

## Arboreal and human bodies in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by Artemis Archontogeorgi<sup>1</sup>

In his essay on the literary representation of trees in Senecan drama, Robert Nisbet points out that "Trees are like people. They have a head (*vertex*), a trunk (*truncus*), arms (*bracchia*). They stand tall like a soldier, or look as slender as a bridegroom (Sappho, 115 L-P). Their life moves in human rhythms, which in their case may be repeated: sap rises and falls, hair (*coma*) luxuriates, withers, drops off. Sometimes they are superior and aloof, sometimes they go in pairs, whether as comrades in arms (Hom. *Il.* 12.132ff., Virg. *Aen.* 9.679ff.) or husband and wife (Ov. *Met.* 8.720)".<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, Alessandro Perutelli, in his article examining the function of the term *bracchium* in Latin literature, notes similar correspondences in the interpretation of the figurative relationship between trees and humans.<sup>3</sup>

Long before modern scholars became interested in the anatomical resemblance between trees and humans, Pliny the Elder held similar views in his *Naturalis Historia*. He assumed that "there is also a juice in the body of trees, which must be looked upon as their blood", and that "in general the bodies of trees, as of other living things, have in them skin, blood, flesh, sinews, veins, bones and marrow".<sup>4</sup> According to the Roman natural historian, trees get sick much like humans do; they can be affected by a disease comparable to arthritis; they also need to be beautified, just like humans need their hairdresser and manicurist.<sup>5</sup>

Correspondingly, Columella finds similar analogies in the physiology of trees and humans in his work *De Re Rustica*. He notes the comparison between the roots and the legs, the trunk and the body, the branches and the arms, the shoots and the hands, while identifying the

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<sup>2</sup> Nisbet 1987: 243.

<sup>3</sup> Perutelli 1985. On the anatomical similarities of trees and humans, see also Bretin-Chabrol 2012: 82-90.

<sup>4</sup> Plin. *HN*16.72.181 (translated by Rackham).

<sup>5</sup> Plin. *HN*17.37.224, 17.37.248.

foliage with the protection of clothing.<sup>6</sup> Lucretius adds to this brief overview of the similarities between trees and humans. In his work *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius admits that organisms have some similarities when they are created, although he believes that humans, fruits and fruit trees are made up of very different elements.<sup>7</sup> Lucretius, however, does not deny the possibility of branches sprouting from the human body, resulting from the coexistence of different elements within the same organism, an evolution that seems to be a monstrosity.<sup>8</sup>

Against the background of the observations mentioned above, this paper attempts to map the presence and function of tree transformations in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and to discuss their subtleties from an ecocritical perspective.<sup>9</sup> Ecocritical theory proposes an 'earth-centered' approach to the study of literature. By focusing on literary representations of nature, it seeks to reflect on the multiple and complex connections between people, texts and their physical environment while raising awareness of a major modern problem: the ecological crisis. In the naturalistic setting of the Ovidian work, the idea of a human being transforming into another physical form, whether animate or inanimate, leaves room for a variety of associations about the complex relationship between humans and nature. Particular attention will be given to the correlation between gender, metamorphosis, and sylvan imagery and to exploring the liminality (temporal and spatial) of the actual transformation from human to tree (and vice versa). The semantic ambiguity of the term *truncus*, meaning both "tree trunk" and "body", will also be discussed in the broader context of mutilation as an act of violence against humans and trees.

Furthermore, this paper proposes that arboreal transformations as evidence of the absorption of the human body by the natural environment in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* correspond to Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-

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<sup>6</sup> Columella, *Rust.* 3.10.11.

<sup>7</sup> Lucr. 2.695-699.

<sup>8</sup> Lucr. 2.701-703. On the attitude of Roman agronomists' attitude towards nature and its relationship with the world of humans, see Bretin-Chabrol 2012: 35-46; Armstrong 2019: 2-6.

<sup>9</sup> On ecocriticism as an interpretive tool for classical literature, see Glacken 1976; Hughes 1994; Gifford 1999; Thommen 2009; Schliephake 2017. On the rapidly growing interest in ecocriticism on Latin literature, see Saunders 2008; Apostol 2015; Armstrong 2019; Schliephake 2020; Rozzoni 2021.

corporeality. By emphasising movement across bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges between different bodily natures and the ways in which these bodily entities interface with each other.<sup>10</sup> Most importantly, although trans-corporeality appears to be anthropocentric, it shifts the focus from humans to nature. This is because it considers humans as part of “an active, often unpredictable more-than-human world” and thus “denies the human subject the sovereign, central position”.<sup>11</sup>

### **Moving across bodies: from human to tree**

In the mythological world of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, we find a total of ten transformations of humans into trees. Six of them concern women; three refer to men and one to a couple.<sup>12</sup> The transformations recorded are: Daphne into a laurel tree (Ov. *Met.* 1.548-552); the Heliades into poplar trees (Ov. *Met.* 2.346-366); Lotis into a lotus tree (Ov. *Met.* 9.346-348); Dryope into a lotus tree or poplar (Ov. *Met.* 9.351-355, 9.388-392); Myrrha into a myrrh tree (Ov. *Met.* 10.489-498); the Edonides into oaks (Ov. *Met.* 11.69-84); Cyparissus into a cypress (Ov. *Met.* 10.136-140); the shepherd from Apulia into a wild olive tree (Ov. *Met.* 14.523-526); Attis into a pine (Ov. *Met.* 10.104-105); and Philemon and Baucis into an oak and a linden respectively (Ov. *Met.* 8.714-719). The causes of transformation vary and may be sexual violence (Daphne, Lotis), grief (Heliades, Cyparissus, Myrrha), punishment (Dryope, Edonides, Apulian shepherd), or divine intervention (Attis, Philemon and Baucis).<sup>13</sup>

During the alterations mentioned above, humans take on arboreal characteristics, which underline the connection between tree nature and human nature. The very process of metamorphosis from human to tree confirms the anatomical similarity between humans and trees, an analogy vividly expressed in Daphne's metamorphosis. As the nymph gradually transforms into a laurel tree, we see her chest turn into a tree

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<sup>10</sup> Alaimo 2010: 2.

