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SEX AND THE CITY: OVID'S ELEGIAC ROME

Much of Ovid's poetry is concerned with the city of Rome and its monuments, history and institutions. The *Fasti* record the urban rituals that marked the city's calendar and detail the settings in which they took place. The last two books of the *Metamorphoses* move from Rome's foundation by Romulus into the recognisable landscape of Augustus' city. The poems Ovid wrote from exile, the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, repeatedly invoke Rome as their imagined destination and the site of their reception, bewailing the poet's unhappy distance from the centre of the Roman world. The imperial city is also very much apparent in Ovid's love poetry, serving as a location for many of the passionate encounters narrated and hoped for in the *Amores*, *Ars Amatoria* and *Remedia Amoris*. Rome is not just a backdrop here, however, but a politically-charged landscape of vital importance to Ovid's elegiac project. In these three pre-exile elegiac works, Ovid persistently excavates Rome's secrets, scrutinises its monuments, and exposes Rome as a city in which love reigns supreme, a city to which it is the apparently frivolous genre of elegy that holds the key. His poetry offers us a startlingly original perspective on Rome which systematically destabilises authoritarian Augustan messages about the meaning of the city. However, Ovid's poetry is not simply subversive, revealing that Rome, apparently so stately, so pious, so moral, so controlled, was actually a far less dignified and much more passionate place: it also offers a strong argument for why the city matters, not as the imposing political centre of a powerful empire but as the centre of a sophisticated world of literature and love.

The poet uses well-known images and ideas about the city as the basis of his startling revelations, and much about his Rome appears familiar. In the middle of the *Amores*, for example, Rome is a model of how to go forth and conquer:

Roma, nisi immensum uires promosset in orbem,
stramineis esset nunc quoque tecta casis.

Amores 2.9.17–18

If Rome hadn't marched her troops out to occupy the world's immeasurable vastness, she'd be hidden huddled under straw-roofed huts even now.¹

At first this inspiring image of imperial expansion may seem uncontroversial, as the city and her empire are presented as models of what can be achieved by bold perseverance. It is one of several references in Ovid's elegy to how the city has grown from humble beginnings,² and is reminiscent of Augustus' alleged boast that he had found Rome made of brick, and left it marble.³

However, as McKeown notes in his monumental commentary on the *Amores*, the couplet is also provocative in its perversion of 'the doctrine that [Rome] owed its greatness to its early simplicity.'⁴ This doctrine was often evoked by those condemning the moral failings of contemporary culture,⁵ and Ovid's reference to the confining straw huts of early Rome which have given way to the glories of an unbounded empire (ll. 17–18), echoes very closely one such condemnation by his elegiac contemporary, Propertius:

atque utinam Romae nemo esset diues, et ipse
straminea posset dux habitare casa!

Propertius 2.16.19–20

And what's more I wish that no one in Rome were rich, and our glorious leader himself could live in a straw-roofed hut!

¹ Quotations from Ovid's *Amores*, *Ars Amatoria* and *Remedia Amoris* come from Kenney's OCT (2nd ed.). All translations are my own.

² E.g. *simplicitas rudis ante fuit: nunc aurea Roma est, / et domiti magnas possidet orbis opes* (Before there was rustic simplicity: now Rome is golden, and holds the great wealth of the tamed globe, *Ars Am.* 3.113).

³ Suet, *Aug.* 28.

⁴ McKeown (1998), *ad loc.*

⁵ For an expression of such moralising views by Ovid, cf. *Am.* 3.8.31 ff.

Propertius' criticism that the greed which characterises modern life has put mercenary *puellae* out of reach of the impecunious lover is itself an elegiac spin on a common claim that Rome's growing wealth led to concomitant moral decline. Thus Ovid's evocation of the Propertian couplet is both a challenge to the earlier elegiac poet, marking his poetic persona as substantially different to the lover portrayed in his predecessor's poetry, and a comment on the inconsistencies of Rome's moralists.

