

Dominae natalis: Playing with Tradition in the Tristia

Even beyond Ovid's overtly mythological oeuvre, figures from mythology tend to appear as exempla in all of his poetic works, and his use of myths in the exile poetry, especially as regards his wife, generally has more than one meaning. In this paper I argue that Ovid's use of Ulysses and Penelope throughout the exile poetry (usually as *exempla* for himself and his wife) is used as a metaliterary commentary on his own earlier work – particularly the erotic elegy that he maintains is the primary reason for his exile. Ovid's Ulysses carries with him not only the negative connotations of centuries of literature reacting to Homer, but Ovid's own portrayals of the character in his earlier works: specifically, a Ulysses whose skill at prevarication, if not outright lying, has served him particularly well in his interactions with the opposite sex.

Tristia 5.5, written on the occasion of his wife's birthday, shows this tension with particular clarity from the very beginning, with the reference to *dominae natalis* in the very first line. While the word can refer merely to one's wife as mistress of the household, it is also used specifically in elegy to refer to another kind of mistress: the *puella* as object of the poet's *servitium amoris*. The word *domina* appears with particular frequency (forty-four times in all) in the *Amores*, usually with reference to Corinna; when the *poeta/amator* refers specifically to a wife rather than a mistress (as in *Am.* 3.13.1), *coniunx* is used instead. There is a continual tension in the poems between the repeated generic signposts of elegy on the one hand, and the insistence on the poet's – and his wife's – past and present good behavior on the other. The struggle between the two thus reflects Ovid's conflicted attitudes throughout the *Tristia* toward all of his poetry, but particularly his earlier erotic elegy as represented by the *Ars Amatoria* and *Amores*. By transforming Corinna, the somewhat risqué *puella docta* of his earlier work, into his

own wife, Ovid is offering the reader a modified form of erotic elegy: one which, like his own earlier work, cannot be taken at face-value.

Bibliography

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