CHAPTER FOUR

RELIGIOUS RITUAL AND POETIC DEVOTION: OVID’S REPRESENTATION OF RELIGION IN TR. AND PONT.

nec pietas ignota mea est: uidet hospita terra
   in nostra sacrum Caesaris esse domo.
   “My devotion’s well-known: a foreign land sees there’s a shrine to Caesar in my house.”

Pont. 4.9.105–106

This chapter addresses the extent to which the picture of Augustus as an actual god with divine powers, devoted worshippers, and his own sacred rites provides commentary on what historians of religion have recognized as the highly visible presence of the princeps at the center of the city’s religious discourse.1 To start, I shall consider the more general problem of “reading religion,” that is, the difficulty of analyzing cult practice in literature. Then I shall attempt to situate the often slippery details of the poet’s “devotion” to Augustus as the all-powerful god within their literary-historical context. The circumstances of Ovid’s punishment make it hard to imagine such devotion as sincere, and it is perhaps best understood as the natural result of the poet accepting at spurious face-value the very deities he himself creates. The presumptive rites of these gods within Ovid’s literary prototype of the emperor-cult are clearly distinguished from the sacred rites of the poets, a distinction the poet brings into vivid focus in Pont. 4.8. The conclusion here will offer an interpretation of this poem against the theoretical background of the theologia tripertita—a tripartite division of the gods among poets, priests, and philosophers—found in Varro’s Res Diviniae.2

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2 The three theologies may be original to Varro, so Rüpke 2005, 107–118, whose arguments nevertheless do not refute Lieberg’s influential article on the theoretical origins of the theologia tripertita in an earlier Greek (perhaps Stoic) source, e.g. Lieberg 1973, 106–107.
To say the problem of reading religion in Ovid is vexed is to understate the case. Both religion and poetry involve politics at Rome, and all three must first be filtered through a lengthy and disputed history, itself made more remote by the difficulty of understanding sources in ancient Greek and Latin. Yet the vagaries of history have made Ovid, of all Latin poets, the most authoritative voice on Roman ritual practice by preserving for us his aetiological exploration of the annual calendar, the Fasti. In its present form, the poem covers only the months of January through June because, as we read in the Tristia (2.549–552), Ovid had apparently completed for publication only the first half of the calendar year when he was suddenly exiled in 8 AD. Still, the poem remains our singlemost important literary source for Roman religion, even if the poet “was both selective and inventive in his presentation of deities and their cult.” Even before the Fasti, however, the poetic representation of the realia of religious ritual may have appealed to Ovid’s intellectual curiosity, and indeed a famous passage from the Ars appears to provide us with some evidence on the matter, 1.637–638:

expedit esse deos et, ut expedit, esse putemus:
dentur in antiquos tura merumque focos.

It is useful that gods exist, and as it is useful, let us think that they do: let there be offered incense and wine at ancient hearths.

The word-repetition, assonance, and alliteration of labials and dentals in the hexameter together with the pentameter’s homoioteleuton at the central caesura and verse-end contribute to the aphoristic quality of the distich. Its spirit is funny and light, in keeping with a passage (631–658)—and a poem—that recalls Jupiter’s trysts and prevarications to exonerate men’s deception of women for sex. But what can these two lines tell us about the concept of divinity in Ovid? or the significance of ritual to his poetry?

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4 It is possible, and perhaps likely, that Ovid never intended to cover the second half of the year, thus avoiding the emperor’s months of Iulius and Augustus, on which see Fantham 1998, 2–3.
6 Cf. Boyle 1997, 8, on this distich in relation to the Fasti, “Ovid’s poem on tempora, arae, sacra, and religious festivals.” Kennedy 1992, 45, interprets the passage in relation to the Augustan discourse: “Even those like Ovid, who might arguably have