

# I

## HISTORY

### Ovid and the Augustan myth

Writing from exile in A.D. 9 Ovid says that two things ruined him – a poem and a blunder:

perdiderint cum me duo crimina, carmen et error  
(*Trist.* 2.207)

The blunder remains mysterious, and I have no new suggestions to offer. Presumably, however, it was quite a serious matter, for when Ovid confessed to his friend Cotta, who was then on the island of Elba, what had taken place, Cotta was very angry.<sup>1</sup> Soon after, Augustus summoned the poet to Rome, reviled him bitterly,<sup>2</sup> and imposed a savage penalty which was never revoked. Ovid says more than once that the blunder was the more serious charge, and on other occasions he speaks as if that had been the decisive factor.<sup>3</sup> So it is hard to agree with those scholars who over the centuries have maintained that the real reason for Augustus' anger was the *Ars Amatoria* and that the blunder was only used as a pretext for getting rid of the poet.<sup>4</sup>

The opposite approach has been more common. Many writers since the renaissance have ignored or underestimated the effect of the poem. To them the *error* was all important, though they disagree about what it may have been. A few have supposed that Ovid came upon something by chance in the imperial palace – theories range from Augustus committing incest to Livia having a bath. Several have conjectured that Ovid became involved in a conspiracy centred on Agrippa Postumus, the emperor's grandson. Most believe that he somehow got mixed up

<sup>1</sup> *Pont.* 11.3.61–4.      <sup>2</sup> *Trist.* 2.133; *Pont.* 11.7.56.

<sup>3</sup> *Pont.* 11.9.72–6; 111.3.71–6; *Trist.* 2.109–10; 1v.10.99–100.

<sup>4</sup> The evidence concerning Ovid's exile, and the various theories that have been held about it, are set forth very fully and clearly by J. C. Thibault in *The Mystery of Ovid's Exile* (California 1964). The older discussion by S. G. Owen in his commentary on *Trist.* 2 (1924) is also well worth reading.

## HISTORY

in the affairs of the younger Julia.<sup>5</sup> Vague as it is, the last theory may well be right. All I am concerned to argue is that the *Ars Amatoria* contributed to the poet's fall.

Let us start with a few negative considerations. It is often maintained that the interval between the publication of the *Ars Amatoria* and Ovid's banishment was so long that one event could have had no bearing on the other. It is true that Ovid himself makes a great deal of this in *Trist.* 2.539–46:

‘Long ago I too sinned in writing poetry of that kind [i.e. amatory verse]. So a misdemeanour which is not new is paying a new penalty. . . The poems which in my thoughtless youth I believed would bring me no harm have now brought me harm in my old age. The vengeance which you have taken for that little volume of long ago is late and overwhelming. The punishment has come a long time after the act which provoked it.’

That passage is designed to show how unreasonable it was to punish the poet for writing the *Ars Amatoria*, and so it exaggerates the interval in question, making it sound like one of at least twenty years. Several modern scholars, like Owen, Rogers, and Thibault, have accepted Ovid's plea rather too easily. They all speak of a ten-year period. But if the poem was finally published in A.D. 1 and Ovid was exiled towards the end of A.D. 8, we get a period of just over seven years, and that, surely, was not too long.<sup>6</sup> Consider a rather similar point which arose in the case of Oscar Wilde. At the trial of Lord Queensberry at the Old Bailey on 3 April 1895 Sir Edward Clarke in his opening speech for the prosecution referred to what he called ‘an extremely curious count at the end of the plea’, namely that in July 1890 Mr Wilde published, or caused to be published, with his name upon the title page a certain immoral and indecent work, with the title of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, which was intended to be understood by the readers to describe the relations, intimacies, and passions of certain persons guilty of unnatural practices. That, said Sir Edward, was a very gross allegation. The volume could be bought at any bookstall in London. It had Mr Wilde's name on the title page and had been published five years.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Thibault, *The Mystery of Ovid's Exile*, Appendix 1.

