

Language of profit and commerce in Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*

There has been remarkably little philological study of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*. This paper enters that gap by analyzing key words of advantage, exchange, and loss in the poem. These terms reveal a clear pattern defying the announced goal of the *praeceptor amoris* to create long-lasting love relationships. The lexical complex I examine consists of terms of profit and loss (*utor/usus*, *prodesse*, *perdere*, *damnum*), terms of payment (*commercium*, *merces*, *pretium*, *munus*), and a verb of exchange (*dare* in its technical uses). *Utor/usus*—studied by DeCaro in *Amores*, and by García Jurado in Plautus, Cicero, and Livy—are employed in *Ars*, I argue, almost exclusively to mean “advantage” or “profit” (*OLD* s.v. *usus*, 11c; this meaning seems to begin with Plautus, cf. Smith).

Perdere and *damnum* refer not only to “loss” but also to the opposite of *usus*, especially in *Ars* 3, where it is used when discussing drawbacks for courtesans who do not charge their clients for services. Gifts, *munera*, were the standard, euphemistic method of payment for Graeco-Roman courtesans (Davidson ch.4, James 2001: 235n.29); but this façade breaks down often, as when the *praeceptor amoris* bemoans the expectation of giving the *puella* gifts (e.g., 3.97–98, cf. James 2003 on the “elegiac impasse”). *Dare*, in Ovid, has a divided, gendered meaning. When an *amator* “gives,” he gives money or gifts for sex (e.g., 1.449), whereas a courtesan simply “gives” sex (e.g., 1.454, *ne dederit gratis quae dedit, usque dabit*).

I devote most of my attention to *utor* and *usus*, and I augment my argument about the function of this complex in *Ars* by brief comparison with its function in prior elegiac works (Propertius, Tibullus, *Amores*). Propertius uses *utor* in its more conventional sense of “use” or “enjoy,” with the exception of poem 4.5, in which the *lena* Acanthis employs *utor* in her erotodidaxis to

connote “advantage” (cf. Ovid *Amores* 1.8). The concept of profit or advantage is not present in Tibullus’ usage of *utor*, except perhaps at 1.5.18, where the tone is more of failed piety than of financial loss; in Ovid’s *Amores*, the lexicon appears much more often than in his predecessors, but is not used in any one coherent way, whereas it is used programmatically in *Ars*.

Ovid’s use of these terms in *Ars* 1 and 2 shows the *praeceptor* teaching not the art of love, but the business of getting girls. With injunctions like *fallite fallentes* (1.645, cf. 2.165–166), he demonstrates that tricking *puellae* out of the gifts they need to survive is fair play. His pupils become sexual con men, exploiting women for their own sexual pleasure—even to the point of raping them (1.375, 1.663–680).

In *Ars* 3, likewise, much of the advice to women is couched in terms of business. Through the language of commerce, the courtesan’s body (i.e., sexual access to her) comes to be treated as a commodity (e.g., 3.103, 3.258), enhanced by deceptive *cultus* (cf. Leach, Churchill, Rimell). Ovid deploys this lexicon to undermine the *praeceptor*: the didactic posture of the poem’s speaker ultimately reveals the true nature of the relationships depicted in Roman erotic elegy. They are business, not romantic, relationships.

Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* is a text predicated on the exploitation of courtesans—of an entire social class—and in the poem, especially in the third book, the use of terms of profit and commerce turn this class’ activity (social and sexual) into a commodity. The Roman settings of *Ars* are materialistic and realistic, dealing not with the sweeping scale of epic or myth but with scenes that could plausibly represent (in an exaggerated, humorous style) aspects of everyday life. The *praeceptor amoris*, by importing language of profit and commerce into his teaching, contradicts his purported intent to create lasting relationships, and in a way deconstructs his own text to reveal its basic material underpinnings.

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