International Journal of the Classical Tradition
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12138-019-00511-9

ARTICLE

Ali Smith and Ovid

Holly Ranger[1]

© The Author(s) 2019

In her Sebald Lecture for the British Centre of Literary Translation, Scottish author Ali Smith invoked Ovid to describe the simultaneous perils and delights encountered when using the online tool Google Translate. She noted that the software 'is not an Ovidian god … [although it offers] the kind of pleasure that a writer like Ovid would surely have understood'; and on the conversion of *Salman Rushdie* to *Salmon Residue* by her computer's spellcheck function, she joked that both Ovid and twenty-first century electronic word processing programs remind us that 'language can change us … even into another species'.[1] Despite the extent and depth of Smith's engagement with Ovid, few critics have pursued the link between the two writers, and fewer still have considered how Ovid crucially informs her oeuvre.[2] The central focus of this essay is the many and varied effects of Ovid's presence in three novels: *Like* (1997), *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) and *How To Be Both* (2014).

Throughout interviews, public talks, and essays, the Roman poet is an abiding concern for Ali Smith. Interviewed on BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs*, she

[1] A. Smith, 'Loosed in Translation', 2011 Sebald Lecture, British Centre for Literary Translation, Kings Place, London, 31 January 2011. Available at: http://www.bclt.org.uk/events/sebald-lecture/sebald-lecture-2011 [accessed 17 February 2017]. My sincere thanks are extended to Tessa Roynon, who read earlier versions of this manuscript, and whose generosity and critical insight as an editor is acknowledged with gratitude.

[2] Existing scholarship on Smith and Ovid comprises: F. Doloughan, 'Bottling the Imagination: Writing as Metamorphosis in Ali Smith's *Girl Meets Boy*', *New Writing*, 7, 2010, pp. 241-51; K. Mitchell, 'Queer Metamorphoses: *Girl Meets Boy* and the Futures of Queer Fiction', in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. M. Germanà and E. Horton, London, 2013, pp. 61-74. My readings here build upon my MPhil dissertation (University of Birmingham, 2013, available at: http://etheses.bham.ac.uk/4294 [accessed 8 September 2018]), in which I argue that Smith's twofold employment of queer feminist theory and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in *Girl Meets Boy* (A. Smith, *Girl Meets Boy*, Edinburgh, 2007) re-politicizes Ovid for twenty-first century readers; my ideas resonate in the readings of F. Cox and E. Theodorakopoulos, 'Female Voices: The Democratic Turn in Ali Smith's Classical Reception', in *Classics in the Modern World: A 'Democratic Turn?'*, ed. L. Hardwick and S. Harrison, Oxford, 2013, pp. 287-98, and now F. Cox, 'Ali Smith', in her *Ovid's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing: Strange Monsters*, Oxford, 2018, pp. 25-46; see also H. Ranger, '"Reader, I married him/ her": Ali Smith, Ovid, and Queer Translation', *Classical Receptions Journal*, 2019.

✉ Holly Ranger
HAR067@alumni.bham.ac.uk

[1] Institute of Classical Studies, Senate House, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HU, UK

Published online: 11 February 2019

selected Mary Innes's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as the book she would wish to be stranded with as a castaway.[3] Smith has repeatedly expressed her admiration of visual artists inspired by tales from *Metamorphoses*, including Correggio, Victor Pasmore, and Chris Ofili.[4] And she has written exhibition catalogue essays which argue for and explore the Ovidian play of form and language in the work of Sara Barker and Tracey Emin.[5] She frequently references Ovidian characters in the context of discussions on the ethical responsibilities of the writer and what she perceives to be the artistic imperative to take stylistic and political risks. She uses Marsyas, for example, to illustrate this point in conversation with Jeanette Winterson: 'Do you come to art to be comforted, or do you come to art to be re-skinned?'.[6] Elsewhere, she draws on the stories of Arachne and Pallas, Icarus and Daedalus, Echo and Narcissus, Pan and Syrinx, and Cinyras to comment on artistry and voice; and she cites a passage from *Ars Amatoria* – on finding innovative methods to break into a lover's house – to argue for the importance of art and literature in finding new ways of seeing and being.[7] For Smith, what she terms the 'Ovidian' epitomizes the revitalization and lability of identity, style, and imagination: 'The Ovidian conversation is always about formal exchange and renewal. If the modernists were classicists, Ovid is the original modernist, the first maker of things new via the text'.[8]

In the few scholarly treatments of Smith's *Girl Meets Boy* (2007) – which rewrites the myth of Iphis, the girl transformed into a boy from *Metamorphoses* Book 9 – Kaye Mitchell focuses on its presentation of sexuality and queer identities; Fiona Cox and Elena Theodorakopoulos discuss its female narrative voice; and Fiona Doloughan reads the tale as an allegory of the creative process.[9] This overtly Ovidian novel is regarded as an anomaly within her body of work. Despite its popular success, *Girl Meets Boy* has received substantially less critical attention than works such as *Hotel World* (2001) and *The Accidental* (2006). Only one chapter in the first academic volume dedicated to Smith's work discusses the novel.[10] This critical reticence is symptomatic of scholars' reluctance to follow Smith's playful crossing and

[3] First broadcast 11 November 2016; available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b081tflr [accessed 13 February 2017].

[4] E.g., T. Young, '"Love and the Imagination Are Not Gendered Things": An Interview with Ali Smith', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 9, 2015, pp. 131-48 (*passim*).

[5] A. Smith, 'Making It Even Newer', in *CHANGE-THE-SETTING*, ed. S. Barker, Birmingham, 2016, pp. 132-7; A. Smith, 'Emin's Emendations', in *Tracey Emin: Love is What You Want*, ed. R. Rugoff and C. Lauson, London, 2011, pp. 20-30.

[6] First published in *The Times,* 25 April 2003; available at: http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/journalism/ali-smith (accessed: 13 February 2017).

[7] *Ars*. 2.243-6. For Smith on Ovid see also: C. Aridjis and A. Smith, 'In Dialogue', *Night and Day*, 1, 2011, pp. 8-11 (10); T. Young, 'An Interview with Ali Smith' (n. 4 above) pp. 146-7; Smith, 'Making It Even Newer' (n. 5 above), pp. 133-5; A. Smith and J. McGregor, 'In Conversation', Nottingham Festival of Words, Nottingham Lakeside Arts Centre, University of Nottingham, 17 October 2014); A. Smith and C. Higgins, 'Why Read the Classics? Ali Smith and Charlotte Higgins in Conversation', Newell Classics Event, St John's College, Cambridge, 28 April 2016.

[8] Smith, 'Making It Even Newer' (n. 5 above), p. 133.

[9] Mitchell, 'Queer Metamorphoses' (n. 2 above); Cox and Theodorakopoulos, 'Female Voices' (n. 2 above); Doloughan, 'Bottling the Imagination' (n. 2 above).

[10] A. Smith, *Hotel World*, London, 2001; A. Smith, *The Accidental*, London, 2006; Germanà and Horton, *Ali Smith* (n. 2 above).

transcendence of the boundaries between disciplines and between the ancient and the contemporary in her conversation and fiction – a reluctance to accept Smith's invitation to experience 'the shock of the old and the new both at once'.[11] In this essay I argue that while *Girl Meets Boy* is Smith's only explicitly-signalled engagement with Ovid, a sustained dialogue with the Roman poet can be traced throughout her novels and short stories which crucially informs Smith's characteristic style.

