

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-89581-1 — A Commentary on Ovid's Metamorphoses
Alessandro Barchiesi, Phillip Hardie, J. D. Reed
Excerpt
[More Information](#)

Books 13–15

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-89581-1 — A Commentary on Ovid's Metamorphoses
Alessandro Barchiesi, Phillip Hardie, J. D. Reed
Excerpt
[More Information](#)

Commentary on Book 13

Philip Hardie

13.1–398 The Debate over the Arms of Achilles (*Armorum Iudicium*)

In keeping with the poetics of a *perpetuum carmen* Ovid continues his reworking of the *Iliad* into the larger design of an epic cycle (12.1–14.608; on the epic cycle as the structural framework of Ovid's Trojan material see Ludwig 1965, pp. 62–5; on the strategy of a 'cyclic' retelling of the *Iliad* see Ellsworth 1980). The dispute between Ajax and Ulysses over the arms of Achilles continues the action of the Trojan War after the death of Achilles, but compensates for the elision in book 12 of the material of the *Iliad* at its proper place in the linear chronology with a twofold retelling of Iliadic material from the different perspectives of two of the major heroes. In book 12 Ovid had caught the creation of an epic tradition at the moment of its formation on the lips of those present in the action, both in the retellings by the Greeks of their previous military adventures at 12.159–67 and in Nestor's recollection of the Ur-epic encounter between the Lapiths and Centaurs (12.168–535), a garrulous old man's reminiscences that allow the main narrator no time for a full-length Trojan War narrative. In each case the narration is far from disinterested, whether because of a need to cater to self-esteem or to find a subject suitable for the ears of the greatest model of epic *uirtus*, Achilles (12.159–63), or because of the wish to avoid opening old wounds (12.536–48: *quis enim laudauerit hostem?*). In this respect, then, the construction of epic *fama* in book 12 differs little from the selectivity and misrepresentation of the rhetoric demanded by the agonistic structure of the debate over the arms in the next book.

The Debate is often viewed as one of Ovid's most brazenly anachronistic exercises, importing the atmosphere of the late first-century BC declamation hall into the world of Homer, and symbolising the victory of the newfangled over the traditional in the defeat of Ajax, the man of action from an older scheme of things, by Ulysses, the type of a

quick-tongued and unprincipled modernity. This is to overlook the sense of literary history built into the episode. It is true that the ability to retell old stories with new *colores* is as typical of the exercises of the rhetorical schools as it is of Ovid himself, whose whole poetic output might be regarded as a sustained exercise in a verbal remodelling of reality, the imposition of *uerba* on *res* (on the slippage between words and deeds in the Debate see Hardie 2007), and it is a legitimate temptation to see in Ulysses a particularly Ovidian manipulator of words. So Stanford 1963, p. 138: 'a tribute from one skilful rhetorician to another'; Otis 1970, p. 285: 'Ulysses' *facundia* and *ingenium* are ... much like Ovid's own'; Pavlock 2009, p. 12: 'Ulysses is an imaginative and deconstructive rhetorician analogous to the poet who thoroughly destabilizes the genre of epic'; Duc 1994 sees the associative structure of Ulysses' speech as being in the manner of O.'s own practice as a declaimer, according to Sen. *Controv.* 2.2.9 *hanc ... controuersiam ... declamauit ... longe ingeniosius, excepto eo quod sine certo ordine per locos discurrebat*. But the Ulyssean-Ovidian skill in *referre aliter ... idem* (*Ars am.* 2.128) is only a particularly self-conscious manifestation of the basic law of the Graeco-Roman literary tradition, and not least of the oldest and most tenacious of genres, epic. Already in the *Odyssey* the hero Odysseus appears as a masterful reteller of epic material in ways more or less devious. Retelling is even more deeply embedded in the *Aeneid*, both through the quality of the epic as a whole as an allusive renarration of the Homeric poems and in the inclusion within the poem of 'microcosmic recapitulations', in ecphrasis, internal narratives and songs, or even separate books, of earlier epic poems (the Cycle, Ennius) and of the *Aeneid* itself. A particularly important model for the Ovidian debate is the Council of Latins at *Aeneid* 11.225–444, itself probably drawing on versions of the *Armorum iudicium* in its presentation of a violent verbal debate between a 'man of action', Turnus, and a 'man of words', Drances, that already explores the impossibility of neatly separating the verbal constructions of rhetoric, *facundia*, from the supposedly objective narratives of epic, *fama* (see Hardie 2012, ch. 4; on the parallelism between the tendentious reworkings of *fama* and *facundia* see Dippel 1990, p. 93).

