

Byblis in exemplo est: the Power of Reception in Ovid's Tale of Byblis and Caunus
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The narrative in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* of Byblis' desire for her twin brother, Caunus, significantly begins by announcing itself as a negative *exemplum*, and as the story unfolds, Byblis herself makes use of literary *exempla* to come to grips with her situation and attempt to seduce her brother. Byblis twice mentions incestuous unions among the gods (9.497-501, 9.554-5), first privately rejecting them as unsuitable models for a mortal such as herself, then encouraging Caunus to emulate them and yield to her overtures. Moreover, as many scholars have previously noted, Byblis acts as though she were obeying the instructions Ovid gives to hopeful lovers in the *Ars Amatoria*, or were following the examples of the lovelorn writers in the *Heroides*. How are we to understand this dense collection of both overt and implicit uses of literature as *exempla*?

It is important to note how strong the ancient critical tradition was that held literature potentially able to contaminate its readers with immorality. There is a recurring fear, from Plato's *Republic* through Plutarch's *How a Young Man Should Study Poetry*, that poetry infects readers with dangerous and irrational passions and teaches them bad morals via the examples set by its characters. Indeed, the particular danger that gods in poetry pose to readers is a veritable trope of such writings. At the very least, readers required some form of mental inoculation against these images; rejecting them outright was Plato's recommendation.

In this paper, I will argue that Ovid's Byblis and Caunus story confronts and explores a theory of reception which considers literature a straightforward source of moral *exempla* or instruction. Caunus refuses to read the entirety of the letter with which Byblis propositions him, throwing it to the floor and barely restraining himself from attacking the messenger who delivers it. We ourselves learn at the story's *incipit* that it will be about an incestuous desire, and are equally free to abandon the text unread. The difference between our readership and Caunus', however, should not be overlooked: while Caunus receives a letter from his sister, Byblis, we are reading a story from a book (or *byblos*, in the oft-noted pun). At that story's end, Byblis is transformed into a fountain, a not uncommon symbol in Hellenistic and Roman poetry for poetic inspiration: whatever sort of *exemplum* Byblis may set, it is her ultimate destiny to become an engaging and thought-provoking piece of poetry.