

THE ART OF LOVE

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Ovid

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THE ART OF LOVE

Translated by James Michie

Introduction by David Malouf



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NEW YORK

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The great classical poet Ovid was born Publius Ovidius Naso in Sulmo (modern Sulmona) in Italy, on March 20, 43 B.C. Although biographical information is scant—and based largely on Ovid's autobiographical poetry—it is known that Ovid's father had the wealth and position to anticipate a political career for his son. Ovid was educated in Rome, where he studied rhetoric, and traveled in Athens, Asia Minor, and Sicily. Reluctantly, he held minor official posts upon his return, but poetry became increasingly important to him. The contemporary works of Virgil and Horace had spurred Ovid's imagination, and he decided to give up public life and begin writing.

Ovid is believed to have written his first surviving work, the *Amores* (*The Loves*), between 25 and 20 B.C. The *Amores* consisted of short poems of 86 to 106 lines in proper elegiac couplets. With its simple and obvious theme, the *Amores* was a successful stepping-stone for the young poet, and it was republished in a shorter second edition years later.

At roughly the same time, Ovid composed the *Heroides* (*Heroines*), a collection of fifteen imagined letters from famous women of Greek mythology to absent or abandoned lovers. Though it is uncertain when the *Heroides* was written, some scholars date it after the *Amores* because Ovid again utilizes the form of the love elegy, but augments it with dramatic monologue and mythical themes. The influence of Greek tragedy on Ovid's writing was significant, and he wrote his own version of the *Medea*, perhaps around the time he worked on the *Heroides*.

Building on some of the themes of the *Amores*, Ovid turned next to the composition of three poems on the art of seduction. The first of these didactic poems was likely the *Medicamina Faciei* (*On Cosmetics*), a short poem, of which only a fragment remains, that professes very technical knowledge on how to cultivate physical beauty. The second and more substantial work, *Ars Amatoria* (*The Art of Love*), was probably finished between 2 B.C. and A.D. 2 and published in three volumes—two addressed to men, one to women. This ambitious and very popular handbook taught readers how to find, catch, and hold on to lovers, and it highlighted Ovid's lack of reverence for Emperor Augustus' strict moral code. While finishing the third book of the *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid wrote a follow-up poem titled *Remedia Amoris* (*Remedies for Love*). In this recantation of sorts, Ovid offers cures for falling out of love in the spirited and burlesque style of the *Ars Amatoria*.

Soon, Ovid began exploring different literary themes and forms. Around A.D. 1–4, he worked on the *Fasti* (*Calendar*), a long poem consisting of twelve books of elegiac couplets that describe the origins of Roman religious festivals and holidays. The six surviving books of the *Fasti* chronicle the first six months of the year and are filled with bits of astronomical detail as well as patriotic enthusiasm. During this period, Ovid also began work on what is perhaps his most famous work, the *Metamorphoses* (*Transformations*). Totalling fifteen books and nearly twelve thousand lines, this long poem was inspired largely by Virgil's *Aeneid*. Ovid's epic, written in hexameter verse, sweeps from the creation of the world to the deification of Julius Caesar in a variety of historical and mythological tales. By A.D. 8, Ovid

had completed the poem; final revisions, however, were left unfinished when Emperor Augustus banished Ovid from Rome that year (some claim that the hedonistic themes of *Amatoria* were to blame). Exiled to the harsh Black Sea port of Tomis (now Constanta, Romania), Ovid continued writing and hoped for reprieve.

Ovid produced three major poems from exile: *Tristia* (*Poems of Sadness*), *Ibis*, and the *Epistulae ex Ponto* (*Letters from Pontus*). It is believed that the *Tristia*, a set of fifty autobiographical poems in five books, was written first, between A.D. 8 and A.D. 12. In the *Tristia*, he returns to the first person and to the use of elegiac couplets as he woefully describes his journey into exile. The undated *Ibis* is a lengthy imputation directed at an anonymous enemy in which Ovid again shows the breadth of his mythological learning. The *Epistulae ex Ponto* consists of forty-six poems in four books written between A.D. 12 and A.D. 16. Like the *Tristia*, the *Epistulae* recounts the miseries of life in Tomis, but in this work Ovid addresses his melancholy “letters” to specific people in Rome—his wife, his friends, and the emperor—and appeals for aid and sympathy. These compositions failed to move Augustus, and although Ovid was popular among Romans, he remained in exile until his death in late A.D. 17 or early A.D. 18.

Ovid’s adoption of Greek themes and meter into the Latin language, his mastery of classic mythology, and his technical precision are but a few of the reasons many consider him one of history’s most brilliant poets. His influence on Western literature is immeasurable.

