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## ABSTRACT

Taking as its starting point Michael Drayton's reworking of a key Heroidean topos, the heroine's self-conscious reflection on letter-writing as an activity fraught with anxiety, this essay examines the cultural and literary factors that conspire to inhibit or facilitate the emergence of a distinctive feminine epistolary voice in *Englands Heroicall Epistles*. In particular it seeks to explain how Drayton's female letter-writers manage to negotiate the impediments to self-expression they initially encounter and thus go on to articulate morally and politically incisive forms of complaint. It argues that the participation of Drayton's fictional writers in the authorial business of revising Ovid for an altered historical context plays a crucial role in supporting that process. This allows Drayton's heroines to recover a degree of textual authority through an independent critical engagement, by turns resistant and identificatory, with his Ovidian sources, including the *Metamorphoses* as well as the *Heroides*. A comparative analysis of the ways in which intertextual allusions to these sources are deployed by his male and female writers reveals them to be governed by a different dynamic and used for different ends. It is primarily by means of their complex, intersecting dialogues with their male correspondents and with the Ovidian models upon which they draw that Drayton's heroines are able to formulate a compelling counter-perspective on the politics of love and history.

## KEYWORDS

Ovid, Drayton, complaint, allusion, rhetoric, ethics

## **‘Large complaints in little papers’: negotiating Ovidian genealogies of complaint in Drayton’s *Englands Heroicall Epistles***

**Alison Thorne**

*Heere must your Ladiship behold variableness in resolution: woes constantly grounded: laments abruptly broken off: much confidence, no certainty, wordes begetting teares, teares confounding matter, large complaints in little papers: and many deformed cares, in one uniformed Epistell.*

(Dedication of Rosamond Clifford and Henry II’s epistles to Lucy Russell, countess of Bedford)<sup>i</sup>

This essay examines the reworking of an Ovidian tradition of female-voiced complaint and its complex moral and political resonances in Michael Drayton’s *England’s Heroicall Epistles* (hereafter *EHE*), a collection of verse epistles purportedly authored and exchanged by illustrious English men and women at a time of crisis in their relationship or within the state. That Drayton’s collection, first published in 1597 and thereafter expanded and revised prior to its inclusion in his collected works of 1619, was primarily, though not exclusively, modelled on Ovid’s *Heroides* was well recognised by its early modern readers.<sup>ii</sup> In his preface to the reader Drayton himself acknowledges his debt to Ovid ‘whose Imitator I partly professe to be’, in connection with his use of the term ‘*Heroicall*’ to signify ‘*greatnesse of Mind*’, not just deeds.<sup>iii</sup> This claim, emphatically endorsed in William Alexander’s commendatory verses (added in 1600) which affirm that ‘*These Love-sicke Princes passionate estates,/ Who feeling reades, he cannot but allow,/ That OVIDS Soule revives in DRAYTON now*’, was echoed more widely by the poet’s contemporaries who dubbed him ‘our English Ovid’.<sup>iv</sup> As well as the explicit Heroidean allusions we may be sure that Drayton’s classically educated readers would have registered the more diffuse and submerged Ovidian influences, encompassing the *Metamorphoses* and the Augustan poet’s various works on the art of love, that permeate this text. This essay seeks to trace the ways in which these various Ovidian sources are deployed and manipulated not only by Drayton himself, but by his fictional

writers, both male and female, with particular attention to the implications of this for the construction of the female epistolary voice.

Drayton's handling of his female letter-writers is shaped by the contradictory and contested legacy the *Heroides* bequeathed to him and other early modern imitators. Central to this is the question of the status of the female epistolary voice and its relationship to the author. On the one hand, Ovid's capacity to create lifelike characters by conjuring a credible illusion of an interior self, caught in the throes of vacillating emotions, from the modulations of the rhetoricized female voice has long been admired and imitated.<sup>v</sup> Latterly, some feminist critics, on the strength of this linguistically produced 'authenticity effect', have gone further in claiming that Ovid's heroines should be regarded as authors in their own right whose relative independence of their creator allows them to 'rewrite the canonical version of [their] own story' from a radically different standpoint.<sup>vi</sup> But to other readers his heroines, far from enjoying a measure of expressive freedom, have seemed little more than puppets, continually at the mercy of authorial manipulation and the web of intertextual ironies generated between Ovid and his informed readers.<sup>vii</sup> Still others have noted how prone their famed rhetorical dexterity is to moments of psychological and linguistic collapse that compromise their ability to argue their case effectively. However, these apparently conflicting evaluations of the heroines' status and autonomy as 'writers' may not, in fact, be so irreconcilably opposed as is sometimes implied.<sup>viii</sup> In practice, the respective contributions of author and fictional persona are often hard to disentangle. Duncan Kennedy astutely notes that 'if the "authors" of the *Heroides*, the heroine and Ovid, are analytically separable in and for the agenda of a particular reading, they remain functionally intertwined: it is in their interplay, their correspondence even, that the *Heroides* achieve their distinctive form'.<sup>ix</sup> In such 'double-voiced' feats of poetic impersonation neither voice necessarily prevails at the other's expense. The author's decision to assume a foreign, in this case feminine, persona may be variously motivated; if it is sometimes impelled by an urge to subvert

or usurp his character's utterances<sup>x</sup>, it may equally express a sense of affinity or empathetic 'correspondence' with that persona, just as in his *Tristia* and letters from exile the banished Ovid famously identified his plight with that of his epistolary heroines by mimicking their rhetorical habits.

