

ERROR, IMPIETAS AND AUCTORITAS IN OVID'S METAMORPHOSES

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Abstract: In this paper, we will emphasize various aspects related to error, impietas and auctoritas in Ovid's Metamorphoses. Error and impietas are closely related to the notions of hamartia and hybris as they are reflected by the Greek tragedians. For instance, for Aeschylus, the divinity was the embodiment of good, truth and beauty. His characters are guilty and the received punishments are well deserved. The mistakes, the 'sins' are expressed by the term of hybris. In Metamorphoses, Ovid seems at first glance to go on the same coordinates as Aeschylus: when a character commits an act of impiety towards the divine authority, he is punished justly. However, let us remember that Ovid created during a dictatorship. The ideas of an author could not have been openly expressed. That is why, in that period, literature often was strewn with malignant allusions and symbols. In Metamorphoses, the act of impiety made by a character - and not just any character, but an artist - appear to us, if we interpret it in a secondary key, small or insignificant compared to guilt and discretionary applied by an abusive authority. We could speak about a kind of error made by an artist totally dedicated to his art, reminding us of the famous phrase carmen et error.

Keywords: hybris, hamartia, impietas, error, auctoritas

The Metamorphoses of Ovid are a mythological poem focused on the theme of metamorphosis. Through this mythological epos, Ovid intends to revitalize the myth and to configure a profound view of the world: matter is in a continuous transformation, but by the will of a deity it is ordered, going from chaos to cosmos, from rusticitas to urbanitas, from primitivism to civilizational and cultural acquisitions of Rome. Despite the constant change of matter, Ovid emphasizes, however, that certain aspects never change: amor, pulchritudo, veritas, iustitia and so on. Amor, especially, defeats and dominates everything. So we can speak at Ovid about a philosophical and mythological vision of the world. Nevertheless, we have to be aware that Ovid did not intend to create a philosophical treatise or an exposure of religious dogmas, but he was concerned, in particular, by the beauty of the mythological universe that he sought to transfigure poetically. The Latin poem is, eventually, a poetic work that reflects

various mythological episodes focused on metamorphosis. It remains questionable whether Ovid sought only to revitalize the mythology, in an imaginary universe, without saying more about his times – a period marked by dictatorship, by the suppression of various freedoms – for the delight of a refined and often dissatisfied audience. The myths highlighted by Ovid could be interpreted, certainly, purely from a mythological and poetic perspective, but certain aspects of *Metamorphoses* tend to say more. One such issue is related to the acts of impiety. The mythological coordinates tell us that a human being should always be respectfully to a god otherwise he commits an act of impiety. If an impietas was committed, a man is punished justly by the gods. One might conclude that Ovid purely reflects mythological episodes where gods as Jupiter, Juno, Minerva or Apollo use to punish mortals because of their evident guilt. Nevertheless, we know that Romans used to reinterpret the Greek myths in order to reflect Roman aspects and ideas. In fact, they changed Greek mythology in four ways:

“(1) they refocused the myths, redefining the characters of the gods and shifting the emphasis to those they considered especially important; (2) they historicized the myths, attaching them to real events and individuals in Roman history; (3) they politicized the myths, making them serve the needs of the Roman state; and (4) they reinterpreted the myths to reflect Roman ideas and values.”¹

Even more so in the case of Ovid, which was one of the great poets of the first long dictatorship of Rome, myths acquired unforeseen meanings. These subtle rendered aspects were supposed to be an opportunity for meditation or for amusement of a refined audience. Such a problem arises when we discuss the acts of impietas reflected in *Metamorphoses*. Is it about a real act of impiety or about an apparent impietas that hides, in fact, tragic realities of that time? In this study, we will seek to analyze precisely this issue.

Error and impietas are closely related to the notions of hamartia and hybris (or hubris) as they are reflected, for example, by the Greek tragedians. In Greco-Roman antiquity, the meaning of the term hybris involved, in a first stage, the voluntary use of physical or verbal violence, usually by those who were strong against those who were weak, just for pleasure and representing an excessive arrogant attitude.² Aristotle makes reference precisely to this sense

¹ Stephen L. Harris; Gloria Platzner, *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights*, Mountain View, London and Toronto, Mayfield Publishing Company, 1995, p. 846.

