CHAPTER TWO

OVID’S LANGUAGE AND STYLE

E.J. Kenney

Lingua Latina apud eum metro dactylico, cui natura repugnat, adeo videtur aptata, ut levissimos ac facillimos Ovidi versus legentes plane obliviscamur illud metrum primo tamuisse alienum ab ingénio linguae Latineae, et paene audeamus dicere Romanos exempla Graeca arte vicesse.

Bednara (1906) 604 = 120

In Ovid the Latin language seems to be so well adapted to dactylic meter, though resistant to it by nature, that as we read his smooth and easy verses we quite forget that this meter was originally so foreign to the natural character of Latin, and we almost dare to say that the Romans have excelled their Greek models in technique.

The Elegiac Poems

I

“Nihil quod tetigit non transformavit.” Ovid was from first to last a worker of metamorphoses. The first transfiguration in his poetic oeuvre occurs in the opening lines of the Amores, where he tells how Cupid transformed his hexameters into elegiacs by docking every second verse of a foot.¹ It may seem obvious that what differentiates

¹ The technical implications of this conceit deserve attention. Ovid’s readers would have been well aware that the change could not be effected simply by docking the hexameter of its last foot. What it entails is the removal of a hypothetical compound foot made up of the second elements of the third and sixth feet. That pos-
tulates a metrical scheme for the hexameter corresponding to one of the two alternative analyses of the pentameter attested by the ancient grammarians (Mar. Vict. GLK 6:109.29–110.16, Ter. Maur. GLK 6:377.1753–1800). This lends point to Ovid’s pained expostulation to Cupid: what business has he to meddle in this
elegy from epic is the pentameter, but it is precisely Ovid's handling of the pentameter that is central in any discussion of the style of his elegies. Ovid himself, in this witty conceit of Cupid's hijacking the role of Apollo, has slyly and allusively identified this crucial technical point.

But there is more to it than that. The words arma graui numero uiolentaque bella create expectation of an epic; and the distribution of consonants and the sequence of vowels specifically invoke the first and second proems of the Aeneid. Virgil's poetic progress had been "from relatively small to ever greater compositions...a model for many poets and writers to come." Ovid's ostensible claim to have started with epic and abandoned it for elegy reverses this canonical sequence and implies a deliberate promotion of this comparatively humble genre. Though he did eventually write an epic which, indirectly but unmistakably, challenged the Aeneid, it was with elegy, when the crunch came, that he found his poetic identity to be bound up; and his claim to have done for elegy what Virgil did for epic (Rem. 395–96) if anything understates his achievement as poetic empire-builder. As Virgil had reshaped the hexameter that he had inherited from Ennius, Catullus, Lucretius, and Cicero, so Ovid, no less masterfully, remolded the distich as he found it in Gallus, Propertius, and Tibullus into a uniquely flexible and adaptable instrument, giving it what was to prove its definitive form through twenty centuries.

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2 McKeown 2:11–12.
4 For reasons of space no examples from the exile poetry figure in this article, but the omission is not to be construed as a reflection on their technical quality: see, e.g., Kenney (1992a) xxi–xxi, Williams (1994) 50–99, and chapter 11 below.
5 Cicero's role in the evolution of Latin verse technique is too often undervalued: see von Albrecht (1997) 1:539, Clausen (1982) 178: "Neither as a poet nor as a critic of poetry is Cicero to be ridiculed: he was...as good a poet as a highly intelligent man who has never experienced the sacred rage can be."
6 "[T]he Roman attacks the problems of the transfer of Greek metrical forms to Latin with great determination. One cannot help admiring the dexterity with which Ovid lightened the Roman elegiac, even if in doing so he overworked his scanty supply of iambi" (Gildersleeve ap. Miller (1930) 354). Ovid had once been Gildersleeve's favorite poet (Miller (1930) 401).
7 Cf. Wilamowitz (1924) 1:240. Generations of English schoolmasters and classical dons have demonstrated the versatility of the Ovidian couplet, none more brilliantly than B.H. Kennedy and W.H.D. Rouse: the former in, for instance, his rendering of the summons to a committee meeting called to consider a proposal