

Latona and Divine Identity in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

The brief episode of Latona and the Lycian Farmers (6.313-381) recounts a dispute over access to water resulting in divine retribution for human arrogance. As she wanders after giving birth to Apollo and Diana, Latona, weary and thirsty, comes to a pool hoping for refreshment, but the Lycian farmers there prevent her from drinking. She tries to prevail upon them with suppliant gesture and words to grant her access to this freely available natural resource. Despite her pleas, not only do the farmers continue to deny her access, but they muddy the water by stomping in it, rendering it undrinkable. Only then does Latona take divine vengeance and transform them into frogs to punish their dishonor. Discussions of this episode have focused primarily on the narrative structure of this inset tale and the Callimachean poetics of the dispute over water (Myers 1994; Clauss 1989); and Latona is considered in relation to Niobe, especially in terms of their maternal identities (Lateiner 2006; Feldherr 2004-5). My own discussion focuses on the ways this episode configures Latona's divine identity. In the preceding episode, Niobe questions Latona's divine status, charging that it is madness to prefer gods merely heard of to those actually seen (6.170-171). Though it is her wrath at this disrespect that results in the slaughter of Niobe's children, Latona herself remains in the background. She emerges as a fuller character in the Lycian farmers episode, gradually assuming her full divine status.

In this paper, I consider the configuration of divine identity through Latona's interaction with the Lycian farmers. I examine first the abundance of religious language, signaling the issue of divinity. Next I turn to the ways Latona uses traditional gestures and words of supplication to address the farmers, thereby complicating the divine-human hierarchy. Finally, I argue that the episode progressively solidifies Latona's divine identity and reinforces the natural order.

Several features of the episode direct attention to the religious significance and Latona's divinity. The story is recounted to answer the question as to the origin of an altar in a pool (6.329-330). Most notable is the description of the pool where Latona stops as *prodigio notum* (6.321). *Prodigium* is a rare word in the *Metamorphoses* (also occurring only at 11.411, 13.917); its use here elevates this incident and signals its importance for establishing divine-human interaction. Latona's own appearance as divine is ambiguous throughout the narrative. She first appears in this episode in diminished, nearly human form as she wanders weary, thirsty, caring for her two newborn children. Notably, however, she does not formally disguise herself as human, as the gods often do elsewhere; but neither does she fully identify herself as a goddess. Throughout her encounter with the Lycian farmers, Latona herself complicates her divine identity as she beseeches them. The conflict between them is not based on recognition of divinity *per se* nor a claim to superiority to a particular divinity's skill as in the surrounding episodes (Arachne 6.1-145, Niobe 6.146-312, Marsyas 6.382-400); rather the conflict arises due to a challenge to the cosmic order, namely the public distribution of water and the natural elements (6.349-351). As Latona asks the farmers for permission to access the water they prohibit her from, she makes a suppliant speech, thus reversing the divine-human hierarchy, using marked language (*supplex peto* 6.352). She furthers the irony by claiming that water would restore life and would be as nectar to her (6.356-7): she identifies her divinity in the simile, even while claiming a human need for refreshment. As she supplicates the farmers using traditional gestures and appealing words (*blanda verba* 6.360), beseeching (*orantem* 3.361) them for favor (*ut detis* 6.352), she performs precisely those actions that her altar will require from her human worshippers. Leaving off her lesser guise (*nec dicere sustinet ultra / verba minora dea* 6.367-8), she takes decisive action, relegating her assailants to yet lowlier status as frogs, as she

finally fully assumes her divine persona. The recounting of this *prodigium* vividly demonstrates divine wrath at human disrespect for the natural order. As Latona establishes herself as the deity honored by this temple in this pool, the question of whether she should be worshipped raised by Niobe in the previous episode has now been fully resolved.

Works Cited

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