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History, Rhetoric and Political “Opportunity” in the Encomium of Vestal (Ov. Pont. 4,7)

Abstract: The epistle 4.7 Ex Ponto, addressed to the primipilus Vestal, is of particular importance and worthy of study for three reasons. First, it is the only attestation of a historical episode that has no other evidence, that is the capture of Aegisos by Getae and the following reconquest of the Danubian city by the sovereign Cotys and Vestal himself (in 12 AD). It also represents an interesting document for literary scholars since, as pointed out (see eg Helzle 1989, 158), it seems to follow, although in part, the topical and stylistic features of the laudatory genre. Finally, it records Ovid's attempt to ensure his amicitia with Vestal, a leading figure in the Tomis environment, whose support would, presumably, alleviate the hard conditions of the poet's exile.

Key-words: Ovid, Vestal, Cotys, Aegisos, political opportunity, celebratory τῶποι, irony.

The ep. 4.7 *Ex Ponto*, addressed to Vestal, *primipilus* following the general Vitellius, who was in charge of defending the Danube in AD 12 and later (in AD 13-14: André 129) sent in Scythia Minor to *reddere iura* in the Ovidian exile places, is the only evidence, along with some mention in Pont. 1.8 (Gaertner 428 ff. Vedaldi Iasbez 59 f.) of the occupation of the Roman protectorate of *Aegisos* (today Tulcea) by Getae and of the subsequent reconquest of the Danubian town by Cotys IV, the king of the Odrysians (a Thracian tribe: Plin. *Nat.* 4.40) and vassal of Rome (Gaertner 20 ff.)

Scholars disagree on the historical value of the attestation: in the late fifties, while a high degree of reliability was supported by Lascu (315), who pointed out that the news transmitted by Ovid on the territories and the inhabitants of ancient Dobrogea and of the Danube lower flow had a first-rate documentary value (316), Lozovan (355

ff.) considered the Ovidian ethnic and geographical notations on the lands of exile as the result of a rhetorical process and poetic tradition.

Almost two decades later, Della Corte considered the event a “skirmish”, described by Ovid with epic tones (58), while Syme underlined, on the contrary, the importance and exclusivity of the source, which even provided the names of the officers and cities involved (166: “otherwise Danubian history in the time of Augustus can show nothing comparable”).

Some doubt, at least on the “rapidity” of the career of Vestal, was again raised in the late eighties by Helzle: according to him, since Ovid defines Vestal *iuvēnis* (l. 6), the addressee of the epistle should have obtained the title of *primipilus* earlier than the usual practice, according to which this title was awarded to centurions over fifty (157).

Williams is firmly convinced of the unreliability of Ovid's verses: according to the scholar, the description of Vestal and of his military exploits cannot be trustworthy because it finds no confirmation in the historical works and in the archaeological and epigraphic evidence of that time, and because Ovid would seem to depend on the epic tradition (34: “the lack of contemporary reference in the historians to this bold and highly successful campaign is both surprising and perhaps revealing about the nature of Ovid's poetic performance”) to the extent that “the kind of epic hero which Vestal becomes in *P.* 4.7 simply does not exist outside the world of literary invention” (41).

In particular, Williams highlights how Helzle, while accurately pointing out the epic reason of the piles of corpses on the battlefield in ll. 47 f. (*ense tuo factos calcabas victor acervos/impositoque Getes sub pede multus erat*), which echoes the *Illiad* (see 5.886), did not discuss the possible ideological implications, far enough from the epic celebration of the character (40). The scholar thinks, indeed, that there may be an allusion to the ritual, which finds evidence both in Virgil and Livy, of burning the enemies' shields after a battle successfully won (*Aen.* 8.562; *Liv.* 1.37.3); here the ritual act is “degraded” in the act of trampling the corpses, which demeans the epic status of the character in such a way that the following celebration of his *virtus* ll. 51 f. appears to be highly ironic (*sed tantum virtus alios tua praeterit omnes / ante citos quantum Pegasus ibit equos*).

