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Harvard Studies in Classical Philology, Vol. 100 (2000), 439-451.

Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0073-0688%282000%29100%3C439%3ATWI%28OO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-M

Harvard Studies in Classical Philology is currently published by Department of the Classics, Harvard University.

THE WRITING IN (AND OF) OVID'S BYBLIS EPISODE

THOMAS E. JENKINS

IN a recent article, Joseph Farrell, in the course of a fuller argument about the interplay of gender and rhetoric in Ovid's *Heroides*, argues convincingly that Byblis' tragedy in the *Metamorphoses* stems in large part from her attempt to embrace a male mode of writing. While (ineptly) following the instructions intended for the male readers of the *Ars Amatoria*, Byblis proves herself unable or unwilling to change her literary gender, and so fails disastrously in her purpose.[1] I suggest a complementary reason for Byblis' failure, one that involves an examination of the paradoxes inherent in Byblis' attempt to write an unspeakable longing; the moment of narrative crisis (that is to say, the point of no return) occurs not when Byblis writes her incestuous desire—but when she sends it. As long as the 'unspeakable' (*nefandum*, 9.626) confession lacks delivery (and therefore a reader), it extends the world of Byblis' private musings, her innocuous (if incestuous) private monologues. Once delivered to a reader, however, the letter fulfills its speech-act, and thoughts previously ineffable find their voice: the letter will confess, *fatebitur*, the unspeakable (9.515). In a twist in the tale, Ovid's own written narrative becomes self-reflexive, as the highly distraught characters within the drama reflect on what sort of speech may be successfully written. Paradoxically, then, the Byblis episode most artfully succeeds for its own readers when relating the doomed writings (and aborted readings) of its narrated characters.

Except for the tale of Byblis, portrayal of writing in the *Metamor-*

[1] Joseph Farrell, "Reading and Writing the *Heroides*," *HSCP* 98 (1998) 323: "Try as she might to follow Ovid's advice about the letter of seduction, [Byblis] finds that this is an essentially masculine form, that the woman writer is not sufficiently duplicitous to carry it off; that her writerly gift is not persuasion, but rather exquisitely, evenly painfully accurate self-disclosure."

phoses remains a surprisingly peripheral phenomenon.[2] By crafting a narrative, therefore, in which the tension between orality and literacy bubbles over into myth, Ovid highlights his ingenuity in reworking an older version of the Byblis story. The schema below demonstrates how Ovid carefully arranged this episode in order to emphasize the centrality, both literally and thematically, of Byblis' fateful letter:

455–473: Introduction: Byblis' dream and desire for her brother
  474–516: Internal monologue of Byblis and the conception of the letter
    517–529: The composition of the letter
      530–563: *The secret letter of Byblis*
    564–584: The delivery and rejection of the letter
  585–629: Internal monologue of Byblis and regret over the letter
630–665: Conclusion: rejection of Byblis' desire, and metamorphosis

No other version of the Byblis myth features writing as an integral part of its narrative, though the tale may be found in a surprising number of variations. In Nikainetos, for instance, the lovesick sibling is not Byblis, but Caunus—Ovid had even his choice of protagonists. In this version of the myth, Caunus, the unwilling (ἀέκων) lover of his sister, banishes himself to exile, while an uncomprehending Byblis mourns for his return.[3] However, most accounts do feature Byblis as the lovelorn sibling who confesses a monstrous desire: Οἱ δὲ πλείους τὴν Βυβλίδα φασὶν ἐρασθεῖσαν τοῦ Καύνου λόγους αὐτῷ προσφέρειν καὶ δεῖσθαι μὴ περιιδεῖν αὐτὴν εἰς πᾶν κακὸν προελθοῦσαν.[4] Though Byblis' actual confession is obliquely phrased (λόγους αὐτῷ προσφέρειν), the sense is generally to 'entreat' or 'proposition'.[5] Without a verb of writing, e.g., γράφειν, there is no reason to posit a letter or other form of writing.[6] Most likely, the phrase indicates that Byblis

[2] For an analysis of the other types of writing in the *Metamorphoses* (namely, in the stories of Io and Philomela, and in various references to inscriptions), see Stephen Wheeler, *A Discourse of Wonders: Audience and Performance in Ovid's Metamorphoses* (Philadelphia 1999) 50–58.

