

A Philosophical Gigantomachy in the *Metamorphoses*

Gigantomachy is the paradigmatic example of a contest between the gods and another race.<sup>1</sup> It is traditionally interpreted allegorically, since any literal reading falls foul of the difficulties expressed in Plato's *Republic*, that the Gigantomachy impiously attributes quarrelsomeness to the gods.<sup>2</sup> From an early date, then, the Gigantomachy 'was regarded as a symbol of the triumph of order over chaos, civilization over barbarism,'<sup>3</sup> and this moralistic and political interpretation endures well into the Augustan period.<sup>4</sup> However, in the *Sophist*, Plato initiates another interpretation of the Gigantomachy, as a conflict of differing views of the cosmos. The Eleatic Stranger describes the conflict between idealists and materialists as 'something like a Battle of Gods and Giants fought over the subject of reality'.<sup>5</sup> This Gigantomachy is fought for the power to define the nature of the cosmos. It is a philosophical battle.

The Giants in the Eleatic Stranger's formulation are materialists, who try to 'drag down everything to earth from heaven ... they define reality as identical with body'.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of whether Plato himself associates Atomists with the Giants, by the time Epicureanism became an important doctrine such an association could hardly be avoided in readers of the *Sophist*. This association of Atomist and Giant proves to be particularly fruitful for Lucretius, who adapts Plato's philosophical Gigantomachy, while reversing the ethical implications of the traditional moral allegory. Lucretius' atomist, Epicurus, takes the part of the Giants and storms the heavens (*DRN* 1.62-79). Epicurus' opponent is Religio, who takes the part of the Gods, and Epicurus is undeterred by stories of the gods, thunderbolts and threatening skies (*fama deum, fulmina* and *minitanti murmure caelum*, *DRN* 1.68-9). As the prize for his victory, he gains knowledge. He learns what can come into being, what cannot

<sup>1</sup> Where the source material does not distinguish between the Titanomachy and Gigantomachy, the term "Gigantomachy" will be used for both.

<sup>2</sup> *Rep.* II.378b-c: οὐ μὰ τὸν Δία, ἢ δ' ὅς, οὐδὲ αὐτῷ μοι δοκεῖ ἐπιτήδεια εἶναι λέγειν. οὐδέ γε, ἦν δ' ἐγὼ, τὸ παράπαν ὡς θεοὶ θεοῖς πολεμοῦσιν τε καὶ ἐπιβουλεύουσι καὶ μάχονται—οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀληθῆ—εἴ γε δεῖ ἡμῖν τοὺς μέλλοντας τὴν πόλιν φυλάξειν αἴσχιστον νομίζειν τὸ ῥαδίως ἀλλήλοις ἀπεχθάνεσθαι—πολλοῦ δεῖ γιγαντομαχίας τε μυθολογητέον αὐτοῖς καὶ ποικιλτέον, καὶ ἄλλας ἔχθρας πολλὰς καὶ παντοδαπὰς θεῶν τε καὶ ἡρώων πρὸς συγγενεῖς τε καὶ οἰκείους αὐτῶν.

<sup>3</sup> D.A. Traill, 'Horace C. 1.3: A Political Ode?', *CJ* 78.2 (1983) 131-137, p.132.

<sup>4</sup> An example from Horace appears at *Ode* 3.4.42-4: *scimus ut impios / Titanas immanemque turbam / fulmine sustulerit caduco*. Note particularly the *impios Titanas*.

<sup>5</sup> *Soph.* 246a: καὶ μὴν ἔοικέ γε ἐν αὐτοῖς οἶον γιγαντομαχία τις εἶναι διὰ τὴν ἀμφισβήτησιν περὶ τῆς οὐσίας πρὸς ἀλλήλους.

<sup>6</sup> *Soph.* 246a-b: οἱ μὲν εἰς γῆν ἐξ οὐρανοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἀοράτου πάντα ἔλκουσι, ταῖς χερσὶν ἀτεχνῶς πέτρας καὶ δρυὲς περιλαμβάνοντες. τῶν γὰρ τοιούτων ἐφαπτόμενοι πάντων δισχυρίζονται τοῦτο εἶναι μόνον ὃ παρέχει προσβολὴν καὶ ἐπαφήν τινα, ταῦτόν σῶμα καὶ οὐσίαν ὀριζόμενοι, τῶν δὲ ἄλλων εἴ τις <τι> φήσει μὴ σῶμα ἔχον εἶναι, καταφρονοῦντες τὸ παράπαν καὶ οὐδὲν ἐθέλοντες ἄλλο ἀκούειν.

and the limits of everything (*quid possit oriri / quid nequeat, finite potestas denique cuique / quam sit ratione atque alte terminus haerens, DRN 1.75-7*). Consequently, Religio is trampled underfoot (*subiecta pedibus, DRN 1.78*) and we are exalted as high as heaven (*nos exaequat victoria caelo, DRN 1.78-9*). The Giant Epicurus successfully replaces the Gods, conquering *religio* with knowledge.

