the orthodox logic of perception which subordinates character to action and to question that decorum properly defined as "an appropriate response to an objective reality which combines fact and value." The rule of Ovid's *Heroides* is the rule of indecorum, of wit in conception no less than in language, a wit which is not his heroine's own but the token of the poet's creative presence in the poem. Its dispassionate, intellectual, emotionally anaesthetizing presence is a constant reminder of how far we, in our sympathy for a heroine, have departed from the traditional view of her situation, and it is a constant goad to the dissociation of emotional appreciation from formal articulation. It is the medium by which our understanding of Ovid's heroines becomes psychologized and historicized, the medium by which their speech becomes present as the empiric fact which inevitably overflows the confines of stable categories. Ovid's heroines become "real" insofar as they become convincingly enigmatic, their truth accessible only as fact enclosed in the wayward, often comically unorthodox fact of their words alone.

II ⊙ JASON'S TWO MEDEAS: *HEROIDES* 6 AND 12

Hypsipyle to Jason

Your ship, I am told, has returned you to Thessalian shores,
and the fleece of the golden ram has made you rich.
Permit me to compliment you on your safety, and on such success
as you had more properly divulged in writing to me.
The winds, of course, may have baffled even your ardent inclination
for a homeward course past those realms I have pledged to you as your own.
Nonetheless, however adverse the winds, a letter may be written.
Hypsipyle was entitled to the courtesy of a personal note from your hand.

Why was it vulgar rumor, and not a letter, that first brought news of you:
Mars' sacred bulls pacing, subjugate, beneath the curving yoke;
the seeds no sooner dispersed than matured; a crop of grown men
whose death was in no way obliged to the help of your sword;
the serpent sleeplessly guarding the golden spoil of the flock
and that fleece removed, nonetheless, by your heroic hand.
Some hesitated to credit such exploits; if I had only been able to silence their doubts
by saying "That is exactly what Jason wrote," how awesome I might have been!

But why should I lament that my husband has fallen somewhat short of proper devotion?
I count myself, for as long as I remain yours, in full possession of your regard.
There is talk that you brought someone back with you, a barbarian witch,
and took her to the bed your oath had reserved for me.
Love is an impressionable thing. I hope they will say I was rash
in bringing this false accusation against my lord.

Only recently a Thessalian stranger arrived here from Haemonia's borders.
Scarcely had his shoe scraped my threshold when I cried out
"What can you tell me of Aeson's prince, and mine?"
Disconcerted, dumb, he planted his rapt attention upon the floor.
At once I leapt to my feet, and from my bosom gashed my gown asunder.
"Does he live? Or does death," I cried out, "cry out, in addition, for me?"
"He lives," he said. Love is hesitant. I forced him to swear.
If a god had told me, I still would scarcely have believed you alive.
As soon as I recovered my composure, I began to ask of your exploits.
He told me of Mars' bronze-shod bulls and their surrender to the plough,
of the poisonous teeth, supplanting seed, sown in the indented ground,
of the men suddenly sprung from them, fully armed for combat at birth,

HEROIDES 6

Litora Thessaliae reduci tetigisse carina
diceris auratae vellere dives ovis.
gratulor incolumi, quantum sinis; hoc tamen ipsum
debueram scripto certior esse tuo.
nam ne pacta tibi praeter mea regna redires,
cum cuperes, ventos non habuisse potes;
quamlibet adverso signetur epistula vento.
Hypsipyle missa digna salute fui.

Cur mihi fama prior de te quam littera venit:
isse sacros Martis sub iuga panda boves,
seminibus iactis segetes adolesse virorum
inque necem dextra non eguisse tua,
pervigilem spolium pecudis servasse draconem,
rapta tamen forti vellera fulva manu?
haec ego si possem timide credentibus "ista
ipse mihi scripsit" dicere, quanta forem!

Quid queror officium lenti cessasse mariti?
obsequium, maneo si tua, grande tuli!
barbara narratur venisse venefica tecum,
in mihi promissi parte recepta tori.
credula res amor est; utinam temeraria dicar
criminibus falsis insimulasse virum!

Nuper ab Haemoniis hospes mihi Thessalus oris
venerat, et tactum vix bene limen erat,
"Aesonides," dixi, "quid agit meus?" ille pudore
haesit in opposita lumina fixus humo.
protinus exilui tunicisque a pectore ruptis
"vivit? an," exclamo, "me quoque fata vocant?"
"vivit," ait. timidum quod amat; iurare coegi.
vix mihi teste deo credita vita tua est.
utque animus rediit, tua facta requirere coepi.
narrat aenipedes Martis arasse boves,
vipereos dentes in humum pro semine iactos,
et subito natos arma tulisse viros—

earth-born nations by civil strife reduced to their common clay
and made to fulfill their full span of life in just one day.

The dragon suffered defeat. Again I put the question:
"Is Jason alive?" Hope and fear bring trust and mistrust in relay.
But as he tells each event, caught up by zeal and the racing current of speech,
his naive art uncovers every wound I have suffered from you.
Where is the trust you pledged me? Where marriage vows,
and the wedding torch, now more fit to ignite my pyre?
I did not give you my body in secret love. Juno was there.
She gave me away, and Hymen, a garland about his brow.

But no, not Juno, not Hymen. It was the grim Fury
who carried, walking before me, the unholy brand.
What were the Minyae to me, or that ship cut from Dodona's pines?
Why, Tiphys, should you pilot that ship to a land of mine?
There was no ram here whose fleece was beautiful, and of gold,
no old Aeëtes to lord it in Lemnos' royal halls.
At first I had decided—but my fate was pulling against me—
to expel the foreign fleet with my army of women.
The women of Lemnos know well, all too well, the way to master men.
That heroic host should have defended my cause.

Yet I looked on a man in my city, and took him to my house and my heart.
Here you passed two summers with me, and two winters raced by.
At harvest-time of the third year, forced to take ship once again,
you flooded with tears your words to this effect:
"I am torn from your side, Hypsipyle, but—by my hope of return I swear—
I am yours, yours even as I leave you, and yours I shall forever remain.
As for my child, the hidden cargo of your womb, may it live
and may each of us, together, be a parent to it." That was all.

And while the spate of tears coursed fluent down your perfidious face
I remember how you were unable to speak another word.
Of all your crew, you were the last to board the holy *Argo*.
It took flight; the wind bellied its hollow sails.
The dark blue water glides from beneath its advancing keel.
Your glance is fixed on the land; I stand watching the sea.
My face and breast drenched in tears, I find my way to the tower
whose vantage is on all sides open to the encircling flood.
I can see so much farther than usual and in that expanse
I watch you through my tears—my eyes oblige the longing of my heart.

terrigenas populos civili Marte peremptos
inplesse aetatis fata diurna suae.

Devictus serpens. iterum, si vivat Iason,
quaerimus; alternant spesque timorque fidem.
singula dum narrat, studio cursuque loquendi
detegit ingenio vulnera nostra suo.
heu! ubi pacta fides? ubi conubialia iura
faxque sub arsuros dignior ire rogos?
non ego sum furto tibi cognita; pronuba Iuno
adfuit et sertis tempora vinctus Hymen.

at mihi nec Iuno, nec Hymen, sed tristis Erinys
praetulit infaustas sanguinolenta faces.
quid mihi cum Minyis, quid cum Dodonide pinu?
quid tibi cum patria, navita Tiphy, mea?
non erat hic aries villo spectabilis aureo,
nec senis Aeetae regia Lemnos erat.
certa fui primo—sed me mala fata trahebant—
hospita feminea pellere castra manu;
Lemniadesque viros, nimium quoque, vincere norunt.
milite tam forti causa tuenda fuit!

Urbe virum vidi, tectoque animoque recepi!
hic tibi bisque aestas bisque cucurrit hiemps.
tertia messis erat, cum tu dare vela coactus
inplesti lacrimis talia verba tuis:
"abstrahor, Hypsipyle; sed dent modo fata recursus,
vir tuus hinc abeo, vir tibi semper ero.
quod tamen e nobis gravida celatur in alvo,
vivat, et eiusdem simus uterque parens!"

Hactenus, et lacrimis in falsa cadentibus ora
cetera te memini non potuisse loqui.
ultimus e sociis sacram conscendis in Argon.
illa volat; ventus concava vela tenet;
caerula propulsae subducitur unda carinae;
terra tibi, nobis adspiciuntur aquae.
in latus omne patens turris circumspicit undas;
huc feror, et lacrimis osque sinusque madent.
per lacrimas specto, cupidaeque faventia menti
longius adsueto lumina nostra vident.

Add to this my chaste prayers, and my vows mixed with fear—
vows which, by your safety, I am now indebted to fulfill.
And should *I* pay those debts, while Medea enjoys their profit?
I am sick at heart, and my love seethes with rage.
Shall I bear gifts to the temples for Jason's life, and yet lose him while he lives?
Shall the sacrificed victim fall in honor of this fall I have taken?

No, I confess, I was never secure, and I was always afraid
your father would choose a woman from Argos to be his son's bride.
My fear was the women of Argos—my ruin was a barbarian whore.
I owe my wound to the hand of an enemy invisible to me.
Her lovely face, her distinction—neither is what you find pleasing, but rather her spe
or the magic scissors that snip her terrible harvest of herbs.
She tries to seduce the reluctant moon from its course
and to bury in shadows the stallions of the sun.
She reins the waters in, and halts the momentum of rivers, she instills life in trees,
in rocks,
and dislodges whole forests and mountains from their proper home.
She moves among random graves with her loosened hair
gathering choice bones from pyres still alive with heat.
Her curse vows destruction for distant victims: she fashions their likeness in wax
and into their wretched vitals her delicate needle probes, and she—
whatever else she does, I should rather not know. It is wicked to look to drugs
for what should properly repay both virtue and beauty, whose reward is love.

Can you embrace a woman such as this, be left alone with her in the same room,
and in the deep quiet of night take your rest and not take fright?
Doubtless she has compelled you, Jason, as she did the bulls, to bear the yoke,
and you feel the same enchantment as the fierce serpents suffered.
Furthermore, she sees to it that her own name endorses your exploits, and those
of your men—and as a wife she blocks her husband's claim to renown.
Moreover, some partisan of Pelias credits your deeds to her poisons:
his influence is such among the vulgar that they believe him.
It was not Aeson's child, but the child of Aeëtes, the Phasian woman,
who tore the fleece of gold from Phrixus' ram.
Your mother, Alcimede, does not approve—respect your mother's opinion!—
neither does your father, his daughter-in-law a denizen of the frozen pole!
Let her find herself a husband—let her indeed, from Tanais,
from the marshes of watery Scythia, and her own country, Phasis.

Son of Aeson, changeable, vaguer than a vapor of Spring,
why are your words lighter than the weight of your promise?

Adde preces castas inmixtaque vota timori—
nunc quoque te salvo persoluenda mihi.
vota ego persolvam? votis Medea fruetur!
cor dolet, atque ira mixtus abundat amor.
dona feram templis, vivum quod Iasona perdo?
hostia pro damnis concidat icta meis?

Non equidem secura fui semperque verebar,
ne pater Argolica sumeret urbe nurum.
Argolidas timui—nocuit mihi barbara paelex!
non expectata vulnus ab hoste tuli.
nec facie meritisque placet, sed carmina novit
diraque cantata pabula falce metit.
illa reluctantem cursu deducere lunam
nititur et tenebris abdere solis equos;
illa refrenat aquas obliquaque flumina sistit;
illa loco silvas vivaque saxa movet.
per tumulos errat passis discincta capillis
certaque de tepidis colligit ossa rogis.
devovet absentis simulacraque cerea figit,
et miserum tenuis in iecur urget acus—
et quae nescierim melius. male quaeritus herbis
moribus et forma conciliandus amor.

Hanc potes amplecti thalamoque relictus in uno
inpavidus somno nocte silente frui?
scilicet ut tauros, ita te iuga ferre coegit
quaque feros anguis, te quoque mulcet ope.
adde, quod adscribi factis procerumque tuisque
se facit, et titulo coniugis uxor obest.
atque aliquis Peliae de partibus acta venenis
inputat et populum, qui sibi credat, habet:
"non haec Aesonides, sed Phasias Aeetine
aurea Phrixeae terga revellit ovis."
non probat Alcimede mater tua—consule matrem—
non pater, a gelido cui venit axe nurus.
illa sibi a Tanai Scythiaeque paludibus udae
quaerat et a patria Phasidis usque virum!

Mobilis Aesonide vernaque incertior aura,
cur tua polliciti pondere verba carent?

When you left here, you were *mine*. You are not mine now and have not returned.
But, when you have come back, let me be the wife I was when you went away.
If high birth and the noble names of my forbears can prevail upon you,
look at me, whom men call the daughter of Thoas, of Minos' line.
Bacchus was my grandfather. The wife of Bacchus, a crown upon her brow,
outshines the lesser constellations with her stars.
My dowry gift to you will be Lemnos itself, a land by nature generous to the laborer's pains.
I shall be among the possessions my dowry will grant you.

