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# The Silence of Men, reflected in “Heroides”, the imaginary letters of love written by Publius Ovidius Naso

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**Abstract:** In this paper, we aim to analyse the set of imaginary letters entitled *Heroides*, written by Publius Ovidius Naso. Employing the elegiac distich, the Latin poet transcends the familiar narrative threads of Greek and Roman myths and legends to explore the intimate impulses that animate the love relationships between famous characters, such as Penelope and Odysseus, Briseis and Achilles, Dido and Aeneas, among others. In recent years, these letters have been re-examined through the lens of gender studies, shifting the critical focus from the frustrated and grieving women to the male perspective on the love relationships. In this article, however, we do not aim to analyse the actions or words of the male characters, but their silences, which are laden with multiple meanings. The theoretical framework will draw upon Max Picard’s *The World of Silence* (1948) and Adam Jaworski’s *The Power of Silence. Social and Pragmatic Perspectives* (1993). Our discussion will focus on the relevance of silence for the actants: how they employ it, the reasons they approve or disapprove of it, and the connections between silence and spoken or internalized words.

**Keywords:** silence, frustration, emancipation, letters, Latin elegy.

Max Picard, in his famous book *The World of Silence*, stated that silence is creative, just like language.<sup>1</sup> Silence can convey information beyond words, or it can signal the refusal and inability to use them. Starting from this premise, we propose to analyse the cycle of imaginary letters entitled *Heroides*, written by Publius Ovidius Naso in the first century B.C. Through the use of elegiac distich, the Latin poet transcends the familiar narrative of Greek and Roman myths and legends, to explore the intimate impulses that animate the love relationships between famous characters. The collection comprises twenty-one letters in which mythological figures express an acute sense of abandonment and fear: Penelope to Ulysses, Phyllis to Demophoon, Briseis to Achilles, Phaedra to Hippolytus, Hypsipyle to Jason, Dido to Aeneas, Hermione to Orestes, Deianira to Hercules, Ariadne to Theseus, Canace to Macareus, Medea to Jason, Laodamia to Protesilaus, Hypermestra to Lynceus, Sappho to Faon, Helen to Paris, Hero to

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<sup>1</sup> Picard 1948, IX.

Leander, Cydippe to Acontius. Letters 16<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> are written by men to their beloved women: Paris to Helen, Leander to Hero, Acontius to Cydippe. The three male characters have earned their “right” to write letters because they are the only ones who have actively sought to win the woman they love. The theoretical foundation of this paper relies particularly on the works of Max Picard (*The World of Silence*, 1948) and Adam Jaworski (*The Power of Silence. Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*, 1993). The analysis will focus on the relevance of silence for the actants how they employ it, the reasons they approve or disapprove of it, and the connections between silence and spoken or internalized words. The concept of silence in *Heroides* is also closely associated with that of absence, since the latter conditions the former. As Jaworski observed „in love and friendship silence may function as an expression of bondage, or it may be a sign of a disintegrating relationship”.<sup>2</sup>

In the epistles analysed here, Ovid uses silence both as a manifestation of disinterest or powerlessness on the part of the man, and as a catalyst for the woman’s devastating emotions as she awaits a response. The letters come to fill a void created by the absence of the beloved, thus becoming a “substitute that can prove to be as powerful as presence, sometimes even more powerful than it, since we identify in absence a painful, memorable, indelible lack”.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, these letters can create inner worlds and parallel realities. A typology of the couple relationships reveals the following situations:

- Marriage (8): Penelope and Odysseus, Pyllis and Demophoon, Hypsipyle and Jason, Medea and Jason, Dido and Aeneas, Laodamia and Protesilaus, Hypermestra and Lynceus, Deianira and Hercules;
- Engagement (1): Hermione and Orestes;
- Property (woman as slave) (1): Briseis and Achilles;
- Inappropriate relationship (2): Phaedra and Hippolytus, Canace and Macareus;
- Adulterous relationship (1): Paris and Helen;
- Relationship created by deception (2): Acontius and Cydippe; Theseus and Ariadne;
- Hidden relationship (1): Hero and Leander;
- Love without inhibitions (1): Sappho and Phaon.

Of the women who write the letters, only Briseis and Hero are in a position of social inferiority to the men they love, and they long to be recognized as equals. The others proudly emphasize their noble ancestry or, in Sappho’s case, her awareness of her value as a poet, they

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<sup>2</sup> Jaworski 1993, 69.

