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Ovid's Military Metaphor and Gender Transgression in *Amores*

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Ovid's *Amores* utilize an extended military metaphor that creates a gendered dichotomy for sexuality. Through a series of erotic poems about love, the *Amores* celebrate transgressions from the *Lex Julia*: a series of laws which laid the groundwork for appropriate sexual behaviors and described punishments for deviant sexual acts. Ovid's compilation of *Amores* also evidences his own societal and gender transgressions. Writing poetry was criticized by his father as being a "totally useless act," yet Ovid sought to create a work that shed light on love and sexuality in an otherwise nationalistic and militaristic society. While other Romans were fighting in wars or at least writing war epics, Ovid was writing about love. In various personas, the *Amores* explore sexual violence, sexual activity/passivity, and victimization among other themes in a way that makes aspects of love ambiguous. Ovid's poems are so dynamic that he appears as a character both in masculine and feminine forms (at different times). Despite the fact that sometimes Ovid is extremely active in his sexuality (thus masculine), he becomes an effeminized male in other poems through the more passive thoughts and behaviors that he displays. The military metaphor and Ovid's aggression are an aid in maintaining a masculine tone for the majority of the poems, but there are times that his feminine voice appears and he shifts out of his masculine-gendered zone into a passive sexual role in the female realm. However, in both the masculine and feminine persona, Ovid is a victim of *amore*.

i. Victimizing the Victim

Ovid's *Amores* elicit the notion of sexual victimization with regard to violent sexuality and the power of love in his military metaphor. The historical background that influenced Ovid to write in this style relates to the emperor of Rome, Augustus. According to his *Lex Julia*, a woman could be put to death even if she was raped because a raped woman has lost her honor. There was no concept of the victim in this set of laws. Hippocrates' "two-seed model" also contributed to the subjection of feminine sexuality. The notion of two seeds implies that woman releases her seed during orgasm and only then can she conceive a child. The problem with this is that when a raped woman becomes pregnant, she was believed to have experienced pleasure during the rape.

Women of Ovid's time were thought to be sexually passive because sex meant being penetrated and not actively penetrating. The penetrator held the power and was a male or masculinized figure. Ovid himself is penetrated by love and gives in to the power of it. Referring to the power of love, Ovid writes, "All right, I give in" (line 10; bk. 1, sc.2). He is a victim of love, even going so far as to literally state, "So I'm coming clean, Cupid: here I am, your latest victim" (19; bk. 1, sc. 2). Leslie Cahoon comments on victimization and warfare, saying, "Like a Roman victor, Cupid subjugates and enslaves the conquered; Roman love demeans and enslaves the lover" (Cahoon 295). She goes on to say that Ovid "delights in being Cupid's victim because he can thereby victimize others" (295). This idea of being victimized and victimizing others contributes to the notion that Ovid's masculinity and femininity are expressed simultaneously. Being in love is being enslaved, and Ovid uses military imagery to show that love can become violent.

In Book 1, Sections 1 and 2, Ovid describes being pierced by Cupid's arrows. He writes, "heart skewered / by shafts of desire, the raging beast..." (6-8; bk. 1, sc. 2). This military metaphor is an example of a way in which Ovid feminizes himself. He is being penetrated. All those who are punctured by Cupid's arrows are women in the sense that they are passively victimized and must give in and accept their penetration. The man is in control.

ii. Control and *Sophrosyne*

Male control over sexuality is a key feature in looking at sexual behaviors in ancient times. The notion of *sophrosyne* refers to the wisdom that comes from controlling the passions. Men were thought to have better control than women and control over women as their sexual victims. Sometimes women are the victim of lover's rage (*amator's furor*), most notably in Book 1, Section 7. In this poem, Ovid's agency is compromised by his maturity and he again becomes a feminized man. He is fickle, upset with his woman over a trifling issue, not knowing what she wants and pulling her hair. He writes, "I could have ripped down her dress from neck to waistline – the belt would have stopped me there. Instead, I grabbed the hair off her forehead, tore at those ladylike cheeks with my nails" (47-50; bk. 1, sc. 7).

