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Confronting Time: The Quest for Agency and Power in Ovid's *Heroides*

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine various temporal perspectives found in Ovid's *Heroides*, considering how they clarify the way in which we view the letters' power dynamics, together with the female authors' capacity for agency in a mythological setting which appears to be already determined. Deploying a theoretical framework for time drawn from modern philosophy and science, I examine four examples drawn from the single *Heroides*. In Laodamia's letter to Protesilaus, I consider how Laodamia strives to take back control of their fated futures against a backdrop that will see her husband lose his life. Then, I turn to Dido's letter to Aeneas, which offers Aeneas an alternative future in Carthage, one which appears to be more secure from Dido's standpoint than his fated journey to Italy. Hypsipyle and Medea's letters to Jason enable me to evaluate the role of causation in a pre-determined world. Penelope's letter to Ulysses provides an example of subjective time, framing her self-representation in relation to Ulysses' delayed return. At the centre of these examples sits the question of free will in a fixed world, a topic which remains relevant now, as we too supposedly exist in a deterministic universe where temporal passage is deemed to be an illusion. These letters, therefore, can offer the modern reader a fictional window into what such a world might look like, a viewpoint that is unobtainable in real life.

KEYWORDS

Ovid, *Heroides*, female voice, heroines, epistolography, time, free will

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to consider the representation of time in Ovid's *Heroides*. Focusing on a selection from the single letters, I will examine how the various types of temporality expressed by these female authors help determine the way in which we view relationships of

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power between them and their male addressees, as well as their capacity for agency (or lack of it) in a mythological setting that appears to be already determined by a series of "source" texts. I will begin by applying two types of temporal perspective to the internal worlds of the *Heroides*, deploying a theoretical framework for time drawn from the western philosophical tradition in order to do so. In the first, as seen from the standpoint of the authors themselves, time appears to pass dynamically, involving an open future that emerges as the present before turning into the fixed past. A second perspective takes the form of an alternative, more dominant kind of temporality, centred on the literary tradition. This, I will argue, can be seen to resemble an eternalist spatiotemporal system as outlined in modern metaphysics and science, in which all events are real, and past, present, and future are reduced to matters of individual experience. On the surface, these letters reveal their authors to be in a powerless position, subservient to and largely unaware of this other eternalist temporal reality. Their engagement with time is narrow, centred on the belief that the future is open and can be changed, and that time flows. However, just as the act of letter writing is in itself an attempt to reclaim agency from their precarious states, a closer examination of the multitude of temporal responses expressed in these letters reveals how these authors seek to secure some form of control for themselves in situations that appear, from the omniscient gaze of the reader, to be hopeless. At the centre of this analysis sits the broader question of free will and what this might look like in a world that is already fixed, with the *Heroides* providing a spectrum of viewpoints on the complex interaction between human temporal experience, freedom of action, and open and closed futures. This is an issue which is relevant in the twenty-first century, as we too supposedly exist in a deterministic universe where temporal passage is deemed to be a subjective illusion. I will conclude, therefore, by suggesting that the *Heroides* can offer the modern reader an insight on what that world might look like, an experiential window onto four-dimensional time and space which is unobtainable to us in real life.

When thinking about time in the *Heroides*, it is important to take into account the temporality of the epistolary form more broadly beyond its manifestation in Ovidian poetry. Letters are *per se* highly charged documents when viewed from a temporal perspective. Assuming a continuous or near-continuous composition, they capture a moment in time that incorporates both past and future standpoints, centred on the writer's immediate

present, as seen exclusively through their eyes.[1] This is certainly the case in the *Heroides* where the letters and the mythical worlds they describe are to a large extent "projections or extensions of individual minds."[2] By the time the addressee will have received the letter, that present moment will have become the past, the letter's contents possibly overtaken by events that would have been the unknown future when the letter was being written.[3] As Duncan Kennedy has observed, the moment of their arrival becomes as significant as the moment of their composition, resulting in possible outcomes that lie beyond the author's control.[4] Therefore, they also privilege the act of reading, something the writer can anticipate but never predict. Moreover, letters are a means of negotiating prolonged absence, both spatial and temporal, acting as a "stand-in for verbal conversation."[5] When considering the *Heroides* specifically, these letters, while written later than the source texts against which they place themselves and clearly shaped by them, also refer to situations that precede certain events contained in those texts. From a metaliterary perspective, they create, as Alessandro Barchiesi has noted, an inverted temporal dynamic of pseudo-causation and a bidirectional intertextuality.[6]

As has been long observed by the scholarship, the *Heroides* are clearly not real letters, but epistolary poems, written in an elegiac metre, which are generically complex.[7] Nor do they reflect human experience in an un-

[1] Liveley (2008), 87–8.

[2] Jacobson (1974), 349, also cited in Verducci (1985), 299. Jacobson (1974), 358, notes how these letters "are subject to principles that often determine the nature of autobiographies."

[3] The question of the stated addressee and whether these letters allow for more than one recipient is also relevant here. See Spentzou (2003), 28, and the collection's need for "intermediaries."

[4] Kennedy (2002), 222–4.

[5] Lindheim (2003), 20. See also Kennedy (2002), 220–1; Liveley (2008), 88. Lindheim (2003), 18–30, summarises the use of the epistle in ancient literature before the composition of the *Heroides*.

[6] Barchiesi (1993).

[7] Spentzou (2003), 13–14. Jacobson (1974), 5–7, for how the *Heroides* are a response to the realisation that amatory elegy had reached the limits of what it could achieve, requiring a completely new type of elegy, as cited by Ovid in Ov. *Ars am.* 3.345–6. Kennedy (1984), 416, observes how the *Heroides* mostly pay only "cursory attention" to their status as letters,

mediated way but are careful reconstructions by the writer of that experience.[8] They are, as various scholars have suggested, similar to the dramatic monologues of tragedy,[9] while (when compared with the broader Ovidian corpus) they become one of Ovid's transitional pieces, linking themes that belong to his amatory elegy with his great mythological epic on change, the *Metamorphoses*.[10] The letters are infused with the language of Roman love poetry, which both accentuates their literariness, placing these famous mythological figures in an incongruous contemporary Augustan context, and which brings certain themes associated with amatory elegy to the fore, centred on questions of domination, subjugation, and relationships of power.[11] Patricia Rosenmeyer has further argued that the *Heroides* contain an important exilic dimension, serving as models for the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* — a body of work that builds on Ovid's "fascination with the genre of letters and the subject of abandonment."[12] Above all, the *Heroides* exist in the shadows of the source texts whose plotlines are already known by the literate reader. This complicated dynamic that incorporates the female letter writer, the male poet, and the intertexts against which he is positioning his poetry raises another central question that has dominated the recent scholarship: the extent to which the female voice is discernible from the voice of Ovid, the poet, and the literary web within which he is working.[13]

especially in a context where the actual writing of and subsequent delivery of the letter seems so implausible. See also Fränkel (1945), 36–9; Fulkerson (2005), 9–10.

[8] See Rosenmeyer (1997), 50–1, for a discussion of truth and fiction via the epistolary form.

[9] Wilkinson (1955), 86; Hinds (1993), 34. Verducci (1985), 16, notes how the letter form combines "the privacy of the interior monologue and the publicity of would-be persuasion," pointing to the important rhetorical dimension (and background) to the *Heroides*.

[10] Kenney (1996), 2. For an extended discussion of where to place the *Heroides* in relation to the poetry of Ovid's early career, citing the hypothesis of a revised collection of the earlier works that may have appeared in around 2 CE, see Thorsen (2014), 9–38; also, Harrison (2025) for a general chronology of Ovid's career.

[11] Farrell (1998), 316–17, notes how Roman love poetry often communicates the very real danger faced by women who write letters expressing their feelings towards a male lover. This too is a central feature of the *Heroides.*

[12] Rosenmeyer (1997), 29.

[13] For example, Kennedy (2002), 227–31; Spentzou (2003), 2–6, 23–8; Fulkerson (2005), 5–6.