<sup>11</sup> Alaimo 2010: 16-17.

<sup>12</sup> On gender and transformation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, see Sharrock 2020: 31-53.

<sup>13</sup> For an overview of the structural elements of the transformations in the Ovidian epic, see Barchiesi 2020: 14-24. On the causes of transformation into trees and their connection to moral embodiment, see Forbes Irving 1990: 128-138; Tzachi 2011; Frontisi-Ducroux 2017: 35-47, 59-68.

trunk, her hair into foliage, her arms into branches, her legs into roots, and her face into a canopy of leaves:

*vix prece finita torpor gravis occupat artus, / mollia cinguntur tenui  
praecordia libro, / in frondem crines, in ramos bracchia crescunt, / pes  
modo tam velox pigris radicibus haeret, / ora cacumen habet: remanet  
nitor unus in illa.*

(Ov. *Met.* 1.548-552)

“her prayer was scarcely finished when she feels a torpor take possession of her limbs – her supple trunk is girdled with a thin layer of fine bark over her smooth skin; her hair turns into foliage, her arms grow into branches, sluggish roots adhere to feet that were so recently so swift, her head becomes the summit of a tree”.<sup>14</sup>

In the case of Myrrha, Ovid looks at the transformation even more closely. Myrrha’s nails grow into roots that support her trunk; her bones become wood; the blood in her marrow becomes sap; her arms become twigs while her fingers become branches, and her skin hardens into bark:

*nam crura loquentis / terra supervenit, ruptosque obliqua per  
ungues / porrigitur radix, longi firmamina trunci, / ossaque robur agunt,  
mediaque manente medulla / sanguis in sucos, in magnos bracchia  
ramos, / in parvos digiti, duratur cortice pellis. / iamque gravem crescens  
uterum perstrinxerat arbor / pectoraque obruerat collumque operire  
parabat: / non tulit illa moram venientique obvia lingo / subsedit  
mersitque suos in cortice vultus.*

(Ov. *Met.* 10.489-498)

“for, even as she was still speaking, the earth rose up over her legs, and from her toes burst roots that spread widely to hold the tall trunk in position; her bones put forth wood, and even though they were still hollow, they now ran with sap and not blood; her arms became branches, and those were now twigs that used to be called her fingers, while her skin

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<sup>14</sup> The Latin text follows the edition by Miller & Goold 1916. All translations of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* are from Martin 2004.

turned to hard bark. The tree kept on growing, over her swollen belly, wrapping it tightly, and growing over her breast and up to her neck; she could bear no further delay, and, as the wood rose, plunged her face down into the bark and was swallowed”.

Daphne’s physical transformation into a tree provides a narrative model for all subsequent arboreal transformations. In most of the narratives, trees and humans are identified anatomically by using word pairs such as *crinis/capillus/caput – frons* (“hair/head – foliage”, 1.550, 2.350-351, 9.355), *bracchium – ramus* (“arm – branch”, 1.550, 2.352), *pes – radix* (“foot – root”, 1.551), *os – cacumen* (“face – tree tip”, 1.552), *ossum – robur* (“bone – timber”, 10.492), *sanguis – succus* (“blood – sap”, 10.492-493). Apart from the above word pairs, coherent elements of the transformations are the gradual stillness, the rigidity of the body and finally the loss of voice, which in the cases of the Heliades and Philemon and Baucis is underlined by a final salutation (2.363 *iamque vale*, 7.717-718 *vale / o coniunx*).<sup>15</sup>

These human-tree hybrids, through their metamorphosis, transcend the biological limits of human life but retain human characteristics and behaviour. Daphne’s breast still throbs beneath the laurel’s trunk (1.554), while the laurel, like Daphne before it, still eludes Apollo’s erotic embrace (1.556). Dryope, transformed into a poplar or lotus tree, retains the warmth of her body (9.392-393, 9.365); the myrrh tree is pregnant with Myrrha’s child and bears the fruit of the girl’s incestuous love for her father (10.505-514); the wild olive tree, into which the Apulian shepherd has been transformed, preserves on its sour wrist the profanity of human speech (14.524-526).

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<sup>15</sup> Immobility: Ov. *Met.* 1.548, 1.551, 3.349, 3.351, 9.351-352, 11.70-72, 11.76-78. Stiffness: Ov. *Met.* 3.348, 9.357, 10.105, 10.139, 10.494. Loss of voice: Ov. *Met.* 3.363, 9.388, 10.506-507, 14.523. The metamorphosis of Cyparissus (Ov. *Met.* 10.137), though short, is slightly different from the other transformations, for his limbs do not turn into branches but take on a greenish colour. Ovid describes the metamorphoses of Lotis (Ov. *Met.* 9.346-348) and Attis (Ov. *Met.* 10.104-105) in a single sentence without further detail. On the phonocentric aspects of the Ovidian metamorphoses, see Barchiesi 2020: 21, n. 24 with examples. On the loss of voice in Ovid’s *Metamorphose*, see Natoli 2017: 33-79. For a discussion on immobilization, see Segal 2005: 31-49; Salzman Mitchell 2005: 67-116.