And now, too, I have given birth; Jason, rejoice for us both!
The burden I carried was one its author made sweet.
I am fortunate, too, in the number: by Lucina's favor
I have given birth to twins, two pledges, one for each of us.
If you ask whom it is they resemble, they remind everyone of you. Incapable of deceit,
in all other respects they are their father's sons—
they whom I almost sent, their mother's ambassadors-in-arms.
But even as I was proceeding, a stepmother's cruelty checked my intention.

It was Medea I feared, Medea is more than a stepmother,
Medea whose hands are ready for any kind of crime.
Would she, who could dismember her brother's body, then cast upon the fields
her brother's dismembered limbs—would she spare the pledges of my love for you?
Yet this is the kind of woman, deranged by the toxins of Colchis,
for whom they say you have scorned the bed of Hypsipyle!
Virgin adulteress! She gave her body without honor to her husband,
but the wedding torch was chaste that, giving me to you, gave you to me.
She betrayed her father. I rescued mine, Thoas, from death.
She deserted the Colchians. My Lemnos remains my home.
What good is it to me that my goodness has been beaten by her evil, or that the means
to win her husband, like the dowry she brought him, were crime.
What the women of Lemnos did excites my censure, but not, Jason, my surprise.
The weak—no matter how weak—can be compelled by passion to arms.

Come now, tell me, what if you had been forced by hostile winds,
you and your companions, to the necessity of entering my harbor,
and I had come out to meet you, and my twin sons:
surely you would have prayed that the earth yawn wide for you.
Tell me, how would you have looked, wretch, at your sons—how at me?
As reward for your treachery, what death would you have deserved to die?

vir meus hinc ieras, vir non meus inde redisti.
sim reducis coniunx, sicut euntis eram!
si te nobilitas generosaque nomina tangunt—
en, ego Minoo nata Thoante feror!
Bacchus avus; Bacchi coniunx redimita corona
praeradiat stellis signa minora suis.
dos tibi Lemnos erit, terra ingeniosa colenti;
me quoque dotalis inter habere potes.

Nunc etiam peperi; gratare ambobus, Iason!
dulce mihi gravidae fecerat auctor onus.
felix in numero quoque sum prolemque gemellam,
pignora Lucina bina favente dedi.
si quaeris, cui sint similes, cognosceris illis.
fallere non norunt; cetera patris habent.
legatos quos paene dedi pro matre ferendos;
sed tenuit coeptas saeva noverca vias.

Medeam timui: plus est Medea noverca;
Medeae faciunt ad scelus omne manus.
spargere quae fratris potuit lacerata per agros
corpora, pignoribus parceret illa meis?
hanc, hanc, o demens Colchisque ablate venenis,
diceris Hypsipyles praeposuisse toro!
turpiter illa virum cognovit adultera virgo;
me tibi teque mihi taeda pudica dedit.
prodidit illa patrem; rapui de clade Thoanta.
deseruit Colchos; me mea Lemnos habet.
quid refert, scelerata piam si vincet et ipso
crimine dotata est emeruitque virum?
Lemniadum facinus culpo, non miror, Iason;
quamlibet infirmis ipse dat arma dolor.

Dic age, si ventis, ut oportuit, actus iniquis
intrasses portus tuque comesque meos,
obviaque exissem fetu comitante gemello—
hiscere nempe tibi terra roganda fuit!—
quo vultu natos, quo me, scelerate, videres?
perfidiae pretio qua nece dignus eras?

Yet you, even you, thanks to me, would have been safe and unharmed,
not because you were worthy, but because I had the kindness to spare you.
But your whore—I would have smeared my own face with her life's blood,
and your face too, the face she stole from me by her poisons.

I would have been a Medea to your Medea!
But if Jupiter in heaven above attends at all, in justice to my vows,
I pray that the pain Hypsipyle feels, she also, usurper of my marriage bed,
may suffer, and may herself know the conditions she inflicts upon me.
As I have been deserted, a wife and a mother of two children, so when she has had
as many sons as I, may she suffer the loss of her man.
And may she not keep what her evil has gained, but by worse means lose all,
and let her be exiled, searching for refuge over the whole of the earth.
As harsh a sister as she was to her brother, as harsh a daughter as she was to her father,
may she prove equally bitter to her sons, just so harsh to her husband.
And when she shall have exhausted the sea and earth, let her attempt the sky.
Let her wander resourceless, without hope, stained with the blood of her murder
Cheated of my marriage, I call this down upon you by my prayers. Farewell,
both husband and wife! Live well in that bed, your bed, possessed by my curse.

ipse quidem per me tutus sospesque fuisses—
non quia tu dignus, sed quia mitis ego.
paelicis ipsa meos inplessem sanguine vultus,
quosque veneficiis abstulit illa suis!

Medeae Medea forem! Quodsi quid ab alto
iustus adest votis Iuppiter ipse meis,
quod gemit Hypsipyle, lecti quoque subnuba nostri
maereat et leges sentiat ipsa suas;
utque ego destituor coniunx materque duorum,
a totidem natis orba sit illa viro!
nec male parta diu teneat peiusque relinquat—
exulet et toto quaerat in orbe fugam!
quam fratri germana fuit miseroque parenti
filia, tam natis, tam sit acerba viro!
cum mare, cum terras consumpserit, aera temptet;
erret inops, exspes, caede cruenta sua!
haec ego, coniugio fraudata Thoantias oro.
vivite, devoto nuptaque virque toro!

Medea to Jason

But I remember that I, though a princess of the Colchian nation,
found time for you when you asked for my help, and my magic.
The sisters who apportion the length of our mortal life
should then have unwound the spindle that carries mine.
Medea should have died then. I could have died well. Since that moment
all of my life has been a lengthening pain.
Why, why should that ship, timber of Pelion driven by strong young arms,
ever have come in search of Phrixus' golden ram?
Why did we, the people of Colchis, ever look upon Magnesia's Argo?
Why should you and your Greek crew ever drink the waters of Phasis?
And the sight of your golden hair, why did it delight me so much,
too much? And your beauty, and the deceit that made all you said sweet?

But for that delight, when once that strange boat
had beached upon our sands and brought her bold crew,
Aeson's so forgetful son would have gone unanointed
to brave the flaming breath of the bulls.
He would have sown the seeds, reaped from each one an enemy,
and garnered a harvest rich in his own life's blood.
How much deception would have died then, betrayer, with you,
and how many murderous sorrows would I have been spared!

To reproach an ungrateful man with what he owes to your kindness—some
pleasure can be had in that,
and I shall take it, the only joy I shall ever take from you.
Told to direct your untried ship to Colchis,
you entered the lavish kingdom of my lands.
In that realm I, Medea, was all that your new bride is in hers.
Her father's wealth: my father's wealth was no less.
He rules Corinth and its two seas; mine rules all the land
on the left shore of the Pontus as far as Scythia and her snows.

Aeëtes offers hospitality to the young Pelasgians, and you recline:
our painted couches learn the pressure of your Greek bodies.
Then I caught sight of you, and then began to see what you were.
There was the first beginning of ruin for my mind.
I looked and was lost, burning with a fire others do not know,
like a torch of pine kindled before an altar to powerful gods.

HEROIDES 12

At tibi Colchorum, memini, regina vacavi,
ars mea cum peteres ut tibi ferret opem.
tunc quae dispensant mortalia fata sorores
debuerant fusos evoluisse meos.
tum potui Medea mori bene! Quidquid ab illo
produxi vitae tempore, poena fuit.
ei mihi! Cur umquam iuvenalibus acta lacertis
Phrixeam petiit Pelias arbor ovem?
cur umquam Colchi Magnetida vidimus Argon,
turbaque Phasiacam Graia bibistis aquam?
cur mihi plus aequo flavi placuere capilli
et decor et linguae gratia ficta tuae?

Aut, semel in nostras quoniam nova puppis harenas
venerat audacis attuleratque viros,
isset anhelatos non praemedicatus in ignes
inmemor Aesonides oraque adusta boum;
semina iecisset, totidemque et semina et hostes,
ut caderet cultu cultor ab ipse suo!
quantum perfidiae tecum, scelerate, perisset,
dempta forent capiti quam mala multa meo!

Est aliqua ingrato meritum exprobrare voluptas.
hac fruar; haec de te gaudia sola feram.
iussus inexpertam Colchos advertere puppim
intrasti patriae regna beata meae.
hoc illic Medea fui, nova nupta quod hic est;
quam pater est illi, tam mihi dives erat.
hic Ephyren bimarem, Scythia tenus ille nivosa
omne tenet, Ponti quo plaga laeva iacet.

Accipit hospitio iuvenes Aeeta Pelasgos,
et premitis pictos, corpora Graia, toros.
tunc ego te vidi, tunc coepi scire, quis esses;
illa fuit mentis prima ruina meae.
et vidi et perii; nec notis ignibus arsi,
ardet ut ad magnos pinea taeda deos.

Yes, you were wonderful to look on, but my fate was forcing me.
Your eyes, larceny, stole my sight from me.
You knew it. Traitor—but who can really conceal love? The darting gash of flame
escapes, self-accusing, self-betrayed.

You are told, meanwhile, the terms of your harsh ordeal:
You must bend the savage bulls to the unaccustomed weight of the plow,
the bulls of Mars, savage not alone by their lethal horns—
their terrible breath was fire.
Their feet were solid bronze, wrought-bronze their nostrils,
the metal itself blackened by what they exhaled.
Further, you are told that your own doomed hand must scatter
upon the wide fields the seeds to breed nations,
peoples armed in their birth to assault your body.
That is a tillage that hates its harvester.
Your last task is to escape the sight of the guard, eyes ignorant of sleep's persuasion,
which you must elude by whatever art you command.

Aeëtes had spoken. You and your men arise, and you grieve.
From the couches of purple they take the high table away.
How far from your thoughts, then, were the dowry of Creusa, her kingdom,
and Creon, your father-in-law, and she herself, daughter of great Creon?
You take your leave, troubled by sorrow. I follow you, looking through a curtain
of tears.
With a whispered murmur, my tongue spoke its farewell.
Wounded to the heart, I lay upon the bed prepared in my chamber,
and there I passed a whole long night of tears.
Before my eyes I saw the bull, and the fearful harvest;
the wakeful serpent was there before my eyes.
On the one side was love, on the other, fear: the fear
increased the love. Then morning, and my dear sister entered my room.
She found me with disheveled hair, lying face-down,
and everything wet with my tears.
She asks me to help your men, the Minyae. What one asks for, another will receive:
I grant her petition to the Aesonian youth.

In a grove so dark with pine-trees and boughs of ilex
that the sun's rays scarcely force an entrance into its shade
there is (or at least there was) a shrine to Diana where the goddess stands,
golden, an image of gold fashioned by savage hands.
Do you remember? Or has the place vanished, as I have, from your mind?
We went there. You were first to speak, and what you spoke was treachery:

et formosus eras, et me mea fata trahebant;
abstulerant oculi lumina nostra tui.
perfide, sensisti—quis enim bene celat amorem?
eminet indicio prodita flamma suo.

Dicitur interea tibi lex ut dura ferorum
insolito premeres vomere colla boum.
Martis erat tauri plus quam per cornua saevi,
quorum terribilis spiritus ignis erat;
aere pedes solidi praetentaque naribus aera,
nigra per adflatus haec quoque facta suos.
semina praeterea populos genitura iuberis
spargere devota lata per arva manu,
qui peterent natis secum tua corpora telis;
illa est agricolae messis iniqua suo.
lumina custodis succumbere nescia somno,
ultimus est aliqua decipere arte labor.

Dixerat Aeetes; maesti consurgitis omnes,
mensaque purpureos deserit alta toros.
quam tibi tunc longe regnum dotale Creusae
et socer et magni nata Creontis erat?
tristis abis; oculis abeuntem prosequor udis,
et dixit tenui murmure lingua: "vale!"
ut positum tetigi thalamo male saucia lectum,
acta est per lacrimas nox mihi, quanta fuit;
ante oculos taurique meos segetesque nefandae,
ante meos oculos pervigil anguis erat.
hinc amor, hinc timor est; ipsum timor auget amorem.
mane erat, et thalamo cara recepta soror
disiectamque comas adversaque in ora iacentem
invenit, et lacrimis omnia plena meis.
orat opem Minyis. Alter petit, alter habebit;
Aesonio iuveni quod rogat illa, damus.

