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Ovid's *Invidia* and the literary tradition

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In discussions on the uniqueness of the *Metamorphoses* as an epic poem, scholars have frequently stressed Ovid's ability to renew both traditional and well established motifs. Ovid's interest in personified abstractions fits within this creativity. Personification, thus, a technique widely used by many writers, is for him a suitable method of literary expression and practice.

The personification of human emotions and abstract ideas was a particular *topos* in the Greek and Roman literary tradition. Epic, lyric poetry and drama gave a prolific field for the creation of such abstractions. By definition the noun 'personification' as a technical term means a figure of speech in which inanimate objects or abstractions are endowed with human qualities or are represented as possessing human form.¹ Personified figures in the majority were depicted in feminine form² while many abstractions gradually gained divine status and were worshipped as deities.³

The purpose of this article is twofold: it aims to examine the personification of envy and its treatment by Ovid at *Metamorphoses* 2.760-805 and, further, to consider how ancient accounts of *phthonos* as a personification influence the Ovidian text. For the purpose of a better understanding of earlier adaptations of envy, Callimachus' concluding lines (c.f. 105-113) of the *Hymn to Apollo* will be given special treatment during the discussion. The reason I choose to focus mainly on Callimachus' account as a point of comparison is the fact that his text constitutes an example of extensive literary representation of personified *phthonos* in the tradition before Ovid. Besides, personifications of abstractions were frequently and deliberately used by the Alexandrian poets as suitable devices for commenting on something or for didactic purposes.

¹ For the problem of the definition of literary personification see Stafford 2000: 9-19.

² For gender and personifications in Greek tradition, see Stafford 2000: 27ff. Latin personifications generally follow their Greek counterparts.

³ Eros, Gaia, Tyche, Aidos, Concordia, Fides are only few of the many abstractions deified in Greek and Roman thought.

Thus, Callimachus, in a few lines, succeeds in building up a more literary image of *phthonos* using some of its basic characteristics, such as secretive talk and the evil eye which is activated by one's success accompanied by ill-speaking, criticism and slyness.

Through these comparisons, the examination aspires to highlight how and to what end Ovid refers to pre-Hellenistic or Hellenistic literary traditions and finally to lead to the conclusion that Ovid is capable of transforming previous literary models.

Phthonos in Graeco-Roman Thought

The common belief of Greeks and Romans about the danger of *phthonos* (or the evil eye) and the harm that it could inflict on people stimulated the interest of ancient writers and led to its extensive use in literature.⁴ The abstract concept of envy thus gained gradually a personified status and in the hands of writers became a significant allegorical device of poetic inspiration and a method of literary and artistic defence against poetic enemies.⁵

There is evidence to be found in ancient sources that the belief in the evil eye influenced in many ways the thought and actions of the ancients from the age of Homer.⁶ According to the Greeks, for example Hesiod (*Works and Days* 25-26), Herodotus (*Historiae* 3.80.3), Demosthenes (18.3; 18.315), envy is a feeling that all people experience by nature.⁷ The envious glance towards another was considered poison. Because of the fear of its destructive

⁴ Plutarch tries to give a scientific explanation of the evil eye and what he writes seems particularly interesting; he seems to believe 'that sight, being vigorous and active, sends forth a strange fiery power; so of all diseases, the soreness of the eyes is the most infectious and easily causes infirmities in another; thus, people possessing the evil eye were supposed to send out poisoned darts as they fix their eyes upon another' (*Quaest. Conviv.* 5.7 = *Mor.* 680Cff.).

⁵ Pindar and Callimachus use this technique frequently in their works.

⁶ In Homer the verb *phthoneein* (=to envy) and its derivatives have three different meanings: (a) "to refuse" or "deny" (*Od.* 11.149); (b) "to censure" or "blame" (*Od.* 1.346); (c) "to feel pain at the sight of another in possession of something desirable" (*Od.* 18.18).

