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ACROSTIC IN *IBIS*: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

Abstract: The present author suggests that Ovid's *Ibis* contains an acrostic called *cephalonomasicon* (verses 584–585). This acrostic, which has not been noticed by interpreters and commentators of Ovid's poem, can be read both backwards (**TITUS IBIS**) and straight (**IBIS TITUS**). This double acrostic indicates clearly that Ovid's adversary was a real person, who – according to R. Ellis (1881: XXIV–XXVI) – may be identified with Titus Labienus, the well known orator of the Augustean Age.

In my Polish presentation entitled *Owidiusz i jego „napiętnowany” prześladowca* [Ovid and his „stigmatized” enemy], read during the 100th Jubilee Conference of the Polish Philological Society (Warsaw, 16–18 September 2004)¹, I discussed some aspects of the origin of Ovid's poem entitled *Ibis*, which seems unclear and extremely difficult to interpret (see e.g. Williams 1992; 1996; Zajęc 1991–1992). In this poem the famous poet from Sulmo, who was relegated to Tomi, swears at his earlier friend, now his adversary and the most odious enemy. This adversary defames Naso at Rome, he seeks to despoil and trample on his former friend and at the same time he persecutes Ovid's wife (see also *Tristia* I 6, vv. 7–16). Naso do not identify his enemy by name, calling him „Ibis” (i.e. a dirty bird). The poet fights with his enemy by means of an invective, adapting a lost Greek model created by Callimachus of Cyrene.

Many philologists have tried to answer who “Ibis” was, but their attempts are not acceptable for lack of confirmation. A different hypothesis was expressed by A. E. Housmann (1920: 287–317 = 1972, s. 1018–1042), who suggested that the poem *Ibis* is a literary exercise and Ovid's enemy is a fictitious person (like Corinna) imagined to provide an occasion for the composition of an invective (i.e. a literary genre that was very popular in the Alexandrian epoch). Housmann's

¹ See the Polish abstract published among the conference papers (Witczak 2004).

position was rejected by most researchers. Antonio La Penna (1957), Hermann Fränkel, John C. Thibault and others think that Ovid's *Ibis* was an attack on a real enemy, though they are not able to quote convincing arguments (see e.g. Thibault 1964: 140–141).

I believe that Housmann's hypothesis is completely wrong. In Ovid's poem we can find not only some information about his enemy, which has been analyzed earlier by philologists (see e.g. Homme 1908), but also some hidden indications documenting the real existence of the mysterious „Ibis”.

The hidden instructions are given in verses 581–586 of *Ibis*, which refer to the death of Niobides: Ovid mentions the seven sons of Niobe, slain by Apollo (v. 581–582), Amphion the harper, husband of Niobe, who took his life (v. 583–584), and Niobe, sister of Pelops and daughter of Tantalus, who was changed into stone (v. 585). Also Battos the shepherd was turned into rock for deceiving the baby Hermes in the matter of stolen cattle of Apollo. The text of *Ibis* reads as follows:

*utque ferunt caesos sex cum Damasichtone fratres,
intereat tecum sic genus omne tuum.
addidit ut fidicen miseris sua funera natis,
sic tibi sint uitae taedia iusta tuae.
utve soror Pelopis, saxo dureris oborto,
et laesus lingua Battus ab ipse sua.*

(“581. And as they say his six brethren perished with Damasichthon, so may all thy race perish with thee. 583. As the harper completed with his own his wretched children's deaths, so mayst thou with reason grow weary of thy life. 585. Or like Pelops' sister mayst thou harden with a growth of stone, [586] or like Battus harmed by his own tongue”²).

The initial letters of the final five words in verse 584, read backwards, create the well known Roman *praenomen*, which can be easily understood as the first name of Ovid's mysterious enemy:

sic tibi sint uitae taedia iusta tuae.
sic tibi s u t i t

Also the initial two words of this verse may represent a second part of the same acrostic: if we take the first letter from the word *sic* (ignoring the next two letters) and if we remove the initial letter in

² The Latin text is translated into English by Mozley (1929: 301).

the neighbouring pronoun *tibi*, leaving three other letters, then Ovid's acrostic occurs in the following form:

sic tibi sint uitae taedia iusta tuae.
 sic tibi s u t i t
 s ibi s u t i t

Such an acrostic, called *cephalonomasticon*, if it is read backwards, creates a very interesting text: **TITUS IBIS**. It is worth emphasizing that R. Ellis in his edition of *Ibis* (1881: XXIV–XXVI) tried to identify Ovid's enemy with Titus Labienus, the orator of the Augustean Age, who was called *Rabienus* by reason of his violent character (cf. Lat. *rabies* 'violence' and compare verse 231 of *Ibis* for the *rabies* of Ovid's enemy³). Seneca the Rhetor (*Contr.* 10. 4) gives an unfavourable description of Titus Labienus (*summa egestas erat, summa infamia, summum odium*), which seems to agree completely with the characteristics of the mysterious "Ibis", suggested by Naso in his poem. It is highly probable therefore that Titus Labienus was Ovid's school friend, who later became the most odious enemy of the relegated poet.

In my opinion, the backward-running acrostic did not appear by chance, but it was consciously introduced by the poet himself. My opinion may be confirmed by a similar acrostic (**IBIS TITUS**) that may be read straight in lines 584–585:

sic tibi sint uitae taedia iusta tuae.
 utve soror Pelopis, ...
 sic tIBI Sint uitae Taedia Iusta Tuae.
 Utve Soror Pelopis, ...
 ... IBI S ... T I T
 U S ...

After rejecting the extreme elements *t-* and *-int*, the phrase *tibi sint* contains four successive letters, creating the characteristic word **IBIS**, which evidently refers to Ovid's enemy. Somewhat further the initial letters of the five next words (*taedia iusta tuae. / utve soror*) create the Roman *praenomen* **TITUS**. It is clear that we have to do with a second acrostic, which runs straight: **IBIS TITUS**. Such a double acrostic must have been invented by Ovid himself to "stigmatize" the mysterious enemy.

³ André (1963: XXVI) quotes also the successive words: *latrat et in toto uerba canina foro* (v. 232), which may be treated as a *signum*.

Conclusion: Ovid introduced a double acrostic called usually *cephalonomasticon* to his poem entitled *Ibis* (verses 584–585). This so far unknown acrostic can be read both backwards (**TITUS IBIS**) and straight (**IBIS TITUS**). It is obvious now that such a double acrostic did not occur by chance. In other words, the acrostic in question was consciously introduced by the poet himself. The charade, occurring in verses 584–585 of *Ibis*, allows the reader to identify Ovid's enemy with Titus Labienus.

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