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THE NOVELTY OF OVID'S *HEROIDES*

MAURICE P. CUNNINGHAM

IN THE third book of the *Ars amatoria* Ovid asserts that his *Heroides* constituted a new literary type or genre. His words are (*Ars* iii. 346):

ignotum hoc aliis ille novavit opus.

The meaning of this line is the problem with which this paper is concerned. We may assume that Ovid's contemporary audience knew just what the novelty of the *Heroides* consisted in, but we are not so fortunate ourselves. The best that we can do is to try to form a reasonable conjecture based on the text of the poems and on what Ovid says about them in his other works.

Hermann Peter,¹ who made a study of the letter as a Roman literary form, noted that *novare* in Ovid often means "to revive" (*erneuern*), and he tried to use the line just quoted as evidence for the existence of poems similar to the *Heroides* in Alexandrian poetry. But his suggestion, which ignores the words *ignotum aliis*, has not won general acceptance, particularly since the alleged Alexandrian poems seem to have disappeared completely.²

Even in Latin, however, the poetical epistle was not new, for the form had been employed by both Lucilius and Horace; and the letter of Arethusa by Propertius (iv. 3) in elegiac meter may also have been written before the *Heroides*. It is usually said that the novelty of the *Heroides* lies in the adoption of situations and characters from mythology and legend.³ The

suggestion is also made that the *Heroides* reproduce in verse the form of the *suasoria* as employed in the schools of the rhetoricians.⁴

On the basis of three passages in Ovid, I wish to suggest that the *Heroides* were originally written as lyric-dramatic monologues to be presented on the stage with music and dancing. This suggestion is, I believe, confirmed by the internal evidence of the structure of the poems themselves. The novelty of the *Heroides* lies in the fact that they present Latin erotic elegy in a form adapted to a new type of theatrical performance which was first introduced at Rome when Ovid was a young man.

In the second book of the *Tristia* Ovid says that *poemata* of his had been publicly performed at Rome. The passage occurs in the section devoted to a defense of the *Ars amatoria*. Ovid says that love has been the subject of a great deal of poetry in both Greek and Latin. Didactic poetry has been written on gambling and other amusements. The subject matter of Ovid's *Ars* is far less offensive than that of the mime, but mimes even have a sort of official sanction because they are bought by the praetor for public performance. Then he goes on (*Trist.* ii. 515-20):

scribere si fas est imitantes turpia mimos,
materiae minor est debita poena meae.

¹ Otto Ribbeck, *Geschichte der römischen Dichtung*, II (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1889), 239; Schanz-Hosius, *Geschichte der römischen Literatur*, II (4th ed.; Munich: Beck, 1935), 223-24; Edgar Martini, *Einführung zu Ovid* (Brünn: Rohrer, 1933), p. 14.

² L. C. Purser in his Introduction to Arthur Palmer's ed. of the *Heroides* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898), p. xiii; Henri Bornecque, *Ovide, Héroïdes* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1928), pp. xi-xii.

¹ "Der Brief in der römischen Litteratur," *Abhandlungen der sächsischen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Classe*, XX, No. 3 (1901), 189-90.

² Sykutris, *RE*, Suppl. V (1931), cols. 207-8, s.v. "Epistolographie."

an genus hoc scripti faciunt sua pulpita tutum
quodque licet mimis scaena licere dedit?
et mea sunt populo saltata poemata saepe,
saepe oculos etiam detinuere tuos.

Poemata can mean either "poems" or "passages from a poem or poems."⁵ Commentators on this passage agree that Ovid here refers to selections from the *Ars*. Although that seems the most natural interpretation, still all the words say is: "*poemata* of mine have also been publicly performed in your presence on a number of occasions." The most that can be said for certain is that Ovid's statement would be equally reasonable whether we assume that he refers to selections from the *Ars* or to other *poemata*. If we give weight to the emphasis on subject matter in this context (l. 516, *materiae*), we might easily see a reference to the epistles of Paris and Helen, which in great part parallel the *Ars* in content.

In one other place Ovid refers to public performances of his works (*Trist.* v. 7. 25-30):

carmina quod pleno saltari nostra theatro,
versibus et plaudi scribis, amice, meis—
nil equidem feci (tu scis hoc ipse) theatris
musa nec in plausus ambitiosa mea est—
non tamen ingratum est, quodcumque oblivia
nostri
impedit et profugi nomen in ora refert.