⁷ For a detailed analysis of envy and the Greeks see Walcot.

consequences amulets (*probaskania*)⁸ were used to combat the malicious gaze. Pindar was the first to represent human envy as mainly motivated by the glory of success in athletic competitions.⁹ Aristophanes (*Plutus* 883-885), on the other hand, comments on the harm that *baskania*¹⁰ causes to its victims and provides evidence that there is no defence against the evil eye and confirms its invincible nature. Besides, Democritus presents a similar belief in the harm that the evil eye causes to its victims; he speaks of envious particles emanating from the eyes of the *phthoneros*, particles which are full of poisonous qualities that damage the bodies and minds of those bewitched (68 A 77).¹¹ The Romans were also aware of envy and of its potency and the harm that the evil eye inflicts on people. The multiple references to this idea give evidence about the close affinity in the belief of the *baskanos ophalmos* in Greek and Roman thought.¹²

From the extant literary sources, Greek and Roman, it is made clear that a rich variety of features - both internal and external - were attributed to personified *phthonos* in literary accounts and art. These include among others wasting¹³ and emaciation, pallor and sunken eyes; features that essentially allude to disease-like symptoms;¹⁴ also a frowning brow and gnashing teeth of rage and sometimes other physical distortions such as hunched back; further representations of *phthoneros* strangling himself, choking, or bursting, or

⁸ Attempts to ward off the evil eye have resulted in the use of a number of talismans. As Ogden argues (2002: 224), in antiquity it was believed that the evil eye could be averted by spitting, by use of phallic charms and ornaments and by the skin of the hyena. See also Barton 1993: 167-172, where a list of *probaskania* used as defence from the evil eye is given.

⁹ Eleven passages in Pindar justify his belief that human envy was linked with success and its praise; c.f. O.6.7, 74; O.8.55; O.11.7; P.1.85; P.2.90; P.7.18-20; N.4.39; N.8.21; I.1.44; I.2.43; I.5.24.

¹⁰ *Baskania* is the Greek term meaning the evil eye and it centres on the notion that certain people have the ability to cause harm.

¹¹ The passage occurs within Plutarch's discussion about the phenomenon of *baskania*; see *Quaest. Conviv.* 5.7.6 (682F - 683A).

¹² It could be suggested that the mythological figure of Medusa and her fatal glance with its destructive consequences affirms in a manner of speaking this primeval belief that the evil eye has the power to injure or even kill.

¹³ C.f. Menander, fr. 538.6-8; Theocritus, *Id.* 5.12f., 6.26f.; Lucretius, *DRN* 3.75; Horace, *Sat.* 1.1.110f., *Epist.* 1.2.57-59.

¹⁴ Aeschylus is the first to represent Envy as a disease (*Ag.* 834-837). For the same idea, see also Euripides (fr. 403 N²); Isocrates (15.13).

wounding himself as well as the internal torture¹⁵ and associations with venomous creatures (snakes or scorpions) were also basic characteristics of *phthonos*-image.¹⁶

Callimachus and *Phthonos*

Callimachus gives a more visualised literary figure of *phthonos*:

ὁ Φθόνος Ἀπόλλωνος ἐπ' οὔατα λάθριος εἶπεν·
'οὐκ ἄγαμαι τὸν ἀοιδὸν ὃς οὐδ' ὄσα πόντος ἀεῖδει.'
τὸν Φθόνον ὠπλόων ποδί τ' ἤλασεν ὣδ' εἶπεν·
'Ἀσσυρίου ποταμοῖο μέγας ῥόος, ἀλλὰ τὰ πολλὰ
λύματα γῆς καὶ πολλὸν ἐφ' ὕδατι συρφετὸν ἔλκει.
Διοῖ δ' οὐκ ἀπὸ παντὸς ὕδωρ φορέουσι μέλισσαι,
ἀλλ' ἤτις καθαρὴ τε καὶ ἀχράαντος ἀνέρπει
πίδακος ἐξ ἱερῆς ὀλίγη λιβὰς ἄκρον ἄωτον.'
χαῖρε, ἄναξ· ὁ δὲ Μῶμος, ἴν' ὁ Φθόνος, ἔνθα νέοιτο.
(*Hymn to Apollo*, 105-113)¹⁷

Envy whispered into Apollo's ear:

'I don't like a poet who *does not* sing as much as the sea.'

Apollo kicked Envy aside and said:

'Great is the flow of the Assyrian river, but it carries much filth from the earth and much refuse in its waters.'

The bees bring water to Deo not from every source but where it bubbles up pure and undefiled

from a holy spring, a tiny spray, the finest essence.'

Farewell, Lord! Let *Blame* go where Envy's gone!¹⁸

In this programmatic conclusion of the hymn, *Phthonos* appears to whisper criticism into Apollo's ear secretly in an attempt to make the god disapprove any poem, including this that was not long and continuous. Apollo, in turn, kicks *Phthonos* away while he then states his own opinion of Callimachus'

¹⁵ C.f. Pindar *Pyth.* 2.89-91; Aeschylus, *Ag.* 834ff.; Democritus, DK 68 B 88; Horace, *Epist.* 1.2.58f.

