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Vergil's and Pythagoras' Helenus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

In book 15 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Ovid devotes 403 lines to a long and rambling speech by Pythagoras (15.75-478). This speech culminates in a prophecy of Rome's rise to power and of her destined rule over the world, led by a descendant of Iulus. To confirm this prophecy, Pythagoras claims to quote a prophecy of the Trojan seer, Helenus, to Aeneas. This type of "focalized praise," in which a poet creates a character who praises his laudandus, was a Hellenistic invention and is used several times by Callimachus, Theocritus, and Vergil. With these influences in mind, I will examine Pythagoras' prophecy in order to determine its rhetorical effect.

Mack (1988) 142-143 notes some of the problems with Ovid's Pythagoras. In her opinion, he is "Ovid's climax to a succession of unreliable and comic narrators." The reliability of Pythagoras is doubtful for a number of reasons. His speech seems to be a parody of serious philosophical poetry like that of Lucretius. Numa seems to be in the audience, which is anachronistic. Moreover, Pythagoras is caught in a self-contradiction: he had earlier claimed at 15.160-163 that he was the Trojan Euphorbus in a former life and that he was killed by Menelaus. But he narrates Helenus' prophecy as if he had heard it first-hand (*recordor*, 436, *mente memor refero*, 451), even though Euphorbus was already dead (and had died not long before Helenus spoke to Aeneas). Pythagoras' account also contradicts the version of Helenus' prophecy in the Aeneid, where Helenus states that he is permitted to tell Aeneas only details of the future which will help him reach Italy successfully and nothing further. Although the two prophecies begin by addressing Aeneas with the same words (*Nate dea*), their content differs completely. Vergil's Helenus emphasizes the difficulties lying between Aeneas and Italy, while Ovid's (or Pythagoras') Helenus dismisses these problems, choosing instead to dwell on Rome's future greatness and the greatness of Aeneas' descendants. In the speech, the rise of Rome's greatness follows a series of examples of great cities that have fallen, like Troy, Sparta, Mycenae, Thebes, and Athens. The prophecy looks ahead to the end of the *Metamorphoses* and the supremacy of Rome with Augustus at her head. It therefore plays an important role in the book as a whole. But while the focalized praise of Rome and Augustus is high, Pythagoras appears not to be reliable as a speaker.

The rhetorical effect of Pythagoras' speech is hard to judge: does Pythagoras' apparent unreliability undermine his own prophecy, or is his character not relevant to the content of his speech? What significance does it have as a rewriting of a Vergilian scene? I will attempt to answer these questions by comparing the Ovidian passage to other examples of focalized praise in Callimachus, Theocritus, Horace, Propertius and Vergil, and by a close examination of the passage's construction.

The Ovidian passage use of prophetic praise most closely resembles Apollo's prophecy of Ptolemy II's defeat of the Galatians in Callimachus'*Hymn to Delos* (160-190) and Vergil's insertion of prophecies of Roman and Julian supremacy into books 1, 6, and 8 of the *Aeneid*. Ovid's use of an unreliable narrator to speak the praises of Rome, however, is difficult to parallel. His use of Pythagoras may be compared to Horace's and Propertius' use of enemies to praise their laudandi (Cleopatra praises Augustus at Propertius 3.11.55-56 and Hannibal praises the Neronians at Horace *Odes* 4.4.37-76). Or it may be closer to Theocritus' and Vergil's use of rustic or lower class speakers (Theocritus *Idylls* 14.60-65, 15.46-47, 77-86, and Vergil *Eclogues* 1 and 9). As I will argue, the effect of all of these examples is the integration of praise into a context to which it is ostensibly unsuited. Ovid's insertion of Helenus' prophecy into Pythagoras' speech has this effect also, but, in a typically Ovidian fashion, the poet adds a number of playful twists. The narrative confusion and the play with Vergil mean the prophecy cannot be viewed with complete seriousness. On the other hand, its evident accuracy seems to lend credence to the unbelievable Pythagoras. In this passage therefore, Ovid manages to rewrite Vergil at his most serious and to do it in a playful fashion. He achieves this effect by coopting a rhetorical technique which Vergil had used to integrate praise of Rome and Augustus into his epic on Aeneas.