Notes on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*

1.438 ff.: Midway through the opening book of the *Metamorphoses* Ovid tells the story of Apollo’s founding of the Pythian games to memorialize his slaying of the python (438-51). Apollo so acts *neve operis famam poset delere vetustas* (445). This may be an echo of Herodotus’ statement of purpose, to prevent great deeds from being erased from memory by the passage of time, ὡς μήτε τὰ γενόμενα… τῷ χρόνῳ ἐξίτηλα γένηται, μήτε ἔργα μεγάλα… ἀκλεὰ γένηται (Hdt. 1, proem).\(^1\)

It is then nothing if not curious that in the middle of the final book of the *Metamorphoses* another passage from Herodotus’ opening is echoed. Thus, at 15.420-35 Ovid (Pythagoras) writes, *sic tempora verti / cernimus atque illas adsumere robora gentes / concidere has. sic magna fuit . . . / nunc humilis . . .* (followed by examples), an indisputable echo of Herodotus’ remarks at 1.5.4. Of the history of cities, he observes, τὰ γὰρ τὸ πάλαι μεγάλα ἦν, τὰ πολλὰ σμικρὰ αὐτῶν γέγονε, τὰ δὲ ἔπ’ ἐμεῦ ἦν μεγάλα, πρότερον ἦν σμικρά.

2.868-9: *ausa est quoque regia virgo / nescia quem premeret tergo considere tauri*. In this episode, Jupiter in the guise of a bull is able to seduce Europa. Ovid is here interestingly adapting a famous episode from Vergil, the seduction of Dido in *Aeneid* 1. Ovid’s tale takes place in Sidon (2.840), Vergil’s in an *urbs Sidonia* (1.678-9). Both heroines are Sidonian royalty, Europa a princess, Dido a queen (1.613 *Sidonia Dido*). Both liaisons are desired by a powerful god (Jupiter in Ovid, Venus in Vergil) and effected through a lesser deity who is dispatched (Mercury in Ovid, Cupid in Vergil). Thus, it should come as no surprise that verses 868-9 are a subtle echo of Vergil. Unaware of the real identity of the bull and of the attendant dangers, Europa sits upon the bull’s back, thereby in essence re-enacting Dido’s mistake, who ignorant of the real identity of the child in her presence and the attendant dangers, takes him upon her lap (*gremio fouet inscia Dido / insidat quantus miserae deus*, 1.718-9)). Europa thus seals her fate no less than Vergil’s Dido before her.

4.416 ff.: Juno’s descent to the underworld to solicit aid from the furies in her desire to punish Ino and Athamas is obviously influenced by Juno’s similar descent

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\(^1\) That Ovid will have read Herodotus needs no argument. His rendition of the ‘Arion and the Dolphin’-tale (*Fast*. 2.79-118) is mostly dependent on Herodotus’ narrative. His Phoenix (*Met*. 15.391 ff.) also shows Herodotean influence. For discussions of Herodotus’ influence on Ovid, see e.g. Renard 1938, Seel 1958.
in Aeneid 7. But it should be noted that it also bears the influence of Juno’s seeking aid from Aeolus in book 1. Vergil’s Allecto makes no response to Juno. But Tisiphone’s response clearly corresponds to Aeolus, ‘your wish is my command’.

Thus, non longis opus est ambagibus . . . / facta puta, quaecumque iubes (4.476-7) / tuus o regina quid optes / explorare labor. Mihi iussa capessere fas est (1.76-7).

7.604-5: pars animam laqueo claudunt mortisque timorem / morte fugant utroque vocant venientia fata. The plague at Aegina is heavily influenced by Lucretius’ account of the Athenian plague in book 6. All commentators and readers take note of this. The remarkable notion that some people escape the fear of death by killing themselves merits a brief comment by Bömer (1976, 353 ad loc.), who points to the ‘oxymoron’. Anderson (1972, 306-7 ad loc.) elaborates, “Ovid goes on to seize his rhetorical opportunity to point out that such suicides were routing their fear of death by dying (something which Lucretius observed more restrainedly in 1212)”.

But commentators, in their reasonable zeal to show how influential Lucretius’ plague account is here, fail to observe that in fact Lucretius makes the exact and explicit point that Ovid uses here, but not in book 6.\(^2\) In his lengthy discussion of the fear of death at the beginning of book 3 Lucretius makes the very point (3.79-82) that some people, out of their fear of death (mortis formidine), commit suicide (sibi consciscant maerenti pectore letum).\(^3\)

9.28: et accensae non fortiter imperat irae. There is good reason for Hercules to wax angry here and there and are certainly plenty of places in myth where this hero displays fierce anger. Consider his clash with Cacus in Aeneid 8 (e.g. 219, 228-30). But the language here suggests something, as Anderson senses (1972, 419 at 9.28), “Ache- lous affects to condemn Hercules for his boorish lack of self-control”. We need to add to this. Hercules is supposed to be the model of Stoic virtue. He was, as scholars have put it, an “ideal saviour-hero of the Stoics”, “adopted as their patron”\(^4\).

Imperare and fortis with reference to emotions and psychological self-restraint are

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\(^2\) Commentators do note that Ovid’s mortisque timorem at line-end echoes Lucr. 2.45, mortisque timores.

\(^3\) On this paradox, see Kenney 1971, 86 ad 3.79-84. To his examples we can add Seneca Ep. 70.8.

\(^4\) The first quote is from Costa 1984 ad Lucr. 5.22 ff., the second from Bailey ad 5.22. See Heraclitus All. 33, especially 33.4 and 8 (ed. Buffière 1962, p. 39).