Smith is noted for her experimentation with the novel form.[12] She crafts stories that blur literary genres, fiction and autobiography, and realist and non-realist narratives with a playful self-referentiality. Her distinctive literary style knowingly conjoins a modernist classical sensibility with many of the formal preoccupations of postmodern literature (as she wittily notes: 'so post is a post is a post is a post').[13] Her dense intertextual allusion incorporates material as diverse as literary modernism, critical queer theory, YouTube videos, public monuments, and advertising jingles. And her work is characterized by multiple narrative voices, a celebration of the fluidity of identity and desire, and an endless play with language, definitions, repetition, and puns. At the same time, Smith's work is infused with an Ovidian engagement that is inherently ethical and actively political.

In the first part of this essay I survey Smith's oeuvre to establish her 'Ovidianism', spotlighting key recurring themes and episodes from *Metamorphoses* that Smith revisits and refigures across her work. Building on explorations of Smith's 'democratic' female voice and drawing on theorizations of the ethics of postmodernism, I examine the interrelation between Smith's politics, her engagement with Ovid, and her literary strategies.[14] I seek to counter readings of Smith's work which see only the dissolution of meaning in her formal play, or which reject Smith's associations with postmodernism on account of her ethical and political preoccupations.[15] This overview is intended as a foundation for further close readings and is provided, in part, to aid the reader, as this is the first essay to address the ubiquity of Ovid in Smith's body of work.

In the second part of the essay I focus on the prevalence of ekphrasis in her novels most densely informed by Ovid's presence, and I draw out the implications of her employment of this characteristically 'Ovidian' feature.[16] I argue that across and through these moments of ekphrasis, Smith engages in a self-reflexive and intertextual literary dialogue, which develops from an ambivalent engagement with classical

---

[11] A. Smith, *How to Be Both*, London, 2014, p. 25.

[12] *How to Be Both* won the 2014 Goldsmiths prize for experimental fiction.

[13] A. Smith, *Artful*, London, 2012, p. 36.

[14] E. Smith, '"A Democracy of Voice"? Narrating Community in Ali Smith's *Hotel World*', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 4, 2010, pp. 81-99; Cox and Theodorakopoulos, 'Female Voices' (n. 2 above); L. Hutcheon, 'A Postmodern Problematics', in *Ethics/ Aesthetics: Post-Modern Positions*, ed. R. Merrill, Washington DC, pp. 1-10; L. Doan, 'Jeanette Winterson's Sexing the Postmodern', in *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. L. Doan, New York, pp. 137-55.

[15] R. Eshelman, 'Checking Out of the Epoch: Performatism in Olga Tokarczuk's *The Hotel Capital* vs Late Postmodernism in Ali Smith's *Hotel World*', in his *Performatism, or The End of Postmodernism*, Aurora, 2008, pp. 39-53; Germanà and Horton, *Ali Smith* (n. 2 above), p. 6.

[16] E. Norton, *Aspects of Ekphrastic Technique in Ovid's* Metamorphoses, Newcastle, 2013, provides a useful overview of the scholarship on ekphrasis in Ovid.

learning in her first novel *Like* (1997), to an integrated and celebratory engagement with Ovid in *How To Be Both* (2014).[17] In this section, a description of a painting of Marsyas in *How To Be Both* provides a focused example to illustrate my argument that the author uses her Ovidian viewing-scenes to politicize the role of the reader and to advance a gendered ethics of reception. And in Part III, I offer an analysis of the formally-experimental *How to Be Both*, using the novel as a case study to explore the effects of Ovid's presence in Smith's work. I argue that the novel's thematic tropes and use of Ovid's texts continue the political and aesthetic concerns of Smith's earlier allusions to the poet. In conclusion, I consider Smith's extended invitation to 'be both' as an ethic for rewriting the past. I argue that Ovid is inextricable from any analysis of Smith's work, and that her idiosyncratic contribution to the tradition 'after Ovid' re-politicizes the Roman poet for the postmodern age.

The Ubiquity of Ovid in Smith's Oeuvre

The following overview of Smith's career to date illuminates the variety and depth of the dialogue with Ovid that has spanned her career and draws attention to her politicized use of favourite Ovidian characters. From her first short story collection, *Free Love and Other Stories* (1995), Smith shares the preoccupation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with language, grief, and desire – her lovers lose themselves in dictionaries and word-play, or dissolve into nature in their attempts to voice inexpressible lust or trauma.[18] Metamorphic imagery and episodes shade her second collection, *Other Stories and Other Stories* (1999), in which a woman is haunted by the echo of a hanged girl; another character feels his moving tongue 'rooted to him like a thick-stemmed plant', and two lovers exchange tales of people who fall in love with the sky, statues, and their own reflections.[19] Although the transformative power of lust is a common thematic feature of many Ovidian receptions, Smith's metamorphoses always positively transgress the boundaries between human, animal, and plant. The besotted lover in 'Blank card', for example, lies sleepless:

> my mouth full of flowers, curlicued fronds and the sodden bad-smelling ends of stems; flowers and greenage spewing and trailing up my throat and out of my mouth, ears, nose, all over the floor … the taste in my mouth was medicinal.[20]

As well as using metamorphic tropes, Smith draws on specific episodes from *Metamorphoses*, revisiting favourite characters over time and focusing particularly on stories about voice, ambition, inventiveness, and pity. As in Ovid, Smith's use of these themes also comments metapoetically on the artist, although she takes an

[17] A. Smith, *Like*, London, 1997.

[18] A. Smith, *Free Love and Other Stories*, London, 1995.

[19] A. Smith, 'The Hanging Girl', in her *Other Stories and Other Stories*, London, 1999, pp. 15-35 (24, 32); A. Smith, 'A Story of Love', in her *Other Stories and Other Stories*, pp. 169-79 (177-8).

[20] Smith, 'Blank Card', in her *Other Stories and Other Stories* (n. 19 above), pp. 39-49 (45).

especial interest in the woman artist, re-telling or re-writing Ovid within her text. In *The Accidental* the story of Icarus recurs in the sections of the novel narrated by ten-year-old aspiring videographer Astrid, who may look to myth to create a narrative that holds her fragmented identity together. Although she finds the story lacking, Astrid experiments with reworking Ovid and fantasizes an alternative – and differently gendered – ending. The episode is reimagined as a coming-of-age parable for a female Icarus, flying successfully before expectations of normative femininity remind her not to be too ambitious:

> She wonders what the difference would have been if the father had made wings for a girl instead, who maybe would have known how to use them properly. But probably this would depend on how old the girl was … she would be worrying about people seeing up her skirt and the sun melting her eye make-up.[21]

This wry revision of her Ovidian source text is characteristic of Smith's irreverent approach to her classical model. She frequently signals her alterations to Ovid's text and invites the reader's complicity in her new versions of old myths. In 'True Short Story', first published in 2005 and collected in *The First Person and Other Stories* (2008), the author admits that her retelling of Echo's tale manipulates the nymph's echoes to rudely 'answer back' to Juno: 'Actually, I'm making up that small rebellion. There is actually no rebelliousness for Echo in Ovid's original version of the story'.[22] In *Girl Meets Boy*, Iphis's re-telling of her own story is similarly intercut with a self-reflexive critical commentary: 'I'm imposing far too modern a reading on it.'[23]

As well as her recurring use of Icarus and Echo – who appear again in 'The Wound' in *Shire* (2013), and in Smith's recent novel, *Autumn* (2016) – the story of Daphne is a persistent motif. The author's interest in the tale may revolve around its programmatic and problematic representation of women in *Metamorphoses*.[24] Daphne is the first victim of attempted rape in the epic, and her metamorphosis epitomizes the poem's repeated elision between women and works of art. Daphne is woman *as* art, whether fleeing in terror or transformed into the landscape.[25] As I discuss further in the second section of this essay, her repeated return to this tale may indicate an anxiety on Smith's part regarding her relationship with Ovid, and suggests a compulsion to re-read, re-write, and re-figure such violently gendered

---

[21] Smith, *The Accidental* (n. 10 above), p. 25; cf. p. 125.

