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Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*

Quentin Tarantino's film *Inglourious Basterds* (2009) ends with a sentence spoken by Lt. Aldo Raine, "I think this just might be my masterpiece." In interview Tarantino concedes this is his own judging of the film's merits. Some take this as arrogance, but I think the point is well taken and compared to its antecedent, downright humble. Tarantino's words evoke the last words of Ovid's masterpiece *Metamorphoses*, but unlike Tarantino, Ovid allows no possibility for error. Ovid opines the work will be "famous through the ages" and known "beyond the distant stars." Even the supreme god Jupiter and the "tooth of time" cannot mar his vehicle to immortality. An exceedingly arrogant prediction, but correct so far. *Metamorphoses* is remarkable for its comprehensive reworking and retelling of classical mythology and history, making it Ovid's own. The work is full of mixed literary genres and styles. Its tales are populated with divinities, monsters, heroes, warriors, lovers, haters, and occasional narrators. The overarching device driving the work is metamorphosis, changing from one thing into another. All the same can be said for *Basterds*, but its myths are mostly cinematic, the history is World War II, and the genres from American Western to European. A Tarantino associate says about the film, "pretty much 90 percent is based on movie references." Tarantino describes his appropriation of cinema so:

"So I was really using the whole feeling and mood from a scene in another movie, but what happens is that it becomes my scene with my actors and my way of telling the story and I feel like I somehow make it my own."

The word "own" should perhaps be taken in one of its current nuances, to supersede, to better, to outdo. "You are *owned*" connotes that the object was spectacularly defeated or

beaten at his or her game. Ovid *owned* prior mythologies and lore, and Tarantino follows the example by means of his own *Metamorphoses*, an adventure film tied together with tales about how Joan of Arc, King Kong and a band of American Indians converge to knock off the Nazi regime.

The Ovidian motif of human to animal metamorphoses is particularly interesting to poets, exemplified by Shakespeare in his *Midsummer Night's Dream*, a taste Tarantino seems to share. The first such metamorphosis is dairy farm girl Shosanna (pronounced Shoshanna) into a rat. She and her Jewish family are hiding under the floorboards of a neighbor's home when the SS arrives led by Col. Hans Landa, the "Jew Hunter." While interrogating the neighbor Landa refers to Goebbels' propaganda comparing Jews to rats, likely a reference to the film *Der ewige Jude* (1940). But Landa thinks the comparison is not an insult at all. Is not a rat just a squirrel without a cute tail? Do not they carry the same diseases? After Shosanna's family is slaughtered Landa follows her movements under the floorboards like a cat--he certainly likes milk--and like a cat playing with its prey he lets her get away.

In Paris Shosanna undergoes another change, an oppositional metamorphosis from rat to cat. This conversion climaxes in *Basterds'* final chapter titled "Revenge of the Big Face" wherein she prepares for the premier of the film *Nation's Pride [Stolz der Nation]* (2009). Outwardly she changes from arty French girl into glamour puss, dressed to kill. She applies her war paint and we watch her wend her way to the theater lobby from an aerial vantage, just as Col. Landa tracked her at the farmhouse. But this time she emerges proudly through the door as a cat, not squalidly through a vent like a rat. Her perch is the landing atop the lobby stairway. Her prey is the assembling Nazi propaganda film industry luminaries and Nazi political elite including all chief officers of the SS and Gestapo (with one very notable absence). Fittingly, this feline transformation is scored to

David Bowie's "Cat People (Putting out the Fire)," the theme song from *Cat People* (1982), a film about people who turn into cats.

