Central to Ovid’s elegiac texts and *Metamorphoses* is his pre-occupation with how desiring subjects interact with and seduce each other. This major study, which shifts the focus in Ovidian criticism from intertextuality to intersubjectivity, explores the relationship between self and other, and in particular that between male and female worlds, which lies at the heart of Ovid’s vision of poetry and the imagination. A series of close readings, focusing on both the more celebrated and less studied parts of the corpus, moves beyond the more often-asked questions of Ovid, such as whether he is ‘for’ or ‘against’ women, in order to explore how gendered subjects converse, complete and co-create. It illustrates how the tale of Medusa, alongside that of Narcissus, reverberates throughout Ovid’s oeuvre, becoming a fundamental myth for his poetics. This book offers a compelling, often troubling portrait of Ovid that will appeal to classicists and all those interested in gender and difference.

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quippe ubi temperiem sumpsere umorque calorque,
concipiunt et ab his oriuntur cuncta duobus;
cumque sit ignis aquae pugnax, vapor umidus omnes
res creat et discors concordia fetibus apta est.
ergo ubi diluvio tellus lutulenta recenti
solibus aetheriis altoque recanduit aestu,
edidit innumeratas species partimque figuras
rettulit antiquas, partim nova monstra creavit.

For life is conceived when moisture and heat unite,
and from these two elements all living things arise;
and though fire and water clash, their steam creates
all things, and inharmonious harmony is the recipe for life.
So when, muddied by the recent flood, the earth
grew hot from the burning rays of the high sun,
she gave birth to countless species; in part, she restored
the shapes of old, in part she issued creatures new and strange.

In the *Medicamina* and the third book of the *Ars Amatoria* Ovid wrote for,
or made us imagine his writing for, an audience of women. In the *Heroides*,
the subject of my next three chapters, he delves further into (men’s fantasies
of) the female psyche by imagining mythic heroines taking the advice he
gave in *Ars* 3 and composing letters to their male lovers. It’s hardly surpris-
ing, then, that the issue of how authorial and textual voices are gendered
has loomed large in criticism of *Heroides* 1–15 since the early 1980s. The
poems have long been a testing ground for Felman-esque questions about
what makes a voice female, what it means for a man to write ‘as’ a woman,
and whether one can ever write/read from the position of the ‘other’.

1 See especially Felman (1975: 3, and summary in Sharrock (2002a) 99–100. Lindheim (2003) discusses
this issue in the context of the *Heroides* specifically.
an allegiance to the feminine is perhaps most indisputable: it is through these passionate, defiant, anxious heroines that the elegist stakes his claim on the canon (and projects his own exilic, narcissistic fear of abandonment), often seeming to cheat time and unravel literary hierarchies by presenting the women’s alternative accounts as predating their ‘appropriation’ by the great (male) epicists and tragedians. As the writers strive for material presence, the letters’ seeping, female fleshiness (softened with tears and blood) offers up a poetics of fluidity within which concrete borders can move and smudge. Thus the complex ways in which our own unshakeable knowledge of those legendary texts is both ratified and disputed by the heroines’/Ovid’s versions of events become symbiotic with an ongoing dialogue between gendered utterances (or our interpretation of them). In other words, reading (or eavesdropping on) Ovid’s letters becomes a loaded act, invested with as much authority and privilege as vulnerability and constraint. The poems can often seem to position us as conventional readers defending the status quo of master fictions, so that we too are responsible for locking the heroines back into tired, old fates (in its secrecy and writteness, the letter itself helps silence its author, and freezes her in a specific moment of a story we already know). Yet at the same time, the heroines’ isolation feeds potent desires and assertions that often rebut our (now subjectivized) presumptions: their professed simplicity and naïvety, too (they all write ‘for the first time’, and claim emotional transparency), is a deceptive rhetoric liable to fracture complacency and tempt creative perspectives and re-readings. 

In this chapter, I want to home in on Heroides 15, Sappho’s letter to Phaon, because it is here, I think, that this interaction and competition of voices in the ‘single’ Heroides is at its most immediate and perplexing. The poem is a more complicated, and in some ways more ambiguous example of

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1 In chapter 6, I will discuss the idea that the Heroides may be read as letters from exile in further detail. Rosenmeyer (1997) is fundamental on this topic.
2 See e.g. Her.3.3–4, 5.72, 8.107–9, 14.6–8, 15.97–8, where the heroines tell us that tears are falling onto the page and mingling with their words. At Her.11.1–2, blood drips onto the page.
3 See e.g. Desmond (1993) on Dido, and Smith (1994) with Spentzou (2003) 33–5, on the collection in general. Spentzou argues that we still do not take the heroines’ challenges seriously enough, and that readings which have concentrated on the intertextual intricacy of the poems depend on an ‘interpretative conspiracy’ between critic and reader (2), to the detriment of the heroines’ ‘own’ voices. For me, it is not so much a question of being able to decide either to comply with or to reject the dominant discourses of canonic fictions, which Spentzou sees as ‘first-level messages’ beneath which we can recuperate female truths: often these differing fabrics of reality can be seen to affect and get woven up in each other, and it is the jolting shifts and dialogues, as well as the identity crises that these create which interest me more.
4 See also Lindheim’s recent analysis of the poem (2003): ‘Heroides 15 provides something of a test case for questioning the role of the gendered authorial voice in the construction of Woman and of her desire’ (11). Lindheim argues that the fragments of Sappho’s own poetry in Her.15 point to a view of female heterogeneity and realness that jars with the repetitive, generalized Woman of male
the kinds of dialogues and interchanges we have been looking at so far in the *Medicamina*, *Ars* and *Metamorphoses*. While Sappho’s letter is of course part of an exchange with Phaon, whose reply we can predict or imagine but never see, it is also in itself dialogic, a sometimes harmonious, sometimes jarring blend of the voices and desires of two love poets. For despite the mythology that grew up around her, of which Phaon was a part, Sappho was of course a real woman and a real writer, *the* Greek love poet par excellence. She already has her own (far from silent) *lyric* song. Not only that, she was and is a figure who, in her poetic persona at least, is famous for communicating her love for women, not for the local ferryman. As we will see, her homosexuality further complicates the exchange of gazes in the poem: Ovid’s Sappho is a split character, attempting to relate to her (old) self as much as to Phaon/Ovid. She looks very *written* at times, yet as the only heroine-writer, and as the love poet often cited as Ovid’s influential predecessor, she can represent the culmination and reification of the *Heroides*’ illusion of female authorship, and functions as *the* crucial figure in a collection of poems in which the Ovidian author writes in disguise. In what becomes finally a life or death situation, her poem questions the definition and definability of authorship, gender and identity. We are constantly asked, or prompted to ask: Just how authentic, or how artificial, is Sappho in this posed, erotic alignment of His ‘n’ Hers, Roman and Greek love poets? What is it for an Ovidian author to write through and over the poetess whose work he recommends should be read alongside his own, and whose influence on his own writing and love affairs he hints at on several occasions?6

For modern readers, the authenticity debate surrounding *Her*.15 seems almost to be baited by the letter itself, which not only displays some unusual features, but is also transmitted separately from the single epistles.7 Recently, some scholars have argued that it cannot be the work of Ovid,8 and that


7 However, as Tarrant acknowledges (1981) 135–6, the fact of separate transmission, although curious, is not altogether surprising given that Sappho is a historical rather than a mythical character. Moreover, a twelfth-century florilegium offers excerpts from our *Her*.15 between the last of the single letters and the first of the double (see Dörrie 1971, 52–4), and it has often been said that this was copied from a ninth-century exemplar, suggesting that the letter was transmitted from antiquity with the other *Heroides* in its traditional position and that its detachment was a result of medieval intervention.

the mention of a Sappho letter at *Am.2.18.26, 34* is either interpolated, or refers to a lost Ovidian work on the same topic (I will discuss these lines later: let it suffice to say here that I do not consider them incompatible with the narrative we have in *Her.15*).  

Tarrant has led the way in discrediting Ovidian authorship on stylistic and metrical grounds, using what is undoubtedly the idiosyncrasy of Sappho’s letter to support his ‘private opinion’ that it is ‘a tedious production containing hardly a moment of wit, elegance, or truth to nature’. Tarrant points out several interesting – if inconclusive – peculiarities of the letter’s style and metre, but, in my mind, fails to prove the case against authenticity. Rather, I agree with Rosati’s assessment that ‘one would have to attribute to the presumed interpolator of the *Epistula Sapphus* a theoretical awareness and an expressive capacity not only uncommon in general but also hard to attribute to the writer responsible [as Murgia argues], for “an innocent attempt to supply a missing poem as the author believed Ovid would have done it”’. Indeed, in my reading, this poem’s experiment in performing poetic and gendered identity as relational not only plays a crucial role in Ovid’s wider exploration of intersubjectivity as discussed in this book, but also (whether it was intended to be placed in its present position or not), provides a fascinating ‘bridge’ between the single and double letters, and offers a more self-reflexive commentary on the dynamics of the collection as a whole. Viewed in this context, I would argue, *Her.15* looks more unmistakably Ovidian than ever.

I will also be emphasizing in this chapter that the interrogative thrust of *Her.15* depends fundamentally on the frame and site for this bitter-sweet affair, the Ovidian love letter. The uncertainty surrounding the identity

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9 See Murgia (1985) for a convincing rebuttal of Tarrant’s opinion that *Am.2.18.26, 34* are interpolated.


13 Also see Rosati (1996b) on the possible ring composition between the beginning of Dido’s letter and the end of Sappho’s, supporting the letter’s present position at the end of the collection.