On one level, the shift from epic to elegy symbolises a corresponding shift from a male to a female thought world, framed by elegy's close association with lament (as the image of the final song of the dying swan that opens *Heroides* 7 implies).[14] For Sara Lindheim, however, only the male voice is discernible in these letters,[15] while Efrossini Spentzou has argued that "we have no way of distinguishing safely and clearly between his [Ovid's] voice and their [the heroines'] voices."[16] This question of authorial voice ties in with the power imbalances that are contained within these letters. For the *Heroides* lays bare a series of unequal relationships in which the men seemingly have all the power, these unreliable and selfish individuals who are variously described as *perfidi* or *scelerati*.[17] They are the ones who will depart on their ships while the abandoned women are left on the shore, spatially and temporally immobile, crestfallen, seemingly reduced to passive figures.[18] Their letters become both an expression of this powerlessness, while also serving as a serious attempt to achieve some agency from that position, as these authors seek to influence events that the reader knows are fixed and ultimately beyond their complete control. Via their writing, the authors look to question and resist, to a degree, the certainties of the source texts. As "resisting readers," they are, according to Spentzou, "united in their determination to assert, explore, and vindicate women's mindset and value-schemes."[19]

With this in mind, I will address the following case studies, considering the temporality of the letters in question using the theoretical framework laid out above. To start, my analysis of Laodamia's letter to Protesilaus (*Heroides* 13) will evaluate how she responds to a future which is overtly pre-

[14] Von Glinski (2018), 227. Thorsen (2014), 10, notes how Ovid's reference to the *Heroides* in the *Amores* (2.18.21–6) uses the first-person plural *scribimus* (2.18.22), which suggests a shared poetic enterprise between male author and the heroines.

[15] Lindheim (2003), 182, as part of her broader argument that the female authors write to their own disadvantage.

[16] Spentzou (2003), 194; also, Martorana (2024), 2–3.

[17] Ov. *Her.* 2.17; 7.79; 7.118; 10.35; 12.19; 12.37.

[18] Bolton (2009), 274, observes that "who can move onto and into the sea and what this means becomes a gender-loaded question." See also Flanders (2012) for how the physical landscapes contained in the *Heroides* shape the authors' literary self-characterisations.

[19] Spentzou (2003), 38. This question of control touches on another of the important questions associated with Roman love poetry, relating to truth, authenticity, and the apparent sincerity or otherwise of that genre. See Wyke (2002), 11–45; James (2003), 3–7; Miller (2019).

determined, seeking to recapture a degree of agency via the very same supernatural sensations and occurrences that appear to foreclose it. I will then turn to Dido's letter to Aeneas (*Heroides* 7) and consider the ways in which Dido seeks to establish an alternative future for herself and Aeneas, centred on him remaining in Carthage, which for her seems to be more real than his plans to depart for Italy. Hypsipyle and Medea's letters to Jason (*Heroides* 6 and 12) will be treated as a pair as a means of examining causation in a pre-determined world, centred on the latter's decision to murder her own children. Finally, I will analyse Penelope's letter to Ulysses (*Heroides* 1), focusing on how Penelope's psychological state determines the sluggish speed at which time appears to flow for her, and how this then feeds into her examination of her own agency with respect to Ulysses' apparently interminable absence.

2. The *Heroides*' Two Types of Temporal Reality

There sits at the heart of our present-day notion of time a supposed contradiction. On an everyday level, according to the western philosophical tradition, we have a sense that time flows in a broadly linear way, the nebulous future becoming the present and then transitioning into the fixed past. Within this arrangement, the present moment enjoys a privileged position, "uniquely marked out from all others,"[20] while there is a fundamental asymmetry to the way in which we experience events, occurring in a certain order which cannot be changed. Within this framework, human temporal experience is marked by a fundamental difference in terms of our engagement with past and future. The past is seen as knowable, accessible to us through memory, whereas the future feels like it is open, full of opportunities and possibility. However, it seems like this may not be how time is actually organised. Modern metaphysics and theoretical physics have posited an alternative understanding of time which sees it as a dimension operating in conjunction with the three of space, part of a four-dimensional superstructure that encompasses the entire universe.[21] There is no sense of flow in this eternalist system and events exist in a tenseless way: past, present, and future become a matter of internal individual perspective which are

[20] Dyke (2021), 4.

[21] This view of time first came to prominence in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; see Bigelow (2016).

then projected onto the objective world.[22] It is only the way in which humans come across events within this superstructure that gives the impression that time passes when in fact it does not. Temporal passage, therefore, takes on a metaphorical quality as a means of describing an everyday type of human experience that has been overtaken by this other dominant temporal system, raising questions as regards our own ability to influence the future and the moral responsibility we consequently assume for our own actions.[23]

These contrasting temporal models can be productively mapped onto the *Heroides* and the letters' associated master texts, providing a unified theoretical framework that can be applied across the collection. The literary tradition, which in one sense tells us everything that has happened, is happening, and will happen, displays all of the events which are contained in the female authors' story arcs: their past, present, and future laid out in the manner of an eternalist universe.[24] The world, on this objective, meta-literary level, simply *is*. However, the letter writers themselves are unaware of these texts. For them, the world *happens*: events primarily unfold in time. The future as far as they are concerned remains unknowable and available to their own agency (even if the circumstances in which they find themselves complicate their capacity to act freely). "The writers experience…," Kennedy says, "the circumstances of their stories at the moment when they write as open and contingent, whereas the external reader, in a privileged position beyond the end, sees them as working out a series of events already determined… facilitating or struggling against their destiny — against the destination, that is, to which, at the end of the story, the external reader feels it has been directed all along."[25] The *Heroides* plays on the tension that exists between these two opposing temporal realities within its own fictional universe. The female letter writers hint (in an unknowing way) at this other

[22] Prosser (2016), 316, describes it as follows, "according to this view, no time is intrinsically present; indeed, no time has a different metaphysical status from any other, and the impression that there is something special about the present, and that time passes, is an illusion. In this respect, at least, time is somewhat like space."

[23] See, for example, Le Poidevin (2016), 537, who argues that one can still affect events in a deterministic world even if one may not be able to change them. See also Tallant and Donati (2025) for a discussion of time and causation, as well as Gallow (2022) for an overview of causation more generally.

[24] It is important to recognise at this juncture the sheer variety of stories, at times contradictory, associated with these figures. See Thorsen (2014), 35–7, for a list of relevant source texts.

[25] Kennedy (2002), 225. See also Barchiesi (1993), 350.

objective, tenseless world that resides beyond their immediate experience, which then takes on a physicality of its own, often in the form of the supernatural, as the actions of gods, or the result of omens, prophecies or individual premonitions.

3. *Heroides* 13: Laodamia's Letter to Protesilaus

Laodamia's letter to her husband, Protesilaus, provides a useful starting point for this line of enquiry.[26] It is dominated by just one event which conditions the reading of the letter: Protesilaus' death at the hands of Hector, as the first warrior to disembark from the Greek ships at Troy and therefore the first to die, as dictated by irreversible fate. Laodamia does not yet know this outcome. It resides in her future,[27] although maybe it is only her discovery of this event that is in her future. Given the uncertain time that it might take for any putative letter to reach Protesilaus, the arrival or even the writing of the letter may come after his death, forming part of Laodamia's as-yet-unknown past. Either way, she is powerless to alter the determined course of events. Protesilaus will die, may even be dead already, and there is nothing this letter can do to change it.

The first few lines of the letter signal the temporal uncertainty outlined above: *Aulide te fama est vento retinente morari/ a, me cum fugeres, hic ubi ventus erat?* ("Rumour has it that you have been delayed at Aulis by the wind. Oh, where was this wind when you were leaving me behind?" Ov. *Her.* 13.3–4). It is *fama* which has brought Laodamia news of the Greek fleet's delay at Aulis, a notoriously fickle and unreliable mode of receiving knowledge (as fickle as the wind that failed to stop Protesilaus from leaving Laodamia in the first place).[28] From the outset of her letter, therefore, Laodamia presents herself and her husband as being swept by and beholden

[26] Their story is told in Hom. *Il*. 2.698–702, Catull. 68.73–130, as well as in the *Cypria* and a lost tragedy by Euripides, among other treatments. See Jacobson (1974), 195–8. See Prop. 1.19.7–10 for this story's status as an example of love that is everlasting. The elegy ends with the following line (1.19.26): *non satis est ullo tempore longus amor* ("However long love lasts, it is never enough.")

[27] And presumably Protesilaus' future as well, if we assume that the Greek fleet is still stuck at Aulis when Laodamia writes, a by no means certain assumption.

