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# PROCEEDINGS OF THE CAMBRIDGE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY

NO. 202 (NEW SERIES, NO. 22) 1976

CONTENTS

*page* 1 C. COLLARD, *Jeremiah Markland 1693–1776*

14 A. ANDREWES, *Androtion and the Four Hundred*

26 C. CAREY, *Pindar's eighth Nemean Ode*

42 J. DIGGLE, *Notes on the Iphigenia in Tauris of Euripides*

46 E. J. KENNEY, *Ovidius Prooemians*

54 E. J. KENNEY and J. DIGGLE, *Ausoniana*

56 R. MAYER, *Two notes on Latin poets*

60 T. C. W. STINTON, *'Si credere dignum est': some expressions of disbelief in Euripides and others*

90 J. P. SULLIVAN, *Interpolations in Petronius*

123 N. G. WILSON, *Aristarchus or a Sophist?*

# OVIDIUS PROOEMIANS

In noua fert animus mutatas dicere formas
corpora: di, coeptis (nam uos mutastis et illa)
adspirate meis primaque ab origine mundi
ad mea perpetuum deducite tempora carmen.

*illa* P.Lejay ex Erfurtano Amploniano 1 saec. xii: *illas* codd.

In spite of several valuable contributions to the understanding of this proem that have appeared in the last few years,[1] it does not seem to me that modern exegesis has as yet taken all the points that Ovid has contrived to pack into it. This is an astonishingly brief introduction to an epos over 12,000 lines long; and that very brevity ought to put us on our guard.[2] We should expect that not a word will be wasted; and with so little sea-room we should further expect that the reader, though he may be playfully tantalized, will not be actually misled. That was a risk Ovid could not afford to take. Unfortunately his editors have taken it for him by printing and justifying the nonsense which his copyists have made of the second verse of the poem. By so doing they have set a stumbling-block before the feet of the reader on the very threshold, just where the going should be smooth and the omens fair. Ovid's own lines might have been written to the address of the next edition of the *Metamorphoses*:

missa foras iterum limen transire memento
cautius atque alte sobria ferre pedem.

Von Albrecht's careful analysis of the vocabulary of the passage and its literary implications has shown that it is pitched at a stylistic level appropriate to epos. The structure of the verse period is also formal and emphatic. Ovid indeed begins by playing a little trick on the reader. The words 'in noua fert animus', as has more than once been pointed out, can be read autonomously: 'my inspiration carries (me) on to new things'.[3] As we shall find to be the case with other phrases in the proem, this can be taken in more than one sense. On the most obvious level it is a claim to originality: here is a work the like of which the world has never seen. That claim is certainly true and worth making. But the words also apply to the poet himself: Ovid's genius summons him to essay a kind of writing that is new for him. This point, as will be seen, is taken up and developed in what follows. However, as we read on we discover that 'noua' after all does not stand alone but has a syntactical complement in 'corpora' at the beginning



of v. 2; and we reinterpret the sentence. In doing so we do not discard our first interpretation; rather a new vista of meaning opens up. That this ambiguity is planned and not casual is probable *a priori*, for the reasons advanced above, but it is also suggested by the word order: Ovid could quite well have written 'in noua mutatas animus fert dicere formas'.

The enjambment of 'corpora' seems designed to throw emphasis less on that word than on what follows: the invocation, not of the Muse or a single deity but of the pantheon—all the gods indeed whose activities, irresponsible where they are not actually disreputable, Ovid is about to chronicle with such unsparing relish. But what was it that they 'also' changed? All attempts to retain the transmitted text are shipwrecked on the indefensible (though hotly defended) placing of 'et'. It is possible to keep 'illas' only, as Housman observed,[4] if 'et' refers back to 'mutastis': 'Inspire me to tell of transformations, for you were also the cause of them', in Mr Lee's rendering.[5] But as Hartman long ago remarked, in a contribution to the discussion that has been too little heeded, we surely have a right to expect something a little more pointed from this poet: 'Ovidium tamen equidem credo (et quis non credat?) Metamorphosesin suis praemisisse aliquid quod illarum sit proprium—et quod paululum certe habeat acuminis'.[6] Point, however, quite apart, the transmitted text is linguistically unacceptable unless it can be shown, not merely that the retrospective use of 'et' is possible for Ovid, but that it is possible *in this context*. On the face of it 'et' modifies 'illas', a fact of which Ovid could hardly be unaware. In this brief proem, where every word is to tell, how likely is it that he would have invited this obvious but, we are told, mistaken inference? And what was the literary gain in such an ambiguity? Or are we to suppose that this was the best he could do? We are discussing Ovid, not the poet of the *Culex* or *Ciris*.