In the first book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, there are two references to the Gigantomachy. In the first version, Ovid<sup>7</sup> tells us that the Giants attack heaven so that it would not be safer than earth (*neve foret terris securior arduus aether / adfectasse ferunt regnum caeleste gigantas, 1.151-2*). Jupiter then breaks Olympus (*perfregit, 1.154*, a very strong word) with his thunderbolt in order to dislodge the mountains that had been heaped up to form a path. The race which springs from the blood of the Giants is also *contemprix superum* (1.161). Given that this Gigantomachy occurs in the Iron Age of degenerate men, this account of the Gigantomachy appears to belong among the moralistic interpretations – although perhaps we should take *ferunt* as a distancing formula warning us against considering this interpretation to hold true in all versions of Gigantomachy in the *Metamorphoses*.

With the Lycaon episode, however, Ovid plays with other aspects of the Gigantomachy myth in ways that do not appear to have received attention from previous scholars.<sup>8</sup> The difficulty of interpreting this episode is that the horror of Lycaon's crime may induce a moral revulsion and condemnation so strong as to preclude any intellectual interpretation. Indeed, this is certainly the response that *Jupiter* is trying to induce, in order to justify his planned retribution. As Anderson observes, 'Jupiter is the narrator, it should be remembered, and he has an interest in presenting situations in black and white colors that favor himself and his sense of justice'.<sup>9</sup>

Since Jupiter defines this episode as being as threatening as the Giants' assault on heaven, I am suggesting that it ought to be looked at as a Gigantomachy: *non ego pro mundi regno magis anxius illa / tempestate fui, qua centum quisque parabat / inicere anguipedum captivo bracchia caelo* (1.182-4). What is at stake is the sovereignty of the world (*mundi regnum*), and human wickedness is compared to the Giants' attempt to lay hands on heaven. Despite the moralistic overtones, this language reminds us of Plato's materialist Giants, who drag 'everything to earth from heaven' and grasp 'rocks and trees in their hands; for they lay hold of all such things' (*Soph.* 246a-b). In the philosophical interpretation, both Plato and Lucretius hold that the power to define the cosmos is at stake, and Lucretius identifies divine sovereignty with religious superstitions.

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<sup>7</sup> As there are multiple narrators in the first book, I shall call the primary narrator Ovid for reasons of clarity.

<sup>8</sup> While Volk has explored the motif of the intellectual Gigantomachy in Manilius' *Astronomica*, there has as yet been no attempt to discuss the intellectual Gigantomachy in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. On Manilius and the intellectual Gigantomachy, see K. Volk, 'Pious and Impious Approaches to Cosmology in Manilius', *MD* 47 (2001): 85-117, pp.100-117.

<sup>9</sup> W.S. Anderson, 'Lycaon: Ovid's Deceptive Paradigm in *Metamorphoses* I', *ICS* 14 (1989): 91-101, p.96.

If Jupiter takes human wickedness (exemplified *pars pro toto* by Lycaon) as gigantomachic, it seems likely that sovereignty is at stake in one way or another – as, indeed, Jupiter claims it is. Jupiter's descent to earth is prompted by a report (*infamia* 1.211, 215) of the post-Gigantic race's impiety. When he reaches Lycaon's home, he indicates that a god is present (*signa dedi venisse deum*, 1.220) and is immediately worshipped (*vulgusque precari coeperat*, 220-1). Lycaon alone mocks (*inridet*, 1.221) and decides to test Jupiter's godhead, saying *experiar deus hic discrimine aperto / an sit mortalis: nec erit dubitabile verum* (1.222-3). Since the common worship disproves Jupiter's claims of universal impiety, it appears that Lycaon is not an example of the whole race, but merely a single (possibly the only) transgressor. He is then the Giant who rises against the Gods as represented by Jupiter.

Yet what is his motive? He does not seek, as the Giants do, to appropriate the sovereignty of heaven, but rather, like Epicurus, to attain true knowledge which is not based on the claims of superstition (Jupiter's claim of his own godhead appeals to superstition, since he does not seem to offer proof). Lycaon does not accept report without experience and proof, as, in fact, Jupiter himself does not when he decides to test the *infamia*. This shared desire for knowledge marks Jupiter and Lycaon as similar. Neither will accept signs without evidence and personal experience. They are, therefore, placed on an equal footing, and are consequently fitting adversaries. Ovid underscores the similarity between human and divine, when he calls the lesser gods *plebs* (1.173) and the dwelling place of the higher gods the *Palatia* of heaven (*magni Palatia caeli*, 1.175). He also likens the gods' zeal to learn of Lycaon's impiety towards Jupiter to the human race's concern following an attempted assassination on Caesar (1.199-205). Ovid, then, continually underscores the similarities between gods and humans.