[28] Hardie (2002), 134, notes how Ovid's House of Fama in the *Metamorphoses* (Ov. *Met.* 12.39–63) is described at precisely this point in the Trojan-war story arc.

to physical forces beyond their control, which will have terrible consequences for them both. This overriding sense of impotence is foregrounded further in the following lines, as Laodamia recalls via memory the moment when Protesilaus departs.[29] She describes how she is gripped by a physical response that goes beyond the normal:[30] she becomes enveloped by darkness, she turns a deathly pale, and she sinks (so she is informed) to the ground (*lux quoque tecum abiit, tenebrisque exanguis obortis/ succiduo dicor procubuisse genu*, Ov. *Her.* 13.23–4). Laodamia is so shaken that her family can barely bring her back to consciousness. And once they do, her erratic behaviour and dishevelled appearance in the aftermath of Protesilaus' departure become that of someone in mourning, described as like that of a Bacchant.[31] Purely on a metaliterary level, here we have traces of the master story making themselves felt in the letter's fictional world. However, when considered from that world's internal standpoint, one can say that Laodamia becomes aware in this moment (however vaguely) of this other temporal reality, where all events exist in time and space, that is normally beyond her perception. Her description of it reconfigures it as a premonition, and this is underscored by the contrast between her brief loss of physical sight and the supposed gaining of a temporal foresight (a standard literary trope for this form of knowledge).[32]

And yet, as the letter proceeds, these moments of heightened premonition are only fleeting, most notably re-emerging into view later on when Laodamia discusses how Protesilaus appears to her as a ghost — a *pallens imago* — in her dreams (referencing a literary tradition where she is so distraught at his death that the gods allow him to visit her briefly, after which she kills herself).[33] Instead, Laodamia goes on to curse Paris for causing the

[29] Ov. *Her.* 13.5–28.

[30] Jacobson (1974), 205, notes how the ship's gradual disappearance from view symbolises her loss of control.

[31] Ov. *Her.* 13.33–4.

[32] For Laodamia's complex relationship with the magical and the supernatural (which may even unwittingly cause Protesilaus' death), see Fulkerson (2002) and (2005), 107–21; also, Hardie (2002), 137; Jacobson (1974), 208–9.

[33] Hyg. *Fab.* 103; Ov. *Her.* 13.109–11. This reference to the ghost complicates supposed timing of the letter, and in particular the opening lines which refer to the Greek fleet being stuck at Aulis. While it may prefigure Protesilaus' death, it may also imply that he is dead already. Equally, Laodamia's reference to the wax image which she keeps of Protesilaus (Ov. *Her.* 13.151–8) also unwittingly foreshadows her own death, as according to the literary

war, calling him an ill-omened son of Priam, imagining for herself an alternative future where he had not eloped with Helen, before turning her ire on Menelaus.[34] Then, she prays for Protesilaus' safe return, before thinking again to the moment of departure when she wishes that she had called Protesilaus back after he had stumbled on the threshold of their house, an inauspicious event which she subsequently reinterprets in her favour, insisting that it will make him more cautious: *ut vidi, ingemui, tacitoque in pectore dixi:/ 'signa reversuri sint, precor, ista viri!'/ haec tibi nunc refero, ne sis animosus in armis;/ fac, meus in ventos hic timor omnis eat!* ("When I saw this, I groaned, and in my silent heart I said: 'I pray, let that be a sign that my husband will return!' I am telling you this now so that you are not overly brave when you fight. See to it that you make all of my fears vanish in the wind," Ov. *Her.* 13.89–92). In one sense, Laodamia shows herself to be hamstrung by the supernatural, as the scholarship has made clear: she does not speak out at the time about Protesilaus' stumble for fear of turning this random detail into an omen (*substitit auspicii lingua timore mali*, Ov. *Her.* 13.86), which from the reader's perspective it clearly is. And yet, she tries to turn the warning to her advantage in her written report of it, as part of a broader strategy in her letter which sees her treat the supernatural features of a supposedly pre-determined world as a rhetorical means of persuasion that will help (she wrongly believes) Protesilaus survive. Laodamia insists that these features can allow her to claw back a degree of agency in a world that otherwise appears to be severely constrained. This is how she deals with the elephant in the literary room: *the* prophecy, the thing which will condemn to death the first Greek to disembark at Troy.[35] She frames it as a warning rather than a certainty (*hoc quoque praemoneo*), insisting that Protesilaus should not be overly eager in his desire to reach the Trojan mainland. Let your ship be the last (*ultima*) to arrive and you be the final warrior (*novissimus*) to disembark, she says. There is no reason for you to

tradition (Hyg. *Fab.* 104) she throws herself on the fire after her father decides to burn it. See Jacobson (1974), 210–12; Hardie (2002), 135–7; Fulkerson (2002), 77–84.

[34] Ov. *Her.* 13.43–8.

[35] *sors quoque nescio quem fato designat iniquo/ qui primus Danaum Troada tangat humum* ("A prophecy exists that marks someone out for an unfair fate, the first Greek who sets foot on Trojan soil," Ov. *Her.* 13.93–4). Laodamia's use of *nescio quem* is especially poignant, as is her lament for the unhappy woman who will have to bear this loss (*infelix, quae prima virum lugebit ademptum*, Ov. *Her.* 13.95).

hurry.[36] The choice of *praemoneo* at Ov. *Her.* 13.99 is particularly instructive, underscoring this sense Laodamia is trying to convey that she remains in control of their shared future, that she has the capacity to shape it. Her forewarnings also imply that Protesilaus has indeed some responsibility for his own death: if he had shown more care and let someone else disembark first, then he would never have been killed.

Laodamia's clumsy attempts at agency reside in a state of heightened tension with observations that unwittingly refer to this other higher temporal reality where everything is fixed and Protesilaus dies, producing a sense of dramatic irony which is a hallmark feature of the entire collection.[37] Most notably, her advice as to how Protesilaus should fight, once he reaches Troy, shows the very real boundaries of her human perspective, as she tries to influence events beyond her control, unaware of the broader temporal picture.[38] Beware of Hector, she says (Protesilaus' killer), whoever he may be (*quisquis is est*). Treat the war as if there are many Hectors, in fact, each one a danger (*et multos illic Hectoras esse puta*, Ov. *Her.* 13.68). Seen from her standpoint, Hector is someone she has heard of, but who is not (yet) the great warrior of legend or her husband's murderer. Just by keeping her in mind, Protesilaus can ensure his and her own survival, Laodamia insists: *et facito ut dicas, quotiens pugnare parabis:/ 'parcere me iussit Laudamia sibi'* ("And make sure that you say, whenever you are preparing to do battle, the following: 'Laodamia has ordered me to spare herself,'" Ov. *Her.* 13.69–70). This line of thinking makes clear the lack of clarity which, as Genevieve Liveley has rightly argued, characterises the experience of the female authors in the *Heroides* more generally, citing the following lines:[39] *nos sumus incertae; nos anxius omnia cogit,/ quae possunt fieri, facta putare timor* ("We remain uncertain: anxious fear forces us to believe that everything which might happen has happened," Ov. *Her.* 13.149–50). In Laodamia's case, her fears do indeed come to pass in the temporal reality of the objective (metaliterary) world.[40] Yet, for her, the sheer unknowability of the future and the distress this causes, as she contemplates various possible future outcomes, is still tangible and real.

[36] Ov. *Her.* 13.96–100.

[37] See Jacobson (1974), 200–1, for how this letter in particular is heavy with such irony.

[38] Ov. *Her.* 13.65–70.

[39] Liveley (2008), 100.

[40] They may even, as I indicated before, have already taken place.

Laodamia is one of a number of writers who experience a strong sense of premonition in their letters, a momentary awareness of this other reality that shapes their lives. Oenone responds in a similar way in *Heroides* 5 when Paris tells her about his judgment of the three goddesses: *attoniti micuere sinus, gelidusque cucurrit,/ ut mihi narrasti, dura per ossa tremor* ("When you told me this, my heart shook with astonishment and a cold tremor ran through my hard bones," Ov. *Her.* 5.37–8). Ariadne innocently describes how she imagines seeing vague images of wild beasts which prefigure the arrival of Bacchus (a god associated with such animals) in her own future.[41] As Florence Verducci says, these are "actors who cannot comprehend the dark ironies of their own charade."[42] And, against this higher reality of which they are only dimly aware, the *Heroides* asks the broader question, which remains relevant now: what is agency, what does it look like in a world that may not be totally open? Is it just a matter of mistaken perspective, a false belief that one can act when in reality one cannot? We know that Laodamia will not change her own or Protesilaus' future via this letter. For it is already written down. But Laodamia does not believe this. She shows herself to be aware of the existence of a greater authority, which she describes as fate or as prophecy or as omens but which could alternatively be viewed as approximating a secular world which is pre-determined structurally. Nevertheless, Laodamia still fights against it, believing/hoping that there is something she can do to prevent Protesilaus from dying. There is additionally in this letter (and across the collection more generally) a recurring and unresolved opposition between *fama* and *fatum* (a central feature also of the *Metamorphoses*).[43] *Fama*, the spread of news and gossip, could be said to be representative of an open, uncontrollable world which appears to unfold in time before our eyes. In contrast, *fatum* stands as a proxy for this other predetermined world, where (as in twenty-first-century science) all events exist in a tenseless way and where everything is fixed.[44]

[41] Ov. *Her.* 10.81–7.