<sup>3</sup> Stoica 2022, 22.

demand, amidst tears of love, respect and recognition. A recurring motif in these epistles is the women’s frustration with their social condition, which condemns them to a static way of life full of inner tensions, in contrast to the active, public lives of men beyond the domestic space. Confronted with the men’s prolonged silence, the women feel as if they are “banging their heads against a brick wall.”<sup>4</sup> In this context, we aim to analyse not the actions or words of the male characters, but their silences, which are loaded with multiple meanings. Let us remember that the letters remain unanswered, regardless of whether a reply is expected or not. Ovidian silence does not signify listening, but rather a refusal of dialogue or an inability to participate in it. Silence is not, as Picard would say, the third participant in the conversation<sup>5</sup>, but the second one, for only silence responds to letters. The women seek to conquer, through words, the men who travel through new worlds: the heroes the Trojan cycle – Ulysses, Protesilaus, Achilles, Paris – or the adventurers Hercules and Jason. But these women, unable to make themselves heard, decided to write. In his book *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard rhetorically asks:

“How hard it is to situate the values of being and non-being! And where is the root of silence? Is it a distinction of non-being, or a domination of being? It is “deep”. But where is the root of its depth? In the universe where sources about to be born are praying, or in the heart of a man who has suffered? And at what height of being should listening ears become aware?”<sup>6</sup>

The space in which the female characters live and write is clearly defined; that of the men remains uncertain. There is always a sea between the lovers, agitated by strong winds. The silence of the men is perceived as an uncontrollable force – one the lonely, wounded, self-tormented women wish to overcome through the power of words. Ovid's heroines fight silence with words more than with tears or actions. If silence can exist without words, words cannot exist without silence.<sup>7</sup> Thus, assumed silence becomes a form of power. For the female characters, it is not distance or even the fear of death that poses the greatest danger, but silence itself.

“Silence is precisely due to the multitude of meanings that reach the reader and is connected to the process of derealization, which represents an act that Hugo Friedrich calls the dislocation of the real into absence. A transformation of language into a means of struggle against reality takes place.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Jaworski 1993, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Picard 1948, 9.

<sup>6</sup> Bachelard 1994, 180.

<sup>7</sup> Picard 1948, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Şipoş 2017, 35.

Women open themselves to the transcendence of what is heard, in order to be heard. “But before speaking, one must listen.”<sup>9</sup> Ariadna resorts to gestures first, then to letters:

*Haec ego; quod uoci deerat, plangore replebam; / uerbera cum uerbis mixta fuere meis. / Si non audires, ut saltem cernere posses, / Iactatae late signa dedere manus.* [“Thus did I cry, and what my voice could not avail, I filled with beating of my breast; the blows I gave myself were mingled with my words. That you at least might see, if you could not hear, with might and main I sent you signals with my hands.”]<sup>10</sup>

Unable to express themselves openly and vocally before their beloved, absent for various reasons, the women choose to write, transforming letters into the messengers of all their personal emotions and inner worlds. An intimate relationship is established with the document, which, through personification, becomes the confidant *par excellence*.

In the first of the letters, Penelope marks the entry of the Trojan War into realm of folklore: *illi uicta suis Troica fata canunt* [the husband sings of the fates of Troy that have yielded to his own].<sup>11</sup> By returning home unharmed (*pro saluis maritis*), domestic balance and marital harmony are restored - a state in which communication between the man and wife is central: *narrantis coniunx pendet ab ore uiri* [the wife hangs on the tale that falls from her husband’s lips].<sup>12</sup> Only at this point does silence intervene as the third participant in the conversation – in Picard’s terms – for it strengthens the power of the word through the attention with which it is received. The importance that Penelope attaches to the spoken word is emphatically underscored by the poet through the topicalization of the verb *referre*, used with its primary sense, “to bring back the word”, appearing twice: first in the pluperfect, *rettulerat*, then in the perfect *rettulit*:

*“Omnia namque tuo senior te quaerere misso / rettulerat nato Nestor, at ille mihi. / Rettulit et ferro Rhesumque Dolonaque caesos,* [For the whole story was told your son, whom I sent to seek you; ancient Nestor told him, and he told me. He told as well of Rhesus’ and Dolon’s fall by the sword.]”<sup>13</sup>

Penelope listens to the accounts of the Trojan War and, after its conclusion, reconstructs and relives the action. She triggers a second war, her own with her own fears, comparable to

<sup>9</sup> Bachelard 1994, 180.

<sup>10</sup> Ariadne to Theseus, *Her.*, X, 37-40, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 125.

<sup>11</sup> Penelope to Ulysses, *Her.*, I, 28, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Penelope to Ulysses, *Her.*, I, 30, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 13.

