EPISTOLARY FICTIONS: AUTHORIAL IDENTITY IN HEROIDES 15

1

Heroxides 15. Sappho’s letter to Phao, is an enigma in its present context for many different reasons. What is Sappho doing, heterosexualised, at the end of a string of elegiac epistles written by women plucked straight from myth and each given their fifteen minutes of fame? Despite the mythology that grew up around her, of which Phao was a part, Sappho was a real woman and a real writer, the Greek love poet par excellence, not only that, she was and is a figure who, in her poetic persona at least, is famous for communicating her love for women, not for the local ferryman. This Sappho looks very written, yet as the only heroine-writer, and as the love-poet often cited as Ovid’s influential predecessor, she can represent the culmination and reification of the Heroxides’ illusion of female authorship.

In doing so, Sappho functions as the crucial figure in a collection of poems in which the Ovidian author writes in disguise; in what becomes finally a life or death situation, her poem radically questions the definition and definability of authorship, gender and identity. We are constantly asked, and are prompted to ask: Just how authentic, or how written is Sappho in this self-conscious erotic alignment of His ‘n’ Hers, Roman and Greek love poets? What is it for an Ovidian author conspicuously to write, through and over, the poetess whose work he recommends should be read alongside his own, and whose influence on his own writing and love-affairs he hints at on several occasions?

Thus before we even start reading Her. 15, we face a series of challenging questions: Ovid’s technique of disguising and/or splitting the authorial voice immediately appears to shake his readers’ confidence in their ability to recognise and comprehend authorial intention. In the course of this essay, I will argue that the interrogative thrust of the poem is dependent not only on the use and role of Sappho as a written Ovidian heroine who is also an influential love-poet, but also largely on the frame and site for this bitter-sweet affair, the love-letter.2 More specifically, the uncertainty surrounding the identity

1 E.g., Ars 2.334, Rev. 761, Tristis 2.365. Jacobson even goes so far as to suggest (1974) 281: ‘when Ovid writes in Tristis 2.365, “lebas quid damnat Sappho, nisi amare, possit?” one almost senses that he considers her his female counterpart.’ Lefkowitz comments (1984) 35 that, in the bibliographic tradition, Sappho has a reputation as a teacher: ‘we learn that she had pupils, and therefore a school, according to one commentator (SLG 261A)’, cf. Dover (1978) 174–5.

2 My reading sets itself against critics who maintain the importance of the epistolary form, e.g., Kerney (1970) 380: ‘for all its versatility, Ovid was bound by the essential limitations of the form he had chosen. The epistolary connection in Her. 15 is pretty flimsy,’ or Palmer (1898) xi: ‘The epistles are really soliloquies, the epistolary style being little more than a mere form which gives an apparent reason for these soliloquies being committed to writing at all.’ Critics who make the letter itself crucial to their readings include Henderson (1985) and Canali (1995).
and role of author (and also, we will see, of reader) in Her.15 is foregrounded by a detailed discourse of epistolary seduction in the *Amores* and *Ars amatoria*, where the lover-letter is situated at the core of Ovid's erotics of deception. Via a series of pointed verbal illusions, as well as reflections of themes and scenarios, Sappho's poem negotiates a complex relationship with Ovid's commentary on love-letters in the *Amores* and *Ars*, so that we are almost encouraged to view its challenges as a "test" of knowledge acquired in Ovid's earlier texts, as well as of the educated reader's loyalty to the Ovidian authorial persona, based largely on an ability to recognise its originality. This is an infinitely complex exercise (and the fun or frustration of reading this poem), however, as *Her.15* clearly wants to intertwine Ovid with Sappho, obscuring recognisability as well as singularity (or originality): while on a literal level the poem seems to rehearse Sappho's fictional lure as an elegant seductress, on another Sappho's "failures" are also Ovid's, motivated by an acute awareness of the fragility of his own posthumous reputation and of the complexity of literary influence. *Her.15* stages authorship as a volatile rivalry in which both parties can be seen to betray their mutual dependency. The reader's quandary is always that there is no right side to be on, no winning formula for reading this battle of authorial ego.

My discussion will approach this problem thematically. In sections II and III, I will explore in detail the relationship between *Her.15* and passages which address letter-writing in the *Ars amatoria*, as well as the poem which has long been privileged as crucial for discussions of authorship in *Her.15*, *Amores* 2.18, where Ovid imagines his friend Silanus replying to the heroines' letters. I will be concerned in particular with how Sappho, writing elegy for the first time in an attempt to seduce a man, looks like a reader-pupil of *Ars* 3, reversing her role as educational love poet recommended alongside Ovid in *Ars* 3.331, while at the same time reminding us that Sappho was the "first" love-poet, whose "simplicity" and "originality" Ovid wants to appropriate. In section IV, I will look at the character of Phaon, who is made to appear not only as an artificial construction, but also as a symbol for a conflict of poetic types and influences. Further, I will discuss in detail the scene of Sappho's dream at 125-84, where the rival power of male and female love-poetry to make things real is explored at the site of a battle of personified poetic types (*Elephos* and *Tragedonia*) in *Amores* 3.1. In section V I will be concerned with the thematisation of repetition and difference in this poem and its accompanying textbook, *Ars amatoria*, as a tool for persuasion, education and seduction; here I will explore the various ways in which Ovid uses the themes of repetition to rehearse poetic rivalry and influence, the death and rejuvenation of elegy and elegist, and the effectivness of didactic poetry as a means of ensuring and perpetuating poetic identity. Finally in section VI I will concentrate on the motifs of tears, sailing and drowning as metaphorical articulations of the blurring and liquefying of authorial identity in the poem and of epistolary, and literary communication itself.

My discussion does not attempt to engage with the authenticity debate concerning

---


5 Knox notes (1971) 34 that: Sappho's intertextuality is exactly what makes the letter unusual in its context. As commentators such as de Vries (1885) have always noted, this beginning is also striking for the way it seems to echo (or parody?): Ex Ponto 2.10.1-2, written to Macer, Ovid's (el)erect in the elegiac crisis of *Ars* 2.18 (apud ut illi impressa emendavit, interdictum: I have not been able to make sense of this difficult passage).

6 For a fuller analysis of the relationship between *Her.15* and Tertullian see Hinds (1985).


8 The idea that Sappho's letters are not in theory justified in the context of the *Amores*. A number of recent contributions to the authenticity debate (Sheerr 1990, de Vries 1885, Tarrant 1981, Verdrucc 1985, Murgia 1985, Courtnay 1990, Knox 1995, Grene 1996 and Rosanti 1998) point to the intertextuality of *Her.15* and its relationship with the *Ars amatoria*.

9 Tarrant (1981) 169 notes that: Sappho's letter is not only unusual in its context, but also striking for the way it seems to echo (or parody?): Ex Ponto 2.10.1-2, written to Macer, Ovid's (el)erect in the elegiac crisis of *Ars* 2.18 (apud ut illi impressa emendavit, interdictum: I have not been able to make sense of this difficult passage).

10 For a fuller analysis of the relationship between *Her.15* and Tertullian see Hinds (1985).
practice faking your own handwriting to make it look like someone else’s (discere
consessus multa manus unius figurae), and change the sex of the addressee, writing 'her' when you mean him (illa sit in ususris, qui fuit ile, noitis, 498). Little wonder,
than, that Sappho begins her letter by asking whether we know who she really is.

Ovidian love-letters, Ovidian seduction itself, are predicated on the obfuscation
and confusion of gender and identity, and this is precisely the ambiguity Sappho plays upon
in the opening lines of the poem. Yet the intertextual relationship between Heroides
15 and the Ars amatoria clearly implies that it is not only the authenticity of the letter-
writer which is at stake, but also that of its recipient, its reader; in fact, the two go hand
in hand. Moreover, what Ovid hints at in Ars. 3.498 is not merely the cunning of the
well-trained letter-writer, who can pretend both to be, and be writing to, a man or
woman, but also the indecisiveness germane to letter-writing itself, especially in the
days before Royal Mail. One feature letters have in common with didactic poetry is
that they may be said to model literary communication by addressing someone, thus
making explicit the activity of writing. Yet who that someone will actually be is even
more difficult to determine than in didactic poetry. A letter is sent, via an intermediary,
and in Sappho’s case across an ocean, hopeful but uncertain of its final destination, or
of whom it will be read by en route.