<sup>6</sup> The poem may have been published in instalments in the period 1 B.C. to A.D. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Stuart Mason, *Oscar Wilde: Art and Morality* (London 1912) 203–4.

## HISTORY

At this point it may occur to us to put a very simple question: if the *Ars Amatoria* had nothing to do with Ovid's downfall, why does he say the opposite on more than one occasion? R. S. Rogers is candid enough to face this problem. His solution is that Ovid knew his blunder was *not* defensible and therefore devoted most of his excuses to the poem, which *was* defensible.<sup>8</sup> If Rogers is right, we have to assume that in the second book of the *Tristia*, which contains nearly six hundred lines, Ovid is like a man arraigned for dangerous driving, who protests at great length and with great ingenuity that he has never picked a pocket in his life.

Another argument which one occasionally hears is that Ovid states explicitly in at least six passages that the *Ars* is a guide to the relations of men and *freed*women; it was not intended for married ladies and therefore could not have had any harmful effect on social morality. Not many readers, I imagine, take these protestations seriously, but it is worth considering for a moment just why they *are* so unconvincing. First of all the Roman public would have approached the *Ars* with expectations already engendered by the *Amores*. In *Amores* 11.1.3f. Ovid serves warning that his poems are not for the strict (*procul hinc, procul este, seueri*). But there is no social distinction implied; and indeed we are asked to believe that the work is especially suitable for engaged couples:

me legat in sponsi facie non frigida uirgo  
*I hope to be read by the girl who feels a glow at the sight of her fiancé.*

(In connection with the special status of the betrothed one thinks of the two highly respectable old ladies who stood looking at Rodin's statue 'The Kiss'. After a minute's silence one turned to the other and remarked rather dubiously: 'I take it they must be engaged...') In 11.4.47–8 Ovid says: 'Whatever girls are admired by anyone in the entire city – my love has designs on them all.' That comes at the end of a piece which sets out in great detail just how comprehensive the poet's aspirations are. Or take a verse like 111.4.37:

rusticus est nimium quem laedit adultera coniunx  
*only an oaf is offended by his wife's infidelities.*

Those words occur in a poem committed to the thesis that if a husband refuses to connive at his wife's adultery he is a bad sport, a bore, and no gentleman.

<sup>8</sup> R. S. Rogers, *TAPA* 97 (1966) 377–8.

Cambridge University Press  
 0521611865 - Lines of Enquiry: Studies in Latin Poetry  
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 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

## HISTORY

There are also passages in the *Ars Amatoria* itself which seem to rule out any distinction within the female population. In 1.269–70, for example, we have the following:

prima tuae menti ueniat fiducia cunctas  
 posse capi; capies, tu modo tende plagas.

*You must first convince yourself that all girls can be caught. You will catch them; all you have to do is spread your nets.*

Shortly after, we are told that it is an adynaton – an actual reversal of nature – for a girl to refuse a presentable man. Are we really supposed to say to ourselves: ‘Of course he means every girl *except* the wives of the upper classes’? The fact is, surely, that the nature of the didactic genre demands that the author’s precepts should be universally valid. Ovid’s lover and his lass are in the same category as the farmer, the fisherman, the hunter, and the other types made familiar by the didactic poetry of Hellenistic Greece. The τέχνηαι which govern these various occupations are entirely independent of social distinctions.

Last of all, some of Ovid’s disclaimers look rather odd when seen in their context. In 1.33–4 we read:

nos Venerem tutam concessaque furta canemus  
 inque meo nullum carmine crimen erit.

*I will sing of sex which is not illicit and of intrigues which are allowed; in my song there will be no wrong.*

The previous couplet, however, is this:

este procul, uittae tenues, insigne pudoris,  
 quaeque tegis medios instita longa pedes.

