

How and Why does Ovid Exploit the Epistolary Form in the Single Heroides?

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Introduction

The Heroides of Ovid are '*fictional epistles from heroines of Greek and Roman mythology to the men they love*'¹. The focus in this paper is on the single heroides, that is those for which Ovid has not provided a response from the lover back to his heroine. Although '*Ovid claimed that the Heroides constituted a new literary genre*'² they are perhaps better understood as building on the genre of the erotic elegy which he had extensively explored in the Amores.

The genre of the erotic elegy is likely to have been begun by the poet Gallus but unfortunately only a few tiny fragments of his poems have come down to us. The genre had already been developed further by Tibullus and Propertius by the time Ovid came to be writing. Ovid's use of the epistolary form here differentiated the Heroides from what had come before; this paper will consider the way in which he did this and will set out a framework for considering the possible motivations for choosing the epistolary form as the way in which to differentiate himself.

This paper will first consider what a letter is and what this means for the epistolary form. Then it will set out how Ovid uses the epistolary form. Ovid is known as a multi-layered author and the Heroides especially as '*a multi-faceted collection*'³. It is likely his purposes for choosing to use the epistolary form were many and inter-woven. The Principally this paper will consider four categories of fictional spannings that the epistolary form allowed, four different ways in which Ovid was able to connect ideas in the reader's mind by using the epistolary form.

In this paper attention will be particularly focussed on the seven single epistles in the edition of Knox (1996). These represent about half of all the single epistles and benefit from this detailed fairly recent commentary to aid analysis.

The Nature of the Letter

The question of what is the letter as a written form can be considered in a similar way to '*different strategies for defining... [literary] genres*'⁴. Gibson and Morrison (2007) advocate the following properties for defining the letter as a form:

¹ Knox (1996), p5

² Altman (1982), p14

³ Tarrant (2002) p18

⁴ Gibson and Morrison (2007), p2

- A. *'written message from one person... to another'*
- B. *'set down in a tangible medium'*
- C. *'physically conveyed'*
- D. *'overtly addressed... by ... conventional formulae'*
- E. *'physically distant... so unable to communicate by unmediated voice'*
- F. *'relatively limited length'* ⁵

While these properties definitely do seem to apply there are elements of duplication and overlap. Consequently these properties of the letter can be more usefully seen as linking to different aspects of the *'letter's power to span'*⁶ from one fictional entity to another, that is to connect in the reader's mind one concept with another. These will be discussed in more detail later in this paper in the following categories: temporally, spatially, discursively and intertextually. Discourse is perhaps the most subtle of these spannings given the *'forms and obscure forces by which we usually link the discourse of one man [sic] with that of another'*⁷.

The first, Property A *'written message from one person... to another'* is perhaps the most complicated. It directly relates to the discursive but also the written aspect indirectly relates to the temporal and the spatial as it largely commits the letter to a given time and space. It is oddly in the nature of the written message that although it is essentially fixed to a fairly short time period, it does also give the writer more time to reflect on their message than spoken communication which affects the discursive aspect.

The other characteristics are somewhat more straightforward to relate to this framework of spannings. Property B *'set down in a tangible medium'* very much relates to the temporal and the spatial. The permanence aspect of this characteristic indirectly relates to the discursive. Similarly, Property C *'physically conveyed'* directly relates to the spatial. Property D *'overtly addressed... by... conventional formulae'* is most useful taken as relating largely to the discursive. For Property E, *'physically distant'* is very much spatial but the resultant inability *'to communicate by unmediated voice'* can relate to the discursive and also the temporal. Property F *'relatively limited length'* directly relates to the temporal.

