

CIRCE AND DOCTOR MOREAU

Odysseus, in his ten-year-long journey to his homeland of Ithaca after the Trojan War, comes to an island off Italy where smoke can be seen rising from a dwelling in the midst of a dense forest. He splits his crew into two groups, remaining aboard ship himself to supervise necessary maintenance and sending his second-in-command, Eurylochus, inland with twenty-two men to reconnoiter.

The scouts find an imposing stone house in a clearing at the center of the island. A pack of wolves and some lions roam about it; but these usually fierce beasts greet the Greeks pleasantly, like dogs fawning on their masters. Within the house dwells the sorceress Circe, who serves the men a feast of cheese, barley, and honey laced with wine. But she has slipped a magic potion into their food, too, and, as Homer tells it in *The Odyssey* (the translation is that of Allen Mandelbaum):

When they had drunk,
she struck them with her wand, then drove them off
to pen them in her sties. They'd taken on
the bodies—bristles, snouts—and grunts of hogs,
yet kept the human minds they had before.

So they were penned, in tears; and Circe cast
before them acorns, dogwood berries, mast—
food fit for swine who wallow on the ground.

Only Eurylochus avoids this grim metamorphosis. He rushes back to the ship to inform Odysseus of what has befallen his men. On his way to investigate, Odysseus encounters Hermes in the form of a young man, who tells him about Circe and her wiles, gives him the herb mandrake that will enable him to avoid the effects of her potions, and advises him to draw his sword on her when she comes at him with her wand. Circe has been forewarned that Odysseus would succeed in resisting her, and, when he menaces her with his sword, she quickly proposes that they become lovers instead. Odysseus, a deft hand with the ladies, binds her by a mighty oath to do him no harm, and off they go to bed. Then she restores the transformed sailors to human form; they spend the next year feasting in Circe's hall and enjoying the attentions of the sorceress and her handmaidens, and eventually they take their leave—reluctantly—and sail on to their next port of call.

Not long afterward another traveler comes the same way, this one Aeneas of Troy, leading the survivors of his shattered city to Italy to found what in time will become Rome. We are told, in Virgil's Latin epic *The Aeneid*, that these wanderers sail close by the shore of Circe's island, where they can hear "the raging groans of lions." (The translation once again is Mandelbaum's):

They roar at midnight, restless in their chains—
and growls of bristling boars and pent-up bears,
and howlings from the shapes of giant wolves:
all whom the savage goddess Circe changed,
by overwhelming herbs, out of the likeness
of men into the face and form of beasts.

But Neptune, who has taken a liking to Aeneas, calls up winds that blow the Trojans safely past Circe's island and onward toward the Italian mainland, and there is no repetition of the metamorphoses of *The Odyssey*.

The theme of metamorphosis is common in classical literature, depicted most notably in the delightful epic-length poem that the Roman poet Ovid wrote in the time of the

Emperor Augustus. Ovid pulls together scores of Greek myths (and a few Roman ones), deftly and easily gliding from one tale to another to demonstrate not only the capriciousness of the gods but also the impermanence of all things: characters transformed by irritated and vengeful deities into monsters or statues or trees, swans or pigeons or frogs, or swept up into the heavens as comets or stars to save them from some unpleasant fate, or even the gods themselves intentionally taking on animal form, as Jupiter does when he assumes the semblance of a bull in order to carry off the maiden Europa. All is fluid in Ovid's world; nothing is stable, everything is subject to immediate and startling change at the whim of some divine being. The world itself is a transient thing. ("We speak of elements, but these, we know, lack fixity, and through their phases go. . . . Nothing, I say, the form it has can hold. Inventive nature fashions new from old.")

A more recent masterpiece of metamorphosis is the sinister opposite of Homer's: instead of turning men into swine, we have swine turned into men. I speak of H.G. Wells' dark, powerful, and terrifying novel of 1896, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, which is for me the most profound and profoundly horrifying of all these tales.

Wells purports to provide the narrative of one Edward Prendick, a Victorian gentleman of leisure who is rescued at sea after a shipwreck, then cast off again by the drunken, angry captain of the vessel that rescued him. This time he is accompanied by one of the passengers of that ship, a man named Montgomery whose destination is a remote and nameless Pacific island to which he is transporting a cargo of animals—a caged puma, some rabbits, a llama, and a pack of savage-looking dogs. Montgomery, Prendick, and an oddly brutish servant of Montgomery's are put ashore on the island, and are met by a broad-shouldered, white-haired man. He is Dr. Moreau, and this is his island. Prendick has heard the name. Ten years earlier Moreau, "a prominent and masterful physiologist," had been involved in a scandal involving the experimental vivisection of animals, had disappeared abruptly from London, and had not been heard of again. Now, grudgingly, Moreau accepts his uninvited visitor as a guest.

