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**BURLESQUE OF THE HERBIVORE: OVID'S COMIC
PYTHAGORAS IN *MET.* 15**

by

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of the requirements for the degree

of

DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

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Pythagoras' speech at the climax of *Metamorphoses* (15.60-478) has frustrated all attempts to pin it down.¹ To many it seems playfully vacuous, a harmless intellectual exhibition. Mack, for instance, calls it "vehement and impassioned...but signifying little."² Solodow argues that it does not have "any special significance in itself nor lends any to the poem as a whole."³ Little sees only "superficial correspondence with [Ovid's] subject matter."⁴ Particularly troublesome is its culminating injunction to "empty the mouth of meats and choose harmless foods" (*ora vacent epulis alimentaue mitia carpant!* 478), which seems not only out of place in the context of Latin poetry but was in fact a trope often used to spoof Pythagoras.⁵ Of all the

¹ Henceforth line numbers refer to Book 15 of *Metamorphoses*.

² Mack, 142.

³ Solodow, 164.

⁴ According to Little (360), it is "not meant to be examined too closely. Just as there are many things in a beauty which are best seen in the dark...there are many things in the *Metamorphoses* which it is inconsiderate to expose too relentlessly to the searching light of critical analysis, and the role of philosophy is one of them...[t]he poet did not take it seriously, and neither should we." Galinsky (1975, 107) argues that "the principal purpose of the discourse of Pythagoras...is that it serves Ovid to comment on his own literary aims in the poem...[it] serves Ovid to demonstrate in how different a manner from his own he could have treated the subjects of metamorphosis and myth. After suffering through Pythagoras' boring disquisition we can only be grateful to Ovid that he did not do so..." Segal (280) states, "not to say that the Pythagoras section is entirely lacking in seriousness...but even granting that the speech contains some serious import for the poem as a whole, one must be a bit surprised at the vehicle which Ovid has chosen to convey it."

⁵ As Galinsky (1997) points out, extreme vegetarianism was "not part of the mainstream." Segal (1969, 282) remarks that "Pythagorean vegetarianism, in fact, seems to have been a point of special ridicule in Roman literature. The dietary laws could, of course, be admired as conducing to good and simple living; but they were more often satirized as mildly inane...these dietary restrictions, moreover, have a long history of literary ridicule. They were a common joke, for example, among the comic poets of fourth-century Athens. When Ovid makes vegetarianism the main point of Pythagoras' speech, the seriousness of the entire episode is, at the very least, open to question." Miller (478) references several examples of such ridicule: Horace, looking forward to retirement, wonders when he might be able to enjoy a meal of beans – forbidden fruit for Pythagoreans – and hoped they would be accompanied with juicy bacon wrapped in herbs (*Sat.* 2.6.63). Juvenal yearns to escape from busy city life to the country and become Chief of the Hoe, cultivating a garden fit to feed a hundred Pythagoreans (*Sat.* 3.229).

moral qualities for which this sage was known, this is an odd one to emphasize, especially at the finale of an epic cosmogony.

Vegetarianism, however, makes sense if it is seen as “anti-Augustan,” a tone which many scholars find pervasive in the *Metamorphoses*.⁶ By the time this poem was published, Augustus had long promoted an image of himself as priest conducting or overseeing public animal sacrifice. It was, in fact, one of the most visible symbols of his imperial rule.⁷ Thus, Pythagoras’ injunction, which by all appearances is a serious directive not to eat meat, runs directly counter to the emperor’s own depiction of himself as pious carnivore. This stark contrast can hardly be

⁶ The term “anti-Augustan” presents semantic difficulties. Since the 1970’s scholars have been divided on this question. Galinsky (1975, 256) roundly rejects any dichotomy and notes that every political interpretation is facile. “We will never be able to explain – and this should be the first task of literary critics or scholars – the Augustan writers’ literary eminence and appeal to later readers if we try to read them with too much ideological or political significance into their works...nor does the tortuous and contrived explication and diffuse qualification of the presumed conflict between the ‘Augustan’ and ‘anti-Augustan’ Ovid shed any light on the enjoyment that he wanted his readers to derive from his telling of the myths...” (1975, 216). It is difficult to see how this might apply to an audience that *would* enjoy clever subversions, or how it is possible that, in Galinsky’s own words, “Ovid’s strictures intersect with Augustus’ concern for both the moral and the material qualifications of his ruling class,” or how Ovid could be “ever the true Augustan” in *Ars Amatoria* (1996; 91, 291). Barchiesi (2001) provides a summary of the conversation, noting the circularity of the discourse. However, recent scholars such as Curtis (2015, 421) continue to explore the subversive undertones of Ovid’s exile poetry, which in its supposed admiration of Augustus “undermines even as it flatters.” This paper takes an anti-Augustan stance, since as Hardie (2004, 193) puts it, “*Metamorphoses* is not a literary game played in a demilitarized zone outside the “realities” of contemporary politics. Rather Ovid reveals the seamless continuity between the representations of imperial ideology – of all ideologies – and those of literary texts.”