Another faunal metamorphosis evident is from ape to man. King Kong becomes Marcel, the employee of the Parisian theater Shosanna comes to own, and the only black character in the film. *King Kong* (1933) is a film about film, love and show business, and an important influence in *Basterds*. In the tavern scene guess-your-identity party games are played for amusement. The name cards used are emblematic signifiers, not unlike the forehead swastika wounds the Basterds carve on German soldiers. In these games the ape's name "King Kong" is dealt twice, and once the name of *King Kong's* screenwriter/creator, "Edgar Wallace." The arguable racial subtext of the film *King Kong* is gleefully explained by Gestapo Maj. Hellstrom. Message delivered: think *King Kong*. The original King Kong chomps on people and splits dinosaur skulls and such, but his physical treatment of Ann Darrow is tender. Tarantino extrapolates from King Kong's soft side to create Marcel, the kindest, gentlest character in *Basterds*. The understated love between Marcel and Shosanna also allows the audience the space to accept the possibility of another affection between Shosanna and Pvt. Fredrick Zoller, German war hero, film buff, and possible Frankenstein. The film *King Kong* is not only relevant thematically about prejudice, but provides a key plot point: the theater scene. In *King Kong* the ape on stage is frightened by the photographers' taunting flashbulb flashes and the terrorized audience rushes to the back exits. In *Basterds'* theater scene Marcel is on the stage. He starts a fire with burning film stock and the terrorized audience rushes to the back exits—King Kong gets his revenge. *Basterds* blends *King Kong's* theater scene with the bomb shelter Holocaust allegory in *The Dirty Dozen* (1967), that film's fiery climax ignited by that film's sole black character and victim of racism, Jefferson, played by American icon Jim Brown.

There are at least two semi-human transformations. The Basterd named The Bear Jew changes into a Golem. At least he is a Golem in the fearful minds of German soldiers, a matter which infuriates Hitler. Golems are European Jewish mythological humanoid creatures that protect Jewish towns and ghettos. Golems are thought to be an inspiration for Mary Shelley's monster Frankenstein, more correctly "Frankenstein's monster," but I prefer Frankenstein. Fredrick is a Frankenstein. Shelley's man-made monster has a violent side, but also an intelligent and caring side. Unlike most film Frankensteins, the original literary monster is well-spoken and intelligent. He wants to befriend people who abhor his exterior appearance. Fredrick wants to befriend and converse with Shosanna who sees him as nothing more than a loathsome uniform. Shelley writes her monster is "eloquent and persuasive" and so is Fredrick. Goebbels says about his film star, "It seems I've created a monster. A strangely persuasive monster." But I could be wrong about Fredrick as a Frankenstein. I admit this for the purpose of film review: *Basterds* is the most stimulating film I have seen. It is allusively rife, seemingly always referential to something else, and provides the pleasure of thinking about what was meant by its creator, or something else.

Film star Fredrick is Goebbels' creation on the surface, but deeper he is Tarantino's. *Basterds* explores the matter of Nazi-era German cinema, to my previous education a few anti-Semitic films and a couple of Leni Riefenstahl flicks. As a filmmaker Tarantino has a special interest in Goebbels, Nazi Germany's chief of propaganda and film industry. Within *Basterds*, the fictional Goebbels believes *Nation's Pride* will be his "masterpiece." At the premiere Hitler says, "This is your finest film yet." This praise brings a mawkish tear to Goebbels' eye. But *Nation's Pride* is a real, extant film, written and produced by Tarantino, not Goebbels. Thus, Tarantino creates the wannabe *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) masterpiece the real Goebbels dreamed of making, has Hitler praise it, makes Goebbels cry, then wipes them all out. That is some ownership.

Another form of metamorphosis is intra-human, prominently from American Jewish soldier into American Indian warrior, Apache specifically. For Tarantino soldiers and warriors are different, “The Basterds don’t have the luxury of being soldiers...they have the duty to be warriors, because they’re fighting an enemy that’s trying to wipe them off the face of the earth.” Western film genres are important to *Basterds*, and the putative genocide film *Little Big Man* (1970) plays a part. The titular main character is a white settler boy/man who transforms into a Cheyenne warrior, and back and forth. Col. Landa informs a captured Basterd the Germans’ nickname for him is “Little Man.” The news depresses the Basterd, he thinks the name is insulting. Actually, cinematically, the name comes from respect. It is related in *Little Big Man* that Little Man is a mythological Cheyenne warrior-hero. Although Little Man was decapitated in battle, his body continued to fight the Pawnees, while his head, stuck on a spear, whooped supportive war cries. “Little Man was small, but his bravery was big,” Chief Old Lodge Skins says. Another Cheyenne warrior is Younger Bear. Younger Bear is an elite warrior, a “contrary,” the most dangerous kind of Cheyenne. At the end of the film Younger Bear puts two arrows into Gen. George Custer. Likewise, the Basterd named The Bear Jew, also an elite warrior, puts numerous bullets into Hitler. The two even share war whoops with club waving. The Bear Jew shouts Boston (thankfully not clichéd Brooklyn) baseball allusions after taking a baseball bat (an American icon) to a Nazi. Younger Bear’s whoop and war club waving occurs after he fulfills a social obligation, a life debt, a moment of emotional release. Other influences from *Little Big Man* may be Shosanna’s dash for life paralleling Sunshine’s escape attempt and the plot point of luring an enemy into a spatial trap, the coulee at Little Bighorn. The films’ two vice figures, Gen. Custer and Col. Landa, both character arc downward into complete buffoons by the films’ ends. Custer and Landa share a political parallel. *Little Big Man* partly purports to be a historical recounting, and it casts Custer as the centerpiece, the personification one might