Owen⁶ remarks that the *carmina* here referred to cannot be passages from the *Ars*, since that work seems to have been under an official ban. He suggests that they may have been some of the *Heroides*. It seems quite likely that the *carmina* of this passage and the *poemata* of *Tristia* ii. 519 are identical. Certainly, if some *poemata*, not from the *Ars*, had been presented on the

stage from time to time, a person reading or hearing the line

et mea sunt populo saltata poemata saepe would naturally have thought of the works that he had seen on the stage. If both these passages refer to the same work of Ovid, he must be referring to either the *Amores* or the *Heroides*. The *Ars amatoria* seems out of the question at the time that the fifth book of the *Tristia* was written. The *Metamorphoses* had just been published when the second book of the *Tristia* was composed, so that Ovid could hardly say that passages from it had been performed "*saepe*." I think we may disregard the possibility that Ovid refers to his *Medea*, since *saltari* is not the proper word for the production of a tragedy in the traditional form and Ovid's language in general seems inappropriate if he has in mind a number of performances of a single work.

The passage in the *Ars* with which we opened this discussion suggests that Ovid is probably referring to the *Heroides* as the works which were danced. At least, Ovid there implies that music for the *Heroides* was in existence, and his language points up an implicit contrast with the *Amores* in this respect. Ovid is saying that a girl should be able to read and sing the works of poets. Someone, he adds, will suggest that Ovid's own works be included in her repertory. He mentions the *Ars* itself, the *Amores*, and the *Heroides* (*Ars* iii. 341-46):

atque aliquis dicet "nostri lege culta magistri
carmina, quis partes instruit ille duas,
deve tribus libris,⁷ titulo quos signat Amorum,
elige, quod docili molliter ore legas,
vel tibi composita cantetur epistula voce:
ignotum hoc aliis ille novavit opus."

While *cantare* by itself does not necessarily mean "to sing," the addition of the words

⁷ The true reading of the first half of this line is doubtful.

⁵ F. H. Sandbach, *CR*, LIV (1940), 75-76.

⁶ S. G. Owen, *P. Ovidi Nasonis Tristium liber secundus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 271 (note on *Trist.* ii. 519).

composita voce and the contrast with the phrase *docili molliter ore legas* in the preceding line seem to demand that *cantetur* be taken literally.⁸ It would be possible to say that only some of the *Heroides* had been set to music or, indeed, only passages from some of the poems, but the plain sense of Ovid's words is against such a limitation. In any case, when we take this passage in connection with the two passages from the *Tristia* already discussed, it becomes practically certain that the poems of Ovid which were sung and danced on the stage were the *Heroides*.

The next question is whether the *Heroides* were originally written for the accompaniment of music and dance or were arranged for such presentation after they had been published. The latter alternative may seem more plausible, since Ovid says (*Trist.* v. 7. 27):

nil equidem feci (tu scis hoc ipse) theatris.

Wheeler⁹ translates: "I have indeed composed nothing . . . for the theatre." The difficulty with this is that it makes Ovid say something that he and everyone else must have known was not true. His *Medea* was written for the theater. Ovid's meaning must be: "I have never written to gain the applause of the moment." This is a sentiment often expressed by Ovid (e.g., *Ars* iii. 403-14). I should paraphrase the passage as follows: "You say that my poems are being presented to a full house and are very favorably received. As you know, I never wrote for the gallery, nor have I gone out of my way to win applause; yet I am very pleased that people still remember me and speak of me." The line then does not bear either one way or the other on the question proposed.

⁸ Hermann Fränkel, *Ovid: A Poet between Two Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1945), p. 190, n. 1.

⁹ Ovid: *Tristia, Ex Ponto*, ed. and trans. Arthur Leslie Wheeler ("Loeb Classical Library"), p. 237.

The only evidence that is available for deciding whether the *Heroides* were originally written for the stage is the internal evidence of the structure of the poems themselves. Such evidence must be sought in the first fourteen epistles, since there is considerable doubt about the authorship of the letter of Sappho and the double epistles seem to have been written later than the others.

In most of the first fourteen *Heroides* the illusion of a letter is pretty well maintained throughout each poem. In the epistle of Deianira, however, there is a definite break at line 143. The first part of the poem is addressed to Hercules. Deianira remonstrates with him for falling in love with Iole. She recalls that Hercules twice fought for her, with Achelous and with Nessus the centaur (*Her.* 9. 139-46):

cornua flens legit ripis Achelous in udis

truncaque limosa tempora mersit aqua;
semivir occubuit in lotifero Eveno

Nessus, et infecit sanguis equinus aquas.
sed quid ego haec refero? scribenti nuntia venit
fama virum tunicae tabe perire meae.
ei mihi! quid feci? quo me furor egit amantem?
impia quid dubitas Deianira mori?