[3] Quoted by Parthenius 11.3.

[4] Parthenius 11.3. For a fuller account of the variations of the Byblis tale see Heather White, "Parthenius and the Story of Byblis," *Corolla Londiniensis* 2 (1982) 187–193.

[5] Parthenius 17.2 uses a similar phrase a few tales later, when Periander's mother attempts to seduce her son: ἕως ἀποτολμήσασα προσφέρει λόγους τῷ παιδί. Again, there is no indication of writing. See also Herodotus 8.52 and Lysias *De Caede Eratosthenis* 8 for the phrase used in the sense of 'entreat' (either politically or amorously).

[6] In fact, Nicander's version of the myth (which exists only in a late paraphrase) per-

accosted Caunus verbally, as she both admitted her love and demanded his in return. The seminal version of the Byblis tale features an *oral*, not written confession of desire.[7]

Ovid pointedly alludes to these previous versions of the myth when introducing his innovation of the letter. As Byblis contemplates her possible avenues for seduction, Ovid shrewdly situates his own version as the crowning variation, even though each of the rejected options have been, in their turn, authentic literary versions:

> si tamen ipse mei captus prior esset amore,
> forsitan illius possem indulgere furori.
> ergo ego, quae fueram non reiectura petentem,
> ipsa petam! poterisne loqui? poterisne fateri?
> coget amor, potero! vel, si pudor ora tenebit,
> littera celatos arcana fatebitur ignes. (*Met.* 9.511–516)

These six lines (which fall neatly into couplets) explore the three ways in which the story might have developed: two are 'traditional' and one—Ovid's—is innovative. Lines 511–512 allude to the equivalent of Nikainetos' version of the myth; Byblis reasons that if Caunus had fallen in love with *her*, she might well have indulged his desire. In the context of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Byblis' musings sound like rationalizations for her decidedly unnatural longings: she would not reject her brother, so how can he reject her? However, Nikainetos' version also features Caunus' self-loathing and consequent self-exile; Byblis is sadly delusional if she finds comfort in *that* line of thinking. In the next couplet, Byblis launches into self-directed rhetorical questions: can you speak? can you talk? This couplet too glosses versions of the myth in which Byblis, as seducer, attempts to persuade her brother with spoken

haps highlighted the element of oral taboo. Byblis, madly in love with her brother, rejects her numerous non-consanguineous suitors and tries to cast herself from a cliff; she pays the suitors scant regard because an unspeakable love drives her to frenzy: ἡ δὲ τῶν [the suitors] μὲν λόγον ἐποιεῖτο βραχύν, αὐτὴν δὲ ἄφατος ἔρως ἐξέμηνε τοῦ Καύνου [Nicander F. 46 = Anton. Lib. 2.30]. I suggest that ἄφατος possesses its etymological meaning, here: the love is literally unspeakable (as opposed to a more general sense of 'overwhelming').

[7] An aspect of this myth reappears at the end of Ovid's tale, when Byblis, admitting that the letter did not succeed, pleads her case orally (9.631–632). In this instance Ovid 'reverts' to the standard version of the myth, and, by the same token, emphasizes his previous and radical departure.

words, λόγοι. Finally, Ovid introduces his own variation with the coy conjunction *vel*.[8] If *pudor* grips Byblis' tongue, then Byblis cannot therefore speak her love; a secret letter will have to speak, *fatebitur*, for her, exposing the fires that should remain hidden, *celatos*.

Frederick Ahl and more recently Garth Tissol have argued that, in introducing the motif of the letter, Ovid puns on Byblis' name: Byblis/βύβλος, the writer and the written.[9] Translating into English, one could do worse than to render the heroine's name as "Paige," a pun that neatly captures the crux of the problem: the page will destroy Paige.[10] Although Byblis does not intend to speak out loud her unspeakable love, by transferring her thoughts to a written letter, she places her formulation of desire in a liminal state.[11] As long as the

[8] A point noted by Brooks Otis, *Ovid as an Epic Poet* (Cambridge 1970) 417: "[Ovid] certainly was responsible for expanding the 'words' of Byblis to the elaborate letter and monologues and for making the metamorphosis an 'inevitable' outcome of Byblis' final plight rather than the elaborate rescue from a suicide leap that we find in Nicander or the hanging that we find in Parthenius, Aristokritos and Apollonius.... [T]he striking features (especially the letter and the metamorphosis) are his own."