[22] A. Smith, 'True Short Story', in *The First Person and Other Stories*, A. Smith, London, 2008, pp. 1-17 (12); A. Smith, 'True Short Story', *Prospect*, 117, 2005. Available at: https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/trueshortstory [accessed 10 June 2017].

[23] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* (n. 2 above), p. 91.

[24] Rowena Fowler suggests that the continuing vitality of the story of Daphne and Apollo lies in the insight it provides 'into women's experience as subjects and makers of poems', in R. Fowler, 'This tart fable': Daphne and Apollo in Modern Women's Poetry', in *Laughing With Medusa: Classical Myth and Feminist Thought*, ed. V. Zajko and M. Leonard, Oxford, 2006, pp. 381-98 (381). See also S. A. Brown, 'Daphne', in her *Ovid: Myth and Metamorphosis*, London, 2005, pp. 45-66.

[25] Or, transformed into the pages of the book: J. Farrell, 'The Ovidian Corpus: Poetic Body and Poetic Text', in *Ovidian Transformations: Essays on the* Metamorphoses *and its Reception*, ed. P. Hardie, A. Barchiesi and S. Hinds, Cambridge, 1999, pp. 127-41 (133).

ekphrastic moments. And yet, positioned as it is near the beginning of Book 1, Daphne's tale is also one to which a long-standing reader may naturally return. Smith's characters are often encountered at the moment of their plucking *Metamorphoses* from the bookshelf or flicking through the text's first few pages.

Daphne's tale ghosts the account in *Like* of the martyrdom of St Bride, 'transformed into a flowering piece of wood', and the short story 'The Beholder', first published in *Shire*, in which a rose bush growing out of the protagonist's chest aids his or her recovery from depression.[26] Smith explores Ovid's Daphne more fully in 'May', in *The Whole Story and Other Stories* (2003), in which a character falls in love with a tree: 'I couldn't not. It was in blossom'.[27] In Smith's version, the metamorphosis occurs in the viewer of the tree rather than the tree itself: 'I was changed already … . It was me who was like something other than myself'. Smith's source text is not explicitly signalled; after 'Apollo' confesses to her/his obsession, and the partner asks, 'Like in the myth?', s/he replies: 'What myth?'[28] Later in the story, after half-remembering the tale of 'the old couple who are turned into two trees' but forgetting the characters' names, the partner searches for 'the book' in which the story can be found. Unable to find the exact tale, s/he encounters instead:

> … the one about the grieving youth who becomes a tree, and the jealous girl who inadvertently causes the death of her rival and is turned into a shrub, and the boy who plays such beautiful music in the open air that the trees and bushes pick their roots up and move closer, making a shady place for him to play, and the god who falls in love with the girl who doesn't want him, who's happy without him.[29]

Despite the potential strife of the ménage à trois in Smith's tale ('Apollo' is already partnered), it is 'the book' that finally reunites the two lovers:

> When we're in bed I hand you the book, open it at the story. You read it. You look pleased. You read it again, leaning over me to catch the light. I read my favourite bit over your shoulder, the bit about the shining loveliness of the tree, and the god, powerless, adorning himself with its branches. You fold the page down.[30]

Although Smith does not explicitly name Ovid in such passages, she includes a physical copy of *Metamorphoses* in two of her novels. In *Girl Meets Boy*, Imogen – sister to 'Ianthe' – is 'too drunk and dizzy to make out the cover of the book' of stories that 'Iphis' is reading.[31] In *Autumn*, Elisabeth purchases a 'new/ old book' from a second-hand bookshop – later the reader is told it is 'about metamorphoses',

[26] A. Smith, 'The Wound', in *Shire*, A. Smith, Ipswich, 2013, pp. 113-21; A. Smith, *Autumn*, London, 2016, pp. 171-2; Smith, *Like* (n. 17 above), pp. 299-300; A. Smith, 'The Beholder', in her *Shire*, pp. 17-34, and her *Public Library and Other Stories*, London, 2015, pp. 43-56.

[27] A. Smith, 'May', in her *The Whole Story and Other Stories*, A. Smith, London, 2003, pp. 53-69 (53).

[28] Ibid., pp. 55-6; 62.

[29] Ibid., p. 68.

[30] Ibid., p. 69.

[31] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* (n. 2 above), p. 74.

but no further clues to authorship are provided.[32] In *Artful*, the narrator reads Ovid second-hand via the lecture notes of his/her late lover. On the unidentified Marsyas ('a man in a Greek myth, I couldn't make out his name, who plays music so beautifully that the god Apollo challenges him to a music competition…'), the reader is privy only to the dead lover's commentary on the episode:

> *Of course the god wins*, you wrote, *because gods always win, but the music played by the man who is bound to lose his skin moves to tears, moves more than any god's perfect playing ever will, every living thing round him*. Under this Greek myth you'd written: *books and skins: books have spines because animals have spines.*[33]

Ovid's Marsyas is transformed into Smith's book that the reader holds in their hands. After reading the stories of the (again unnamed) Daphne and Baucis and Philemon – although this time deciphering the author's name – the narrator makes a humorously vague mental note to 'find that Ovid book when I got home and read it. It would be the book I'd read next, after I'd finished Oliver Twist. If I ever finished Oliver Twist' (*sic*).[34] Smith's evocation of belatedness – the classics are books only half-remembered, experienced second-hand, or obligatory canonical books that one never quite gets around to – and her ironic summaries of Ovid's tales work in counterpoint to her clear narrative use of his stories. In 'May', for example, close details of Ovid's Latin text are incorporated as Smith 'translates' the neck-and-neck chase, Daphne's prayer to her father for help, and her swift metamorphosis: 'All of a sudden her feet take root.'[35]

Smith first names Ovid explicitly in 'True Short Story' when she notes her own 'rebellious' deviation from 'Ovid's original version of the story'.[36] 'True Short Story' interweaves a retelling of the myth of Echo with an autobiographical narrative (Smith's struggle to find her voice at a university dominated by a male curriculum), a meditation on the short story form, and an account of her friend's campaign to ensure the provision of the breast cancer drug Herceptin for women via the National Health Service. Smith implicitly contrasts the wastage of Echo with the absence of women's voices from the literary canon and the ravages of cancer. The story epitomizes the fact that for Smith, the Ovidian and the political seem complementary, if not inextricable.[37] In *Autumn*, a deeply political book (hailed by one reviewer as 'the first serious Brexit novel'), Smith draws on Ovid again.[38] In a recurring scene in the novel, an old man lies unconscious in a care home, while his friend Elisabeth reads

32 Smith, *Autumn* (n. 26, above), pp. 112, 126.
33 Smith, *Artful* (n. 13 above), pp. 139-40.
34 Ibid., p. 78.
35 Smith, 'May' (n. 27 above), p. 68; *Metamorphoses* I.551: 'pes modo tam uelox pigris radicus haeret'.
36 Smith, 'True Short Story' (n. 22 above), p.12.
37 A reading of Ovid that chimes with subversive readings of Augustan poetry; see esp. J. Hallett, 'The Role of Women in Elegy: Counter-Cultural Feminism', *Arethusa*, 6, 1973, pp. 103-24.
38 A. Preston, '*Autumn* by Ali Smith – "the First Serious Brexit Novel"', *Financial Times*, 14 October 2016. Available at: https://www.ft.com/content/0e227666-8ef4-11e6-a72e-b428cb934b78 [accessed 15 February 2017].

aloud from *Metamorphoses*. As Daniel dreams of a witness to a political scandal cruelly cross-examined in court, he sees:

> one of her hands, the one on the rail of the witness box, cover itself in little shoots and buds. The buds split open. There are leaves coming out of her fingers. … Overnight, like a girl in a myth being hunted by a god who's determined to have his way with her, she has altered herself, remade herself so she can't be had by anyone. … he watches the white bark rise up and cover her mouth, her nose, her eyes.[39]

As well as transplanting Daphne to the context of the Profumo affair, Smith uses the tales of Pitys and of Baucis and Philemon in *Autumn* to allegorize the importance of bearing witness and of offering pity and hospitality. This has particular resonance in the context of the global refugee crisis, which became acute in early 2015 (the year preceding *Autumn*'s composition), and which shadows the text throughout.[40] Smith's recurrent use of the 'unexpected stranger' motif here and in earlier works including *Artful, The Accidental* and *There But For The* (2011) is, I argue, better understood with an awareness of her fascination with the exemplary Baucis and Philemon.[41] As this section has shown, while *Girl Meets Boy* is Smith's only explicitly signalled engagement with Ovid, a sustained dialogue with the Roman poet can be traced throughout her novels and short stories which crucially informs many of her characteristic formal and thematic tropes.

