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Human Artistry and Divine Jealousy

Ovid has already made clear the egotism and vindictiveness of the Olympian gods, who cannot endure a human rival. But their jealousy is not confined to sexual matters, and the poet will demonstrate repeatedly how human artists are punished, or simply victimized, for challenging a god's professional expertise. In this context, it does not matter whether their performance succeeds or fails: to compete with a god on any terms brings loss of human identity. Among the five tales of divinely imposed metamorphosis in books 5–6, three are of formal contests and illustrate how human musicians and artists compete with divine beings and suffer for it.

Ovid's first example is so extended that one competition piece displaces the main text. When Pallas Athene comes to Helicon to see Hippocrene, the fountain created by the winged horse Pegasus, she graciously congratulates the Muses, daughters of Memory, on their skill and the amenities of their new home. Suddenly there is a beating of wings and the sound of birds—nine magpies—uttering recognizable human greeting. The Muse Urania explains that these are the daughters of Pieros and Euippe, only freshly turned into birds after being defeated in a song contest. Here the poet teases his

readers, since this parentage would make these human sisters Pierides, a name regularly given to the Muses themselves; but he has found and exploited a variant myth in Nicander and will call the Muses by other names through this long episode. We are told that the sisters challenged the Muses to a song contest, boasting that they would not be outdone in singing or artistry. Their spokeswoman proposed that if the sisters won, the Muses should resign claim to the fountain, but if they lost, the sisters would leave the region altogether. In this and other contests it seems to be assumed that the losers must pay a penalty, though this was not the pattern in Greek games. It is also the practice (as in Virgil's pastoral song contests) that the challenger names a judge, and if this judge is accepted by the other contestant they proceed. We are told that the Pierides demanded the nymphs as judges; the formalities were observed and the nymphs sworn in before taking their seats.

How much can Ovid convey of the rival performances? His audience, of course, can measure only the quality of the written text offered by the poet. But this would be only one of the four skills tested in such competitions. Whether the poetic genre was lyric or epic (and this will be epic), the same person was poet and composer, singer and accompanist on the lyre: in *mousike*, the Greek art of song, the one artist both created and then performed words and music. This was the art of the citharode, invented by Apollo, who will put in a professional appearance later in this chapter and Ovid's poem. On this occasion, Ovid does not report the competition in person but leaves it to the Muse, a party we may suspect of some bias. She begins by summarizing the song of the leading Pierid sister—who apparently narrated the wars of the giants against the Olympians, giving false credit to the giants and belittling the gods' heroism. The Pierid even claimed that Typhoeus put the gods to flight as far as Egypt—and at this point the Muse reproduces her words:

> "and Jove became a ram,"
> She said, "Lord of the herd, and so today
> Great Libyan Ammon's shown with curling horns,
> Phoebus hid as a raven, Bacchus a goat,
> Phoebe a cat, Juno a snow-white cow,
> Venus a fish, and Mercury an ibis" (5.327–31, tr. Melville)

The song seems rather perfunctory, but despite the historically correct equation of Greek and Egyptian deities, it was clearly offensive in its blasphemous content. Next, it is the turn of the Muses, again represented by one sister, Calliope. Encouraged by Athene, Calliope produces a complete miniature epic (5.341–661) on the rape of Persephone by Dis and Ceres' search. Of course, Ovid has given it all his narrative skill and incorporated a feminist perspective to appeal to the nymph-judges; male gods are lustful or untrustworthy, and human males are rude or treacherous; only the nymphs Cyane and Arethusa are loyal and helpful. The judges unanimously declare for the Muses. In anger the defeated Pierides turn to abuse and are punished for being bad losers by transformation into magpies as noisy and garrulous as the girls themselves had been.

Tapestry: The Feminine Art

The story leads Athene to think about her own prestige and the praise and thanks that are her due as inventor and teacher of weaving. She is angered that the young weaver Arachne, born of a humble family, is supposedly her match in skill. Indeed, the nymphs would desert their streams not just to see her completed tapestries but to observe her in action—carding, spinning, and weaving. Arachne is so skilled, says the poet editorially, that you would know she had learnt from Pallas Athene, but she denies it and issues a challenge, declaring that she is willing to pay any forfeit if she loses (6.1–25). When Athene accosts her disguised as an old woman, she persists in her disrespect until Athene reveals her identity and imposes a contest between them. This time Ovid gives both contestants equal treatment, first describing how they work at speed to set up their looms, "moving their expert arms, as their dedicated concentration makes the toil pass unnoticed" (6.59–60). Indeed, his magical description of subtle rainbow shading is applied to both webs alike.

