

PER MONSTRA AD SPHAERAM: OF PEGASUS AND POETICS

μή τις ἀνθρώπων ἐς ὠρανὸν ποτήσθω / μηδὲ πηρήτω γαμῆν τὰν Ἀφροδίταν.

“Let no man fly to heaven, nor attempt marriage to Aphrodite” (Alcman 1.16-17)

Introduction

When Franz Boll, historian of astrology, died on 3 July 1924, the art historian Aby Warburg, whose own astrological researches had been inspired by his earlier reading of Boll’s famous *Sphaera* (1903), commemorated Boll, and his work, with a phrase now famous: *per monstra ad sphaeram*, “through monsters to the sphere.” Regular visitors to the Warburg Library in London know the phrase well: when Warburg purchased Boll’s personal library, he had the Viennese artist Rudolf Larisch design a special book-plate for that collection, framed by the motto, and wrought in imitation of the Renaissance *imprese amorose* that had lately been Warburg’s special study. First and foremost, the motto encapsulated Boll’s lifeswork as a scholar, the reconstruction of the text of the *Sphaera Barbarica*, as well as that work’s path from ancient Greece and Rome, through Iran and India, and back again into the celestial models of medieval Europe. The motto, and image it enclosed, also encoded the *imprese* tradition’s association of “spheres” with “hope” (*speranza*),ⁱ as well as a more personal onomastic pun: the deceased’s very name suggests the movement from barbarism to civilization his work describes, departing from his Christian name—Franz>Franciscus>Lat. *Francus*>Fr. *Franc*>OHG *Franko* (from which we derive such monsters as *Frankenstein* and the European dark ages)—and resting on “Boll”, i.e. *ad sphaeram*. Uniting researches eastern and western, Boll’s *Sphaera* was, in Warburg’s phrase, “das unangreifbare Bollwerk” (‘the unassailable bulwark’), for later research into the astrological tradition.

Warburg’s bookplate motto, however, was itself a reworking of one of Warburg’s own earlier mottos, a reworking of the 16th century astronomer Johannes Kepler’s *per aspera ad astra* (“through hardships to the stars”) as *per monstra ad astra* (“through monsters to the stars”). On the one hand, this motto reflected the use to which Warburg had put Boll’s work in his landmark 1912 lecture on the planetary frescos in Ferrara’s Palazzo Schifanoia: “Athens must always be conquered afresh from Alexandria,” (*Athens will eben immer wieder neu aus Alexandrien zurückerobert sein*—Ges. Schr. II.534) wrote Warburg, encapsulating his attempts to trace the path of classical visual and spiritual motifs through their monstrous transmogrifications in the East, their equally monstrous return to the medieval West, and their rebirth in the clear-minded rationality of the Renaissance. While Warburg’s approach remains subject to critique for its fundamental lack of empathy for (and interest in) eastern (and perhaps medieval) art on its own terms, his evocation of this particular path of reception—“from the terror of monstrosity to contemplation within the ideal sphere of of pagan learned observation”—usefully counters what one might still today regret, “the inability of Europeans to conceive pagan civilization as a whole” (RPA 702).ⁱⁱ Without such universalism one can grasp neither the migration route of this particular text—“Cyzicus-Alexandria-Oxiana-Baghdad-Toledo-Rome-Ferrara-Padua-Augsburg-Erfurt-Wittenberg-Goslar-Lüneburg-Hamburg” (RPA 702)—nor the contradictory impulses of classical antiquity itself (between the rational and the irrational).