² See Odd Magne Bakke, *Concord and Peace. A Rhetorical Analysis of the First Letter of Clement with an Emphasis on the Language of Unity and Sedition*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2001, p. 168 and William Barclay, *Palabras Griegas del Nuevo Testamento*, translated in Spanish by Javier-José Marin C., El Paso, Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 2000, pp. 51-54.

of the term *hybris*. Thus, Aristotle tells us, in his *Rhetoric* (2.2.5-6), that the basic meaning of the concept of *hybris* referred to committing physical or verbal violence to humiliate a victim. Those prone to commit a *hybris* would be rather young and rich people, because they are generally convinced that they are better than the others. This first meaning of the concept refers to the attempt of ancient people to avoid a dishonorable and abusive behavior generated by *hybris* and could not imply anything else from the part of others than blame. The ancients aimed, therefore, to avoid shame/ *αἰδώς* and to prove that they have honor/ *τιμή*. For now, the semantic area of the term *hybris* was not involving the internalization and the awareness of guilt, so it was not including the notion of sin as we understand it today.³ In the mentality of the ancient Greeks there was no word for sin or, at least, for this sort of sin. However, the need for such a notion was strongly felt: “Because Greek has a word for error (*hamartia*) but not for sin, some poets - especially Hesiod (7th century BCE) and Aeschylus (5th century BCE) - used *hybris* to describe wrongful action against the divine order. This usage led to the modern sense of the term.”⁴ And, we will add, this second usage of the term *hybris* led to the Latin term of *impietas*. In literature, history and mythology, this last meaning appears to be the most appropriate. By *hybris*, by committing an act of *impietas* not only the human laws are brutally violated, but also the laws of nature and the divine laws. *Hybris* appears to be the most appropriate Greek term for sin. However, also in this sense of the notion, we point out that it was not referring, eventually, to sin as it is defined in Christianity, but to everything that exceeds the measure, to the excesses of all kinds. In the dictionary, *hybris* and its derivatives have the following meanings: (ἡ) ὑβρις, ὑβρεως n. - everything that exceeds the measure; (as feeling) pride, insolence, excessive passion; (as action) violent deed, outrage; ὑβριστικός adj. - who abandons himself to excesses, which refers to violence etc. or ὑβρίζω vb. - to behave excessively, to have exaggerated behavior, to be arrogant, impertinent, to speak or to act with great arrogance, to be proud, to have no limits, to be unchaste etc.⁵ The person who allows to be driven by *hybris* has no boundaries, he is arrogant, vainglorious, he has an insatiable lust for power, almost one of demonic nature. Trapped by this blinding passion, the person in question is too confident in his own forces and heads, ultimately, to destruction. Such behavior, characterized by *hybris*, causes the disapproval of others and brings the divine vengeance/ *νέμεσις*, as well.

³ See <http://www.britannica.com/topic/hybris> (November 30, 2015).

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ See Anatole Bailly, *Dictionnaire Grec-Français*, Paris, Hachette, 1950, pp. 1981-1982.

For a better understanding of the way in which Ovid reflected the concept of *hybris/ impietas* at literary and mythological level, it is important to explain what it meant this concept for each of the Greek tragedians, respectively for Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.

For Aeschylus, the divinity was the embodiment of good, truth and beauty. His characters are guilty and the received sentences are well deserved. The mistakes, the 'sins' are expressed by the term of *hybris*. The lack of self-control, the reckless and reprobable acts entail, inexorably, a punishment. The god helps the man who runs to perdition and teaches him to become wise through suffering. Suffering is absolute knowledge. All the acts that violate the laws of nature are punished by the gods.

Always in the tragic conflict from the plays of Aeschylus we encounter the moral law. His heroes have the conscience of values and they confront an hostile destiny. For Aeschylus, destiny is not blind and does not punish innocent people, but embodies the moral ideal of justice. Destiny is the right and proper law for Aeschylus, not a blind law. Finally, destiny punishes a deed that could be characterized by *hybris*.

Unlike Aeschylus, Sophocles treats different the concept of *hybris*. At Sophocles, the heroes confront also their destiny – exactly how does Oedipus -, but without having the consciousness of their guilt, and the gods do not always embody the theodicy. Aeschylus believes in the harmony of the divine world and believes that this order can descend into the human spirit. Sophocles shares this belief into the harmony of the divine world, but limits it to the sphere of Olympus and do not believe this could descend into the human spirit. Sophocles manifests veneration for divine order, but also admiration for human heroism. For Sophocles, the punishments of heroes come from divinity, as in Aeschylus's plays, but are not proportionate to *hybris*. At Sophocles, the god is almighty, but we can not know him and we can not know what he thinks. Although man commits a *hybris*, he is not aware of what he commits and the punishment received is usually far too harsh and unjustified. In Aeschylus's plays, the characters had the consciousness of guilt and they received a well deserved punishment, but in Sophocles' plays they do not have this consciousness of guilt and the divinity does not embody justice, but the unlimited power of divinity in relation to the human being, which is instead fragile and humble. For Sophocles, the concept of *hybris* reveals the courage and fortitude of those who are oppressed and not the divine justice. The tragic poet Sophocles rejects the states of mind in which instinct dominates reason.