CONTENTS

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

INTRODUCTION *by David Malouf*

Dedication

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

THE ART OF LOVE: [ENGLISH]

BOOK ONE

BOOK TWO

BOOK THREE

THE ART OF LOVE: [LATIN]

LIBER PRIMUS

LIBER SECUNDUS

LIBER TERTIUS

David Malouf

The *Ars Amatoria* presents itself as a didactic poem in the manner of Virgil's *Georgics*. But we expect it to be solemn and improving, we will from the start be confounded. Its subject is neither farming nor military tactics, hunting, horsemanship, seafaring, rhetoric, or any other practical and socially useful activity. In the topsy-turvy "modern" world that Ovid introduces us to, the flaneur's world of cruising the streets of a vast cosmopolitan city, of shopping and partygoing, of theaters, taverns, temples, synagogues, colonnades, racetracks, piazzas, Ovid's subject is the entirely unsolemn and to this point unconsidered art (or so the poet would have us believe) of getting and keeping a lover.

Highly colored, allusive, audaciously tongue-in-cheek, the *Ars Amatoria* is from first line to last a series of surprising and provocative reversals, not only of established literary conventions but of anything that even the most alert and knowing reader might expect.

Comic disproportion is its method. Petty concerns are illustrated with large examples, great matters with ones that are trivial. Moral tags are misapplied, old tales are introduced on the most tenuous pretext and given new twists, arguments are playfully exaggerated until they collapse under their own weight—it is the playfulness, not the argument, that we are meant to approve and be impressed by, psychological analysis, as in the recounting of Pasiphaë's passion for the bull, pursued to the point where it becomes comically absurd. Seriousness is at every turn averted, but with so disarming a mixture of slyness and candor, and so much infectious joy in the doing of it, that to charge the poet with crime—*lèse-majesté* or libertinism or the corruption of youth—would be, to steal an image from a later Augustan poet, like breaking a butterfly on a wheel. Is this why it took Augustus so long to accuse and punish Ovid?

In A.D. 8, a good seven years after the poem first made its spectacular appearance, Ovid was banished to Tomis on the Black Sea, a place from which, despite many appeals for clemency, he was never to return. The *Ars Amatoria* is cited as one part of his offense, and it is not difficult to see in the poem what the emperor might have found offensive.

At its center is a character that was to have a long history in poems of this kind, and not only in Latin: the modern lover—the carefree, pleasure-loving man-about-town who has dropped out of the world of serious civic duty and become a hero not of the battlefield or the law courts but of the bedchamber, where the only "virtue" he recognizes is play. The poem is really subversive—not in the challenge it offers to the new morality, or because it has the effrontery to claim for the lover the same "professional" status as the farmer, the soldier, the holder of high public office, but because it makes the role it creates so invitingly attractive. Most of all, because it establishes the lover/poet as the emperor of an alternative art.

privately constituted state. As one of Ovid's later incarnations puts it: "She is all States, and all Princes, I, / Nothing else is."¹ The poem's ostensible subject, the art of love, is a decoy. The real subject is the poet himself. To be a poet—to be *the* poet Ovid—is to be a world unto yourself. The emperor's world, the great world of Rome, is simply the scene of operations, the most, "material." That is the immodest claim. No wonder Augustus felt he had to act.

Around this lively and youthfully impulsive *dramatis persona* (the poet himself, we should remember, was in his middle forties), Ovid organizes a spectacular ado, a series of brilliant sideshows in which what is on display is the poet's delight in his own talent: the range of his erudition, his verbal dexterity and wit, his inventiveness in painting scenes of sweeping grandeur but also, since he has what we would now call a cinematic eye, illuminating close-ups. The poet can take literally anything into his poem in the assurance that what will hold together is his own mercurial presence, as guide, joker, confidant, provocateur, storyteller, picture maker, mock scholar, mock sage, magician, stage manager.

At one moment he is leading us on a conducted tour of the city's sights and monuments—with time out to comment on the usefulness of each as a pickup place. In the next he is playing knucklebones or spillikins, or recommending hairstyles or footwear or health resorts or diverting us with old tales retold, of Pasiphae and her bull, of the birdman Daedalus, of Mars and Venus, Cephalus and Procris, and throwing out hints along the way to a whole company of poets and playwrights and novelists to come: to the school of English poets we call Metaphysical, who will find in his unexpected juxtapositions, his yoking together of disparate worlds and objects, the way to a new kind of imagery; to Molière for *Les précieux ridicules* and *Les femmes savantes*; to the long line of eighteenth-century epistolary novelists; even perhaps, in his proposal that the safest way of transmitting a message is to write it on the back of the messenger, to a twentieth-century filmmaker, Peter Greenaway, for *The Pillow Book*.

It is the protean inclusiveness of the *Ars Amatoria*, its joy in the variousness and contrariness of things, their lovely capacity for surprise and paradox, that has made it such a treasure house of literary tropes and genres, such a gallery of pictures that need only the stroke of a brush to make them actual paintings. Titian, Rubens, Poussin, and others had only to turn the verbal pictures here—Bacchus in a chariot drawn by tigers, a drunken Silenus falling sideways off his ass, Cephalus stretched out in a grassy clearing—to discover the program down to the smallest detail, for some of the greatest Renaissance and Baroque paintings.