Perhaps the most obvious confirmation of this uncertainty and slippage of addressee
comes in the first letter, which will declare itself one of many sent by Penelope
to Polyphemus. In a phrase which is particularly acute and ironic given the dramatic context
(as Kennedy has successfully shown, this is the eve of the slaying of the suitors, when
Penelope, unaware that her husband is already home, is just about to give herself to one
of her rabbit husbands-in-waiting), she says,

8 In “Sapphicas” history, Augustus bases the entire education of his nephew on the imitation of his hand-
writing: “sepulcro et multis et varias aliquae rectitudines per se penitus discetas, ut nihilque aliud elaboratis
ex mentis ac chlorophengum sumat” (Aug. 44.3), achieving through pedagogy the reproductive role of a navigable prince.
9 Pindar’s discussion (198) which argues for a specific relationship between the Heroes and the Ar
amatoriae sees this problem of the conundrum reader as a continued reflection of Ovid’s writings in the Ars
that letters can be intercepted and fail to reach their intended readers: “shoulde we imagine ourselves as
reading the letters after the gentleness to whom they are addressed? Or in our position more analogous to
that of various others placed at the Ars, who threaten to intercept the letter before it reaches its
destination?” (315).
10 As discussed by Castile (1982) 43: “The letter symbolizes and relays communication while it does not
necessarily embody it.”
11 See Sharrock (1994) 6 et passim: “what is specific in didactic texts is the foregrounding of the act
of reading by the presence of an involved Reader who receives the text’s instruction. Didactic poetry makes
explicit the activity of readers by preparing to teach someone.”
and “unintended” readers in didactic poetry. The Ovidian letter, I suggest, writes into its non-intended
reading a more explicit illegibility, one even to the point whereby, if we follow the logic, an illegible reader
might have no chance of understanding such a subtle and specifically directed text.
13 On the reading of Heroides 1 see Kennedy (1984) and Hendriksen (1986). Castile re-emphasizes the point
(1995c: 505): “Ironic persiflage in the Heroides is formally realized through intertextual interpre-
tation.”

14 Johnson (1980) 114; cf. Jacobson (1974) 5, where he defines Ovidian elegy as “both subjective and
ironic”, adding: “Ovid stands outside the poems while at the same time being part of them.” The
Ars, he continues, is an “imaginary extension of this technique”, the “very form made concrete the
distance between the poet as poet and the poet as lover”. In the Heroides, he says, Ovid “transfers
the subjective element to his heroines”. Instead of reading the character’s mind, “be becomes it”.
The “unconscious subjectivity, tied inevitably to the idea of authenticity, is what Pindar (195, 36)
recognizes when he says: “When we read the Epicure verse epistles, we come near and then upon a passage the
like of which we otherwise mean to write at some point in our life.” Readability is unreadability, a concept
Sappho seeks to impress on his students throughout the Ars (see familiar language to, and says it at 1405); but
he with emphasis the appeal of his own verses, sugary-sweetly approach to instruction, and encourage
the student to have a go themselves, to write as well as read.
15 “Te modo blandius ite legataque tuis / quae voles legati, vetas accipitstrictaque tectis” (Ars. 1.490-1).
16 See Chambers’ discussion (1984) s.a. 13: “seduction goes hand in hand with the understanding or read-
ability of literature.” Sharrock’s analysis (1994) of the Ars amatoriae is often rooted in this idea. Ovid’s
audience is seduced merely by reading his instruction on how to seduce. See especially 62-7, 50-3.
17 “Vulgar poema” sexual disparity about, Sappho is mentioned for her fragment, on which Ovid models
himself, in Ars. 3.3297; he recommends his audience read a long list of authors, including Sappho, adding
its further advertisement, quod omnibus licet? (331).
eyes is the most reprehensible invasion of privacy and consciousness.
Moreover, the cleverest illegal reader is one already schooled by Ovid in epistolar
detective work; at this point (the next "hands-on" stage in the course after _Ars_ 3?), he needs all the help
he can get, for as Altman reminds us, "pushed to its logical extreme, epistolary discourse
would be so relative to its I-You that it would be unintelligible to the "outside"
reader;" Uncertainty and self-consciousness are the price to pay for an educated look
through Ovid's peephole.

So as soon as we start reading Sappho's letter to Phaon, good readers (and pupils) of
Ovid must revise a body of accompanying literature about the tricky construction
and reception of the love-letter, that genre which comes in the _Ars_ to stand for the seductive
tactics of writing, and of Ovid's didactic oeuvre in particular. The problems we encounter, and will
encounter, in reading _Heroides_ 15 (such as, to what extent aurthorial identities fuse, conflict,
or override one another, what kind of readers are we meant to be, are taught to be, or
desire to be, to what extent do we decide the fate of Sappho by reading her? Is the letter to
her, what kind of readers are we if we are seduced by Ovid's Sappho . . .) are stirred up and
programmed by a discourse of desire which stamps letter-writing with a necessary suspicion
and destabilisation of the identity, sex and motives of author and reader. As soon as we start
reading (1–4), our readerly input and prejudices are interrogated; from this point on, the
letter does not allow us to disentangle ourselves from its initial challenge, working to
postpone decisions of authenticity and probing conceptions of what does or might constitute
a genuine Ovid-Sappho. If this is an advanced Ovidian lesson in the trials of seduction, we
are on our own: no instruction, no rules in the direction of 'correct' response, no visible
author-ly figure to speak of. In no other genre, we are reminded, do readers "figure so
prominently within the world of the narrative and in the generation of the text".

III Just like the first time

The Sappho of _Heroides_ 15 is not easy to recognise; she has to ask us in the first lines
(necesse est unde sitere opus?) whether we can identify her from her handwriting.

19 Perry (1986), 130–1. Verdouw (1985) 15 writes: "perhaps the greatest and surely most original achievement
of Ovid's letters is the impression they create of psychological authenticity," cf. Day (1986) 68 on epistemology
in general as authentication. Ferrari (1998) 523–3 reports this in Ars 3 (469–98, 63–69), women
are encouraged to think of letter-writing as dangerously self-revelatory rather than as a 'safe medium for
the depiction of seduction' (522), which is the gist of his advice to men on the same topic in Ars 1.

20 Ovid advises girls, expetere, inquit. viridi, ex irrita collate novit Ifigesta, an in certe sollicitate sibi non sit
(Ars 3.471–7). He even teaches girls to decipher invisible ink (Ars 3.267–8) and to make sure they don't
get confused by letters previously written on the same wax tablets (nesc nati dictis tantum rescribere certe,
I ne teneat gemina una delineo manus, 3.455–6).

22 And yet the cues on which the poet, and the letter itself hangs, is the reader's ability to recognise. See
Altman (1983) 92: "the letter is a pure instrument of revelation and discovery, so that the act of reading
in epistolar fiction often corresponds to the classical moment of recognition (Aristotle: _eureka_)."
23 Judging us both to recall her original self-image as a love-poet in her poems, alongside her
reconstruction and perpetuation as the best love-poet in Ovid's œuvre, and to question our own ability
(as unintended, illegal readers) to recognise and comprehend the dynamics of aurthorial identity and motive
as the prototypes of the love-letter reader. For Altman (1983) 92, the letter is a pure instrument of
 revelations and discovery, so that the act of reading in epistolar fiction often corresponds to the classical moment
 of recognition (Aristotle: _eureka_)."
24 Note that the conflation of genres is marked in Sappho's terminology, or lack of it: _carmina_ is used of
both elegy (line 6) and of lyric (13, 14), as in _opus_ (marked out at the end of lines 3 and 14).
25 Also see Tiuvio (1975) 13 ( _heliconian_); Her. 15 is full of erotic themes and motifs, leading Verdouw (1985)
145 to imagine that the erotic poems were 'ghostwritten' by one of Ovid's hangers.
his roots, and parading poetic influence and intertextuality for all to see, he achieves the apparent antithesis and the impossible — originality.