[9] For the pun, see Frederick Ahl, *Metaformations: Soundplay and Wordplay in Ovid and Other Classical Authors* (Ithaca 1985) 211. Garth Tissol also remarks on the pun Byblis/βύβλος, as he examines the tale from the viewpoint of semantic slippage; the written word as penned by Byblis dramatizes the vulnerability of a written text delivered to a unknown audience (*Wit, Narrative, and Cosmic Origins in Ovid's* Metamorphoses [Princeton, 1997] 49): "Byblis' written but unpublished letter may seem well aimed to overcome this problem of audience: she directs her text to a single person, well known to her; but Caunus' refusal to read or heed it shows how a written text can perish as utterly as any speech." See James O'Hara, *True Names: Vergil and the Alexandrian Tradition of Etymological Wordplay* (Michigan 1996) 2–7 for general remarks on the place of etymology in the Roman poetic tradition, and 95–102 for a catalogue of Ovidian experiments based on Virgilian wordplay.

[10] See also Aeneas Tacticus 31.9a, in which βιβλία and ἐπιστολαί are used synonymously: ὁ δὲ ἄρχων λαβὼν τὰς ἐπιστολὰς καὶ ἀνακαλεσάμενος τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τὰ σημεῖά τε ἐδείκνυεν τῶν δακτυλίων, ἅπερ ὡμολόγουν αὑτῶν εἶναι, καὶ λύων τὰ βιβλία ἐδήλου τὸ πρᾶγμα. Though the documents in question are written on papyri, not tablets, I believe that interchangeability here of the two nouns further supports the evidence in favor of a pun. Ovid takes βιβλίον to designate any sort of written document, including the technologies that supercede papyrus, at least in the Roman sphere.

[11] In some respects, Byblis' predicament mirrors that of Phaedra in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Both lovelorn women turn to writing to express what they themselves are ashamed to utter; for Byblis, it is an expression of desire, for Phaedra, a shameful (because false) accusation of rape. Charles Segal, "Signs, Magic, and Letters in Euripides' *Hippolytus*," in Ralph Hexter and Daniel Selden eds., *Innovations of Antiquity* (New York 1992) 420–456, situates this type of writing within a matrix of signs, both written and oral (p. 431): "Phaedra becomes engaged in an exchange of magical signs, a synec-

letter remains undelivered, Byblis' writing functions as a continuation of her incestuous dreamscape, a fantasy world unperturbed by spectators, violence, or even sound.[12] Indeed, terms for silence cluster around Byblis' dream: after her reverie of Caunus, Byblis remains silent, *silet*, and seeks again the vision of her repose, *quietis* (9.473). When she does speak, in fact, her voice disturbs the hush of the night around her: *tacitae quid vult sibi noctis imago*? (9.474). Byblis' love begins in dreamy silence; Ovid maintains narrative thrust by changing this safe silence to dangerous speech, through the medium of a letter.

A letter of unspeakable seduction is not a document composed leisurely. Byblis conquers her initial misgivings with ultimately tragic perseverance:

> in latus erigitur cubitoque innixa sinistro
> "viderit: insanos," inquit "fateamur amores!
> [Ei mihi, quo labor? quem mens mea concipit ignem?"][13]
> et meditata manu componit verba trementi.
> dextra tenet ferrum, vacuam tenet altera ceram. (*Met.* 9.518–522)

Byblis announces that she will confess her insane desire (*insanos fateamur amores*, 9.519) as she begins the arduous process of writing (9.521): her 'speaking' consists of writing, which graphically replaces speech, thereby suspending the consequences of the speech-act. At the same time, Ovid alludes unexpectedly to the lovelorn heroine of another epic, that of Virgil. When first a reader comes across the phrase *dextra tenet ferrum*, he or she is likely to think that Byblis holds not a writing implement (*ferrum*) but iron of quite a different sort—a sword. In fact, the whole scene recalls Dido's suicide, alluding first to Dido's

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dochistic substitution of *sêmeion* for *logos*, and of an object for a real person. As a result of this shadowy, in-between discourse of signs, she neither speaks to Hippolytus nor keeps her love silent.... [Phaedra's writing] marks the intermediate position of the sign as a subverter of both speech and silence." Byblis' letter holds exactly this 'intermediate' state; the physical movement of the letter from sender to recipient indexically demonstrates this transitional period.

