

The *Heroides* and the Fight for Authorial Control

The *Heroides* are a rich source for discussions of gender and authorship, the difference between female and male writing, and the power of women over their own histories (and futures) (cf. Spenzou (2003) and Fulkerson (2005)). A classic example of the dynamics of these issues is the story of Acontius and Cydippe. Acontius, by becoming an author, binds Cydippe as she unsuspectingly reads the words of the oath aloud. As Rosenmeyer (1996) aptly puts it, Acontius, “cleverly arranges that *his* words become *her* words.” The result, as she notes, is that Cydippe “functions as an echo of Acontius’ master voice.” Acontius inscribes Cydippe and thus becomes the male author of her future. In this way Cydippe can be seen as a paradigm for all the other heroines of the single epistles: they are similarly “inscribed”, their futures are already foretold. This necessarily raises questions about the ability of these women to control their own stories. In this paper I will argue that by encouraging the reader to participate in the fiction that these letters were written by their respective heroines, Ovid both makes their authorship a part of the tradition, and sets up the illusion that the tradition ultimately depends on that authorship.

Barchiesi’s (1993) discussion of what he calls the “future reflexive”, “when the older tradition enters the new text as a view of the future”, shows how this mode of allusion opens up rich possibilities for irony. This was a favorite tactic of the Hellenistic poets who routinely depicted moments prior to the established literary tradition, as Apollonius does. But there is an important difference between Apollonius’ portrayal of a pre-*Medea* Medea, on her way to becoming Euripides’ Medea, and the effect Ovid achieves in his *Heroides*. As Farrell (1998) reminds us, the letters are presented as written by women, more precisely, by these particular women. Whereas Apollonius writes a third-person narrative, and Theocritus inserts his first-person song as an explanatory story, Ovid’s *Heroides* construct themselves as letters actually

written by these women. Indeed they insist upon it, as the opening couplets of many letters attest. This insistence that the text of *Heroides* 10, say, is what Ariadne wrote to Theseus complicates Barchiesi's allusive dynamic in a unique way. By emphasizing the authorship as they do, the *Heroides* represent themselves as *primary* texts, texts that antedate all "later" treatments. If we accept for a moment, however fanciful the claim may be, that *Heroides* 10 is written by Ariadne, we cease moving from newer to later, from Ovid to Catullus, and instead move from older to newer, from Ariadne to Catullus, not merely in terms of narrative, as with Theocritus and Apollonius, but in terms of literary tradition. Farrell observes that the discrepancy between the *Heroides*' authorial claim and the fact that the poems are written in Latin (implying, as it does, an intermediary translator and perhaps an editor and textual critic) forces us to think about the literary tradition and its transmission. In becoming authors, Ovid's heroines not only deeply engage with this tradition, but attempt to reassert authorship of that tradition. The authors of the *Heroides* consciously write themselves in as the "sources" of their source texts.

I will argue that the numerous allusions to Catullus 64 in Ariadne's letter to Theseus may be read as an attempt to inscribe Catullus' voice in her own primary master text. Ariadne, at the end of her letter, even describes herself as an image in a way that makes her readily transferrable to Catullus' ekphrastic depiction. The emphatic emphasis on Ariadne's authorship encourages us to read in a deviant manner, to read the letter not as allusion to, but as a source for Catullus' "later" poem. In a trick reminiscent of Acontius' use of writing, Ovid's Ariadne cleverly arranges that *her* words become *Catullus'* words. Nor is Ariadne the only author to engage in this trick. Medea, for instance, speaks of her future action as a play she will stage, as Hinds

(1993) and Barchiesi have shown. I will end by noting some places where Ovid treats what his heroines wrote in the *Heroides* precisely as authoritative primary sources for his own poetry.

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