A particular, though unnamed target, is the emperor Augustus, who promoted old-time simplicity, symbolised by the thatched hut on the Capitol that allegedly had belonged to Romulus, as a central part of his claims to be reviving Rome's glories. These claims are inescapably brought to mind here, as the poet hints at the paradox of promoting a return to an old-fashioned lifestyle while at the same time celebrating expansion and the concomitant aggrandisement of the city.

Moreover, Ovid's depiction of the city of Rome not only points to an unfortunate illogicality in imperial celebration of the distant past but also puts the spotlight on another potential imperial embarrassment. The two lines sit halfway through the *Amores*, close to the turning point of the pair of poems, 2.9 and 2.9b, in which a life without love is first considered and then emphatically rejected.⁶ The youth encouraged to take Rome's successes as inspiration for extending the reach of his own endeavours is not, as one might expect, a hapless or hesitant lover, the typical target of Ovid's amatory advice. Such an addressee would be provocative enough, making Rome's hard-won dominance a model for amatory empire-building by a citizen who ought instead, as all traditionalists would argue, to be putting his efforts into ensuring the continued glory of the city and its people. Instead, the poet addresses Amor, son of Venus and god of love. The idle divine child (*desidioso puer*, *Am.* 2.9.2) is accused of confining his attention to lovers already subjected to his power, while there are many as yet untouched by love:

tot sine amore uiri, tot sunt sine amore puellae:
hinc tibi cum magna laude triumphus eat.

Amores 2.9.15–16

There are so many men with no love in their hearts, so many girls similarly untouched: you should let *them* be the reason for a triumphal parade attended by great glory.

Roman elegy often uses military language to describe love while also claiming that the life of love it celebrates is a rejection of the military career expected of Rome's elite men.⁷ Ovid's representation of Amor as a triumphing general, however, is audacious even in this context, allowing the frivolous god of love to participate in a ceremony Augustus had restricted to members of his own family.⁸ This reminds us that Amor too could be considered a member of the imperial family, as the half-brother of Aeneas, the founder of the Roman people and ancestor of the *gens Julia*. Presenting the god of love as a general mockingly evokes both the emperor's control of the triumph and the stress laid on his divine ancestry, and is indicative of a pervasive strategy of subversion throughout Ovid's poetry.

The couplet has one final sting to deliver, discernable in the description of olden-days Rome as not only roofed by straw but also hidden concealed beneath it (*tecta*, *Am.* 2.9.18). This suggests perhaps that Rome was always destined for glory, needing only boldly to march out in order to shed its rustic disguise and achieve world domination. Equally, however, it evokes the well-known play on the name of the city itself, *Roma*, which, in Latin, is 'love' (*amor*) spelled backwards. The two-fold repetition of *amore* in the preceding couplet (l. 15) encourages readers to note the pun, revealing the great city not only as an inspiration for Amor, the god of love, and site of his greatest triumphs, but also as a reflection of love itself.

⁶ *Amores* 2.9 and 2.9b have been recently discussed by Boyd (2002). See also Booth (1991) and McKeown (1998), with suggestions for further reading.

⁷ Murgatroyd (1975); McKeown (1995).

⁸ Cupid also appears as a triumphing general, with the lover Ovid as his latest victim, at *Amores* 1.2, on which see McKeown (1989), Athanassaki (1992), and Ryan & Perkins (2011), with suggestions for further reading.

Ovid's subversive perspective on Rome is the keystone of his advice to lovers in the first book of the *Ars Amatoria*. Here, the elegiac poet operates in didactic mode as a teacher of love (*praeceptor Amoris*, *Ars Am.* 1.17), and his first lesson is where to find it. A lover must be like a canny hunter (*scit bene uenator*, *Ars Am.* 1.45) and the richest hunting ground is the city of Rome, the centre of the empire:⁹

nempe ab utroque mari iuuenes, ab utroque puellae
uenere, atque ingens orbis in Vrbe fuit.

Ars Amatoria 1.173–74

Naturally young men and gorgeous girls came from east coast and from west, and indeed the great wide world was contained within the city.

