

Hippolytus and Virbius: Narratives of “Coming Back to Life” and Religious Discourses in Greco-Roman Literature

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Abstract:

This paper concentrates on the plethora of stories about Hippolytus’s gruesome end and his coming back to life. I trace these stories through their many iterations from classical through Roman times, beginning with Euripides and moving on to the versions told by Pausanias, Virgil, and Ovid. Each telling of these tales provides a different way to think about the borders between life and death, as well as between gods, heroes, and mortals—and about politics, religion, and poetry. In relation to all these topics, the story about Hippolytus’s coming back to life was good to think with. For Euripides, Hippolytus provides an example of polis-related discourse in late fifth-century BCE Athens. In Hellenistic times, Hippolytus became attached to Italian mythology, probably already by Callimachus. Finally, the versions told by Virgil (*Aeneid*) and Ovid (*Fasti* and *Metamorphoses*) demonstrate sophisticated ways of dealing with the new phenomenon of apotheosis in Roman religion and its meaning for Augustan poetry.

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**Hippolytus and Virbius:
Narratives of “Coming Back to Life” and Religious
Discourses in Greco-Roman Literature¹**

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I. INTRODUCTION:

ON DEFINING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH

If one tries to find stories about human beings “coming back to life” in the polytheistic mythologies of the Greco-Roman world, one immediately starts to think about and doubt the categories “mortality” and “immortality,” “hero,” “human being,” and “god.” Does a hero such as Heracles “come back to life” when, as the story goes (since the seventh century BCE), he is received by the gods on Mount Olympus, a narrative which was retold in Roman imperial times as his apotheosis from the funeral pyre (Graf 1998a, 394ff.)? Or is he just transformed from a hero into a god? Obviously his story is different from the one told about pious Alcestis, who died voluntarily to save the life of her husband and was then brought back to life by none other than Heracles (Johnston 1999, 99–100).² Her story fits into a group of narratives which might be called “trickster” stories about death (Johnston 1999, 9 and 100). In these stories, figures like Theseus, Heracles, or Sisyphus succeed in

¹ I thank the participants of the “Coming Back to Life” conference in May 2014 for discussing my paper, and the editors—especially Fred Tappenden and Brad Rice—for valuable suggestions to improve my English as well as my argument. A slightly altered German version of this paper, which is aimed at a more general readership, is also available as Waldner 2016.

² The story probably goes back to the sixth century BCE (Phrynichus). Besides Euripides’s *Alcestis* (438 BCE), we find Alcestis sent back by Persephone because of her love and piety in [Plato, *Symp.* 179b–180b](#).

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outwitting or fighting down death, personified as Thanatos, Hades, or Persephone. One might also include narratives about Asclepius in this group; he is no “trickster,” but rather an ingenious physician whose ability to bring ordinary human beings back to life forms part of his medical skills.³

One of the earliest examples of a Greek coming-back-to-life story, probably from the sixth century BCE, relates that Hippolytus was restored to life by Asclepius and thus resembles the “trickster” stories. Afterwards, Zeus killed Asclepius in punishment (*Naupaktia*, frags. 10 and 11 [Bernabé 1987–2007]).⁴ At the same time, Hippolytus was certainly a hero who was honored at several cult sites in Greece (Hall 1999). This paper will concentrate on the plethora of stories about his gruesome end and his coming back to life. The stories begin with Euripides and move on to the versions told by Pausanias, Virgil, and Ovid. All of these tales will be read as different ways to think about the borders between life and death, as well as between gods, heroes, and mortals—and about politics, religion, and poetry. Euripides will be analyzed as an example of polis-related discourse in late fifth-century BCE Athens. We will explore afterwards how Hippolytus became attached to Italian mythology, probably already by Callimachus. Finally, the versions told by Virgil (*Aeneid*) and Ovid (*Fasti* and *Metamorphoses*) will be interpreted as sophisticated ways of dealing with the new phenomenon of apotheosis in Roman religion and its meaning for Augustan poetry.

But before I discuss the different ways of telling these stories about Hippolytus’s return to life, it will be useful to formulate some general observations about the history and function of this kind of story, as well as about the figure of the *hero* in ancient Greek religion. In her monograph *Restless Dead* (1999), Sarah Iles

³ One might also add to this group the story about Orpheus, whose ability to face the realm of death is related to his skills as a poet and musician. The earliest mention is found in [Euripides, *Alc.* 357–362](#).

⁴ Hippolytus is the only example of this type of myth told about Asclepius (cf. the sources collected by Edelstein and Edelstein 1945, 1:37ff.).

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Johnston carefully reconstructs the history of conceptions and rituals dealing with the dead from Homer to classical times. She states that stories like those mentioned above—that is, stories about Alcestis and Heracles, Sisyphus, Hippolytus and Asclepius, and also Orpheus and Eurydice—were rather rare and that there is no evidence for them before the sixth century BCE (Johnston 1999, 99ff.). One could add the Thracian Zalmoxis in Herodotus ([Hist. 4.94–96](#)) and the Pamphylian Er in Plato’s *Republic*. But these two examples also clearly demonstrate a tendency to push such a transgressing of the boundaries between life and death to the barbarian fringes of Greek culture, whereas at least in the cases of Asclepius and Sisyphus, the transgression is severely punished by Zeus. In general, it can be observed that, on the level of ritual practices, the boundaries between the living and the dead became more permeable from the sixth century onwards (Johnston 1999, 36–123). Already in the seventh century, burial sites in mainland Greece were more strictly separated from the settlements, and a growing fear of pollution by corpses and of “ghosts” haunting the living developed at the same time (Johnston 1999, 96ff.; Sourvinou-Inwood 1983, 1995). Our stories thus form part of an ongoing discourse about the right way of ritual communication with the dead and about death in general, especially with regard to the polis, its political identity and social structures. This discourse is the result of a paradox clearly formulated by Johnston (1999, 97): “In sum, the less familiar the dead became and the more uncertain people became about their nature, the more people were likely to begin wondering about the ways in which they might affect the living.” In general, these boundaries are not “naturally” given, but all cultures develop ritual practices and related discourses to draw them and preserve them in certain characteristic ways. At the same time, the discourse about this basic boundary may also be intertwined with discourses on other very basic categories (for example, gender or space; Robben 2004). Johnston (1999, 23–30) convincingly argues that Athenian tragedy was one of the most prominent voices in this discourse. Therefore, it is not by accident that this article starts with a short

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analysis of these questions in the famous play *Hippolytus Stephanis* or *Stephanophoros* by Euripides, brought to stage in 428 BCE (Roth 2015, 5–7). I will read the representation of Hippolytus’s fate in this tragedy as a discussion about different ways to conceptualize the relationship between life and death, and especially about the related function of poetry and hero cult. This raises the question of hero cult, which is seen in my contribution not only as part of the discourse on life and death, but also on literature and memory.

