



Manioti, N. (2010) '*In limine sedit: Aglauros and the barring of the lover in Ovid's Metamorphoses*'

Rosetta **8.5**: 64-74.

http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue8supp/manioti_aglauros/

In limine sedit: Aglauros and the barring of the lover in Ovid's

Metamorphoses

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Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is one of the finest examples in Classical literature of the elimination of boundaries between genres.¹ Only in form an epic, this poem brings together Homeric grandeur and Alexandrian tenderness. The list of models and influences is endless: epic, hymns, lyric, tragedy, comedy, philology, epyllion, epigram, folk stories. Last but by no means least comes elegy, a genre in which Ovid made his first steps and to which he returned in a different mood in his exile. It is this latter type of poetry I will be concerned with in the present paper. Admittedly, it has been widely explored ever since Heinze's time.² I believe, however, that there still remain a few issues to be investigated, and this is why I now turn to consider a story with origins in Archaic Greek myth where Ovid inserts elegiac motifs to create a parody of elegiac love, namely, the tale of Aglauros and Herse in *Met.* 2.708-835.

I will begin with a brief summary of the episode. As Mercury is flying over Athens on the day of the Panathenaic festival (*Met.* 2.708-721), he spots the princess Herse and falls instantly in love with her (*Met.* 2.722-729). He adorns himself and heads to the palace (*Met.* 2.730-736), where her sister Aglauros notices him and asks him what he is up to (*Met.* 2.740-742). Mercury states his purpose to sleep with Herse, but Aglauros asks for gold in return and sends him away (*Met.* 2.743-751). Meanwhile, Minerva sends Invidia to punish Aglauros (*Met.* 2.752-796) for a previous crime – namely, looking into the basket where the goddess had hidden Erichthonius, an event Ovid puts into the mouth of a crow some 200 lines earlier in the book (*Met.* 2.552-561). Aglauros becomes envious of Herse and is tormented by visions and evil thoughts (*Met.* 2.797-813) so that when Mercury comes back with the gold, she sits on the threshold and does not let him pass (*Met.* 2.814-817). He then

¹ Knox 1986: 1 with note 4.

² Starting with his 1919 monograph *Ovids elegische Erzählung*; see Knox 1986: 9-26 ("The transformation of elegy").

transforms her into a stone statue and leaves to take part in a different episode (*Met.* 2.818-835).

Although the story of Erichthonius and the daughters of the Athenian king Cecrops is widely used as a subject in Greek art and literature, with the earliest example in the latter being a mention in Euripides' *Ion*,³ the subsequent events which are narrated here, namely the affair between Hermes and Herse and Aglauros' transformation into a rock, was thought not to appear in the body of literature preceding Ovid.⁴ This view was altered by the discovery of *PHerc* II 243 1-6,⁵ which runs as follows:

(As) Callimachus (says) ... bent, but (turned) Pandrosos (into) a stone, because she did not give him access to her sister Herse.⁶

Now given that the influence of Callimachus is certain as far as the earlier events are concerned, with his epyllion *Hecale* being an important intertext for the story of the crow,⁷ this fragment encourages the reader to see this story as continuing Ovid's reworking of Callimachus which started earlier in Book 2.⁸

Epic elements are also present in this typical example of multi-genre tale from the *Metamorphoses*. The most conspicuous one is the reworking of a famous simile concerning a young woman's beauty. Herse, when viewed by Mercury, stands out from her retinue as much as Lucifer is brighter than the other stars, and as Luna, the moon, is brighter than Lucifer (*Met.* 2.722-5). Nausicaa in

³ Kron 1981; Gantz 1993: 235-239.

