

The Temple of *Mars Ultor* in Ovid's *Fasti* (5.545-598)

The passage in which Ovid describes how Mars himself visits his own temple in the *forum* of Augustus in the *Fasti* has been extensively studied (cf., e.g., Newlands 1995, ch. 3), but not from the viewpoint of its relation to theater and comedy. If one interprets this passage based on what is also explicitly said in its two last verses (597f.), which admonish the Romans to celebrate Mars in the circus (a hint at the reality of the cult, cf. Scheid 1992, 124), not on stage, the humor and even ridicule for Augustus' political program that was built into the entire forum becomes apparent (This reading of the passage thus supports Murgatroyd 2005).

Since Mars enters the poem as *miles gloriosus* the stage is already set. V. 598 confirms Mars' entry as such in retrospect even if by denying that the "*scaena*" is appropriate for the god. Yet this last verse tells us even more. The intertextual potential of the passage is not fully grasped if we do not read this line in connection with Aen. 1.429. When looking at the future site of Carthage, Aeneas observes the Carthaginians as they are building a theater. *Scaenis decora apta futuris* does not forebode well for Carthage in the *Aeneid*. The tragedy of Dido will subsequently unfold. Ovid's *non visa est fortem scaena decere deum* harks back to Vergil and his poetic play with the different media of epic poetry and tragedy. Ovid would not be Ovid, however, if he would not appropriate what he saw in Vergil to his own poetic purposes. Scholarship has recognized the epic tone of this passage within elegiac verses (cf. Gee 2002, 59f.). But Ovid also plays with tragic moments in comic form.

The god of war in Ovid becomes a ridiculous soldier whose sexual prowess on the other hand allows the existence of unconquered goddesses, but only on top of his temple (560). The impression that the building makes on him lets the *miles* forget his usual (bad) behavior and he is

furthermore duly impressed not only by the images of his offspring, but also by the addition of *Caesar* to *Augustus* in the inscription on the temple. Mars is deceived by an optical illusion and apparently does not realize it. This procession of superlatives does not stop here, because the program of the temple celebrates not just one, but two instances where *Mars Ultor* exacted vengeance: from the murderers of Caesar and the Parthians (cf. Herbert-Brown 1994, 97-108 on “one of the greatest hoaxes of the Augustan regime”). The language betrays that Ovid apparently knew that Augustus’ claim was not quite in keeping with reality, because Ovid claims that this double victory forces the celebrations for the god to a bigger structure than a theater is (597f.), but this move also reveals the comic features of the entire enterprise. A stage, for example like Pompey’s theater, which was the first in Rome to be built of stone, is simply not big enough for the *miles gloriosus* Mars. A *circus* was not even built by the Carthaginians in Aen. 1. But the expansion of the *circus maximus* was a project constantly worked on by Augustus. Thus, we see Ovid pointing his readers’ attention to the fact that now everything – structures, glory, even poetry – needs to be bigger than before. And there is also a warning: The higher they are, the higher they fall. What is true for the braggart soldier, may be true for others as well. Orion and the other stars (545-8) will in reality not fail in their course. The poet is or thinks he is subject to an illusion. The *mise en abyme* is complete.

We need to compare this passage to the later passage *trist.* 2.295f. Since Venus is joined by Mars on the frieze of the temple, her husband has to sing his *paraklausithyron* outside of the new building. Augustus’ temple gave Ovid reason for repeated jokes. Apparently he did not get over its blatant inconsistencies. Revisions (cf. Martelli 2013) did not happen in this case.

Bibliography

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