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Fatifer, mortifer, and letalis in the Roman Culture

Abstract: The aim of this article is to reveal how the adjectives *fatifer*, *mortifer*, and *letalis* function in the ancient Roman literature. Interpretative problems as well as etymology of the title adjectives were discussed on the basis of selected fragments of texts. The significant emphasis was put on the collocations with nouns such as *ensis* (a sword), *ferrum* (a sword, an iron), *iaculum* (a javelin), *arcus* (a bow) and *harundo* (an arrow) in order to create a catalogue of the weapons described with epithet “lethal.”

Key words: death, lethal, Roman literature

The variety of ancient texts that are fortunately extant, as well as all research carried out by literature enthusiasts and experts, allow us not only to discover the history of the inhabitants of the Roman Empire, but also get to know a wide array of both grammatical and lexical structures typical of that times.

Studying the fragments of ancient texts, we come across the adjectives (apart from other linguistic forms) which not only highlighted the features of the described objects, but were also a confirmation of authors' unquestionable talent and ingeniousness. Besides the adjectives which describe the appearance of weapon quite literally, for instance *longus* (long), *brevis* (short), *acutus* (sharp), *uncus* (curved), it is worth pointing out to these which carry metaphoric meaning. Their role is to make the descriptions more vivid and, at the same time, to draw attention even of the most sophisticated readers. Furthermore, it should be stressed that adjectives carrying negative connotations make it easy for a reader to feel a prickle of excitement.

The first adjective worth mentioning herein is *fatifer*. According to the dictionary definition, it means something lethal, fatal or disastrous. Therefore, at first glance, the negative connotations are obvious. If we make an effort to uncover its etymological foundation, we find the verb *ferre* (to carry, to hold) and the noun *fatum* (fate). For the ancients *Fatum* was a divinity of destiny and was directly connected with a belief in inevitability of future events. Nevertheless, in the Roman culture there was also a particular margin for cases defined as *fortuna* or *casus*.¹ The word itself is also etymologically linked with the verb *fari* and initially meant “the word of god,” that was understood as irreversible god’s will.² However, it is necessary to stress that the mentioned god’s will was not always fatal. That is the reason why the adjective *fatifer* can be interpreted simply as carrying destiny and does not necessarily pertain to death – *mors*. The negative meaning of the adjective in a military context results from the person who wields a weapon and whose task was to annihilate an enemy and take opponent’s life. A fragment of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* describing a fierce combat between Centeus (the son of Elatus) and centaurs exemplifies the above:

Capuloque tenus demisit in armos
ensem fatiferum caecamque in viscera movit
 versavitque manum vulnusque in vulnere fecit.³

In the preceding verses of this work Ovid mentions that five centaurs had already died at the hands of Centeus. Meanwhile, he – much to his enemies’ surprise – came out of the skirmish unscathed. He was forced by his insolent word to deal a final, deadly blow to Latreus (the last one from centaurs, who decided to fight with him). The furious centaurs came running soon after. They chose as their main priority to avenge their companion’s death and kill his murderer. They joined forces to crush Centeus by a huge pile of trees. The term *fatifer ensis* can undoubtedly be translated as a “deadly sword.” Each blow given by fighting Centeus turned out to be fatal one for his enemies.

The adjective *fatalis*, used by Statius in the books 6 and 11 of *The Thebaid*, has the same etymological origin. In the first instance it was collocated with the noun *harundo*:

Campum emensa breui **fatalis** ab arbore tacta,
 horrendum uisu, per quas modo fugerat auras,

¹ S. Śnieżewski: *Wojna, pokój i bogowie w starożytnym Rzymie*. Kraków 2006, p. 174.

² P. Grimal: “Fatum.” In: Idem: *Słownik mitologii greckiej i rzymskiej*. Wrocław 1990, p. 98.

³ Ov. *Met.* 12, 492–494: “He drove his deadly sword in the other’s side, and there in his vitals twisted and turned the buried weapon, inflicting wound within wound” (trans. F.J. Miller).

uenit **harundo** retro uersumque a fine tenorem
pertulit, et notae iuxta ruit ora pharetrae.⁴

The main character of the quoted fragment is Adrastus, who commanded the Argive forces in the military expedition against Thebes. He was encouraged to take part in funeral games for the dead Opheltes killed by a snake. Adrastus's task during the competition was to shoot an arrow and hit the target placed on a particular tree. *Fatifer harundo* turned out not to be a fatal arrow in this case, but rather ominous one. While leaders put the blame for the failed arrow flight on unfavourable weather conditions (a fog or a adverse wind), others regarded it as an omen foretelling the commander's sad return from the war.

We deal with a completely different situation in book 11, that is a turning point in the epic. It is a depiction of duel between brothers – Polyneices and Eteocles – who were acting under the influence of the Furies' (Megaera and Tisiphone's) persuasion. The immediate context here is the following: Polyneices has just said goodbye to his wife, father-in-law, and Mycenae, and now he decides to take a steed and an armour from the Fury:

Coeperat et leni senior mulcere furentem
adloquio: scidit orsa nouo terrore cruenta
Eumenis, alipedemque citum **fataliaque arma**
protinus, Inachii uultus expressa Pherecli,
obtulit ac fidas exclusit casside uoces.⁵

Fatalia arma means here fatal, disastrous arms. The duel was instigated by Polyneices, who struck his brother. Eteocles fell to the ground and while pretending dead stubbed Polyneices with a sword when the latter bent in order to defeat the enemy definitely. Both brothers were killed in the fight and Oedipus' curse came true in that way.