A similar interplay between divergent tendencies, I would argue, is to be found in *EHE*. Drayton, seeking perhaps to surpass his classical precursor's ethopoeic skills, is respectful of the integrity of the epistolary voices he has brought into being, while sometimes availing himself of them as tropes through which to vent his personal preoccupations on a range of issues: most notably, imitation, the poet's function as socio-moral critic, the relationship between public and private experience, and the predicament of women. At the same time as Drayton foregrounds the female epistolary voice, however, he insistently draws attention to its vulnerability to erasure. These latent tensions inherent within the Heroidean model are differently re-enacted in his collection on two main levels. First, many of the female epistles are visibly scarred by a conflict between the putative writer's desire freely to relate her side of the story and her consciousness of being hedged in by literary and cultural norms. And, secondly, these tensions are written out in the form of a temporal progression within the letters themselves: from diffident, stumbling beginnings, as the writer struggles to find words adequate to convey her feelings, several epistles go on to launch a surprisingly forceful complaint against the abuses of masculine eloquence and ethics within both the private and public spheres. In what follows my aim is to elucidate these paradoxes by analysing factors that might be said to hinder or enable (or both) the emergence of a distinctively feminocentric perspective on the politics of love and history. Specific consideration will be given to the complicated ways in which this process is influenced by the collection's Ovidian sources and the (real and fictional) authors' responses to them. For the analytical purposes of this particular reading, I shall start by focusing on Drayton's use of intertextual allusions and then compare the ways in which they are deployed by his male and female writers.

Drayton's remaking of Ovid in *EHE* is clearly no mere exercise in literary pastiche, still less an attempt to render a canonical Latin text faithfully into the vernacular tongue. Rather, in the competitive and renovatory spirit of early modern theorising of *imitatio*, it entails a bold transposition of the *Heroides*' basic scenario of abandoned women lamenting the loss or treachery of their lovers into an alien cultural system with its own mores, discursive habits, literary conventions and legendary past. At the most overt level, Drayton's format deviates from his classical model in substituting twelve twinned epistles, addressed by separated couples to each other, for the female-voiced dramatic monologues that constitute *Heroides* 1-15. This allows for a dialogic exchange of gendered viewpoints that is largely absent from Ovid's single epistles, informed as they are by the author's/ reader's proleptic awareness that these letters are destined never to receive a reply.<sup>xi</sup> Although the three sets of paired epistles that round off Ovid's collection – generally believed to have been tacked on to the original sequence – supplied an important precedent for Drayton's innovations, they remain claustrophobically centred on the lovers' stories. The same cannot be said of Drayton's fictionalised letter-writers who are no inhabitants of the timeless world of classical myth but eminent men and women culled from the annals of British history to whose vicissitudes and exigencies they are subject. The sequence starts with the Plantagenet Kings (Henry II, John, the Black Prince) and their paramours, extends through the crisis of Richard II's fall and its turbulent aftermath, and culminates in the valedictory epistles exchanged by Lady Jane Gray and her husband, Gilford Dudley. To complicate matters further, Drayton's collection is traversed by a variety of generic cross-currents; lyrical complaints are spliced together with historical matter from the Tudor chronicles and authorial notes and 'arguments' added to the mix. It also registers fractures within the complaint tradition itself, as amatory lament in the Ovidian-Petrarchan vein is intertwined with, and played off against, a more popular and overtly politicised indigenous strain of complaint exemplified by the *Mirror for Magistrates* (1559-87). For Drayton's historically situated lovers, the main consequence of this

peripatetic focus is that they, unlike Ovid's heroines, are not permitted the luxury of wallowing in their 'passionate estates', which must compete for attention with the unremitting pressure of external events. Hence the dual orientation of their epistles towards public and private experience, noted by Clarke in this collection. These multiple displacements, which enrich *EHE* with a generic hybridity and intertextual density to rival that found in the *Heroides* itself, must be taken into account when assessing the significance of Drayton's use of the plaintive Ovidian female voice.

Initially, at least, Drayton seems intent in his female-authored epistles on accentuating the more negative aspects of his classical model. Rosamond Clifford's thwarted attempts to inscribe her thoughts and feelings - as adumbrated in the dedication quoted in the epigraph to this essay - are typical of the compositional problems encountered by other female correspondents in *EHE*. Their hesitancy in beginning their letters recalls the rhetorical ineffectuality of Ovid's more abject heroines, like the barbarian slave, Briseis, who opens her epistle to Achilles with an apology for her inability to write properly in Greek (*Heroides* III, ll.1-2). More broadly, it is also legible as a deliberate *reprise*, on Drayton's part, of a key Heroidean *topos*: the heroine's self-conscious reflection on letter-writing as an action fraught with insecurity. Periodically, the verbal fluency of Ovid's female speakers is hijacked by a fit of self-doubt or an irruption of uncontrollable emotion and its corporeal manifestation as tears, sighs, trembling etc. This idea is materialised through the recursive image of the blood- or tear-stained page, which functions as an index of the writer's physical as well as mental suffering - a motif that is picked up and elaborated in the epistles of Rosamond, Margaret of Anjou and Jane Gray (cf. *Heroides* III, XI, XV).<sup>xii</sup> But what, for Ovid's heroines, is usually no more than a passing glitch is amplified by Drayton into the starting-point for eight of his twelve female epistles. It becomes an impasse that threatens to stymie the possibility of persuasive communication even before it takes shape:

I set me downe, at large to write my mind,

But now nor Pen, nor Paper can I find;  
For still my passion is so powerfull o'r me,  
That I discern not things that stand before me:  
Finding the Pen, the Paper, and the Waxe,  
These at command, and now Invention lacks;  
This sentence serves, and That my hand out-strikes;  
That pleaseth well, and This as much mislikes,  
I write, indite, I point, I raze I quote,  
I enterline, I blot, correct, I note,  
I hope, despaire, take courage, faint, disdain,  
I make, alledge, I imitate, I faine.  
(Matilda to King John, 27-38)

As one that fayne would graunt, yet fayne deny,  
'Twixt Hope and Feare I doubtfully reply,  
A Womans Weakenesse, lest I should discover,  
Answering a Prince, and writing to a Lover ...  
And some one thing remayneth in my Brest,  
For want of Words that cannot be exprest.  
(Alice, Countess of Salisbury to the Black Prince, 1-4, 19-20)

