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Reading and Teaching Ovid's *Amores* and *Ars amatoria* in a Conservative Christian Context

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I taught for many years at a midsize state university in the American South. The courses I offered included sophomore surveys of pre-Enlightenment world literature in translation designed for the general student as well as classes devoted to early modern British authors for English majors and minors who planned to become public-school teachers. The institution is located in a community of fifteen thousand, which doubles in population with the students included, most of whom hail from the exurbs of the two major metropolitan areas three hours from campus in different directions. The town itself features eighteen Baptist churches along with an approximately equal number belonging to other Protestant denominations. It is also the seat of the only county within a one-hundred-mile radius in which one may legally buy alcoholic beverages. Those who read English translations or paraphrases of Ovid with me in these somewhat unlikely circumstances were not classics majors, nor did they enter my courses with an abiding interest in the ancient world or literary study. By and large, they were there merely to fulfill a requirement.

This environment poses special problems for the instructor who teaches material with erotic content, such as *Ars amatoria*. Some students of a conservative Christian bent, like the devout in other cultures, express puzzlement and outrage when class texts do not reflect or validate their perspectives. Many have no idea that the Bible has historical, artistic, and editorial traditions or that scriptural literalism is itself a type of theology. Most find medieval religious literary conventions incomprehensible and hypocritical: they are surprised that lyrics addressed to the Virgin and to the domina of *fin' amors* may draw mildly sexual imagery from the same wellspring; that some cathedral schools used *flores* (lines excerpted for memorization and study) from *Ars amatoria*, a few quite graphic (Hexter, *Ovid and Medieval Schooling* 72, 77) and that the first partial English translation of *Ars* was a book of precisely this type, *The flores of Ovide de arte amandi with theyr englysshe afore them* (1513); that Petrarch could be a practicing Christian who nonetheless admits in a poem that his passion for Laura outweighs his sense of the Passion during Good Friday Mass; and that Petrarch's fourteenth-century French contemporary, the author of the *Ovide moralisé*, allegorizes the brief account of Jupiter, Danaë, and Perseus in *Metamorphoses* as typological precursors of the Holy Ghost, the Blessed Virgin, and the baby Jesus. At the same time, to stereotype these students as intolerant is of no pedagogical value and therefore downright counterproductive. Actually, many Bible readers, as a result of their studies, have learned valuable inter- and intratextual hermeneutical skills unknown to their peers: the ability to read texts closely; a tolerance for simultaneous and contradictory interpretations within a

literary work; a patience for allowing meanings to manifest themselves gradually to the individual; and the knowledge that communities of readers together negotiate and make meaning. They know, therefore, that group discussion of literary texts is necessary and exhilarating.

Other problems, certainly not peculiar to this student population, are gender related. No instructor would wish for his or her praise of Ovid's subtle poetics in *Ars* to be mistaken for an endorsement of the rogue masculine ethos of seduction or for the work to be misunderstood as entirely about physical love. The conscientious female professor would not wish to appear to be inviting inappropriate attention. An ethical male professor would want to use tact to avoid creating, however inadvertently, a classroom atmosphere that some female students might perceive as hostile to them.

Yet the greatest pedagogical problem may well lie with the nagging perceptions that even the most dedicated faculty members may find themselves sharing with their less conscientious peers. That is, students who take a course for compulsory distribution credit should not be condescended to because they are not convinced of the value of learning for learning's sake, an attitude that professorial negativity only exacerbates. Many of the young men and women I taught were products of test-oriented public school systems with rigidly unimaginative curricula that were just inches from violating church-state separation, whose governing boards, with the happy endorsement of the communities they served, firmly committed their budgets to football instead of academic programs or teacher salaries. Many had parents who had not encouraged them to become independent readers in their formative years.

