

Ovid's Romanisation of the *Heroides*

Ovid's *Heroides*, a series of fictitious letters written in elegiac couplets, incorporate a variety of *topoi* such as love, passion arising from love, and the sea as an entity that separates lovers as well as the women themselves, who – being ventriloquised by Ovid – characterise themselves in terms of *eros*. In this paper I shall argue that Ovid's heroines portray themselves as objects of male desire by showing how they fulfil some or all the criteria of an ideal Roman woman. Given that Ovid is strongly influenced by the ideals and legislations of the Augustan period, having adequate knowledge of the historical background and Roman marriage conventions is indispensable for an accurate interpretation of his *Heroides*. The significance of the historical context of Ovid's time seems to have been widely neglected in various interpretations of his work, which is why the need for a new interpretation of his *Heroides* in light of ancient Roman marriage ideals has arisen.¹ In this paper, I shall focus on the following four heroines, who indubitably are productive examples of this new interpretation: Penelope, Dido, Hypsipyle, and Medea. In the first section I shall discuss the importance of marriage in ancient Rome, duties of a husband and wife, and motives of marriage while touching on the historical context of the marriage ideal. Thereafter, I shall establish how the ideal

¹ For examples of previous interpretations without mention of marriage conventions, see Howard Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974); Florence Verducci, *Ovid's Toyshop of the Heart: "Epistulae Heroidum"*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Christoph Pieper, "Voce Voco. Ariadne in Ovids "Heroides" Und Die 'weibliche' Stimme." *Mnemosyne* 65, no. 2 (2012): 219-37.

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Roman woman was constructed in the Augustan period, her character traits as well as those of her opposite. In the third section I shall examine how Ovid uses the image of the Roman Matron and the 'wicked woman' to break or support the Augustan norms and ventriloquise the abovementioned heroines. Finally, I shall argue that denying that these women must be interpreted as Roman and an abnegation of the historical context of Ovid's writing will ultimately lead to misinterpretation.

In Roman society, women were considered to be predominantly part of the domestic sphere and as such, their highest tasks were thought to be within the household.² Women as wives and mothers had to bear children for the state, whereas men were responsible for the maintenance of the male line as well as their family name.³ If a woman was of marriageable age, the aim was to find her a *digna condicio*, a suitable match, which *inter alia* depended on birth, wealth, and rank of the respective partners.⁴ A disparity of birth — that is, a disparity of class — needed to be avoided in an alliance for it was seen as a disgrace to the partner with higher birth.⁵ It should be noted that wealth, however, could compensate for lack of birth, which is why dowries were necessary components of any alliance.⁶ Marriage in general was not only important for the husband and his family for it provided them with legitimate children and heirs, but also for the state, which was in need of free-born and legitimate

² Kristina Milnor, *Gender, domesticity, and the age of Augustus: inventing private life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1.

³ Susan Treggiari, *Roman marriage iusti coniuges from the time of Cicero to the time of Ulpian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 84.

⁴ Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*.

⁵ Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 85-89.

⁶ Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 95-98.

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citizens.⁷ Legal conditions for marriage in general were citizen-status and *affectio maritalis* (consent) of both parties.⁸

Marriage was undoubtedly an integral part of life in ancient Rome, and for the matter at hand, it is vital to examine its importance and high status in the Augustan period. Milnor asserts that “femininity functions as a cultural construct, which both creates and is created by a particular historical context.”⁹ The historical context of Ovid’s *Heroides* is evidently that of the rule of Augustus. Ovid wrote in a time in which Augustus depicted the new Roman Republic as being centred around family and domestic life in particular.¹⁰ Given that women were “the focal point of the domestic sphere,” they functioned as “representatives of what the imperial regime had to offer” and thus, people were excessively concerned with “feminine virtue and its locations.”¹¹ Augustus’ social legislation of 18-17 BCE was the beginning of “a return to ... the ancient domestic virtues on which the Roman state had been built.”¹² The *Leges Juliae* forced women for the first time not to answer to their husbands but to the state and also functioned as a reward system for people marrying within their social class and for women producing a certain number of children.¹³ The reason for these laws, as Milnor points out, was that Augustus saw marriage, reproduction, and domestic life in general as “too important to be left in the hands of individual citizens,” which is why he felt

⁷ Treggiari, *Roman Marriage*, 184.