*Keep away, ye fine headbands, badge of purity, and the long flounce that reveals only the toes.*

The headband and flounce were the signs of respectable womanhood, but the formula *este procul*, which recalls the Sibyl’s *procul o procul este profani*, suggests that Ovid is celebrating *sacra* or rites of a holy kind from which these ladies must be rigorously excluded. It is they who are in danger of blasphemy, not the poet.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> ‘Écrire en tête d’un ouvrage “Éloignez-vous d’ici, vous qui portez des bandelettes légères, insigne de la pudeur”, n’est-ce-pas donner à quelques-unes d’entre elles le désir de s’approcher? . . . La manière de tromper un mari ressemble beaucoup à celle de tromper un amant.’ G. Boissier, *L’Opposition sous les Césars* (sixth ed. Paris 1909) 124. The whole chapter on Ovid’s exile is full of charm and good sense.

## HISTORY

In 2.152ff. Ovid recommends that love should be fostered by sweet talk; quarrelling should be left to those who are married. ‘That is appropriate for wives; quarrels are a wife’s dowry – *hoc decet uxores; dos est uxoria lites*. But see to it that a mistress always hears welcome words. It is not by the law’s decree that you have ended up in the same bed. In your case love does the duty of law.’ Here there is certainly a distinction between Ovidian and conjugal love, but the advantage seems to lie heavily with the former. Marriage means strife – better give it a miss. Would this amusing advice have appealed to the emperor, who was trying so hard to promote matrimony? Would the epigram *dos est uxoria lites* have pleased the Empress Livia, who had dedicated a shrine to Concordia and presented it to her dear husband?<sup>10</sup> And do the phrases *legis iussu* and *munere legis* not look dangerously like defiant references to the *leges Iuliae*? There is no doubt that *amor* is seen as something alien to *lex*.

In 2.557ff. young men are advised not to catch their girlfriends out: ‘Let them sin, and as they do so let them think they are fooling you.’ Detection only makes matters worse – a point illustrated by the story of Mars and Venus. Presented in ample, if not extravagant, detail, it culminates in the assertion that Vulcan, the injured husband, was a stupid interfering fool; his action only made the guilty pair more determined. Turning to his readers Ovid says: ‘You be warned by this; Venus’ detection warns you not to set such traps’ (593–4). That is really the end of the section and the conclusion is plain enough. But Ovid goes on to say that this kind of detective work should only be practised by husbands, though even they may not think it worth while. And then comes the formal disclaimer: ‘You see – I say it again – there is no game here that is not allowed by law. No flounce takes part in my fun’ (599–600). Did Ovid really believe that this feeble couplet cancelled out the effect of the previous fifty lines?

Finally, in 3.611ff. Ovid says:

qua uaffer eludi possit ratione maritus  
 quaque uigil custos, praeteriturus eram.  
 nupta uirum timeat, rata sit custodia nuptae:  
 hoc decet, hoc leges duxque pudorque iubent.  
 te quoque seruari, modo quam uindicta redemit,  
 quis ferat? ut fallas, ad mea sacra ueni.

*I was going to pass over the techniques for bamboozling a cunning husband or a vigilant guardian. Let a wife respect her husband, let*

<sup>10</sup> Ovid. *Fast.* iv.637–8.

## HISTORY

*there be thorough surveillance over a wife; that is proper, that is enjoined by law, decency, and our leader. But that a watch should be kept on you too, who have just been freed by the Praetor's rod – who would stand for that? Come to my service and learn how to practise deception.*

Freedwomen, then, are fair game. And they for their part may be expected to use every wile to outwit the men who would restrict them. This carefree attitude, however, was not shared by Augustus. In the *leges Iuliae* he had made it legal for every citizen, except senators, to marry freedwomen. According to Dio (LIV.16.2), ἐπέτρεψε καὶ ἐξέλευθέραις τοῖς ἐθέλουσι, πλὴν τῶν βουλευόντων, ἄγεσθαι, ἔννομον τὴν τεκνοποιίαν αὐτῶν εἶναι κελεύσας. We may be fairly sure that when Augustus passed this measure he did not add as a rider that such women would, of course, be at liberty to deceive their husbands and would be exempt from the penalties of adultery.