At line 143 the letter form is abandoned, and the whole tone of the poem changes. The final section of the poem is unconvincing if we regard it as a letter, but it would be very effective on the stage.

Of the epistle of Dido to Aeneas, Purser¹⁰ says: "Dido drifts off into regular soliloquy twice (25, 103); and the last six lines, which are an address to her sister, should not belong to the letter at all." In the first of these soliloquies, as Purser calls them, Dido seems to forget all about writing to Aeneas and speaks of him in the third person. The second is really an address to Sychaeus. All three of these sections belong to the poem but not to the letter. Considered as a letter, the form of

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. xx.

the poem is unsatisfactory; but the very elements which make it unsatisfactory as a letter would make it more appropriate for stage presentation and more effective on the stage.

When we look at the dramatic possibilities of the other epistles, it is obvious that each of them is superbly adapted to dramatic interpretation, even though the convention of the epistolary form is also maintained.¹¹ The letters of Briseis, Hermione, Ariadne, Canace, Medea, and Hypermestra all have a major apostrophe in which the attention is withdrawn completely from the addressee and returns to him without any break in the sequence of thought. For example, Canace relates how Aeolus sent her a sword. There is an address to her father, to Hymenaeus, and to the Erinyes. She expresses a wish that her sisters may marry happily. Then she speaks of her son and addresses him. Finally, her thoughts return to Macareus, whom she requests to bury their son with her. A passage of this sort provides an opportunity for presenting a remarkable sequence of various emotional states, and this presentation might suitably be accompanied by considerable physical activity on the part of an actor. The point I wish to make is that the poems are so constructed that they can be acted out. Even the frequent references to the actual process of writing are "in character"; for example, Briseis says (*Her.* 3. 1-2):

quam legis, a rapta Briseide littera venit,
vix bene barbarica Graeca notata manu.

In fact, the poems are so dramatic in form and conception that modern critics almost universally apply that adjective to them.¹² They, however, use it in a figura-

tive sense. My suggestion is that the *Heroides* are literally dramatic. They evidently were presented in the theater, and it seems more probable that their author wrote them originally for such presentation than that some representative of the praetor first pointed out their dramatic possibilities to him.

The general type of dramatic performance which I believe was given of the *Heroides* is of the sort described by Ovid in the *Remedia amoris*. Ovid has just said that one can fall out of love by being too poor to afford it, but he considers becoming poor on purpose too drastic a remedy. But one can stay away from the theater (*Rem.* 751-56):

at tanti tibi sit non indulgere theatris,
dum bene de vacuo pectore cedat amor.
enervant animos citharae lotosque lyraeque
et vox et numeris brachia mota suis.
illic adsidue ficti saltantur amantes:
quid caveas, actor, quid iuvet, arte docet.

The principal items mentioned here are the orchestra, the singing, and the solo dancer. We are told that this type of performance was introduced at Rome by the dancers Pylades and Bathyllus about the year 22 B.C.¹³ In the last quarter of the first century B.C. a number of new types of theatrical performances were introduced at Rome;¹⁴ and, as we lack specific evidence, it is not possible to be certain of the details which characterized the various types. The items mentioned by Ovid seem to have been regular features of the performances of dancers, or *fabulae salticae*, as they apparently were called.¹⁵ The

¹¹ The ancient evidence for the career of Pylades is collected and discussed by Lillian B. Lawler, "Portrait of a Dancer," *CJ*, XLI (1946), 241-47. On the whole subject see Friedländer, *Darstellungen aus der Sittengeschichte Roms*, II (10th ed., rev. by Wissowa; Leipzig: Hirzel, 1922), 125 ff.

¹⁴ E.g., Plin. *NH* vii. 159: "Stephanionem qui primus togatus saltare instituit"; and Suet. *Gramm.* 21: "C. Melissus . . . fecit et novum genus togatarum inscripsitque trabeatas."