[42] Verducci (1985), 82.

[43] Ov. *Her.* 13.3 versus Ov. *Her.* 13.93. Other references to *fatum* notably occur at Ov. *Her.* 4.53, 5.33, 7.1, 8.65–6; for *fama*, see 3.57–8, 6.9, 7.5–6, 9.3, 9.143–4.

[44] On an associated level, *fama* as reputation allows for a literary immortality, an autobiographical account that is left for posterity. In contrast, *fatum* can be seen as representative of the inexorable course of a human life towards death.

4. *Heroides* 7: Dido's Letter to Aeneas

Dido's letter to Aeneas, *Heroides* 7, is also conditioned by fate, aligning with its central role in the source text, Virgil's *Aeneid*. The letter alludes to events in Book 4, the moment when Dido learns that Aeneas is preparing his ships to sail away from Carthage and found a new city in Italy, leaving her behind.[45] As with Laodamia's letter to Protesilaus, it plays on this idea of another reality in which events are already established, albeit with Dido showing a greater awareness of and direct engagement with this pre-determined world (Dido's reference to fate in the opening lines of the letter is an indicator of her sensitivity to this fixed future). Again, it is the male hero who is leaving, crossing that inaccessible boundary from shore to sea. And yet, in this letter, Dido offers Aeneas a window into an alternative future, one in which he stays and together they build Carthage into a great city, offering him the prospect of a more certain version of events when compared with the very real uncertainty that (from her perspective) shrouds his departure to Italy.

The letter famously opens with an admission that Dido will die, a mortal victim of *fatum*: *sic ubi fata vocant, udis abiectus in herbis/ ad vada Maeandri concinit albus olor* ("So the white swan sings at the call of fate, as it lays down in the wet grass by the shallows of the Maeander," Ov. *Her*. 7.1–2).[46] This arresting opening couplet, describing the final song of a dying swan, recognises the basic powerlessness of Dido's situation, and the pointless nature of the letter which she is composing, as is then made clear in the following lines: *sed merita et famam corpusque animumque pudicum/ cum male perdiderim, perdere verba leve est* ("To waste words is a small matter when I have lost my entitlements, my reputation, my body and my chaste heart for no purpose," Ov. *Her.* 7.5–6).[47] Dido's suicide is an outcome that is already established: it is determined by fate and is obviously part of the Virgilian source text. Yet it becomes clear, as the letter unfolds, that Dido also frames it as an outcome chosen freely, one that may even be deserved. It becomes an act of agency, therefore, from a position of no power

[45] Citing Arthur Palmer's commentary, Kennedy (1984), 416, proposes the moment of composition as intersecting with Verg. *Aen.* 4.408–15, as Dido gazes on the final preparations for Aeneas' departure.

[46] Jacobson (1974), 85–6, argues that Ovid provides the reader with a gentler version of the Virgilian Dido. These opening lines appear to signal this characterisation.

[47] Again, as cited above, we have *fatum* and *fama* referenced in close proximity.

(she is after all fighting against an *adverso deo*, Ov. *Her.* 7.4). It is unsurprising that so many of the letter writers follow this course of suicide, the only action that they believe is possible to them when they feel, on a temporal level that goes well beyond the physical and other restrictions of their immediate circumstances, that they cannot act freely.[48] Moreover, the reference to the notorious Maeander river, whose waters circle back and cross one another in a bewildering and utterly confusing way, is especially significant.[49] Ovid returns to this image when describing Daedalus' labyrinth in Book 8 of the *Metamorphoses*,[50] transforming it into a symbol for the complicated physical and literary structure of the fictional universe he creates in his epic poem. Here too it serves as a metaphor for spatial and temporal confusion, a feature of all the letters. Whereas the reader is offered an aerial view of events, Dido is facing a labyrinthine situation which she has found impossible to navigate, prompting her to take her own life.

For Dido, her death is the only aspect of her future which is clear. For the letter then goes on to challenge Aeneas, questioning in quite a precise way whether his departure has been pre-determined at all or whether fate and the gods are an excuse for a free choice which he himself, as the male hero of this story, has made. Again, this plays on the reader's knowledge of the *Aeneid*, as it is in Book 4 that Aeneas insists the gods are forcing him to leave Carthage.[51] From a Virgilian perspective, this statement is fundamentally true given that Mercury visits him on the orders of Jupiter to

[48] Dido notes at Ov. *Her.* 7.183–6 how Aeneas' sword is resting on her lap as she writes. It is wet with tears but will soon be stained with blood. Canace even begins her letter by admitting that she is holding a drawn sword in her other hand as she writes: *dextra tenet calamum, strictum tenet altera ferrum* (Ov. *Her.* 11.3). It is because of this that the letter roll is stained, not with tears (as is customary in the tradition), but with blood (Ov. *Her.* 11.1–4), a macabre detail that implies that the act of suicide is possibly already being performed. Williams (1992), 207, suggests that Canace is writing as Macareus is about to arrive and save her from an unnecessary death, having negotiated a reprieve with their father Aeolus.

[49] Also mentioned by Deianira in more detail in Ov. *Her.* 9.55–6 where the river is described as *terris totiens errator in isdem,/ qui lassas in se saepe retorquet aquas* ("so many times wandering over the same ground, and which often turns back its exhausted waters against itself.")

[50] Ov. *Met.* 8.162–6. For the labyrinth/Maeander as a metaphor for the structure of the *Metamorphoses*, see Barchiesi, Kenney, and Reed (2024), 142.

[51] Verg. *Aen.* 4.356–61.

command him to depart,[52] an epiphany that leaves Aeneas *amens*, out of his mind (Verg. *Aen.* 4.279). Aeneas reiterates this version of events again when he encounters Dido in the Underworld in Book 6.[53]

But whereas the ghost of Virgil's Dido remains silent,[54] in her Ovidian letter Dido has plenty to say. She accuses Aeneas of using the gods as a smoke screen, thereby avoiding the moral responsibility that comes with his departure. Are you sure that this is what you must do, she asks him (*certus es*, repeated at Ov. *Her.* 7.7 and 7.9)? Do you really plan to travel to a place completely unknown (*ubi sint nescis*, Ov. *Her.* 7.10)? An aerial, overarching view of time and space affords the literate reader the knowledge that Aeneas' journey will lead to the foundation of Rome, a Virgilian narrative that sits at the very heart of Augustan ideological discourse.[55] But Dido does not have this perspective: for her, at this point in her letter, the future is still unclear, framed by the choices one makes, while her understanding of the world is partial and incomplete, as is ours. For her, events unfold in time and the reality of their situation together now, in this place she calls New Carthage, seems to her more real than this vague notion of an Italian kingdom: *nec nova Carthago, nec te crescentia tangunt/ moenia nec sceptro tradita summa tuo?* ("Are you not affected by this new Carthage or by its rising ramparts, or the sceptre of supreme authority that has been handed over to you?" Ov. *Her.* 7.11–12). Dido even goes on to say, *facta fugis, facienda petis; quaerenda per orbem/ altera, quaesita est altera terra tibi* ("You run away from what you have achieved, as you search for new achievements. Another homeland must be searched for across the world, yet that other home has already been found by you," Ov. *Her.* 7.13–14). The use of the gerundive is an admission of the compulsion that frames Aeneas' departure. However, *facta* and *quaesita est* indicate that these heroic ambitions have already been completed. Their life now, in the present moment, has a greater reality, from Dido's perspective, than the one that Aeneas wants to pursue.

In this letter, Rome and Carthage are placed in direct opposition by presenting Rome as an alternate Carthage (*instar Carthaginis urbem*, Ov. *Her.* 7.19), even if the full meaning of this connection lies beyond Dido's

[52] Verg. *Aen.* 4.259–78.

[53] Verg. *Aen.* 6.455–66.

[54] Verg. *Aen.* 6.469–74.

