

On Not Looking at a Gorgon: Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.217

Finding himself alone in the midst of his (quite literally) petrified army, Phineus attempts to surrender (*Met.* 5.210-18):¹

paenitet iniusti tunc denique Phinea belli. 210
 sed quid agat? simulacra uidet diuersa figuris
 agnoscitque suos et nomine quemque uocatum
 poscit opem credensque parum sibi proxima tangit
 corpora: marmor erant; auertitur atque ita supplex
 confessasque manus obliquaque brachia tendens 215
 ‘uincis’, ait, ‘Perseu! remoue tua monstra tuaeque
 saxificos uultus, quaecumque ea, tolle Medusae:
 tolle, precor’
 217 ea] est e₁ est ea *W*

The variants *est* and *ea* in 217 are quite old, since both must have been in some parent of *W*, which can be dated to 1275.² Most editors prefer *ea*, though Slater and Breitenbach prefer *est*,³ and the parallels which Slater provides (*quaecumque es* 9.312, *quodcumque est* 10.405, *quicumque est*, *V. Aen.* 5.83) suggest that they are right to do so.⁴

However, there is a larger problem with *quaecumque*, whether we read *ea* or *est*. Why should Phineus say of Medusa, ‘whoever she is’? His own words show that he already knows her name, that she is a monster, that Perseus possesses her head, and that

¹ Text and apparatus are quoted from W. S. Anderson’s Teubner edition (Leipzig, 1977): variants which are not pertinent to the point in question are omitted.

² The evidence for the date is a hexametric subscription: cf. F. Munari, *Catalogue of the MSS of Ovid’s Metamorphoses* (BICS Supplement 4), London, 1957. Anderson’s *W* = Munari 345 = Vat. lat. 5859. Since the unmetrical nature of *W*’s *est ea* would have been obvious to most scribes, it seems likely to have come from no further back than the immediate parent of *W*, though the date of that is unknowable.

³ D. A. Slater, *Towards a Text of the Metamorphoses of Ovid*, Oxford, 1927; H. Breitenbach, *Ovids Metamorphosen*, Zürich, 1958. In his notes on this passage, F. Bömer (*P. Ovidius Naso, Metamorphosen, Buch IV-V*, Heidelberg 1976, *ad loc.*) provides full comments on the ‘ungewöhnliche Eindringlichkeit’ of Perseus’ appeal, as reflected in the fullness and ‘rhetorische Intensität’ of Ovid’s language, but has nothing on the textual question except a bare mention of Breitenbach’s preference for *est*.

⁴ P. Burman (Amsterdam, 1727) recommends *ea* in our passage, and also reads *quicumque is* in *Aeneid* 5.83, against the manuscripts, defending his choice by referring to *Ov. Tr.* 3.11.56 and 3.12.43, which read *quisquis is es* and *quisquis is est*, respectively. I do not see how passages containing both a demonstrative and a verb can be used as evidence either way, when the meter forces us to choose between them.

that head turns men to stone: the last fact has just been demonstrated to him at great — some might say excessive — length. Any other interesting particulars are surely irrelevant to one in Phineus' position. Lafaye's comment serves to illustrate the problem: after translating *quaecumque ea* 'quelle que puisse être ta Méduse', he remarks in a footnote 'Il ne sait d'où elle vient ni comment Persée la possède',⁵ as if Phineus would be likely to join Perseus in an aetiologico-teratological inquiry at this point.⁶

It seems to me that *auertitur* (214) and *obliqua bracchia* (215) provide the clue to understanding this passage. If I am not reading too much into these three words, they create a comical picture of Phineus stretching out his arms in a direction in which he cannot look.⁷ What Phineus does not know, and very much needs to know, is exactly where Medusa is: if he knew that, he would know where not to look. But the only way to find out for sure where she is is to look for her, and once he spots her it will be too late not to look. That is Phineus' dilemma, and Ovid's little joke.⁸ All Phineus can do is avert his eyes from where he thinks Perseus is, extend supplicating arms obliquely in that general direction, and hope (in vain) that he will be kind enough to keep Medusa out of sight. Consequently, it seems to me that what Ovid wrote was neither *quaecumque ea* nor *quaecumque est*, but either *quacumque est* or *quacumque es*,⁹ not "take her away, what-

⁵ G. Lafaye, *Ovide, Les Métamorphoses* (Budé), 3 vols., Paris, 1928-30, *ad loc.*

⁶ There are certainly passages in which *quicumque* and *quisquis* imply no doubt as to the identity of the person referred to. A clear example with *quisquis* is *A.A.* 1.440, *uerba, nec exiguas, quisquis es, adde preces*, where *quisquis es* must, as A. S. Hollis says, mean "however superior you consider yourself" (Ovid, *Ars Amatoria, Book I*, Oxford, 1977, *ad loc.*). However, reading our line as if it meant "take away Medusa, however great she is", would be quite inappropriate in this context of abject submission.

⁷ There is conceivably just a hint of the meaning 'zigzag' (*OLD* s.v. *obliquus* 3), with Phineus sticking out his hands alternately to either side.

⁸ It is not entirely unlike the modern joke that the most difficult thing in the world is not to think of a hippopotamus. It would be difficult to avert your eyes from someone who is trying to kill you and is holding something that will have that effect. (No doubt that is also why Phineus does not just close his eyes.)

⁹ Although Ovid usually uses *quacumque* with verbs of motion, as at *Met.* 4.28 (*quacumque ingrederis*), he uses it with *esse* at 12.399 (*quacumque uir est*, of the human portions of the centaur Cyllarus). A case might be made for *ubicumque*, which is more usual with *esse* stated or implied. This would imply a two-stage corruption, from *ubicumque* through *quacumque* to *quaecumque*. This cannot be ruled out, given the common substitution of synonyms and near-synonyms, even when they do not resemble each other paleographically: *ubi* has been corrupted to *qua* in one MS. (Anderson's P) at *Met.* 4.57. The *i* of *ubicumque* is long at *Met.* 7.736, short at *Ib.* 25.

ever she is”, but “take her away, wherever she is” or “wherever you are” — it hardly matters which, since Perseus and Medusa’s head are in very nearly the same place.

It is not at all easy to decide between *quacumque est* and *quacumque es*. I have a slight preference for the former, which is the *lectio facilior*, since *est* is found in two MSS and *es* in none. On the other hand, the fact that the next word begins with *t* would have made corruption of *es* to *est* particularly easy. Furthermore, if Ovid wrote *quacumque es*, corruption to *quaecumque es* would have produced obvious nonsense, with the implication that Perseus is a woman,¹⁰ and a scribe wishing to fix the error would have easily thought of *est* or *ea* as the obvious patch. However, although the precise details of the Latin text are arguable, I believe that my interpretation is sound.

¹⁰ It might have been appropriate for Phineus to question Perseus’ masculinity in this way earlier in the battle, but not now, not while begging for his life.