Empathy, patience, and humility are therefore required for one professing Ovid in such an environment, and for other reasons besides those above. My students were often forced to learn in an academic milieu in which virtually everything has been predetermined—"radical determinacy," if you will, which stifles the critical thinking so crucial to independent learning. The only writing model that the members of a given class might have previously learned is the reductive tripartite-list thesis that fuels the mechanical five-paragraph essay. The sole reading model: learn the plot of the "story" (a term that can also mean "play" or "poem") and summarize it so that the act of meeting the page with the eyes can be verified. Students must sometimes also unlearn more pernicious educational vices, conceptual in nature: the idea that moral questions are simply solved and unambiguous—for example, that adultery is always wrong; that writers always have a hidden message that they alone know, which the instructor, as the sole authority in the classroom, should reveal; that, if the notion of radical indeterminacy one proposes as a counterweight to their previous experience is truly operational, the validity of everyone's opinion, including the instructor's, is arbitrary; and, most important, that a student should finish a given academic task as hastily as possible because it is at best boring, at worst worthless.

I conclude that my primary task was not to promulgate the study of Ovid per se to those who elected my courses or to prepare them for elite academic

careers. My ethical perception of my job dictated that I use any means to encourage critical thinking and to teach analytical-argumentative writing skills. Assigning texts that were controversial and even offensive to some of my students was salutary for these purposes. My approach was broadly heuristical, learning by discovery: large-class discussion, group work, student presentations, and writing, writing, writing.

The Ovid of *Ars* (the *praeceptor Amoris* ["teacher of love"]) and of *Amores* (the *desultor Amoris* ["circus rider of love"]) provides a paradigm of writerly indeterminacy in any language, eminently useful as a teaching tool. How does one resolve the early statement of the *desultor* that he is not a circus rider of love (*Amores* 1.3.15) with his subsequent revelations (e.g., 2.4) that this is exactly what he aspires to be? He seems to follow much of the advice that the *praeceptor* offers both men and women in *Ars*, which proves disastrous for his attempt at a love life. Some of the material in this latter text contradicts itself or otherwise cancels itself out. How much efficacy, then, does the sage counsel of the learned doctor actually have? Many medieval writers, most notably Chaucer and Jean de Meun, speak reverently of *Ars* as a trustworthy, even infallible, guidebook to love, a position that few moderns would be likely to hold. Does this suggest that people from the distant past read differently? Did Ovid actually "mean" any of this? Is he the same person as the *praeceptor*? Although such questions may appear naive and jejune to those steeped in the lore of the critical site, they can be fresh and invigorating to the novice, especially when he or she is challenged to find textual evidence as support for arguments that must be logically structured to be credible for an academic audience.

That Ovid might not be writing autobiography or expressing his own deeply held opinions surprised my students, especially when I made available to them his famous disavowal of *Ars* from Tomis (*Tr.* 2.353–58): "I assure you, my character differs from my verse (my life is moral, my muse is gay), and most of my work, unreal and fictitious, has allowed itself more licence than its author has had. A book is not evidence of the writer's mind, but respectable entertainment; it will offer many things suited to charm the ear" (Ovid, *Tristia* [ed. Wheeler] 81). They asked why a writer should not be what he writes. Isn't this just special pleading, considering the circumstances? We discovered that they shared some critical perceptions with early commentators: "Of Ovidius Naso his banishment, divers occasions be supposed, but the common opinion and the most likely is, that Augustus Caesar then Emperour, reading his bookes of the art of loue, misliked them so much that hee condemned Ovid to exile" (Churchyard, title pg. verso). This critic, like my students (and Augustus), identifies a writer with his work, especially that composed in the first person. What such a writer writes about might not have really happened but in some sense must be true. As a result, he bears responsibility for what he says and must accept the consequences of self-expression. Therefore, the named object of affection in the *Amores* must also be real, albeit pseudonymous, a concept that the commentator E. K. in Edmund Spenser's *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579) explains:

“Ovide shadoweth hys love under the name of Corynna, which of some is supposed to be Julia, the [e]mperor Augustus his daughter, and wyfe to Agryppa” (*Yale Edition* 34–35). Students resisted the concept of the persona, despite the evidence of the anguished statement of Ovid from exile. “Corinna” was a real person, and her admirer’s love for her was true. My students suggested that there was no other reason to write about her.

