

## OVID AND *CULTUS*: *ARS AMATORIA* 3.113–28

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Sententious utterances are so frequent in Ovid's poetry that it is not surprising to find scholars quoting lines out of context—often with a resultant distortion of their original significance. This is especially true of the couplet 3.121–22:

prisca iuvent alios, ego me nunc denique natum  
gratulor: haec aetas moribus apta meis.

Divorced from their context, the lines are often presented as a general statement of Ovid's philosophy with the emphasis largely on moral considerations.<sup>1</sup> They belong, however, to a longer digression commencing at 113; this, in turn, in order to be fully appreciated, must be studied as part of the whole section from 101, which serves as an introduction to the precepts on *cultus* beginning at 129.

In keeping with the stress on physical appearance in the introductory portion of the book (cf. especially 73–80), Ovid begins his advice to *puellae* with details of their *cultus*, which here includes dress, hair-style and make-up.<sup>2</sup> As in the opening lines of the *Medicamina Faciei Femineae*, the concept of feminine *cultus* is illustrated with georgic imagery (101–2). At 103–4, the poet justifies the use of *cultus* with the argument that most women are not naturally beautiful; since such a statement may prove unpalatable to his readers, however, Ovid, with shrewd psychological

<sup>1</sup> E.g., E. K. Rand, *Ovid and his Influence* (Norwood 1925) 170; L. P. Wilkinson, *Ovid Recalled* (Cambridge 1955) 295; J. Krókowski, "Ars Amatoria—Poème didactique," *Eos* 53 (1963) 155; E. S. Ramage, *Urbanitas: Ancient Sophistication and Refinement* (Norman 1973) 88; N. Rudd, *Lines of Enquiry* (Cambridge 1976) 19–20; K. Morgan, *Ovid's Art of Imitation: Propertius in the Amores* (Mnemosyne Suppl. 47, Leiden 1977) 30; G. Williams, *Change and Decline: Roman Literature in the Early Empire* (Berkeley 1978) 63.

<sup>2</sup> It is unclear how far the section on *cultus* extends; the precepts on behaviour (281–380) might be viewed as a development of the same theme (see A. Hermann, "Versuch einer Aufbauanalyse des 3. Buches der 'Ars amatoria'," in *Ovids Ars amatoria und Remedia amoris: Untersuchungen zum Aufbau* ed. E. Zinn [Stuttgart 1970] 30–33).

insight, adds the qualification that even those gifted with beauty will find it fades if neglected.<sup>3</sup>

In urging the advantages of *cultus*, Ovid adopts a position which is to a certain extent opposed to the attitude of his elegiac predecessors as displayed, for example, in Propertius' tirade in 1.2 against artificial, in contrast to natural, beauty. On the other hand, the *cultus* espoused by Ovid here is only partially identical with that deprecated by Propertius and Tibullus.

In the opening lines of 1.2, Propertius makes it clear what he understands by *cultus*: elaborate hair-style (*ornato . . . capillo*, 1), Coan silk (*Coa veste*, 2), perfume (*Oronthea . . . murra*, 3) and exotic finery (*peregrinis . . . muneribus*, 4). Similarly, in Tibullus 1.9 a *culta puella* is not only carefully coiffured (67–68) and made-up (69) but she also wears gold bracelets (69–70) and Tyrian purple (70).<sup>4</sup> References to expensive and elaborate dress are also frequent in passages alluding to female attire where the term *cultus* is not specifically employed, e.g., Prop. 1.15.5–7 (hair-style, make-up, jewels), 3.13.5–8 (gold, jewels, Tyrian purple, perfume); Tibullus 2.3.53–58 (Coan silk, gold embroidery, purple) and 2.4.27–30 (jewels, Tyrian purple, Coan silk).

The elegiac lover's opposition to *cultus* is rooted first in the financial burden it imposes upon him<sup>5</sup> and second in its connection with moral laxity: Propertius, for example, views Cynthia's *cultus* as a sign of infidelity (cf. especially 1.2.23–26, 1.15.5–8).<sup>6</sup> For this reason, the advice given by the *lena* in Prop. 4.5 (and Ovid's version of the *topos* in *Am.* 1.8) is anathema to the lover, since the pursuit of *cultus* as urged in these poems<sup>7</sup> involves not only promiscuity (Prop. 4.5.27–28, *Ov. Am.* 1.8.39–44) but the rejection of the poor poet in favour of the *dives amator* (Prop. 4.5.49–58, *Ov. Am.* 1.8.57–64). Now in presenting the doctrine of *cultus*

<sup>3</sup> This is special pleading, since elsewhere in the book (251–54, 257–58) he admits that really beautiful women do not need *ars*, but as all women fancy themselves beautiful (cf. 1.614), no one would read the precepts on *cultus* if they were aimed only at those lacking *forma*!