Williams' analysis is based on the assumption of the “unreality” of the poetry of exile: in the light of this interpretation, the presence, in this passage, of clichés familiar to the Romans, unreliable because conventional, would undermine the authenticity of Vestal's portrait and deeds as well as Ovid's reliability as a historical source and especially

the sincerity of his words (42: "Ovid...is anything but a candid reporter").

The analysis of the themes of the panegyric genre, especially of βασιλικὸς λόγος, could help delineate more carefully the possible role of the many literary allusions and reminiscences – more or less explicit, more or less "unconscious" (Pasquali 275) – which are present in the epistle: these themes would be widely used later on in encomium and eulogistic speeches addressed to the emperors in late antiquity. In III-IV cent. AD, the Greek rhetorician Menander of Laodicea (Russell, Wilson) provided a schematic representation of such discourses reaching the accomplishment of a tradition – just to set some reference points – tracing back to Aristotle's *Rhetorica* and *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* (of dubious attribution) and Latin to Cicero's *ad Herennium*, *De oratore*, *Partitiones oratoriae* and to ch. 3.7 of Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*.

The application of the panegyric schemes in the *Ex Ponto* is the result of Ovid's more and more evident inclination to celebratory themes to confirm his willingness to be the "cantor" of Rome (Fedeli LXXXVI). An example is represented by the epistle opening the II book, addressed to Germanicus, where the triumph of Tiberius in Pannonia and Dalmatia in October of 12 AD is related; the poet's knowledge of this event came from *Fama* and therefore he can only imagine it in the solitude of *relegatio* (2.1.1 *huc quoque Caesarei pervenit fama triumphi*).

Apart from the many insights, although exciting and worthy of study, on the possibility of an ironic reading of the epistle, which, according to some scholars, was meant to underline that there was no need to physically attend a ceremonial imperial in order to describe it, since it is characterized by repetitive and conventional practices (Fedeli LXXXVI), while for others was meant to denigrate Tiberius, the appointed successor, in favour of Germanicus, whose political pars was supported by Ovid (Luisi-Berrino, 85 ff. [2008]), what seems relevant, for our purposes, is the prophecy of the future triumph of Germanicus against the Germans and Ovid's declaration of celebrating his success, as in the following statement:

*hunc quoque carminibus referam fortasse triumphum / sufficiet nostris
si modo vita malis / imbuero Scythicas si non prius ipse sagittas /
abstuleritque ferox hoc caput ense Getes* (2.1.63-66).

The possibility of *referre carminibus* the triumph of the young prince is a significant evidence of the way Ovid, fully aware of his

expertise as well as of the propagandistic efficiency of his verses, proposes his candidature for the role of “official panegyrist”, making an attempt to approach Germanicus, in comparison with whom the triumph of Tiberius would seem even relegated to the background given the wide space dedicated for the prophecy addressed to Germanicus (Galasso 93 s.). In *Ex Ponto* some monarchs of neighbouring countries are also celebrated such as *Cotys* (2.9) and friends who could have reached positions of particular importance and could have interceded with the *princeps*, as *Cassius Salanus*, Germanicus’ teacher of rhetoric (2.5), *Sextus Pompei* (4.4), *Pomponius Grecinus* (4.9), the peerage of Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus, with epistles to his sons – Marcus Valerius Messalla Messalinus (1.7) and *Marcus Aurelius Cotta Maximus Messalinus* (2.3; 3.5) – and *Rufus*, his wife Fabia’s uncle (2.11); *Paullus Fabius Maximus* (1.2).

It should be noted that the use, in many of these letters, of the traditional celebratory τόποι, clearly highlights the age-old question, aforementioned above, about the authenticity of the celebratory nature of Ovid's poetry together with the question of the meaning of the proclaimed loyalty of the poet from Sulmo, whose letters from Pontus have been often interpreted on the basis of the antithesis between ironic opposition and servile adulation: this has often undermined its comprehension and interpretation.

