

'Love-Letters' from Heroines of Myth

by R.A. Faber

The Latin poet Ovid (43 BC- 17 AD) is well-known for the love elegies he composed. Less well-known are the *Heroides*, the imaginary love-letters by characters of myth. This book of poems contains 21 letters in all, though it is thought that some of them were composed by someone other than Ovid (most notably *Heroides* 15). Letters 1-14 are composed by legendary women who complain about the fact that their lovers have abandoned them, or are separated from them too long. They are self-contained monologues from the perspective of the women; of course, the poet's own persona is never far below the surface of the text, as the allusions to other writers, and even his own writings reveal. The last six poems in the collection form three doublets, or letters and the responses to them.

There are several influences upon the composition of the *Heroides*. One of the main ones is the declamatory exercise; this was an important part of education at Rome in the first century BC, and Ovid no doubt produced many such written and spoken pieces. One exercise in particular was the *suasoria*, in which the speaker was to advise a famous legendary or historical person on some course of action in his special circumstances. Thus, for example, one might be asked to advise Odysseus on how to escape unharmed from the cave of Polyphemus. Sometimes the *suasoria* was presented from the perspective of the character himself, as a soliloquy. Ovid's *Heroides* are often deliberative, and the imagined author of the letter reflects on her own situation and considers possible courses of action for herself and her lover. In this regard, the single letters have something in common also with the soliloquies of heroines in Greek tragedy. Medea's deliberations in Euripides' play of the same name come to mind as instances of this sort. It is clear that Ovid was influenced by the representation of the woman's voice in such passages of tragedy.

For many readers the *Heroides* are remarkable for the way in which the women 'authors' respond to their unique or exciting situations. And it is true that Ovid employs his skills of characterisation to lend the mythical

persons the quality of being life-like. Helen, for example, who is the 'author' of poem 17, is depicted in a sympathetic way, unlike the often harsh and pejorative portrayal of her by previous authors. In reading the letters, the reader also gains a greater appreciation of the nuances in the situations in which each woman finds herself, so that the myth in which she functions gains significance. Most interestingly, perhaps, the letters deflect attention from the perspective of the man to the point of view of the woman. Thus in the poem that opens the collection, Odysseus is not the focaliser (the one from whose point of view events are recounted), but Penelope. The effect of this narrative technique is to produce greater sympathy and compassion for the female characters. Indeed, while many of the female characters in the traditional versions of the myths function only as agents of fate, as puppets of the gods, in the *Heroides* the women come across as real human beings.

The imagined letter by Ariadne to Theseus (poem 10) may be taken as representative of the *Heroides*. The myth was well-known: son of the king of Athens, Theseus had joined a group of fourteen young men and women sent as a tribute to the Crete. Their king Minos intended to offer them as a sacrifice to the monstrous Minotaur which inhabited the labyrinth. Ariadne, the daughter of the king, fell in love with Theseus and assisted the group. Conquering the Minotaur and returning safely from the labyrinth, Theseus takes Ariadne on board his ship, as her act of treason forces her departure. When they reach the island of Naxos, however, Theseus abandons Ariadne, who awakes to find herself alone. It is when she is in this situation that Ariadne writes to Theseus, hoping desperately that the letter will reach its destination. In her letter, she describes her reaction at seeing Theseus' departing ship, and her frantic cries for help. She berates Theseus for his deeds and harsh feelings, and impresses on him her loneliness, isolation, and helplessness. She lists her many regrets, and lastly warns Theseus that she may die on the island. In this way, the plight of the abandoned heroine gains full expression, with the consequence that Theseus' behaviour in the story is re-evaluated by the reader.

As was noted at the outset, poems 16-21 in the collection comprise 3 doublets of letters; that is, letters by mythical heroes to their loves, and the replies composed by the heroines. Unlike the earlier poems in the group, these are based on a different type of rhetorical exercise, namely the *controversia*. Two speakers were required for this type of rhetorical practice, in which opposite sides of an issue were argued by each. Like the

modern debate, then, the *controversia* served to bring out all the advantages and disadvantages of two different points of view. What lends these poems their special charm is the comparison the reader must make between the arguments of each 'author', so that greater meaning may be drawn from them as a doublet.

Ovid assumes that the reader is familiar with the myth in which each heroine functions, and he employs that knowledge to place the letter in a larger context. For example, the letters of Helen and Paris (16 and 17), are written by individuals who are unaware of the events in which they will be caught up - namely the Trojan war, in which suffering and death abound. Thus while the reader knows the larger context of the relationship between Helen and Paris, the characters in the poems do not. The effect of this disparity is a greater sense of both the immediacy of the letters and of the ultimate ramifications of the characters' decisions. While there are comic and romantic elements in them, the two letters are overshadowed by the gloom of the Trojan war.

The manipulation of the reader's knowledge of the story occurs also in the letters of Hero and Leander, which are number 18 and 19 in the collection. It was Leander's habit to swim across the Hellespont, from Abydos to Sestos, to be with his beloved Hero. On account of their social differences, however, Hero and Leander kept their love secret. The readers familiar with the story know that Leander was drowned while swimming one dark and stormy night. They also know that when she discovered Leander's body washed on the shore, Hero leaped from a tower to be united with him in death. Of course, none of this is known to the amorous couple at the time of writing their letters; but there is a sense of foreboding. Separated from Hero by the water, Leander writes a secret letter to her, expressing his love and desire. The tone of these missives is Romantic love (not unlike that of Romeo and Juliet), and both characters sense that their strong feelings will lead to their undoing. Leander plunges into the sea even before receiving Hero's response, and he is dead by the time her letter is written. The reader will understand that Ovid pulls out all the emotional stops in these letters, as he is keen to exploit the genre of the poetic letter to the full.

Ovid also employs the readers' knowledge of earlier literary versions of the myths to lend greater depth to the letters. Indeed, one of the remarkable qualities of these letters is the combination of materials from disparate literary sources into one unit. As most readers will know, in the famous

epic *Metamorphoses* Ovid does precisely the same: gathering elements from a wide range of sources and incorporating them into one long poem unified by the theme of physical transformation. From Homer's *Iliad* to the epigrams of the Hellenistic period, Ovid draws on a wide range of sources. On the one hand the allusive quality takes away from the sense of immediacy and urgency in the letters, but on the other it enriches them by evoking a world of experience and expression that continually alters one's reading of them.

It will be clear to the reader that the *Heroides* are not really love-letters; rather, they are letters written by one lover to another, or by lovers to each other, in which the relationship is viewed as critical. In other words, in this collection Ovid explores the behaviour of the human heart and mind when they experience stress and hardship. The stress that unifies them is caused by separation or abandonment. Little did Ovid know that he himself was destined to experience separation from his family and his favourite city, Rome, when he would be banished to Tomis by Augustus in AD 8. What he tried to imagine in writing the *Heroides*, he would experience in real life. Then he would compose, in his own person, the *Letters from Pontus*, which are marked by the themes of separation, abandonment, and sorrow.