say, of odious anti-Indian policy and prejudice (he compares Indians to “rats”). But that is untrue of Custer and the events leading up to the Battle of Little Bighorn are twisted to make this assertion seem true. There are a few hints inside the film that some matters represented might not be true. For one, the protagonist feels the need to emphasize that “it is a true historical fact” Custer was ambitious, which is indeed true. Also, and oddly, the film is mostly a comedy despite the film’s introduction about genocide. *Basterds*, on the other hand, relishes its ahistoricity and its unabashed mythmaking. The historical representation is so palpably false there is no need to debate it. But hidden inside this fiction is a small, obscure true historical fact expanded by Tarantino into a centerpiece of his mythological alternative history. This fact involves the extremely important real-life Nazi not killed in the theater scene, a man who--unlike Custer--was indeed an advocate of genocide. He appears in *Basterds* as a differently named character in an oppositional metamorphosis.

Regarding violence, Tarantino’s depictions share interesting parallels with Ovid’s. Ovid has a taste for negligently stupid violent deaths such as the spearing of Procris (Book VII) or Hyacinthus’ death by bouncing discus to the face. (Book X) Sgt. Wilhelm’s wild gun play in the tavern scene kills not only a Basterd but one of his countrymen and a French barmaid. Tarantino’s best stupid death perhaps involves the accidental handgun discharge in the car cabin scene in *Pulp Fiction* (1994). The scalping of Nazis in *Basterds* reminds me of the peeling of Marsays’ skin (Book VI), the two artists like to show not only blood, but internal organs too. Their violence is gory, but usually quick, there is no drawn out pain to stress a hero’s sacrifice in *Basterds*, except for Shosanna’s death. One might say Sgt. Rachtmann’s demise is like that of Lampetides during the battle at the palace of Cepheus. (Book V) Especially relevant here for *Basterds*’ tavern scene is the gory and quickly paced violence in the wedding banquet battle between the Lapiths and Centaurs. (Book XII) Sgt. Stiglitz’ senseless knifing of the back of Maj.

Hellstrom's head is perfectly fitting in an Ovidian melee. Tarantino's filmic violence may owe something to Ovid, or they share like-mindedness. What strikes me most now about Ovid's banquet battle is how it begins, with the celebrants throwing cups and bowls at each other. This scene may be the inspiration for a tradition of cinematic kitchenware fights, people throwing plates and such at each other, as Ovid says, "things intended for feasting, now used for fighting and killing." One example of this is found in a fight scene in Tarantino's *Kill Bill Volume 1* (2003) where a cup, dishes, a frying pan, and even a box of breakfast cereal are deployed as weapons.

Another great literary figure *Basterds* borrows from is Shakespeare, the greatest borrower of literature ever. I sense in Col. Landa's discussion about rats the influence of Shylock's revenge speech (*MOV* 3.1.47-67) and the oration on the "certain loathing" he has for Antonio (*MOV* 4.1.35-62). When Landa speaks to an unseen American general about all the outrageous benefits he requires, I find a similarity in Lancelot Gobbo's grandiose imagining about what rewards he will gain for switching sides. (*MOV* 2.2.150-160) *Basterds* has a film within a film, and *Midsummer Night's Dream* has a play within a play. The play, *Pyramus and Thisbe*, is itself borrowed from *Metamorphoses*. In turn, Ovid's tale of lovers who die together influence another Shakespeare work, *Romeo and Juliet*. A relationship between Shosanna and Fredrick would enormously fit a Romeo and Juliet situation of love against social obstacle. The motif of young lovers dying together may be so culturally pervasive that it arises here with no instigation from Shakespeare or Ovid. However, I believe not in this case, for there is a staging clue pointing to an influence. Thisbe falls in love with Pyramus through a hole in a wall. Likewise, Shosanna falls for Fredrick through a hole in a wall.

