

Laughing at the Boundaries of Genre in Ovid's *Amores*

The opening verses of Ovid's *Amores* reveal the poet's acute sensitivity to the relationship between meter, content, and genre:

arma graui numero uiolentaque bella parabam

edere, materia conueniente modis.

par erat inferior uersus—risisse Cupido

dicitur atque unum surripuisse pedem.

Ovid draws explicit attention to the intersection of metrical form and a poem's subject in v. 2 (*materia conueniente modis*). In the very next verse, the Ovidian poem erupts into laughter (*risisse*). This paper interprets the laughter in the first of Ovid's *Amores* as a genre-specific occurrence that transcends its immediate narrative meaning to direct reader response and relay information about the tone of Ovid's literary project. With an eye on the Ovid in China translation project, I also consider the challenges of translating laughter across cultures when the same behavior may have very different cultural resonances.

Building upon Stephen Harrison's definition of literary genre as "a form which can be identified through a particular generic repertoire of external and internal features" (Harrison 2007: 11), I read laughter in Ovid's *Amores* as one such internal feature. In *Amores* 1.1, Ovid sets expectations of genre and then immediately frustrates them. In so doing, he draws readers' attention to boundaries between genres and establishes new expectations. His poetry will contain occasions of play, of laughter, and, importantly, of generic self-consciousness—an awareness that he is writing at the boundary of genres.

I briefly examine other elegies containing the vocabulary of laughter in Ovid's three-book collection to assert three conclusions: 1) laughter in the *Amores* repeatedly occurs at the seams between books; 2) laughter coincides with moments in the narrative when Ovid refers either to his beginnings as a love poet or to potential departures to other genres; and 3) the characters who most frequently laugh in the *Amores* are those who give their names to the genre—that is to say, the figures Love and Elegy.

Bibliography

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