

TWO DIVINE SCANDALS: OVID *MET.* 2.680 ff. AND 4.171 ff. AND HIS SOURCES

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The twin subjects of this study are the myths of Battus and the cattle-rustling Mercury as told in *Met.* 2 and of Vulcan and the adulterers Venus and Mars in 4. We shall approach these two brief tales as examples of distinctly and deliberately unedifying divine “history,” carefully considering a Roman poet’s suppression, adaptation, and invention of details in contrast with earlier versions of stories that were already in his time ancient. Such an approach seems to be one that Ovid himself both expected and desired of his sophisticated readership, into whose state of prior knowledge we must try to bring ourselves so far as the lacunose documentary evidence permits. We shall here leave aside such interesting matters as the genesis and the original “meaning” of the two myths, and the question of “analysis” of their sources in Greek hexameter poetry vs. defence of the texts’ integrity. We cannot, however, ignore ancient attitudes toward these myths, either as embodied in their very telling or as otherwise likely to be familiar to Ovid and his contemporaries, for these make up an important part of the background against which we may discern his individual nuances of both point and tone.¹

¹ The one comprehensive treatment of the first remains R. Holland, “Battos,” *RhM* 75 (1926) 156–83; see also N. O. Brown, *Hermes the Thief* (Madison 1947), App. A = pp. 135–40. For more recent bibliography see F. Bömer, *P. Ovidius Naso: Metamorphosen, Buch I–III* (Heidelberg 1969) 398 (*ad* 2.676), 399 (*ad* 679), and 401 (*ad* 683). (I have been unable to consult L. Radermacher’s 1931 monograph *Der homerische Hermes hymnus*.)

Bibliography for the Odyssean tale of Olympian adultery is predictably vast. The best study seems to be W. Burkert, “Das Lied von Ares und Aphrodite,” *RhM* 103 (1960) 130–44. Again see F. Bömer’s commentary, the second volume *P. Ovidius Naso: Metamorphosen, Buch IV–V* (Heidelberg 1976) 68–69, for recent bibliography. There is little agreement among scholars whether Demodocus’ song is early, integral to the *Odyssey*, and has its origin in popular story-telling (see G. M. Calhoun, “Homer’s

Let us begin with “Mercury and Battus.” The Greek sources present an imposing set of problems. The only *earlier* literary document now extant is the “Homeric” *Hymn to Hermes*, dating probably if not certainly from the sixth century B.C.² This narrates the newborn Hermes’ theft of Apollo’s cattle, its detection and immediate consequences, and finally the reconciliation between the two divine half-brothers. On his way from Pieria, whence he steals the cows, to the banks of the Alpheus river in Arcadia, where he sacrifices two and conceals the rest of them, the young thief is observed by an (unnamed) “old man” tending his vineyard at Onchestus in central Greece (2.87–88). To this potential witness against him Hermes offers good wishes for the vintage, to which he adds a warning that the man should be blind and deaf to what he has just seen and heard (90–93).³ We must note that there is *only* a warning. When some ninety verses later (185) Apollo appears at Onchestus and inquires after his missing animals, the old man describes in some detail a remarkable “infant child” and his singular method of driving some cows: he himself moved zig-zag and made the cattle move backward (208–11). Hereupon the aggrieved god presses on with his search—and the informer quite disappears from the story. These events differ radically from what Ovid relates in Book 2 of his *Metamorphoses*. It is, in fact, possible to maintain that Ovid did not know this “Homeric” hymn at all, or at least not directly, since, like most of its companion hymns in the collection ascribed to Homer, the one to Hermes was notably *uninfluential* in later antiquity; it is certain that the Roman poet got both the name “Battus” and the gist of his story elsewhere. But precisely *where* elsewhere is a nice puzzle.

According to the mythographer Antoninus Liberalis (probably second century A.D.) his information on his twenty-third entry,

Gods—Myth and Märchen,” *AJP* 60 [1939] 23–24), late in the Homeric text but with an origin in very ancient cult (see M. Delcourt, *Héphaïstos ou la légende du magicien* [Paris 1957] 9 and 76–84; cf. O. Kern, *Die Religion der Griechen* [1926 and 1935; repr. Berlin 1963] 1.119 and 203, and 2.12–13), or with a source only in poetic invention (see U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Der Glaube der Hellenen* [Berlin 1931] 1.323, referring back to his own reconstruction of a lost Ionian poem on Hephaestus in *Nachr. der Ges. Wiss. zu Göttingen* 1895, pp. 237–38 [which I myself have been unable to see]).