The fact that Lycaon is the only one who refuses Jupiter's sign and demands proof further aligns him with Epicurus, as Epicurus is the only one to stand against *Religio*.<sup>10</sup> The traditional Gigantomachy pits several Giants against all the gods, but Lycaon challenges Jupiter, just as Epicurus challenges *Religio*; in each case there is only one combatant on either side. Although Lycaon makes no claim to sovereignty, we know from the *De rerum natura* that the consequence of standing against superstition and championing knowledge is that humanity becomes exalted as high as heaven (*nos exaequat victoria caelo*, 1.78-9). The struggle of a single man for knowledge, therefore, has wide-ranging consequences which involve the whole of humanity. This may provide some justification for Jupiter's attribution of Lycaon's criminality to the whole human race, since the whole race may benefit from such impiety.

However, Lycaon's quest for knowledge seems to take a very different form from Epicurus'. Lycaon does not undertake a mental journey, or even attempt to overthrow humanity's belief in the

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<sup>10</sup> Lucretius writes *primum* *Gravius homo mortalis tollere contra / est oculos ausus primusque obsistere contra* (*DRN* 1.66-7).

gods. Moreover, however powerful Lucretius' Religio might be, her power manifests itself in human agents, through fear (*DRN* 1.102-11); Lycaon, on the other hand, faces the much more direct power of Jupiter as a *praesens deus*. In testing the power of Religio, Epicurus essentially finds it empty; Lycaon embarks on the same test, but with the opposite result. Lycaon's test is carefully constructed to draw out the truth of Jupiter's nature; not only does he plan to kill Jupiter himself (impossible, of course, if Jupiter really is an immortal), but he also serves up a Molossian hostage (*obses*, 1.227) to test Jupiter Hospes. This experiment (*experientia veri*, 1.225) succeeds in proving Jupiter's divinity, since the god avenges the Molossian hostage *vindice flamma* (1.230).

Finally, of course, Lycaon is transformed into a wolf. In describing this metamorphosis, Jupiter strongly emphasises the continuity of Lycaon's character (1.232-9):

*territus ipse fugit nactusque silentia ruris  
exululat frustra que loqui conatur: ab ipso  
colligit os rabiem solitaeque cupidine caedis  
vertitur in pecudes et nunc quoque sanguine gaudet.  
in villos abeunt vestes, in crura lacerti:  
fit lupus et veteris servat vestigia formae:  
canities eadem est, eadem violentia vultus,  
idem oculi lucent, eadem feritatis imago est.*

The continuity which Jupiter emphasises is the continuity of ferocity. This supports his moral interpretation of Lycaon's Gigantomachic crime. However, Lycaon's own words have made it clear that simple ferocity is not the cause of his actions, but merely the method by which he attempts to increase his knowledge. Anderson sees the metamorphosis as a continuation of 'that bestiality which has already done enough damage to human beings' and asks 'why is it just to shift its operation against innocent animals', since Lycaon continues to get pleasure?<sup>11</sup> Yet, in asking this question, Anderson is taking Jupiter's narration to be correct in the details of the metamorphosis – precisely the error against which he has already warned when acknowledging that Jupiter has 'an interest in presenting situations in black and white colors that favor himself and his sense of justice'.<sup>12</sup> Jupiter quotes Lycaon directly when he reports Lycaon's desire to test whether Jupiter is a god or a mortal, and this quotation allows us to see that the god's emphasis on the continuity of savagery in fact hides the more significant discontinuity. Lycaon commits his crime not for the sake of pleasure but for the sake of knowledge. In his transformation into a wolf, his method (ferocity) remains, while his motive (the desire for knowledge) seems to disappear.

Jupiter's comparison of Lycaon to the Giants indicates that Ovid is comparing Lycaon to Lucretius' Epicurus but, unlike Epicurus, Lycaon does not find superstition empty. In the *Metamorphoses*, the gods are not unconcerned with the world – quite the contrary! In the Lycaon

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<sup>11</sup> W.S. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p.98.

