

## Don't Be So Full of Yourself: Byblis, Creusa, and Escaping Repetition

The connection between Ovid's use of transgressive sex-acts (i.e. rape, incest, etc.) and his method of poetic composition has recently been used to interpret Byblis' incestuous desires in *Metamorphoses* 9. Shilpa Raval (2001) has shown, for instance, that Byblis' love affair consistently alludes to Ovidian elegiac poetry, while Joseph Farrell (1998) and Thomas Jenkins (2000) focus on Byblis' use of the epistolary mode. All of these approaches have been influenced by Micaela Janan's provocative reading (1991) of Byblis as a character encoding the threat of repetition (253). Janan's article gives pride of place to the interpretive significance of Ovid's allusions to his own poetry. The present paper contextualizes Ovid's self-allusivity as part of a broader allusive program. Namely, it is my contention that Ovid signals the denouement of the incest in Book 9 by the allusive assimilation of Byblis to Vergil's Creusa in *Aeneid* 2. This allusion operates polemically, as Ovid shows that he, unlike Vergil, is able to escape the anxiety of influence of his own poetry.

The association of self-allusion with narrative recursion is highlighted by Ovid in the Byblis narrative. The salutation of the girl's love letter (*Met.* 9.530-31) is a nearly exact replica of the openings of three of the *Heroides* (4, 11, and 16). Byblis and Ovid write, but their composition is a repetition of the literary past. This literary recursivity spills over into the narrative when Byblis makes attempt after attempt (*Met.* 9.632: *infelix committit saepe repelli*) to seduce her brother. Caunus leaves his fatherland when there is no apparent end of his sister's attempts at seduction (*Met.* 9.633: *mox ubi finis abest*); Byblis nevertheless gives chase and follows her brother's footsteps (*Met.* 9.640: *sequitur vestigia fratris*). The phrase *sequitur vestigia* echoes part of Apollo's injunction in Callimachus' *Aetia*, commonly used by Augustan poets for its programmatic overtones, warning the poet to avoid the tracks left behind by earlier

poetry (frag. 1.26: ἐτέρων δ' ἔχνια μὴ καθ' ὁμὰ). This serves as a signifier of intertextuality and helps the reader to notice Ovid's allusion to one of his foremost epic predecessors, Vergil. As he flees the city, Caunus is transformed allusively into an Aeneas figure: both are called *profugi* (*Met.* 9.640~*Aen.* 1.2) and leave their home cities to found new *moenia* (*Met.* 9.634~*Aen.* 1.7). The reader is hereby encouraged to look outside Ovid's text, an act which Caunus himself has encoded in his own actions when he casts aside the half-read letter of his sister. Jenkins sees this as an apotropaic act warding off the reader from similarly casting away the *Metamorphoses* in disgust at the illicit themes of the passage (2000 450). I submit that Caunus also provides the reader with an impetus to set down his Ovid and be ready to pick up another text.

Furthermore, this allusion leads to the conclusion that Byblis, following her brother's *vestigia*, reminds the reader of Creusa in Book 2 of the *Aeneid*, who is ordered to follow her husband's footsteps (*Aen.* 2.711: *servet vestigia coniunx*). The attentive reader, however, is left to ponder the implications of Ovid's assimilation of Byblis, the paragon of self-allusivity, to Creusa, who is both named Eurydice in earlier versions of the Aeneas myth and is modeled upon the Eurydice of *Georgics* 4 (Gale 2003 337-39).

When Ovid follows in the footsteps, *vestigia*, of earlier poetry, he is able to escape his own literary past and return to the novelty that is so important to the *Metamorphoses* (*Met.* 1.1: *in nova fert animus*). Vergil, by comparison, is unable to escape his poetic past. As soon as he realizes that he has lost Creusa, Aeneas runs back into Troy; retracing their own *vestigia*, Aeneas and Vergil are led backwards, *retro*, not only to Troy, the burial ground of Homeric epic, but also to Creusa, the ghost of the Vergilian past (*Aen.* 2.753-54: *repeto et vestigia retro / observata sequor*).

## Works Cited

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