² On the dating see J. Humbert, *Homère: Hymns* (Paris 1959) 114–15.

³ The warning and/or promises may have been more elaborate than what we now read if those who suspect a lacuna after line 91 are correct: see, for example, T. W. Allen and E. E. Sykes, *The Homeric Hymns* (London and New York 1904) *ad* 91; but contrast Humbert, *op. cit.*, *ad* 92, who doubts a lacuna.

“Βάττος,” derives, by way of the first-century lexicographer Pamphilus, from no fewer than five writers. He lists them in the following order: Nicander, Hesiod, Didymarchus, Antigonus, and Apollonius of Rhodes. Now since Liberalis’ account begins with a detailed genealogy of the pretty boy Hymenaeus, love for whom is supposed to have distracted Apollo from due watchfulness over the cattle, but since there is a major chronological awkwardness (or even impossibility) in the sequel, we may surmise that the Hesiodic *Megalai Eoiai* most likely contributed *only* genealogical data about Hymenaeus—or perhaps only about Hymenaeus’ father Magnes.⁴ The pederastic element might come from any of the Hellenistic writers; it would certainly be possible from Apollonius—but who can say what we might impute to the obscure Didymarchus and/or Antigonus? It is to Nicander, however, whom Liberalis mentions first and whom Ovid often used, that we probably ought to credit the mythographer’s version of the Battos story. To be on the safe side let us call it simply “Hellenistic.”⁵ It goes as follows: Hermes, taking advantage of Apollo’s erotic preoccupation, drives an (obviously composite) total of 113 cattle down from Thessaly through a very long list of places to the vicinity of Mt. Maenalus in Arcadia, more precisely to the Βάττου Σκοπίαί, “Battus’ Look-out.” There Battos, neither whose age nor occupation is specified, perceives the cattle to be stolen and demands an (also unspecified) μισθός for his silence. Hermes *promises* to pay this blackmail, whereupon Battos gives an *oath* (which he evidently volunteers) not to tell on him. After concealing the cattle by the seashore the god changes his appearance and returns to learn whether the man will abide by his oath. Offering the reward of a cloak

⁴ The chronological problem involves on the one hand mention of *Admetus’* cattle, on the other the identity of the boy with whom Apollo is supposed to have been distractedly in love: *Hymenaeus*, son of Magnes son of Perimele daughter of Admetus!

Too long to quote here, a full text of Liberalis 23 may be found in R. Merkelbach and M.L. West, *Fragmenta Hesiodica* (Oxford 1967) fr. 256; their note is surely apt: “perpaucā hic Hesiodē esse vix monendū est.”

⁵ In fact two major poets between Hesiod and the Alexandrians also dealt with Hermes’ cattle theft: Alcaeus in his *Hymn to Hermes*, of which only the introductory first stanza survives (fr. 308 L-P; for a full discussion of Alcaeus’ relationship to the “Homeric” hymn see D. Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus* [Oxford 1955] 252–58); and Sophocles in the *Ichneutae*. Neither version can be shown to have mentioned either Battos or his nameless “Homeric” counterpart, although R. L. Green in his translation, *Two Satyr Plays* (Harmondsworth and Baltimore 1957) 82, ingeniously extrapolates an end to *Ichn.* that includes an account by Apollo of information that Battos gave him (lines “625–36”).

(χλάμυς) he inquires about some stolen cattle; Battos takes the garment (which, we should note, fulfills Hermes' earlier promise!) and gives the full information. Angered at the man's duplicity, the god touches him with his magic wand: Battos is changed to stone "and there leaves it neither freezing cold nor burning heat." Thus ends the Hellenistic account, leaving Apollo to his own devices should he take up a quest for the missing herd.