Est nemus et piceis et frondibus ilicis atrum;
vix illuc radiis solis adire licet.
sunt in eo—fuerant certe—delubra Dianae;
aurea barbarica stat dea facta manu.
noscis? An exciderunt mecum loca? Venimus illuc.
orsus es infido sic prior ore loqui:

"Fortune has given to you—for good or ill—the power to decide my fate.
My life and death alike rest in your hands.
To be able to destroy at will is enough—enough if sheer power is pleasure—
But to save my life is to earn your greater glory.
By my misfortunes, which you can relieve, I implore you, by your ancestral nobility,
by your grandfather the sun, whose divine presence looks upon all things,
by the triple visage and secret rites of Diana
and by whatever other gods, if there be any your race reveres:
maiden, pity me, and pity my men. Make me,
by your generous favor, yours forever.
And should you, perhaps, not scorn a Greek for a husband—
but how may I presume upon gods so complaisant to my will?—
then may my life's breath escape into thin air before
I take to my marriage chamber any woman but you.
May Juno, guardian of holy marriage, be my witness,
and that goddess too in whose marble temple we now stand."

Language such as this (and how small a part this was of all you said!)
moved the innocent mind of a girl. I took your hand in my own.
I saw tears start to your eyes—Or were they too accomplice to your treachery?
Your captive was only a girl, and how quick her surrender to your words!

Unharmed by fire you yoke the bronze-shod bulls,
and plough, as you were commanded, the hard earth.
It is not seed but poisoned teeth you scatter in the fields: they yield
an army—sword and shield equip each enemy for his birth.
I, I who had myself granted you the magic charms, I sat ashen
at the sight of those sudden men in battle array
until—it was an awesome sight—the earth-born brothers
drew, and they flailed each other.
Then suddenly, spiked, scales crashing, the sleepless guard
hisses, and with coiling breast sweeps across the ground.
Where then was your lavish dowry, your imperial consort,
or the waves of the two seas your Isthmus divides?
It was I, I who now—so late—seem "barbarian" to you, I
who now am beggared in your sight, who now strike you as evil,
I sealed those blazing eyes in magic slumber, and I gave you the fleece
so that you might steal it, safe, away.

My father was betrayed, I left both kingdom and country. My reward?
I am at liberty to live whatever life of exile I like.

"ius tibi et arbitrium nostrae fortuna salutis
tradidit, inque tua est vitaque morsque manu.
perdere posse sat est, siquem iuvet ipsa potestas;
sed tibi servatus gloria maior ero.
per mala nostra precor, quorum potes esse levamen,
per genus, et numen cuncta videntis avi,
per triplicis vultus arcanaque sacra Dianae,
et si forte aliquos gens habet ista deos—
o virgo, miserere mei, miserere meorum;
effice me meritis tempus in omne tuum!
quodsi forte virum non dedignare Pelasgum—
sed mihi tam faciles unde meosque deos?—
spiritus ante meus tenues vanescat in auras
quam thalamo nisi tu nupta sit ulla meo!
conscia sit Iuno sacris praefecta maritis,
et dea marmorea cuius in aede sumus!"

Haec animum—et quota pars poterat!—movere puellae
simplicis, et dextrae dextera iuncta meae.
vidi etiam lacrimas—an pars est fraudis in illis?
sic cito sum verbis capta puella tuis.

Iungis et aeripedes inadusto corpore tauros
et solidam iusso vomere findis humum.
arva venenatis pro semine dentibus inples;
nascitur et gladios scutaque miles habet.
ipsa ego, quae dederam medicamina, pallida sedi,
cum vidi subitos arma tenere viros;
donec terrigenae, facinus mirabile, fratres
inter se strictas conseruere manus.
Insopor ecce vigil squamis crepitantibus horrens
sibilat et torto pectore verrit humum!
dotis opes ubi erant? ubi erat tibi regia coniunx,
quique maris gemini distinet Isthmos aquas?
illa ego, quae tibi sum nunc denique barbara facta,
nunc tibi sum pauper, nunc tibi visa nocens,
flammea subduxi medicato lumina somno,
et tibi, quae raperes, vellera tuta dedi.

Proditus est genitor, regnum patriamque reliqui;
munus in exilio quod libet esse tuli!

My virgin innocence fell plunder to an alien and a thief.
My dear mother, and dearest sister, both were abandoned.
But fleeing I did not leave you behind me, my brother.
Now, only now, does the act of writing defeat me.
I do not dare to write in my own hand what, by my own hand, I dared to do.
I should have been torn to pieces in the same way—but *with* you.
And even then I was not afraid—after such acts, how could I fear?—
although a woman now, and guilty, to trust myself to the sea.

Where is heaven's power? Where are the gods? Let death by drowning exact from e
the price of his crimes: your death for your treachery, mine for my trust in you.
I wish the Symplegades had trapped us and crushed us together.
I wish I were embracing you now, bone upon splintering bone,
or that rabid Scylla had found food for her dogs in our bodies—
Scylla, worthy vengeance against ungrateful men.
And she who time after time vomits the tides, and time after time sucks them in agai
I wish too that she had buried us within the Trinacrian flood.

Yet you will return to the cities of Greece victorious, unscathed.
The fleece of the golden ram is an offering to your father's gods.
Why should I tell the devotion of Pelias' daughters, whose virtue spurred their crime,
or mention the limbs of the father hewn by their virginal hands?
However others may accuse me, you can give me only praise,
you for whom I have so often endured the coercion of evil.
You have dared—but I cannot find the words to requite my pain
—you have dared to say to me "Leave this place, the house of Aeson's heirs!"
I obeyed and left your house. My two sons were my companions,
as well as my love for you, which pursues me always.

Then suddenly I hear the sounds of a wedding chant.
Darting flames play about the kindled torches.
A flute pours out its music, a wedding march for you, but to me
a song more tearful than the dirge for the dead.
I was terrified—but still I did not believe such infamy could be—
and yet my heart went cold inside me.
People come thronging, shouting "Hymen" and "O Hymenaeus" over and over,
and the nearer the words approached me the more my terror advanced.
My servants turned, trying, as they wept, to hide their tears from me:
who could want to reveal something so freighted with evil?
Still, whatever it was, better for me not to know it
even while suffering it as if I did.

virginitas facta est peregrini praeda latronis;
optima cum cara matre relicta soror.
at non te fugiens sine me, germane, reliqui!
deficit hoc uno littera nostra loco.
quod facere ausa mea est, non audet scribere dextra.
sic ego, sed tecum, dilaceranda fui.
nec tamen extimui—quid enim post illa timerem?—
credere me pelago, femina iamque nocens.

Numen ubi est? ubi di? meritas subeamus in alto,
tu fraudis poenas, credulitatis ego!
compressos utinam Symplegades elisissent,
nostraque adhaererent ossibus ossa tuis;
aut nos Scylla rapax canibus mersisset edendos—
debuit ingratis Scylla nocere viris;
quaeque vomit totidem fluctus totidemque resorbet,
nos quoque Trinacriae supposuisset aquae!

Sospes ad Haemonias victorque reverteris urbes;
ponitur ad patrios aurea lana deos.
quid referam Peliae natas pietate nocentes
caesaque virginea membra paterna manu?
ut culpent alii, tibi me laudare necesse est,
pro quo sum totiens esse coacta nocens.
ausus es—o, iusto desunt sua verba dolori!—
ausus es "Aesonia," dicere, "cede domo!"
iussa domo cessi natis comitata duobus
et, qui me sequitur semper, amore tui.

Ut subito nostras Hymen cantatus ad aures
venit, et accenso lampades igne micant,
tibiaque effundit socialia carmina vobis,
at mihi funerea flebiliora tuba,
pertimui, nec adhuc tantum scelus esse putabam;
sed tamen in toto pectore frigus erat.
turba ruunt et "Hymen," clamant, "Hymenaee!" frequenter—
quo propior vox haec, hoc mihi peius erat.
diversi flebant servi lacrimasque tegebant—
quis vellet tanti nuntius esse mali?
me quoque, quidquid erat, potius nescire iuvabat;
sed tamquam scirem, mens mea tristis erat,

Then my younger son, at my command, and eager to see what was happening,
stood outdoors upon the threshold of our house.
"Mother," he called to me, "Come here. My father Jason is leading a parade.
He is dressed in gold, and he is driving a team of horses."
No sooner had he spoken than I tore my cloak and beat my breast.
Not even my own face was safe from my tearing nails.
I felt I had to rush out, out into the midst of the thronging people,
and tear those choice flowers out of their hair.
I could scarcely stop myself from tearing my own hair,
from screaming aloud "He is mine," or hurling myself upon you.

Now, father, exult in your injury. People of Colchis, rejoice now at my forsaking you.
Brother, ghost, take me, a living sacrifice to your ceremony of death.
Kingdom, country, home, I have lost them all, and now I am left
by my husband, he who alone was everything to me.
I could, it seems, master serpents and frenzied bulls.
I could not control this one man alone,
I, whose skill in drugs repulsed the savagery of fire, am now
powerless to shelter myself against my own passion's flames.
Even my spells, my herbs, my arts have abandoned me. The rituals of powerful Hecate,
and even the goddess herself, are all of them worthless to me.
My days are drained of pleasure. The nights are wakeful and bitter.
Tender sleep has turned away from my heart and its sorrow.
I could drug a serpent; I cannot drug myself.
My skills extend to anyone, and exclude me.
A whore now gathers into her embrace the body I saved from death:
the full harvest of my labor is hers to enjoy.
And when you inflate yourself before your ignorant bride, and when you speak
in accents fit for her corruption to hear, perhaps you will fashion
novelties of slander about how I look, and about the things I do.
Let her smile. Let my vices furnish her joy.
Let her laugh and lie exalted on Tyrian purples—she shall have her tears,
and be consumed, and surpass even my ardor with her own.
As long as there is steel, or fire, or poison,
no enemy to Medea lives unavenged.
But if there is any hope that prayers can touch a heart of steel, listen now
to what I say, to words far more than matched by what I can dare.

I am now as much the suppliant to you as you so often were to me.
I do not hesitate to cast myself at your feet.

Cum minor e pueris iussus studioque videndi
constitit ad geminae limina prima foris.
"hinc" mihi "mater, abi! pompam pater," inquit, "Iason
ducit et adiunctos aureus urget equos!"
protinus abscissa planxi mea pectora veste,
tuta nec a digitis ora fuere meis.
ire animus mediae suadebat in agmina turbae
sertaque conpositis demere rapta comis;
vix me continui, quin sic laniata capillos
clamarem "meus est!" Iniceremque manus.

Laese pater, gaude! Colchi gaudete relicti!
inferias umbrae fratris habete mei;
deseror amissis regno patriaque domoque
coniuge, qui nobis omnia solus erat!
serpentis igitur potui taurosque furentes;
unum non potui perdomuisse virum,
quaeque feros pepuli doctis medicatibus ignes,
non valeo flammas effugere ipsa meas.
ipsi me cantus herbaeque artesque relinquunt;
nil dea, nil Hecates sacra potentis agunt.
non mihi grata dies; noctes vigilantur amarae,
et tener a misero pectore somnus abit.
quae me non possum, potui sopire draconem;
utilior cuivis quam mihi cura mea est.
quos ego servavi, paelex amplectitur artus,
et nostri fructus illa laboris habet.
forsitan et, stultae dum te iactare maritae
quaeris et iniustis auribus apta loqui,
in faciem moresque meos nova crimina fingas.
rideat et vitiis laeta sit illa meis!
rideat et Tyrio iaceat sublimis in ostro—
flebit et ardores vincet adusta meos!
dum ferrum flammaeque aderunt sucusque veneni,
hostis Medeae nullus inultus erit!
quodsi forte preces praecordia ferra tangunt,
nunc amimis audi verba minora meis!

Tam tibi sum supplex, quam tu mihi saepe fuisti,
nec moror ante tuos procubuisse pedes.

If I am trivial to you, be reminded of your children.
A harsh stepmother will turn savage against children of mine.
And they are like you, excessively like you, and the likeness touches me,
so that whenever I look at them my eyes become wet with tears.
By the powers above, by the light from which I claim descent,
by my kindnesses to you, and by our two sons, our pledges to each other,
take me back to that bed for which, in my madness, I renounced so much.
Lend some truth to the words you spoke, and help me as I once saved you.
I do not sue for your aid against bulls or against men,
or ask that a dragon surrender to your art and yield to sleep.
I ask for *you*. I have earned you, you who gave yourself to me,
you, the father of our children, by whom I was made their mother.

Do you ask where my dowry is? I counted it out on that field
you were obliged to plow before you carried the fleece away.
Beautiful in its deep wool, that ram of gold is my dowry, my own,
yet if I were to claim it from you, you would refuse to give it up.
My dowry is your *survival*. Your whole young cohort of Greeks is my marriage pri
Compare that with your new legacy from Sisyphus, the riches of Corinth.
That you are alive, that you can claim for yourself the power of your bride and her father,
the very fact of your power to prove ungrateful—all this you owe to me.

