

The Metamorphoses of George Sandys: Ovid Commentary as Self-Making in Virginia's  
Jamestown Colony

My contribution reexamines the rhetorical aims of George Sandys's 1632 translation of the *Metamorphoses* in the wake of recent scholarship by Lee Percy, Deborah Rubin, and James Ellison. I contend that, to a greater extent than admitted by recent critics, the commentary appended to each Book of Sandys's translation articulates a coherent interpretation of Ovid's poem intimately connected to Sandys's own Jamestown experience in the early 1620s—a decade made particularly tumultuous by Opechancanough's debilitating war against the English colonists, in which Sandys played a sufficiently noteworthy role to earn him his own ballad (Ellison 2002, 125-6). The canvass upon which Sandys first begins to sketch the interpretive framework that will be developed throughout his commentary is the prefatory poem *The Minde of the Frontispiece* (cf. Percy 1984, 46-51). Here, Sandys establishes a homology between Ovid's fifteen-book unfolding of a narrative of material universal history progressing from chaos to order, on the one hand, and the human soul's aspirations to order and virtue, on the other.

According to this broadly Platonic interpretation of the Frontispiece, those whose souls follow Pallas are ennobled:

the *Mind* attires

With all *Heroick Vertues*: This aspires

To *Fame* and *Glorie*; by her noble Guide

Eternized, and well-nigh Deifi'd. (7-10).

Those, however, whose souls sink into matter in the pursuit of Venus, “charm'd by CIRCE's luxurie, and ease, / Themselves deforme” (14-15).

Regarded against the backdrop of Ovid's epic, the *Minde* activates a series of connections between themes in Sandys's translation and in his commentary in a manner relevant to the Jamestown settlers' attempts to grapple with broader ontological questions of what their relation should be to Powhatan's people. Sandys's distinction between those who follow Pallas and those who follow Venus offers a potential hermeneutic whereby to explain the differences between Native Americans and English settlers as being fundamentally one of nurture (one prefigured by Shakespeare's dialectic between Ariel and Caliban in *The Tempest*; cf. Sandys's ruminations on the universality of the Flood myth such that “not the salvage Virginians but have some notion of so great a ruine,” p. 31).

Even as he explores the nature of the Other as encountered in Virginia, Sandys also articulates a vision for his own identity as a man of action—once again, an identity intimately tied to his role as a traveler. The recurrence of foundation and travel narratives in the *Metamorphoses* gives Sandys ample opportunities to engage in the rhetoric of self-making, exploring the question of how to properly train a soul for heroic enterprises in a manner which makes clear that ventures such as Sandys's earlier voyage through the Mediterranean and his Virginia sojourn represent for him the culmination of the ennobled path of Pallas. In Book 3, for example, Sandys uses the myths of Thebes to consider ventures to found cities (“for experience and renowne is not gotten by such, as affect their own ease; but through painfull travell, and attempts at danger,” p. 98). Through analysis of these and other passages, I attempt to

demonstrate that, far from proffering a mere late flowering of the medieval commentary, as which the 1632 *Metamorphoses* is read by some critics (see Percy 1984, 37-38), Sandys in this work rather attempts to *ad sua perpetuum deducere tempora carmen*, turning a somewhat hackneyed *Metamorphoses* which had often represented little better than a moralizing teaching text into a universal history still unfolding in Sandys's own day, in which a Renaissance Humanist man of action such as Sandys himself has yet a dynamic part to act.

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