

## OVID'S CLAIM TO ORIGINALITY AND *HEROIDES* 1

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The importance of the first poem in Ovid's *Heroides*, the epistle from Penelope to Ulysses, has not been assessed in the light of Ovid's claim to have originated a new type of literature with these epistolary elegies. Yet we know that Roman poets, for example Tibullus, Propertius, and Vergil, attached great importance to an introductory poem and sometimes altered the chronological order of the poems in a collection and thereby secured a more effective arrangement.<sup>1</sup>

Studies of the *Heroides* have neither called attention to the possibility that this factor may have been operative in the placing of the letter from Penelope first in this collection of imaginary letters, nor have they considered whether it was placed first because it is typical of the *Heroides* and sets the tone, so to speak, of the poems which follow. Eggerding,<sup>2</sup> for example, in his published dissertation, is concerned with questions of structure and with Ovid's procedure in taking a story from epic and transferring it to the declamatory elegy. Two other studies, the first by J. N. Anderson<sup>3</sup> and the second by Tolkiehn,<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Chronologically, the tenth poem of the first book of Tibullus antedates the first. See the discussion by A. Cartault, *Tibulle et les Auteurs du Corpus Tibullianum* (Paris 1909) 14-24, and by K. F. Smith, *The Elegies of Tibullus* (New York 1913) 183. For the order of the elegies in Propertius see F. Plessis, *Études Critiques sur Properce* (Paris 1884) 230, and for the order in Vergil's *Eclogues* see J. Conington and H. Nettleship, *The Works of Vergil* 1 (London 1898) 19-22.

<sup>2</sup> *De Heroidum Ovidianarum Epistulis quae vocantur commentationes* (Halle 1908) 224.

<sup>3</sup> *On the Sources of Ovid's Heroides* (Berlin 1896) 10-33.

<sup>4</sup> *Homer und die römische Poesie* (Leipzig 1896) 143-44. See also E. Oppel, *Ovids Heroides: Studien zur inneren Form und zur Motivation* (Erlangen-Nürnberg 1968). E.-A. Kirfel's recently published dissertation, "Untersuchungen zur Briefform der *Heroides* Ovids," *Noctes Romanae* 11 (Bern 1969), is primarily concerned with the "Anfangen- und Schlussformeln" of the *Heroides*.

are largely an inquiry into sources and a listing of parallel passages in ancient authors.

Ovid, however, was not insensitive to the importance of an introductory poem and therefore explains, in the first poem of the *Amores*, why he turned from epic to elegiac poetry.<sup>5</sup> The *Heroides* do not have such a clear-cut introduction, for there is simply no place for one in the prescript of a letter, confined as it is to giving the addressor's and the recipient's names.<sup>6</sup> But, since the first poem is typical of what follows, especially in the way Ovid employs the themes of *querela*<sup>7</sup> and of *timor*, themes which are found to one degree or another in all the *Heroides*, this epistle functions quite well as an introductory poem.

A study of *Heroides* I also leads to a clearer understanding of Ovid's claim to originality which he makes in the *Ars Amatoria* (3.345-46):

vel tibi composita cantetur Epistula voce:  
ignotum hoc aliis ille novavit opus.

The meaning of the first line of the distich is clear: Ovid intended the *Heroides* for oral, dramatic recitation.<sup>8</sup> Epistles in verse were not, of course, Ovid's invention; in this type of literature he had been preceded by Lucilius, Catullus, Horace, and Propertius. Ovid's epistles differ at least in this respect, that they deal with fictional persons and situations.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See especially 1-4 and 27-30.

<sup>6</sup> Kirfel (above, note 4) rightly concludes that Ovid took the form of the epistle ("Praescript, eigentliches Briefcorpus, Schlussgruss," p. 1) and did not change it. He says, p. 112, "Wenn Ovid angibt, er sei der *heuretês* dieser Dichtungsgattung, dann kann dies sich nicht auf die Form des Einzelgedichtes, sondern nur auf die Sammlung als Ganzes und auf den Inhalt beziehen. Denn die Form des Briefes war für Ovid etwas Vorgegebenes."

<sup>7</sup> *Querela* as a technical term for elegy is advanced by C. Saylor, "Querelae: Propertius' Distinctive Technical Name for his Elegy," *Agon* 1 (1967) 142-49.

