

SEXUAL POLITICS IN OVID'S *AMORES*: 3.4, 3.8, AND 3.12

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RECENT OVIDIAN CRITICISM has devoted a good deal of attention to Ovid's attitudes towards women and to his narrator's program of erotic deception and conquest in *The Amores*.¹ The tradition of scholarship on Ovid's amatory works, however, has tended to dismiss the *amator's* attitudes and practices as merely a part of Ovid's strategy to entertain, shock, and amuse his audiences with his ingenious wit.² More recently, feminist critics have contended that Ovid's poetry ought to be read as a critique of the competitive and exploitative nature of *amor*. Among feminist interpretations of Ovid there is, of course, disagreement about how to read Ovid's apparent valorization of traditional male domination over women. Both Leslie Cahoon and Amy Richlin have expressed horror at "all the black Ovidian travesties of love" that appear in Ovid's amatory texts.³ In her essay "Reading Ovid's Rapes," Richlin argues that Ovid is a pornographer who encourages the reader to enjoy violence inflicted on women. She points up the horror in the intersection of pleasure

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1. Two important volumes of *Helios* are devoted to a critical reevaluation of Ovid's works. *Helios* 12 (1985) contains: L. Cahoon, "A Program for Betrayal: Ovidian *Nequitia* in *Amores* I.1, II.1, III.1," pp. 29–39; A. G. Elliot, "Ovid and the Critics," pp. 9–19; M.-K. Gamel, "Introduction," pp. 3–7; J. Hemker, "Rape and the Founding of Rome," pp. 41–47; W. R. Johnson, "Ring Down the Curtain on Love," pp. 21–28; C. Segal, "Ovid: Metamorphosis, Hero, Poet," pp. 49–64. *Helios* 17 (1990) devoted two issues to "Reappropriating the Text: The Case of Ovid." The essays in these issues interrogate Ovid's works from a feminist perspective and offer many illuminating insights about "reading" Ovid in terms of gender. Especially important are: L. Cahoon, "Let the Muse Sing On: Poetry, Criticism, Feminism, and the Case of Ovid," pp. 197–211; P. Culham, "Decentering the Text: The Case of Ovid," pp. 161–70; E. Keuls, "The Feminist View of the Past: A Comment on the 'Decentering' Of the Poems of Ovid," pp. 221–24; A. Richlin, "Hijacking the Palladion," 175–85. See also M.-K. Gamel, "Non Sine Caede: Abortion Politics and Poetics in Ovid's *Amores*," *Helios* 16.2 (1989): 183–206.

2. See especially: I. M. Le M. Du Quesnay, "The *Amores*," in *Ovid*, ed. J. W. Binns (London, 1973); H. Fränkel, *Ovid, A Poet Between Two Worlds* (Berkeley, 1945); A. G. Lee, "Tenerorum Lusor Amorum," in *Critical Essays on Roman Literature*, ed. J. P. Sullivan (Cambridge, Mass., 1962); G. Luck, *The Latin Love Elegy* (London, 1959); K. Quinn, *Latin Explorations* (London, 1963); L. P. Wilkinson, *Ovid Recalled* (Cambridge, 1955).

3. Cahoon, "Let the Muse," p. 200. Cahoon points up the educative value of being confronted with "the breakdown of real love" in Ovid. Her comments are worth citing: "For myself and for my students, I have found such dark visions the most resonant and the most productive. For the culturally estranged, the shock of evil and the confrontation with evil bring more reformation than do the loftiest pieties" (p. 201). In addition, Richlin, in "Hijacking the Palladion," points up the politics of gender in Ovid that can *neither* be easily ignored *nor* easily understood: "Their [Ovid's poems'] combination of stylistic brilliance with violent content, especially violence against women, I find fascinating but repellent . . . I think Ovid's texts take pleasure in violence" (p. 179).

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and violence in Ovid's texts and in Ovid's representation of the "female as the site of violence."⁴ On her view, Ovid's pornographic model "offers no exit from gender hierarchy."

