

## Ovid's Hitwomen: Monsters for Hire in the *Metamorphoses*

In his epic poem the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid vividly personifies feelings as grotesque, deformed old women. In Book 2, the personification *Invidia* (“Spite”) is recruited by Minerva to infect Aglauros with overwhelming envy, leading to the latter’s death by petrification. Later, in Book 8, Ceres hires *Fames* (“Hunger”) to infect the wicked king Erysichthon with overwhelming hunger, resulting in his death by autophagy. Finally, in a similar narrative arc in Book 4, the hideous Fury Tisiphone carries out Juno’s attack on Theban Ino, who dies by cliff-fall, her newborn clutched in her arms. These three monstrous hitwomen—*Invidia*, *Fames*, and Tisiphone—have been observed to possess similar appearances and behaviors, with the two personifications identified as variations on the literary tradition of the Furies (Lowe 2008, Hardie 2012: 168–174). And yet, the unique monstrosity of these three beasts for hire remains difficult to categorize.

This paper seeks to pin down the complex ontology of Ovid’s hitwomen by examining them in their literary and historical context. First, intertextual references to earlier poetic works such as Virgil’s *Aeneid* illuminate the metapoetic capacity of Ovid’s personified feelings to behave as anti-muses: rather than inspiring art and creation, they wreak havoc and death. Then, an art-historical comparison of Ovid’s hitwomen to female monsters in contemporary statuary demonstrates the intimate association between femininity and disease in ancient thought.

The Fury Allecto infects several characters with madness in Book 7 of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Like Virgil, Ovid describes his hitwomen as infecting their mortal targets, literally breathing, *inspirare*, poisonous air into their lungs. This act of “inspiration” may be compared negatively to the initial act of “a-spiration” that opens the *Metamorphoses*, where Ovid asks the gods to

breathe favorably upon his work (*aspirate*, *Met.* 1.3). While others have considered Virgil's Allecto as a chthonic inversion of a muse (Clement-Tarantino 2016), I argue that Ovid develops this idea further with his three hitwomen, who transmit not only madness, but a range of subtler cognitive and somatic feelings, to disrupt mortal lives in disturbing ways.

*Invidia* and *Fames* are described in graphic detail (2.775–777, 8.797-808). Their effluviant bodies draw not only from the literary tradition of the Furies, but also of other abhorrent feminine monsters such as Sirens and Gorgons, thereby contributing to the cultural association between femininity and contagion. Moreover, I argue that Ovid relied on statuary grotesques to develop these uniquely repulsive beings. Excavated all around the Mediterranean, hyper-realistic grotesques functioned to ward off the misfortunes they represent (Mitchell 2013, Dunbabin & Dickie 1983). In *Invidia* and *Fames*, Ovid references the properties of grotesques that produce disgust in the viewer (Spatharas & Lateiner 2016). The distinctly human aspect of grotesques lends a particular horror to these beings, as they resemble not only traditional epic monsters, but also externalized depictions of our own human experiences.

With consideration of the poem's artistic, literary, and cultural context, this investigation demonstrates the profound import of Ovid's innovative hitwomen characters, who devastate mortals and transform the tradition of monsters in epic.

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