The Ovidian Elegiac Couplet: an Empedoclean Verse Form?

In a classic paper, Philip Hardie (1995) has argued that the speech of Pythagoras in the fifteenth book of the *Metamorphoses* offers a version of literary history that suggests Latin epic can be read in an important sense as “Empedoclan *epos*.” The speech of Pythagoras, however, is not the only place in Ovid’s poetry in which Empedoclean influence is detectable; it notably appears elsewhere in his *elegiac* poetry (see Pfligersdorffer (1973), Hardie (1991), Garani (2011) on Empedocles in the *Fasti*; Stewart (1959), Rusten (1982), and Janka (1997) on Empedocles in the *Ars amatoria*). If the Empedoclean characteristics of the *Metamorphoses* are intelligible because of the poem’s place in the tradition of Latin epic, how do we explain Ovid’s interest in Empedoclean cosmology in his elegiac poetry?

I argue in this paper that we can begin to understand Ovid’s preoccupation with Empedocles by recognizing the potential for the elegiac couplet to be seen as an “Empedoclean verse form.” The second book of the *Ars amatoria* is the focus of my analysis, since it contains several passages in which representations of the elegiac couplet are connected to Empedocles’ philosophy. The story of Daedalus opens the second book of the *Ars* and in the course of relating this myth Ovid describes the Minotaur in an (in)famous line of verse: *semibouemque uirum semiuirumque bouem* (2.24). As several scholars (Rusten (1982) and Hardie (1995)) have observed, this “monster” of a line imitates a similarly chiastic word-play found in Empedocles (B61.2-3), which suggests that the Minotaur is an “Empedoclean monster.” Importantly for our purposes, Alison Sharrock (1994) has also taken the Minotaur to be a reflection of the “hybridity” of the elegiac couplet in its duality of hexameter and pentameter verses. Moreover, much the same suggestion has been made by Alessandro Barchiesi (1991) about the two-faced god of the *Fasti*, Janus, whose genealogy (Hardie (1991)) equally includes the hybrid creatures “with two faces and two chests” who arose at a certain point in Empedocles’ zoogony (B61.1). I argue, then, that the status of the Minotaur and Janus as simultaneously reflections of the elegiac couplet and Empedoclean hybrid figures suggests that the elegiac couplet (in its “hybridity”) may be considered an “Empedoclean verse form.”

Armed with this, I argue that the elegiac couplet can be considered “Empedoclean” in a further, even more important, sense. As *Amores* 1.1 dramatically shows, the hexameter verse conventionally represents martial epic, while the pentameter is what transforms epic into (erotic) elegiac verse. The alternation of the hexameter and pentameter can then be seen as a metrical representation of the Empedoclean alternation of the principles of Strife (hexameter) and Love (pentameter). I find support for this in a close reading of Ovid’s version of the myth of the adultery of Mars and Venus at *Ars* 2.561ff. This myth, first found in the song of Demodocus in *Odyssey* 8, was famously interpreted in antiquity to be an allegory that anticipated Empedocles’ cosmic principles of Strife (Ares) and Love (Aphrodite) acting on the four elements (cf. Feeney (1991)). I argue that Ovid points to the allegorical interpretation of the myth, so that we are to see Mars and Venus here too as allegorical representations of Empedocles’ principles of Strife and Love. Moreover, I argue that the passage is densely metalinguistic and correlates Mars to the hexameter of martial epic and Venus to the pentameter that distinguishes elegy from epic. In this way Ovid uses the myth of the adultery of Mars and Venus to represent the elegiac couplet itself in its metrical (and therefore temporal) alternation of hexamater (war or Strife) and pentameter (Love) as a microcosm of Empedocles’ cosmic cycle, which too involves the temporal alternation of Strife and Love. Empedoclean cosmology, therefore, is exploited by Ovid as a philosophal analogue for the elegiac verse form. This helps us to begin to make sense of Ovid’s interest in Empedoclean cosmology in his elegiac poetry.

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