[12] Like her dream, Byblis' letter (when still unsent) lacks an audience, a *testis* (9.481)—her difficulties occur only when Byblis interacts with another.

[13] As he has indicated to me *per litteras*, Richard Tarrant will mark line 520 as spurious in his forthcoming Oxford Classical Text edition of the *Metamorphoses*. Tarrant also expresses doubt about the authenticity of line 524, which, ironically, concerns Byblis' act of editing.

similar inclination on an elbow (Ovid's *cubitoque innixa sinistro*, *Met.* 9.518 vs. *cubitoque adnixa levavit*, *Aen.* 4.690) and next her possession of steel (*ensemque recludit / Dardanium, non hos quaesitum munus in usus. Aen.* 4.646–647). Ovid's Byblis, however, is not committing suicide with her *ferrum*—or is she? The letter will have the same effect.

Byblis first encounters compositional difficulties when at the beginning of the letter she must identify her relationship to the recipient.[14] Even before she begins writing, Byblis struggles with her identity as Byblis—but also as sister. Byblis therefore wishes yearningly for power over naming; her first mental tactic is to 'rename' her brother as master: [Byblis] *iam dominum appellat, iam nomina sanguinis odit* (9.466). One might next expect Byblis to rename herself from 'sister' to *puella*, 'girl(friend)', and thereby form the amatory pair *dominus/puella*. Instead, surprisingly, she renames herself Byblis, seeking to divorce her identity from 'sister': *Byblida iam mavult, quam se vocet ille sororem* (9.467). This assertion of identity—Byblis rather than sister—appears again in altered form at line 487: *o ego, si liceat mutato nomine iungi*. The name to be changed is 'soror' (into 'Byblis'); the next two lines yearn for a marriage with perfectly ordinary blood relations between in-laws—for which Byblis' damaging identity (her '*ego*') as 'soror' must be banished (cf. *verum nocet esse sororem*, 9.478). The end of the first monologue—which reads for all the world like an identity crisis—concludes with Byblis' fateful decision to write a secret letter, *littera arcana*. Her first obstacle will be, then, this opening revelation of identity.

The more Byblis re-writes the opening, the more frustrated she becomes; Ovid the writer toys with Byblis the writer. At last, Byblis conjures up a possible opening gambit, one that mimics a solution found in times of civil turmoil. In his third speech against Catiline, Cicero describes the opening of a letter that Lentulus sent privately to the chief conspirator: *Quis sim scies ex eo quem ad te misi*.[15] The conceit of this message is that the recipient, Catiline, will learn or guess the sender's identity without the sender explicitly (and therefore perilously)

[14] See for instance Gaius Julius Victor's prescriptions for letter writing in his *Ars Rhetorica* 27 (*'De Epistolis'*): messages to one's superiors must not be haughty; to one's inferiors must not be snide; and to one's equals must not be obnoxious. The relationship between sender and recipient is paramount, since the identities of both individuals control the tone of discourse.

[15] Cicero *Third Catilinarian* 12.

spelling out his name. The message makes references to *external* clues outside of the text itself: the letter includes no self-identification. In a false start, the perplexed Byblis begins her letter by identifying herself dangerously as the recipient's sister, *scripta 'soror' fuerat* (9.528). She decides, however, that the first line of attack needs correction and inserts a riddle instead:

> quam, nisi tu dederis, non est habitura salutem,
> hanc tibi mittit amans: pudet, a!, pudet edere nomen,
> et si quid cupiam quaeris, sine nomine vellem
> posset agi mea causa meo.... (*Met.* 9.530–533)

Byblis includes the traditional opening of a letter, *mittit hanc salutem*, but disguises it cleverly with convoluted syntax. Byblis twice alludes to (but does not offer) her name; since she is ashamed of her identity, the author wishes that she could send her salutations (and plead her case) without it, *sine nomine*. In this respect, the epistle resembles the secret message sent by Lentulus to Catiline: the identity of the sender cannot be divined from the contents of the writing itself.