Wells is in no hurry to reveal the secret of the island of Dr. Moreau. Prendick sees Moreau's strangely bestial-looking servants now and then. He hears sharp cries of animal pain in the distance. And then, wandering into a nearby forest glade, he comes upon "three grotesque human figures. . . . They were naked, save for swathings of scarlet cloth about the middle, and their skins were of a dull pinkish drab color, such as I had seen in no savages before. They had fat heavy chinless faces, retreating foreheads, and a scant bristly hair upon their heads." They begin a sort of clumsy dance, and he notices the abnormal shortness of their legs. "The three creatures engaged in this mysterious rite were human in shape, and yet human with the strangest air about them of some familiar animal," Prendick says, noticing at last "some now irresistible suggestion of a hog, a swinish taint, the unmistakable mark of the beast."

The awful truth comes home to him in the next few days. Moreau, a modern-day Circe in reverse, is using his surgical skills to transform animals into quasi-human things. They walk upright; they have the power of speech (impossible, we now know, to achieve); they look upon Moreau as a god-like being, obeying his every command. Most awfully of all, Moreau's experiments are conducted without benefit of anesthesia: the beast-creatures refer to his operating theater as the House of Pain, and the air is filled with the agonized cries of the puma, Moreau's newest experimental subject.

It is a nightmarish book, and, as nightmares will, it deepens in intensity until it becomes almost unbearable. The various creatures—an altered leopard, some wolf-men, a thing that is a mingled horse and rhinoceros, an ape-man, a pig-hyena, and others even more bizarre—behave in increasingly ominous ways. Prendick's one friend in this weird crew is, of course, a dog, an altered St. Bernard. In time the puma rebels ferociously against its torment and the book reaches its ghastly climax. We see, as Homer and Ovid never could have shown us, the true horror of metamorphosis.

Which is worse: man into pig, or pig into man? I can't help shivering at the transfor-

mation of Odysseus' men into swine that retain human consciousness; but Wells' novel fills us with compassion for the pitiful beasts that after great physical pain are rebuilt into creatures that are no longer unthinking animals but are unable to comprehend the strange and dreadful changes that have befallen them. The two tales, taken together, offer a fascinating philosophical contrast.

Metamorphosis is a common theme in modern science fiction, of course. Again and again explorers on far worlds have stumbled into involuntary transformations. And we should remember, also, Franz Kafka's great tale of a man who awakens one morning to find that he has turned into some sort of gigantic insect. But the handling of the theme that I like best is that found in "Desertion," the fourth and best of the eight splendid short stories that make up Clifford D. Simak's classic chronicle-novel, *City*. Here metamorphosis is neither agony nor a source of alienation; it is simply a description of the step beyond human life.

City as a complete book was first published in 1952, but "Desertion" initially appeared by itself in *Astounding Science Fiction* in 1944. The human race has begun to explore the Solar System and attempts are being made to land on Jupiter. It is, of course, impossible for humans to set foot on what Simak calls "the howling maelstrom" of the giant planet, facing "the terrific pressure, the greater force of gravity, the weird chemistry of the planet." No metal can stand up for long against pressure of fifteen thousand pounds per square inch and Jupiter's harsh constant rains of liquid ammonia. Only by sending down robots equipped with television cameras can the surface of Jupiter be examined. But it is a clumsy method at best. Biologists have discovered life on Jupiter, though—creatures that they have given the name of Lopers, beings with ammonia-hydrogen metabolism that are able to withstand the formidable conditions of Jupiter's surface.

It would be possible for humans to explore Jupiter at first hand if only they could transform themselves into Lopers. Whereupon Simak proposes a device called a "converter"—he does not try to explain how it works; in essence it is mere magic, with no more scientific plausibility than Circe's wand and herbs—and, one by one, four explorers are turned into Lopers and sent down to roam the giant planet. None of them come back. Kent Fowler, the commander of the survey mission, decides to go down himself to see what has become of his men. He has himself converted into a Loper; and, because Simak was very fond of dogs, Fowler has his own dog, amiable old Towser, turned into a Loper too, and off they go together.

Jupiter, now that he experiences it in the form of a Loper, is a wondrous place. Fowler perceives the ammonia rain as "drifting purple mist that moved like fleeing shadows over a red and purple sward." He sees lightning bolts as "flares of pure ecstasy across a painted sky." And he realizes that he *likes* being a Loper. ("Fowler flexed the muscles of his body, amazed at the smooth, sleek strength he found.") Most amazing of all is the discovery that he can communicate telepathically with his dog. "Hi, pal," Towser says, using thought-symbols rather than words, and they have a lovely conversation. It is a marvelous adventure. For Simak the metamorphosis is wholly benign, not at all the agonizing nightmare of Moreau's beasts or Odysseus's bestialized sailors. And, of course, Fowler and Towser, having the time of their lives, moving with exhilaration, with "a deeper sense of life," through "a world of beauty that even the dreamers of the Earth had not yet imagined," decide, like their predecessors of the expedition, not to return. This tale of metamorphosis concludes, unlike most others, with what must be seen as a happy ending:

"I can't go back," said Towser.

"Nor I," said Fowler.

"They would turn me back into a dog," said Towser.

"And me," said Fowler, "back into a man."