'Ovidian' Ekphrasis in *Like, Girl Meets Boy* and *How to Be Both*

Despite her oeuvre-wide allusiveness to Ovid, Smith's literary relationship with his work maintains a critical perspective. She shares with the Roman poet a fondness for ekphrastic passages, and her evolving, often-ambivalent critical dialogue with his work can be tracked through highly significant ekphrastic set-pieces in her three most allusively Ovidian novels: *Like*, *Girl Meets Boy* and *How to Be Both*. In what follows, I illuminate the ways in which the author's recurrent employment of ekphrasis is a particularly charged site of intertextual dialogue.

In dominant contemporary theories of ekphrasis – 'the verbal representation of visual representation' – the (male) viewer-narrator plays a tutelary role in a homosocial relation to his reader, while the relation between word and image is figured

[39] Smith, *Autumn* (n. 26, above), pp. 95-6, 112, 171-2. As well as the shades of Myrrha's transformation here, further Ovidian figures and themes in Smith's work include: Orpheus, Eurydice, and Persephone (via Edwin Morgan, Rilke and Plath), Io (via Correggio), Danaë and Perseus, and Ovid's *Amores* (via Marlowe) in *Artful* (n. 13 above), pp. 131-40, 50, 165. Also Ariadne of *Heroides* X in 'Last', in her *Public Library and Other Stories* (n. 26 above), pp. 5-17 (10).

[40] Over 1 million refugees arrived in the EU in 2015; statistic provided by ECHO, the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations, European Commission. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/echo/refugee-crisis_en [accessed 10 June 2016].

[41] Smith, 'May' (n. 27 above), p. 68; Smith, *Artful* (n. 13 above), p. 78; Smith, *Autumn* (n. 26 above), pp. 118-19; Smith, *The Accidental* (n. 10 above); Smith, *There But For The*, London, 2011.

within a heterosexual paradigm.[42] This gendered, binary relationship is further conceptualized as essentially *paragonal* – as a contest between word and image figured as an antagonistic relation between male poet and female Other. The 'ekphrastic metamorphoses' of Ovid's tale of Philomela in the classical reception tradition have been used to exemplify the inevitably gendered antagonism of ekphrasis, and expose the extent to which the language of sexual violence, predation, possession, and rape informs the terms employed as word approaches image.[43] In such binary conceptions of ekphrasis '[t]he ease with which other dichotomies can be lined up with this one, so that men are cast as bearers not only of the look but also of speech and narrative, is patent'.[44] In writing back to this canonical ekphrastic tradition, which seemingly precludes women writers from looking and speaking, 'feminist ekphrasis' creates space for women viewers and writers.[45]

While a feminist ekphrastic tradition will be necessarily manifold, it may be tentatively defined as a branch of ekphrasis:

> that recognizes the power of a sexually charged, male tradition of looking, takes it on, and challenges its gendered dynamics … . Feminist ekphrasis recognizes that a woman's place as viewer is established within, beside, or in the face of a male-dominated culture, but that the patterns of power and value implicit in a tradition of male artists and viewers can be exposed, used, resisted, and rewritten.[46]

Drawing on this definition, I use the term 'feminist ekphrasis' in this section to describe Smith's development of an ekphrastic model which disrupts patterns of power between image, speaker, and reader, and is collaborative rather than competitive, curious rather than predatory. Smith's ekphrastic model is one which dismantles

[42] J. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*, Chicago, 1993, p. 7; W. J. T. Mitchell, 'Ekphrasis and the Other', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 91, 1992, pp. 695-719. Since 'visual representations are generally marked as feminine (passive, silent, beautiful)', 'the treatment of the ekphrastic image as a female Other is a commonplace in the genre', Mitchell, 'Ekphrasis and the Other', p. 705. On ekphrasis in the ancient world, see the standard essays of D. Fowler ('Deviant Focalisation in Virgil's *Aeneid*', *The Cambridge Classical Journal*, 36, 1990, pp. 42-63, and 'Narrate and Describe: The Problem of Ekphrasis', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, 81, pp. 25-35), and the journal special issues edited by J. Elsner, *The Verbal and the Visual: Cultures of Ekphrasis in Antiquity, Ramus*, 31, 2002, and *Eight Ways of Looking at an Ekphrasis*, *Classical Philological*, 102, 2007 (with S. Bartsch). For a comparison between ancient and modern ekphraseis, see R. Webb, '*Ekphrasis* Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre', *Word & Image*, 15, 1999, pp. 7-18.

[43] Heffernan, *Museum of Words* (n. 42 above), pp. 46-90 ('Weaving Rape: Ekphrastic Metamorphoses of the Philomela Myth from Ovid to Shakespeare').

[44] J. Hedley, 'Introduction: The Subject of Ekphrasis', in *In the Frame: Women's Ekphrastic Poetry from Marianne Moore to Susan Wheeler*, ed. J. Hedley, N. Halpern and W. Spiegelman, Newark, 2009, pp. 15-40 (24).

[45] On 'feminist ekphrasis', see: S. Lundquist, 'Reverence and Resistance: Barbara Guest, Ekphrasis, and the Female Gaze', *Contemporary Literature*, 38, 1997, pp. 260-86; E. Bergmann Loiseaux, 'Women Looking: The Feminist Ekphrasis of Marianne Moore and Adrienne Rich', in her *Twentieth-Century Poetry and the Visual Arts*, Cambridge, 2008, pp. 80-108; and J. Feit Diehl, 'Toward a Theory of Ekphrasis: The Female Tradition', in *In the Frame,* ed. Hedley, Halpern, and Spiegelman (n. 44 above), pp. 43-54.

[46] Bergmann Loiseaux, 'Women Looking' (n. 45 above), p. 81.

the compulsory heterosexuality of 'the look', confounds binaries of gender (and all associated dichotomies), and seeks to thematize and establish a relation with the Other that is based upon the recognition of difference rather than a desire for its annihilation. The democratic implications of such a relation are fully attendant.