In the book 6 of *Metamorphoses* Ovid used the adjective *fatifer* in collocation with the noun *ferrum* (which, in numerous cases in the Roman literature, is an equivalent for terms *gladius* and *ensis*, meaning a sword). This book contains the myths in which a metamorphosis is a punishment sent by gods. In every case it was inflicted on humans for their insolence. Apart from Ariadne, Marsyas, and the Lycian peasants, also Niobe was penalized. She boasted that because of having such numerous offspring (most frequently recurring information says about seven sons and seven

⁴ Stat. *Theb.* 6, 938–941: “The fateful arrow in a moment measured the plain and struck the tree, and then – awful to behold! – came back through the air it but now had traversed and turning homeward from the goal kept on its way, and fell by the mouth of its well-known quiver” (trans. J.H. Mozley).

⁵ Stat. *Theb.* 11, 196–200: “And the aged king had begun to soothe his rage with gentle words: but the cruel Fury broke off his speech with new terrors, and straightway, in the shape of Inachian Phereclus, brought his swift wing-footed steed and fatal arms, and with his helmet closed his ears to trusty counsels” (trans. J.H. Mozley).

daughters), she was better than Leto. That was the reason why the goddess demanded of Apollo and Artemis that they took vengeance and slayed Niobe's children. After the death of Ismenus, Sipylus Phaedimus, and Tantalus, it was Alphenor's turn:

Adspicit Alphenor laniataque pectora plangens
advolat, ut gelidos complexibus adlevet artus,
inque pio cadit officio; nam Delius illi
intima **fatifero** rupit praecordia **ferro**.⁶

Alphenor is killed by the death-dealing steel, the arrowhead shot by Apollo. Reading the Silius Italicus's work, we can find the same noun collocated with the adjective *mortifer* this time. In book 10 of *Punica* the author describes the story of the Moorish hunters who surrounded a den of lion cubs, which were not strong enough to defend themselves. At the very beginning Hannibal was parrying the attack by his shield, but later decided to kill the warriors:

Mortiferum inde manu properantem uellere **ferrum**
pilo Volsonem namque hoc de strage iacentum
fors dabat adfixa sternit per tegmina nare.⁷

Volso died of a javelin blow, a fatal steel – *mortifero ferro* – dealt by Hannibal. The etymological source of the adjective *mortifer* need to be discerned in the noun *mors* (a death, an extermination) and in the verb *ferre*. It is also worth stressing the fact that this adjective is very often collocated by ancient authors with the nouns such as: *bellum* (a war), *poculum* (a glass, a beverage), *aestus* (a heat) and *morbum* (an illness). In each case the meaning of the adjective is determined by its situational context. Furthermore, it is very often used in a collocation with the noun *vulnus*. We can find the engaging example in Livy's *The History of Rome*:

Prima excepta a circumstantibus tela; sustineri deinde uis nequit;
consul **mortifero uulnere** ictus cadit, fusique circa omnes.⁸

In book 2 of his work Livy describes a clash with the Etruscans' army, during which Gnaeus Manlius died. In spite of the eventual Romans' victory, they deplored the death of the two outstanding consuls: Manlius and Quintus Fabius.

⁶ Ov. *Met.* 6, 248–251: “Alphenor saw them die, and beating his breast in agony, he ran to lift up their cold bodies in his arms; and in this pious duty he fell; for Apollo pierced him through the midriff with death-dealing steel” (trans. F.J. Miller).

⁷ Sil. 10, 142–144: “Volso's turn came next. He was trying to pluck forth the fatal steel, when Hannibal laid him low, piercing his nostrils through his shield with a *pilum* which he had chanced to pick up from a heap of corpses” (trans. J.D. Duff).

⁸ Liv. 2, 47, 3: “Their first discharge of javelins was parried by the soldiers who surrounded him, but after that there was no withstanding their violence. The consul fell, mortally wounded, and all about him fled” (trans. B.O. Foster).

The adjectives *letifer* and *letalis* are also etymologically connected with death. They are derived from the Latin term *letum*, which means death, damage, or destruction. The examples of its usage can be found, among others, in Virgil. In book 4 of the *Aeneid* he tells us the story of Dido and Aeneas, who fell in love with each other by gods' will. The author interestingly compares the female lover to a deer stabbed by a lethal arrow:

Uritur infelix Dido totaque uagatur
 urbe furens, qualis coniecta cerua sagitta,
 quam procul incautam nemora inter Cresia fixit
 pastor agens telis liquitque uolatile ferrum
 nescius: illa fuga siluas saltusque peragrat
 Dictaeos; haeret lateri **letalis harundo**.⁹

Their love story ended tragically. Aeneas, who wanted to obey the gods' will, left Carthage. The distraught woman committed suicide. She had ordered to build a stake and threw herself into the flames.