On the other hand, this same motto—*per monstra ad astra*—captured Warburg’s struggles with his own demons, culminating, after WWI, in his hospital stay in Kreuzlingen from 1918 to 1923. Warburg was released from medical care only after lecturing the hospital patients, staff, and his family and friends on 21 April 1923 on the serpent rituals he had observed among North American tribes some twenty-six years earlier. As Warburg explained in a letter to his family dated 26 December 1923, “One could say (it occurred to me last night) *per monstra ad superos inferosve* [“through monsters to the gods above and the gods below”],

namely, fate has placed ‘the struggle with the dragon’ before the liberation from fear...*per monstra ad astra*: the gods have placed the monster on the path to the Idea”.ⁱⁱⁱ

This latter sense of Warburg’s motto—as a heuristic device that points us to the daemonic qualities of antiquity and its afterlives—has motivated my own project to write what could be called a beastly history of the Augustan age and its literary successors, and that has included a number of recent and forthcoming articles I have written under the general heading of *All Augustus’ Animals: A Symbolic Bestiary of the Classical Tradition*. This work has built on my first book on *The Solitary Sphere in the Age of Virgil*, that sphere being, as I showed, where Latin literature from Cicero to Ovid found itself more truly and more strange. In my recent work, this Project has taken various forms. An article entitled ‘Exit Pursued by Horace: Bears, Shakespeare, and the Classical Tradition’ showed that the bear that tears through the centre of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* builds on a tradition of the bear as classical emblem of classical rule-breaking that is localized in Horace’s *Ars Poetica* and its Renaissance avatars. An article on ‘When Rome’s Elephants Weep’ shows what worlds of lore, legend, and power politics combined to make elephants responsible for Pompey’s downfall in antiquity, in ways that would be rehearsed as if to a script in the papal court of Leo X, thus contributing to the rising tide of Martin Luther’s reformatory revolution. An article on ‘Virgil’s *Equus Graecus* and the Monstrosity of a Literature in Latin’, showed how Virgil’s episode of the Trojan Horse replayed traditional monstrous birth-stories of Latin literature, in ways that Dante would realize were at the heart of the battle to foster vulgar eloquence against traditional literary principles.

Today’s paper represents an early form of an attempt to get at the heart of Warburg’s motto, and look to a figure that in mythological terms best exemplifies the connections between the classical grotesque and poetic: Pegasus, the winged steed born of monstrous Medusa, who releases the waters of Hippocrene to be home to the Muses, who together with Bellerophon clears the world of the last vestiges of earth’s chaotic children, only to assume his place in the stars as Zeus’ lightning bearer, as Bellerophon languishes in terrestrial solitude. Our efforts will focus on showing how the figure of Pegasus served Ovid as a symbolic icon for his greatest work of poetry, the *Metamorphoses*, as well as for his life as a whole. Making clear how and why this was the case will involve looking first at the Greek tradition Ovid inherited, while clarifying the implications of such a focus on Ovid’s part will take us on a long tour from the Roman Principate through Nizami’s *Haft Payker*, Dante’s *Commedia*, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and, finally Aby Warburg’s bookplate itself.

Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Euripides, Callimachus

Pegasus first appears in extant Greek literature within Hesiod’s works. One part of the story, Pegasus’ birth and current activities, arrives in the *Theogony* (Th. 280–6):

τῆς δ’ ὅτε δὴ Περσεὺς κεφαλὴν ἀπεδειροτόμησεν,
ἔκθορε Χρυσάωρ τε μέγας καὶ Πήγασος ἵππος.
τῷ μὲν ἐπώνυμον ἦεν, ὅτ’ Ὠκεανοῦ περὶ πηγὰς
γένεθ’, ὃ δ’ ἄορ χρύσειον ἔχων μετὰ χερσὶ φύλησιν.
χῶ μὲν ἀποπτάμενος προλιπὼν χθόνα, μητέρα μῆλων,
ἵκετ’ ἐς ἄθανάτους· Ζηνὸς δ’ ἐν δώμασι ναίει
βροντὴν τε στεροπὴν τε φέρων Διὶ μητιόεντι.

And when Perseus cut off her [sc. Medusa’s] head, there sprang forth great Chrysaor and the horse Pegasus who is so called because he was born near the springs of Ocean; and that other, because he held a golden blade in his hands. Now Pegasus flew away and left the earth, the mother of flocks, and came to the deathless gods: and he dwells in the house of Zeus and brings to wise Zeus the thunder and lightning.