

Ovid, *The Art of Loving*

Translated and Introduced by Aaron Poochigian

OVID'S "THE ART OF LOVING," ORIGINALLY WRITTEN IN Latin, is made up of what are called Elegiac couplets—pairs of lines of different lengths and with distinctive rhythms. Each couplet is its own little work of art. Each can be admired on its own or as part of the greater Gestalt that is the poem.

Other translations of "The Art of Loving" strike me as getting the words, more or less, but not the artistry. I felt a need for a translation that respects and replicates the technique of the original. I have made a version that, first, renders the couplets in such a way as to preserve their integrity and, second, marks them off, sonically, as a unit. I tried to achieve the first goal by translating the couplets as separate grammatical modules that can stand alone. I tried to achieve the second goal by linking the lines of the couplet with a rhyme—true rhyme, off-rhyme, anything that tells the ear that the two lines belong together.

But that's enough technical talk. What this translation really arises from is the pleasure Ovid's "The Art of Loving" has given me since I first read it in Latin in undergraduate school. It has given me three decades' worth of joy. I want share that joy with the whole world, so I have done all I can to recreate not just the artistry but the charm and fun of the poem for readers who may not know Latin. My great hope is that something in this excerpt makes you smile.



**LITERARY
LIVES**

I. The Overture

If someone doesn't know the art of loving, he
should read this book and love with mastery.
It's art that makes our oar- and sail-borne warships dart,
our chariots dash. Love, too, should yield to art.
Automedon knew when to let his team run free,
and Tiphys helmed the ship from Thessaly,
and I am Venus' savant. I will be known
as young Love's Typhis and Automedon.
Although Love fights and frustrates me and is unkind,
he is a boy and can be disciplined.
Chiron taught wee Achilles how to play the lyre
and quelled his mettle with quiescent lore.
Although Achilles made both foes and allies run,
he cowered, they say, before that wise old man.
He freely offered up the two hands that would crush
Hector for penance underneath the lash.
As Chiron schooled Achilles, I school Love. Both came
from goddess mothers; both were tough to tame.

A bull's neck, though, can learn to bear a harrow's weight;
the teeth of wild mares learn to champ the bit.
Let Love's shafts stab me in the vitals, let his shaken
torches enflame me: still he will be broken.
All that he wreaks on me with arrowheads and fire
just makes my vengeance stronger than before.

To say you taught me love-craft, Phoebus, would be false;
I didn't get it from occult bird calls.
Clio and all her sisters never met me up
along your slopes, Ascra, while I grazed sheep.
Usefulness has inspired this. Heed an expert bard.
My song will preach truths. Venus, back my start.

You are profane here, garlands, badge of the demure!
Be gone, you dresses reaching to the floor!
But, no, I'll sing of sound sex and approved affairs.
I won't put any vileness into verse.

The first thing for a novice soldier in this war
is to select an object of desire.
Wooing the girl you like comes next. Third comes what needs
to happen to ensure your love abides.
My chariot will circumscribe those bounds. That space
contains the turning post my wheels will graze.

II. Where To Find Her

While still at ease and off the leash, identify
a girl to call "the only one for me."
She won't come floating downward to you on a breeze.
No, you must find the right one with your eyes.
The hunter knows well where his nets will snag a deer
and which ravines most likely feature boar.
The fowler knows which shrubs hold birds. The angler knows
in just which brooks the fish are most profuse.
You, the pursuer of a durable romance,
must learn where girl, the quarry, keeps her haunts.

I won't tell you to board a ship and sail abroad.
To find her, local precincts must be trod.
Perseus flew Andromeda out of the sooty
Far East; a Trojan stole the Grecian beauty.
Rome, though, our home, will offer up knockouts galore.
You'll swear the wide world's chicks have settled here.
Think of Methymna's ripe grapes, Gargara's bound sheaves,
fish in the ocean, birds among the leaves,
the stars—that's the amount of girls our streets contain.
The mother of Aeneas fills her town.