¹⁵ Owen on *Trist.* ii. 519; Martini, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

¹² Ovid, *Heroides*, ed. Vitus Loers, I (Cologne: Dumont-Schauberg, 1829), xxxiii-xxxiv; Fränkel, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹³ See especially the interesting quotation from Marmontel in Bornecque, *op. cit.*, p. xi.

dancer could be assisted by one or more persons representing subsidiary parts as occasion demanded. In a dramatic presentation of the epistle of Deianira I should imagine that at line 143 a subsidiary actor hands her a message. The address to Anna in Dido's epistle may have called for the entrance of someone to represent Anna. Briseis was probably accompanied by at least two persons representing retainers of Agamemnon left to guard her. Her words (*Her.* 3. 127-32), "mittite me Danai, etc.," are addressed to them. One may add that the ancient custom of composing aloud would have made the dramatic illusion more readily acceptable to Ovid's audience.¹⁶

In this connection mention should be made of *Amores* ii. 18, which is written to Macer, the epic poet. In that poem Ovid speaks of his attempts to use the elegiac form for poetry of a more serious character than the erotic poems of the *Amores*. His experiments include didactic elegy (l. 19) and the *Heroides* (ll. 21-26). To Ovid the *Heroides* were a new type of elegy containing elements adapted from the more exalted forms of poetry. The greater seriousness of the *Heroides* does not come from the letter form or even from the mythological subject matter as such; it apparently lies in the incorporation into the poems of some of the formal elements of serious drama. At the end of the poem Ovid says that Macer will also be forced to adapt elements from erotic poetry in order to treat some of his themes. The statements in this poem do not add much to the information that we have already gathered from other places; but the fact that Ovid considered the *Heroides* a mixed form and more serious than normal erotic elegy is of some importance.

The next point to be discussed is wheth-

er the *Heroides* reproduce the form of the rhetorical *suasoria*. The question is easily answered as soon as we define what a *suasoria* was. In a *suasoria* a person (or persons) taken from legend or history is supposed to be taking counsel whether he should pursue a certain course of action under circumstances which are given.¹⁷ The title of the third item in the collection of the elder Seneca is typical: "Deliberat Agamemnon an Iphigeniam imolet negante Calchante aliter navigari fas esse." The speaker adopts the guise of a *suasor* and speaks in favor of one side or the other of the double question. He does not identify himself with any specific person in the assumed situation. For example, he does not play the part of any particular one of the Greek leaders; he is merely one of the group. Attempts to portray character in the *suasoriae* are directed toward showing the character of the person addressed rather than that of the speaker.¹⁸

In the *Heroides* the center of interest is not the addressee but the writer of the epistle. No attempt whatever is made to present the character of the addressee. In this respect the poems follow the traditional method of Latin erotic elegy, which is almost wholly subjective in character, especially in Tibullus and Propertius.¹⁹ The persons written to are not taking counsel about anything having to do with the persons who write to them. None of the poems could be considered as answers to any question introduced by *utrum* or *an*. By and large, very little advice is given in the *Heroides*; Hypsipyle curses Jason, and Medea threatens him.

¹⁷ E. Patrick Parks, *The Roman Rhetorical Schools as a Preparation for the Courts under the Early Empire* ("The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science," Ser. LXIII, No. 2 [1945]), p. 86.

¹⁸ Sen. *Suas.* 1. 5.

¹⁹ See the forthcoming article of A. W. Allen, *Yale Classical Studies*, Vol. XI.

¹⁶ Eugene S. McCartney, *CP*, XLIII (1948), 185.

I have described the normal form of the rhetorical *suasoria* as we know it in Ovid's day. Certain of the exercises sometimes assigned to students seem to have a greater superficial resemblance to the *Heroides*,²⁰ since these exercises were based more closely on poetic models. It is not my contention that Ovid neglected to study poetic models but simply that the *Heroides* do not represent an attempt to reproduce a form of prose literature in verse.

The suggestion that the *Heroides* are *suasoriae* in verse could be dismissed at once,²¹ if it were not for the underlying reasons which prompted the suggestion in the first place and the effect that the notion has had on the way in which the text of the poems has been edited.²² We know that Ovid was a pupil of the rhetor Arel- lius Fuscus and that he actually declaimed occasionally himself. What is sometimes forgotten is that Ovid says he never could get the hang of presenting his material in a manner suitable to prose composition²³ and that the elder Seneca, who had heard him, confirms his judgment. For purposes of the present discussion it is not necessary to go behind these statements, for the elder Seneca surely qualifies as an expert witness on declamations. He says of Ovid (*Controv.* ii. 2. 8): "oratio eius iam tum nihil aliud poterat videri quam solutum carmen." Since Seneca says that Ovid's choice of words was unexceptionable (*ibid.* 12: "verbis minime licenter usus est nisi in carminibus"), it seems he has in mind the point which he makes explicit in the following sentence (*ibid.* 9): "hanc certe controversiam ante Arellium Fuscum declamavit, ut mihi videbatur, longe in-

geniosius, excepto eo quod sine certo ordine per locos discurrerat."