14 The epistolary form was downplayed for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: e.g. Palmer (1898) xi: ‘The epistles are really soliloquies, the epistolary setting being little more than a mere form which gives an apparent reason for these soliloquies being committed to writing at all.’ Also see Wilkinson (1955) 86: ‘the choice of epistolary form for what are really tragic soliloquies was not entirely happy’, and Kenney (1970) 389: ‘for all his versatility, Ovid was bound by the essential limitations of the form he had chosen. The epistolary connection in *Her.15* is pretty flimsy.’ Critics who make the letter itself crucial to their readings include Henderson (1986), Casali (1993b), Kennedy (2002), who all draw on Derrida’s reframing of epistolarity as a much broader literary mode, one that is often concerned (in its formal separation of writer and addressee) to highlight and explore issues of communication more generally (see Derrida 1980).
Co-creators: Heroides 15

and role of author (and also, we will see, of reader) in Her.15 is adumbrated by a detailed discourse of epistolary seduction in the Amores and Ars Amatoria, where the love letter is situated at the core of Ovidian erotics (at Ars 3.345, the Heroides are also a set-book for would-be lovers). Via a series of pointed verbal tags, as well as reflections of themes and scenarios, Sappho’s poem sustains a close relationship with Ovid’s commentary on love letters in the Amores and Ars, so that we are almost encouraged to view its challenges as a ‘test’ of knowledge acquired in Ovid’s earlier texts, as well as of the educated reader’s loyalty to the Ovidian authorial persona. This is an infinitely delicate exercise (and the fun or frustration of reading this poem), however, as Her.15 carefully interlaces Ovid with Sappho, obscuring recognizability as well as singularity (or originality). While on a literal level the poem seems to rehearse Sappho’s hilarious deficiency as an elegiac seductress, on another her ‘failures’ are also Ovid’s, motivated by an acute awareness of the fragility of his own posthumous reputation and of the sheer denseness of literary influence. Her.15 stages authorship as a volatile (and sexually charged) rivalry in which both parties can be seen to betray their mutual dependency. For the reader, the quandary is always that there is no right side to be on, no winning formula for reading this battle of authorial egos. I see the hybridity or palimpsestic quality of Her.15 as a further, significant development of Ovid’s interest in the intersubjective foundation of the self. Although, next to the Medicamina, Ars Amatoria and Metamorphoses 10, Sappho’s letter makes less overt reference to Narcissus and Medusa, whose stories have so far provided a rich mythic framework for this theme, it is equally interested in exploring (as much, now, through the play off of lesbian and heterosexual as simply of male and female desire) the moment in which difference threatens to collapse into sameness, and the implications of that merger for the life (and poetics) of desire. As we scrape away at the wax, identities fracture and slip, and repressed, belligerent passions both feed and deeply trouble the narcissistic imagination.

So while this Sappho is, on the one hand, neatly elegized, remade in Ovid’s vision, on the other she is the stubborn antithesis of the elegiac puella we saw made up from scratch in the Medicamina: this poetess has no cultus – her hair is a mess, she dresses down, and wears no perfume or jewelry (Her.15.73–7). She is the black Andromeda, the ugly, wild-haired Medusa, to the Medicamina’s white-skinned narcissist: as she says at 15.35–6, ‘If I am not a fair-faced beauty, just think how Cepheus’ Andromeda was pretty in Perseus’ eyes, although she was dark with the colour of her native land.’ When in her letter she drops in references to the avenging women of ancient myth (at 15.155, she sings of lost love Phaon, while Procne’s bird
sings of murdered Itys), we get glimpses of the cruel dominae of the Amores or the scary girlfriends of the Ars Amatoria, who are always threatening to shipwreck their men. The way in which Her.15, and Sappho’s fearsome talent, almost kill male lover Phaon off for good, also lets us see flashes of her lesbian identity – yet her love for women is often expressed in the (heterosexual) voice of Ovid, echoing the Amores and Ars.

My discussion of these tensions will be thematic. I will start by mapping the relationship between Her.15 and passages which address letter writing in the Ars Amatoria, as well as in Am.2.18, where Ovid imagines his friend Sabinus replying to the heroines’ letters. Here I will be concerned in particular with how Sappho, composing elegy for the first time in an attempt to seduce a man, writes both as a didactic lover and as a reader–pupil of Ars 3 (her ‘simplicity’ is paradoxically also her enviable originality: she herself was the ‘first’ love poet). At Ars 3.331,5 she is recommended reading alongside Ovid, yet while Her.15 is imprinted with echoes of Ovidian instruction, it also tells the story of didactic failure. For despite her pedagogy, Sappho’s brother Charaxus (refusing, perhaps, to take lessons from a woman) remains inops (‘weak’, or ‘lacking’ 63), and was caught in love’s trap when he fell for a prostitute – now he despises his sister, and gloats as Phaon leaves her (me quoque, quod monui bene multa fideliter, odit / ‘because I warned him well, and in good faith, now he hates me’ 67; gaudet et e nostro crescit maerore Charaxus / frater / ‘joy swells in my brother Charaxus’ heart as he sees my pain’ 117–18).

I will go on to look more closely at the character of Phaon, who appears as a strangely artificial construction, a symbol for a conflict of poetic types and influences: he is both an ephebic Narcissus figure immune from the attentions of a Sapphic Echo, and the delicious, homoerotic fantasy of an Ovidian poet(ess). Phaon, Ovid’s audience would have known, is the famous ferryman who worked the route between Lesbos and the mainland, and who was rewarded with irresistible attractiveness by Aphrodite when he offered her a free ride, after she appeared to him in disguise as a poor old woman.6 As such, he embodies the Ovidian poet in the Ars Amatoria (Venus’ favourite, the expert lover and epic–elegiac sailor with Cupid at the helm7), and also becomes an abstract figure for the rhythm of communication between epistolists:8 his movement back and across a body of

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5 nota sit et Sappho (et quid enim lascivius illa? / “you should know your Sappho too – for who is more wanton than her?”).
7 Cf. Her.15.215 (ipse gubernabit residens in puppe Cupido).
8 Perhaps even in more literal terms: a ferryman would by definition also be called upon to transport letters. Phaon is (should be) Sappho’s postman.
water marks out and literalizes what Altman calls the ‘bridge/barrier’ function of a letter. Leander’s role in Her.18–19 is very similar, as I’ll explore in chapter 6, and the roles of Sappho and Hero overlap as heroines who yearn for their partners to referre pedem (15.186: to return, and to turn back a quintessential Ovidian metrical foot by replying), just as they always have. Phaon is now in Sicily (15.11), breaking his epistolary/romantic contract with Sappho in literal and metaphorical terms. I will also discuss in detail the scene of Sappho’s dream (or narcissistic illusion) at lines 125–84, where the rival power of male and female love poetry to make things real is explored via Am.3.1’s site for a battle of personified poetic types (Elegia and Tragoedia). Throughout, we will see, Ovid exploits his trademark topos of continuity in change to rehearse poetic rivalry and influence, the death and rejuvenation of elegy and elegist. Finally, I will be suggesting ways in which motifs of tears and drowning enact the liquidity of authorial identity and literary exchange in the letter, and explore how the prospect of Sappho’s suicide (and Phaon’s departure) is confounded by the memory of Tibullus’ death in Am.3.9, and by Ovid’s nebulious and puzzling ‘reply’ to the poem in Am.2.18.

**POST CODES**

*Heroides* 15 is an immensely intricate poem which throws many questions at its readers at once. We are interrogated from the first lines:

\[
\text{Ecquid, ut aspecta est studiosae littera dextrae,} \\
\text{protinus est oculis cognita nostra tuis?} \\
\text{an, nisi legisses auctoris nomina Sapphus,} \\
\text{hoc breve nescires unde veniret opus?}\]

Tell me, when you looked at the script from my eager right hand, did your eye know at once whose it was? Or, unless you had read the author’s name, Sappho, would you not know from where this short work came?

*Her.15.1–4*

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99 Altman (1982). As Kennedy (2002) 221, summarizes: ‘Epistolary discourse must manipulate both time and space in order to overcome these barriers so as to make communication relevant rather than anachronistic at the moment when the letter is read.’

10 Baca notes (1971) 34, that Sappho’s interrogation makes the letter very unusual in its context. As commentators such as de Vries (1888) have always recognized, this beginning is also striking for the way it seems to echo (or predict?) Ex P.2.10.1–2, written to Macer, Ovid’s rival in the elegiac crisis of Am.2.18: Ecquid ab impressae cognoscis imagine cente / hanc tibi Nasonem scribere verba, Macer? can you guess from the figure pressed into the wax that Naso writes these words to you’. For a fuller analysis of the relationship between *Her.15* and *Tristia* see Hinds (1983), and Rosenmeyer (1997).

11 Here and throughout this chapter I use Knox’s text (1993).
If we didn’t know to be suspicious, we are now. But we had been warned, for the sophisticated interpretative challenges of the *Heroides* often prompt readers to return to Ovid’s manual on love and love poetry, the *Ars Amatoria*. In *Ars* 1.437–86, Ovid schooled his male audience in letter writing as the first step in a strategy of seduction. Treat the letter as a tool of the trade, he lectured; the point is not sincerity, but the very opposite – a rhetorical campaign of deceit and flattery designed to hook your prey. In *Ars* 3, as I discussed in chapter 2, he lets girls into the secret, instructing them to counter guile with guile (‘*indice me fraus est concessa repellere fraudem*’ / ‘in my judgement fraud may be repelled by fraud’ 3.491). In the early stages of a relationship, he advises that women get either their slave boy or slave girl (the gender is irrelevant) to write letters on their behalf (‘*ancillae puervae manu peranate tabellas, / pignora nec puero credite vestra novo*’ / ‘write your messages by the hand of slave or slavegirl, and don’t entrust your pledges to a boy you do not know’ 3.485–6). At *Ars* 3.493ff., he offers a cheap alternative, or an ultra-discreet shortcut: practice faking your own handwriting to make it look like someone else’s (‘*ducere consuescat multas manus una figuras*’ / ‘let one hand be accustomed to copying many styles’ 493), and change the sex of the addressee, writing ‘she’ when you mean ‘he’ (‘*illa* sit in vestris, qui *fuit* *ille*, notis’ 498).

Little wonder, then, that Sappho begins her letter by asking whether we know who she really is! Ovidian love letters, and Ovidian seduction itself, are predicated on the obfuscation and confusion of gender and identity. Yet the intercourse between *Heroides* 15 and the *Ars Amatoria* implies that it is not only the authenticity of the letter writer which is at stake, but also that of its recipient, its reader: what Ovid hints at in *Ars* 3.498 is not merely the cunning of the well-taught letter writer, who can pretend both to be, and be writing to, a man or woman, but also the indecisiveness germane to letter writing itself, especially in the days before the Royal Mail. One feature letters have in common with didactic poetry is that they may be said to model literary communication by addressing someone, thus making explicit the activity of reading. Yet who that someone will actually be is even more difficult to determine than in didactic poetry. A letter sent,

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22 As discussed by Castle (1982) 43: ‘The letter symbolises and reifies communication while it does not necessarily embody it.’

23 See Sharrock (1994) 6 et passim: ‘what is specific in didactic texts is the foregrounding of the act of reading by the presence of an *involved* Reader who receives the text’s instruction. Didactic poetry makes explicit the activity of readers by purporting to teach – someone.’

24 See Sharrock (1994) 6–20, and Konstan (1994) for discussion of the dynamic and slippage of ‘intended’ and ‘unintended’ readers in didactic poetry. The Ovidian letter, I suggest, writes into its non-intended reading a more explicit illegality, even to the point whereby, if we follow the logic, an illegal reader might have no chance of understanding such a subtle and specifically directed text.
via an intermediary, and in Sappho’s case across an ocean, is hopeful but ultimately uncertain of its final destination, and of the interceptors it will attract en route.