But Byblis botches it. She ends the riddle by revealing the answer, stating that she would wish to remain nameless and not be known as Byblis until she were confident her prayers would be answered: *nec cognita Byblis / ante forem, quam spes votorum certa fuisset* (*Met.* 9.533–534). The opening lines, then, reveal the paradoxes inherent in Byblis' attempt, for Byblis must hide and reveal (or speak and not speak) all at once. Even if (as Byblis fervently hopes) Caunus responds favorably, the siblings would be wise to continue this perplexing state of affairs; they should disguise their secret passions (and true identities as lover and beloved) under cloak of family ties, *dulcia fraterno sub nomine furta tegemus* (9.558). Their discourse will consist then *entirely* of secrets, *secreta loquendi* (9.559)—Byblis' secret letter is but the first volley. After chiding Caunus for his neglect of her condition—an ineffable love, Byblis archly intimates, is not invisible as well—Byblis concludes her letter with the haunting phrase *neve merere meo subscribi causa sepulchro* (9.563). Writing once again has everything to do with Byblis' downfall: it is not enough that Byblis would be ruined, but that her failure would be *written*, this time on her tombstone. Once spoken, Byblis' letter becomes her epitaph.[16]

[16] The poignancy is all the greater if one takes into account Jesper Svenbro's excellent analysis of the link between written epigram and the spoken word (in *Phrasikleia: An*

After Byblis gushes forth her declarations of desire, Ovid ratchets up suspense by prolonging the delivery of the letter. Ovid first dwells on Byblis' tearful sealing of the letter (lines 9.566–567), a guarantee of identity that resonates darkly with Byblis' earlier struggles with self-revelation.[17] Next, Ovid highlights the role of the messenger, the intermediate character who, all too faithful to his mistress (*fidissime*, 9.569), unwittingly transforms the episode from high passion to high tragedy.[18] Lastly, Byblis drops the tablets while handing them off, an ill omen and the final hurdle to be overcome before the letter enters its transitional state.

The next section features Ovid at his most mischievous. In one of his letters, Cicero commands his servant to wait until an appropriate time to deliver a sensitive letter to Brutus: *Itaque ei praecepi, quem ad te*

Anthropology of Reading in Ancient Greece [Ithaca 1993], trans. Janet Lloyd). See especially Chapter 3, "The Reader and The Reading Voice: The Instrumental Status of Reading Aloud" 44–63. An epigram remains silent until it finds its reader, through whom it is vocalized; the epigram depends on the human voice to 'trigger' its meaning. This link between written symbol and spoken voice parallels exactly Byblis' predicament.

[17] Plautus employs the same word as Ovid, *gemma*, in metonymy for a family heirloom, *anulum* (*Curc.* 595): *sub gemmane abstrusos habeo tuam matrem et patrem* (*Curc.* 606). The ring is proof of Planesium's identity. For a ring as a seal for a letter, see for instance *expressam in cera ex anulo suam imaginem* (*Pseudolus* 56), a passage in which the soldier Polymachaeroplagides stamps his visage in wax as proof of identity (and as a hindrance to possible fraud).

[18] Faithful delivery of a letter is not to be taken for granted; Cicero complains often and bitterly about the unreliability of his messengers. A particularly humorous example, as Cicero interrogates undependable slaves returning from Rome: *voco, quaero ecquid litterarum. negant. 'quid ais' inquam, 'nihilne a Pomponio?' perterriti voce et vultu confessi sunt se accepisse sed excidisse in via. quid quaeris? permoleste tuli.* (*Atticus* 2.8.1) Though they did not admit it at first, the messengers confess that they *lost* Pomponius' letter *en route*, and receive in return a browbeating lecture by Rome's foremost orator. And messengers can do even worse than to lose a letter. In another dispatch to Atticus (1.13.1), Cicero asserts that he delays sending letters because he cannot find a faithful messenger, *fidelem tabellarium*. By the epithet *fidelem* Cicero does *not* mean, surprisingly, that the messenger is slow or inefficient. That, indeed, is the least of his worries. Cicero fears that the messenger will try to scan the letter, *pellectione*. If a letter *must* be sent under trying circumstances, therefore, Cicero uses code, usually by writing in Greek. See *Ad Atticum* 6.7 (in which Cicero refers to confidential letters written *Graece* ἐν αἰνιγμοῖς, 'in Greek, as a riddle') and *Ad Familiares* 7.18.1 (a reference to another letter written in Greek). For a complete catalogue of Cicero's epistolary misfortunes, see John Nicholson, "The delivery and confidentiality of Cicero's letters," *Classical Journal* 90 (1994) 33–63.