<sup>13</sup> Penelope to Ulysses, *Her.*, I, 37-39, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 13.



the one that has passed into legend: *Diruta sunt aliis, uni mihi Pergama restant* [For others Pergamum has been brought low; for me alone it still stands.]<sup>14</sup>

Direct communication also defines, at the familial level, the strong bond between a father and his children. Penelope asks Ulysses to educate their son, Telemachus: *In patrias artes erudiendus erat* [should have been trained by you in his father’s ways]<sup>15</sup>; Hypsipyle calls upon Jason to rejoice at the birth of their twins: *Nunc etiam peperit; gratare ambobus, Iason!* [And now, too, I have brought forth; rejoice for us both, Jason!]<sup>16</sup>

Silence emerges at the moments of separation. The heroines obsessively recall these scenes, emphasizing both their own difficulty, and the men’s difficulty in speaking: *Quam uix sustinuit dicere lingua ‘uale’!* [How your tongue could scarcely endure to say “Farewell”!]<sup>17</sup>; *cetera te memini non potuisse loqui!* [I remember you could say no more.]<sup>18</sup>

From the female writer’s perspective, the man who adopts silence is either unworthy of her love or indifferent to it. The first situation is illustrated by Cydippe’s attitude toward Acontius’ rival, unnamed man with whom she refuses to communicate, and who makes no effort to change this:

*“Nec loquor, et tecto simulatur lumine somnus / captantem tactus reicioque manum / ingemit et tacito suspirat pectore, meque / offensam, quamuis non mereatur, habet* [And (I) do not speak, and close my eyes in simulated sleep, and when he tries to touch me, I throw off his hand. He groans and sighs in his silent breast, for he suffers my displeasure without deserving it.]”<sup>19</sup>

The spoken word, in the form of prayers to deities, is associated with the effort to establish emotional connection. Leander prays to the god of winds to calm the storm: *Parce, precor, facilemque moue moderatius auram* [Have mercy on me, I pray ; be gentle, and stir a milder breeze.]<sup>20</sup> He also addresses the Moon god, employing again the religious verb *precor*: *Flecte, precor, uultus ad mea furta tuos* [Bend, I pray, thy face to aid my secret loves.]<sup>21</sup> Acontius likewise places himself under Diana’s protection, through the spoken word, a gesture

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<sup>14</sup> Penelope to Ulysses, *Her.*, I, 51, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 15.

<sup>15</sup> Penelope to Ulysses, *Her.*, I, 112, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Hypsipyle to Jason, *Her.*, VI, 119, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 79.

<sup>17</sup> Oenone to Paris, *Her.*, V, 52, trad. trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 61.

<sup>18</sup> Hypsipyle to Iason, *Her.*, VI, 64, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 75.

<sup>19</sup> Cydippe to Acontius, *Her.*, XXI, 199-202, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 307.

<sup>20</sup> Leander to Hero, *Her.*, XVIII, 47, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 247.

<sup>21</sup> Leander to Hero, *Her.*, XVIII, 47, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 249.

Cydispe, still undecided, reproaches him for: *Aut, dea si frustra pro me tibi saeua rogatur* [Or if in vain you beseech the cruel goddess on my behalf.]<sup>22</sup>

Bachelard believed that silence is directly linked to the idea of boundless spaces.<sup>23</sup> In Ovid's *Heroides*, such spaces are materialized in the form of the stormy sea – the fundamental obstacle to erotic fulfilment – as the heroines lament: *Per mare, quod totum uentis agitur et undis* [Across the sea, all tossed by wind and wave.]<sup>24</sup> The lantern that Hero keeps lit thus becomes a symbol of steadfast love, guiding the man toward a life full of sentimental fulfilment and serenity. Each night, Leander must cross the Hellespont, drawn by the light of his beloved's lantern, to reach her. "The metaphor of the sea and the shifting wind", as scholars have noted, was used in ancient Latin literature to denote the turbulence of public life, which, as Ovid repeatedly suggests, is a means of avoiding or curing the effects of erotic passion."<sup>25</sup> Hero, by contrast, laments the domestic way of life of women, forever spinning and sewing, and expresses her desire to swim alongside her lover, in an attempt to transcend her social condition:

*"Nam modo te uideor prope iam spectare natantem, / brachia nunc umeris umida ferre meis.* [For now I seem to see you already swimming near, and to feel now your wet arms around my neck.]"<sup>26</sup>; *Ire libet medias ipsi mihi saepe per undas, / sed solet hoc maribus tutius esse fretum.* [Oft am I prompted myself to go through the midst of the waves, but 'tis the wont of this strait to be safer for men.]"<sup>27</sup>

For Hero, the erotic fulfilment amidst the waves is only a compromise: *Exiguum, sed plus quam nihil illud erit* ['twill be little, but more than nothing!]"<sup>28</sup>