And as for them, I shall very soon . . . but what is gained by a warning of the price
to be paid? Rage is at pains to deliver its monstrous message.
Where rage leads me, I shall go. Perhaps I will regret the thing I do—
just as now I regret my concern for a faithless man.
But leave that to the god who even now pilots my veering heart.
My mind labors, it is clear, toward some obscure enormity.

si tibi sum vilis, communis respice natos;
saeviet in partus dira noverca meos.
et nimium similes tibi sunt, et imagine tangor,
et quotiens video, lumina nostra madent.
per superos oro, per avitae lumina flammae,
per meritum et natos, pignora nostra, duos—
redde torum, pro quo tot res insana reliqui;
adde fidem dictis auxiliumque refer!
non ego te inploro contra taurosque virosque,
utque tua serpens victa quiescat ope;
te peto, quem merui, quem nobis ipse dedisti,
cum quo sum pariter facta parente parens.

Dos ubi sit, quaeris? campo numeravimus illo,
qui tibi laturo vellus arandus erat.
aureus ille aries villo spectabilis alto
dos mea, quam, dicam si tibi "redde!" neges.
dos mea tu sospes; dos est mea Graia iuventus!
i nunc, Sisyphias, inprobe, confer opes!
quod vivis, quod habes nuptam socerumque potentis,
hoc ipsum, ingratus quod potes esse, meum est.

Quos equidem actutum—sed quid praedicere poenam
attinet? ingentis parturit ira minas.
quo feret ira, sequar! facti fortasse pigebit—
et piget infido consuluisse viro.
viderit ista deus, qui nunc mea pectora versat!
nescio quid certe mens mea maius agit!

1 ❀ *Medeae Medea Forem*

this duc Jasoun
That is of love devourer and dragoun
As matter appetiteth form alway
And from form into form it passen may.
—Chaucer, *The Legend of Good Women*

The two epistles of the *Heroides* which, in the circumstances of their supposed composition, most nearly approximate the letters written to the "Honorable Augustus Hope" are *Heroides* 6 and 12, the letters of Hypsipyle and Medea to Jason.[1] *Heroides* 6 and 12 are the only two letters of the collection written by two deserted heroines to the same man. In fact, they are in this respect a singular exception to the general rule of the *Heroides*. While their singular status is itself sufficient to invite us to regard them in the light of companion pieces, the many and unmistakable ways in which Ovid calls attention to their reciprocal relationship is further cause to seek out the poetic conception which led him, in this instance alone, to depart so radically from the norm he had established for his collection.

Insofar as these two poems are further distinguished from the rest of the collection, they are companion targets for an almost universal critical disapproval, a disapproval based on what has seemed to be a markedly unbridled and unredeemed excess of the conventionally understood Ovidian flaws. They will thus offer exemplary indices to the complex poetic character which most distinguishes Ovid's fictive epistles—by their effect—from the agonizing appeals to human justice and mercy discovered in Hatfield's private correspondence.

Hypsipyle, the queen of Lemnos, writes her letter to Jason after she has learned of the recent success of the Colchian expedition and of Jason's safe return to Thessaly. In the course of Hypsipyle's close interrogation of a Thessalian stranger (an interview theatrically interrupted by a punctual fainting fit and more briefly suspended by the queen's paroxysms of compassionate dread), her informant not only describes Jason's capture of the Golden Fleece but also touches almost inadvertently upon Jason's marriage to the Colchian princess Medea:

singula dum narrat, studio cursuque loquendi
detegit ingenio vulnera nostra suo. (39–40)

[1] For a comprehensive account of the literary background to these two epistles, see Howard Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 94–123.

But as he tells each event, caught up by zeal and the racing
current of speech,
his naive art uncovers every wound I have suffered from you.

In the light of this information, Hypsipyle reproachfully reminds Jason of her reception of him, of his tearful, convincingly reluctant departure from Lemnos, of his promise to return to her as a husband, of the vows she made to secure his safety in Colchis. Since Jason is safe, Hypsipyle's debt to the gods has fallen due. Why should she pay it? Shall Medea, she asks, reap the profit of her sacrifices, and shall she fulfill her vows for Jason's life with thank-offerings for a man who, though alive, is lost to her? Admittedly, she had always been somewhat uneasy on the issue of Jason's marriage to her, fearing his father's inevitable preference for a Greek bride for his son. But this? A barbarian poisoner! A barbarian whore! A witch! Jason's liaison with Medea disgraces Hypsipyle quite as much as it degrades Jason.

Now Hypsipyle launches into a catalogue of her rival's dangerous powers and deviant habits. Neither good nor beautiful, Medea has estranged Jason from his proper self by incantations and ghastly pharmaceutical brews—by her magic, not her merit. Her infernal powers allow her to reverse the natural course of sun and moon, defy gravity, animate the voiceless insentience of rocks and stones, and confuse all things in perverse chaos. She exhibits no fear of death, no awe for the dead: at night, with loosened hair, she picks her scary way through the still warm remnants of corpses in search of ingredients for her charms. She curses and kills like a witch, through telekinetic suggestion: sharp needles search out the vital organs of little wax dolls. Hypsipyle could say more, but it's all unspeakable, so she won't. Here she cuts her catalogue short with a sudden, elliptical evasion: *et quae nescierim melius* (whatever else she does, I should rather not know, 93). This ellipsis, however, does not end the rehearsal of Medea's vices; Hypsipyle merely diverts her river of vitriol to more immediate, specific crimes. How, she asks, can Jason abide being left alone in the same bedroom at night with such a woman? Isn't he afraid of waking up dead?

Let Jason be warned, too, of this. Because of his alliance with such a woman, his reputation (like Mr. Wopsle's Hamlet) will now commence to die by inches from the ankles upward. Medea is so estranged from proper womanly submission and from the other proper limitations of her sex that she will not only dominate but surpass even the heroic masculinity of the Argonaut captain. She will usurp his honors publicly; the world will whisper, and laugh, remembering Jason as the

merest instrument of a *woman*. Add that Medea is not simply not of Jason's class, not simply inferior in class to him and to Hypsipyle, but provincially brutish in the extreme. Let Jason consult his mother on this, as well as his father: his parents will not approve! Furthermore, if Jason were interested in land, wealth, lineage, a lavish dowry, and a wife dowered lavishly with respectable morals, she, Hypsipyle, should surely have outranked Medea. She would come to him dowered—in addition to all else—with the two sons whom, she is gratified to announce, she has born to him, sons she cannot now even think of sending, legates-in-arms, to their father. Medea, after all, is worse than the ordinary stepmother. A woman who has engineered the death and dismemberment of her own brother is not likely to exhibit restraint in the matter of her husband's twin heirs by another woman.

In a moment of unanticipated candor (139–40) Hypsipyle cannot approve the crime of the Lemnian women, but it does not surprise her: grief equips even the weakest of creatures for an act of slaughter. Here Hypsipyle's imagination intervenes to suggest a small but telling vignette. What if the winds had blown Jason and Medea off course toward Lemnos, where the miscreant lovers would be met on the beach by a Hypsipyle doubly freighted with her maternal burden? The much embarrassed Jason would have been allowed to live—not, of course, because he deserves such clemency, but because Hypsipyle is gentle and kind. As for Medea, she would not have been so spared. Hypsipyle would have splashed her own face, and Jason's too, with Medea's blood. She would have met her rival as one Medea to another: *Medeae Medea forem* (I would have been a Medea to your Medea, 151). But if there is justice in heaven, Medea will learn what it means to usurp another woman's bed. May she, in times to come, feel what Hypsipyle suffers now, and much worse things as well. Although a mother and a wife, may she be abandoned by her husband and be forced to seek her exile in the far regions of the world. May she prove, first, as bitter a wife to Jason, as bitter a mother to her sons, as she has already proved to be as daughter and sister to her father and brother. Let her wander the earth bloody, stained by the murders she has done. And farewell to both of them, a curse on their bed.

If, as Hypsipyle claims, Medea rules Jason, she dominates Hypsipyle's thoughts no less, almost entirely effacing the presence of Jason in the poem. Scholars have invariably remarked upon the oddly anachronistic, peculiarly prescient command of Medea's biography which Hypsipyle reveals in the course of this poem. She knows too much about Medea, inexplicably much. At the time Hypsipyle writes to Jason, Medea is still the romantic adolescent girl of Apollonius' epic

whose heart, when she first saw Jason, seemed to leave her breast and "flutter in his path like a bird." She has, to be sure, betrayed her father in order to save the life and advance the career of her lover; and she is at least partly responsible for the death of her brother Apsyrtus, whose torn limbs cast in the path of King Aeëtes' ship drive the father to distraction and thus derail his pursuit of the Argo. But she has not yet become the mature Medea, whether the sorceress of folk tradition or the formidably malevolent, maddened creature of Euripides' play, a woman "like a wild beast in her grief and her rage" yet sufficiently controlled to "crook the pregnant hinges of the knee" in the interest of securing her final, terrible retaliation and her unnatural vengeance.

Nevertheless, the full career of Medea is represented, however darkly at times, in the epistle of Hypsipyle. Indeed, one is almost tempted to imagine that Hypsipyle's Thessalian informant either spoke far more voluminously on the topic of her Colchian rival than she claims he did, or that the same informant lightened his equipage by leaving behind him several volumes of Greek literature. His donation would have included, at the very least, two works: the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes and Euripides' play *Medea*. One critic has remarked that Hypsipyle's list of her rival's antisocial tendencies and illicit acts is so comprehensive and above all so familiar a rehearsal of Medea's career as to be almost ludicrous: "One scarcely restrains a smile. . . ."[2]

If Hypsipyle is not impossibly literate, then she is improbably clairvoyant; in either case she forfeits credibility and is, as a result, upstaged by the poet. That Ovid should have sacrificed the "imitation of nature," abandoning "the cooler dictates of reason" for the "false applause of fancy" earned by a trivially spectacular irony, is the major point of censure leveled against this poem. The effect of the poet's apparent rejection of poetic logic is the major question raised by this poem, and it is the question which shall be explored here. First, however, some background on the legendary life and literary history of the Lemnian queen should reveal the fact that her career, unlike Medea's, is represented in this epistle in a quite unorthodox light—so unorthodox, in fact, that Ovid's Hypsipyle is not even an extraordinary variation upon the tradition, but an absolutely unprecedented creation.

The story of the Lemnian women had been told at length both by

[2] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 103. For a fuller discussion of Hypsipyle's curse, see pp. 102–8. Jacobson dismisses the structurally "ironic" relationship between *Heroides* 6 and 12, arguing "the character of Hypsipyle is shaped for intrinsic not external reasons" (p. 104). I see no reason why Hypsipyle's coherence as a character and the cross-referential irony of the two poems should be mutually exclusive. "Intrinsic" and "external" poetic motives need not, and do not, conflict in these poems. Nevertheless, Jacobson's whole discussion of "sexual role reversal" in *Heroides* 6 is quite persuasive.

Apollonius and by Varro, and Ovid unquestionably knew both versions. According to the account of Apollonius, the men of Lemnos, because of a noxious smell visited upon their wives by Venus, had deserted their proper conjugal beds and taken up with the female Thracian captives. The true wives had, in retaliation, committed the infamous *Lemniadum facinus*: they murdered their husbands in their beds, and their Thracian mistresses as well, and did not exempt from the general slaughter any male children on the island, who might otherwise grow up to avenge their fathers' deaths. The Lemnians had then become a race of "Amazon" women. They tilled the fields, cared for their flocks, and even bore arms. Hypsipyle, their queen, had been the single exception: a royal virgin, she had had no husband to kill, and, worse, she had secretly exempted her aged father, King Thoas, from the communal slaughter by consigning him to the sea, alive, in a box. Years later, upon the discovery of her criminal innocence, she would be forced to endure exile as a punishment for her piety.

When the Argonauts appear off Lemnos, the Lemnian women, led by Hypsipyle, prepare to offer battle, but Jason's herald persuades Hypsipyle to allow the Argonauts a single night of rest on their beached ships. The next morning, the queen calls an assembly of the Lemnian women, suggesting that the Argonauts be given whatever provisions they might desire for their journey but not be allowed access to the city for fear that they discover, and publish to the world, the crime which left no man on Lemnos alive. Hypsipyle is persuaded against this course by her aged nurse Polyxo. Polyxo urges the necessity of exploiting the visitors as an unexpected source for male children, and she recommends that the Argonauts be invited to share in the rule of Lemnos as a precaution against any retaliatory measures the Thracians might undertake. As a result of Polyxo's counsels, Hypsipyle summons Jason to her palace. When she first sees Jason, she betrays her interest in him by an involuntary blush. She offers Jason a duplicitous but persuasive explanation for the conspicuous dearth of male inhabitants on the islands, and she invites him to share her kingdom with her. He declines, with his compliments, arguing the urgency of his mission to Colchis: "Hypsipyle, we need your help, and all you may give us will indeed be welcome. I shall come back to the city when I have told my people everything. But I must leave this island and its sovereignty to you. I refuse, not through indifference, but because a hazardous adventure calls me on."[3] Jason's actions, however, to some extent belie

[3] Apollonius of Rhodes, *The Voyage of Argo*, trans. E. V. Rieu (London: Penguin, 1967), pp. 52–60. *Argonautica*, ed. H. Fränkel, bk. 1, 609–909 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

his words. With the consummate tact of the born seducer, he touches Hypsipyle's right hand as he finishes speaking. And what Hypsipyle offers him does indeed prove "welcome," since Jason himself proves surprisingly content to postpone his voyage in order to sample the recuperative pleasures of the queen's bed. Only the impatient taunts of Hercules arouse him to resume his voyage:

> Fleeces do not come to people of their own accord. We might as well go home, leaving this captain of ours to spend all day in Hypsipyle's arms till he has won the admiration of the world by repopulating Lemnos.