This long-standing controversy may have found a solution in the mediating position of Galasso, who attempted to reconcile these two opposing readings by distinguishing the panegyrist will and the submission to the emperor from the proud consciousness of the poet’s profession and Ovid’s role as a “creator of glory” (Galasso 41 with extensive bibliography)

As mentioned, the use, in *Ex Pont.* 4.7, of many κεφάλαια of the epideictic discourse, albeit in ways not fully conform to the “canonic” model since they are characterized by an original compositional formula, which shapes the elegiac structure with rhetoric and stylistic influences from epic poetry and historiography, makes the epistle worthy of attention as it could be considered a sort of *exemplum ante litteram* of βασιλικὸς λόγος (Helzle 159). Therefore, the same ways of reading the laudatory works can be applied: these transcend the celebrative purpose in order to identify, between the lines, those historical news that cannot be found in other sources, following the practice already grasped, *in nuce*, by Gibbon (320).

In the Ovidian epistle, indeed, the poet’s effort to obtain a sort of “bargaining power” with the praised subject is particularly evident.

The subject, whom poetry collocates in a dimension of public visibility, could not fail to reach that ideal level which was raised to: this is a strategy - applied also in other *Ex Ponto* - based on some sort of "blackmail" mechanism against the addressees who, literally "invested" by praises and eulogies and presented as embodiments of key-role and important figures such as the true friend, the faithful wife, etc., were somehow forced to model on these figures their attitude to the poet (Galasso 43 f.).

In the epistle in question, for example, such a strategy can help explain the accent on the γένος of the praised character, emphasised by the Horatian reminiscence and the implicit comparison with Maecenas (5 f. *accedet voci per te non irrita nostrae, / Alpinis iuvenis regibus orte, fides ~ carm. 1.1.1 Maecenas, atavis edite regibus*): this is also functional to give evidentiary value to Ovid's words, corroborated by the testimony – although involuntary – of the imperial official, who must be believed as a descendant of Donno, king of the Ligures (see 29 f. *at tibi, progenies alti fortissima Donni, venit in adversos impetus ire viros*; see Letta 67 f.).

The mechanism of investiture with prestigious models has the same function and is translated, on the rhetorical level, with the σύγκρισις, a process that even involves Ovid's wife, in *Ex Pont.* 3.1: in this case the heroines of myth who faced death or huge sacrifices for their husbands are recalled by reference to one of the Iliad deeds carried out by Ajax, who had prevented the fire set by Hector from destroying the Greek fleet (41 f. *talis apud Troiam Danaïs pro navibus Ajax/dicitur Hectoreas sustinuisse faces*) and to Pegasus, known for his legendary speed (51 f. *sed tantum virtus alios tua praeterit omnes / ante citos quantum Pegasus ibit equos*).

An irrefutable evidence of a well aware use of this strategy is then the reference to the eternal power of poetry: *vincitur Aegisos, testataque tempus in omne/sunt tua, Vestal, carmine facta meo* (53 f.), further developed in *Ex Pont.* 4.8 with the statement *carmine fit vivax virtus, expersque sepulchri / notitiam serae posteritatis habet* (47 f.).

The reason, belonging to an ancient tradition (see Theocritus 17.135 ff. *δοκέω δ' ἔπος οὐκ ἀπόβλητον / φθέγξομαι ἐσσομένοις* and *Panegyricus Messallae* 210 f. *quandocumque hominem me longa receperit aetas,/inceptis de te subtexam carmina chartis*), is in contrast to the earlier, and clearly conventional ἀπορία consisting of a confession of his own embarrassment to talk about the "martial" deeds of the *laudandus* (45 f. *dicere difficile est, quid Mars tuus egerit illic,/quotque neci dederis quosque quibusque modis*): this represents another very old cliché, which has been differently declined in the

Greek and Latin tradition and boasts previous distinguished examples in Pindar (*Nem.* 4.71), Isocrates (4.13), Lysias (2.1) and Cicero (*Manil.* 29) and then widely attested in the *Panegyrici Latini* (see e.g. 7.1.3; 10.1.1 etc.).