A Maidens thoughts do check my trembling hand,  
On other Termes or Complements to stand,  
Which (might my speech be as my Heart affords)  
Should come attyred in farre richer Wordes ...  
As in a Feaver, I doe shiver yet,  
Since first my Pen was to the Paper set.  
If I doe erre, you know my Sexe is weake,  
Feare proves a fault, where Maids are forc'd to speake.  
(Lady Geraldine to Henry Howard, 3-6, 15-18)

As these passages reveal, the anxieties besetting Drayton's female letter-writers are of a different order and magnitude from those experienced by their legendary precursors. Their struggle to express themselves is precipitated not by grief at the lover's treachery nor by fear of abandonment, but by the act of writing itself, conceived here as an act of self-betrayal. How are we to account for this overpowering sense of trepidation? What factors have intervened to make these writers so reluctant to speak their mind, in contrast to their bolder Ovidian prototypes?

// [new para] Drayton's recasting of this Ovidian motif - the heroine's anxiety having now at least as much to do with the wisdom of disclosing her emotional state as her ability to convey this<sup>xiii</sup> - furnishes him with a means of drawing the (external) reader's attention to a concatenation of



cultural factors that conspired to inhibit female articulation in this period, particularly of sexual desire.<sup>xiv</sup> Her discomfort is shown to reflect, in part, the precarious position early modern women occupied within a male-dominated rhetorical culture. Henry Howard, earl of Surrey, and William de-la-Poole, duke of Suffolk, speak for the majority of Drayton's male characters in vaunting their ability to wield the 'sacred Pow'r' of eloquence and shape reality to their will through a mastery of 'plenteous Oratorie'.<sup>xv</sup> His female writers, in pointed contrast, are only too conscious that language, in its instrumental and signifying function, evades women's control. Lacking the cultural authority to enforce their meanings, they know how susceptible their words are to being falsely interpreted or misapplied. Echoing yet another Heroidean *topos* - the heroine's fear that her epistolary pleas will be intercepted, misread or simply brushed aside (cf. *Heroides* IV and V) - Drayton has Alice of Salisbury complain of the propensity of male readers to 'wrest our plaine words to another sense':

Thinke you not then, poore Women had not need  
 Be well advis'd to write what Men should read;  
 When being silent, but to move awry,  
 Doth often bring us into obloquie? (7-10)

Not only does silence offer no refuge for Drayton's female writers; they are denied even a modicum of their Ovidian precursors' licence to indulge in frank description of their desires, having apparently internalised the prevailing doctrine that verbal self-assertion is incompatible with female modesty.<sup>xvi</sup> It is specifically a 'Maidens thoughts' that check Geraldine's trembling hand, restraining her from making too candid a declaration of her love for fear that the slightest over-boldness of expression will 'disclose' her 'inward Guilt' (her secret desire for the earl of Surrey), thereby jeopardising her self-presentation as an exemplar of virginal innocence (23-36). Alice's uncertainty about how to frame her response to the Black Prince likewise stems from her terror 'a Womans Weaknesse, lest I should discover' (3). But the real 'fault' seems to be located not so much in the guilty longings themselves as in their publication through an act of writing that

the heroines regard, and expect others to construe, as a source of shame equatable with whoredom.<sup>xvii</sup> The need for concealment is constantly reiterated:

Whilst in our Hearts our secret Thoughts abide,  
Th'invenom'd Tongue of Slander yet is ty'd ;  
But if once spoke, deliver'd up to Fame,  
In her Report that often is too blame. (11-14)

As Alice's coupling of 'Fame' with 'blame' and (implicitly) 'shame' suggests, the deeply ingrained fear of self-exposure expressed by these writers is also inspired by a distrust of fame and its consequences: a concern thematized in many female-voiced complaints written at the turn of the century, as Guy-Bray notes in this collection.<sup>xviii</sup> Such misgivings may have been intensified by the shift from a predominantly oral environment, like that in which Ovid's heroines operate, to an increasingly print-based culture. Whereas Drayton's male writers would seem to share his personal investment in that culture, using their epistles as medium for crafting and disseminating a heroic public image to an (anticipated) wider audience<sup>xix</sup>, their female interlocutors' excessive caution over committing their thoughts to paper reflects a sense that any publicising of the self, even in the semi-private form of a love letter (that does, it so happens, find its way into print), can only be damaging to their sex. Speculation aside, what is clearly exposed through these authorial manoeuvres is the extent to which the rhetorical resources of Drayton's heroines have been eroded and 'deformed' by such 'cares' and the timidity, doubt and self-censorship they breed.

In addition to negotiating these cultural and linguistic constraints, his female writers have to contend with a tradition of love poetry that not only claims the right to define them but does so in ways that place them at a marked disadvantage in relation to their male counterparts. Drayton's use of the paired epistle, it might be argued, serves primarily to position his female writers as the objects of, and respondents to, a masculine amatory discourse, irrespective of who initiates the exchange of letters. The epideictic language of his male lovers partakes of a rhetorical tradition