Perhaps the most decisive confirmation of this uncertainty and potential slippage of addressee comes in the first of the *Heroides*, which will declare itself one of many sent by Penelope to Ulysses. In a phrase which is particularly acute and ironic given the dramatic context (as Kennedy has successfully shown, this is the eve of the slaying of the suitors, when Penelope, unaware that her husband is already home, is on the verge of yielding to one of her rabid husbands-in-waiting), she writes:

> quisquis ad haec vertit peregrinam litora puppim,  
> ille mihi de te multa rogatus abit,  
> quamque tibi reddat, si te modo viderit usquam,  
> traditur huic digitis charta notata meis.

Whoever turns his foreign prow towards these shores, leaves only after being interviewed by me, and I give him the note inscribed by my own hand, to deliver to you if he should ever see you.

*Her.1.59–62*

As Johnson puts it:

Everyone who has held the letter, or even beheld it, including the narrator, has ended up having the letter addressed to him as its destination. The reader is comprehended by the letter; there is no place from which he can stand back and observe it. Not that the letter’s meaning is subjective rather than objective, but rather that the letter is precisely that which subverts the polarity “subjective/objective”.

The seduction of the published love letter is predicated on the idea that anyone can imagine himself (or herself) as beloved addressee, as Phaon. Anybody, in other words, has the right to reply. Moreover, as Ovid suggests in *Ars* 1.480–1, replying is even a condition of reading: don’t worry, he tells

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23 On this reading of *Her.1* see Kennedy (1984) and Henderson (1986).
26 B. Johnson (1980) 114; cf. Jacobson (1974) 5, where Ovidian elegy is defined as ‘both subjective and denying subjectivity . . . Ovid stands outside the poems while at the same time being part of them’. The *Ars*, he continues, is an ‘imaginative extension of this technique . . . the very form made concrete the distance between the poet as poet and the poet as lover’. In the *Heroides*, Ovid ‘transfers the subjective element to his heroines’. Instead of reading the character’s mind, ‘he becomes it’. The impression of subjectivity, tied inevitably to the idea of authenticity, is what Frankel (1945) 36, recognizes when he says ‘When we read the fifteen verse epistles, we come here and there upon a passage the like of which we ourselves meant to write at some point in our life’. Readability is writeability, a concept Ovid seeks to impress on his students throughout the *Ars* (use familiar language to coax, he says at 1.465); thus he both emphasizes the appeal of his own casual, sugar-daddy approach to instruction, and encourages shy students to have a go themselves, to write as well as read.
his male readers, as long as a girl reads your letter, you can be sure she’ll want to reply eventually (tu modo blanditias fac legat usque tuas. / quae voluit legisse, volet rescribere lectis / ‘just see to it that she is always reading your sweet-nothings. / She who has wanted to read, will want to answer what she has read’ Ars 1.480–1). Replying becomes compulsive once reading has taken place, because it is in reading itself that seduction is achieved.\(^{27}\)

As if to entice readers’ creative powers further, Ovid in Amores 2.18.27–35 suggests that his friend Sabinus has composed answers to six of the heroines’ letters (including Sappho’s): *quam cito de toto rediit meus orbe Sabinus / scriptaque diversis rettulit ipse locis! / ‘how quickly Sabinus has returned from the ends of the earth and brought back letters written in far-distant places!’* (27–8). In Heroides 15, the idea that we can (and are supposed to) write back is made even more alluring by our compromised position as unintended readers of a poem renowned for its intimacy and lewdness.\(^{28}\) As set-up voyeurs, we are privy to what is (in the epistolary fantasy) the most self-revelatory and intimate of texts, designed for the lover’s eyes only. As Perry states, ‘because letters reveal the self, reading letters intended for other eyes is the most reprehensible invasion of privacy and consciousness’.\(^{29}\) Moreover, the cleverest illegal reader is one already schooled by Ovid in epistolary detective work: Ovid advises girls: *inspice, quodque leges, ex ipsis collige verbis / fingat an ex animo sollicitusque roget / ‘examine it, and in what you read, find out from the words themselves whether he is faking, or writes from the heart in real distress’* Ars 3.471–2. He even gives lessons in deciphering invisible ink (Ars 3.627–30) and counsels women not to get confused by palimpsests (*nec nisi deletis tutum rescibere ceris, / ne teneat geminas una tabella manus / ‘nor is it safe to write an answer unless the wax is quite smoothed over, lest one tablet contain two hands’* 3.495–6). Yet at this point (the next ‘hands-on’ stage in the course after Ars 3), Ovid’s student needs all the help he can get, for as Altman reminds

\(^{27}\) See Chambers’ discussion (1984), e.g. 13: ‘seduction goes hand in hand with the readability of literature’. Sharrock’s analysis (1994) of the *Ars Amatoria* is often rooted in this idea: Ovid’s audience is seduced by reading his instruction on how to seduce. See especially 26–7, 50–3.

\(^{28}\) Views on the poem’s sexual depravity abound. Sappho is renowned for her lustfulness, on which Ovid models himself; at Ars 3.329ff., he recommends that his audience read a long list of authors, including Sappho, adding as further advertisement, *quid enim lascivius illa? / ‘could anything be sexier than her?’* (331).

us, ‘pushed to its logical extreme, epistolary discourse would be so relative to its I-You that it would be unintelligible to the “outside” reader’.\textsuperscript{30} Mistrust and self-consciousness are the price to pay for an educated look through Ovid’s peephole.

So as soon as we start reading Sappho’s letter to Phaon, good readers (and pupils) of Ovid must revise a body of accompanying literature about the tricky construction and reception of the love letter, that genre which comes in the \textit{Ars} to stand for the seductiveness of writing, and of Ovid’s didactic oeuvre in particular. The problems we encounter in reading \textit{Heroides} 15 (such as, to what extent do authorial identities conflict, fuse, or override one another, what kind of readers are we meant to be, have been taught to be, or desire to be, to what extent do we decide the fate of Sappho by reading her / replying to her?) are stirred up by a lover’s discourse which fosters suspicions about the identity, sex and motives of a letter’s author and reader. \textit{Her}.15 does not allow us to disentangle ourselves from its initial inquiry, working to postpone decisions of authenticity and probing conceptions of what does or might constitute a genuine Ovid/Sappho. But if this is an advanced Ovidian lesson in the trials of seduction, we are on our own: no instruction, no nudges in the direction of ‘correct’ response. In no other genre, we are reminded, do readers ‘figure so prominently within the world of the narrative and in the generation of the text’.\textsuperscript{31}

\textbf{FIRST LOVES}

When Sappho asks us whether we can identify her from her handwriting, she nudges us to recall her original self-image as a love poet in her poems, alongside her reconstruction and perpetuation as the first and hottest love poet in Ovid’s oeuvre, and to question our own ability (as illegal readers) to comprehend the dynamics of authorial identity and motive throughout this letter. Sappho, the lyric poetess, now composes elegiac songs (\textit{alterna carmina} 5–6\textsuperscript{32}), and the scene is set for her transformation. She cries, and elegy (characterized as \textit{flebilis}, ‘weepy’, in \textit{Amores} 3.9.3)\textsuperscript{33} is suited to tears; the shift from Greek lyric to Latin elegy represents a change in both emotional state and sexual preference (15–16). As she learns to cope with the pain of

\textsuperscript{30} Altman (1982) 37.  \textsuperscript{31} Altman (1982) 37.  \textsuperscript{32} Note that the confusion of genres is marked in Sappho’s terminology, or lack of it: \textit{carmina} is used of both elegy (line 6) and of lyric (11, 14), as is \textit{opus} (marked out at the end of lines 4 and 14).  \textsuperscript{33} Also see Tr.3.1.5 (\textit{flebile carmen}); as I have mentioned already, \textit{Her}.15 is full of exilic themes and motifs, leading Verducci (1985) 145, to imagine that the exile poems were ‘ghostwritten’ by one of Ovid’s heroines.
a heterosexual love affair, so she must learn new rules, a new language, a new metre – in short, a completely new mode of emotional and literary expression.

For Ovid’s Sappho, then, this is like falling in love for the first time. Everything is new, foreign, uncertain; feelings are raw, communication intense and desperate, lust insatiable. At a point where elegy had, in Jacobson’s words ‘reached the end of the road’, the only way to go, it seems, was back down it. Indeed, in Am.2.18, Ovid frames the *Heroides* as a response, or even a solution, to a crisis in elegy, precipitated by a constant peer pressure to get back to composing ‘real’ poetry – a bit of tragedy, or some traditional Homeric epic, preferably something macho and bellicose in the exemplary style of Macer’s *Iliad* (‘While you are setting your poem in the time of Achilles’ wrath . . . I am dilly-dallying in Venus’ lazy shade’ Am.2.18.1–3). Ovid reports that tried his hand at tragedy with some success, but it wasn’t him (risit Amor pallamque meam pictosque coturnos / ‘love laughed at my cloak and painted buskins’ 2.18.15). He either preaches about love, or is ensnared by love itself (19–20) until he finds a third way: the composition of a rather pessimistic (tragic) kind of love poetry in the role of characters from the traditional epic past – from Penelope (21), to Dido (25) and Sappho, *Lesbis amata* (26).

In the *Heroides* Ovid gets to perfect stage presence in his very own costume drama, summoning literary gravitas via epic reference while revitalizing and re-grounding elegy in its Greek, and implicitly heroic, grandiose origins. While retaining his own identity and ego in the shape and subject of elegiac metre, he can rejustify his poetics as an interpretation, rather than a rejection of Homeric epic: after all, *Amor* is as dominant a theme in the *Iliad* as the anger of Achilles (nec tibi, qua tutum vati, Macer, arma canenti / aureus in medio Marte tacetur Amor / ‘nor do you, too, Macer, so far as it’s possible for a poet who sings of arms, leave golden Love untouched amid your warlike song’ Am.2.18.35–6). Later, in his famous self-advertisement in *Ars* 3.346, he pinpoints the real genius of the plan: by getting back to his roots, and parading poetic influence and intertextuality for all to see, he achieves the apparent antithesis and the impossible – originality.