When Jason and his crew are prepared to depart for Colchis, Hypsipyle again offers to share her scepter with him, although, as she adds quite dispassionately, "that is not what you will wish; something tells me it will not happen." Jason, moved, admits that he intends to live in his own country, adding with a prematurely martyred note of heroic self-commiseration that "release from toil" is all he really asks from heaven. He instructs the impregnated queen to send their child, if it prove a boy, to console his mother and father in the event of his unhappy death. The two lovers then part friends, with some regrets, and less passion. As E. W. Leach remarks, "The incident remains a businesslike experiment in repopulation."[4] The interlude on Lemnos has proved a restorative for all concerned.

There is no hint, in Apollonius, of the menace which shadows Hypsipyle's future. Her countrywomen, learning of the pious ruse by which she saved her father's life, drive her from Lemnos in fury and condemn her to the wandering life of an exile, lonely and without resource. And neither in the *Argonautica* nor anywhere else in the known literature of antiquity does Jason promise marriage to her; nor does Hypsipyle herself even learn of the existence of Medea. Instead, in virtually every mention of her, she exhibits that gentleness and compliant generosity which—in her treatment of Jason in the *Argonautica* no less than in her far more famous demonstration of filial loyalty to her father—make her the embodiment of the repressed femininity of her countrywomen,[5] and which were to lead Hyginus to

[4] E. W. Leach, "A Study in the Sources and Rhetoric of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and Ovid's *Heroides*" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1963). I am greatly indebted to Ms. Leach's two extremely valuable studies on *Heroides* 1 and 6, and especially to her discussion of Ovid's treatment of the *Argonautica*.

[5] Leach, "Study in Sources," p. 383: "In addition to her queenly bearing, Hypsipyle seems to represent the essential feminine nature which is hidden within all the Lemnians."

class her among the *piissimae*, the most faithful and dutiful heroines of antiquity. Only Ovid exploited the erotic potential merely suggested in Apollonius, and only Ovid made any connection at all between Jason's casual treatment of Hypsipyle and his rejection years later of his wife, Medea, for his new bride, the princess Creusa. Thus, it is readily apparent that however otiose in its rehearsal of the stale details of Medea's career Hypsipyle's malediction might seem to be, it would still strike the reader as surprising, and as a surprisingly unfamiliar, daring, unprecedented alteration of the tradition, simply by virtue of the fact that it is Hypsipyle who speaks.

Novelty, even if it takes the form of so inventive an association between two women, one of them perhaps the most famous villainess of antiquity, will only compound the censure traditionally leveled against *Heroides* 6. This censure is, specifically, the criticism that the poet forfeits the psychological coherence of his invented heroine, as well as the coherence of his poem, in the interest of a bravura display of irony: Medea condemned to repeat at the hands of Jason and Creusa the torments that Jason and she (herself unawares) inflicted years earlier on the abandoned Hypsipyle. The sacrifice of psychological plausibility, moreover, seems doubly excessive when it deflects our attention away from an entirely novel Hypsipyle and, at the same time, diverts our attention toward a heroine all too notorious, one who, in addition, will shortly tell her own story, the *same* story in her own voice. That, at any rate, is the traditional censure of a poem whose irony is so pervasive that it "seems to exist for the sake of the irony it contains."[6] It remains, however, to examine the poetic function of Hypsipyle's curse within *Heroides* 6 and to enquire whether, even despite the too patent irony of its content, Hypsipyle's treatment of Medea may not sustain the impression of a coherent, authentically emerging voice.

If we turn now to *Heroides* 6, we discover a Hypsipyle who is unique on two equally important counts. First, as we have seen, she is not just different from, but alien to, all other characterizations of this heroine. Second, she is not only different from, but alien to, all of the other heroines of Ovid's collection: "Hypsipyle moves from proud and scornful anger to the depths of violence and hate. In this she is virtually unique among Ovid's heroines."[7] Furthermore, in the language which voices her imagined murder of Medea, she "goes farther beyond the bounds of decency than any other heroine in Ovid including Medea herself."[8] What is the conception of Hypsipyle's personality

[6] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 102.
[7] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 104.
[8] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 104.

which would lead Ovid first to create (from materials not naturally congenial) an erotic-elegiac heroine, and then, placing her in a sisterhood of erotic-elegiac heroines, allow her to express motives and sentiments which estrange her from that sisterhood?

The couplet which describes the way in which Hypsipyle's informant unconsciously introduces Medea into his report applies no less appropriately to that accelerating process of involuntary self-revelation from which this epistle derives its extraordinary momentum:

> singula dum narrat, studio cursuque loquendi
> detegit ingenio vulnera nostra suo. (39–40)
>
> But as he tells each event, caught up by zeal and the racing current of speech,
> his naive art uncovers every wound I have suffered from you.

Indeed, Hypsipyle is not so much gradually revealed in the course of her letter as she is dramatically exposed by it.

Hypsipyle begins her letter by adopting the posture, and the lexicon, of outraged but patient virtue. She speaks with bourgeois fervor about the moral evil of adultery, the sacred bonds and mutual obligations of marriage, the merits of high birth and genuine respectability, the degrading insult of a husband's foreign mistress, and, most emphatically, the proper submission of self-effacing docility which a wife owes to the husband she has won by her beauty and her virtue. Her ferocious hauteur becomes truly Augustan when she speaks of her twin sons, Jason's children, as not only lovable reproductions of their father's features and *pignora* (pledges) of their parents' alliance but evidence of her own aristocratic fecundity: she is *felix in numero* (121). Throughout her epistle she makes one point over and over again. She is, in spirit (and in her own eyes, in *fact*), an injured wife whose husband has disgraced her bed and himself by taking a foreign mistress who is beneath the civilized contempt of both of them. Her charges against Medea derive their rhetorical force from the everywhere implied claim that she, a very paradigm of wifely virtue, would never, never contemplate the outrageous things (*quae nescierim melius*) Medea has done and will do. As long as Hypsipyle, in writing to Jason, concentrates on Jason alone, on Jason's responsibility for her damaged pride and anxious fears, reproachful irony remains her predominant tone. Too proud to exhibit humiliation openly, her rancour adopts a mode of glacial sentimentality or, in her melting moments, malicious innuendo.

Nevertheless, to speak to Jason of his casual desertion or to reproach him for his ingratitude and negligence is inevitably to speak of the cause. Medea is that cause. And as Hypsipyle's epistle is drawn closer and closer within the magnetic orbit of her envied and hated rival, Hypsipyle shows herself gradually compelled to surrender her self-mastery to the momentum of her invidious comparison of Medea with herself. Her implicitly competitive motive permits her to dilate upon her own corseted virtues and inflexible morals by elaborating upon the garish, Grand Guignol draperies of her macabre, uncivilized rival. Lured by the tyranny of her own jealous rancour into a detailed, imaginatively tinted catalogue of Medea's off-color habits and traits, Hypsipyle's language at last rips the seams of haute couture propriety. Her ironically self-effacing posture autodestructs. Her pose of sedate, matronly dignity becomes, suddenly, a short fuse. Ignited, she goes whizzing like a Roman candle into a final flare of lunatic illumination. Yet when in her voyeuristic cathexis on her victorious rival she catalogues Medea's every dark and deviant transgression against the orthodox pieties of an ordered and stable world, what she says becomes an unanticipated revelation of herself, the revelation of a hitherto veiled but volatile sensibility. At every point, that revelation makes sense, retrospectively, in terms of the more controlled emphases of her epistle and in terms of the values those emphases register and, by concealing, convey. What then emerges, disclosed as the latent principle which governs her perception of Jason, Medea, and herself, is that the Medea she creates, the Medea she understands, is the mirror image of her own deepest fears and desires—those desires her own scarcely "feminine" pride and power, those fears the jealousy and rabid hatred consequent upon humiliation and defeat at the hands of another woman.

When Hypsipyle, in an irrelevant but fiercely genuine moment, condemns and excuses her countrywomen in the same breath, she is led by the force of her own unconscious associations to imagine her own meeting with Jason and Medea. Jason, she assures him, would go unharmed—not, as she claims, because *she* is gentle but because *he* is immaterial to her true concern, a desire for retribution against Medea into which he scarcely seems to enter. When she considers her meeting with Medea, Hypsipyle forgets the single point on which her whole argument rests, the premise without which her whole posture collapses into pretense: the difference between Jason's new mistress and herself:

> paelicis ipsa meos inplessem sanguine vultus,
> quosque veneficiis abstulit illa suis!
>
> Medeae Medea forem! (149–51)

> But your whore—I would have smeared my own face with her life's blood,
> and your face too, the face she stole from me by her poisons.
>
> I would have been a Medea to your Medea!

The image is impacted and terrible, and in its imaginative cruelty virtually unrivalled in Ovid's poetry. Medea seems scarcely to exist any longer as an object to be attacked. She is no sooner seen than she is, in imagination, annihilated. All that remains of her is her blood, smeared now, not only on Jason's face but on Hypsipyle's own. The almost primordial blood-lust awakened in Hypsipyle by that imagined meeting discloses the concealed but nonetheless psychologically coherent sensibility of Ovid's Hypsipyle: the Medea created by her own impetuous, ungoverned hatred is a figment of what she, Hypsipyle, is. She is in her desires and fears no less Medea than Medea is. Thus there is nothing in her final curse, a curse begun with the wish that Medea in turn experience what she has herself felt, which cannot equally apply to the conventional history of Ovid's so unconventional Hypsipyle.

Emerging from Ovid's recasting of the affair between Jason and Hypsipyle in the *Argonautica*, as well as from his quiet allusions to Hypsipyle's own future in her curse upon Medea, is a surprising two-edged parallel: injured wives, unfaithful husbands, foreign mistresses, and swift retribution. Hypsipyle's present situation closely parallels that of the Lemnian women into whose terrible retaliation she had earlier declined to enter, and it also parallels the situation which Medea herself will confront years hence when Jason abandons her—similarly with her two sons—for Creusa. What Ovid's epistle shows is that Hypsipyle's claims to civility, dignity, gentleness, and feminine restraint are a sham. Given the opportunity she would now, because she now has the cause, exhibit the same "Amazon" ferocity as her countrywomen. She is no more the tolerant and long-suffering type of the *matrona Romana* than Medea is. And it is to this end—the double identification of Hypsipyle with the Lemnian women of the past and the Medea of the future—that Ovid's wit allows the familiar future career of Medea to issue so improbably from the lips of the Lemnian queen.

Yet Ovid does not forfeit the impression of psychological "verisimilitude"; instead, he escapes from conventional, even universal irrationality into the darker, pathological recesses of near-insanity, the *caeca nox humanitatis*. In the final lines of the poem, Hypsipyle jettisons all fictions of rhetorical persuasion to reveal her genuine colors,

her suppressed but not wholly latent potential for vindictive rage and hatred. Neither witch nor prophetess, she nevertheless identifies in imagination so strongly with the projected cruelties of her rival that with pitiless near-exactitude, she wishes upon Medea the crimes Medea has yet to commit, the betrayal and restless exile which Medea has yet to experience. Medea's future, as yet unborn and dark to the naked eye, is illuminated by an act of sympathetic imagination: *Medeae Medea forem*. Hypsipyle's opinion of her own respectability, fidelity, generosity, and dignified restraint is a desperate pose under which, at times, her latent fury flickers, a pose consumed in the illuminated explosion of the poem's final lines. The impassioned rehearsal of the faults of her rival's character will only seem too tedious, too familiar, too gratuitously ironic to readers who do not perceive that her invective is not only the irony upon which her whole epistle rests. It is an irony which does not forfeit the verisimilar coherence of Hypsipyle's maddened jealousy, a jealousy into which Jason enters scarcely at all. It is, moreover, an irony which anticipates the more spectacular irony of *Heroides* 12. From the vantage of that epistle the true irony of Hypsipyle's letter emerges with shocking clarity: it is she, and not Medea, who is the true Medea of Ovid's collection.

