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## THE MYTH OF ACTEON AND THE REASON FOR OVIDIUS' EXILE

As it is known Ovidius states that the poem „Ars amandi" and an incident of which he became an unintentional witness were the reasons for his exile. However, he does not specify the second reason. An extract from book II of „Tristia", where the poet draws parallel between the myth of Acteon and his tragedy, is worth being heeded.

cur aliquid vidi? cur noxia lumina feci?  
cur imprudenti cognita culpa mihi?  
inscius Actaeon vidit sine veste Dianam,  
praede fuit canibus non minus ille suis,  
scilicet in superis etiam fortuna luenda est,  
nec veniam laeso numine cassus habet.

*Tristia II, 103, 108-112*

The extract further became a source of a lot of fantasy whether what the poet could have seen and to what he fell a victim.<sup>1</sup> Why does the poet bring up the myth of Acteon in connection with the reasons for his misfortune? By what does his fate resemble Acteon's? Naivety would it be to think that the poet like Acteon had eyewitnessed a delicate scene. Here one thing is to be emphasized. For what did Acteon deserve his punishment and why was the Goddess angry with him? I think the extract from book III of „Metamorphoses", where the myth of Acteon is worked out, will answer the question.

Acteon and his companions were rambling through the woods to amuse themselves (non certis possibus errans – Met. III, 175) and quite occasionally they approached the Diana shrubbery and a beautiful cave where they found a wonderful sight – bathing Diana surrounded by the nymphs. On seeing Acteon they were startled. In vain were the nymphs trying to cover the naked Diana

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<sup>1</sup> See J. S. Tibault, *The Mystery of Ovid's Exile*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, 1964.

with their bodies. The Goddess was their superior in height and figure. Furious Diana splashed Acteon's face with water and addressed him so:

nunc tibi me posito visam velamine narres  
si poteris narrare, licet...

*Met. III, 192-193*

The Goddess felt fear that he would disclose his seeing her naked. Diana threatens him by not giving him a chance to tell the story to anybody. She transforms Acteon and his companions. Turned into deer, i. e. punished by Diana, Acteon stands baffled, knowing nowhere to go, whether hide himself in the woods or to come back to the palace. He is suffering from fear and shame:

quid faciat? repetatne domum et regalia tecta  
an leteat silvis? timor hoc, pudor impedit illud.

*Met. III, 204-205*

Ovidius thinks, that neither Acteon nor his companions are to be blamed. They have committed none of the crime; That was a mistake and they were destined for it.

et bene si quaeras fortunae crimen in illo  
non scelus invenies, quod enim scelus error habebat.

*Met. III, 141-142*

Here is one more detail of some interest. At the end of the myth Ovidius points out that Acteon's misfortune gladdens Jupiter's wife, though she does not express it orally (*Met. III, 256, 258*).

Now Let us see how Ovidius' fate resembles Acteon's. I. Ovidius' guilt lies in his writing amusing, jocular verses. In his love elegies the poet wasted his talent and enjoyed himself (*Tristia I, 62, II, 74, II, 313*).

Acteon's guilt lies in the fact that for the sake of pleasure he was rambling through the woods where he came across the naked Goddess.

2. Ovidius was at his friend Cotta Maximus' holiday house when furious Augustus summoned him to his place. The confused and frightened poet did not know what answer to give to his friend who asked him if the evil rumours about his guilt were true (*Ex Ponto II, 3, 8-88*). Let us recollect confused Acteon who did not know which path to take. He was overwhelmed with fear (*timor*) and shame (*pudor*). Ovidius mentions „*timor*” and „*pudor*” in connection with his tragedy in „*Tristia*” (*III, 628, IV, 39*).

4. Acteon's mischief gladdens Iuno whose earthly image is Livia. To put it mildly, she is not troubled by the tragedy of Ovidius, as she has not even tried to ease his punishment, to say nothing of her being the initiator of his exile.

5. The nymphs are trying to cover the naked Diana with their bodies, but they are not able to do this as the Goddess is their superior in height and figure. Augustus greatly tried to hide the scandalous histories of his daughter and granddaughter, but everybody was aware of everything, as the behaviour of the Prinsep's family – members, certainly, caught the public eye.

6. Acteon, turned-into a deer, is torn by his own friends turned-into dogs. And Ovidius, the same way, becomes the victim of his own verses.

In "Tristia" Ovidius continuous talking on his tragedies:

quo videar quamvis nimium iuvenaliter usus,  
grande tamen tot nomen ab orbe fero,  
turbaque doctorum Nasonem novit, et audet  
non fastiditis ad numerare viris  
corrui haec igitur Musis accepta, sub uno,  
sed non exiguo crimine lapsa domus.

*Tristis II, 117-122*

Though the poet isolates his verses from the event to which he has fallen victim and which reminds him of Acteon's guilt, he unexpectedly declares that the reason for his tragedy is one thing, though of no insignificance. This allows us to infer that the reason for the exile of Ovidius is one that appears in various aspects. I think Acteon's seeing naked Diana allegorically represents a Roman urban lifestyle full of luxury, which Ovidius sang of and which he was punished for. Ovidius was praising all against what Augustus was. The Prinsep wished the morality of his family members to be exemplary for the Romans, to make everybody sure in fairness of his reforms. But all his attempts turned out vain.

Augustus was afraid that in his elegies Ovidius in his own manner would express the distress the Prinsep had endured owing to his Family members. The poet could by his habitual humour and hints (subtexts) show Augustus' failures in home affairs and compromise him in the eyes of the society, and that was partially reflected in his poems.

The poet sang for the Rome of the Augustus' period; he declared what he had seen. Irritated Augustus sentenced the poet to silence,<sup>2</sup> the way Diana had done to Acteon. If we let Augustus speak by Diana's words, he threatened the poet: Go and boast of what you have seen i. e. Rome, not what Augustus wanted it to be – highly moral, but the way it was in reality and the way Ovidius described in his love elegies.

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<sup>2</sup> Ch. Corten, Ovid, Augustus und der Kult der Vestalinnen (Studien zur klassischen Literatur), Fran. am Main, Bern... Bd. 72, 191.