

*Victa iacet pietas: The Transformation of Pietas in Ovid's Metamorphoses*

*Pietas*, defined as loyalty, devotion, and respect towards one's country, gods, and family, was a key Roman virtue and much emphasized during the reign of Augustus. Vergil offers the epitome of *pietas* with Aeneas, but Ovid also incorporates and plays on *pietas* in his epic, the *Metamorphoses*. Yet Ovid's results are different from Vergil's and quite shocking at times. In his story of the Ages of Mankind, Ovid names various strained and murderous family relations and remarks at the end that *pietas* lies conquered (*victa iacet pietas*, 1.149). This statement could serve programmatically of the nature of *pietas* in the *Metamorphoses*; Ovid is more interested in *impietas* and all the possible perversions and breakdowns of *pietas*. This paper explores the redefinitions of *pietas* in the *Metamorphoses* and argues that Ovid feminizes, subverts, and trivializes this virtue, thus transforming its very nature.

Although *pietas* was expected of all family members, not only males, a male-centric view of this virtue emerges in Roman literature. Yet most examples of *pietas* in the *Metamorphoses* involve a woman. *Pietas* explicitly plays a role, of varying importance, in the stories of Medea, the Peliades, Procne, Althaea, Iphigenia, Byblis, and Myrrha, while implicitly in the stories of Scylla and Erysichthon. Ovid does not delve into *pietas* to the gods as frequently (although see, e.g., the stories of Lycaon, the Minyeides, and Erysichthon), instead focusing on the familial side of the virtue. Women acknowledge their conflicting claims of loyalty and debate their roles as mothers and sisters or daughters and wives. They suffer from a family member's lack of *pietas* towards them, or they themselves violate *pietas* towards a father, son, or husband.

Ovid further subverts *pietas* via what some scholars (e.g. Anderson 1972, Tissol 1997) have called a favorite paradox of his, *pietas est scelus*. Both Procne and Althaea redefine *pietas* towards a sibling to justify vengeance and the murder of a son, thus transforming their loyalty

into a crime. Byblis and Myrrha reinterpret *pietas* towards a brother and a father, respectively, and stretch their (mis)interpretation to encompass and rationalize incest.

Ovid deflates *pietas* through feminization and subversion but also through his handling of several seemingly ordinary stories of *pietas*. Jason's *pietas* for his father motivates him to ask Medea to rejuvenate Aeson, but Ovid focuses more on Medea's reaction to, and manipulation of, Jason's *pietas*. The Sibyl may recognize Aeneas' *pietas*, yet Ovid downplays the hero's distinguishing quality. Ovid applies the term to Aeneas on his nurse's epitaph and also relegates it to a story told to, not about, Aeneas. Ovid's redefinitions reach a new low in Book 15 where Pythagoras warns against eating animals: therefore, so that *pietas* may not be conquered by the belly's greed, refrain from driving out kindred spirits with impious slaughter (*ergo, ne pietas sit victa cupidine ventris,/ parcite ... cognatas caede nefanda/ exturbare animas*, 15.173-75). Pythagoras' reformulation of *pietas* as vegetarianism trivializes it and highlights that *pietas* has indeed been conquered.

### **Works Cited**

- Anderson, William S. 1972. *Ovid's Metamorphoses. Books 6-10*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Tissol, Garth. 1997. *The Face of Nature: Wit, Narrative, and Cosmic Origins in Ovid's Metamorphoses*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.