

THE LOVER GOES POSTAL. OVID'S *AMORES* 1.11

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Colligere incertos et in ordine ponere crines
docta neque ancillas inter habenda Nape
inque ministeriis furtivae cognita noctis
utilis et dandis ingeniosa notis,
saepe uenire ad me dubitantem hortata Corinnam, 5
saepe laboranti fida reperta mihi,
accipe et ad dominam peraratas mane tabellas
perfer et obstantes sedula pelle moras.
nee silicum uenae nec durum in pectore ferrum
nec tibi simplicitas ordine maior adest; 10
credibile est et te sensisse Cupidinis arcus:
in me militiae signa tuere tuae.
si quaeret quid agam, spe noctis uiuere dices;
cetera fert blanda cera notata manu.
dum loquor, hora fugit: uacuae bene redde tabellas, 15
uerum continuo fac tamen illa legat.
aspicias oculos mando frontemque legentis:
et tacito uultu scire futura licet.
nec mora, perlectis rescribat multa iubeto:
odi, cum late splendida cera uacat. 20
comprimat ordinibus uersus, oculosque moretur
margine in extremo littera rasa meos.
quid digitos opus est graphio lassare tenendo?
hoc habeat scriptum tota tabella 'ueni.'
non ego uictrices lauro redimire tabellas 25
nec Veneris media ponere in aede morer.
subscribam VENERI FIDAS SIBI NASO MINISTRAS
DEDICAT. AT NVPER VILE FVISTIS ACER¹

[1] The text is taken from the Oxford Classical Text, edited by E.J. Kenney.

Amores 1.11 demonstrates amply Ovid's skillful and original treatment of the genre of amatory epistle as seen in the context of Latin elegiac poetry. The most intimate form of epistolary writing is re-created in the hands of the Augustan elegiac poets, Propertius and Ovid. The latter especially re-invents the *topos* in his own way.² When a lover composes a love letter, it is addressed to the object of his/her affection and intended for a particular recipient to read. Access, therefore, is denied to the public, and the claim for proprietary and privacy interest is guaranteed in his love epistles. No poet, however, composes without an invisible audience. What is created as a personal missive by the poet/lover to an individual becomes available as a text to the reader. Reading such a poem, the reader (not the recipient) becomes a voyeur or eavesdropper. Such an act of readership violates the boundary between the private and the public. My intention is to examine how Ovid explores this phenomenon and inverts—or rather upsets—the formula in *Amores* 1.11.

Among the earliest compositions, the *Amores* were originally published in five separate books and were reduced to three books (what we now possess) in the second edition, as attested in the introductory epigram of Book 1. The date of composition is generally assigned to the 20s B.C.³ when Ovid himself was in his twenties. He is quick to announce his debt to the masters of Roman poetry, toeing and challenging the line defined by his contemporaries such as Gallus, Tibullus, and Propertius,⁴ to Horace, and to older influences as Catullus, the Hellenistic poets, and comedy. Ovid was the youngest among the Augustan poets. His Corinna, albeit a composite figure of an elegiac *domina*/mistress, is modeled on Catullus' Lesbia, Gallus' Lycoris, Tibullus' Delia, and Propertius' Cynthia.⁵ Corinna inhabits a make-believe world created by Ovid the poet for his *persona*, the lover, in which episodes and situations are re-enacted to display the changing moods, emotions, and thoughts of the lover in the course of a single poem. The *Amores* contain a series of high drama depicting the lover's life and experience—be it real or imaginary. To quote one critic: the *Amores* “present a comprehensive image of what a young man's existence is like when it is dominated by a passionate attachment.”⁶ According to another scholar, Ovid launched

[2] Numbered among the Ovidian opus is a collection of epistles: *Heroides* (or *Epistulae Heroidum*), imaginary letters addressed by legendary women to absent husbands or lovers; *Tristia*, written en route to and upon arrival at Tomis (where he was banished by Augustus) and addressed to the emperor, the poet's wife, and unnamed recipients; and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, poems written in exile to named addressees.

