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Aetiological Action in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

When Demeter drinks the *kykeon* in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* she imitates, yet authorizes, the action of her human worshippers. There are several examples of such tacit aetiological action in the *Metamorphoses*: in Book 5 Ceres searches for her daughter at night with torches, a feature meant to recall the use of torches in the Eleusinian mysteries; in Book 2 the daughters of Cecrops engage in a *pompa* to the acropolis in Athens, implicitly enacting the Panathenaia. A further example has apparently not been noticed. In Book 1, after Apollo slays Python, providing the origin of the Pythian games at Delphi, his pursuit of Daphne and donning of the laurel tacitly enacts the running of the competitors at these games. This carries the aetiological idea forward from the athletic action which precedes.

The Daphne episode concludes with aetiologies for the use of laurel in Apollo's cult and as an honor for Roman generals and for Augustus. Viewed aetiologically, a central theme tying the whole section 1.438-565 together is *honor*. Public honoring of victors unites the aetiologies of the Pythian games and the Roman triumph/Augustus' laurels. *Honor* is the real subject of the intervening dispute between Cupid and Apollo over their relative prowess in archery. *Honores* is the key and final word in Apollo's speech (*frondis honores* 565, an echo of 449 *frondis honorem*); and of course *honor* is the central meaning of the *laurus* itself as a cultural symbol in the Greco-Roman world. Viewed aetiologically the Python and Daphne episodes are an exploration of *honor* from various angles—Greek, Roman, athletic, religious, military, political—culminating in an elegant complement to Augustus, whose pride in the laurels outside his house is well known.

Ovidian critics usually assume that the aetia of the *Metamorphoses* are predominately natural or "scientific," in contrast to the religious or cultural aetia of the *Fasti*. But the laurel action, like many others, draws on and explores in myth the cultural meaning of a natural object. The aetiological aspects of this episode are more important than scholars usually allow.