Today, the *communis opinio* holds that hero cults, as a very characteristic feature of ancient Greco-Roman religion, started somewhere and somehow in the late eighth century BCE and were, until their end in late antiquity, a quite heterogeneous phenomenon (Hägg 1999; Ekroth 2010; Graf 1998b). Nevertheless, it remains undisputed that heroes and hero cults have always, though not always in the same way, had something to do with death, tombs, and memory. This is shown clearly by two recent definitions, which cannot help but include the notion of death. Gunnel Ekroth (2010, 100) thus formulates: “A hero can be defined as a person who had lived and died, either in myth or in real life, this being the main distinction between a god and a hero.” In a comparable way, Johnston (1999, 11) states, “a hero was essentially a dead person who had retained more of his ‘vitality’ after death.” So one might summarize that the category of the hero helped to define and—by its variability—also to establish the boundaries between the living, the dead, and the immortal gods. On the level of sociopolitical structures, hero cults always mediated between concerns of individual families and broader groups such as the polis or even an empire (e.g., Johnston 1999, 97; Polignac 1995). Whereas in archaic and classical times hero cults were mainly bound to tombs and were in most cases run by the polis or its subgroups, in Hellenistic and Roman times one finds considerable new developments, which are enumerated by Dennis D. Hughes (1999, 167) as follows: “The founding of cults by private citizens for deceased family members, the designation of the dead as ‘heroes’ on tombstones, public heroization of prominent benefactors, and the revival of traditional

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hero cult in the Roman period, in particular the cults of great figures from earlier Greek history.” Throughout this history, there seems always to have been a relationship between hero cults, the figure of the hero, and the conceptualization of place and space.

As Fritz Graf (1998b) demonstrates in his article on hero cults in *Der Neue Pauly* (and here I summarize Graf), already in archaic and classical polis religion, there existed a few “heroes” who were situated somewhere between typical heroes and gods, namely Asclepius, the Dioskouroi, and Heracles; one might call them heroes, but they are like gods or they even become gods. Graf reminds us that all hero cults have a transregional, panhellenic character (Graf 1998b, 478). Hippolytus, whose hero cult already had a transregional character in archaic and classical times (Hall 1999), resembles these ambivalent figures, and it is not by accident that he was combined in myth and cult with Asclepius. In Hellenistic and Roman times his story becomes connected to the Latin deity Virbius, located in the famous sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis of Aricia, about eleven miles from Rome along the Via Appia: it was told that he was brought back to life by Asclepius and/or Diana and then hidden in the precinct of Diana Nemorensis, where he lived on as Virbius (Green 2007, 208–31). The Augustan poets Virgil and Ovid were especially fascinated by the story and told it several times in different versions, whereas Euripides insists on a tomb of Hippolytus at Trozen, though he might also have known the version of Hippolytus brought back to life by Asclepius.

The fact that Hippolytus’s coming back to life was neglected by Euripides, but highly popular from Hellenistic times onwards does not come as a surprise. It fits into a growing general interest in highly unbelievable stories about ordinary people and/or heroes who were brought back to life by spiritual powers or by a god him/herself. Whereas these stories formed, on the one hand, part of a new kind of Jewish-Christian historiography, which starts with the narratives on the Maccabees and the bodily resurrection of the Maccabean martyrs (Nickelsburg 2006) and ends with the canonical Gospels, we also find an ever growing interest in the subject of

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“coming back to life” in the realm of pagan literature. In his *Fiction as History: Nero to Julian*, Glen Bowersock (1994) not only reminds us of this remarkable fact but also calls our attention to the basic problem of “fiction and history,” which in his eyes is immediately related to the spatial dimension of empires, especially the Roman Empire. He thus states:

The ease of communication and transport in the Roman empire meant that local marvels were local no more. They soon merged into an international conglomerate of fantasy and the supernatural. History was being invented all over again; even the mythic past was being rewritten, and the present was awash in so many miracles and marvels that not even the credulous or the pious could swallow them all. (Bowersock 1994, 2)

Epics and historiography, the classical genres that tell more or less marvelous but always authoritative stories about the past, were now supplemented by novels, gospels, demonstratively alternative historiographies, biographies, letters, dialogues, and so on, most of which were typical for the cultural productions of the so-called Second Sophistic. If I understand him correctly, Bowersock supposes that it was especially this kind of “genre trouble” which made it possible to spread stories about bodily resurrection; moreover, he provokes with the thesis that the obvious fondness for stories about “Scheintod” and consequently “as-if-resurrections” in pagan novels was triggered by the first stories about the resurrection of Jesus and that the whole phenomenon was especially characteristic of the Neronian epoch (Bowersock 1994, 99–119).

In what follows I would like to show exactly how the development from local mythologies to an “international conglomerate of fantasy and the supernatural” works in the case of the stories of Hippolytus coming back to life. It might not be caused only by “the ease of communication and transport in the Roman empire.” In my opinion, the development of new kinds of stories about coming back to life in pagan as well as in Jewish-Christian

discourses during Hellenistic and imperial times is related to new and different functions and modes of religious storytelling, as well as to new ideas about the boundaries between the living and the dead—and especially between mortality and immortality—as they were expressed in the discourses and rituals of the Hellenistic and imperial ruler cult, especially in the apotheosis of the Roman emperor after death.