⁸ Jane F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1986), 31.

⁹ Milnor, *Gender, domesticity and the age of Augustus*, 2.

¹⁰ Milnor, *Gender, domesticity and the age of Augustus*, 3.

¹¹ Milnor, *Gender, domesticity and the age of Augustus*, 4.

¹² Milnor, *Gender, domesticity and the age of Augustus*, 140.

¹³ Milnor, *Gender, domesticity and the age of Augustus*, 151.

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the need to make them into “a matter of state interest and control.”¹⁴

Given that the Augustan legislations emphasised marriage and family virtues, it is not surprising that the Romans established marriage norms as well as a socially constructed ideal woman. The most significant personal qualities of a woman in general were good looks and *pudicitia* (chastity), and if a woman was beautiful and a virgin, “a dowry was hardly necessary” because in some cases, beauty could be seen as a dowry.¹⁵ It is apparent that good looks played an important role for the Romans and Treggiari goes so far as to say that “[u]gliness in either sex was obviously a handicap.”¹⁶ The reason why the Romans valued good looks is that they believed them to be an indicator for good health and both aspects were utterly important in a marriage as children were the result of it.¹⁷ Moralists, however, put more emphasis on a woman’s character and her chastity as they saw a link between external and internal beauty — that is, a beautiful outward appearance and a good and virtuous character.¹⁸ Given that *pudicitia* in general was the most important virtue of a woman, girls lived a sheltered life before their marriage to ensure that they remained chaste.¹⁹ Essentially, Treggiari sums up the ideal Roman wife as “kind, compliant, loving, steady, faithful, and subordinate.”²⁰

Having outlined those traits, being subordinate was a significant character trait of any woman since almost all Roman

¹⁴ Milnor, *Gender, domesticity and the age of Augustus*, 140-152.

¹⁵ Treggiari, *Roman marriage*, 100.

¹⁶ Treggiari, *Roman marriage*, 101.

¹⁷ Treggiari, *Roman marriage*.

¹⁸ Treggiari, *Roman marriage*, 105-106.

¹⁹ Treggiari, *Roman marriage*.

²⁰ Treggiari, *Roman marriage*, 104.

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women were subject to a man — either their father, husband or guardian — for their whole lives.²¹ Augustus describes the ideal wife as “discreet, domestic, a good manager and childbearer; a woman to rejoice you in times of health and look after you in illness” (Dio 56.3.3-5).²² This image involved an affectionate marriage with children and emphasised the marital ideal of *concordia* (harmony).²³ Furthermore, the ideal Roman Matron — a socially constructed Roman woman — functioned as a role model and ideal for any wife and mother.²⁴ Evidence from tombstone inscriptions suggests that the ideal Roman wife was beautiful, fertile, faithful to her husband and capable of running a household and Fischler holds that one could define her as “a refined woman whose life focused on the needs of her family and household.”²⁵ Plutarch uses Octavia as an example for the ideal Roman wife for she “despite her husband Mark Antony’s rejection of her in favour of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra ... continued to act as the exemplary wife” since she stayed at their home, took care of the household, and entertained Antony’s friends during his absence as were the responsibilities of a good wife.²⁶

As the Romans used special marriage criteria and the image of the ideal Roman woman to simplify match-making, naturally, they needed to avoid the counterpart of the ideal,

²¹ Gardner, *Women in Roman Law*, 5.

²² Suzanne Dixon, “The Sentimental Ideal of The Roman Family,” in *Marriage, Divorce and Children in Ancient Rome*, edited by Beryl Rawson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 100.

²³ Dixon, *Sentimental Ideal*, 107.

²⁴ Susan Fischler, “Social Stereotypes and Historical Analysis: The Case of the Imperial Women at Rome,” in *Women in Ancient Societies*, edited by Leonie J. Archer, Susan Fischler, and Maria Wyke (New York: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1994), 116.

²⁵ Fischler, “Social Stereotypes,” 117.

²⁶ Fischler, “Social Stereotypes,” 118.