It would be different if the defenders of the transmitted text were able to show that this trajection is not only characteristic of Ovid but is on occasion employed by him, with apparent perversity, to create just the kind of misunderstanding which the commentators on this verse so painstakingly endeavour to dispel. But this is not the case, and the 'parallels' collected by Bömer[7] and the others prove no such thing. In the first place only three are from Ovid himself, and it is on these that the case for the transmitted text must stand or fall. First, a passage that must be totally disallowed:

(1) spes quoque lenta fuit: tarde, quae credita laedunt,
credimus; inuita nunc es amante nocens.

*Her.* 2. 9–10

That this is what Ovid wrote was first formally demonstrated in print by M.D.Reeve (*CQ* n.s. 23 (1973) 324–5); the reading for which he argues was in fact approved by Housman many years before (*CR* 13 (1899) 175 = *Classical papers* 476). This leaves us with two Ovidian examples of postponed 'et':

(2) ...pertimuitque sonos propriaque exterrita uoce est.
uenit et ad ripas ubi ludere saepe solebat...

*Met.* 1. 638–9

Here 'et' refers forward to 'ripas' rather than back to 'uenit': 'she came also/even to the banks of her own father's stream' (cf. Bömer, 'sie kam auch'); but, what is crucial, *there is no ambiguity.*

(3) ...traxit in exemplum ferroque incidit acuto
perpetuos dentes et serrae repperit usum
primus et ex uno duo ferrea bracchia nodo
uinxit...

*Met.* 8. 245–8

I transcribe the text from Ehwald's revision (1915) of Merkel; the vulgate punctuation, on which Bömer apparently relies, with a full stop after v. 246, is not self-evidently correct.[8] However, let us accept it for the sake of argument: the postponement of 'et' is not in any way unusual, and since the word can in this case refer to nothing but 'primus', there is again *no ambiguity.*

I do not assert that nowhere in the works of Ovid is there a trajection of 'et' analogous to that postulated by the defenders of the transmitted text of *Met.* 1. 2; but I do assert that I have not yet seen it produced. Unless it is to be argued that Ovid is actually copying one of his predecessors for some special effect, the usage of other poets seems to me irrelevant. Nevertheless we may as well dispose of the other alleged 'parallels':

(4) dicendum et quae sint duris agrestibus arma.

Virg. *G.* 1. 160

More than one rendering is possible: 'I must also sing' or 'I must sing also'; but the emphasis falls on the new subject rather than on the word 'dicendum' (cf. (2) above). More important: *there is no ambiguity.*

(5) quattuor hinc rapimur uiginti et milia raedis.

Hor. *Sat.* 1. 5. 86



An undeniable and striking case of trajection, but: (i) this is satire, not a 'high' poetic genre; (ii) even for Horace this is a licentious postponement (cf. P.Lejay ad loc.), not in the least like our Ovidian passage or indeed any of the other passages cited by Bömer; (iii) there is no possibility of referring 'et' to 'milia' or to anything else but the two numerals. How this line sounded to the Roman ear I cannot guess, but *it cannot have been ambiguous.*

(6) tunc etiam felix inter et arma pudor.

Prop. 2. 9. 18

This example is again in a different category, since the words 'inter et arma' form a single phrase; and—for the last time—*there is no ambiguity.*

Such notions has the modern Ovidian commentator of a parallel.

It has been convincingly shown by Hartman and Luck,[9] and should not need to be shown all over again by me, that the only reading that satisfies the demands of both sense and latinity is Lejay's 'illa'. The persistent preference shown for the transmitted 'illas' by recent editors and commentators strikes me as not merely unaccountable but disconcerting and depressing, for it reveals the low expectations that they apparently entertain of their chosen poet. As with the first four words of v. 1, the conceit, thus re-established in the teeth of copyists, editors and interpreters, yields sense on more than one level. Obviously, as Luck points out, it glances at the change in Ovid himself, from 'poeta nequitiae suae' to the creator of a 'maius opus' that will for ever preserve his name and memory. But it is his 'coepta' that the gods are actually said to have changed, and the word is ambiguous. Commonly it means 'undertaking'; but the literal sense of something begun can never be wholly unfelt. Ovid then may be making a point about the character and quality of the poem itself. If the literal sense of 'coeptis' is pressed, the words imply that he had actually embarked upon another kind of poem but the gods had deflected his purpose. We have, that is to say, the adumbration, faint but in the context unmistakable, of the now classical theophany and divine admonition. Just as Apollo had intervened to turn Callimachus and Virgil from epic to a different kind of poetry (Virg. *Ecl.* 6. 3–5 = Callim. fr. 1. 21–8 Pf.), so the gods—not only Apollo on this occasion but the whole of Olympus (perhaps, as Mr J.C.Bramble has suggested to me, a deliberate programmatic perversion of the topos: an implicit denial of Apollo's exclusive right to dictate the poet's course?)—have saved Ovid from setting his hand to some less auspicious plan. What might that have been? The implication is perhaps that Ovid might have exploited some hackneyed formula analogous to the Gigantomachy rejected in the