**II. EURIPIDES'S *HIPPOLYTUS*:
THE EXCEPTIONAL DEATH OF A HERO AND
HIS CULTIC COMMEMORATION**

In the fifth century BCE, when the Athenian poets Sophocles and Euripides were competing with each other in presenting three different versions of the tragedy of Hippolytus, the hero Hippolytus was the object of at least three cults: in Attica, he was worshipped at Trozen; also in Attica, on the southern slopes of the Athenian Acropolis; and in Sparta he had a *heroon* behind the *Metroon* (Hall 1999, 51). If the archaeological remains at Trozen are interpreted correctly, he might have been honored there from the end of the eighth century (Hall 1999, 51). Only Euripides's second Hippolytus tragedy (traditionally called *Hippolytos Stephanis* or *Stephanophoros*) is extant (Barrett 1964; Roth 2015). It was produced in 428 BCE and refers especially and explicitly to the cult at Trozen, where—as its plot goes—Theseus, his wife Phaedra, and her stepson Hippolytus were living. Hippolytus is presented by the author as a young man who despises sex and marriage and consequently neglects Aphrodite, whereas the virgin Artemis is his favorite companion. His stepmother Phaedra falls in love with him and hangs herself out of shame, though not without leaving a written message that falsely accuses Hippolytus of rape. Theseus curses his son and Poseidon kills him by a horrible accident with a horse chariot.

The very last scene of the play shows us the dying Hippolytus on stage. Artemis appears and reveals the truth to Theseus. The dialogue between Hippolytus and his favorite goddess makes clear

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that the immortal gods are not able or willing to rescue human beings from death. After Hippolytus has realized that the goddess is present, he asks her: “Do you see me, lady, see my wretched state?” ([Euripides, *Hipp.* 1395](#)). And Artemis answers: “Yes, but the law forbids my shedding tears.” The very last words of the goddess seem even more cruel: “Farewell: it is not lawful for me to look upon the dead or to defile my sight with the last breath of the dying. And I see that you are already near that misfortune” ([1437–1439](#)).⁵ Nevertheless, the goddess promises Hippolytus a kind of reward: he will become the object of a religious practice, which will guarantee that he lives on—at least in and through the memory of the cult performers:

To you, unhappy man, I shall grant, in recompense for these sorrows, supreme honors in the land of Trozen. Unmarried girls before their marriage will cut their hair for you, and over the length of ages you will harvest the deep mourning of their tears. The practice-skill of poetry [*μουσσοποιός*] sung by maidens will forever make you its theme, and Phaedra’s love for you shall not fall nameless and unsung. ([1423–1430](#))

The “law” (*νόμος*), which hinders Artemis from shedding tears and staying with Hippolytus until he dies, is the same law that governs the traditional hero cult of Hippolytus at Trozen. Hippolytus will be there, lying dead in his grave or, as Artemis says, “in the gloom under the earth” ([1416](#)), but he will also live on through the honors of the cult, the rituals of the maiden, and the memory of their songs.

At first sight it seems that Euripides’s play proves the existence and importance of a dichotomy that was often seen as typical for Greek religion: Olympian gods on the one side, chthonian heroes in their graves on the other side;⁶ there is no idea of an individual afterlife, but the possibility of living on in the memories of the descendants. Nevertheless, Euripides could probably have told a very

⁵ Here and throughout, translations of Euripides’s *Hippolytus* are drawn from [Kovacs 1995](#) (see also Roth 2015 and Shaw 2007).

⁶ For a basic critique of this dichotomy, see Ekroth 2002, 13–22.

different story about Hippolytus because—as I argued in the first paragraph—the boundaries between the living and the dead, as well as between heroes and gods, were disputed from the sixth century onwards. And also as mentioned above, our evidence shows that, as early as the sixth century, Asclepius’s restoration to life of Hippolytus and subsequent punishment-by-death from Zeus was probably told in an epic poem.⁷ In addition, we have evidence that Hippolytus was joined by Asclepius in the former’s cults at Athens and at Trozen.⁸ Nowhere in the play does Euripides allude to this version. Nevertheless, he lets us suppose that he is at least well aware of alternative ideas about living on after death. So he tells us that Phaedra saw Hippolytus for the first time when he came to Athens for the mysteries (25), and that Theseus brands Hippolytus as a follower of an Orphic group that only pretends to live a pure life with vegetarian diet and sexual restraint (952–955). The diet is described as ἀψύχου βροῦς (952)—“food without soul”—and thus hints at the idea of metempsychosis (cf. Johnston 1999, 19).

Why did Euripides choose the very traditional version of Hippolytus becoming the object of a local hero cult? The following is a rather tentative answer that tries to read Euripides’s tragedy as a voice in the religious discourse of late fifth-century Athens. In general, one can observe that during the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians tended to be more anxious about the rules of their polis religion and their identity as related to local cults (Furley 1996). Later, in the first half of the fourth century, Plato harshly criticizes religious practitioners who claimed to be able to communicate with the dead and to improve the afterlives of their clients with rituals and by referring to books by Orpheus and Musaios ([Plato, *Resp.* 364e–365a](#)). This perfectly fits Theseus’s criticism of Hippolytus as someone who is proud of a vegetarian diet, is a follower of Orpheus, and who “honors the smoke of books” (952–954; see also [Aristophanes, *Av.* 414](#)). At the same time, one can find evidence for

⁷ See above, n. 4.

⁸ Clear evidence exists only from the fourth century BCE onwards (Barrett 1964, 5).

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several trials concerning religious issues at the end of the fifth and at the beginning of the fourth centuries, among them the famous case of Socrates, but also the cases of Ninus and Phryne, both of whom related somehow to private mystery cults of the Orphic type (Trampedach 2001; Eidinow 2010).