Leo Curran, on the other hand, in his essay "Rape and Rape Victims in the *Metamorphoses*," argues that Ovid's insight into the suffering of women victimized by male domination reflects a sympathy for the plight of women.⁵ In a similar vein, Leslie Cahoon, Mary-Kay Gamel, and Julie Hemker argue that Ovid's presentation of sexual violence and exploitation of women is a complex literary strategy that serves to unmask and condemn the brutality inherent in amatory relations. Moreover, there is some suggestion in their work that sexual violence and exploitation of women are viewed by Ovid as paradigmatic of a corrupt social and political system.

In this paper, I hope to give further support to the idea that Ovid criticizes a social and political system that promotes aggression, conquest, and the exploitation of others—especially women. I will argue that by provoking us into a gradual uneasiness at the consequences of domination, Ovid's poems invite us to question the perspectives of a lover who espouses and practices conquest and deception as a way of life.

A number of scholars have demonstrated that throughout the first two books of the *Amores* Ovid's *amator* adopts the conventional role of the elegiac lover and gradually reveals that his *persona* as a *servus amoris* is a posture "we are invited to penetrate."⁶ The third book in the collection, however, has received less critical attention. I hope to show that the poems in the third book give a much more blatant picture of the *amator's* deception and exploitation of women than we see in the earlier books. Furthermore, I will argue that, compared with Books 1 and 2, the poems in Book 3 reveal how the version of *amor* practiced by the *amator* is inextricably bound up with mercantilist attitudes. The *amator's* flagrant indifference to the moral implications of his amatory practices in Book 3 conveys Ovid's attempt to destroy the myth of the elegiac lover as the upholder of an ideal that is morally superior to the conventional values of Roman society.

In earlier poems in the *Amores*, Ovid shows how deception is an effective strategy for the attainment of the *amator's* desires. In 3.4, 3.8, and 3.12, we see how deception is not only an effect but a cause of the *amator's* "love." In these three poems, which deal openly with adultery, the *amator's* casual indifference to moral concerns becomes much more overt than in earlier poems. Through the lover's attitudes, Ovid tears away the elegiac ideal that is based on the illusion of *fides*. Ovid attempts to expose and ridicule the hypocrisy that is inherent in preserving that illusion. One of the ways he does this is by having the *amator* adopt contradictory attitudes

4. A. Richlin, "Reading Ovid's Rapes," in *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (Oxford, 1992), p. 173.

5. In "Rape and Rape Victims in the *Metamorphoses*," in *Women in the Ancient World*, ed. J. Peradotto and J. P. Sullivan (Albany, 1984), Curran takes the view that although Ovid "may not always have shown great respect for women as a sex, his fascination with them led him to an insight . . . almost unique in ancient literature" (p. 283).

6. In *Fictus Adulter: Poet as Actor in the "Amores"* (Amsterdam, 1990), J. T. Davis offers an insightful and detailed analysis of the *amator's* role-playing and deception in the *Amores*.

toward the practice of husbands' "pimping" for their wives. We see that the *amator's* criteria for judging the husbands' behavior are based on pursuit of his own pleasure, and not on any moral or legal considerations.

In 3.4, the *amator* openly admonishes the *maritus* of his mistress to loosen his control over his wife so that she may pursue any desires she might have for other men. At the beginning of 3.4, it seems that the *amator* is encouraging the husband to be more permissive with his wife so that she will be more chaste. The *amator* bases his argument on the fact that people naturally rebel against restrictions and desire whatever is forbidden. The *amator's* credibility here is extremely suspect in light of the fact that in 2.19 he used the same argument about "forbidden fruit" to try to get the husband to increase his watch, so that the amatory pursuit would be more challenging (2.19.1–2):

Si tibi non opus est servata, stulte, puella,
at mihi fac serves, quo magis ipse velim!

While marvelling at the *amator's* virtuosity, critics have failed to question the exploitative attitudes toward women embedded in the *amator's* clever posturing. In 2.19, the narrator unabashedly admits that imagining his mistress held captive by her husband evokes desire in him. The *amator* reverses his position in 3.4 by asking the *maritus* to be more permissive with his wife.