While drawing on classical models, *Like* problematizes the often disturbing representation of women in classical art and literature and interrogates the (mis)use of a classical education. The novel's protagonists – Amy, the classically educated Cambridge scholar, and Ash, her Scottish working-class friend – offer different and seemingly irreconcilable readings of the classics and appear unable to resolve the impasse between art and life. Amy uses her education as an emotional and psychological defence, and despite her brilliance the classics are of no use to bridge the divide between herself and her friend; soon after meeting, Amy sends Ash a postcard written in Latin that Ash cannot understand. The novel's concern with the absence of women from classical texts is foregrounded by two details in the novel: the classicist Amy writes books from which women are absent; in turn, when Ash attempts to contact Amy, she can only push a sheet of blank paper underneath her door. At the same time, Smith suggests that the representation of women found in Ovid's writing is often problematic and disturbing.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* can be glimpsed in *Like* via the embedded descriptions of two postcards that Amy acquires while on holiday in Pompeii. The first card is a photograph of a mosaic depicting the myth of Pitys and Pan bought by seven-year-old Kate, who mistakes the picture for a cartoon. Kate describes the scene on the card as:

> a man with a really big sticking up willy and horns, beside a lady who has what looks like a mushroom or a cloud coming out of her head, but it is supposed to be leaves. … on the back it says the picture is Pan the god trying uselessly to rape a lady. … The legs of the lady are turning into the trunk of a tree. Amy says it is from a myth.[47]

The scene is anti-epic in description and grotesquely humorous, yet all the more disturbing because it is narrated from a child's viewpoint. Kate understands neither the content of the card she is viewing, nor the words used to describe the content, *myth* and *rape*; the scene pointedly raises issues about both the responsibilities of representational forms and the content of classical texts themselves.

In a later scene, Amy flicks through a series of postcards depicting the frescoes and mosaics in the Villa of the Mysteries. In one, a 'terrified woman' is depicted fleeing, 'her hand held out in front of her in fear'; Amy tears the terrified woman off the postcard and discards it: 'I've had enough of civilisation for today.'[48] As she does so, Amy is unexpectedly struck by the beauty of the image. Perhaps Smith suggests that in the over-intellectualizing of the frescoes that take place within the 'shaded lecture halls' in which Amy is comfortable, the humanity of the image and its ability to emotionally transform the viewer has been lost. This is a theme that will be revisited in *How*

[47] Smith, *Like* (n. 17 above), p. 102.
[48] Ibid., pp. 114-15.

to Be Both.[49] Yet the image of a fleeing woman can also be read as a *mis-en-abyme* for Ovid's epic poem, and the disposed fragment may function here synecdochally for a physical copy of *Metamorphoses*. Smith's discarding of Ovid's text here, coupled with Amy's misuse of a classical education to wield power over her friend, suggests a scepticism or anxiety about the utility of that education. In both postcard scenes, Smith's engagement with Ovid is revisionary, although she appears to initially reject Ovid as an unsuitable tool for contemporary women to negotiate the present.

While Ovid divided the two protagonists in *Like*, ten years later Smith renegotiates her relationship with the Roman poet in the explicitly Ovidian *Girl Meets Boy*. Published before same-sex marriages were recognized by law in the UK, the novel addresses marital inequality for same-sex couples, eating disorders, the abuse of creativity for commercial interests, and the 'simulacrization' not only of culture but of human identity, flattened into a single Facebook profile page. Smith's Iphis and Ianthe are two gender-queer lovers in contemporary Inverness, political activists and artists who spray-paint the town with political slogans that both highlight contemporary gender inequalities and reference/rewrite their Ovidian originals. Smith's descriptions of these artworks – and a variety of viewers' responses – comprise the fourth chapter of *Girl Meets Boy*.[50] Smith further politicizes her novel by blurring the boundaries between critical and creative texts, blending an imaginative rewriting of Ovid with a fictionalized version of Judith Butler's critical work, *Gender Trouble* (1990). She uses Ovidian metamorphosis to refigure contemporary identities and sexualities: the artwork depicted on the coverslip of the first edition – Tracey Emin's *Self-Portrait as a Small Bird* (2002) – continues the blurring of bodies and forms.[51] The novelist's clear anti-capitalist anti-imperialist anti-racist and ecological concerns are focalized in the ekphrastic passages in the novel to first harness – then exceed – the subversive blurring of sex and gender latent in Ovid's tale.[52]

Smith's consideration of how to approach the myth of Iphis as a rewriter of Ovid seems crystallized in a description of the Monument to the Women of World War II in London.[53] Imogen's account to the reader of the Monument to the Women is

---

[49] Cox and Theodorakopoulos, 'Female Voices' (n. 2 above), pp. 291-2.

[50] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* (n. 2 above), pp. 132-46 (32-7).

[51] Emin's bird motif recurs in her first work of public sculpture, the diminutive *Roman Standard* (2005, Liverpool Oratory). Emin stated: 'My *Roman Standard* represents strength but also femininity. Most public sculptures are a symbol of power which I find oppressive and dark. I wanted something that had a magic and an alchemy, something which would appear and disappear, and not dominate.' Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/02_february/24/emin.shtml [accessed 20 January 2018].

[52] *Girl Meets Boy* is suffused with allusions to many others of Ovid's tales of metamorphosis, including Narcissus and Echo, Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, Clytie, Philomela, Daphne; in the central love-making scene Iphis's physical transformation in Ovid is replaced by shapeshifting lovers, who cycle through the tales of Midas, Arethusa, Cyane, Niobe, Myrrha, Cadmus, Actaeon and Thetis.

[53] The Monument to the Women of World War II was the first UK national war memorial to commemorate the work undertaken by seven million women in that conflict. The Monument is a 7m high bronze cenotaph depicting seventeen sets of clothing (hats, handbags, and coats), including the uniforms worn by the Women's Land Army, Women's Royal Naval Service, nurses, policewomen, canteen women, and welders. The Monument was sculpted by John W. Mills, and unveiled on Whitehall, London in July 2005. In her speech dedicating the memorial, Baroness Betty Boothroyd hoped the Monument would

a moment of feminist ekphrasis that links to her descriptions of the painted slogans later in the same chapter. As with Kate's description of the postcard, the ekphrastic passage narrated by Imogen is knowingly colloquial and bathetic ('Oh, right, it's a statue to the women who fought in the war. Oh, I get it'). To my mind, Imogen's questioning response to the memorial – 'I wonder why they didn't get to be people. … [T]hose women, they just got to be gone, they just got to be empty clothes. … Is it better, like more symbolic, *not* to be there?' – raises a key metatextual and theoretical dilemma confronting feminist Ovidian scholarship and feminist revisionary mythmaking.[54] Again, Smith's moment of ekphrasis becomes an allegorical comment on the potentialities of classical reception praxis. In *Girl Meets Boy*, Smith does not resolve whether it is possible to re-read and re-write old texts, or whether they are irredeemable; whether women should be written back into the texts from which they are absent, or their absence staged.[55] Although Iphis does not undergo a bodily transformation into a boy, her fluid identity resists a simple re-designation into the singular category 'girl'; Smith thereby rejects a simplistic reversal of myth. Instead, the author's open question invites her readers to become collaborators in the act of mythmaking, and to consider for themselves the ethics of reception.

Smith returns to her questioning of the tension between staging and absence in *How to Be Both*, using a series of Ovidian ekphraseis to explore the possibility of 'being both' and continue her experiments with rewriting myth and history. This novel is divided into two halves which can be read either way and have been published both ways; which half is read first can be a matter of chance or choice. One half comprises a historiographical metafiction narrated by the ghost of the Renaissance painter Francesco del Cossa, whom Smith has reimagined as a woman. The other half follows the story of George, a teenage girl piecing together her memories of a holiday with her late mother to visit Francesco's frescoes in the Palazzo Schifanoia in Ferrara, Italy. As well as sharing a structural framework with Smith's previous Ovidian novels, whose split narratives likewise physically represent two sides to one story, the Ovidianism of *How to Be Both* is signalled by its sharing of thematic tropes with the earlier novels (sight, the fluidity of gender, the reconstruction of the past). It also involves similar meditation on the processes of narrativization, the potentially fatal cost of art as well as art's transformative power, and the interrelation between politics and artistic representation.

