

## Carmentis and the *Carpenta*: Testing Poetic and Political Boundaries in *Fasti* 1.617-636

Carmentis, introduced briefly in *Aeneid* 8.333-341 as Evander's prophetic mother and as a nymph, is upgraded in Ovid's *Fasti* to the status of a goddess. In his second entry for the Carmentalia, the celebration of this goddess (Jan. 11-15), Ovid tells a shocking story that critics, with the exception of Green (2004: 282-290) and Barchiesi (1997: 93-96), have largely failed to discuss: the Roman matrons, stripped of their privilege to ride in carriages (*carpenta*), abort their unborn fetuses in protest. The brief but graphic depiction of abortion (lines 623-624) is unsettling enough in an aetiology for the celebration of a goddess of childbirth, but it is even more unsettling given that the women's right to ride in *carpenta* has apparently no historical connection either to January 15<sup>th</sup> or to the goddess Carmentis. In this paper, I explore the passage's boundary-testing generic play in order to argue that Carmentis is a representative of Ovid's provocative and interrogative elegiac voice.

The story of the *carpenta* as told by Livy, Ovid's only predecessor on this subject, is quite different from Ovid's own: following the capture of Veii in 396 BCE, the Roman matrons helped to fund a temple to Apollo, and the senate, in gratitude, granted them the right to travel in *carpenta* (*AUC* 5.25.7-10). 180 years later, the Lex Oppia removed the right; 20 years after that, the protests of the women led to its restoration (*AUC* 34.1-8). Livy does not specify the nature of those protests beyond declaring them non-violent. Ovid's version of events not only collapses the span of historical time (using only *prius* and *mox* to describe the giving and removal of the privilege) but also replaces the *reason* for the privilege (the matrons' service to Apollo) with a graphic description of abortion and a reference to a far less prominent deity, whose connection to the story he fabricates with a spurious etymology between *carpenta* and *Carmentis* (Bömer calls it "verdächtig"). Carmentis had earlier in the *Fasti* been defined as a goddess of poetry (*quae*

*nomen habes a carmine ductum* – 1.467), and in this later passage the language used to describe the abortions alludes to Ovid's own erotic elegiac corpus (*Amores* 2.13 and 2.14 and *Heroides* 11), the only other extant Latin poetry to deal with such a controversial issue so explicitly. Ovid thus removes the story of the women and the *carpenta* from its original, historical context and fashions it into an episode that echoes his own earlier poetry - poetry that infamously tests the boundaries of propriety (Gamel 1989) - creating continuity between his erotic elegy and the *Fasti* despite the latter's new religious/historical framework. Carmentis' role as representative of Ovid's elegiac poetry is confirmed at the end of the passage in question, where Ovid manipulates the names of Carmentis' companions Porrima and Postverta to have reference not to the positions of childbirth, as Varro insists (Scullard 1981) but to the power of prophecy and poetry (*carmina*) to relate both future and past.

I also argue that the passage has significant political ramifications. Sandwiched between a passage about the derivation of Augustus' name from *augere* - and its consequent association with increase and fertility (*Fasti* 1.609-616) – and a passage in which Livia's marital fidelity is praised (*Fasti* 1.649-650), the abortion passage is conspicuously at odds with the goals of Augustan moral legislation. Furthermore, instead of celebrating Augustus' patron deity, Ovid erases Apollo's connection to the *carpenta* as a reward for the matrons' propriety and invents a connection to Carmentis and to the matrons' blasphemy, drawing attention away from a god who was not only closely associated with the emperor but also symbolic of chaste, rational behavior (Miller 2009).

Thus Carmentis, who plays a subsidiary role in the *Aeneid* and seems to have received relatively little attention from the Augustan regime, provides an example of how Ovid in the *Fasti* writes an elegiac history of Rome that challenges official narratives.

## Works Cited

- Barchiesi, Alessandro (1997) *The Poet and the Prince* (Berkeley: University of California Press).
- Bömer, Franz (1958) *Die Fasten: Herausgegeben, übersetzt und kommentiert. Band II*  
(Heidelberg).
- Gamel, Mary-Kay (1989) 'Non Sine Caede: Abortion Politics and Poetics in Ovid's *Amores*',  
*Helios* 16: 183-206.
- Green, Steven (2004) *Ovid, Fasti I: A Commentary* (Leiden: Brill).
- Miller, John F. (2009) *Apollo, Augustus, and the Poets* (Cambridge University Press).
- Scullard, H.H. (1981) *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic* (Cornell University Press).