⁷ Green’s explication is worth quoting at length here. “During the reign of Augustus, it is clear that animal sacrifice was being consciously advertised in the ‘traditional’ way, as an unquestionably *positive* institution and a most potent symbol of religious revival under the Principate. The most spectacular example of this new emphasis occurred during the Secular Games of 17 BC... An elaborate sequence of daily and nightly animal sacrifices, conducted principally by the Emperor himself, established a conceptual connection between the imperial family, religious revival, and Roman fecundity. This connection between Augustus the sacrificer and Augustus the benefactor was very important to the Emperor, resulting in several statues being erected showing him with veiled head (*capite velato*), the traditional pose of the sacrificer...” (43).

unintentional; rather, as he has done so often in the epic, Ovid is making yet another jab at Augustus' grandiose vision of Rome.⁸

But looking at the passage this way addresses only one of its many complexities. As the last major speech in an epic about change, Pythagoras' erratic discourse upon the nature of the world also seems ill-suited to Ovid's larger context. Put simply, where is the metamorphosis in this climactic moment of *Metamorphoses*? While earlier in his lecture the philosopher delivers a mock-Lucretian exegesis of change as Heraclitean flux (*cuncta fluunt* 179), in the end nothing changes, at least not on the surface.⁹ After speaking for over four hundred lines, Pythagoras ends up the same long-winded professor he was at the beginning, with an enrollment of one student Numa who says not a word, then dies. Nothing is transformed, transported or transposed. But to a Roman of Ovid's day one clear change *has* taken place. The image of the emperor has been transmuted from celestial hierophant to blood-soaked cannibal, a man who in eating meat was, in fact, devouring his own people, in mythic terms a Roman Cronos unwittingly ingesting recycled souls. Seen this way, the unstated implications of Pythagoras' speech open the door to a brutality of truly epic scope fully in accord with the savageries and violence found throughout the poem.

The Proper Pythagoras

Ovid was a master of purposed ambiguity who knew how to play to different audiences at the same time. Some Romans would have had good reason to take Pythagoras in *Metamorphoses*

⁸ The Pythagoras episode foreshadows an ending charged with anti-Augustan sentiment; see Moulton, 7.

⁹ According to Miller (477), "The philosopher's ranting does not by itself make him a caricature of Lucretius, but the hyperbolic quality of his prohibitions against meat – don't eat your relatives – works in that direction."

at face value, as the author surely hoped they would, particularly scholars at court who passed along their interpretations of the poem to Augustus.¹⁰ Seen this way, the only historical character in a world of mythological fantasies promises a culminating voice that can bring coherence to the many narratives in the text.¹¹ Thus, the final book can be seen to afford superficial unity and intellectualism counterpoint to Ovid's ostensible patriotic melody, the deification of Caesar and Augustus. From this perspective, the philosopher's ideas may be taken seriously *per se*.

Moreover, for Romans with pro-Augustan sentiments, the name Pythagoras raised a loyal banner for what Aristotle had called "the Italian philosophy."¹² Nor was the mystic and mathematician unpopular in Ovid's day; his statue had been standing in the Forum for two centuries.¹³ By blurring lines between science and magic, his cult enjoyed much Roman attention in the early empire.¹⁴ Apocryphal folklore held that the great wisdom King Numa acquired came firsthand from Pythagoras himself.¹⁵ Ovid's finale, adorned with marvelous Alexandrian

¹⁰ One such messenger appears in *Tristia*, 2.76: *a! ferus et nobis crudelior omnibus hostis / delicias legit qui tibi cumque meas / carmina ne nostris quae te venerantia libris / iudicio possint candidiore legi*. "Oh! That savage man, crueller to me than all my other enemies, was he who read to you [Augustus] the lighthearted things in my poem, rather than the reverent songs that could be read with clearer dedication."

