

The Lady and the Tiger: Generic Play in *Tristia* 1.6

Ovid's third wife is a prominent figure throughout the *Tristia*, as the addressee of seven poems and the subject of long passages in many others. In this paper I argue that 1.6, the first of Ovid's poetic epistles to his wife, makes use of specific generic markers to invite an identification of the woman with the work: just as the elegiac mistress of his earlier work came to represent both a physical and literary *corpus* (Wyke), so too does Ovid's wife ultimately amount to a metaliterary stand-in for Ovid's poetry. What appears to be a straightforward poetic tribute to his wife's loyalty thus becomes a hyper-elegiac exploration of the poet's contradictory feelings about his own earlier work, the *carmen* that came to be an *error*.

Elegiac reminiscences that go beyond the meter are interwoven throughout the poem: it begins with a reference to the Hellenistic elegists Antimachus and Philetas, both identified by the women (Lyde and Bittis respectively) who acted as namesakes to their own works. While such phrasing is conventionally literary, the periphrasis runs counter to the use of names elsewhere in the *Tristia*: Ovid is eager enough to place his own name anywhere and everywhere he can (Oliensis), but his wife, as well as the other addressees of poems, are kept nameless. Here, by contrast, it is the names of the poets that are elided from the text and the women – or the poems – who are allowed to stand forth, suggesting that Ovid has in mind the use of beloved as Muse and inspiration: a literary, as well as literal, addressee. The description of his wife's place among the *sanctas heroidas* (33) calls to mind the elegiac aspects of his own *Heroides* and echoes Ovid's current predicament as a lover far from home. His status as husband, however, and hence his adherence to the morality of Augustan marriage legislation, is emphasized by introducing Livia, somewhat ironically, as “the model of a good wife” (*exemplum coniugis...bonae*, 26).

The poem ends with a return to elegy in the form of a conventional *recusatio*, bemoaning

the fact that Ovid's failing poetic powers in exile fail to do his wife justice, but giving the lie to his 'pose of poetic decline' (Williams) by asserting that she will nonetheless avoid death via his poetry (*carminibus vives tempus in omne meis*, 36). There is a continual tension in the poem between the repeated generic signposts of elegy on the one hand, and the insistence on the poet's – and his wife's – past and present good behavior on the other. The struggle between the two thus reflects Ovid's conflicted attitudes throughout the *Tristia* toward all of his poetry, but particularly his earlier erotic elegy as represented by the *Ars Amatoria* and *Amores*: they are simultaneously a route to eternal life and the cause of his exilic "death."

Works Cited

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