

Elegiac Voice and Power: An Approach to Studying and Teaching Gender and Agency in Ovid

This project focuses on Ovid's *Amores* and *Metamorphoses* as classroom texts to consider ideas about gender, voice, and agency on an introductory level, more in-depth possibilities, and meta-literary options. Using a selection of excerpts from both to illustrate both female elegiac voices (*Metamorphoses*) and male elegiac voice (*Amores* and *Metamorphoses*), students first focus on speaking voices and situational context. This section tends to lead to observations that many speakers in the *Metamorphoses* are female, and that they often faced some form of powerlessness in a love situation. In contrast, the speaker in the *Amores* is almost exclusively masculine, and he faces more success than failure. Adding themes of love, loss, and change to the discussions allows for more in-depth study of the language and poetry in individual texts, as well as each collection separately. Students often come to the conclusions that in order for women to have some form of voice or power in elegy as in the *Metamorphoses*, they must endure loss, either of their humanity or life. In the more personal *Amores*, the male speaker has both power and voice in the beginning, but gradually loses the power in the relationship as Corinna gains more voice. By the end of the *Amores*, the male speaker has the ability to walk away from elegy, towards greater poetic achievements.

A similar approach used for more advanced study also has potential for leading students to consider gender and agency in elegy {NB-This part remains theoretical; I have not yet had the opportunity to work with advanced students on these texts}. When these two texts are paired together, a more complex version of the gender power dynamics in elegy appears. The *Metamorphoses* collectively give more equal voice to both genders, while the *Amores* focus on the male *desultor amoris* and the gradual rise of Corinna. When named and not an anonymous

girlfriend, the longer the poet and Corinna are together, the more direct their exchanges of words become in Book 1. Corinna does not actually open her mouth and speak her own words in Book 1, but the possibility and potential is set by 1.14. Corinna is a participant and occasional speaker in several poems of Book 2, speaking directly for the first time in 2.18. Her presence as a voice grows until by book 3 Corinna gains significant power over the poet, so much so that in 3.14 her words have more power than her actions. In *Metamorphoses*, the female may have more voice but rarely do they have more agency or power. For example, Iphis must become male in order to achieve happiness in love, Daphne becomes a tree, and even Venus cannot prevent the loss of Adonis. In contrast, Pygmalion only needs pray to Venus to end his elegiac difficulties, Orpheus is reunited with Eurydice after his death, and Jupiter never has cause to suffer in love since he always takes what he wants, and if he loses it later, does not dwell on the loss. While both male and female voices present similar tones in their difficulties, the male voices are presented as those with more agency and success.

Even though the male elegiac speaker claims to have no control and that the usually female object of his desire has it all, Ovid's framing of both *Metamorphoses* and *Amores* reveals the illusion of feminine agency. The consideration of gender and agency in elegiac situations provides another way of viewing Ovid's presentation of himself as a poet. In the *Amores*, the male poet/narrator has all the agency, evident in his beginning and ending the collection with statements of poetic intention. *Amores* 1.1 is the traditional statement of poetic intention and ability, and 3.15 is the confident conclusion that he will achieve eternal fame with his elegiac poetry, even as he moves on. The *Metamorphoses* opens with an epic vision of the history of the world from the beginning until Ovid's present, and concludes with an equally epic statement of how his work will live on no matter what happens after his death. This similarity provides a basis

for comparison between the two works, and emphasizes that the male poetic voice has had all the agency all along.

Bibliography

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