As it happens, the *Armorum iudicium* is subjected to retelling in the Epic Cycle itself, as the contest was narrated in both the *Aithiopsis* and the *Ilias Parua*, with significant divergences (see conveniently Davies 1989, pp. 60, 63–4; for a full treatment of the traditions see Huyck 1991, pp. 10–68): in the *Aithiopsis* the jury was composed of Trojan prisoners, and Ajax's suicide was probably a direct consequence of the judgement (as in Ovid);

in the *Ilias Parua* Nestor sent scouts to eavesdrop on the chatter of Trojan girls in order to reach a decision, and the judgement was followed by the madness of Ajax. Furthermore, the epic episode comes to Ovid filtered through a long tradition of tragic and rhetorical rehandlings. A series of Greek tragedies beginning with Aeschylus' Ὀπλων Κρίσις 'Judgement of Arms', the first play of an Ajax trilogy, was followed by Latin tragedies by Pacuvius and Accius. Ovid also had access to plays on other parts of the legendary material: Sophocles' *Ajax* mirrors the earlier debate between Ajax and Odysseus in the *agōn* between Teucer and Agamemnon, in which Agamemnon counters the charge, found in the Pindaric treatments of the story (*Isthm.* 4.36–43; *Nem.* 7.20–30, 8.21–34), that the judgement represented the unfair victory of guile over courage, with the claim that he himself had been just as forward in battle as Ajax, and with the assertion of the superiority of brain over brawn (1250–4). Ovid may also have drawn on Livius Andronicus' *Aiāx Mastigophoros* and Ennius' *Aiāx*. The disputants' argument over Ulysses' role in the matter of Philoctetes also draws on the Greek and Latin tragedies on that subject (in general see Lafaye 1971, ch. 8 'La tragédie et la rhétorique', with von Albrecht's bibliographical notes on pp. xiii–xiv).

This part of Ovid's Cycle is indeed strongly marked by a tragic, and specifically Latin tragic, colouring (and so prepares the reader for the even more tragic material of the following Hecabe episode). Opinions on the exact extent of Ovid's borrowings from particular Latin plays depend on conflicting reconstructions of those plays; the debate has focused above all on the question of who constituted the jury in the several plays, but even if it were the case that Ovid agrees with Pacuvius in having a jury of Greek chiefs, this would hardly preclude borrowings from other plays. Whether by accident or otherwise, the greater number of visible parallels are with fragments of Accius' *Armorum iudicium* (on parallels with the Pacuvian and Accian fragments see D'Anna 1959, pp. 226–32). In general Ovid seems to owe more to Accius than to other Latin tragedians: Accius is paired with Ennius at *Am.* 1.15.19–20; for a review of the discussion of Ovid's use of the Latin tragic sources see de Rosalia 1989, pp. 123–4.

In combining within this episode both epic and tragic models, Ovid, himself the author of an acclaimed but lost tragedy, the *Medea*, places himself in a line of Roman writers who wrote both epics and dramas (Livius Andronicus, Naevius, Ennius). The combination of the tragic and the rhetorical is naturally already present in the *agōn* of Attic tragedy, but we might also remember the especially close links between early Roman

drama and rhetoric (Jocelyn 1967, p. 42; Argenio 1961). Specifically rhetorical treatments of the debate start with Antisthenes' pair of speeches by Aias and Odysseus, which shows marked parallelisms with the Ovidian treatment, both in the overall shape of a short speech by Aias followed by a longer one by Odysseus, and in many details, some of which may be the result of shared sources, or mediated to Ovid through fourth-century tragedies on the subject by Carcinus, Theodectes and perhaps Astydamas.