Again twisting the triumph to elegiac ends, the poet here claims that Rome's celebration of its military successes has brought the world to city, and it is a world that – importantly – is peopled by lovers. As a consequence, Rome's population of *puellae* is so innumerable that Venus herself appears manifest in the city:¹⁰

quot caelum stellas, tot habet tua Roma puellas:
mater in Aeneae constitit urbe sui.

Ars Amatoria 1.59–60

Your own Rome holds as many potential new girlfriends as there are stars in the sky:
Venus is a permanent resident in her son's city.

Here again we see Ovid pointing to how the imperial representation of its family tree could be read against the grain. The Julian family, and thus Augustus, claimed descent, through Aeneas, from Venus, and the official portrait of the goddess was of a commanding and respectable figure.¹¹ As Rachel Kousser has recently shown, however, the city was full of more seductive, Hellenised representations of Venus as well, and it is to this Venus, the goddess of love, that Ovid appeals here. This is not a mistaken misinterpretation of the Augustan Venus, unwittingly contaminated by Ovid's exposure to eroticised depictions of the goddess in private art,¹² but rather a deliberate misreading, pointing out the erotic implications of the fact that the mother of the city and *gens Iulia* and the seductive goddess of love were one and the same.

It is appropriate, then, that Venus' city is the place to find a girlfriend, and the first example given to illustrate this point takes Ovid's reader to the colonnades of some of Rome's public buildings, associated with the aggrandisement of its most powerful citizens, and particularly with the image and achievements of the imperial family:

tu modo Pompeia lentus spatiare sub umbra,
cum sol Herculei terga leonis adit:
aut ubi muneribus nati sua munera mater
addidit, externo marmore diues opus.
nec tibi uitetur quae priscis sparsa tabellis
porticus auctoris Liuia nomen habet,
quaque parare necem miseris patruelibus ausae
Belides et stricto stat ferus ense pater

⁹ Cf. also *Ars Am.* 1.55-56. The poet ambitiously claims that he is keen to take on all the attractive girls in Rome: *Amores* 2.4.47-48.

¹⁰ Compare in particular *Am.* 1.8.41-42: *nunc Mars externis animos exercet in armis, / at Venus Aeneae regnat in urbe sui* (now Mars expends his energies in foreign campaigns, and Venus rules in her son Aeneas' city.) Reference to Venus as the mother of Aeneas is also found at: *Am.* 2.14.17-18.

¹¹ Kousser (2010), pp. 287-88.

¹² *contra* Kousser (2010), pp. 298-99, who discusses how Ovid (in *Tristia* 2.295-96) shows a viewer of a public statue of Venus at the Temple of Mars reacting to it as an image of adultery rather than of Roman glory. In Kousser's view, this viewer mistakenly allows the erotic connotations of popular private representations of the goddess to shape understanding of the statue's meaning. Statues of Venus erected in Augustan public spaces were clearly open to misinterpretation, as Ovid points out. However, Kousser's claim that the error reported (and she believes shared) by Ovid is due to the novelty and unfamiliarity of the principate's visual language fails to take into account the poet's persistent practice of exposing and subverting imperial image making.

Just try sauntering in the shade of Pompey's portico, when the sun is high in the sky: or in the Portico of Octavia, which she enriched with gifts in memory of her son, Marcellus, a building richly clad in marble. Don't shun the portico that's festooned with ancient paintings, either, Livia built it and it bears her name: and last but by no means least the Portico of the Danaids in the Temple of Apollo, those daring Danaids who plotted to murder their unfortunate cousins, as their father stood by, sword in hand.

The details of these directions make clear that the advice given subverts the messages supposed to be associated with these public spaces: the pick-up joints listed were meant to be symbols of status, solidarity and success, not of the search for sex. The final example, however, also points out that the images promoted officially by such monuments could be appropriated in the service of love more easily than might be imagined or intended.

