COMMENTARY ON OVID, AMORES 1.1 (Ortwin Knorr)

Forced by Cupid, the Poet turns to Love Elegy

1-4 Cupid stole one foot each from every second line of the “Ovid’s” martial epos, turning it into an elegy. 5-20 The poet protests: Cupid should not interfere with poetry; poetry is not his line of work. And besides, “Ovid” is not in love, and so has no one to write love poems about. 21-26 Hit by Cupid’s arrow, the poet falls in love. 27-30 Farewell to epic, hello to elegy.

The opening poem programatically announces the content and character of Ovid’s Amores and introduces the poet’s hapless persona, “Ovid”, a young poet and lover who has clearly spent more time in Rhetoric School than was good for him.

1-4 By way of a parody of a Dichterweihe (poetic initiation scene), the poem opens with a tongue-in-cheek apology for Ovid’s choice of a less than respectable genre. The locus classicus is Hesiod’s encounter with the Muses on Mt. Helicon that turns the shepherd into a didactic poet (Hes. Theog. 30-31). Ovid’s version, however, pays witty homage in particular to a much admired Hellenistic poet, Callimachus of Cyrene (310/305 – 240 BCE). In the prologue to the first book of his Aetia (21-28), a collection of foundation myths also written in elegiac distichs, Callimachus claims that Apollo, as god of poetry, directed him away from epic to shorter, more refined poems and less well-trodden topics (cf. McKeown 1989, 7-11).

1 Arma gravi numero: The introductory hexameter comically misleads the reader’s expectations. Clearly alluding to the beginning of Vergil’s Aeneid (Arma virumque cano, Aen. 1.1), Ovid pretends to start a typical epos. In fact, since it was custom to refer to a book by its opening words, the apparent title of Ovid’s amatory poems is Arma gravi numero, “Weapons in heavy rhythm” (cf. McKeown 1989, 11-12).

2 risisse Cupido dicitur: Phrases like dicitur, ferunt, fama est, etc. are oft used to signal a so-called “Alexandrinian footnote” (Hinds 1998, 2). Here it is not clear to which passage Ovid alludes. Ovid’s conversion to an amatory poet by a thievish Cupid seems to be an original idea (cf. McKeown 1989, 13). The notion of Cupid as a mocking thief, however, may be borrowed from another famous Hellenistic poem, Apollonius’ epic Argonautica. In Arg. 3.124, Eros laughs as he cheats Ganymede out of his two golden astragaloi (knuckle bone dice); not much later, he laughs again as he hits Medea with an arrow that makes her fall in love with Jason (cf. Bretzgeheimer 2001, 14). If this is correct, Cupid’s laughter may well predict doom for the unlucky poet-lover.

4 Pieridum vates: The Muses are called Pierides either after a region in southern Macedonia called Pieria, after their haunt on Mt. Pierus, which is located there, or as daughters of king Pierus of Macedon (elsewhere, they are called daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne). Kenney punctuates Pieridum vates, non tua, turba sumus, i.e., “We poet-prophets are the crowd of the Pierids, not yours”, but there is no caesura after tua, and it seems more natural to read, “We are the poet-prophets of the Pierids, not your crowd.”

7-12: A paradoxical list of gods trying to assume their counterpart’s attributes and areas of responsibility. The declared virgin and warrior-goddess Minerva (7)
shakes the torches of love, unwarlike Venus Minerva’s arms (7-8); Ceres, the goddess of agriculture, exchanges her reign with the uncultivated forests of Diana, goddess of the hunt, whose attributes are bow and quiver (9-10); Mars, god of war, brandishes Apollo’s lyre whereas the god of poetry holds Mars’ spear (11-12).

7-12 praeripiat, ventilet, probet, instruat: potential subjunctives.

11 crinibus insignem: the reference to his hair makes Apollo seem unwarlike, like his fellow archer Paris, who in Horace’s Odes 1.15.13-15 is mocked by old god of the sea, Nereus: Nequiquam Veneris praesidio ferox / peces caesariem grataque feminis / inbelli cithara carmina divides (“What good will it do to sit in your lady’s chamber, / Venus’ hero, combing your beautiful hair, / And playing a tune on the cithara, of the sort / That women like?” transl. David Ferry).

15 Heliconia tempe: “the valleys of the Helicon;” Mt. Helicon in Boeotia is traditionally the abode of the Muses. Tempe refers properly to the beautiful Peneus river valley in Thessaly between Mt. Olympus and Mt. Ossa, but Ovid is the first to use the term metaphorically for any kind of beautiful valley (McKeown 1989, 21).

17-18: cum bene surrexit: In contrast to the typical Augustan recusatio, in which the poet of a less exalted genre claims he is unable to ascend to the heights of epic poetry, Ovid boasts that he would have been up to the task (McKeown 1989, 10). Apart from this, the distich imitates the rising of the hexameter and falling of the pentameter, just like lines 27-28 (sex mihi surgat opus numeris, etc.). In English, Coleridge tried to capture the same sensations in his epigram on “The Ovidian Elegiac Metre” (1833)

In the hexameter rises the fountain’s silvery column,
in the pentameter, aye, falling melodiously back.
Coleridge’s epigram, by the way, is itself a translation of a German original, by Friedrich Schiller, that managed to do without a clumsy line filler (Coleridge’s “aye”):

Im Hexameter steigt des Springquell’s flüssige Säule,
Im Pentameter drauf fällt sie melodisch herab.

20 aut puer aut … puella: Both hetero- and homosexual love were traditional topics of Greek erotic poetry. In contrast to some of his fellow Roman elegists, Catullus and Tibullus, however, Ovidius conspicuously avoids addressing poems to a boy lover (see also McKeown 1989, 23 with further references).

20 longas compta puella comas: longas comas is a Greek accusative of reference after compta (“coiffed with respect to her long hair”). The phrase represents both an etymological pun (compta ... comas, cf. McKeown 1989, 23) and forms a word picture: the position of longas ... comas in the verse imitates the girl’s long hair falling down to both sides of her face.

27-28 numeris ... modis: numerus refers to the beat or rhythm, modus to the meter.

28 ferrea cum vestris bella valete modis: another half-veiled reference to Callimachus Aetia prologue, fr. 1.17-18: ἔλλετε, θαυμανόν ὀλοὸν γένος, αὐθί δὲ τέχνη / κρῖνετε, μὴ σχοινῳ Περαιώδι τὴν σοφίν “Be gone, you destructive race of Envy, / From now on judge poetry by its art, not by the Persian rod.” The
Persian rod or measuring stick is the parasang, a large measure of length, equivalent to 30 Greek stadia (3.455 miles or 5.56 km), and used by Callimachus to refer to the excessive length of epic poems. *Valete* corresponds to ἔλλετε, *vestris modis* to the similarly inappropriate Persian measure, σχοινῳ Περσίδι.

29 *litorea flaventia tempora myrto:* another word picture (the shore myrtle surrounds the temples like a wreath). Myrtle was sacred to Venus and thus symbolizes love poetry. *Litorea* alludes to the story of Venus’ birth from the sea: when she first stepped from the sea, a myrtle bush growing by the sea shore hid her nudity (cf. Ovid, *Fast.* 4.15).

30 *emodulanda:* “to be set to rhythm,” an impressive *hapax legomenon* (word occurring only once) coined by Ovid (cf. McKeown 1989, 30). The ponderous paraphrase for the Muse of elegiac poetry, “Musa per undenos emodulanda pedes,” imbues his final invocation of the Muse with suitable (mock-)gravitas.

A flowering branch of myrtle (*myrtus communis*)

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