Ovid makes no attempt to disguise the affinities of the speeches of his epic heroes with the performances of the rhetorical schools in which he had been trained as a youth. On literary-historical grounds there was nothing wrong in this, since Homer was generally regarded as the inventor of rhetoric, and Odysseus as an exemplar of the elevated style, Nestor with Menelaus being the exemplars of the other two styles (see Radermacher 1951, pp. 6–10); at 12.178 Achilles addresses Nestor as *o facunde senex*. The *Armorum iudicium* is indeed attested as a subject in both the Roman and Greek rhetorical schools (e.g. Sen. *Controv.* 2.2.8; Theon, *Progymn.* 9 Spengel p. 112), although most of the references provided by Bömer on 12.620–13.398 (p. 197) are to another subject of the *controversia*, whether Ulysses, having been found near the body of Ajax, should be judged to have killed him. But Ovid's *Armorum iudicium* cannot be classified neatly as either a *controversia* or a *suasoria*; although this is clearly a judicial forum, and not a deliberative council (like the Virgilian debate between Drances and Turnus): 'the debate cannot be classed as a *Controversia*, for no general principle is in dispute; it is rather a tragic *agōn* extended till it resembles a pair of opposing *Suasoriae*' (Wilkinson 1955, p. 230; on the problem of definition see Dippel 1990, p. 74 nn. 14–15. Bonner 1949, p. 151 takes the speeches to be *suasoriae*, citing Sen. *Controv.* 2.2.12 *declamabat autem Naso raro controversias et non nisi ethicas*; de Sarno 1986 analyses the debate as a *controversia*).

The most pointed allusion to the declamation schools comes at the end of the speech not of Ulysses but of Ajax (120–2), reworking a conceit used by Ovid's favourite rhetorician Porcius Latro in a debate on the subject of the *Armorum iudicium* (Sen. *Controv.* 2.2.8). This is a problem for those who see a simple contrast between a doltish Ajax, unskilled in speaking, and the consummate rhetorician Ulysses. Inevitably the debate within the text (which is unequivocally decided in Ulysses' favour) is projected into a critical debate on the relative skills and moral qualities of the two speakers. Unlike the contest between Beckmesser and Walther in *Die Meistersinger*, it is not the practice of ancient poets to characterise a defeated performance through obvious incompetence (witness the

problems in trying to decide why Thyrsis is defeated in *Eclogue* 7). Ajax is by no means an unskilled speaker; his opening outburst, dispensing with a formal *exordium*, can be read as a skilful exploitation of an emotion truly experienced, and has famous parallels in the orators. This casting-aside of the rulebook in favour of an abrupt and emotional manner was indeed a fashion of the late first century BC, most notably in the case of the trend-setting Cassius Severus, who spoke better in a temper, and who even shared the large stature of Ajax and was said to look like a gladiator (Huyck 1991, pp. 58 ff., citing Sen. *Controv.* 3 *praef.* 3–4; Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.117; Plin. *HN* 7.55). However, Casamento 2003 judges the two speeches by the standards of Ciceronian doctrine on *ethos* and *pathos*, and finds Ulysses to be much more in control of rhetorical technique.

Since the jury is made up of the Greek leaders, Ajax does seem to err in appealing to the people, although to label it an *oratio plebeia* in contrast to Ulysses' more senatorial performance also exaggerates. Furthermore, at one point Ulysses turns to his own ends a privileging of *uirtus* over inherited *nobilitas* that is especially associated with, although not restricted to, Marian rhetoric and the ideology of the *nouus homo* (see 150–3 n.).

The debate speaks to other matters of interest to a Roman audience. The contrast between the blunt-spoken doer Ajax and the wily manipulator of words Ulysses has its roots in archaic Greek culture, but corresponds easily to a Roman perception of their own cultural development from a primitive and militaristic simplicity to a sophistication indebted to the civilising or corrupting (depending on the point of view) influence of the Greeks: in a historical sketch of the development of *cultus* at *Ars am.* 3.101–28, Ajax is used as an analogy for the *simplicitas rudis* of early Rome (III–12). In the Roman mind Ulysses came to symbolise the intelligence or cunning of the Greeks; one Virgilian model for the Ovidian debate is offered by the contrasting interventions in the debate in *Aeneid* 2 over whether to bring the Wooden Horse into Troy, firstly by Laocoon, who delivers a brief and impassioned speech followed by a token display of direct physical aggression, and secondly by Sinon, the consummate master of feigned words and agent of Ulyssean trickery; their two speaking manners have been taken as models, respectively, of an upright Catonian oratory and a sophistic Greek rhetoric (Lynch 1980). Casanova-Robin 2003, p. 421 discerns antithetical aesthetics in the speeches of Ajax, monolithic and archaising, and of Ulysses, representative of a Hellenistic *art nouveau*.

The debate also has affinities with suits over *hereditas*, of which Ovid had direct experience in his youth as a member of the court of the *centumviri*. But at issue here is the inheritance of the arms of the greatest

of epic heroes, Achilles, foreshadowing the problems of succession that will figure largely in book 15, firstly the succession to the first king of Rome and then the succession to the first Caesar, in each case calling for a man adequate to the shouldering of a burden as onerous and honorific as the armour of Achilles, and in the second case a man who is capable of realising the uniqueness of the epic hero (the claim that Ulysses makes sophisticatedly for himself) in the imperial fiction of the one man who embodies the state.