It is also worth noting that most female characters retain their feminine roles after metamorphosis.<sup>16</sup> Daphne, for example, is still beautiful and erotic in Apollo's eyes (1.553). Motherhood still plays an important role in the lives of both Dryope and Myrrha, even after they have lost their human bodies. Dryope nurses her infant son during her transformation (9.356-358, 9.375, where Dryope remarkably refers to her hands as *rami*, "branches"); Myrrha gives birth to her son with her tree body (10.505-514, where the tree has a *venter*, "womb", moans and sheds tears during labour, taking on the role of a *genetrix / mater / parens*, "mother"). With their collective transformation, the Heliades preserve the fraternal bond between them and continue to mourn their lost brother as tree sisters with their amber tears. In their new form as a grove of poplars, they form a feminine circle of trees whose precious extract flows back into the female community, for the amber is used to adorn the Roman bride.<sup>17</sup>

### Tree trunks and body trunks

On closer examination, the semantic ambiguity of the noun *truncus* best describes the metamorphosis of a human being into a tree. In Myrrha's case, her body transforms into a long tree trunk (10.490 *longi ... trunci*).<sup>18</sup> In Dryope's metamorphosis, her sister embraces the trunk that grows around Dryope's body (9.361 *crescentem truncum*) to delay the transformation. The imagery becomes even more vivid when the noun *truncus* is juxtaposed with the noun *corpus*, which it replaces in the course of the metamorphosis. This literary substitution of the body for a trunk is better expressed in the metamorphosis of Philemon and Baucis, where two bodies transform into two neighbouring trunks (8.719-720 *de gemino vicinos corpore truncos*). Both the meaning of the adjective *geminus*, "twin, double", which specifies the noun *corpus*, and that of the adjective *vicinus*, "neighbouring", which specifies the noun *truncus*, as well as the chiasmus, emphasise the concept of proximity, the need of the old couple to maintain their companionship even in their changed form as trees. It also restores the meaning of the adjective *conterminus* (8.620 *tiliae contermina quercus*, "an oak and a linden, side by side"), which allows for

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<sup>16</sup> On the biological sex of trees, see Bretin-Chabrol 2009; Frontisi-Ducroux 2017: 93-99.

<sup>17</sup> See Kelley 2015: 153-161.

<sup>18</sup> An elongated trunk indicates a female tree. See Frontisi-Decroux 2017: 96.

the idea of mutual contact and recognition of the couple's new "bodies". The final salutation as *coniunx* (8.717-718 '*vale' que / 'o coniunx' dixere simul*, "Farewell, dear husband! they both shouted together"), which Philemon and Baucis address to each other shortly before their transformation, refers to the extension of their marriage state which they also want to preserve as trees.<sup>19</sup>

Images from arboriculture and viticulture further illuminate the relationship between the human body and the tree trunk, placing the former in an erotic context.<sup>20</sup> In the case of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, similes from the realm of nature illustrate the violent eroticism with which the nymph captures her object of desire. Salmacis' erotic grip around Hermaphroditus' body resembles, on the one hand, an ivy wrapped around a long trunk and, on the other, the grafting of a branch into the bark of a tree:

*denique nitentem contra elabique volentem / inplicat [...] / utve solent hederæ longos intexere truncos; [...] illa premit commissaque corpore toto / sicut inhaerebat; [...] nam mixta duorum / corpora iunguntur, faciesque inducitur illis / una. velut, si quis conducat cortice ramos, / crescendo iungi pariterque adolescere cernit, / sic ubi complexu coierunt membra tenaci, / nec duo sunt et forma duplex, nec femina dici / nec puer ut possit, neutrumque et utrumque videntur.*

(Ov. *Met.* 4.361-362, 4.365, 4.369-370, 4.373-379)

"although he strives to tear himself away, the nymph – now here, now there – surrounds her prey [...] or just as ivy winds around a tree; [...]"

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<sup>19</sup> See Gowers 2005: 351-353. The tender closeness of Philemon and Baucis recalls the metamorphosis of Cadmus and Harmonia who, having turned into serpents, crawl away together with intertwined spirals. Cf. Ov. *Met.* 4.600 *et subito duo sunt iunctoque volumine serpent*, "and at once there were two serpents intertwined". Also, Ceyx and Alcyone continue their lives together as birds. Cf. Ov. *Met.* 11.736-737 *ut vero tetigit mutum et sine sanguine corpus, / dilectos artus amplexa recentibus alis*, "and when she reached his silent, bloodless corpse with her new wings, embraced his cherished limbs", 11.743-744 *nec coniugiale solutum est / foedus in alitibus*, "as birds, their love and conjugal vows remain in force". In both cases, as well as in the story of Philemon and Baucis, the emphasis is on the continuous coupling even after the metamorphosis.

<sup>20</sup> Forbes Irving 1990: 128-138; Frontisi-Decroux 2017: 69-91.

She presses her whole body against his as though stuck on him [...] their two bodies blent, both face and figure, to a single form; so when a twig is grafted to a tree, they join together in maturity. Now these two figures in their close embrace were two no longer, but were something else, no longer to be called a man and woman, and although neither, nonetheless seemed both”.