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namely the Roman "wicked woman." Fischler argues that "the elite woman 'gone bad' was a common cultural construct, just as the Roman Matron was," but wicked women were particularly threatening insofar as they turned "virtue and society upside-down."²⁷ One example of such a woman is Sempronia²⁸ who Fischler thinks is "the classic transgressor of the female role" for she "has all the right attributes which she uses in all the wrong ways."²⁹ Sallust describes her as a woman who has "committed many crimes of masculine audacity," but was "favoured by fortune in her birth and beauty, and in her husband and children."³⁰ Additionally, he mentions that she was an accomplished and sophisticated woman, but "she always held all things dearer than modesty and chastity" and "[h]er sexual desires were so inflamed that she sought men more often than she was sought by them."³¹ Hence the wicked woman incorporates all the good qualities of the ideal Roman Matron apart from *pudicitia* for she is driven by her sexual desires and does not act modestly but has rather vicious intentions. In short, the Roman "wicked woman" can be seen as the immoral opposite of the ideal Roman Matron.

As shown in the above, the Romans valued chastity and modesty displayed by the Roman Matron and condemned the opposite qualities found in the wicked woman. Before moving on to analysing how Ovid uses these images to transform the characters in his letters, I shall briefly explain the usage and symbolic meaning of the sea in the *Heroides* since it functions

²⁷ Fischler, "Social Stereotypes," 120.

²⁸ Sempronia was a Roman noble woman and an adherent of Catiline. cf. Sallust: *De Coniuratione Catilinae*.

²⁹ Fischler, "Social Stereotypes," 119.

³⁰ Fischler, "Social Stereotypes."

³¹ Fischler, "Social Stereotypes."

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as a means for defining who of the heroines can be defined as an ideal wife. First, it should be noted that there are a variety of gendered spaces in the myths of the heroines examined here. One such space, mentioned in all the letters discussed here (*Heroides* 1, 6, 7, 12), is the sea, which in mythology was associated with female sexuality — the birth of Venus being one example.³² Bolton, in her discussion of such gendered spaces, raises the question of who can move within and beyond a certain space in the *Heroides*, pointing out that the beloved always departs and arrives via the sea and asserts that “[t]he passion of love is therefore linked to the physical entity of water.”³³ That said, she also claims that the sea replaces the lover and thus “becomes a locus for the women’s ever-hopeful passions.”³⁴ The reader of the *Heroides* only knows what sea travel means from a female perspective, however, given that the males do not reply to the letters. Thus, to the women, sea travel “presents a change in sexual status” for they could potentially be reunited with their lovers.³⁵ Later on it shall be seen that the women remaining within their own territory are the ones who display more traits of the ideal Roman Matron than the ones who choose to leave their home and travel with their respective lover.

Having defined the sea as a locus for sexual desire, I shall analyse how Ovid uses the image of both the Roman Matron and the Roman wicked woman to depict and ventriloquise the female letter-writers in the *Heroides*. I shall begin with Penelope (*Heroides* 1) since she most closely fits the

³² Catherine M. Bolton, “Gendered Spaces in Ovid’s *Heroides*,” *Classical World* 102 no. 3, 273-290, (2009), 273.

³³ Bolton, “Gendered Spaces.”

³⁴ Bolton, “Gendered Spaces,” 274.

³⁵ Bolton, “Gendered Spaces.”

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description of the ideal Roman Matron. Penelope starts off her letter with the following words: "Haec tua Penelope lento tibi mittit, Ulixē" (1.1).³⁶ While this first line seems to be a conventional epistolary opening, Lindheim points out that Penelope "defines herself in terms of her addressee", which shows that "she cannot imagine herself without [Ulysses] as a reference point for her own self-definition."³⁷ Jacobson, however, asserts that it is wrong to "identify Ovid's Penelope with Homer's" for she "introduces herself as the dissatisfied lover who feels wronged by her man."³⁸ Furthermore, he argues that Penelope is no longer the Homeric "paragon of wifely devotion and loyalty" for by referring to him as *lento*, she accuses him of willingly extending his journey rather than returning to his wife like all the other men.³⁹ In the second line she demands the immediate return of her husband and she clearly states that a letter is not necessary as she wants him to come himself: "Nil mihi rescribas attinet: ipse veni!" (1.2).⁴⁰ Jacobson claims that Homer's Penelope would never speak ill of her husband or hint that he is deliberately staying away from her, and he sees Ovid's Penelope as not only making Ulysses "responsible for her state," but also as depicting herself as the one who has been the "real sufferer all these years."⁴¹

³⁶ "Your Penelope sends you this, Ulysses, the so-long-delayed." All Latin references refer to Ovid, *Heroides* in Ovid: *Heroides* and *Amores*, revised by George P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977 [1914]); The English translations refer to Anthony S. Kline, "Ovid: *The Heroides*," *Poetry in Translation*. Web.