Going back to beginnings saves elegy by letting us visualise what it is both to learn how to write love-poetry, as a novice (as a woman), and to experience the poetic expression of what is staged as true love, love that causes wars, risks kingdoms, crosses oceans, or lasts a lifetime. Moreover, for an educated audience already schooled by Ovid in epistolary seduction, the heroines' letters are paradigms for the Ovidian love-letter's key feature — well-faked sincerity: Learning how to write a sincere and persuasive love-letter and putting pen to paper (as if) for the first time is what the Heroides entail and show. Through the letters, and through the letters' well-constructed readers, Ovid exacts his role as both originator and teacher, the figure who by definition is always original in his readers/pupils' eyes because he shows and tells them things that are new and unknown. And as we have seen, the epistolary fiction makes emphatic what is or might be foreign and unknown to its unintended reader.

Ovid's Sappho, then, is a paradoxical cocktail of new and old, known and unknown, difference and repetition, originality and tradition, a paradigmatic figure performing the Heroides' core poetic strategy of faked and transubstantiated newness.26 Putting Sappho at the end of the Heroides makes perfect sense in terms of the overall strategy of the collection27 — as a historical figure she necessarily looks more real and more faked here than a literary character, and as a love-poet she functions as a climactic locus for Ovid's problematising discourse of poetic influence, inheritance, competition and reputation, or, simply, of what it is to teach and be taught in the sense of learning, both in order to teach and in the course of teaching itself, and in the sense of having your own lessons re-taught.

As Sappho in Heroides 15 learns to write elegy, as if for the first time, she must become Ovid's pupil, tutored alongside his readers, who are picking up 'tips for first-time writers', whether by negative or positive example. The ultimate power-trip, you might expect, from an author indulging his negated masculinity to save face before his friend and rival Macer (see Am.2.18). Sappho's letter represents the ultimate challenge for the Ovidian ego, an ego which is teaching here by example: how to seduce (male) readers with a Sappho who refers to her past sexual preference for women, and who clearly parts herself down as small, ugly and dishevelled (si mihi difficile formam natura negaret, 31; sine brevis, 33; candida si non sum, 35; laetum collo sparsis sine lege capilli, 73), especially as Ovid has given elaborate lessons on the importance of good looks, hairstyles in particular, and has dismissed women who cry all the time as 'boring' (Ars 3.517) or well and truly conquered (Ars 2.455–62).28

26 On the heroines as a 'paradigm of paradigms' see Brownstein (1985) xx.
27 See Isoult (1996) on the unusuality of the poem's present location at the end of the collection.
28 Ovid's men, on the other hand, rarely get emotional (Ars 3.518), and their letters, faked or real, are a sort of penmanship. A rhetorical trick, e.g. Ars 1.055–60 et incipit poena: lacrimis adhibant noctem ubi in melius sidem, si putes, ille genus.

Yet at the same time, the more we are reminded of Ovid's other works, the more we are also reminded of references to Sappho which highlight the extent of her influence on Ovid.29 The point of the Heroides as we have seen, culminating in the letter-elegy of Sappho, is to anchor Ovidian elegy in its origins while pointing the way towards its continuing and future reputation, a fame fuelled by the labels 'New' and 'Original'.30 Survival (repetition) is directly dependent upon the security and legitimacy afforded by origins, by a site and perspective within a literary tradition. In short, Ovid needs Sappho, and trampling on her ego with a combat boast is a risky business which could turn tragic: it is elegy and Ovidian identity themselves which are at stake in this poem's dramatisation of Sappho's rejection by a man, her blunt, unattractive portrayal, and her progression towards what seems an increasingly likely suicide. Heroides 15 is nothing less than a rehearsal of the death of elegy and an experimental exploration of the instability of posthumous reputation, and of literary loyalty, memory and recognition as defining factors which constitute poetic identity — what is for a writer the vital difference between death and immortality, oblivion and fame.

In the Ars amatoria, Ovid alerts both male and female readers to the fact that letters written on wax tablets can often contain the traces of previous letters, of another voice.31 Ovid's echo is discernible from the very first line of Heroides 15: when Sappho asks whether we recognise her handwriting (even, it is understood, when a later author is trying to parody her by altering her poetic shape), Ovid whispers in the background, 'Will you be able to tell me apart from a fake, will you continue to remember me and preserve my original identity?'. Ovid imagines and challenges us with his own death in the figure of his predecessor, testing our love of the love-poet (Sappho/Ovid) by fictionalising his readers as (his) lovers, as the unintended but intended recipients of this love-letter.

What critics of Heroides 15 have repeatedly failed thus far to make explicit in their readings is that the fates of Sappho (and, hence, of Ovid) in this poem are construed by the epistolary fiction as necessarily determined by this determination is framed as the ultimate challenge for the reader-pupil who has been taught at length how Ovidian letter function in the Ars amatoria and whose knowledge, loyalty and love are now on the line.32 Now the Ovidian instructor is concealed behind a tragic mask, all we (and Ovid) can rely on is our memory, intuition and instinct: the poet-teacher/reader-pupil hierarchy is implicitly revealed as an interactive relationship of mutual academic and emotional dependency. Yet we also know that, however we proceed as readers (who, having

29 See note 1.
30 Compare Braheini (1993) on the paired poems that end the second part of the collection, Her. 20 and 21: here he argues that the Accanite epic, via its reflexive imitation of Callimachus, functions as a 're-narration' or 'a re-narration' of Rome's elegiaque tradition, 'a kind of myth of origins'. 'Ovid's readers are witness to the co-existence of modern love elegy in Rome.'
31 E.g. Ars. 1.385–6. 3.955–6. Farnell, (1988) 311–17 emphasis that traces left in wax represent a far greater risk to women than men. Men merely risk losing their manuscripts without each other, whereas for women the letter can become a 'document of inches' (322).
32 Palmer (1988) xlix may be right when he says that Her. 15 is the only epistle which exhibits real passion.'
read, in Ovid's book, always want to reply)? Ovid, in his 'Metamorphoses,' writes: If you are seduced by Sappho, or at least refuse to rally her name and reputation by participating in even a pany of her death, you've proved yourself loyal to the most famous love-poet of all; you would do the same for Ovid, and you're prepared to prove it. If you let her die, you help Ovid pull the trigger, aiding and abetting his musculine and Romnising one-anship, proving once and for all that Ovid has taken love-poetry to new heights; if Sappho were alive today, you confirm, she'd seen crimes and hopelessly unrefined, and if she and Ovid were competing now, as 'poet-lovers,' side by side, the sophisticated Ovid would have done her up. Sappho may have taught him well, but if only she had known what he knows now...

Verdeschi's reading of *Heroïdes* 15 seems to relish the opportunity to side with Ovid and kill off Sappho, in the hope that the poem comes off as stridently and typically Ovidian: 'Ovid omits nothing in her situation that would reduce her dignity or degrade her infatuation,' she states. The subject of the poem (Sappho) is 'the failure of poetry,' so 'it must be conceded that Ovid's poem is a victory of conscious craft over its subject. It is a shallow victory.' Ovid's all too carnal Sappho, the libertine Sappho of the gossip, the scandal, the legend and the comedies, becomes for him an occasion for the poetic exploration of the conventional notion of necessary 'artistic distance.'

The evidence for Ovid's dismantling of Sappho's reputation is certainly all there for the taking. Attacking a woman by exposing her sexual appetite, navel (stupidity) and bad repute is all too easy, if we take the bait. But while it relies on our level to maintain an illusion of creative distance, the creative thrust of *Heroïdes* 15 is precisely the lack of distance between Ovid and Sappho, the interpretative dilemmas that arise from a complex collision and interdependence of authorial identities. The poem is preoccupied with the subtext with which authorial signatures are approximated and entwined, and with the constructed play-offs of power that arise as a result of that intertexture.