[3] See Syme 1978: 6 for his reconstruction of the chronology for Ovid's poetic career. Binns 1973: 3 argues that the *Amores* were composed during 25-15 B.C. and the revision earlier in the last decade B.C.

[4] Rand 1925: 9-10. Ovid was the last of the Latin elegiac poets, who exhausted the genre with his wit and facile play with words and *topoi*.

[5] Wilkinson 1962: 7. The mistresses of the Roman elegiac poets belonged to the class of courtesans, who could provide physical and mental pleasures and were not put on a pedestal of love.

[6] Frankel 1945: 1.

a new phase of Latin love-elegy by which "we are to be entertained and not moved."⁷ Indeed, the Ovidian lover is at one and the same time duplicitous and manipulative, and naive and disarming. No one woman, not even Corinna herself, can monopolise his attentions. But Ovid, the lover, must monopolise his mistress' affection. As the reader follows the vicissitudes of his love affairs (beside Corinna, there are other women), he/she is challenged and amused by the art and artifice of the poet.

Scholarship on Ovid has been scarce in indirect proportion to the influences he has exerted over the millennia. The *Amores* have finally received the scholarly attention that they deserve with the publication of two recent monographs devoted entirely to Ovid's loves poems.⁸ M.L. Stapleton looks forward to Ovid's imitators and Barbara Boyd looks backwards to his imitations. Suffice it to say that in the collection of love-elegy, the poet represents love as a game in which the lover is either an adroit or impudent player, depending on the amorous situation in which he is located. Stapleton identifies him as the "*desultor amoris*" (the circus-rider in training) jumping from mount to mount, always fickle and never constant, but ultimately shown to be "an ordinary man who makes ordinary mistakes."⁹ I agree with most commentators who see a *persona* of the lover in Ovid's corpus. It is the Ovidian lover who occupies centre stage in this sequence of love poems. The delayed introduction of his mistress, Corinna (until the fifth poem of Book 1), betrays the insignificance of the object of his love and of his poetry. Ovid the poet is always in control and is conscious of his own detachment, cleverness, and facile play with words and *topoi*.¹⁰ Each poem is in itself a *narratio*: it tells an episode whereby the lover undergoes physical and emotional (even psychological) turmoil or gratification.¹¹

I now turn to a reading of *Amores* 1.11: in twenty-eight lines, this elegy runs the gamut of the lover's wishful thinking to despairing reality.¹² The poem begins with a flattery of Nape for her skill as Corinna's handmaiden and continues into a

[7] Wilkinson 1962: 16.

[8] Stapleton 1996 begins with a chapter on the *Amores* in which he identifies the Ovidian *persona* as the "*desultor amoris*" (a circus-rider in training), on whom the focus of this sequence of poems lies. He also traces Ovidian influences in later literary tradition. As the title of her book suggests, Boyd 1997 emphasises imitation in Ovid's *Amores*, with a discussion on the different types of imitation and Ovid's sources (other than Vergil and Propertius). It is not only imitative but also the parodic aspect in the *Amores* that concerns Boyd. See also Anderson 1995: xiv-xx. In his introduction, he discusses the poets and trends following in the footsteps of Ovid. His imitators were many and spanned from the first century A.D. to the twelfth century.

[9] Stapleton 1996: 9.

[10] Binns 1973: 1 and Anderson 1995: xiii stress the significance of the amusing and clever Ovidian poet, as opposed to the Ovidian lover/hero, who at times is "a caricature of the elegiac lover" (Binns 1973: 6 and 41).

[11] Binns 1973: 9 dissects the general approach in each poem.