*Hamlet* is invoked in the tavern scene. In a discussion whether a German author could authentically create American characters, the German film star Bridget von

Hammersmark remarks Shakespeare wrote about a Dane, “The character is the character. Hamlet is not British, he is Danish.” Sgt. Wilhelm asks von Hammersmark to sign a little napkin for his newborn son. She signs it “To Max, with love, Bridget von Hammersmark.” Next she busses the fabric with a lipstick kiss. Col. Landa later discovers the napkin. It serves as conclusive proof of von Hammersmark’s betrayal. Likewise, Othello takes the discovery of Desdemona’s little napkin as conclusive proof of Desdemona’s betrayal. The inversion--and little is not inverted in *Basterds*--Desdemona is innocent, her napkin was planted. The writing and kiss on the napkin are an interesting appropriation of Emilia’s eyewitness description of Desdemona with her napkin:

For he conjured her she should ever keep it,  
That she reserves it evermore about her  
To kiss and talk to. (*Othello* 3.3.294-296)

Tarantino metamorphoses Shakespeare’s imagery onto the napkin with pen and lipstick. Also interesting is that he has it as a napkin. Shakespeareans would normally call it a handkerchief, as it is named twenty-four times in the play. However, three times it is called a napkin, including Othello’s first mention of it, “Your napkin is too little.” (*Othello* 3.3.287)

World War II films are a pervasive influence on *Basterds*, especially *The Dirty Dozen*. Normally *Basterds* must outdo the precedent, so instead of one set of holy warriors we get two. The target is scaled up from German Army officers in rural France to the whole Nazi high command in Paris (minus the missing top official). There are many thematic and situational similarities between the films. I focus here on two: God and bad accents. In *The Dirty Dozen* religion is introduced when Lee Marvin interviews Telly Savalas, the latter playing a murderous psychopath named Maggott. The two talk about a biblical injunction against revenge. Savalas quotes from Romans 12:19, “Vengeance is mine, I

will repay, sayeth the Lord.” Marvin parries, “isn’t that supposed to mean we leave punishment of the transgressors to His capable hands?” Savalas replies, “But it doesn’t restrict Him to the kind of tools he would use, now does it?” The scene ends with a bad Southern accented sneer from Marvin suggesting we should look down on Savalas as insane, and almost worse, religious and a Southerner. But Savalas is right, as he is with the Army psychologist who doubts his religious observation about Marvin saving the Dozen from hell. The Dozen are sprung from military prison and transformed into agents of God’s revenge to be tried and tested in their personal purgatory, the attack on the French chateau. They eat their last meal portrayed as the Twelve Apostles at the Last Supper. Marvin is the Jesus figure, but a weak one, he cannot offer the prisoners pardon, but he says he will try his best to get their earthly sentences commuted. The Americans had planned an American-style shoot ‘em up attack, a “turkey shoot.” But Savalas shoots at his fellow soldiers before the planned attack begins. The gun play alerts the Germans. The highest ranking officers, and their female companions, remove themselves with Germanic efficiency to an underground bomb shelter, a demise the Americans would not have thought up. It is an allegorical Nazi death chamber and Savalas is a necessary Judas, his treason is required to realize God’s plan, revenge.

One can encounter World War II films and texts and *Munich* (2005) in which Jewish characters confer whether fighting back constitutes the biblically forbidden revenge. I think Tarantino would find these conversations, often tinged with authorial moral superiority over subject, trite and stupid in the face of people who really want to kill you. If *Basterds* is responsive to these Jewish characters and their creators it is as if Tarantino reeducates and reforms them boot camp-style about the reality of Hitler and World War II in Europe. The instructor is Tarantino, who is part-Cherokee and from Tennessee, metamorphosed into Lt. Aldo Raine, who is a part-Indian Tennessean too. Explorations of moral equivalency and the common (in)humanity of man in World War II cinema are