It is also important to focus our attention on another element of laudatory ancestry, in the incipit of the epistle, where there is the celebration of the role of the guarantor of the official's *iustitia*, as highlighted by the expression *reddere iura* (1 f. *missus es Euxinas quoniam, Vestal, ad undas, / ut positis reddas iura sub axe locis*).

Although there is no agreement among scholars on the typology of the office, whether Vestal had been appointed *praefectus orae maritimae* (André 171; Syme 82; 166) or *legatus legionis* (Helzle 157), it is still possible to point out how the τόπος of the δικαιοσύνη (see Arist. Rhet. 1366b 6 and Men. Rhet. 375.5 ff.) is closely related to the reason of the official's *praesentia* in the places of exile (3 f. *aspicis en praesens, quali iaceamus in arvo, / nec me testis eris falsa solere queri*) and seems to suggest to the one being praised the possibility to take practical action in support of the exile precisely because of his *praesentia*. Ovid, indeed, underlines the way Vestal ascertains *de visu* the roughness and the perilousness of the places where he is confined and therefore can witness the truth of his words. It should be noted that the participle *praesens*, which carries a poignant meaning, with *iunctura ipse vides*, repeated three times (7; 8; 9), and the verb *aspicis* (3; 11), in double anaphora, refer to the motif, widely attested in laudatory literature since the Hellenistic age, of the sovereign perceived as god ἐπιφανής, visible and present, comparable to the concepts of σωτήρ and εὐεργέτης common to ancient gods, new heroes, kings and other θεῖοι ἄνδρες in the conception, similar to the sovereign, who, like a divinity, ensures his aid to those who address him a plea (Galasso 390; see also *Pont.* 2.9.21 f.).

The τόπος, which in Latin literature began to emerge since the age of Caesar (see Cic. *Marcell.* 10), is often used in Ovid with reference to Augustus and incorporates significantly the idea of “rescue” (Ciccarelli 67), according to an old use already attested in Terence (*Phorm.* 345).

The same considerable *praesentia* motif occurs in *Pont.* 2.9, an epistle addressed to Cotys, which is also characterised by many references to the laudatory genre (Galasso 381): here in ll. 77-80, Ovid asks for Cotys' help, as he can take advantage (*hac quoniam careo, tua nunc vicinia praestet, / invisio possim tutus ut esse loco*: 79 f.) of his proximity (*vicinia*) to have protection from the anger of a quite obscure *vindex*. In the epistle 4.7, the use of the

epithet *conspicuus* (l. 31) is remarkable as it refers again to the semantic field of sight (as in *Trist.* 2.54): in this case the definition of Augustus as a god *praesens* and *conspicuus* is a clear message to those belonging to his own *pars*, well-disposed towards a conception of deification of the Emperor on earth, fully debated by scholars (Luisi, Berrino 153 [2002]; Luisi 138-141, with bibliography).

Lines 13-18 are also particularly interested as they celebrated the military value and the ἀνδρεία of the hero (on the motif, see Arist. *Rhet.* 1366b 11 ff. ἀνδρεία δὲ δι' ἣν πρακτικοί εἰσι τῶν καλῶν ἔργων ἐν τοῖς κινδρύνουσιν, καὶ ὡς ὁ νόμος κελεύει, καὶ καλῶν ἔργων ἐν τοῖς κινδρύνουσιν, καὶ ὡς ὁ νόμος κελεύει, καὶ υπηρετικοί τῷ νόμῳ ...)

*atque utinam pars haec tantum spectata fuisset,/non etiam proprio
cognita Marte tibi./tenditur ad primum per densa pericula
pilum,/contigit ex merito qui tibi nuper honor./sit licet hic titulus
plenis tibi fructibus ingens,/ipsa tamen virtus ordine maior erit.*

Since, as underlined, Vestal was appointed official guarantor of justice for his merits in battle, he deserves this mandate *ex merito* for having fought in *densa pericula*: thus, Ovid increases the process of αὔξησης of the *laudandus*. Lines 17-18 highlight that even if the title had been enlarged by rich rewards, Vestal's *virtus* would have had in any case a higher value than any form of "reward" (*sit licet hic titulus plenis tibi fructibus ingens/ipsa tamen virtus ordine maior erit*).