³⁷ Sara H. Lindheim, *Mail and Female: Epistolary Narrative and Desire in Ovid's Heroides* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 48.

³⁸ Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, 250.

³⁹ Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, 243.

⁴⁰ "Don't reply to me however: come yourself."

⁴¹ Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, 250-251.

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Contrary to this view, however, I believe that Ovid does not portray her as the nagging, disloyal wife Jacobson wants us to see, but rather makes an attempt to present the Roman version of the Homeric ideal. It is important to note that Ovid cannot be seen as an advocate for women as he is merely experimenting with the poetic potential of the female voice.⁴² Ovid writing in the persona of a mythical character “was part of the rhetorical training of upper-class Romans of Ovid’s time.”⁴³ Hence, it is most likely that the norms and legislations of the Augustan period influenced his writing and perhaps sparked the idea to transform the character of Homer’s Penelope to that of an ideal Roman woman. I argue here that Penelope is depicted as the ideal Roman Matron. Penelope describes herself as “deserto ... frigida lecto” (1.7),⁴⁴ which demonstrates her faithfulness as well as her desire for her husband. Bolton, on the one hand, points out that Penelope lying all alone in her abandoned bed “places her in the precise physical centre of her identity as faithful wife of Ulysses” and shows that she has remained faithful emotionally as well as spatially.⁴⁵ Smith, on the other, suggests that Penelope here refers to “her suppressed sexuality” although being seen as “a proverbial symbol of chastity in the ancient world.”⁴⁶ I believe that what Smith refers to as “suppressed sexuality” is another sign of her faithfulness and devotion. If she were not a faithful wife, she would not feel the need to suppress her sexual desires given the high number

⁴² Pieper, “Ariadne in Ovids ‘Heroides,’” 221.

⁴³ Laurel Fulkerson, “The Heroides: Female Elegy?,” in *A Companion to Ovid*, edited by Peter Knox (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 81.

⁴⁴ “Cold in an empty bed”.

⁴⁵ Bolton, “Gendered Spaces,” 275.

⁴⁶ R. Alden Smith, “Fantasy, Myth, and Love Letters: Text and Tale in Ovid’s ‘Heroides,’” *Arethusa* 27, no. 2, 247-273 (1994), 261.

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of suitors living under her roof. That said, although frequently receiving visitors and sending people away, Penelope herself never leaves her house, which is precisely why she adopts “the ‘preferred’ female role.”⁴⁷

Furthermore, Ovid’s Penelope justifies her worrying by stating that love and fear are inextricably entwined: “Res est solliciti plena timoris amor” (1.11).⁴⁸ Her worrying about Ulysses (1.45-46), constantly making up scenarios causing her husband’s delay (1.75-78), and actively trying to get information about him by questioning strangers coming to her land (1.60-61) are all signs of her devotion to her husband. Unlike Homer’s Penelope, who first and foremost is characterised by her cunningness, Ovid’s Penelope puts emphasis on her modesty by only briefly mentioning her weaving trick without bragging about it for that would be a character trait of the Roman wicked woman. Contrary to Homer, Ovid depicts Penelope’s weaving not as an act of cunningness, but as another skill, gendered as feminine, influenced by the image of the ideal Roman Matron. Moreover, her resistance of her father’s wish for her to remarry and emphasis of her love for her husband — “tua sum, tua dicar oportet; / Penelope coniunx semper Ulixis ero” (1.83-84)⁴⁹ — demonstrate her faithfulness and determination to be reunited with her beloved, thus emphasising her role as an ideal wife. I suggest that Penelope can be compared to Octavia for they both take care of the household and remain faithful to their husbands during their absence. Hence Ovid’s Penelope can essentially be characterised

⁴⁷ Bolton, “Gendered Spaces,” 275.