<sup>4</sup> K. F. Smith in his note on 74 takes *culta puella* in the sense "a cultivated woman of the world," but this is an unnecessary extension of meaning in view of the preceding lines, which emphasize the girl's outward appearance.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Prop. 3.13.1–2; Tibullus (2.3.49–58, 2.4.21–38) accepts the financial strain as an evil necessity, part of the *servitium amoris*.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. also Prop. 3.13.3–24, 47–50. At 4.8.75, the tables are ironically turned as Cynthia warns the unfaithful Propertius: *Tu neque Pompeia spatiabere cultus in umbra*. The connection between *cultus* and immorality is not, of course, confined to elegy: see J. C. Yardley, "Four Notes on Ovid, *Amores*, I," *AC* 49 (1980) 267 and note 6.

<sup>7</sup> The term *cultus* is used at *Am.* 1.8.26; although the word does not occur in Prop. 4.5, the *lena*'s list of desirable possessions (21–26) includes all the stock ingredients of *cultus*: gold, jewels, silk, perfume; and there is a quotation at 55–56—provided that this couplet is retained—from the earlier poem on *cultus*, 1.2.

in the *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid takes over the rôle of the *lena*, but although the moral aspects of *cultus* adumbrated above are irrelevant in a poem where fidelity to a single partner is no longer required, the financial considerations pose a problem for the poet. Although he assumes the *lena*'s didactic function, his *persona* remains that of the *pauper poeta*,<sup>8</sup> and as such he cannot espouse *cultus* in the sense understood by his elegiac predecessors.

Ovid's solution is to redefine the concept of *cultus* by placing the emphasis on artistry rather than extravagance: the *culta puella* must take pains with her appearance, but the desired effect may be achieved without undue expense. Thus the use of gold and jewels is expressly forbidden (129–32), as is the wearing of Tyrian purple: *nec quae de Tyrio murice, lana, rubes. / cum tot prodierint pretio leviores colores, / quis furor est census corpore ferre suos?* (170–72). The last line, with its clear allusion to Prop. 3.13.11 (*matrona incedit census induta nepotum*) underlines the fact that Ovid's attitude to female extravagance is no different from that of the other elegists.

Finally, it should be noted that, apart from the *lena*-poem where the poet adopts a conventional stance, his approval of *cultus* in the *Ars Amatoria* is not inconsistent with the position that he took in the *Amores*, where on several occasions a girl's *cultus* is alluded to without any derogatory implications (*Am.* 2.4.37, 2.10.5, 3.6.55, 3.7.1; cf. 2.5.45 where the epithet *cultus* is applied to the girl's hair). In none of these passages, however, is the concept elaborated upon; the only earlier poem in which a definition is offered is the *Medicamina Faciei Femineae*: at 17–22, *cultus* is interpreted in the traditional way to include the expensive trappings. Here, though—in contrast to the *Ars*—Ovid's *persona* is that of teacher, but not poor poet, and he does not therefore have cause to deprecate wealth on personal grounds.<sup>9</sup>

In lines 107–12, the anticipated objection that *cultus* was foreign to women of old is countered by two mythological *exempla*, in which neglect of their appearance on the part of these heroines is attributed to the fact that their men were similarly *inculti*. The argument is Ovid's answer to passages in elegy such as Prop. 1.2.15–24, where the unadorned beauty of mythical heroines is held up as an example to modern *puellae* and an argument against the use of *cultus*. To make the point, however, Ovid offers an amusing picture of Andromache clad in her *tunicas valentes* and

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *A.A.* 3.531 and 533: *munera det dives . . . ; carmina qui facimus, mittamus carmina tantum*; also 551–52: *a doctis pretium scelus est sperare poetis; / me miserum, scelus hoc nulla puella timet*.