**IV (a) Two-timing and poetic licence**

As I have already outlined, Sappho's change in sexual preference as discussed in *Heroïdes* 15 is to be construed as directly associated with her change of language and poetic shape: the two ideas about Sapphic transformation are clearly juxtaposed in the first few lines of the poem:

- nec mihi, disposita quae iunxam carmina neculis, procerata; vacare carmina mentis opus!
- nec me Pythrides Mæthémyndæsæ quae meliae,
- nec me Lesbiadum cetera turba infanti. (13–16)

Phonic is both the motive and subject for Sappho's elegiac experiment, just as an elegy the poet's modesty, we are meant to remember, has often stretched to declaring his girlfriends as his inspiration, to the extent that they only exist in, and come to represent, his love-poetry. *non hæc Calliopæ, non hæc mĩ bi contat Apollo; in ingeniis nobis ipsa puella factis,* says Propertius in 2.1.3–4, at a point where he has just made plain the radical 'feminine' image of elegy, *vis-à-vis* traditional and many epic narratives: *Queritis, unde mĩ bi scriptam scribantur amores,* and *unde mecum suscitat mollis in ora liber (1–2).* This Propertian topos is used at Her. 15.206 (*ingeniis atriis illæ dat, illæ rapit*), but now it is Phonic who implicitly plays the role of an elegiac *puella,* who (like Sappho's girlfriends) once inspired Sappho's lyric poetry. Thus on one hand, Ovid in *Her. 15* takes the 'feminisation' of elegy to its ultimate conclusion by appropriating Sappho, a woman-loving poetess, to enact his innovative dramatisation of elegy in crisis. On the other, Phonic is now the male motive and subject of elegy who replaces female inspiration: he could be well situated to invigorate the genre, give it the traditional male energy for which Ovid seems to be striving in *Am. 2.18* and which tragedy encourages in *Am. 3.1.*

Yet Phonic is responsible for destroying, as well as replacing, female creative power, as 206 shows. It is because of him that Sappho has lost her poetic talent, as well as her attractiveness (*ille miel cultus unicus auctor abeas, *78; *dolor aridus obstat; *ingeniisque meis subtrittis annis mollis, *195–6). On one level it would seem that Sappho's inability to win over Phonic, to control him, constitutes another obvious sign of her inadequacy as an elegiac poet; getting Phonic back, and regaining her inspiration, amount to the same thing. Or rather could the inevitable outcome be that Ovidian elegy, like Sappho's poetic talent, is dependent on female inspiration to succeed, just as Ovid in turn needs Sappho and is necessarily a product of his literary influences?

A crucial point at which Ovid's readers are challenged to recognise and decipher poetic influences at work in the poem is at 22–5, when Sappho compares Phonic to Apollo and Bacchus, imagining herself in the role of Daphne or Ariadne:

- o facies oculis insidiosa meis!
- surm fidem et phæathom – cries manifestus Apollo;
- accedant capitis cornus – Bacchus eris!
- et Phæbon Daphnem, et Cnosida Bacchusiamunit...

Phonic's looks are such that he can be any god he wants, provided he wears the appropriate costume; looks are everything in a poem concerned with acting character, with the presence and validation of identity. Yet for Ovid's audience this is no superficial, throwaway simile, not least because both Apollo and Bacchus provide the inspiration for writing love-poetry at crucial points in Ovid's œuvre. To characterise

- *The theme is of course also fundamental in Ovid, e.g. *Am. 1.3.10; 3.12.16.
- *Am. 2.1.1–48; *Am. 3.1.15–20, esp. *25 *sine facio similitudine!"*
Phaon as Apollo, Sappho uses the same line ending as Ovid in his introduction of Apollo's role in Ars 2.493: haec ego cum canere, subito manifestus Apollo. Apollo's interruption to give advice is in the context of Ovid's denial of his influence at the beginning of Ars 1.25f. (non ego, Phoebus, datas a se mithin est arte). All this in the face of his allegiance to Apollo in the Amores: at Am. 1.15.35–6, he wishes, mith in fons Apollo iacula Castalia plena ministrans aquis, at Am. 3.8.23 he declares himself ille ego Musarum pasus Phoebique sacerdos, and at Am. 3.12.17f., he indicates that Apollo has directed his entire career. 43 Apollo's advice-alot in Ars 2, which ends in the admonition sic monstr Phoebus: Phoebae parete manuavit, ierist deliac crece est humitatem alvei, is a mini-Arc in itself, as Sharrock describes in her extensive critique of this passage. 44 This intermission does not contradict, but rather confirms Ovid's declaration of independence in Ars 1; Ovid isn't advised by Apollo, he is Apollo. 45 Apollo's mini-Arc looks insignificant (and perhaps clichéd, because obviously repetitive) next to Ovid's magnus opus, yet at the same time Ovid can use Apollo as a vicarious mouthpiece for the expression and legitimation of didactic arrogance and omniscience. Apollo exactly fits the double function of the self-aggrandizing auteur as both the god of poetry and the god of prophecy.

The gods Apollo and Bacchus are paired in Ovid on several occasions: as he gazes at his reflection, Narcissus is compared to Bacchus and Apollo at Met. 3.421; similarly in Am. 1.14.32–3, vain Corinna's hair is said to be worthy of Apollo or Bacchus, before she over styles it (formosius pertire coare - quae vellet Apollo, quae vellet capit Bacchus inesse tuo). In the famous passage at Ars 3.329–48 in which Ovid declares the originality of the Heroides and modestly adds them to his "recomposition," the list also includes Sappho, he ends by saying, "quae Phoebus, vellet ut te, quae numine uatum insigni corum Bacchae, nouemque deae." (347–8). Like Apollo, Bacchus is a poetic sex symbol providing divine sanction for Ovidian authority. In Ars 1.525–6, Bacchus summons his poet, and is introduced as a love-instructor on a par with Ovid (ecce, suum uatum Liber uocet: hic quoque amantes adiuuat, at Ars 1.565–73, Bacchus donates the inspiration and material for a type of written seduction that is couched alongside the love-letter: a dinner-table spread with manzen Bacchus is an ideal site for rapt seduction: the reader is advised to compose sweet nothings on it in wine. As a synonym for wine, Bacchus here exceeds even Apollo in terms of influence, becoming the very ink in which Ovid's pupae are to practise writing their first, clumsy love-poems. As the god of passion, Bacchus ranks alongside Cupid: at Am. 1.2.47–8, Cupid's opening procession is compared to Bacchus' victory in the Ganges, whereas at Am. 1.6.60, Liber and Amor are as fearless as Ovid in pursuit of his mistress (illa pudore uacat, Liber Amoreque men). And crucially, in the last poem of the Amores, 3.15, Bacchus is the energy that drives the poet on to greater things (coepit incipuit thetis graetio Lyceae: 1 palusque est magnus area maior equis, 18–19).

In imagining Phaon, her reader, as Apollo or Bacchus, Sappho seems to be fantasising about being swept off her feet by Ovidian poetic authority. In particular the summoning of Phaon as Apollo by the allusion to Ars 2 seems to turn up Ovid's presence and specifically Roman power as poet, the poet who writes this elegy, and who as didactic authority teaches Sappho how to compose elegy, prompting his loyal audience to take notes. In his role as fate-predicting lover and Ovid's role as vatic and didactic writer overlap in an image which clearly points up Ovid's controlling role as the 'reader' of this letter who writes (back) Sappho's destiny. Moreover, the idea that, in her ignorance, Sappho calls out to be controlled at this point, to be seduced by divine figures who have presided over the writing of Ovidian texts, is made emphatic by her desire to play the role of Daphnis or Ariadne (23), both of whom are erotically pursued against their will. After Bacchus summons Ovid in Ars 1.525, Ovid recommends the god as a paradigmatic lover who burns so fiercely with lust that he frightened Ariadne and forced her to elope with him when she was abandoned by Theseus: impeticiantque sinu (neque enim pugnare ualebas) labuisti; in facili est omnia posse dao (566–7). The story of Apollo and Daphne as told by Ovid in Met. 1 is very similar: there Daphne is Apollo's first love (primum amor, 452) and an unwilling victim of his lust; when she tries to escape, Apollo turns her into a bay tree to root her to the spot and dooms her to accompany the goddesses of Rome in triumphal procession and to guard Augustus' doores (560–5). At this point, it seems, Sappho has never looked so written as, she is made to consolidate Ovid's all-made fantasy of being forcibly seduced by a god, 46 while losing all sense of identity in the welter of allusion to Ovidian narratives.