Ovid's violence against the woman is feminine, but hurtful nonetheless. It isn't until the girl starts to cry that Ovid ceases to assault her. Cahoon argues that this implies "that a woman's attractions are her soldiers in a violent war" (297). A woman can use her emotions to wage her own war, but this puts her in an active role and is a rare occurrence.

iii. Violence and Ovid's Military Metaphor

Book 1, Section 9 is a perfect example of the interplay and overlap of love and war. Lovers and soldiers have similar lifestyles, according to Ovid, "Cupid has his headquarters in the field. Fighting and love-making belong to the same age-group – in bed as in war..." (3-5; bk. 1, sc. 9). Love is as violent as war and love is a substitute for Ovid who does not physically fight in wars. Ovid also writes about sexually violent acts in Book 2, Section 12 when he talks about the Sabine rapes. Cahoon writes that Ovid, "draws attention...which gradually and implicitly brings responsibility for rape, violence, and war home to Rome in spite of the explicit responsibility of the unknown but apparently universal *femina* of the lover's paranoia (299)... In the *militia* of love, the lover is the defenseless captive (*deprensus inermis*)" (302). The male takes no responsibility for violence committed against women.

Extreme critiques of Ovid express the horror of violence that makes his poems so warlike. Ellen Greene argues that, "Ovid is a pornographer who encourages the reader to enjoy violence inflicted on women" (Greene 344). While this opinion may be drastic, it is obvious that Ovid's representation of women is "the

site of violence" (345).

After much violence in war, the winner often receives a prize. In the case of Ovid's military metaphor, woman is the prize and therefore becomes objectified. Greene discusses woman as the object:

Not only is the woman presented as a commodity intended to advance the poet's own *fama*, but her marketability is closely linked to the arousal of male sexual desire...The *amator's* presentation of his mistress as *vendibilis* defines her exclusively in terms of her function – use as a vehicle of enhance between a male poet and his audience of sexually excitable (perhaps predatory) men. (349)

The woman is thrown into a passive role without control over herself.

iv. Active and Passive Sexuality

Ruth Mazo Karras attempts to explain the confusing and contradictory parts of ancient sexualities, and her views are a tool to examine Ovid's violence and gender transgressions in the *Amores*. First, it is necessary to understand that, "sexuality is not a thing that can be found in all cultures, but is created by the various discourses of particular societies, and the active/passive dichotomy...categorized sexual behaviors or identities not by the gender of the participants but by the sexual role that each played" (Karras 1250). Many scholars have come to agree that "gender roles – masculine or feminine, active or passive – were more important than object choice in the ancient world" (1255). This notion relates to Ovid's voices in his poems because as a male writer, he can transgress his gender. According to the active/passive model, the one who is penetrated is gendered feminine, but "women who penetrate and men who are penetrated are seen not primarily as sexual deviants but as gender transgressors" (1256).

The Athenian view of sex was an act that one does to someone else, "a hierarchical act, rather than something two people do together" (1259). However, the penetrated, though passive, were not always seen as objects. According to James Davidson, "The one who is penetrated does not have to be inert or apathetic in order for intercourse to be understood as one person doing something to someone else...it is not that he *is* penetrated

but that he desires to be penetrated" (1259). This is a new way to look at passivity in sexuality. It makes passivity an anatomical construct rather than emotional or mental.

Jonathan Walters discusses the significance of impenetrability to Roman concepts of manhood. He writes, "to have a woman's experience" is to be the passive partner, but to be penetrated "was not just the experience of a woman, but also that of a slave or freedman" (1261). This concept correlates to the military metaphor along with social hierarchies in that the man who is the strongest warrior carries the sword and makes many penetrations. He is the most active and the most masculine. There is no penalty for penetration; in fact, there is honor in it.

Elizabeth Thomas writes that "the passion of love gives rise to warfare" (Thomas 162). Ovid's military metaphor is an effective way to capture the readers' attention because the parallel of love and war is also analogous to many aspects of the gender dichotomy in ancient Greece and Rome that governed sexuality. Throughout the *Amores*, Ovid transgresses gender and societal bounds to interpret and explore sexuality and love. His technique of writing in many voices allows the reader to experience a continuum of gender and sexuality. Perhaps sexuality is not as dichotomous as it seems.

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