



**Ovid's Attempt at Tragedy (AM. 3.1.63-64)**

Richard F. Thomas

*The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 99, No. 4 (Winter, 1978), 447-450.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0002-9475%28197824%2999%3A4%3C447%3AOAAT%283%3E2.0.CO%3B2-4>

*The American Journal of Philology* is currently published by The Johns Hopkins University Press.

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/jhup.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

OID'S ATTEMPT AT TRAGEDY  
(AM. 3.1.63-64)

altera me sceptro decoras altoque cothurno:  
iam nunc contacto magnus in ore sonus.

So Ovid, in response to Tragedy's attempts to woo him away from the writing of elegy. The attempt fails, of course, and Elegy is triumphant:

altera das nostro victurum nomen amori:  
ergo ades et longis versibus adde brevis.

(65-66)

Our concern is with *contacto* (line 64)—with what was the poet's mouth touched? Nowhere in this sense (*Th.L.L.* 4.714.57ff.)<sup>1</sup> is *contingere* found without qualification; it is always accompanied by an ablative (*sale, melle, etc.*; e.g. *Lucr.* 1.934 [4.9], 947 [4.22]; 2.755; *Virg. G.* 3.403). This is especially true of other examples of *os contingere* in Ovid, cited (the second example since Heinsius) without distinction as parallels to line 64 (*tum pater ora sui sacro medicamine natil/contigit, Met.* 2.122-23; *unxit et ambrosia cum dulci nectare mixta/contigit os, Met.* 14.606-7).<sup>2</sup> Neither here, moreover, nor anywhere else, does the phrase appear in connection with *Dichterweihe*;<sup>3</sup> if it did, Ovid's unqualified *contacto . . . in ore* would perhaps be acceptable.

The solution is close at hand—we should read *contracto*, with two of the *recentiores* (V<sub>a</sub> and O<sub>b</sub>, both of the 13th century):<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The *Thesaurus* in fact lists this instance under a more general heading (4.713.18), but other instances cited by commentators as parallels are all under the heading we have given (*tangendo conspergere, ungere, tingere*).

<sup>2</sup> Only Salmasius appears to have been troubled by this difficulty, emending to *contacto (contacto ore personati nempe tragoedi, N. Heinsius, P. Ovidi Nasonis Opera Omnia, v. 1 [1683], ad loc.)*.

<sup>3</sup> The only close instance I find in this respect (*e quarum numero me contigit una dearum, Prop.* 3.3.37) is of too general a nature to be considered a parallel.

<sup>4</sup> The *sigla* are those of E. J. Kenney (*P. Ovidi Nasonis Amores, etc.* [1961], p. 3); the identification of the *recentiores* in question (Kenney's ζ) is made by F. Munari, *P. Ovidi Nasonis Amores* (1959<sup>3</sup>). This variant has been

iam nunc contracto magnus in ore sonus.

What then does the line mean? *Contractus* can have a technical meaning, describing a word of restrained style:

'misellus' et 'pauperculus' summissa atque contracta,  
'fortis' et 'vehemens' et 'latro' erecta et concitata  
voce dicendum est.

(Quint. *Inst.* 11.3.175)<sup>5</sup>

A similar meaning is attested by Cicero, in a broader sense, referring to a lower, or less expansive style of oratory (*De Or.* 3.216; *Brut.* 120; 162).

If the term can be thus applied to diction and oratorical style, what is its significance in *Amores* 3.1? It is, in fact, a synonym for *angustus*,<sup>6</sup> which had been used by Propertius (2.1.40; cf. 3.1.14) to describe Callimachean poetics, being, of course, an extension of Callimachus' own poetic metaphor (*Aet.* 1.1.25-28; cf. *εἰ καὶ στε[ι]γοτέρην ἐλάσεις*, line 28).<sup>7</sup>

Ovid's line can now be included with others in which he identifies poetic style by using an appropriate adjective with the word *os* (epic: *magnique Rabirius oris*, *Pont.* 4.16.5; analogistic epic: *gravis Ennius ore*, *Trist.* 2.423; tragedy:

---

preferred only by J. A. Amar-Durivier, *Publius Ovidius Naso ex rec. Heinsio-Burmanniana* (1820), ad loc., and had not been admitted since. His case was perhaps weakened by rather simplistic argument against *sonus* in the same line.

Additional manuscript support for *contracto* has appeared with the publication of Codex Berolinensis Hamilton 471 (Y) by F. Munari (*Il Codice Hamilton 471 di Ovidio*, Note e discussioni erudite, a cura di A. Campana 9 [1965]). An 11th-12th century corrector of this manuscript (y) restores *contracto*; from here and elsewhere it is clear that this corrector had access to a manuscript with affinites to, but earlier than, V<sub>a</sub> and O<sub>b</sub>. For numerous other restorations by y, see also G. Perl, 'Ovids Amores im Codex Berolinensis Hamilton 471 (Y)', *Philol.* 110 (1966) 268-76.

