

Sending Signals with *signa*: The Puzzling Placement of Aquarius in Ovid's *Fasti*

In the programmatic opening of the *Fasti*, Ovid unveils his two-fold poetic agenda:

“times together with causes and the settings and risings of constellations” (*tempora cum causis /...lapsaque...ortaque signa* 1.1-2). Later, at the beginning of the entry for Jan. 3rd, as if responding to those who might scoff at his interest in such an arcane subject as astrology, Ovid asserts: “What prevents me from telling also of the stars, how each one rises and falls? For that also was part of my pledge” (*quid vetat et stellas, ut quaeque oriturque caditque, / dicere promissi pars sit et ista mei* 1.295-6). Indeed, throughout the work, Ovid provides the reader with countless references to constellations. Some are fleeting, lasting less than a single line, while others are accompanied by a lengthy aetiological narrative. Ultimately, the astronomical notices and Greek star-myths provide a counterpoint to the Roman festivals (Martin; Newlands). The focus of this paper will be on two couplets concerning the constellation Aquarius (1.649-50 & 2.145-6), both of which allude to the Trojan prince Ganymede immediately before and/or after a passage that features a comparison between Jupiter and Augustus. It is my contention that these two couplets activate a negative aspect of Jupiter that reflects back upon Augustus and reduces the grandeur of his association with Jupiter.

Most scholarly attention has been paid to the later of the two couplets (2.145-6), which follows the acclamation of Augustus as *pater patriae* and his identification with Jupiter. This same couplet also precedes the story of Jupiter and Callisto (2.153ff.). In examining the effects of sandwiching the Aquarius couplet between the panegyric of Augustus and the rape of Callisto, Harries convincingly argues that the juxtaposition of two thematically incongruent passages produces “counter-effects” that serve to upset the balance of the poem (Harries, 164). Less attention, however, has been paid to the earlier couplet (1.649-50), which directly follows the

likening of Livia to Juno in that “she alone was found worthy of the bed of great Jove” (*sola toro magni digna reperta Iovis* 1.650). Indeed, this is the only place throughout the entire *Fasti* where Ovid explicitly equates the Princeps and his wife with the divine couple Jupiter and Juno. Here too one can detect similar “counter-effects,” as Newlands (44-7) has observed.

Building on these interpretations, I argue that these two Aquarius references operate under the guise of Ovid’s programmatic devotion to *signa*, but actually act as textual markers that serve not necessarily to undermine, but rather to ground the elevated conflation of Jupiter and Augustus. Supporting this view is Denis Feeney’s argument that the prevalence of violence and rape throughout the poem is indicative of enforced silence under an imperial regime (Feeney, 1992). In light of such considerations, these two couplets do more than simply mark the location of Aquarius – if they serve that purpose at all; they provide the reader with another tool for interpreting the tone and meaning of the adjacent passages.

Lastly, I show that the rape of Ganymede has a place elsewhere in the *Fasti*, which in turn colors the reader’s perception of its association with Aquarius; for in Book 6 (6.43) Ovid has Juno cite the rape of Ganymede as part of the *duplex causa* for her former wrath against Troy, a direct allusion to *causae irarum* at the beginning of Vergil’s *Aeneid* (*Aen.* 1.25). Thus any mention of Ganymede not only serves as a metonymy for Aquarius, but sends the reader down an associative path, beginning with Jupiter’s rape of Ganymede, and culminating in Juno’s hatred for the Trojans and by extension the Romans themselves. By channeling that negativity and funneling it into the seemingly innocuous reference to a token constellation, Ovid ingeniously creates an unnecessary degree of friction.

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