Exploitation and the Epistolary Form

Here *'epistle'* will be taken to be a letter that is (probably) fictional in the sense that it was not written with the intent of being sent from one person to another person. In some cases, such as the Letters of Pliny the Younger there is disagreement amongst scholars, with some fairly confident on *'the authenticity of the letters'*⁸ but others seeing *'construction of his own persona'*

⁵ Gibson and Morrison (2007), p3

⁶ Altman (1982), p4

⁷ Foucault (1969), p24

⁸ Sherwin-White (1969), p33

⁹ albeit for didactic purposes with the alleged recipients fairly clearly authentic people. In other cases, such as Petrarch *'inspired to the composition of a letter to Cicero'* ¹⁰ the authenticity of both sender and recipient are fairly clear but the sender lived centuries after the alleged recipient so clearly the intended audience is not the addressed recipient.

In the case of The Heroides not only are both sender and recipient mythological characters but being characters in *'narrative poetry of illiterate culture... examples of oral poetry'* ¹¹ they actually predate the concept of the letter, at least in their own culture. So an even greater suspension of disbelief is required of the reader. Nonetheless a key aspect of them as epistles is the authenticity of emotion expressed in them. The phrase *'epistolary form'* will be taken to mean having some, but not necessarily all, of the aspects of an epistle. That is a writing using the register, or language variety, of the epistle, even though it may not have the intentionality of sending needed to make it an actual epistle..

In this paper *'exploitation'* will be taken to mean *'use of... formal properties to create meaning'* ¹². The formal properties considered here will primarily be Properties A to F discussed above, as seen through the lens of temporal, spatial, discursive and intertextual spannings. Meaning will be left as a somewhat loose concept here to accommodate the spectrum of exploitation found in the Heroides.

How Ovid Exploits the Epistolary Form

It is generally accepted that Ovid's claim that in the Heroides *'hoc... ille novavit opus'* ¹³ *in this work he (re)invented a [genre]* is intentionally hyperbolic, it is clear that he did make a substantial step in taking forward a sub-genre. To do this he needed to establish the epistolary form clearly in the reader's mind. Heroides I: Penelope Vlixi is the first in the text that comes down to us and it is likely to *'have been put in first place by Ovid himself as a programmatic gesture'* ¹⁴. He uses the very familiar characters of Penelope and Ulysses from Homer, so that the reader is not taxed by understanding the narrative context. Moreover, he explicitly highlights the epistolary form with a formula of salutation *'Haec tua Penelope lento tibi mittit'* ¹⁵ *This your Penelope sends to you slowly* with the act of sending ('mittere') explicitly indicated. This is immediately followed by a reiteration of the process of writing, albeit now highlighting that letter writing does have its shortcomings *'nil mihi rescribas attinet: ipse veni!'* *Don't concern yourself to write back to me: come yourself!*

The epistolary form, although apparently a new (sub)genre, actually allows Ovid to mix genres. The Heroides are formally written as elegy, like Ovid's earlier works such as The Amores. It has

⁹ Gibson and Morello (2012), p80

¹⁰ Abbott (1897), p323

¹¹ Murray (1919), p2

¹² Altman (1982), p4

¹³ Ars Amatoria III.346

¹⁴ Kennedy (2002), p 217

¹⁵ Heroides I.1

already been seen that epic themes are a key part of the *Heroides* with highly familiar epic characters appearing in what is likely the very first line. A particularly good example of mixing of genres is *Heroides* V: Oenone Paridi where in addition to bringing epic characters into an elegiac poem, Ovid is able to bring in a bucolic motif '*saepe greges inter requievimus arbore tecti*'¹⁶ *Often among the flocks have we lain sheltered by a tree*. Not all the *Heroides* bring in so many different genres, *Heroides* VII: Dido Aeneae very much engages with the epic being almost just '*an elegiac commentary*'¹⁷ on epic.

By writing in the epistolary form Ovid can create '*an end anticipated by the writer that does not correspond to the end assumed by the external reader, the result is a sense of irony, tragic or humorous*'¹⁸ A good example of this is in *Heroides* VI: Hypsipyle Iasoni. For example in '*vir tuus hinc abeo, vir tibi semper ero*'¹⁹ *I depart from here your man, your man I will always be*, Ovid has Jason give the strongest of declarations of faith with the parallelism of *vir*, the use of *semper* and the use of the future tense *ero*, rather than say the present subjunctive.

