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ELEGIAC METER AND OVIDIAN STYLE

Ovid's meter of choice is the **elegiac couplet**, the form in which (apart from the epic *Metamorphoses* and several lost works) all of his poetry took shape. (For a general introduction to Latin meter and an overview of the elegiac couplet, see AG #607–616d.) The basic elements of the elegiac couplet are the **dactyl** (one long syllable followed by two short syllables, $\text{—} \text{˘} \text{˘}$), the **spondee** (two long syllables in a row, $\text{—} \text{—}$), and the **foot** (a measure of metrical length; in elegiac couplets every foot is either a dactyl or a spondee). Every elegiac couplet is formed of one **dactylic hexameter** followed by one **pentameter**. The dactylic hexameter (Greek for 'six-measure') contains six feet, of which the first four may each be either a dactyl or a spondee but the last two must be a dactyl followed by a spondee. Exceptions to this rule are very rare and nearly always involve ornate Greek names; in all three books of the *Ars* only one line includes a fifth-foot spondee (3.147):

hānc plācēt ōrnārī tēstūdīnē Cŷllēnāēā

The pentameter (Greek for 'five-measure') does not in fact have five full feet but two half-lines of two and a half feet each. Like the first four feet of the hexameter, the two full feet in the first half of the pentameter may each be either dactylic or spondaic, but the second half of the pentameter is always dactylic ($\text{—} \text{˘} \text{˘} \text{—} \text{˘} \text{˘} \text{—}$) and very nearly always (and without exception in the *Ars*) ending in a two-syllable word.

Both the hexameter and the pentameter have a central **caesura**, a 'cutting' of a foot by breaking it up into two or more words. In the hexameter, this caesura nearly always (and without exception in all three books of the *Ars*) comes within the third foot, usually after the first long syllable, as in line 5:

nōn ērāt ārmātīs ∼ āēquūm cōncūrrērē nūdās

Occasionally (in the *Ars*, fewer than one in ten) the caesura occurs after the first short syllable of a dactyl, as in line 39:

ēt fāmām piētātīs ∼ hābēt, tāmēn hōspēs ēt ēnsēm

(Note that both of these examples also show a caesura in the fourth foot of the line. This tendency in the hexameter becomes a law in the pentameter, where a caesura always appears after the first two and a half dactylic feet.)

One of the primary benefits of such third-foot caesuras is their creation of a lively contrast between rhythmic pulse and verbal stress. Two short syllables are metrically

equal to one long syllable, so a dactyl and a spondee take up the same amount of time; the six feet of the hexameter then provide a constant rhythmic pattern, with an emphasis on the first long syllable of each foot like a downbeat in a bar of music. A different pattern, however, arises from the syllabic accents of the words themselves (for the rules of syllabic word stress, see AG #12), and the shifting contrast between these two patterns is fundamental to the elegiac couplet's engaging sound. (English iambic pentameters rely on the same effect. *Hów do I lóve thee? Lét me cóunt the wáys* generally lines up its accented syllables with the stress at the end of each iambic foot, but the verbal emphasis on *how*, working against the rhythmic emphasis on the following *do*, draws our attention to that first word and allows it to become the organizing idea of an entire sonnet.) The stylistic tendencies of the Roman elegiac poets (such as the avoidance of a single monosyllable before the third-foot caesura; the only exception in *Ars* 3 is *258 est illis sua dos*) ensure that every hexameter and pentameter includes feet in which these two patterns agree and feet in which they diverge. In the hexameter the third foot nearly always provides contrast between verbal accent and metrical emphasis; in both the fifth and the sixth feet these two rhythms nearly always align. The elegiac pentameter shows a similar blend of overlap and divergence, especially at the end of the line. The two-syllable word at the end of every pentameter is never preceded by a monosyllable, and hence the final full foot of the line always includes two different accented syllables, one on the rhythmic downbeat at the start of the foot (10 *puëllä süis*) and one on the last, unemphasized short syllable (*puëllä süis*). This ever-shifting rhythmic duet provides the elegiac couplet with an inexhaustible sonic variety, which in turn supports the couplet's use in the creation of book-length poems such as the *Ars*.