At the same time, the woman is still treated as a commodity of exchange between her lover and her husband—with no agency or autonomy of her own. The feminist theorist Luce Irigaray, in her work *This Sex Which Is Not One*, argues that Western patriarchal culture is based on the exchange of women by men, and that women are used as commodities in the sexual and economic marketplace: "men make commerce *of* them [women], but they do not enter into any exchanges *with* them."⁷ In the same way, in *Amores* 2.19 and 3.4, Ovid's *amator* tries to "make deals" with the *maritus* of his mistress to manipulate how she will be used as an object of the *amator's* pleasure.

In addition, in 3.4, the *amator* uses the same mythological *exempla* he uses in 2.19, but for the opposite purpose. In 2.19, he uses Io and Danae as examples of how women should be treated (*si numquam Danaen habuisset aenea turris, / non esset Danae de Iove facta parens; / dum servat Iuno mutatam cornibus Io*). In 3.4, he uses Io and Danae to show how women shouldn't be treated, and he adds the example of Penelope to suggest that if the *maritus* stops guarding his wife, she will be as faithful as Penelope (3.4.19–24):

centum fronte oculos, centum cervice gerebat
Argus, et hos unus saepe fefellit Amor;
in thalamum Danae ferro saxoque perennem

7. L. Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. C. Porter with C. Burke (Ithaca, 1985). Irigaray's work has been extremely influential in articulating important ideas about the question of woman's *essence* and of a female sexuality.

quae fuerat virgo tradita, mater erat:
 Penelope mansit, quamvis custode carebat,
 inter tot iuvenis intemerata procos.

By including Penelope to support his argument, the *amator* offers a paradigm for the *maritus'* wife that would be difficult to refuse. The *amator's* willingness to use the same *exempla* for contradictory purposes suggests that his concern for the chastity of free-born wives is a pose that he uses to suit his amatory desires of the moment. Although the arguments the *amator* uses in 2.19 and 3.4 are contradictory, the mythological *exempla* of Io and Danae in both poems present images of women as most desirable when they have been dehumanized and exploited by male captors.

The falseness of the *amator's* concern for virtue becomes more obvious when he announces to the *maritus* that it is simply unsophisticated to object to adulterous wives: "rusticus est nimium, quem laedit adultera coniunx" (3.4.37). The *amator* takes his argument further and says that Rome was, in fact, founded on adulterous practices (3.4.38–40):

et notos mores non satis Urbis habet,
 in qua Martigenae non sunt sine crimine nati
 Romulus Iliades Iliadesque Remus.

The implication is that if the *maritus* wants to be a good Roman, he had better adhere to the *vitia* that produced Rome in the first place. In fact, one of the central myths in the story of the origins of Rome is the rape of the Sabine women. By having his *amator* encourage husbands to "pimp" for their wives and justify it by alluding to a "heroic" tradition that sanctions brutality toward women, Ovid presents a view of Roman society that shows a pervasive acceptance of deception and exploitation as an inevitable part of amatory relations, including marriage. Furthermore, by having his *amator* link sexual "pandering" with Rome's hegemony, Ovid suggests a close alliance between male sexual dominance and the assertion of political control and aggression.

In 3.8, the *amator* seems to contradict his moral indifference to the practice of "pandering." Instead, the *amator* expresses outrage that his mistress can be seduced by the allure of wealth and status, and that, in essence, her affections can be bought. The *amator* presents himself as the upholder of ideals of purity in contrast with the crass values of commercialism. While in 3.4 he associated being cultured with a mercantilist approach to "love," here the *amator* bemoans the degeneration of a culture that values money more than *ingenium*. The "panderer" we saw in 2.19 and 3.4 becomes, at 3.8.23, the *Musarum purus Phoebique sacerdos*.

When however, the *amator's* high-minded moral stance doesn't advance his position, he looks for ways he can compromise his principles in order to succeed with his mistress (3.8.29–34):

Iuppiter, admonitus nihil esse potentius auro,
 corruptae pretium, virginis ipse fuit.
 dum merces aberat, durus pater, ipsa severa,
 aerati postes, ferrea turris erat;

sed postquam sapiens in munere venit adulter,
praebuilt ipsa sinus et dare iussa dedit.