It was noted briefly earlier that in the *Heroides* Ovid very much uses familiar mythological characters in a '*blend of the elegiac, the epistolary and the mythic*'²⁰. It was seen earlier in *Heroides* I that this allows him to instantly create a sense of familiarity for his reader whilst he gets on with the slightly more tricky business of explaining that he is using the epistolary form. This continues with *Heroides* VII: Dido Aeneae a good example where he uses the character of Dido and Aeneas which had been made extremely familiar by Virgil's *Aeneid*. In '*nova Carthago... ut condas instar Carthaginis urbem*'²¹ *for a new Carthage... to found a city as good as Carthage*' the very much epic theme of founding cities is reiterated and the archaic word *instar* used. Another example is *Heroides* X: Ariadne Theseo '*one of the most celebrated episodes of seduction and betrayal*'²². Even the less familiar story of Oenone in *Heroides* V: Oenone Paridi has at least the familiar character of Paris in it. In addition to creating a sense of familiarity to the (at least moderately) educated Roman, it would also give such a reader a sense of satisfaction in being able to differentiate themselves from the less educated.

Finally, the epistolary form allows Ovid to insert newly imagined material which '*fits perfectly into the plot*' of established stories by making '*incisions into a given framework*'²³. Ovid subtly signposts this process of his weaving new elements into an existing framework quite early on in *Heroides* I: Penelope Vlixii, the first and most programmatic of the epistles in which weaving is directly referenced '*lassaret viduas pendula tela manus*'²⁴ *a hanging warp tires my widows' hands*. However, the Ovid's insertions still need a little bit of adjustment here and there. In *Heroides* VI: Hypsipyle Iasoni the main protagonists are frequently referred to as married even

¹⁶ *Heroides* V.13

¹⁷ Knox (1996) p201

¹⁸ Kennedy (2002), p225

¹⁹ *Heroides* VI.60

²⁰ Fulkerson (2005), p10

²¹ *Heroides* VII.12-19

²² Knox (1996), p233

²³ Barchiesi (2001), p30

²⁴ *Heroides* I.10

though this was not part of the traditional myth. In *'ubi conubialia iura // faxque sub arsuros dignior ire rogos?'*²⁵ *where are the bonds of wedlock and is the marriage torch more fit to go under my burning pyre?* there are repeated references to marriage and the breaking of the vow is emphasised by enjambement. Similarly in Heroides X: Ariadne Theseo *'there is considerable variation in our sources on almost every detail'*²⁶.

It has been seen here that after he has established the idea of the epistolary form for his reader, Ovid uses it by mixing genres, introducing dramatic ironies, making strong use of highly familiar mythological characters by making *'incisions'* and weaving into established plots.

Temporal Spanning as a Purpose

It has already been noted that the letter allows the writer time to reflect on what they say, and the impact this has on discursive aspects will be considered later. However, the Property F *'limited length'* of the letter essentially *'freezes them at a moment within the story'*²⁷. This can either lead to *'epistolary closure'*²⁸ where that moment of the story has ended and the reader is carried forward to the next, or *'overture... where open-endedness of the letter [is] seen as a segment within a chain of dialogue'*²⁹. The addressee *'is not only spatially but temporally absent'*³⁰.