A critical attitude to Orphic practitioners and groups might explain why Euripides chooses the traditional aetiological story of a local hero cult with its tomb at Trozen, as well as why he insists on a clear-cut border between the living and the dead and on the function of hero cult in building collective identities; it fits in this pattern that he also mentions the cult of Aphrodite “in the (precinct) of Hippolytus” or “near Hippolytus” founded by Phaedra on the southern slope of the Acropolis ([Euripides, *Hipp.* 30–32](#); cf. [Pausanias, *Descr.* 1.22.1](#); see Barrett 1964, 5; Roth 2015, 71).⁹ If one considers the observation by Fritz Graf (1998b, 478) that figures who oscillate between the status of god and hero always have a transregional or panhellenic character, it is clear that Euripides does not count Hippolytus among them, even if this might have been possible. He is on the side of down-to-earth local hero cult clearly referring to Athenian democratic identity; this position becomes even more decisive as he shows that he is well aware of other, more elitist religious perspectives (for example, the so-called “Orphics”; Hunter 2009; Bremmer 2010). This is not surprising when one thinks of the prominent function of Athenian tragedy in forming, but also reflecting, Athenian politics (Meier 1988). At the same time, Euripides is quite aware of a certain cruelty shown by these traditional gods and of the strict boundaries between life and death, as the last scene of the play clearly demonstrates. In others of his tragedies, the protagonists explicitly complain about these kinds of gods and even tend sometimes to a form of “agnosticism.”¹⁰

⁹ There are two fragmentary inscriptions from the fifth century mentioning the sanctuary: *IG*² 324.69 and 310.280 (= [IG I³ 369 \[line 66\]](#) and [IG I³ 383 \[lines 233–234\]](#), respectively).

¹⁰ One of the most famous examples is the prayer of Hecabe in [Euripides, *Tro.* 884–888](#).

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Certainly, “literature” forms part of the religious discourse (cf. Waldner 2014). In *Hippolytus*, Euripides draws the attention of his audience to the central role of poetry in the religious sphere. In the end, it is poetry, and not Asclepius or any Orphic initiations, that makes Hippolytus live on after his death. As reward and compensation, Artemis promises Hippolytus that his and Phaedra’s story will be sung by the Trozenian maidens:

Unmarried girls before their marriage will cut their hair for you, and over the length of ages you will harvest the deep mourning of their tears. The practice-skill of poetry [μουσσοποιός] sung by maidens will forever make you its theme, and Phaedra’s love for you shall not fall nameless and unsung. ([1425-1430](#))

It is not just that the narrative of Hippolytus’s and Phaedra’s story, sung by the Trozenian maidens, makes Hippolytus live on after his death, but also that Euripides’s tragedy itself forms an important part of the religious discourse. Thus Euripides is a strong, single voice in the ongoing debates about the boundaries between life and death in fifth-century Athens, and he opts for a tomb-bound local hero cult that ensures collective Athenian identity. At the same time, Euripides reflects the cruelty and fragility of this kind of order for individuals, and he utilizes the function of poetry in all this.

III. TRANSCENDING LOCAL NARRATIVES:

HIPPOLYTUS-VIRBIUS IN PAUSANIAS’S

DESCRIPTION OF GREECE

When we read the description of the sanctuary of Hippolytus and Aphrodite at Trozen by the second-century writer Pausanias, it is striking how well this description fits the picture we have gained from the much older tragedy by Euripides. According to Pausanias, there was a famous precinct for Hippolytus the son of Theseus, and “every maiden before marriage cuts off a lock for Hippolytus” ([Descr. 2.32.1](#)). But, whereas in Euripides it is said that the

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gruesome story about Hippolytus's death is retold and mourned by the maidens, Pausanias sets forth a different account:

They will not have it that he was dragged to death by his horses, and, though they know his grave, they do not show it. But they believe that what is called the Charioteer in the sky is the Hippolytus of the legend, such being the honor he enjoys from the gods. ([Descr. 2.32.1](#))¹¹

In a passage about inscriptions in the Asclepius sanctuary at Epidaurus, Pausanias shows that he knows yet another story about Hippolytus:

Apart from the others is an old slab, which declares that Hippolytus dedicated twenty horses to the god. The Aricians tell a tale that agrees with the inscription on this slab, that when Hippolytus was killed, owing to the curses of Theseus, Asclepius raised him from the dead. On coming to life again he refused to forgive his father; rejecting his prayers, he went to the Aricians in Italy. There he became king and devoted a precinct to Artemis, where down to my time the prize for the victor in single combat was the priesthood of the goddess. The contest was open to no freeman, but only to slaves who had run away from their masters. ([Descr. 2.27.4-5](#))

Does Pausanias care where Hippolytus *really* is? His agenda is obviously quite different from that of Euripides: he wants to represent to his imperial readers *πάντα τὰ Ἑλληνικά* (“all Greek things”) in a cultural sense (Hutton 2005, 55–57). Greek mythology and ritual form part of his own and his contemporaries’ classical education, the *paideia* (Hutton 2005, 35–53; cf. Pirenne-Delforge 2008). In the case of Hippolytus, Pausanias was challenged by a common phenomenon: Greek mythology was entangled with Roman stories. In Hippolytus’s case this might even have started in Hellenistic times (Callimachus frag. 190 = 146 in Asper 2004), when

¹¹ All translations of Pausanias are from Jones, Ormerod, and Wycherley 1918–1935.

someone asked the question: What happened to Hippolytus after he had been brought back to life by Asclepius? The answer was that he went to Italy and had something to do with the very famous sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis at Aricia (Green 2007). It was told that he founded the sanctuary (as we saw in the passage by Pausanias quoted above) or that he was identified with a hitherto unknown god called Virbius, living there with Diana in her precinct (Green 2007, 208–31). The whole story might have been triggered by the simple fact that horses—the animals who caused Hippolytus’s early death—were forbidden in the sanctuary (Graf 1998c).

It is clear that the version of the Hippolytus story told by Euripides takes a different emphasis than the one told by Pausanias; the former binds the hero to his tomb at Trozen or Athens, while the latter stresses his coming back to life and ongoing activities in Italy. This fits Pausanias’s aim to connect local mythological stories to an “international conglomerate”¹² of Greek religious *paideia*. In the case of Hippolytus, this was already done by Callimachus, who probably told the story about Hippolytus becoming Latin Virbius for the first time. In the same way, the myth of Hippolytus becoming a star might stem from a Hellenistic source.¹³ But interestingly, Pausanias does not refer to one consistent antiquarian version of the story. Despite his globalizing perspective, he respects local traditions, which tell different transregional stories about Hippolytus and relate them to their given local contexts and monuments. If we believe Pausanias’s account, the predilection for versions of Hippolytus’s coming back to life was well established in the second century CE, even at a cult site like Trozen, which was traditionally concentrated

¹² Bowersock 1994, 2; see above, Introduction.