One of Ovid's most sympathetic qualities for those who came later was his own sense of belatedness—of being, as he must have seen it, postclassical. But what he also demonstrated, and by brilliant example, was that all we need to make old material new is freshness of invention and a previously unconsidered point of view.

Walking along the shore with Calypso, Ulysses maps the Trojan plain for her by drawing with a stick in the sand. So Ovid embarks, once again, on the well-known story. But Ulysses has barely got started on his "epic" when a wave sweeps up the beach and, in a wonderful dramatic and affecting image, Troy and all the old world of gods and heroes is once more obliterated.

In the retelling of the Daedalus story, one of the most extended and fully imagined in the poem, an aerial view of the Greek islands Naxos, Paros, and Delos, in itself a remarkable piece of imagining, is momentarily suspended while Ovid shows us his two birdmen from

another angle, through the eyes now of a supernumerary angler on the beach below. More than fifteen centuries later, Brueghel would appropriate this extraordinary image for a famous painting, and four centuries later again, W. H. Auden for an equally famous poem.

For the ancient reader, any suggestion of solemn intent would have been subverted by the poet's choice of meter—not hexameters, as the didactic poem traditionally demanded, but elegiac couplets (hexameter followed by pentameter) of the sort used in the refined, playful, erotic poems Ovid had previously produced in his *Amores*. James Michie's irregular couplets with their unpredictable rhymes and quick-footed shifts of register and perspective splendidly re-create the lightness of the original and its careless charm. We know this voice. It is the authentic voice of Ovid as it has been transmitted to us by a long line of English poets who, in localizing it, discovered their own:

Since there's no helpe, Come let us kisse and part,
Nay, I have done: You get no more of Me....²

or

I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I
Did, till we lov'd? were we not wean'd till then?³

or

Licence my roaving hands, and let them go,
Before, behind, between, above, below.⁴

Michie is able to evoke an Ovid who seems so immediately present, so racily up to date, because the persona he created has turned out, by a kind of miracle, to be timeless.

To the wandering scholars and minnesingers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, as to the authors of *The Romance of the Rose*, and to Chaucer in the fourteenth, Ovid seemed like a man of modern sensibility, a contemporary out of his time, and he appeared that way also to the poets of the English Renaissance. His dedication to what Chapman called "Ovid's banquet of sense" made him a natural alternative to Petrarch and the Petrarchans. It was his joy in the senses, in color and action, most of all in the self, that he offered Marlowe, who translated the *Amores* while he was still a student at Oxford. For Francis Meres, writing in 1598, Shakespeare was the "sweet witty soul" of Ovid mellifluously reborn. Thomas Heywood and Thomas Lodge both made translations of the *Ars Amatoria*. In France it is what a rejuvenated Ronsard turned to in the second and third books of his *Amours*. And when Goethe, in the fifth of his *Roman Elegies*, taps out his hexameters on the back of a sleeping girl, it is surely Ovid who is there in the shadows behind him, as it must have been Ovid, as much as any of the Italian painters, or Winckelmann with his promise of "classical ground," who drew the great Northerner into that area of his nature that he called Italy.

Ovid represents the playful, irreverent element in our culture that, once a place has been made for it, we cannot do without. We have only to hear his voice in our own everyday language, as we do here in James Michie's translation, to recognize a lost but living contemporary whose boldness is a challenge to our own, and the charm of whose

companionship is, as it always was, irresistible.

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¹ John Donne, “The Sunne Rising.”

² Michael Drayton, Sonnet 61, “Idea.”

³ John Donne, “The Good-morrow.”

⁴ John Donne, “Elegie. To His Mistris Going to Bed.”

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

Publius Ovidius Naso (the "Nose" no doubt reflects some distinguished ancestor) was born in 43 B.C. of a long-standing equestrian family. Though his birthplace was ninety miles east of the city, he belonged therefore to the second highest social class in Rome. As a teenager he was sent to Rome for a suitable education, which at the time heavily stressed the art of rhetoric, or the sophisticated gift of the gab which could lead a clever lad to the lucrative profession of an advocate in law; that is what his father hoped for, and that was the example set by his talented elder brother. It soon became clear to Ovid that, though he enjoyed the literary and emotional side of rhetoric, sheer argumentation bored him. He was writing poetry, and wanted to be a poet. His father, as fathers usually are, was aghast, but Ovid had his way. At about twenty, he did the equivalent of the Grand Tour, studying in Athens and visiting Sicily and the cities of Asia Minor. Like Catullus, in the same year he both gazed at the ruins of Troy and lost a beloved brother.

