

OVID'S LOST LINE¹

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ABSTRACT

Ovid expressly forbade the elimination of three criticized lines of verse from his complete work, when friends encouraged him to delete them. Tradition has preserved two of these verses. What might the third one be?

KEY WORDS: Ovid, Latin, poetry.

EL VERSO PERDIDO DE OVIDIO

RESUMEN

Cuando sus amigos pidieron a Ovidio que eliminara tres versos de su obra, este se negó expresamente a eliminar precisamente esos tres. Dos de ellos nos han sido preservados por la tradición ¿cuál sería el tercero?

PALABRAS CLAVE: Ovidio, latín, poesía.

The brilliant episode is referred to by Seneca the Elder (*contr.* 2.2,12): some of his friends asked Ovid whether they could forever delete just three lines from all of his poetic work. Ovid agreed, with the condition that at the same time he could also choose three lines that could in no way be removed from his work. The critics and the poet wrote the chosen verses separately and when the long-awaited moment came to see what the other part had written... they discovered that the verses were one –or three– and the same!

This anecdote illustrates very effectively how Ovid was self-conscious of the effect that his technique exerted on critics and the general public. But what were the three censurable and uncensurable lines? Fortunately, Seneca has preserved two of them. Unfortunately, the Elder is completely silent about the third one and gives no reason for this unexpected lacuna. Here is the complete passage:

Declamabat autem Naso raro controuersias et non nisi ethicas. Libentius dicebat suasorias. Molesta illi erat omnis argumentatio. Verbis minime licenter usus est, non [ut] in carminibus, in quibus non ignorauit uitia sua, sed amauit. Manifestum potest esse [ex eo] quod rogatus aliquando ab amicis suis, ut tolleret tres uersus, inuicem petit, ut ipse tres exciperet in quos nihil illis liceret. Æqua lex uisa est. Scripserunt illi quos tolli uellent secreto; hic, quos tutos esse uellet. In utrisque codicillis idem uersus erant, ex quibus primum fuisse narrabat Albinouanus Pedo, qui inter arbitros fuit:

¹ I am deeply grateful to Dr. Paul Scott Derrick for correcting and improving my English. This paper has benefitted from a grant (FFI2008-01759) for the project *Poetæ Latini Minores II*, directed by Prof. Dr. J. Luis Vidal (University of Barcelona).

“semibouemque uirum semiuirumque bouem”

Secundum

“et gelidum Borean egelidumque Notum”

Ex quo apparet summi ingenii uiro non iudicium defuisse ad compescendam licentiam carminum suorum sed animum. Aiebat interim decentiorem faciem esse, in qua aliquis næuus fuisset.

Both the context (*Verbis minime licenter usus est, non <ut> in carminibus*) and the quality itself of the verses show that the criticism of them focused on their pleonastic contents, since “half-bull man” (*semibouemque uirum*) and “half-man bull” (*semiuirumque bouem*) are lexically and semantically redundant and *gelidum* ‘cold - frozen’ and *egelidum* ‘hot - not frozen’ are lexically reiterative.

But what about the third case? It is really tempting to look for the reprehensible and objectionable –but for Ovid, untouchable– third line throughout the poet’s immense work. But how and where can we look for it? What kind of features should that enigmatic and silenced third line contain?

Certainly, some pleonastic aspects could be expected in the lost line as well, since pleonasm is such a salient stylistic feature in the other two verses. At the same time, the lost line is likely to have contained some internal or external aspect indicating why Seneca or Albinovanus Pedo –seemingly Seneca’s main source for the passage– had not mentioned it. Surely with the acquiescence of Ovid himself (*see below*), his peculiar style was sometimes in apparent collision with the poetic *bon usage* of his time; and this circumstance was evident for all attentive readers too, especially for critics. Therefore, it can be theoretically assumed that his peculiar style had left other critical remarks –and other criticized verses– in Roman literature. Thus, in order to rescue the missing line, a possible –almost the only– approach is to inquire into the other Ovidian verses that were criticized by ancient authors. Another possible clue is the source of the two preserved lines, since they come from *Ars amatoria* (2.24) and *Amores* (2.11,10), respectively, that is, from the earliest of Ovid’s works. In this regard the poems written by Ovid during his *relegatio* cannot feasibly be taken into account (*Tristia* and *Epistulæ ex Ponto*) nor probably the incomplete *Fasti* or the newly finished *Metamorphoses*. In addition, the presence of Albinovanus as a judge (*inter arbitros fuit*) points to a rather early date. Albinovanus himself was a good –probably old– friend of Ovid (*Pont.* 4.10,3-4: *carissime [...]/ Albinouane; Pont.* 4.16,6: *sidereusque Pedo*) and reputed to be a fine raconteur (*Sen. ep.* 22.122,15: *fabulator elegantissimus*). Likewise, Albinovanus was no doubt well known to Seneca the Elder as a writer (*suas.* 1.15): he actually preserved the longest extant fragment of Pedo’s poetry.