[55] Drinkwater (2022), 13–39, finds in this account a contribution to a more general scepticism towards Augustan cultural propaganda, as mediated through Ovid's rewriting of Virgil.

immediate perception.[56] Dido asks Aeneas how he will secure this new land in Italy from hostile forces, as well as who will be his wife?[57] This replacement partner is referred to as an *altera Dido* (Ov. *Her.* 7.17), matching the correspondence that frames her description of Carthage and Rome, and reinforced further by Dido's assertion that this second marital pledge made by Aeneas will also prove to be false (*quamque iterum fallas altera danda fides*, Ov. *Her.* 7.18).[58] Behind these lines there exists this other temporal system in which these questions are already answered and which shape for the reader the meaning of some of what Dido writes. Yet for Dido, the future seems to be still open, if only Aeneas saw it that way, and we have moved far away from the fatalism which characterises the letter's opening lines. This is further emphasised by Dido's questioning of the events that took place in the aftermath of Troy's fall, as Aeneas has described them to her.[59] She says, *omnia mentiris, neque enim tua fallere lingua/ incipit a nobis, primaque plector ego* ("You are all lies, nor am I the first woman your tongue had deceived nor the first to have been hurt by you," Ov. *Her.* 7.81–2). As so many of the heroes in these letters, she twice addresses Aeneas as *perfidus* (Ov. *Her.* 7.79, 118), fundamentally unreliable and, above all, morally responsible, to blame for what is happening.[60] Dido insists, deploying a familiar literary trope, that he is the offspring of rocks and mountains, oak trees, wild beasts or the sea.[61] But Aeneas is not the only target of Dido's anger. "Burn me," she says, "for I deserve it. The punishment of my own death is lesser than my guilt" (*merentem/ ure; minor culpa poena futura mea est*, Ov. *Her.* 7.85–6). The reader knows that Dido will be destined to burn on a funeral pyre following her suicide, witnessed from a distance by Aeneas (without him realising its significance), as he is sailing away.[62] And, figuratively, she is already burning as she writes, with love — *uror*, she says at Ov.

[56] This connection is both mythological and historical, given the two cities' rivalry for control of the Mediterranean in the third and second centuries BCE (the Virgilian mythology reinforcing the established history).

[57] Ov. *Her.* 7.15–22.

[58] As Thorsen (2014), 71, notes, this alternate Dido has a metaliterary dimension in that Ovid is presenting the reader with his own characterisation of the Virgilian Dido. See also Knox (2001), 133.

[59] Ov. *Her.* 7.73–86.

[60] This alludes to Verg. *Aen.* 4.305 where Aeneas is also referred to as *perfidus* by her.

[61] Ov. *Her.* 7.37–40. See Verg. *Aen*. 4.365–7.

[62] Verg. *Aen*. 5.1–7.

Her. 7.23. Nonetheless, culpability, as expressed by Dido in the lines cited above, requires an understanding that one can make choices and have some influence over events. Dido believes that she is guilty because she too has some freedom of action, so she thinks, which she has used to her great detriment by aligning herself with Aeneas through an ill-fated union.[63]

Aeneas' deception extends to the quarrel, conducted by them both across *Aeneid* 4 and *Heroides* 7, over whether this marriage of theirs is in fact a marriage at all,[64] a question that takes on even more importance when Dido admits that she may be pregnant — again, hinting at an alternative future in which they bring up a child as husband and wife (rather than lose that child through her suicide).[65] The letter's obsession with promises and pledges (to the gods, to Dido), ones that are kept and ones that are broken, form part of this broader exploration of fixed and open outcomes, of freedom of choice and agency. Aeneas may insist that he has been ordered by the gods to leave for Italy, yet Dido even turns this on its head, arguing that the gods are in fact against him and that he disrespects them: *pone deos et quae tangendo sacra profanas./ non bene caelistis inpia dextra colit* ("Put aside the gods and the sacred objects which your touch profanes. It is not appropriate that your impious right hand should worship the heaven-dwellers," Ov. *Her.* 7.129–30).[66] From a world in which everything is laid out, Dido manages to extract uncertainty and a degree of free will, which she applies to herself and to Aeneas as a means of judging the choices that have been made.

The broader question remains as to how we might classify these alternative futures which Dido proposes in this letter. Are these her wishes, desires, a rhetorical device designed to persuade, a rational assessment of the situation, or a genuine belief that the fated future can be altered? In her analysis of time and narrative in the *Heroides*, Liveley has emphasised how, while for the reader there is only one trajectory that establishes the future path the story will take, for the female letter writers "the future is *not*

[63] Dido cites the Furies as present at her marriage with Aeneas (a literary trope for ill-fated marriages), Ov. *Her.* 7.95–6. She then demands her own punishment for the purity that had been harmed (*exige, laese pudor, poenas*, Ov. *Her.* 7.97) in relation to her former husband, Sychaeus.

[64] Verg. *Aen.* 4.338–9, Ov. *Her.* 7.91–6. Dido in her letter refers to it as a *concubitus*, a lying together.

[65] Ov. *Her.* 7.133–8, alluding to Verg. *Aen.* 4.327–30.

[66] Dido transforms the *pius Aeneas* of Virgil into the opposite, with his *manus inpia* also cited at Ov. *Her.* 7.127.

predetermined, somehow and somewhere already prescribed, it is unknown and open in many different possible directions."[67] My own examination of these letters so far has emphasised this same point. Liveley has proposed that we see these multiple possible futures as "paraquel lines," stories that unfold in parallel with the established one from an alternative present, the result of narrative "sideshadowing" rather than foreshadowing or backshadowing.[68] Another way we might consider this question is to return to modern cosmology and think about the different ways temporality has been conceptualised within this field. In an attempt to resolve philosophical concerns that eternalist spacetime models do not allow for our everyday sense of temporal passage, which one should not dismiss out of hand, some modern theories have attempted to reintroduce the concept of flow within a static superstructure as a means of finessing this conundrum. One such example views the world as like a cosmic four-dimensional tree, with the trunk representing the past and possible futures as its branches.[69] As time passes, the trunk proceeds to grow while the (unused) branches fall into non-existence, a structure that combines static and dynamic elements of time into one highly elaborate system. I think we can productively consider Dido's alternative future of a prosperous and shared Carthage as similar to one of these cosmological branches. The way this is presented — especially the equivalence which is foregrounded with Dido's insistence on these alternate realities (Rome as Carthage, Aeneas' future wife as another Dido, their shared child as an alternative Iulus) — implies that this is more than just a wish or a hope. There appears to be a metaphysical reality to Dido's projections that (to her) is more substantial than the supposed future being described to her by Aeneas. And yet, these branches end up falling away into non-existence, overtaken by the foundation and subsequent emergence of Rome as the pre-eminent superpower of the Mediterranean.[70]

[67] Liveley (2008), 99 (Liveley's italics).

[68] Liveley (2008), 101–2.

[69] See, for example, McCall (1996), 1–19.

[70] And, as a result, the destruction of the historical Carthage, mythologically Dido's home.

5. *Heroides* 6 and 12: Hypsipyle and Medea's Letters to Jason

The world of the *Heroides* is full of these alternate, imagined futures working in conjunction with moments of unexpected foresight in which the future is predicted with uncanny accuracy. The former can be seen as both a psychological response to the reality of the letter writer's present situation and also as an indication of other potential outcomes that do not come to fruition, these cosmic branches that fall away. In *Heroides* 6, Hypsipyle's letter to Jason, for example, the entire letter is framed by a continuing tension between temporal equivalence and opposition, as Hypsipyle works towards a conclusion in which she both imagines herself as an alternate Medea (from a position of extreme contrast) and then appears to predict, in the form of a curse, the tragic course of the other Medea's life. As the letter begins, Medea is disparagingly referenced as a *barbara venefica*, a barbarian sorceress (Ov. *Her.* 6.19), news of her emergence as Jason's supposed lover received via a report that Hypsipyle has heard second-hand rather than from Jason himself (*cur mihi fama prior de te quam littera venit?* "Why has a rumour concerning you reached me before your letter?" Ov. *Her.* 6.9). Medea's future significance as the ultimate subject of this letter is only really hinted at, as Hypsipyle focuses first on the stated addressee, Jason, and the memory of her relationship with him,[71] together with his reported exploits in Colchis.[72] It is only once these details have been laid out that Hypsipyle turns to the future and her own furious anticipation of Medea's tragic demise. This transition, from past to future perspective, is effected by Hypsipyle posing a series of questions as to how she should now behave, as Jason's lawful wife, given that Medea appears to have taken her place.[73] Medea's name is only first mentioned at Ov. *Her.* 6.75, after which Hypsipyle starts to develop her characterisation of her more fully, via a long citation of some of the magical commonplaces associated with her in the

[71] As marked by *memini* at Ov. *Her.* 6.64.

