
Ovid: Ars Amatoria *(The Art of Love)* *Trans. by A .S. Kline*

Introduction¹



Figure 1: Eugène Delacroix, *Ovid among the Scythians*, 1862

Ovid, the Latin poet of the Roman Empire, was banished in 8 CE from Rome to Tomis (in modern day Romania) by the exclusive intervention of the Emperor Augustus, without any participation of the Senate or of any Roman judge. The reasons for his banishment are not known.

At the time, Tomis was a remote town on the edge of the civilized world. According to Ovid, none of its citizens spoke Latin, which as an educated Roman he found trying. Ovid

¹ Wikipedia contributors. "Exile of Ovid." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 11 Feb. 2014. Web. 23 Apr. 2014. [edited by RKH]

wrote that the cause of his own exile was *carmen et error* (a poem and a mistake). The poem was presumably the *Ars Amatoria* (The Art of Love).

Ovid was one of the most prolific poets of his time, and before being banished had already composed his most famous poems - *Heroides*, *Amores*, *Ars Amatoria*, *Remedia Amoris*, *Medicamina Faciei Femineae*, his lost tragedy *Medea*, the ambitious *Metamorphoses*, and the *Fasti*.

In exile, the poet continued producing works, and wrote some more that survive today: *Ibis*, *Tristia*, *Epistulae ex Ponto*, and possibly several other, minor poems. These works contain letters to friends and enemies, and also depict the poet's treatment by the Scythians - particularly Getae, a nomadic people.

In 8 CE, the year of the exile, Ovid was 50 years old and it's believed that he enjoyed a great fame in Rome – the generation of Virgil (19 BCE) and Horace (8 BCE) having ended, some scholars write that he was then the most famous poet in the city.



Figure 2: Titian, Venus and Cupid, 1550

Should anyone here not know the art of love,
read this, and learn by reading how to love.
By art the boat's set gliding, with oar and sail,
by art the chariot's swift: love's ruled by art.
Automedon was skilled with Achilles' chariot reins,
Tiphys in Thessaly was steersman of the Argo,
Venus appointed me as guide to gentle Love:
I'll be known as Love's Tiphys, and Automedon.
It's true Love's wild, and one who often flouts me:
but he's a child of tender years, fit to be ruled.
Chiron made the young Achilles perfect at the lyre,
and tempered his wild spirits through peaceful art.
He, who so terrified his enemies and friends,
they say he greatly feared the aged Centaur.
That hand that Hector was destined to know,
was held out, at his master's orders, to be flogged.
I am Love's teacher as Chiron was Achilles',
both wild boys, both children of a goddess.
Yet the bullock's neck is bowed beneath the yoke,
and the spirited horse's teeth worn by the bit.
And Love will yield to me, though with his bow
he wounds my heart, shakes at me his burning torch.
The more he pierces me, the more violently he burns me,
so much the fitter am I to avenge the wounds.
Nor will I falsely say you gave me the art, Apollo,
no voice from a heavenly bird gives me advice,

I never caught sight of Clio or Clio's sisters
while herding the flocks, Ascra, in your valleys:
Experience prompts this work: listen to the expert poet:
I sing true: Venus, help my venture!
Far away from here, you badges of modesty,
the thin headband, the ankle-covering dress.
I sing of safe love, permissible intrigue,
and there'll be nothing sinful in my song.
Now the first task for you who come as a raw recruit
is to find out who you might wish to love.
The next task is to make sure that she likes you:
the third, to see to it that the love will last.
That's my aim, that's the ground my chariot will cover:
that's the post my thundering wheels will scrape.



Figure 3: John Leech, *The Comic History of Rome: The Mother of the Gracchi*, 1850

While you're still free, and can roam on a loose rein,
pick one to whom you could say: 'You alone please me.'
She won't come falling for you out of thin air:
the right girl has to be searched for: use your eyes.
The hunter knows where to spread nets for the stag,
he knows what valleys hide the angry boar:
the wild-fowler knows the woods: the fisherman
knows the waters where the most fish spawn:
You too, who search for the essence of lasting love,
must be taught the places that the girls frequent.
I don't demand you set your sails, and search,
or wear out some long road to discover them.
Perseus brought Andromeda from darkest India,
and Trojan Paris snatched his girl from Greece,
Rome will grant you lots of such lovely girls,
you'll say: 'Here's everything the world has had.'
Your Rome's as many girls as Gargara's sheaves,
as Methymna's grapes, as fishes in the sea,
as birds in the hidden branches, stars in the sky:
Venus, Aeneas's mother, haunts his city.
If you'd catch them very young and not yet grown,

real child-brides will come before your eyes:
if it's young girls you want, thousands will please you.
You'll be forced to be unsure of your desires:
if you delight greatly in older wiser years,
here too, believe me, there's an even greater crowd.