¹¹ Barchiesi (295) notes that "Pythagoras is the only truly historical character in a poem which otherwise stars gods, demigods, gods 'in waiting' (Aeneas, Romulus, Caesar, and Augustus himself), heroes and legendary characters, or personalities insubstantial to say the least, such as Numa..."

¹² Guthrie (172) refers to Pythagoreanism as the "fountain-head of the Italian tradition."

¹³ "The name of Pythagoras was held in high esteem, and it was almost an act of patriotism for a Roman to invoke the wisdom of this local sage..." Kahn, 86.

¹⁴ Cicero dedicated his translation of Plato's *Timaeus* to his Pythagorean friend Nigidius Figulus, an astrologer who prophesied the glory of Augustus' reign. In youth he also sought the house where Pythagoras died in Metapontum (*De finibus* 5.2; Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras* 57). See Kahn (89) and Rawson (310). Evidence for a revival in Pythagoreanism during the Late Republic and early Empire abounds, such as Varro's "Pythagorean-style" burial, the Sextians and Seneca, and the neo-Pythagorean movement; see Kahn 2001.

¹⁵ Such a meeting was chronologically impossible, as Numa lived two centuries earlier. But Ovid cheekily heightens the effect, as Barchiesi (297) points out. "Ovid makes no attempt to overcome the obstacle; on

eccentricities such as bears licking their cubs into shape, men's spines turning into snakes, and water setting fire to wood – all on the authority of a world-renowned savant – was a perfect vehicle to suit the fancy of an educated audience. Just for that, Augustus should have loved it.

Furthermore, Roman readers would have recognized Pythagoras' speech as the product of a Latin poet characteristically outshining his predecessors by extracting *gravitas* from antiquated Greek learning. To trump his forebears, Ovid chose as his mouthpiece the very man credited with coining the word philosophy, and a personage with ties to Apollo, Augustus' preferred Olympian.¹⁶ By the classical age, treasuries of Pythagorean *pseudoepigrapha* had become useful as Roman authors sought the authoritative stamp of an ancient name.¹⁷ Kahn points out that Platonic cosmology arrived in Rome mingled with Pythagoreanism, and there was some degree of confusion between the two philosophers, both of whom had a certain amount of esoteric tug for Latin poets.¹⁸ It would make sense, then, for Romans to hear Pythagoras as a sort of Socrates

the contrary, the narrative bridge uniting Numa and Pythagoras is constructed in such a way as to highlight the contradiction." Plutarch raises the possibility this would have been Pythagoras the Spartan athlete; see *Life of Numa* 1.

¹⁶ Guthrie (204) notes that Herodotus used 'philosopher' to describe Solon. Iamblichus records as well that Pythagoras held authority directly from Apollo, and that his name commemorates the Pythian. Pythagoras' father had received an oracle from Delphi that his wife "would present him with a son who would surpass all others who had ever lived in beauty and wisdom, and would be of the greatest benefit to the human race in everything pertaining to human achievements" (Guthrie, 58). This is, of course, not at all the Pythagoras Ovid presents.

¹⁷ According to Kahn (90), "The charm of Pythagorean authorship for the Roman literary public, and hence for the book market, is obviously linked to the fact that Pythagorean philosophy is, as Aristotle said, 'Italian.' In the period in which Rome is digesting its conquest of the Greek-speaking East and Roman authors are beginning to match or copy Greek achievements in rhetoric, poetry, history and philosophy, it is a considerable advantage for a newly discovered text to bear the name of an ancient philosopher from Croton..."

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 97. "Pythagorean (or pseudo-Pythagorean) literature must be the pipeline by which the Platonic cosmology is transmitted to Rome, and Numa is designated the legendary point of connection... 'Pythagoras' became again the code word for a tradition of transcendental Platonism."

for the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid's version of what Lanham has called a "referential mystic center" of "Platonic seriousness."¹⁹ There can be no doubt that Ovid shows off his encyclopedic knowledge, tying together the preceding narratives with philosophical insight, or the façade thereof.