The narrative emphasises the mating of bodies (4.362 *implicat*, 4.369 *premit comissaque corpore toto*, 4.370 *inhaerebat*, 4.373-374 *mixta... corpora iunguntur... inducitur*, 4.377 *complexu... coierunt membra*), an idea reinforced by the imagery of the corresponding coupling of the natural elements (4.375 *conducat*, 4.376 *iungi*). In the first simile, the long trunk (4.365 *longos truncos*) that the ivy encloses is juxtaposed with the body of Hermaphroditus (4.369 *corpore toto*) by the semantic proximity of the verbs *implicat* – *intexere* – *inhaerebat*. In the second simile, the grafting of the branches onto the tree (4.375 *conducat cortice ramos*) prepares the assimilation of the limbs (4.377 *coierunt membra*), followed by erotic connotations. In the case of both humans and trees, the transition from two entities to one being (4.373-375 *duorum corpora ... faciesque una*, 4.378 *nec duo sunt et forma duplex*) denotes, as in the case of Philemon and Baucis, the consequent coexistence of the two in one body and satisfies Salmacis' erotic desire.<sup>21</sup>

In the same context, Vertumnus, who tries to curb Pomona's erotic reluctance, uses a typically Roman analogy between viticulture and marriage:<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Catull. 61.33-35 *mentem amore revinciens, / ut tenax hedera huc et huc / arborem implicat errans*, “and bind her heart fast with love, as clings ivy this way and that, as twine tendrils around the tree trunk”, 61.102 – 105 *lenta sed velut adsitas / vitis implicat arbores / implicabitur in tuum / complexum*, “just as the pliant vine winds itself around neighbor trees he'll be firmly enfolded in your embrace” (translated by Green). Cf. also Ov. *Met.* 12.325-331, where Petraeus attempts to uproot an oak tree by wrapping his arms around it and is eventually nailed to the tree in a fatal embrace. Thus, ironically, he becomes one with the tree.

<sup>22</sup> Also cf. Catull. 62.49-58; Hor. *Epod.* 2.9-10; Ov. *Am.* 2.16.41-42, *Her.* 5.46-48. The Romans use the verb *maritare* to indicate the union between the vine and the tree. See *OLD* s.v. “maritare” 4. to join or ‘wed’ vines and trees. See also Bretin-Chabrol 2012: 190-228.

*ulmus erat contra speciosa nitentibus uvis: / quam socia postquam  
pariter cum vite probavit, / 'at si staret' ait 'caelebs sine palmite truncus, /  
nil praeter frondes, quare peteretur, haberet; / haec quoque, quae iuncta est,  
vitis requiescit in ulmo: / si non nupta foret, terrae acclinata iaceret;*

(Ov. *Met.* 14.661-666)

“there was a splendid elm across from these, adorned with shining grapes; he glanced at it approvingly, and said, “Now if that tree trunk were to stand unwed, untrained to any vine, it would not be of any worth to us, but for its leaves; likewise the vine, which has been joined to it, rests on the elm tree; if it had not been, it would be lying flat upon the ground”.

The god in love reminds his beloved that without the vine entwining it, the “celibate trunk” of the elm (14.663 *caelebs ... truncus*) is valuable only for its foliage.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, without the elm, the vine would lie on the ground. The emphasis is again on the vine’s union with the elm (14.665 *quae iuncta est*, 14.666 *si non nupta foret*), with connotations of marriage and sexual intercourse, in contrast to Pomona’s aversion to both (14.668 *concupitusque fugis nec te coniungere curas*, “for you flee the pleasures of sex, nor do you wish to marry”). The verb *coniungere* in 14.668 and the verb *iungere* in 14.675 correspond to the participle *iuncta* used of the vine in 14.665.<sup>24</sup> Interdependence, then, gives value to both the tree and the vine and enables life to continue, just as living together completes a person’s life. Furthermore, if we read *truncus* as an adjective and *caelebs* as a noun, Vertumnus’ assertion refers not to the loneliness of a tree but to the figurative mutilation of a bachelor, this half-body that lacks its other half to be whole. Vertumnus hopes to achieve by his cunning persuasion what Philemon and Baucis had achieved by love and Salmacis by force. From this perspective, Vertumnus makes good use of the pun suggested above, alluding both to the human world and to nature which he uses as an example to point out Pomona’s unnatural behaviour.

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<sup>23</sup> *OLD* s.v. “caelebs” 1. unmarried, bachelor; 2. not supporting vines.

<sup>24</sup> Gentilcore 1995.

## The violent act of mutilation

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the landscape of the forest follows the *locus amoenus* motif of bucolic poetry. But behind the narrative conventions that maintain this pattern, small details deconstruct this ideal landscape and turn the forest into a place of violence and death for both people and trees.<sup>25</sup> Hideous mutilations are part of this scenario. In the case of Erysichthon, Ovid describes a hundred-year-old giant oak in the grove of Demeter, which in itself can be considered a grove (8.743). The presence of dryads, votive bands, epigrams and wreaths underlines the sacredness of the place and also of the tree (8.844-845). Furthermore, although this has not yet been clearly stated, the oak has human-like traits, which are first seen in the tree's resemblance to the goddess Diana. When the dryads embrace the trunk of the tree with their hands (8.747-748 *trunci / circuere*), their action is reminiscent of Diana's followers who surround the goddess to protect her from the profane eyes of Actaeon (3.180 *circumfusaeque Dianae*). Just as Diana stands out, taller than the nymphs who cannot hide her (3.182 *supereminet omnes*), no tree in the forest can surpass the oak's enormous height (8.749-750 *tantum / silva sub hac omnis*). Finally, before beginning his unholy task, Erysichthon remarks that the oak might be a friend of the goddess Demeter or even the goddess herself (8.755-756 *non dilecta deae solum, sed et ipsa licebit / sit dea*), which is another indication of the corporeal concept of the oak in Erysichthon's narrative.