that is Ovidian in origin, though mediated by the poetics of Petrarchism and its heirs, the courtly sonneteers. Reflecting the confluence of these literary influences, its register fluctuates between blatant sensuality and elaborate sublimation, but to much the same effect. Where Drayton is attentive to the vulnerability of the female epistolary voice, the bravura performance of alluring eloquence given by one male writer after another seems calculated to efface this voice altogether, even as it purports to exalt the beloved. The worst offenders in this kind are Drayton's predatory royal lovers - Henry II, John, the Black Prince - who deploy an Ovidian rhetoric of seduction replete with mythological analogies (drawn chiefly from the *Metamorphoses*) in order to legitimate their ruthless pursuit of sexual conquest. The Black Prince, for example, cites the erotic transformations of the gods in order to excuse the 'unlawfull Shifts' perpetrated by 'Imperious Love', specifically invoking Jove's rape of Danae as a precedent for his own 'assault' on Alice's chastity (4, 83-6, 157-66). While John is made to echo the worldly cynicism of the narrator of the *Ars Amatoria*, who instructs couples in the devious arts of love, when he blasphemously reinterprets Matilda's devotional routines as an invitation to sexual congress (69-9). Other male writers resort to that trade-mark of Petrarchan epideictics, the *blazon*, for the seemingly more refined purpose of amplifying female beauty into the mystical source of value that regulates every aspect of the universe. Ostensibly more complimentary to the beloved than the conceit of woman as sexual quarry, this device also contrives, albeit more subtly, to negate the addressee's experientially based viewpoint by dissembling the actuality of her powerless condition and its true causes.<sup>xx</sup> Thus Rosamond's protestation of her helpless state (she is being held captive by her lover in a labyrinth) is not merely ignored but overwritten by Henry's extravagant counter-claim that she alone possesses the godlike power to reinvigorate his old age: 'For Thee, swift Time his speedie course doth stay,/ At thy Command, the Destinies obey' (71-2).

But Ovidian language serves more purposes for Drayton's male lovers than inveigling the lady into bed. Importantly, it can function, in parallel with this, as a covert means of affirming their

entitlement to collaborate in the authorial labour of imitating, revising and adapting the text's classical models to fit different historical circumstances. Particularly resonant in this regard is their use of the Ovidian master-trope of metamorphosis. This tends to be enlisted as a metonym for masculine ambition in all its forms, particularly their quasi-divine gifts of persuasion, erotic mastery, sovereignty and authorship. However, on a metapoetic level, it may be understood as commenting on the process of translation itself, given the polysemantic usage of this word in the period not only in our current sense of turning a text into another language, but also to denote 'a transformation, alteration or change' in form or substance (*OED*, II.2a, 3a) – in short, metamorphosis. The earl of Surrey – generally assumed to be an idealised projection of Drayton's own literary aspirations - invokes this same Ovidian idiom to proclaim his powers of invention as one of 'great Apollo's heirs'. He assures Geraldine that

When Time shall turne those Amber Lockes to Gray,  
My Verse againe shall guild and make them gay ...  
That sacred Pow'r that in my Inke remaines,  
Shall put fresh Bloud into thy wither'd Veines ...  
When thy dimme Sight thy Glasse cannot descry,  
Nor thy craz'd Mirrour can discern thine Eye;  
My Verse, to tell th'one what the other was,  
Shall represent them both, thine Eye and Glasse. (123-34)

Tellingly, Surrey asserts his capacity not only to renew himself, Phoenix-like, in his 'immortall Lines', but to reconstitute the beloved afresh. Even when old and withered she will fetch her sense of identity from the fictive images reflected back at her by his poetic glass. In laying claim to the power to refashion self and others, Surrey/ Drayton implicitly defines the act of translation (and its cognates: imitation, allusion, paraphrase) as a masculine prerogative, woman as the text to be reconfigured.<sup>xxi</sup> As Liz Oakley-Brown reminds us in her analysis of the sexual politics of early modern translation, the business of translating classical texts (as distinct from religious writings) was chiefly reserved for men in this period, women being consigned to the less active role of readers or dedicatees.<sup>xxii</sup> As if to confirm this imbalance, Drayton's heroines differ sharply from their male interlocutors in experiencing metamorphosis as an irreversible loss of identity,

something that is inflicted on them as punishment for their sexual/ political ‘faults’ or by the revolution of Fortune’s wheel and that is therefore neither voluntary nor liberating but profoundly disabling. Thus Rosamond accuses Henry of translating her into a monstrously deformed figure by making her his mistress: ‘In this thou rightly imitatest JOVE,/ Into a Beast thou hast transform’d thy Love;/ Nay, worsere farre [...] A monster both in Bodie and in Minde’ (171-4). Elinor Cobham similarly imagines her fall from political grace as being emblazoned in her shameful disfigurement, likening herself to a goblin, leper, owl, ‘a foule *Gorgon*’, and ‘one of BACCHUS raging frantike Nunnes’ (137-80).

That the combined legacy of these poetic models weighs heavily upon Drayton’s female letter-writers, severely constricting their field of agency and avenues for individual self-expression, is beyond dispute. Yet while in one sense their subjection to these intersecting literary traditions compounds their estrangement from their own words and identities, by the same token it also opens up the possibility of recuperating a degree of textual authority through an independent critical engagement with the collection’s classical sources. For it does not necessarily follow that Drayton’s heroines are prepared to surrender entirely the right to participate in the process of “translating” Ovid into a different set of cultural terms. Their apposite and highly self-conscious use of intertextual allusions to the *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* can be taken as evidence of a familiarity with Ovid’s major works scarcely inferior to that displayed by Drayton or his male writers.<sup>xxiii</sup> However, their relationship with these texts, especially the latter, tends to be mediated by a differently inflected textual dynamic, one that is driven not primarily by emulation but by what Raphael Lyne has described as a ‘deep unease with the Ovidian formula’.<sup>xxiv</sup> This unease, arising from distrust of the licentious poetic scenarios proposed by that ‘formula’ and concerns about the potential risks of capitulating to them, imbues many of the female-authored epistles. Jane Shore’s sardonically knowing gibe at the ploys Edward uses to tempt her into adultery encapsulates these misgivings: ‘*Romes* wanton OVID did those Rules impart,/ O, that your

Nature should be help'd with Art!' (103-4). Often it is just such wary responses to the negatory images of the female self as an object of desire propagated by Ovidian-Petrarchan discourse that provoke the heroines' interventions in this poetic tradition. The parading of erotic conceits in the letters of their male correspondents creates opportunities for Drayton's more resourceful heroines (e.g. Matilda, Alice of Salisbury, Mistress Shore) to expose the damaging implications of the scripts their lovers would impose on them and to begin reshaping these in order to reflect their personal desires and interests. Thus the critical process of reading the Ovidian traces inscribed in their lovers' epistles generates, and becomes embodied in, a revisionist act of re-writing that allows their content to be re-assessed from another, often robustly sceptical, perspective. But the heroines' interactions with Ovid's legacy are not always so combative; in some instances, as we shall see, they turn to the *Heroides* in search of material that can be appropriated as templates for their own attitudes, conduct and value-systems and the rhetorical forms through which these are expressed. In either case, it is no exaggeration to say that the heroines' struggle for literary self-definition is waged mainly in the context of their sometimes antagonistic yet ultimately fruitful dialogue with Ovid.

