Playing Board Games with Ovid

Ovid tells his readership in the *Ars Amatoria* that "love is often won by playing" (*ludendo saepe paratur amor.* 3.368). The mingling of love and play is a predictable theme for the reader of elegy. Inasmuch as Roman love elegy is often semantically playful, one might even say that playfulness is constitutive of this genre. On a basic level, the elegists have skillfully worked the notion of play and games into their writings, textually intertwining play with the writing of poetry. As Wagenvoort (1956) shows, it is not uncommon for a poet to mention his *ludus poeticus*, his poetry writing as a game.

Beyond the *ludus poeticus*, Ovid however also approaches play on a surprisingly concrete level, incorporating board and dice games into his work. Most scholarly work on these Ovidian games has been devoted to understanding the technical details of the games themselves. This work is indeed necessary and fruitful, since the games described are not always readily identifiable (for major scholarship on board games see Austin 1934 and 1935; Becq de Fouquieres 1869; Lamer 1927). But, beyond the mechanics, what is the role of board games and playing in Ovid? Are games merely used by Ovid to demonstrate his virtuosity at the versification of technical language, in the manner of the poet's painstaking descriptions of hairstyles and sexual positions, or can the presence of games lead to larger insights?

This paper closely examines passages on board and dice games in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* and *Tristia*. In particular, it focuses on the following: *Ars Amatoria* 3.353-384 (the longest passage on board games by Ovid, on this passage see Gibson 2003), *Ars Amatoria* 2.203-208, and *Tristia* 2.471-484. It argues that the games are crucial components in Ovid's creation of elegiac *topoi*, especially of *militia amoris* (battles of love). Games, with their inherent instabilities between winner and loser, between chance and skill, and between rules and rivalries lend themselves well to a genre written by the "augurs of instability" (Miller 2004, 25).

Roger Caillois (1958, 7) notes that games function in a "fixed space" and it is in this space that "unexceptionable rules must be accepted." Elegy has its own space and its own set of rules, which not coincidentally can often be matched to those of Roman games. Board games can riff on elegy's fluidities and it is within this world of rules and unusual spaces that this paper approaches Ovidian board games.

Works Cited

Austin, R. G. 1934. "Roman Board Games I." *Greece & Rome* 4: 24-34.

Austin, R. G. 1935. "Roman Board Games II." *Greece & Rome* 4: 76-82.

Becq de Fouquieres, L. 1869. *Les Jeux des Anciens.* Paris: C. Reinwald.

Caillois, R. 1958. *Man, play, and games.* New York: Schocken Books.

Gibson, R. K. 2003. *Ovid, Ars amatoria. Book 3.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lamer, H. 1927. "*Lusoria Tabula*." *RE* 13: 1900-2029.

Miller, P. A. 2004. *Subjecting verses: Latin love elegy and the emergence of the real.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Wagenvoort, H. 1956. "*Ludus Poeticus*." *Studies in Roman Literature, Culture, and Religion.* Leiden. 30-42.