A good example of closure is in Heroides I: Penelope Vlixii; from the very first line Penelope emphasises how *'lento'* slowly time is passing in her waiting and so how desperate she is for closure. The epistle has stark images of time closing over the ruins of Troy *'semisepulta...// ossa'*³¹ *half-buried bones*, the spreading of the phrase over the start of two lines giving a sense of the half-buriedness. The epistle ends with a demonstrative temporal spanning *'Certe ego, quae fueram te discedente puella, // protinus ut venias, facta videbor anus.'* *I, who was a girl when you departed, am sure if you came immediately, I would seem to have become an old lady.* From one line to the next the reader jumps from indicative pluperfect to subjunctive present; from *'puella'* girl to parallel *'anus'* old lady. The *'protinus'* immediately contrasts with the vague *'facta videbor'* *I would seem to have become.*

In Heroides VII: Dido Aeneae, Dido chooses the most dramatic form of closure for herself in the form of suicide at the very end of that epistle *'prae-buit Aeneas et causam mortis et ensem // ipsa sua Dido concidit usa manu'*³² *Aeneas provided both the reason for death and the sword // by the use of her very hand Dido fell.* The choice of suicide as the very dramatic form of closure is emphasised with both intensifying and reflexive pronouns *'ipsa sua... manu'* *by her own very*

²⁵ Heroides VI.41-42

²⁶ Knox (1996), p234

²⁷ Kennedy (2002), p225

²⁸ Altman (1982), p144

²⁹ Altman (1982), p186

³⁰ Kennedy (2002), p221

³¹ Heroides I.55-56

³² Heroides VII.195-196

hand. Also in Heroides XII: Medea Iasoni, Medea takes closure by revenge towards the end of the epistle '*dum ferrum flammaeque aderunt sucusque veneni, // hostis Medae nullus inultus erit!*'³³ *While sword and flame are to hand and juice of poison, no enemy of Medea will be unpunished*. The indicative future tense, rather than say a subjunctive, shows that the closure will be definite.

The epistolary form can be regarded as '*temporally polyvalent*'³⁴ that is able to connect, in the reader's mind, to different moments in time. It '*freezes*' time creating '*a present tense*' but this forms '*a pivot for past and future*'³⁵.

Spatial Spanning as Purpose

The idea of spatial spanning as purpose relates directly to Property C of the letter '*physically conveyed*' previously identified, and to Property E '*physically distant*' participants. However, it also relates quite closely to Property B '*tangible medium*'. These properties of the letter allow the epistolary form '*to emphasise separation and reunion*'³⁶.

In Heroides II: Phyllis Demophoonti the spatial spanning aspect of the letter in relation to separation and reunion is emphasised by referring to sea voyages. In '*saepe putavi // alba procellosos vela referre Notos*'³⁷ *Often I have thought the gusty south winds will bring your white sails back* the enjambement emphasises the separation and the colour and reference to details of the winds makes the scene vivid. In Heroides V: Oenone Paridi the spatial spanning aspect is indicated by spatial elements associated with liminality such as cliffs and shores. In '*et remis eruta canet aqua... et lacrimis umet harena meis*'³⁸ *and the water wails as it is churned by the oars... and the sand weeps my tears* the spatial elements of sand and sea are personified to join in the lamentation.

The Heroides V: Oenone Paridi also alludes to the physicality of writing, which can be considered an aspect of spatial spanning. In '*hoc in rugoso cortice carmen habes*'³⁹ *you have on your rugged bark this poem* the personified beech tree is addressed directly. The carving on a tree brings to mind that the writing will grow and/or become distorted as the tree grows, which can be an allusion to the way that words in the letter will be interpreted differently when they are read having spanned both space and time.

The physicality of the letter is made even more manifest when bodily fluids such as blood and tears stain the letter. In Heroides XI: Canace Macareo both appear, '*siqua tamen caecis*

³³ Heroides XII.181-182

³⁴ Altman (1982), p118

³⁵ Altman (1982), p118

³⁶ Altman (1982), p14

³⁷ Heroides II.11-12

³⁸ Heroides V.54

³⁹ Heroides V.28

*errabunt scripta lituris, // oblitus a dominae caede libellus erit.*⁴⁰ if however anything of this letter escape from eyes blinded [by tears], it will be from the [blood of] slaying the mistress of this little book. Some scholars have also suggested that as a spatial spanning 'epistles seek to make textual a surrogate for sexual intercourse'⁴¹, in this sense the physicality of the letter form can be related to the physicality of the sexual act. Such allusions are indirect but perhaps quite clear nonetheless, such as '*venit amor gravior*'⁴² loves come deeply or '*ego deserto iacuissem frigida lecto*'⁴³ I had lain cold in my deserted bed.

