

Ovid's *Heroides* 7 and the Illusion of Authenticity

This paper will explore the way in which Ovid uses and exploits the conventions of the epistolary genre in *Heroides* 7 to challenge the authority of Vergil's account of the same mythic events. The main convention that will be discussed in the paper is the assumed authenticity of the epistolary genre, in which epistolary correspondence is assumed to represent the "authentic thoughts and emotion of the writer" (Lindheim 2003). But as the letters of Cicero, Pliny, and Seneca suggest, the ancient Roman letter is more often used to display a carefully self-constructed version of the author masquerading as the undeniable authentic self. Ovid undermines this assumed authenticity of the genre in the concept of the *Heroides* alone.

Scholars such as Sara Lindheim (2003), Catherine Bolton (2009), and Efrossini Spentzou (2003) have done thorough readings of the *Heroides* concerning gender, genre, or some combination thereof. Lindheim's essays deal generally with how the epistolary form works to create the illusion of presence from necessary absence and specifically how the epistolary form works for women in this regard. Spentzou and Bolton also discuss this same interaction between limited female mobility and the epistolary genre. These sources discuss gender in epistles and specifically in the *Heroides*, but they fail to fully take into account Ovid's purpose in writing in that genre and how the *Heroides* interact with the larger poetic tradition. Conversely, Marilyn Desmond (1993) recognizes the close poetic relationship between Vergil and Ovid concerning *Heroides* 7, but does not comment upon how genre informs this relationship.

This paper will combine these two modes of scholarship to provide a reading of *Heroides* 7 that concerns how the conventions of the epistolary genre interact with the intertextuality between the two authors. Ovid includes obvious narrative and textual allusions to Vergil's

account of Aeneas' departure and Dido's suicide. But there are also several narrative and character differences between the two accounts that compel readers to ask: Which is the true Dido? On the one hand, Vergil has the authority of precedence and the prestige of the epic genre. But on the other hand, Ovid's usage of the epistolary form, having Dido tell her own account in her own voice, complicates this question of narrative authority and authenticity.

Bibliography

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