After his return to Rome he held some minor public posts, but his passion remained poetry. He made friends with Horace and Propertius, he mourned the early death of Tibullus, he saw Virgil but never spoke to him. Before long his verses were circulating and being publicly recited. First came the *Amores*, a series of clever love poems, most of them addressed to a probably fictional mistress, Corinna; next the *Heroides*, imaginary letters written by heroines of legend to their lovers or husbands; and then the *Ars Amatoria*, which brought him to the peak of popularity.

Meanwhile (possibly it was arranged by his anxious father) he had married a girl whom he not long after divorced: she was, in Ovid's single, scathing reference to her, "neither worth nor useful." A second marriage was also short-lived; when or why it ended, and whether there was a child, we do not know; Ovid only vouchsafes that his wife "had nothing against her predecessor. His last marriage, to a well-connected widow with a daughter, was happy and it was to her and about her that he wrote some of his most touching poetry in exile.

In A.D. 8, almost a decade after the appearance of the *Ars Amatoria*, Ovid was abruptly banished by edict of the Emperor Augustus. (An irony of history is that he learnt of his fate while he was visiting an island famous in the annals of banishment: Elba.) It was not the harshest form of that particular punishment, which was *exsilium*, but *relegatio*, whereby he retained his civic rights and property; all the same he had to leave Rome for a place of Augustus' choice (this was Tomis, on the Black Sea) and his books were removed from the public libraries. Ovid says the grounds for his sentence were "a poem" and "a blunder" and at the end of his life presented himself as an astonished innocent; but if we look at the background to the Emperor's decision we may feel less surprise than Ovid professed to have felt.

As Octavian, Augustus had come to power after a period of civil war and disorder. Part of his programme of reform was to revive the stricter moral standards of the previous generation, to which end he passed a number of laws, notably one against adultery. In 2 B.C. on discovering that his daughter Julia was a multiple adulteress, he banished her and her

known lovers. Ten years later he also banished his grand-daughter, another Julia, for the same offence. He was clearly in earnest. Between these two banishments Ovid had published his *Ars Amatoria* to the applause of educated Rome. This was the guilty “poem.” Ovid, riding high, must have been so blinded by success that he failed to see that it was bound to displease the Emperor deeply. Although he always protested that the available girls in his poem were exclusively freedwomen—unattached demi-mondaines—his text doesn’t bear him out: adultery is more than hinted at. And how could he have hoped that Augustus would tolerate his recommending as the two best hunting-grounds for casual sex the patriotic mock naval battle which the Emperor himself staged and the porticos which Augustus and his sister had dedicated in honour of his consort?

The “blunder” has puzzled historians. “*Repertus ego*,” says Ovid, suggesting that he was “discovered” as an unwilling or unwitting witness or minor accessory to some scene or plot offensive to the Emperor. He may have known too much about Julia’s love-life, or he may have been too friendly with members of the political opposition. He insists that the “blunder” was in no sense a “crime,” but it was certainly a fatal indiscretion. Augustus, having long stayed his hand, struck.

What were conditions like for an exile in Tomis? When Franco banished the philosopher Unamuno to a remote island in the Canaries, he had his books, local wine and an agreeable climate—what more, a cynic might ask, could a true philosopher desire? Ovid had none of these amenities: imported wine, it’s true, was available, but, as he complains, it was often iced over and could be drunk “not by the draught but only by the chunk.” Delacroix’s painting in the National Gallery, *Ovid Among the Scythians*, is charming but misleading: it shows the poet lounging, lightly clad, on a bank in front of a pleasant-looking stretch of water, enjoying the sight of a picturesque tribesman milking a mare. In fact, Tomis (now Constanta in Romania) was a god-forsaken, run-down, self-governing Roman frontier outpost, continually harassed by barbarian horsemen from the steppes. The inhabitants spoke not a word of Latin, only a garbled form of Greek. The climate was vile (a prevailing north-east wind), he was without his wife (she had begged him to let her accompany him, but they had decided it was wisest for her to stay behind, look after their property and work for his recall), he was without his library and without skilled doctors, the posts to and from Rome took several months, privacy was hard to come by, and he had no one with whom he could share his love of poetry: as he poignantly put it, “To write a poem you can’t read to anyone else is like dancing in the dark.” Yet he didn’t collapse, as Oscar Wilde did, with less excuse, in Dieppe. He buckled down to learn the local language, Getic, and, as a middle-aged man in a frontier community living in fear of raids (“we pick up poisoned arrows in the street”), he joined the citizen militia. And during his eight or nine years of exile he continued to write poetry, nearly six thousand lines of it, sometimes grovelling in hopeful flattery of Augustus, sometimes whingeing, sometimes aggressive (his *Ibis* is a savage attack on some, to us, unknown enemy in Rome, whom he blames for his misfortunes), sometimes deeply moving (the autobiographical parts of the *Tristia*), but always glitteringly accomplished. He ended up honoured in Tomis, crowned with a municipal wreath and exempted from taxation. A statue of him stands in Constanza today. By the time he died, at the age of fifty-nine, another emperor, Tiberius, was the ruler of the Roman world, and the question of the poet’s exile was not high on his agenda.

