' emasculation as part of a play, as Vermaseren suggests.⁶⁹ The informed viewer will perceive the metamorphosis, which the scene implies.

Attis' bust appears on a stone altar from Vesunna (Périgueux), France (**Fig. 15**).⁷⁰ The bust is on a pedestal placed on an altar covered by a fringed cloth. A pine tree depicted above and behind his Phrygian cap indicates his metamorphosis after his death. Whips (a hint perhaps, to Phrygian cults, such as those of Cybele and Attis, where whipping was part of the ritual) and *crotals* are hung from the branches of the tree, with a *syrix* nearby.⁷¹

The main part of a marble altar from the Via Appia in Rome is dedicated to Cybele (**Fig. 16**).⁷² The goddess is shown riding her lion-drawn chariot, searching for her lover, and the noise of the *tympanum* announces her arrival. Attis is standing cross-legged behind a pine tree, loaded with large cones, and against which he leans, as he listens to the sounds of the approach of Cybele announced by the roar of the lions and the loud music. He holds a *tympanum* in his left hand and sustains his head with the right, his *pedum* placed next to him.

On a relief from Glanum, Gallia (**Fig. 17**),⁷³ Attis is shown lying near a palm tree, his legs crossed, one hand covering his *genitalia*. Nearby, a *pedum*, while on the opposite side a *syrix* is represented as if hanging in the background (rocks, perhaps). A tree, possibly a cypress, with pipes nearby, completes the left part of the relief.

⁶⁶ Ov. *Met.* 10.103 ff.

⁶⁷ Ov. *Fast.* 4.227; www.theoi.com/Phrygios/Attis.html. This annual feast comprised the *tristia* and *hilaria*, see VERMASEREN 1966, 32, associating them with Attis' cult.

⁶⁸ VERMASEREN 1966, 56, No. 4, Pl. XXXVII.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* Pl. XXXVIII; CCCA IV, No. 29, Taf. 7.

⁷⁰ Musée du Périgord, Inv. No. A3183; PICARD 1957, 12, Pl. I; VERMASEREN 1966, 32, No. 7; CCCA V, 146-147, No. 420 (second century CE).

⁷¹ PICARD 1957, 12-15; *crotals* and the *syrix*, as well as the *tympanum*, are musical instruments associated with the wild, noisy music that accompany Cybele's and Attis' cults, and of course, also Dionysus' cult.

⁷² Now in the Villa Albani, Rome, Inv. No. 215.208; VERMASEREN 1966, 27; CCCA III, 101, No. 357; end of the third century CE.

⁷³ VERMASEREN 1966, 35, n. 3, Pl. XXI, 2. Museum St. Rémy, Inv. No. 1186.



Figure 14. Attis, wall painting in the Casa di Pinario, Pompeii (VERMASEREN 1966, Pl. XXXVII, No. 4).



Figure 15. Attis, stone altar from Vesunna, Perigueux, Museum of Perigord, Inv. No. A3183 (VERMASEREN 1966, No. 7).



Figure 16. Attis, marble altar from Via Appia, now Villa Albani No. 215.208 (VERMASEREN 1966, No. 27).



Figure 17. Attis, relief from Glanum, Gallia (VERMASEREN 1966, Pl. XX.2).

As mentioned above, a tree, either a fir or a pine tree, both of which have cones, are depicted behind or near Attis in many and various works of art.⁷⁴ These cases, as well as those where the image is reduced to one or more cones, but without a tree, clearly suggest the metamorphosis undergone by Attis, into a fir or pine tree. Both trees resist winter, as well as death, therefore promising eternal life to his believers.⁷⁵ Attis' pose and gesture clearly point to his castration and its consequence.

In the same way, the metamorphosis of Pithys, a nymph, was the outcome of Pan's love and his desire for her.

6. Pitys

The reference to the myth of Pitys is both infrequent and brief in classical literary sources, while in visual art it is very rare: as far as I know, there is only one work of art depicting this myth.

