Plus est quam quod videatur imago: Magic in the *Heroides*

Many of the female letter-writers in Ovid's *Heroides*, such as Phyllis, Phaedra, and Dido (*Her*. 2, 4, 7), are able to offer aid to their absent or prospective lovers thanks to their positions of influence, but they can do very little for themselves. To change their unsatisfactory situations, the women must rely on their letters to sway the recipients' hearts. However, to gain power over their own lives, some of the women in the fifteen single letters use magic. The difference magic can make is most clearly illustrated in Medea's letter to Jason (*Her*. 12). Thanks to her magic, Medea has been a force in her own life; she did not wait to be saved by Jason from her father's wrath—*she* saved *him*, and was instrumental in retrieving the Golden Fleece. Furthermore, Medea's letter is a warning about what she can and will do to change her own circumstances—and Jason's. Magic is the principal tool that allows her to craft this future for herself.

While Medea is the primary practitioner of magic in the *Heroides*, magic also figures prominently in the letter I focus on here, Laodamia's epistle to Protesilaus (*Her*. 13). Some previous scholars dismiss magical elements of Laodamia's letter as formulaic, superstitious actions and "an extension of her tendency to fantasize" (Jacobson 208). Reeson acknowledges the presence of omens and Laodamia's superstitions, and sees "perhaps a hint at sympathetic magic" (202), while Fulkerson has persuasively argued the prevalence of magic throughout the epistle. I build on Fulkerson's recognition of magic's existence throughout the letter, but—as I agree with Reeson that Laodamia is unwittingly writing after Protesilaus' death (203 and *passim*)—I differ in my interpretation of the reason for its presence, and how Ovid intended for magic to work within the *Heroides*.

Ovid's Laodamia certainly exhibits familiarity with activities suggestively similar to magical practices: she communicates with ghosts (13.102-08) and she describes a history of

attempting to control her husband (13.7, 13, 69-70, 165-66)—who has fled *to* Troy (13.4, 21, 87). Above all, Laodamia has created a wax figurine of Protesilaus (13.152-58). Ovid's audience, having read Hypsipyle's earlier letter, would be reminded of the assumption that wax figurines could be used for revenge or control (*Her.* 6.91-92). I will argue that Laodamia, by using a wax figurine, recalls Hypsipyle's account of Medea's methods of control. The figurine of Protesilaus should therefore not be read merely as a physical replacement for Laodamia's husband. Since her wish has always been for her husband to be safe at her side (13.65-84, 165-66), Laodamia has used this obsessive concern for Protesilaus' well-being, mixed with her desire for her husband, and actually created a wax figurine.

Magic is a tool used by some of Ovid's heroines to try to create futures for themselves. But I will demonstrate that, for Ovid, magic cannot change minds and hearts, only circumstances. Medea could not force Jason to love her; she could only use her magic to benefit Jason, and hope that her actions were enough to gain his love. Likewise, Laodamia could not force her husband to remain safely by her side; she could only keep him perpetually with her after his death.

Bibliography

Fulkerson, Laurel. "(Un)Sympathetic Magic: A Study of *Heroides* 13." *AJPh*, 123.1 (2002): 61-87.

Jacobson, Howard. *Ovid's* Heroides. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974.

Reeson, James. *Ovid* Heroides *11, 13 and 14: A Commentary*. Leiden: Brill, 2001.