

Prelude

At the midpoint of the last century, Archibald Allen argued that it was a mistake to apply the criterion of “sincerity” in its Romantic form to Latin love elegy.¹ Allen was taking issue with the biographical emphasis of much contemporary scholarship, which detected authenticity in Propertius while dismissing Ovid as a mere poseur. Scholars writing on Ovid’s love poetry in this century are unlikely to fall into the biographical trap. But the specter of “sincerity” can never, it seems, be exorcized once and for all. Hovering at the side of the stage, it has continued to inform, via a sort of negative pressure, the reception of the *Amores*. The dominant view is captured if not caricatured by W. R. Johnson: “As for Ovid, who came at the tail-end of the elegiac project, his love poems, glittering with flawless technique and polished to a durable sheen by ruthless irony, concern themselves mostly with cataloging – as for a museum exhibit – the prime themes and tactics of love elegy and with displaying them as a sort of gaudy collection of outworn clichés.”² For Johnson, the *Amores* are all surface and no depth, all flash and no substance, all art and no heart, all irony and no engagement: the very essence of “secondary literature” (with a scholarly bent: cf. “cataloging,” “museum”). Where Johnson (who prefers Propertius) is severe, others are neutral or appreciative.³ But what remains largely undisturbed is the underlying assumption that Ovid’s love poetry is founded on the relegation of love.⁴

¹ Allen (1950); for Allen the proper question is not “Did the elegists really feel this?” but the stylistic/rhetorical “Is it reasonable that the lover whose character appears in the elegies should speak in this manner?” (153).

² Johnson (2009) xii; more affectionately, Arnaldi (1958) 29: “that vast anthology of erotic commonplaces that is the *Amores*.”

³ For example: “[A]dopting [the elegiac] character and genre he is effectively parodying both” (Lyne (1980) 243); “As his elegiac Ego toys with love, Ovid himself toys with the love poetry of his precursors” (Gauly (1990) 12); “Ovid is a prolific writer of what I would call anti-love elegy” (Boyd (2012) 526).

⁴ Largely but not entirely undisturbed; exceptions include Martin (1994), Hardie (2002), Miller (2004), Liveley (2005), Rimell (2006), and Kennedy (1993) and (2008), all of whom, in different ways, take Ovidian desire seriously.

It is true that in the *Amores* Ovid is constantly citing, twisting, refurbishing, or otherwise engaging with the language and figures of his precursors. But does this mean that I am required, as a putatively responsible scholar, to read his poetry that way? that the meaning and value and interest of the *Amores* reside essentially in that engagement? *Must* I read the *Amores* with Tibullus and Propertius (and Callimachus and Virgil and Catullus and . . .) by my side? Scholars writing about Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, likewise a late entry in a crowded tradition, do not feel obliged to catalogue Shakespeare's every debt; but then again Shakespeare produces such a powerful effect of authenticity, or at least *authority*, that those debts are regularly forgiven. A better comparison is Sir Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, the first such lyric sequence in English and self-consciously indebted to the Petrarchan tradition. Yet literariness has not dominated the scholarly reception of *Astrophil and Stella* to anything like the degree that it has that of the *Amores*.

Latinists are trained from a tender age to be alert to textual parallels; the commentaries on which they cut their teeth are laden with "cf."s. So scholars steeped in the tradition represented by Callimachus, Catullus, Tibullus, and Propertius can hardly help experiencing Ovid's *Amores* as an echo chamber (and if more of the poetry of Gallus survived, the echoes would be denser still).⁵ Yet it is not just their citationality that sets the *Amores* apart. The problem with the *Amores* is that this citationality is doubled at the thematic level by Ovid's explicit trivialization of passion, embodied in a protagonist who plays at love but is seldom convincingly tormented in its throes. Propertius can mouth clichés and carry conviction; Sidney can exploit and contest the Petrarchan idiom in poems that claim to represent an abiding love; for that matter, a lover can deploy a Hallmark valentine bearing the most saccharine of rhymes in good faith and to good effect. But Ovid always lets us see the lover's radical *opportunism*. In the *Amores*, the tropes of elegy are transparently deployed, not in the service of a grand passion, but to advance a seducer's agenda. The picture is not altered by the fact that this seducer is so often shown to be incompetent.

Scholars have generally responded in two ways (by no means mutually exclusive). Those who are literarily inclined tend to direct attention away from the unseemly doings of the problematic protagonist, focusing by preference on the brilliance and complexity of Ovid's engagement with the literary tradition; those interested in questions of gender and power, by

⁵ These are the obvious suspects; Boyd (1997) expands the list to include epic, a project developed further in Boyd (2017).

contrast, tend to focus their attention on Ovid's portrait of the morally bankrupt poet-lover, whose tawdry aim (Ovid helps us see) is to exploit his girlfriend for sex and also, insofar as she props up and effectively incarnates his verse project, for poetic renown.⁶ Adopting a distinction productively deployed by Kathleen McCarthy, we could say that the first group gives more weight to the discourse (Ovid the poet writing "for us"), the second to the represented "story" (the "I" of the collection speaking to others such as Corinna and Bagoas within the storyworld).⁷ My aim here is not to contest the important work these approaches have generated, but to provide a complement to it by exploring the collection from within and on its own terms. For my purposes, this means generally ignoring the literary tradition from which it emerges,⁸ along with the clean division between love and poetry on which Ovid's project appears to be founded.

Again, given all the ways in which the collection trumpets its derivativeness, this procedure may seem perverse and I will in fact have occasion to refer to the usual suspects. Nevertheless, I do think the scholarly reception of the *Amores* has been somewhat hobbled by scholarly knowledge. I am not suggesting that Ovid's rhetoric of love would sound more persuasive if only we were unacquainted with the poetry of Tibullus and Propertius. It is just that while I take the encompassing citational atmosphere of the *Amores* seriously and am even prepared to concede that intertextuality is at the center of Ovid's authorial practice, I do not therefore feel obliged to leap into the intertextual vortex. Hanging back from the edge, what I see is a poet thoroughly enmeshed in the messy fictional world he sporadically attempts to rise above. Nor does the flamboyant insincerity of the lover lead me to conclude that the collection is *merely* secondary: a self-promoting anatomy, or amusing pastiche, or sophomoric parody, or cunning exposé, or moral critique, of

⁶ Representatives of the first approach include Hinds (1987), Boyd (1997), Bretzigheimer (2001); of the second, Cahoon (1988), Greene (1998), James (2003). For a less sanguine view of the Ovidian project (via the appropriation of the *Ars Amatoria* by contemporary misogynists), see now Zuckerberg (2018).

⁷ McCarthy (forthcoming) ch. 1. Of course, as the work of the second set of scholars cited in the preceding note makes clear, and as McCarthy herself underscores, the "story" will also function as the medium of an authorial communication, Ovid communicating with us *by way of* the communications his speaker makes to others.

⁸ And also the literary corpus of which it forms part, i.e., Ovid's other amatory works. I need to stress that I am not proposing that this approach is the "right" one and I recognize that, in light of recent work that showcases the interpretive consequences of the collection's chronological enigmas (e.g., Jansen (2012), Martelli (2013) ch. 1, Thorsen (2014)), this narrowing of focus may strike some readers as deeply problematic. My claim is just that it is theoretically and practically possible, and (as I hope to show) productive, to take up the *Amores* as an independent work.

the conventions it recycles. On the contrary, one dimension of Ovid's originality is his bland rejection of the amazingly resilient fiction of an original passion unmediated by cultural representations. So let us stay inside the poems and see what they have to offer. After all, secondariness has its own authenticity.