Ironically, it follows, Sappho's forced and now overtly sexual appropriation in Roman elegy is at the hands of a god—poet famous for his lyre-playing, which is exactly how Sappho has defined her Greek song and talent, now lost (see melis, dispositis quae turgem carmina naves, 1 proveniant, 13–14). Her own poetic talent (her own divine inspiration), it seems, is being used against her. Yet if we only go back to 9–10 we might spot that Sappho's description of her pining for Phaon (aur, ut iniuris ignem exercentibus Eras) lertis accensus mexibus ardet oger) is just how Ovid describes his lust for Daphne in Met. 1.492–5. 47 Sappho still looks Ovidian, yet the balance of power is suddenly not so simple: as well as downtrodden elegiac puella (the written object), Sappho can also stand alongside and even usurp Ovid in the predatory, authorising role of Apollo, the god to whom she plans to dedicate her lyre at 181–4. Just as Sappho presents us with alternative ways of imagining her reader, Phaon, 46
47
48
49
implying that he is so good-looking he could impersonate any god, so Ovid reminds us that this latter always has more than its one, intended reader: its real audience is a highly sophisticated one, whose perspectives on this poem are multiplied by conflicting allusions to the poetic power of both poet and poetess.

(b) A dream come true

The central section of *Heroides* 15 is Sappho's dream, followed by the dream-like episode in which she revisits the wooded groves and caves which were the scene of the couple's lovemaking. After reliving the point of Phain's departure in lines 99-122, she recalls him in her dreams (se somnia nostra reducunt, 123). They kiss (129-30), and she fondles him, saying things that seem almost like the waking truth (aetetiae similitudine urba 1 eloquor, 131-2); so much so, that, in the lines that have shocked generations of scholars, she loses control and has an orgasm:

> ulteriora pudet narrare, sed omnia fiant, et iuuent, et sicce non licet esse mihi. (133-4)

Sappho's dream fosters the epistolary illusion and fantasy of physical presence, to the extent that she can climax from the imagining itself, giving it some certain hold in reality, despite the fact that she cannot finally make the dream come true. Like a female Pygmalion, Sappho has created a characterless, bodiless beauty who nevertheless is almost real, returning her kisses and giving her as much pleasure as if he were alive. Like Pygmalion, Sappho's artistry is defined by a simultaneous control and lack of control, a creativity that is in itself limited: like Pygmalion at Met. 10.270-6, Sappho must rely on Venus (Her. 15.213) to return Phaon to her, to make him real. In reality the creation has left Sappho talentless and robbed of creative power, as she herself sees it: (dolor arbitus obstant, ingeniamque metis subliciti omne malis, 195-6).43

Yet in the context of Ovid's overall scheme, 133-4, which stands out for their X-rated appeal, perform a quite different kind of poetic rectification. It might seem quaint, funny or ironic that Sappho precedes 'one of the most explicitly lubricious lines in the Ovidian corpus'44 with the cautious *ulteriora pudet narrare*. Yet it is funny and ironic because it doesn't fit or really make sense: in other words, it comes from elsewhere, mocking Ovid's false modesty in Ars 3.769 (*ulteriora pudet docuere*),45 when the teacher-poet blushed at the clinical erotic instruction of an ostensibly female audience. The phrase also achieves a similar effect to Am. 1.5.23-6 (singula quid referat: seteare quis

43 This may remind us of another allusion of Sappho's voice in her own words, Cat.51's revision of fr. 31

44 Verducci (1985) 165.

45 Verducci (1985) 165.

46 Also cf. Rem. 339, Fast. 5.532; Met. 14.18.
she obviously has not read Ovid’s instruction booklet, Ars 3, which warned of just such a scenario. She is not even aware, in the context of her role as Procris, of the irony of her final wish at 214 (auro dabit currsum).

Yet Sappho has already alluded to a myth in which Cephalus really did cheat on Procris, not with aura, but with Aurora (hunc ne pro Cephalo roparet, Aurorea, timeanem, 87). Ovid tells this story in Met. 7.694–758, when Cephalus and Procris had been married for two months, Aurora caught sight of Cephalus hunting from Mount Hyamusus (the same place where he was caught whispering sweet nothings to aura in Ars 3), and carries him off. Despite admiring Aurora, Cephalus protests, declaring his love for Procris; Aurora finally lets him go, but curses his marriage. As a punishment, Aurora leads Cephalus to suspect Procris too of infidelity and to seduce her in the guise of a rival; the false infidelity causes the couple to separate briefly, before they are reunited some time later. By juxtaposing pointed allusions to different stories about Cephalus and Procris, both of which centre around the theme of suspected infidelity and misinterpretation, Ovid invests the activity of reading itself with a great deal of power and responsibility, not to mention paranoia. By prompting us to recall the two stories and two adulteresses, aura and Aurora, side by side, we are perhaps even tempted to suspect that Procris in the first case might have been right, that when she heard Cephalus say aura, she really heard was Aurora, cut off by the wind. Our reading ability, and even also our faith in Ovid’s interpretations in Ars 3, is shaken at the very point at which its life-threatening power is also verified: we, like Cephalus, are also in danger of misreading Sappho, sanctifying her death (as a direct result of her interpretative naivety and her inadequacy as a Roman elegist) and practically reading her off that cliff. Thus on the one hand the Procris/Cephalus parallel encourages Ovid’s readers to feel superior; Sappho, like Procris, is made to look unsophisticated and literal-minded, next to her literary readers spotting irony and doubleness at every turn. Yet on the other, the same parallel is a constant reminder of the responsibility of reading (would we want, as literary readers, to make the same tragic error as Cephalus?) and of the possibility that even great readers (maybe even Ovid) can be mistaken.

Romantic rivalry signifies poetic rivalry, and the poetic grove scene also reminds us of Amores 3.3, which shapes the confrontation of poetic types, Elegia and Tragedoia. Her. 15.152 (et nullae dulce queruntur aues) is almost a direct quote from Am. 3.1’s introduction (et laterex omni dulce queruntur aues, 4), defining the parallel as a juxtaposition of singing voices, as well as of genres. A classic example, also, of the difference embodied in repetition: in Ovid’s grove, the birds are singing, in Sappho’s there are silent: only the Daedalean bird (Procris’ cries for her lost love) is just as Sappho too sings of love abandoned (sola uram non alta ple mariae visi laet s eorun. 1 intentius Daedulam alas Iyn. 1 alit. Iyn, Sappho deserta contam amores, 153–5). Amores, of

V Practise what you preach, and if at first you don’t succeed...

The seductive strategy of Sappho’s letter, and the love-letter per se, continually evoking lost (past) presence, demands regressive imaginings: her argument, particularly at the beginning, seeks to establish a present and a future by negating (but in so doing, remembering) the past, from her ex-girlfriends (15–19), singing poetry to Phoön (41–4), their lovemaking (45–50), or her family (61–70). Ovid naturalises the remembrance and repetition of his own poetry through Sappho’s desire to be recalled in her previous poetic personas. Yet the seductive rhetorical strategy of this Ovidian letter is precisely that Ovid’s Sappho is strong between emphasising her beauty and reputation as a lyric poet, and ensuring that she has left all that behind, not least because she no longer loves women (15–20); the more Sappho establishes epistolary presence through the recollection of her past identity and poetry, the more she loses validity and

31 As Leander swims towards another woman’s death in Her. 18, he is accompanied by the song of the hyacinth (79–82), i.e. Cat. 65.1–4 the poet’s successful verse is compared to the nightingale’s song. Sappho also sings of nightingales (fr. 136 LP).

32 We recall 115–16: non agit, quam si acia ple mariae visi laet s eorun. 1 intentius Daedulam alas Iyn. 1 alit. Iyn, Sappho deserta contam amores, 153–5.
credibility as Phoön’s seductress (to work, love-letters must seem sincere), and the more Ovid’s authorising influence is plain to see.

Sappho’s quandary, and the stakes it raises, are spotlighted in 21-40, a crucial passage which I have already discussed in part. Sappho begins with flattery, praising Phoön’s beauty and comparing him to Apollo and then to Bacchus, citing their success in love with Daphne and Ariadne (Curtiata, 25); neither girl knew the lyric mode, she continues, suggesting that perhaps poetic performance is no longer an issue, or justifying her own switch from lyric to elegy. Yet she goes on to stress that, unlike Daphne and Ariadne, she is attractive precisely because (even, only because) of her poetic reputation: at mini Pegaseidae blandissima carmina dicunt; iam canitur tuto nomine in orbis mane. nec plus Alceus, consors patriaque lyraeque, i laudis habit, quomas grandius ille onus (21-30). Again she sells herself in a rather clumsy or negative way; if the idea is that Sappho is more desirable than even Daphne and Ariadne because of her poetic talent, this is scarcely the most convincing way to put it.\(^{53}\) Especially as her argument is written in Latin, elegiac verse, a genre in which she later suggests she has no poetic skill (nunc vellem facundia forem! dolor aribus obstat, 195).