2 ❀ *Sit Medea Ferox et Invicta*

It is fair to suspect that Ovid found the greatest challenge to his artistry in the similarities of his heroines' situations. He would often exaggerate these similarities so that the idiosyncracy of each heroine might depend almost exclusively on quietly allusive yet often radical departures from literary exemplars, on individual variations on a standard motif, and on thematic motifs made singular by a heroine's variations on the familiar erotic-elegiac lexicon. That we should find familiar patterns in the *Heroides* should come as no surprise, nor should an individual heroine's difference from her Greek or Latin prototype be disconcerting to us. Nevertheless, the reader who turns to Ovid's *Heroides* 12—especially should he come to that epistle with *Heroides* 6 in mind—will quite probably be surprised by the degree to which the second poem (Medea's) recalls the first (Hypsipyle's). But surprise at the similarities of these two epistles will soon give way to discomfiture, and even shock, first at the radically different sensibilities which emerge from two poems so similar in content and, second, at the Medea who emerges from *Heroides* 12. She is a Medea who is (unlike Hypsipyle)

wholly a creature of tradition, yet if we judge simply from the kind of sensibility she exhibits, she is a novel creation, unprecedented in that tradition and—in her own way—unrivalled.

Heroides 12 is also unrivalled within the collection for the almost universal disdain, and even ire, it has elicited from scholars and critics. The poem has been considered an "unfortunately dull" attempt,[9] marred by its "lack of excitement, its frigidity, the absence of spontaneity and passion."[10] Yet more often it is not so much the poem itself which has been judged and found wanting, but rather the Medea of *Heroides* 12, a "contemptible personality": ". . . we realize that there is no hope for this dastardly villain . . . there is little good to be said for Ovid's Medea. . . . Though interesting in what it tries to achieve, this letter, or more to the point, Ovid's Medea, must in the end face relentless and odious comparison with, at least, Euripides' play and Apollonius' epic."[11] Furthermore, the terms for the unfavorable comparison between Ovid's Medea and the Medea of Apollonius or Euripides are almost always ethical ones:

> The debate between reason and passion is nowhere in sight. This Medea does not even have the qualms of Euripides' Medea. She is resolved to follow where passion leads. . . . Medea is deprived of the moral stature and integrity which Apollonius is at such pains to endow her with. Ovid's Medea has no concern for parents and country, no sense that she may be performing an act of disloyalty. For whatever reason (overpowering love?) she is unable to glimpse the ethics of the situation.[12]

As W. S. Anderson has quite justly remarked, it is her "long struggle with her conscience [which] portrays Medea as a moral creature."[13] Yet the text which evokes this comment is neither Euripides' nor Apollonius', but one of the most famous passages in the literature of antiquity (and the text with which Spinoza introduces his *Ethics*), the *aliud cupido, mens aliud* interior monologue of Medea in Ovid's own *Metamorphoses*, which in A. E. Watts' translation reads:

> But strangely drawn the way I would not go
> I hear desire say Yes and Reason No

[9] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 123. [10] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 123.
[11] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, pp. 113, 123.
[12] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, p. 117.
[13] *Ovid's Metamorphoses, Books 6–10*, ed. W. S. Anderson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), p. 254.

And see with open eyes the better course
And own it better, yet pursue the worse.[14]

This passage is certainly evidence that Ovid could have made the Medea of *Heroides* 12 "a moral creature" had he chosen to do so. That Ovid deliberately chose not to do so is apparent from the manner in which, in *Heroides* 12, he conspicuously exploits the familiar syntactic and lexical vehicle for the conventional antithesis and then just as conspicuously breaks the antithesis down:

hinc amor, hinc timor est; ipsum timor auget amorem. (61)

On the one side was love, on the other, fear: the fear increased
the love.

The line of *Heroides* 12 (120) which has aroused the greatest controversy among editors and the greatest censure among scholars is one whose wit highlights the deformation of conventional ethical and moral principles in the poem. I shall cite it here with the full context within which the line occurs and in the light of which it has seemed so reprehensible an utterance (for Medea) and so inexcusable a comic litotes (for Ovid):

At non te fugiens sine me, germane, reliqui!
deficit hoc uno littera nostra loco.
quod facere ausa mea est, non audet scribere dextra.
sic ego, sed tecum, dilaceranda fui.
nec tamen extimui—quid enim post illa timerem?—
credere me pelago, femina iamque nocens.

Numen ubi est? ubi di? meritas subeamus in alto,
tu fraudis poenas, credulitatis ego! (113–20)

But fleeing I did not leave you behind me, my brother.
Now, only now, does the act of writing defeat me.
I do not dare to write in my own hand what, by my own hand, I
dared to do.
I should have been torn to pieces in the same way—but *with*
you.

[14] *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, trans. A. E. Watts (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1980), p. 140.

And even then I was not afraid—after such acts, how could I
fear?—
although a woman now, and guilty, to trust myself to the sea.

Where is heaven's power? Where are the gods? Let death by
drowning exact from each
the price of his crimes: your death for your treachery, mine for
my trust in you.

The textually unassailable word *credulitatis* proved so objectionable that the unmetrical but morally preferable *crudelitatis* entered the manuscript tradition, inspiring a host of later metrical emendations, including the *cod. Monac. impietatis*. The objectionable noun is wholly deleted from Tate's translation in Dryden's edition, where it is replaced by the word *parricide*:

Why left I not my brother too?—cold fear
Arrests my hand, and I must finish here!
This hand that tore the infant in our flight,
What then it dar'd to act, dreads now to write.
To the rough seas undaunted I repair;
For after guilt, what can a woman fear?
Why 'scap'd our crimes those seas? we should have dy'd;
For falsehood thou, and I for parricide. (my emphasis)

Arthur Palmer spells out his objection to *credulitatis* quite lucidly and then suggests that the offending couplet is so "absurd" and its sentiment so "laughable" that the whole couplet may perhaps be spurious. Failing that, he can only suppose that Ovid so far forgot himself as to compose it in his sleep:

> No two verses of the Heroides are more frigid and absurd; that a woman should assign her credulity as a reason for deserving retribution from heaven, after mentioning that she had murdered her brother, is laughable. Verily bonus Ovidius dormitat. Is it too wild to suppose these lines spurious: that crudelitatis was the original reading written by a scribe who regarded sense more than quantity, credulitatis a correction by a scribe who regarded quantity more than sense?[15]

[15] *P. Ovidi Nasonis Heroides*, ed. Arthur Palmer (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967), p. 395.

Jacobson takes up Palmer's censure of the couplet, but he exempts Ovid from fault by emptying the couplet of its wit and by transferring the responsibility for the "horrifying" sentiment to Medea:

> Lines 121–122 should not be passed over so quickly. The pentameter has, after all, shocked many readers. Listen to Palmer. [Here follows Palmer's objection cited above, his speculation about the two scribes omitted.] Now this manages to miss the point precisely as it hits it on the head. Medea recognizes her guilt—after a fashion. She was guilty of gullibility, credulity, naïveté, of allowing herself to be taken in by Jason. It is the very triviality of the remark following hard upon her admission of fratricide that makes the juxtaposition *horrifying. To be so concerned with her own image, her pride, her power when she recognizes herself as a fratricide brands her character and her values in the most sinister and blackest tones.* . . . (My emphasis)[16]

The couplet has always aroused comment, even among those who recognize the authority of the text and the probable vigilance of the author. Loers, according to Palmer, made "the best of a bad case" with his gloss *nimia eius credulitatis omnium illorum flagitiorum* [106–16] *erat causa* (Her excessive trust [in Jason] was the [original] cause of all those crimes).[17] There is, however, another gloss on these lines which perhaps ought to supplement Loers'. It is Hypsipyle's *credula res amor est* (Love is an impressionable thing, 6.21). And should we require further explanation, it is possible to depart entirely from antiquity and enter the world of decayed love embalmed in Miss Havisham's disinterred malice:

> "I'll tell you," said she, in the same hurried passionate whisper, "what real love is. It is blind devotion, unquestioning self-humiliation, utter submission, trust and belief against yourself and against the whole world, giving up your whole heart and soul to the smiter—as I did." (Miss Havisham to Pip in *Great Expectations*)

Yet that would be to go too far afield; however convincingly Miss Havisham's words explain the dimension of diseased self-humiliation present in Medea's memory of her submission to Jason, they explain only one dimension of Ovid's text. The meaning conveyed by Medea

[16] Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, pp. 112–13.
[17] Palmer, *Heroides*, p. 395.

should not, indeed cannot, be divorced from the wit of the poet who exercises his detachment at his heroine's expense, much as later in Medea's epistle he will employ an hyperbole exactly comparable, by virtue of its effect, to the present litotes. There Medea, upon hearing the wedding music of Jason (whom she has already implicated in her every crime), says that she had a terrible presentiment of what her senses were about to confirm by direct evidence, yet she "still did not believe such infamy could be": *pertimui, nec adhuc tantum scelus esse putabam* (141). It will be our task to examine the most egregious example of Ovidian wit in this epistle (*credulitatis*, 120) in the light of the whole poem, and to discover the response most suitable to it and to the character of the Medea whom this poem creates.

Medea's epistle to Jason is the only literary artifact preserved from antiquity in which the mature, demonic Medea of Euripides' play speaks with the same voice as the young, sympathetically engaging Medea of Apollonius Rhodes' *Argonautica*. What is most surprising in this diminutive fact of literary history is not that no other author attempted what Ovid did, but rather that Ovid, against so many odds, succeeded. The agency for the reconciliation of the youthful and the mature Medea accomplished in Ovid's *Heroides* 12 is memory, and that agency yields, in this poem, one of the most stunning and difficult creations of Ovid's career: a poem in which conventional material is exploited in so unconventional a manner that Ovid's Medea becomes a voice and a sensibility for which the tradition leaves us wholly unprepared.

The word *memini* at the center of the poem's first line, emphatically separated by caesurae from the words around it and rendered almost superfluous by its parenthetical status, is the key to the poem's achievement and to the character of the Medea who emerges from this poem. There is no other letter in the *Heroides* whose organization is so dominated by the narrative of past events recalled from the vantage of the present; and there is no other account of the present memory of past events so colored in the telling by present emotion or so insistently confronted by allusions to the present condition of the speaker. This confrontation of past and present follows, almost systematically, the model which it first adopts when Medea compares herself, as she was when Jason first arrived in Colchis, with Creusa: *hoc illic Medea fui, nova nupta quod hic est* (In that realm I, Medea, was all that your new bride is in hers, 25).

The first adjective applied to Jason in the entire epistle, the adjective which governs Medea's present perception of her husband, is the reproachful *inmemor*:

isset anhelatos non praemedicatus in ignes
inmemor Aesonides oraque adusta boum; (15–16)

Aeson's so forgetful son would have gone unanointed
to brave the flaming breath of the bulls.

The adjective *inmemor* is, strictly speaking, both logically and temporally irrational. It is logically irrational because the noun *Aesonides* which it modifies is not vocative but nominative, and it is thus used to describe Jason in his conduct of an event which never occurred (Jason, unaided by Medea, going forth to encounter the fire-breathing bulls). The adjective is also temporally irrational since upon Jason's arrival in Colchis, at a time when he had not yet met Medea, he had not yet become forgetful of her. Thus, just as the mature Medea remembers and in remembering creates the creature she once was, so she throughout the poem creates the young hero—the Jason who at the cost of all else in her life was to become everything to her—on the model of the Jason he now is. This is a Jason treacherous, deceitful, forgetful of who his wife is and was, forgetful too of what he owed her then and what he owes her no less now. Whether through an act of memory Medea creates the young Medea in the light of what she now is or whether she creates the young and faithless Jason in the light of that treachery she has only now discovered in him, memory is the agency of that creation, as well as of that distortion by which it turns the apparently irrational truth into the most nearly approximate, rational fiction of itself.

Ovid's Medea opens her letter with the familiar rebellious wish that the Argonauts and their Colchian expedition had never been, and that she had never seen or heard the Jason whom she loved and trusted. That wish (expressed in a rhetorical question, 7–11) is framed by two couplets in which Medea speaks of her own death, and Jason's. In the first couplet, she says she could have died well had the fates unwound the spindle of her destiny when Jason first requested her aid, for all her life since that time has been her punishment. In the second, she exclaims that had she not loved and saved Jason and had he gone unaided by her to an unsuccessful encounter with the fire-breathing bulls, he would have died, and with him his treachery, while she would have escaped the many sufferings the crimes she committed for his sake had brought upon her. But to wish that what is and was had never been is, as she sees, an act of futility. Yet she will pursue that futility for the futile pleasure it affords her. She has no hope of per-

suading Jason; she can simply tell, and tell again, how and why she has earned his gratitude, addressing this story, uselessly, to his deaf and ungrateful ears. She knows that the only joy she will ever receive from him is the crazed gratification she finds in repetition—the rehearsal, again and again, of the scenario in which she and he, the two protagonists, became one in crime, became thus an exclusive society of two, estranged from the world by the criminal guilt they shared but together exempted from guilt by the one law they honored and the one language they spoke. Their law and that language were, simply, love.

