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The Game of Love

“Of all sexual aberrations, chastity is the strangest.”

-Anatole France

Although Ovid's The Art of Love is divided into three books, it is more logically broken up into two parts: the first, including books one and two of the original, directed towards men; and the second, book three, towards women. It is possible to ask the question of what the relationship is between the second part of the work and the first one. What was Ovid's purpose in writing book three? After instructing men on how to catch their prey in book one, and how to keep it in book two, why make his own advice less useful by informing the women of what men are up to? The answer lies in what Ovid considers “love.”

Throughout the poem Ovid alludes to love as a “game,” and just as all games, this one has certain rules. The whole poem is a presentation of the rules Ovid has invented for his game. Books one and two contain the rules for men, while in book three are the rules for women. The two sets of rules are not contradictory. Instead, they supplement each other. According to Ovid, love, like most other games involves goals for the different players. Ovid lays down those goals, and gives a basic explanation of the techniques which can be used to reach these goals.

Throughout the poem, Ovid suggests that romance is not only an art form, but also a game, for which there are rules. As Ovid puts it: “Women can always be caught, that's the first rule of the game” (Ars 113). The metaphor of game for love, though not usually as

readily apparent as in the quote above, appears in other places in the poem. An example of this is Ovid's treatment of the rape of the Sabine women. Ovid tells us that when "Romulus gave the sign... / Up they leaped, and their noise was proof of their vigorous spirit" (Ars 108). The description given by Ovid is very similar to how one would describe some sort of a game, where at the starting signal all players rush toward a certain object or goal. In another instance, in book three, Ovid puts in a passage describing what games girls should and should not play. However, the passage is highly ambiguous about what games Ovid has in mind. After suggesting that women stay away from chess in favor of tic-tac-toe, he goes on: "Make up some games of your own, but always try to play something: / Games are but one of the ways where in losing you win" (Ars 164). This seemingly oxymoronic phrase should remind the reader of an earlier phrase: "Do not deny to your men pleasures their eagerness craves. / They will deceive you at last, but what have you lost by it? Nothing. / Taking a thousand joys, still they take nothing away. / ... / ...What you are giving, you keep" (Ars 155). What Ovid is implying is not only may you win by losing games, but also that love is an example of such a game. The fact that a woman keeps what she is giving is parallel to her winning while losing. Another indication that Ovid considers love a game comes later in his discussion of games. Ovid tells the women that "There are not many games which nature has fashioned for women" (Ars 164). According to Ovid boxing, ball or throwing the spear is not for women, "But [women] can walk at ease by the shadowed arches of Pompey / When August sun scorches the roofs of the town" (Ars 164), as well as many other places. In a different passage, mentioned below, Ovid suggests that men search for girls in the same places. The fact that the suggestion of taking such walks is included in the passage describing games, it is highly likely that Ovid would have included courtship among his examples of games, this one

suitable for both men and women. All of the examples shown above demonstrate how Ovid thinks of love as a game.

In his poem, Ovid lays out the instructions for his game of love. These instructions are different for men and for women. However, the instructions do not contradict, but rather supplement each other. That is either the men's instruction tell him to do something, while the women's tell her to expect it to be done, or similar instructions are given to both sets of players in order to guarantee that a certain event takes place and that the game is played at all. The examples of this are many. For instance, Ovid instructs young men to search for girls in many locations, including the porticoes in "Pompey's Octavia's or the one in Livia's honor" (Ars 107). He further suggests going to the theater, or the race course. The girls he instructs to "Visit the monuments of our leader, his wife, and his sister; / ... / Theaters? All have good seats; choose any one of the three. / ... / Go to the race course and watch the chariots making the turn" (Ars 164). Ovid tells man to go to certain locations to search for girls, and then turns around and tells the girls to go and visit the same places. Therefore, if both the men and the women follow Ovid's advice, they are certain to meet. The instructions clearly supplement each other in that if the instruction was given to just one side, rather than both, then the game would be unlikely to take place.