⁴ Henrichs 1983: 40. The next attested version of this liaison, namely the love affair of Hermes and Herse resulting in a son Keryx, is found in a poem by Marcellus of Side (*IG* XIV 1389 I 32, 54) commissioned after AD 161. Pausanias writing around the same time mentions a legend according to which Keryx was not the son of Herse but of Aglauros by the same god (*Gr. descr.* 1.38.3). In Ps.-Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca*, on the other hand, the affair of Hermes and Herse is mentioned but the son born from this union is Cephalus (3.14.3). Given that the work is not easily datable, it is not possible to say whether this version appeared before Marcellus' poem or Pausanias' travel guide, but it certainly comes after Ovid's account.

⁵ Henrichs 1983: 40-43, certain about the attribution of this fragment to Callimachus, discusses its relationship to the Ovidian account. Also Keith 1992: 123-124.

⁶ According to the reconstruction of the passage found in Henrichs 1983:37-38, repeated in Hollis 1990: 231.

⁷ Hollis 1990: 225-226, 229-231; Keith 1992 *passim*.

⁸ Keith 1992 treats this matter extensively.

the *Odyssey* (6.102-9),⁹ Medea in the *Argonautica* (3.876-86), and Dido in the *Aeneid* (1.494-504),¹⁰ as they are viewed by Odysseus, Jason, and Aeneas respectively, are all compared to the goddess Artemis / Diana one of whose aspects is Luna, to whom Herse is compared here. Moreover, the description of the effect Invidia's attack has on Aglauros recalls more than once the depiction of a woman in love that is exemplified by Virgil's Dido: the cause of her passion flows through the bones: *piceumque per ossa / dissipat* (*Met.* 2.800-1); cf. *ardet amans Dido traxitque per ossa furorem* (*Aen.* 4.101);¹¹ the source of pain is hidden: *dolore / ... occulto mordetur* (*Met.* 2.805-6); cf. *caeco carpitur igni* (*Aen.* 4.2) and *tacitum uiuit sub pectore uulnus* (*Aen.* 4.67); the woman in love burns: *felicisque bonis ... uritur Herses* (*Met.* 2.809) cf. *uritur infelix Dido* (*Aen.* 4.68).

This non-exhaustive list of examples confirms the validity of the general statement about the elimination of genre boundaries in this particular episode of the *Metamorphoses*. What I intend to show now is that the use of elegy contributes to this lack of boundaries in two ways. Not only is there yet another genre at work that coexists with the rest without appearing out of place; but the internal limits of elegy are also broken, resulting in this episode becoming a parody of an elegiac love scene. The rest of the paper will point out the elegiac motifs in the story of Aglauros and Herse, and looking at their function within the episode.

Whereas scholarship has pointed out some of the more obvious elegiac motifs of the episode,¹² there has been no attempt to show that the entire episode constitutes a mock elegiac scene. I describe it as mock because unlike Propertius and Tibullus and rather more daringly than in his earlier poems, Ovid here plays with both tradition and rules, challenging the former and

⁹ Bömer 1969 ad II 725 points out the passage from the *Odyssey* as being the first instance of this motif but does not mention the Virgilian parallel.

¹⁰ Clausen 1987: 19-20 discusses the sequence Nausicaa, Medea, Dido but leaves out the present simile concerning Herse's beauty.

¹¹ Bömer 1969 ad II 800.

¹² Bömer, Moore-Blunt and Barchiesi in their commentaries; see the following notes for individual observations.

breaking the latter. I intend to show this process by presenting the motifs he employs and the roles he assigns to his characters

As commentators and scholars have already pointed out, the pleas and flatteries with which the *amator* seeks to break the resistance of the *puella*, or to overcome the obstacle of her *ianua* (with the use of terms such as *oro*, *precor*, *faueo*, *blanditiae*, *preces*),¹³ are here exemplified in the behaviour of Mercury. In his own words at *Met.* 2.747, *Herse causa uiae; faueas oramus amanti*. Later he is described by the poet *blandimenta precesque / uerbaque iactanti mitissima* (*Met.* 2.815-6).¹⁴ The mention of a keyword of Latin elegy, the *limen*, which symbolizing a major obstacle for the *amator*, sometimes almost synonymous to the *ianua*, has also been pointed out:¹⁵ Aglauros *in aduerso ... limine sedit* (*Met.* 2.814) in order to prevent Mercury from meeting her sister. Finally, the theme of *exclusus amator*, with the door being held responsible, is more than obvious to commentators:¹⁶ the previous passage continues with the words *exclusura deum* (*Met.* 2.815).