The thinking of Euripides about gods is governed by reason, not by piety as in the plays of Aeschylus. Instead of theodicy, now reigns arbitrary and hazard, hence Euripides's resignation and his opinion that tyrants rule the world without gods. In Euripides's plays, from theodicy (except the play *The Bacchantes*, where we find the return to faith as a regeneration force in a world without piety) we arrive to an unjust and hostile divine world. Man is helpless and he always aspires to virtue.

For Aeschylus, the notion of *hybris* was a religious and a moral mistake. For Sophocles, *hybris* was a sort of error, as well. For Euripides, the concept of *hybris* is profane, desecralised, it reflects the tyranny and it is based on the conflict between justice and hope.

For Ovid, the notion of *hybris/ impietas* is difficult to approach. The poet himself received many labels, modern scholars characterizing Ovid, in *Metamorphoses*, for example, either as an 'Augustan' or as an 'anti-Augustan' poet. There were even interpretations according to which Ovid was merely a poet of his time, so he was neither 'Augustan', nor 'anti-Augustan'.⁶ The way in which Ovid approaches the concept of *impietas* and the fact that the poet lived under a dictatorship – usually, a person living under a dictatorship is not very fond of the dictator in question (except, indeed, the numerous fanatics and opportunists; however, in this respect, Ovid is out of question) –, prompts us to think of an exquisite poet who criticizes, without being a fervent 'anti-Augustan', the slippages of the regime in a subtle and enciphered manner. At least this would result from what follows.

The intentions of the Latin poet seem difficult to decipher and to classify. As we will see, Ovid avoided univocity almost always with his characteristic skill. His myths can be interpreted in different keys. To exemplify this feature of the Ovidian myth, we will refer to the mythological episode of the young weaver Arachne. If we remain within the traditional framework of mythology, this myth reflects the traditional view of the ancients concerning the punishment of an act of *impietas*.

Arachne, a young weaver from Lydia, the daughter of Idmon from Colophon, famous for the artistry with which she was weaving her tissues, defies, because of her skill, the goddess Minerva, the patron of weavers:

“Maeoniaeque animum fatis intendit Arachnes,/ quam sibi lanificae non cedere laudibus artis/ audierat.” (M. VI, 5-7)

⁶ G. Karl Galinsky, *Ovid's Metamorphoses: An Introduction to the Basic Aspects*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1975, pp. 213-214 and further.

“Then she thought of young Arachne,/ The girl of Maeonia, and what doom/ Would come upon her, for Arachne dared/ To rival Pallas at the loom, to think/ Herself superior in art.”⁷

The goddess descends from Olympus to see the tissues of Arachne, initially disguised as an old woman. A contest starts between the two: Minerva pictures on her tissues the twelve gods of Olympus and creates scenes that depict the punishments received by those mortals who tried to rebel against the divine order. In turn, Arachne weaves wonderful tissues where are depicted love scenes between gods and mortals:

“Non illud Pallas, non illud carpere Livor/ possit opus.” (M. VI, 129-130)

“Not even Pallas nor blue-fevered Envy/ Could damn Arachne’s work.” (H.G., p. 151)
Angered, the goddess tore her tissues and hits Arachne with a wand on her forehead:

“doluit successu flava virago/ et rupit pictas, caelestia crimina, vestes,/ utque Cytoriaco radium de monte tenebat,/ ter quater Idmoniae frontem percussit Arachnes.” (M. VI, 130-133)

“The gold-haired goddess/ Raged at the girl’s success, struck through her loom,/ Tore down the scenes of wayward joys in heaven,/ And with her shuttle of Cytorian boxwood/ Slashed the girl’s face three times and then once more.” (H.G., p. 151)

Angry, desperate, Arachne tries to hang herself, but Minerva does not let her die, but instead transforms her into a spider, doomed ever since to weave her web at infinity.⁸

If we interpret this myth in an Aeschylean key, we can say that Arachne committed an act of impiety. She did not understand her minor place in comparison with that of a goddess:

“The cosmic status of characters is ordinarily persistent, immortals remaining immortals, mortals remaining mortals, and so on, although a few mortals are elevated to a higher status in the cosmic hierarchy. For the most part, however, a being remains in the cosmic category of birth and is expected to behave accordingly. Any mortal who acts as though he or she were equal or superior to a deity in some respect is likely to incur the wrath of the deity, and the same is true of a minor deity who ventures to compete with a major deity. “Know thyself,” as the Delphic maxim expresses it. That is, understand your place in the scheme of things.”⁹

⁷ Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, translated and with an introduction by Horace Gregory, New York, The Viking Press, 1958,

p. 147. The other translations by Horace Gregory will be marked with the initials of the author and with the proper page number.

