

Nutus loquax: Ovid's Sexual and Literary Innuendo

The notion that lovers communicate by means of secret signs—speaking nods, codes, hidden scribblings—is one of Ovid's favorite themes, appearing in a number of his poems and with remarkable frequency in those more narrowly erotic works (rough numbers are as follows: *Amores*—four times; *Epistles*—two times; *Ars Amatoria*: seven times; *Metamorphoses*: two times; *Fasti*: one time; *Tristia*: one time). On the one hand, lovers' secret signs are congruent with the common elegiac theme of love as something done by stealth (*furtim*), as something stolen (*furta*), or as something that for various reasons must be concealed from society at large. On the other hand, the theme is a peculiarly Ovidian one, appearing with considerably less frequency in Propertius (one time) or Tibullus (three times), while being virtually absent from Hellenistic epigram. In this paper I argue that the appearance of the theme in the *Epistle to Augustus* (*Tristia* II) plays an essential role in the poem's main rhetorical aim of persuading the notional reader (Augustus) that Ovid is not *obsceni doctor adulterii* (v. 212). Ovid invokes the lovers' secret signs in order to demystify them, and thereby to present erotodidactic poetry as a patent, and thus unoffending, poetic enterprise. At the same time, Ovid suggests that such an inoffensive reading of his erotodidactic poetry is proper to the *docti*—those who are 'in the know'. By associating a benign reading of his *Ars Amatoria* with the *docti*, Ovid presents his notional reader with an interpretive choice: either read like the *docti* (thus exonerating the poem), or persist in viewing the poem as offensive (thus excluding yourself from the ranks of the *docti*).

The argument is grounded in the *Epistle*'s most densely intertextual moment, namely the reworking (at vv. 447-464) of the arts of erotic deception as presented in Tibullus I.2, I.5, and I.6. In the Tibullan source texts, Delia's instruction in the secret codes proper to lovers ends up backfiring on Tibullus. Instead of using the codes just to fool Tibullus' rival, Delia uses the codes to fool Tibullus himself. This notion—the effective failure of attempted secret communication—appealed to Ovid, who appropriated and expanded a similar scene in a pair of poems from the *Amores* (1.4 and 2.5). In the *Epistle to Augustus*, Ovid invokes the theme again in his description of Tibullus (vv. 449 f.): *fallere custodes idem docuisse fatetur, | seque sua miserum nunc ait arte premi*. This characterization—of a teacher of erotic deception now weighed down by his own 'art'—takes on a pointed double meaning here, referring jointly to the Tibullan elegiac fiction and to Ovid's own status as an exile. By casting himself in a Tibullan mode, and by emphasizing Tibullus' wide appeal (vv. 463 f.: *...legiturque Tibullus, | et placet*) Ovid exposes the deceptive *praecepta* as seductive elements of the elegiac fiction. These elements, Ovid suggests, reveal their own deception to a reader aware of the history and conventions of the genre.