The temple of Apollo on the Palatine, built by Augustus to celebrate his victories over Sextus Pompeius, Mark Antony and Cleopatra, is mentioned a number of times by the love poets of Augustan Rome.¹³ They identify it particularly by the statues of the Danaids in the portico that surrounded it:

hesterna uidi spatiantem luce puellam
 illa quae Danaï porticus agmen habet.
 protinus, ut placuit, misi scriptoque rogauī

Amores 2.2.3–5

Yesterday I saw the girl walking in public view in the portico which houses the warlike procession of the daughters of Danaus. Hubba hubba! Straightaway I sent her a text: *voulez-vous ...?*

The Danaids were the fifty mythical daughters of king Danaus who married their cousins, the sons of their father's brother Aegyptus. At their father's instruction, all but one of them killed their husbands on their wedding night. For this crime against marriage the murderous daughters were condemned to an endlessly frustrating afterlife of attempting to fill a leaky vessel with water. Their myth is prominent in Augustan literature, not just in elegiac descriptions of the temple of Apollo and its portico but also in the *Aeneid*, where the Danaids are depicted on the sword belt which Turnus takes as a trophy from Pallas when he kills him, and which Turnus is wearing when Aeneas slaughters *him* at the end of the epic, reminded of Pallas by the fatal trophy.¹⁴

The Danaids symbolise many things: young lives terminated before their promise can be fulfilled; the savage destruction of internecine strife and, by extension, of civil war; both sexual and familial transgression; punishment; and even the potential for reconciliation.¹⁵ Appearing as statues ranged along the portico attached to Apollo's temple, they must also bear political symbolism, their connection to Egypt evocative particularly of the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium which Apollo's temple celebrated. However, as Ovid's references to the Danaids in both the *Ars Amatoria* and the *Amores* shows, they also carry an erotic charge, and in that way are significantly like the potential targets of the erotic hunt that is detailed at the start of the *Ars Amatoria*.

This similarity between the mythical women who appear as statues in the portico and the living women of Rome promenading in the portico is suggested by the description of them in warlike procession in *Amores* 2. It is also evoked by Ovid's earlier use of one of the Danaids as the third in a series of mythical comparands for a beautiful *puella*:

¹³ Cf. Prop. 2.31.1–4; Ovid, *Tristia* 3.1.59–62, *Ars Am.* 3.389–90.

¹⁴ The belt and Turnus' taking of it are described at *Aen.* 10.495–502. The significance of the Danaids in the *Aeneid* and Augustan culture is discussed by Harrison (1998). The Danaids appear as sinners in the underworld in Tibullus' elegy 1.3.79–80.

¹⁵ On the symbolism of the Danaids, see also Leach (2008).

qualis Amymone siccis erravit in Argis,
 cum premeret summi uerticis urna comas,
 talis eras: aquilamque in te taurumque timebam
 et quicquid magno de Ioue fecit Amor.

Amores 1.10.5–8

You were just like Amymone when she wandered in the parched fields of Argos, with an urn weighing upon the hair at the top of her head: I was afraid that an eagle would attack you, or a bull, or whatever shape Love moulded great Jupiter into.

Looking like the water-carrying Danaid Amymone, the girl is an enticing figure: so, the poet suggests, were the water-bearing Danaids who ranged along the portico where Ovid's *puellae* walk before the gaze of Rome's would-be lovers.¹⁶

Ovid's Rome, then, is a city of monuments which – at least in the eyes of those with an elegiac perspective – are monuments not to the greatness of the empire, its generals and gods, but to the joys of illicit affairs. The poet makes this point explicitly from exile when defending his poetry against the charge of being corrupting. He claims that even shrines of the gods can be viewed as encouragement to vice by a girl with her mind fixed on a liaison, as she remembers the many affairs enjoyed by Jupiter *et al* while touring their temples (*Tristia* 2.277–302).

More than just being prompts to an elegiac lifestyle, however, these religious monuments are also meeting places, a feature they share with Rome's other public spaces, including the courts (*Ars Am.* 1.79), the theatres (*Ars Am.* 1.89), and the games:

sic ruit ad celebres cultissima femina ludos;
 copia iudicium saepe morata meum est.
 spectatum ueniunt, ueniunt spectentur ut ipsae:
 ille locus casti damna pudoris habet.