Discursive Spanning as Purpose

The idea of discursive spanning relates most strongly to Property A: '*written from one person to another*' but also has a little to do with Property D: '*addressed by conventional formulae*'. There was a '*well-established ancient literary tradition of treating philosophy in an epistolary format*'⁴⁴. Although later Ovid would evolve this to the '*situation of a teacher educating someone... e.g. the Ars Amatoria*'⁴⁵ his writing is much more than just an '*exercise in rhetorical point*'⁴⁶.

A key way in which the epistolary form facilitates discursive spanning is by having one (mythological) person '*identified as the "implied reader"*'⁴⁷ with our seeming to be '*reader as eavesdropper, reading something that is not addressed to us*'⁴⁸. Some scholars suggest that '*epistles are really soliloquies*'⁴⁹ but in the case of the Heroides, Ovid does create an authentic feeling voice different from his own which gives the sense of a discourse between the (mythological) woman writing and the (mythological) man receiving it.

Gender is an important aspect of the discourse that Ovid creates in the Heroides. In a society in which '*documentation of men's occupations is far more abundant*'⁵⁰ in the Heroides each heroine is '*given authority to rewrite her story*'⁵¹. This is very much in contrast to many passages in Ovid's Amores where not only is the voice male but it is describing what the man involved does, '*adposui...levanda //... deripui tunicam*'⁵² I lay down to rest... I pulled down her dress. In Heroides I: Penelope Vlixii, the heroine sets out the difficulties she faced when Odysseus was away at war directly '*Tres sumus inbellis numero, sine viribus uxor // Laertesque senex Themachusque puer*'⁵³ We number three, unwarlike, a wife without power and Laertes an

⁴⁰ Heroides XI.1-2

⁴¹ Kennedy (2002) p224

⁴² Heroides IV.19

⁴³ Heroides I.7

⁴⁴ Gibson and Morrison (2007), p9

⁴⁵ Gibson and Morrison (2007), p14

⁴⁶ Hardie (2002), p32

⁴⁷ Altman (1982), p87

⁴⁸ Fulkerson (2009), p99

⁴⁹ Palmer (1898), p2

⁵⁰ Foxhall (2013), p97

⁵¹ Fulkerson (2007), p18

⁵² Amores 1.5.2-13

⁵³ Heroides I.97-98

old man, and Telemachus a boy. The male-female contrasts are made clear by her explaining her position by comparison with weakened male figures and by the use of the almost tautological '*sine viribus uxor*' which could almost be taken as '*a wife without masculinity*'. She also references the traditional virtues that a Roman woman was '*expected to be able to spin and weave*'⁵⁴, when she complains of '*lassaret viduas pendula tela manus*'⁵⁵ *a hanging web tires my widows' hands.*

In addition to allowing engagement with debate on gender roles, the epistolary form allows a more convincing portrayal of women engaging in passionate discourse with their lover as '*what modesty has forbidden one to speak, passion impels one to write*'⁵⁶. In Heroides VII: Dido Aeneae, after asking a series of rhetorical questions, Dido says quite starkly a single short word at the start of the line '*Uror*'⁵⁷ *I am ablaze* before adding further fire references '*sulpure taedae*' *sulphurous torches* engaging the sense of smell and '*fumosis... foci*' *smoking hearths* generating a harsh fricative sense of enveloping smoke. In Heroides XII: Medea Iasoni the fiery image is even more clear in '*dum ferrum flammaeque aderunt*'⁵⁸ *while sword and fire are to hand*. The imagery of the sword, which would often be taken as a phallic symbol, is noteworthy here. This could be to engage thoughts of gender discourse or it could be a cheeky allusion from Ovid to his "*drag*" *performance*'⁵⁹ in writing with a female persona.

