

Ovid's Epigraphic Parroting: Epigraphic Language in *Amores* 2.6

Ovid's work is characterized by innovation, while also reflecting the influence of his literary predecessors and the visual culture of Augustan Rome. Tarrant (2002) has noted parallels between Ovid's "creative synthesis of diverse traditions" and aspects of the Augustan program. The increased epigraphic activity that occurred during the Augustan era (Alföldy 1991, Bodel 2001) heightened the visibility of inscriptions, making them a readily available source for Ovid's literary innovations, and as Ramsby (2007) has observed, he uses the most literary inscriptions of any of the Augustan elegists. In this paper, I argue that in *Amores* 2.6, a poem with a clear literary epitaph and a programmatic emphasis on imitation, Ovid mimics both epigraphic conventions and his literary predecessors, creating a distinct poetic persona.

The imitative nature of Ovid's persona in *Amores* 2.6 has been discussed (Boyd 1987, Hinds 1998). Epigraphic parallels with *Amores* 2.6 have also been identified, including the similarity between Ovid's "raptus es invidia" and CLE 1014 (McKeown 1998), as well as the connections between Ovid's characterization of the parrot and descriptions of virtues detailed on epitaphs (Booth 1991, McKeown 1998). What has not been recognized is that Ovid combines epigraphic and literary conventions in order to characterize the personas of the parrot and the poet as both imitative and unique.

Ovid begins his poem with an epigraphic imitation that emphasizes the link between the parrot and the poet. The opening line of *Amores* 2.6, with its use of the adjective *imitatrix*, resembles Roman occupational inscriptions (such as CIL VI 33370a), which often list an occupational title ending in "-trix" after the name of the commemorated individual. Similarities between the parrot and the poet have been noted (Cahoon 1984, Boyd 1987), and epigraphic

conventions reinforce the correspondence. Since "imitatrix" corresponds with an occupational title, and the parrot corresponds with the poet, the poet is himself an imitator.

Ovid imitates throughout the poem, combining his epigraphic imitations with imitations of Virgil. Ovid's close reading of Virgil has been recognized (O'Hara 1996), and his blending of Virgilian poetry and epigraphic conventions is also clear elsewhere in his work, including in his epitaphs in honor of Dido (*Fast.* 3.549-50, *Her.* 7.195-96). In *Amores* 2.6, Ovid uses language similar to Virgil's literary epitaph of Daphnis (*Ecl.* 5.42-44) and description of Marcellus (*Aen.* 6.860-89). Both Virgil and Ovid use language that parallels conventions of Roman epitaphs (such as CIL VI 19007) that describe the outstanding individual qualities and appearance of the deceased. The parrot, and hence the poet, is exceptional.

Ovid's elegiac and Hellenistic influences are also clear. Ovid characterizes the bird as pleasing to the mistress (*Am.* 2.6.19), and McKeown (1998) notes similar language on epigraphic portrayals of relationships between masters and slaves. This parallel is consistent with Boyd's argument that Corinna is the parrot's elegiac *domina* (1987). In addition, Ovid's reference to the small size of the tombstone (*Am.* 2.6.60) may recall Callimachean and Roman epigraphic language (Booth 1991) as well as Hellenistic pet-epitaphs (Boyd 1987).

In short, Ovid imitates both literary and epigraphic sources in his poem, creating a unique poetic persona that reflects his desire to both imitate his literary predecessors and produce distinctly original poetry. The poet's epigraphic parroting reflects his interest in visual culture, as well as his awareness of the increasing presence of inscriptions in Augustan Rome. Ovid's shaping of his poetic persona also parallels the commemorative purpose and production process of tombstones, which shape, define, and memorialize the identity of the deceased. Through his

epigraphic and literary imitations, the poet projects a distinctly Roman persona, and a distinctly Ovidian one.

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