

Aeneas and the Ekphrasis of the Theban *Crater* in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 13

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 13, Anius gives a *crater* to Aeneas. Ovid pauses his quick-hitting "Little *Aeneid*" here for a brief ekphrasis (13.685-701) detailing the *crater*'s scene of the Orionides' self-sacrifice and rebirth in ancient Thebes. This ekphrasis has drawn some scholarly attention (e.g., Hardie 2024: 101-104, Papaioannou 2005: 21-31, Hopkinson 2000: 201-204, Junod 1991), and it has a somewhat obvious interpretation: the rebirth of the Coroni from the daughters of Orion is a metaphor for the rebirth of Rome from Troy. This paper is concerned rather with the framing scene of exchange that surrounds the ekphrasis and, in particular, with Ovid's omission of Aeneas' reaction to the *crater*. Following the idea that Ovid's "Little *Aeneid*" offers a "rare test case in metapoetics" (Papaioannou 2005: 9), we are left to confront why Ovid has left Aeneas' interpretation of the *crater* in *Metamorphoses* 13 as open as our own. Working from the idea that Aeneas in Augustan poetry is a proxy for Augustus himself, I suggest that Ovid's silence about Aeneas' reaction to viewing the *crater* anticipates the poet's critique of Augustus as an interpreter of art, a motif that becomes explicit later in Ovid's exile poems (Davis 1999). I demonstrate the significance of this speciously minor omission in two ways: first, by reviewing how Vergil often focalizes ekphrases through the eyes of Aeneas in the *Aeneid*; second, by showing how viewing and correctly interpreting—or not—is a significant act elsewhere in the *Metamorphoses*.

In the *Aeneid*, Vergil frequently lets us know directly about Aeneas' impression of objects he views. In several of these moments, Aeneas is either unable to understand an image (e.g., he does not understand the images on his shield (*rerum... ignarus*, 8.730)) or is unable to finish taking it all in (e.g., at Cumae, where time demands that Aeneas must move on (*non hoc ista sibi*

tempus spectacula poscit, 6.37)). The *Aeneid*'s ekphrases, in sum, are full of challenges for both Aeneas and the reader (e.g., Putnam 1998). Aeneas' interpretation of the *Aeneid*'s ekphrases, though, is hindered by circumstance rather than by his intellectual acumen.

The story seems different in the *Metamorphoses*. Ekphrases are complex here, too (Leach 1974, Lateiner 1984), and throughout the poem they can serve to point up some contrast between the narrative and a viewer who should have gotten a message that they failed to catch. Tereus, for example, misses the message that Philomela weaves into her tapestry (*purpureas... notas*, 6.578). At the opening of Book 2, Phaethon pushes past his father's doors, which are decorated with an order antithetical to his own chaotic actions. Ovid had even drawn specific attention to the value of interpreting art objects earlier in *Metamorphoses* 13. One of Odysseus' claims about why Ajax is undeserving of Achilles' armor is that Ajax is ignorant about the images on Achilles' shield (*neque... clipei caelamina novit*, 13.291). Achilles' shield and Anius' gifted *crater* are further linked by their shared association with Orion (13.294, 13.692).

Ultimately, by reading the frame of the ekphrasis in *Metamorphoses* 13 in dialogue with these comparable moments from the *Aeneid* and elsewhere in the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid suggests by omission that Aeneas fails to understand the significance of the *crater* he has received. On this reading, we have another dimension of Ovid's Aeneas to compare with his Vergilian counterpart. Like Vergil's Aeneas, Ovid's Aeneas is unable to appreciate art. Ovid's Aeneas, though, lacks the excuses that Vergil writes into the *Aeneid* for his hero. Instead, the reader finds an implicit comparison between Aeneas (and, by extension, Augustus) and some of the *Metamorphoses*' least circumspect personalities.

Works Cited

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