¹³ In Hellenistic times the so-called *katasterismoi* (stories about mythological figures becoming stars to explain constellations) became a literary genre, although the type of narrative was much older. A *katasterismos* was at the same time an apotheosis. It is disputed how these stories relate to the idea of human souls becoming stars after death, which we find for the first time in the fifth century BCE ([Aristophanes, *Pax* 832ff.](#); [Plato, *Tim.* 41d–42b](#); see Loehr 2002, 95ff.).

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on the tomb of the hero. And there is one more important observation: though traditions about Hippolytus being transformed into the Latin god or hero Virbius are central to Augustan poetry (as we will see below), neither the Greek local traditions nor Pausanias or his local guides refer to such claims in detail. Pausanias does not tell us the name of Virbius, although Callimachus may have already known this story. If this is not by accident, it confirms again Pausanias's agenda to tell *πάντα τὰ Ἑλληνικά* in a globalizing but definitively “un-Roman” way, avoiding the name of the Latin god Virbius which was—as we will see in the next section—highly important for Augustan poetry.

IV. TRANSCENDING CATEGORIES IN AN EMPIRE: HIPPOLYTUS AND VIRBIUS IN AUGUSTAN POETRY AND RELIGION

As already mentioned, Hippolytus's coming back to life was combined with the famous sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis near Rome from the Hellenistic period onward. Hippolytus is not the only connection between this Latin cult and Greek mythology. There was also a myth that Orestes founded the sanctuary, coming there as a fugitive after he had murdered King Thoas and stolen Artemis's statue to bring it to Aricia.¹⁴ With this myth, Orestes became the *aition* for the notorious ritual related to the *rex Nemorensis*, the priest of the sanctuary; he was replaced at the moment when a fugitive slave succeeded in killing him (Green 2007, 201–07, 147–84).¹⁵ The sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis was related to Latin and Roman politics from the sixth century BCE onwards; the figure of Diana Aricia was not only honored in the sanctuary, but according to

¹⁴ The main evidence is [Servius, *Ad Aen.* 2.116](#) and [6.136](#). Green (2007, 202) argues convincingly that the story might go back at least to the fourth century BCE.

¹⁵ E.g., [Strabo, *Geogr.* 5.3.12](#); [Pausanias, *Descr.* 2.27.4](#). The ritual triggered the famous twelve-volume *The Golden Bough* by James George Frazer (cf. Green 2007, 147–49). It is disputed whether or not the ritual was still practiced in the imperial period.

Roman historiography ([Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.45](#)), Servius Tullius founded a cult of Diana on the Aventine, and both cults together formed a religious basis for Latin alliances (Green 2007, 13). The famous temple with the golden roof was built around 300 BCE, just at the time when the Aricians definitively surrendered to Rome. By the time of the republic, the sanctuary had become “formalized and Hellenized” (Green 2007, 25) and flourished with international clientele, especially as a center for healing (cf. Green 2007, 235–55). Green (2007, 23–33) argues that there was an intense politicization of the sanctuary at the end of the republic because of the title *rex*, which played an important role in the discourse of the civil war. It comes as no surprise that the political meaning of the sanctuary was prolonged into early imperial times. Nevertheless, in the details one finds a quite astonishing, contingent element: we know from Cicero’s *Philippics* that Antony reproached Octavian for his *Aricina mater*, which implied low birth ([Phil. 3.6.15–17](#); cf. Green 2007, 34ff.).¹⁶ Later on, when Octavian as Augustus chose Apollo as his favorite god, Diana as sister of Apollo also became important to him (Green 2007, 40ff.) and it is highly probable that it was Augustus who transferred the alleged bones of Orestes from Aricia to Rome (Green 2007, 40–48). The passages by Virgil and Ovid that I will now discuss must be seen in this context.

When Virgil enumerates the Latin heroes ready to go out to fight the Trojans, he names among them Virbius ([Aen. 7.761–764](#)). Right at the beginning he surprises the reader, especially the one who knows Euripides well, by the paradoxical formulation “*Hippolyti proles . . . Virbius*” ([7.761ff.](#)). In his version, he states that a certain Virbius was the son of Hippolytus and that he was educated in the grove of Egeria (a Latin nymph and the wife of King Numa)—that is, in the sanctuary of Diana at Aricia—and was sent to fight by his *mater Aricia*. It is disputed whether *mater* in this sentence carries a local or personal meaning, but the obvious parallel to Augustus’s mother as well as the adjacent *Hippolyti proles* “suggest a personal

¹⁶ See also [Suetonius, *Aug.* 4.1](#).

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sense” (Horsfall 2000, 479).¹⁷ After this surprising introduction, Virgil goes on to tell the traditional aetiological story (7.765–780), starting with *ferunt fama* (“rumor goes”) and ending with the remark that this story explains why horses are forbidden in the sanctuary of Diana at Aricia.¹⁸ Virgil first sums up the content of the Euripidean tragedy in two verses and then recounts Hippolytus’s coming back to life: he was called back to life (*revocatus*) by the herbs of Asclepius and the love of Diana (*amore Dianae*). Then Virgil tells how Asclepius was punished by death for this through Jupiter (*pater ominipotens*) and does not forget to stress the fact that Asclepius was the son of Apollo (*Phoebigena*). In the end, Diana brings Hippolytus to the remote shrine at Aricia, where he hides under his new name Virbius. When looking back at the beginning of the passage on Virbius, the reader is astonished by the fact that the Latin hero Virbius mentioned there with his *mater Aricia* is not the transformed Hippolytus, but the son (Virbius II) of Hippolytus (= Virbius I).