The heroines' involvement in the process of recasting Ovid goes some way towards explaining how it is that they do in fact manage to overcome the seemingly insuperable "writer's block" confronting them on first setting pen to paper. Other factors too may play a part in releasing their pent-up creative energies. Although the pairing of epistles undoubtedly works against the female correspondent in some respects, it also offers her the possibility (not always taken up) of replying in a dialogical rather than merely echoic fashion. The acute awareness of women's subjection to the 'rules' of a masculine system of representation which Drayton has bestowed on some of his heroines may not of itself be sufficient to deliver them from such entanglements. But the mere act of reflexively rehearsing the various impediments to writing at the start of their letters may help them circumvent such problems and thereby clear a discursive space for themselves. Whatever

explanation we favour, evidently Drayton's female writers do not remain marooned in a state of 'verbal impotence'.<sup>xxv</sup> For, as the material existence of their letters attests, each of them contrives to find a way around these obstacles that allows her to write eloquently. In moving beyond their initial difficulties, they simultaneously move beyond a form of complaint that is problematically rooted in the body and emotions - in part through their assimilation of more rational modes of analysis, argument and dissent. Indeed in several epistles complaint begins to shed its gendered connotations of impotent lamentation and recover its other history as a compelling medium for moral and socio-political protest.<sup>xxvi</sup> The final part of this essay will briefly attempt to show how the *Heroides*' subliminal presence in Drayton's text is instrumental in fostering this development.

Assuming that, as Lyne has convincingly argued, Drayton's imitation of Ovid in *EHE* includes a strong element of resistance to his classical model on ethical grounds, it is highly significant that he should have chosen to delegate the task of articulating this authorial critique of Ovidian-Petrarchan poetics almost exclusively to his female writers.<sup>xxvii</sup> Instances of formerly tongue-tied women taking on this revisionist function abound, most evidently in Drayton's 'more Poeticall' epistles, those concerned primarily with love rather than "historicall" matters or 'the Occurrents of the Time, or State'.<sup>xxviii</sup> Matilda specifically objects to the pernicious influence of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, among other 'wanton' books, when inveighing against 'Lascivious Poets, which abuse the Truth' by glorifying unnatural forms of lust, of the sort indulged in by Myrra, Sylla and their ilk, to the detriment of chaste virginity (135-56). Earlier she aligns herself with the eye of 'judgment' in opposing the 'sicke Conceit[s] of men' which lack 'Forme, Fashion, Certaintie, or Being' (47-76). Other heroines follow her lead in protesting at the distortive properties of Ovidian-Petrarchan amatory rhetoric. Alice administers a sharp corrective to the Black Prince's perverse manipulation of the well-worn trope of the chaste woman as a besieged fortress<sup>xxix</sup> - literalised here in that he is indeed laying siege to her castle - according to which it is not she, but he who, by her charms, is being held hostage (153-6). With the deflationary wit of a worldly-wise

citizen's wife, Mistress Shore mocks the feigning of her lover's hyperbolic conceits and the warped logic underpinning them, which prompts men to be 'so shamelesse, when you tempt us thus,/ To lay the fault on Beautie and on us' (101-2):

Who would have thought, a King that cares to raigne,  
Inforc'd by Love, so Poet-like should faine?  
To say, that Beautie, Times sterne rage to shunne,  
In my Cheekes (Lillies) hid her from the Sunne;  
And when she meant to triumph in her May,  
Made that her East, and here she broke her Day. (105-110)

But if Ovid is the prime target of such ironic revisionism, he may also justly be claimed as its facilitator. For, arguably, the nearest precedent for this type of caustic anatomising of self-justificatory male rhetoric is to be found in the paired epistles of the *Heroides* (especially, Helen's response to Paris [XVII], and Cydippe's to Acontius [XXI]). Such spirited interventions invite comparison with Helen's sceptical point-by-point rebuttal of Paris' glib assurances that their liaison will not provoke war nor make her an object of universal infamy, and with Cydippe's demolition of the casuistical legal arguments used by Acontius to coerce her into marriage.

We might expect Drayton's female writers to echo Ovid where love matters are in question. Much more remarkable is the extension of this use of complaint as a vehicle for moral and political critique into the public domain, as they assume the role of commentator on unfolding historical events. On the face of it, this seems unpromising territory in which to search for Heroidean parallels. It is, after all, a critical truism that Ovid's heroines, forsaken and isolated, occupy a peripheral position in relation to the world of heroic endeavour and conflict which takes their lovers from them. Indeed they are doubly insulated from that larger picture by their solipsistic absorption in their own erotic affairs, a feature typical of Roman love-elegy, to which political concerns are subordinated even in the minds of those who are rulers as well as lovers (e.g. Phyllis, Dido, Hypsipyle). As Efrossini Spentzou puts it, 'in their marginalised existence public concerns and collective destiny have become private stories of loss and mourning'<sup>xxx</sup>;



hence the heroines' apparent indifference to what is occurring beyond the theatre of their emotions. By contrast, Drayton's female writers, thrust into the midst of some of the most turbulent episodes in English history, can hardly avoid bearing witness to the times. In this context it is understandable that Drayton 'historically' epistles, where the traumas of love take second place to those of the nation, should be more conspicuously indebted to native traditions of politically inspired complaint in the *de casibus* format of the *Mirror for Magistrates* than to Ovidian models. Later editions of the *Mirror* (from 1578 onwards) numbered two infamous women (Mistress Shore and Elinor Cobham) among their ghostly speakers, who also feature in *EHE*; and their bewailing of their political misfortunes supplied Drayton with a convenient template for other royal consorts whose power and status are waning or already irretrievably lost (including both Richard and Mortimer's Queen Isabel, and Margaret of Anjou).