Women experience their partners' silence as a force they seek to master through words, the only means by which they can restore the love relationship. That is why the motif of *imaginary conversation* recurs throughout their letters. Dido imagines Aeneas asking for forgiveness: *quid tanti est ut tum 'merui! concedite!' dicas* ['Tis my desert; forgive me. ye gods!]"<sup>29</sup> She also imagines that Sicheus is calling her, an invitation she equates with the acceptance of death: *ipse sono tenui dixit 'Elissa, ueni!'* ['twas he himself crying in faintly sounding tone: Elissa, come]"<sup>30</sup>; Ariadne asks Theseus not to leave her out when he recounts his

<sup>22</sup> Cydispe to Acontius, *Her.*, XXI, 61, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 297.

<sup>23</sup> Bachelard 1994, 74.

<sup>24</sup> Phyllis to Demophoon, *Her.*, II, 35, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 23.

<sup>25</sup> Nicolae 2022, 389.

<sup>26</sup> Hero to Leander, *Her.*, XIX, 59-60, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 263.

<sup>27</sup> Hero to Leander, *Her.*, XIX, 161-162, trans. Grant Showerman, 1914, 271.

<sup>28</sup> Hero to Leander, *Her.*, XIX, 169, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 271.

<sup>29</sup> Dido to Aeneas, *Her.*, VII, 71, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 89.

<sup>30</sup> Dido to Aeneas, *Her.*, VII, 102, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 91.

heroic deeds: *me quoque narrato sola tellure relictam! / Non ego sum titulis subripienda tuis* [Tell also of me, abandoned on a lonely shore — for I must not be stolen from the record of your honours!]<sup>31</sup>; Medea imagines Jason boasting to his new wife and slandering her: *Forsitan et, stultae dum te iactare maritae / Quaeris et iniustis auribus apta loqui, / In faciem moresque meos nova crimina fingas* [Perhaps, too, when you seek to boast before your foolish bride and say what will pleasure her unjust ears, you will invent new slanders against my face and against my character.]<sup>32</sup>

“In poetry, the engagement of the being who imagines is so strong that the being is not just the subject of the verb *to adapt*. Real conditions are no longer decisive. In poetry, imagination is placed precisely in that area where the function of the unreal comes to seduce or to unsettle – always to awaken – the being asleep in its automatisms.”<sup>33</sup>

The character who writes the letter acts out imaginary scenes under the impulse of frustration and emotional imbalance. The lack of control over events, the long silence they strive to explain, produces what Leon Festinger called *cognitive dissonance*. The elements that constitute the characters’ “cognition” are grounded in reality:

“These elements of cognition are responsive to reality. By and large they mirror, or map, reality. This reality may be physical or social or psychological, but in any case, the cognition more or less maps it. This is, of course, not surprising. It would be unlikely that an organism could live and survive if the elements of cognition were not to a large extent a veridical map of reality. Indeed, when someone is ‘out of touch with reality,’ it becomes very noticeable.”<sup>34</sup>

Ovid’s characters reconstruct reality in their minds as a way to regain control over external reality. Laodamia longs to hear Protesilaus speak to her again: *Quando erit, ut lecto mecum bene iunctus in uno / Militiae referas splendida facta tuae?* [When will it be mine to have you again close joined to me on the same couch, telling me your glorious deeds in the field?]<sup>35</sup> We have seen how Penelope relives the Trojan War; Dido goes further, projecting a future reality in which she forces Aeneas to confess his betrayal and anticipates her own suicide: *tu potius leti causa ferere mei* [You shall rather be reputed the cause of my own doom].<sup>36</sup> As

<sup>31</sup> Ariadne to Theseus, *Her.*, X, 129-130, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 131.

<sup>32</sup> Medea to Jason, *Her.*, XII, 175-177, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 155.

<sup>33</sup> Bachelard 1994, 28.

<sup>34</sup> Festinger 1968, 10.

<sup>35</sup> Laodamia to Protesilaus, *Her.* XIII, 117-118, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 167.

<sup>36</sup> Dido to Aeneas, *Her.*, VIII, 64, trans. Grant Showerman 1914, 87.

Jaworski notes, „the breaking of silence by women has been viewed as a positive change toward their emancipation”<sup>37</sup>.

Regardless of the women’s lament and despair, in *Heroides*, the male characters persist in refusing communication, aware that through dialogue they would be defeated, diverted from the active life they have chosen, symbolized by the voyage on the stormy sea, or forced to acknowledge their faults and weaknesses.

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<sup>37</sup> Jaworski 1993, 120.