<sup>8</sup> Ovid himself tells us that his elegies were recited on the stage, *Tr.* 2.519-20 and 5.7.25-26. For a discussion of the *Heroides* as librettos, see the article by M. P. Cunningham, "The Novelty of Ovid's *Heroides*," *CP* 44 (1949) 100-3. E. Courtney, "Ovidian and Non-Ovidian *Heroides*," *BICS* 12 (1965) 66, takes exception to Cunningham's idea without, however, detailing his objections.

<sup>9</sup> With the exception of *Heroides* 15, Sappho to Phaon. Ovid's phrase, *ignotum aliis*, must certainly mean that there was no model in Alexandrian literature, though H. Peter, "Der Brief in der römischen Literatur," *Abh. sächs. Ges. Wiss.* 20 (1903) 189-90, argued that there was such a model. His argument is quite tenuous *ob silentium papyrorum*.

The second part of the distich, "ignotum hoc aliis ille novavit opus," cannot be so readily understood. A survey of some interpretations will be valuable. Ribbeck, for example, saw the originality of the *Heroides* in Ovid's choice of themes and persons from the mythological past.<sup>10</sup> Schanz-Hosius look to the rhetorical schools for a definition of Ovid's novelty:

Die Quelle des fingierten Briefes werden wir da zu suchen, wo die fingierte Rede erscheint, in der Rhetorschule; von der Rede zum Brief ist nur ein kleiner Schritt. Es ist eine Neuerung Ovids, die Briefe von Personen altersgrauen Zeiten aus der Rhetorschule in das Reich der Poesie verpflanzt und eine Sammlung solcher Briefe publiziert zu haben.<sup>11</sup>

Palmer's conclusion is the same, that Ovid took the *suasoria* and changed its medium from prose to poetry.<sup>12</sup> Although Wilkinson is also in substantial agreement with this view, he adds the example of Propertius' elegy from Arethusa to Lycotas as an additional model for Ovid's epistolary elegy:

There had been poems entirely concerned with literary heroines before, and imaginary letters may possibly have been used in the schools. Ovid's claim to originality was for combining the two and for having seen the possibilities, such as they were, of developing Propertius' charming invention into a genre.<sup>13</sup>

Differing from this view is Cunningham, who detects little of the influence of the rhetorical schools upon Ovid's *Heroides* and sees the novelty of the epistles in their dramatic character:

The novelty of the *Heroides* lies in the fact that they present Latin erotic elegy in a form adapted to a new type of theatrical performance which was first introduced at Rome when Ovid was a young man.<sup>14</sup>

Anderson, in a welcome departure from his relentless *Quellenforschung*, looks to Propertius (like Wilkinson), but limits the extent of Ovid's debt to him:

<sup>10</sup> *Gesch. der röm. Dicht.* 2 (Stuttgart 1889) 239.

<sup>11</sup> *Röm. Lit. Gesch.* 2 (Munich 1958) 223-24.

<sup>12</sup> *P. Ovidii Nasonis Heroides* (Oxford 1895) xiii. All citations from the *Heroides* are from this edition.

<sup>13</sup> *Ovid Surveyed* (Cambridge 1962) 36.

<sup>14</sup> Cunningham (above, note 8) 101.

Prop. 5,3 (Arethusa) has been looked upon as possibly suggesting the *Heroides* to Ovid. This is quite possible, but nothing more can be said for it. There is no great similarity except in the opening and the close. . . . Some have suspected an Alexandrian source for the *Heroides*. . . . Some try to evade Ovid's statement by interpreting it to refer to Roman literature alone. . . . It seems to me, however, that this position is untenable. Ovid's words will hardly bear this interpretation without straining. By claiming originality for the plan of the *Heroides*, Ovid probably meant that no such *collection* of epistles was in existence at his time.<sup>15</sup>

Two more statements will conclude this survey, those of Rahn<sup>16</sup> and of Winniczuk.<sup>17</sup> Rahn sees Ovid's originality in the use of the theme of farewell. Winniczuk follows the development of the *erôtikoi logoi* from Hellenistic to Augustan uses and concludes that Ovid's originality lay in imparting a didactic element to the epistolary elegy. To him, then, Ovid is a *praeceptor amoris* in the *Heroides* no less than in the *Ars Amatoria*.