¹⁶ For a detailed discussion of these features and for more examples see Dunbabin and Dickie 1983.

¹⁷ The ancient text has been taken from Pfeiffer's edition (1949-1953, vol. 2).

¹⁸ The translation is mainly taken from Nisetich, *Hymn to Apollo* 105-113. The *italics* indicate where I have altered the translation for the sake of clarity.

poetry; he too praises, allusively, short and delicate poems. In the final line of the *hymn* Callimachus adds his own curse: he wishes that Blame (*Momos*) may go to join Envy (v. 113). Envy and Blame¹⁹ here represent on the one hand critics of Callimachus' preference for short and carefully wrought poems and his rejection of traditional epic themes, while on the other hand it can be argued that they symbolise the evil eye (*baskania*). Callimachus employs in an allegorical way statements of his polemical poetics and expresses his poetic principles by personifying *phthonos* and *baskania*. The same belief in the evil eye is found again in the prologue to the *Aetia*²⁰ where Callimachus addresses his critics as Telchines.²¹ Their association with *baskania* comes at line 1.1.17 of the prologue where he characterizes them 'Βασκανίης ὀλοὸν γένος' and he angrily dismisses them. It is notable that *Phthonos* whispers secretly to Apollo in the same way that the Telchines mutter secretly against Callimachus (1.1.1, *μοι Τελχῖνες ἐπιπρύζουσιν ἀοιδῆ*).²² He seems to imply that Envy, accompanied by criticism, will always lurk behind every successful attempt or poem but Apollo, the patron of the poets, will be there to strike the envious literary rivals away. The personified *Φθόνος* of the hymn is in fact the personification of the envious glance (the *baskanos ophthalmos*) that is cast on Callimachus' literary success and Apollo's approval of the Callimachean aesthetics overcomes *Phthonos* and gives Callimachus a triumph of style.²³

Callimachus' representation, although descriptive, appears to be more complex in meaning and perhaps more obscure; this fits better with his literary aspirations and the abstract personification of *Phthonos* seems to match perfectly to its allegorical use here. The *Hymn* is a difficult passage and the use of *Phthonos* here has raised debates among scholars.²⁴ However, it is

¹⁹ For a discussion on the different meaning and relationship of the two words see Kohnken 1981: 419ff; Blomqvist 1990: 21ff.

²⁰ For the primary text of the *Aetia* Prologue see Pfeiffer's edition (1949-1953, vol. 1).

²¹ Strabo C654 gives evidence for the association of Telchines with the evil eye; Ogden (2002: 224), refers to them as 'the archetypal evil-eye-ers of the mythology'.

²² For a detailed discussion on Telchines and their association with *Phthonos* in the opening lines of Callimachus' *Aetia* see Acosta-Hughes and Stephens 2002.

²³ See also Walcot 1978: 77ff.; Williams 1978: 85-97; Hutchinson 1988: 67-68; Bassi 1989: 227f.; Blomqvist 1990: 17ff.

²⁴ See for example the views of Bundy 1972; Williams 1978; Kohnken 1981; Bassi 1989; Blomqvist 1990; Trail 1998.

indeed one of the best examples of the literary representation of the personified *Phthonos*.

So the question arises: does Ovid typically refer to his models in the same way? Or is his relation to them emulative?

***Invidia* and Ovid (*Met.* 2.760-805).**

First a word on the general context of the myth in which *Invidia* appears. Ovid tells in Book two of his *Metamorphoses* (2.710ff.),²⁵ that Mercury, as he returns to Olympus, passes over a festival of Pallas and spots Herse, the most beautiful of the virgin girls participating in the festival. He falls in love with her and approaches Herse's sister, Aglauros, in an attempt to enter Herse's room. Aglauros agrees to give Herse his message for the price of gold, a request that Minerva overhears; the goddess, full of anger, seeing Aglauros' success in winning Mercury's favour and recalling the girl's former betrayal,²⁶ flees to the house of *Invidia* and orders the goddess to poison Aglauros with envy. *Invidia* obeys and infects her. Aglauros begins to waste away with jealousy and blocks the passage to Herse's room. Finally, Aglauros is turned to stone by the god Mercury in retribution for her attempt to frustrate his abduction of Herse.