Figure 4: Pleading, Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1876

So far, riding her unequal wheels, the Muse has taught you
where you might choose your love, where to set your nets.
Now I'll undertake to tell you what pleases her,
by what arts she's caught, itself a work of highest art.
Whoever you are, lovers everywhere, attend, with humble minds,
and you, masses, show you support me: use your thumbs.
First let faith enter into your mind: every one of them
can be won: you'll win her, if you only set your snares.
Birds will sooner be silent in the Spring, cicadas in summer,
an Arcadian hound turn his back on a hare,
than a woman refuse a young man's flattering words:
Even she you might think dislikes it, will like it.
Secret love's just as pleasing to women as men.
Men pretend badly: she hides her desire.
If it was proper for men not to be the first to ask,
woman's role would be to take the part of the asker.
The cow lows to the bull in gentle pastures:
the mare whinnies to the hooped stallion.
Desire in us is milder and less frantic:
the male fire has its lawful limits.
Remember Byblis, who burned with incestuous love,
for her brother, and bravely punished herself with the noose?
Myrrha loved her father, but not as a daughter should,
and then was hidden by the covering bark:
oozing those tears, that pour from the tree as fragrance,

and whose droplets take their name from the girl.
Once, in the shady valleys of wooded Ida
there was a white bull, glory of the herd,
one small black mark set between his horns:
it the sole blemish, the rest was milky-white.
The heifers of Cnossos and Cydon longed
to have him mount up on their backs.
Pasiphae joyed in adultery with the bull:
she hated the handsome heifers with jealousy.
I sing what is well-known: not even Crete, the hundred-citied,
can deny it, however much Cretans lie.
They say that, with unpractised hands, she plucked
fresh leaves and tenderest grasses for the bull.
She went as one of the herd, unhindered by any care
for that husband of hers: Minos was ousted by a bull.
Why put on your finest clothes, Pasiphae?
Your lover can appreciate none of your wealth.
Why have a mirror with you, when you seek highland cattle?
Why continually smooth your hair, you foolish woman?
But believe the mirror that denies you're a heifer.
How you wish that brow of yours could bear horns!
If you'd please Minos, don't seek out adulterers:
If you want to cheat your husband, cheat with a man!
The queen left her marriage bed for woods and fields,
like a Maenad roused by the Boeotian god, they say.
Ah, how often, with angry face, she spied a cow,
and said: 'Now, how can she please my lord?
Look, how she frisks before him in the tender grass:
doubtless the foolish thing thinks that she's lovely.'
She spoke, and straightaway had her led from the vast herd,
the innocent thing dragged under the arching yoke,
or felled before the altar, forced to be a false sacrifice,
and, delighted, held her rival's entrails in her hand.
The number of times she killed rivals to please the gods,
and said, holding the entrails: 'Go, and please him for me!'
Now she claims to be Io, and now Europa,
one who's a heifer, the other borne by the bull.
Yet he filled her, the king of the herd, deceived
by a wooden cow, and their offspring betrayed its breeding.
If Cretan Aerope had spurned Thyestes's love
(and isn't it hard to forego even one man?),
the Sun would not have veered from his course mid-way,
and turned back his chariot and horses towards Dawn.
The daughter who savaged Nisus's purple lock
presses rabid dogs down with her thighs and groin.
Agamemnon who escaped Mars on land, Neptune at sea,
became the victim of his murderous wife.
Who would not weep at Corinthian Creusa's flames,
and that mother bloodstained by her children's murder?
Phoenix, Amyntor's son wept out of sightless eyes:

Hippolytus was torn by his fear-maddened horses.
Phineus, why blind your innocent sons?
That punishment will return on your own head.
All these things were driven by woman's lust:
it's more fierce than ours, and more frenzied.
So, on, and never hesitate in hoping for any woman:
there's hardly one among them who'll deny you.
Whether they give or not, they're delighted to be asked:
And even if you fail, you'll escape unharmed.
But why fail, when there's pleasure in new delights
and the more foreign the more they capture the heart?
The seed's often more fertile in foreign fields,
and a neighbour's herd always has richer milk.



