

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Ars Amatoria (The Art of Love) 10 B.C.

Ovid (43 B.C.-17 AD)

OVERVIEW

Publius Ovidius Naso (43 B.C.- 187AD) was born in Sulmo to an important equestrian family—equestrian meaning just below the highest patrician rank. He was sent to Rome for his education—as were his social and intellectual peers—and studied Rhetoric, as a prelude to the study and practice of law. (This educational pathway, leading toward Law, and beyond that toward politics, was generally expected of the aspiring young gentleman learning in Rome.) For some reason, perhaps the shocking death of his brother at age twenty, Ovid decided to stick with his initial instinct, and to give himself unreservedly to poetry. At this point Ovid went to Athens to study, and while studying there travelled to Asia Minor and Sicily. From 29 B.C.-25 B.C. Ovid returned to Rome to devote himself to poetry. It was at this period that he too—as was also part of the expected pattern-- found his patron. This time it was not the wealthy and magnanimous Maecenas, who was to become the central figure of Augustus' literary circle, but Marcus Corvinus, who was long a defender of the Roman Republic against Augustus, and who found himself moving toward Augustus, as the tide of history swept in that direction. Thus Ovid too came ultimately under the supportive umbrella of the Emperor's largesse, and left us one more instance of the way money and connections paved the way to literary success.

Poetry. From this point on Ovid not only determined, but had the means to give, his life to poetry. To shorten the discussion, he was mentally preparing to write what would become a world famous series of erotic-social works—the *Heroides* (15 B.C.), the *Amores* (10 B.C.), the *Ars Amatoria* (10 B.C.), the *Metamorphoses* (starting 2 A.D.)—when a devastating blow of fate assaulted him. In the year 8 A.D. Ovid was banished--relegated-- from Rome by the Emperor Augustus, and sent to the distant city of Tomi, on the Black Sea. Even though relegation was different from exile, and gave a few more local privileges—he kept his books-- this life confinement to a remote sea port was a serious exile for any Roman, let alone for an urban sophisticate accustomed to the cultural interactions of the metropolis. (Rome was at this point becoming a thrilling center of literary and architectural growth.)

Relegation and the Erotic. The world at large has never known the true cause of this exile, which Ovid attributes to *carmen et error*, a song and an error, terms which have resisted any clear interpretation though Ovid's contemporaries, and later scholars, have generated theories about what these words mean. One leading explanation is that Ovid had inside information about scandalous behaviors in Augustus' court. Whatever the case, we are sure that Augustus was outraged by some 'open immorality' Ovid had foregrounded in his long poem, the *Ars Amatoria* (2 A.D.), which promoted exactly the adultery that the new Emperor, Augustus, was making an intense effort to criminalize.

The fury of Augustus. The poems Ovid created, both before and during his relegation, included a wide variety of tones, within a single minded attention to issues of love. The early *Amores* (10 B.C.) include some of the world's wittiest couplets on the war (and truce) between the sexes; funny, bitter, urbane to the max. The *Heroides* (written around 15 B.C.) translate that witticism into insight; into the psychology (mostly female) encapsulated in imaginary 'love letters' written to one another by notable Greco-Roman literary figures. The *Ars Amatoria* (10 B.C.) is equally witty—a handbook first for guys, then for gals, on the most effective ways of seducing a married woman or man, depending; and with tons of collateral tips on, for example, detours like the lady's maid you use to get at the married lady, but who turns out to want a seduction of her own en route. (This kind of game playing was particularly odious to the Emperor Augustus, who had staked the dignity of his reign (27 B.C.-19 A.D.) on a high level of civil morality, and who had already suffered deep embarrassment from the misbehaviors of members of his own family.)

Last works. Ovid's masterwork, the *Metamorphoses* (8 A.D.) is a compendium of 15 books and 250 myths, tracking the history of the world from its creation to the deification of Julius Caesar. In his last poems, written from Black Sea exile, Ovid writes *The Tristia* (9 A.D.-12 A.D.), elegant but deeply sad poems of banishment, in which he laments everything lost—his beloved Rome, his beloved third wife; the living urbanity for which isolation was ultimately the price he had to pay.

STORY.

The story of the *Ars Amatoria* is about Ovid himself, who at the time of writing is in fact a poet of reputation in Rome, though still in his early thirties. His topic in this poem is how-to, how to find, catch and keep a girl in a large metropolitan city, such as the Rome in which the tale is being told. Ovid writes with confidence, self-mocking but cocky and knowing, and with considerable erudition; he writes in a brilliance of meter deliciously pertinent to the themes he assays. (The meter was just right for erotic poetry: elegiac couplets, in which an hexameter line is capped by a shorter pentameter, which wraps the package and applies spit and polish to the sharply hewn couplet.)

If any Roman knows nothing about love making, please
Read this poem and graduate in expertise.

In three books of such couplets--the first two books for guys, the third designed for women who were on the hunt-- Ovid lays out a game plan for successful erotic matchings, and one can readily see why an Emperor bent on promoting decent behavior would have little sympathy for a poet with the present project.

From the outset Ovid lays out a visual map of Rome, suggesting that the male on the hunt should try out the theatres, the chariot races, the law courts, the cafes, the woods; banquets, ceremonies, and of course special tributes to Bacchus!

There you'll find someone to love, or a playmate, there
You can opt for one night or a solid affair.