For ancient attitudes toward Hermes' conduct in this affair I know of no evidence beyond what the development of the story itself implies. In the "Homeric" telling we find no bribe on the thief's part, no promise of secrecy on the old man's; and, although Hermes does hint that the man might avoid trouble by minding his own business, after the fellow tells Apollo exactly what he has seen he disappears from the story for good, neither rewarded nor punished. The peculiarly inconsequential nature of the old man's role, and especially of the little speech that Hermes addresses to him, suggests that something has been suppressed. We know that the author of the hymn was capable of mitigating Hermes' villainy: the theft of Apollo's bow, known to Horace (*Odes* 1.10) and the unidentifiable source(s) of Apollodorus *Library* 3.10.2 is reduced to a mere laughable *possibility* in the *Hymn to Hermes* (515).⁶ In "Homer," then, both the old man and Hermes in dealing with him are rather bland. In the Hellenistic version, on the other hand, Battos, *not* necessarily old, becomes a greedy blackmailer and a ready perjurer. Indeed the place-name "Battos' Look-out" strongly hints that his occupation (recall that none other is given) may be professional informer. His very name was understood to mean "Tattler."⁷ The Hellenistic Hermes promises a payment and later (ironically) gives a garment. This garment is presumably his to give; moreover, he returns to Battos for a morally sound reason. Liberalis tells us explicitly that Hermes wants to see whether the mortal rascal will adhere to a *sworn promise*. We observe, therefore, that themes of bribery and punishment, very possibly suppressed in "Homer," reappear in the Hellenistic tale in a manner

⁶ On the theft of the bow see Holland (above, note 1) 167–68, and more recently Page 255–58; Page 257 quotes a scholion on *Il.* 15.256 that also mentions the stealing of Apollo's bow.

Although Apollodorus gives a fairly circumstantial account of the cattle theft, in it there is no *individual* corresponding to Battos; instead Apollo gets helpful information from "the inhabitants" at Pylos.

⁷ On the meaning of the name see Holland (above, note 1) 160 and Bömer *ad* 688. "Battos" indeed seems to have given rise, through this very myth, to the word βαττολογία, which Hesychius glosses as ἀκαιρολογία.

most favorable toward Hermes, most critical toward Battos. In the hexameter hymn nothing happens to the honest witness, who simply does his social duty; in *Liberalis* the conniver Battos, who suffers what we may call a punitive metamorphosis, thoroughly deserves his fate. In neither of these Greek tellings does the affair of the old man or Battos amount to a distinct divine scandal within the greater scandal of the stolen cattle. In Ovid's account the incident is "a different story" indeed.

Beginning with the transition it runs thus:

Flebat opemque tuam frustra Philyreius heros,
Delphice, poscebat. nam nec rescindere magni
iussa Iovis poteras nec, si rescindere posses,
tunc aderas: Elim Messeniaque arva colebas.
680 illud erat tempus, quo te pastoria pellis
textit, onusque fuit baculum silvestre sinistrae,
alterius dispar septenis fistula cannis.
dumque amor est curae, dum te tua fistula mulcet,
incustoditae Pylios memorantur in agros
685 processisse boves: videt has Atlantide Maia
natus et arte sua silvis occultat abactas.
senserat hoc furtum nemo nisi notus in illo
rure senex; Battum vicinia tota vocabant.
divitis hic saltus herbosaque pascua Nelei
690 nobiliumque greges custos servabat equarum.
hunc tenuit blandaque manu seduxit et illi
"quisquis es, hospes" ait, "si forte armenta requiret
haec aliquis, vidisse nega, neu gratia facto
nulla rependatur, nitidam cape praemia vaccam!"
695 et dedit. accepta voces has reddidit: "hospes,
tutus eas! lapis iste prius tua furta loquetur,"
et lapidem ostendit. simulat Iove natus abire;
mox redit et versa pariter cum voce figura
"rustice, vidisti si quas hoc limite" dixit
700 "ire boves, fer opem furtoque silentia deme!
iuncta suo pariter dabitur tibi femina tauro."
at senior, postquam est merces geminata, "sub illis
montibus" inquit "erunt," et erant sub montibus illis.
risit Atlantiades et "me mihi, perfide, prodis?
705 me mihi prodis?" ait periuraque pectora vertit
in durum silicem, qui nunc quoque dicitur index,
inque nihil merito vetus est infamia saxo.
Hinc se sustulerat paribus Caducifer alis,
Munychiosque volans agros gratamque Minervae
710 despectabat humum cultique arbusta Lycei. (*Met.* 2.676–710)

According to 680–82, when the “Delphic One” left his cattle unguarded he was more playing than really living the life of a herdsman, evidently to aid his pursuit of the (here unnamed) object of an idyllic love (683).⁸ We do not learn whether he is after Admetus, as in Callimachus’ *Hymn to Apollo* and Tibullus 2.3, or a great-grandson of Admetus, as in Liberalis.⁹ But his great carelessness is clear in Ovid’s account (*incustoditae*, 684: note the unusual penthemimeral word).¹⁰ It is true that the Hellenistic version omits entirely Apollo’s search for and eventual discovery of the cattle; yet neither does it imply any contradiction of these events, which make up so important a part of the “Homeric” story. In *Met.* 2, however, it seems as though he never either notices or cares about the disappearance of his cattle! For, once Mercury is done with Battus, he clearly flies away scot-free (708), first to Athens for some sightseeing and a love affair of his own (709–832), then to Tyre in order to assist his father Jupiter’s abduction of Europa (836–45). Indeed in the latter episode his expertise as a cattleman makes him useful: so far is he from being disciplined for rustling cows.