Footnote 53 (continued)
cause passers-by 'to ask themselves "what sort of women were they?"' (quoted in 'Women's Courage in Second World War Commemorated', *The Daily Telegraph*, 9 July 2005; available at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1493698/Womens-courage-in-Second-World-War-commemorated.html [accessed: 29 January 2018]. The Monument to the Women was intended as a pair to the Cenotaph; like the Cenotaph, it records no names.

[54] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* (n. 2 above), pp. 114-15.

[55] See the opposing positions of, e.g., A. Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision', *College English*, 34, 1972, pp. 18-30 and D. Purkiss, 'Women's Rewriting of Myth', in *The Woman's Companion to Mythology*, ed. C. Larrington, London, 1997, pp. 441-57; on Ovid, compare, e.g. P. Culham, 'Decentering the Text: the Case of Ovid', *Helios*, 17, 1990, pp. 161-70 and L. Cahoon, 'Let the Muse Sing On: Poetry, Criticism, Feminism, and the Case of Ovid', *Helios*, 17, 1990, pp. 197-211.

The repeated ekphrastic passages throughout the novel describe Francesco's works. These include the paintings of St Lucia, St Vincent Ferrer and Marsyas, and a series of frescoes which depict scenes from local Ferrara life below Ovidian scenes of the gods and the twelve zodiacal signs. While on the one hand Smith's extended account of the frescoes is a literal account of the wall decorations at the Palazzo Schifanoia, at the same time her narrative and thematic focus directly evokes the ekphrasis which opens Book II of *Metamorphoses* and which describes the decorated doors of the Palace of the Sun. The allusion is signalled by Francesco's decision to begin painting her wall with Apollo first (the god who also unites the novel's emblematic use of the stories of Phaethon and Marsyas), and Smith playfully challenges the Ovidian reader to draw a comparison between her version of the frescoes and Ovid's account of the silver doors.

In her half of the novel, Francesco describes how she doubly encodes the frescoes, painting in such a way that the sexual ambiguity of the images can be objectively present, or only subjectively present, or both. Francesco's professed love of the *trompe l'oeil* effect that confounds notions of reality and fiction, inside and outside, asks the reader to exist in an in between space and to accept both readings simultaneously. (The acceptance by George's mother that the image can be 'both' reveals her sexually and intellectually labile character). Francesco also describes incorporating into the fresco scenes the faces of 'real' women from her life – the Graces are brothel workers and the Fates local weavers – as well as those of lovers and her family. In personalizing the images and visually reinserting into the narratives of myth, art, and history those who are usually absent, Francesco enacts within the novel one answer to Smith's problematization of the ethics of revisionary mythmaking in *Girl Meets Boy*. The smiling face of Francesco's mother tramping cloth on the fresco works in part to redeem the image of the 'terrified' woman in the Pompeiian fresco in *Like*: Francesco's act of viewing is sympathetic, not predatory. At the same time, the gender-queer Francesco herself is an insertion by Smith, on the macro-level, of a woman into Renaissance art history, albeit (like Iphis) one who resists definitive categories of gender. As well as foregrounding issues of artistic production and reception, the frescoes function here – where they earlier stood for Ovid's text – as *mis-en-abyme* for Smith's novel, both thematically (illustrating visually the themes of mothers, gender-fluidity, race, and poverty) and methodologically (inserting women, queering the text).

In a very simple linear reading, *How to Be Both* constitutes an artist's production of works of art, and a selection of viewers' receptions, as Smith sets up intriguing contrasts between (imagined) artistic intention and readerly interpretation. The descriptions of the frescoes and paintings appear as varied refrains throughout the novel, reframed in different contexts – while they are being created, *in situ* today, in a photograph in a magazine, in a Google Images search, or hanging in the National Gallery – and filtered through the perspectives of a variety of characters at different points in time across six hundred years. The repeated ekphrastic passages of the novel demonstrate the wholly subjective nature of interpretation and illustrate the metamorphoses of reception over time, as the layers of the frescoes physically represent the metamorphoses of transmission. Smith both exposes and confounds historical relativism. For even as she asserts difference (Francesco's artistic intent remains

ultimately unknowable to contemporary viewers), she implies a comparison between the abilities of characters in different time periods to share similarly authentic emotional responses.

The repetition throughout the novel of this stock 'viewing scene' invites the reader to accept a range of viewing subject positions and to consider their role in interpretation. While subversive readings of both the frescoes and Smith's novel are present, the reader is not forcibly manoeuvred into this reading position. In her presentation of multiple perspectives and interpretative disagreement, Smith allows for the independence of both her internal and external audiences, creating ambiguity both within and without the narrative space of the novel. She is never prescriptive, nor does she offer a totalizing 'answer' to the puzzle of the artworks in place of the monolithic ideologies her novels seek to critique. The multiply-signifying fresco is an image that urges the restoration of layers to the flat surface of the 'desert of the real' of the contemporary age. The author stresses the importance of emotional and authentic responses to a work of art in a world where 'reactions' and experiences are predetermined, and so compromised, by multinational corporations. She urges her readers to engage with the text and collaborate in the creation of meaning.

The Ferrara frescoes and the paintings of Saints Lucia and Vincent are real art objects. As with the Pompeiian mosaics described in *Like*, and the Monument to the Women of World War II in *Girl Meets Boy*, the reader can simulate the actions of the characters in the novel and view the pieces in person or online. Provocatively, two figures from the fresco that Smith discusses in detail in the text are printed on the inside front covers of the book, inviting the reader to engage directly with the images and disagree with the author. The key distinction that marks out Francesco's painting of Marsyas is that it is a work of Smith's imagination. This notional ekphrasis adds a frisson to the issue of reception in the novel.[56] Comparing the real and the fictional is not simply a literary game here, but a contrast that asks the reader to reflect on the construction of fiction, and the fictionality of reality itself. In implicitly contrasting the ekphraseis of respectively real and imagined artworks, Smith asks her reader to consider their responses to real and fictional art, arguing that our responses to both forms can be equally subversive and imaginative: the reader-viewer should not be intimidated by a painting's realness or by the notion that a 'correct' interpretation exists.

It is striking that for her imaginary artwork Smith has chosen to visualize an episode from Ovid, and so the notional ekphrasis functions as a miniature act of Ovidian reception embedded within the super-narrative structure of the novel. Francesco ascribes her inspiration for the painting to 'picturing a story I remember from childhood … . It's a story I've puzzled over almost all my years.'[57] In the version of Marsyas's story told to Francesco by her mother, the transformative nature of pity, that is, the profound effect of Marsyas's fate on the weeping on-lookers, justified

[56] 'Notional ekphrasis' is John Hollander's term for representations of imagined works of art in his *The Gazer's Spirit: Poems Speaking to Silent Works of Art*, Chicago, 1995, p. 7.

[57] Smith, *How to Be Both* (n. 11 above), p. 360.

his artistic endeavour: 'always risk your skin'.[58] This is not offered as a definitive interpretation of the episode. Smith suggests with her repeated revisiting of the tale within the novel that one endeavour of reception is not to find the 'correct' reading but rather to respond authentically. Francesco must return to the story and fashion her own way of seeing Marsyas:

> right now though I've found the way to tell it : the god stands to one side, the unused knife slack in his hand : he has an air near disappointment : but the inner body of the musician is twisting up out of the skin in a kind of ecstasy like the skin's a thick flow of fabric coming rich in one piece off the shoulder and peeling away at the same time from the wrists and the ankles in little pieces like a blown upward snow of confetti : the body appears through the skin's unpeeling like the bride undressing after the wedding : but bright red, crystal red : best of all the musician catches the skin over the very arm it's coming off and folding itself, neat.[59]

The painting mirrors the moment of Francesco's metamorphosis earlier in the novel from girl to boy as her dress slips off like lily petals.[60] The image of the artist 'twisting up out of the skin in a kind of ecstasy' suggests that we may read into the painting of Marsyas Francesco's own chrysalis-like emergence as an artist – a self-portrait of the woman inside the male skin. At the same time, the moment of Francesco's transformation is also inverted, as the ekphrasis employs a subversively gendered simile in which Marsyas is transformed from (male) satyr to virginal bride. This gender subversion is also a clue, for, as the reader shortly discovers, Francesco's Marsyas is a woman. Francesco's new 'way' to tell the tale of Marsyas is revealed as a queering of gender, enacting and doubling within the novel Smith's own rewriting of Francesco in the novel's frame. When rival painter Cosimo Tura sees Francesco's Marsyas, he says to her: 'You're wrong. … Marsyas is a satyr and therefore male. … Says the story. … Say the scholars. Say the centuries.'[61] Cosimo cannot imagine an alternative ending to Marsyas's story. He is clearly threatened not only by Francesco's clear superior skill as a painter, but also by the fact that she has a wholly different way of seeing.