In book 10 Vergil used in turn the adjective *letifer*. *Letifer arcus* (a deadly bow) was a part of Clusium and the city of Cosae inhabitants' weaponry:

Massicus aerata princeps secat aequora Tigri,
 sub quo mille manus iuuenum, qui moenia Clusi
 quique urbem liquere Cosas, quis tela sagittae
 gorytique leues umeris et **letifer arcus**.¹⁰

Another fragment with the adjective *letalis* can be found in book 3 of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*. There we find a description of a clash between crews during a naval battle:

Multi inopes teli **iaculum letale** reuolsum
 uolneribus traxere suis et uiscera laeua
 oppressere manu, ualidos dum praebeat ictus
 sanguis et, hostilem cum torserit, exeat, hastam.¹¹

⁹ Verg. *A.* 4, 68–73: “Wretched Dido burns, and wanders frenzied through the city, like an unwary deer struck by an arrow, that a shepherd hunting with his bow has fired at from a distance, in the Cretan woods, leaving the winged steel in her, without knowing. She runs through the woods and glades of Dicte: the lethal shaft hangs in her side” (trans. A.S. Kline).

¹⁰ Verg. *A.* 10, 166–169: “Massicus cut the waters at their head, in the bronze-armoured Tiger, a band of a thousand warriors under him, leaving the walls of Clusium, and the city of Cosae, whose weapons are arrows, held in light quivers over their shoulders, and deadly bows” (trans. A.S. Kline).

¹¹ Luc. 3, 676–679: “Many a man, for want of a missile, plucked forth the fatal javelin from his own wounds and clutched his vitals with the left hand, that the blood might have time to deal a sturdy and hurl back the enemy's spear before it flowed forth” (trans. J.D. Duff).

Iaculum letale in this case is a fatal shell or a javelin, which was disastrous for the opponents.

The adjective *letalis*, similarly to previously mentioned *fatifer*, not always means “lethal.” Its connotations with death very often depend on numerous factors, also cultural ones. The nouns which are preceded with that adjective more than once become harbingers of unhappy events as well as unpredictable difficulties. The example can be a fragment of *The Golden Ass* (or *Metamorphoses*), where Apuleius used the adjective *letalis* in collocation with the noun *difficultas* (difficulty):

Sed cum primum praedicti iugi conterminos locos appulit, videt rei vastae
letalem difficultatem.¹²

Psyche was sent by Venus for a bottle of water from a dark stream, which had its source on the top of a steep mountain. The peak turned out to be very slippery, therefore a moment’s inattention or any sudden move could lead to death. Despite the imminent danger Psyche completed the task. In that case the adjective *letalis* did not concern difficulty that leads to death, but rather emphasised a possibility of a tragic end.

The similar interpretative problem occurs in book 10 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Its main character is Myrrha, Adonis’ mother. The child was born as a result of the incestuous relationship of Myrrha with her father, king Cinyras. She was torn apart by contradictory emotions and doubts to the bitter end, but the love to her father turned out to be stronger:

Ter pedis offensi signo est revecata, ter omen
Funereus bubo **letali carmine** fecit.¹³

In the quoted fragment the adjective *letalis* is used in collocation with the noun *carmen* (a song). However, in this context it does not mean a lethal song, but an ominous one. It is worth taking into consideration the fact that a screech-owl was regarded as an ominous bird in Roman culture. That undoubtedly could explain the usage of the adjective *letalis*. Myrrha, feeling a deep aversion to her emotions and passions, was trying to commit suicide. Yet she was brought back to life by her minder, whom she confided her problems. Thanks to a plotted intrigue Myrrha – while the Cinyras’ wife was absent – spent a few nights with her father. One night the king felt a desire to know who his mistress was. Having recognized his own daughter, got hold of a sword ready to kill her. Myrrha escaped and a divinity answered her request for rescue. She was metamorphosed into a tree.

¹² Apul. *Met.* 6, 14, 1: “When she was come up to the ridge of the hill, she perceived that it was very deadly and impossible to bring it to pass” (trans. W. Adlington).

¹³ Ov. *Met.* 10, 452–454: “Thrice was Myrrha stopped by the omen of the stumbling foot; thrice did the funeral screech-owl warn her by his uncanny cry” (trans. F.J. Miller).

The epithets *fattier*, *mortifer*, and *letal*, which are willingly used by the ancient authors, undoubtedly deserve readers' attention. Thanks to their negative connotations they capture the imagination illustrating both, war reality and terror of the events at the same time. Moreover, they reveal authors' aspiration to originality as well as to uniqueness. That is why metaphors in texts acquire not only instrumental but also aesthetic significance. According to Aristotle's theory it becomes a form of noticing (typical of bright people) a resemblance between words meaning and objects which are described by these terms. Using the terms and views which are unattainable for human senses, it creates curiosities, which express author's feelings. What is more, it is a valuable instrument of intellectual in-depth understanding of the world and achieving of its contemporary ideals.