If Ovid's studies in rhetoric left any real mark on his poetic style, we should expect to find that influence greatest in respect to the order of presentation of ideas. In diction and choice of subject matter Ovid works within established poetic traditions. Metric is outside the field of rhetoric. Of the three items covered by the title of Seneca's book on the declaimers—*sententiae*, *divisiones*, *colores*—only the second (*divisio*) belongs more to oratorical prose than to other forms of literary composition.²⁴ And Seneca finds fault with Ovid for not using a proper *divisio*. But editors who are convinced that Ovid learned his lessons in rhetoric well revise the text of his poems to make them conform to the standards of rhetorical prose. Penelope, for example, speaks of the suitors and Irus and Melanthius and says that she herself, Laertes, and Telemachus are but three against so many. She goes on to tell of the ambush against Telemachus and hopes that he may live to bury his mother and father in due time. Then she mentions the swineherd and neatherd who are on their side; but Laertes is not equal to the task of ruling. Telemachus will grow up, but now he needs a father's protection. Penelope cannot clear the house; may Ulysses come. He has a son who needs a father's guidance, and so on. In this little section couplets have been bracketed and transposed almost endlessly, solely in order to get the references to Telemachus together in one place and to achieve a proper rhetorical sequence of ideas. What the passage needs is not editorial revision but dramatic interpretation by a skilled actor to bring out

²⁰ Quint. iii. 8. 49 and 52.

²¹ As it is by Fränkel, *op. cit.*, p. 190, n. 1.

²² See R. Ewald in his ed. of Ovid's works, I (Leipzig: Teubner, 1903), vi.

²³ *Trist.* iv. 10. 26: "et quod temptabam dicere, versus erat."

²⁴ William A. Edward (*The Suasoriae of Seneca the Elder* [Cambridge: At the University Press, 1928], pp. xxxv–xxxvi) maintains that, strictly speaking, *colores* had no place in *suasoriae*. See also Parks, *op. cit.*, pp. 79 ff.

the emotional complexity of the thought. The very fact that the ideas in this passage are not marshaled in a neat rhetorical order is part of Ovid's technique for showing Penelope's distraught condition. An actor would use the recurring references to Ulysses' family ties with Laertes and Telemachus to build up to the climax of the last couplet of the poem:

certe ego quae fueram te discedente puella
protinus ut venias facta videbor anus.

Penelope distrusts the power of a personal appeal on her own part, for she is growing old. Proper rhetorical order would require that Laertes, Telemachus, and Penelope be discussed separately and in order. But Ovid is not interested in an orderly presentation of a case; he is trying to give an interpretation of the traditional epic situation in terms of the conventions of Latin elegy.²⁵

One other small textual point in the letter of Penelope should be mentioned. The first line reads

Hanc tua Penelope lento tibi mittit, Ulix.

Palmer (note *ad loc.*) doubts the soundness of the first word *hanc*, as the ellipse of *epistulam* or a similar word seems unparalleled. However, a simple gesture would easily make the meaning of the word clear, and the difficulty of under-

standing *hanc* otherwise may be an additional indication that it was originally intended to be accompanied by the gesture. The fact that *hanc* is the first word of the first poem of the collection makes this point particularly interesting.

The arguments in favor of the suggestion that the *Heroides* were written for the stage are briefly as follows. They almost certainly were presented on the stage. They seem remarkably similar in length, tone, and structure. In some of the poems the illusion of a letter is broken or interrupted without breaking the sequence of thought in the poem itself. And, lastly, Ovid says that there was something really new about the type of poem represented by the *Heroides*. He mentions two points of difference between the *Heroides* and the *Amores*. The *Heroides* were more serious in character and were set to music. One would expect these features to be significant elements in the novelty of the *Heroides*. If the sort of performance for which the *Heroides* were intended was first introduced at Rome when Ovid was about twenty-one years of age, one can easily understand how he became the first to write elegies intended for such performances. Other suggestions as to the novelty of the *Heroides* do not seem to give full weight to Ovid's own statements about the poems.

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²⁵ See Fränkel's discussion (*op. cit.*, pp. 43-45) of the epistle of Briseis.