Yet the point is precisely that the superficial logic of this passage is largely irrelevant, or rather that the confusing way it tries to make a point points to a different kind of obfuscation, the hidden trace of previous letters etched in wax. We are to remember that this (Sappho) is Roman elegy, but that it comes from Greek lyric, and is motivated by the image and content of other elegiac poetry. As I have suggested, Sappho’s fantasy of Phoön as Apollo or Bacchus triggers a network of allusions to the composition of Ovidian poetry: in confusing Sappho’s Greek lyric and Latin elegiac identities, this passage now stages an overt clash of poetic voices, all ringing to be heard the loudest. For example, Sappho’s boast iam canitur tuto nomine in orbis mane, followed by her declaration of equality with her great male rival Alceus, is a trope repeated at various places throughout Ovid’s work, most closely in the epithalamion to Ars 2, when Ovid asks his reader-pupils to sing his praises and remember to write ‘Ovid was my maestro’ on any trophies they win (Naso magister erat, 744). In Amor 1.15, a poem about rivalry and criticism addressed to Envy (Liwor edax, 1), Ovid bites back with ambition: mini fama perennis quae sequitur, in tuto semper at orbis conar (6-7). The poet’s ultimate goal -- to achieve immortality with a household name -- is repeated in the majority of Ovid’s extant works.\(^{54}\) Ovid’s signature is written all over Sappho’s allusion to her reputation, reminding the reader who looks back that Sappho (qua poet) is just a name (nomina, 3; mensuram nominis ipsa fert, 34), and that, as the first few lines of the poem show, it is readers’ recognition which determines and directs poetic identity. In this letter it is Sappho whom we read (nati legitores, 3) and Ovid who sings out (canitur), relishing

the reality of this silent, written letter’s public declaration, alongside the reader-lover, who can always betray the letter’s privacy by reading it out loud.

In 51ff., poetic rivalry is given a different edge. Phoön, who embodies the beauty Sappho has lost with her lyric poetry, has his eye on the girls of Sicily. She wishes she were Sicilian (Steevis esse solis, 52), and addresses her rivals directly:

\[\textit{ vos eos eromen tellure remittite uestra.} \\
\textit{Ninidies materes Nissadesque nurus,} \\
\textit{ nec vos decipiant blandae mendacia lingus!} \\
\textit{qua dicti ubis, dixist an ubi.} \]  
(53-6)

Line 55, which mirrors Am. 2.9.43–5 (nec modo decipient suoces fallacis amicae) hints that Sappho could still be talking to female lovers just as Ovid addresses his girlfriend, as well as figuring the repetition of a deceptive Ovidian voice over and above Sappho’s. In line 56, it appears that Sappho has been taking Ovid’s textbook advice to heart; he warned his ostensibly female audience about believing handsome young men in Ars 3.4.35, saying, \textit{nec suos dixist, dixist remilles puellas.} Sappho, like the slave-girl employed as post-mistress, is made to pass on Ovid’s lessons, fulfilling a truly heterosexaul role as a reproductive woman and crocodile intermediary for male creative power. Yet the role of Sappho as mother (and, it must follow, as good parent and good teacher) in the poem stirs up considerable tension which problematises facile characterisations of Sappho as passive copy and copyist; in sharp contrast to her feelings for Cleis in fr. 132, L.P.\(^{55}\) Sappho has already described her in lines 69-70 as an unwelcome burden.\(^{56}\)

Sappho’s repetition of Ovid’s precepts, as well as enforcing Ovidian identity and Ovid’s desire to be remembered, enacts precisely that which the women who remember him should guard against: inauthentic repetition of the same old seduction technique. On the one hand, what we see here is a blunt reaffirmation of the effectiveness of Ovidian didacticism, of the recognisability of Ovidian poetry and hence identity: we want to hear his words again and again, because he makes learning fun, even to the point of making the repetition involved in making emblematic the compulsion with which loyal readers want to re-read his other works. On the other, Sappho’s disappointed reminder of Ovid’s rhetoric of seduction could sound like a monotonous recollection of the dilemma which apparently motivates the Heroides in Amor 2.18, where Ovid feels caught in the snare of his own teaching (procepsit urger epist meli, 20). Is this clichéd, repetitive elegy, a dull over-extension of a genre which had ‘lost its original

\(^{53}\) Knox limits it at much the same thing when he notes that the argument here is ‘emotional, not logical’ (1995) 285.

\(^{54}\) E.g. Rom. 363, Met. 15.871–9, Tr. 2.118.

\(^{55}\) Here Sappho says that she would give up everything for Cleis, who as Leftkowitz writes (1981, 63), was understood by biographers to be her daughter (POxy. 1800.1–4). Knox (1995) 203 finds ‘no evidence’ why Sappho should suddenly regard her daughter as a burden. I suggest that, regardless of missing information, we might see this relationship within the context of the poet’s problematic dichotomy of literary reproduction, of the complex ties between parent and child, writer and reader, teacher and pupil.

\(^{56}\) at temperam iatrem, quae me sine fine fatigant, iterumque cumue finis parva mais.
plaintive purpose and meaning, as one critic has accused.97 If all Ovid’s pupils predictably do as they are told, is there room or need for the performance of authority and expertise, is there anything left to teach the pupil who knows all there is to know from the man who knows? We can always turn to Sappho to save Ovid’s face (the only way to save face in this poem is to take sides); her predictability might provoke histrions for the celebration of elegy’s perfection at the hands of the love-poetess’s failure to master its tricks. Elegy might look easy, a mass of clichés even a woman could churn out, but students who take the initiative might well end up looking like girls. Especially alongside a teacher whose masculinity is repeatedly affirmed even when he is performing as women in what (in a woman’s hands) is the most womanly of literary habits – rhetoric, confessional, silent, love-letter.

And similarly line 80, when Sappho tells Phaon of her undying love: et semper causae est, cur ego semper amem is a direct quote from Amores 1.3.2 (aunt amant et faciunt, cur ego semper amem), the poem which initiates the love-affair with Corinna, only two lines after Sappho had addressed Phaon as her “author” (unicus auctor, 78). The phrase at Am. 1.3.2 is cunningly repeated by Ovid at Am. 2.4.10 in a line that is even closer to Sappho’s at 80 (centum sunt causae, cur ego semper amem); double standards dictate that in Sappho’s writing, the kind of gigolo bravado displayed by Ovid in Am. 2.4 (he’s attracted to hundreds of girls, and isn’t funny), looks best embarrassing and casts a dubious light on Sappho’s previous declaration that Phaon is the only one for her (ille mei unicus auctor abe, 78). As Sappho in the next couplet muses about her character traits spun out by the sisters of fate (81–2), she repeats Ovid’s wish in Am. 1.3.17–18 that his love for Corinna may be fated (secedam, quos derederat annos mihi filae sororem, iuxure contingitque olim dolente mori). Line 96 of Her. 15 (non est amor, amorem ut agmen) also echoes Am. 1.3.3 (a, nimium nulli – tamen patiatur amare).

Sappho, like Corinna, is offered up as materiam felicem (Am. 1.3.19) for Ovid’s letter, which will ensure that their names will be joined like lovers in poetry (nos quoque per totum partem contaminari orbes, iuvenique semper erant nominis nostrae taut, Am. 1.3.25–6).

Again, Ovid returns to a beginning, here to the start of his poetic love-affair with Corinna in Amores 1.3, in order to retool and rejuvenate elegy, and to idealise his rivalry with and dependence on Sappho as a love-affair in its most naive, intoxicated and original stage. Yet, as Phaon is Sappho’s auctor, so her author, Ovid, is her lover, the solicitous sender and recipient of her letter who has left her for other women, achieving Varro’s poetic distance in the most crude way possible. Sappho’s fate is in Ovid’s hands, it always has been; the question, as ever, is what are her readers (and the letter always has other readers, other rivals), going to do about it? This is perhaps when know-all pupils get a chance to make their claim on the role and authority of teacher.