[72] Jason's exploits at Colchis are summarised at Ov. *Her.* 6.9–16, 32–7, while Ov. *Her.* 6.39–74 deals with their relationship before his departure on the Argo. In these lines, Hypsipyle addresses themes that are also reminiscent of Dido: the ill-fated wedding (Ov. *Her.* 6.39–46) and the marital pledge that is then betrayed; the pregnancy and birth of twins (Ov. *Her.* 6.61–2), which then prompts Hypsipyle to speculate as to what would happen to them; the false tears and departing vow, as Jason leaves, matches Aeneas' own deception and his broken vows (Ov. *Her.* 6.63–4).

[73] Hypsipyle asks whether she should absolve her vows, bear gifts or undertake a sacrifice following Jason's safe return (Ov. *Her.* 6.75–8).

literary tradition.[74] Hypsipyle even chides Jason for the fact that he has chosen such a woman, removing from him the glory of his achievements in Colchis (having listed them earlier), which are all in fact down to Medea's terrifying magic (Ov. *Her*. 6.95–108). Jason is fickle, *mobilis*, Hypsipyle writes, less reliable than the winds in spring, *vernaque incertior aura* (Ov. *Her.* 6.109):[75] his heroic acts and the hypermobility associated with male heroes such as him repurposed to expose his faithlessness.

Hypsipyle then lingers over the topic of their offspring, the twins she has borne Jason, a sign of her supposed happiness and good fortune (*felix*, Ov. *Her*. 6.121). The children even resemble him, she writes, aside (of course) from his capacity for deception: *si quaeres, cui sunt similes, cognosceris illis./ fallere non norunt; cetera patris habent* ("If you ask who they look like you will recognise yourself in them. They do not know how to deceive. The rest is like their father," Ov. *Her.* 6.123–4). Here, we have in full view the tension between equivalence and opposition that characterises this letter — Jason's children are like their father but at the same time not like him in possibly the most important way — and it serves to introduce another alternate future, as Hypsipyle imagines with horror what it would be like if they were placed under the care of Medea, who would be their stepmother.[76] She even says at one point in a moment of great clarity, *Medeae faciunt ad scelus omne manus* ("Medea's hands are capable of any type of crime," Ov. *Her.* 6.128). Medea is someone Hypsipyle has not met, and so this might be classed as another unwitting premonition given that Medea does murder her own children, as the reader will know from Euripides. One can alternatively see these lines as offering a parallel version of events in which Medea kills Hypsipyle's children (and not her own), a cosmic branch that is supplanted by another equally sinister one in which Medea becomes a murdering mother rather than a murdering stepmother.

The implication here is that Hypsipyle would never murder her own children, as Medea ends up doing.[77] Moreover, Hypsipyle goes on to observe

[74] Ov. *Her.* 6.85–94. This is magic which Medea admits in her own letter is useless to turn Jason away from Creusa (Ov. *Her.* 12.163–74).

[75] It is at this stage in the letter that Hypsipyle makes a final plea for his return, citing her noble lineage, *nobilitas generosaque nomina*, (Ov. *Her.* 6.111–18). There is a possible metaliterary subtext here of who, out of Hypsipyle and Medea, has the most famous story.

[76] Ov. *Her.* 6.119–28.

[77] Medea also notes her children's likeness to Jason (but as a prelude to their murder) at Ov. *Her.* 12.189–90.

a number of other important differences between her and Jason's latest lover: her chastity, her loyalty to both her father, Thoas, and to Lemnos (while Medea deserted Colchis and betrayed her own father, Aeëtes, with the murder of her brother serving as an ominous example of her capacity for extreme familial cruelty).[78] Hypsipyle then projects forwards in time to imagine Jason arriving at Lemnos in a storm, prompting her to offer him safe harbour. It is at this point that she simultaneously casts herself as an alternate Medea who tears the real Medea to pieces, covering her own face and that of Jason with her blood, an act of extreme violence worthy of her rival.[79] *Medeae Medea forem*, Hypsipyle even writes at one point, suggesting an almost transformation of herself into Medea (Ov. *Her.* 6.151) — her previous self-distancing suddenly cast aside as she presents herself as Medea's alter ego.[80] And this extreme form of equivalence then paves the way for the climax of the letter in which Hypsipyle utters a curse that, from the perspective of events that unfold in time, delineates with great precision the misery Medea will go on to suffer in her own future (Ov. *Her.* 6.151–64): may Medea be abandoned as I have been, Hypsipyle asks angrily of Jupiter, and lose not just her husband but two children as well (the same number of children that Hypsipyle has);[81] may she become an exile, as bitter (*acerba*) to her husband and children as she was to her father and brother, Hypsipyle goes on to say; may she travel the world destitute and without hope (*erret inops, exspes*), stained with the blood of her murders (*caede cruenta sua*).

From a temporal standpoint, this concluding section can be read in a number of ways. Most obviously, one might say the curse will be shown to have worked. It becomes the ultimate expression of a certain type of agency, as Jupiter accedes to Hypsipyle's desires. A more complex reading may see this as another moment in which Hypsipyle's awareness of time and space, of the objective world around her, expands beyond the present of her immediate experience, collapsing past, present, and future. She is able to perceive events in a tenseless manner (albeit expressing that brief vision supernaturally), becoming conscious of and attracted to this other reality

[78] Ov. *Her.* 6.133–8.

[79] Ov. *Her.* 6.149–50.

[80] Jacobson (1974), 102–4. There is a parallel with Dido and the *altera Dido* cited in *Heroides* 7, as this letter discusses the possibility of their being more than one Medea.

[81] *utque ego destituor coniunx materque duorum,/ a totidem natis orba sit illa viro!* ("In the same way that I, as a wife and mother of two children, have been left abandoned, so may she be left bereft of as many offspring and her husband," Ov. *Her.* 6.155–6).

which I have talked about, but not in control of it, her foreknowledge framed by this radical reimagining of her own character, which (even as she is repelled by her) takes on the persona of Medea herself in an effort to secure her revenge.

Hypsipyle's engagement with Medea's future contrasts with the very real temporal agency that is on display at the end of Medea's own letter, *Heroides* 12, when she warns darkly, *nescio quid certe mens mea maius agit* ("Some greater plan that I do not yet know is certainly brewing in my mind," Ov. *Her.* 12.212).[82] This line, which underscores this idea of an open future in which Medea has the capacity to make dreadful choices, comes after she references her two children in relation to the decision to eject her from the royal palace and to the wedding procession involving Jason and his latest bride Creusa.[83] The reader is left with the suspicion that maybe Medea does have a clearer sense of what she is about to do than she is letting on. But this is just a suspicion, conditioned by a knowledge of events, as they are laid out in other texts. For Medea, her precise course of action remains open to her. She is, as she herself sees it, the agent of her own future behaviour, free to shape it as she so wishes.[84]

This question of Medea's agency with respect to her own internal future takes place in a letter which oscillates between expressions of extreme power and powerlessness. Medea showcases the control that she has over life and death, as evidenced by the murder of her brother and of Pelias (under the pretence of assisting his daughters in their rejuvenation of him), events

[82] Barchiesi (1993), 344–5, suggests that what Medea has in mind cannot be described in elegiac form but requires a different literary setting. Ovid wrote a lost tragedy about Medea and also describes her story at length in Book 7 of the *Metamorphoses*.

[83] Ov. *Her.* 12.133–58. Verducci (1985), 78, describes Medea's depiction of the procession as the "temporal fulcrum" of the letter. It is also worth noting the threatening undertones that accompany Medea's repetition of *ausus es* in relation to the ejection (Ov. *Her.* 12.133–4), both times placed at the beginning of the line.

[84] This is a view of herself that takes on greater significance when one considers her elevated status in the literary tradition, her actions pre-determined by the male authors who write about her. See Hinds (1993) for an extended analysis. With respect to the literary tradition, there is in particular this dual characterisation of Medea as young girl and seasoned witch which draws from Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica* and Euripides' *Medea*, respectively. See Verducci (1985), 71–2. See also Jacobson (1974), 118–19, for how the letter recreates the Apollonian version of Medea in Euripidean terms (even if she does self-describe as a *puella*, see fn 87).

referenced at Ov. *Her.* 12.113–20 and 12.129–30.[85] Yet, her admission that Jason's betrayal has turned her from a queen (*regia coniunx*) to a barbarian foreigner (*barbara facta*), echoing Hypsipyle's description of her as a *barbara venefica* at Ov. *Her.* 6.19, is conversely representative of her powerlessness, in that her status has been stripped from her by Jason's act of infidelity.[86] And this is a change in position which is amplified by the wedding scene and her humiliating exclusion from the palace, as cited above. Medea even begins her letter by wishing that her own life had ended at that point in time when she was at her most powerful (before her authority had started to drain away), with Jason seeking the fleece: *tunc quae dispensant mortalia fata sorores/ debuerant fusos evoluisse meos./ tum potui Medea mori bene* ("That was the time when the sisters who determine the lifespans of mortals should have unwound my thread. Then could Medea have died well," Ov. *Her.* 12.3–5). Since that moment, her life has been a punishment, she admits (*quidquid ab illo/ produxi vitam tempore, poena fuit*, Ov. *Her.* 12.5–6). By citing the Fates, Medea accepts that, ultimately, she is not in charge of her own life, even if she seems to be so of the lives of others.[87] From a temporal standpoint, this is a wish crucially expressed as a memory (*memini*), prominently placed in the very first line:[88] the past is here seen as fixed and impossible to change, however much one might want to from the perspective of a present moment of deep regret. And it is from this position of apparent powerlessness that Medea intimates the terrible unravelling of life which will ultimately result in the deaths of her very own children. This final act of defiance will carry with it none of the magic for which Medea is

[85] The former referenced with evident regret.