Going back to beginnings ‘saves’ elegy by letting us visualize what it is both to learn how to write love poetry, as a novice (as a woman), and to experience the poetic expression of what is staged as *true* love, love that causes wars, risks kingdoms, crosses oceans, or lasts a lifetime. Moreover, for

35 See also Besone’s interesting recent discussion of the many archetypes of ancient love poetry worked into Her.15 (2003).
an audience already tutored by Ovid in epistolary seduction, the heroines’ letters exemplify the love letter’s key feature – well-faked sincerity: learning how to write (what looks like) a heartfelt and persuasive love letter and putting pen to paper (as if) for the first time is what the Heroides entail and show. Through the letters, Ovid enacts his role as both originator and teacher, the figure who by definition is always original in his readers’/pupils’ eyes because he shows and tells them things that are new and unknown (the epistolary fiction makes emphatic what is or might be foreign and arcane to its unintended reader). Ovid’s Sappho, then, is a paradoxical cocktail of new and old, difference and repetition, a paradigmatic figure performing the Heroides’ core poetic strategy of faked and brandished new-ness. Placing her at the end of the Heroides makes perfect sense in terms of the overall strategy of the collection – as a historical figure she necessarily looks more real and more faked here than a literary character, and as a love poet she functions as a climactic locus for Ovid’s investigation of literary influence, inheritance and competition.

As Sappho in Her.15 learns to write elegy, as if for the first time, she must become Ovid’s pupil, tutored alongside her readers, who are picking up ‘tips for first time writers,’ whether by negative or positive example. The ultimate power-trip, you might expect, from an author indulging his neglected masculinity to save face before his friend and rival Macer (see Am.2.18). Sappho’s letter perhaps also represents the supreme challenge for the Ovidian ego, an ego which is teaching here by example: how to seduce (male) readers with a weepy Sappho who refers to her past sexual preference for women, and who apologizes for being small, ugly and dishevelled (si mihi difficilis formam natura negavit ‘if malign nature has denied me the charm of beauty’; sum brevis ‘I’m short’; candida si non sum ‘if I’m not a pretty girl’; iacent collo sparsi sine lege capilli ‘my hair curls, dishevelled, at my nape’), especially as Ovid has given elaborate lessons on the importance of good looks, hairstyles in particular (see Ars 3.133), and has dismissed women who cry all the time as ‘hateful’ (Ars 3.517).

Yet at the same time, the more we are reminded of Ovid’s other works, the more we also recall references to Sappho which highlight the extent of

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56 On the heroine as a ‘paradigm of paradoxes’ see Brownstein (1984) xx.
57 See Rosati (1996b) on the suitability of the poem’s present location at the end of the collection.
58 Compare Her.15.73 with this line in Ars 3 (non sint sine lege capilli ‘on no account is your hair to be messy’).
59 Ovid’s men, on the other hand, are a cheerful lot and rarely get emotional (Ars 3.518); their tears, faked or real, are a tool of persuasion, a rhetorical trick, e.g. Ars 3.659–660: et lacrimae pronunt; lacrimis adamantia movebis: / faci meditata videat, illa genas, illa genas / ‘tears too are useful: with tears you can move iron: let her see, if you can, your dampened cheeks’.
her influence on Ovid. In the *Heroides*, it is clearer than ever that survival (reputation) is contingent upon the security and legitimacy afforded by origins, by a site and perspective within a literary tradition. In short, Ovid needs Sappho, and trampling on her ego with a combat boot is a risky business which could turn tragic. It is elegy and Ovidian identity themselves which are at stake in this poem’s dramatization of Sappho’s rejection by a man, her blunt, unattractive portrayal, and her progression towards what seems an increasingly likely suicide. *Her.15* is nothing less than a rehearsal of the death of elegy and an experimental probing of the instability of posthumous reputation.

An interesting crisis point occurs at 15.133–4, during Sappho’s recollection of her wet dream. The couple kiss (129–30), and she fondles him, saying things that seem *almost* like the waking truth (*verisque simillima verba / eloquor* 131–2), so much so that she loses control and has an orgasm:

ulteriora pudet narrare, sed omnia fiunt:
    et iuvat et siccae non licet esse mihi.
I blush to tell the rest, but everything happens,
I love it, and can’t help getting wet.  15.133–4

Sappho’s dream fosters the epistolary fantasy of physical presence, to the extent that she can climax from the imagining itself, giving it some certain hold in reality, despite the fact that she cannot finally make the dream come true. Like a female Pygmalion, or lustful Narcissus, Sappho has crafted a characterless, bodiless beauty who nevertheless is almost real, returning her kisses and giving her as much pleasure as if he were alive. Her artistry is defined by a simultaneous control and lack of control, a creativity bound by limits: again like Pygmalion at *Met.*10.270–6, she must rely on Venus (*Her.*15.213) to return Phaon to her, to make him real again, and the invention has left her talentless and robbed of creative power (*dolor artibus obstat / ingeniumque meis substitit omne malis* 195–6). Yet in the context of Ovid’s oeuvre, lines 133–4, which stand out for their X-rated appeal, perform a quite different kind of poetic reification. When Sappho precedes ‘one of the most explicitly lubricious lines in the Ovidian corpus’ with the cautious *ulteriora pudet narrare*, she mimics Ovid’s false modesty in *Ars* 3.769 (ulteriora pudet docuise / ‘I’m embarrassed to teach you any more’), where the teacher–poet blushes at the clinical erotic instruction of an ostensibly

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40 This may remind us of another silencing of Sappho’s voice in her own words, Catullus 51’s revision of fr.31LP (*Lesbia, aspecti, nihil est super mi / vocis in ore / lingua sed torpet 7–9*), and also, as Bessone notes (2003) 221, of Catull.65.4 (*sunt fluctuat ipsa malis*).
41 Verducci (1985) 165.  
female audience. The phrase also achieves a similar effect to the familiar punchline at Am.1.5.23–6 (singula quid referam? . . . cetera quis nescit? ‘Why give all the details? . . . who doesn’t know the rest?’), as Verducci notes. In Amores 1.5, Ovid’s blasé rhetoric is a titillation, transferring all suggestiveness to the eye of the beholder, who is now lured in as voyeur. Line 133 of Her.15 points the finger straight at Ovidian innuendo, at the recollection (and enactment) of Ovidian instruction (though Sappho, unlike Ovid at Am.1.5, does fast-forward to the gritty details, at least of her own, masturbatory pleasure). At the point at which Sappho gets intimate (and so vulnerable), in the context of an unrealizable creative fantasy, Ovid steps in to assert the reality of his authorial presence and the stamp of his poetic achievement.

Yet the poem which stages Corinna’s overdue but glamorous entrance into the Amores is also picked up at Her.15.161–2, when a Naiad appears before Sappho just as she has lain down, exhausted, on the grass:

hic ego cum lassos posuissem flebilis artus,
constitit ante oculos Naias una meos.

I wept, and had laid down my weary limbs,
when a Naiad appeared before my eyes.

Compare with Am.1.5.2/17 (adposui medio membra levanda toro / ‘I laid my limbs to rest in the middle of the couch’; ut stetit ante oculos posito velamine nostros / ‘she stood before my eyes, having cast aside her clothes’). Ovid’s Sappho rewrites Am.1.5 as lesbian erotica, suggesting an entire blue movie with one discriminating gaze, and refining Ovid’s laddish striptease for an altogether subtler audience. Though arguably, the scene of meeting a (perhaps already naked) Naiad in a wooded grove next to an enticing pool is already provocative enough: the Naiad’s advice to plunge into water is vaguely evocative of Salmacis’ rape of Hermaphroditus, and the example she gives of Deucalion dousing the flame of his passion for Pyrrha reminds us that immersion in Venus’ element can be emasculating (and hence a turn-off) for men. As Sapphic desires trickle into Ovidian elegy, line 133 also reiterates Sappho’s own words, sung at fr.137LP (θέλω τι τ’ εἴπῃς, ἀλλὰ μὲ κοιλύει / σκίδωσι). The web of reference that spans this distich dictates that we cannot recall Ovid without rousing (and arousing) Sappho. As she says herself at line 43, meminerunt omnia amantes / ‘lovers remember everything’: this is precisely what Ovid is ashamed to tell in a couplet.

43 Verducci (1985) 165.
which dramatizes an eroticized battle between two authors in the pursuit of authenticity and originality, the ability to be and make real.

In fact, Her.15 often looks just like one of the dreaded palimpsests Ovid describes in the Ars Amatoria.44 When Sappho asks whether we recognize her from her handwriting (even when a later author distorts her poetic shape), Ovid whispers in the background, ‘Will you be able to tell me apart from a fake, will you continue to remember me and preserve my original identity?’ Ovid imagines and confronts us with his own death in the figure of his predecessor, testing our devotion to the love poet (Sappho/Ovid) by fictionalizing his readers as (his) lovers, as the (unintended but intended) recipients of this love letter. Critics of Her.15 have tended to underemphasize the extent to which the fates of Sappho (and, hence, of Ovid) are construed in the epistolary fiction as determined by its readers, who have been taught at length how Ovidian letters function in the Ars Amatoria and whose knowledge, loyalty and love are now on the line. As Sappho puts it at 15.189–90: an potes / si moriar, titulum mortis habere meae? / ‘if I die, can you bear to be called my murderer?’

Now the Ovidian instructor is concealed behind a tragic mask, all we (and Ovid) can rely on is our memory, intuition and instinct. If we are seduced by Sappho, or at least refuse to sully her name and reputation by participating in even a parody of her death, we prove ourselves faithful to the most famous love poet of all; we would do the same for Ovid, and we’re prepared to prove it. But if our reply (or lack of it) lets her die, we help Ovid pull the trigger, aiding and abetting his masculine and Romanizing one-upmanship, proving once and for all that Ovid has taken love poetry to new heights: if Sappho were alive today, you confirm, she’d seem crass and hopelessly unrefined, and if she and Ovid were competing now, as ‘poet-lovers’, side by side, the sophisticated Ovid would more than show her up. Verducci’s reading of this letter seems to relish the opportunity to side with Ovid and kill off Sappho, in the hope that the poem comes off as stridently and typically Ovidian: ‘Ovid omits nothing in her situation that would reduce her dignity or degrade her infatuation’, she states.45 The subject of the poem is ‘the failure of poetry’, so ‘it must be conceded that Ovid’s poem is a victory of conscious craft over its subject. It is no shallow victory46 . . . Ovid’s all too carnal Sappho, the libertine Sappho of the gossip, the scandals, the legend and the comedies, becomes for her an occasion for

44 E.g. Ars 1.395–6. 3.495–6. Farrell (1998) 311–17 emphasizes that traces left in wax represent a far greater risk to women than men. Men merely risk letting their mistresses know about each other, whereas for women the letter can become ‘a document of incrimination’ (322).
45 Verducci (1985) 137. 46 Verducci (1985) 156.
the poetic exploration of the conventional notion of necessary “artistic distance”.

The evidence for Ovid’s dismantling of Sappho’s reputation is certainly all there for the taking. Attacking a woman by exposing her sexual appetite, naïveté (stupidity) and bad repute is all too easy. But while it tries on one level to maintain an illusion of creative distance, the creative drive of Her.15 is precisely the lack of distance between Ovid and Sappho, the interpretative dilemmas that arise from a collusion and interdependence of authorial identities. The poem is preoccupied with the subtlety with which authorial signatures are approximated and entwined, and with the constructed play-offs of power that arise as a result of that intertexture.