Why did Virgil spend so many verses on this rather obscure story? Why does he duplicate Hippolytus/Virbius by inventing a son of his, also called Virbius as a Latin hero with a *mater Aricia*? For Green (2007, 210) it is clear that Augustus must have been interested in the figure of Virbius “as a way to transform *Aricina mater* from Antony’s vile insult to a courtier’s compliment.” But in fact we cannot know if Augustus really was interested in this detail of Arician mythology, even if it is very probable that he was highly interested in the famous Latin sanctuary in general (as discussed above). But what we can know is that it was Virgil who combined *mater Aricia*, which hints at Augustus, with an (invented?) figure Virbius II, who is said to be the son of Hippolytus/Virbius I. I would like to suggest that Virgil might have constructed, on the basis of

¹⁷ The Latin reads: *Ibat et Hippolyti proles pulcherrima bello, / Virbius, insignem quem mater Aricia.*

¹⁸ The Latin text of Virgil is from Mynors 1969; translations are my own, though the reader may also wish to see Ahl 2007. The linked hypertext is to the older Loeb edition, Fairclough 1916–1918.

mater Aricia, a parallel between Augustus and Virbus II. This was not possible for Hippolytus/Virbius I, who was traditionally the son of Theseus and an Amazon (Hippolyte or Antiope). If one takes this suggestion, a new interpretive possibility opens: it might be that Virgil's story of Hippolytus/Virbius is a parallel to the transformation from human being to god which Julius Caesar underwent, and whose temple was dedicated in 29 BCE. Even if one denies such a direct relation, it is nevertheless possible to state with Denys Feeney (1998, 108–14) and Alessandro Barchiesi (1997, 112–19) that the Augustan poets were not only highly interested in the new categories coming into play when Roman politics started to practice very specific forms of ruler cult, but they also reflected on the forms and consequences of this new phenomenon in and for their poetry, and thus for religious discourse in general. So one could say that Virgil chooses the story of Hippolytus/Virbius as a model for understanding what happened to Julius Caesar and what probably would happen to his son Augustus after his death.

What must stay an educated guess in the case of Virgil becomes much more obvious in the case of Ovid, who treats the story of Hippolytus coming back to life as Virbius in two rather long passages of his extant oeuvre: in the [Fasti \(6.733–762\)](#)¹⁹ and in the very last book of the [Metamorphoses \(15.497–546\)](#).

In the last part of the sixth book of the *Fasti*, our story forms part of a passage that is devoted to Asclepius from its beginning: on the 21st of June it comes to explain the constellation of the *Ophiuchus* or *Anguifer*, a boy holding two snakes who is identified by Ovid and others as Asclepius.²⁰ Ovid is thus more interested in the fate of this hero-god than in the transformation of Hippolytus to Virbius, which he mentions only very briefly ([6.755ff.](#)). Instead he narrates in detail the procedure of Hippolytus's revivification by Asclepius and draws a line to another story of coming back to life in which snakes play an important role—namely, the narrative about Glaucus, the son of Minos, brought back to life by the seer and healer Polyeidus. In that

¹⁹ He also mentions the story shortly at [Fasti 3.265ff.](#)

²⁰ For *katasterismoi* see above, n. 13.

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story, Glaucus has fallen in a jar of honey and dies. King Minos shuts Polyeidus into his son's grave, where the seer observes how a dead snake is healed by another one; by using the same herb as that used by the snake, Polyeidus succeeds in reviving Glaucus.²¹ Littlewood (2006, 215) rightly remarks in his commentary that Ovid interweaves "the theme of *anguis* and *anguifer* with a multiplicity of motifs of rebirth and apotheosis." In what follows, Ovid draws the attention of the reader to the problem that the gods punish such transgressions of the boundaries between life and death harshly: "Clymenus (i.e., Hades) and Clotho are resentful . . . Jupiter, fearing the precedent, aimed his thunderbolts down at the very man who had employed the power of too great an art [*qui nimiae noverat artis opem*]" (6.757–760).²² This prepares the reader for the witty highlight at the end of the story: Jupiter consoles the angry Apollo by restoring Asclepius to the constellation of *Ophiuchus*, which means that Asclepius is not only revived but becomes a god: "Phoebus, you were complaining. He's a god, be reconciled with your father. For your sake he himself does what he forbids to be done" (6.761ff.).

Ovid clearly wanted to tell his readers that transcending the boundary between life and death has to do not only with skills but also and more so with power and hierarchies: Asclepius is punished severely because he had done his job too well. Polyeidus is a seer who is punished by an arrogant king who does not accept the fact that his son has died. Jupiter claims the right to transgress any boundaries, even the most dangerous ones between life and death. Does this reflect Augustan politics? As already argued in discussing the passage on Virbius/Hippolytus by Virgil, there cannot be any doubt that Augustan writers were reflecting on the conceptual and

²¹ Only extant in [Apollodorus, *Bibl.* 3.3.1](#). But it must have been known to Athenian dramatists since the time of Aeschylus (for example: Aeschylus, *Kressai*; Sophocles, *Manteis*; Euripides, *Polyidos*; Aristophanes, frag. 468–476 *PCG*).

²² This and the following translations are from Wiseman and Wiseman 2011.

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religious consequences of apotheosis at Rome. And compared to Virgil, Ovid is clearly more interested in exposing the dimension of political and cultural power in this domain. It is quite probable that he wanted at the end of the *Fasti* to compare himself—a poet sent into exile by the powerful Augustus—with Apollo’s gifted son, the one who fell not into oblivion (like Hippolytus) but into “immortality, by Jupiter, whose supreme power has been threatened ‘by excessive art’” (Littlewood 2006, 219ff.).²³

This argument might also be supported by the fact that Asclepius is important for the discussion of apotheosis in the *Metamorphoses* as well, where the introduction of his cult at Rome is compared to the introduction of the cult of Julius Caesar. In the last book of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid tells another quite elaborate version of the myth of Hippolytus becoming Latin Virbius ([Metam. 15.485–546](#)). As often, the poet surprises his readers with a yet unknown and humorous way to tell a traditional story. In *Metam.* 15, Virbius forms part of the wider narrative on King Numa and his wife, the nymph Egeria. After the king has died, Egeria is inconsolable to the point that, in the end, she will fade away by being transformed into a spring. But before this happens, she meets Virbius in the precinct of Diana Nemorensis and he tries to console her by telling her his own story. This leads to the remarkable fact that we read the myth about Hippolytus-Virbius as first-person narration in a rather long passage ([15.500–546](#)). After he has described the traumatic experience of the chariot accident in gruesome detail, he goes on to speak about his own death. To the reader’s surprise, he goes to the underworld in his very body: “Also, I have seen the realms that lack light, / I have soothed my mangled body in Phlegethon’s water” ([15.531–532](#)).²⁴ Different from the version in the *Fasti*, Jupiter’s anger is only briefly mentioned; the medicine of “Apollo’s offspring” gives him back his

²³ Littlewood (2006) expands this argument; see also Newlands 1995, 175–208.