1–122 The Speech of Ajax

1 consedere duces: obeying Agamemnon's command at 12.627–8 *duces ... considerare ...* | ... *iussit*. For 'preludes' at book end cf. 1.776–9, 13.966–9; at *Aen.* 1.753–6 Dido requests Aeneas' tale; *Aen.* 2.1 describes the audience, *conticuere omnes*, followed by a line introducing the speaker Aeneas. Repetition of a word or name bridges book division at 6.720–7.1, 7.864–8.4, 8.884–9.1 (*gemitus*), 9.796–10.2. O. may follow Pacuvius in making the jury the Greek chiefs. *consido* (*OLD* 1b, '(of judges) to sit to try a case'; cf. 11.157), *surgō* (*OLD* 1b 'get up to speak') and *corona* (*OLD* 4a 'a circle of bystanders ...; the crowd present at a judicial sitting') lend Roman colouring (although this is also a *corona* of soldiers: *OLD* 4b). Ajax is supported by the *uulgu*s (123–4), but Ulysses persuades the *proceres* (126, 370, 382), whom he reminds of his punishment of the upstart Thersites (232–3). Juvenal exploits O.'s *declamatio* in epic fancy dress for his own 'epic satire', 7.115–17 *consedere duces, surgis tu pallidus Ajax | dicturus dubia pro libertate bubulco | iudice*.

2 clipei dominus septemplicis Aiax = *Am.* 1.7.7 (an *exemplum* of *furor*); the Homeric σάκος ἑπταβόειον 'shield of seven oxhides' (*Il.* 7.219–23); cf. *Aen.* 12.925 *clipei ... septemplicis* (of Turnus). The Ovidian use of *dominus* 'owner' (also at 138, 389, 402; see McKeown 1989 on *Am.* 1.7.7–8; Haege 1976, pp. 55–6) anticipates the sustained play on mastery and possession in the episode; Ajax's failure to become the 'master' of Achilles' shield (the most important item of the armour: cf. 12.621) leads to his final assertion of his ownership of his sword by using it against its *dominus* (387–90).

3 utque erat impatiens irae: 'unable to endure his anger, as was his nature': a prose use of *ut* favoured by O. (*OLD* s.v. *ut* 20b). *impatiens* with gen. (usually of an external obstacle) is used here in the sense *impotens* 'unable to control'; cf. Apul. *Met.* 4.29 *impatiens indignationis*. Ajax's emotion, unlike Ulysses' (132–3), is genuine; the model of patient endurance

in battle in the *Iliad*, at 385 Ajax will succumb to his anger. **Sigeia:** Sigeum (II.197, 12.71), a promontory facing Tenedos, famous as the burial place of Achilles (Plin. *HN* 5.124–5). For the rhetorical exploitation of setting cf. Livy 6.20.9 (Manlius during his self-defence) *Capitolium spectans* 'looking at the Capitol', the site of his greatest achievement (see Vasaly 1993, ch. 1). Sight and memory are repeatedly used in the debate to conjure up the presence of the past.

3–4 toruo ... uultu: cf. 6.34–5 *toruis ... uultibus* (Arachne, also with marked hyperbaton), 13.542 (Hecuba), 9.27–8 (Hercules and Achelous) *talia dicentem iam dudum lumine toruo | spectat et accensae non fortiter imperat irae* (an episode having other parallels with this: see 9–12, 19–20 nn.). For Ajax's wild glare cf. *Il.* 7.212 βλοσυροῖσι προσώπασι 'shaggy face'; *Iliupersis* fr. 1.8 Davies ὄμματά τ' ἀστράπτοντα 'flashing eyes'; Pacuvius, *Arm. iud.* 43 Warmington (Ajax) *feroci ingenio, toruus, prae-grandi gradu*; it was famously depicted in the painting of Ajax in despair after his madness by Timomachus (*Tr.* 2.525 *uultu fassus Telamonius iram*), a work placed by Julius Caesar in the temple of Venus Genetrix.

5 intendensque manus = 8.107 (Scylla enraged).

5–20 Ajax's *indignatio* dispenses with a formal *exordium*; cf. e.g. Cic. *Cat.* 1.1.