⁸ See Anca Balaci, *Mic dicționar mitologic greco-roman*, București, Editura Științifică, 1966, pp. 60-61.

⁹ William Hansen, *Classical Mythology: A Guide to the Mythical World of the Greeks and Romans*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 204.

She claimed to be unsurpassed in her art (in the art of processing wool and we know that the cosmic provinces of Minerva included this domestic craft), which involved inclusively the idea of overcoming deities. Eventually, the goddess punished rightfully Arachne for her foolishness and for her lack of piety. The goddess did not make any mistake. Minerva punished only the exaggerated claims of the young weaver from Lydia. The character was guilty and the punishment received was well deserved. The goddess helped the man who ran towards perdition and she taught him to become wise through suffering. The suffering is the absolute knowledge. This myth can be considered, eventually, an aetiological one, because it explains how spiders appeared.

But in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, this myth could be interpreted also from another perspective, closer perhaps to the view of Sophocles or of Euripides and remaining, however, a strict Ovidian and Roman signification of the mythological episode, specific to the Augustan Age. In the period of Augustus, says Pierre Grimal, not a single literary work could be considered innocent. Even when the literary work had mythological characters as subject, it was always possible to discover malignant intentions and symbols.¹⁰

Indeed, in the myth of young woman Arachne, Ovid speaks rather about an apparent impietas. It was well known in the age the similarity established between Jupiter or Apollo, on the one hand, and Augustus, on the other hand, emerged from the tendency of Romans to politicize the myths. Also it was well known the parallel made between gods and a person empowered with imperium, an authority in fact. The first level of interpretation says that a mortal has no right to consider himself equal or superior to a deity in some respect. But at the second level of interpretation, we know that Ovid makes a parallel between gods and Augustus and criticizes the abusive relation between those who have auctoritas and the subjects, especially when the subjects are artists and artisans, as was Arachne, for example. The question at issue here is whether those who represent authority are truly superior in every respect. The relation between a deity and a mortal has to be marked by pietas, otherwise it would be a religious and a moral mistake (the first stage of approaching the notion of impietas), but the relation between a powerful mortal and a normal one has to be marked by tolerance, clemency and understanding, not by suppression or other punishments (the second stage of approaching the notion of impietas; a sort of error here - the artist was not cautious enough - rather than a

¹⁰ Pierre Grimal, *Literatura latină*, translated in Romanian by Mariana and Liviu Franga, București, Editura Teora, 1997, p. 271.

real impietas). The suppression and the persecution of an artist because of his art - and we know that such episodes occurred during the reign of Augustus - was not justified by anything, even when this suppression was ordered by an emperor. Ovid was sure that in poetry and through poetry, a poet was superior to an emperor.

His character has no awareness of committing an impiety – Arachne knows that she is unsurpassed in her art and she does not understand why she should be ashamed because of this reason-, and the punishment received is usually too high and unjustified, as it happens in Sophocles' plays. God is almighty, and the human being is fragile and is humiliated in the end. However, Ovid goes further than Sophocles in a personal manner. This second level of interpretation is justified if we consider that Ovid evolved as a poet under a dictatorship. The ideas of an author could not have been openly expressed.

As we mentioned, it was well known, in the era, the comparison between Jupiter and Augustus. Jupiter was the most important of the gods and Augustus was the most important among men, and Arachne enters in competition with Minerva precisely with a scene that depicts Jupiter in a blamable hypostasis.

But Arachne was a mere mortal, of humble origin, while Minerva was a powerful deity. Ovid insists especially on this humble origin of the weaver to highlight the gap between her and the goddess, just as between an artist and an emperor was an enormous difference of status:

“non illa loco nec origine gentis/ clara, sed arte fuit.” (M. VI, 7-8)

“The girl/ Had neither family nor proper place; / Her art alone had given her rewards.” (H.G., p. 147)

The competition with a person invested with imperium and auctoritas is dangerous and risky.¹¹ Not only the myth of Arachne, but also other mythological episodes (the legend of Orpheus, the myth of the Emathides or of the Pierides, the episode of Daedalus and Icarus and so on) reveal, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a sort of pessimism as regards the fate of an artist. Artifex ends badly. Nevertheless, he never denies his essence, his talent and value, but rather he is defiant through his talent itself and this even after he is transformed and reduced to a humble existence, in which he no longer can express his talent or ideas.

In *Metamorphoses*, the act of impiety made by a character - and not just any character, but an artist - appear to us, if we interpret it in a secondary key, small or insignificant compared

¹¹ See Patricia J. Johnson, *Ovid before Exile. Art and Punishment in the Metamorphoses*, Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008, pp. 117-121.

to guilt and discretionary applied by an abusive authority. We could speak about a kind of error made by an artist totally dedicated to his art, reminding us of the famous phrase *carmen et error*.

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