<sup>9</sup> At *R.A.* 343–44, Ovid reverts to the traditional interpretation of *cultus*; *auferimur cultu; gemmis auroque teguntur / omnia . . .*, but here he deliberately emphasizes the less attractive aspects of *cultus*—from the lover's viewpoint—because he is trying to make *amor* repellent.

the unadorned Tecmessa confronted by Ajax's enormous shield. In the case of Andromache, her apparel here is in no way consonant with the description of her clothing in the *Iliad* (e.g., 22.468–70); it could, on the other hand, be appropriately applied to an early Roman matron—one of the *antiquae Sabinae* who appear in a similar context at *Med.* 11–16.<sup>10</sup>

For this reason, the *exempla* provide a fitting lead-in to the digression, commencing at 113, in which the difference between past and present is symbolized by the contrast between ancient and contemporary Rome. Virgil's account of Aeneas' meeting with Evander in *Aeneid* 8 (337–61) contains a description of the primitive site of Rome and a comparison with the present-day city (cf. especially 347–48: *hinc ad Tarpeiam sedem et Capitolia ducit / aurea nunc, olim silvestribus horrida dumis*, and later, 360–61: *... passimque armenta videbant / Romanoque foro et lautis mugire Carinis*). In addition, both Tibullus and Propertius dwell at length on the idea (Tib. 2.5.25–38, Prop. 4.1.1–38).<sup>11</sup> In one respect, the version presented here by Ovid differs from those of the other Augustan poets: the scene is set during the reign of the Sabine Tatius (118: *Tatio regna tenente*), i.e., contemporary with Romulus, whereas both Tibullus and Propertius (in 4.1) follow Virgil's lead in depicting the rural settlement before the arrival of Aeneas, that is, many years prior to Romulus' foundation of a city on the site. Propertius, it is true, describes the setting for his story of Tarpeia and Tatius (4.4) in similar terms; but given the context leading up to Ovid's digression, it is more likely that Ovid is developing an idea which he had already employed in two earlier passages where the Sabine women are presented as *exempla* of the ancient lack of *cultus*, *Med.* 11–12: *forsitan antiquae Tatio sub rege Sabinae / maluerint quam se rura paterna coli* and *Am.* 1.8.39–40: *forsitan immundae Tatio regnante Sabinae / noluerint habiles pluribus esse viris*.

A second, and more significant, divergence from the tradition lies in the function of Ovid's description of early Rome. For Virgil, Propertius and Tibullus, the difference between past and present is fascinating in itself; apart from an implicit sense of awe that a city so great could arise from such small beginnings, no attempt is made by those poets to ridicule the past or to state their own preference for one era rather than the other. In another type of context, to be sure, such a statement of preference is to be found—and this is the second element underlying the passage under discussion—namely, instances in which a contrast between present-day wealth and the rural simplicity of early Rome is drawn, not for its own sake, but in order to symbolize the process of moral decline against which the poet is voicing his protest.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Am.* 1.8.39: *immundae Sabinae*. For the unkempt appearance of men in olden times, see Hor. *Carm.* 1.12.41 with Nisbet and Hubbard *ad loc.*

<sup>11</sup> Compare also Prop. 4.4.9–14, Ov. *Fast.* 1.243–44, 5.91–92, 6.261–64.

The general theme of a nostalgic longing for the impoverished but virtuous early days became a commonplace in Augustan poets, e.g., Horace *Carm.* 2.15, 3.6, *Epod.* 2, Virgil *Georg.* 2.458–540, especially 532–40; a similar view is expressed by Livy in his preface.<sup>12</sup> The elegists also took up the cry (e.g., Prop. 2.16.19–20, 3.13.25–46, Tib. 2.3.35–49, Ov. *Am.* 3.8),<sup>13</sup> but with the important difference that their distaste for contemporary *avaritia* is based on purely personal considerations: the drain on their resources that resulted from female cupidity (Prop. 3.13.1–2) or, more commonly, the disadvantage at which the *pauper poeta* thus found himself *vis-à-vis* the *dives amator* (Prop. 2.16, Tib. 2.3, Ov. *Am.* 3.8).

In order to gain a full insight into what Ovid is trying to achieve in the passage commencing at 113, the reader must be aware, then, of the two literary *topoi* which are being utilised: first, passages where a contrast is drawn, purely in terms of outward appearance, between the primitive site of Rome and the present-day city in all its splendour, and second, those contexts in which the wealth of contemporary Rome and the simplicity of the past serve merely as the symbolic basis for a moral discussion. Not only does Ovid combine these two distinct *topoi*, as will presently be demonstrated, but as well he wittily inverts the tradition by imposing upon it his own novel preference for the present rather than the past.

In addition, the passage is dependent for its effect on an element of surprise, which may readily be appreciated by the reader cognisant with the background outlined above. At this point, the most fruitful approach will be to examine the poet's train of thought, beginning with line 101.

