

## Transformations: Margaret Mahy's *The Tricksters*

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Metamorphosis, quoting Webster, is “the change of physical form, structure, or substance” especially “by supernatural means” (“Metamorphosis”). Ovid, Ted Hughes writes, brought “the current of human passion” to his myths (ix-x). As the myths in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are full of passion and beauty so is Margaret Mahy's novel. Critical readings of *The Tricksters* have especially focused on Margaret Mahy's plural and multi-layered novel as a feminist text whereby, a young woman, Harry Hamilton, is empowered and transformed through the creative power of her imagination and writing. Mahy incorporates a mythic and supernatural dimension into her own tale as Harry and her family experience changes wrought by the intensification of hidden passions.

Mahy's novel begins with the arrival of the Hamilton family at Carnival's Hide for their annual celebration of Midsummer, Christmas, and the New Year. Carnival's Hide, explains Jack Hamilton to an invited friend, Anthony, is “open to ghosts.” Seemingly, an idyllic holiday retreat, Carnival's Hide is where Teddy Carnival, a tormented and tormenting youth died—presumably drowned in the bay. During the time it has belonged to the Hamilton family, Carnival's Hide has also been a site where family relationships have become unstable and boundaries transgressed. In the first chapter, Christobel refers to the wife-swapping parties held one Christmas during which time, unknown to Christobel, Jack's adulterous relationship with Emma, Christobel's best friend, took place resulting in the birth of Tibby, Jack and Emma's illegitimate daughter. Not only did this relationship violate Jack's marriage but since Emma had been regarded as almost an adopted daughter to the Hamilton family, it also bears the mark of incest. Later in the novel, Teddy Carnival transgresses the boundaries between death and life materializing in the forms of three young men Ovid, Hadfield, and Felix who, once they have crossed over the threshold of Carnival's Hide, bring disruption, violence, and transformation to those within.

The setting in which Mahy's story takes place is characterized by the displacement of time and space, illustrated, for example, by the passages which describe Harry's diving into the cave in which Teddy's drowned body was supposed to have been submerged. Under water, Harry encounters a “discontinuity” of space and time so that “she was in one place, and somehow, her hand was in another” (28-29). She feels her hand grasped by a “chilly hand,” then something whispers against her palm through which she can now see: “It could see the age of the rock, the volcano in which the rock had been borne out of fire, and the salt water that had slowly shaped it over thousands of years. Pictures of a rambling garden, in which a spade and garden fork stood up like witnesses, formed in her mind, and Carnival's Hide could be seen beyond them, recognizable but indefinably altered” (29).

Mythic time and space permeate Mahy's non-linear text which is suffused with allusions to and quotes from fairy-tale, poetry, and myth including Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In his translation of Ovid's work, which begins with a description of the formation of the earth over eons of time, Ted Hughes writes: “The act of metamorphosis, which at some point touches each

of these tales, operates as the symbolic guarantee that the passion has become mythic, has achieved the enduring intensity that lifts the whole episode onto the supernatural or divine plane” (ix-x). The story of Teddy Carnival with the passions that led to his death had already been transformed into myth, for when Anthony, the Hamilton’s guest, confesses to Naomi that he is the great-grandson of Minerva (Teddy’s sister), he tells her that coming to Carnival’s Hide was akin to coming to stay among his own myths. He had grown up with Minerva’s fairy-tales about her childhood. Minerva and Teddy, moreover, had created their own stories about their childhood, one of which Anthony had brought with him entitled: *The Goddess of Wisdom and the Boy Enchanter*. Written on yellow fading paper and bound with ribbon, it is a companion volume to *Seven Ways to Outwit the Black King: Advice to Mortals by the Goddess of Wisdom and the Boy Enchanter*, which had remained at and is re-discovered at Carnival’s Hide. These books were written, Anthony explains, by Minerva and Teddy when they were children. Brought up in seclusion and in fear of their father, Edward (the Black King) they had written “mythological lives for themselves” (245). Their fairy-tale kingdom was filled with the characters of “King-Trowley and Lord Rake-Rake” and “Suriel” the spade, referred to as “the benevolent angel of death” (246-47).

Edward, it is said, had wanted to make Carnival’s Hide into a kind of “Garden of Eden” (38). In Mahy’s novel, however, the association often made between enchanted garden and idyllic childhood is shattered. The enchanted garden was the site of the murder of the young man, Teddy, who had mocked and tormented the father who had wished to stifle all signs of passion within himself, and within his son, after his wife had died in childbirth. Teddy’s grotesque figure as he is transmogrified on the rock with his bleeding face in sight of a shocked and terrified Harry bears witness to his violent death. With the metamorphosis of Teddy, the passions, violence, and intensity embedded in the story of the Boy Enchanter transgress boundaries of mythic space and time to exist on the level of the supernatural.

