

Epistolary and Allusion: *Tristia* 3.3 and Tibullus 1.3

Among the works of pre-Imperial Latin Literature, Ovid's *Tristia* occupies a rather unique place, perched somewhere between fact and fiction. Though elegiac epistles ostensibly sent from the exiled poet to his friends and family in Rome, Ovid takes the basic plot, rooted in reality, and infuses it with fanciful stories of Odyssean journeys and fearful encounters with the barbarous tribesman of the Black Sea. Such a mixture of fact and fiction takes its literary heritage from a multitude of places such as the exilic, political epistles of Rufus and the epistolary fictions of the Hellenistic period (Rosenmeyer). Yet, despite the almost universal acknowledgement that the *Tristia* were meant to be read as letters, no full-scale study of the impact of epistolarity on the poems has been attempted. This paper hopes to address the question of epistolarity in the *Tristia* by examining the impact of epistolary tropes in one of Ovid's poems in particular, *Tristia* 3.3.

Scholarship on this poem consistently depicts an Ovid, alone in a distant land, as pining for his beloved wife. Such a depiction has led to the clear comparison between the Ovid of *Tristia* 3.3 and the poetic persona in Tibullus 1.3.6. Both poets are isolated in distant lands, lament their impending deaths, and grieve over absent loved ones. Such comparisons between the two poems make up the bulk of the current scholarship about *Tristia* 3.3.7. As a result of scholarly focus on poetic allusions and references, although some scholars explicitly point out that "Ovid's use of an epistolary format is careful and deliberate", the epistolarity of *Tristia* 3.3 has been consistently omitted or given short shrift. Yet, if one examines the cues given by Ovid and compares them to ancient epistolary theory, a different picture emerges, one that does not paint so idyllic an image of marital bliss. Far from pining for his wife, Ovid chastises her for not writing him and for leaving him to die alone in Tomis, wondering aloud whether she truly

remembers him at all and contrasting his loyalty with her forgetfulness. Thus, Ovid can emphasize his isolation while still preserving his own dignity through professing his loyalty.

Therefore, this paper will attempt to marry these two areas of scholarly interest – epistolarity and allusion – and will analyze how Ovid’s use of epistolary tropes actually supports the arguments made to connect *Tristia* 3.3 to Tibullus 1.3. First, Ovid’s self depiction will be handled and our discussion will show Ovid’s use of traditional epistolographic tropes to present himself as a typical, loyal elegiac lover: although deathly-ill, he remains loyal to his wife. Then, Ovid’s description of his wife will be explored and will argue that through epistolary theory, Ovid portrays his wife as a typical, fickle elegiac *puella* who doesn’t care what happens to her lover when he isn’t around. Finally, the discussion will conclude by examining the ramifications of such a negative depiction of Ovid’s wife by comparing her actions to those of Delia, Tibullus’ beloved in Poem 1.3. After such an examination, it will be shown that Ovid manipulates epistolographic tropes to further his claim of isolation and desperation, a claim that is strengthened by the presence – or lack thereof – of his fickle wife.

Select Bibliography

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