misi, ut tempus observaret epistulae tibi reddendae.[19] Similarly, the servant of Byblis, following similar orders from his mistress, waits for the most opportune moment to hand the letter to Caunus: *apta minister / tempora nactus* (9.572–573). With the phrase *apta tempora*, Ovid impishly implies that there *is* a good time for the letter to be read; but given the contents of the letter, there is no such thing.[20] Not surprisingly, Caunus flies into a rage upon receipt of the epistle, and, like his twin sister, compels the tablets to fall to the floor: *proicit acceptas lecta sibi parte tabellas* (9.575). In his anger, Caunus does not even read the whole letter—an important point I will reconsider later in this argument.

Once it is clear that the letter has failed in its purpose, Byblis experiences a moment of tragic insight worthy of any Greek heroine. It is, however, a peculiar insight; Byblis blames not the unpalatable message, but the *medium* of writing itself:

> et merito! quid enim temeraria vulneris huius
> indicium feci? quid, quae celanda fuerunt,
> tam cito commisi properatis verba tabellis?
> ante erat ambiguis animi sententia dictis
> praetemptanda mihi. (*Met.* 9.585–589)

When she first made up her mind to confront Caunus, Byblis, compelled by *pudor*, wrote her confession instead of speaking it. It is now clear to Byblis that she ought to have employed less *pudor* and more guile. A better stratagem, she believes, would have been to *speak* her

[19] Cicero *Letters to Friends* 11.16.1. He continues *nam quemadmodum, coram qui ad nos intempestive adeunt, molesti saepe sunt, sic epistulae offendunt, non loco redditae.* Epistles that arrive at the wrong juncture are interpreted differently than those timed well. Byblis and Cicero employ similar language for describing this ideal reader. For Cicero, the reader must be *ab omni molestia vacuus*; for Byblis, the reader must possess an *animum vacantem* (*Met.* 9.612). The letter will then 'fill up' the willing reader's mind without difficulty or resistance. For an Ovidian parallel, see also *Tr.* 1.1.93, in which Ovid hopes that his letter (to which he is giving traveling instructions) finds Augustus at a receptive moment (*si poteris vacuo tradi*).

[20] Ovid returns to this thought later in the episode when Byblis searches for blameworthy participants in her debacle. She strikes out against the messenger, whom she suspects of poor timing: *non adiit apte, nec legit idonea, credo / tempora* (9.611–612). Again, the wit (or the tragedy) inheres in the fact that there was no suitable (*idonea*) time for the messenger to approach Caunus.

hidden desires, *celanda*, in properly coded language, *ambiguis dictis*. Oral delivery allows for the possessor of careful double-speak to gauge reactions and change course appropriately.

In fact, Byblis reaches much the same conclusions as (Pseudo-) Isocrates does in his first letter to Dionysios of Syracuse. Like Byblis, Isocrates complains bitterly about his choice of medium. He takes for it granted that it is easier to discuss matters in person than by letter (ῥᾷον ἄν τις παρὼν πρὸς παρόντα φράσειεν ἢ δι' ἐπιστολῆς δηλώσειεν) and that oral conversation is by nature a more convincing medium than writing (πάντες τοῖς λεγομένοις μᾶλλον ἢ τοῖς γεγραμμένοις πιστεύουσιν). Most people, in fact, regard speech as an ideal medium for practical matters (ὡς εἰσηγημάτων) and view letters as something suspiciously artistic (ὡς ποιημάτων) and therefore unpersuasive. Moreover (and this is the heart of Isocrates' bitterness), the absence of the sender makes it impossible to argue convincingly if the letter is met with suspicion or bafflement:

> ἔτι δὲ πρὸς τούτοις ἐν μὲν ταῖς συνουσίαις, ἢν ἀγνοηθῇ τι τῶν λεγομένων ἢ μὴ πιστευθῇ, παρὼν ὁ τὸν λόγον διεξιὼν ἀμφοτέροις τούτοις ἐπήμυνεν, ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἐπιστελλομένοις καὶ γεγραμμένοις, ἤν τι συμβῇ τοιοῦτον, οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ διορθώσων· ἀπόντος γὰρ τοῦ γράψαντος ἔρημα τοῦ βοηθήσοντός ἐστιν. (Isocrates *Epistolae* 1.3)

In an oral conversation, if the recipient is not persuaded (μὴ πιστευθῇ) by the argument, the presenter of the discourse (ὁ τὸν λόγον διεξιών) can change tactics to fend off counter-arguments or confusion. However, in written correspondence—and letters are singled out here for especial attention, ἐπιστελλομένοις—if something should go wrong, there is no one to correct the misapprehension. The written word, though substituting for the absent writer, can be of no further help; Isocrates confesses that letters are a poor substitute for speech.[21]

Byblis' dissection of the proceedings follows exactly Isocrates' line of inquiry, with one oversight. Byblis understands now that her letter was an imperfect substitute for speech, but fails to realize that for her

[21] Plato's Socrates employs much the same language (though with more concision) about the relationship between a written λόγος and speech: πλημμελούμενος δὲ οὐκ ἐν δίκῃ λοιδορηθεὶς τοῦ πατρὸς ἀεὶ δεῖται βοηθοῦ· αὐτὸς γὰρ οὔτ' ἀμύνασθαι οὔτε βοηθῆσαι δυνατὸς αὐτῷ (*Phaedrus* 275e). The 'father' of a text is not able to help his offspring once it leaves his hands.

particular argument, even speech—especially speech—was impossible. Ignoring the content of her proposed liaison with Caunus, she believes she ought to have *spoken* rather than written her feelings: *et tamen ipsa loqui, nec me committere cerae / debueram* (9.601–602). In that way, Caunus might have seen her weeping and angst, and been persuaded by these extra-literary phenomena. Moreover, in *ex tempore* fashion, she might have manufactured lengthy arguments on the spot, *plura loqui poteram, quam quae cepere tabellae* (9.604). Ovid here highlights his handiwork in retelling and reshaping the myth; Byblis yearns for the (by now) quaint variation in which she did *not* write a letter! The letter itself caused the problem: *et scripsi et petii* (9.627); Byblis wooed in writing, an awkward medium for incest.

The end of Byblis' tale demonstrates again that Byblis has not quite grasped why her letter failed. The last words of her monologue are curiously optimistic: *quod superest, multum est in vota, in crimina parvum* (9.629). Even at this late point in the narrative, Byblis maintains a distinction between her *vota* and her *crimina*, as if the two were distinct entities; though she has admitted that what she has done is unspeakable (*nefandum,* 9.626), she separates the act of wishing—*vota*—from the criminal act itself. In fact, in her desperation, Byblis tries *again*, this time with oral argument, a wicked crime (*nefas* 9.632) which succeeds finally in driving her brother from the country. At the end of a tale in which Byblis' desire finds its expression in every possible medium—thought, voice, wax, and even stone—Ovid points out the final irony; exhausted by her travails, Byblis ends her life both mute (*muta* 9.655) and unhearing (*surdae menti* 9.654), the victim of her unspeakable (and ultimately un-hearable) love.

It would be unfair however to censure Byblis too greatly for her failure to distinguish between her desire and its expression—for this is exactly what Ovid does as narrator. For the reader of Ovid, the structure of the episode does indeed separate Byblis' yearnings from their expression on the wax, for the reader begins with Byblis' incipient desire, her dreams, her internal monologue, and only then moves to Byblis' titanic struggles to express herself in writing. The elements develop causally, but discretely. Caunus, however, has not had the benefit of Ovid's narration and does not see the problem coming; for him, the *vota*—and therefore the *crimina*—arrive all at once. From Caunus' point of view, the letter speaks taboo, and so must be silenced with a violent toss to the floor.