There is a number of elegiac motifs in this episode which are not immediately obvious and therefore require a closer reading. The first one is the presence of the *amator* outside the *ianua* of the *puella*: Mercury goes to Cecrops' palace, where (*Met.* 2.737-42):

*pars secreta domus ebore et testudine cultos
tres habuit thalamos, quorum tu, Pandrose, dextrum,
Aglauros laeuum, medium possederat Herse.
quae tenuit laeuum, uenientem prima notauit
Mercurium nomenque dei scitarier ausa est
et causam aduentus; ...*

The description of the arrangement of the rooms has no meaning unless one assumes that Mercury is standing in front of them, somewhere to the left where Aglauros' room is, as she is explicitly described as the first one to see him. The position of her room contributes to her acting as an obstacle that

¹³ Moore-Blunt 1977 ad 815 and Barchiesi 2005 ad II 746-7.

¹⁴ This phrase may be seen as summarising the content of an entire elegy, namely *Ov. Am.* 1.6.

¹⁵ Moore-Blunt 1977 ad 814; Barchiesi 2005 ad II 814; Lowe 2008: 426.

¹⁶ Moore-Blunt 1997 ad 815; Barchiesi 2005 ad II 815.

stands in the way of the god. When Mercury comes back, Aglauros, as was quoted above, *in aduerso uenientem limine sedit / exclusura deum* (*Met.* 2.814-5). The text presupposes that we imagine the god as standing in front of Herse's door but her sister is again between him and his goal. Finally, the description of Mercury as he *caelesti fores uirga patefecit* (*Met.* 2.819) again implies that he is in front of it like the *exclusus amator* of Latin elegy.¹⁷

Another elegiac motif is that of the *ianua* barring the way of the *amator*. Aglauros does not allow Mercury to have access to Herse. First, the poet describes Aglauros as *tectis excedere coegit* (*Met.* 2.751), so that he brings the gold she asked in exchange for the favour. After the attack of Invidia, however, Aglauros becomes more active in her role of barring the way, *Met.* 2.814-8:

*denique in aduerso uenientem limine sedit
exclusura deum. cui blandimenta precesque
uerbaque iactanti mitissima 'desine!' dixit,
'hinc ego me non sum nisi te motura repulso.'*

Not only does she sit in his way in front of Herse's door, but she also declares that she will not move from that place until he is gone.

Furthermore, sometimes a *custos* may receive money in return for his compliance: Aglauros *proque ministerio magnum sibi ponderis aurum / postulat* (*Met.* 2.750-1). One may compare *Am.* 2.2.39-40, where the poet tries to convince the slave Bagoa to let him near Corinna, and in return:

*sic tibi semper honos, sic alta peculia crescent.
haec fac, in exiguo tempore liber eris.*

The promise of money and freedom, so both material and abstract rewards, matches here what Aglauros asks for (*aurum*) and what Mercury had promised earlier in his speech (*prolisque meae matertera dici*, *Met.* 2.746), namely that she will be in a position to boast that she is the aunt of the

¹⁷ Motifs such as the *exclusus amator* and the dealings with the girl's *custos*, of course, originate in Roman comedy, as Copley 1956: 28-42 explains.

offspring of a god. Despite these gifts, however, Aglauros behaves similarly to her elegiac predecessor, Bagoa, and does not let the *amator* pass.