**Changes of Address**

As we have seen, Sappho’s change in sexual preference is directly associated with her change of language and poetic shape: she can no longer compose lyric, just as the girls of Pyrrha, Methymna or Lesbos (or so she claims) no longer interest her (15.13–16). Phaon is both the motive and subject for Sappho’s elegiac experiment, just as Ovid’s elegy is inspired and embodied by his puellae. As Propertius in 2.1.3–4 writes, at a point where he has just made plain, in programmatic terms, the radical ‘feminine’ image of elegy (this is a mollis liber, ‘soft book’ 2.1.2), non haec Calliope, non haec mihi cantat Apollo; / ingenium nobis ipsa puella facit / ‘it’s not Calliope, nor Apollo, who sings these things to me – my girl herself creates the inspiration’. This topos is re-employed at Her.15.206 (ingenio vires ille dat, ille rapit. / ‘My genius had its powers from him, and with him they were swept away.’), but now it is Phaon who takes the place of the girlfriends who once animated Sapphic lyric and Roman elegy. Thus on the one hand, Ovid in Her.15 takes the ‘feminization’ of elegy to its ultimate conclusion by getting a woman-loving poetess enact his novel dramatization of elegy in crisis. On the other, Phaon is now the male motive and subject of elegy, a stand-in for the Ovidian poet and for female inspiration: he could be well situated to invigorate the genre, give it the traditional male energy for which Ovid strives in Am.2.18 and which Tragedy urges in Am.3.1.

Yet Phaon is responsible for destroying, as well as replacing, female creative power, as 15.206 shows. It is because of him that Sappho has lost her

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48 See N. K. Miller (1980) e.g. xi: ‘the heroine’s text is the text of an ideology that codes femininity in paradigms of sexual vulnerability’.
49 The theme is of course also fundamental in Ovid, e.g. Am.1.3.19, 3.12.16.
50 Am.2.18.1–18, Am.3.1.15–30, esp. line 25: cane facta virorum (‘sing deeds of heroes!’).
poetic talent, as well as her attractiveness (\textit{ille mei cultus unicus auctor abes} / ‘you, the one cause of my adornment, are gone’ 78; \textit{dolor artibus obstat}, \textit{ingeniumque mei substitit omne malis} / ‘grief stops my art, and all my talent is blocked by my pain’ 195–6). On one level it would seem that Sappho’s inability to win over and control Phaon constitutes another obvious sign of her inadequacy as an elegiac poet: getting Phaon back, and regaining her talent, amount to the same thing. Through Phaon, meanwhile, Ovid flatters himself as Sappho’s lover while also rejecting her advances. Yet Her.15’s experiment also hints that Ovidian elegy, like Sapphic lyric, falters when it tries to erase and forget the female (is this what happens when Ovid sails away from Sappho, and sings of \textit{desertos amores} 15.155?). Through Sappho’s lesbianism, in addition, we glimpse a vision of homoerotic elegy which privileges sameness over difference to a dangerous degree. It’s perhaps not surprising, then, that we catch flashes of Narcissus’ passion throughout her letter. For example, when Sappho enters the grove, with its sacred spring that seems itself to harbour a living \textit{numen} (158), she encroaches on the landscape of \textit{Metamorphoses} 3.359ff.: Phaon is a classic Narcissus-double, described by Sappho at 15.93 as \textit{nec adhuc iuvenis, nec iam puer} / ‘he wasn’t yet a man, but no longer a boy’ (compare \textit{Met.}3.352: \textit{poteratque puer iuvenisque videri} / ‘he might seem either a boy or a man’). And as Sappho mourns her loss, and fails to find her lover in the leaves of the forest floor (she also play-acts a deserted, maddened Dido, revisiting the woodland site of her doomed ‘marriage’ to Aeneas\footnote{See \textit{Aen.}4.165–72.}), she too settles next to a pool that shines with narcissistic reflections (\textit{est nitidus vitroque magis perlucidus omni / fons sacer} / ‘there is a sacred spring, bright and more transparent than any crystal’ 157–8; cf. \textit{fons erat inlimis, nitidis argenteus undis /} ‘there was a clear pool, with silvery bright water’ \textit{Met.}3.407\footnote{Compare Lindheim (2003) 178–9 \textit{et passim}, arguing that Ovid’s heroines continually strive to accommodate a masculine penchant for Imaginary identification, i.e. narcissism, in their lovers: ‘the heroines set their understanding of the narcissistic aspects of masculine desire to work in service of their goal. Self-consciously they choose to act out roles that will satisfy the masculine subject’s demands of the mirror image’ (179). Here, however, Sappho plays the narcissist herself, searching for, instead of (or as well as) \textit{the reflection}.}).

Yet Sappho (as a \textit{heroine}, and as a woman composing an elegiac, that is, plaintive, silent epistle) must also fulfill the role of Echo, and the poem enacts the loss of her lyric voice (from \textit{Her.}15.42: \textit{unam iurabas usque decere loqui} / ‘you used to swear that I was the only one ever to be graced with the powers of speech’, to 15.110: \textit{ nec potuisse loqui} / ‘I could no longer speak’). Only mournful, repetitive, elegiac song is audible in these haunts: \textit{Her.}15.152 (\textit{et nullae dulce queruntur aves} / ‘and no birds tweet their sweet complaint’).
restages the confrontation of poetic types, *Elegia* and *Tragoedia*, in *Amores* 3.1, and almost quotes the fourth line of that poem *(et latere ex omni dulce queruntur aves)* ‘and from every side comes the sweet complaint of birds’).
In Ovid’s grove, then, the birds are singing, while in Sappho’s they are silent: only metamorphosed Procne cries for her lost Itys, just as Sappho sings of lost love:

\[
\text{sola virum non ulta pie maestissima mater}
\]
\[
\text{concinuit Isonian Daulias ales Ityn.}
\]
\[
\text{ales Ityn, Sappho desertos cantat amore.}
\]
\[
\text{Just the Daulian bird, grieving mother, husband-killer}
\]
\[
\text{laments Isonian Itys in her song.}
\]
\[
\text{She sings of Itys, Sappho of abandoned loves.}
\]

*Her.15.153–5*

*Amores*, of course, now refer also to Ovid’s oeuvre, left behind – whether we read this as registering the progressiveness of the *Heroides* (this is Ovid ‘moving on’), or as spelling out how Ovid himself, like Phaon, has metaphorically ‘ditched’ Sappho in her hour of need. Sappho is herself trampling on the Ovidian territory and elegiac crisis of *Am.3.1*, pursuing the memory of Ovidian authorship (as she looks for *dominum silvaeque meumque* / ‘master of the forest and of me’ 145) but also usurping it, lying where the elegist had been *(incubui tetigique locum, qua parte fuisti / I have laid down and touched the spot, the place you rested in’ 149).

The alignment of Sappho and Procne, Phaon and Itys, in the above passage is particularly interesting. It extends the joke that Sappho is old enough to be Phaon’s mother (linking up with lines 115–16: *non aliter, quam si nati pia mater adempti / portet ad exstructos corpus inane rogos* / ‘just like the loving mother of a lost son carries his empty frame to the funeral pyre’), and accents the other references to Sappho’s maternal role in this poem (70, 120). Yet Itys is also a son destroyed by and lost to his mother as a result of Philomela’s ability to communicate through artistic creation, by weaving a tapestry. Implicitly, Sappho is like Philomela as well as Procne, as she is attempting to communicate in a similarly silent, written form, the letter. Her epistle, too, is motivated by sexual betrayal and is the result of her (sexualized) appropriation by Ovid, who has metaphorically cut out her expressive, lyric tongue. Yet by censoring Sappho in the context of Procne’s and Philomela’s tragic fight to express themselves, Ovid highlights

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53 As Leander swims towards another watery death in *Her.18*, he is accompanied by the song of the halcyons (79–82). In Catull. 65.11–14, the poet’s mournful verse is compared to the nightingale’s song. Sappho also sings of nightingales (*fr.136LP*).
the inevitability of reading male authorial aggression into this poem, and marks the obstinate power of the written word as epitomized in a woman’s letter. This same passage also makes Phaon (like Ity and Tereus) the victim of a vengeful, Medean poetess. Indeed, in harmony with her narcissistic impulses, Sappho’s letter determinedly kills off a string of male relatives – she mourns the premature death of her father (61–2), is estranged from her brother (67), and experiences Phaon’s departure as the death (or murder?) of a son (115–16). When Phaon leaves for Sicily, Charaxus snipes that she shouldn’t grieve, as her daughter is still alive (120), and Sappho has already written of how she worries endlessly about Cleis (70), recalling fr.132LP, in which she swears she would give up everything for her daughter. Her quiet refusal to stop privileging a female genealogy now culminates in the sisterly conspiracy of Procne and Philomela, which casts shadows over the sensual locus amoenus of lines 135ff. The desperate pleas of a lonely woman in Her.15, voiced through and muffled by Ovidian elegy, barely conceal an undertow of mutinous and antagonistic passions. Sappho’s is a noisy and suspended metamorphosis.