Some moralized that a poet whose verses recommend adultery and celebrate sexual freedom deserves to endure the consequences, regardless of subsequent, convenient disavowals. We should judge a writer on what she or he says and surmise what she or he thinks is professed ownership of a text. Although I did not think it my duty or place to challenge my students’ moral tenets, such a reductive argument struck me as worth answering, in one case with an essay assignment. If I, the instructor, ask you to choose a passage from the *Ars amatoria* to analyze in a short paper, and then circulate the finished product to your peers, should they be able to make assumptions about your character and morality, based on the excerpt you select and your analysis of it? Would it be fair to say that your piece of the poem can be read as a kind of horoscope, revealing something secret and unknown (even to yourself) about you?

Naturally, I did not expect such discussions and writing prompts to produce a result from students that would magically convert them to a liberated and capacious position about life and literature. Indeed, I would have been disappointed if their textual interpretations had interacted with my criteria like the ingredients of a foolproof recipe, producing a pan of twenty-four perfectly symmetrical brownies. I hoped for some outrage. Some students applied themselves with enthusiasm, and others resisted. Some produced good essays, and some did not. Yet the act of thinking itself and the writing process were valuable, I hope, to them, because the assignment was immensely valuable for me as germane experience for future intellectual challenges. This constitutes the real usefulness of confronting, through writing and discussion, a complicated text such as *Ars*. The instructor may learn how to be a better teacher for his or her future students.

This Ovidian exercise in indeterminacy can also be useful in the English literature classroom. In an early modern survey course, it seems criminally negligent not to remind students that a syllabus of canonical texts constitutes only one interpretation of the period. They need to know about other authors besides Shakespeare; other forms of writing besides sonnets and tragedies; and other writers from different epochs and cultures whom the syllabus authors read, imitated, and emulated in the complicated nexus that we call intertextuality. To enable my students to explore these issues and broaden their perspectives as well as my own, I explain and illustrate one motif that Ovid repeats in three texts in different forms: the secret seduction of a married woman in front of her husband, which includes the humorous device of writing on the table in wine. The *praeceptor amoris* explains his strategies for executing this feat in *Ars amatoria* (1.571–72); the *desultor amoris* recounts his performance of it in

1 *Amores* (1.4 and 2.5.17); Helen chides Paris for the same behavior in *Heroides*
 2 (17.75–90).

3 The first exercise asks students to compare these repetitions and to note cer-
 4 tain differences. Is Ovid's *praeceptor* serious about this as a romantic strategy?
 5 How successful, ultimately, is the *desultor* in his adulterous relationship with
 6 Corinna, especially in his use of this device? Why should Ovid also ventriloquize
 7 himself as a female speaker—Helen of Troy, no less—and then have her show
 8 mild disapproval of the same behavior? How do we square these conceptions of
 9 morality—not so different from those of Augustus, as legend has it—with our
 10 own? Again, I did not expect simple answers to such difficult questions. I just
 11 wanted my students to see that authors are not always consistent in their ideas
 12 and opinions and, more radically, that this does not often matter to them.

13 After we discovered the immense ambiguity beneath what seems to be a
 14 simple problem or question of influence, we turned to Spenser's very obvious,
 15 even showy manipulation of all three Ovidian uses of the material in the 1590
 16 version of *The Faerie Queene* 3.9–10. His allusively named adulterers, Paridell
 17 and Hellenore, carry on in front of her husband, the despicably possessive and
 18 jealous Malbecco, who is conveniently (from his wife's perspective) blind in one
 19 eye. Spenser knows that adultery is wrong, too, yet does not entirely castigate
 20 Paridell as he seeks "to intimate / His inward griefe, by meanes to him well
 21 knowne" with "all that art he learned had of yore" (29), ostensibly the advice of
 22 the *praeceptor*:

23
 24 Now *Bacchus* fruit out of the silver plate
 25 He on the table dasht, as overthrowne,
 26 Or of the fruitfull liquor overflowne,
 27 And by the dauncing bubbles did divine
 28 Or therein write to lett his love be showne;
 29 Which well she redd out of the learned line,
 30 A sacrament prophane in mistery of wine."