*Amores* (2. 1. 11ff.), a mythological epic à la Apollonius or a catalogue poem in the manner of Aratus or Nicander.[10] It has indeed been ingeniously suggested that he went so far as to include in the *Metamorphoses* a specimen of the kind of epos that he wisely chose not to write, and that the monologue of Pythagoras in Book XV was projected and composed expressly to show the public, by boring it, what it had been spared: what, in less accomplished hands, the whole poem might have been like.[11] Be that particular point as it may, the implication of the phrase that we are considering is that the *Metamorphoses* itself exists in consequence of a metamorphosis. This is not cleverness for its own sake; it makes a perfectly serious point about the poem. It is, he tells us, not only original but (to strip Ovid's meaning of the polite fiction of divine assistance) the product of very careful thought and planning directed towards avoidance of all the possible pitfalls that lay in wait for the would-be writer of epic in the generation after Virgil. Ovid was here, in terms of the literary schema involved, traversing familiar ground. In the first three poems of the first Book of the *Amores*, which form a unified programmatic sequence (with the theophany motif employed explicitly but in an unexpected way), he had already drawn attention to the quality of the strategical planning, so to call it, that he brought to his poetry. In the proem to the *Metamorphoses* he has refined and compressed to an almost incredible degree the scheme which in his first work had been developed through three entire elegies. The conventional apparatus—theophany and admonition, the poet's reaction, resistance, compliance—is taken for granted; the merest suggestion, three words, 'mutastis et illa', suffices to convey the point. It is an agreeable paradox, surely intended to be understood and enjoyed, that the complexity and elaboration of the means employed is in inverse proportion to the significance of the point to be conveyed. The *Metamorphoses* was Ovid's chef d'oeuvre; this was the work on which he staked his posthumous reputation. In the coda to the poem (15. 871–9) he is more expansive but not more explicit. The *doctus poeta* has the right to expect a *doctus lector*.

The sentence which extends from 'di' to the end of v. 4 and of the proem moves fast and smoothly, with full enjambment of vv. 2–3 and quasi-enjambment of vv. 3–4.[12] The effect is achieved with the assistance of a technical device which Ovid was to make peculiarly his own: the important point that we have just discussed is communicated not merely allusively but in parenthesis.[13] The last verse of the period is a Golden Line of the abAB type, conferring dignity and emphasis and rounding the proem off. Even on this miniature scale the architecture is managed so as



to impress. The interpreters have rightly stressed the implications of the word 'perpetuum'. Read predicatively it has a purely chronological reference: 'assist me to tell a story that shall be continuous from the creation to my own day'. But in a programmatic context such as this 'perpetuum carmen' must inevitably have recalled for Ovid's readers the 'single continuous song', ἓν ἄεισμα διηνεκές, which Callimachus had been criticized for declining to write (fr. 1. 3 Pf.).[14] In announcing the epic pretensions of the *Metamorphoses* Ovid does so in language that implicitly but clearly draws attention to its un-Callimachean character. On the face of it the poem may resemble the *Aetia*, consisting as it does of a series of more or less discrete episodes strung together on an often slender thread of ingenious and sometimes far-fetched transitions; but, hints Ovid, don't let that fool you—it does possess a real unity. The suggestion of theophany and admonition in v. 2 has helped to prepare the way for this discreet evocation of Callimachus, who was, so far as the Augustans were concerned, the *fons et origo* of the motif.[15] But paradox now begins to verge on the disingenuous. 'When all is said and done, the resemblance to the *Aetia*, metre apart, is immediately obvious; and whatever thematic architecture Ovid's ingenuity might devise or the percipience of modern critics detect, the poem is bound to appeal to most readers as a collection of stories.'[16] Though the *Metamorphoses* no doubt ought to be read continuously for full effect, it need not be; the story of Acis and Galatea can be enjoyed without reference to the story of Narcissus and Echo, whereas no major episode of the *Aeneid* really makes sense in isolation.[17] To evoke Callimachus in making this claim is a good example of the sort of inspired cheek at which Ovid excelled.