not new ideas and Tarantino treats these sentiments like toys. The only developed German characters who are possible good guys, Fredrick and Wilhelm, get a pass because they know film, and are not killed by the Basterds anyway. Elsewhere, German prison guards are emblemized with evil via a copy of the newspaper *Der Stürmer*, the most fanatical of Nazi racist media. Tarantino makes sure the newspaper is utterly destroyed. In another scene three German regulars are captured in the woods. They seem to be nice guys. Sgt. Rachtmann is developed to be an honorable man, the good German soldier. But the build up is a set up. When The Bear Jew asks Rachtmann if he earned his Iron Cross “for killing Jews,” the German replies with one word, “bravery.” By itself the word is an unresponsive redundancy since the Iron Cross is a bravery medal. But the way he sneers “*bravery*” confirms the The Bear Jew’s inquiry, reforming the act of murdering civilians into praiseworthy heroism. With a single word the film destroys the motif of the presumed innocence of regular German army personnel, and puts to question what this unit of nice guys had been up to. In my back story for the scene The Bear Jew’s emotional release arises from the realization that this time his victim is assuredly guilty.

Back to divine intervention, a matter much present in *Metamorphoses*. On the screen within the screen Shosanna says the theater fire is “Jewish revenge.” But there is no such thing as Jewish or Christian revenge. As in the *The Dirty Dozen*, the religious tension about acts purported to be revenge are resolved in *Basterds* with the intervention of God. This is the “Revenge of the Big Face.” Shosanna’s big face appears on the theater’s screen after Fredrick’s. It reminded me of Joan of Arc’s big face in the big-facey film *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) because Shosanna is a savior of France too. In interview Tarantino confirms Shosanna is a Joan of Arc figure. But the face of God ultimately supersedes Shosanna’s face in the transforming smoke that fills the theater, even his feet appear. The smoke and faces are inspired by the scene in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)

where the Holy Ark is desecrated. Some might call this “homage.” It looks more like an owning to me.

*Basterds* and *The Dirty Dozen* explore failed metamorphoses too. Americans do not do European well, and given the Gen. Fenech character, the same applies to Canadians too. Americans think bad accents, foreign and domestic, are funny. Representations of bad accents are replete in the American World War II film and television genre of the 1960’s and 1970’s. In *The Dirty Dozen* there are bad and corny accents, and Charles Bronson’s self-acknowledged weak grasp of German. Lee Marvin, besides providing the inspiration for the gruff mid-American portion of Lt. Raine’s miscellaneous accent, takes some turns at different bad accents and inflections. His Southern is much worse than Savalas’, and purposely humorous. Elsewhere he announces seemingly ironic vocal inflections which are jarringly awful. Perhaps these are humorous references to earlier filmic precedents. But with one word, “arrivederci,” the actor Brad Pitt as Lt. Raine owns all previous presentations of American military gruff talk. This word, and Col. Landa’s Italian lesson, are also Tarantino’s linguistic owning and trashing of Leni Riefenstahl, which will take some explaining.

Von Hammersmark remarks that “Germans have a bad ear for Italian accents,” a proposition I will accept as true. But, as it turns out, Col. Landa has a good Italian accent, and can shift between German to Italian to French with ease. His facility in Italian allows for the humorous predicament where he educates and grades the Italian accents and body language of the *Basterds* Omar and The Bear Jew. Bad Italian accents, arrivedercis, and gesticulations are also a part of Riefenstahl’s film *Das blaue Licht* (1932). Riefenstahl produced, directed, co-edited, starred in, and provided the story idea for the film. It is the film most her. She plays Junta, a name she invented for an Italian-speaking girl. Junta lives on Crystal Mountain in the Italian-speaking region of