So far, therefore, we can attribute the following elegiac roles to the protagonists: Mercury is the *amator*; Herse is the *puella* and Aglauros is both the *custos* and the *ianua*. It may appear strange that one character is assigned two different roles; in elegy, however, the *custos* and the *ianua* eventually perform the same function, namely, they keep the *puella* out of the *amator's* reach. The *custos* can be either a man (which is more often the case) or a woman. There are in fact two instances where the *custos* is clearly a woman (Prop. *El.* 1.11.15; Tib. 1.3.84), and this idea goes back to instances in Hellenistic poetry which represents young women in the custody of old maids.¹⁸ As for Aglauros' playing the role of the *ianua*, such a correspondence results from the crucial part she plays in the exclusion of the *amator*, for which the *ianua* is mostly held responsible in elegy.

As I have forewarned, however, nothing is clear-cut and limited in the *Metamorphoses*, and the same applies to this seemingly perfect elegiac scene. The poet plays with tradition by recasting Propertian ideas, and breaks the rules by attributing more than one role to each protagonist.¹⁹ Thus, adornment, which is usually typical of the beloved, is here attributed to the *amator*. At *Met.* 2.730-731 Mercury's reaction to love at first sight is described:

*vertit iter caeloque petit terrena relicto
nec se dissimulat: tanta est fiducia formae.*

He then goes on to comb his hair, adjust his clothes, polish his caduceus and make sure that his sandals look nice and shiny. Introducing this embellishment scene, the phrase *fiducia formae* appears in the same metrical position in Propertius, *El.* 3.24.1, but there it refers to the *puella*. This idea, however, is one that our poet has partly pondered on before.²⁰ In *AA* 1.505-16

¹⁸ Fedeli 1980: 276.

¹⁹ As Knox 1986: 5 puts it, in the *Metamorphoses* "[t]he rules of genre count, but only so that the reader may recognize when they are broken".

²⁰ Barchiesi 2005 ad II 731.

he declares that neglect befits the lovers and that, instead of their hair, they should only care about cleanness of body and clothes, an advice that Mercury here seems to take with a pinch of salt.

In the same spirit of reversal of roles, envy here does not characterise the *amator* but the *custos*, and is not directed against another lover but against the *puella*. Invidia's actions are thus described at *Met.* 2.803-5:

*germanam ante oculos fortunatumque sororis
coniugium pulchraque deum sub imagine point
cunctaque magna facit; ...*

The importance of visual terms in the whole episode has been often pointed out; Invidia is the personification of envy²¹ but the pronounced visualisation suggests, I believe, that she is also related to the idea of seeing inside. In that respect she is the appropriate agent to punish Aglauros for seeing inside the basket containing Erichthonius.

Propertius in *El.* 1.12 mentions envy (from a third party) as a reason for which he, that is, the *amator*, has lost Cynthia's favour (*inuidiae fuimus*, *El.* 1.12.9); in *El.* 1.16, however, it is the *ianua* that ends its complaints with the word 'envy' (*sic ego nunc dominae uitiiis et semper amantis / fletibus aeterna differor inuidia*, *El.* 1.16.48), to which it falls victim. Therefore, since in Propertius already the *ianua* considers itself a victim of envy, it is not a big logical leap for Ovid to present a human playing the role of the *ianua* and being the victim of Invidia's attack. In fact, since the *ianua* became animate in the figure of Aglauros, envy can in turn obtain a personification in the figure of Invidia.

Another association, more implicit this time, between seeing and envy, may be found in a poem that lies between the above mentioned two, namely *El.* 1.13. There Propertius peeps inside Gallus' bedroom and points out his activity by the repetitive use of 'I have seen' (*uidi ego: me quaeso teste*

²¹ And is, according to Keith 2002: 126 and Saltzman-Mitchell 2005: 40-42, preannounced by the insistence on the use of words of seeing and perceiving to describe both Minerva and Aglauros.

negare potes? / uidi ego te toto vinctum languescere collo, *El.* 1.13.14-5); the poet, who is all alone at the moment, predicts that Gallus' new affair will end badly, which may imply that he is envious of his friend's luck and tries to find fault with it. Thus, seeing Gallus and his girlfriend in action provokes sentiments of envy to Propertius and prompts him to describe the outcome of this new affair with the bleakest colours. If Ovid read this poem in a similar way, then this might be where he found the inspiration for associating *uidere in* and *inuidere* in this episode of the *Metamorphoses*.