²⁴ The Latin reads as follows: “*vidi quoque luce carentia regna / et lacerum fovi Phlegethontide corpus in unda.*” Both text and English translations are from Hill 2000.

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life ([15.533–535](#)). More important is the following agency of Diana, who first conceals and then transforms him: “Then, in case my presence might increase envy / of my gift, Cynthia cast thick clouds over me, / and, so that I might be safe and could be seen with impunity, / she added to my age and left me with a face / that could not be recognized” ([15.536–540](#)). The *aition* with the horses is only alluded. Diana changed his name to Virbius, because the name Hippolytus “could have been a reminder of horses” ([15.542ff.](#)). At the end of his story, Hippolytus/Virbius describes his existence in the grove of Diana Nemorensis: “Since then I have dwelt in this grove and, as one of the lesser gods, / I have hidden under the protection of my mistress and am enrolled in her retinue” ([15.545ff.](#)). As already mentioned, his story does not help Egeria—but as Virbius himself, in the end she is saved by Diana: “She [i.e., Egeria] dissolved into tears, until Phoebus’s sister / was moved by the piety of her grieving and made a cool spring / from her body, and thinned her limbs into eternal waters” ([15.549–551](#)).

Compared to all other versions discussed until now, Ovid’s is the only one to lay clear stress on individual experience. Because Hippolytus/Virbius tells his story in the first person, the reader automatically asks: How is it possible that there is an “I” which remains the same although it undergoes death, transformation, and renaming? What really comes as a surprise is the fact that this “I” is not a soul separated from the body, because Virbius tells that after his death he went to the underworld with his badly injured body. This almost reminds us of Jewish-Christian ideas that were developed roughly at the same time and insisted on bodily resurrection (Nickelsburg 2006). And it stands in a kind of opposition to the model that is presented *in extenso* by Ovid immediately before the story about Numa’s death and Egeria’s grief: Pythagorean metempsychosis (15.60–478). Pythagoras praises the peaceful life in the Golden Age when human beings did not even slaughter animals but instead opted for a vegetarian life; as in Ovid’s poem, the basic principle in the world is continuous change ([15.454ff.](#)). He ends up with the concrete description of the

migration of souls as the ultimate cause for a vegetarian diet (15.456–478). Although Numa was taught all this by Pythagoras, he installs Roman religion with bloody sacrifices instructed by the same goddesses, the *Camenae*, who also inspire the poets. At least he succeeds in bringing his people, who are used to “ferocious war,” to a more peaceful way of life (15.482–485). When he dies, nothing is said about the migration of his soul; instead of this, Ovid tells how his folk and especially the women were mourning; he then moves on to the story of Egeria’s excessive mourning, her encounter with Hippolytus and his story, and further narrates how Diana also saved Egeria by transforming her into a spring. All this happens in a sanctuary where, at least according to the tradition, the main priest was installed after he had murdered a human being. We thus find a pattern that resembles Euripides’s confrontation of an Orphic Hippolytus and his vegetarian diet with the fact of his own gruesome death, Theseus’s mourning, and the hero tomb with its cult. At first sight, both poets seem to be on the side of a clear separation between life and death, and one is tempted to think that they deny alternative ideas such as Orphic and Pythagorean metempsychosis. But at least in the case of Ovid, things are more complicated. Certainly there is a relationship between the praise of a cosmic principle of change in Pythagoras’s speech in *Metam.* 15.165 (*omnia mutantur, nihil interit*) and Ovid’s own epic poem that consists of nothing but mythological stories about transformations. The combination of the Pythagorean model with the story about Egeria and Hippolytus can be read on a poetological level: it is the poet who is fully conscious of the eternal change, and yet by his storytelling he and his poem will never die. His ability forms part of the religious discourse. As Euripides insisted on the function of poetry in hero cult, so Ovid draws a parallel between the Pythagorean speech and his poem.²⁵ But does this mean that Ovid’s sympathy is on the side of Pythagorean metempsychosis, whereas Euripides tends to the

²⁵ Pythagoras presents himself as inspired by a god and speaks of “my own Delphi” (15.143ff.); Numa is inspired by the Latin Muses, the *Camenae*, when he installs Roman religion (15.482).

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more conservative model of hero cult, which is related to Athenian identity and politics?

To conclude, I suggest that Ovid, like Euripides—but in a quite different way—connects his poetry and especially his stories about the boundaries between life, death, and (im)mortality with the political dimension of the religious discourse. When looking at the narrative structure of the whole of book 15 of the *Metamorphoses*, one recognizes that there is even more on these boundaries than the speech by Pythagoras and the story about Hippolytus/Virbius. In this book the *epos* comes, so to speak, down to the present time and place (Italy and Rome). The very last transformation story told by Ovid is the one of Julius Caesar, whose “soul” (*anima*) is saved by Venus and brought directly to the stars, notably with the permission of Jupiter:

[Jupiter speaking:] Meanwhile, snatch up this soul from the
slaughtered body / and make it into a star so that Divine Julius
may always look out / from his dwelling-place on high at our
Capitol and forum.' / Scarcely had he said these things when
bounteous Venus stood / in the middle of the senate, unseen
by anyone, and snatched / The fresh soul of her own Caesar
from its body, not letting it / Be dissolved into the air, and she
brought it to the heavenly stars. ([15.840–846](#))

At this point, it is interesting to look back again at Pythagoras's speech, which describes the fate of the soul after death quite differently:

O race stupefied by the dread of cold death, / why do you fear
Styx, why the shades and empty words, / the stuff of bards
and the dangers of a false world? / Your bodies, whether it is
the pyre that removes them with its flame, or long time / with
decay, you must not think of them as able to suffer any evils; /
souls are free from death, and, when they have left their
earlier abode, / they always live in new homes and dwell
where they have been received. ([15.153–159](#))