"Quot homines, tot sententiae." These definitions have shared one element: they establish Ovid's originality in terms of a technical procedure. Other critics have taken a different, and, I believe, more rewarding approach in stressing stylistic novelties in the *Heroides*. Pichon, for example, has seen a similarity between the *Amores* and the *Heroides* which is quite novel: "Ovide est moins un poète élégiaque qu'un romancier en vers: les *Amours* sont un roman à forme autobiographique, les *Héroïdes* un roman à cadre historique."<sup>18</sup> Few would accept Pichon's statement, strikingly epigrammatic as it is, without serious reservations, since the question of the historicity of the *Amores* is open to discussion.<sup>19</sup> Yet Pichon's approach has the merit of turning our attention from a technical definition of Ovid's innovation to one which seeks to isolate and identify the novel stylistic elements of the *Heroides*. This approach also has the value of widening the base for a definition, since a technical analysis is limited by the lack of evidence to complete it. A more comprehensive understanding of

<sup>15</sup> Anderson (above, note 3) 7.

<sup>16</sup> "Ovids elegische Epistel," *Antike u. Abendland* 7 (1958) 105-20.

<sup>17</sup> "Ovids Elegie und die epistolographische Theorie," *Meander* 12 (1957) 39-70.

<sup>18</sup> *Hist. de la Litt. Lat.* (Paris 1903) 413.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Schanz-Hosius 212: "Sie (sc. Corinna) existierte aber nur in dem Geiste des Dichters, um seine Phantasiestücke individuell zu beleben."

Ovid's originality, then, should include a consideration of the literary and stylistic innovation of the *Heroides* which clearly sets them apart from the rest of Latin elegy: Ovid's psychological sensitivity to the emotions of the heroines he portrays.

The *Heroides*, to use a modern term, are "psycho-dramas"<sup>20</sup> in which all the rôles are structured, and all the situations are controlled, by the mythological writer, who, in her stressful vision and imagination, interprets reality in a highly subjective—if not neurotic—fashion. Penelope is not neurotic, but several of the heroines, e.g. Phyllis and Deianira, threaten suicide if their version of reality is not made actual. Fränkel has remarked on the psycho-dramatic aspect of the *Heroides* in this way:

Persistently the *Heroides* is styled a collection of "suasoriae in verse." The label, however, sheds little light on the actual content of Ovid's work. Perhaps we can find a more helpful analogy. When we read through the fifteen verse letters, we come here and there upon a passage the like of which we ourselves meant to write in some crisis of our own life. . . . Now the *Heroides* are very nearly letters of this kind—thought letters, as we may call them. It is true that they pretend to be letters in black and white; but their tenor is so peculiar that it makes little difference whether or not they were written out and dispatched and delivered.<sup>21</sup>

It is, then, as a "thought letter" and as a psycho-drama acted by Penelope that I should like to read *Heroides* I.

Post-Homeric portrayals of Penelope stressed her epic qualities of steadfastness and loyalty. Here, for example, is the Penelope of Propertius (2.9.3–8):

Penelope poterat bis denos salva per annos  
vivere, tam multis femina digna procis;  
coniugium falsa poterat differre Minerva  
nocturno solvens texta diurna dolo;  
visura et quamvis numquam speraret Ulixen,  
illum exspectando facta remansit anus.

Ovid, however, unlike Propertius, departed from the tradition of a "*periphrôn Pênelopeia*" and created a new Penelope whose soliloquy

<sup>20</sup> The theory and practice of psycho-drama are presented in the book by I. Greenberg, *Psycho-Drama and Audience Attitude Change* (Beverly Hills 1969).

<sup>21</sup> Ovid: *A Poet Between Two Worlds* (Berkeley 1945) 36–37.

reveals her not only as loyal, but as a woman who is deeply wracked by fear (*timor*) and resentment (*querela*). Sellar saw the new Penelope Ovid created and remarked:

Penelope is not the Penelope of the Odyssey, the worthy wife of the great Ulysses, but a Roman wife of the Augustan age longing for the return of her husband from the war. She writes with the petty jealousy of a conventional wife. . . . What Penelope wants in Ovid is the quality that Ovid was so deficient in—dignity.<sup>22</sup>

Sellar's characterization of Penelope is correct, but his final judgment reveals his misunderstanding of Ovid's purpose. What Sellar saw as a fault is a virtue: it is precisely Ovid's ability to present Penelope stripped of her *persona* which permits him to draw a psychologically true picture of a woman in distress and thereby to place the stamp of originality on his poem. For all his delicate artistry and mastery of chiaroscuro, Ovid's very Roman genius make his portrait painting akin not to idealized art, but to the realistic busts of the Roman sculptor. But let us turn now to the poem itself.

