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# Miles Amoris and Ovidian Metaphor

by Nate Emmerson

Throughout all three books of Ovid's *Amores*, he revisits many common themes in various poems. An important one of such themes Ovid employs is a metaphor comparing *Amor* to a general, and the lover to a soldier in his army. As Stephen Harrison points out, Ovid wittily reminds us that love elegy can also be described as war.<sup>1</sup> This theme of *miles amoris* spans the three sections of the *Amores*, and is employed via an interesting dualism: the poet becomes both the conquered, having been defeated by *Amor*, as well as the conqueror, bearing the standard of and triumphing over women in the name of love. Poems 1.9, 2.12, and 3.11 of the *Amores* exhibit the quandary this presents the lover/poet. Ovid's military language when describing the escapades of the lover and the obligation he has to *Amor* execute the metaphor, and provide both sides of the coin simultaneously. Poem 1.9 explores the similarities between the two roles. Poem 2.12 develops the extended metaphor on the side of the lover as triumphant by comparing the narrator's victory over Corinna with various military victories. Poem 3.11 demonstrates the other half of the analogy, with expressions of the lover's having been conquered and held captive by the same one in whose *castra* he serves.

Ovid begins poem 1.9 with a clear statement of love's military aspect, saying "every lover serves as a soldier, and Cupid has his own fortresses" (*militat omnis amans, et habet sua castra Cupido*).<sup>2</sup> Ovid repeats the first three words again,<sup>3</sup> placing further

importance on the fact that each lover serves two roles: the one of the *amator* and that of the *miles*. Ovid continues to explain the similarities in the two roles: "the age which is suitable for war is also suitable for Venus" (*quae bello est habilis, Veneri quoque convenit aetas*).<sup>4</sup> Another similarity is vigilance: "both [the lover and soldier] watch through the night, each takes his rest on the ground; one guards his mistress's doors, the other his general's" (*pervigilat ambo, terra requiescit uterque; / ille fores dominae servat, at ille ducis*).<sup>5</sup> Lover and soldier will also overcome any obstacle in order to achieve their goals: a long march (*longa via*), mountains and rain-flooded rivers (*montes duplicataque nimbo flumina*), thick snow (*congestas nives*), swollen wind (*tumidos Euros*), frosts of the night (*frigora noctis*), snow, and rain (*denso mixtas perferet imbre nives*).<sup>6</sup> Lovers and soldiers must both be watchmen—a soldier looking over his fortress or camp for enemies, and a lover constantly vigilant for rivals to his affection (*mittitur infestos alter speculator in hostes, / in rivale oculos alter, ut hoste, tenet*).<sup>7</sup> The walls of cities are besieged by a soldier, and the lover acts similarly with the doors of his mistress (*ille graves urbes, hic durae limen amicae / obsidet; hic portas frangit, at ille fores*).<sup>8</sup> Each uses the element of surprise: the soldier attacks when the enemy sleeps, and lovers take advantage of their mistresses' slumber (*saepe soporatos invadere profuit hostes / cadere et armata vulgus inerme manu. . nemphe maritorum somnis utuntur amantes / et sua sopitis hostibus arma movent*).<sup>9</sup> Even their patron gods exhibit similar characteristics:

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Harrison, "Ovid and Genre: Evolutions of an Elegist" pp.79-94 in *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, ed. Philip Hardie, Cambridge University Press 2002

<sup>2</sup> *Amores* 1.9.1

<sup>3</sup> *Am.* 1.9.2

<sup>4</sup> *Am.* 1.9.3

<sup>5</sup> *Am.* 1.9.7-8

<sup>6</sup> *Am.* 1.9.11-16

<sup>7</sup> *Am.* 1.9.17-18

<sup>8</sup> *Am.* 1.9.19-20

<sup>9</sup> *Am.* 1.9.21-22, 25-26

Mars, of the soldiers, and Venus, of the lovers, are both described as precarious (*Mars dubius, nec certa Venus*).<sup>10</sup>

Although the lover exhibits all these qualities just as a soldier, his work is still love, not war. He does not indulge in the activities of actual warfare, but has to adopt the same methods in his own particular field.<sup>11</sup> The two fields, however, are certainly not mutually exclusive. Even though the lover goes forth alone (*non ego militibus venio comitatus et armis*),<sup>12</sup> he still employs similar tactics: the lover, like the soldier, must fight to win.<sup>13</sup> Ovid goes on in the poem to give examples of famous warriors who were also lovers. Achilles experienced passion at the death of his enamored captive, Briseis (*ardet in abducta Briseide maestus Achilles*). Hector went to battle from the arms of his wife, Andromache (*Hector ab Andromaches complexibus ibat ad arma*). The famous warring king Agamemnon fell for the very daughter of the king whom he fought against (*summa ducum, Atrides visa Priameide fertur / Maenadis effusis obstipuisse comis*). Even the god of war, Mars, fell victim to Amor, having been found making love to Venus (*Mars quoque deprensus fabrilis vincula sensit: notior in caelo fabula nulla fuit*).<sup>14</sup> These masters of both war and love exhibit the aforementioned qualities, and utilize them in both roles. Ovid ends the poem by comparing love to military service yet again: he says that love has turned him from leisure to fitness, much like army training (*qui nolet fieri desidiosus, amet*),<sup>15</sup> completing the analogy.

