

Fidissima coniunx? Generic Instability in *Pont.* 1.4

The overt use of names in the *Epistulae ex Ponto* is one aspect that sets it apart from the rest of the exilic poetry: a seemingly simple change which leads to a host of complex renegotiations both inside and outside the text. In this paper I argue that *ex Ponto* 1.4, the first of only two poems in the collection addressed to Ovid's wife, mobilizes *comparanda* from a number of genres (epic, lyric, and of course elegiac poetry) only to subvert them. He eschews a more conventional epistolary opening (leaving the audience ignorant of the letter's addressee for more than three-quarters of the poem's sixty-eight lines), giving the impression of a soliloquy rather than a letter (Gaertner 2005). His focus is the inexorable decline that comes with both winter and old age—but to emphasize rather than bemoan his own lack of interest in (or even ability for) the usual youthful pursuits (*iuueni lusus qui placuere*, 4). The opening lines of 1.4 are therefore something of a cipher, introducing *comparanda* familiar from earlier seasonal poetry (Helzle 2003) only to use them to subvert the audience's expectations.

Much of the rest of the poem is taken up with reminiscences of the epic cycle (Nestor makes an appearance in line 1, and Dawn oversees an imagined reunion between poet and wife reminiscent of the *Odyssey*), as well as an extended comparison with the mythological hero Jason. Ovid uses the captain of the Argo as a visitor to the Black Sea whose journey boasted countless advantages unavailable to Ovid himself, while shying away from any mention of the hero's female companions – a perspective that challenges Ovid's passive depiction of Jason elsewhere (Kenney 2001). This avoidance thus invites the two men's respective relations with women as a subtext in the comparison. There is a continual tension in the poem between a number of generic signposts: the elegiac meter, thematic reminiscences of Latin and Greek lyric, and names and stories familiar from epic all contribute to a sense of desperation mirroring that of

the authorial voice, as the poet reaches out to anyone, and anything, that could help him. The struggle thus reflects Ovid's conflicted attitudes throughout the exilic works toward all of his earlier poetry, but particularly his earlier elegy as represented by the *Ars Amatoria* and *Amores*: they are simultaneously a route to eternal life and the cause of his exilic "death."

Bibliography

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