

Translating Authority and Doubt in *Metamorphoses* 15.60-478

In *Metamorphoses* 15.60-478, Pythagoras discourses on philosophical doctrines from a number of pre-Socratic philosophers, touching on what were traditionally called his own teachings, but alluding to Heraclitus and Empedocles in addition. Indeed, as Hardie (2009) points out, the entire passage is Lucretian in presentation and content: from the anti-religious screed to the use of a didactic audience as addressee for sidebars on the teacher's anxiety regarding the reader's comprehension. As Sedley (1998) has shown, in passages wherein Lucretius dismantles either traditional religion or the Pre-Socratics, he was writing in imitation and allusion of Empedocles. Thus the passage with which Ovid opens the last book of his epic ties his work to traditional philosophical poetry that Lucretius had previously drawn upon, and more widely to Latin epic at large, this time through Lucretian allusion.

In his 1567 translation of the *Metamorphoses*, Golding displays remarkable awareness of both the philosophical theories at play but also the techniques Ovid and Lucretius use in their defense or rebuttal. Lucretius uses the poetic register to debunk traditional myth and religion, presenting traditional stories like Iphigenia's sacrifice (I.80-101) and the inmates of the Greco-Roman underworld (III.977-1000) as proof not of divine influence but of religion's pernicious effects. Likewise, as narrator Lucretius addresses his audience directly, pointing out the unbelieveability of an idea or demanding special attention for a key precept (ex. I.80-83; 331-333;). Ovid parenthetically editorializes in sidebars which not only doubt Pythagoras' own ideas, but go further to cast doubt upon the entire tradition into which his philosophical speech is so thoroughly situated. Elsewhere he uses the narrator's voice to cast doubt on, for instance, the cause of Actaeon's punishment (*Met.* III.144-146), making reference to multiple interpretations and undermining alternative mythic traditions. In Book 15, rather than making use of an

objective narrator, Ovid actually builds up Pythagoras' authoritative voice only to have the speaker undermine himself, rather than being countermanded by an external storyteller. In this respect Ovid uses a Lucretian-Empedoclean narrator to undermine the philosophical-poetic tradition that those authors represent.

Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is commonly referred to as "Shakespeare's Ovid," and holds an influential place in the history of both English translation of the classics and broader classical reception. Golding's prefatory epistle gives the impression that the translation will be a moralizing treatment of the original, since Golding repeatedly emphasizes Ovid's compatibility with Christian morality and even theology. He furthermore states that book fifteen's "speech of Pythagoras" presents a summary of the poem's "philosophy." In a sense (though surely not the one he intended) Golding was correct, namely that the Pythagoras passage uniquely displays Ovid's love of interwoven narratives, genres, historical and even linguistic traditions within a single passage of his epic. But where Lucretius uses the didactic narrative voice to undermine myth and religion and Ovid breaks apart the notion of authoritative discourse as a whole, Golding subverts Ovid and reverts to a more Lucretian mode to challenge the few ideas that his Christian orthodoxy cannot tolerate. Golding deviates most notably from the sense and syntax of Ovid's Latin when it comes to issues regarding the soul, its composition, and its mortality. This reveals Golding's unwillingness to embrace the heart of Pythagorean physics and ethics: the transmigration of the soul. When faced with this idea, Golding exaggerates the incredulity of Pythagoras' asides until they more resemble Ovid's and Lucretius' editorializing voices. The cumulative effect is to undercut the threat to the soul's immortality, which Golding seems obliged to defend. In this respect we find Golding's translation difficult to describe if limited to the usual tropes of criticism for

translations (literal, paraphrase, etc.). Despite his statement of syncretic intent in his preface, Golding's adoption of Lucretian/Ovidian strategies of interwoven narrative and editorializing personae reveal him to be no less a historically contingent translator than either of the authors he imitates. But when we look more closely at the way in which he interjects himself within the translation, hijacking what was originally Ovid's attack on traditional didactic authority, we find Golding behaving more like a Lucretian narrator. His view from outside the narrative enters into even the mouths of his speakers, and what Ovid intended for anti-authoritative ends, Golding reshapes to his own doctrine ultimately by more closely resembling Lucretius.

Works Cited

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