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Clearly the story about Hippolytus/Virbius belongs to the “empty words, the stuff of bards” (*nomina vana . . . materiem vatum*). For a modern reader it is astonishing that Ovid tells the story nevertheless. In his *Epistulae ex Ponto* ([4.8.55–56](#)) one reads: “Gods too were made by poetics, if it is permissible to say” (*Di quoque carminibus, si fas est dicere, fiunt*). Whereas Euripides only equates his storytelling with the cultural memory of local, cultic songs, Ovid goes further. With his poetry and especially the *Metamorphoses*, he does something new: on the one hand, he tells hundreds of traditional aetiological stories (Waldner 2007, 2014); on the other hand, he tells them in a demonstratively new way. This is necessary not only because of the new spatial dimension of the Roman Empire, but especially because of the challenge of the emperor cult to the traditional categories of hero, god, and human being. In the last book of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid represents himself as a poet who is fully aware of the challenges of the empire as a cultural space, so aptly described by Glen Bowersock (1994). In combining three different stories about coming back to life—the Pythagorean model, the story told about Hippolytus/Virbius, and the one of Julius Caesar told by the inspired *vates* himself—Ovid tells his readers that he is in the powerful position of making sense of contemporary pagan religion by forming a continuing narrative based on traditional stories. He thus sees himself as not dependent on political or religious discourses, although he is well conscious that he has a voice within both. In the famous last lines of the *Metamorphoses* he triumphantly states that he will come back to life in his own way:

And now I have completed a work which neither Jove's anger,
nor fire, / Nor sword, nor devouring age will be able to
destroy. / When it wishes, let that day, which has no power
except / Over this body, finish the span of my uncertain
lifetime; / but, with the better part of me, I shall be borne for
ever / above the stars on high, and my name will be indelible;
/ and, where Roman power extends over subdued lands, / I
shall be read by the nations, and, through all the ages, in
fame, / (if there is any truth in the predictions of bards) I shall
live. ([15.871–879](#))

V. CONCLUSION

The foregoing suggests that the story about Hippolytus's coming back to life was good to think with. From quite early on, somewhere in the sixth century BCE, it was possible to tell at least two stories about Hippolytus. The first was linked to the figure and cult of Asclepius and held that Hippolytus was revived by the excellent skills of the healer hero, whom Zeus consequently punished. On the other side, one finds a hero cult related to tombs in Attica and Sparta. This made Hippolytus a figure who, from the fifth century onwards, oscillated between hero and god, like Asclepius, Heracles, and the Dioskouroi. The religious discourse of archaic and classical Greece needed this type of figure to discuss the setting of boundaries between life and death, between mortality and immortality, between hero, human being, and god. In the first part of this chapter, I concentrated on the example of Euripides. In his extant tragedy *Hippolytus*, he formulates his contribution to the religious and political discourse of his time by telling one version of the Hippolytus story. He insists on the importance of a local, tomb-related hero cult highly relevant to Athenian political identity. At the same time, he lets the audience know that he is well aware of two facts: on the one hand, that alternative discourses exist, such as the one promoted by Orphic practitioners; and on the other, he recognizes the cruelty of the traditional gods and their power to set strict boundaries between life and death. As far as his poetry is concerned, he relates and maybe also equates its function to the traditional hero cult.

In Hellenistic and imperial times, the myths of Hippolytus were further developed. The authors (Callimachus, Virgil, Ovid, Pausanias) used them as a space where they could discuss boundaries and their transgression. The story that Asclepius brought Hippolytus back to life became more important in the Hellenistic and Roman eras than in the archaic and classical epoch. It was enriched by the concept of *katasterismos* and by the idea that Hippolytus not only transgressed the boundary between life and death, but also between Greece and Rome by being transported after

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his revivification to the sanctuary of Diana Nemorensis at Aricia. On the Greek side, we find Pausanias, who provides evidence that these ideas were not only formulated in poetry, but also influenced or reflected developments at certain cult sites where the tomb of Hippolytus lost its importance/meaning. Finally, the most refined and complicated elaboration of the story is found in the Augustan poetry of Virgil and Ovid. Because of the high political significance of the sanctuary of Diana at Aricia—indeed, of Diana in general—and the symbolism of the archaic ritual of the *rex Nemorensis*, the *mater Aricina* of Augustus, they used the story of Hippolytus becoming Virbius to reflect upon both apotheosis and the new political, religious, and poetological consequences of Augustus's reign. Virgil plays with the idea of an oxymoron: there was a son engendered by chaste Hippolytus/Virbius (*Hippolyti proles*), also called Virbius. By giving him a *mater Aricia*, he draws a parallel not only between Augustus and Virbius II, but also between their fathers, Hippolytus/Virbius and Julius Caesar, who was transformed into a constellation and treated as a god in Rome. In the sixth book of the *Fasti*, Ovid draws the reader's attention to Jupiter acting out his power in a rather cruel and absurd way: he punishes Asclepius for his skills and afterwards, by transforming him into a star constellation, he himself does exactly the same thing for which he had punished Asclepius. I have suggested that Ovid thinks the emperor has punished him in an (unjust) way, much like Jupiter did to Asclepius. In the last book of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid formulates the story of Hippolytus's revivification and transformation in a highly original way. Virbius tells it in the form of a first-person narrative to Egeria, the widow of king Numa. For the first time, a poet telling the Hippolytus story asks the question: what happens to a person's identity when a person comes back to life and is transformed into a god at the same time? Interestingly, this identity seems somehow connected to the body, which is described as going into and returning from the underworld. Ovid enlarges this discourse by combining the story with Pythagoras's speech on metempsychosis with the story about Caesar's apotheosis. Ovid thus

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shows himself as a poet and *vates* who is able to see beyond all these religious, philosophical, and political ways of drawing and transgressing boundaries between life and death, between human beings, gods, and heroes. Through his poetry, he as a poet will never have to come back to life because he will never die, transcending all boundaries of time and space—in the same way as the political power of the Roman Empire.

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