

Starving the Slender Muse: The Curse of Pedantry in Ovid's *Ibis*

For the better part of two millenia, scholars viewed Ovid's *Ibis* as "a set-piece of vitriolic cursing followed by a self-indulgent show of learning" (Williams 1996, 4) which aimed its (hopefully) deadly shafts at an enemy either real or invented; identifying the addressee and explicating the two-hundred-odd mythological exempla riddlingly alluded to within its verses were seen as its only points of academic interest. A decade ago, however, Gareth Williams reintroduced the long-sidelined poem to modern scholarship, showing how it functions as a literary text and fits thematically and programmatically into Ovid's exilic corpus. But Williams is so wearied by the earlier pursuits of "literal-minded scholars" who attempted nothing more than "the restoration of the text and the elucidation of Ovid's more arcane allusions" (4) that he fails, just as those earlier scholars did, to look below the surface of Ovid's text where one can, I argue, detect further networks of allusivity that sometimes run counter to the most immediate explanations.

I propose that the surface structure of the *Ibis* is meant to echo that of mythographic texts, which were their own genre in the ancient world. They set forth in plain prose myths that they collected under a variety of rubrics, from the thematic (stories of metamorphosis, stories of lovers' travails) to the chronological (cf. ps.-Apollodorus's *Bibliotheka*). These mythographies were possibly intended as reference texts or aides-de-memoir, and one is self-professedly summarily written "in the fashion of a little notebook" (Parthenius, *Erot. Path.* praef.2) to serve as inspiration for its poet-addressee to turn into epics and elegies. Ovid seems on one level to imitate this collative tendency of mythography, sometimes linking his mythological exempla categorically and sometimes genealogically or by name: his compressed catalogue of those who committed incest (357-60), for example, is comparable to Hyginus' catalogue of "those who slept together in contravention of divine law" (*Fab.* 253). However, it takes some investigation to notice his "sequence of tangentially related Pyrrhi" (Williams 94) at lines 301-8, and a reference to Atalanta's husband (458) is followed by a reference to Limone's father (459), both named Hippomenes but both left deviously unnamed.

Most mythographic texts "share the aim of reducing myth in bulky sources to manageable proportions" (Lightfoot 1999, 224), but Ovid in fact reduces the myths so far that they cannot survive on their own. Rather than serving as explication (the goal of true mythographic texts), his exempla must *be* explicated; and yet in the process of decoding Ovid's "riddles" (59) it becomes apparent that he is playing with the mythic tradition's inherent mutability and syncretism. I suggest that Ovid is in fact creating an "anti-mythographic" text, warring not only against his *bête-noir* *Ibis* but against the ossification of myth that is inescapable within the bald prose narrative of the mythographic genre.