97 Verdilecch (1985) 150.

VI (a) The crying game

In Heroides 15, tears both define and constitute elegy. They are the central motivating factor for Sappho’s altered shape and mode of emotional expression in lines 7–8 (iunctas amor meus est – elegiae fidelis carmen, non facta ad lacrimas barbitos alta mentis) and come to define the new Sappho in sharp contrast to her old fiery image as described famously in Horace and Plutarch, as well as by Sappho herself.99 In Ovid’s formula here, tears are to elegy what flames are to lyric. We are reminded of how tears come to characterise elegy in Am. 3.9, when Ovid uses a similar phrase to the one Sappho adopts (fidelis Elegiae, 3) to comment on another crucial poetic relationship, with Tibullus, the poet who (like the old, fiery Sappho) now lives burning on his high funeral pyre (arides in excusco, corpus iuvene, rago, 6). Sappho in tears marks the death of one poetic shape and image and the appropriation of a new genre.60 Yet as I have suggested throughout, Her.15’s theme of learning how to write elegy, and more specifically elegiac love-letters, for the first time, continually refers us back to Ovid’s handbook on the topic, the Ars amatoria: we cannot forget that in the Ars, tears function as a rhetorical device in a campaign of seduction and are to be faked if necessary at critical moments to manipulate, persuade or distract.61 While signifying the reality and sincerity of Sappho’s grief, tears also retrace an Ovidian rhetoric of seduction and instruction based on the faking and disguise of emotions and identity. It is only when Sappho is finally expressed in elegant-letter-writing that she really begins to emerge as elegist, in tear:

scribimus, et lacrimis oculi ruminabant abebris;
adsipisc, quam sit in hoc multa litera loco! (97–8)

Sappho proceeds to recount the time she last saw Phaon (99–116); at first she could neither cry nor express herself (nece mei fiere diu, nec potuisse loqui, 110), suggesting that tears amount to a kind of speech or writing.62 Like Hinds, we might wonder at what point the literae in 98 become literae, and are reminded that literae is also used to mean the smearing of a wax tablet to erase (present or past) inscriptions.63 When grief

98 See Horace, Odes 4.9.10–12, Plutarch, Amast.18 (here Sappho is compared to the fire-spitting son of Herophilus).
99 E.g. fr. 48 L.P.
60 Tears are emphatically a visual pun; this letter must be looked at to be seen as real, just as men must see their eyes to seek out (and seek to penetrate) a woman: quoserenda est oculis opta puella usque (Ars 1.46).
61 Ars 1.459–62.
62 As they do throughout the first fifteen, Heroides: see e.g. 3.3–4; 5.72; 8.107–9; 14.6–8. As they write, the Heerens tell us that tears are filling onto the page and mingling with their words.
63 See Hinds (1985) 30 n.12. For instances where literae means 'cautious' or 'editorial correction', see Carneiae, apud Ciceronianum Fam. 5.7.1; Horace, AP 293; Seneca, Dial.7.8.2, Ovid uses it in this sense himself at Farn. 2.4.18, 4.1.14, 4.12.20.
surfaces, Sappho remembers how she cried out, tore her hair and bared her breast just like a mother carrying her son’s corpse to the funeral pyre. Yet line 116 (portet ad exactissim corps unane rogos) mirrors exactly the description of the death of Tibullus in that tearful elegy, Amores 3.9 (ardet in exactissim corpore, unane rogo, 6); the possibility for ridicule and cheap jokes is all here of course—Sappho is old enough to be Phoën’s mother in Ovid, whereas in her own poetry she was heard to swear ‘I would never share my bed with a younger man’ (fr. 121 L.P.). But through the tears, and via the signposted allusion to Amores 3.9, we get more than a glimpse of true Sapphic ardour, the fire that fuels Ovid’s hero, Tibullus, and makes Sappho the mother of all elegiac poets. Sappho may be blushed and watered down in elegy, on paper, but there is no hiding Ovid’s powerful metaphors of literary influence and inheritance. Yet, as we have seen, Sappho’s strange disregard for her daughter Cleis in this poem, hinted at again here in Charismat’s snipe (quid dolet haec? certo filia audat, 120) pushes the point that this author also wants to privilege a paternal narrative which focuses on male authoritative power versus the inherent passivity of female creativity and reproduction.

At least that’s what one reader says. How difficult it is (in the epistolary fantasy) to read a text which describes its own illegibility (quae sit in hoc multa linia loco?): Tean epitomise the enigmatic paradox of the love-letter: they cultivate sincerity and intelligibility, foster presence (lover sends beloved a bit of herself), yet they can also leak contained, obscure and obscure, make the letter (literally and metaphorically) difficult to read. Ovid, who has both tears in his literary tool-box for some time, makes his readers highly aware of this tension, which further emphasises their role as unintended readers suspicious of their tendency to misunderstand, or be deceived. What we see may not be what we get in a genre particular about making us visualise a poet’s image and look at what is emphatically written (profinitus est oculis cognita nostra tuis? 2). This poem-letter continues images the liquidity (or superfluidity) of authorial identity, and signposts the possibility of its own distortion in the process of transmission, figuring its own predicted reception as a misreading.

(b) Sink or swim

When, in her poetic groove, Sappho finally gives way to floods of tears, this is also, in the same breath, the near-death she cannot not just to writing but to being elegy, in the tradition, of course, of elegy’s material girls: hic ego cum luxos possessam flebilis artis (161). Artis are far too close to artes (or artis) in a blurred text reflecting on the fake sincerity or physicality of elegy as a flebilis artis, and on the love-letter’s pretence and fantasy of coporeality (letters in Ovid come strapped to and written on limbs). Sappho is both the weeping woman (the weeping poem/letter) and the weeping poet, mourning her lonely position as both writing subject and written object.

Does she need help? This is always the question in a love-letter which pleads, moves and addresses. As if by magic, in line 162, a Naiad appears to assist her: consilia ante oculos Naias una mettis. The handmaid of Venus interjects to repeat her mistress’ entrance in Ars 3 (et ante oculos constat tue mettas, 3.44), just in time to help Ovid out with his female students, who like Ariadne (35), Phylis (38) and Dido (40) (all Heroïdes) could have done with his advice a long time ago. The scene that follows line 162 also echoes the epiphany of Aphrodite in fr. 2 L.P.6 Yet again Sappho is like Ovid, praying to and being advised by Venus; her primary influence on Ovidian epiphany is clear to see, while at the same time she is a teacher-turned-pupil, learning and showing what it is to write elegy for the first time, and looking not only to Venus but to both for help.

The Naiad’s advice is for Sappho to jump off a cliff into the sea to extinguish her ‘unrequited fires’ (ignisus aequas, 163), suggesting again that to water down Sapphic ardour risks killing the poet, something the flebilis Elegiae in Tibullus’ funeral in Am. 3.9 will always recall. Taking the plunge, it is later revealed, will indeed kill off the poetess, if not the person, Sappho: the only way for her poetic powers to return to her is with Phoën—without him, they are lost, and suicide is the only option (esse quoque vetuerit ille dat, ille repa, 205–6). Sappho’s fate is truly in the hands of the letter-reader.

Cur tener Acis uxor miseram me mittis ad oras? she asks in 185. Cruelly, Sappho must jump from Actium, home and sanctuary of Apollo (Phoebus ab eis accipit ... aspiciit, 165), the fantasy-figure in whom she saw Phoën in 24, but to whom she also connects her identity as lyric poet. If she goes ahead with it, she’ll give Apollo her chelys, inscribed with a little verse (183–4) to mark their poetic partnership as fellow lyricists. Is this a final plea to readers faced with the responsibility of Sappho’s poetic demise (si moriar, iterum mori aut habere meae, 190), particularly when that death is to be staged at the site of Augustus’ founding victory at Actium? Sappho’s transmission from Lesbos to Actium looks so seamed in the power of imperial imagery that Ovidian insertion could easily fire off. Augusian values, the same imperialistic subtext that plagues Ovid in his elegiac crisis at Am. 2.18, are dramatised and reaffirmed here while they are implicitly challenged both by the interrogative structure of the letter itself, with its direct intent and addresser (cur me mittis?) and by the double poetic identity of Apollo, appropriated as Sapphic lyricist and Roman Ovidian muse par excellence.