To sum up: Ovid's disclaimers are unconvincing because we already know the *Amores*, because the effect of his protestations is obliterated by the rest of the material, and because the protestations themselves are nearly always nullified by the context. The *Ars Amatoria*, then, is really all-inclusive – indeed all-embracing – in its message. As Matthew Prior put it:

Ovid is the surest guide  
 You can name to show the way  
 To any woman, maid or bride,  
 Who resolves to go astray.

So far our attention has been focused mainly on Ovid. It is time now to consider the other actor in the drama – viz, the Emperor Augustus. Here we shall be criticizing a different line of reasoning – one which contends that since Augustus was a man of the world with a rather dubious past he could not possibly have been shocked by the *Ars Amatoria* and therefore the poem could not have contributed to Ovid's disgrace.

There is not much evidence concerning Augustus' love-life, but there is too much to present here, and so I shall have to select and summarize. First, many people thought he showed an unbecoming impatience in divorcing Scribonia and marrying Livia just three months before the birth of Livia's son Drusus. When Drusus was born rumour suspected that Augustus (then Octavian) was the father, and the following verse became popular:

## HISTORY

τοῖς εὐτυχοῦσι καὶ τρίμηνα παιδία<sup>11</sup>

*The fortunate have babies in three months.*

Secondly, a year or two before Actium Antony complained about the campaign of vilification which was being directed against him and Cleopatra. He alleged that Octavian for his part was having immoral relationships with Tertulla, Terentilla, Rufilla, and Salvia Titisenia.<sup>12</sup> If this is to be discounted because of Antony's malice, another piece of evidence is suspect for the opposite reason. I refer to the eulogy of Octavian by Nicolaus of Damascus, in which we are told that Octavian had to attend divine service at night because his good looks drove women mad. 'But although they plotted to ensnare him he was never taken captive, partly because his mother shooed them all away and protected him, partly because he was exceptionally sensible for his years.'<sup>13</sup> One can't help feeling that this kind of testimony raises the very suspicions it was designed to quell.

Those passages all refer to the Triumviral period. Suetonius (71) says that later too (*postea quoque*) Augustus had the reputation of being keen on young girls. No doubt he had, and perhaps he deserved it. But when Suetonius adds that his wife and others used to obtain such girls for him from all over the place, our credulity falters. There is something decidedly implausible about Livia in the role of imperial procurers. The same kind of discrimination is called for in dealing with Dio LIV.16.3. There we are told that in 18 B.C. comments were made in the senate about the promiscuity of women and young men; this was alleged to be the reason for their reluctance to marry. Senators urged Augustus to set this right too, making ironical allusions to his intimacy with numerous women (ὅτι πολλαῖς γυναῖξιν ἐχρῆτο). According to Dio the emperor gave a rather weak reply. Again, this account may be taken as further evidence of the emperor's reputation, but it is hard to believe that senators would have dared to go in for that kind of bar-room banter with the Princeps. Finally there was a rumour that Augustus had an affair with Maecenas' wife Terentia.<sup>14</sup> There is

<sup>11</sup> Suetonius, *Claud.* 1.1.

<sup>12</sup> Suetonius, *Aug.* 69.

<sup>13</sup> See C. M. Hall, *Smith College Classical Studies* 4 (1923). The passage comes from Nicolaus, chap. 5. In chap. 15 he adds the remarkable fact (θαυμαστόν τι) that at an age when young men are especially licentious Octavian abstained from sex for a whole year. The motive ascribed, however, is perhaps not the highest: it was for the sake of his voice and general physique.