What sort of man was Ovid? The Romans were not given to self-portraiture—Horace has left us a few sentences, Virgil nothing—so we must be grateful that Ovid occasionally spoke of himself in his poetry, especially in exile, though he was at all times speaking through the poet's mask, or persona. I get the impression of an affectionate nature: his expressed love for his parents, his brother and his last wife, his unjealous friendships with fellow poets, even his sexual teasing in the *Ars* strike me as the mark of a warm, not a cold person. He was entirely heterosexual in a society that was tolerantly not, but he thought some “gays” fair target for mockery. If he had a tendency to self-pity, he also had humour as well as wit, as demonstrated (as I read it) by a story of Seneca's. Knowing and disapproving of Ovid's weakness for verbal extravagance, three of his friends proposed to him that they should, as a committee, select three of his lines that ought to be excised from his work. He agreed, but only on condition that he could select three lines that on no account should be sacrificed. The lines on each list were identical.

Francis Meres, a contemporary of Shakespeare, hit on a happy phrase—“the sweet wit and soul of Ovid.” In the language of the nineteenth-century clubman, Macaulay tries to sum him up: “He seems to have been a very good fellow; rather too fond of women; a flatterer and a coward; but kind and generous, and free from envy, though a man of letters sufficiently vain of his literary performance.” I see no evidence for “coward,” I do not know where being fond of women should properly stop, and as for flattery (that old Whig obsession), what other weapon could Ovid have laid hands on in trying to get his sentence repealed? For me, he is a more complicated character—imaginative, self-indulgent, histrionic, but also tough, responsible and adaptable, as the facts prove. Above all, he was persistently, dedicatedly, a poet, with a superb ear, a genius for both compression and digression, and an exceptional rich memory, enabling him to retell innumerable myths and legends that were part of his cultural heritage, if not of his, or any other sophisticated Roman's, religious belief.

The *Ars Amatoria* is a mock-didactic poem. The traditional didactic poem—Virgil's *Georgics* are its supreme culmination—was a practical versified guide to such prosaic subjects as bee-keeping or antidotes to poison. Ovid himself wrote a short one, at about this time, on facial cosmetics. What he now did was entirely original: he built a joke around the genre. From his self-appointed professorial podium he delivered a tongue-in-cheek verse lecture on the science of seduction, not in the expected hexameters, but in a metre associated with erotic poetry, elegiac couplets. New, too, was the tone of voice—here was no conventional, passive-melancholy love poet, but an unorthodox, positive ringmaster, exhibiting his tricks, totally in charge of the show. The first two books give advice to men on how to find a mistress, how to seduce her, and how to keep her. The third book, added later and perhaps at the request of female friends (of which, one feels, Ovid was never short), purports to be an equivalent guide for women; but in it, although he pretends to be betraying male secrets and weaknesses to the other sex, he is really compounding the macho joke by giving away very little that matters. The poem is riddled with metaphors of war and the chase. It is also embroidered with illustrations from legend, set-pieces which teasingly delay the business in hand but without which we would be the poorer—the rape of the Sabine women, the princess Pasiphaë turned into a cow and mad with love for a white bull, Bacchus in his tiger-drawn chariot rescuing Ariadne from her desert island, and, best of all, the tragedy of the first aeronaut, Daedalus and Icarus. These bravura passages contrast amusingly with the sexual tips the

interrupt. Contrast, ironic or parodic, between a lofty manner and down-to-earth concerns at the heart of Ovid's method. Nowhere is it more outrageously employed than when he borrows Virgil's solemn phrase referring to the difficulty Aeneas will have in retracing his steps back from the Underworld, "*hoc opus, hic labor est*" ("herein lies the task, the great labour") and finishes the line in his own way—"primo sine munere iungi" ("to part with nothing before she's given herself").

Ovid was a survivor, and so it's fitting that his work too should have survived, not only the manuscripts which the celibate monks, to whom we are smilingly grateful, preserved in monastery libraries, but in the judgment of posterity. He was Martial's favourite poet after Catullus. Touchstone in *As You Like It* calls him, with intent to praise, "the most capricious poet," and Marlowe, who translated the *Amores* while he was at university, brilliantly transferred his lover's prayer into the mouth of Dr. Faustus desperately close to the stroke of midnight: "*O lente, lente currite, noctis equi!*" Milton admired his erotic poems. Macaulay read his entire works in Calcutta and pronounced the *Ars Amatoria* "decidedly his best." For the next hundred years a Victorian reaction prevailed, at least publicly, and the *Ars* was described as "a shameless compendium in profligacy" and as "*l'art d'aimer sans amour.*" How odd! It may be "naughty" but by no stretch of imagination is it pornographic and, as for "true love," Ovid makes it clear that he is not dealing with that. In 1993 readers will find it easy, despite what is lost in translation, to enjoy it as they would Pope's *Rape of the Lock*—as a sparkling, clever, gorgeously decorated, serio-comic masterpiece.