On the other hand, Erysichthon ironically is closely associated with the oak tree he wishes to violate. Ovid calls Erysichthon by the patronymic *Triopeius* (8.751), son of Triopas. Although not accepted by most modern editors, the reading *Dryopeius*, preferred by the best preserved manuscripts, may be more favourable to our interpretation.<sup>26</sup> The latter as an ethonymic would indicate Erysichthon's origin in Dryopis, a region in Thessaly, and complement the epithet *Thessalus* (8.767), "from Thessaly", which Ovid ascribes to the faithless hero in the further course of the narrative.<sup>27</sup> *Dryopeius* associates Erysichthon above all with the oak he is

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<sup>25</sup> See Perry 1964; Segal 1969: 71-85; Bernstein 2011: 80-83.

<sup>26</sup> On the preference of *Triopeius* over *Dryopeius* by most editors and the corresponding discussion, see Hollis 1970: 135; Griffin 1987: 57; Weber 1990: 209-210.

<sup>27</sup> See Hollis 1970: 135. Cf. Plin. *HN* 4.28.

about to cut down. As Griffin (1987: 57) explicitly points out “since *Dryopeius* was derived from *δρῦς* (*drûs*, “oak”), Thessalian Erysichthon in the act of destroying an oak is associated with oak through his name. He will progress from destroying an oak tree to killing an oak nymph (dryad) and finally destroy himself through autophagy”.<sup>28</sup> If *Dryopeius* is accepted, Erysichthon would also be associated with Dryope, who accidentally cuts a flower from a lotus tree and is punished for her act by transforming herself from “an oak-girl into an oak-(nymph)” (Kenney: 549).

When Erysichthon enters the grove, eager to complete his impious task, he ignores his servants’ reluctance to cut down the tree and takes the task into his own hands:

*contremuit gemitumque dedit Deoia quercus, / et pariter frondes,  
pariter pallescere glandes / coepere ac longi pallorem ducere rami. / cuius  
ut in trunco fecit manus in pia vulnus, / haud aliter fluxit discusso cortice  
sanguis, / quam solet, ante aras ingens ubi victima Taurus / concidit,  
abrupta cruor e cervice profundi.*

(Ov. *Met.* 8.758-764)

“the sacred oak gave out a groan and shuddered, and its leaves, its acorns, and its branches paled. But when he struck with his defiling hand, blood issued from its severed bark, as when a bull is sacrificed before the altar and the warm blood pours from its severed throat”.

Erysichthon delivers the first blow with his axe, and the oak reacts with fear, trembling and sighing (8.758 *contremuit gemitumque dedit*) while its leaves, branches and acorns turn pale (8.759-760 *pariter frondes, pariter pallescere glandes ... longi pallorem ... rami*). Blood flows from the wound in the trunk of the oak (8.761 *in trunco ... vulnus*, 8.762 *discusso cortice sanguis*), just as from the neck of a bull sacrificed on the altar (8.764 *abrupta cruor ... cervice*). The emotional reaction of the tree corresponds to the emotional and physical reaction of women who experience the

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<sup>28</sup> Weber (1990: 209) suggests that the epithet *Dryopeius* is related to *δρύοψ* (*dryóps*) “which is the name of a variety of woodpecker mentioned by Aristophanes (*Av.* 304) and included by Callimachus in his lost treatise on birds (*Frag.* 421 and 423 Pfeiffer)”.

abusive behaviour of a man and react similarly.<sup>29</sup> The use of similes from the natural environment in these cases underlines the physical expression of the emotion of fear, as these women also tremble and turn pale. At the same time, the identification of the oak tree with the sacrificial bull emphasises the tree's relationship to a living being and highlights the tree's physicality.

Similar paradigms reinforce the connection between trees and humans through their shared vulnerability. Echion's spear wounds the trunk of a maple tree as he hunts the Calydonian boar (8.345 *truncoque dedit leve vulnus acerno*, "it struck and left a maple slightly wounded"). The mother of the Heliades, Clymene, observes the transformation of her daughters into trees, and in a desperate attempt to stop the transformation, she peels the bark from their bodies (2.358-359 *truncis avellere corpora temptat / et teneros manibus ramos abrumpit*, "she attempts to strip their bodies of this new veneer and breaks the little twigs off with her hands"). In this violent mutilation, the trunks of the trees, which are already part of the human body, are injured, and blood flows from the wound (2.359-360 *at inde / sanguineae manant tamquam de vulnere guttae*, "releasing drops of blood, as from a wound").<sup>30</sup> The pain forces the Heliades to beg their mother to stop as their bodies gradually become trapped in the tree trunk:

*'parce, precor, mater,' quaecumque est saucia, clamat, / 'parce, precor: nostrum laceratur in arbore corpus'.*

(Ov. *Met.* 2.361-362)

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Ov. *Her.* 11.75-78 *ut quatitur tepido fraxina virga Noto, / sic mea vibrari pallentia membra videres*, "as an ash-tree's branch quivers in the warm south wind – you'd have seen my pale body trembling just like that", 14.40-41 *frigida populeas ut quatit aura comas, / aut sic, aut etiam tremui magis*, "like poplar leaves shaken by a chilly breeze – that's how I trembled, or even more than that", *Am.* 1.7.53-54 *exanimis artus et membra trementia vidi / ut cum populeas ventilat aura comas*, "I saw her limbs all nerveless and her frame a-tremble like the leaves of the poplar shaken by the breeze" (translated by Showerman). On the possible emotional state of human-tree hybrids, see Zatta 2016: 102-109.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Verg. *Aen.* 3.22-48, where Aeneas cuts wood from a cornelian cherry bush and a clump of wild myrtle, into which Polydorus is transformed. As he pulls on it (*Aen.* 3.28 *vellit*) to remove some branches, blood gushes from the trees with each of his movements; Ov. *Met.* 9.344-345, where the lotus tree into which Lotis is transformed bleeds and shudders as Dryope removes its blossoms. On the case of Vergil's Polydorus, see Gowers 2011: 96-102.