He describes the goddess's tapestry first (suggesting that it will be outdone by her rival): it is self-congratulatory, if not also self-fulfilling, representing her previous victory over Neptune when they competed before the other gods for patronage of Athens. Ovid describes twelve gods in ceremonial symmetry on either side of Jupiter (but this is problematic: Athene and Neptune are competing before ten others!). She shows Neptune striking the earth with his trident, and the fountain emerging, then herself, fully armed, striking the earth, from which emerges a tree loaded with olives: the gods marvel and her work produces victory. Then to warn her rival she weaves in each of the four corners an example of those who foolishly competed with the gods and suffered metamorphosis. Finally, she surrounds its edges with olive branches and marks the end of her work with the foliage of her tree (6.70–102).

Arachne's theme is also metamorphosis, but in an aesthetically daring and morally scandalous form: first, she illustrates Europa deceived by Jupiter as the bull, "so vividly you would think it a real bull and real seas" (the reader too would have been deceived!); Europa seems to be looking back to land (cf. 2.873) and calling to her companions and shrinking from the leaping waves. But this is only one of more than twenty scenes of women raped by Jupiter, Neptune, Apollo, Bacchus, and Saturn, each god shown only in the animal or material disguise adopted for his sexual purpose: Jupiter, for example, appears to Danae (and Arachne's spectators) as gold, and to Tyro as fire, while Bacchus seduces Erigone in the form of a bunch of grapes. To complete her canvas, the last part of the web is surrounded with a delicate border of ivy interwoven with entwining flowers.

Ovid does not indicate how these scenes were arranged on the tapestry, though modern critics suggest a swirling spiral, which would certainly be a technical challenge. Instead, the poet implies her success by affirming that it leaves nothing for Pallas to fault. Envy itself could not criticize the work of art, but the goddess, in her jealousy, tears apart her rival's cloth and strikes Arachne with her shuttle. The girl tries to hang herself in bitter indignation, but Athene crowns her injustice by shrinking Arachne into a spider, which spins threads from its belly, still weaving her webs as she did in the past. To this reader at least, the destruction of Arachne's masterpice seems more terrible than the ensuing metamorphosis. If Athene were not a goddess, we would call this a tantrum, and the poet shares the popular indignation that he reports: even if all artists are conceived as learning from divine skill, Ovid sees the outcome as beyond justification by Arachne's pride or ingratitude.

Here is a consummate artist of humble origin, acknowledging no debts for her artistry and challenging authority by its contents, destroyed along with her masterpiece by a jealous authority figure. Could Arachne stand for Ovid himself, with Pallas playing Augustus (see Lateiner 1984)? Hardly, I think, unless he composed this scene after Augustus had sent him into exile by his personal decree. To have set up such an implicit analogy before the blow of exile would have been asking for the penalty Ovid actually suffered.

In the symbolism of literature, such woven tapestries have an importance beyond that common to all textiles as measure of a woman's skill. They are also the female counterpart to men's poetry. In the *Iliad,* Helen weaves tapestries narrating the events of the war, just as the hero Achilles sings to his lyre the narratives of former heroic deeds. But they are more than that. When the weavers are setting up their looms, the poet speaks of the ancient narrative (*argumentum,* 69) being laid down on the web, and the final border of Arachne's tapestry ends with the word translated as "interwoven" (*intertextos,* 128), evoking the affinity of woven design with written text, both constructed in rows across an existing tissue (papyrus was made of horizontal layers glued across vertical ones). The convergence of pictorial with written communication is most apparent in the secret message woven later in book 6 by the imprisoned Philomela, whose tongue has been cut out by her rapist. What she sends to alert her sister to her fate is a tapestry with signs woven in red on a ground of white, "evidence of the crime committed" (6.576–8). Procne "unrolls the cloth" (like a written scroll) and "reads the pitiable poem of her misfortune" (6.581). Has Philomela woven a

written text or a visual depiction of her rape? In choosing the word "marks," or "signs" (*notae*) (6.577), Ovid may be recalling the secret message sent with Bellerophon at *Iliad* 6.168, bearing ominous *semata* (marks or signs) to ensure his execution. Like the contest, Philomela's message equates tapestry with text, but unlike Arachne's web, her message reverses the balance of power. There could be no stronger symbol of both the silencing of women and the compensation afforded by the written word, as Charles Segal has brought out in "Philomela's Web and the Pleasures of the Text" (1994).