As he does in a number of the elegies, the *amator* uses Jupiter as his model of a successful seducer of women. Violence, deception, and prostitution are all approaches used by Jupiter and emulated by the *amator*. The *exemplum* proves that women can be bought and that all the *sapiens adulter* needs is enough money. Jupiter shows that if you want to be *sapiens*, you have to be willing to abandon your moral principles. *Puellae* willingly give up their virtue for profit, and smart seducers will buy their way into the affections of their mistresses. The *amator's* use of an *exemplum* to justify such corrupt practices reveals his moral outrage to be a sham—a device for seducing his *puella* away from a soldier who succeeds because of his greater wealth and status. We find out that the *amator* is not upset about pandering for moral reasons, but because he can't afford the price.

While the *amator* idealizes Jupiter's amatory practices, he also announces that his standard for judging a woman's "worth" is how she measures up to one of the Sabine women. His "ideal" woman—too costly for him at the moment—is one who offers the greatest opportunity for him to subjugate her. Earlier in the *Amores*, in 1.3, the *amator* expressed similar sentiments (only veiled in mythological allusion) when he used Jupiter's relationship with Io, Leda, and Europa as examples of ideal amatory union.⁸ The *amator's* implied correlation of an "ideal" mistress with mythical women in 1.3 becomes blatant admission in many of the elegies in the third book. In 3.8, the *amator* makes it clear at the end that everyone is out for profit. For the right price, the husband, with the *custos* as accomplice, would turn his home into a house of prostitution.

In 3.12, the exploitation of women for profit is heightened when the *amator* admits that he has prostituted his mistress for the sake of his literary fame. He starts by complaining that his own verses are causing him trouble because they have publicized the charms of his *puella* and made other men desire her. The *amator's* stance as the helpless victim of an obsession with *one* woman is contradicted by his declaration in other elegies that he desires a multitude of beautiful women. In addition, the sudden change from the idealized perspective of the elegiac lover to an emphasis on the commercial aspects of love undermines the *amator's* credibility. The *amator's* complaint that Corinna is "on the market" now because of him is undermined by the implication that he has profited from her as his subject in his elegies. What is really "on the market" are the elegies themselves. Like a pimp, he has profited from his "sale" of her to other lovers, not in monetary terms, but in terms of literary fame. He admits openly that by making his mistress an attractive and therefore highly marketable commodity, he has himself become a pander (3.12.7–10):

fallimur, an nostris innouit illa libellis?
sic erit: ingenio prostitit illa meo.

8. L. Curran offers a perceptive reading of *Am.* 1.3 in "*Desultores amoris: Ovid Amores* 1.3," *CP* 61 (1966): 47–49.

et merito: quid enim formae praeconia feci?
vendibilis culpa facta puella mea est.

In 1.3, in the context of manipulating his mistress with promises of *fama*, the *amator* asked her to give herself to him as *materia* for his *carmina*: *te mihi materiem felicem in carmina praebe* (19). But in 1.3, the *amator*'s identification of the woman as *materia* is veiled by the *amator*'s conventional elegiac rhetoric of subservience toward the mistress.⁹ In 3.12 the *amator* is entirely forthright in his presentation of the elegiac mistress as a "thing of sale." The elegiac poet is a pander who uses her as a vehicle to display his talents and "sell" poems. Mary-Kay Gamel observes that "in this scheme, the male poet is the farmer/writer, the woman the earth/empty tablet on which he plows/writes."¹⁰ The emphasis on the woman as "vendibilis," as *materia* for the poet to mold and manipulate for his art, entraps the woman within a discursive practice that preserves her object status. It places her in a symbolic order structured around male fantasies of control over women's sexuality and autonomy.

Not only is the woman presented as a commodity intended to advance the poet's own *fama*, but her marketability is closely linked to the arousal of male sexual desire, both in the *amator* himself and in his fantasies of other men "sharing" her with him. The *amator*'s presentation of his mistress as *vendibilis* defines her exclusively in terms of her function—her use as a vehicle of exchange between a male poet and his audience of sexually excitable (perhaps predatory) men. The pandering we saw in the *amator* trying to make deals with the *maritus* of his mistress becomes pandering on a large scale. The sexuality of the *femina* is entirely "owned" by the men who use her as an object of exchange.