There is, of course, another way to see it, as a covert satire. To start with, Pythagoras' authority in the text is undercut by its setting. His only audience, Numa, has travelled to Croton expecting the secular rationality of a Lucretius (*rerum natura requirit*, 6). Instead, the Roman king dangles "in the dative case for half a book" while the philosopher lectures him on entirely anti-Epicurean doctrines, spewing a bewildering stream of pompous nonsense.²⁰ Besides being a traditional sage, Pythagoras also had a reputation as a "crackpot," and Ovid portrays him accordingly.²¹ The philosopher boasts that he has soared above the earth into the starry firmament, unlocked the heavens, surveyed all things by reason and wakeful diligence, then met the gods and channeled the Delphic oracle. But Ovid makes it clear from the start that all this is incredible and no one believes anything Pythagoras has to say (*sed non et credita*, 74). What remains unclear is what any of this has to do with Numa. Indeed, the speech lacks a target for all its portentous divination, and the "profusion of protreptic injunctions and didactic

¹⁹ Lanham, 36.

²⁰ Mack, 142. "The introducer rushes breathlessly on, spewing out an enormous amount of information that is much too diverse to be comfortably included in one poorly articulated sentence (15.60-75). [Ovid] does not take Pythagoras seriously enough to distinguish between his origins, his scientific and theological study, and his precepts... A whole course in ancient physics...is crammed into five lines."

²¹ Miller, 478.

pronouncements”²² comically falls on deaf ears, the “sermon of a windbag.”²³ On the other hand, it’s not unreasonable that a hyperbolic sage who cannot be trusted and has an audience of one feels no obligation to stay on subject.

The satiric punchline is that Pythagoras misremembers his own former life as Homer’s Euphorbus, by botching the story of his purported demise at the spear of Patroclus.²⁴ As Miller puts it, “[t]he crowning irony is that Pythagoras’ display of his legendary powers of recall has occasioned the forgetting of his own immediate argument.”²⁵ Ovid casts the Greek sage as a digressive and tedious rambler, who compares his own speech to wave upon wave, pressing on each other as time goes on in an excruciating circle (*sed ut unda inpellitur unda / urgueturque eadem veniens urgueturque priorem / tempora sic fugiunt pariter pariterque sequuntur* 181-183). The assonance of groaning (*ut... und... ur... und... urg... uet... ur... urg...*) succeeded by a list of banal observations – such as night turning into day and back again (186-187) – highlights the affective lethargy produced in a listener exposed to a disquisition of this sort. At one point Pythagoras even promises to adjourn after only a few more stories (*pauca referam*, 308) and then for the next two hundred lines bombards poor Numa with pseudoscientific data. This virtuoso performance culminates in an anticlimax, as Pythagoras loses his own chain of thought, admitting his metaphorical horses seem to have forgotten their goal (*oblitis...equis*, 453-454).

²² Galinsky, 1997.

²³ Miller, 477. Segal (2001, 73) remarks, “Because he lacks the traditional didactic relationship with his addressee, all his passion floats empty in the air.”

²⁴ Euphorbus was killed by a spear to the neck, not the breast. For the tradition of Pythagorean metempsychosis, see Guthrie, 164.

²⁵ Miller, 487.

Having announced that he has “embarked on the boundless sea and spread full sails to the winds” (*et quoniam magno feror aequore plenaque ventis*, 176) – Segal suggests “he may be ‘filled with wind’ in a not altogether complimentary sense”²⁶ – Pythagoras’ blustery voyage meanders through a long catalogue of incredible wonders.

These *paradoxa* only add to the playful tone. Pythagoras’ marvels are not explanations, but cleverly-designed props and thaumastic oddities egregiously lacking justification. Myers points out that Ovid “re-mythologizes” the epic tradition and in doing so undercuts philosophical rationality.²⁷ Having plucked curiosities from paradoxographical collections, Ovid highlights each one just briefly enough to give the impression that Pythagoras stands gaping in amazement, not pondering the causes of things.²⁸ For philosophers, wonder usually gives way to reason – *miratio* to *ratio* – but in Pythagoras’ mind, the opposite happens.²⁹ In a reversal of Lucretius, “the philosopher is made more of a poet than the poet a philosopher.”³⁰ Ovid has transformed

²⁶ Segal 2001, 75.

²⁷ According to Myers (65), “...Ovid reacts against Lucretius’ purely materialistic explanation of natural phenomena, and by incorporating physics into his unrelentingly unnaturalistic and supernatural metamorphoses he consciously “re-mythologizes” Lucretius’ rationalist allegorizations of myth. The aetiological focus of Ovid’s mythological stories actively engages with and challenges the claims of Lucretius’ cosmological epic to explain the world.” Also, as Myers (49) observes, “Ovid thus continues his pose as a cosmogonic epic narrator, fulfilling humorously and perversely the expectations set up by his lofty cosmological opening. There is of course considerable irony in Ovid’s pseudo-scientific posture. By exploiting the language of physics to describe myths of the most fabulous nature, Ovid creates a humorous incongruity between this authoritative posture and the fictional content of his mythological epic narrative, while simultaneously challenging the cosmological claims of his epic predecessors...”