Our principal concern, however, is with Battus, who alone, according to Ovid, had been aware of Mercury’s *furtum* (687–88). In the Latin account he is, as in “Homer,” an old man (*senex* in 688, *senior* in 702). We are also told his occupation. He is the watchman of the pastures and famous mares of wealthy Neleus (689–90), into whose Pylian domain Apollo’s cattle have wandered. These details are in several ways significant—and are, so far as we can tell, Ovid’s invention. The place Pylos more or less corresponds to Hermes’ destination in both Homeric and Hellenistic tales (as well as in

⁸ Note the amusing repetition, at bucolic diaeresis, of the typical pastoral word *fistula* in 682 and 683, which is surely parodic; note also the retrospective irony that this sequence gains for Apollo’s words at 1.513–14: *non ego sum pastor, non hic armenta gregesque / horridus observo*.

⁹ Callimachus’ *Hymn* at 47–54 “explains” why Apollo is called *Nómuos*: “on fire with love for the youth Admetus” (49) he tended and increased his cattle great and small, not only kine but also (first mentioned) horses, goats, and sheep. Tibullus 2.3.11–32, on the other hand, mentions only bulls, cows, and calves. Since the point of both is the care Apollo showed for Admetus’ herds, neither says anything of their theft by Hermes/Mercury.

¹⁰ Ovid seems to have invented the word *incustoditus*, in fact, though he uses it five times; see Bömer *ad* 684. One may not wish to agree with Bömer, however, when he maintains that Ovid “nicht merkt, dass er . . . dem Mercurius kein besonders gutes Zeugnis ausstellt, denn *boves incustoditas* zu stehlen ist kein Kunststück.” Ovid’s Mercury is not an “artist” but rather a thorough crook.

Apollodorus); but in our Roman's telling the cows have strayed that far on their own. Secondly, Battus as a dutiful and observant *custos* contrasts sharply with the god Apollo, whose ludicrous incompetence as a herdsman we have already noted. Thirdly, the wealth of Battus' master Neleus sets off the presumable relative poverty of his aged field hand, who, whether free or slave, is no independent *vigneron* as in "Homer."¹¹

Let us consider his story in detail. According to Ovid, Mercury approaches Battus (recall that in *Liberalis* it is the other way around) and the idea of a bribe is the god's (691–94). Numerous details of the narration deserve close attention. The divine thief's words to the old man follow an expression (*hunc tenuit blandaque manu seduxit*, 691) that unmistakably imitates the Homeric formula *χειρί τέ μιν κατέρεξε*, "he/she comforted her/him with a pat of the hand," which repeatedly describes the action, often the *amused* action, of an elder and/or superior person toward a favorite.¹² Ovid's Mercury is indeed amused here, but will save his laugh for later. Ovid's Battus offers no solemn oath of secrecy, only an assurance that a nearby stone will inform on the theft before he does (696). Moreover, he offers this assurance after he has been given a cow from the stolen herd: by Mercury's shrewdness the witness to his crime becomes a party to it as a receiver of a share of its proceeds. After this the god, who merely pretends to go away (as the Hellenistic Hermes had done in fact), disguises himself and asks for Battus' help in recovering some stolen cattle (697–700). He promises the very tempting reward of another cow *and a bull* (701). That is certainly much more valuable than the preceding bribe (note *merces geminata* in 703), enormously more valuable than the garment of the Hellenistic version. If we consider Battus' age and humble station, and Mercury's initiative in offering him first the bribe of a stolen cow, then a tempting reward, we find in Ovid's tale a genuine divine scandal. When the thievish god finds the man willing to break his

¹¹ There may also be a subtle point in the mention of Neleus' horses. These seem to allude to the account, by Neleus' son Nestor, of heroic horse-and-cattle raids in the eleventh book of the *Iliad*. Such raids were an important part of warfare and called for a man's valor—very sharply in contrast, I think, with the *ars* (*Met.* 2.686) by which the god Mercury acquires *his* cattle.