⁴⁸ “Love is a thing full of anxious fears.”

⁴⁹ “I’m yours, I should be spoken of as yours: I’ll be Penelope, wife to Ulysses, always.”

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as a faithful, loving, devoted, modest, and proactive wife, who values family virtues and longs for the return of her husband.

Since Ovid's Penelope clearly adopts the role of the ideal Roman Matron, I shall show in the following that Dido (*Heroides* 7) is depicted as the ideal Roman widow. Dido describes herself as a loving and chaste *univira* — that is, a woman who has had only one husband — who maintains her dead husband's shrine: "Est mihi marmorea sacratus in aede Sychaeus" (7.99).⁵⁰ After her encounter with Aeneas, however, she transgresses the boundaries of a life of a *univira* for a chance to be with him. Having realised that Aeneas is about to leave her, she offers him everything she owns including her city to persuade him to stay with her: "Hos potius populos in dotem, ambage remissa, accipe et advectas Pygmalionis opes" (7.149-150).⁵¹ Dido out of desperation to win back Aeneas' attention emphasises her dowry (7.150), the love she could give him (7.22) as well as her sexual desirability: "Mille procis placui, qui me coiere querentes / nescio quem thalamis praeposuisse suis" (7.123-124).⁵²

Additionally, Kennedy notes that Ovid makes Dido welcome the "ghostly voice" of her husband because in the *Aeneid* (6.473-5) they will be reunited in the underworld.⁵³ Dido as a letter-writer is not aware of how Ovid uses her voice to foreshadow future events, which is why he portrays her as a *univira* who feels bad for violating her marriage vows and is thus haunted by her dead husband's voice: "Elissa, veni!" (7.102).⁵⁴

⁵⁰ "Sychaeus is honoured by me in a marble shrine."

⁵¹ "Rather you should accept this nation, without quibbling, as my dowry, and the riches of Pygmalion I brought here."

⁵² "I was flattered by a thousand suitors, plaintive to wed me, and I don't know which of their marriage beds I preferred."

⁵³ Duncan F. Kennedy, "The epistolary mode and the first of Ovid's *Heroides*," *Classical Quarterly* 34, no. 2, 413-422 (1984), 418.

⁵⁴ "Elissa, come!"

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In Augustan Rome a *univira* “was regarded as attaining some ideal of marriage” and a widow in general seemed “to have attracted no disapproval in society at large by remarrying,” but “was expected to allow a certain period for mourning before remarriage.”⁵⁵ Hence, Dido before meeting Aeneas remained a chaste, mourning wife and even after breaking her marriage vows, claims to deeply regret having given herself to Aeneas: “Exige, laese pudor, poenas! violate Sychaei / Ad quas, me miseram, plena pudoris eo.” (7.95).⁵⁶ To a certain extent, the reader feels obliged to sympathise with and despise her at the same time. This is the case since Ovid not only depicts her as a chaste and faithful wife to her dead husband, but also openly displays her suppressed wish to marry anew and fall in love once again. Therefore, two main functions of her suicide letter can be established: (1) winning back Aeneas’ affections and (2) making amends for violating her vows. She makes Aeneas responsible for her suicide (7.195) in an attempt to make him stay and save her and their unborn child (7.133-134), but as she realises he will leave and never return, she feels the need to kill herself as punishment for her unchastity. Thus, she begs the ghost of her husband for forgiveness and promises that they will be reunited after her suicide: “Nulla mora est, venio, venio tibi debita coniunx; / sum tamen admissi tarda pudore mei” (7.103-104).⁵⁷ Having knowledge of the Roman definition of a *univira* is obviously necessary to interpret Ovid’s literal display of Dido’s

⁵⁵ Gardner, *Women in Roman Law*, 51.

⁵⁶ “Exact my punishment, wounded Honour, and by the violated laws of my marriage-bed leave no reputation to my ashes. And you ghost, and spirit, and ashes of my Sychaeus to whom, alas for me, filled with shame I go.”

⁵⁷ “No delay: I come: I come to you, a wife in debt – yet still I am late through confessing to my shame!”

