

AUGUSTAN LOVERS

19 Devious narrators

Our experience

- We have so far considered several examples where we've found the narrator to be less than honest with his readers (and his internal audience)
 - ▣ In poems to the *puella* claiming she is the only love interest – contrasting with poems in all three writers that suggest the opposite
 - ▣ In poems using mythological examples and establishing an analogy between the poet lover and philandering characters
 - ▣ Examples: Prop. 1.19 where the Laodamia simile undermines the narrator's stated faith in love beyond death or Harrison's reading of Prop. 1.3

Ovidian inconsistencies

- Ov. *Am.* 1.9.11f states that the narrator (and any lover) will cross rivers (*flumina*) doubled in size due to rain in mountain areas
- In Ov. *Am.* 3.6, however, the lover is stumped and fails to pass a stream (*amnis*), which he describes as having been tiny before the rains
- The second poem prompts the comparison with the first river poem, after which we conclude that the narrator is prone to exaggerate or be unreliable
- Linear readings (the whole story) enhances the effect of the narrator's comical stance in *Am.* 3.4

The stream in *Ov. Am.* 3.6

- Direct address with emphatic speech – plenty of exclamation marks!
- Comments meant to reinforce the narrator's authority (believe me!) and good intent (if the river doesn't follow his advice, things will go badly)
- Pronounced use of rhetorical tricks
 - ▣ Rhetorical questions
 - ▣ Extensive list of mythological examples
- Focus on self (perhaps that worries others: I'm worried by my own woes.)
- But also note how analysis of the poem as a whole shows that there is something odd about the narrator's stance here – the list of examples of rivers 'swells' the narrative much more than the river itself!

Stop, you reed-filled river with muddy shores, I'm hurrying to my girl – wait for a little, waters! You've neither a bridge, nor a roped ferryboat, to carry me across, without a stroke of the oar. I remember you as little, and didn't fear to ford you, and the tops of your waves barely touched my ankles. Now you rush by, full of melted snow from the mountain, and your swollen waters roll on, in murky flood. [...] Believe me you'll not be able to endure the hatred, if it's said, torrent, you by chance barred a lover's way. [...] Even as I speak your swelling waves spread wider, your deep bed can't hold your surging waters. Why rage at me? Why delay shared delights? Why rudely interrupt the road I started on? Why? [...] Perhaps that worries others: I'm worried by my own woes. Alas for me then! Madly telling the loves of rivers!

Unreliable narration

- Unreliable narration a term used in literary theory since the 1960s and given increased attention from the 1990s onwards
- It is used to describe narrators who reveal themselves to be less than accurate or forthright
- We 'catch them' through inconsistencies in the text
 - ▣ Between what the narrator says and what the text as a whole allows us to understand
 - ▣ Between the narrator's text and the facts the reader knows to be true (either because they are explained in the text or rely on reader pre-knowledge)

Recognising unreliable narration

- Unreliable narrators tend to
 - Make use of utterances ostensibly intended to reassure the reader (or addressee), like emphatic speech or addresses to the reader
 - Offer interpretive comments on narrated facts
 - Be preoccupied with their own self and therefore harangue the reader in long monologues
- The reader needs to work harder on a text with unreliable narration; he/she needs to draw much more on
 - His/her own knowledge and world view
 - Intertexts
- The text book examples of unreliable narration in modern literature:
 - Agatha Christie *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and *Endless Night*
 - The tension arises because the Christie reader is trained to think of the narrator as an outsider: here, he did it.
 - Vladimir Nabokov *Lolita*
- Often, examples feature not a whole-sale unreliable narrator but one that nonetheless provides false interpretations, e.g an overly naïve understanding of events or one influenced by mental illness

Elegy and unreliable narration

- While Roman elegy is not a wholly narrative genre, narratological methods of interpretation can often be useful
 - ▣ See esp. Lively (2011): a collection volume with essays approaching elegy using narratological methods
- Remember also how the first, trend-setting collection of elegies (Prop. 1) lends itself to being read as a narrative of a love story, in several instalments
- We have already noted several contradictions and inconsistencies within that book, and more if willing to consider Books 2, 3, and 4 as well.
 - ▣ E.g.: One love interest or more? Military achievement to be rejected or emulated?

Prop. 1.15

- Prop. 1.15 and 1.2 contains the same type of inconsistency as we observed in *Ov. Am.* 1.9 and 3.6
- Cynthia has failed to appear at the narrator's bedside during a period of illness, and in the first few lines we may observe the same inconsistency as in 1.2 and 2.1: here, use of cosmetics etc is again reprehensible
- The mythological examples, Calypso, Hypsipyle, Euadne, and Alpheisiboea are ostensibly included to show Cynthia how women should behave in similar situations

Excursus: Hairstyle examples



Roman girl, 1st C BCE
National Museum,
Copenhagen

Prop. 1.15: Cynthia and Calypso

- Hair: Cynthia: being tidied, Calypso: unkempt
- Tears: Calypso: real and in plenty (cf. salt waves), Cynthia: feigned (l. 40)
- Awareness: Calypso: of what she has lost (remembering...), Cynthia: (only potentially) of crimes committed (recall your perjury)
- Further: note the shift in emphasis from Calypso's lack of attention to her looks to her devotion for Odysseus...
- ...as keeping faith with the beloved becomes the main focus in the following examples

But you're not frightened, though you've come at last, and you can use your hands to re-do yesterday's hairstyle, and spend an hour on your make-up, can even flash a string of Eastern pearls as if in honour of a new lover. Unlike Calypso, who on the Ithacan's departure wept beside the lonely sea; for many days in mourning, hair unkempt, she sat complaining to the cruel salt waves, and though she'd never see him more, felt sorry for him, remembering their long happiness:

Mythological proof?

Nor like Hypsipyle – when the winds swept Jason off, distraught, immobile in her empty bower, Hypsipyle thereafter felt no other love, pining only for her Haemonian guest. Euadne too, proud to burn on her poor husband's pyre, died a paragon of Argive virtue.

Alphesiboea to avenge a husband killed her brothers, breaking blood's precious bond for love. Could none of these inspire you to amend your ways that you too might become a legend.

- 'Nor like' reminds the reader of the aim of the catalogue
- The setting, with Hypsipyle alone in her chamber, also has some correspondences to Cynthia's situation, presumably alone as she prepares her hair
- The focus shifts with the mention of the winds, linking Hypsipyle closer to Calypso's grief
- The Euadne and Alphesiboea examples focus entirely on fidelity, and there is an increase in pathos and drama (the later, the bloodier the myth!)
- These examples seem to show that Cynthia falls short of the mythological role models
- BUT: as Cynthia may be said to do, the mythological examples have also transgressed traditional boundaries for love. This similarity heightens the emphasis on her shortcomings

Implications: looking at men

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- Julia Gaisser has stressed that three out of the four exemplary women (Calypso, Hypsipyle, and Alpheisiboea) were abandoned by their male lovers who moved on to other women
 - ▣ In Hypsipyle's case, also later abandoning that woman (Medea)
- Using their own, external knowledge of the myths, the reader may become suspicious about the narrator's own fidelity
 - ▣ Sharp contrast to the narrator's purported focus
- Such suspicions may be seen as confirmed in Prop. 17 and 18, where the narrator has left Cynthia:
 - ▣ Prop. 1.18.9f: Where is my guilt? What slander changes you against me? That I've taken a new girl to make you jealous?