

ON THE NUMBER OF BOOKS IN OVID'S *METAMORPHOSES*: A POSTSCRIPT

I have no doubt that Elena Merli is right to argue that Ovid's choice of a fifteen-book structure for the *Metamorphoses* was intended to signal, to those equipped to take the hint, 'its proper distance from the traditional epic which is instead characterized by a number corresponding to a multiple of six' (*CQ* 54 [2004], 306). But that, I suggest, is only half the story. The *Metamorphoses* forms half of a literary diptych, as Philip Hardie has pointed out: 'taken together the *Fasti* and the *Metamorphoses* represent Ovid's typically indirect answer to the challenge of Virgil's epic, on the other hand a Callimachean elegy on the central subject of the *Aeneid* and on the other a hexameter epic on themes for the most part not Roman' (*MD* 26 [1991], 47). To that elegiac epic in fifteen books an epicizing elegy in twelve (as planned) is clearly complementary in both scale and structure. The number of books in the *Fasti* is dictated by the calendrical scheme: were scheme and subject suggested to Ovid by the fact that there were twelve months in the Roman year and twelve books in the *Aeneid*? As to that, one can only speculate; it was at least a happy accident, enabling a poet writing for readers alert to generic nuance to invest his monumental combined *chef d'oeuvre* in a form which signalled to the *doctus lector* its highly original—I am tempted to say subversive—character.

Peterhouse, Cambridge

E.J. KENNEY
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AENEID 1.647–55

G. N. Knauer's great *Die Aeneis und Homer*¹ has such vast sweep and profound depth, detecting and elucidating not merely the obvious Homeric ties to the *Aeneid* but also the most subtle instances of influence, that one is almost incredulous if one thinks that he has found an example of Homeric influence on the *Aeneid* that has eluded Knauer (and, it goes without saying, all the commentators). With due incredulity, I note the following.

Aeneas dispatches Achates to bring gifts for Queen Dido. Servius already commented on the peculiar nature of the gifts: *quamvis apta nupturae reginae sint munera, tamen futurorum malorum continere omen uidentur* (1.653); *uide iam omen infelicitatis futurae, cum adulterae Dido suscipit munera*. Modern commentators follow suit, e.g. Conway, 'The origin of these gifts . . . of course carried an evil omen (especially those from Helen's wardrobe)' (at 1.650),² and Austin, 'The sinister character of the gift is further underlined in *inconcessos hymenaeos*' (at 1.650); 'Aeneas' gifts to Dido could scarcely have been charged with more ominous associations' (at 653).³ Let us look at the first set of gifts: *pallam signis auroque rigentem/et circumtextum croceo uelamen acantho,/ornatus Argivae Helenae, quos illa Mycenis,/Pergama cum peteret inconcessosque hymenaeos,/extulerat*. What do we have here? A gift of garments for a woman, at some level conceived of as wedding presents from groom to bride (as Servius observed), and deriving from none other than the paradigmatic adulteress herself, Helen. This already occurs in the *Odyssey* (15.104ff.). When Telemachus visits Menelaus in Sparta, Helen selects a lovely garment of her own

¹ Göttingen, 1964.

² R. S. Conway, *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Primus* (Cambridge, 1935), 112.

³ R. G. Austin, *P. Vergili Maronis Aeneidos Liber Primus* (Oxford, 1971), 198.

making, presents it to Telemachus and instructs him to give it to his bride on his wedding day. Whether Homer intended such a gift from Helen to carry ominous implications is impossible to tell,⁴ but it seems safe to say that Virgil read his *Odyssey* in just this way and thus transferred the theme to the ill-fated story of Dido and Aeneas.⁵

OID METAMORPHOSES 15.88–90

Heu quantum scelus est in uiscera uiscera condi,
Congestoque audum pinguescere corpore corpus
Alteriusque animantem animantis uiuere leto.

That there are Lucretian influences in Ovid's Pythagoras-episode has long been noticed.⁶ Some have well observed that, in spite of the Lucretian influence, the tenor of the passage is decidedly anti-Lucretian.⁷ Ovid is Lucretian and anti-Lucretian at one and the same time. This is most marked in the culmination of Pythagoras' speech, his declaration of the immortality of the soul (158–9).⁸ But for the above lines (88–90), commentators remark the Lucretian side (in the style and language), but fail to see the anti-Lucretian side (in the substance). The Lucretian colour is used to condemn a Lucretian position. There is polemic in the argument that lends irony to the tone. In Lucretius' view of the workings of the universe death and life are cyclical and *alteriusque animantem animantis uiuere leto* is the working principle of the universe. *Viscera* will ultimately be transmuted into *uiscera*, *corpus* will grow fat *corpore*, as part of the natural and necessary process (see e.g. 2.72–9, 3.964–70, 5.828–36). Indeed, *alteriusque animantem animantis uiuere leto* is a rephrasing of *DRN* 1.263–4, *nec ullam/rem gigni patitur nisi morte adiuta aliena*.

FIERE

That the form *fiere* was in use as the infinitive of *fio* is well known.⁹ But there is a second form *fiere* that is in use in later Latin, e.g. at Aug. *Ep.* 153.4.11, *quanto sis celsior potestate, tanto humilior fiere pietate*. It is, clearly, used as the imperative. But nowhere in the pertinent reference works does it appear to be noted and

⁴ I do not know of any commentator, ancient or modern, who reads the Homeric passage as ironic, but Jasper Griffin stops just short of this, 'She [Helen] is aware that the dress will have special value because of its maker . . . Any bride will be flattered to wear what the legendary Helen made. And Helen is a legendary figure not for her great achievements, not even for her womanly virtue, like Penelope, but for her guilt and suffering' (*Homer on Life and Death* [Oxford, 1980], 97–8).

⁵ Perhaps Virgil knew the story of the gruesome outcome of Telemachus' marriage to Circe (Lycophron *Alex.* 808–10).

⁶ Indeed, Pythagoras is presented as an *alter Epicurus*. Thus, at 62–72 Pythagoras is represented as seeing remote realities not with his eyes but with his mind (cf. *DRN* 1.72–4) and as teaching mankind the true nature of the world (cf. *DRN* 1.75–7); at 144–52, Pythagoras journeys high above the earth and relieves humankind of their irrational fears (cf. *DRN* 1.72–9).

⁷ See e.g. L. P. Wilkinson, *Ovid Recalled* (Cambridge, 1955), 215, 217–18; K. S. Myers, *Ovid's Causes* (Ann Arbor, 1994), 137–42, 158; also, O. S. Due, *Changing Forms* (Copenhagen, 1974), 29–31.

⁸ See Myers (ibid.), 144. With reference to these verses, Due remarks (ibid.), 31, 'The gospel of Pythagoras is exactly the opposite as that of Lucretius'. Contrast *Met.* 15.252–7, which is Lucretian both in language and substance.

⁹ See e.g. Skutsch *ad Ennius Ann.* 11 (p. 165).