It has been seen that one of the most powerful reasons for Ovid to have used the epistolary form is to lift his poems from soliloquy into discourse, both in the specific sense of a debating interaction between two (fictional) people and more generally as the debate within society of a topic. Some aspects of gender discourse that arise thus are especially noteworthy.

Intertextual Spanning as Purpose

It was noted earlier that Ovid makes extensive use of reference to earlier works. However, '*use of a previous poetic source does not... mean slavish imitation*'⁶⁰ and although he wants to make use of mythology and other intertexts that would be familiar to a (reasonably) educated Roman he still wants to do something new in his writing, whether or not he actually created a new genre. The concept of intertextual spanning is less closely related to the properties of the letter identified by Gibson and Morrison (2007) but perhaps has some connection with the '*conventional formulae*' part of Property D.

In Heroides V: Oenone Paridi, Ovid directly explores the similarities and differences of the epic, the bucolic and the elegiac. In '*Qua Venus et Iuno sumptisque decentior armis // venit in arbitrium nuda Minerva tuum*'⁶¹ *When Venus and Juno, and Minerva who would have been*

⁵⁴ Pomeroy (2010), p184

⁵⁵ Heroides I.10

⁵⁶ Altman (1982), p38

⁵⁷ Heroides VII.23-24

⁵⁸ Heroides XII.181

⁵⁹ Fulkerson (2009), p93

⁶⁰ Fulkerson (2009), p94

⁶¹ Heroides V.35-36

more suited to armour, came naked to your judgement the contrast between bucolic Venus and Juno and epic Minerva is shown by their being separated across lines and across opposite ends of the line. Elegy did not have its own foundational basis of myth, in the *Heroides* Ovid uses complex and inter-related intertextuality '*as a deft manipulator of pastoral, epic and elegy*'⁶² to bring a mythology into elegy.

The use of intertextual spanning also allows Ovid to explore the idea of '*literary canon formation*'⁶³, that is how certain texts come to acquire a "must-read" status amongst an intelligentsia. The source texts of Homer's *Illiad* for *Heroides* I: Penelope Vlixi and of Vergil's *Aeneid* for *Heroides* VII: Dido Aeneae were already established in the literary canon '*enjoying a considerable and widespread circulation*'⁶⁴ in Ovid's time. However, the heroine of *Heroides* V: Oenone Paridi is only tangentially referenced in canonical texts then and indeed now. Indeed Ovid indirectly addresses this at the start of the poem '*Perlegis?*'⁶⁵ *Will you read it through?* Although this rhetorical question is apparently addressed to Paris, it can also be taken as being addressed to Ovid's reader. Ovid ask the reader whether they will still devote the time to Oenone's words even though she doesn't come directly from a canonical text.

Intertextual spanning is perhaps the subtlest of the forms of spanning that the epistolary form allows but it perhaps allows Ovid to consider some of the deepest questions: How can a genre acquire a foundational mythology? How are literary canons formed? Are canonical texts more worthy of the reader's attention?

Conclusion

However, one takes Ovid's claim about having (re)invented a literary (sub)genre in the epistle, it is clear that by the suspension of disbelief that allows the insertion of new material into an established myth Ovid achieves a great deal in the *Heroides*. His purposes in using the epistolary form have been considered here as different kinds of spannings, that is, different connections that Ovid seeks to make in the mind of the reader. Temporal spannings allow the narrative to interconnect to different moments of the past, present and future. Physical spannings allow both geographical connections and consideration of the physicality of the letter. Discursive spanning turns soliloquies into discourse, perhaps especially on gender and passion. Finally intertextual spannings allow Ovid to ask deep questions about literary canon formation.

⁶² Drinkwater (2015), p387

⁶³ Kennedy (2002), p227

⁶⁴ Goold (1999), p14

⁶⁵ *Heroides* V.1

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