The first lines of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, as translated by Hughes, seem to reverberate in Mahy’s text with the arrival of the Carnival brothers, preceded by Teddy’s appearance on the rocks by the cave the day before.

Now I am ready to tell how bodies are changed  
Into different bodies.  
I summon the supernatural beings  
Who first contrived  
The transmogrifications  
In the stuff of life. (3).

Teddy’s transformation into the three young men, whom Harry meets the next morning on the beach, represent at first sight the stuff of nightmare. As she stares at the two identical dark-haired young men standing behind the first figure, Harry thinks: “[T]hey had never been children; they had never been innocent” (61).

As Anna Lawrence-Pietroni has pointed out, the distinction between fiction and Harry’s own writing becomes “blurred” as “story” and “real” become meaningless concepts, each infected with the other’s uncertainty and constructedness” (36). The Carnival brothers, Felix,

Hadfield, and Ovid seem real, but they are also fictitious. Is he a “ghost,” Harry asks Felix Carnival but receives no definitive answer (151). “Carne-val!” also means “Farewell to flesh!” he tells her (150). There is a fleeting moment, too, when Harry sees Felix with a face of stripes and wearing a “rainbow-colored mask” (98). Mahy draws on the disguises, masks, and transformations associated with the carnivalesque as well with Ovid’s myths of transformation. Even the young man, Anthony, invited by Jack to Carnival’s Hide, frequently wears “dark glasses,” and like the trickster Ovid, is “travelling incognito” masking his real reason for his presence in Carnival’s Hide. During the time frame of the novel, the Hamilton family and friends celebrate Midsummer, Christmas, and New Year—seasons associated with Carnival. At the Christmas Eve beach party, for example, the Hamilton family and friends don fancy dress transforming themselves into all manner of different characters and creatures while Ovid Carnival, named by Christobel as “King of the Rainbows,” performs fantastic conjuring tricks. Teddy’s transmutation into three manifestations of his split personality each bearing the scar on their foreheads that bears witness to their murder are, thus, associated with the grotesque as well as with carnival.

Even the names that become associated with the tricksters demonstrate their fictitious status. When the brothers had entered the house at Carnival’s Hide, Ovid had chosen his own name and those of Hadfield and Felix at random from titles of books lying on the bookshelf: Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, of course; John Hadfield’s *The [sic] Book of Love*; and George Eliot’s *Felix Holt*, but in so doing he reinforces the meaninglessness of assigning names to those who are not what they seem. Harry does not know Felix’s real name or what he is like at all, Ovid warned Harry. He may surprise her (208). “[H]ow strange,” Harry thinks toward the end of the novel, that Hadfield’s name was taken from John Hadfield’s edited book of romantic poetry, *The[sic] Book of Love*. Indeed, Hadfield is represented as incapable of romantic love. He is, rather, described as representing the instinctual aspect of Ovid’s persona and is often violent and threatening. Described as a “predator,” he threatens Harry on the beach, grasping her breast as he imprisons her from behind. He fights Ovid and then Felix with ferocity and meets “like an iron man” an attack by Charlie (Harry’s brother) and his friend Robert. The solidity of Hadfield’s physical presence mocks the insubstantiality associated with “Carne-val—without flesh;” and his association with instinctual behaviour would seem to parody the very idea of change and transformation. There is irony, too, in that Hadfield’s book, associated with love in all its aspects, had been given to Jack by one of his students, which is immediately linked by Christobel with the days of “wife-swapping.”

George Eliot’s *Felix Holt* is a book that Christobel, ironically, says she would like to read over Christmas before she knows the secret about her father and Tibby. Eliot’s novel contains a convoluted plot written, perhaps tellingly, in three volumes that includes an illegitimate child, an adopted daughter (Esther) whose father has kept from his daughter the secret about her mother, false identities, and shifting relationships and fortunes. The novel features the very earnest, truthful, young man, “Felix the Radical” who is certainly not a trickster, for he refuses to condone his mother’s continuing to run his deceased father’s quack medicine business. He admonishes Esther early on in their acquaintance for reading Byron and tells her that he will “never love, if I can help it; and if I love, I’ll bear it and never marry” (1: 229). Felix Radical, however, has one transformation of character in common with Felix Carnival; he falls in love.

Some of the most tender passages in Mahy's novel are the love scenes between Felix and Harry that take place in the open hillside country—almost in an in between space between earth and sky that is away from Carnival's Hide and its cultivated garden of bad memories. Felix places "wild flowers" on Harry's breast. They are: "Married by grass, witnessed by clouds and stones," Felix tells Harry (258). But in contradistinction to Felix the Radical, Felix Carnival is still one of the trickster brothers, a supernatural being, and a "divided man," as he also reminds Harry (263). The love between Harry and Felix can, thus, only be experienced in "stolen time" (264). "One transfixing hour—perhaps you have made me immortal after all," Felix tells her (259). Through her love making with Felix, Harry also feels transformed. She no longer has to clothe herself in Christobel's silk dressing gown (138) in order to experience the sensuality of desire.