“pray spare me, mother!’ comes from each of them, the selfsame cry repeated: ‘spare me, pray! It is my body wounded in this tree!’”.

In the Heliades’ narrative, it is the wound (*vulnus*) that connects the tree (*truncus / arbor*) to the body (*corpus*), a connection sealed by the flowing blood as bodies and trunks intertwine.

The context described above is further elaborated in the case of Pentheus. Pentheus’ first reaction when he sees the angry horde of maenads attacking him is fear. The young man trembles, as does the oak that Erysichthon attacks with his axe (3.716-717 *trepidumque ... / iam trepidum*, “and he, now terrified”). Horribly mutilated by the maenads, Pentheus desperately shows his mother and aunt his dismembered body and wounds:

*non habet infelix quae matri bracchia tendat, / trunca sed ostendens  
dereptis vulnera membris / ‘adspice, mater!’ ait.*

(Ov. *Met.* 3.723-725)

“he has no arms to stretch out to his mother, unlucky man, but cries out, ‘mother, look!’ and shows her his torso with its missing limbs”.

The wounded Pentheus (3.719 *saucius*) calls for his mother, as the injured Heliades (2.361 *saucia*) did before him, hoping that his maimed form will force her to stop. Agave and Ino forcibly remove Pentheus’ limbs (3.721-722), just as Clymene removes the bark and branches from her daughters’ arboreal bodies (2.358-359). But in Pentheus’ case, it is not a body trapped in a tree trunk that is violently mutilated. The noun *truncus* (2.358), mentioned in the narrative of the Heliades to denote their wooden body trunk, is now replaced by the adjective *truncus* (3.724) to denote the violent mutilation of Pentheus’ youthful body.<sup>31</sup> The simile of the young man’s dismemberment with the leaves and branches of a tree scattered by the autumn wind forcefully restores the analogy between the tree and the human being:

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Ov. *Met.* 3.680-681, where similarly the Tyrrhenian sailors dive into the sea with their mutilated bodies and no hands as they turn into fishes.

*non citius frondes autumnni frigore tactas / iamque male haerentes  
alta rapit arbore ventus, / quam sunt membra viri manibus direpta  
nefandis.*

(Ov. *Met.* 3.729-731)

“swift as the wind that tears the last few leaves clinging to trees touched by autumnal frost, those impious hands tore him all asunder”.

Agave’s violent attack continues, however, and ends with the beheading of Pentheus. Agave holds the uprooted head in her hand and shakes Pentheus’ hair in the air (3.726-727 *movitque per aera crinem / avulsumque caput*). The scene recalls the aforementioned simile with Pentheus’ hair (3.726 *crinem*) blowing in the air like the leaves of the tree (3.729 *frondes*) in the autumn wind. A similar but less grotesque scene takes place in the myth of the Heliades. Aegle, the third of the sisters, runs her fingers through her hair and plucks off the leaves of the poplar into which she has been transformed (2.350-351 *tertia, cum crinem manibus laniare pararet, avellit frondes*). Accordingly, Dryope does exactly the same thing just before she is transformed into a tree; she runs her hand through her hair just to tear off a handful of leaves (9.354-355 *ut vidit, conata manu laniare capillos, / fronde manum implevit: frondes caput omne tenebant*, “she tried to tear the hair out of her head, but found her hands were full of leaves instead”). Apart from the typical word pair *crinis/caput – frons*, the use of the verb *avello* (2.351 *avellit*, 3.727 *avulsum*) connects the foliage of the tree with Pentheus’ severed head. Moreover, the imagery recalls Erysichthon’s threat that the oak would touch the ground with its leafy tip (8.756 *iam tanget frondente cacumine terram*), as if Erysichthon wanted to decapitate the oak. Erysichthon, however, does not get carried away with decapitating the oak but swings his axe and beheads one of his servants who wanted to prevent his sacrilegious deed:

*Thessalus inque virum convertit ab arbore ferrum / detruncatque  
caput repetitaque robora caedit).*

(Ov. *Met.* 8.768-769)

“Erysichthon muttered when he saw him, and turning from the tree toward the man, truncated him by severing his head”.

Due to Erysichthon’s lack of empathy towards both his servants and nature, it is the servant’s head and not the foliage of the oak that first touches the ground. But although the servant is beheaded (8.769 *detrunctaque caput*), it is the oak that is killed and falls into the ground (8.769 *caedit*), and thus the woodsman’s homicide amounts to a quercicide.<sup>32</sup> Here, as in the case of the Heliades and Pentheus, the wounding of the oak and the beheading of Erysichthon’s servant triggers the voice of the oak-nymph, not to ask her perpetrator to cease his blows, but to confirm his punishment. The nymph, who dwells in the oak, a being that is half-human, half-tree, is a reminder of the mutual suffering of trees and humans in the paradigms described above. She also recalls the need for justice in both the human and the non-human world. As Jill De Silva (2008: 103) notes, “the warning inherent in this prophecy is one which still rings true today: abuse nature and sooner or later be visited by famine”.