In conclusion I wish to suggest that Ovid may have gone out of his way to underline quietly the impudence of what he was saying. The innocent-seeming word 'deducite' may itself be part of the intended paradox. With reference to the chronology of the poem it means simply 'bring down' or 'carry through' ('de-' of motion towards a goal). With reference to the poem itself it takes on another connotation altogether. Bömer has pointed out that when Horace and Propertius use 'deduco' with poetry as object, the subject is the poet; in making the gods the subject Ovid is innovating, and the innovation may have been designed to assist a witty ambiguity. For supposing that the gods comply with his request, what will be the literal result? Why, a 'deductum carmen': precisely that 'fine-spun song' enjoined on Virgil by the Virgilian-Callimachean Apollo (*Ecl.* 6. 5).[18] That, however, is a contradiction in terms, for a poem cannot be both 'deductum' and 'perpetuum', both Callimachean and un-Callimachean; but that, if we

press the word 'deducite', is the implication. Whether we are right to press it of course admits of argument; two considerations suggest that we are. The first is based on the point that has already been emphasized more than once, the brevity of the proem and the consequent likelihood that every word in it is pulling its weight; could Ovid conceivably have overlooked the programmatic nuance now possessed by the word 'deduco'? If he did, it is at least odd that he should have introduced it in this slightly unusual new sense. The second is even more fundamental. The more one thinks about the poem itself the more probable it becomes that the implication suggested above was intended by Ovid; for the simple reason that it is true. 'In noua fert animus': of all the remarkable features of this highly original poem, not the least remarkable is indeed the way in which it manages to get the best of both worlds. If Propertius is the Roman Callimachus, Ovid is Super-Callimachus. 'Naso magister erat'; not least, as he here demonstrates to the reader who is alert to take his point, in the Gentle Art of Puffing.

PETERHOUSE, CAMBRIDGE E. J. KENNEY

## NOTES

1. In particular H.Herter, *AJP* 69 (1948) 129–48 = *Ovid* (ed. M. von Albrecht – E.Zinn, 1968) 340–61; U.Fleischer, *A&A* 6 (1957) 27–59; M. von Albrecht, *RM* 104 (1961) 269–78.

2. Cf. Fleischer, art. cit. 32.

3. The phrase contains all five vowels, as does the first hemistich of *Aen.* 1. 1 (Bömer ad loc.). Cf. on *Am.* 1. 1 W.Stroh, *Die römische Liebeselegie als werbende Dichtung* (1971) 145 n. 19.

4. See (ed.) A.G.Lee, *P.Ouidi Nasonis Metamorphoseon Liber I* (1953) ad loc.

5. Which is to be preferred to that of (ed.) M.Haupt–R.Ehwald, *P.Ovidius Naso Metamorphosen* I ed. 10 rev. M. von Albrecht (1966) ad loc.: 'denn wie alle anderen (die kosmischen und physischen. . .), so sind auch diese Verwandlungen euer Werk'. Cf. von Albrecht, art. cit. (n. 1) 277.

6. J.J.Hartman, *De Ovidio poeta commentatio* (1905) 83.

7. F.Bömer, *P.Ovidius Naso Metamorphosen* Buch I–III (1969) ad loc.

8. It seems to be due to N.Heinsius; his father's text reads '& serrae repperit vsum / Primus, & ex vno' eqs. 'Repperit. . .primus', as Dr Diggle reminds me, recalls Greek πρῶτος εὑρετής.

9. Hartman, op. cit. (n. 6) 83–4; G.Luck, *Hermes* 86 (1958) 499–500.

10. For the last suggestion cf. Fleischer, art. cit. (n. 1) 47–8.



11. G.K.Galinsky, *Ovid's Metamorphoses. An introduction to the basic aspects* (1975) 103–7.

12. For the distinction cf. E.J.Kenney, 'The style of the *Metamorphoses*', in (ed.) J.W.Binns, *Ovid* (1973) 138 and n. 116.

13. On the stylistic importance of the parenthesis in *Met.* see M. von Albrecht, *Die Parenthese in Ovids Metamorphosen and ihre dichterische Funktion* (1963).

14. See especially Herter, art. cit. (n. 1) 139–44 = 351–7; and cf. Nisbet–Hubbard on Hor. *C.* 1. 7. 6.

15. Cf. W.Wimmel, *Kallimachos im Rom* (1960) 132ff.

16. Kenney, loc. cit. (n. 12) 116–17.

17. Cf. B.Otis, *Ovid as an epic poet* ed. 2 (1970) 334.

18. Cf. D.O.Ross, *Backgrounds to Augustan poetry* (1975) 134–5. That Ovid uses *deducere* here in an unusual sense is remarked by W.Eisenhut, 'Deducere carmen. Ein Eintrag zum Problem der literarischen Beziehungen zwischen Horaz und Properz', *Gedenkschrift für George Rohde* (Aparchai 4, 1961) 91 = (ed.) W.Eisenhut, *Properz* (Wege der Forschung 237, 1975) 247; but he detects no double meaning.

*Addendum.* My confidence in the suggestion put forward in the last paragraph of this article is strengthened by the fact that it has also been made independently by Mr C.D. Gilbert at *C.Q.* N.S. 26 (1976) 111-12.