Ars Amatoria 1.97–100

The fashionistas flock to be part of the audience: there are so many that it is often hard to choose. They come to see, but also to be seen: that's the place where *no one's* hard to get.

Ovid's city is packed with potential places for starting a new love affair. Persistently throughout Ovid's elegy Rome's grand public buildings, significant public institutions and major public events – even including triumphs – give space and opportunity for seduction.¹⁷ From exile the poet even claims that Rome's monuments incite the affairs described in the *Amores* and taught in the *Ars Amatoria*:

ut tamen hoc fatear, ludi quoque semina praebent
 nequitiae: tolli tota theatra iube!
 peccandi causam quam multis saepta dederunt,
 Martia cum durum sternit harena solum.
 tollatur Circus; non tuta licentia Circi est:
 hic sedet ignoto iuncta puella uiro.

Tristia 2.279–84

Granted, however, that I admit my *Ars Amatoria* led people astray a bit, the games also fan the flames of lust: tell them to tear down all the theatres, too! How many lovers have the voting booths given an opportunity to transgress when the elections are on?! Oh, and get rid of the races! The freedom they offer isn't safe: that's where a girl can sit smack bang next to a guy she doesn't even know.

¹⁶ For the Danaids at the portico of the temple of Apollo as water-bearers, see Mattusch & Lie (2005).

¹⁷ This is celebrated, for example, in *Amores* 3.2 on the seductive opportunities offered by the races, on which see Henderson (2002). Cf. also *Ars Am.* 3.633ff.

The message that being in Rome inevitably entails being in love persists as Ovid moves on, in the 'Cures for Love' to claim that leaving the city is a sure-fire way of extinguishing the flames of lust that Rome fans so persistently and so well:

tu tantum, quamuis firmis retinebere uinclis,
 i procul, et longas carpere perge uias.
 [...]
 tempora nec numera nec crebro respice Romam,
 sed fuge: tutus adhuc Parthus ab hoste fuga est.

Remedia Amoris 213–14, 223–24

Just leave, however much you might be shackled by love's ball and chain: go far away, and take a loong trip [...] Don't watch the clock, or keep looking back at Rome, just run away: the man who runs from his enemy stays safe.

As the *Remedia* goes on to reveal, however, the so-called 'cures' for love which the poet offers are questionable at best, and even after over 800 lines of elegiac advice it is by no means certain that the hapless lover will ever find respite from the pangs of passion.¹⁸ The reason for this is in part the power of love (*amor*) and of the god by the same name who rules over love and the elegiac lover. A second and no less important reason is that the lover is an urbanite.

For the Romans, being of the city (*urbanus*) was not merely a designation of origins but also of mindset. Urbanity (*urbanitas*) denoted a sophisticated, witty, polite and refined quality that was the opposite of the behaviour of those from the country, stereotyped as boorish, mannerless and stupid. Ovid's love poetry presents this urbanity as necessarily involving sexual sophistication, including an acceptance of marital infidelity. It also stresses that such tolerance is a quality demonstrated by those who belong not just to any city but specifically to the city of Rome, which was founded by the offspring of an illicit sexual union between the god Mars and a Vestal Virgin:

rusticus est nimium, quem laedit adultera coniunx,
 et notos mores non satis Vrbis habet,
 in qua Martigenae non sunt sine crimine nati
 Romulus Iliades Iliadesque Remus.

Amores 3.4.37–40

A man who is upset when his wife cheats on him is an unmitigated hick and doesn't have a good grasp of the well-known way it works in this city, where Romulus and Remus themselves were born after a dalliance between Mars and Ilia which some prudes might condemn.

