

Nobis Aspiciuntur Undae: Water and Abandonment in Ovid's Heroides

Water imagery pervades the single letters of Ovid's *Heroides*. Despite the attempts by women in the *Heroides* to follow their lovers across the sea, they are unable to do so because, as Bolton (2009) has argued, the sea in the *Heroides* is a male-dominated space and the women are limited to the land. My paper builds upon Bolton's observations to show that sea imagery in Ovid's *Heroides* goes further by proving that the sea highlights the hero's control over his relationship with the heroine, which then causes the heroine emotional trauma through intense feelings of abandonment and subsequent heartbreak. Moreover, not only does Ovid use the sea to symbolize a means of abandonment, but the sea is also a representation of the hope that a lover will return. The vastness of the sea is a tool used for exploring the trauma of abandonment that many of the women in the *Heroides* feel as they are left behind.

In many letters of the *Heroides*, heroes abandon their beloveds by sailing away from them. This is the case in *Heroides* 2, 5, and 6, which present the stories of Phyllis, Oenone, and Hypsipyle who have been abandoned by their lovers, Demophoon, Paris, and Jason, respectively. Each of these women pays close attention to the sea in the hope that what facilitated her lover's departure will enable his return. The men of *Heroides* 2, 5, and 6, sail away on the sea, and so the sea represents a means of abandonment that results in the emotional trauma of unrequited love for the heroine. Phyllis' fascination with the sea is evident early in *Heroides* 2: *nec vehit Actaeas Sithonis unda rates* ("the Thracian sea does not convey Athenian ships" *Ep.* 2.6). Phyllis reveals how she is anxious that the sea that took Demophoon away will not return him to her. She places prime importance on the sea as the force that keeps her and Demophoon apart. The sea and ship work in tandem to offer a means of escape for him. His departure causes Phyllis to wander the shores and stare into the sea hoping to

see him again: *maesta tamen scopulos fruticosaque litora calco; / quaque patent oculis aequora lata meis* (“Nevertheless, gloomy I tread the ledges and shrubby shores; where the wide seas lie open to my eyes” 2.121-122). Phyllis is gloomy (*maesta*) as she gazes upon the broad sea (*aequora lata*). Since she is unable to cross the sea, she can only hope that Demophoon will return to her.

In *Heroides* 5 Paris also deserts Oenone by sailing away across the sea. Just as Phyllis expects Demophoon to return, Oenone waits for Paris’ return by sea. Oenone discusses Paris’ destruction of their shared pastoral world as he assembles his fleet (5.41-42). When Oenone sees Paris returning, she rushes to a cliff that overlooks the sea: *aspicit immensum moles nativa profundum; / mons fuit: aequoreis illa resistit aquis* (“A natural mass looks upon the boundless sea; it was a mountain: that keeps back the watery waters” 5.61-62). It is from this mountain that Oenone watches Paris return by ship, though the two are not reunited in the way that Oenone hoped. The mountain that keeps the water back demonstrates the physical separation between Oenone and Paris. Moreover, it is from this mountain that Oenone recognizes that Paris has replaced her with Helen, and this marks a climax of her feelings of abandonment.

Although water imagery is less prominent in *Heroides* 6, Hypsipyle is as concerned with the sea as Phyllis and Oenone. She clearly distinguishes between her concerns and Jason’s when he journeys away from her: *terra tibi, nobis aspiciuntur aquae* (“The earth is looked upon by you, the waters by me” 6.68). For Hypsipyle, as for Phyllis and Oenone, the sea functions as a representation of their abandonment. These heroines look to it for hope that they will be reunited with their lovers, but their hope is in vain. The women of the *Heroides* attempt to convince their lovers to return to them, but the imagery of the sea reinforces the power of the male to abandon

the heroine and the emotional trauma that such abandonment causes the heroine to experience. It also suggests the futility of the women's attempts to convince their lover to return.

Bibliography

Bolton, M. Catherine. 2009. "Gendered Spaces in Ovid's *Heroides*." *The Classical World* 102: 273-290.