

### *Coniugis exemplum: Playing with Persona in Pont. 3.1*

The two poems in the *Epistulae ex Ponto* taking Ovid's wife as their sole addressee are both set somewhat apart from the rest of the collection; the *incipit* of each poem avoids the straightforwardly epistolary openings seen elsewhere. The poems' eschewal of epistolary conventions is a way of linking them to Ovid's poetic predecessors via as many genres as possible, reflecting the result of the multiple addressees in the collection: the image is of the desperate poet trying anything and everything which might help him. In this paper I argue that *ex Ponto* 3.1, the second of the two, uses the trappings of tragedy (masks, the stage, etc.) to create an image of a poet racked by paranoia and uncertainty, a mindset extended to the audience: just as he is unable to truly know what is happening in Rome, so too are we dependent on the poetry for any knowledge of Ovid's own situation.

3.1 begins with an apostrophe to Tomis itself, but once his wife appears (*coniunx*, 31), the emphasis shifts to a portrayal of his wife as the center of attention, as the *scaena...magna* (59) of tragedy dovetails with the *magna...persona* (43) placed on her earlier in the poem. The emphasis on drama, particularly tragedy, as her current generic model exposes an ominous undercurrent, however. The collective audience for Ovid's poetry (and hence his wife's performance) has, if anything, increased; where earlier it was his wife who was advised to watch her own behavior (*tuearis*, 46), here she has become a spectacle for anyone who might care to look (*spectabere*, 59). By making her a part of his poetry at all, Ovid has essentially placed his wife in a kind of panopticon of public opinion: no matter what her actions may be (*quicquid ages*, 59), she is subject to judgment by anyone at all (*non paucis testibus*, 60): anyone, in fact, who happens to read his poems. This idea of the external audience and their view of Ovid's wife

in turn introduces another aspect of the *magna persona* bestowed upon her by his poetry. The use of Philetas' mistress Bittis in 57-8 (*non / inferius Coa Bittide nomen habes*) brings in elegy as a second generic comparandum and thus identifies his wife with Corinna as well – someone who likewise gained notoriety through her presence in the poetry. Ultimately, although Ovid can give his wife a reputation – good or bad – via his poetry, what he cannot do is bring about a change in his own situation. As had been the case in his earlier poetry with Corinna, so too now with his wife: he can use his poetic gift to affect both his *puella* and his broader audience (*non paucis testibus*, 60), but never to affect himself.

#### Bibliography

Claassen, J.M. 2008. *Ovid Revisited: The Poet in Exile*. London.

McGowan, M.M. 2009. *Ovid in Exile: Power and Poetic Redress in the Tristia and Epistulae ex Ponto*. Leiden.

Nagle, B.R. 1980. *The Poetics of Exile: Program and Polemic in the Tristia and Epistulae ex Ponto of Ovid*. Bruxelles.

Williams, G. D. 1994. *Banished Voices: Readings in Ovid's exile poetry*. Cambridge.

Wyke, M. 2002. *The Roman Mistress*. Oxford.