Invidia, thus, plays a leading role in the whole episode of *Metamorphoses* 2.708-835 and provides a link with what has taken place previously while she becomes an essential device for the advance of the action. In a passage of roughly fifty lines Ovid manages to build up *Invidia*'s image based upon the act of visualization. The scene opens with an overview of the setting of the house, then of the house itself. Next Minerva arrives and knocks on the door; when it opens she catches sight of Envy and Envy in turn sees the goddess. Ovid, then, gradually describes *Invidia*'s actions, gestures, diet preferences,

²⁵ *Invidia* may appear at *Met.* 2.760-815, but the preparation for her appearance goes back to the beginning of the story and ceases when Aglauros is turned into stone.

²⁶ According to Ovid (*Met.* 2.710ff.), Erichthonius was born without a mother. Minerva placed him in a willow basket and gave it to Aglauros and her sisters with the express command not to open it. Two daughters, Herse and Pandrosos obeyed, but Aglauros looked and saw the child lying next to a great snake.

physical appearance and general statements of her character, to lead eventually the scene to its climax by representing *Invidia* contaminating Aglauros.²⁷

The tendency of Ovid to Romanise inherited elements and his ability to focus on realistic scenes is what makes this text so important. In fact, as Lowe has argued 'the location, behaviour and personality of the Roman *Invidia* symbolise the various attributes and symptoms of envy in Roman thought'.²⁸ Thus, her associations with black colours (*Met.* 2.760, 776, 790), with chilliness (*Met.* 2.763) and mainly with the sidelong glance (*i.e.* evil eye, *Met.* 2.776, 787),²⁹ an idea also developed by Callimachus, confirm such suggestions.³⁰ Callimachus in the much-discussed final lines of his hymn also succeeds in creating a visual image of *Phthonos* and it is possible that Ovid has Callimachus in the back of his mind. Nevertheless, Ovid's representation is unique; what he in fact does is to create an integrated personified figure by incorporating both internal and external features attributed to *phthonos*. For him *Invidia* as personification becomes a suitable narrative device to speak about his poetic ability and wit and to show his talent to emulate significant literary techniques that have been used by his predecessors.

One of the greatest innovations that Ovid introduces is the representation of *Invidia* inhabiting a kind of house. The construction of her abode is carefully done since the house and the environment around her highlight everything that *Invidia* is. Setting, thus, plays an important role in the understanding of *Invidia*, since it produces the relevant atmosphere of mystery that adds to her monstrous nature. The depiction of the filthy house, rotten with black corruption, which comes before the basic description of *Invidia* herself,³¹ strengthens the image of the character. I would argue also that the description

²⁷ See Solodow 1988: 201-202. The scholar notes that the narrative follows a line which can be visualized as a movie, filmed by a single camera without cutting.

²⁸ Lowe 2008: 425.

²⁹ Ovid plays with the etymology of the verbs *video* and *invideo* to stress the act of seeing and especially the flawed act of vision. *Invidia*'s name in its own right after all implies such connotations.

³⁰ For details see also Dickie 1975.

³¹ Ovid, *Met.* 2.760-764.

has one main function in the text: to prepare the reader for the horrible figure that is about to enter the stage. For this reason he intentionally seems to omit significant details since his major aim is to reinforce the mystery that already covers his personified figure. He does not actually mention anything concerning the location of Envy's home; he simply notes obscurely that it is remote from all the other people and it is hidden somewhere in a deep valley (*Met.* 2.761-762: *domus est imis in vallibus huius / abdita*).³² This lack of precision is in keeping with the mysterious atmosphere that infuses both the whole episode and *Invidia*. Something similar occurs in the *Hymn to Apollo* (cf. 105-113); there, the personified *Phthonos* first of all appears out of nowhere while no indication is given about the place of the meeting between the god and Envy. In Ovid the description becomes more elaborate in style. The presence of the goddess is important in the text and their close contact is purposely designed here because it is important for the progression of events: through Minerva Ovid smoothly transfers us to *Invidia*'s house and through the goddess's eyes we get the chance to look at *Invidia* herself. Thus Minerva finds in *Invidia* an "ally" to help her in carrying out her malevolent plans to punish Aglauros by poisoning her with envy. The goddess does not actually reprove *Phthonos* as the god Apollo does but instead Minerva herself looks for *Invidia*'s help.