The scene at Her.15.135–74 – an ancient grove with cave and spring, emitting the sweet sound of birds – also recalls the fable of Procne and Cephalus, told by Ovid in Ars 3.686ff., as well as in Met.7.661–865. As I explored at length in chapter 2, this is a paradigmatic drama about rivalry and misunderstanding in love. Procris overhears Cephalus calling to the wind (Aura) in a similar sacred grove (fons sacer et viridi caespite mollis humus / there is a sacred spring and ground soft with green turf’ Ars 3.688; cf. fons sacer . . . tenero caespite terra viret / there is a sacred spring . . . the earth is green with tender turf’ Her.15.158, 160). Before she realizes her ‘mistake’, she assumes he is seducing a woman, and like Sappho, runs wild like a Maenad (ut thyro concita Baccha Ars 3.710; cf. Her.15.339–40), returning to the wood alone to see the flattened grass where her lover had lain (vidit ut oppressa vestigia corporis herba / ‘when she saw the mark of a body on the flattened grass’ Ars 3.721; cf. cognovi pressas noti mihi caespitis herbas / ‘I recognized the pressed-down grass of the turf I knew so well’ Her.15.147). Procris’ misjudgement is punished by a second error, when Cephalus thinks for a moment that she is a wild animal and kills her with his spear. We might be tempted to conclude that Sappho is also doomed to pay for her impulsiveness with her life, that not trusting Phaon was her tragic mistake. She is made to look especially naïve, we might say, because she obviously has not read Ovid’s instruction booklet, Ars 3, which warned of just such a scenario. She is not even aware, in the context of her role as Procris, of the irony of her final wish at 15.214 (aura dabit cursum / ‘the wind will speed you on your course’).
Yet Sappho has already alluded to the myth in which Cephalus really did cheat on Procris with Aurora (\textit{bunc ne pro Cephalo raperes, Aurora, timebam / 'I always feared you would steal him in Cephalus' place, Aurora' 15.87}), the story also told by Ovid in \textit{Metamorphoses} 7. By juxtaposing pointed allusions to two different stories about Cephalus and Procris, both of which centre around the theme of suspected infidelity and misinterpretation, Ovid invests the activity of reading itself with a great deal of power and responsibility, not to mention paranoia – especially when we have already played similar games in the \textit{Ars Amatoria}, as I discussed in chapter 2. Our reading ability is shaken at the very point at which its life-threatening power is also verified: we, like Cephalus, are also in danger of misinterpreting Sappho, sanctioning her death and practically reading her off that cliff.\footnote{Although, as I also discussed in chapter 2, Ovid’s retellings of the Cephalus and Procris myth make it difficult to decide whether the lovers’ reactions can ever be defined as innocent misreadings.}

To a point, the Procris/Cephalus analogy encourages Ovid’s readers to feel superior (Sappho, like Procris, is made to look unsophisticated and literal-minded, next to her literary readers spotting irony and doubleness at every turn). But Sappho herself dramatizes how easy it is for roles to be reversed within the parameters of this multi-layered myth: for at 15.177–8, having laid down in Phaon’s/Cephalus’ place at 149, she too calls on \textit{aura} (\textit{aura, subito / et mea non magnum corpora pondus habe / 'come breeze, and bear up the light weight of my body'}). Like Cephalus summoning the breeze at \textit{Met}.7.837, Sappho also needs soothing in her \textit{labor} (\textit{aura, veni' dixi, 'nostroque medere labori!}), but she also asks \textit{aura} to bear her up before she touches the sea, just as Aurora carried off Cephalus at \textit{Met}.7.703–4: there’s no mistaking \textit{this} as an innocent summons. In short, nostalgia for Sappho’s love of women in \textit{Heroides} 15 takes us on another narrative tangent here, sending us back and forth in tangled paths – in empathy with her torn emotions.

\textbf{Old Lyrics, New Tunes}

Another important point at which Ovid’s readers are challenged to decipher poetic influences and their hybridization can be found earlier in the poem at lines 23–6, when Sappho compares Phaon to Apollo and Bacchus, imagining herself in the role of Daphne or Ariadne:

\begin{verbatim}
sume fidem et pharettram: fies manifestus Apollo.
accedant capiti cornua: Bacchus eris.
et Phoebus Daphnen, et Cnosida Bacchus amavit,
nec norat lyricos illa vel illa modos.
\end{verbatim}
Take up the lyre and quiver – you’ll look like Apollo.
Let horns spring up on your head – you’ll be Bacchus.
Phoebus loved Daphne, and Bacchus loved the Gnosian girl,
yet neither one knew the lyric mode.  

Phaon’s looks are such that he can be any god he wants, provided he wears the appropriate costume – and appearances are everything in letters concerned with acting and image, with the pretence and vacillation of identity. Yet for Ovid’s audience this is not just a superficial, decorative simile, not least because both Apollo and Bacchus provide the stimulus for writing love poetry at crucial points in Ovid’s oeuvre. Sappho uses the same line ending here as Ars 2.493, when Ovid introduces Apollo’s role: haec ego cum canerem, subito manifestus Apollo.../’while I was singing this, Apollo suddenly appeared’. Ovid had previously denied Apollo’s influence at the beginning of Ars 1 (non ego, Phoeb, datas a te mihi mentiar artes /’I will not lie and say my art was your gift, Phoebus’ 25). Yet at Am.1.15.35–6, he wishes, mihi flavus Apollo / pocula Castalia plena ministret aqua /’for me may Golden Apollo fill cups from the Castalian fount’; at Am.3.8.23, he declares himself musarum purus Phoebique sacerdos / ‘the unstained priest of Phoebus and the Muses’, and at Am.3.12.17ff., he indicates that Apollo has directed his entire career. Apollo’s advice-slot in Ars 2, which ends in the admonition sic monuit Phoebus: Phoebo parete monenti; / certa dei sacro est huius in ore fides /’so Phoebus advised: obey Phoebus’ counsels; the sacred mouth of that god contains the absolute truth’ (509–10), is a mini-Ars in itself, as Sharrock describes in her extensive critique of this passage. This intermission does not contradict, but rather confirms Ovid’s declaration of independence in Ars 1: Ovid isn’t advised by Apollo, he is Apollo; Apollo’s mini-Ars looks insignificant (and perhaps cliché, because obviously repetitive) next to Ovid’s magnum opus, yet at the same time Ovid can use Apollo as a vicarious mouth-piece for didactic arrogance and omniscience. As both the god of poetry and the god of prophecy, Apollo exactly fits the double function of the self-aggrandizing vates.

The gods Apollo and Bacchus are also paired in Ovid on several occasions: as he gazes at his reflection, Narcissus’s hair is compared to that of Bacchus and Apollo at Met.3.420–1: spectat... / et dignos Baccho, dignos et Apolline
crines (hence the Narcissus plot in Her.15 is traceable from the very begin-
ning). Similarly, in Am.1.14.31–2, vain Corinna’s hair is said to be worthy of Apollo or Bacchus, before she overstyled it (formosae periere comae, quas vellet Apollo, / quas vellet capiti Bacchus inesse suo / ‘Her beautiful tresses are no more – such as Apollo could lust after, such as Bacchus could covet, for their own heads’). In the famous passage at Ars 3.329–48 in which Ovid declares the originality of the Heroïdes and modestly adds them to his ‘recom-
commended’ reading list, which also includes Sappho, he ends by saying, o ita, Phoebe, velis, ita vos, pia numina vaturn, / insignis cornu Bacche, novemque deae! / ‘so grant it, O Phoebus! So grant it, blessed souls of poets, and you, horned Bacchus, and the nine goddesses too’ (347–8).

Like Apollo, Bacchus is a poetic sex symbol providing divine sanction for Ovidian authority. In Ars 1.525–6, Bacchus summons his poet, and is introduced as a love instructor on a par with Ovid (ecce, suum vatem Liber vocat: hic quoque amantes / adiuuat / ‘look, Liber summons his bard: he too helps lovers’). And at Ars 1.565–73, Bacchus donates the inspiration and material for a type of written seduction that is couched alongside the love letter: a dinner table spread with munera Bacchi is an ideal site for risqué flirting, and the reader is advised to compose sweet nothings on it in wine. As a synonym for wine, Bacchus here exceeds even Apollo in terms of influence, becoming the very ink in which Ovid’s pupils are to practise writing their first, clumsy love poems. As the god of passion, Bacchus ranks alongside Cupid: at Am.1.2.47–8, Cupid’s opening procession is compared to Bacchus’ victory in the Ganges, whereas at Am.1.6.60, Liber and Amor are as fearless as Ovid in pursuit of his mistress (illa pudore vacat, Liber Amoreque metu / ‘the first knows nothing of shame, while Liber and Love know nothing of fear’). And crucially, in the last poem of the Amores, 3.15, Bacchus is the energy that drives the poet on to greater things (corniger increpit thyro graviore Lyaeus; / pulsanda est magnis area maior equis / ‘the horned Lyaean has dealt me a blow with his heavier thyrsus: I must beat the ground with mighty steeds, on a mightier course’ 17–18).

In imagining Phaon, her reader, as Apollo or Bacchus, Sappho might seem to be fantasizing about being swept off her feet by Ovidian poetic authority. In particular the summoning of Phaon as Apollo via the nod to Ars 2 seems to conjure up Ovid’s presence and specifically Roman power as poet. Phaon’s role as fate-predicting lover and Ovid’s position as vatic and didactic writer overlap in an image which points up Ovid’s controlling role as the ‘reader’ of this letter who writes (back) Sappho’s destiny. Moreover, the idea that, in her ignorance, Sappho calls out to be directed at this point, to be seduced by divine figures who have presided over the writing
of Ovidian texts, is made emphatic by her desire to play the role of Daphne or Ariadne (25), both of whom are pursued against their will. After Bacchus calls Ovid in *Ars* 1.525, Ovid recommends the god as a model lover who burns so fiercely with lust that he terrified Ariadne and forced her to elope with him when she was abandoned by Theseus: *implicitamque sinu, neque enim pugnare valebat, / abstulit: in facili est omnia posse deo / 'and clasping her to his chest, for she had no strength to fight, he carried her off: it's easy for a god to be all powerful’* (*Ars* 1.561–2). The story of Apollo and Daphne as told by Ovid in *Met*.1 is very similar: there Daphne is Apollo’s first love (*primus amor* 452) and an unwilling victim of his lust; when she tries to escape, she is turned into a bay tree, doomed thereafter to accompany the generals of Rome in triumphal procession and to guard Augustus’ doorposts (560–5). Note too that Phoebus Apollo presides over the promontory at Actium (conflated with Leucas in *Her*.15), from which Sappho is instructed to make her potentially fatal leap (*Phoebus ab excelso quantum patet aspicit aequor / 'Phoebus from on high looks down on the whole wide expanse of sea’* *Her*.15.165). At this point, it seems, Sappho has never looked so written, as she is made to consolidate a series of male, Roman fantasies, her identity fading in a welter of Ovidian tales.

Ironically, Sappho’s forced and now overtly sexual appropriation in Roman elegy is at the hands of a god-poet famous for his lyre-playing, which is exactly how Sappho has defined her Greek song and talent, now lost (*nec mihi, dispositis quae iungam carmina nervis, / proveniunt 15.13–14*). Her own poetic skill (her own divine inspiration), it seems, is being used against her. Yet if we only go back to lines 9–10 we might spot that Sappho’s description of her pining for Phaon (*uror ut, indomitis ignem exercentibus Euris, / fertilis accensis messibus ardet ager / ‘I burn, just like the fertile field when its harvests are ablaze, whipped up by the wild east-winds’) is precisely how Apollo describes his lust for Daphne in *Met*.1.492–6 (‘and as the stubble of the harvested grain is kindled, as hedges burn with the torches which some traveller happens to have put too near, or has left at the break of day, so the god was consumed by flames, and burnt in all his heart, and fed his frustrated love with hope’). Sappho still looks Ovidian, yet the balance of authority is suddenly not so simple, and her relationship with Phaon/Ovid is caught up in a chemistry of attraction/repulsion: as well as desired, objectified elegiac *puella*, Sappho can also stand alongside and even

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58 Violence is the normative fantasy in Ovid: e.g. *vim licet appelles: grata est vis ista puellis / you may use force: women like you to use it’ (*Ars* 1.673).

