

Why Would Ovid Even Mention the Sabine Women in the *Ars Amatoria*?

Scholars have long discussed the strangeness of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* – which purports to be a didactic poem – but no interpretation has balanced the poem's sincerity with its comedic tone (Ginsberg 1998, 65-67). After reviewing critical approaches to this problem, I suggest my own interpretation: the purpose of the *Ars Amatoria* is to teach its readers how to control Love, both the feeling and the deity. Love is controlled by levity; to demonstrate this principle, Ovid infuses both the form and the content of his poem with levity.

His humorous retellings of classical myths are animated by a levity of form (Watson 1983, 119). To complement this, the content of the myths are cautionary examples of lovers who ignore his teachings; that is, they take Love too seriously. This approach is best exemplified in Ovid's rendition of the Rape of the Sabines: while the story may seem, on its face, to be wholly out of place in a light-hearted jaunt like the *Ars Amatoria*, I will demonstrate that Ovid uses this particular story to prepare the reader to read the rest of his poem properly. Scholars have noted the presence of political satire in this telling, but little attention has been paid to the function of the story in the larger structure of the *Ars* (Wardman 1965, 103; Eidinow 1993, 413). As the first of many extended vignettes in the *Ars*, the story of the Sabines captures the reader's attention, serving as a literary centerpiece that works out the logic of the Ovid's approach to controlling Love. If we can understand what Ovid is doing in this particular story, the rest of Ovid's myths will open up to us - and with them, the true purpose and method of the *Ars Amatoria*.

References

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