From the viewpoint of strict logicity, the passage has a satisfactory internal consistency. The sequence of thought may be summarized as follows: *cultus* is desirable (101–6); it may be true that women of the past did not employ it, but they were living in a different era (107–11); to appreciate the extent of this difference between past and present, one only has to look at the splendid modern city of Rome and contrast this with how it must have once appeared (113–20); my own preference is for the present age (121–22)—but *not* because of contemporary wealth; rather, it is the presence of *cultus* which appeals to me (123–28). The argument has thus come full circle with a return to the original premise that *cultus* is necessary for the modern-day *puella*. Thus the way is prepared for a transition to the next section, in which the nature of *cultus*

<sup>12</sup> On moralizing in the Augustan poets, see G. Williams, *Tradition and Originality in Roman Poetry* (Oxford 1968) chapter 9, pp. 578 ff.

<sup>13</sup> In all these passages except the first, the past is represented by the Golden Age of Saturn rather than early Rome (Virgil in *Georg.* 2 combines the two—the simple life of the farmer was led both by the early Romans and in the Golden Age 532–35, 538).

is examined in detail. The smoothness with which this transition is effected is dependent also on a parallelism of thought between Ovid's rejection of contemporary wealth in 123–26 and the negative advice with which the following precepts commence—*cultus* does *not* involve wealthy ostentation. This connection is reinforced by verbal similarities, *aurum* (123) corresponding to *auro* (131) and *lecta . . . concha* (124) to *lapillis / quos legit . . .* (129–30).

Such a summary of the logical thought-sequence of the passage, however, does not fully represent its effect on the observant reader. In part, this effect depends on a surprise twist at line 123. Although, as was observed, Ovid's rejection of wealth as the reason behind his preference for the present age is in accord with the concept of *cultus* presented in 129–33, this is realised only in retrospect; to the reader arriving at line 123 after the preceding digression on Rome (113–20), it is entirely unexpected. This surprise effect must now be explored in greater detail.

At 113 comes a shift of emphasis away from the physical appearance of women to that of the city of Rome; the description that follows is of sufficient length that by the time line 123 is reached, the original starting-point of the digression has been lost sight of. Furthermore, unlike similar passages in other Augustan poets, the appearance of the modern city is presented in explicitly laudatory terms; note in particular the description of the Curia as *consilio dignissima tanto* (117) and the use of *fulgent* with reference to the Palatine temple of Apollo, coupled with the derogatory contrasting picture of 120. Although—as will shortly be demonstrated—the sentiment expressed in the next line, *prisca iuvent alios*,<sup>14</sup> is an inversion of the attitude commonly adopted by other Augustan poets, nevertheless it is the logical sequel to the praise of the modern-day city that precedes it. However, the reasons given at 123–28 for the statement made in the preceding couplet are the exact opposite of what Ovid has deliberately led us to expect (that is, in view of the ideas expressed in 113–20 we might reasonably suppose the poet's preference for the present to be based on the wealthy splendour of contemporary Rome). The emphatic anaphora *non quia . . . nec quia . . . nec quia* underlines the *παρὰ προσδοκίαν* effect: i.e., it is not—as you might expect—the wealth of the present age which attracts me, but the fact that women nowadays look after their appearance!<sup>15</sup>

Finally, as was suggested above, the full impact of the lines may only be felt in conjunction with the underlying poetic tradition. In 113–22 the

<sup>14</sup> For the formula, cf. Hor. *Carm.* 1.7.1 *laudabunt alii . . .*; Tib. 1.1.1 *divitias alius . . . sibi congerat*, 1.10.29 *alius sit fortis in armis . . .*; [Tib.] 3.3.31 *haec alii cupiant*.

<sup>15</sup> The observant reader may have already suspected from the almost irreverent wit of 116 (*alterius dices illa fuisse Iovis*) and the amusingly belittling manner of expression in 120 (*quid nisi araturis pascua bubus erant?*) that Ovid's eulogy of Augustan Rome is not entirely serious; nevertheless, this does not substantially detract from the surprise effect at 123–28.