This is another laudatory τόπος which occurs, to provide an example after Ovid, in the Panegyric to Maximian and Diocletian in 289 AD, when the rhetorician Mamertinus emphasizes how the privileges obtained are far lower than the merits and *cura rei publicae* showed by Maximian (*Paneg.* 2.3.1; see also *Paneg.* 4.4.3).

Even the detailed and amplified description of *fortia facta* of *laudandus* draws on the tradition, as in Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1366b 6 ἐν πολέμῳ ... χρήσιμος ἄλλοις) and Menander (372.28 ff. δεῖ γὰρ τὰς τῆς ἀνδρείας πράξεις πρώτας παραλαμβάνειν): it can be noticed, for example, as *iunctura ingentique gradu* (l. 33) recalls the Virgilian *longe gradientem* (*Aen.* 10.572), which has its origin in Homer (see *Il.* 3.21 f. Τὸν δ' ὥς οὖν ἐνόησεν ... / ... μακρὰ βιβάντα).

The exhortation, addressed to Vestal by Ovid, to not conceal his value (l. 32 *fortia ne possint facta latere, caves*) also refers also to the Gallic commentary, although in this case it is referred to the soldiers' courage while they fight under Caesar's eyes and in front of the whole army (*Gall.* 3.14.8 *reliquum erat certamen positum in virtute, qua nostri milites facile superabant, atque eo magis, quod in conspectu*

Caesaris atque omnis exercitus res gerebatur, ut nullum paulo fortius factum latere posset). An analogous motif occurs Pliny's panegyric, where the emperor is praised as *testis* of the actions of its soldiers (Plin. *Paneg.* 15.5).

In light of this analysis, however incomplete and certainly worthy of further investigation, some conclusive remarks can be traced.

As widely and unanimously recognized, Ovid's words do not correspond *in toto* to reality: the description of the ἀπιστεία of the character (15-54) is an emphatic demonstration since, as we have seen, it draws on well known and widely experimented epic and laudatory schemes.

However – considering that poetry, as a genre, follows principles and parameters that do not always coincide with the scientific rigor of historical and geographical reliability – the widespread use of the epic and epideictic tradition (see Williams and Helzle) alters neither the trustworthiness nor the “realism” of Ovid's poetry.

One might rather think that, anticipating a practice well known to panegyrists and late ancient rhetoricians, Ovid uses the epic and rhetorical formula to give probative value to his statements and to appear credible to poetry readers, and at the same time to obtain some benefit from the person he praised. This latter, celebrated and elevated to the status of epic hero, as mentioned above, could not but listen to his prayers.

Fully aware of the opportunities offered by his poetic ability, Ovid also appointed Vestal “involuntary” witness (André XXIX) of his destiny in an attempt to insure the protection and *amicitia* of a powerful man belonging to the Tomis environment, who could in some way alleviate the difficult conditions of his exile; at the same time it would be inappropriate and unwise to address him compositions with veiled irony, as happens in other verses written by the poet from Sulmo, such as those addressed to Livia, responsible for supporting her son Tiberius with Claudius' dynasty, whereas, as known, the poet would support Julius, represented by Germanicus and his entourage (81-87 Luisi, with extensive bibliography).

On the other hand, what would seem too emphatic, sometimes implausible, or not conform to the epic statute of *laudandus*, as the offensive act of trampling the corpses of the Getae, piled up in an offensive way, could be targeted to enhance, rather than to deride, the military value of Vestal, who reserves the defeated a treatment so different from the one imposed by the Roman ethical code and traditionally reserved for losers, a treatment based on respect and

pietas, but certainly in line with the ferocity and bestial characteristics that the exile would ascribe to enemies.

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