[86] Ov. *Her.* 12.103, 105. Her own use of *barbara* also represents an almost tacit acceptance of her capacity to commit terrible acts. Earlier in the letter, when describing events at Colchis, she describes herself, using the language of Roman love elegy, as a naïve young girl, a *puella simplex* and a *capta puella* (Ov. *Her.* 12.89–90, 92), deceived (as Hypsipyle was) by Jason's false tears (Ov. *Her.* 12.91). She even turns pale, *pallida* (Ov. *Her.* 12.97), when watching Jason undertake the quests for the fleece, even though her magic (referred to as her *ars* in Ov. *Her.* 12.2) will ensure that he is successful.

[87] A subsequent desire that both she and Jason had died a violent death at sea reinforces her rueful self-presentation as someone whose life has gone on for too long (Ov. *Her.* 12.121–8).

[88] This recalls Hypsipyle's use of the exact same word, as cited above. In both cases, it additionally serves as an allusive marker for the heavy literary tradition surrounding these stories.

famed: she is forced to rely on her capacity for unimaginable violence to enact her revenge on Jason via these brutal acts of murder.[89]

When considered as a pair, these letters to Jason offer the reader an interpretative puzzle. They ask the following philosophical question, centred on causation: who is ultimately responsible for the way Medea's life eventually unfolds? For Laurel Fulkerson, by reinventing herself as Medea and taking on her magical capabilities, Hypsipyle might even be seen as responsible for the events of Medea's later life, offering via her curse an "impossibly accurate rendering" of them.[90] Yet, on a surface level, it may be the case that Jupiter is responsible (at Hypsipyle's request) or Medea herself, who casts her actions as the result of her own free will. Equally, it may be neither of the female figures, their sense of agency (as expressed in their letters) an illusion in a cosmological setting where everything is already fixed. I would argue that this puzzle is ultimately left unresolved. And it is complicated further by the fact that these are the heroines' supposedly unmediated versions of events, expressed in letter form (which is what provides these poems with their transparent veneer). They are coloured by the authors' own subjective (rather than objective) views of the worlds which they inhabit, projecting what Verducci calls a "psychological authenticity" and a "convincing fidelity to the private perspective."[91]

6. *Heroides* 1: Penelope's Letter to Ulysses

The highly subjective nature of the letters represents another important factor when considering temporality, agency, and relationships of power within the *Heroides*. A prime example of this is the very first letter, written by Penelope to Ulysses, which is programmatic for the collection as a whole. The legendary story of Ulysses' return from the Trojan War has time and in particular *timing* as a core concern, with Penelope seeking to maintain control of her domestic household while being besieged by suitors for the two decades during which her husband is absent. Her letter in the *Heroides* lays bare how that period of time is felt by her, centred on the common

[89] The sheer horror of what Medea goes on to do is amplified in this letter by the fact that it is never explicitly suggested, as if it is almost too terrible to speak of openly.

[90] Fulkerson (2005), 53.

[91] Verducci (1985), 15.

human experience of time seeming to pass more quickly or slowly depending on that person's prevalent emotional state. This feature of temporal experience goes on to shape Penelope's account of her own situation, and is foregrounded in the very first line: *hanc tua Penelope lento tibi mittit, Ulixe –/ nil mihi rescribas tu tamen; ipse veni!* ("Penelope sends you this letter, Ulysses, slow to return. Do not write back to me, however. Come yourself!" Ov. *Her.* 1.1–2). Ulysses is being *lentus*, slow, not just objectively in terms of the number of years he is taking to come back, but excessively slow for *her*.[92] Penelope insists that Ulysses return now, that he shows himself straightaway, *ipse veni*. So much time has passed and yet he is still not back, his whereabouts (for Penelope, at least) entirely unknown.

Penelope then goes on to repeat this theme at Ov. *Her.* 1.66: *quas habitas terras, aut ubi lentus abes?* ("In which lands are you living, where are you in your absence idling your time?"). As indicated above, the *Heroides* is infused with the language of Roman love poetry and *lentus* is one of those important programmatic words, incorporating a broad range of meanings in an Augustan amatory context. For Bardo Maria Gauly, it can signify indifference or unresponsiveness, endurance and tenacity, as well as slow-burning desire,[93] all of these meanings predicated on the word's core temporality which is then extended to convey a series of subjective time-related perspectives in relation to the attitude of the lover. Here, in *Heroides* 1, *lentus* takes on this additional dimension, amplifying Penelope's sense of time that is almost at a standstill because of Ulysses, the result of her fragile psychological state.[94] It comes to symbolise the entrapment and extreme stasis she feels amid the very real danger she faces at home. Moreover, Penelope's emphasis on Ulysses being *lentus* places time firmly within the broader context of their marital relationship, recast in the contemporary Augustan vocabulary of a male lover and his beloved. It feeds

[92] This label of absent men being *lenti* is a feature of the *Heroides*, see Ov. *Her.* 2.23 (Phyllis and Demophoon); 6.17 (Hypsipyle and Jason); 8.18 (Hermione and Orestes). Hermione, a prisoner of Achilles' son Pyrrhus, begs Orestes to come now, *ipse veni!* (Ov. *Her.* 8.24), while Phyllis' exact phrasing is, *at tu lentus abes*, also echoing the language used by Penelope.

[93] Gauly (1995), 92–3; see also Fulkerson (2005), 38, for how it refers to a lover who is not as responsive as one might want; also, Martorana (2024), 35; Gardner (2013), 130–1.

[94] At Ov. *Her.* 1.71, Penelope describes herself as *demens* with fear driven by her situation at home and a lack of knowledge as to Ulysses' whereabouts. In contrast, the reader familiar with the *Odyssey* will know well enough that part of the reason for this is down to Ulysses' other lovers, Calypso and Circe.

into, both in this letter and the entire collection, themes that reside at the heart of Roman love poetry, as identified by Hunter Gardner in her examination of the temporality of that genre: resistance, delay, cyclicality and repetition, versus the linear time of action and mobility of the Roman male.[95] While Ulysses is away, involved in the world of martial endeavour, Penelope has been left behind. She self-represents (on behalf of the entire community of female authors) as an abandoned sweetheart, the *puella relicta* of amatory elegy,[96] suspecting that Ulysses' absence may be deliberate and down to a rival lover, her fidelity to him betrayed.[97] Penelope even uses this adjective, *relicta*, when she writes how, if Troy were still standing, she would not be lying in an empty bed, cast aside, complaining at how slow the days are appearing to pass: *non ego deserto iacuissem frigida lecto,/ non quererer tardos ire relicta dies* (Ov. *Her.* 1.7–8). And it is within this context of temporal and spatial enclosure that Penelope then recasts her powerfully symbolic act of weaving, reduced here to a means of surviving the long and lonely nights: *nec mihi quaerenti spatiosam fallere noctem/ lassaret viduas pendula tela manus* ("Nor would the hanging thread be tiring my widowed hands as I seek to deceive the long hours of the night," Ov. *Her.* 1.9–10). All of the agency associated with this famous act, in which Penelope is supposed to have woven and unwoven a burial shroud for her father-in-law Laertes as a delaying tactic, is removed, redeployed to emphasise her apparent powerlessness and the grindingly slow temporality of her life without her husband.[98] Penelope's use of *tardos dies* and *spatiosam noctem* serves to underscore this idea of a vast expanse of time that barely passes, while the important Homeric context of Penelope's weaving is only ever hinted at via *fallere*. Here, Penelope is not seeking to deceive the suitors, but time itself.