Nevertheless, I believe there are strong grounds for arguing that the undercurrent of Ovidian influence in these epistles offered Drayton's heroines a more productive mode of engagement with political history. Like their Heroidean precursors, Drayton's female writers have no pretensions to objectivity; their interpretations of historical events are quite overtly skewed by personal emotion, desire and self-interest. As prone to evasion and self-deception as any of Ovid's heroines, they often indulge in wishful thinking, constructing alternative realities in the past and future conditional as they regret what might have been or yearn for what may yet be. Hence they are exposed to accusations of allowing excessive 'passion' or womanish 'spleene' to cloud their political judgment by giving way to intemperate outbursts of grief or fury.<sup>xxxii</sup> In *EHE* the outstanding example of such emotional incontinence is Elinor Cobham. Katherine Tillotson has identified the *Mirror* as one of the primary sources for Elinor's epistle to her husband Humphrey, duke of Gloucester (added in 1598), alongside the chronicles and Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays.<sup>xxxiii</sup> But while this letter is certainly indebted to Ferrer's poem in important respects, I would suggest that a more potent, buried model was provided by *Heroides* XII,

Medea's letter to Jason, or, more precisely, a composite Medea forged from the differently nuanced interpretations Ovid offers us in this text and *Metamorphoses* VII. Consider the parallels. A figure of monstrous, hyperbolic passions which she, like Medea, is incapable of controlling, Elinor is exiled from her homeland (to the Isle of Man) for dabbling in magic with malignant intent. Stripped of her former privileges, she continues to shadow her classical predecessor's example by venting resentment on the female rival who has supplanted her (Margaret of Anjou; in Ovid, Creusa) with a torrent of bitter invective and sadistic threats of vengeance, which in Elinor's case, unlike Medea's, will remain unfulfilled (cf. *Heroides* XII, ll. 206-12). Most striking of all is the studied manner in which she aspires to emulate the career of Ovid's barbarian princess.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Not only does Elinor wish that she 'were a Witch' the better to torment her enemies, but she consciously patterns her identity after Medea's; the 'Hellish Power' and 'pow'rfull Charmes' she craves, though explicitly attributed here to the English 'Druides', were more firmly associated in the popular imagination with that legendary sorceress.<sup>xxxiv</sup> At one point she imagines herself harnessing natural forces in an incantatory passage that unmistakably recalls Medea's invocation of Hecate in *Metamorphoses* VII which, as Jonathan Bate notes, 'was viewed in the Renaissance as witchcraft's great set-piece':<sup>xxxv</sup>

They say, the *Druides* once liv'd in this Ile,  
 This fatall *Man*, the place of my Exile,  
 Whose pow'rfull Charmes such dreadfull Wonders wrought,  
 Which in the *Gotish Island* Tongue were taught;  
 O, that their Spels to me they had resign'd,  
 Wherewith they rays'd and calm'd both Sea and Wind!  
 And made the Moone pawse in her paled Sphere,  
 Whilst her grim Dragons drew them through the Ayre. (125-32)<sup>xxxvi</sup>

What draws Elinor to Medea's story is presumably the beguiling fantasy it offers of a woman triumphing over personal and political humiliation by dint of her indomitable capacity to wreak destruction on her enemies.

The inability to view the tide of events except through the lens of their own affective histories which Elinor Cobham and Drayton's other female writers share with their Ovidian precursors may seem to disqualify them as reliable commentators on the past. Yet it is noteworthy how often this unabashedly subjective, feminocentric outlook provides a point of departure for an alternative revisionist reading not just of historical events but, more importantly perhaps, of political ethics. Rosamond and Matilda's first-hand experience of the abuse of the royal prerogative by their (would-be) seducers lends added authority to the connections they make, like Shakespeare's Lucrece before them, between aggressive wooing and political tyranny.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Using a combination of chiding, taunts and mockery (a tactic already tested by Ovid's Briseis and Deianira), Alice and Geraldine strive to shame their suitors into resuming their 'proper' vocations as poet or soldier and serve their own emotional interests into the bargain.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Generic as well as political issues are in contention here. Georgia Brown has argued that the 1590s witnessed the emergence of a new, hybridised form of complaint, 'combining lyric, particularly Ovidian lyric, with historical narrative', wherein the relationship between public and private experience could be debated by mobilising the affective ethos of lyric to 'challenge the [chronicles'] version of English identity ... based on the assertion of masculine values that trivialize privacy, emotion and the feminized voice'.<sup>xxxix</sup> It is precisely by questioning the tendency to sacrifice the desire for private emotional fulfilment to the performative demands of one's public identity – as manifested, in *EHE*, by the male writers' collective compulsion to boast of their distinguished family lineage and heroic feats on the battlefield or tilting ground – that their female interlocutors demonstrate their own allegiance to Ovidian values. Henry V's widow, Katherine, determined that her second marriage will be for love not dynastic imperatives, disparages considerations of wealth, title, dominion and public opinion as worthless when weighed against the 'secret' pleasures private women enjoy:

I seeke not Wealth, three Kingdomes in my Power;  
 If these suffice not, where shall be my Dower?  
 Sad discontent may ever follow her,  
 Which doth base Pelfe before true Love preferre ...  
 Nor these great Titles vainely will I bring,

Wife, Daughter, Mother, Sister to a King ...  
More thou alone to me then all these other. (43-8, 57-60)

Jane Gray's trenchant analysis of the destructive effects of 'vile Ambition' is similarly informed by nostalgic regret for the brief interlude of domestic bliss she enjoyed with her husband before being forced by their power-hungry relatives to claim the throne, 'As when we liv'd untouch'd with these disgraces,/ When as our Kingdome was our deare embraces' (43-56).

