Playing with Agency in Ovid's *Ibis*

As a curse-poem addressed to a suggestively unknown enemy (whose identity, or lack thereof, remains a tempting object of discussion: cf. Casali 1997, Krasne 2012, & Williams 1996, among others), the *Ibis* is often kept apart from the rest of Ovid's elegiac corpus. In this paper I argue, however, that both the opening and the closing sections of the poem (ll. 1-16 & 639-44) have been carefully crafted to appeal to an image of Ovid as an author of love elegy specifically: a grammatically passive, apolitical victim of a hostile antagonist. In the *Amores*, Ovid is 'forced' into writing elegy by Cupid, who steals a metrical foot, Corinna, who closes her door, or Elegy, who argues him into submission (*Am.* 1.1, 2.1, and 3.1 respectively). In the *Ibis*, by contrast, it is the deliberately vague misdeeds of his unknown enemy which bring about the genesis of the poem. Ovid's enemy has taken up the role of poetic inspiration earlier held by his mistress: a *scripta avis* in place of the *scripta puella* (Wyke 2002). By portraying his situation in specifically passive, elegiac terms, Ovid is making a deliberate connection between the *Ibis* and his previous elegiac work. Ibis himself, meanwhile, becomes an enemy whose offenses change along with the needs of the text; the only aspect of his character to remain constant is the position as active offender, in contrast to Ovid's defensive (and usually passive) positioning throughout the opening lines.

The *Ibis* ends with a brief, six-line coda that looks in two directions, offering a summation of the poem itself before turning towards other poems to be written in the future; as in the *incipit*, however, the poet himself takes almost no direct grammatical action at all in this conclusion, instead allowing his enemy Ibis the central role. Far from the triumphant *opus exegi* seen in the closing lines of the *Remedia Amoris* (811) and *Metamorphoses* (15.871), the ending of the *Ibis* makes Ovid the grammatical subject only once, with a parenthetical *fateor* (641).

Rather than claiming glory for either himself or his finished poem, Ovid has instead chosen to place his enemy at center stage: he is present in the lines, but tends to remain as more of a passive observer than a participant. Even the poem itself is minimized, with much of the focus in the lines afforded instead to a hypothetical iambic poem to be written at some point in the future: in comparison, the newly-completed *Ibis* is continually presented as somehow lacking. By minimizing the importance of not only himself but his poetry as well, Ovid concludes the poem as he had begun it: with an implicit reminder of his status as a writer of trivialities, and hence the innocence which would argue for his pardon and, ultimately, a return to Rome.

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