

Ira Dei: The Politics of Anger in Ovid's Exile Poetry

Ovid's exilic poetry has received much attention of late, but critics often neglect to take into account that Ovid is not our best, but our *solitary* source for his own relegation, and for his relationship with the emperor. It is always hazardous to use a single source, and the dangers of reading this relationship solely through Ovid's poetry are particularly acute because, although Augustus did indeed exist outside of the exile poetry, his depiction within it is such that he might not have recognized himself. The 'Augustus' of the exile poetry and his feelings about the 'Ovid' of the exile poetry are nothing but a series of poetic fictions. I here eschew the quest for *Realien*, instead examining the portrayal of 'Augustus' as it affects our understanding of the relegation of 'Ovid'.

Anger (*ira principis, ira deus*, etc.) and divinity (*deus, Juppiter*, the *fulmen*, etc.) are the single most distinctive characteristics of Augustus in the exile poetry (Videau-Delibes, etc.). For Ovid to refer primarily to the emperor as a divine figure sets up the expectation that he will behave justly, or at the barest minimum, knowledgeably. Instead, he is angry. By this assimilation, Ovid is enabled to draw a contrast between the affable, worshipful poet and his stern, irrational god. Ovid presents himself as willing to believe the best about Augustus as he simultaneously provides evidence for the worst; the exile poetry becomes a series of increasingly manic attempts to appease a new and cruel god who has not yet made clear how he wants to be worshipped.

The prevalence of Augustus' anger has often been noted, but its importance has not; critics make the mistake of believing that Augustus really was angry simply because Ovid says he was. About the state of the emperor's emotions in relation to Ovid we have no information; he

might well have continued to be angry with Ovid until the end of his life, given up his anger at some point, or never been angry in the first place. By fashioning the emperor *not* as a ruler who relegated him for some specific event and saw no reason to change his mind, but as an enraged deity barely in control of his own emotions, loosing thunderbolts with reckless abandon, Ovid manipulates the situation to his own advantage: anger is detrimental, dangerous, and unmanly, not to mention unfair to its victims. So too, while it is certainly possible that Augustus didn't like the *Ars* when he first read it, the reason for its mention as a cause of relegation is to highlight the fact that 'Augustus' held his grudge for an extremely long time. Ancient theorists of anger believed that the virtuous man would either get revenge quickly or not at all (Harris), so Ovid's claim that Augustus quietly seethed – for somewhere between six and ten years, depending on the publication date of the *Ars* – is again extremely pointed.

To present Augustus as divine, angry and rancorous thus not only undermines any pretensions the emperor might have to self-control, it removes the relegation of Ovid from the realm of rational explanation. Why was he punished? Not for a *carmen*, not for an *error*, but because the emperor could not control his emotions. To the extent that Ovid persuades us of the reality of the emperor's anger, discussion of punishment and hopes of remission must center not upon what he has done or deserved, but upon how the emperor feels; this strategy minimizes both Ovid's agency and his culpability.

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