

ON THE *HEROIDES*



Elegy takes over the world

□ Ovid's *Heroides*

- Likely to have been published immediately after or about the same time as the *Amores*
- Elegiac love letters written as if from the point of view of mythological heroines
- This picks up the Hellenistic/Callimachean preference for writing missing-moments stories
 - We have already seen this is 'canonical' elegy:
 - E.g.: Propertius magnifying the Briseis-Achilles relationship, writing Calypso on the beach, Tibullus expanding on Apollo's enslavement to Admetus

□ ...but bringing in features of the two 'high' poetic genres: epic and tragedy:

- Penelope, Dido, Ariadne, and Medea are perhaps the most famous of the letter writers

Elegiac features

- First, what is elegiac about these poems?
 - The metre: the ancient reader's first and foremost clue no longer to expect Penelope to speak 'epic'
 - The vocabulary: key phrases from 'canonical' elegy recur here and due to the allusions, they change the tone of the narrative
 - Odysseus is 'ferreus', 'hard-hearted', a word often used of lovers playing hard to get in 'canonical' elegy
 - The emphasis on love
- Furthermore, all letter writers are shut-out lovers, or lovers that have been abandoned for a rival – both scenarios we know well from 'canonical' elegy

Blending Genres

- The *Heroides* letters all deal with mythological topics outside of the usual area of 'canonical' elegy
- They all depend extensively on intertextual interplay with epic and tragedy: i.e., you need to know your Homer to appreciate Penelope's letter
- Above all, the reader's knowledge of the intertexts create a sense of dramatic irony:
 - ▣ E.g. the reader will understand from Penelope's letter that the traveller she is preparing to hand her letter to, is actually Odysseus himself:
 - ▣ 'Whoever turns his wandering vessel towards this shore departs weary of being questioned by me, about you: and what he'll deliver to you, if he sees you anywhere, will be letters surrendered to him, written by my hand.'

Heroine vs. genre

- The elegiac form imposes several changes on the epic/tragic matter: Love is the one central concern in the letter writers' minds
 - Odysseus is neglecting his love interest Penelope, so in the very first line of her letter, she calls him 'long-delayed', or literally, in the Latin, 'lazy'
 - Ovid's Penelope doesn't worry about ship wreck – she worries primarily about her husband having found another woman
 - While I foolishly fear it, that is your wilfulness, you could be captive now to a foreign love. And perhaps you tell her, that your wife's an innocent, considered to be almost like raw wool.
- This makes the focus shift from what the reader knows are important events in the mainstream version of the myth:
 - ▣ Penelope drawing focus away from Telemachus' actions, saying that she sent him to Pylos and Sparta – when the reader knows from the Odyssey that he went on his own account, and had to trick his mother to get away

Reader response

- How does the reader respond to such shifts?
 - ‘Hey, we finally find out what *really* went on!’ ‘That Odysseus/Aeneas/Jason, what a twat!’
 - ‘She hasn’t got a clue, has she?’
- When considering this, we need to bear in mind that the epic version of the myths would have been considerably more ingrained in the ancient reader than it is, perhaps, for us
 - Greek and Roman epic vital parts of school education, where they had canonical status
 - However, the ideal learned reader of elegy would also know of variants – but would likely be inclined to consider them just that, variants

Reading epic through the *Heroides*

- Does Ovid's elegiac take on these myths tell us anything about the genres of the intertexts?
- ▣ The *Heroides* offer a similar perspective on mainstream society and its priorities as 'canonical' elegy does – heroes are encouraged to leave aside the pursuit of glory, just as the narrators of elegy reject military and civic careers
- ▣ This may be seen as supporting an anti-traditional agenda pursued in earlier elegy, suggesting that the values associated with, if not explicitly expressed by, mainstream literature are flawed

Reading elegy through the *Heroides*

- Does it tell us anything about their other intertext, that of ‘canonical’ elegy?
- Let’s come back to the suggested reader response of ‘She’s got no clue!’:
- It may recall the possible reader response to ‘canonical’ elegy that the narrators are characters lacking in understanding of Roman society and its priorities
- If so, the *Heroides* would reinforce that the elegiac lifestyle does not work out in reality
 - ▣ Elegy can be seen as being tested against the reality of epic?