59 The line also echoes Virgil’s advice to farmers in *Georg*.1.84 (*saepe etiam sterilis incendere profuit agros / ‘it is often helpful to burn even sterile fields’*).
above Ovid in the predatory, ascendant role of Apollo (lusting, still, after a woman), the god to whom she plans to dedicate her lyre at lines 181–4. Just as Sappho presents us with alternative ways of imagining her reader, Phaon, so she reminds us that this letter always has more than its one, intended addressee: its real audience is a highly sophisticated one, whose perspectives on this poem are multiplied by colliding evocations of the poetic/sexual power of both poet and poetess.

In lines 27–8, however, Sappho makes her strongest assertion of independence, as if clinging to her lyric/lesbian past and regretting her momentary slip into a foreign tongue:

at mihi Pegasides blandissima carmina dictant,
iam canitur toto nomen in orbe meum;

Yet for me the daughters of Pegasus write the sweetest songs:
My name is already sung all over the world;

It is women who inspire her (and as I mentioned in the introduction, Pegasus is born of blood from the head of Medusa, poetry’s most stunning creatrix). Yet Sappho’s boast in line 28, followed by her declaration of equality with her great male rival Alcaeus (29), is a brag repeated at various places throughout Ovid’s work, most closely in the epilogue to Ars 2, when Ovid asks his reader-pupils to sing his praises and remember to write ‘Ovid was my maestro’ on any trophy they win (cantetur toto nomen in orbe meum 2.740). In Amores 1.15, a poem about rivalry and criticism addressed to Envy (Livor edax 1), the elegist bites back with ambition: mihi fama perennis / quaeritur, in toto semper ut orbe canar / ‘but my quest is eternal fame, to be known in song forever across the globe’ (7–8). This line in turn ironically transforms the formula of Am.1.3, where before we even knew Corinna’s name, Ovid claimed: iunctaque semper erunt nomina nostra tuis / ‘my name shall ever be joined with yours’ 1.3.26). We are reminded that, like Sappho, Corinna was (the name of) one of the most famous female poets of antiquity. In other words, Ovid’s signature, but also his ambition for conjoined fame, is written all over Sappho’s allusion to her reputation, reminding the reader who looks back that Sappho (qua poet) is just a name (nomina 3; mensuram nominis ipsa fero 34), and that it is readers’ recognition which determines and directs poetic identity. In this letter it is Sappho whom we read (nisi legisses 3) and Ovid who sings out (canitur 28), relishing the reality of this silent, written letter’s public declamation.

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60 Also see Rem.363, Met.15.871–9, Tr.2.118.
alongside the reader-lover, who can always betray the letter’s privacy by reading it out loud.

In lines 51ff., poetic rivalry is given a different edge. Phaon, who embodies the beauty Sappho has lost with her lyric poetry, has his eye on the girls of Sicily. She wishes she were Sicilian (Sicelis esse volo 52), and addresses her competitors/sisters directly:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Line</th>
<th>Translation</th>
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<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>O vos erronem tellure remittite vestra, Nisiades matres Nisiadesque nurus!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>nec vos decipiant blandae mendacia linguae: quae vobis dicit, dixerat ante mihi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>O send me back my wanderer from your lands, you Nisean mothers and Nisian girls!</td>
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<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>Don’t let the lies of a slick tongue deceive you: What he says to you he’s already said to me.</td>
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<td>55</td>
<td>Her.15.53–6</td>
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Line 55, which mirrors *Am.2.9.43–5* (me modo decipiant voces fallacis amicae / ‘let only the words of a lying girlfriend lure me on’) warns an entire female population against Phaon’s Ovidian wiles as well as figuring the repetition of Ovid’s deception over and above Sappho’s. In *Her.15.56*, it appears that Sappho has been taking Ovid’s textbook advice to heart; he warned his ostensibly female audience about believing handsome young men in *Ars* 3.435, saying, *quaes vobis dicunt, dixerunt mille puellis / ‘what they say to you, they’ve said to a thousand girls’. Like the slave-girl employed as post-mistress in the *Ars Amatoria*, Sappho is made to pass on Ovid’s lessons, fulfilling a truly heterosexual role as a reproductive woman and eroticized intermediary for male creative power.

At *Her.15.80*, similarly, when Sappho tells Phaon of her undying love (*et semper causa est, cur ego semper amem / ‘there is always a reason why I might always be in love’*) she quotes *Am.1.3.2* (aut amet aut faciat, cur ego semper amem / ‘let her love me, either that or ensure that I love forever’), the poem which initiates the love affair with Corinna. Only two lines previously, she had addressed Phaon as her ‘author’ (*unicus auctor* 78). The phrase at *Am.1.3.2* is cunningly repeated by Ovid at *Am.2.4.10* in a line that is even closer to Sappho’s at 15.80 (centum sunt causae cur ego semper amem / ‘there are one hundred reasons why I should always be in love’), and which in turn responds to the beginning and end of Propertius’ second book: see *invenio causas mille poeta novas / the poet in me finds a thousand new inspirations* (Prop. 2.1.12); cf. *mi fortuna aliquid semper amare dedit /*
‘Fortune has ensured I always have some object for my love’ (Prop. 2.22.18).\(^6\)

The gigolo bravado displayed by Ovid and Propertius here casts a dubious light on Sappho’s previous declaration that Phaon is the only one for her (ille mei cultus unicus auctor abes / ‘you, my one inspiration, are gone’ 78), especially as Am.2.4.10 also inspires Her.15.19, where she reminisces about the one hundred maids of Lesbos she once loved (atque aliae centum, quas non sine crimine amavi).

As Sappho in the next couplet muses about her character traits spun out by the sisters of fate (81–2), she touches on Ovid’s wish in Am.1.3.17–18 that his love for Corinna may be fated (tecum, quos dederint annos mihi filia sororum, / vivere contingat teque dolente mori / ‘with you I hope I’m destined to live the years which the sisters’ threads have spun for me, and to be mourned by you when I die’). Line 96 of Her.15 (non ut ames oro, verum ut amere sinas / ‘I’m not begging you to love, but to let yourself be loved’) also echoes Am.1.3.3 (a, nimium volui: tantum patiatur amari / ‘ah, I wanted too much – just let her suffer herself to be loved’). Sappho, like Corinna (the other most famous female poet of antiquity) offers herself as materies felix (Am.1.3.19) for Ovid’s letter, which will ensure that their names will be joined like lovers in poetry: see once more Am.1.3.25–6 (nos quoque per totum pariter cantabimur orbem, / iunctaque semper erunt nomina nostra tuis / ‘you and I, too, will sing together throughout the world, and my name shall forever be joined with yours’). Again, Ovid returns to a beginning, here to the start of his poetic love affair with Corinna in Am.1.3, in order to re-root and rejuvenate elegy, and to idealize his rivalry with and dependence on Sappho as a love affair in its most naïve, intoxicating and original stage. Yet it is precisely by means of these regressions to Ovid’s early career that the poem allows subject–object positions to slide and reverse: frequently, the absence–presence of Sapphic desire in Heroides 15 means that Sappho and Ovid/Phaon seem to write/reply in tandem, pursuing the same goals, the same girls . . .

THE CRYING GAME

In Heroides 15, tears both define and constitute elegy. They are the central motivating factor for Sappho’s altered metric shape and mode of emotional expression in lines 7–8 (flendus amor meus est: elegia flebile carmen. / non facit ad lacrimas barbitas illa meas / ‘I must weep – for elegy is tearful poetry; no lyre is suited to my tears’) and come to define the new Sappho

\(^6\) See Bessone (2003) 235–8 on the semper amare formula in Her.15.
in acute contrast to her old fiery image as described famously in Horace and Plutarch, as well as by Sappho herself (e.g. fr. 48LP; cf. Her.15.9–10). In Ovid’s formula, tears are to elegy what flames are to lyric. We are reminded of how tears come to characterize elegy in Am.3.9, when Ovid uses a similar phrase to the one Sappho adopts (flebilis Elegia 3) to comment on another crucial poetic relationship, with Tibullus, the poet who (like the ardent Sappho we knew) now lies burning on his funeral pyre. Sappho in tears marks the death of one poetic shape and image and the appropriation of a new genre. Yet we also cannot forget that in the Ars Amatoria, tears function as a rhetorical device in a campaign of seduction and are to be faked if necessary at critical moments to manipulate, persuade or distract.

Let’s look first at lines 97–8, where Sappho really begins to emerge as elegist, in tears:

\[
\text{scribimus, et lacrimis oculi rorantur abortis;} \\
\text{aspice, quam sit in hoc multa litura loco.}
\]

I write, and my eyes pour out tears like drops of dew;
just look how many blots there are just here.

Sappho proceeds to recount the time she last saw Phaon (15.99–116). At first she could neither cry nor express herself (nec me flere diu, nec potuisse loqui 110), suggesting perhaps that tears amount to a kind of speech or writing; like Hinds and Farrell, we might wonder at what point the liturae (‘blots’) in 15.98 become litterae (‘letters’), and are reminded that litura is also used to mean the smearing of a wax tablet to erase (present or past) inscriptions. When grief surfaces, Sappho remembers how she cried out, tore her hair and beat her breast just like a mother carrying her son’s corpse to the funeral pyre. Yet line 116 (portet ad exstructos corpus inane rogos / ‘she carries his empty frame to the high-built funeral pyre’) mirrors exactly the description of Tibullus’s death in that tearful elegy, Am.3.9 (ardet in exstructo corpus inane rogo 6). The possibility for ridicule and cheap jokes in 15.116 is all here of course – Sappho is old enough to be Phaon’s

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62 See Horace, Odes 4.9.10–12, Plutarch, Amat.18 (here Sappho is compared to the fire-spitting son of Hephaistos).
64 Tears are emphatically a visual pun: this letter must be looked at to be/as well as read, just as men must use their eyes to seek out a woman: quae renda est oculis apta puella tuis / ‘you need to hunt out the right girl with your eyes’ (Ars 1.44).
65 Ars 1.659–62.
Co-creators: Heroides 15

mother in Ovid, whereas in her own poetry she was heard to swear ‘I would never share my bed with a younger man’ (fr.121LP). But through the tears, and via the signposted implication of Am.3.9, we get more than a glimpse of true Sappho ardour, the fire that fuels Ovid’s hero, Tibullus, and makes Sappho the mother of all elegiac poets (note that Elegia is compared to a mourning mother at Am.3.9.1). Sappho may be blurred and watered down in elegy, on paper, but there is no hiding Ovid’s powerful metaphors of literary influence and inheritance.