Penelope's first words establish the dominant theme of the *querela* (1-10):

Haec tua Penelope lento tibi mittit, Ulixee;  
 nil mihi rescribas tu tamen: ipse veni!  
 Troia iacet certe Danais invisa puellis:  
 vix Priamus tanti totaque Troia fuit.  
 o utinam tum, cum Lacedaemona classe petebat,  
 obrutus insanis esset adulter aquis!  
 non ego deserto iacuissem frigida lecto,  
 non quererer tardos ire relictas dies,  
 non mihi quaerenti spatiosam fallere noctem  
 lassaret viduas pendula tela manus.

Then, in the following couplet, the second prominent theme, that of *timor*, makes its initial appearance (11-12):

quando ego non timui graviora pericula veris?  
 res est solliciti plena timoris amor.

Penelope writes that while her mind was tortured by the thought

<sup>22</sup> *The Roman Poets of the Augustan Age* (Oxford 1899) 335-36.

of the dangers to which Ulysses was exposed, she knew that the god of chaste love protected them (23-24):

sed bene consuluit casto deus aequus amori:  
versa est in cineres sospite Troia viro.

Her implication is quite clear: had she not been chaste, Troy might have stood and Ulysses might have perished. By her loyalty she saved her husband. Behind every successful man stands a woman.

Ulysses did not return, however, as did the other leaders of Greece, for whom the altars of the gods smoked with the offerings of the happy (25-26). Other men's wives (27-28) listened suspensefully to their husbands reciting their war exploits, but Penelope has only Telemachus (37-38) to report to her the events told him by Nestor. She feels no pride in Ulysses' daring raid upon Rhesus nor in the slaying of Dolon (39-40), actions which she interprets as having been potentially dangerous to her own security. Thus, she turns upon Ulysses in phrases full of resentment (*querela*) and sarcasm (41-44):

ausus es, o nimium nimiumque oblite tuorum,  
Thracia nocturno tangere castra dolo,  
totque simul mactare viros, adiutus ab uno!  
at bene cautus eras et memor ante mei!

Judging Ulysses' actions in this narrowly personal fashion, Penelope ignores the fact that it was his life that was in danger and never hers, because her involvement with her own security closes out all other considerations. Her *querela* reaches its most emotional point in an outcry in which she states she cares not a whit that Troy fell, for its defeat has not improved her situation (47-50):

sed mihi quid prodest vestris disiecta lacertis  
Ilios et, murus quod fuit, esse solum,  
si maneo, qualis Troia durante manebam,  
virque mihi dempto fine carendus abest?

Penelope suspects that Ulysses is purposely hiding from her, and this suspicion underlies her harsh words (57-58):

victor abes, nec scire mihi quae causa morandi,  
aut in quo lateas ferreus orbe, licet.

Her efforts to locate Ulysses have failed, and nothing, she feels, is worse than not knowing where he is. She therefore brushes patriotic considerations aside and wishes Troy still existed, for then, at least, she would know where Ulysses was and her cries of lamentation would mingle with those of other miserable women (67-70):

utilius starent etiamnunc moenia Phoebi:  
(irascor votis heu! levis ipsa meis)  
scirem, ubi pugnares, et tantum bella timerem  
et mea cum multis iuncta querela foret.

Thus far in the poem, Penelope's words have been largely a statement of *querela*, with the theme of *timor* sounding, so to speak, like a sustained pedal-note. Now the note of fear becomes dominant, as Penelope is revealed as a thoroughly frightened woman when she says (71), "Quid timeam, ignoro; timeo tamen omnia demens." Then, in the following couplet, her *timor* and *querela* are stated together, the one reinforcing the other (75-76):

haec ego dum stulte metuo, quae vestra libido est,  
esse peregrino captus amore potes.

The prospect of Ulysses "peregrino captus amore" is bad enough, but worse is what this means to her personally (77-78):

forsitan et narres, quam sit tibi rustica coniunx,  
quae tantum lanas non sinat esse rudes.