²⁸ Myers (158) goes on to explain, “Just as earnestly as Lucretius had implored his reader throughout his poem not to wonder at the workings of nature, Pythagoras actively encourages amazement at the marvelous in nature...”

²⁹ See Myers, 149. Little (355-7) emphasizes, however, that “[m]any of Pythagoras’ examples are statements of verifiable fact... Pythagoras’ examples are not instances of transformation in the world of myth, but of what Ovid and others believed to be recorded natural phenomena.” Water setting fire to wood perhaps would have been an exception (*aquis accendere lignum*, 311).

³⁰ Myers, 136.

“Platonic seriousness” into dumb astonishment, complete with dependence on seers as the source of truth, with his disclaimer “unless all faith is to be snatched from the prophets” (*nisi vatibus omnis / eripienda fides*, 282). Rather than the esteem Plato attributes to the Pythagorean way of life (Πυθαγόρειον τρόπον, *Rep.* 6.600a), the audience would have been reminded more of Aristophanes’ *Clouds*, in which the philosopher’s brain functions like a head of leafy greens.³¹ The threads of dialectical seriousness Plato wove into Homer’s hexameter unravel in Ovid; this Socrates seems to be hanging out of his basket.

But if the Pythagoras of *Metamorphoses* wears any mask, it is not that of a character from Old Comedy, but closer to one Ovid himself wears in *Ars Amatoria*, the *praeceptor amoris*, the self-styled *vates paritus* who bumps along in the uneven chariot of the Comic Muse.³² Compared to his muddled and disorganized philosophical ideas, Pythagoras’ fingerwagging about the evils of eating meat stands out in its force and clarity. In response, Numa, an especially dull student for a Roman king, nods accordingly and falls backward into his grave a few lines after the lecture, but not before instituting the opposite of everything he just been taught (*sacrificos docuit ritus*, 15.483).

³¹ κάρδαμα, *Nub.* 235.

³² *Ars Amatoria*, 1.17 and 1.27-30. Mack (143) calls it another “burlesque of didactic...though tailored in subject and style to epic.” Lanham (56) muses about Ovid’s contrast to Plato in dramatically toying with the idea of serious philosophy: “Ovid unmasks the rhetorical ingredient in serious behavior, and debunks it. Such unmasking may constitute, in fact, satire’s standard operating procedure. But both comedy and satire require a referent self Ovid neglects to supply...Ovid’s serious self, with its windy posturing, seems absurd enough, but so does the sophisticated rhetorical self, the butterfly machiavel.”

Vegetarianism and Animal Sacrifice

Thus, the takeaway message of Pythagoras' speech foregoes a profound metaphysical claim in favor of impracticable dietetic advice.³³ Whereas philosophers in the Platonic tradition expound weighty imperatives and moral propositions – knowledge is virtue; the unexamined life is not worth living – Ovid chooses to magnify an abstruse ideology that most of his audience would immediately ignore, especially given the importance of animal sacrifices in Roman society and ceremony. As Solodow puts it, “Man is portrayed as torn between steak and string beans, as if this were the central conflict of the moral life.”³⁴ Such a “bizarre ‘vegetarian’ framework”³⁵ would have been nonsensical, if not offensive, to an ancient public that was all but universally carnivorous.³⁶ In this context, vegetarianism makes it challenging to take Pythagoras as a serious philosopher.³⁷ Little blames Ovid, and argues that the speech is evidence “of hasty and slipshod composition.”³⁸

³³ Barchiesi (295) remarks, “It has been noted, with a certain amount of radicalism, that Pythagoras offers Ovid’s readers an eloquent speech *de rerum natura* framed by the precept ‘strive for five!’”

³⁴ Solodow, 165.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 295.