Ovid's couplets distinguish themselves from those of Tibullus and Propertius by his preference for dactyls and his avoidance of elision. With two metrical options for each of the first four feet, every hexameter has sixteen rhythmic possibilities, from the slow spondees of 435

quāē uōbis dicūnt, dixērūnt millē puëllis

to the lively dactyls of 327

disc(e) etiām düplicī gēniālīā nābliā pālmā

Likewise, the pentameter's first two feet offer four metrical versions. More than his contemporaries, however, Ovid displays a particular fondness for dactyls and the speed that they provide. In *Ars* 3, fully dactylic hexameters (1, 233, 301, 327, 347, 399, 411, 421, 423, 643, 653, 661, 671, 695, 699, 743, 763, 769, 781) are more than

twice as common as fully spondaic lines (159, 211, 215, 235, 435, 513, 567, 623), and only 18 percent of the hexameters and 20 percent of the pentameters begin with a spondee. Ovid also distinguishes himself by including only one **elision** (the metrical suppression of a syllable at the end of a word when that word ends with a vowel or *m* and when the next word begins with a vowel or *h*; AG #612e) for every ten lines of *Ars* 3. Elided syllables do not affect the metrical assessment of a line, but they were likely to have been at least partly pronounced when reading out loud; their infrequency in Ovid improves the speed and the clarity of his lines.

Additional clarity comes from Ovid's habit of treating every couplet as a separate unit of grammar and sense. Nearly every couplet is its own self-contained sentence, and even the few couplets that end without (modern) punctuation still form complete grammatical units of their own. Thanks to Ovid's talent for brevity, a single couplet can include three (103–4, 133–34, etc.), four (41–42), or even five (735–36) distinct sentences, though this last example is unique in the three books of the *Ars*. On rare occasions a sentence will extend over four full couplets, but Ovid tends to save this stylistic refinement for the most important topics of all: his city (121–28) and his poetry (339–46). Nearly the longest sentence, however, in all of Ovid's elegies (apart from several monstrosities in the *Ibis* and a register of rivers at *Pont.* 4.10.47–58) comes at 633–44, where he breathlessly catalogs eight different ways for a woman to fool her guardian. Here form follows function: the *custos* can't stop the *puella*, and Ovid can't stop himself.

Ovid's linguistic choices also deserve attention. His integration of vocabulary and imagery from other spheres of human activity into the world of love is not just a sign of verbal creativity but a method of expanding Cupid's erotic domain. The terminology of agriculture appears throughout the *Ars*, with copious comparisons of lovers to farmers (101), to crops (562), or to fields (82). Metaphorical comparisons of agriculture and sexual intercourse are as old as Homer (*Od.* 5.125–28), but Ovid's heavy reliance on these metaphors furthers the notion that love, like agriculture, helps to extend its practitioners' control over nature. Ovid's agricultural themes also subvert Vergil's patriotic account of farming in the *Georgics*: now patience, hard work, and cultivation of raw nature create not the agricultural bounty on which Rome depends but the personal beauty in which Rome delights. Thanks to his early education in legal argumentation, Ovid also incorporates a particularly large amount of language from the realm of the law. Direct references to Roman law are prominent, of course, in *Ars* 3 (cf. 449–50, 531–32, 614), but legal phrasing is applied to the life of love as well (cf. 491–92, 588 *non potes* 'you do not have legal access,' 801 *manifesta* 'caught in the act'). Most conspicuous is his introduction of *index* ('informer') and *indicium* ('evidence') into elegy. Ovid invests these formerly legal terms with an erotic charge—*index* is now 'one who reveals the secrets of love' (to a rival)—and thereby

manages both to strengthen the sense that love and the teaching of love can be reduced to legalistic formulas (cf. 668 *indicio prodor ab ipse meo*, where Ovid testifies against himself, and 719 *locus est et nomen et index*) and to undermine the stability of the legal system through amorous insinuations (cf. esp. *Ars* 1.79–88, where a lawyer falls in love while prosecuting a case in court).

Ovid's verbal innovations are no less striking. Compound adjectives beginning with *semi-* are a specialty with him, especially in contrast with Tibullus and Propertius, who have no such adjectives. Nearly a dozen of them, however, appear either first or only in Ovid, often with a stylistically elevated tone; the use of *semisupina* (788) in the description of a sexual position embellishes what might otherwise have been a crude account. (In a famous anecdote, *Sen. Contr.* 2.2.12, Ovid's friends asked him to remove their three least favorite lines of his poetry, and he agreed, on condition that his own three favorite lines could not be removed; both they and he, of course, had chosen the same three lines. One of those lines is a description of the Minotaur [*Ars* 2.24]—*semibouemque uirum semiuirumque bouem*—and the doubling of *semi-* adjectives in a single line is surely one of its most Ovidian features.) Ovid is also fond of adjectives in *-osus* that derive from abstract nouns, for example, *officiosa* (324), *speciosa* (421), *studiosa* (423), *odiosum* (649), *damnosa* (509), *morosa* (237). Such adjectives, which are notably less common in epic, have a colloquial quality. Most notable of all is *formosa* (257, 417, 665, 753), which is entirely absent from Vergil's *Aeneid*, and not simply because epic pays less attention to physical beauty; its synonym *pulcher* appears forty-four times in the *Aeneid* but only once in *Ars* 3, at 255.