[12] Binns 1973: 30-35 is one of the few critics who includes a discussion of *Amores* 1.11.

praise of her devotion to Ovid's cause (vv. 1-6). Flattery alternates with exhortation (vv. 7-12) –all in an effort to persuade her to deliver his love letter to her mistress. Nape is not only skilled in dressing her mistress's hair (vv. 1-2), she is also a sympathetic ally and advocate for the lover (vv. 5-6). In his opinion, she is elevated above the rank of slaves (v. 2) and is experienced in the art of love and the state of being in love (vv. 11-12); hence his equal. In his eagerness (or perhaps desperation) for an enthusiastic response from Corinna, Ovid rehearses her reading of the letter and her response (vv. 17-24). He instructs Nape to ensure that Corinna read the letter at once and to watch carefully her reaction (vv. 16-18). He suddenly becomes concerned with the image of Corinna exerting herself over writing an answer to his message (v. 23). In his heart of hearts, he wills the answer to be brief and succinct: "come!" ("veni," v. 24). The poem ends in a four-line triumphal dedication to Venus –what the poet would do if Corinna's response were favourable (vv. 25-28). This closure opens up a suspense in that the reader is swept away by Ovid's imagination, and, nonetheless, is still denied the knowledge of Corinna's response.

We are never privy to the contents of the poet's missive to his mistress. The poem does not contain a love letter, but the despatch of a letter. The writing and reading of the letter remain a private affair. The entrusting of it into the hands of the maid (Nape) of the lover (Corinna) becomes public inasmuch as the reader is allowed to participate in the process. The text is layered. The reception of the love missive by the mistress informs the poem and exposes the lover's anxiety. Ovid the lover is concerned with Corinna's receptivity –how his letter will be received, read, and responded to. Ovid the poet, on the other hand, plays the mastermind dictating the reading and reception of a love letter. The reader, caught in the embarrassment of the reading, is exposed to the dictates of the poet. By creating a narrative in which Corinna is depicted as a potentially sympathetic reader of his love letter, Ovid instructs the reader how it should respond to the letter, although what the reader is not told is its contents. It is as if the author himself practised censorship.

The genre of letter writing is extended to its limit when the poem represents neither the epistle itself nor the voice of the lover to his beloved. *Amores* 1.11 hinges on the lover's discourse, which is in the process of being transferred to Corinna's maid. Nape is made responsible for conveying the letter (love) to the *domina* (a double entendre here since Corinna is both Ovid's and Nape's mistress). Love is far removed from the poem. It is the lover and his rampant imagination (or fancy, if you will) that occupy the bulk of the elegy. His agony and mind are made evident in the course of the reading. In a subtle way, however, Ovid the poet re-directs the reader's gaze to his own poetic creativity. The poem constitutes a mental and psychological exercise, which re-defines reading and readership within the elegiac canon. The text, therefore, is appropriated as a vehicle for the author to manipulate his reader.

I would like to elaborate on Stapleton's remark: "Corinna has no reason to exist except as fodder for elegiacs."¹³ The power of poetic creativity is connected with the power of immortalisation. Ovid, like his fellow Augustan poets, is well aware of the ability of the author, through the text, to confer immortality on his subject. After all, the text, and not the author, will endure (Horace's "*exegi monumentum*," *Carmina* 3.30.1). The Latin elegiac poets immortalise not only the object of their love but also the subject of their poetry by one stroke of the pen. In *Amores* 1.11, Ovid enhances (even abuses) this power when he chooses to omit from the poem the contents of the letter to Corinna and her reaction. The reader is made to notice the conspicuous absence of Corinna as the addressee or the subject of the love epistle. Instead Ovid re-aligns the poem with an imaginative reception, all a "creation" from the *persona*'s perception. Indeed, it is the *tabellae* (tablets), and not the requital of his love, that will be immortalised through a votive dedication to Venus. Even his maple-wood tablet is enhanced in value and standing through the inscription of the poet's text written upon it:

... Veneri fidas sibi Naso ministras
 dedicat. At nuper vile fvistis acer.
 (to Venus his faithful aids Naso dedicates;
 when once you were but mean maple wood.)

[13] Stapleton 1996: 33. Corinna is the material –subject and object– of Ovid's love poems, whom the poet can elevate or debase in his poems.

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