In any case, in light of the recension of Ovid, nothing prevents our accepting *contracto*: "Recensionem habemus, ut Pasqualiano more loquar, apertam: sapientis est editoris ἐκλεκτικῶς edere." (Kenney, p. ix)

<sup>5</sup> Also Quint. *Inst.* 11.1.32; 11.3.15 (where *contractus* is the opposite of *fusus*, 'unrestrained').

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Cic. *Or.* 187, where *angusta oratio* is contrasted with *fusa oratio*, and *De Or.* 3.216, dealing with antithetical terms, *leve asperum*, *contractum diffusum*, etc. Also Quint. *Inst.* 11.3.15 (above, n. 5).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. W. Wimmel, *Kallimachos in Rom*, *Hermes Einzelschriften* 16 (1960) 106ff.

*animosique Accius oris, Am. 1.15.19* [the very opposite of *contracto . . . in ore*]). We can also relate the line to the rest of the poem, and appreciate its irony.<sup>8</sup> Because Tragedy has decked him out with the trappings of her art (*altera me scepro decoras altoque cothurno*), Ovid begins to utter the sound of tragedy (*iam nunc . . . magnus . . . sonus*); yet as a proponent of attenuated elegy, he is unequal to the task—the result: failure through inability to attain the appropriate style for such a genre (*contracto . . . in ore*). Accordingly he is won back by Elegy. All this in a single line, with the tension highlighted by the interweaving position of the opposing concepts (*contracto magnus in ore sonus*).

Ovid has in fact built upon the fiction of the *recusatio* made by Propertius at 2.10.11-12:

surge, anime, ex humili; iam, carmina, sumite vires;  
Pierides, magni nunc erit oris opus.

The parallel is clear. Propertius exhorted himself to take on the writing of epic; but it was always impossible (remaining in the distant future), for such poetic activity is denied to the follower of Callimachus:

sed neque Phlegraeos Iovis Enceladique tumultus  
intonet angusto pectore Callimachus.  
(Prop. 2.1.39-40)

Ovid takes the *recusatio* one step further; he actually begins his tragic song, but fails within one verse of beginning, for precisely the same reason—incompatibility between poetic creed and attempted genre.

A further passage should be considered. In the second proem of the Third Georgic Virgil writes of the difficulty of winning honour through the type of poetry he is writing:

nec sum animi dubius verbis ea vincere magnum  
quam sit et angustis hunc addere rebus honorem;  
sed me Parnasi deserta per ardua dulcis  
raptat amor; iuvat ire iugis, qua nulla priorum  
Castaliam molli devertitur orbita clivo.  
nunc, veneranda Pales, magno nunc ore sonandum.  
(G. 3.289-94)

<sup>8</sup> Again, only Amar-Durivier has seen some of the possibilities if we read

There is no need to demonstrate the clear similarity of Virgil's final line to the passages of Propertius and Ovid—apart from parallels in words of a programmatic nature, all three poets express the urgency of their change of style in the same manner (*nunc . . . nunc*, Virgil; *iam . . . nunc*, Propertius; *iam nunc*, Ovid). Particularly in the last line of Virgil's passage, there is an apparent modification<sup>9</sup> of the Callimachean principles espoused in the Sixth Eclogue (indeed, a seeming reversal—*tenui meditabor harundine*, *Ecl.* 6.8).

Virgil's apparent rejection of these principles is the ultimate impulse for Ovid's allusive and intricately balanced line.

iam nunc contracto magnus in ore sonus

is a reaffirmation of pure Callimachean poetics, an exquisite demonstration of what will befall the poet who attempts to turn his back on such poetics.

RICHARD F. THOMAS

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

---

*contracto* here: "unde miratur poeta, quod *os* adhuc *contractum*, *sonorem* jam emittat adeo *magnum*."

<sup>9</sup> This is not the place to deal with Virgil's poetic allegiance in the *Georgics*; however, we can briefly compare the opening of the fourth book:

admiranda tibi levium spectacula rerum  
magnanimosque duces totiusque ordine gentis  
mores et studia et populos et proelia dicam.  
in tenui labor; at tenuis non gloria . . .

(G. 4.3-6)

Each of the passages is the reverse of the other: in the first, Virgil will compensate for the narrowness of his subject matter (*angustis . . . rebus*; i.e. *lanigeros agitare greges hirtasque capellas*, 3.287) by elevation of style (*magno nunc ore sonandum*, 3.294). In the above passage, unconscionably high subject matter (lines 4-5—the reminiscence of *Ecl.* 6.3 can be no accident) will be mitigated by the treatment (*in tenui labor*—a difficult, but highly loaded phrase, in light of the significance of *tenuis* for Virgil and the Augustans). The very reversal between these two passages contains in itself the stamp of *λεπτότης*.