Penelope returns to this idea of an alternate future in which Troy continues to exist at Ov. *Her.* 1.47–56, subtly comparing her own wretched situation with that of the city: so much time has passed, she observes, that even Troy itself is undergoing a form of renewal, the cycles of seasonal time providing crops ready to be harvested on land made fertile and rich by Trojan blood: *iam seges est, ubi Troia fuit, resecandaque falce/ luxuriat*

[95] Gardner (2013).

[96] See Gardner (2013), 145–80.

[97] For the tradition of Penelope as a symbol of marital devotion together with an alternative tradition which described her as the opposite, see Jacobson (1974), 243–9. For the former characterisation in Roman love elegy, see Ov. *Ars am.* 1.477–8, 3.15–16.

[98] Hom. *Od.* 2.85–128; 19.134–64.

Phrygio sanguine pinguis humus (Ov. *Her.* 1.53–4). Yet there is no such renewal afforded to Penelope: she remains *frigida*, unable to escape her own personal temporal standstill, trapped in a form of perpetual winter. At Ov. *Her.* 1.67–9, Penelope observes directly how it would be more useful for her that Troy were still standing (*utilius starent etiamnunc moenia Phoebi*), as at least this way she would know where Ulysses was fighting (*scirem ubi pugnaris*). Her husband has won the war, yet she cannot locate him as he hides nor does she know the cause for such a delay (*victor abes, nec scire mihi, quae causa morandi/ aut in quo lateas ferreus orbe, licet!* Ov. *Her.* 1.57–8). He is, for her, both spatially and temporally elusive, almost invisible. Ulysses is not just *lentus*: he is being cruelly so, Penelope is implying here, and she calls him *ferreus*. He is cold-hearted in his reluctance to return and allow her to live in proper accordance with time, leaving her in effect stranded spatiotemporally while he enjoys at his own leisure the attentions of her rivals.[99]

And yet, while Penelope finds herself trapped in this tortured form of psychological standstill, time in the form of the ageing process and the course of a human life continues to pass, in this case all too quickly. By the time Ulysses finally does decide to show, Penelope concludes, she will be an old woman (*anus*), very different from the young girl (*puella*) which he left behind: *certe ego, quae fueram te discedente puella,/ protinus ut venias, facta videbor anus* (Ov. *Her.* 1.115–16).[100] Here, the letter ends by emphasising again the language of Roman love elegy and a common elegiac concern to do with ageing and the loss of desire via these stock figures of the *puella* and the *anus*.[101] And it makes clear the letter's abiding concern not just with time, but with timing — making sure that one lives by the *correct* time. For while the family household is not completely bereft of males who might defend her from the suitors, Penelope notes, Laertes is now too old and

[99] As per Ov. *Her.* 1.75–80, where Penelope imagines Ulysses telling some other lover about his uncultured wife, *rustica coniunx* (1.77), a metaliterary play on the trope of the *docta puella* in Roman love elegy. Penelope's letter is, of course, the opposite of *rustica* given its careful engagement with the literary tradition (as is the case with the entire collection). See James (2003), 21–8, 212–23, for an analysis of the *docta puella*.

[100] Barchiesi (1993), 336, notes how in the Homeric tradition it will be Ulysses who will return looking like an old man, citing Hom. *Od.* 13.432 and 18.27.

[101] Gardner (2013), 25–6, 181–2, 207–18, for a discussion of the figures of the *puella* and the *anus*. See Miller (2019) for an analysis of how the figure of the *puella* in Roman love elegy has been treated in the scholarship over time.

Telemachus too young: *tres sumus imbelles numero, sine viribus uxor/ Laertesque senex Telemachusque puer* (Ov. *Her.* 1.97–8). The former is approaching death (Ov. *Her.* 1.113–14), while the latter still needs to be trained in the arts of his father (Ov. *Her.* 1.111–12), a subtle hint at Ulysses' capacity for deception and (in this context) perhaps his skills as a lover. In short, the timing of her and their family existence is all wrong: Laertes is a frail *senex* and Telemachus an inexperienced *puer*. Only Ulysses can bring the temporal rhythms of their family life back into their correct place: by being present to bury his own father when the time comes and to instruct his son as he grows into responsible adulthood.

And yet, within this bleak portrayal of Penelope's situation, the letter contains subtle hints of agency, centred on the act of writing itself. For Penelope indicates that she is an assiduous writer of letters, which are then handed to travellers so that they might pass them onto Ulysses himself if they happen upon him.[102] As Kennedy suggests, it may be the case that this particular letter, *Heroides* 1, is actually to be handed to Ulysses himself, recently arrived to Ithaca in the guise of a beggar.[103] Penelope's intention may not necessarily be that the beggar passes it on, but that she might force Ulysses to drop the pretence, of which she is all too well aware. Therefore, depending on when exactly the letter was written, Ulysses is perhaps also slow because Penelope may know that he is already on the island, but he has not yet shown himself to his wife (in a situation where the timing of his unmasking is crucial).[104] As such, this sense of impotence that appears to pervade Penelope's letter may be read as part of a strategy to communicate a constructed powerlessness, an elaborate rhetorical ploy. The letter may in fact be a test, a way of forcing its reader, Ulysses, to come clean, an act of genuine agency when so many other letters she has supposedly written might be viewed as futile expressions of the opposite. Certainly, the discrepancy between Penelope's own description of her nocturnal weaving and the account of it in the source text, the *Odyssey*, is suggestive of someone

[102] Ov. *Her.* 1.59–62.

[103] Kennedy (1984), 417–18.

[104] This relates to the extensive Homeric scholarship that has considered the question of recognition, the moment when Penelope realises that the beggar is in fact her husband. For an overview, see Vlahos (2007); Reece (2011). See Thorsen (2014), 27, for how this programmatic opening letter references "a point of origin in ancient literary history where Penelope, Ovid's primary heroine, refers to the primordial poet in the canon of ancient literature, Homer."

who is merely presenting herself as powerless, seemingly lacking any agency altogether.[105] The temporality of the letter, with its focus on the psychological impact of Ulysses' absence in terms of how time is felt, may consequently be a clever means of smoking Ulysses out. By emphasising her inability to manage time, therefore, Penelope may in fact be trying to gain control of it.

7. Conclusion

This paper has considered the temporality of the *Heroides* from various perspectives, placing the question in the context of the relationships the letter writers have with their absent lovers and the power dynamics that stem from them. At the centre of all of these case studies sits the question of agency and what this might realistically look like in an objective world which is pre-determined. For the female authors, the future appears to be open and undecided, and yet they occasionally show an awareness of the fixed course of their own lives, as determined by a literary tradition of which they are obviously unaware. Equally, as demonstrated in my analysis of Penelope's letter to Ulysses, time becomes an expression of the letter writers' psychological states, drawing out in extreme and unbearable ways. It grinds to a halt and consequently aligns with the extreme spatial immobility described by these writers.

Returning to the question posed earlier with respect to the discernibility or otherwise of the female voice, my consideration of the temporality of the *Heroides* has an additional relevance, as it can give us a basis for usefully distinguishing between Ovid and his fictional heroines. These women view time as unfolding before their very eyes, as we do in our own external lives, and this is a means of identifying their perspective, their view of the world in relation to the poet's view. And, while to us it may seem on the surface that these women have little or no agency at all, with the letters symbolising a sort of final act of defiance, that is not how it seems to them. They perceive in their writing that the future is open and can be changed, even if they accept the very real restrictions associated with the situations in which they find themselves.

[105] Spentzou (2003), 104, sees Penelope's "force of resistance" as gathered around the loom in her bedroom.

Equally, the *Heroides* retains a relevance to us as readers in the present day that goes beyond a purely literary interpretation of the poetic texts themselves. Those contemporary philosophers who argue for the existence of a fixed four-dimensional universe, in which past, present, and future events are all equally real, also have to address this question of free will, the level of real agency people have in their lives not just to affect but to change the course of events in their future.[106] One of the strengths of imaginative literature is its figurative power, the capacity it has to describe complex concepts in ways that are intelligible, often beyond the scope of the abstract language of science or philosophy. Working within a literary tradition that is supremely sensitive to questions of freedom of action and agency in a mythological landscape replete with supernatural power, the *Heroides* shows us, in the twenty-first century, what it might be like to live in a world that's supposedly fixed and yet in which the capacity for human agency may not be entirely closed off, even if it is severely constrained. Its depictions of heroines fighting against their supposed destinies provide, therefore, a spectrum of perspectives into these fundamental questions to do with time and human agency that are relevant now, able to enrich and supplement the important theoretical work being done in this arena elsewhere.

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[106] Dyke (2021), 48–9; Le Poidevin (2016).

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