Switzerland. She treasures the mountain's crystals that sparkle blue in the blue moonlight. In the documentary *Die Macht der Bilder: Leni Riefenstahl [The Power of Pictures]* (1993) Riefenstahl says the crystals are "symbolic of the ideal one always dreams of but never attains." Interestingly, this sounds like the mineral called "unobtainium" in *Avatar* (2009). Maybe this is just a meaningless coincidence, like *Avatar's* wide use of blue light. Anyway, back on Earth, Vigo, Junta's innocent love interest, discovers the cave and its crystals. Convinced that the exploitation of this natural resource would help everyone including Junta, he informs the nearby villagers who arm themselves with mining gear and invade the pristine mountain followed by a handicapped guy... which sure sounds like a debarkation on the planet Pandora, except mountains can float there. The sparkly bits in the faces of the Pandorians, are those like the water glitter that fades in over Junta's portrait at the film's beginning, or the light-reflecting waterfall droplets on her beautiful dead face at the end? Or are they the crystals that surround the portrait, or stud the cave wall, or all four? Are the winners in *Avatar* a race of extraterrestrial Riefenstahls? She would have liked their physiques. Anyway, there are several open borrowings from *Das blaue Licht* in *Basterds'* first chapter. Junta and Shosanna at the dairy farm wear the same tattered frock and similar blouses. Both experience a running escape to a forest, both chased by weapons, rocks and sticks after Junta, handguns after Shosanna and Sunshine in *Little Big Man*. The French dairy farm house feels like Junta's pastoral farm house. Farmer Perrier LaPadite manly chops a tree stump, Vigo axes small pieces of wood against a boulder—he is a city guy from Vienna. Some have noted the view outside through the French farm house door recalls the ending shot of *The Searchers* (1956) which is true, but I think it is also in part Vigo's view of the forest through Junta's house door. The setting Vigo describes as "schön," Tarantino makes terrifying. Notably, both films have milk drinking by a Germanic intruder. For *Basterds* the LaPadites and Dreyfuses had to be dairy farmers, not vintners or some other agricultural enterprise, because the farm house is a re-creation

of *Das blaue Licht*. What Riefenstahl offers as an idyllic refuge of bucolic purity Tarantino recasts, or shows to be, a locus of Nazi horror. *Basterds* has two blue illuminations. The gunfire that kills the Dreyfuses fills the farmhouse with floating detritus. The bits that float in front of Landa's face are lit blue and shine. Are these the ghosts of the dead victims, or the presence of Crystal Mountain, or something else? It is an enigmatic moment, perhaps a hint at the mesmerizing power of film, a Riefenstahl forté. Easier to interpret is the blue lit big face of Shosanna at the end of *Nation's Pride*. In *Das blaue Licht* Riefenstahl's big face is lit blue by the moon above. Shosanna's face is lit blue from below. She is Leni from hell.

There are laughs too, and these come with the aforementioned accents. Vigo cannot speak Italian. After a stagecoach drops him off near Santa Maria village he tries his first "arrivederci" accompanied with an attempt at an Italian arm gesture. He later says two more bad arrivedercis to Junta after the discovery of the crystal cave, a poignant moment when she cannot comprehend what Vigo means or intends. There is an Italian lesson where Junta teaches Vigo the Italian word for bread and Vigo shows her a block of cheese and says "formaggio." Junta replies, "Molto bene, molto bene, molto bene." By comparison Col. Landa is economical, he needs only one "Bravo" to make his point. I think Riefenstahl's voice is cutest here, and is cute elsewhere, kind of like a kitten mewling. But her Italian accent is not great, she is certainly no Landa. Her accent accelerates into camp in the scene where she recounts her escape from the village. Her accent has a different quality here, I thought it was a voice over from another actress, or she practiced this part more, plus her Italian-like gesticulations are over the top.

Anthropomorphically, the farm animals look at her quizzically. I cannot tell if these are German animals who find Italianness curious, or Italian animals who find the portrayal ridiculous, like the Basterds' reaction to Landa's attempt at American. Anyway, the Italian is bad and if I had a name like Tarantino I might take offense. He outdoes

Riefenstahl by showing a German speak Italian well, an American do a funnier bad arrivederci, and a portrayal of Italian body language with subtlety—though still humorously.

But as accents go, the worst one belongs to the film's best linguist, Col. Landa. Landa can do European, but he cannot do American. With one word, "bingo," the fearsome monster transforms himself into a buffoon to be laughed at. His attempt at American mannerism is epic failure. He wants to transform himself into an American, but cannot, or Tarantino will not let him. He treasures Lt. Raine's oversized Bowie knife (an American icon) and readily parts with his smaller SS dagger engraved with the German words meaning "My Honor is Loyalty." For his disloyalty he wants a Medal of Honor, a pension, and property on Nantucket Island. Nantucket Island connotes New England-ish Yankee-dom, very *haute* American, L. L. Bean and Ralph Lauren territory. But an American metamorphosis will not be allowed because the Basterds carve a swastika on his forehead. Not only is Landa the film's biggest buffoon, he is the biggest betrayer. Among other things, Landa is Tarantino's demolition of the motif of German honor.