Had the Medea who emerges from Ovid's *Heroides* 12 shown any of the fury, rancour, contempt, and above all fierce pride exhibited by Ovid's Hypsipyle, she would have been the Medea we know and expect, the Medea, for example, of Ovid's lost play. Of that play only one line has been rescued from oblivion, a line spoken by Medea herself and sufficient to distinguish Ovid's theatrical Medea from the Medea of *Heroides* 12: *servare potui: perdere an possim rogas?* (I was able to save your life: do you ask whether I can ruin it?). The Medea of *Heroides* 12 is I think even better understood in contrast to Euripides' brilliant, vindictive, heroic, and ultimately inhuman woman. That we may understand the terms in which that contrast is to be drawn, Ovid himself directs us to the one passage of Euripides' play which has most in common with this epistle and which, by virtue of its enormous difference in the heroine's character, tone, and motivation, is the most economical introduction to Ovid's novel and sympathetic portrait of human self-deception, deranged and self-destroying love.

The passage in Euripides' play to which Ovid's couplet 21–22 so closely alludes—which this epistle so closely follows in content and from which it so dramatically departs in tone and emphases—occurs at the end of the speech with which Medea welcomes Jason. Jason's hurried arrival follows his discovery that the ungovernable Medea has so frightened Creon with her threats that Creon has placed her under sentence of exile. After sententiously rebuking Medea for the "fatal results which follow from uncontrolled rage," Jason, all generosity, promises that Medea and her children will not be forced to depart from Corinth "with an empty purse, or unprovided."[18] To this assurance he adds another: "You no doubt hate me: but I could never bear ill-will to you." Medea's reply to his sentiment is aptly termed by Jason at its conclusion a "hurricane of recrimination and abuse":

[18] All English translations of Euripides' *Medea* are by Phillip Velacott and are from *Medea: Myth and Dramatic Form*, ed. J. Sanderson and E. Zimmerman (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), pp. 25–27, 403–95.

You filthy coward!—if I knew any worse name
For such unmanliness I'd use it—so, you've come!
You, my worst enemy, come to me! Oh, it's not courage,
This looking friends in the face after betraying them.
It is not even audacity; it's a disease,
The worst a man can have, pure shamelessness. However,
It is as well you came; to say what I have to say
Will ease my heart; to hear it said will make you wince.

What Medea says in order to ease her heart is, in many respects, a summary of the points covered in *Heroides* 12:

I will begin at the beginning. When you were sent
To master the fire-breathing bulls, yoke them, and sow
The deadly furrow, then I saved your life; and that
Every Greek who sailed with you in the Argo knows.
The serpent that kept watch over the Golden Fleece,
Coiled round it fold on fold, unsleeping—it was I
Who killed it, and so lit the torch of your success.
I willingly deceived my father; left my home.
With you I came to Iolcus by Mount Pelion,
Showing much love and little wisdom;
There I put King Pelias to the most horrible of deaths
By his own daughters' hands, and ruined his whole house.
And in return for this you have the wickedness
To turn me out, to get yourself another wife,
Even after I had borne you sons. If you had still
Been childless I could have pardoned you for hankering
After this new marriage. But respect for oaths has gone
To the wind. Do you, I wonder, think that the old gods
No longer rule? Or that new laws are now in force?
You must know you are guilty of perjury to me.

Medea goes on, with ever heightened mockery, to ask Jason's advice in reply to the question, Where now can I turn? She does not, she says, hope for any help from Jason but asks nonetheless, in order "to expose your infamy." Medea concludes her mock interrogation of Jason with a lament to Zeus:

O Zeus! Why have you given us clear signs to tell
True gold from counterfeit; but when we need to know
Bad men from good, the flesh bears no revealing mark?

The chorus here responds to her passion with a gnomic maxim on jealous rage:

The fiercest anger of all, the most incurable,
Is that which rages in the place of dearest love.

Jason's response to the hurricane of abuse is the response of good seamanship to a storm: "I'll furl all but an inch of sail, and ride it out." He rides Medea's storm first with a sophistic *praeteritio*:

To begin with, since you build
To such a height your services to me, I hold
That credit for my successful voyage was solely due
To Aphrodite, no one else divine or human.
I admit, you have intelligence, but, to recount
How helpless passion drove you then to save my life
Would be invidious; and I will not stress the point.

He continues by cataloguing all the advantages Hellas has offered to Medea, not the least of them the civilized justice and law of which he is scarcely an inspiring exponent. Throughout his reply he ignores the force of the choric maxim, which should not only describe Medea but warn him, since if, as he says, only gallantry prohibits his arguing that what Medea did was merely to act the passive instrument of passion, then that passion is no less fearful when it takes the form of the fiercest anger of all, the rage which supplants dearest love. Jason's gallantly fatuous self-suppression so underscored the insult to Medea that Ennius, in his *Medea*, seems to have translated the *praeteritio* as a simple statement of fact: *tu me amoris magis quam honoris servasti gratia* (You saved me more for the sake of love than honor).

Medea's epistle follows—with some significant departures—the content of her Euripidean speech which, "beginning at the beginning," reminds Jason of her role in his exploits on Colchis and, ending at the present and thus with Jason's new marriage, charges him with perjury. And yet it will be immediately apparent that *Heroides* 12 does not exhibit in its author the same motive as Euripides' Medea professes, namely, that her accusation will at once ease her own heart while making Jason wince at his own guilt. Insofar as it reproaches Jason, Medea's letter is, for the most part, equally a letter of self-incrimination. Again and again, she returns to the paradox which she cannot penetrate: that her every crime was committed out of love for Jason, and that all her crimes, the deeds which have estranged her from all

human community and left her homeless and resourceless, are (or should be) the *merita* which have earned her Jason's love *in omne tempus*:

o virgo, miserere mei, miserere meorum;
effice me meritis tempus in omne tuum! (81–82)

Maiden, pity me, and pity my men. Make me,
by your generous favor, yours forever.

Ovid's Medea knows and (unlike Euripides' Medea) confesses that she is guilty of a crime so unspeakable that the hand that accomplished the deed can scarcely dare to write it down in words (113–16). After that act, the murder of her brother, she felt herself so stained by the inhumanity of her crime that, now a *femina nocens* (a guilty woman, 118), she was exempt from human fear and could fear nothing, certainly not the sea (117–18). Yet had the sea punished her then, exacting her death by drowning and Jason's too as the worthy recompense (*meritas poenas*, 119–20) for their crimes, what would those crimes have been? His *fraus*, her *credulitas*, her too trusting, mistaken confidence in Jason, and Jason's deceptive assurance (*fraus*) that whatever she did for his sake would be the *merita* by which she would earn his reciprocated passion for all time to come. That is, despite their command of the conventional ethical lexicon of praise and blame, innocence and guilt, Jason and Medea so distort the referential value of that lexicon as to subvert it: a crime committed in the name of love is, within the terms of their exclusive society of two, no crime at all. Nevertheless, while two can so subvert a conventional ethical lexicon that it becomes a wholly unorthodox language which most conceals what it most should disclose, a language spoken by one is no language at all.

Medea, despite the sincerity of her confessions of guilt, will not tolerate the thought that Jason no longer shares either her language or the world of love which gave that private language its moral currency. He has betrayed her by forgetting their conspiracy of common speech. She is now one who seems guilty (*visa nocens*, 106) in his eyes, and is guilty upon his tongue. Thus Medea's confession to the murder of Pelias, augmented by the crime of the corruption of Pelias' daughters (to which Euripides' Medea does not allude), is followed by a couplet spanning twelve years of marriage and referring explicitly to the linguistic law of that marriage by which a whole language of value is perverted, its terms reversed in the lexicon of love:

ut culpent alii, tibi me laudare necesse est,
pro quo sum totiens esse coacta nocens. (131–32)

However others may accuse me, you can give me only praise,
you for whom I have so often endured the coercion of evil.

From this much abbreviated account of twelve years of tranquil criminal complicity, Medea moves immediately to the account of Jason's declaration of divorce. For the second time in the poem, words are inadequate:

ausus es—o, iusto desunt sua verba dolori!—
ausus es "Aesonia," dicere, "cede domo!" (133–34)

You have dared—but I cannot find the words to requite my pain
—you have dared to say to me "Leave this place, the house of
Aeson's heirs!"

More telling still is Medea's description of her dawning realization that the "Hymen" and "Hymenaee" signified the passing of the ceremonial marriage procession of Jason and Creusa:

pertimui, nec adhuc tantum scelus esse putabam; (141)

I was terrified—but still I did not believe such infamy could be—

Similarly, so great is Medea's belief in the moral currency of love that when the slaves fear to inform their mistress of what she herself knows yet cannot quite believe, she imputes to their motives the same moral-erotic framework whose lexicon for value coincides with her own:

diversi flebant servi lacrimasque tegebant—
quis vellet tanti nuntius esse mali? (145–46)

My servants turned, trying, as they wept, to hide their tears from
me:
who could want to reveal something so freighted with evil?

It is Medea's son who breaks the spell when, with childish speech, free from interpretation, he reports only what he sees, the fact. And it is this scene, in which her youngest son's childish naiveté reports the fact so different to his sight than to the sight of his mother, that

creates the strongest moment of compassion for Medea in the poem, compassion for the estrangement which is now complete and for the silence to which she is now abandoned:

deseror amissis regno patriaque domoque
coniuge, qui nobis omnia solus erat! (161–62)

Kingdom, country, home, I have lost them all, and now I am left by my husband, he who alone was everything to me.

In fact, it is jealousy for the words Jason will whisper to Creusa, and for the *nova crimina* (new accusations, 177) he will invent against Medea's beauty and character, which leads her to contemplate her revenge. The revenge is made a perfect crime when a metaphor for passion is stripped of the metaphorical value most naturally assigned to it so that it conveys the design of a fearfully literal act of murder:

flebit et ardores vincet adusta meos! (180)

she shall have her tears,
and be consumed, and surpass even my ardor with her own.

The elaborately wrought scene in which Medea learns of Jason's marriage through observing, entirely by chance, the passing nuptial procession is a masterpiece of dramatic and pictorial detail. As a narrative depiction of a single event, it is unique in Ovid's *Heroides*. The scene is the temporal fulcrum of the poem. Immediately preceding it is the description of Jason's pronouncement of divorce and Medea's departure from her home, with her only companions her two sons and that strangely personified emotion, the love she bears for Jason which follows her always, everywhere (*qui me sequitur semper*, 136). Within the vignette itself present and past tenses collide. The moment is so intensely present to Medea's memory that it cannot be strictly confined to the past. The gradual approach of the wedding procession—its suggestive imprecision richly conveyed by visual and auditory detail—keeps pace with the simultaneous inner event it precipitates: Medea's growing understanding of what the event signifies. What it signifies is that divorce in the interpretive apprehension and evaluation of events by which the nuptial songs (*carmina*, 139) are for Jason and Creusa marriage hymns (*socialia vobis*), while for Medea they are not hymns at all but laments more painful than a dirge sung for the dead (*at mihi funerea flebiliora tuba*, 140).

Throughout the narrative leading to the discovery of Jason's marriage, Medea fails to reconcile her emotional premonition of the event's meaning and the sudden cold which seems to invade her heart. She holds on to the conviction that Jason surely cannot have committed so monstrous a crime (*tantum scelus*, 141). She cannot believe that he has in fact entered a marriage which is criminal by the laws of the erotic code which they two, by their love, have obeyed. The nearer the procession approaches and the more clear the exultant cry *Hymen, Hymenaee* becomes, the greater is Medea's wordless pain and the more eloquent the silence which enfolds her. The truth still has not fully penetrated her consciousness, yet emotion anticipates the revelation, as though she knew what she does not yet really know (*tamquam scirem*, 148). Her youngest son eagerly rushes to the door, and with childishly eager simplicity, he calls his mother to come to him: *hinc mater, abi.* Why? Because Jason leads a procession, Jason, his father, all in gold, driving a team of horses. The boy does not even seem to see Creusa; he does not mention her. The procession he describes might as well (given its lexical associations) be a victory procession. For Medea, though, it is a funeral cortege, and she a wildly keening mourner who can barely restrain herself from rushing upon Jason and crying aloud the two words she may never again speak: *meus est* (he is mine).

This brilliantly modulated vignette, so lavish in particulars and rich in the psychological and emotional correlatives to those particulars, is in every respect the fulcrum for the chiastic arrangement of events which so quietly governs the structure of this poem. Now, again, Medea describes her nights of pain, a pain resourceless and without hope. Now, again, the exploits of Jason are introduced—but as examples of a kind of power which (however potent against adversary magic) cannot command human emotion, whether her own or Jason's. And now Medea, who at the beginning of the poem told how Jason was suppliant to her, becomes herself a suppliant and defines her every wish and every means of recompense by a negative of the terms which governed the original encounter with Jason in Colchis. Finally, the Medea who began with memory, memory of the meeting whose whole vivid aftermath in the light of memory seemed a punishment (*poena*, 6), becomes the Medea who turns to the future and discovers in its dim contours a *poena* which Jason must endure, an unspeakable revenge.