Moreover, the *amator*'s complaints about having to share Corinna with other men contradict his insistence in other poems that the presence of rivals or, for that matter, obstacles in general, only increases the thrill of the amatory pursuit and fuels his creative imagination as well. Immediately after denouncing his own talents in 3.12, the *amator* spends half the poem offering a display of his poetic virtuosity. He enumerates in stunning detail some of the well-known myths (e.g., Scylla, Tantalus, Niobe, Proteus) that he, along with other poets, has brought to life in verse. If the *amator*'s ulterior motive in this poem is to win back his mistress' affections, then he is very clever. His pose of pretending to be sorry that he made Corinna so famous conceals his more subtle strategy of dazzling both her and his audience with his genius.

All the *amator*'s mythological *exempla* bear witness to the poet's abilities to make illusion seem like reality. The *amator*'s long list of myths is a devious way of praising the poet's talents. The *amator* demonstrates how easy it is to be seduced by the poet's powers of language that make mythological figures seem real. But underlying the *amator*'s inventory of

9. See M. Wyke's important studies of how elegiac woman, in Propertius' texts, is subordinated to her role as *materia* for the poet's literary productions: "Scripta Puella, Written Women," *JRS* (1987): 47–61; "Mistress and Metaphor in Augustan Elegy," *Helios* 16 (1989): 25–47.

10. Gamel, "Non Sine Caede," p. 197.

his poetic accomplishments is an elaborate deception of both his mistress and his audience. He wears the mask of the abandoned lover and pretends to prefer reality to fiction, even though he celebrates at great length the fictional world of myth created by the poet. Like his myths, Corinna is also a fiction created by the poet. The implication is that if she continues to be a fiction, that is, *materia* for the poet to use for his art, she will gain mythical status. The *amator's* strategy is ingenious, both as a means of winning back his mistress and as a way of showing off his skills as poet. The *amator's* assertion that the "gullibility" (*credulitas*) of his audience has been harmful to him is hardly believable, considering his own argument for his genius has produced such compelling and seductive images of his *femina*.

At 3.12.41, the *amator* refers to the poet's skills as *fecunda licentia*, a description that, on one level, may be interpreted as "poetic license." "Poetic license" by itself is a gender-neutral activity that normally has to do with the poet's authority to manipulate language freely and creatively. But here the basic meaning of *fecunda* as "fertile" resonates with the *amator's* earlier allusions to his mistress as fertile *materia* for his poetic productions. Furthermore, the sexual overtones of *licentia* suggest a link between the "poetic license" of the elegiac poet and the wanton use of the *materia* he uses for his art. In other words, the poet exploits the fertile subject of woman in order to produce his *carmina* as his offspring. Far from being his undoing, the success of the *amator's* "pandering" has proven what a fruitful enterprise literary "prostitution" can be. By showing what a good salesman the *amator* is, Ovid suggests that the elegiac stance of servitude toward the mistress is self-serving for the *amator* and dehumanizing toward women. By having his *amator* openly identify the elegiac mistress as *materia*, Ovid points to an objectification and exploitation of the female that is inherent not only in the elegiac enterprise but in the nature of amatory relations in general.

Roman poets before Ovid, to be sure, criticize values of commercialism in Roman society. But for Ovid's poetic predecessors, the erotic and imaginative life offers, at least potentially, a moral refuge from the degradation in the exterior world. Ovid, on the other hand, shows that rather than provide an ethical alternative, *amor* often reiterates the mercantilist and imperialist values in Roman society. Ovid's portrayal of the poet in the *Amores* disavows the idealism traditionally associated with poets of love. But there is more. Ovid's demystification of the elegiac poet's avowed commitment to moral ideals questions and destabilizes ideologies of erotic conquest and domination. In refusing to perpetuate the illusions and self-deceptions he believed were so much a part of love and love poetry, Ovid's poems reflect a deep commitment to the moral responsibility of the poet to show the cruelty and inhumanity perpetrated in the name of culture, in the name of *amor*.