While *Metamorphoses* explores the transformative effects of love, *Basterds* explores betrayal. The betrayals grow through the film. They begin with the near meaningless betrayal of the precise whereabouts of the Dreyfus family and end with the humongous and incredible treason of Col. Landa. If there is a "common humanity of man" theme explored studiously in *Basterds* it is rage and disgust at traitors. In Paris Shosanna is the hyper-emblematic French girl. She could be Marianne, Deneuve-style. Her *nom de guerre*, Emmanuelle Mimieux, is uniquely and mellifluously French. At one point she sits at a Parisian bistro and drinks coffee and smokes a cigarette and reads a book, a very French milieu and characterization—at least in American representation. Shosanna signifies France. A different kind of France is presented in two other women, Babette

and Francesca. Babette is the girlfriend of a Waffen SS soldier. She mistakenly complements Shosanna/Emmanuelle for having a German boyfriend. “You’re a very lucky girl, catching a brave war hero,” Babette says. The next French traitor is Francesca, Goebbels’ mistress and translator. Shosanna meets her in a serious, tension-filled scene at an elegant restaurant. At one side of the table sit Shosanna and Fredrick. Seated on the other side are Goebbels, Francesca and a French (Standard) Poodle. The French Poodle denotes France in American iconography. “Poodle” in current British usage denotes lapdog, pawn. I think at one or two points the French actress playing Shosanna suppresses a giggle about the poodle. Anyway, Francesca gets her just desserts, but by the Basterds, not Shosanna or Marcel. Hitler and Goebbels are shot together, but Francesca gets the screen all to herself, dispatched with special rage. The only time Shosanna can allow herself to show rage at a traitor is with the kidnapped film editor whom she and Marcel accuse of being a collaborator. If he really is, that is left ambiguous. The film is full of such thought-provoking devices.

The transformations into traitors on the Germanic side are complex and their degrees of excusability explored. Basterd Hugo Stiglitz was a regular German army soldier who killed thirteen German officers. However, all were Gestapo officers. In the calculus of Anglophone World War II film and television even SS officers can take the high ground over the Gestapo, because *everybody* hates the Gestapo, evident everywhere from *Hogan’s Heroes* to *Where Eagles Dare* (1968). For example, Col. Landa shows no distaste for Stiglitz and merely declaims him for “insubordination.” This modicum of respect, like that shown to open enemies, is not shown to film star Bridget von Hammersmark, illustrated in the escalations of anger directed towards her. In the tavern party games a “Mata Hari” card is dealt, but not to von Hammersmark. Mata Hari was a glamorous female spy, but she was not a traitor. Von Hammersmark is dealt two cards, “Genghis Khan” and “G. W. Pabst.” Genghis Khan is certainly not a positive

connotation and G. W. Pabst, a film director, was a kind of traitor. Within the international arts community it was seen as immoral to stay in Nazi Germany and work in cinema. However, he had no involvement with Nazi propaganda films, perhaps that is why we do not see him wiped out in the theater, unlike the actor Emil Jannings. Von Hammersmark's treason is ambiguous, it is unclear why the "double agent" switched sides. No ideological reason is offered. According to Gen. Fenech, she "approached" the British "two years ago," June 1942. Is she a fair weather friend who switched sides when the tide turned? From an American perspective the turning point of the war was the Battle of Midway in June 1942. Col. Landa later claims she was purchased. But would a spy for mere money dream up Operation Kino, her personally risky "brainchild" to wipe out the Nazi elite? Regardless, von Hammersmark provides a focal point for Tarantino to explore rage at the traitor. First, Maj. Hellstorm shows a crack in his investigative composure when he says "shut up slut" to von Hammersmark. Soon thereafter Sgt. Wilhelm changes his negotiation demeanor and tells the Basterds to get this "fucking traitor" away from him. The rage responses peak with Landa's manhandling of von Hammersmark, a surprising twist indeed, given his otherwise calm conduct. Yet, in the end, the smartest, smoothly evilest, and "Aryan"-est Nazi in cinematic history reveals himself to be the brashiest traitor and hypocrite of all time, merely to save his own skin. This outcome is not merely Tarantino's imagination, but based on a true historical fact.