5–6 agimus ... causam: a juristic phrase (*OLD* s.v. *causa* 3a), signalling a *controversia*. The juxtaposition of *agimus* with *manus*, formerly the instruments of Ajax's physical heroics (cf. 205 *manu*, opposed to *consilio*) but now employed in a rhetorical gesture, reminds us that the man of action is now involved in a verbal *actio*. *agimus* may also have a theatrical overtone: Ajax (and Ulysses) are 'acting' (*OLD ago* 25) roles. **pro Iuppiter!:** this forceful oath, at home in drama, is used in the *Aeneid* only at 4.590, by Dido as she gazes on the Trojan fleet leaving her shore; Dido's self-destructive anger echoes that of Ajax. **ante rates:** cited by Quintilian (*Inst.* 5.10.41) as an example of the power of place to arouse an audience's favour or hostility. **mecum confertur Vlixes:** cf. Accius, *Arm. iud.* 98 Warmington *quid est cur componere ausis mihi te aut me tibi?* The two heroes match their respective services to the Greeks against each other (cf. 98 *conferat*); critics read the debate as a *synkrisis* of two types of heroism or world views, and also attempt to adjudicate on the relative rhetorical skills of the two men. *confero*, like *comparo* (338), can also be used of 'matching' combatants; O.'s verbal duel replaces the Homeric armed duels; at *Controv.* 4 *praef.* 1 the elder Seneca likens himself to a gladiatorial producer. **Vlixes:** emphatically and scornfully placed at line end, as often in the speech.

7–8 at non ... fugau: as at 82–97, Ajax appeals to his part in the battle at the ships in *Iliad* 12–16 (cf. esp. 13.701–25; 15.501 ff., 674 ff.), but *fugau* is an exaggeration. *cedere* can mean both ‘retreat before’, and ‘to admit defeat, be inferior to’ (as 9.16 *turpe deum mortali cedere* ‘it is disgraceful for a god to yield to a mortal’), continuing the equivocation between military and judicial confrontation.

9–12 tutius ... loquendo: the opposition of *dicere/facere, uerba/manus* structures the whole debate, as it does the speech of Antisthenes’ Ajax (see Höistad 1948, p. 98). The contrast goes back to *Il.* 16.630–1 ‘the goal of war lies in hands, but of words in council; therefore there is need not of further words, but of fighting’, 18.252; *Aen.* 9.634, 11.378–91 (Drances and Turnus); *Met.* 9.29–30 *uerbaque tot reddit: ‘melior mihi dextera lingua. | dummodo pugnando superem, tu uince loquendo’*. In Rome the military man was conventionally characterised as blunt of speech and uninterested in eloquence: e.g. Sall. *Iug.* 63.3 (Marius); Tac. *Agr.* 9.2. In 10 Ajax neatly uses the contrast as a cue for the exordial apology for the inability to speak well (Volkman 1963, p. 130). For Ajax as a ‘doer’ cf. *trag. inc. inc.* 53–5 Warmington *facinus fecit maximum, cum Danais inclinantibus | summam perfecit rem, manu sua restituit proelium insaniens*, lines quoted by Cicero (*Tusc.* 4.52) in a discussion of the self-destructive effects of anger on *fortitudo*. **tutius:** but for Ajax the outcome of this verbal contest will be his fatal self-wounding. **fictis ... uerbis:** *tingo* is particularly associated with the inventive and deceptive powers of Ulysses, *fandi fictor* (*Aen.* 9.602; see Stanford 1963, pp. 94, 110); cf. 59. **loquendo:** a less dignified word than *dicendo* (von Albrecht 1961, p. 271), emphatic and dismissive at line end.

13–15 nec memoranda ... sola est: Ajax introduces a further set of contrasts, between telling and seeing in person (cf. 73, 223; at Antisthenes, *Aias* 1 *Aias* complains that the jury (of Trojan prisoners) were not present at the events), between acting in the open (the way of the true hero) and in concealment or darkness (cf. 100, 103–6; cf. Antisthenes, *Aias* 5 ‘there is nothing that he would do in the open, but I would not dare to do anything in secret’). *memoro* and *narro* hint at the function of epic poetry (the process of memorialisation is caught at its inception at 12.159–62 *sed noctem sermone trahunt, uirtusque loquendi | materia est; pugnam referunt hostisque suamque, | inque uices adita atque exhausta pericula saepe | commemorare iuuat*. In the *Odyssey* Odysseus narrates his own adventures (of which no other witnesses survive); Ovid makes of him a fictional narrator of the *Iliad*. With Ajax’s particular argument cf. Quint. *Inst.* 5.13.16 *id quoque (quod*