Harry, like Minerva and Teddy before her, is also a creator of stories and, at the beginning of the novel, is in the process of creating her enchanted tale, which takes the form of a passionate romance. Within the pages of her writing journal, she wished to will into life through her pen "the winged Belen" with his dark silver streaked hair whom she feels has become her "secret lover" (15-16). Only the day before, had she written the very same words she utters on seeing the menacing young men about Belen and she had wished for a book "that would make something happen in the outside worked by the power of its stories" (27). Seeing the mirror images of Prince Belen on the beach before her in the form of the young men, she knows that the means of their arrival has been "the silken thread of her own story" (61).

Roberta Trites argues that Mahy has created a feminist novel by transforming folktales and myth that are intertextualized into Mahy's novel and reclaiming them to recreate agency and power for Harry as a female writer (44-45). Harry has the power to write and re-write her stories. "Being a novelist," Felix reminds Harry, gives her the power to change and erase people. She can just "rewrite" him or "cross" him "out" (229). After a dramatic family scene, set up by Ovid, when Harry reveals the truth about Tibby's birth in revenge for Christobel's reading aloud and mocking Harry's story about Belen and Prince Valery, the Carnival brothers dissolve and vanish leaving "the alterations in the family they had left behind" (275-76). Harry goes down to the beach where she had first met the Carnival brothers to burn the book she has created and sees once more, the figure of Teddy. The faces of Ovid, Hadfield, and Felix look "back at her" as if they reflect her own face as she burns the words that had drawn them forth (285).

Mahy shows in her novel just how much the act of writing and creating can empower a young woman. When Ovid in his most menacing guise comes to Harry's attic bedroom to tell her to leave Felix alone, because Felix's love for her threatens to displace Ovid and Hadfield's power, Harry feels "powerful for the first time in her life" because she knows that she can "overcome Ovid and his commandments" (209). She had "subdued Hadfield with a blow and Felix with a kiss, and, matching her own magic with Ovid's, she might also assert herself at last over Christobel" (202). In contradistinction to Teddy who was finally overcome by the Black Prince in his own fairy tale, Harry demonstrates that she believes she is able to control those who threaten her through her writing.

Christine Wilkie-Stibbs points out that by the close of the novel, Harry has re-defined herself in relation to nature, her body, desire, and language (62). At the beginning of the novel,

Harry had wished for a book that would change the world as one read it. She wished for a book in which people would be able to recognize a face in which they could see “their true beauty” (26). Feeling neglected, she is tired of being in the middle position in her family; she is tired of being perceived as “good old Harry” and desires to be perceived rather as “wonderful Ariadne,” her “real name” (25). It is in her attic bedroom, the place where she writes, that Harry sees in the mirror glimpses of the reflection of the beautiful young woman she has the potential to be and the “enchantress” that she becomes through the power of her creative imagination. Harry experiences a series of epiphanies during the novel. One such epiphanic moment toward the end of the novel is a scene in which Harry walks, without her clothes, into the sea and experiences the metamorphosis of a young woman into an artist. The sea flows sensuously over her and: “The ripples wrote lines around her, until Harry felt that she might begin to shine. When she spoke glowing words would come out of her mouth.” She feels “filled up” with fire like the sunset and “possessed” by the “brute blood of the air (308).

In the last paragraph of Mahy’s novel, Harry opens up the new journal with blank pages given to her by a forgiving Christobel. She writes the words, “Once Upon a Time...” and refers to the lines left by her pen as ones that will “wind up by going all around the world if one could only follow them” (311). Her words, Harry thinks, “may lead in any direction” (310). The fluidity implied in Harry’s new writing is in contrast to the “stilted images” of her earlier writing and stale romantic images is associated by Wilkie-Stubbs with “l’écriture feminine” as she interprets Harry as beginning the process of writing self (62). Harry will begin with new stories rather than the old myths and romances.

After the departure of the Carnivals, Harry reflects that Ovid had helped “the metamorphoses along” in the Hamilton family but had not “caused them.” (283). Similarly, Ovid and his brothers are shown to be catalysts but not the cause of Harry’s own transformation. That potential is shown to always be in Harry herself. Jack tells her toward the end of the novel that he will now call her Ariadne for it is a “beautiful name,” and she will “grow into it, more very year” (305). I believe with Lawrence-Pietroni that *The Tricksters* is one of those novels that has the potential to open to young adult readers a variety of reading positions because Mahy “offers the possibility of a reading process that celebrates, and does not desecrate, the dissolution of fixity” (39). The reading of *The Tricksters* can be, in itself, a transforming experience.

## Works Cited

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