She realizes that Ulysses does not have a true notion of her worth. Thus, she hastens to tell him that she is still attractive to men. Her father, she tells Ulysses, importunes her to marry, but she will not listen (81-82, 85-86). Her proud statement of loyalty rings forth fortissimo (83-84):

increpet usque licet: tua sum, tua dicar oportet,  
Penelope coniunx semper Ulixis ero.

In a sudden realization, however, that she has abandoned her defences and exposed herself—for her statement effectively frees Ulysses to misbehave as he will—she hastens to recover lost ground by assuring Ulysses that many a local lord woos her (87-90):



Dulichii Samiique et quod tulit alta Zacynthos,  
 turba ruunt in me luxuriosa proci,  
 inque tua regnant nullis prohibentibus aula;  
 viscera nostra, tuae dilacerantur opes.

Having recovered her composure, Penelope concludes her letter with appeals based on logical considerations designed to evoke Ulysses' sense of honor.<sup>23</sup> She first tells him that the vagrant Irus and the goatherd Melanthius add to his disgraces by approaching her (95-96). Then she states how helpless she, Laertes, and Telemachus are without him (97-98). She calmly lectures Ulysses on his duties as a father to Telemachus who needs his guidance (107-8, 111-12), as a husband who has a wife to protect (109-10), then as a son himself whose duty it is to be at his father's side when he dies (113-14). Her demands are reasonable and are grounded on considerations which are everywhere valid.

Suddenly, however, Penelope returns to seeing the world from her own, subjective perspective: what difference can it make, she cries, if he returned; should he do so, he would find an old woman and not the girl he left (115-16):

certe ego, quae fueram te discedente puella  
 protinus ut venias, facta videbor anus.

This reading of Penelope's "thought letter" has shown her as a woman far different from the "*periphron Pênelopeia*" of the received tradition. Ovid's originality in the *Heroides* consists not only in the combination of previously existing genres, but also in his innovative departure from literary tradition. It is perhaps Ovid's altering of the traditional portrayal of Penelope which accounts for the factual errors he makes in handling the Homeric account.<sup>24</sup> His departure

<sup>23</sup> Cunningham (above, note 8) 106 feels that the loose order of ideas in lines 93-114 reflects "Ovid's technique for showing Penelope's distraught condition." Penelope is distraught, but her mind is quite functional; her difficulty is only in marshalling the ideas she does have.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Anderson (above, note 3) 33 and Tolkiehn (above, note 4) 143-44. The case could very well be made that all Ovid's heroines, and especially Helen, Hypsipyle, and Phaedra, are characterized in a novel way. Oppel (above, note 4) 10 calls attention to Ovid's novelty of characterization in this way: "Neue psychologische Motive wie Argwohn und Eifersucht werden von Ovid in einige dieser Mythen eingeführt. Für die Untersuchung der inneren Motivation werden gerade diese von Ovid eingeführten Motive von grösster Bedeutung sein, aber auch jene Motive, in denen mythologische Fakten um des psychologischen Effektes willen eine andersartige Funktion erhalten haben."

from tradition, moreover, is most strongly marked in his failure to mention the undoing by night of the web Penelope wove by day. When Ovid wished to adhere to the Homeric text he could do so without committing a single factual error, as is shown in his use of the Homeric account in *Heroides* 3, the letter from Briseis to Achilles.<sup>25</sup>

Ovid's originality in the *Heroides*, then, can be assessed in terms of the possibilities he opened for psycho-dramatic portrayals in the epistolary elegy, as is demonstrated by the unique psychological sensitivity of his portrayal of Penelope. Thus it is impossible to agree with Palmer's statement that Penelope is a "staid character" and that "the fidelity of Ovid to the conceptions of the authors he followed is very marked."<sup>26</sup> Precisely the opposite is true in *Heroides* 1.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Ehwald, *BPW* 17 (1896) 1515, and Tolkiehn (above, note 4) 143-44.

<sup>26</sup> Palmer (above, note 12) 277.

<sup>27</sup> Thus I am in agreement with Oppel (above, note 4) 10, who says, "Am stärksten aber entfernt sich Ovid in der Darstellung der Gefühlsentwicklung von seinen Quellen."