¹² The occurrences in Homer: *Il.* 1.361 and 24.127 (Thetis to Achilles), 5.372 (Dione to Aphrodite), and 6.485 (Hector to Andromache); *Od.* 4.610 (Menelaus to Telemachus), 5.181 (Calypso to Odysseus), and 13.288 (Athena to Odysseus). The Scholia also report a variant reading at *Il.* 14.263 with the same formula (Hera to Hypnus).

earlier word and point out the hiding place of the herd Mercury himself has stolen, not with the Hellenistic Hermes' indignation but with a laugh (704) he turns the poor fellow into a pointing stone, wittily to fulfill the promise at 695.¹³ *Me mihi prodis*: the irony of the situation is just too much for our clever god, who not only makes but repeats this joke (704 and 705) immediately before he petrifies the "Pointer." This is, of course, quite amusing, but also matter to give the thoughtful reader some pause. Not only is the Ovidian Mercury guilty of the traditional cattle theft; he also gravely compounds his felony with what we might call conversion of goods, with bribery, with entrapment, and finally with a lethal sort of practical joke. He even incidentally breaks a promise of his own, namely to award a bull and cow for information. Worst of all, however, must be the gross hypocrisy of *his* punishing anyone else for anything. The theme of punishment, absent (and quite possibly, as I have argued, suppressed) in the "Homeric" hymn and carefully justified in *Liberalis*, becomes in the *Metamorphoses* as scandalous as it is witty.

For our second "divine scandal," the adultery of War-god and Love-goddess, we find the identity of Ovid's direct source mercifully clear. In the eighth book of the *Odyssey* the Phaeacian singer Demodocus narrates the amour of Ares and Aphrodite and its consequences when her husband Hephaestus learns of it (8.267–366). The affair begins in secret, but soon the Sun-god sees and bears the tale to Hephaestus. The angry Smith-god devises an unbreakable but invisible net as a trap for the lovers, in which, as soon as he pretends to leave home on a long journey, they very promptly fall. At the Sun-god's word he returns, calling all the other Olympians to have a laugh, but also to witness his shame: his wife and her lover held fast in adulterous embrace. He demands return of his bride-price (that is, he sues for divorce). The other goddesses of Olympus stay away out of embarrassment; the male gods, on the other hand, quickly gather round, saying to one another "Evil deeds do not prosper; see, the slow catches the fast," and the like. Asked jokingly if he would like to lie thus with Aphrodite, Hermes replies with four heavily formulaic verses that amount to a strong assent. The senior god Poseidon, however, does not laugh. Instead he prevails upon Hephaestus to accept his solemn guarantee that Ares will make due amends for the offense. The divine cuckold thereupon releases the two culprits, who

¹³ For an interesting attempt to explain the petrification in terms of an old Roman form of oath see Holland (above, note 1) 160–61. If he is right, Ovid's Mercury's joke gains a kind of pedantic-antiquarian humor.

hurry away to the security of their lands Thrace and Cyprus. So ends the bard's song. All his audience enjoy it; Odysseus does so especially (367–68), most likely both because he fears that when he returns home to Ithaca he may find himself in the same plight as Hephaestus and because he has heard how his own two divine foes, the Sun-god and Poseidon, cooperate with a wronged husband in the myth.¹⁴

Ancient as well as modern feelings about this story have been rather less than unanimous. Its moral tone, despite the unobjectionable assertion that οὐκ ἀρετᾶ κακὰ ἔργα, “evil deeds don’t prosper,” has seemed to many scholars incongruous for the *Odyssey*—and some of the ancient editors are known to have held it suspect.¹⁵ Yet this story seems certain to have numbered among those to which the likes of Xenophanes and Plato took such ardent exception; and it was obviously in the text of the *Odyssey* as Ovid knew it: he summarized (and, of course, adapted) the tale in Book 2 of his *Ars Amatoria*—although the “moral” he draws from it is more than a little different!¹⁶ Ancient scholars who regarded the passage as genuine were somewhat embarrassed by it. At least one of them agreed with a number of modern critics who emphasize that a Phaeacian tells this story for other pleasure-loving Phaeacians; while another read the myth as a

¹⁴ Some have believed that the intervention of Poseidon is not really to Hephaestus’ advantage; see, for example, W. B. Stanford’s commentary *ad Od.* 8.351–53. The other and better view is taken in the definitive study of A. Erler, “Die Burgschaft Poseidons im 8. Gesange der Odyssee,” *Zeitschr. der Savigny-Stiftung f. Rechts-Gesch., Röm. Abt.* 65 (1947) 312–19.