Figure 5: Ancient Roman Terra Cotta portrait of a kiss

But to get to know your desired-one's maid
is your first care: she'll smooth your way.
See if she's close to her mistress's thoughts,
and has plenty of true knowledge of her secret jests.
Corrupt her with promises, and with prayers:
you'll easily get what you want, if she wishes.
She'll tell the time (the doctors would know it too)
when her mistress's mind is receptive, fit for love.
Her mind will be fit for love when she luxuriates
in fertility, like the crop on some rich soil.
When hearts are glad, and nothing sad constrains them,
they're open: Venus steals in then with seductive art.
So Troy was defended with sorrowful conflict:
in joy, the Horse, pregnant with soldiers, was received.
She's also to be tried when she's wounded, pained by a rival:
make it your task then to see that she's avenged.
The maid can rouse her, when she combs her hair in the morning,
and add her oar to the work of your sails,
and, sighing to herself in a low murmur, say:
'But I doubt that you'll be able to make her pay.'
Then she should speak of you, and add persuasive words,
and swear you're dying, crazed with love.
But hurry, lest the sails fall and the breeze dies:
anger melts away, with time, like fragile ice.
You ask perhaps if one should take the maid herself?
Such a plan brings the greatest risk with it.
In one case, fresh from bed, she'll get busy, in another be tardy,
in one case you're a prize for her mistress, in the other herself.

There's chance in it: even if it favours the idea,
my advice nevertheless is to abstain.
I don't pick my way over sharp peaks and precipices,
no youth will be caught out being lead by me.
Still, while she's giving and taking messages,
if her body pleases you as much as her zeal,
make the lady your first priority, her companion the next:
Love should never be begun with a servant.
I warn you of this, if art's skill is to be believed,
and don't let the wind blow my words out to sea:
follow the thing through or don't attempt it:
she'll endure the whispers once she's guilty herself.
It's no help if the bird escapes when its wings are limed:
it's no good if the boar gets free from a loosened net.
Hold fast to the stricken fish you've caught on the hook:
press home the attempt, don't leave off till you've won.
She'll not give you away, sharing the guilt for the crime,
and you'll know whatever your lady's done, and said.
But hide it well: if the informer's well hidden,
you'll always secretly know your mistress's mind.

Book I Part XI: Don't Forget Her Birthday!



Figure 6: John William Waterhouse, Venus awakening Adonis, 1899

It's a mistake to think that only farmers working the fields,
and sailors, need to keep an eye on the season:
Seed can't always be trusted to the furrow,
or a hollow ship to the wine-dark sea,
It's not always safe to capture tender girls:
often the time itself makes for success.
If her birthday's here, or the April Kalends,
that delight in joining months, Venus's to Mars,
or if the Circus is decorated, not as before
with clay figurines but with the wealth of kings,
delay the thing: then winter's harsh, the Pleiades are here,
then the tender Kid is merged with the ocean wave:
it's best to hold off then: then he who trusts the deep,
can scarcely save the wreckage of his mangled boat.
It's fine to start on that day of tears when the Allia
flowed with the blood poured from Roman wounds,
or when the Sabbath day returns, the holy day
of the Syrian Jews, less suitable for buying things.
Let your mistress's birthday be one of great terror to you:
that's a black day when anything has to be given.
However much you avoid it, she'll still win: it's
a woman's skill, to strip wealth from an ardent lover.
A loose-robbed peddler comes to your lady: she likes to buy:
and explains his prices while you're sitting there.
She'll ask you to look, because you know what to look for:
then kiss you: then ask you to buy her something there.
She swears that she'll be happy with it, for years,
but she needs it now, now the price is right.

If you say you haven't the money in the house, she'll ask
for a note of hand - and you're sorry you learnt to write.
Why - she asks doesn't she for money as if it's her birthday,
just for the cake, and how often it is her birthday, if she's in need?
Why - she weeps doesn't she, mournfully, for a sham loss,
that imaginary gem that fell from her pierced ear?
They many times ask for gifts, they never give in return:
you lose, and you'll get no thanks for your loss.
And ten mouths with as many tongues wouldn't be enough
for me to describe the wicked tricks of whores.