This scene, however, despite its pain and pathos, is a paradigm for the function of Ovid's wit in this poem. Throughout *Heroides* 12 we sympathize with Medea, and must sympathize with her, because how-

ever distorted her memory of the past, she does not seem to lie. She is not hypocritical. She is not covert. All that she relates is so suffused with emotion that the narrative of past events is a secondary product of what she tells us she wishes, regrets, or suffers. In this scene our compassion for her—a consequence of the seeming sincerity and vulnerable naiveté of her voice—reaches its highest pitch when she is forced to confront a voice of equal simplicity, her son's. The relationship between Medea's discourse and her son's, coupled with the fact that she is forced to confront the meaning of what his simplicity reports enthusiastically, is in a sense a mirror image of the relationship the poem establishes between its speaker and its reader. As a result, the child's revelation of his father's passing presence is the most poignant event in the poem at the same time that it is the poem's most chilling moment.

We know that Medea will shortly kill that child; we also know, if we remember Euripides' play, that the process leading to the definition of her revenge resembles closely, in its dissociation of thought and feeling, the dissociation with which her child is introduced in this epistle. Given that, we cannot, I think, escape our nervous reaction to the comparable dissociation which results from realizing that our felt sympathy is for something, someone monstrous. We see the ghost of the dagger we always knew was there, a dagger, unforgettable, that we have somehow for the moment forgotten. That dagger is the brutal act, the dismembered brother years before, the children soon under the knife of their deranged but deliberate mother. The mist that obscures the act, and at times conceals it, is affect, Medea's and our own. *Credulitatis* is another such moment of collision between what finally is, or was, and the emotion which, in the act of disclosing it, conceals it so overtly that the mind recoils at the grotesque gap between feeling and thought into which Medea's voice has almost allowed us to fall. Like *credulitatis, scelus* (141) and *parturit* (208) are both instances of wit which, in recalling us to ourselves, show us how far from ourselves we have drifted and how near to a monstrous pathos we have strayed.

We are now in a position to consider the relation of Hypsipyle's letter to Medea's. Hypsipyle is, in the final analysis, the first and last Medea of Ovid's collection. It is she who makes it possible for the poet to enable us to bypass the otherwise insuperable resistance we might offer to a Medea who is not independent, not ruled by pride, not a creature of murderous rage, not a woman whose obsession so far departs from love as to become a fearful contest for self-assertion and mastery. It is Hypsipyle who makes it possible for us to avoid the one response to Medea—moral recoil—which is so easily available to

us that its anticipation can even overrule the experience of discovering a newly fictive creature. Moral censure is a reflex of detached judgment which Ovid's epistle forces us to circumvent by that very disequilibrium between character and action moral censure cannot tolerate. Ovid's poems thus become a poetic medium for fresh perceptions—for renewed apprehension of that vitality and mystery which are at the secret heart of human experience, the *penetralia* of the *caeca nox humanitatis* to which poetry and imagination, our imagination and the poet's, hold the key.

3 ❀ "*Coenaesthesia*"

Ovid's *Heroides* have quite properly been praised for their psychological verisimilitude, the representation of the mind's disordered struggle between thought and emotion made convincing, and individualized, through the presentation of a coherently impassioned voice. This emphasis on psychology or coherent psychopathology, however, has led to a fundamental misapprehension of the function of wit, irony, and parody in Ovid's collection. The wit of the poems, like their rhetorical or sentimental excesses, has been mistaken for the poet's own poetic failures, the intrusion of his voice into the speech of his "feign'd characters," jeopardizing the dramatic illusion. Ovid's wit is indeed his own, but its presence in the poems is no injudicious error, no token of an absence of judgment or self-restraint. Instead, that wit is a medium of disclosure, and it occurs, more often than not, at his heroines' expense. It evokes the possibility of alternative modes of perception, rival modes of interpretation extraneous to the heroine's perception of herself and her world. It is primarily a device by which the reader is encouraged to see through the feigned writers of Ovid's epistles. It is an invitation to pit a heroine's declarations of sentiment against a more comprehensive or more traditional view of experience. That wit extended into a parody of earlier literary models is another device by which the reader is encouraged to apprehend simultaneously several different orders of perception, and thus different ordering views of the same experience. It is primarily the critical failure to separate the voice of the poet from the voice of his creature which confounds the attempt to assess the tone of Ovid's fictive epistles.

The true pathos of these poems is not in an unintended tension against the wit and parody of the poems, but a natural result of the poet's strategic exercise of wit and parody. The tragic meaning of their lives is wasted on Ovid's heroines. Because they are all too human,

too limited, and too fallible, the issues of which they are, in tragedy or epic, the embodiment, become for them issues of sentiment and momentary perspective, not norms or values universal and abiding. They are actors who cannot comprehend the dark ironies of their own charade. No matter how amusing their incomprehension may be for the spectator, for those whom it engulfs, it is an occasion for pain.

It has long been conceded that the epistles of Ovid's heroines reveal closer affinities to the dramatic monologue than to the rhetorical *suasoria*. But the implications of that distinction have not been assessed. Ovid's poems are said to lack the virtues of true drama and, by extention, of dramatic narrative. In drama the opinions, sentiments, and emotions of individual characters are tested against the dramatic context. The limitations of a speaker's position are revealed only partially in the moment of speech, but revealed decisively, if often tacitly, against the action of the entire play. Yet the epistles of Ovid's heroines lack both a dramatic and a narrative context. They therefore lack the possibilities of revelation which, for example, allowed Coleridge and De Quincey to indulge that passion of "great emotion" and "bitter, almost vindictive indignation" against the "Honorable Augustus Hope." It is for this reason that the *Heroides* have seemed to be "static" or "a monotonous iteration of woes." It is for this reason that they have been said to lack the essence of dramatic love—the confrontation of the emotions and aspirations of two distinct characters—and that they have at times been dismissed as "a tour de force which had no future."

Nevertheless, the lack of dramatic tension and dramatic conflict in Ovid's *Heroides* is richly compensated for by a tension and conflict of another order, one supplied by the reader of these texts. The words of most of Ovid's heroines exercise a calculated challenge, by way of parody, to an earlier literary prototype. The conflict between the poet's vision and the vision of his characters, accomplished through the medium of wit, is ever before our eyes.

If Ovid's *Heroides* are exercises at all, they are exercises in limited perspective—exercises which bore abundant fruit in the calculated posture of the *praeceptor amoris*, in the pedantic antiquarianism of the narrator of the *Fasti*, in the many and differing narrative voices of the *Metamorphoses*, and finally in the half-assumed personae of the *Tristia* and *Epistulae Ex Ponto*, many of which cannot fail to remind the reader of the *dolor ira mixtus* of Ovid's youthful *Heroides*. Each of Ovid's heroines has a consistently sustained *limited* point of view. Each is a fallible narrator, a voice shown to be limited and unreliable in the very process of her declaration of her own point of view. Thus, each of the heroines is an instance of that narrative "in-

conscience" which Henry James varied and explored in his novels James' "inconscience" was, in fact, a manifestation of his appreciation of the possibilities latent in the "dramatic" monologues of Chaucer, Tennyson, and Browning and in epistolary novels like Richardson's *Clarissa* and Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*—all works in some way indebted to Ovid's youthful *ignotum opus*.

The fact remains, however, that the more Ovid's epistles are read as exercises in limited perspective, the more they are open to the criticism of E. K. Rand that they are not stable in tone, that there are shifting and even contradictory impulses of poetic sympathy and generic motive. If the poems are neither consistently tragic nor consistently romantic, what then are they? The answer is that Ovid's epistles are not consistently anything that one can expect. The poems (with the exception, I think, of the Ariadne epistle) require a kind of tolerant double vision and a kind of tolerant willingness to be both moved and amused. For it happens that Ovid will often enter a sequence with a parody of passion, a parody which imperceptibly becomes a passion seriously meant and sympathetically conveyed, and which then is unexpectedly undercut by something trivial, whimsical, banal, or absurd (the Briseis and Sappho poems are the best examples of this). The result of such a pattern of alternation is that the reader will be swept away in sympathy with the current of a heroine's grievance, suffering, or affection, and then be required to check his own unrestrained judgment in a smile at his own susceptibilities to sentiment, hyperbole, and error. Yet such a pattern of alternation is only necessarily a violation of generic integrity when the notion of genre is too limiting.

If there is a consistent method in Ovid's poems, it is an unpredictable consistency. It can safely be argued that in the creation of his heroines, Ovid characteristically emphasizes one dominant facet of her character and one dominant facet of her role—often with astonishing imaginative ingenuity. Quite often the tension between character and role will be his principal instrument of wit and parody, pathos and charm. Briseis is thus an admixture of native seductiveness and docility, manipulation and servility. Sappho is an admixture of the mature and independent pride of the poet who rises above experience and the resourcelessness of an aging woman caught too late in the degrading backwash of an adolescent passion. Canace has been trapped in the web of a tragic pattern of incest, abortion, infanticide, and suicide—and it has made no decisive mark upon her perception. She retains the radical anonymity and baffling innocence of a banal teenage "girl next door." Phyllis is a thoughtful "philosopher-queen" who arrives by intelligent deduction at a truth which she cannot permit herself to

believe. In her epistle Ovid explores with consummate delicacy an impassable gulf between knowledge and belief, reason and feeling. What is consistent in each letter is an admixture of attitudes and roles, traits and techniques of persuasion, whose uneasy harmony or open incompatibility exacts from the reader a complicated response, much like what I. A. Richards calls "coenaesthesia":[19] that superimposition and overlay of different emotional responses to a single stimulus which account for the treacherous incongruities both of literature and of the human emotional life.

If Ovid's technique of "coenaesthesia," double-vision, or superimposition is constant in the *Heroides*, it is by definition unpredictable, for in each poem the admixture is almost limitlessly various in content and intensity. Nevertheless, what emerges from such a pattern of alternation and superimposition is the clear necessity that we not require the poems *either* to move *or* to amuse us. Nor is it necessary to share Rand's almost furtive wish that Ovid had gone "all the way" and made his mind narrower by making up his mind. What we require is a wider sense of genre and a wider scope of expectation. Parody, in this instance, is the key to the problem, parody which never requires that Don Quixote travel alone, without his attendant Sancho Panza. Criticism must accommodate itself to the apparent caprice of Ovid as it has accommodated itself to the seeming caprice of Ariosto, of Cervantes, of Sterne. The result of such a widened field of expectation will be the same liberation from the compulsion to sift good from bad, pathos from absurdity, elegance from crudity, and sixpences from pudding that has made Sterne, among others, freshly available to a new generation of readers. What Dorothy van Ghent says of Sterne is, I think, equally valid for Ovid:

> What have been considered his indecent lapses must be taken as an essential element in the whole Sterne—one term of a structural irony, and a provision for keeping the sentimental and the emotional and the pathetic in the same human world with the obscene and the trivial and the absurd.[20]

Ovid, like Sterne, does not write from a comic perspective limited to comedy. It is precisely Ovid's synthetic vision which exempts him from the charge of cynicism and mere heartless wit exercised at the expense

[19] I. A. Richards, "Emotion and the Coenaesthesia," in *Principles of Literary Criticism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925), pp. 98–103.

[20] Dorothy van Ghent, *The English Novel* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 142.

of his tragedy queens. His epistles display what George Bernard Shaw called "that proximity of emotion without which laughter, however irresistible, is destructive and sinister."[21]

It remains now in conclusion to speculate on the motive of Ovid's parody, that countergeneric literary mode which has often been styled the parasitic art. Here we confront the question which most readers of Ovid's *Heroides* find themselves asking: What was it that induced Ovid to debase Ariadne, diminish Dido, and blacken Phaedra so? For however great the momentary or errant pathos and charm of Ovid's heroines, the women themselves speak to us from Ovid's epistles as no longer great in themselves but often foolish, vain, silly, and uncomprehending. At best they are only human, and if greatly human only because so clearly human.

Like most serious literary parody, Ovid's is the medium for the transition from a lifeless to a vital means of expression, a transition in the *Heroides* which anticipates the metamorphosis of myth in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. But this is by no means to suggest that Ovid found Vergil, Catullus, Euripides, and Homer "lifeless." He did not. It is not they against whom Ovid reacts in his *Heroides*. He reacts, I think, to a fact of literary history, or of history alone, the fact that these writers had become no longer a vital expression of a spirit of Ovid's own times and temperament. They had become instead, for many, a narcotic, a neuralgic area hostile to the challenge of fresh associations.

What Ovid could not or would not do was to provide yet another "undiscovered chamber in the districts of romance," a watering-spot or spa for vitiated emotions, a tourist attraction like the kind so readily provided for the theater-goers and travelers of England who sated themselves on the "romantic and somewhat tragical affair" of the Beauty of Buttermere. Instead, Ovid offered a challenge to the Roman "classical" heritage, a challenge which does not insult the integrity of the past but which adjusts the fictions of the past to the complicated, urbane, skeptical, yet charitable integrity of a new and different world.

[21] George Bernard Shaw, "My Memories of Oscar Wilde," in *Oscar Wilde*, ed. Maynard Mack (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), pp. 95–96.

OVID'S TOYSHOP OF THE HEART:

Epistulae Heroidum

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