Lucian mentions the nymph Pitys, in a very brief passage, where Pan tells Hermes that he loves Echo and Pitys, and all the Maenads of Dionysos.⁷⁶

Longus tells of a maiden who "sitting under a pine and wearing a coronet of the same she would sing of Pan and the Pine (...)".⁷⁷ In another passage, he mentions "I called on Pan that he would help me, as having bin himself caught with the love of peevish Pitys".⁷⁸ He adds: "Pan is a wanton, faithless God; for he loved Pitys, he loved Syrinx too".⁷⁹

Although Propertius does not mention Pitys by name, he subtly implies her presence: "if trees know any love, Beech and Pine beloved of the god of Arcady".⁸⁰ The pine is the tree into which Pitys was transformed when escaping from Pan.

The sole presentation in visual art of the myth of Pitys seems to be the scene represented on a Roman mosaic in the National Museum of Naples (**Fig. 18**),⁸¹ depicting the metamorphosis of Pitys, who is shown partly in her human shape and partly as a tree. The pine tree is known as *pitys* in Arcadia.⁸² Pan is depicted with his hands raised in a gesture of surprise as he watches the transformation of the nymph into a tree. Pitys stands with her legs crossed, her lower legs and feet changed into green leaves and branches. Her arms are raised above her head, a tree trunk behind her head, as her hands are lifted and melt into the fullness of the leafy crown of the tree. She is otherwise nude, while she turns her head and eyes towards Pan. Thus the metamorphosis is incomplete, since Pitys is clearly shown while still undergoing the process of transformation.

⁷⁴ The works of art depicting this scene are numerous in various media: coins, medallions, and lamps, such as a terracotta lamp of the Roman Imperial period, from Sparta, with Attis lying near a pine tree on with a *pedum* in his hand, and flutes, a *syrinx* and a *tympaanum* scattered nearby, see VERMASEREN 1966, 34, n. 2, Pl. XIX, 2.

⁷⁵ PICARD 1957, 22-23.

⁷⁶ Luc. *DDeor.* 2(22).4 (second century CE) (transl. M. Macleoud, The Loeb Classical Library, 7, Cambridge [Mass.]–London 1969).

⁷⁷ Long. *Daph. et Chloe* 1.27 (second century CE) (trans. G. Thornley, The Loeb Classical Library, London and Cambridge [Mass.], 1916).

⁷⁸ Long. *Daph. et Chloe* 2.7.

⁷⁹ Long. *Daph. et Chloe* 2.38.

⁸⁰ Prop. 1.17 (first century BCE) (trans. G. P. Goold, The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge [Mass.]–London, 1990).

⁸¹ Mus. Naz. Napoli, Inv. No. 27708; *LIMC* 7/1,2, 411-412, No.1 (third century CE).

⁸² *LIMC* 7.1/2, 413.



Figure 18. Pitys, mosaic in
The National Museum of Naples
(www.theoi.com: Z 22.2).

Nonnos writes of Pan's love and pursuit of Pitys, comparing her fate to that of Daphne, "and I tremble at your lustful Pan, who will persecute me like Pitys, like Syrinx (...)"⁸³ In addition, he mentions "that I may die before I wed, and go to Hades a virgin, still a stranger to Eros, like Pitys and like Daphne!"⁸⁴ In another passage he also refers to her: "(...) sing also of Pitys who hated marriage, who fled fast as the wind over the mountains to escape the unlawful wooing of Pan, and her fate –how she disappeared into the soil herself: put the blame on the Earth!"⁸⁵

The iconographic scheme follows a pattern similar to that of Apollo and Daphne, with Pan appearing instead of Apollo, and Pitys instead of Daphne. Both Apollo and Pan pursue these nymphs, who in their flight are transformed into trees. Daphne becomes a laurel tree, while Pitys is changed into a pine tree.

7. Conclusions

As proposed above, metamorphoses can be complete or incomplete, real, imaginary, or virtual. The mind of the informed viewer perceives the difference, and when the metamorphosis is incomplete or unfinished, the viewer conceptually fills in the missing features, and thus it is not only an incomplete metamorphosis, but also an imaginary metamorphosis. Such an imaginary metamorphosis, albeit temporary, takes place in Agave's mind leading her to kill her own son, Pentheus, whom she mistakenly perceives as a wild animal. Dionysos had dressed Pentheus as a Maenad, when he wanted to spy on the Maenads –this change of appearance, which included his clothes had led to a transformation of his image.

