

Ovid's Orpheus – Some Thoughts about Reading Latin Poetry & More

That Ovid, in the first years of this millennium, is as aware of how to read and how to help his audience be readers as any modern critic is most evident in his handling of the story of Orpheus and the story within that story, Pygmalion, in book 10 of his epic poem, Metamorphoses.

That Ovid was not the only ancient artist to have recognized the problems of interpretation is further shown in ancient paintings, as illustrated by a picture, from the Villa of Fannius in Boscoreale. The artist was concerned how his painting would be viewed and anticipated the viewer's response. Behind a seated woman, who plays her lyre looking not at it but at the audience, stands her attendant holding a wine glass, not staring fondly down upon her mistress but looking directly at the audience. The gaze of the woman allows us to understand that the painter wanted to capture in his painting another art-form, music, unheard but still delighting us 2000 years later.

In Metamorphoses 10, 1-297, Ovid tells of Orpheus's song, after the bard's failed trip to the underworld to retrieve Eurydice, of Pygmalion and his statue that came to life. The emphasis is not on a detailed description of the beautiful statue but on the sculptor's involvement with and aesthetic appreciation of his own art work, that he gave "a beauty more perfect than that of any woman ever born" (10. 248-9). Ovid/Orpheus apostrophizes the reader/listener with

ways, arrow and song, and both lovers obtain their beloved, only to lose them again (Persephone for part of each year, Eurydice permanently in this life). Everything is subject to Love.

Love and lament, the two most important stimuli for Orpheus' ballad, are the constituent elements of Roman elegiac poetry. Orpheus, the son of epic inspiration, is in the awkward position of being an elegiac poet in the epic situation of descent to the underworld and rescue. He must do what he can: rely on his persuasive skill, including the use of direct address to the royal pair about the universal experience of love, just as the poet who employs apostrophe to make the text immediately relevant to the reader. So Ovid is blurring generic boundaries of epic and elegy in the song of Orpheus, the master of audience manipulation.

Ovid knows about art and the interpretation of art and includes in the pages of his grandest poem Orpheus and Pygmalion, models of a poet and how he captivates his audience with his text and an artist and how he brings his artwork to life through sensitive interpretation. Similar is the lyre player from Boscoreale. Her companion seems to be staring straight ahead, but the musician, who is still playing, seems to be making the quick upward glance of a person slightly startled out of her absorption in her musical creation. Since the companion seems to be staring intently at the viewer, the musician may