The actor Brad Pitt said the following to the German magazine *Stern*:

"The Second World War could still deliver more stories and films, but I believe that Quentin put a cover on that pot," and, "With *Basterds*, everything that can be said to this genre has been said. The film destroys every symbol. The work is done, end of story."

The words "the work is done" echo Ovid, literally. "And now the work is done" is Ovid's segue into his version of "this just might be my masterpiece" at the end of his story. This precise wording is unique to A. S. Kline's excellent contemporary translation

of *Metamorphoses*,\* the most popular and accessible edition given that it is freely available on the internet. Although Ovid is the master of ownership of things past, I venture to say Tarantino could win an award for best individual metamorphosis for his fictional depiction of our missing real-life top Nazi. Several times the film instructs all of the Nazi high command will attend the *Nation's Pride* premier. At the theater we see Goebbels and Hitler. Surtitles are deployed to didactically point out the presence of Hermann Goering and Martin Bormann. Message delivered: where is Himmler? Heinrich Himmler, the "Architect of the Holocaust," head of the SS and Gestapo, the regime's real No. 2 and chief of security, does not appear in the film. In Tarantino's history there is no exact Himmler, but he appears through a fictional character, Col. Hans Landa. This metamorphosis is a remarkable aesthetic joke, but some history first. Landa's story of betrayal is Himmler's little known story, fictionalized but realized. In the last months of the war Himmler endeavored various secret attempts to cut a deal with the British to surrender Germany to the Western Allies. Each offer was premised on his gaining legal immunity for himself from war crimes trials. He had a surreally respectful meeting with a representative of neutral Sweden's Jewish community trying to gain the Swede's assistance in this pursuit, and took the occasion to rationalize the Holocaust. In his last days Himmler thought if only he could talk to Gen. Eisenhower for an hour he could win himself immunity and the position of Chief of Police of post-war Germany. Landa is a little different. He wants war crimes immunity, but no part of Germany, just a chunk of Nantucket, a pension, and a rewriting of history. To avoid a war crimes trial Landa offers a deal to not interfere with Operation Kino. This has a resonance in another earlier episode of self-serving treason by Himmler. As early as 1942 he tried back channel communications with the British to get rid of Hitler and end the war with the Western Allies so he could take over and continue the fight with the Soviets. Of course, these included demands for his legal immunity. It is believed he had an inkling of an idea about the von Stauffenberg bomb plot to kill Hitler in 1944, the one portrayed in the film

*Valkyrie* (2008). He did not interfere hoping someone would knock off Hitler and then he could take over. After the plot failed he rounded up the many co-conspirators so quickly because he already had a good idea who they were.

Himmler is a difficult personage to own cinematically. He is so outwardly plain. Monty Python's *Mr. Hitler* sketch (1970) takes a funny stab at "Mr. Bimmler" as a buffoon trying to speak like an Englishman--his pronunciation of "window" is especially horrible--but this was not Himmler's demeanor. Sir Stephen Henry Roberts, the Australian scholar who met many top Nazis before the war, described Himmler as "the most normal man in Germany." The first sentence of *Metamorphoses* reads, "I want to speak about bodies changed into new forms." Tarantino takes a novel approach. He transforms Himmler into an opposite, Col. Landa, fit, handsome, compelling, and sophisticated. This conversion of the unattractive Himmler into a good looking monster is more than a visual trick to show how evil can look good. Besides being chief of security for the Nazi state, Himmler was the foremost promoter of the Nazi ideal of "Aryan" beauty, fitness and racial hygiene. For example, he invented the *Lebensborn* program to breed healthy blue-eyed blondes. The visual dissonance of Himmler in this leadership role is shocking, as if the Jaws character took over the Drax role in the eugenics film *Moonraker* (1979). A Nazi official said of Himmler, "If I looked like him, I would not speak of race at all." Tarantino builds his Himmler/Landa monster into cinema's sharpest representation of Nazi ideology and iconography, then subverts them in the end by revealing that Nazism's highest adulator of German honor was its brashest betrayer and a buffoon. Landa is Himmler's apotheosis, one could say he is for all of Nazism too, then torn down, humiliated, owned by a truth. I think this single metamorphosis outdoes any one of Ovid's. But Ovid was at a disadvantage, he did not have the great monsters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for material.

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