One last remark: In the 9<sup>th</sup> book of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Achelous tells Theseus and his companions about his duel with Hercules for the hand of Dianeira. During the duel, the river god transforms from a man into a snake and finally into a bull. Although the transformation into a tree is not included, Achelous has some tree-like features:

*reieci viridem de corpore vestem, / bracchiaque opposui, tenuique a  
pectore varas/ in statione manus et pugnae membra paravi.*

(Ov. *Met.* 9.32-34)

“I shed my green robe and raised my hands, and crouching, took my stance in opposition, with my arms widespread, and so prepared myself to wrestle him”.

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. Verg. *Aen.* 3.55 where Polydorus is beheaded (3.55 *obtruncat*) and turns into a tree. Cf. also Ov. *Met.* 8.510-514, where the life of Meleager depends on the existence of a firebrand. As the wood burns, it seems to sigh and at the same time Meleager’s life ends. For an ecocritical approach to the myth of Erysichthon and the elements added by Ovid, see Da Silva 2008.

Before the duel, he takes off his greenish robe (9.32 *viridem ... vestem*);<sup>33</sup> with his arms raised (9.33 *bracchiaque*) and his hands bent (9.34-35 *varas ... manus*) like branches, Achelous looks like a standing tree.<sup>34</sup> During the duel, Hercules struggles to immobilise Achelous. The constant references to the weight (9.39 *gravitas*, 9.41 *pondere*, 9.54 *onerosus*), either of the river god himself or the force Hercules exerts on him, are reminiscent of other transformations of humans into trees, where the roots exert pressure on human feet to immobilise them.<sup>35</sup> The scuffle of the two gladiators follows the course of a tree-like transformation when legs, fingers and forehead intertwine as if the two opponents wanted to become one:

*eratque / cum pede pes iunctus, totoque ego pectore pronus / et  
digitos digitis et frontem fronte premebam.*

(Ov. *Met.* 9.43-45)

“and stand there, toe to toe, fingers knotted, breast against breast, and forehead pressed to forehead”.

When Achelous realises that he cannot defeat Hercules, he attempts his final transformation into a bull. The demigod grabs Achelous by the horns and finally immobilises him by thrusting his horns into the deep sand:

*induit ille toris a laeva parte lacertos, / admissumque trahens  
sequitur, depressaque dura / cornua figit humo, meque alta sternit harena.*

(Ov. *Met.* 9.82-84)

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<sup>33</sup> The adjective *viridis* is used in the *Metamorphoses* to specify the forest or trees. Cf. Ov. *Met.* 1.112 *viridi ilice*, “green holm-oak”, 3.324 *virida silva*, “green forest”, 7.280 *viridi frondes*, “green leaves”, 12.22 *virides ramos*, “green branches”. The limbs of Cyparissus also turn green when he becomes a tree (Ov. *Met.* 10.137). Anderson (1972: 420) notes that “Ovid wishes to keep us aware that he (Achelous) was a river in man's shape, and river banks are ‘clothed’ with greenery”.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Stat. *Silv.* 2.3.40, where the noun *manus* indicates the branches of a plane-tree. For Achelous' fighting stance, see Secci 2009: 48-50.

<sup>35</sup> See for example Ov. *Met.* 1.548 *torpor gravis occupat artus*, “a torpor take possession of her limbs”, 2.348 *deriguisset pedes*, “a rigidity down in her feet”, 9.351 *haeserunt radice pedes*, “her feet, as though turned roots, clung to the ground”.

“he got his arms around my neck again, and dragged his heels beside me as I galloped, until he pushed my horns down to the ground and plowed my poor head deep into the dirt”.

Achelous' defeat and fixation in the sand recalls the scene in which Bacchus nails the Edonides into the earth before they become oaks:

*[radix] traxit et in solidam detrusit acumina terram, [...] / ut quaeque solo defixa cohaeserat harum.*

(Ov. *Met.* 11.72, 11.76)

“[root] drawing them out and down into the earth; [...] just so, as each of them, fixed to the soil”.

The root immobilises the Edonides, just as Hercules immobilises Achelous. The similarity of the process is underlined by the use of the verbs *traho* (9.83 *trahens*, 1172 *traxit*) and *figo* (9.84 *figit*, 11.76 *defixa*) and the homonyms *deprimo* (9.83 *depressa*) and *detrudo* (11.72 *detrusit*). But Achelous has not yet become a tree.

The mutilation of Achelous by Hercules supports the river god's resemblance to a tree:

*rigidum fera dextera cornu / dum tenet, infregit, truncaque a fronte revellit*

(Ov. *Met.* 9.85-86)

“grasping my rigid horn in his right hand and cruelly breaking it, he tore it from my mutilated forehead”.

Achelous' horn is deflected from his forehead, just as Midas cuts a lush branch from a tufted holm-oak (11.108-109 *non alta fronde virentem ilice detraxit virgam*, “when he snapped a green twig from the low branch of an oak”) and as Aeneas cuts the golden branch from the tree in Persephone's grove (14.113-115 *auro / fulgentem ramum silva Iunonis Avernae / monstravit iussitque suo divellere trunco*, “deep within the wood of Proserpina, a shining golden branch and ordered him to break it