Moreover, the erotic feelings are not limited to the *amator* but extend to the *custos*. Mercury is described as burning for Herse at *Met.* 2.726-9:

*obstipuit forma love natus et aethere pendens
non secus exarsit, quam cum Balearica plumbum
funda iacit: uolat illud et incandescit eundo
et, quos non habuit, sub nubibus inuenit ignes.*

But Aglauros also burns: *uritur* (2.809). As I have said at the start of the paper, this description recalls that of Dido in love; but one may also compare Aglauros' hidden pain (*dolore / ... occulto mordetur*, *Met.* 2.805-6) with Propertius' hidden love pains at *El.* 1.18.3 (*hic licet occultos proferre impune dolores*), with the crucial word, 'pain', being in the same metrical position.

To conclude, the elegiac motifs identified in this episode at a first glance give the reader the impression that it is an elegiac scene like the ones with which Ovid started his poetic career. The experiment, however, results in a parody, since the poet does not obey the rules of Latin elegy that assign specific roles to specific figures. Moreover, the situation he creates is bound to fail from the start. The beloved is only glimpsed at the start of the episode, and then only through the eyes of Mercury. The *custos* is played by the sister of the *puella*, who performs some functions of the elegiac *ianua*. Finally, the *amator* is not a mortal man, but an all-powerful god, and in that respect his imposed exclusion is ridiculous.

As far as the reassignment of roles and functions is concerned, an *amator* who spends too much time adorning himself is not necessarily going to be successful, as the poet warns him in his earlier love lessons. By playing the double role of *custos* and *ianua*, Aglauros oscillates between human and thing. By standing in Mercury's way, she tries to turn herself into an unsurpassable obstacle, namely, to become the hard inanimate *ianua*. In the end, Mercury transforms her into a stone statue, and she becomes the *ianua*, the role which she has been playing so far. However, as she is no longer able to move and occupies much less space as she is seated, she is unsuccessful in playing that precise role, namely, in barring the *amator*.

Moreover, the *amator* in Latin elegy may be envious of a rival lover, or someone else may be envious of his happiness with his beloved. Therefore, Aglauros as both victim and agent of envy goes as far as to appropriate characteristics of the *amator* himself. Her feelings as a result of Invidia's attack are more suitable for a person in love, namely the *amator*, while the Virgilian precedent brings her closer to the *puella*, whose actual feelings are nowhere described. In that way, Ovid condenses the three seemingly distinct characters into one who exemplifies at least one of each character's typical roles: Aglauros envies and is envied (*amator*), experiences love pains and fiery passion (*amator / puella*), prevents the entrance, is addressed with prayers and flattery, and asks for money (*custos / ianua*). Thus the whole elegiac scene becomes a parody, and the transformation at the end confirms such a statement.

At *Met.* 2.818-835, Mercury breaks the door open, transforms Aglauros into a seated statue and leaves. What about Herse? Since Aglauros has appropriated both the *amator's* envy and his love pains, the only role left to Mercury is that of the *exclusus amator*. With Aglauros' transformation the obstacle that 'kept him out' is being lifted and Mercury is left with no role to play, therefore he can only walk away. Besides, we are not told if Herse feels anything for him. She is only seen through his eyes at the start of the episode (*tanto uirginibus praestantior omnibus Herse / ibat, Met.* 2.724-725) and then through Aglauros' envious eyes (*germanam ante oculos ... / ... point, Met.*

2.803-804), but beyond that she is but a name on the door (*tres habuit thalamos ... / ... medium possederat Herse, Met. 2.738-39*). As Aglauros is transformed and Mercury walks away, the *raison d'être* of the elegiac scene, Herse, ceases to exist. Perhaps she never did.

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