In Book II of the *Amores*, Ovid develops the comparison in poem 12, which tells of the victory of a lover who has emerged victorious in his conflict with a woman, like a soldier on the winning side does in a battle.<sup>16</sup> He begins with an exclamation of victory (*ite triumphales circum mea tempora laurus*),<sup>17</sup> and says that he has conquered (*vicimus*).<sup>18</sup> Immediately following, Ovid informs the reader that it is not a military battle of which he speaks, but a battle with a woman, and the result is that she is in his embrace (*in nostro est, ecce, Corinna sinu*).<sup>19</sup> Even though the battle was completely devoid of blood (*in qua, quaecumque est, sanguine praeda caret*),<sup>20</sup> Ovid continues the analogy to military matters—he goes on to declare himself better than the Greeks conquering Troy, as he was alone in his endeavors (as in poem I.6, “*solus eram*”<sup>21</sup>), whereas it took all the Greeks ten years to bring down the city:

*Pergama cum caderent bello  
superata bilustri,  
ex tot in Atridis pars quota  
laudis erat?  
at mea seposita est et ab omni  
milite dissors  
gloria, nec titulum muneris  
alter habet.*<sup>22</sup>

Ovid points to another aspect of the *bellum amoris*: similar cause (*nec belli est nova causa mei*).<sup>23</sup> Women are, he says, the cause of both love and many wars. He cites several women: Helen, whose kidnapping caused the Trojan War, Hippodameia, feelings for whom caused the battle between the centaurs and the Lapiths, and Lavinia, whose engagement to Aeneas caused the

<sup>10</sup> *Am.* I.9.29

<sup>11</sup> “Variations on a Military Theme in Ovid's ‘Amores’”, Elizabeth Thomas, *Greece & Rome*, 2nd Ser., Vol. 11, No. 2. (Oct., 1964), pp. 151-165.

<sup>12</sup> *Am.* I.6.33

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, 160

<sup>14</sup> *Am.* I.9.33-40

<sup>15</sup> *Am.* I.9.46

<sup>16</sup> Thomas, 161

<sup>17</sup> *Am.* II.12.1

<sup>18</sup> *Am.* II.12.2

<sup>19</sup> *Am.* II.12.2

<sup>20</sup> *Am.* II.12.6

<sup>21</sup> *Am.* I.6.34

<sup>22</sup> *Am.* II.12.9-12

<sup>23</sup> *Am.* II.12.17



conflict between the outcast Trojans and the native Latins:

...nisi rapta fuisset  
tyndaris, Europae pax Asiaeque  
foret.  
femina silvestris Lapithas  
populumque biformem  
turpiter adposito vertit in arma  
mero;  
femina Troianos iterum nova  
bella movere  
inpulit in regno, iuste Latine,  
tuo;<sup>24</sup>

Ovid even points to animals, such as bulls, which fight over females of the species (*vidi ego pro nivea pugnantes coniuge tauros*)<sup>25</sup> to show the feminine root to conflict, whether amorous or militant.

Even though the lover's victory is bloodless in this case, it is clear that this is not always true. In poem I.8, Ovid's victory is not a "*sanguine praeda caret*" as in II.12, but has come through violence (*nam furor in dominam temeraria brachia movit; / flet mea vesana laesa puella manu*).<sup>26</sup> This follows more closely with the mythological exempla in II.12, in that not only does war break out over the women in his examples, but there is also warfare with most of them, in that they are victims of violence.<sup>27</sup> Both love and war spill blood, and the lover in II.12 misleads the audience by claiming a bloodless conquest.

While poem II.12 deals with the lover's role as a soldier of love, III.11 illustrates the other half of the dualism presented in the *bellum amoris* analogy—the lover as someone having been conquered by love himself. As usual, Ovid comes right

out in the first couplet and states the situation: the lover has been defeated by his mistress's vices (*vitiis patientia victa est*)<sup>28</sup> and reflects on his servitude. He claims to have slipped his chains (*fugique catenas*),<sup>29</sup> and thinks himself free from the *servitium amoris*, a common theme throughout all Roman elegy. However, *Amor* is not so easily defeated. Rather, the lover is again conquered, and again becomes one of the prisoners mentioned in I.2, following Cupid's triumphant procession (*Mens Bona ducetur manibus post terga retortis / et Pudor et castris quidquid Amoris obest*).<sup>30</sup> Though his heart is pulled both ways, by love and hate, love ends up winning (*luctantur pectusque leve in contraria tendunt / hac amor hac odium, sed, puto, vincit amor*).<sup>31</sup> Love has conquered the lover to such an extent that while he feels an aversion to his mistress in his mind (*nequitiam fugio. . . aversor morum crimina*),<sup>32</sup> he cannot pull himself away (*fugientem forma reducit. . . corpus amo*).<sup>33</sup> Thus *Amor* proves himself the better soldier: the lover was unable to overcome his master; even though his *Mens Bona* demanded release, he remained *ducetur manibus post terga retortis*.

The *bellum amoris* metaphor, comparing a lover to a soldier, runs through many poems of Latin elegy. In particular, Ovid's *Amores* exhibit the metaphor with unique focus and elegance. Poem I.9 establishes the comparison as valid by stating the qualities both the *miles* and the *amator* share. The poems in the second two books, II.12 and III.11, look specifically at the two sides of the *miles amoris*: the former discussing the lover as a member of the *castra amoris*, and latter referring to the lover as *victus amore*. Ovid's treatment of the

<sup>24</sup> *Am.* II.12.17-22

<sup>25</sup> *Am.* II.12.25

<sup>26</sup> *Am.* I.7.2-3

<sup>27</sup> Leslie Cahoon, "The Bed as Battlefield: Erotic Conquest and Military Metaphor in Ovid's *Amores*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* (1974-), Vol. 118. (1988), pp. 293-307.

<sup>28</sup> *Am.* III.11.1

<sup>29</sup> *Am.* III.11.3

<sup>30</sup> *Am.* I.2.31-32

<sup>31</sup> *Am.* III.11.33-34

<sup>32</sup> *Am.* III.11.37-38

<sup>33</sup> *Am.* III.11.37-38

metaphor stands out, and he gives validity  
to his claim that *militat omnis amans*.