31 (3.9.30)

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 33 The Protestantism of the students at my former institution tended to prevent
 34 their recognition of the significance of this final line, which was potentially blas-
 35 phemous to a pious Roman Catholic. Yet they certainly noticed how Hellenore
 36 then very suggestively spills her own wine in her lap, not so much quen-
 37 ching her ardor as demonstrating the futility of cooling it off, "Shewing desire
 38 her inward flame to slake" (31), obviously aroused by Paridell's deployment of
 39 *Ars*. She later deserts her husband and, after her lover abandons her, takes up
 40 with a herd of satyrs who proceed to enjoy her with her full cooperation, which
 41 her cuckolded mate secretly witnesses as he pursues her (3.10.43–53). I then
 42 ask students to write an essay in which they consider two problems: How does
 S Spenser transmute his profane material, and to what purpose? Why does he, a
 R Christian author in other contexts, use it so approvingly? He shows an amus-
 L

ingly critical, even heartless, attitude toward Malbecco and does not seem to condemn Hellenore, as an observation by Helen C. Gilde implies: “there is nothing perverted about her sexuality—only about what causes her to express it in such ways” (235).

A seventeenth-century survey course could feature a less-specific conjunction of *Ars* with English literature. I found some success with the type of poetry classified under the *carpe-diem* tradition, which exemplifies the aforementioned rogue masculine ethos of seduction: John Donne’s “The Flea” and “Elegy: On His Mistress Going to Bed”; Thomas Carew’s “A Rapture”; Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress.” These authors, thoroughly steeped in Ovid’s erotic works, fashion speakers who adopt the amorality of the *praeceptor* and *desultor*. However, instead of facetiously addressing a group of ignorant pupils in the ways of love or recounting their experiences to a neutral third party as their classical predecessors do, the speakers directly address women with amorous condescension and supercilious logic to persuade them to feel privileged in submitting to the advances, as in *Ars amatoria* 3. An assignment can be crafted using virtually any section of *Ars* or any one of the poems in *Amores* as a prompt to explore how writers such as these emulate their predecessors.

Just as instructive is to ask one’s students to go back a half century and read the soon-to-be canonical Isabella Whitney’s “The admonition by the Auctor, to all yong Gentlewomen: And to al other Maids being in Loue”:

Some use the teares of Crocodiles,
 contrary to their hart:
 And yf they cannot always weepe,
 they wet their Cheekes by Art.
 Ovid, within his Arte of loue,
 doth teach them this same knacke,
 To wet their ha[n]d, and touch their eies:
 so oft as teares they lacke.
 Why have ye such deceit in store:
 have you such crafty wile:
 Lesse craft the[n] this god knows wold soone
 us simple soules begile.
 And wyll ye not leave of: but still
 delude us in this wise:
 Sith it is so, we trust we shall,
 take hede to fained lies.

(W. I., sig. A6)

This example was particularly piquant for many of the students in a course I once taught who were, like Whitney, young women reared in morally conservative households, themselves the objects of unsolicited masculine attention. This author had enough Latin to read *Ars* and identifies herself as a recipient

1 of exactly the same kinds of blandishments that carpe-diem poets proffer.
 2 Some of my readers found Whitney's sarcasm amusing. Men who use *Ars* as
 3 a guidebook for the seduction of impressionable, love-starved maids deserve
 4 to be mocked, because their prey would be seduced just as easily with less ef-
 5 fort. Some feminine voices, my students were pleased to discover, were raised
 6 against the monolithically masculine poetical beast.

7 Some of my students still resisted the idea that a text such as *Ars* is worth-
 8 while or appropriate material precisely because it contains sexual content, even
 9 when presented with maximum professorial caution and empathy, and for one
 10 good reason that may be invisible to professors reared in different times and
 11 under different circumstances. Some students today have learned that sex is
 12 the most important thing in the world, an idea promulgated, somewhat con-
 13 tradictorily, by a strict or fundamentalist religious upbringing on the one hand
 14 and celebrity-driven popular culture on the other. They may feel pressured to
 15 participate in sexual congress to gain the love of their peers but take pledges of
 16 abstinence to ensure the love of their parents. To them, Ovid's intimations that
 17 the physical component of sexuality can be comical and supremely unimportant
 18 may sound subversive indeed. For one teaching his erotic poetry in this milieu,
 19 then, it is advisable to cull one of the *flores* that Renaissance schoolboys knew
 20 from *Metamorphoses* and to use it as an emblem: "ars adeo latet arte sua" so
 21 does his art conceal his art (10.252).
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