Yet Ovid undoubtedly saw poetry in its full musical form as the highest art, and he expresses its power through two other musical contests and through the person and music of Orpheus. In book 11 Ovid portrays Apollo competing as citharode in full concert attire:

> Apollo's golden hair
> Was garlanded with laurel of Parnassus;
> His mantle, rich with Tyrian purple, swept
> The ground he trod; in his left hand he bore
> His lyre, inlaid with gems and ivory;
> His right the plectrum held, his very pose
> Proclaimed the artist. Then with expert touch
> He plucked the strings. (11.165–70, tr. Melville)

This is an unequal contest, as Ovid warns his readers, because Apollo is competing with Pan, whose instrument is only the reed pipes: a piper cannot sing but can only accompany another singer, so Pan produces only melody without words. But although Pan loses the contest, he is still a god and does not suffer; it is only the misguided critic Midas who is punished with a partial metamorphosis, growing asses' ears because he preferred the pipes. According to tradition, another piper, Marsyas the satyr, was brutally punished by Apollo for competing. But after the cruel tale of Niobe in book 6, Ovid has had enough of contests and of Apollo's vengeance. In sharp contrast he only briefly evokes Apollo's flaying of the satyr who dared to rival his music and subordinates Marsyas's protests (6.382–400) at divine injustice to the metamorphosis by which the tears shed for Marsyas's death became the Phrygian river that bears his name.

The Isolation of the Poet and Artist: Orpheus and Pygmalion

Apollo was also father, by the Muse Calliope, of the singer-poet Orpheus, and the god's trivial contest with Pan comes only after Ovid has told the tragic story of Orpheus and his miraculous art. As the miniature epic of his mother, Calliope, occupied the second half of book 5, so the many poetic tales of Orpheus fill book 10. As a poet's epic his song sequence will be analyzed later in its own right, but since Orpheus was always the model of the supreme artist, we should pause here to notice how simply Ovid conveys the emotional power of his artistry, not with elaborate detail of the performance, but by reporting its effect on even inhuman listeners. When Orpheus descends to Hades to plead for the restoration of Eurydice, the dead souls weep at his words, as he plucks his lyre; tormented sinners pause from their punishments, and even the Furies grow teary-eyed (10.40–8). As in Virgil's memorable account in the fourth *Georgic,* the rulers of Hades are moved to compassion and allow Orpheus to rescue Eurydice, but then he fails through love and breaks their conditions by looking back, thus losing her.

Seeking solitude on the Thracian hillside, he attracts with his music a virtual arboretum of trees that "crowd into a shade" (10.90–105), and wild creatures and birds sit attentively round him like an audience as he tunes his strings (143–4). Ovid gives Orpheus a formal proem, in which he invokes his mother, the Muse, and acknowledges tradition by proposing Jupiter as the proper opening theme but then excuses his substitution of a lighter program consisting of tales of boys loved by the gods and the sinful passions of girls. It is not his erotic material that will destroy Orpheus but his earlier denunciation of women, which leads to the brutal attack by the Thracian maenads, whose Bacchic cries and noisy instruments prevent them from hearing the melody of his lyre; if they had heard it, says Ovid, then surely the very stones they threw would have grown soft. Instead, the rocks (just now part of his attentive audience) grew red with the blood of the poet, whose appeal (this time)

went unheard. When Orpheus is torn apart, his head and lyre are received by the river Hebrus and float, murmuring pitiable laments, down to the sea, while the poet's shade is reunited with his beloved wife in death.

Orpheus was needed here to complete Ovid's implied manifesto of art, which is also carried to its extreme form in one of Orpheus's tales. The requited love of Pygmalion will claim our attention again in the context of relations between the sexes, but it would be negligent to write about Ovid's presentation of the artist without including the story that attributes to art its most miraculous success. In Greek myth it was Daedalus who was famous for making statues seem to live and move, and one might ask why Ovid has excluded this aspect of Daedalus's artistry from the *Metamorphoses,* celebrating Daedalus only for his invention of wings, to escape from Crete, and the tragic death of his little son. Perhaps Ovid excluded Daedalus's achievements as a sculptor because they involve no metamorphosis, perhaps because he wanted no competition with his own romantic account of the artist and lover Pygmalion. Certainly, Ovid is conscious of Daedalus's pride as an inventor, which motivates his jealous killing of his nephew and apprentice, young Perdix (8.235–55). But what marks Daedalus out is his suffering as a father: like the sun god, he loses his child because the boy does not heed his anxious instructions, and he cannot save him. Here we can compare the poignant repetitions of Ovid's verse in Latin with the English version (which substitutes a third repetition of "where" for the third calling of his name):

At pater infelix nec iam pater "Icare" dixit
"Icare" dixit, "ubi es? qua te regione requiram?"
"Icare" dicebat: pennas adspexit in undis
devovitque suas artes.

