

The Ovidian Subject in Lope de Vega's *El Caballero de Olmedo*

Like his contemporary William Shakespeare, Lope de Vega (1562-1635) has occupied a place of canonical sovereignty (Pedraza Jiménez 2008) in the speech community of his language, mirroring and furthering both the nation-building projects of an early modern colonial power and a model of subjecthood whose emergence is often linked to the cultural or epistemic shifts constituting the onslaught of modernity (Foucault 1966). Also like Shakespeare, Lope de Vega was a dramatic poet steeped in classical literature whose precise degree of erudition still inspires debate (Dixon 2008), and in whose theater the text of Ovid does special work bound up with the historical conditions of his dramatic production (Schevill 1913, Nelson 2010). This paper reads the embedded Ovidian intertext in Lope's best known play, *El Caballero de Olmedo* (The Knight of Olmedo), as standing for two issues that haunt early modernity: the unknowable opacity of psychological depth, and the uncanny writtenness of deterministic fate.

The play begins with its protagonist Don Alonso apostrophizing the god of love in a thirty-verse soliloquy: *Amor, no te llame amor / el que no te corresponde, / pues que no hay materia adonde / imprima forma el favor* ("Love, be not called love where you are unrequited; for there no matter is found for (love's) favor to stamp its form on," 1-4). Scholars have recognized that this opening gesture references hylomorphism, the grounding theory of Aristotle's physics that explains all perceptible things as composites of form and matter (Flynn 1990). But the mode of subjecthood that these lines are already beginning to construct is less well understood. The knight's natural philosophy is egregiously, delightfully bad, and Lope's training as a priest would have given him more than enough Thomist scholasticism to say why. Love is, on that tradition's view, neither a composite thing possessing substance nor the actualization of a potentiality but rather an affection, a weakness, of the soul. And the only

reason for talking of love this way, describing it as a substance developing toward its own perfection, is if one happens to be an erotic subject in the painful throes of love, hoping to win love's pity and favor through an extravagant performance of flattering wit.

In other words, the knight's opening speech is enacting a highly particular mode of divided consciousness (Milowicki and Wilson 1995), wheedling petulance, and seductively specious use of rational argument: a mode that specifically evokes the depicted subjectivity of Ovid's female characters in the *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides* as well as that of the male elegiac subjectivity in the *Amores*. The end of the knight's speech explicitizes this Ovidian intertext by reprising the philosophical conceit, clothed this time in a figural system drawn from the first book of the *Metamorphoses*: *pero si tú, ciego dios, / diversas flechas tomaste, / no te alabes que alcanzaste / la vitoria, que perdiste / si de mí solo naciste, / pues imperfeto quedaste* ("but if you, blind god, have taken up contrary arrows, do not boast of achieving the victory you have lost if born only of me, for you have remained unperfected," 25-30). *Diversas flechas* specifically references the gold and leaden *tela...diuersorum operum* ("shafts of contrary effects," Ov. *Met.* 1.468-9) with which Cupid pierces Apollo to punish the god by making him love a nymph who flees him. Love's power is suddenly rendered fully physical, in the logic of the play, and the evocation of Ovid's Apollo recharacterizes the exuberant preciosity of the knight's entire speech as the portrait of an Olympian narcissism threatened with decompensation under the pressure of erotic pain.

Ovidian references highlight a number of dramatic pressure points in this comic tragedy's halting march toward the knight's overdetermined death, as when the first act ends with a comparison of him to "Adonis in his finery" (861), and when his likening of himself as a suitor

to Ovid's Leander swimming the Hellespont is answered with a warning that he in fact *is* another Leander, swimming "another sea" (926), of dangers no less real.

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