So how to reply? Sappho is on the look-out for a ship to come to her rescue (qui mea

---

64 In Ars 3.621–6 Ovid tells female readers to deceive guests by using a girl-accommodating essay letter: first try tucking messages into her shoe, strap them to her calf, or slip them between her limbs and her feet. If these tricks fail, use your collaborator as a postage stamp and send a letter on her back. See Eger (1983) 52 for discussion of the letter as a ‘flesh’ insinuating in for absent bodies.

65 Sappho calls to Aphrodite from her original poetic grove, which blooms with roses and runs with sacred streams.
VICKY RIMELL

neha ferunt, sestem tua velit referreus, 209), not a letter, which will confirm rejection
(boc sollem intremae crudelis epistula dicit, 219). The hope is that epistolary commu-
nication will continue in a sea-voyage, a fantasy which approximates dura and sale in
line 209. In a poem which has consistently alluded to the Ars amatoria, and in particular
to its advice on epistolary seduction, the idea of a letter or poem as a ship is easily
recognized. In the Ars, Ovid constantly describes his poetic progress and direction in
terms of a sea-voyage en route to port: in Ars 1, the ship-poem pauses at anchor
(711–2), just as Sappho demands (nove rateant 213, 214); Ars 2 begins with a warning
to Ovid's student that his ship is still far from its destination (9–10), and later (337–8)
that after one success with a girl he should not get carried away and let his sals catch
the wind. It is sailing that makes a girl burn with desire (semae suis aereus iubata datis,
3, 254); Ars 2 combines with Ovid's advice on how to reach simultaneous orgasm,
imagined as a tricky ship-race (725–7), while Ars 3 pauses in a still harbour (99–100)
before spreading its sails (499–500) and finally steering the weary poem-veiled to
top (747–8).

Thus the interrogation of the reader, especially dramatic at the end of the poem, is
framed by Ovid's didactic instruction in the Ars amatoria; what is explicitly stated
here is an examination of the student schooled in the metaphors of Ovidian seduction.
It is Sappho who sets the questions, yet at the same time her immersion in the poet's
metaphor (in an overflow of jubilis elegia) and her positioning at a remove from the
poetic vehicle, driven by Cupid (215), by Ovid, or by Phoas the ferryman, dramatically
illustrates her submission as written object. What is clear also, is that the reader too,
qualified in Ars amatoria, has his hands on the helm. Ovid's ultimate power in Heroides
15, we might say, is that afforded by the author's exclamatory self-distancing from the
seat of power in a letter which addresses its reader as privileged interlocutor and adjuc-
dicator of authoritative fate.

Yet there is a sense in which the poem's cliffhanger predicts an end that has already
happened before the reader begins. To reply to this letter, to read it, reframes Sabine's
critical responses to the heroines in Amores 2.18: dat uinum Phebo Lesis amatus lyrum (34),
the very thing that Sappho in Her. 15 promises to do if her love is not required, a
betrayal which she finally imagines arriving in a letter (crudelis epistula, 219). Has the reader's
reply already been written, just as the letter always foresees (fantasises) a reader and a
response which motivates its composition? The meaning of Sappho giving her lyric to
Apollo now takes on a new ambiguity: does Am. 2.18 make sense, is it saying what it thinks
it's saying, or are we reading this correctly? Harvey in her essay concludes that Sappho's
predicted jump is a 'neutralisation of the threat that Sappho's reputation represents,' yet
the point is precisely the opposite: reputation, the recontextualisation of these author's previous
work, is exactly what disrupts and poisons the ending of this poem, drawing the reader back
to recontextualise its origins and leave us with the guilty taste of misreading, ofhaving missed.
The point of contention, as it was at the beginning, is the figure of Apollo, the god appreciated as Sappho and Ovid's muse who has now become the quintessen-
tial emblem of poetic rivalry.

VII Conclusion

Heroides 15, it has long been clear, accumulates a series of questions and problems
about poetic influence and intent, staging a power-struggle between Ovid and Sappho
whose poetic voices wrestle for visibility in a valiant hierarchy. Critics inevitably
take sides, if not as vehemently as Vendramin, or as decisively as Knox, then as subtly
as Harvey, who postpones Sappho's fate until the final countdown. However, I have
argued that the Ovidian author has already written a complex and predicted self-criti-
cope into his apparently macho campaign, warning readers against rash judgement and
preference even as he tempers and forecasts it. Critics have continually underestimated
the role of the letter's dialogic structure in foregrounding the complexity and risk
involved in reading this poem. Ovid manipulates the letter's dialogic relationship with
didactic poetry, a genre which also addresses a reader with a view to a reply, to imagine
interactivity as a literary theme and the role of the reader in constructing and
determining authorial identity. There is no Ovid without Sappho, this is the reader
must learn: Ovidian self-invention is staged alongside and through Sappho's original
didacticism. Ovid looks back at Tibullus in Amores 3.9 and forward to the writing of
his own posthumous reputation when he beseeches us to read and imagine the death of an
author. Yet as critics' responses have hinted, this is a risky strategy which may
rely too much on the loyalty and memory of reader-pupils eager to please and comply.
This is the surprise of Her. 15, and its originality, as it establishes ends in beginnings
and vice versa: that there are real feelings, real vulnerabilities exposed here, if only
artificially, reminding us that there must always be an element of risk, unpredictability and
loss of control in Ovidian rhetoric, if the author is ever to survive.

KING'S COLLEGE, LONDON

VICKY RIMELL

47 Seafaring, as Giovanni Greco (1998) wrote recently, plays a key role in the 'mucho metaphor systems'
of Ovid and later writers. Writers in the Ovidian tradition can suggest an entire context by referring to
provinces slipping into narrow bays or wrenched and splitting their cargo on barren shores, etc. al lbus.
48 sed permere ut dominum vetitu manet busa i desere, nec carmis venen illa nau, l od memos perpetuen
timat.
49 The meaning of fate itself (fata) in line 220 is not clear, as Knox (1998) 315 notes: does it mean 'death'
or just 'destiny'?
50 This line in Am. 2.18 is usually translated to infer that Sappho's love was required, e.g. Rosell (1996). 11–12
she might, but this doesn't make sense in Her. 15, whether it is a warning trick by Ovid, again
proving that Sappho is 'the odd one out', or whether it is the scrupulous departure of an author copying
Ovid while holding all the time at his revisionist strategy. Knox's recognition of the problem (1995, 305)
concludes that the discrepancy can only point to inauthenticity, taking an excuse of the idea that it may
have been intended in a letter concerned with the confusion and disruption caused by re-writing and re-
writing a poem. Our reading of the end of the poem can only be marred by the work of critics
(Vendramin, Barcham, Casazza who have drawn attention to the stakes and tension motivated by the
poems' constant evocation of parallel masculine and feminine, of their own masculinity.
51 Harvey, in Greene (1996) 42.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aitken, J.G. 1983 Epistolarity: approaches to a form. (Columbus, Ohio).


Barbieri, A. 1988 'Narratività e convinzioni nella Heroides', MD 19: 83-90

1992 'Ovidii Metamorphidarum Heroides i-7' (Oxford).


Cassid, S. 1995 P.Ovidii Nasonis Heroidæm Epistolas I-7 De Amoris Heroidæ (Florence).


Carle, T. 1983 Clarice's epiphany: mapping and disavowal in Richardsons 'Clarissa' (London and Baltimore).

Charlton, R. 1984 Sirens and isles: narrative seduction and the power of fiction (Minneapolis).


du Velt, E. 1985 Epistolas Oscii ad Phoemone (Leiden).


Findlen, P. 1975 Ovid, a woman between two worlds (Berkeley, Los Angeles).


Glasgow, M. 1979 Writing sex: myths and self-presentation in ancient Rome (Penang).


Hayes, J. 1996 'Sacralizing Sappho, or the Lesbian Muses' in Garmon (ed.).


Mervyn, J. 1989 The women and the lyre: women writers in classical Greece (Bristol).


Tannen, J.R. 1981 'The authenticity of the letter from Sappho to Phoemus (Heroides XV)', HSCP 85: 133-53.


Wilson, A.P. 1985 Ovid recoupled (Cambridge).

Wyke, M. 1987 'Writing women: Propertius' scripta puella'. JRS 77: 47-64.