<sup>14</sup> Dio LIV.19.3. Dio is the only source, unless we identify Terentia with the Terentilla mentioned by Antony in the letter cited by Suetonius, *Aug.* 69. In that case we have to believe that the affair lasted at least sixteen years.

## HISTORY

nothing inherently incredible in such an idea, but when Dio reports that some people believed that the reason why Augustus set out for Gaul in 16 B.C. was his wish to live quietly with Terentia beyond the reach of gossip, and when he adds that Augustus was so in love with Terentia that he made her enter a beauty contest against Livia, then one sighs for evidence of a more pedestrian kind. Let us suppose, then, that there was something in what Dio and Suetonius say, and that the emperor allowed himself an occasional mistress; that still would not mean that he was willing to overlook the tone and implications of the *Ars Amatoria*, for there was, I would suggest, a tension, and in certain matters a contradiction, between the private and public areas of Augustus' personality.

In the spring of 1869, during the excavations ordered by Napoleon III, a house was discovered on the Palatine under the imperial residence. Because her name was found on one of the pipes this is commonly called the House of Livia, but Lugli, Maiuri, and many others believe that it is in fact the house of Augustus, as described by Suetonius. On the back wall of the tablinum is a painting of Polyphemus wading after Galatea, who is making her escape on the back of a hippocamp. A winged eros stands on Polyphemus' shoulders and guides him with reins. Two nereids are to be seen, one in the centre background and one on the left, while in the foreground Galatea sits sidesaddle on the hippocamp, half draped, with her back to the viewer and looking over her right shoulder at her gigantic but gentle pursuer. The picture on the right wall, though damaged, is better preserved and can be seen in Maiuri's book entitled *Roman Painting*, published in the Skira series. It represents Io in a bluish grey, rather diaphanous, dress, sitting on a rock in the centre foreground. She is observed from the right by a completely humanized Argus; and on the left, coming round the corner of the rock, is the figure of Mercury. In the reproductions printed by Rizzo two tiny horns are sprouting from Io's forehead. Maiuri comments: 'Such romantic tales of the loves of the gods were in high favour, not only with the artists of Rome and Campania, but also with the local élite. Indeed the upper class had a predilection for those amorous adventures of maidens in distress which were the stock in trade of the Alexandrian littérateurs.'<sup>15</sup> Not very much hinges on this,

In two passages that are hostile to Terentia (*Epist.* 114.4–6 and *De Prov.* 3.10–11) Seneca says nothing about her alleged adultery with Augustus.

<sup>15</sup> A. Maiuri, *Roman Painting* (English trans. by S. Gilbert) 28. The fullest description and illustration of these paintings will be found in G. E. Rizzo, *Monumenti della pittura antica scoperti in Italia*, sec. III, Roma, Fasc. III.



Cambridge University Press

0521611865 - Lines of Enquiry: Studies in Latin Poetry

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## HISTORY

but if the house *is* that of Augustus the decoration suggests that in private the emperor could enjoy works which were not dedicated with a heavy seriousness to glorifying himself, his family, and his regime.

Augustus' private taste in art was consistent with his private taste as a writer. He once began a tragedy on the subject of Ajax, but failed to complete it; and when his friends asked how Ajax was coming on he replied that the hero had fallen on his sponge (Suet. *Aug.* 85.2). Epigram was more in his line. Pliny the elder mentions verses in Greek, written for the dedication of a picture in Caesar's temple (*NH* 35.91). Another couplet is referred to by Macrobius (11.4.31). Apparently a Greekling had made several attempts to hand Augustus a complimentary epigram as he came down from the Palatine. When the emperor saw him pressing forward again, he quickly scribbled a couplet and sent it to the other man first. Unfortunately the contents are not preserved. Two other trivial verses in Greek *are* preserved; they will be found in Suetonius, *Aug.* 98.4. A more serious composition was a poem in Latin hexameters on Sicily. No doubt it described the history, legends, and sights of the island – including Etna, which Seneca says was a regular topic for poets (*Epist.* 79.5). Suetonius, who mentions this poem (85.2) also refers to an epitaph in Latin verse carved on Drusus' tomb (Suet. *Claud.* 1.5).