Ovid's artistry is at work in every couplet, and to discuss the finer poetic points of them all would require a much longer commentary. Suffice it to say that every line deserves its own appreciation. Take one example, when Ovid agrees to sabotage his project by revealing men's secrets to women (671–72):

*uiderit utilitas; ego coepta fideliter edam:
Lemniasin gladios in mea fata dabo.*

Ovid devotes the couplet to the expression of a single thought—that he will knowingly work against his own best interests—yet finds three harmoniously different ways of expressing that thought, separating the couplet into its natural parts with a sense pause at the central caesura in the hexameter. Every sentence is longer than the one that precedes it; the result is a rising tricolon, a familiar and stylish element of rhetoric in both poetry and prose. As so often in his works, here too the pentameter rephrases the hexameter's abstract thesis with an arresting visual metaphor. Sound underlines sense: Ovid tends to avoid vowel rhyme in the hexameter at the

beginning of the fifth and sixth feet, but the repetition in *fideliter edam* supports the straightforwardness of his claim. In grammar and vocabulary Ovid manages to have it both ways, combining a breezy colloquialism (the idiomatic future perfect *uiderit*, the prosaic *gladius* in place of the poetic *ensis*) with scholarly flair: *Lemniasin* summarizes an entire myth in one word and (only here in Ovid) transliterates a particular Greek dative plural ending into Latin. And so on.

Even the literary history of the elegiac couplet can affect the shape of its contents. Homer's and Vergil's grand epics are written entirely in dactylic hexameters; the elegiac couplet separates itself from that tradition by its topics (less weighty than those of the *Iliad* or the *Aeneid*) and its pentameter lines (less weighty than the hexameter). The second half of a couplet, then, becomes regarded as the defining characteristic of the elegiac couplet, the part of its poetic DNA that distinguishes it from the nobler epic hexameter (as Ovid famously acknowledges in *Amores* 1.1). If the pentameter is more elegiac than the hexameter, we should appreciate all the more Ovid's analysis of Roman cultural history at *Ars* 3.115–20: just as Propertius did before him (4.1.1–6), he elevates the contrast between Rome's current grandeur and its earlier shabbiness by articulating all its modern glory in (grand) hexameters and its humble antiquity in (lowly) pentameters. Like Rome itself, the elegiac couplet is a combination of opposites, and the productive tension between its two halves should always be kept in mind.

Ovid would want the last word on poetry to be his. On the topics of sex and seduction, his advice may not deserve the reader's trust, but when it comes to poetic achievement, his declarations are persuasive. When he defends himself in the *Remedia amoris* from charges of writing overly licentious poetry, he concludes his defense (395–96) with a statement that is not just outrageous but true. (And ingenious, too; even here he provokes a conflict between form and content, describing elegy in the epic hexameter and epic in the elegiac pentameter.) Ovid may be a braggart, but he's also correct:

*tantum se nobis elegi debere fatentur,
quantum Vergilio nobile debet epos.*

‘Elegy owes as much to me—and it admits it, too!—
as lofty Epic owes to Vergil.’

FIGURES OF SPEECH

This brief list defines the rhetorical terms that appear most frequently and notably in *Ars* 3. Numbers in parentheses give line numbers that provide examples of the figure in question. The list of references is not meant to be exhaustive.