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internal conflict. Knowing her considerably high reputation as chaste widow enables modern commentators to visualise Dido's conflict between her fear of losing her status as *univira* and her desire to be with Aeneas, who humiliates her by rejecting and leaving her. Hence her suicide can be interpreted as an escape from humiliation and as an act of love — for her husband rather than for Aeneas.

So far, we have seen how Ovid uses the image of the ideal Roman woman to transform Penelope and Dido to Roman women, which is why I shall now demonstrate how he uses the opposite of the ideal to construct two other powerful women: Hypsipyle and Medea. *Heroides* 6 and 12 are the only two letters of the collection directed at the same man, namely Jason, and hence scholars believe they function as a pair.⁵⁸ Overall, both women aim at portraying themselves as the ideal wife, but Hypsipyle, in a desperate attempt to reveal Medea's wickedness to Jason, only manages to display her own wicked character. Bloch asserts that *Heroides* 6 "contains an anomalous presentation of Hypsipyle[']s]" and notes that her letter mainly deals with Medea's story.⁵⁹ At the beginning of her letter, we find a hopeful woman longing for Jason's return: "Nam ne pacta tibi praeter mea regna redires, / cum cuperes, ventos non habuisse potes" (6.5-6).⁶⁰ She emphasises her faithfulness (i.e. "maneo si tua"),⁶¹ but also mentions hearing rumours of Jason's marriage to the Colchian princess Medea, which are confirmed

⁵⁸ David J. Bloch, "Ovid's *Heroides* 6: Preliminary scenes from the life of an intertextual heroine," *Classical Quarterly* 50, no. 1, 197-209 (2000), 199; and Verducci, *Ovid's Toyshop*.

⁵⁹ Bloch, "Ovid's *Heroides* 6," 199.

⁶⁰ "For though you might not have had the winds, as you wished, so as not to be driven beyond the kingdoms I granted."

⁶¹ "I'm still yours."

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by a Thessalian stranger interrogated by her (6.23-40). Thus, her hope turns into disappointment, which is why she attempts to remind him of how she welcomed him into her city ("Urbe virum iuvi, tectoque animoque recepi" (6.55)),⁶² the promises he made ("Abstrahor, Hypsipyle; sed dent modo fata recursus, / vir tuus hinc abeo, vir tibi semper ero" (6.59-60)),⁶³ as well as his fatherly duties (6.121-123).

Hypsipyle openly admits her insecurities (6.79), but also reveals her disapproval of Jason settling for a *barbara paelex* (6.81) (barbarian rival). Verducci asserts that "Jason's liaison with Medea disgraces Hypsipyle quite as much as it degrades Jason."⁶⁴ Hence, Hypsipyle — threatened by Medea and blinded by her love for Jason — refuses to believe Jason would willingly fall for a barbarian poisoner and thus, she arrives at the conclusion that Medea must have used incantations to make him fall in love with her: "Nec facie meritisque placet, sed carmina novit / diraque cantata pabula falce metit" (6.83-84).⁶⁵ Ovid's Hypsipyle is a quite problematic character for she knows her assets and tries to use them to manipulate her beloved into returning and marrying her. She emphasises her noble blood, her heritage, and wealth as queen of Lemnos and promises him all her possessions including herself as a dowry if he only returned to her (6.113-118):

*"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;*

⁶² "I saw that man into my city, admitted him to my house and heart."

⁶³ "I'm dragged away from you Hypsipyle. May fate only let me return: I leave here as your husband, your husband I'll always be."

⁶⁴ Verducci, *Ovid's Toyshop*, 57.

⁶⁵ "It's not her face or merits that enchant you, but the charms she knows and the herbs, cut, with fearful incantations."

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me quoque dotalis inter habere potes."⁶⁶

Her disappointment turns into desperation and in condemning Medea's wicked character throughout her letter, it becomes more and more apparent that she would be willing to do absolutely anything to get Jason back. Bloch correctly observes that the more she tries to distinguish herself from Medea, the more she "becomes who she claims she is not": "Medeae Medea forem!" (6.151).⁶⁷ At the end of her letter, her desperation turns into scorn as she curses Medea and reminds him that her dowry was a crime (6.137-139) and hence she is not worthy of being with Jason. Hypsipyle curses Medea to be exiled for "exile compels an individual to become rootless," which she thinks to be a punishment (*Exulet et toto quaerat in orbe fugam!*, 6.158).⁶⁸

