

The Muses' Playground 14

Humour in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

Lecture overview

- Another way of changing the brief: the addition of humour?
 - Does humour have a place in epic?
 - Verg. *Aen.* 5
- Case studies:
 - Ov. *Met.* 8: The Caledonian Boar hunt
 - Discrepancy between manner and theme

Is there humour in epic?



Hom. *Od.* 8: Demodocus sings
of Ares and Aphrodite

Then indeed great indignation
burned in the young man's marrow,
and there were tears on his cheeks,
and forgetting his own pride and his
crew's safety he heaved the timid
Menoetes headlong into the sea
from the high stern: he stood to the
helm, himself captain and
steersman, urged on his men, and
turned for the shore. But when
Menoetes old as he was, clawed his
way back heavily and with difficulty
at last from the sea floor, he climbed
to the top of the crag and sat down
on the dry rock dripping, in his wet
clothing. The Trojans laughed as he
fell, and swam and laughed as he
vomited the seawater from his chest.

Humour in pre-Ovidian epic

- Early epic does contain humorous episodes
- How are they presented?
 - *That was the song the famous minstrel sang. As he listened, Odysseus felt joy in his heart— long-oared Phaeacians, famous sailors, felt it, too.* (Hom. *Od.* 8.462-464)
 - The games episode in *Aen.* 5 is a respite from the travails of the Trojans: it is intimately connected to Aeneas' epic agenda but is clearly for play, not for real

Overview of the episode (Horsfall)

- 260-272: transition from Daedalus in Sicily to Theseus in Calydon.
- 273-444: the boar hunt.
 - 273-297: Diana sends a wild boar to punish the Aetolians for king Oeneus of Calydon's failure to make offerings to her.
 - 298-328: catalogue of the hunters; Atalanta of Tegea stands as its climax; Meleager, Oeneus' son, is instantly filled with passion for her.
 - 329-419: the hunt.
 - 420-444: end of the hunt and death of the Thestiadae.

An Epic Episode?

- 260-272: transition from Daedalus in Sicily to Theseus in Calydon.
- 273-444: the boar hunt.
 - 273-297: Diana sends a wild boar to punish the Aetolians for king Oeneus of Calydon's failure to make offerings to her.
 - 298-328: **catalogue of the hunters**; Atalanta of Tegea stands as its climax; Meleager, Oeneus' son, is instantly filled with passion for her.
 - 329-419: the hunt.
 - 420-444: end of the hunt and death of the Thestiadae.
- The story is well-known from Homeric times onward – a vastly popular vase painting motif in the archaic period
 - For the king, Oeneus, **it is said**, when plenty blessed the year [...] (Ov. *Met.* 8.273)
 - Alexandrian footnote
- It features heroes well known from (in and around) Homeric epic:
 - Theseus, Castor and Pollux, Telamon, Peleus, Nestor, Laertes...
- The inclusion of a female hero (Atalanta) recalls the inclusion of Penthesileia in the Epic Cycle or Quintus Smyrnaeus, or Camilla in the *Aeneid*

Hom. // 9 description

- *Thereon the archer goddess in her displeasure sent a prodigious creature against him - a savage wild boar with great white tusks that did much harm to his orchard lands, uprooting apple-trees in full bloom and throwing them to the ground. But Meleager son of Oeneus got huntsmen and hounds from many cities and killed it - for it was so monstrous that not a few were needed, and many a man did it stretch upon his funeral pyre. On this the goddess set the Curetes and the Aetolians fighting furiously about the head and skin of the boar.*

The Boar

The smarting goddess sent a giant boar, huge as the bulls that grassy Epirus breeds, dwarfing the bulls of fertile Sicily; his eyes ablaze with fire and blood; his neck solid and steep; his bristles long and sharp, rigid as spear shafts; his broad sweeping flanks flecked, as he hissed and snorted, with hot foam. His tusks were huge as Indian elephants'; his mouth flashed lightning and his burning breath seared the green leaves.

- Ovid's description both of the boar and the damage it causes is far more extensive than what we normally see in this type of passage
- The language is closely associated with epic: commentators point to frequent Vergilian parallels
 - Cf. Horsfall
- What does the high level of detail do? How does it work on us as readers?

Questions: The boar description

- Does the extensive description actually take us away from the action of the passage?
- Does it therefore make us see this as a literary exercise and make us less engaged in the story itself?
- Does that then make us ask what the point of this literary tour de force is going to be?
- Does that in turn prepare us for the different version that Ovid will give of the hunt itself?

Other themes...