⁸³ Nonn. *D.* 2.98-118 (fourth to fifth century CE).

⁸⁴ Nonn. *D.* 2.108.

⁸⁵ Nonn. *D.* 42.255-259.

The transformations of the mythological images studied here allow me to suggest that metamorphoses can be multi-faceted. They also present very complex processes –the motives for their creation by ancient writers, mythographers and artisans seem difficult to ascertain. Does this phenomenon represent an attempt to express passionate love, hatred, jealousy, revenge, desire and the fear they can arouse? These passions are cited, not only in literary sources, such as Euripides, but are also shown in dramas presented in the theatre.⁸⁶ We may say that the transformations undergone by the figures studied in this article might show attempts that differ in each case to present the various passions under different guises. While divine vengeance was the driving force of the metamorphoses related to Dionysos, it was divine love, jealousy and vengeance whether a god's or a goddess', which caused the other metamorphoses.

Although a certain correlation may be noted between the literary sources and the works of art, the artisan frequently uses his imagination freely instead of following closely any of the known literary sources. Theatrical performances may have also provided some models to which he could refer. It is worth pointing out some interesting differences that emerge from the study of the metamorphoses in these myths.

The transitory metamorphosis of the Maenads is imposed by the powerful Dionysos who transforms them from well-balanced, well-behaved, rational maidens and women to hysterical, insane creatures. The Maenads may show in their metamorphosis the profound need and aspiration of Greek women to be liberated from the fetters of their strict way of life. Dionysos' cult gives them the opportunity to loosen their self-repression by entering into an ecstatic state.

In quite another sort of metamorphosis, though again swayed by Dionysos, the nymph Ambrosia is transformed into a winding vine, which strangles Lycurgos who had attempted to kill her. Ambrosia's metamorphosis into a vine is the consequence of Dionysos' revenge for Lycurgos' denial of the god's divine nature.

In the Adonis myth, metamorphosis appears, according to a few sources, in a very different aspect: Aphrodite's abandonment of Ares, her former lover, for Adonis, arouses Ares' anger and jealousy, who transforms himself into a wild boar, which attacks and mortally wounds the lover-hero. The metamorphosis of Ares into the boar, which kills Adonis, may represent the ruse that permits him to give vent to his hatred and jealousy, while rendering the identity of the killer unknown. Other versions change the source: the vengeance of Apollo or Artemis. However, after Adonis' death, Aphrodite's love and tears transform her lover's blood into red anemones, which symbolize the renovation of nature and the cycle of life. Thus, Aphrodite's love imparts eternal life to Adonis. This myth expresses the polarity of two strong passions: love and hatred.

Attis' breach of promise arouses the goddess Cybele's jealousy and fury; this conjointly with her love and revenge cause his self-castration and death. Transformed into a pine or a fir tree, Attis' metamorphosis becomes real and visible. Whereas the passionate jealousy of Cybele causes Attis' suicide, the metamorphosis after his death into an evergreen tree shows the renewal of nature and eternal life.

The myth of Pan and Pithys is somewhat different. We may assume that both Pan's lust and his pursuit of Pithys, and essentially her own fear, triggered her

⁸⁶ For the dramas of Aeschylus', Sophocles' and Euripides' as source of inspiration for artists/artisans in visual media, see TRENDALL – WEBSTER 1971,1-7. See also EASTERLING 2002; EASTERLING – HALL 2002.

transformation into a pine tree. Pithys' metamorphosis may also signify the terror and fear of the Nymph when confronted with Pan's lustful desire.

In the light of this study I propose that metamorphoses can be of various types: not only complete and incomplete, and thus visible and real, but also imaginary or virtual, and therefore, invisible. In addition, it seems also plausible to consider that the various forms of metamorphoses, in literature as in visual art, served as the mode for expressing extreme or socially unacceptable and undesirable human passions. Therefore, the representations of passions had to undergo the mutation into images, so as to become acceptable and appropriate, as well as also intelligible and clear to the informed viewer.

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