- aetiology** (Gk. ‘giving of a reason’): a story that provides a reason for the name of a person or location. Ovid’s use of aetiology to describe the fate of Phyllis (38) hints at the earlier (and lost) version of the story in Callimachus’ *Aetia*, which also relied heavily on aetiology.
- Alexandrian footnote** (18, 659): the insertion of a seemingly general verb of speaking (*ferunt, dicuntur*, etc.) or memory (*memini*, etc.) to signal a specific allusion to earlier literature. Such ‘footnotes’ imply literary knowledge on the part of the author and encourage the audience to appreciate the current text in its literary context.
- anaphora** (Gk. ‘repetition’; 63–64, 163–65, 189, 321–23, 449–50, 621–23): the repetition of one or more words in the same form at the beginning of successive phrases, providing even greater emphasis on the repeated material.
- apostrophe** (Gk. ‘turning away,’ sc. from the topic at hand toward a new audience; 35, 142, 196, 204, 251, 323, 336, 457, 714, 735): direct address to someone or something not present, that is, to someone or something other than the stated audience. Ovid’s frequent apostrophes can provide variation within a catalog (170, 183, 191) and bolster his air of authority, when he treats epic heroines as his own students (2, 40, 519).
- chiasmus** (Gk. ‘X-formation’): two phrases in which the second is the reverse of the first (AB-BA). This frequent figure calls attention to its stylish symmetry, enlivening catalogs (11–12) and descriptions of artistry (327).
- compendious comparison** (106): a form of comparison that requires the term being compared to be supplied from the context, as with ‘hair like the Graces’ (Hom. *Il.* 17.51) in place of ‘hair like the hair of the Graces.’ The construction sacrifices grammatical clarity for interpretive vibrancy.
- double enallage** (Gk. ‘interchange’): an interlocked pair of hypallages, in which two nouns have switched their adjectives with each other. Ovid uses double enallage to intensify the misery of a woman too old to have lovers (70 *frigida deserta nocte iacebis anus*): the frostiness of the air has seeped into her, and her lonely state is heightened by the fact that her former lovers have deserted not only her but the entire nighttime as well.
- hypallage** (Gk. ‘exchange’; 287, 343): a phrase in which an adjective agrees grammatically with one noun but logically with another: for instance, Cephalus’ ‘sad lap’ (743 *ille sinu . . . maesto*) embodies the sadness that properly belongs to Cephalus himself.
- kakemphaton** (Gk. ‘ugly sound’): the repetition of one or more syllables at the end of one word and the start of the next. Some ancient writers criticized such repetition as inelegant (e.g. Quintilian *Institutio Oratoria* 9.4.41), but Ovid and other poets seem to have ignored the criticism; even so, several instances in *Ars* 3

(251, 261, 315) appear in poetically loaded contexts, where a discussion of elegance is tinged by the sound of clumsiness.

litotes (Gk. 'meagerness'; 208, 649, 762): a double negative that implies a strong positive.

pathetic fallacy (38): the pretense that nature responds emotionally to human suffering (Gk. *πάθος*); cf. 'weeping willow.' The several pathetic fallacies (694, 704) that set the stage for Procris and Cephalus are reversed at the climax of the story, when Cephalus (mis)takes the human Procris for a part of nature (733).

periphrasis (Gk. 'circumlocution'; 177, 183, 214, 357): a roundabout way of description, using more than one word to give the meaning of another single term. Many of Ovid's periphrases allow him to refer to words that are unsuited to elegiac poetry, either for their overly technical nature (283) or for their metrical intractability (364).

polyptoton (Gk. 'many cases'): the repetition of a noun or verb in another form. Used more by Ovid than by any other Latin poet (and more than twenty times in *Ars* 3), polyptoton offers sonic variation and poetic support for the logic of an argument (218, 461-62, 491, 513).

praeteritio (Lat. 'passing by,' 'omission'): a pretended omission of a topic, thereby calling greater attention to that topic. Ovid thus allows himself to emphasize improper subjects and to avoid criticism for doing so (193, 197, 612).

syllipsis (Gk. 'taking together'; 77, 730): the syntactical combination of the literal and the metaphorical. Ovid's frequent use of syllipsis is not simply a form of wit; in *hospes et ensem / praebuit et causam mortis* 'the guest offered both a sword and a cause of death' (39-40) the syllipsis heightens Aeneas' culpability, turning his actions into a weapon as deadly as the sword with which Dido killed herself.

rising tricolon (Gk. 'three clauses'; 385-86, 671-72): a sequence of three clauses in which each is longer than the previous. With the standard caesura in the third foot of the hexameter, the elegiac couplet itself separates into a natural rising tricolon (31-32, 217-18), and such a rhetorical crescendo can support the impression of a logical (91-92, 103-4) or chronological (513-14) progression.

FURTHER READING

Gibson (2003) is the decisive authority on *Ars* 3 and the first place to look for a detailed and lucid treatment of any element of the work. General introductions to Ovid and the *Ars* include Watson (2002), Sharrock (2002, 'Ovid and the Discourses of Love'), Armstrong (2005), and Gibson (2009); Rimell (2006) and Henderson (2006) pay particular attention to the relations among the three books of the *Ars* and the *Remedia*. Gibson, Green, and Sharrock (2006) collect a notably wide-ranging