

Impotent Invective?: Ovid's *Ibis* Revisited

This paper argues that the *Ibis* is an invective poem that adopts the meter, themes, and language of elegy as a means to disarm and draw the reader in while the speaker reconstructs his persona. For the purposes of the *Ibis*, the speakers of the earlier erotic poems are redesigned in order to deploy successful invective, not a “dampened and downgraded” version of the *Metamorphoses* that parallels Ovid's sad state of exile (Hinds 1999: 49) or psychologically broken mind (Williams 1996). Rather, I contend that the measured generic, stylistic, and linguistic choices within the *Ibis* are deliberate means to construct an invective persona, innovative in its implementation of tenets of Ovid's earlier work but traditional in meeting the aims and general purposes of invective. This restyled invective, despite the speaker's consistent appeals to novice status, quick pace of the catalog, and refusal to name his target, succeeds in humiliating his victim nonetheless.

The speaker of the *Ibis* makes it clear he is operating in an unaccustomed genre. He has been forced to take up arms (*tela sumere*, 10) because of his unnamed target's attack. The arms that Ovid had put aside at the beginning of his first extant collection (*arma gravi numero violentaque bella parabam*, *Am.* 1.1.1) are embraced in the *Ibis* but deployed through the same meter of his earlier poetry, elegiac couplets. The speaker himself admits “wars are not accustomed to be waged in this meter” (41) and promises future abuse, in iambs (53-54, 643-44). Ovid's emphasis on his novice status pervades the poem, and this emphasis and the catalog's reduction of mythic stories of the *Metamorphoses* to abrupt single-couplet scenes has been coupled with the fact that exiled Ovid cannot do real harm to his target. Consequently, the poem has often been reduced by critics to either a manic scream that embodies Ovid's deteriorated psychological state (Williams 1996: 32; See also 33, 81, 101) or a literary exercise

in erudition (Housman 1920: 318; Kenney 1982: 454; Mack 1988: 42; Wilkinson 1995: 356-57)—impotent invective. While these readings contribute much to the study of the *Ibis*, to reduce the poem to a manifestation of a broken psyche or highly skilled literary exercise, however, discredits the text as invective that continues to damage its target (whether fictive, as Housman 1920 first argued, or factual, as Oliensis 2004: 319 asserts), after the death of its author. This argument necessarily builds on Oliensis' work on representation and revenge in *Metamorphoses* 6 and *Tristia* 4, in which she discusses the altercation between Arachne and Minerva as parallel to the conflict between Ovid and Augustus. She acknowledges Ovid's powerful position despite his exilic status, because regardless of his physical inability to enact revenge, his poetry, like Ariadne's tapestry, continues to signify (2004: 301-2). The Arachne myth is curiously absent from the *Ibis*' catalog of many *Metamorphoses* myths, and this paper will discuss the reworking of representation and revenge through the retellings of the judgment of Tiresias (*Met.* 3.316-38 and *Ib.* 263-64) and death of Pentheus (*Met.* 3.692-733 and *Ib.* 533-34) to show a similar strategy at work, but one condensed and funneled through invective that constructs the speaker's invective persona and elevating him to a position of power.

Thus, the self-allusive and self-consciously hyperbolic scream of the *Ibis* is not ineffectual, but rather, calculated and controlled invective that succeeds as a performance of potency despite the invective's isolation from semantic context. The speaker's claims that he is uncomfortable in his deployment of invective are contrived and carefully constructed in the garb of earlier poetic performances, not because his mental state or geographic exile prevents him from any other means, but because they abruptly and effectively disarm the reader so that the blood soaked daggers launched from his verse (*Ib.* 41-64), even if years later when others vie to give *Ibis* a name, will damage his target.

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