But how difficult is it (in the epistolary fantasy) to read a text which describes its own illegibility (quam sit in hoc multa litura loco)? Tears epitomize the energizing paradox of the love letter: they cultivate sincerity and intelligibility, foster presence (lover sends beloved a bit of herself), yet they can also look contrived, obscure and obfuscated, make the letter (literally and metaphorically) difficult to read. Ovid, who has had tears in his literary tool-box for some time, makes his readers highly aware of this tension, which further emphasizes their role as unintended readers suspicious of their tendency to misunderstand, or be deceived. What we see may not be what we get in a genre particular about making us visualize a poet’s image and look at what is emphatically written (protinus est oculis cognita nostra tuis? 2). This letter hints at the liquidity (or superficiality) of authorial identity, signposting the possibility of its own distortion in the process of transmission.

When, in her poetic grove, Sappho breaks down in tears, this is also, in the same breath, the nearest she comes not just to writing but to being elegy, in the tradition, of course, of elegy’s material girls: hic ego cum lassos posuissem flebilis artus / ‘here I had laid my weary limbs and given way to tears’ 161. Sappho is both the weeping woman (the weeping poem/letter) and the weeping poet, mourning her lonely position as both writing subject and written object. Does she need help? This is always the question in a love letter which pleads, moves and addresses. As if by magic, in line 162, a Naiad appears to assist her: constitit ante oculos Naias una meos / ‘a Naiad appeared before my eyes’. I have already discussed this line’s interaction with Am.1.5. But the handmaid of Venus also interjects to repeat her mistress’ entrance at the beginning of Ars 3 (et ante oculos constitit ipsa meos / ‘and

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68 An illegibility embodied in femaleness and its connection throughout Western thought with the fluid, the irrational, the chaotic.

69 Compare Lindheim’s Lacanian analysis of Ovid’s heroines in general (2003), whom, she argues, continually perform the irreconcilable roles of powerful and helpless women.
she stood herself before my eyes’ (3.44), just in time to help Ovid out with his female students, who like Ariadne (3.35), Phyllis (38) and Dido (40) (all Heroides) could have done with his advice a long time ago. The scene that follows line 162 also echoes the epiphany of Aphrodite in Sappho fr.2.LP.70 Yet again Sappho is crying out to be heard while stepping into Ovid’s shoes, praying to and being advised by Venus; her primary influence on Ovidian epiphany is clear to see, while at the same time she is a teacher-turned-pupil, learning and showing what it is to write elegy for the first time, and looking not only to Venus but to Ovid for help.

The Naiad advises Sappho to jump off a cliff into the sea to extinguish her fires (‘quoniam non ignibus aequis / ureris’ / “since you are burning with unrequited flame” 163–4), suggesting again that to water down Sapphic ardour risks drowning the poetess (just as flebilis Elegia mourns the death of Tibullus in Am.3.9). Harvey concludes that her predicted jump looks like a ‘neutralisation of the threat that Sappho’s reputation represents’,71 Yet as Sappho becomes more and more desperate to be saved, and the letter draws to its close, what this leap entails and implies looks increasingly blurred. I have already touched on the erotics of water in discussing the Naiad’s appearance at 15.162, and we might also note that the aequor over which Apollo presides at 165 is closely associated with the beloved ‘Lesbian daughters’ Sappho addresses at 199–200 (Lesbides aequorea 199),72 reminding us perhaps of Catullus’ nymphae (aequorea . . . Nereides Catull. 64.15).73 Deucalion’s immersion in water kills his passion for Pyrrha at 167–8, but what happens when a woman plunges into Venus’ element, into elegiac waves? In curing Sappho’s love for Phaon, does Ovid’s remedia also rekindle her closeness to and desire for the female (and stage her rebirth as lyric poetess, as she reaffirms her lyric identity even as she composes clumsy distichs and gives away her chelys at 181–4)? Does Sappho really want to be rescued, or is she already (with Ovid, in the spirit of Am.1.5) undressing the Naiad with her eyes, yearning to plunge back into Narcissus’ pool? As we have seen, Sappho’s transmission from Lesbos to Actium, the site of Augustus’ founding victory, looks soaked in imperialist imagery — yet her metamorphosis is complicated and contested both by the irresolute, interrogative structure of the letter itself (cur tamen Actiacas miseram me mittis

70 Sappho calls to Aphrodite from her original poetic grove, which blooms with roses and runs with sacred streams.
72 Knox (1995) ad loc., finds this a perplexing epithet. He conjectures that it may be a way of referring to the inhabitants of an island (cf. aequorem Britannos Met.15.752)
73 Knox (1995) ad loc., suggests that Ovid may have a lost passage from Sappho referring to sea nymphs in mind here.
ad oras? / ‘but why to you send me to the shores of Actium in my misery?’ (185), and by the double poetic identity of Apollo, appropriated as Sapphic lyricist and Roman Ovidian muse par excellence.

In particular, Ovid’s own ‘answer’ to Her.15 at Am.2.18, is puzzling. Here Sabinus has returned from the ends of the earth and brought back with him letters written by the errant lovers: Ulysses has replied to Penelope, Hippolytus to Phaedra, Aeneas to Dido, Demophoon to Phyllis, and Jason to Hypsipyle. On Sappho’s fate, Ovid writes, finally: *det votam Phoebus Lesbi amata lyram / ‘let the daughter of Lesbos, now loved, offer to Phoebus the lyre she promised him’* (34). This line is even more vague than the list of responses in 29–33, and seems to depend on our close engagement with Her.15. It is usually interpreted to infer that Sappho’s love was requited74 (for she is *amata*75), yet in Her.15.81, she promises her lyre to Apollo only if she goes through with the medicinal leap from the rocks of Actium. For Knox and Tarrant, this can only mean either that the line refers to a lost poem by Ovid on the same subject, but not to Her.15, or that it is an interpolation.76 Yet if, on the basis of *amata*, we are to imagine a happy ending here, it would reverse all we know of mythical Sappho’s fate in the tradition thought to originate in Greek comedy: by all accounts we are expecting Phaon to spurn her. We don’t straightforwardly assume when we read Am.2.18 that Phaon’s reply (written by Sabinus) was positive, just as, in the enigmatic preceding lines, we only get hints, not clear statements, of Sabinus’ take on the stories of Dido, Phyllis and Hypsipyle. The passage as a whole is a cleverly partial synopsis which seems designed to engage us in precisely this kind of parallel reading exercise, and thus immerse us further in the narrative dramas of these fictional love affairs. The line *det votam Phoebus Lesbi amata lyram* seems to fuse exactly the two scenarios envisaged by Sappho in Her.15.175–88, thus apparently alluding quite specifically to the poem we have: either she will attempt suicide, hoping against hope that she will survive and get rid of her passion, in which case she will dedicate her lyre to Apollo (179–84), or she will be saved from this fate by Phaon, who will *be* her Apollo (*tu mihi Phoebus eris* 188). Thus the act of giving her lyre to Apollo seems to be compatible with both the tragic and the happy ending imagined in Sappho’s letter: if she makes the jump and lives, she dedicates the lyre,77 while if she receives a positive reply from

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75 Although we can’t rule out that *amata* is merely used as an epithet, as perhaps it has been already at line 26, where some manuscripts give *Lesbi amata*, although the text is very uncertain here.
76 Knox (1995) 12–14; cf. Tarrant (1982) and Murgia (1985), who argues strongly against Tarrant’s interpolation argument (see 471) but still believes that Am.2.18 proves our letter is not genuine.
77 Moreover, we can’t rule out a concessive quality to *amata* (*although* she was loved . . . ).
Phaon first, the implication is that she will also give thanks to the god, but this time (in addition) in the form of divine Phaon himself (either way, interestingly, she gives up her lyre, and by implication her lyric poetic identity). *Am.* 2.18 presents us with a riddle that plugs us deeper into the confusions, uncertainties, and games of allegiance that characterize our reading of Ovid’s Sappho, as I have emphasized throughout this chapter.78 It only exacerbates the paradoxes already present in *Her.*15, ensuring that the poem ends on a cliffhanger just when we are sure its author is doomed, and leaving us with the guilty possibility of misreading, of having misread.

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We have now seen how *Her.*15 accumulates a series of questions and problems about poetic influence and intent, staging a power struggle between Ovid and Sappho whose poetic voices wrestle for visibility in a vacillating hierarchy. This, I’ve suggested, is what Ovidian erotics is all about: Sappho’s poem offers its readers several different, competing love affairs, making exemplary use of the potential disjointedness of the elegiac couplet to jigsaw together emotions, sexualities and genders. She shows us, in a climactic way, the extent to which literary rivalries and sexual passions are inseparable in Ovid’s amatory poetry, and how Ovidian intertextuality enacts intersubjectivity. Critics of this letter inevitably take sides, if not as vehemently as Verducci, or as decidedly as Knox, then as subtly as Harvey, who postpones Sappho’s fate until the final countdown. Yet as I’ve argued, the Ovidian author has already written a complex and predicted self-critique into his apparently macho campaign, warning readers against rash judgement and preference even as he tempts and forecasts it. Critics have continually underestimated the role of the letter’s dialogic structure in scaffolding the complexity and risk invested in reading this poem. In particular, Ovid manipulates the letter’s relationship with didactic poetry, a genre which also addresses a reader with a view to a reply, to explore intertextuality as a literary theme and the role of the reader in constructing and determining authorial identity. There is no Ovid without Sappho, this is what the reader must learn: Ovidian self-invention is staged alongside and through Sappho’s original didacticism. Ovid looks back at Tibullus in *Am.* 3.9 and forward to the writing of his own posthumous reputation.

78 It seems very unlikely that an interpolator seeking to insert his later Sappho letter into Ovid’s *Heroides* as sketched in *Am.* 2.18 (as Tarrant argues) would choose such an oblique and confusing way to do so.
when he baits us to read and imagine the death of an author. Yet as critics’ responses have themselves shown, his is a hazardous strategy which may rely too much on the loyalty and memory of reader-pupils eager to please and comply. This is the surprise of Her.15, and its originality, as it establishes ends in beginnings and vice versa: that there are real feelings, real vulnerabilities exposed here, if only artificially, reminding us that there must always be an element of jeopardy, unpredictability and loss of control in Ovidian rhetoric, if the author is ever to survive.79

79 Similarly Spentzou (2003) 9 et passim, criticizes existing gendered approaches to the Heroides for their reluctance to question Ovid’s authorial control. I agree, but do not necessarily envisage the heroines’ success in making themselves heard above the silence of the letter in terms of an ‘escape’ from Ovid’s authorial control: we can see Ovid imitating, lusting after, riling the Bacchic dance of feminine discourse in these poems just as much as he restrains and smothers it.
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