³⁶ Newmyer (479) argues contrary to Solodow and Mack that Ovid is in fact a proselytizing vegetarian, though largely in an *ad hominem* on the diets of other scholars today: “One suspects that some of the critical contempt for this part of the speech may stem rather from a distaste for vegetarian philosophy on the part of some critics than from any shortcoming of poetic technique traceable in Ovid. When Solodow judges Pythagoras’ plea for abstention a frivolous attempt to portray meat eating as the ‘the original sin,’ and when Mack brands the vegetarian episode an instance of Ovid’s tendency to emphasize ‘all the more ridiculous aspects of Pythagoreanism while omitting all the more important tenets of the school,’ one wonders whether such strictures reflect the prejudices of these critics rather than the results of an attempt to arrive at a fair assessment of what Ovid has to say on the subject of vegetarianism.” This, however, contributes little to the understanding of the speech in Book 15.

³⁷ Segal 2001, 68. Myers (136) disagrees: “While it is clear that Ovid enjoyed humorously exaggerating the dramatic language of Pythagoras’ exordium, the presence here of vegetarianism does not reduce the whole of Pythagoras’ speech to the status of parody...”

³⁸ Little, 360.



Figure 1: Ara Pacis frieze displays animals to be sacrificed (Galinsky, 145)

Despite all this, Ovid's inclusion of vegetarianism here does merit serious consideration as a deliberate and careful element in the larger scheme of the *Metamorphoses*. As in many other passages in the epic, subtle, anti-Augustan undertones suffuse its content and language. For example, in pleading against the sacrifice of animals in religious rites, Pythagoras says:

*audetis vesci, genus o mortale? Quod, oro,
ne facite, et monitis animos advertite nostris!
Cumque boum dabitur caesorum membra palato,
mandere vos vestros scite et sentite colonos.*

You dare to feed, O mortal race? This thing, I say,
You must not do, and turn your minds to my warning words!
When you give the parts of sliced oxen to the palate,
See and understand that you gnaw on your own fellow countrymen. (139-142)

Augustus, to the contrary, proclaims in the *Res Gestae*,

*Legibus novis me auctore latis multa exempla maiorum exolescentia iam ex nostro
saeculo reduxi et ipse multarum rerum exempla imitanda posteris tradidi.*

I was the one who brought back into use with new laws many original practices of great ancestors grown obsolete in our age, and handed down good ways of doing many things to be imitated by posterity. (8.13)



Figure 2: Altar of the Lares shows Augustus as priest
(Galinsky, 307)

Implicit in this pronouncement is the public slaughter of oxen, which were sometimes killed at the hands of the *princeps* himself. Evidence is copious that this sort of rite was a fundamental aspect of Augustus' public persona. Lists include bulls and ewe-lambs he himself killed, serving as sacrificer-in-chief.³⁹ Rome in the early Empire was indeed saturated with imperial propaganda featuring expiatory imagery, for instance the *Boscoreale Cups*⁴⁰ as

well as the *Ara Pacis* and the many depictions and statues of the hooded figure of Augustus as priest.⁴¹ Galinsky notes that "in the new cult of the *Lares Augusti* at the *compita*, Augustus was honored not with a mere libation of flowers, but with the sacrifice of a bull, an animal reserved for major gods of the state."⁴² In addition, Barchiesi explains that King Numa

founded practically all the sacerdotal colleges upon which Roman state religion was based. Without Numa there would be no *Flamines* or *Salii*, no Vestal Virgins and no Pontifex, no rites of the *Argei*, no *Agonalia*, no *Fordicidia*, and so on: all the auguries, colleges, rites, and annual festivals bound to and connected with the art of sacrifice that unfolds (like a crimson thread of blood) from the age of kings down to Ovid's own

³⁹ *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, 6.32323 64-end (Chisholm, 155).

⁴⁰ Green, 44. See figure 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* See also Galinsky 1996, 171 and figure 4. The hymn sung at the *Ludi Saeculares* orders "to the earth a black sow be consecrated, pregnant with her farrow. Let spotless white bulls be led to Zeus's altar...to the gods of heaven sacrifice is made by day...Hera's temple must receive from your hands a fine white cow. Phoebus Apollo must receive the same offering..." (Chisholm, 151).

⁴² Galinsky 1996, 302.

time...Numa is responsible for the fact that the backbone of Roman religion is animal sacrifice.⁴³



Figure 3: Boscoreale Cup with animal sacrifice (Galinsky, 69)

Thus, Pythagoras' vegetarian plea targeted directly to Numa is boldly irreverent at best and subverts the emperor's claim to his own divine exceptionalism. Pythagoras denounces the gods themselves (*ipsos deos*, 128) – and presumably that would include gods-in-waiting like Augustus – for taking pleasure in such carnage, comparing animal eaters, as all traditional religious Romans were, to a litany of monsters: tigers, wolves, and even the Cyclops (93).⁴⁴ The

⁴³ Barchiesi, 300-301.