The subtextual argument that is being played out in these epistles – that women have often been required to bear the emotional costs of male advancement within a public arena whose value-systems are fundamentally alien to them – also resonates with the classical past. The dialogue between the conflicting ideologies of lyric and narrative history that structures Drayton's *EHE* and other affiliated texts, can be understood as a displaced and updated re-enactment of the contest between the elegiac and epic visions of life that propels the *Heroides*. In Jane Gray's disaffection with dynastic politics we may speculate that Drayton's informed readers would have caught a distant echo of the stringent critique of epic values enunciated by several Ovidian heroines. They might have been reminded, for example, of Penelope's bitter dismissal in *Heroides* I of the heroics of the Greek warriors who brought down Troy as an irrelevance since this event barely touches her affective inner life: 'But of what avail to me that Ilion is scattered in ruin by your arms, and that what once was wall is now level ground – if I am still to remain such as I was while Troy endured, and must live to all time bereft of my lord?' (47-50). Or perhaps the refusal of the dowager queens Katherine and Mary to prioritise duty to the nation over yearning for the lover's presence – epitomised by Mary's rebuke to Charles Brandon, 'To thee what's *England* if I be not there?! Or what to me is *France*, if you be not here?' (189-90) - would have stimulated recollection of Dido's sardonic querying of Aeneas' decision to trade in the assured satisfactions of sharing her bed and throne in Carthage for a lifetime spent pursuing the ever-receding horizons of imperial ambition in *Heroides* VII: 'One land has been sought and gained,

and ever must another be sought, through the wide world. Yet, even should you find the land of your desire, who will give it over to you for your own? ... whence will come the wife to love you as I [do]?' (13-22).<sup>x1</sup>

It is in airing such 'large complaints' within the limited compass of their epistles that Drayton's female writers begin to justify the 'heroicall' qualities of mind ascribed to them in his preface to the reader. Various factors, as we have noted, play their part in impeding and/or facilitating the emergence of this interrogative female viewpoint with its own distinctive set of anxieties, desires, rhetorical preferences and ideological values. The transition from troubled beginnings to the establishment of an authoritative epistolary voice is accomplished via the writers' intertwined dialogues with their male interlocutors and with the Ovidian-Petrarchan traditions used to underwrite positions espoused by the latter. Despite the female writers' profoundly ambivalent responses to this literary heritage, encompassing both resistance and identification, the evidence considered here suggests that Ovidian influences have a crucially productive role to perform in enabling them to formulate an incisive counter-perspective on matters public and private.

I am grateful to Jennifer Richards for her extremely helpful comments and suggestions during the drafting of this essay.

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<sup>i</sup> See William J. Hebel (ed.), *The Works of Michael Drayton*, 5 vols (Oxford: Blackwell, 1931-41), IV.103.

All quotations are taken from this edition.

<sup>ii</sup> *EHE* was reprinted separately in 1598, 1599, 1600, 1602, 1603 (with *Barrons Wars* and *Idea*), achieving its final form in the collected *Poems* of 1619 (see Drayton, *Works*, V, xxi-xxx).

<sup>iii</sup> Drayton, *Works*, II.130. Note that the extended definition of this term allows for the incorporation of women into the category of the heroic.

<sup>iv</sup> Drayton, *Works*, II.131, V.97.

<sup>v</sup> See, e.g., Dryden's preface to *Ovid's Epistles, Translated by Several Hands* (1680), in E.N. Hooker and H.T. Swedenberg (eds.) *The Works of Dryden* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956-2000), I.111-12.

<sup>vi</sup> See Laurel Fulkerson, *The Ovidian Heroine as Author: Reading, Writing and Community in the 'Heroides'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.89, and Efrossini Spentzou, *Readers and Writers in Ovid's 'Heroides'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>vii</sup> See, e.g., Florence Verducci, *Ovid's Toyshop of the Heart: Epistulae Heroidum* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). While Verducci acknowledges the 'impression of ... psychological authenticity' created by Ovid's letters, she sees this as being undermined by an ironic wit that 'is not his heroine's own but the token of the poet's creative presence in the poem' (p.15, 32). For a useful review of intertextual studies of the *Heroides*, and their tendency to occlude the heroine's voice and intertextual interests, see Spentzou, *Readers and Writers*, pp.1-2, 17-24.

<sup>viii</sup> One way of resolving this seeming dichotomy, proposed by Fulkerson (*Ovidian Heroine*, pp.1-18) and pursued further by Raphael Lyne in this collection, is to investigate how intertextual allusion, when wielded by the characters themselves, may become a means of consolidating, rather than sabotaging, their subject

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positions. I have adopted a similar critical strategy in this essay.

<sup>ix</sup> Kennedy, 'Epistolarity: the *Heroides*', in Philip Hardie (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.223.

<sup>x</sup> As argued, e.g., by Elizabeth Harvey in her reading of Donne's 'Sappho to Philaenis' (*Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* [London and New York: Routledge, 1992]), Chap. 4.

<sup>xi</sup> They did, however, receive a reply of sorts in the form of three responses to the epistles of Penelope, Phyllis and Oenone from their lovers, attributed to Ovid's friend Sabinus but probably authored by the humanist scholar, Angelus Sabinus. These were printed in editions of the *Heroides* from 1477 onwards. See Raphael Lyne, 'Writing Back to Ovid in the 1560s and 1570s', *Translation and Literature*, 13 (2004), 143-62.