Medea's letter, however, deals with Jason and his deeds for the most part although she briefly compares herself to his new bride (12.25). Unlike Hypsipyle who Jacobson claims to go "farther beyond the bounds of "decency" than any heroine in Ovid, including Medea herself",⁶⁹ Medea frequently references her guilt (12.108, 120, 134), which no other heroine does.⁷⁰ Moreover, in the beginning of the letter, she describes her love as love at first sight (12.31-34), but later on, she despises him for taking her virginity and abandoning her after she has left her

⁶⁶ "If high birth and a noble name move you: see, I was born the daughter of Thoas and of Ariadne. Bacchus was my grandfather: as Bacchus's wife she wears a crown, and her constellation outshines the lesser stars. Lemnos will be my gift to you: a land ripe for cultivation: and you shall have me too with the rest of my dowry."

⁶⁷ "I would have been Medea to Medea." Bloch, "Ovid's *Heroides* 6," 203.

⁶⁸ Bolton, "Gendered Spaces," 281. "May she be exiled, and search the whole world for refuge!"

⁶⁹ Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, 104.

⁷⁰ Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, 113.

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family behind: "Virginitas facta est peregrini praeda latronis; / optima cum cara matre relicta soror" (12.111-112).⁷¹ This perfectly elucidates her transformation from an innocent, pure maiden that valued family virtues to an unpredictable, vicious creature willing to do anything to be with her beloved, including murdering her brother and later her own children. Unlike Penelope who repeatedly claims to belong to her husband, Medea sees Jason as being hers ("meus est!" 12.158) for she has "earned" him by saving his life and helping him steal the Golden Fleece, which, according to her, is the highest dowry anyone could give him (12.199-203):

*"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
juventus!"*⁷²

Ovid ironically portrays Medea as an innocent maiden that was corrupted by love and driven to commit crimes out of her love for Jason. It seems to me that Ovid makes love responsible for her vicious character transformation, which shows that any girl — no matter how sophisticated and pure — could become a dangerous "wicked woman" if the circumstances allowed it. Additionally, Barchiesi sees Medea's letter as "very rich in literary self-consciousness" for "she speaks not only as a self-

⁷¹ "My virginity becomes the prize of a foreign thief, my most dearly beloved sister, with my mother, lost."

⁷² "You ask, where's my dowry? I numbered it on that field that was ploughed by you, in taking the fleece. My dowry's that golden ram known by its thick fleece, that you'd deny me if I said to you: 'Return it.' My dowry is your safety: my dowry's the youth of Greece."

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conscious character, but also (by implication) as a self-conscious author."⁷³

Having said that, all four women provide an insight into their psyche and display their own self-perception and moral values in their letters. Although some scholars claim that we cannot refer to the women in the *Heroides* as Roman women, it is apparent that the historical context and the social norms reinforced by the Augustan legislation played an important role in Ovid's characterisation of the women he ventriloquises.⁷⁴ Moreover, denying the former would ultimately result in misinterpretation as believing them to be equal to the characters of their respective myths would display an unexplainable shift in personality. This is not reducible to Ovid ventriloquising the female letter-writers. Ovid's inspiration to explore *female* voices in letters not only reverses Latin love elegy, but also attempts to reveal psychological aspects of females, which are crucial for defining them as ideal wives or wicked women. It should be noted that Ovid himself — though much later — wrote letters to his wife from exile, which shows that he deemed letter-writing an important part of a relationship between husband and wife.⁷⁵ Finally, this essay has shown how Ovid uses the image of the Roman Matron and the "wicked woman" to emphasise Augustan marriage ideals and how knowledge of the latter determines the accuracy of modern

⁷³ Alessandro Barchiesi, "Future Reflexive: Two Modes of Allusion and Ovid's *Heroides*," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 95, 333-365 (1993), especially 343-344.

⁷⁴ See Jacobson, *Ovid's Heroides*, 263.

⁷⁵ cf. Raymond Huntington Coon, "Ovid in Exile," *Classical Journal* 22, no. 5 (1927), 355-369; Peter Green, *The Poems of Exile: Tristia and the Black Sea Letters*. (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005).

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commentator's interpretations of the heroines as Roman women.

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