¹⁵ See Scholia to *Od.* 8 lines 267 (Sch. HQT), 271 (HVP), 288 (VBEHQ), 290 (P), 312 (T), 318 (T), 329 (Q), 332 (BEQPT), 333–42 (which passage, according to Sch. H, was omitted in some editions), 344 (T), 351 (EPQVMTBH), 355 (Q), 363 (ETH), 364 (T), and 365 (EHBV): all point out unusual features of diction, thought, or fact in this passage. Cf. Stanford *ad* 266 ff. for a discussion which concludes that it is “fully worthy of H[omer] in lighter vein.” Perhaps the best defense of the tale as Homeric is that by Burkert (above, note 1).

¹⁶ *A.A.* 2.559–94, where, significantly, Ovid omits any suggestion that Vulcan may seek a divorce. He does, however, include the solemn intervention of Neptune (587–88). Ovid is here concerned with the (unintended) fostering of love; his concluding apostrophe to the divine cuckold and the “moral” he draws for his readers are worth quoting:

hoc tibi perfecto, Vulcane, quod ante tegebant
liberius faciunt, et pudor omnis abest.
saepe tamen demens stulte fecisse fateris,
teque ferunt artis paenituisse tuae.
hoc vetiti vos este: vetat deprensa Dione
insidias illas, quas tulit ipsa, dare. (589–94)

On comparison between Ovid’s two accounts, and his mention of the myth in other places see Bömer’s commentary on *Met.* IV–V, p. 69.

technological allegory in which Aphrodite = beauty and gentleness, Ares = violence and the substance iron, Hephaestus = craft and the element fire, and Poseidon, naturally, = the element water.¹⁷ There is an excellent chance that Ovid was aware of such approaches—and rejected them. He would have no allegorical nonsense. For him both in the earlier *Ars* and in *Met.* 4 Venus is simply a married female, Mars a male unmarried (at least not to *her*), and Vulcan is a crude cuckold.

The Latin's poet's second (and shorter) adaptation of this myth runs as follows, once more beginning with his transition to it:

- Desierat: mediumque fuit breve tempus, et orsa est
dicere Leuconoe; vocem tenuere sorores.
“hunc quoque, siderea qui temperat omnia luce,
170 cepit amor Solem: Solis referemus amores!
 primus adulterium Veneris cum Marte putatur
 hic vidisse deus: videt hic deus omnia primus.
 indoluit facto Iunonigenaeque marito
 furta tori furtique locum monstravit, at illi
175 et mens et quod opus fabrilis dextra tenebat
 excidit: extemplo graciles ex aere catenas
 retiaque et laqueos, quae lumina fallere possent,
 elimat (non illud opus tenuissima vincant
 stamina, non summo quae pendet aranea tigno)
180 utque leves tactus momentaque parva sequantur,
 efficit et lecto circumdata collocat arte.
 ut venere torum coniunx et adulter in unum,
 arte viri vinclisque nova ratione paratis
 in mediis ambo deprensi amplexibus haerent.
185 Lemnius extemplo valvas patefecit eburnas
 inmisitque deos; illi iacuerunt ligati:
 turpiter, atque aliquis de dis non tristibus optat
 sic fieri turpis; superi risere, diuque
 haec fuit in toto notissima fabula caelo.
190 exigit indicii memorem Cythereia poenam
 inque vices illum, tectos qui laesit amores,
 laedit amore pari.” (*Met.* 4.167–92)

The very first line of the tale proper already makes a notable change from the Odyssean account. The Sun-god here *putatur*, is only “thought” or “supposed” to have been the first to witness the

¹⁷ For the first approach see Sch. HQT to 8.267, with which Stanford *ibid.* agrees; cf. A. Severyns, *Les dieux d'Homère* (Paris 1966) 25, and H. W. Clarke, *The Art of the Odyssey* (Englewood Cliffs 1967) 55. The allegorical interpretation is recorded in Sch. E to 8.267 and subsequently.