Smith's thematization of viewing and reception in *How to Be Both*, and the repeated ekphrastic passages across the three 'Ovidian' novels, provides a metatextual commentary on her own increasingly recuperative readings of Ovid: from intimidation and miscomprehension in the descriptions of the Ovidian postcards, and Ash's scepticism about 'obscene' knowledge in *Like*; through the spray-painted political murals and war memorials in *Girl Meets Boy*; to an ethical renegotiation of the relationship between women and Ovid in the frescoes and paintings full of life and light in *How to Be Both*. Read in sequence, the repeated ekphrastic passages across the three novels *Like*, *Girl Meets Boy* and *How to Be Both* illustrate

---

[58] Ibid., pp. 249-50.

[59] Ibid., p. 360. Original punctuation.

[60] Ibid., p. 219.

[61] Smith, *How to Be Both* (n. 11 above), p. 361.

Smith's development of a gendered ethics of 'reception in process' that both honours and subverts Ovid's text, and insists upon the politics of reading and (re)writing. In answer to the question posed in *Girl Meets Boy* – '*is it more symbolic not to be there?*' – Smith offers the baton of responsibility for re-viewing and re-telling stories to her reader.[62] If Smith's feminist ekphraseis may be read as an analogy for her classical reception praxis, I suggest that she offers a model of engagement with Ovid that is based on collaboration rather than contest, and which positions the narrating author in relation to her reader as a facilitator rather than a pedagogue. It is a model which confounds binaries, and foregrounds the democratic potential of reading-viewing. She asks her readers to consider new ways of viewing the past, the present, and the future – to 'be both', and more – and offers an example in her own reassessment of her past responses to Ovid.

How to Be Both: A Case Study in 'Ovidianism'

In this final section, I use the novel *How to Be Both* as a case study to draw out the implications of Ovid's presence in Smith's work. As in the consultation of 'the book' in 'May' and *Autumn*, Ovid's name never appears explicitly in *How to Be Both*. Allusions to Ovidian stories present a half-glimpsed relationship to the past: stories are half-narrated, or re-narrated with parts added or missing; names of characters and authors are forgotten; the Ovidian images of the frescoes are only half-seen on unlit walls; and when Francesco is asked to 'illustrate the gods from the poems' she feigns an understanding but is 'none the wiser'.[63] The source text eludes the reader throughout the novel. Yet Ovid's presence is undeniable. If Francesco's half is read first, the reader encounters the stories of Phaethon and Marsyas within the opening three pages – each episode occurs twice more in Francesco's half and both are balanced in George's half by the Minotaur motif. At several points in the narrative Francesco may even be identified with Ovid himself: as she sets out her Ovidian programmatics for the arts of love and painting; as she paints her masterpiece of Marsyas; and when she lists as key among her skills the ability to realistically render 'hair and branches'.[64]

Alongside the specific episodes of Phaethon, Marsyas, and Ariadne and the Minotaur, images of metamorphosis suffuse the novel. Francesco's shedding of her female dress and identity and concomitant adoption of a male identity is described in a simile that is as explicitly metamorphic as it is sexually suggestive: 'I stood up and the whole gown … slipped down away from me like the peeled back petals of a lily and me at its centre standing straight like the stamen : I stepped out naked over its folds.'[65] The phallic imagery of this scene playfully suggests that Francesco's transformation is as physical as the metamorphosis evaded by Smith in her retelling

[62] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* (n. 2 above), p. 115 (my italics).
[63] Smith, *How to Be Both* (n. 11 above), p. 196.
[64] Ibid., p. 352; see Farrell, 'Ovidian Corpus' (n. 25 above).
[65] Ibid., p. 219. Original punctuation.

of Ovid's Iphis (of course, an Ovidian evasion itself). Later, Francesco's first physical sexual experience leaves her overwhelmed by plant-life:

> all I could think of all that week was flowers for breath and flowers for eyes and mouths full of flowers, armpits of them, the backs of knees, laps, groins overflowing with flowers and all I could draw was leaves and flowers, the whorls of the roses, the foliage dark.[66]

Conversely, George's inability to respond to an erotic advance while in mourning evokes an image of Niobe ('She is not a girl. She is a block of stone'). Elsewhere in the novel, only a human voice marks a plague-victim glimpsed amongst the 'imperturbable foliage' as the terribly metamorphosed remains of a man.[67]

As well as using metamorphic tropes to speak of the fluidity of desire, Smith's choice of Ovidian episodes and her shifting employment of those stories work to present the metamorphic power of pity, pathos, or empathy. As with her use of Baucis and Philemon in *Autumn*, when Ovid's stories are read back into the contemporary events of George's half of the novel, in the scroll of deaths on television news channels, pity becomes a political act. In keeping with Smith's exploration of being 'both', identifications with Ovidian figures throughout the novel are highly labile; her characters swap subject positions within and across multiple iterations and variations of the episode. As Smith manoeuvres her characters into positions of empathy with a second or third figure from the myth, she enacts within the space of the novel her repeated insistence on the importance of seeing 'the other side' of a story. Her repeated play on the word 'minotaur' implicitly suggests the ways in which her novel works as a labyrinthine space that dissolves the linearity and boundaries of time and space as she sends her reader backwards and forwards through the text. The physical structure of the book itself – divided into two halves that blur the novel-form with the fresco-form – enacts at the reader's level the experience of the characters. That is, the physical, material form (the frescoes, the textual artefact) stimulates a meditation on the metaphysical. Smith's conjunction of Ovidian tropes with an experimental form becomes not only a tool to dissolve binary modes of being and knowing, but figures style as an epistemological mode – and a space for political agency – in itself.

Smith plays out this insistence on the political responsibility inherent in the retelling of myth and history in a scene in the contemporary half of *How to Be Both*. Smith's teenage protagonist George and her friend 'H' are discussing how to reimagine the life of Francesco del Cossa for a collaborative school project. The girls want to create something original; they do not want to write a conservative 'reimagine someone from the past parachuted into the present' piece. Nor do they want to be inaccurate, despite acknowledging that they cannot know what the past was like (the girls imagine the re-vivified Francesco complaining, '*alas, I am being made up really badly by a sixteen-year-old girl who knows fuck all about art*').[68] However,

[66] Ibid., p. 272.

[67] Ibid., pp. 101, 348.

[68] Ibid., p. 139 (italics in original).

as half of the novel indeed comprises Francesco's life reimagined, the reader may wonder whether Francesco's story is the girls' project, or whether the girls are Smith herself, mid-process, writing the novel we are reading and voicing her ethical and practical concerns about creating historical fiction (or both). The girls' scene illustrates the paradoxical nature of Smith's work, which couples a postmodern self-reflexive writing style with an insistence on originality and authenticity of response to the past and the present alike; the scene mirrors the encapsulation in the Marsyas painting of her ethics of rewriting. The scene also captures the metatextual nature of Smith's thematic and formal exploration of 'being both' throughout the novel. Herein words, images and artefacts are all at least doubly encoded, effecting a dissolution of Enlightenment-derived binaries of being and knowing (boy/girl, art/life, history/fiction) that reclaims and celebrates the space between strictly defined identities and categories.