Book I Part XII: Write and Make Promises



Figure 7: Sandro Botticelli, Venus and Mars, 1483

Try wax to pave the way, pour it out on scraped tablets:
let wax be your mind's true confidante.
Bring her your flattering words and play the lover:
and, whoever you are, add a humble prayer.
Achilles was moved by prayer to grant Hector's body to Priam:
a god's anger's deflected by the voice of prayer.
Make promises: what harm can a promise do?
Anyone can be rich in promises.
Hope lasts, if she's once believed in,
a useful, though deceptive, goddess.
If you've given, you can quite reasonably be forgotten:
she carried it off, and now she's nothing to lose.
But if you don't give, always appear about to:
like barren fields that always cheat the farmer,
like the gambler who goes on losing, lest he's finally lost,
and calls the dice back endlessly into his eager hand.
This is the work, the labour, to have her without giving first:
and she'll go on giving, lest she lose what she's freely given.
So go on, and send your letter's flattering words,
try her intention, test the road out first.
Cydippe was deceived by the message the apple brought,
and unaware the girl by her own words was caught.
I warn you, youths of Rome, learn the noble arts,
not just to defend some trembling client:
like the crowd, the grave judge, the elected senate,
a woman will give her hand, won by eloquence.
But let your powers be hidden, don't display your eloquence:
let irksome words vanish from your speech.
Who, but a mindless fool, declaims to his sweet friend?
A strong letter often causes her displeasure.
Let your speech be credible, use ordinary words,

flattering though, speak as if you were present.
If she won't receive the letter, returns it un-read,
stick to your plan, and hope she'll read it later.
In time stubborn oxen come to the plough,
in time the horse learns to suffer the bridle:
constant use wears away an iron ring,
the curved plough's lost to the endless furrow.
What's harder than stone, softer than water?
Yet soft water carves the hardest stone.
Once steadfast you'll conquer Penelope herself in time:
you'll see Troy captive, though it's captured late.
She reads and won't reply? Don't press her:
just let her keep on reading your flattery.
If she wants to read, she'll want to answer what she's read:
such things proceed by number and by measure.
Perhaps at first a cool letter comes to you,
asking: would you please not trouble her.
What she asks, she fears: what she doesn't ask, she wants,
that you go on: do it, and you'll soon get what you wish.



Figure 8: The Procession from the Roma Ara Pacis Augustae, 9 C.E.

Don't delight in curling your hair with tongs,
don't smooth your legs with sharp pumice stone.
Leave that to those who celebrate Cybele the Mother,
howling wildly in the Phrygian manner.
Male beauty's better for neglect: Theseus
carried off Ariadne, without a single pin in his hair.
Phaedra loved Hippolytus: he was unsophisticated:
Adonis was dear to the goddess, and fit for the woods.
Neatness pleases, a body tanned from exercise:
a well fitting and spotless toga's good:
no stiff shoe-thongs, your buckles free of rust,
no sloppy feet for you, swimming in loose hide:
don't mar your neat hair with an evil haircut:
let an expert hand trim your head and beard.
And no long nails, and make sure they're dirt-free:
and no hairs please, sprouting from your nostrils.
No bad breath exhaled from unwholesome mouth:
don't offend the nose like a herdsman or his flock.
Leave the rest for impudent women to do,
or whoever's the sort of man who needs a man.

Book I Part XVII: Tears, Kisses, and Take the Lead



Figure 9: Peter Paul Rubens, The Rape of Proserpina, 1638

And tears help: tears will move a stone:
let her see your damp cheeks if you can.
If tears (they don't always come at the right time)
fail you, touch your eyes with a wet hand.
What wise man doesn't mingle tears with kisses?
Though she might not give, take what isn't given.
Perhaps she'll struggle, and then say 'you're wicked':
struggling she still wants, herself, to be conquered.
Only, take care her lips aren't bruised by snatching,
and that she can't complain that you were harsh.
Who takes a kiss, and doesn't take the rest,
deserves to lose all that were granted too.
How much short of your wish are you after that kiss?
Ah me, that was boorishness stopped you not modesty.
Though you call it force: it's force that pleases girls: what delights
is often to have given what they wanted, against their will.
She who is taken in love's sudden onslaught
is pleased, and finds wickedness is a tribute.
And she who might have been forced, and escapes unscathed,