A word about this translation. Having just compared Ovid with Pope, I agree with Peter Green's opinion that "Ovid has suffered more than most Roman poets from over-close association with the eighteenth century." Put him into rhyming couplets and not only do you lose a great deal through forced compression, but you also turn, willy-nilly, a young Roman into a middle-aged gentleman, complete with wig, in Twickenham. Mr. Green's excellent translation of the *Ars Amatoria*, published in the Penguin Classics, while still keeping to the couplet concept, uses lines of irregular length, with as many as seven or as few as two stresses. I have followed in his path, but feeling that the two primary elements in Ovid's poetry, wit and technical virtuosity, had to be reflected somehow, I have added rhyme. If there is gain, it is in chic, a very Ovidian quality; if there is loss, it is that I am sometimes cheating the reader of the awareness that after every couplet there is in the original a definite pause. But the test of all translations is simple: is this what the author wrote, and do I enjoy what I'm reading? I can only guarantee you the first.

JAMES MICHIE, 1999

THE ART OF LOVE

[ENGLISH].

If any Roman knows nothing about love-making, please
Read this poem and graduate in expertise.
Ships and chariots with sails, oars, wheels, reins,
Speed through technique and control, and the same obtains
For love. As Automedon was Achilles' charioteer
And Tiphys earned the right to steer
The *Argo* on Jason's expedition,
So I am appointed by Venus as the technician
Of her art—my name will live on
As Love's Tiphys, Love's Automedon.
Love often fights against me, for he's wild,
Yet he's also controllable, for he's still a child.
Chiron made Achilles expert with the lyre,
His cool tuition quenched youth's primitive fire,
So that the boy who later became
A terror to friends and foes alike stood tame
In front of his aged teacher, so they say,
And the hand that Hector would feel one day
Was held out meekly to be rapped
At his schoolmaster's bidding. Achilles was the apt
Pupil of Chiron, Love is mine—
Wild boys both, and both born of divine
Mothers; yet the heavy plough will make
Even the bull's neck docile, and the friskiest colt will take
The bit in his teeth. Love shall be tamed under my hand,
Though his arrows riddle me, though his flaming brand
Is waved in my face. The worse the wounds, the fiercer the burn,
The prompter I'll be to punish him in return.
I won't pretend that I'm inspired by you, Apollo:
The hoot of an owl, the flight of a swallow,
Have taught me nothing; awake or asleep,
I never had a vision of the Muses tending sheep
In pastoral valleys. This poem springs
From experience. Listen, your poet sings
Of what he knows, he tells no lies.
Venus, mother of Love, assist my enterprise!
But you with headbands and ankle-length robes, staid matrons,
Stay well clear—you are not my patrons.
My theme is safe and licit love, stolen joys which women'll
Condone; I'll mention nothing criminal.

Your first job, then, love's volunteer recruit,
Is to find the object of your pursuit;
Next comes the work of wooing and winning; and, last, ensuring
That the love you've won is enduring.
These are the limits of the ground my wheeled
Chariot will rapidly cover, my chosen field.

[LATIN: *Dum licet, et...*]

While you're still unharnessed and can wander fancy-free,
Pick a girl and tell her, "You're the only girl for me."
A mistress, though, doesn't float down from the sky:
You have to seek out the one who's caught your eye.
A hunter has to work,
Know where to spread his stag-nets, in which glens boars lurk,
A fowler's familiar with copses, fishermen learn
Which streams are the most rewarding, and you, if you yearn
For a long-term affair, won't have one till you've found
The places where girls are thick on the ground.
Though Perseus brought back Andromeda from the Syrian coast
And Paris stole Helen from his foreign host,
You can achieve your ambition
More easily. I'm not recommending an expedition
Overseas or a gruelling march; look nearer home
And you'll say, "The prettiest girls in the world are in Rome"—
They're thicker than wheatsheaves on Gargara, grapes in Lesbos, birds in the trees,
Stars in the sky, fish in the seas,
For Venus is a strong presence
In the city her son founded. If you fancy adolescents,
One stunner out of plenty
Will emerge and dazzle you; if you like them over twenty,
The range of available talent is so rich
That your only problem will be which;
And if you prefer mature, experienced women,
Believe me, they're as common
As blackberries.