<sup>xii</sup> See Linda Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre and Epistolary Fictions* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp.36-8.

<sup>xiii</sup> On the Ovidian heroines' epistolary habit of reckless self-disclosure, see Joseph Farrell, 'Reading and Writing in the *Heroides*', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 98 (1998), 322-23.

<sup>xiv</sup> The internal readers (or addressees) tend to ignore or dismiss the heroine's anxieties.

<sup>xv</sup> See Surrey to Geraldine (105-130), Suffolk to Queen Margaret (86-104). The identification of rhetoric as a virile mode of dominance is confirmed by Richard II, who blames his lack of eloquence upon his effeminizing loss of power ('Ill this rude Hand did guide a Scepter then,/ Worse now (I feare me) it will rule a pen' [5-6]).

<sup>xvi</sup> See Deborah Greenhut, *Feminine Rhetorical Culture: Tudor Adaptations of Ovid's 'Heroides'* (New York and Bern: Peter Lang, 1988).

<sup>xvii</sup> Cf. Rosamond to Henry II, 'If with my Shame thine Eyes thou faine would'st feede,/ Here let them

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surfet, of my Shame to reade' (9-10), and Elinor Cobham to Duke Humphrey, 'All thou canst reade, is but to reade my shame' (14). Of course actual female authors in this period confronted similar taboos when publishing their work; see, e.g., Tina Krontiris, *Oppositional Voices: Women as Writers and Translators of Literature in the English Renaissance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp.17-18.

<sup>xviii</sup> See also Heather Dubrow, 'A Mirror for Complaints: Shakespeare's *Lucrece* and Generic Tradition', in Barbara Kiefer Lewalski (ed.), *Renaissance Genres: Essays on Theory, History and Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 399-417.

<sup>xix</sup> For an account of Drayton's investment in print culture, see Andrew Hadfield, 'Michael Drayton's Brilliant Career', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 125 (2004), 119-47.

<sup>xx</sup> As Katherine Carter notes, some of Drayton's female writers also use the *blazon* but to different effects ('Drayton's Craftsmanship: The Encomium and the Blazon in *Englands Heroicall Epistles*', *Huntington Library Quarterly* 38 (1975), 306-14).

<sup>xxi</sup> On the slippage between these categories, see Thomas Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982), pp.51-2.

<sup>xxii</sup> See Oakley-Brown, *Ovid and the Cultural Politics of Translation in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), p.29.

<sup>xxiii</sup> This is unsurprising as, notwithstanding the strictures of moralists against female consumption of Ovidian literature, references to women avidly reading the *Metamorphoses*, the *Heroides* and even the erotic works abound in this period. See Sasha Roberts, *Reading Shakespeare's Poems in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003), Chap. 1, and John Kerrigan (ed.), *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and 'Female Complaint'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), pp.69-70.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Lyne, *Ovid's Changing World: English Metamorphoses 1567-1632* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.154.



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<sup>xxv</sup> Contrary to Greenhut's suggestion (*Feminine Rhetorical Culture*, p.124).

<sup>xxvi</sup> See John Peter, *Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1956), and Kerrigan (ed.), *Motives of Woe*, pp.7-8, 58-60.

<sup>xxvii</sup> See Lyne, *Ovid's Changing Worlds*, pp.146-70. Perhaps this bespeaks a more troubled side to Drayton's experience of authorship than is refracted through the ebullient Surrey. He was certainly no stranger to frustration during his literary career (see Ann Lake Prescott's entry for Drayton in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16:894-8).

<sup>xxviii</sup> Drayton, *Works*, II.152.

<sup>xxix</sup> Cf. *Amores* I.9, *Ars Amatoria*, I.361-5.

<sup>xxx</sup> Spentzou, *Readers and Writers*, p.173

<sup>xxxi</sup> Cf. 'Duke Humphrey to Elinor Cobham' (II.5-6, 39-40); Mortimer to Queen Isabel (II.161-2). These characters (like Suffolk) reject excessive grief as a response to misfortune, counselling defiance or stoic patience.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Drayton, *Works*, V.119-20.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Matters are complicated by Elinor's self-comparison to Ovid's Deianira who unwittingly caused Hercules' death by giving him a garment soaked in 'Nessus poysn'd Gore' (*Heroides* IX, 115-20). But the context, vengeance on a female rival, better fits Creusa who was murdered by Medea, also using a poisoned gown (cf. *Heroides* XII, 175-82; and Euripides' *Medea*).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> The underlying connections between the Druids and Medea are clarified in Drayton's notes where, citing Tacitus, he disparages Druid practices as being '*full of many infernall Ceremonies*' grounded in '*Superstition, the Daughter of Barbarisme, and Ignorance*' (*Works*, II.222). On Drayton's changing attitudes to Druids, see "'Sacred Bards" and "Wise Druides": Drayton and his Archetype

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of the Poet', *ELH* 51 (1984), 1-15.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.252.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> It should be noted that in Golding's translation, Medea vaunts the power of her 'charmes' to 'raise and lay the windes', 'to make the calme Seas rough' and control the moon, before making her get-away from the scene of her crimes in a 'Chariot' drawn by 'winged Dragons' (John Frederick Nims (ed.), *Ovid's Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation, 1567* (London and New York: Macmillan), VI.258-310).

<sup>xxxvii</sup> See the epistles of Rosamond to Henry II (19-34), and Matilda to King John (109-10).

<sup>xxxviii</sup> See the epistles of Alice to the Black Prince (71-8), and Geraldine to the earl of Surrey (151-62).

<sup>xxxix</sup> Brown, *Redefining Elizabethan Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.185.

<sup>xl</sup> Both quotations are from the Loeb edition of the *Heroides*, ed. Grant Showerman (London: Heinemann, 1914).