will be saddened, though her face pretends delight.
Phoebe was taken by force: force was offered her sister:
and both, when raped, were pleased with those who raped them.
Though the tale's known, it's still worth repeating,
how the girl of Scyros mated Achilles the hero.
Now the lovely goddess had given her fatal bribe
to defeat the other two beneath Ida's slopes:
now a daughter-in-law had come to Priam
from an enemy land: a Greek wife in Trojan walls:
all swore the prescribed oath to the injured husband:
now one man's grief became a nation's cause.
Shamefully, though he gave way to a mother's prayer,
Achilles hid his manhood in women's clothes.
What's this, Aeacides? Spinning's not your work:
your search for fame's through Pallas's other arts.
Why the basket? Your arm's meant to bear a shield:
why does the hand that will slay Hector hold the yarn?
Throw away the spindle wound laboriously with thread!
The spear from Pelion's to be brandished by this hand.
By chance a royal virgin shared the room:
through her rape she learned he was a man.
That she was truly won by force, we must think:
but she still wanted to be won by force.
She often cried: 'Stop!' afterwards, when Achilles hurried on:
now he'd taken up stronger weapons than the distaff.
Where's that force now? Why do you restrain
the perpetrator of your rape, Deidamia?
No doubt as there's a sort of shame in having started first,
so it's pleasant to have what someone else has started.
Ah! The youth has too much faith in his own beauty,
if he waits until she asks him first.
The man must approach first: speak the words of entreaty:
she courteously receives his flattering prayers.
To win her, ask her: she only wants to be asked:
give her the cause and the beginning of your longing.
Jupiter went as a suppliant to the heroines of old:
no woman ever seduced great Jupiter.
If you find she disdains the advent of your prayerful sighs,
leave off what you've begun, retrace your steps.
What shuns them, they desire the more: they hate what's there:
remove her loathing by pursuing less.
The hoped-for love should not always be declared:
introduce desire hidden in the name of friendship.
I've seen the most severe of women fooled this way:
he who once was a worshipper, became a lover.

Book II Part XX: The Task's Complete...But Now...



Figure 10: Luca Signorelli, Ovid, 1504

The end of the work's at hand: grateful youth grant me the palm,
and set the wreath of myrtle on my perfumed hair.
As Podalirius with his art of medicine, among the Greeks,
was great, Achilles with his right hand, Nestor his wisdom,
Calchas great as a prophet, Ajax in arms,
Automedon as a charioteer, so am I in love.
Celebrate me as a poet, men, speak my praises,
let my name be sung throughout the world.
I've given you weapons: Vulcan gave Achilles his:
excel with the gifts you're given, as he excelled.
But whoever overcomes an Amazon with my sword,
write on the spoils 'Ovid was my master.'
Behold, you tender girls ask for rules for yourselves:
well yours then will be the next task for my pen!



Figure 11: John William Waterhouse, Hyalas and the Nymphs, 1896

To have been taught more is shameful: but kindly Venus
said: 'What's shameful is my particular concern.'
Let each girl know herself: adopt a reliable posture
for her body: one layout's not suitable for all.
She who's known for her face, lie there face upwards:
let her back be seen, she who's back delights.
Milanion bore Atalanta's legs on his shoulders:
if they're good looking, that mode's acceptable.
Let the small be carried by a horse: Andromache,
his Theban bride, was too tall to straddle Hector's horse.
Let a woman noted for her length of body,
press the bed with her knees, arch her neck slightly.
She who has youthful thighs, and faultless breasts,
the man might stand, she spread, with her body downwards.
Don't think it shameful to loosen your hair, like a Maenad,
and throw back your head with its flowing tresses.
You too, whom Lucina's marked with childbirth's wrinkles,
like the swift child of Parthia, turn your mount around.
There's a thousand ways to do it: simple and least effort,
is just to lie there half-turned on your right side.
But neither Phoebus's tripods nor Ammon's horn
shall sing greater truths to you than my Muse:

If you trust art's promise, that I've long employed:
my songs will offer you their promise.
Woman, feel love, melted to your very bones,
and let both delight equally in the thing.
Don't leave out seductive coos and delightful murmurings,
don't let wild words be silent in the middle of your games.
You too whom nature denies sexual feeling,
pretend to sweet delight with artful sounds.
Unhappy girl, for whom that sluggish place is numb,
which man and woman equally should enjoy.
Only beware when you feign it, lest it shows:
create belief in your movements and your eyes.
When you like it, show it with cries and panting breath:
Ah! I blush, that part has its own secret signs.
She who asks fondly for a gift after love's delights,
can't want her request to carry any weight.
Don't let light into the room through all the windows:
it's fitting for much of your body to be concealed.
The game is done: time to descend, you swans,
you who bent your necks beneath my yoke.
As once the boys, so now my crowd of girls
inscribe on your trophies 'Ovid was my master.'

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