Ovid then continues, instructing men that in the case of wooing a woman, cheating and lying is acceptable. As he puts it: "Jupiter, high in the sky, laughs at the vows of false lovers, / Ordering the winds, 'Carry those light vows away!'" (Ars 124). He continues to instruct men to live an honest life, but that "man should "Cheat these little cheats, for most of them haven't a scruple" (Ars 125). After these quotes he continues to instruct men on exactly how to deceive the women, including an advice on how to fake crying. However, since a

game in which only one side knows the rules would not be fair, Ovid instructs women in a very similar fashion: “When a lover is false, watch it! Don’t open your door. / Girls of Athens, beware: don’t trust any perjuring Theseus, / When he swears by the gods -- he has sworn falsely before” (Ars 166). Thus Ovid, not only tells men to be deceitful, but also warns the women that this will be so. Earlier in the poem Ovid warns women that “[men] will deceive you at last” (Ars 155). Although these two sides may seem contradictory, men being told that women are the cheats, and women being told the reverse, in fact they are not. In Ovid’s game cheating is allowed, in fact it is one of the requirements to being a successful in the game, for a player of either sex. Here again, the instructions supplement each other, though now by telling players of each gender what to expect from the other one.

Another place where Ovid gives seemingly contradictory instructions, which in fact supplement each other, is in the cases of the maids and the slaves. In his advice to both men and women Ovid is quite explicit in this regard. He tells men: “Do not feel ashamed to win her serving-maids over, / Take them according to their rank; also win over her slaves, greet each one by name -- the courtesy can’t be expensive” (Ars 137). At another point he instructs men to “Take some trouble, at first, to make her handmaiden’s acquaintance: / She, more than anyone else, really can lighten your way. / She must be one you can trust, if she knows of the tricks you are playing.” (Ars 116). In this example, just like in the previous one, women are warned about this in their part of the instructions: when a woman writes responses to her lover’s letters, Ovid suggests learning to write themselves rather than utilizing the services of a slave, because a slave may be dishonest. In fact, Ovid makes an off-hand remark about such slaves: “Damn the fellows whose tricks make me give warnings like this!” (Ars 168). However, the existence of such slaves, Ovid can blame on the men whom he

gave instructions to make the slaves their friends. The same problem exists in Ovid's "final word of advice: don't let your maid be too pretty-- / Often a maid will do all you would like to, and more." This advice is also needed because of an earlier advice to men. In response to the question "Do you think it would do any good to seduce the maid?" (Ars 116), Ovid gives a lengthy response, the main point of which is if the maid is pretty, it is fine to try, but if you try, you must succeed. Although the maid is shown as a tool of the lovers in Ovid's game, she is an important tool, useful for many different purposes, not the least of which is seducing a guardian so that the woman can escape to a rendezvous with her lover. Because of this, the instructions on how to use the maid correctly had to be laid out at length to both sides.

As in all games, in this one there should be goals for the opponents. Ovid, with his cynical view of love, sets quite cynical and selfish goals for both men and women. Men he advises to "Count it a black day indeed when you have presents to give. / Dodge this as well as you can, but still she will capture her plunder: / Women have ways; they know how they can swindle a man." He, therefore sets the goal for men to pay as little as possible while attaining the goal of wooing and keeping a woman. In fact, he claims that his advice is not for the rich, because "If you have presents to give, you have no need of my art" (Ars 135). The women are in turn told to try to get as many gifts out of men as they can. "Let the rich bring gifts; get legal advice from lawyers;..." (Ars 169) Ovid suggests. And although "It is worse than a crime to expect any presents from poets," it is also "a sin no girl, apparently, fears." He suggests that girls not be blatant about their purpose, nor are men to be completely clear about theirs. Ovid tells girls to "try hard to mask, even for a little, your purpose." For instance he tells girls that "a girl who will ask for a present [after making love] / Surely is wasting her

time: that's not a nice thing to do." Men are also to conceal their purposes behind facades of being in love. Thus Ovid sets the purposes for different sides of the game.

Throughout the poem, Ovid sets out what he writes as a manual on how to play the game which he himself invented. Making frequent allusions to the "game" which he is teaching his student's to play, Ovid sets down the rules for loving. He explains in quite clear detail how and when to play the game. He also sets down the goals of the game for each player. In Ovid's game there may not be clear winners and losers, but definite goals do exist. Overall, the parallel that Ovid makes between love as he presents it in his poem and a game is very strong.