[LATIN: *Tu modo Pompeia...*]

When the sun's on the back of Hercules'
Lion, in high summer, just stroll at your ease
Down Pompey's shady colonnade,
Or Octavia's (which she made

More beautiful, when her son died,
With rich marblework on the outside),
Or the one that's named
After its founder, Livia, famed
For its antique paintings. Don't forget to go
To the Danaids' portico
Where the fifty sculptured virgins meditate
Their luckless cousins' fate—
The multiple murder planned
By their fierce father Belus (here shown sword in hand).
And don't miss the shrine where Venus weeps
For Adonis, the synagogue where Syrian Jewry keeps
The sabbath sacred, or the Memphian temple
Of the linen-clad heifer Io, whose example
Has taught many a courtesan
To offer her body to a man
As she did hers to Jove.
The law-courts, too, are fertile grounds for love,
Believe it or not—yes, desire
From dry forensic tinder can catch fire.
There where the Appian nymph tosses her water-jets
High from beneath the marble shrine, Venus's nets
Trap even lawyers. The man who knows how to lend
His eloquence to defend others can't defend
Himself, words fail him, he has to look after
A new case now—his own. Meanwhile the goddess's laughter
Tinkles from her nearby temple at the sight
Of the advocate turned client overnight.

[LATIN: *Sed tu praecipue...*]

Above all, comb the curved theatre—that's the place
Richest in spoils of the sexual chase.
There you'll find someone to love, or a playmate, there
You can opt for one night or a solid affair.
As ants in column bustle up and down their lanes,
Jaws clutching their wheat-grains,
As bees in their fragrant glades and pastures hover
Above flowers and thyme and clover,
Our smart women swarm to the games in such numbers my vision
And judgment blur—often I lose my powers of decision.
They come to see and be seen;
Modesty, chastity mean
Nothing there. Romulus, it was all your fault,

It was your games that first featured rape and assault—

Those Sabine women and sex-hungry men.

The theatre had no marble seats or awnings then,

Nor was the stage red-dyed

With sweet-smelling saffron; the Palatine woods supplied

A backdrop of greenery,

And nature without artifice the scenery;

Shaggy-headed, the spectators sat

On tiered turf seats, any old leaves as a hat

To shade the sun. Alert, each man

Brooded silently and formed his plan,

Having marked with a glance his selected girl.

Then, to the skirl

Of Etruscan flutes, the dancers' feet

Stamped the smooth floor in the triple beat

Until amid loud hoorays

(Applause was pretty crude in the old days)

The king gave the sign they were waiting for

And the Rape began. Up they sprang with a lustful roar

And grabbed the virgins. As eagles scatter a flock

Of timid doves or wolves scare lambs, so the shock

Of this wild male charge spread panic. Colour drained

From every girl's face; a common terror reigned,

Though its features varied. Some sat there numb

With fear, some tore their hair; one girl, struck dumb,

Simply wept, another

Called ineffectually for her mother;

They shrieked or stared, they froze or fled.

And so, as plunder of the marriage-bed,

They were carried away, and I dare say their alarm

Gave some of them a piquant extra charm.

A girl who struggled and wouldn't co-operate

Was hoisted up and hauled off by her new mate

With "Why spoil those tender eyes with tears? Never mind,

I'll be as kind to you as your father was kind

To your mother." Romulus, you found the right reward

For soldiers—for *that* I'll enlist myself, with a sword!

Since then time-honoured custom has made our Roman

Theatres danger spots for pretty women.

And don't miss the chariot races: the big Circus

Offers lots of chances for smart workers.

No need of finger-language here, no need to guess

That a nod of the head means yes:

You can sit as close to a girl as you please,

So make the most of touching thighs and knees

(The seating arrangements almost force
Physical intimacy as a matter of course).

At this point casually volunteer

An opening remark for anyone to hear.

Ask with keen interest, “Whose team’s that going by?”

And “Who are you backing?” Given a reply,

Add instantly, “So am I!”

When the gods’ ivory statues pass in the grand

Procession, give Venus a big hand,

And if a speck of dust, as it well may,

Falls in her lap, brush it away—

Brush it away even if there’s no dust:

Any gallant excuse in the service of lust.

If her cloak trails on the ground, make a great scene

Of lifting it up to keep it clean,

And if you’ve played it right

You’re rewarded at once—with her permission, the sight

Of her ankles. (Watch out for the man behind—

His knee may be giving the small of her back a grind.)

A frivolous mind

Is won by small attentions. Many a man

Has scored by arranging a cushion or plying a fan

Or slipping a little stool

Under the dainty feet of a sweet fool.

[LATIN: *Hos aditus Circusque...*]

Such openings the Circus offers for the study

Of the art of the pick-up; so does the grim Forum with its bloody

Arena of sand. Here Cupid has his killing-ground,

And the man who came to see blood himself gets a wound—

In the heart. While he’s touching her hand, bending her ear,

Borrowing her programme, asking if the charioteer

He’s backed will win, he feels

The shock of the arrow, the steel’s

Struck home, he groans—and the spectator

Joins in the show, a dying gladiator.

[LATIN: *Quid, modo cum...*]

When Caesar staged that naval mock-battle between

Athenians and Persians, what a scene!

From east and west young women and men

Converged, the whole known world was in Rome then.

In such a crowd, in such a push-and-shove,
Who could fail to find someone to love?
That day hundreds of men learnt
How hot a foreign flame is, and got burnt.