Thus, the line that we are searching for must fulfil five basic requirements. First, although it might seem obvious, the line must be Ovidian, namely, a single Ovidian line. Second, it must contain pleonastic aspects, probably formal pleonastic aspects. Third, it should contain some quality –probably linked to

some contextual reason— potentially explaining its omission in Seneca or in his source, Albinovanus. Fourth, some criticism of it should have been recorded by another author. And fifth, the line must refer rather to a work of an early period in Ovid's composition. Now, let's have a look at the possible candidates for the missing Ovidian line.

The line quoted by the grammarian Diomedes (1.319 Keil: *Ouidius autem uitiose hac re oleo: «perque lacus sacros et olentia sulphure fertur/ stagna Palicorum»* (= *met.* 5.405-406) meets the requirement of the critical remark, but it fails to meet the other four prerequisites.

As to the first and second requirements, it is actually not so difficult to find pleonastic lines in the preserved work of Ovid, e.g. the line *Bis me sol adiit gelidæ post frigora brumæ* from *Tristia* (4.7,1). However, we must dismiss this because it does not meet the other three –contextual, critical and chronological– requirements.

As to the second and fourth requirements, another candidate for the lost Ovidian passage would be:

aureus axis erat, temo aureus, aurea summæ
curuatura rotæ, radiorum argenteus ordo,
per iuga chrysolithi positæque ex ordine Musæ

This text contains repetitive words and pleonastic concepts (*aureus, aureus, aurea, chrysolithi*; note as well: *curuatura rotæ*) and is criticized by the grammarian Diomedes (1.451 Keil) as an example of *cacozelia* by means of an excess of ornamentation (*nimio cultu*). However, we have here not one but three lines and they belong to a work, *Metamorphoses* (2.107-109), whose date does not meet the chronological requirement. Moreover, the *Metamorphoses* was a very well known work by Ovid and there would be no clear reason why Seneca would not record it. By the way, the kind of pleonasm we are looking for is, of course, something different from pure and simple lexical repetition, which is otherwise frequent in Ovid. Indeed some lines with repeated words are also quoted by ancient grammarians, but never critically and only because of purely grammatical aspects (Charis. 132 Barwick = 1.104 Keil & Prisc. 2.333 Keil: *gausapa si sumpsit, gausapa sumpta = ars* 2.300: *gausapa si sumpsit, gausapa sumpta proba*; Prisc. 2.541 Keil: *per flammam saluisse pecus, saluisse colonos = fast.* 4.805: *per flammam saluisse pecus, saluisse colonos?*; Prisc. 2.257 Keil: *ter centum messes, ter centum musta uidere = met.* 14.146). Lexical recursivity was no doubt a major and salient trait in Ovid's style: *ut tenuit domus una duos, domus una tenebit/ oscula aperta dabis, oscula aperta dabis* (*Her. Hip.* 143-144).

As to the second, third and fifth requirements, theoretically a good candidate would be the two last lines quoted by Lactantius (*inst.* 2.5,24). According to this author, the verses were part of the *abregé* of Aratus' "Appearances" (*librum quo "Phænomena" breuiter comprehendit; item Prob. ad georg.* 1.138: *Ouidius in "Phænomenis"*), that is to say, a compendious translation of a highly popular

work from Antiquity, which was originally written by Aratus in Greek. The lines in question are:

tot numero talique deus simulacra figura
imposuit cælo perque atras sparsa tenebras
clara pruinosæ iussit dare lumina nocti

Both “black darkness” (*atras [...] tenebras*) and “clear light” (*clara [...] lumina*) are redundant expressions. This version is very idiosyncratic of Ovid’s baroque style, since the original text does not exhibit those characteristics (Arat. *phæn.* 451-453: ταῦτά κε θηήσαιο παρερχομένων ἐνιαυτῶν/ ἐξείης παλίνωρα· τὰ γὰρ καὶ πάντα μάλ’ αὐτῶς/ οὐρανῶ εὔ ἐνάρηρεν ἀγάλματα νυκτὸς ἰούσης) and Ovid turns out to be more inclined to add than to remove, as he does with *pruinosæ* (cf. *am.* 2.19,22: *longa pruinoso frigora nocte pati*). This text meets the requirement of the source peculiarity as well, since it is part of a translation and it could also meet the requirement of an early period, because this translation is very likely to belong to Ovid’s first stage as an apprentice writer. But obviously, the passage does not meet the first requirement, because what we are looking for is one single line along with the other verses (summing up: *tres uersus*) and not three or one and half lines. The passage does not meet the fourth requirement either. Indeed here there is no critical remark, but the opposite (Lact. *diu.* 2.5,24): *Quanto igitur Naso prudentius quam illi qui sapientiæ studere se putant, qui sensit a deo lumina illa ut horrorem tenebrarum depellerent instituta!*

Finally, as far as I know, the only single line that might meet all five basic requirements is the one referred to by Quintilianus (9.3,70):

cur ego non dicam, Furia, te “furiam”?

