CHAPTER FIVE

PRAECEPTA AMORIS: OVID’S DIDACTIC ELEGY

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1. Introduction

The Medicamina Faciei Feminæ is usually\(^1\) regarded as the first of Ovid’s didactic elegies. Whether it was composed early in Ovid’s career or immediately prior to the Ars is unclear; all that we know for certain is that it predates Book 3 (Ars 3.205–6).

Books 1 and 2 of the Ars Amatoria were originally published together, Book 3 being brought out later, either separately\(^2\) or as part of a second edition comprising all three books.\(^3\) The “table of contents” (Ars 1.35–40) makes no reference to the third book; even more telling is the concluding couplet of Book 2 (745–46) alluding to the women’s request for instruction, which spoils the closure and was clearly added later after the composition of Book 3. The conventional dating for Books 1/2 is late 2 B.C. or 1 B.C., the latter being the year when Gaius Caesar set out on his Parthian expedition, which Ovid talks about (Ars 1.177–212) as imminent.\(^4\) Book 3 and the second edition of 1 and 2 followed within the space of a year or two.\(^5\)

The final poem in the group was the Remedia Amoris. Allusion to a possible military triumph of Gaius Caesar over the Parthians (Rem. 155–58) fixes A.D. 2 as the terminus ante quem, the sentiments being rendered irrelevant by Gaius’s diplomatic agreement with the Parthians in that year.\(^6\)

\(^1\) For the argument that it was written between Ars 1/2 and Ars 3, see Rosati (1985) 42–43.
\(^2\) Hollis (1977) xiii.
\(^3\) See Murgia (1986).
\(^5\) For a radically different view, see Murgia (1986), dating Book 3 and the second edition of 1/2 to A.D. 8: this rather too conveniently explains the gap, on the conventional dating, between the publication of the Ars and the date of Ovid’s exile.
The *Ars Amatoria* has been the focus of a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years, though commentaries in English are still lacking for the second and third books. The best overall treatment of the poem is Myerowitz’s monograph (1985). On the *Medicamina Faciei Femineae* there is an excellent Italian commentary by Rosati (1985), but as yet none in English. The *Remedia Amoris* is well served by commentaries in English (Henderson 1979), Italian (Pinotti 1988) and German (Lucke 1982, Geisler 1969).

2. The *Medicamina Faciei Femineae*

Ovid’s earliest didactic elegiac poem, the *Medicamina Faciei Femineae*, is interesting both in its own right and in the ways it anticipates the *Ars* and the *Remedia*. The poem as we have it contains only 100 lines, and is clearly a fragment of a longer work. It falls into two sections: an introduction, in which the use of cosmetics is justified as part of the *cultus* of contemporary Rome (1–50) and a highly technical passage giving five recipes for skin-care preparations (51–100).

Scholarly attention has been focused on several issues: 1) the length of the original, 2) the technical material, 3) whether or not the piece was intended as a serious handbook, and 4) the prooemium.

1) The poem must have been of a reasonable size; otherwise, the introduction would be out of proportion with the rest. On the analogy of the *Ars* and the *Remedia*, Toohey has suggested that the complete poem may have contained up to 800 lines. But this ill suits Ovid’s description of the work as *paruus* (*Ars* 3.206). A better comparison would be the first book of Virgil’s *Georgics*, which Ovid certainly had in mind (see below): this is 514 lines long with a preface of 42 lines. If the *Medicamina* was around 500 lines it could have accommodated a lengthy introduction, while still being able to be described as *paruus*, especially in comparison with Ovid’s other didactic elegies.

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7 For Book 1 see Hollis (1977). A major German commentary on Book 2 has recently appeared (Janka 1997); Brandt’s complete edition (1902) remains invaluable.

8 The poem was published (cf. *Ars* 3.205), but not in its extant form, given the abrupt ending and the absence of any formal closure.

9 Toohey (1996) 162.