

*Sine viribus uxor: Citizen Dispossession and Ovid's Heroides 1*

Ovid's *Heroides* have, especially in the past three decades, been the focus of productive literary study that has greatly illuminated Ovid's poetic praxis (Kennedy 1984; Barchiesi 1987); yet the *Heroides* continue to be read chiefly as literary works divorced from the context in which they were composed, the tumultuous last decade of the first century BCE (exceptions are Arena 1995 and Davis 2006). Using *Heroides 1* as a case study this paper illustrates how Ovid's translation of figures from the "serious" genres of epic and tragedy into the "frivolous" one of elegy, and his shift from a masculine to feminine perspective, comments on the translation of Roman citizens from significant members of their fatherland into subjects whose voice holds little weight in social and political discourse. Recent studies of Augustan elegy discuss the genre's inherent tensions in terms of its highly charged historical context (Janan 2001; Miller 2003), the poet-speaker's "feminized" stance in elegy as a whole (Greene 2000; Miller 2003), and a recognition of elegy as arising from a crisis of masculine identity in the post civil war context (Wyke 2002). Viewing the *Heroides* through this lens brings to the fore the contemporary political undertones to Ovid's impersonation of mythological women, ideal masks from behind which the poet may speak both critically and with plausible deniability.

Read this way, with the female speaker evoking the male author behind her, Penelope's preoccupation in *Heroides 1* with her status as Ulysses' wife reflects contemporary concerns of citizen status and political power in the burgeoning empire. Penelope's cry that she must always retain this privileged role and that it be recognized by those around her (*Penelope coniunx semper Ulixis ero*, 84) may thus embody the concerns of citizens determined to remain an important part of Rome's political process despite the erosion of senatorial power by the time of Ovid's writing. Her focus on the decimation of her family's resources and her self-presentation

as a woman unable to resist the suitors' depredations (*sine uiribus uxor*, 97) similarly recalls the experience of Ovid's contemporaries during the years of civil war and triumviral seizures of estates that left them similarly bankrupt and powerless, and similarly uncertain of their place in the world around them.

This paper is part of a larger project that attempts to read the *Heroides* as a mediation on the loss of political power among Rome's citizen elite as a result of the gradually evolving Augustan regime, which is all too often viewed as fully formed by the time of Ovid's writing (Miller 2003). In support of this larger scheme the paper briefly notes parallel themes in other Homeric *Heroides*, specifically letters of Briseis (3; cf. Drinkwater 2012), Oenone (5), and the first double-letter pair between Paris and Helen (16-17). The composite picture of Ovid's changes of Homer's epics into the Roman-specific context of Latin elegy is one that emphasizes disempowerment, loss of status, unstable identity, concern about whether the glory of war is worth the price in human life and dignity, and indeed whether the costs of war are worth the eventual benefit of peace. Each of these themes dovetails particularly well with contemporary concerns as to whether the price of peace—a gradual end to the republican system—was worth the bargain (Osgood 2006). Ovid, nearing manhood by the time of Actium, was particularly well positioned to observe these concerns and the evolution of Augustus' rule during the decades between the end of the war and his writing of the *Heroides*—and to filter them through the distancing device of mythological flights of fancy that prove, upon closer reading, to be anything but frivolous.

Works Cited:

- Arena, Antonella. 1995. "Ovidio e l'ideologia augustea. I motivi delle *Heroides* ed il loro significato," *Latomus* 54.4:822-41.
- Barchiesi, Alesandro. 1987. "Narratività e convenzione nelle *Heroides*," *MD* 19: 63-90.
- Drinkwater, Megan. 2012. "*Utile dicebas ipse fuisse capi*: Ovid's *Heroides* 3 and the crisis of Roman identity." Paper delivered at the Classical Association of the Middle West and South annual meeting, March 29
- Davis, P. J. 2006. *Ovid and Augustus: A Political Reading of Ovid's Erotic Poems*. London.
- Greene, Ellen. 2000. "Gender Identity and the Elegiac Hero in Propertius 2.1," *Arethusa* 33: 241-61.
- Janan, Micaela. 2001. *The Politics of Desire: Propertius IV*. Berkeley.
- Kennedy, Duncan F. 1984. "The Epistolary Mode and the first of Ovid's *Heroides*," *CQ* 34.2: 413-22.
- Knox, Peter E, ed. 1996. *Ovid Heroides: Select Epistles*. Cambridge.
- Miller, P. A. 2003. *Subjecting Verses: Latin Love Elegy and the Emergence of the Real*. Princeton.
- Osgood, Josiah. 2006. *Caesar's Legacy: Civil War the Emergence of the Roman Empire*. Cambridge.
- Wyke, M. 2002. *The Roman Mistress: Ancient and Modern Representations*. Oxford.