<sup>12</sup> W.S. Anderson, *op. cit.*, p.96.

episode, the Epicurean redefinition of the gods is tested and rejected. Lucretius' attempt to demythologise the gods is undone, and the traditional gods of myth reassert themselves. However, Ovid grants a small concession to the Lucretian material by keeping the traditional similarity between humans and anthropomorphic gods, but ensuring that such similarity now lies in the fact that Lycaon and Jupiter both seek knowledge rather than mere report. Indeed, this similarity is perhaps the reason for Jupiter's concern; Lycaon's intellectual curiosity may come too close to elevating humans to the status of gods, and consequently to devaluing the gods themselves. In fact, Ovid himself aids Lycaon in the assimilation of gods and men when he describes the abode of the gods in strikingly human terms, as Wheeler has argued: 'If Lycaon's crime will be to confuse the human and the divine and not to believe that Jupiter is a god, the Ovidian narrator begins to take a step in this direction in his own portrayal of the gods.'<sup>13</sup>

Jupiter attempts to disguise the Lycaon episode, presenting it in moral terms in order to justify his vengeance, and in this attempt he is aided by the usual tendency to read the Gigantomachy as a morality tale. Unfortunately for him, however, he has not taken into account Plato's and Lucretius' rewriting of the Gigantomachy as a story of philosophical disagreement. Furthermore, his direct quotations of Lycaon's words do not support his depiction of Lycaon, as he wishes them to do, but rather indicate Lycaon's philosophical desire to test the nature of divinity. However much Jupiter strives for a straightforward Gigantomachy in which impious mortals rise against the just rule of the gods, we are left with a Lucretian Gigantomachy – albeit a rather unsuccessful one – in which a lone seeker after truth challenges the power of the gods. The great irony of the episode is that it is Jupiter's direct quotation of his enemy's words, words which could easily have been suppressed, which reveals Lycaon's true motivation, and consequently reveals Jupiter's attempted manipulation of the story: *experiar deus hic discrimine aperto / an sit mortalis; nec erit dubitabile verum* (1.222-3).

The immediate inspiration for this intellectualised version of the Gigantomachy is undoubtedly the Gigantomachic struggle of Epicurus in the *De rerum natura*; words such as *experiar*, *verum* and *experientia veri* (1.222, 223, 225) strike an unmistakably Lucretian note. However, Ovid is surely aware that the philosophical Gigantomachy is of Platonic origin. The particular myth which Ovid chooses to portray as a philosophical Gigantomachy is that of Lycaon, in which a tyrant becomes a wolf. The relationship between tyranny and wolves is one which appears in the *Republic*, when Socrates invokes the story about the shrine of Zeus Lykaeus in Arcadia, saying that 'the man who tastes a single piece of human flesh, mixed in with the rest of the sacrifice, is fated to become a wolf'.<sup>14</sup> This story is then used to explain the degeneration of a leader into a tyrant, or wolf.<sup>15</sup> The

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<sup>13</sup> S.M. Wheeler, *A Discourse of Wonders: Audience and Performance in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, (Philadelphia 1999), p.173.

<sup>14</sup> *Rep.* 8.565d-e: τίς ἀρχὴ οὖν μεταβολῆς ἐκ προστάτου ἐπὶ τύραννον; ἢ δῆλον ὅτι ἐπειδὴν ταῦτόν ἄρξεται δρᾶν ὁ προστάτης τῷ ἐν τῷ μύθῳ ὃς περὶ τὸ ἐν Ἀρκαδίᾳ τὸ τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ Λυκαίου ἱερόν

relationship between tyrant and wolf makes another appearance in the *Phaedo*, where, speaking of reincarnation, Socrates says ‘those who have chosen injustice and tyranny and robbery pass into the bodies of wolves and hawks and kites’ (*Phaedo* 82a).<sup>16</sup> While metamorphosis is not reincarnation, the transformation of Lycaon into a wolf thus agrees with Socrates’ judgment in the *Phaedo* that tyrants become wolves, and with his judgement in the *Republic* that tyrants in some sense are wolves. Furthermore, in the *Republic*, Socrates refers to the very myth which Ovid has chosen.

In choosing the myth of Lycaon, then, Ovid has given his version of the philosophical Gigantomachy a strongly Platonic flavour, thus reminding us of the origin of the philosophical Gigantomachy in the *Sophist*. This suggests that Ovid is familiar with the Platonic corpus, and it is therefore likely that Platonic references will appear elsewhere in his work. Although there has so far been little scholarly interest in Plato’s influence on Ovid’s thought, there does appear to be a need for thorough investigation of the influence of Platonic philosophy in the *Metamorphoses*.

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λέγεται; ... ὡς ἄρα ὁ γευσάμενος τοῦ ἀνθρωπίνου σπλάγχνου, ἐν ἄλλοις ἄλλων ἱερείων ἐνὸς ἐγκατατετημημένου, ἀνάγκη δὴ τούτῳ λύκῳ γενέσθαι.

<sup>15</sup> *Rep.* 8.565e-566a.

<sup>16</sup> *Phaedo* 82a: τοὺς δέ γε ἀδικίας τε καὶ τυραννίδας καὶ ἀρπαγὰς προτετιμηκότας εἰς τὰ τῶν λύκων τε καὶ ἱεράκων καὶ ἰκτίνων γένη.