“Ars Sine Arte: Paris as amator in Ovid, Heroides 16”

Scholarship on Ovid’s Heroides agrees upon the influence of the Ars Amatoria, or at least its precepts, on the double-letters in general and on Heroides 16 and 17—the letters between Paris and Helen—in particular. The consensus is that Paris’s attempted seduction of Helen shows him to be a skilled lover who closely and accurately follows the advice of the praeceptor (W. S. Anderson, 1973; E. J. Kenney, 1996; A. Michalopoulos, 2006). Although Ovid asserts that his lover’s handbook is not intended for seducers of married women and that its audience is specifically the Romana iuventus (1.459), frequent references to Paris and Helen in the text, along with the injunction to men (1.437-486) and women (3. 467-498) alike to use letters as a mode of seduction, have understandably encouraged scholars to read the letters against the Ars. While references to the Ars in Paris’ imagined letter to Helen are often quite clear, this paper argues that Paris’ skill in following its advice is far less masterful than current scholarship asserts.

Through a close examination of how Paris applies the praeceptor’s advice in Heroides 16, the paper shows that Ovid complicates the issue by referring overtly to the Ars, while covertly having his hero violate its commands with alarming frequency. After detailing some of Paris’ elegiac missteps, such as his inappropriate method of selecting Helen as the object of his affection and his incorrect use of letters as seduction tools, the discussion focuses on two episodes as related by Paris in Heroides 16 along side their counterparts in the Ars: Paris’ versions first of the impact Helen’s desertion of Menelaus will have, and second of the Banquet scene he witnesses while a guest of Helen and Menelaus. Paris’ misinterpretation of the Ars and misapplication of its precepts in Heroides 16, the paper argues, shows Paris not as a lover skilled in the Art of Love, but rather presents the first male amator of the Heroides’ double-letter collection to be an elegiac speaker who imperfectly understands the rules of his own genre. In presenting such a dubiously effective first hero, Ovid calls into question the nature and propriety of the double-letter seductions, encouraging readers to look beyond the surface parallels between his letters and the Ars and into the larger question of the letters’ persuasive efficacy—or lack thereof.