adultery. This leaves open a possibility that someone else may also have seen who did not take the trouble to inform the offended husband. In any case Sol does tell Vulcan, who proceeds as in Homer to set his trap (173–81).¹⁸ He does not, however, have to go or pretend to go any distance before the lovers are caught (182–84); nor does he have to summon the other gods, who appear rather to be waiting with him in a kind of voyeuristic ambush just outside the ivory gates of his bedroom.¹⁹ He merely throws open the doors and sends everyone in for a closer look (185–86). The adulterers lie bound *turpiter*, “in shame” (186–87). Nevertheless one of the merry gods expresses a willingness himself *sic fieri turpis*, “thus to be made shameful” (187–88)—at which they all laugh. And that is all, that is the way the tale ends. We find no moral drawn, no intervention by a grave Neptune (as even in *A.A.* 2.587–88). Furthermore, the joking of the Homeric Hermes, which concerned the pleasure of Aphrodite’s embrace, becomes in Ovid an anonymous but frank wish to be “shameful,” and this in a setting where we sense more than a slight hint that the only real shame, if there is any shame at all in this society, is to be *caught* and thus become the matter of gossip. Finally, Ovid’s Vulcan here is not so much enraged as he is malicious. It seems that his only possible satisfaction can be the unique notoriety which he contrives for the furtive lovers’ embarrassed detection (see 188–89), for we read no mention or suggestion of the separation that in Homer Aphrodite’s return to Cyprus would represent. The only actual consequence (and what this little story explains) is a tragic love affair of the tattle-tale Sol in the immediate sequel, introduced by 190–92. By breaking off the story of Vulcan and the adulterers where he does and by making his climax out of a jest incidental to the Odyssean version, Ovid gives the business much more the air (in modern terms) of a smirking gossip column than that of a separation proceeding with undeniably humorous aspects. As with the Homeric myth placed in the mouth of a Phaeacian, the narration in *Met.* 4 is indirect, to be sure. One of the impious daughters of Minyas tells the story, which most modern texts print within quotation marks. The

¹⁸ Note that the cuckold is first named *Iunonigena maritus* (173). This peculiar matronymic may, of course, refer to his unusual birth in some accounts (see Hes. *Th.* 926–29); yet mention of Juno, who has suffered repeatedly from her husband’s infidelities through Books 1–3, must also have a strong ironic value. (On the uniqueness of the epithet *Iunonigena* see Bömer *ad* 4.173.)

¹⁹ One may, I trust, disagree with Bömer *ad* 4.186 when he supposes that Ovid simply expected his learned readers to fill in details familiar to them from the Homeric account (*viz.*, the departure and return of Hephaestus/Vulcan, and his summons to the other gods) that he did not choose to repeat.

shaping, indeed the “metamorphosis” of a familiar myth is nonetheless entirely Ovidian, characteristic, as we shall presently see, of our author’s designs and methods as both the “divine scandals” of this paper have demonstrated them.

First, however, we must observe that we do well to take these two tales together. One indication is the transposition of an important detail of action from the model for Venus-Mars-Vulcan to Ovid’s version of Mercury-Battus: Homer’s Hephaestus *pretends* to go abroad (*Od.* 8.283), while at *Met.* 2.697 it is Mercury who so pretends (*simulat Iove natus abire*).²⁰ The consequences of this transposition for both stories are interesting. In the first Mercury is made to seem even more dishonest by his “simulation,” while the adulterers in the second are made to seem even more reckless by Vulcan’s lack of need for any deception. Other indications that Ovid somehow associated the two tales are themes common to both in his telling of them: (1) the ill-rewarded *indicium* of an eyewitness to a god’s crime; (2) divine hilarity instead of wrath in the face of moral wrong; (3) the naming not only of Mercury’s crime but also of Mars’ and Venus’ adultery as “theft” (twice in 4.174); possibly (4) the addition of a love affair of Apollo to the account of his cattle’s theft; and probably (5) Mercury the Joker (since the likeliest indirect speaker at 4.187–88 is he.²¹) Even more telling, perhaps, are the two stories’ similar features of both external function and autonomous structure, as well as what we may call a “moral metamorphosis” that inverts dignity and values in the two Ovidian accounts as compared with their presumable sources.

Concerning the function of these two “scandals” within the greater contexts of *Met.* 2 and 4, it must be noted that both are structurally subordinated to what follows them. Mercury-Battus is “added on” to the mention of Apollo at 2.676–83, which in turn is “added on” to the strange story of Ocyroe that begins at line 635; and this all accomplishes the transition to a major narrative sequence involving Mercury. Venus-Mars-Vulcan, as already observed, is prefaced by way of explanation to a much longer (and tonally very different) love story one of whose principals is the Sun-god, the unhappy lover of

²⁰ A pretense of departure is, of course, a device of intrigue in ancient comedy (see, for example, Plaut. *Miles Gloriosus*, where Periplectomenus is supposed to have left house and “wife”). Such can have influenced Ovid.

