

Ovid's *Ibis* and Callimachean Hymn

Chiara Battistella (2013) contends that the birth account in Ovid's *Ibis* alludes to the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*. She argues that Ovid "distorts" a typical hymnic birth account (p. 81), specifically that of the *Homeric Hymn*, to characterize Ibis as an "anti-model" of the god (p. 82). Battistella does not recognize, however, that the birth account also closely subverts features of Callimachus' *Hymns* 1, 2, and 4. In fact, Callimachus is central to the *Ibis* from the start. Ovid makes clear that Callimachus' own *Ibis*, a work now lost to modern scholars, serves as Ovid's model for his own curse poem (55-56, 449-450). Therefore, it is reasonable to read the *Ibis* alongside Callimachus' work.

Prior to the birth scene there is evidence that Ovid is subverting traditional elements of Greek hymn, specifically *aporia* and mimesis. Callimachus uses the "traditional phraseology" of *aporia* (McLennan 128) in *Hymn 1* to acknowledge his inability to sufficiently praise Zeus (92). Ovid subverts a typical instance of *aporia* to lament his inability to sufficiently curse Ibis (197). Additionally, Callimachus' *Hymn 2* opens (1-7) with a "mimetic epiphany ritual" (Williams 15) wherein the poet presides as priest and Apollo signals his own presence with a singing swan, among other signs. Ovid subverts mimetic ritual by casting Ibis as a sacrificial victim, assuming the role of priest himself (104), and observing a sign of approval from Apollo: a bird that flies from the left (127-128).

By using such hymnic devices prior to his account of Ibis' birth, Ovid invites his audience to examine the *Ibis*' birth narrative (221-236) in light of birth accounts featured in Callimachean hymn. Where Callimachus praises Zeus in *Hymn 1*, Rhea washes the infant Zeus in fresh, flowing water (μέγα χεῖμα, 32) and the Meliae place him in a cradle of gold (47). In contrast, Ovid has the Eumenides bathe Ibis in a stagnant pool (*fluxerat*, 225-226) and give

him a pillow of rocks (236). Furthermore, while the she-goat Amaltheia nurses Zeus (48), Ibis drinks dog's milk (229). This is particularly significant because first foods are traditionally the source of a deity's identity and power (Miller 48 n. 119); just as Zeus' famous "aegis" was thought to be the hide of his goat-nurse (Tandy 126), Ovid cites Ibis' canine nurse as the reason for his "barking" Ovid's name throughout the forum (*latrat...foro*, 232).

Apollo's birth scene in Callimachus' fourth hymn, to the island Delos, offers other parallels. Upon Apollo's birth in *Hymn 4*, the Inopus River, presumably the locus of the god's bath, flows with gold (263), and was believed in Callimachus' day to be fed underground by the Egyptian Nile (Mineur 186). Ovid's Ibis, by contrast, is bathed in a stagnant pool that is an outflow of the river Styx (*de Stygiis...vadis*, 226). When Ovid's newborn foe is laid on "naked earth" (*nuda tellure*, 235), Battistella proposes that this subverts the "soft meadow" (λεῖμῶνι μαλακῶ, 118) on which Leto kneels to give birth in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*. The golden earth (χρυσέοιο...οὔδεος, 264) of Callimachus' *Hymn 4*, however, offers an equally compelling contrast. Finally, where at Ibis' birth an owl gives an ominous call, Battistella argues that this hooting subverts the shouts of the goddesses in attendance at Apollo's birth in the *Homeric Hymn* (119). A more compelling contrast, however, is the singing of the swans in Callimachus' *Hymn 4* (249).

The birth scene in Ovid's *Ibis* appears to respond to Callimachus' *Hymns* 1, 2, and 4. This, however, does not invalidate the parallels that Battistella observes between *Ibis* and the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, for the *Homeric Hymns* of course influenced Callimachus' own. Though we can never know the full extent of Ovid's emulation of Callimachus' *Ibis*, close parallels between Ibis' birth account and the birth narratives in Callimachus' hymns suggest that Ovid had those hymns in mind. Moreover, the *Ibis*' allusions to the literary birth accounts

not only of Apollo but also of Zeus may warrant an expansion of Battistella's argument that Ovid's opponent is anti-Apollo. In fact, Ibis may be better understood more broadly as anti-hymn. This interpretation is fitting given that Ovid's *Ibis* is a curse poem, and that curse is fundamentally antithetical to hymnic praise.

Bibliography

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