His wretched father, now no father, cried
"Oh Icarus, where are you? Icarus,
Where shall I look, where find you?" On the waves
He saw the feathers. Then he cursed his skill. (8.231–4,
tr. Melville)

Pygmalion as Creator

We know from other writers that in the Cypriot myth Pygmalion was a king, not an artist, and was lustfully infatuated with a statue of the goddess Venus, which he took from the sanctuary and polluted with his embrace—a tyrant and a sinner whom the goddess would not wish to reward. It is Ovid who makes Pygmalion into a shy sculptor, alienated from living women by their assumed vulgarity and lechery. And it is in a spirit of humility that the sculptor shapes the most beautiful girl he can imagine:

Meanwhile he carved his snow-white ivory
With marvelous triumphant artistry
And gave it perfect shape, more beautiful
Than any woman born. His masterwork
Fired him with love. It seemed to him alive,
Its face to be a real girl's, a girl
Who wished to move—but modesty forbade.
Such art his art concealed. (10.247–52, tr. Melville)

In homage to her beauty he offers gifts and adorns her with jewelry, laying the image on a luxurious couch. When the feast of Venus approaches, he sacrifices and prays to the goddess for a wife like his ivory maiden (not daring to voice his real desire for the maiden herself). Venus sends a sign of her blessing, and on his return he kisses the statue and feels it grow warm and soft to his touch—as if she were a wax model taking shape beneath his fingers. As he caresses the image, it first becomes flesh, then responds to his kisses, looking on her creator and lover at the moment she sees the light of day. In this tale of wish fulfillment, they are married and she gives birth to a son, Paphos (10.280–97).

Women readers may feel less enthusiasm for this story of the perfect wife and its implied guarantee that she will never show discontent or independence. (Compare Michael Longley's poem in Hofmann and Lasdun, *The New Metamorphoses,* in which Pygmalion's passion melts his new bride to nothing.) But it is more important to ask to what extent or in what sense Ovid really believed an

artist could give life. Ovid certainly had faith in the transcendence of the highest art. How far is this story a myth of artistic creation, and how far a simple miracle of piety rewarded? Is Pygmalion any more magically endowed than the pious Deucalion and Pyrrha? And is the final metamorphosis from ivory to living flesh really of a higher order than the initial metamorphosis from elephant tusk to a divine image like that of Athena Parthenos? Historically, ivory would be used only as an overlay for the exposed flesh of a life-size statue: it is already extraordinary for the sculptor to model a whole body in ivory. In Ovid's day life-size marble Aphrodites were more available in Rome, and I suspect he has made Pygmalion's maiden of ivory just because such elaborate work would be altogether beyond normal ambition. So, to my skeptical reading, this miracle is actually a less serious expression of Ovid's belief in the powers of art than the myths of poetry and music that both precede and follow it.

Further Reading

On Ovid's artists, see E. W. Leach, "*Ekphrasis* and the Theme of Artistic Failure in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," *Ramus* 3 (1974): 102–42; D. Lateiner, "Mythic and Non-mythic Artists in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*," *Ramus* 13 (1984): 1–30. On weaving and the development of the Roman concept of text, see J. Scheid and J. Svenbro, *The Craft of Zeus*, tr. C. Volk (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), 131–7. See also C. P. Segal, "Philomela's Web and the Pleasures of the Text: Reader and Violence in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid," in *Modern Critical Theory and Classical Literature*, ed. I. J. F. de Jong and J. P. Sullivan (Leiden, 1994), 257–80. On Pygmalion, see P. R. Hardie, *Ovid's Poetics of Illusion* (Cambridge, 2002); J. Elsner and A. Sharrock, "Re-viewing Pygmalion," *Ramus* 20 (1991): 149–82; also A. Sharrock, "Womanufacture," *Journal of Roman Studies* 81 (1991): 36–49. On more general aspects of depicting transformation, see A. Sharrock, "Representing Metamorphosis," in *Art and Text in Roman Culture*, ed. J. Elsner (Cambridge, 1996), 103–30.

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