*A plain brooch pinned the collar of her dress, her hair was simple, gathered in a knot, from her left shoulder a quiver of ivory hung rattling and her left hand wielded a bow. So she was dressed; her features in a boy you'd think a girl's and in a girl a boy's. When **Meleager saw her**, in a flash his heart leapt high (while Heaven opposed) and deep he drank love's flame. Happy indeed, he thought, the man whom she deems worthy of her hand! **But time and modesty allowed no more; the high task pressed, the challenge of the boar.** (Ov. Met. 8.319-328)*

- Atalante appears as a programmatic exemplum of the girl playing hard to get in Propertius first elegy
- That elegy also emphasises the gaze as the key prompt for falling in love: *Cynthia was the first to catch me, unlucky one, with her eyes* (Prop. 1.1.1f)
- The power balance is also elegiac: normal patterns of gendered behaviour inverted
- ...so, are we going into epic elegy (again)?
- No – note 328: the 'high task' also refers to the generic register
- We are now to expect proper epic again
 - Cf. Verg. *Aen.* 7.44

Varied narrative (Horsfall)

- *Ecphrasis* (i) *silva . . . incipit* (329-30). The forest.
 - Allusions to Verg. *Ecl.* and *Georg.*
 - Is Ovid taking us through the ladder of genres and thus raising expectations?
- *Narrative* (i) *quo postquam venere.* (331-3). The hunt begins.
- *Ecphrasis* (ii) *20 concava vallis erat . . .* (334-7). The boar's lair.
- *Narrative* (ii) *hinc aper excitus . . .* (338ff). He attacks.
 - Note Horsfall's wider understanding of ecphrasis: cf. Henderson as well

The hunt

Out he rushed [...] The huntsmen gave a shout, brave hands held spears thrust forward, their broad points glinting. On rushed the boar, scattering the hounds that faced his fury, striking, as they bayed, swift slanting strokes and tossing them aside. The first spear thrown, hurled by Echion's hand, missed him and lightly grazed a maple trunk.

- Initially a good swift description of a hunting scene
 - Hunting is serious business to heroes of epic standing, the value of the venture is epic
- A fairly unknown hero misses – fine, just prep for a great appearance?

*proxima, si nimiis mittentis viribus
usa non foret, in tergo visa est haesura
petito: longius it; auctor teli Pagasaeus
Iason.*

- The next, aimed at his back, must have lodged there, had not too strong been the throw of **Jason**.
- => So here things go wrong for heroes of truly epic stature as well – makes the reader wonder what's up!

(More) incongruities

But yet Enaesimus, son of Hippocoön, could not escape the fatal blow; the sinews of his knees were severed and his leg-muscles collapsed. And Nestor might have perished too before the time of Troy, had he not leapt, vaulting on his long spear, into a tree that stood at hand, and there in safety gazed down on the enemy that he'd escaped.

- Incongruity is a chief source of humour:
- The reader will know Nestor as the oldest of the Greeks at Troy: a youth story won't be able to block that image out wholly
- ...so we get the image of a grey beard vaulting into a tree
- The Nestor of the Iliad is also very proud of his youthful achievements: but here he sits in safety on the sidelines

Heroic pratfalls and love

- *Telamon followed, careless, all too keen, and tripping on a forest root, fell flat.*
- So far, epic has failed to be grand and only achieved to be comic
- With Atalanta's wounding of the boar, we are returned to the eroticising part of the narrative:
- *'Bravely done! All praise for **manly** prowess!' The men flushed; all urged each other on, their courage raised with shouts and cries, and hurled their spears unplanned, a self-defeating stream that blocked its blows.'*
- Epic fail?
 - Yes, the men do at this point not achieve their task
 - No, this type of competitiveness is frequently present in epic (cf. *Aen.* 5!)

Meleager and the kill

Now it was miss and hit for Meleager. Two spears he sped; the first stood in the earth, the second fair and square in the boar's back. He roared, he raged, he twisted on round and round, slavering blood afresh and hissing foam, and in a trice the wielder of the wound was on his foe and, baiting him to fight, deep through his shoulder sank his shining blade.

- Preceded by another two pratfalls: Theseus and Jason
- The reader expects, now trained in Ovid's way of telling this story, Meleager to fail in the same way?
- Instead, we get the final kill

Results?

- Ovid's telling of the Calydonian boar hunt is markedly different from any other epic hunt scene thanks to its layers of comedy
- It also introduces an erotic element reminding the reader of Roman love elegy
- Is it therefore not epic?
- No – the episode uses different methods to heighten tension in the finale
 - Meleager exceeds the reader's expectations in the manner of a true hero
 - The challenge of Thestius' two sons is well-prepared and motivated

Interpretations and conclusions

- ‘Incongruity and anachronism characterize Ovid's treatment of the gods and mythological figures in the *Metamorphoses*; frequently the resulting discrepancy between the superhuman world of mythology and characteristic aspects of Roman society serves to pillory that society as well as to undermine the dignity of the traditional mythology.’
(Coleman, 1990, 571)

Other notable examples

- Parody of elegy: Polyphemus and Galatea in *Met.* 13.789-869
- Parody of legalistic speech: Teiresias in *Met.* 3.22-38

Humour in the *Metamorphoses*

- Humour and inclusion of comic elements is another way in which Ovid can vary the received genre of epic
- This *variatio* relies on comic elements in earlier epic: it does not come completely out of the blue
- It allows him to work with the material of his predecessors, yet achieve something wholly new: it is generic enrichment at its best