The girls' discussion of the ethics of reimagining the past can be read alongside an epigraph to *How to Be Both* taken from an introduction by Hannah Arendt to the work of Walter Benjamin:

> Although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things 'suffer a sea-change' and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up to the world of the living.[69]

Arendt is discussing Benjamin's concept of *Jetztseit*, a notion of time filled with potential energy, but which requires the intervention of an artist or activist to 'blast' time free from the continuum of history and spur the transmission of revolutionary energy into the future. The passage continues beyond the quotation used for Smith's epigraph as Arendt discusses Benjamin's consideration of how to delve into the past not to resuscitate it as it was, or to reiterate past ages *per se*, but to mine the past in order to assess one's own relationship to it. Benjamin's thoughts on the necessarily political role of the artist in society, and his self-reflexive approach to the past, are clearly echoed in *How to Be Both*. Smith's rejection of conservative historical fiction – which uses the past simply to illuminate the present, or vice versa – can be read as a desire to create instead a consciously forward-looking artistic intervention. Smith achieves this by using the novel's double narrative to explore physically and to enact how the convergence of the past and present can create something wholly new. Arendt's image of crystallization may suggest itself to Smith as a model for a reception praxis which is multi-faceted and non-hierarchical, intertextual and complex, and that can represent many layers of accumulated material – the past and the present – simultaneously. Yet, as I have argued, the novel stages a very particular mode of reception: a sustained (re)assessment of her own evolving textual relationship to the poetry of Ovid.

[69] Excerpt from H. Arendt, 'Introduction', in W. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, Boston, 1986, pp. 7-55 (54-5).

Smith's fictional readers of Ovid are those traditionally excluded from a classical education, particularly marginalized young women like Francesco's working mother, or queer dual-heritage Robin in *Girl Meets Boy*. Arendt's metaphor of a pearl diver therefore also evokes – via Adrienne Rich – an image of Smith's characters as divers, women carrying 'a book of myths / in which our names do not appear', searching 'alone' for 'the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth'.[70] Yet Ovid is frequently read in tandem in Smith's work. Robin and Anthea read Ovid together in bed; and in *How to Be Both* Francesco recalls listening as a child to her mother narrate the tales of Phaethon and Marsyas. Through such reading practices, Smith reveals a developing belief in the ability to rewrite the past through collaborative story-telling. Like their author, Smith's readers also repeatedly return to stories to reread them, or to pass the stories on, a repetition that draws attention to practices of re-reading and re-telling, and the ability to seize agency through narration. Smith's insistence on the transformative potential of reading Ovid *together* offers a method of collaborative recuperation for an author who has been problematic for many feminist classicists, and – as suggested by *Like* – Smith herself. It is surely no coincidence that in Smith's Ovidian novels her three protagonists, Ash, Anthea, and George, have all lost their mothers. In the absence of literary mothers, women must and can work together with the myths they have received. As Smith's Iphis tells her Ianthe: 'Nobody grows up mythless. … It's what we do with the myths we grow up with that matters.'[71]

While the frescoes in *How to Be Both* function to encourage inventive re-reading, Smith's invention of Francesco's Marsyas provides an ekphrastic example to her reader of creatively rewriting Ovidian myth. Like Francesco, Smith now refuses to be intimidated by the scholars and the centuries. Perhaps the ekphrastic passages in *Like* should be re-read in this light: that Smith's earlier discarding of Ovid's text was not a complete rejection, but rather the act of a woman writer initially intimidated by tradition, and an act that mirrored the rejection by the Western cultural tradition of the woman, her art, and her responses to art. Two nights after Francesco paints her Marsyas, the painting is stolen in an act of destruction that attempts to erase this alternative (and explicitly gendered) narrative. Smith foregrounds issues of authorship and ownership of the classics in this scene, but ultimately suggests that it is the continuation of the story – in whatever form – that is her artistic responsibility. That Smith's continual play throughout *How to Be Both* with viewing and re-viewing comments on her own reception practices, and on feminist revisionary mythmaking in particular, is suggested by the ways in which acts of viewing in the novel are frequently and explicitly gendered (as are Smith's fictionalized acts of reading Ovid). As feminist and anti-racist critiques of art history have shown, the acts of viewing and interpretation are necessarily subjective. Throughout the novel Smith demonstrates the inherently political nature and subversive potential of the feminist gaze, especially when the viewer or reader is not the one whose gaze was anticipated by the maker of the image or the text.

[70] Excerpts from A. Rich, 'Diving into the Wreck', in her *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972*, New York, 1973, pp. 22-4.
[71] Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* (n. 2 above), p. 98.

As the layers of meta-narrative multiply and the postmodern proliferations of her novels increase, Smith draws on Ovidian tropes and episodes to meditate on materiality, the body, and emotional trauma, and to liberate new ways of seeing and speaking the self through metamorphic language-play. As I have argued, an understanding of Ovid's presence in Smith's texts provides a deeper understanding of her thematic motifs and celebrated play with form and gender. Her insistence on transformative political engagement is crucially informed by an ongoing concern with Ovidian themes of renewal, liminality, and change. Smith repurposes Ovid to celebrate metamorphosis in a contemporary world obsessed with the construction of human identities and emotions in digital media. Her play with form, language, and her intertextuality with Ovid becomes a strategy aimed at dismantling ontological and epistemological hierarchies, and encouraging new, active, and interrogative readings of the classics. Re-viewing Ovid's own playful 'postmodern' style through the lens of a writer such as Smith redeems his own intertextual play as an inherently critical revisiting of texts and ideology, rather than as witty nostalgia alone.[72] In transforming Ovid's texts in the service of her anti-capitalist, queer feminist politics, Smith also demonstrates how literary strategies can and must be applied subversively to contemporary political ends; she thus critiques the notion of formal play that serves only aesthetic ends.

Smith's repeated use of the figures of the artist or writer as protagonist in her Ovidian novels, and the foregrounding of storytelling in her revisiting and retelling of key stories from *Metamorphoses*, implicitly yet persistently invites the reader to reassess their own complicity with and responsibility to the text. By inviting her readers to engage critically with Ovid and to participate in collaborative storytelling beyond the ending of her novels, the author refigures Ovidian mythmaking as political praxis. She encourages a return to Ovid as one whose work provides particularly fertile material for women rewriters of myth, and she passes on the baton of telling Ovidian stories to her readers, suggesting that the final transformation effected by art should be in the reader or viewer.[73] Yet in re-viewing her own past engagements with his texts, and celebrating a joyful Ovidianism, *How to Be Both* suggests that the final metamorphosis effected by the novel may be in the writer herself.

Open Access This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license, and indicate if changes were made.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

[72] On Ovid as postmodern, see D. Fowler, 'Postmodernism, Romantic Irony, and Classical Closure', in *Modern Critical Theory and Classical Literature*, ed. I. J. F. de Jong and J. P. Sullivan, Leiden, 1994, pp. 231-56 (252), and T. Ziolkowski, *Ovid and the Moderns*, Ithaca, 2005, pp. 170-84. See also Roynon and Orrell's discussion in the Preface to this special issue.

[73] On the metamorphosis of the reader of *Metamorphoses*, see V. Zajko, '"Listening with" Ovid: Intersexuality, Queer Theory, and the Myth of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis', *Helios*, 36, 2009, pp. 175-202.