More important, perhaps, for our purpose are the abusive verses written in the Triumviral period. Some were directed at Pollio, who wisely refrained from answering back: *at ego taceo; non est enim facile in eum scribere qui potest proscribere* – 'But I'll keep my mouth shut, for it isn't easy to write *against* someone who can write you *off*' (Macrobius 11.4.21). Other pieces were aimed at Antony and Fulvia and were so indecent that Martial judged them worthy of praise and preservation. They can be found in the twentieth epigram of Book xi. Much later, when Pliny was justifying his own rather frivolous lines (*uersiculos seueros parum*), he said 'Need I be afraid that a practice which was proper for the divine Augustus and others should be somewhat *improper* for me?' (*Epist.* 5.3). As we know from *Epist.* 4.14, Pliny's verses were hendecasyllables of a rather risqué kind. 'If some of them', he says, 'seem a little on the naughty side (*petulantiora paulo*), bear in mind that the highly distinguished and respectable men who have written such pieces have not refrained from wanton subject-matter nor even from unvarnished phrases.'

We therefore possess or know of the following pieces: a few improvisations and a dedicatory epigram in Greek, a longer poem in Latin hexameters on Sicily, an epitaph on Drusus (presumably in elegiacs),

## HISTORY

fescennine verses against Pollio, Fulvia, and Antony, and some *nugae* of a saucy kind (probably in hendecasyllables). Suetonius also mentions a short book of epigrams which the emperor composed in the bath (Suet. *Aug.* 85). When to all this we add some items from his private correspondence and the remarks attributed to him and made about him by others,<sup>16</sup> it is clear that Augustus had sufficient taste and wit to understand what Ovid was doing. In fact he understood it all too well.

The tension in Augustus' mind between public and private can also be seen in his attitude to his own moral legislation. Although he passed laws against adultery one has the impression that he was reluctant to take account of particular cases. During his censorship a young man was brought to trial for committing adultery with a woman whom he had subsequently married. Augustus was embarrassed – perhaps because he had done the same thing himself – and after some hesitation he said in effect: 'Go away and don't let it happen again' (Dio LIV. 16.6). It has often been remarked that while the emperor did his best to promote marriage and so arrest the falling birthrate, his friends Horace and Virgil remained single all their days. And Dio (LVI.10.3) calls attention to the fact that the consuls Papius and Poppaeus who brought in the marriage law of A.D. 9 were 'not only childless, but not even married' – an odd but quite logical distribution of emphasis.

But this tolerance, however limited, was not extended to his own family. 'In bringing up his daughter and grand-daughters', says Suetonius (*Aug.* 64.2), 'he even had them taught spinning and weaving, and he forbade them to say or do anything except openly and such as might be recorded in the household diary.' Augustus, who had many old-fashioned patriarchal views, may have thought that the ordinary Roman family should be reared in this way. But in any case his was not an ordinary Roman family; it was the royal family and the dynasty depended on it. He was therefore quite ruthless in his treatment of Julia, marrying her first to Marcellus (Dio LIII.27.5), then to Agrippa (LIV.6.5), and finally to Tiberius (LIV.31.2, Suet. *Aug.* 63); and compelling the last two men to divorce wives with whom they were happily settled. Not surprisingly this treatment of a spirited young woman led to trouble. In 2 B.C. the rumours of Julia's behaviour could no longer be hushed up and the scandal broke. It was more than a matter of sexual immorality. Of the five *nobiles* mentioned as ringleaders by Velleius (II.100.4–5) the most striking is Iullus Antonius, who as Augustus'

<sup>16</sup> See H. Malcovati, *Imperatoris Caesaris Augusti Operum Fragmenta* (Paravia 1962).