Then, Ovid carefully selects from the variety of physical features attributed to *Phthonos* only those that effectively introduce visually the portrait of his creature while in order to create suspense he gradually builds up to her entrance. Firstly, we learn about the preferences of her diet: *videt intus edentem / vipereas carnes, vitiorum alimenta suorum* (*Met.* 2.768-769) and gestures. Minerva catches sight of *Invidia* sitting on the ground, eating viper's flesh as a source of venom to nourish her vices. Further, the description of her physical appearance is expanded, as Ovid highlights the paleness of her face (*Met.* 2.775: *pallor in ore sedet*), the emaciation of her body (*Met.* 2.775: *macies in corpore toto*), her sidelong glance (*Met.* 2.776: *nusquam recta acies*; *Met.* 2.787: *obliquo lumine*), her filthy teeth (*Met.* 2.776: *livent rubigine*

³² See also Anderson 1997: 324.

dentes), the green gall in her breast (*Met.* 2.777: *pectora felle virent*) and the poisonous tongue (*Met.* 2.777: *lingua est suffusa veneno*).³³ All these attributes indicate the destructive power of *Invidia* not only to herself, but also to all things that she touches (*Met.* 2.781-782: *carpitque et carpitur una / suppliciumque suum est*). It is not by chance that Ovid represents *Invidia* as polluting with her breath the people and the cities she visits (*Met.* 2.791ff.). Finally, the poet concludes with a brief representation of her behaviour and character: she is sluggish in her movements (*Met.* 2.771-772: *surgit humo pigre semesarumque relinquit / corpora serpentum passuque incedit inert*); she murmurs³⁴ softly and grieves as she sees Minerva fleeing after she has succeeded in her enterprise (*Met.* 2.788: *murmura parva dedit successurumque Minervae*);³⁵ she never smiles (*Met.* 2.778: *risus abest*) and she does not sleep (*Met.* 2.779: *nec fruitur somno*). The murmuring in line 788 in the *Metamorphoses* is due to the unhappiness that *Invidia* feels as she thinks of Minerva's success and corresponds to the same unhappiness that Callimachus' enemies feel facing his poetic success.³⁶

Ovid, thus, creates a full and detailed picture of *Invidia*. This is because Envy (*Invidia*) plays a central role in and is the main cause of Aglauros' transformation (*Met.* 2.801-832). Further, we can see the poet's skill in playing with variations in representing the central characters of the episode: on the one hand *Invidia* is personified, while on the other hand Aglauros mirrors the personification of *Invidia* by taking on her qualities. Aglauros gradually loses

³³ All the features that are used to build *Invidia's* outward appearance (i.e her poisonous tongue, the paleness, the emaciation, her filthy teeth, the green gall), also refer to symptoms of illness.

³⁴ C.f. the use of *Phthonos* and *Telchines* in Callimachus' *Hymn to Apollo* and *Aetia* prologue respectively. Besides, the secretive talk is characteristic of the envious: he whispers criticisms because he is ashamed to admit to his vice.

³⁵ Muttering here may also imply the grinding of teeth, which is a characteristic feature of envious people.

³⁶ Ovid constructs the figure of *Invidia* by using some of the basic features of *phthonos* such as the wasting, the emaciation, the paleness, the gnashing of the teeth because of rage, the sidelong look, as well as the internal torture. However, he seems to omit other characteristics such as the sunken eyes, the frowning brow, or other physical distortions such as the hunched back or actions like the strangling, choking, bursting or even the rendering of the self-inflicted wound – things associated in antiquity with the idea of envy. Ovid follows the previous literary tradition but he also seems willing to incorporate new elements in order to build up an image both horrible and grotesque. It is obvious that all these features did not find equal use among the writers.

her human form and becomes an object. By using this technique Ovid explains the cause of Aglauros' behaviour.

Conclusion

To sum up, Ovid, never one to leave traditional motifs untested, seems to have been intrigued by the potential use of Envy as a literary device; although he emulates significant ideas found in his Hellenistic model, he seems particularly concerned with articulating a more narrative treatment of the personification of Envy. Besides, Ovid also plays with all the pre-Hellenistic images and features of *phthonos* found in earlier accounts.

Both Ovid and Callimachus build up their accounts using descriptive details. Both show their ability to transform traditional themes and topics and adjust them in a way that fit their literary purposes. However, Callimachus uses *Phthonos* to comment on his poetic preferences while Ovid incorporates it in his narration for thematic effect and to show literary skill. The *Invidia* episode, embedded within the Aglauros episode, appears at the very end to hold a significant part in the story.

His choice not to follow Callimachus' literary or didactic purposes that lie behind the representation of Envy does not suggest that he is ignoring or unaware of the Callimachean significance; on the contrary, his variation on the motif shows that as a *poeta doctus* (=learned poet), he has the ability to manipulate former and well-established motifs in such a way that they appear to be new again.

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