²¹ The anonymous god there obviously corresponds to Hermes in *Od.* 8. Moreover, exactly one hundred lines later, at *Met.* 4.288, Mercury has actually sired a son by Venus—Hermaphroditus! Hermes/Mercury as a joker, with or without sarcasm, has ample precedent in ancient literature; see, besides the “Homeric” hymn to the god, *Il.* 22 and 24; and cf. in comedy Hermes in Arist. *Peace* and *Wealth*, Mercury in Plaut. *Amphitruo*.

Leucothoe.²² As regards their own construction, both of our tales are strikingly truncated in the *Metamorphoses*. Apollo never seems to recover the cattle or Mercury to pay anything for his crime(s); no formal action seems to be contemplated against Vulcan's unfaithful wife or her paramour. Indeed these last mentioned facts point to our conclusions, which concern the moral value of Ovid's adaptation of a pair of ancient and ambiguous myths.

What is surely an immoral potential of the Battos story, that is, the possibility of making crime divinely amusing as well as making it pay, and of demonstrating a blatant hypocrisy in divine punishment, was eschewed in both the "Homeric" and Hellenistic tellings. But Ovid seizes upon it with zest and typical wit. In like manner by telling the tale of the cuckolding of Hephaestus/Vulcan in something that could well resemble its most primitive form, where selfishness and self-help would have been the only norms of conduct among very "human" deities, Ovid fully realizes its immoral possibilities, which the *Odyssey* only partially exploits, and which Homer mitigates by means of moral comment and the sober intervention of Poseidon.²³ The Roman poet, of course, has neither a moral-philosophical nor yet a religious-historical purpose in the early books of his *carmen perpetuum*. A cynicism about the pantheon that has begun with the portrayals of Jupiter and Apollo in Book 1 simply continues through the next three or four books, eventually to embrace all the Great Gods of Augustan religion, whose myths are again and again reduced to comedy or even to pure farce, with all morality quite suspended, as in the two incidents we have been studying. Brooks Otis wrote of the Venus-Mars-Vulcan passage that "Ovid does not make much of this episode."²⁴ The same could also be said of Mercury's cattle theft. In

²² By a surely intentional moral irony on the poet's part, the thief Mercury is able to enjoy his love in the Book 2 sequel, while the honest Sun-god loses *his* love in 4. In these books honesty is by no means the best policy. (The ill-rewarded informer, like other matters we have been considering, has possible models in comedy: see, for example, Plaut. *Menaechmi* and a variation on the theme at the end of Ter. *Phormio*.)

²³ On the "drawn-out, solemn note" at the story's end in Homer as contrasted with Ovid see K. Galinsky, *Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Berkeley 1975) 168–69.

²⁴ B. Otis, *Ovid as an Epic Poet* (Cambridge 19702) 155.

neither magnitude nor emphasis does either of these relatively short tales amount to “much.” Nevertheless several of their features deserve careful appreciation. The casual, almost off-hand tone of them both (and of other short episodes whose sources we do not know even so well as theirs);²⁵ the consistent and cheerful presumption that prudence, justice, and fortitude are as rare in heaven as in Rome and that wit passes for wisdom everywhere; and above all the result that such “divine scandals” undermine any attempt to take their principal actors seriously in the major sequences that they bind together—all affect significantly (if, indeed, they do not wholly determine) our response, as both emotional and ethical beings, to the first third of Ovid’s *magnum opus*.²⁶

Note also how before the narrative moves on to a different kind of material in the central books, Ovid gives us a quick survey of divine philandering (partly review, but partly also new and very strange matter) in Arachne’s woven work described at 6.103–26. Arachne is punished, of course, for publicizing *caelestia crimina* (131), as Ovid’s narrative matter-of-factly calls them—but the poet has made his point.

²⁵ Other short episodes involving similar divine amorality in *Metamorphoses* include: 1.689–712 (Pan and Syrinx, a sad story so commonplace that Argus is bored fast asleep at the mid-point of its telling), 3.318–38 (the blinding of Tiresias), 3.359–69 (why Echo could only echo), 4.543–62 (Juno’s diverse cruelty to the women of Thebes), and 5.363–84 (Venus sending Cupid against Dis). In the first case Ovid’s sources are obscure, in the rest he differs so sharply from other known accounts that his invention must play a major role.

²⁶ The foregoing derives from a paper given at the September, 1978 meeting of the Classical Association of the Southwestern U.S., to whose officers I am in debt for the opportunity to present it, to whose members for an encouraging reception. I also very much thank *TAPA*’s two anonymous referees for both corrections and a number of positive suggestions that have considerably improved this piece.