Flattery must never be forgotten, no more than the charming gentlemanly gesture.

Many a man
has scored by arranging a cushion or plying a fan
Or slipping a little stool
Under the dainty foot of a sweet fool.

Man's sexuality, claims Ovid, is far more bestial than woman's, and must instruct itself from this standpoint, noting, in order to learn from the female's difference, tales like that of Pasiphae in Crete, who wooed her lover bull, with fine grasses and herbs, spreading out her longing toward this king of the labyrinth. Ovid is profuse with examples of women whose care and delicacy in erotics can teach men how to score.

Wisdom follows, as Ovid goes deeper into preparing the male for conquest. The guy should be careful to know the maid of his lady, to find out Madame's secrets indirectly, and by the way to be sure the maid herself doesn't become the top player. The hunt thrives on singleness of purpose. (One can see the Emperor cringe at these deliberate calculations of pleasure: the Emperor's ban on adultery is a crude weapon against the bedroom plotting of an aspiring upper class intercourse. The details of instruction proliferate: make sure your toga fits well—and has no food spots; smell good; make sure your shoe buckles are polished, no rust; nails and hair neat and orderly, 'hair and beard need an expert's hand.' Gaze into her eyes, while sipping wine. 'Please with whatever talent can give pleasure.' Grow pallid with sleeplessness, so that your girl will by stages become aware of how infatuated you are.

Having instructed his pupil sufficiently, in the skills of finding a lover, Ovid hurries his reader onto a second, and equally difficult, challenge, keeping the lover.

A centerpiece of illustration, concerning the perils of retaining what you have entrapped, is offered in the tale (Book Two) of Minos' effort to imprison Dedalus in his labyrinth in Crete. Ovid puts us into the mind of the ingenious detainee (Dedalus), kept in imprisonment, who contrives to build a flying machine to escape from Crete. With his son as collaborator and co-escapee Dedalus soars up and over his prison—proofs that the imprisoned can always find a way out—but only to find that the wing -ax was starting to melt, in the heat of the sun; with the tragic finale, a crash into the Ikarian sea. Other examples—Medea and Circe are adduced—are brought forth, to illustrate the folly of imprisoning as such, and finally the advantages of just being nice to the gal, so nice she won't want to think of escaping.

Having gotten your girl it is, of course, essential to keep her, and if the Dedalus case shows how hard it is to confine your lover, then be sure to make her pleased with her prison. Affirm her in every way you can—laugh when and if she does, follow every suggestion she makes, run errands for her.

Told to meet her in the Forum, arrive for the date
Good and early...wait....

Compliments are always in order. Always praise the dress of the day, make yourself reliable, keep your absences from her brief, when caught in an affair don't overreact, but make it up to her in bed. Be sure not to ask her questions about who she has been seeing, or what her upcoming plans are. Leave her in peace, and she'll come back to you. And remember, winning and then keeping your girl is a tremendous battle, and if you are rejected, there are plenty more where this one came from.

The Third Book is for women, that they too may be empowered. Ovid opens by praising the ladies as the virtuous and tender gender, but promising to offer them their own recourses in the battle of the sexes, and, Ovid adds gallantly, in the battle against wrinkles and gray hair. Beauty fades with age, but much can and should be done, to anticipate your physical decline. Simplicity is the general rule to follow, simplicity and knowing your own unique features.

Ovid imagines himself a specialist in make up, and highly recommends the study of this art. (You see, where men are directed toward simple neatness, women are urged toward neatness inside complexity—on facial tones. Even seemingly natural expressions, like laughter, should be carefully managed:

the mouth should be opened only so wide
the dimples kept small on either side;
and the top teeth at the tip
Just covered by the lower lip.

There follows ample advice on such enhancements to beauty as appropriate walking styles, dance movements, games to play, teasing types of letters to send. Finally, bringing us back toward the subterranean topic of adultery, with which we started, women are given some excellent, but careful, tips on how to trick their husbands, send out assignation notes, and prepare the ground for just that adultery the Emperor's hatred would not much later strike Ovid.

THEMES

Challenge Of all Ovid's love related works, the *Ars Amatoria* most directly presents itself as a challenge which has to be faced and overcome. There is a clear and obvious goal proposed by this *Ars*: to find a desirable girl, or in Book Three guy, and to hold on to that precious acquisition. The *Ars amatoria* is thus all about gaining a new loved person and making that gain lasting. To achieve that, the person seeking must have a strong set of tools, know how to use them, and be patient.

Graciousness. In the midst of the Second Book, it seems to the amorous reader that he should simply throw some weight around, in his choosing and relating to women (or guys) he finds attractive. He considers the advantages of simply enforcing his sense of the couple's direction. By a saving instinct,

however, he senses that adopting a relaxed and supporting attitude, toward the actions of his partner, will be the best strategy for winning him/her over.

Humility. It underlies the multiple accounts, of strategies for finding men or women, that the task is of the most difficult order. and must be approached in the most humble possible spirit. The other gender may enjoy being gulled, but will not want to know it is happening, while it is happening.

Love. Ultimately—and this is what saves Ovid from being a shyster—Ovid is in it all for the joy of urbane love. He knows, as few have, the essential role of artifice in creating the seemingly natural; he went so far as to prove that, writing as he did a late in life book,