First, it is Ovidian (Quint. 9.3,69: *apud Ovidium ludentem*) and a single line.

Second, the verse has an obvious lexematic pleonasm with its *Fūria* and *fūriam* in “Furia, why should I not call you a fury?”, and –let’s admit it– the result is a very odd and rather ugly line.

Thirdly, the pun is quoted very generically as belonging to an *Ovidium ludentem* or “joking Ovid”, as we have just seen. Therefore, the line would meet the requirement of contextual peculiarity as well, since the other verses belong to successful publications of works of a whole (*Ars* and *Amores*), but our line is very likely to have been published in a lesser-known collection of poems. This circumstance could explain its omission in Seneca the Elder. Quintilianus (10.1,90: *Rabirius ac Pedo non indigni cognitione*; see also 6.3,61) was quite familiar with Albinovanus –the probable indirect source for the line– and, of course, with Seneca the rhetorician (9.2,42: *Seneca in controuersia*) as well, although rather strangely Quintilianus is less parsimonious in quoting him. Leaving

aside his tragedy *Medea* (*dial.* 3.4 and 12.6; *Quint.* 10.1,97-98), we know that a significant part of Ovid's work did not survive (*Pont.* 1.2,132: *et cecini fausto carmina digna toro*; *Pont.* 1.7,30: *et dedimus medio scripta canenda foro*; *Prisc.* 2.149, Keil: *Ovidius in epigrammatis*; etc.). On the other hand, Quintilianus seems to have had a good knowledge of the presently lost compositions of Ovid (*Quint.* 6.3,96: *Ovidius [...] librum in malos poetas composuerit*). For example, he is the only one to quote (12.10,75) a verse –probably a hendecasyllable– *at si contuleris eam Lacænæ, conspectu melioris obruatur* with a vague *ut Ovidius ait*. But the line is clearly Ovidian because of the subject (*cf.* *Ou. rem.* 707-708: *confer Amyclæis medicatum uellus aenis/ murice cum Tyrio: turpius illud erit*) and the expression (*cf.* *am.* 3.1,39-40: *non ego contulerim sublimia carmina nostris/ obruit exiguas regia uestra fores*).

Fourth, the verse is very critically quoted by the rhetorician from Calagurris (9.3,69) as a device rather to avoid than to imitate (*uitandi potius quam imitandi*), because it is *cold*, namely, 'graceless' even when employed in jest (*etiam in iocis frigidum*). The avoidable device consists in using the same words in different senses altered by the lengthening or the shortening of a vowel (*uoces aut eædem [aut] diuersa in significatione ponuntur aut productione tantum uel correptione mutatæ*). This preventable *trick* was exposed as well in the so-called *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, which is likely the main source for Quintilianus' two other examples immediately quoted before the Ovidian line: *amari iucundum est, si curetur ne quid insit amari* (*cf. ad Her.* 4.21: *nam amari iucundum sit, si curetur ne quid insit amari*) and *ãuium dulcedo ad ãuium ducit* (*cf. ad Her.* 4.29: *hinc ãuium dulcedo ducit ad ãuium*). Moreover, Cornificius –the probable author of the *De ratione dicendi* or *Rhetorica ad Herennium*– is *expressis uerbis* quoted immediately by Quintilianus (9.3,71: *Cornificius hanc traductionem uocat = ad Her.* 4.20: *Traductio est quæ...*) and again some lines below (*Quint.* 9.3,71: *ne patres conscripti uideantur circumscripti - ad Her.* 4.30: *Demus operam, Quirites, ne omnino patres conscripti circumscripti putentur*).

Fifth, the line could perfectly well refer to an early work of this author. Certainly, Ovid was well aware of his qualities... and of his defects, but he was fond of them as a kind of mole, those freckles that embellish the face (*decentiorem faciem esse, in qua aliquis næuus*). In *Tristia* (4.7,18) Ovid willingly repeated the blamed half-verse *semibouemque uirum*. Seneca correctly writes that Ovid even loved his defects (*non ignorauit uitia sua, sed amauit*). Quintilianus was also very aware of the peculiarities of Ovid's style (10.1,88: *Ovidius et nimium amator ingenii sui; item 10,1,98: quantum ille uir præstare potuerit, si ingenio suo imperare quam indulgere maluisset*; and other critical remarks in 4.1,77; 8.3,47 and 9.4,65) and probably was the only one who managed to preserve from Antiquity the third and otherwise forgotten [un]censurable Ovidian verse.