from its tree"). As the narrative progresses, Achelous' horn will resemble the branch of a tree as the Naiads fill it with fruit and flowers (9.87-88 *naides hoc, pomis et odoro flore repletum, / sacrarunt; divesque meo Bona Copia cornu est*, "the naiads immortalized this incident, filling my horn with fruit and fragrant flowers; known as the cornucopia, it now enriches the sweet goddess of Abundance").<sup>36</sup> The verb *revello* is used in the *Metamorphoses* to denote the violent uprooting of a tree; Achelous himself uproots trees from the forests to punish the nymphs who have forgotten him during the sacrificial rites (8.585 *a silvis silvas et ab arvis arva revelli*, "tore away the forests from their forests, fields from their fields"). Moreover, at the battle of Lapithae with the Centaurs, Demoleon unsuccessfully tries to tear a long-lived pine from its trunk (12.356-357 *solidoque revellere trunco anosam pinum magno molimine temptat*, "he had been struggling with all his might to tear an ancient pine tree from the ground") and he is crushed by the tree. As mentioned earlier, both Dryope and Aegle, one of the Heliades, attempt to touch their hair during their transformation but only succeed in plucking their new foliage (2.350-351 *tertia, cum crinem manibus laniare pararet, / avellit frondes*, "now the third sister, tearing at her hair, grasps foliage", 9.354-355 *ut vidit, conata manu laniare capillos, / fronde manum implevit: frondes caput omne tenebant*, "she tried to tear the hair out of her head, but found her hands were full of leaves instead").

The latter observation enables the correlation between the homonyms *frons-frontis*, "front", and *frons-frondis*, "foliage". Achelous constantly refers to his mutilated forehead, which lacks a horn:

*quae gemitus truncaeque deo Neptunius heros / causa rogat frontis;  
cui sic Calydonius annis / coepit inornatos redimitus harundine crines.  
[...] rigidum cornu / ... infregit, truncaque a fronte revellit. [...] vultus  
Achelous agrestes et lacerum cornu mediis caput abdidit undis.*

(Ov. *Met.* 9.1-3, 9.85-86, 9.96-97)

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<sup>36</sup> Anderson (1972: 424) notes that Achelous uses the horn of plenty "to gloss over his humiliation".

“Theseus asked the river why he groaned, and how he happened to have lost his horn; and after binding up his hair in reeds, Achelous began to answer him; [...] my rigid horn ... and cruelly breaking it, he tore it from my mutilated forehead. [...] Achelous concealed his rustic looks and mutilated brow beneath the waves”.

Achelous is ashamed of his appearance and tries to hide his deformity with reeds or willow branches:

*inornatos ... harundine crines; [...] huic tamen ablati doluit iactura decoris, / cetera sospes habet. capitis quoque fronde saligna / aut superinposita celatur harundine damnum.*

(Ov. *Met.* 9.3, 9.98-100)

“after binding up his hair in reeds; [...] his only grief, though, was to be deprived of his lovely horn – he was fine, otherwise, and that one loss was easily repaired by willow leaves and reeds wrapped round his head”.

In Ovid’s metamorphic world, Polyphemus tries to win the heart of his beloved Naiad by praising his unruly hair, which covers his body like a shady forest. (13.844-845 *coma plurima torvos / prominet in vultus, umerosque, ut lucus, obumbrat*, “abundant hair hangs over my fierce face and shoulders, shading me, just like a grove”). Polyphemus takes the typical analogy between *crines* and *frons* a step further and identifies his hair not only with the foliage of a tree but with a whole grove (*coma - lucus*). Moreover, he points out that a hairy man is not ugly; on the contrary, luxuriant hair is a sign of beauty, for it is a disgrace for a tree not to have foliage (13.847 *turpis sine frondibus arbour*). Polyphemus’ argument applies to the case of Achelous. It is a shame for Achelous not to have a horn; a horn he lost when he tried to win the heart of Deianira.<sup>37</sup> Achelous’ forehead was bushy, like the top of a tree, as long as he kept his horn, his manly pride. Instead, after his mutilation, the anthropomorphic river god tries to cover his blemish with willow leaves, opting for an indirect transformation into a tree.

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Ov. *Fast.* 5.122, where the broken horn of the goat diminishes her beauty.

## Conclusion

Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality challenges the dichotomies between biological and textual, natural and cultural, by pointing out that "man and environment can by no means be considered separate" (Alaimo 2010: 2). Ovid's metamorphic world forms a unity in which humans and trees interact and relate to each other. This conscious fusion shows that the boundaries between the human world and the physical environment are blurred. Nature takes advantage of this permeability to shape and reshape the 'bodies' within it, creating hybrids that are human and arboreal, fleshy and wooden. Men and women merge into an environmental network, leaving behind their human nature but retaining an inner dualism in their new bodies. The anatomical similarities between men and trees emphasise this dual nature either literally or through similes and homonyms, as in the case of *frons-ntis* and *frons-ndis*. Human nature continues to exist in a wooden body, even if it cannot communicate with language. But even as a tree, the human part can still express feelings as a bodily reaction and form an embodied language. Fear, grief or pain can restore the ability to communicate that was lost at the end of metamorphosis. Furthermore, metamorphosis can be seen as a kind of body fragmentation, as we observe the tree gradually taking over every part of the human body. In the case of the female human-tree hybrids, the fragmentation of the body, both figuratively and literally, is a clear indication of male violence against women and nature. Moreover, these tree-women retain their social attributes such as the obligation to marry and motherhood, underlining patriarchal conventions. Mutilation and the threat of death link human and arboreal nature. Verbs referring to mutilation are used extensively and indiscriminately for trees and humans. These acts of violence vividly illustrate inter-species suffering and the common fate of all living things. They also indicate that Ovid's narrative is set in a living environment that is not just an empty space for human development. On the contrary, Ovid combines narrativity and collectivity in his work to emphasise the spatiality of both the human body and the environment.

Reading Ovid's *Metamorphoses* through the lens of trans-corporeality, allows us to reconceive the observations of Roman agronomists about the anatomical similarities between humans and trees. By tracing the environment within the text, the transition between body

and environment, as in the case of the human body and the tree body, underscores the deeper connection between humans and their physical environment. And ultimately, the intertwining of culture and nature.

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