[LATIN: *Ecce, parat Caesar...*]

Now Caesar's planning to extend his powers
To the rest of the untamed world. You shall be ours,
O farthest East. Parthians, you shall be paid
In full. Exult, standards that they laid
Shaming barbarian hands on! Rejoice, the shade
Of buried Crassus! Now your avenger appears,
A boy who despite his years
Proclaims his generalship
And has strong hands to grip
The reins of a war that no one of that age
But he would dare or be allowed to wage.
Why timidly rely on arithmetic
When it comes to the age of a god? Valour is quick
To show in Caesars. Divine genius tolerates
No hanging back, accelerates
Achievement, and makes nonsense of mere dates.
The infant Hercules strangled two snakes, even
In the cradle earning the applause of heaven.
And you, Bacchus, still a young god,
How old were you when India kissed your rod?
With your father's authority, under his lucky star,
Boy, you shall fight and win this war.
Your great name calls for a youthful victory:
Today prince of the young, one day you shall be
Prince of the old. You're a brother, a son—then requite
The wrongs of brothers, uphold a father's right.
Your country's father, indeed your own,
Has armed you against a foe who seized *his* throne
By force from a father. Javelin versus bow,
Good against evil, justice and right shall go
Ahead of your standards. Parthia's doom is sealed
By her own guilt; may every battlefield
Reflect that truth, and may my prince come home
Bringing the riches of the East to Rome!
O Mars, O Caesar, both fathers, one divine,
One god-to-be, let your numinous powers shine
On his setting forth. Lo, I predict a

Great triumph, and vow to you, the victor,
A celebratory poem to trumpet your name
Resoundingly. Using the same
Words I wrote, you'll stand and exhort
Your battle-line—and I pray they'll not fall short
Of your valour's reach. I'll describe head-on attacks
By Romans, cowardly Parthian backs,
And arrows in the sky
Shot by their swivelling horsemen as they fly.
(You Parthians, if, pursuing victory, you retreat,
What meaning's left for the word "defeat"?
Your war-will's sapped, it's an ill omen.)
And so the day will come when you, our Roman
Hero, an adored, resplendent sight,
Will ride in gold, drawn by four snow-white
Horses, behind their chiefs—neck-fettered now for fear
They save their skins by a second flight. A cheer
Will rise from every watching girl and boy
On that day of heart-felt joy.
When some girl asks the names of the kings and foreign parts—
Towns, mountains, rivers etcetera—on the pageant carts,
Answer all her questions. No, don't wait
To be asked, volunteer (though you're guessing) with a straight
Face, "Here's Euphrates, his forehead fringed with reeds,
And that's Tigris with the long blue hair. There are the Medes,
And, look, the Armenians, I'm positive. There goes
Some Achaemenid valley town. And those
Must be two generals ..." Give them each a name—
Right, if you can; if you can't, give them one just the same.

[LATIN: *Dant etiam positis...*]

Banquets give openings, too: when the tables are spread,
There's more than wine to turn your head.
There Love, with soft arms and flushed face,
Has often given the horns of Bacchus an embrace,
And when wine has soaked his thirsty plumage, Love
Stands rooted, torpid, can't perform or move.
He takes no time to shake his wings dry again,
But for *us* a few drops of love are intense pain.
Wine rouses the heart, wine makes all men
Lovers, wine undiluted dilutes worry. Then
Laughter arrives, even the poor
Feel as brave as bulls, wrinkles relax, out of the door

Go care and sorrow, into all hearts

Flies truth (rare bird these days), for the god expels the arts
Of the hypocrite. Then girls bewitch men with desire,
And Venus in the wine is a fire within a fire.
On these occasions don't trust the lamps—they can lie:
Darkness and drink blur the judging eye.
It was in broad daylight, not after dinner,
That Paris made his choice: "You, Venus, are the winner."
Blemishes are lost in the half-light,
Faults overlooked. Night
Turns any woman into a goddess.
When it comes to judging faces, bodies,
Jewels or clothes, I always say,
Consult the light of day.

[LATIN: *Quid tibi femineos...*]

But why count grains of sand? How can I list all the places
Where girls go and you can hunt pretty faces?
Take Baiae, its shores fringed with pleasure craft,
Its springs smoking with sulphur—Cupid's shaft
Does heart damage there. One man came back with the report:
"That's no health resort!"
The same goes for Diana's shrine by the lake
In the woods near Rome, where the slave-priests take
Office in turn by murder—she,
Being a virgin, spitefully,
Out of hatred of Love's darts
Wounds, and will go on wounding, human hearts.

[LATIN: *Hactenus, unde legas...*]

Having carried you this far
In my Muse's bumpy, elegiac car
And taught you hunters in which coverts to find
And how to spread nets for the bird you have in mind,
Now for the trickiest, subtlest part: how to get
Your darling well entangled in the net.
Men everywhere, you have something to learn, so attend!
And you, the common people, kindly lend
My enterprise your favour till the end.

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