⁴⁴ Pythagoras' protests do not stop there: "O how criminal it is for flesh to be stored away in flesh, for one greedy body to grow fat with food gained from another, for one live creature to go on living through the destruction of another living thing!" (*Heu quantum scelus est in viscera viscera condi / congestoque avidum pinguescere corpore corpus / alteriusque animantem aniantis vivere leto!* 87-90). Later, he adds, "who with his axe could smite that neck which was worn with toil for him, with whose help he had so often renewed the stubborn soil and planted so many crops?" (*quibus totiens durum renovaverat arvum / tot dederat messes, percussit colla securit*, 125-126).

implication is that animal sacrifice and human murder are synonymous. Pythagoras laments, “who can slay a kid which cries just like a little child!” (*puerilibus*, 466). If anything, then, Augustus’ insistence on killing helpless, innocent beings recalls the “most outrageous religious act in Roman poetry,” the sacrifice of Iphigenia as described by Lucretius (*DRM* 1.80-101).⁴⁵ Like Agamemnon’s daughter, the animal victim hears (*audit*, 132) and watches (*videt*, 133) its own sacrifice.⁴⁶



Figure 4: Hooded Augustus as sacrificer-in-chief (Galinsky, 175)

When Ovid then compares Augustus to Agamemnon explicitly in the final lines of the poem (845), he leaves little room for doubt that Pythagoras’ vegetarianism is no casual trope but a well-crafted, subversive assault on the emperor’s preference in religious ritual.

As a poet, Ovid was clearly fond of playing with fire, often infusing his verse with subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle double and triple meanings. In this culminating speech of *Metamorphoses*, he hints at another possible interpretation of his words, far different from his overt flattery of the current regime, in typical paronymic style.⁴⁷ When Roman listeners heard embedded in close succession the words *caesorum* (141), *palato* (141), and *augustae* (145),

⁴⁵ Green, 49. Galinsky (1975, 141) observes that the speech “cannot fail to evoke the sympathy of even the most hard-hearted reader.” However, rejecting “anti-Augustanism” of all stripes, he does not connect it to religious sacrifice.

⁴⁶ Cf. *sensit*, *DRN* 1.90.

⁴⁷ Ovid was well known for punning and wordplay, as in his tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, which is teeming with it; see Keith (2001).

resembling as they do “Caesar,” “Palatine,” and “Augustus,” who could have missed the real target of his vitriol?⁴⁸ Impracticable dietetic advice, in the end, is yet another coded jab at Augustus, a dangerous habit soon to backfire on the playful poet.

Conclusion

In sum, at the end of a mock-Lucretian lecture in which nothing on the surface changes shape, one thing does metamorphose. The *princeps* himself undergoes transformation from righteous ruler to a child-sacrificing cannibal. Thus, Pythagoras’ speech in Ovid is not entirely fatuous, nor merely “a gesture towards unity which Ovid thought it politic to make, as giving his work some pretensions beyond those of a mere collection, but...only a gesture.”⁴⁹ To the contrary, this finale is in at least one respect appropriate to its context, a Hellenized Latin epic about the dangers and disasters produced by change, and to its author, renowned for his scintillating and multi-layered performances that showcase the irony, wit and intellectual prowess which Ovid claims he will guarantee him an eternal *nomen*. As Feeney puts it, “Outdoing Julius Caesar, who went higher than the moon and became a star, Ovid will go higher than the stars, and become a book.”⁵⁰ That so much of today’s understanding of ancient myth

⁴⁸ Galinsky (1975, 258), rejecting all political interpretations, asserts that “...*augusta*, an adjective Ovid uses only three times in the poem, is almost certainly an ironic allusion to the emperor. It is the kind of playful irony which Ovid applies to everything, including his own role as poet, and there is nothing biting, subversive, or political about it.” Myers (142) responds, “The presence of the word *augustae* is no doubt meant to foreshadow the oracles concerning Augustus that appear later in the book.”

⁴⁹ Little, 360.

⁵⁰ Feeney, 249.

comes from a poem embedded with miscreant gods, vegetarianism, and other blasphemies is confirmation that Ovid's secret art will live beyond the farthest stars – and emperors.

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