The reminder that the conception of Romulus and his brother Remus involved a culpable act further associates the life of love espoused by the poet with the city itself. This claim is clearly provocative to a regime headed by a man who presented himself as a moral reformer, and the second founder of Rome, and who even (we are told) seriously considered calling himself Romulus before choosing the less problematic 'Augustus' instead.¹⁹ It is a joke, but also, again, serious – it shows us that, looking with the right attitude, it is possible to see through a propagandist presentation of a myth to a more complicated, less politically comfortable, version lying beneath.

Ovid continues to question the Augustan myth that the good old days of ancient Rome were days of simplicity and moral uprightness in the *Ars Amatoria*, where he recounts the story of the rape of the Sabine women. The setting, certainly, is very different to the sophisticated theatres frequented by the lovers of his day:

tunc neque marmoreo pendebant uela theatro,
 nec fuerant liquido pulpita rubra croco;
 illic quas tulerant nemorosa Palatia frondes

¹⁸ Watson (2002), pp. 162-65.

¹⁹ Suet. *Div. Aug.* 7.

simpliciter positae scaena sine arte fuit;
in gradibus sedit populus de caespite factis,
qualibet hirsutas fronde tegente comas.

Ars Am. 1.103–8

There weren't any awnings then, or marble theatres, or impressive, costly decorations; branches grown on the wooded Palatine were arranged simply, and the set was entirely artless. People sat on banked seating cut into the turf, and wore leaves as makeshift hats on their shaggy heads.

What occurs there, however, as the Romans each note down the girl they wish to pursue, is very similar to the hunt among Rome's monuments for a lover that we have already seen Ovid endorse, if rather more violent (*Ars Am.* 1.109–30). Rome's good old days may not have been graced by elegant architecture (or hats) but the behaviour of Ovid's Romans hasn't changed much. The poet argues that the lustful depravity condemned by contemporary moralists has its roots in the time of Rome's foundations, a time which those same moralists extolled. Ovid's Rome is marked by significant continuities as well as by change.

The one thing that – crucially – does not change is that the city is the site of love, and of elegy. We have already seen the advice in the *Remedia* to flee from Rome in the quest to escape love (ll. 223–24). While the same city also offers occupations that might distract a lover from his pain,²⁰ the presence of the *puella* in it means that *amor* inevitably rules in Rome. The city is not just the site of lovers' meetings but also the location for the elegiac lover's sufferings in the *paraclausithyron*,²¹ and a better place for a wandering *puella* than the dangerous sea.²² The city is where the lover buys gifts to tempt his mistress, despite his claims that they come fresh from his country estate.²³ Most importantly of all, the city is where elegiac poetry is read, and where the lover is famous, as the personified figure of Tragedy scathingly points out at the beginning of the third book of the *Amores*.²⁴

nequitiam uinosa tuam conuiuia narrant,
narrant in multas compita secta uias.
saepe aliquis digito uatem designat euntem
atque ait 'hic, hic est, quem ferus urit Amor.'
fabula, nec sentis, tota iactaris in Vrbe,
dum tua praeterito facta pudore refers.

Amores 3.1.16–22

Drunken gatherings recount the story of your naughtiness, and the story resounds at the intersections of street after street. Often someone points you out as the poet as you go along and says 'This is the man, that's the one whom fierce Amor burns with love.' You are a tale bandied about throughout the whole city, and you do not care, as you recount your deeds with no shame whatsoever.

For Ovid, then, the city of Rome is not only the heart of the empire but also the heart of his empire-subverting elegiac project. It is a microcosm full of girls, packed with pick-up joints, and the home of potential readers. His poetry offers a vision of the city through an elegiac lens, revealing that Rome's very foundations fit it to be the site of love, and provocatively reshaping the serious, moral, world-dominating city of Augustan propaganda as a place of fun, frivolity, poetry and subjection to the all-powerful god Amor.

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²⁰ *Rem.* 151–52.

²¹ *Amores* 1.6.55.

²² *Amores* 2.11.11.

²³ *Ars Am.* 2.263–66.

²⁴ There are clear references here to Ovid's programmatic elegy *Am.* 2.1. Most recently on *Amores* 3.1 see Perkins (2011).

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