*topos* of a comparison between primitive and contemporary Rome is amalgamated with a statement of preference for one period rather than the other which is reminiscent, as has been shown, of a common type of Augustan moralizing. By expressing a preference for the present rather than the past Ovid inverts the usual attitude; moreover, in so doing he not only lauds the present era, but also pours derision on that rural simplicity which, for other Augustan poets, is an object of admiration: cf. the application of the pejorative *rudis* to *simplicitas*, as well as the depreciatory use of *priscus* in lines 121 and 128, and of *rusticitas* in 128.<sup>16</sup> At 123–26, however, the inversion is found to be incomplete, since in rejecting the symbols of wealth, Ovid is now adopting a position towards the past resembling that of other writers (126: . . . *caeruleae mole fugantur aquae* recalls several Horatian passages, in particular *Carm.* 3.1.33–34 (*contracta pisces aequora sentiunt / iactis in altum molibus* . . .),<sup>17</sup> as well as *Tib.* 2.3.45–46 (*claudit et indomitum moles mare* . . .); and with line 125 compare *Hor. Carm.* 2.18.17–18). This paradox comes about through the exploitation of an inconsistency that existed in Augustan propaganda between reverence for the past and rejection of wealth, and, on the other hand, the pride shown by Augustus in his architectural achievements.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, however, the wealth that is scorned by moralists is invariably presented by them in general terms of greed for gain on the part of private individuals, that is, it has nothing to do with the public display of wealth inherent in Augustus' beautification of the city.<sup>19</sup>

Of deepest significance is the incongruity between the normal seriousness of the two *topoi* that underlie the digression and the Ovidian context in which they are evoked. The whole tenor of the passage up until line 126 is deliberately reminiscent of Augustan moralizing, which Ovid appears to be standing on its head; at 127, however, it is discovered that the reason for his views is not a refusal to accept the moral idealism that condemns wealth, but a much more mundane one—*cultus adest*. To take

<sup>16</sup> *Rusticitas* and *rusticus-a-um* are very frequently used by Ovid with a pejorative force, e.g., *Am.* 1.8.44, 2.4.13, 2.8.3, 3.1.43, *Ep.* 1.77, 4.102, 132; cf. B. Otis, "Ovid and the Augustans," *TAPA* 69 (1938) 203–5, and E. Courtney, "Three Poems of Propertius," *BICS* 16 (1969) 85. The only parallel elsewhere in elegy is Propertius' use of *rusticus* at 2.5.25 to describe a lover/poet who indulges in physical violence against his *amica*.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. also *Carm.* 2.15.2–4, 18.20–22; 3.24.3–4.

<sup>18</sup> Compare Propertius' description of the temple of Apollo at 2.31. On Augustus' pride in his building-programme see Suet. *Aug.* 28.3: *urbem neque pro maiestate imperii ornatam et inundationibus incendiisque obnoxiam excoluit adeo, ut iure sit gloriatus marmoream se relinquere, quam latericiam accepisset*; cf. *Res Gestae* 19–21.

<sup>19</sup> Augustus himself made a distinction between his public and private expenditure (see Suet. *Aug.* 7.2 for a description of the emperor's comparatively modest house on the Palatine), and at *Carm.* 2.15.13–20 Horace praises the attitude of the early Romans who believed in the acquisition of public, but not private, wealth (cf. also Nisbet and Hubbard on line 15).

*cultus* here in the broader sense of sophistication, both physical and moral—as do critics<sup>20</sup> who use the lines as a convenient summary of Ovid's views in general—is to miss the point. It is precisely from the fact that *cultus* has a specific application to women's dress, hair-style etc. that the witty effect is derived: Ovid's quasi-moralizing digression leads up to a bathetic anti-climax which effectively undercuts its pretensions.

<sup>20</sup> See especially the discussions of Krókowski, Ramage and Williams (above, note 1), also B. Otis, *Ovid as an Epic Poet* (Cambridge 1970<sup>2</sup>) 19–20, and G. P. Goold in his revised edition of J. H. Mozley's Loeb *Ovid*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, Mass. 1979) 127. The term *cultus* was correctly interpreted by T. F. Higham, "Ovid: Some Aspects of his Character and Aims," *CR* 48 (1934) 114, and, more recently, A. A. R. Henderson in his edition of *Remedia Amoris* (Edinburgh 1979) 85 (note on R.A. 343). When *cultus* is used by Ovid to refer to cultivation of the person (as opposed to worship of the gods or agriculture) it always alludes to externals, and although the adjective *cultus* in the phrase *culta puella* could perhaps be taken in the broader sense of "sophisticated," I have found no passage where it need mean more than "dressed up." The use of *cultus* to mean *vitae elegantia*, *humanitas*, is in fact very rare (*TLL* 4.1337.39 ff. gives examples from Caecilius, Val. Fl., Seneca, Quint. and Gellius, as well as (wrongly) Ov. A.A. 3.127).