The spectacularly unfavorable reception by Caunus reveals more than just Caunus' distaste at the proceedings; it is also an inquiry into the responses of readers confronted with a challenging and perhaps disturbing text. David Konstan argues that the story of Mercury and Argos in Book One of the *Metamorphoses* dramatizes how a single narrative can evoke from its audience varied (and perhaps negative) reactions.[22] While recounting perfunctorily the myth of Syrinx and Pan, the god Mercury quite literally bores Argos to death. At a crucial point in Mercury's tale—Pan's declaration of desire for Syrinx (1.699)—Ovid's narrative lurches unexpectedly from direct speech to paraphrase; one assumes that this is the point at which the nodding Argos simply could not keep his hundred eyes open. The direct speech, therefore, is focalized through the ears of the monster; the rest of the tale, related in indirect speech, is only for the ears (and two eyes) of the reader of Ovid.

I suggest that Ovid employs a comparable strategy with Byblis' letter, for which the audience is similarly bifurcated. When the liminal discourse of the letter—a suspended confession of love—crosses the *limen* into Caunus' quarters, it is no longer a soliloquy, but a true (and paradoxically ineffable) discourse.[23] The words on the page lie in wait like a trap, *latentia verba* (9.573), and trigger an appropriately violent response when their suspended speech is actualized: Caunus explodes into a rage, hurling the tablets to the floor, and threatening the messenger with grievous injury. Intriguingly, Caunus has read the letter only in part, *lecta sibi parte* (9.575), a turn of phrase that compels the reader (as in the tale of Mercury and Argos) to determine when the recipient of the narrative stopped paying attention. When, exactly, did Caunus

[22] David Konstan, "The Death of Argus, or What Stories Do: Audience Response in Ancient Fiction and Theory," *Helios* 18 (1991) 15–30, sums up Ovid's treatment of multiple listeners in the context of earlier narrative experiments (p. 26): "Ovid's treatment of the death of Argus, who cannot stay awake through Mercury's erotic tale, is not exactly like any of the above, but his extraordinary trick of differentiating the reader from Argus by finishing the story in indirect discourse may, I think, be construed as a variation on this complex tradition."

[23] An excellent example of the liminal properties of letters (and of writing in general) may be found in Diodorus Siculus 5.28.6, who records a curious funerary custom of the Gauls: διὸ καὶ κατὰ τὰς ταφὰς τῶν τετελευτηκότων ἐνίους ἐπιστολὰς ἐμβάλλειν εἰς τὴν πυράν, ὡς τῶν τετελευτηκότων ἀναγνωσομένων ταύτας. The short tale draws a sharp distinction between oral and written communication with the dead, for spoken speech cannot penetrate the barrier of death as the written word can. In this instance, the liminal, transportative powers of writing are so great that it can bridge the greatest distance of all: the gulf between life and death.

stop reading the letter? A likely spot is after Byblis' tortured admission of both identity and desire at the beginning of her letter; the middle and end of the letter, with its touching elegiac language and knotty argumentation, appears to have had only one reader: the reader of Ovid.

The episode is in fact a type of *mise en abyme*, in which Ovid is writing Byblis' writing. There is one crucial distinction between the two types of composition, however. Ovid's writing succeeds precisely in that aspect in which Byblis' must fail: though Byblis may not successfully write the ineffable, Ovid *can* (and in fact, does). The 'layering' effect created here by Ovid highlights the disparity in discourse, for the omniscient, impersonal epic voice may relay with impunity what the epic character itself must not speak—or write. In fact, the narrator specifically labels the episode a morality tale: *Byblis in exemplo est, ut ament concessa puellae* (9.554). Byblis loves *inconcessa*—but so does Ovid. Later in the epic, Ovid's Orpheus begins his own song with a declaration that he will sing of cherished boys and girls struck with forbidden flame, *inconcessisque puellas / ignibus attonitas* (10.153–154). It is not too much of a stretch to imagine Orpheus here as a stand-in for the poet (another *mise en abyme).* Ovid's genius, then, as epic singer, is to elicit a sympathetic response even for *inconcessa*, even for the bizarre and the unsettling. Caunus, upon receiving Byblis' declaration of love, proves himself an unsympathetic reader by tossing away the letter half-read. The reader of Ovid internalizes the *same* letter from incipit to postscript, and if not exactly sanguine about Byblis' prospects, possesses at least some measure of sympathy towards her. In Ovidian narrative, then, the ineffable remains ineffable if written just once; if doubly-written (and doubly-read), the ineffable paradoxically finds its voice—and its true audience.

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