

## It Was Only Natural: Oenone's Narrative in *Heroides* 5

In the *Heroides*, Ovid uses the literary history of abandoned heroines to explore human relationships and experiences within the myths typically found in epic. Each letter appropriates the characters of other genres, placing them in an elegiac context rooted in the heroine's perspective. This is especially true in *Heroides* 5, in which Oenone, a nymph and former bride of Paris, writes to her lover between his judgment in favor of Aphrodite and the outbreak of the Trojan War. I argue that Oenone fails to win back Paris because she cannot break out of the pastoral identity that she has molded for herself, an identity rooted in her own relationship with nature. The poem describes Paris' transition into the genre of epic, yet Oenone unwittingly and ineffectively continues to impose her pastoral identity onto his epic realm. Ironically, it is this failure that makes Oenone an exemplary pastoral character, that is, a character for whom nature forms a backdrop for pining after an absent beloved.

As a letter-writer, Oenone has control over her own narrative, and she fashions herself into a pastoral character with an elegiac plea (Lindheim 2000). Though there is significant overlap between the genres of elegy and pastoral, both consisting of poetic and amorous themes, the pastoral genre is distinguished by rustic features and shepherds take center stage (Veyne, 2013). Oenone understands interpersonal relationships in the framework of nature, which she closely identifies with as a nymph. She even goes so far as to identify Paris as a pastoral figure like herself, in an attempt to recreate the idealized love they once shared (5.9-12).

Oenone expects Paris' love to be as constant as the natural scenery. In fact, Paris literally carves the evidence of their love into nature on a beech tree (5.21). She proclaims that as the tree grows, so will her name and the evidence of their love (5.25-26). Just as the tree advertises the love of Oenone and Paris in its ever increasing size, so does she think her claim on his love is

ever increasing. Instead of a joyful commemoration of their lasting love, though, the inscribed tree becomes a painful reminder of how their relationship has suffered and ironically perpetuates Paris' rejection (Jacobson 1974). The natural setting, emblematic of pastoral, becomes a subversive symbol for Oenone's abandonment. She tries to model her interpersonal relationships on nature (Jacobson 1947), which she imagines to be immutable but even nature goes through cycles of change (Bradley 1969). Ultimately, the destruction of the pastoral scene (5.41) foreshadows Paris' betrayal (Bolton 209).

Once she realizes that the roles of power have been reversed—her pastoral landscape is destroyed and barren, and Paris is preoccupied with the epic concerns of princes and wars, with a new bride no less—Oenone bids Paris to remember how she loved him when he was a pastoral lover in her pastoral world, and for him to love her likewise now that the roles are reversed. As part of her plea she attempts to fashion herself into an epic figure (she is worthy to be the wife of a lord (85), she is capable of ruling well (86), and her love is safe from wars (89)). She cannot accept that they exist within different generic frameworks, but attempts to rewrite her narrative to fit Paris' world of epic (Fulkerson 2005).

Oenone attempts to impose her pastoral experience on other people and events. However, Oenone's perception of her role as a pastoral figure, the constancy of her former relationship, and Paris' role as her pastoral lover do not necessarily conform to the reality of events. Oenone becomes aware of the futility of modeling the constancy of her lover on the constancy of nature, since nature itself is always changing. Not only does she have delusions about the continuous abundance of nature and her relationship, but ultimately, Oenone fails to distinguish between natural processes and human realities, just as she fails to distinguish her pastoral framework from the epic context.

## Bibliography

- Bolton, Catherine. 2009. "Gendered Spaces in Ovid's *Heroides*." *The Classical World* 102.3: 273-90.
- Bradley, Edward M. 1969. "Ovid 'Heroides' V: Reality and Illusion." *The Classical Journal* 64.4: 158-62.
- Fulkerson, Laurel. 2005. *The Ovidian heroine as author: reading, writing, and community in the Heroides*. Cambridge University Press.
- Jacobson, Howard. 1974. "*Heroides* 5: Oenone." *Ovid's Heroides*. Princeton University Press.
- Lindheim, Sara H. 2000. "Omnia Vincit Amor: Or, Why Oenone Should Have Known It Would Never Work Out (*Eclogue* 10 and *Heroides* 5)." *Materiali e discussion per l'analisi dei testi classici* 44: 83-101.
- Veyne, Paul. 2013. "The Pastoral in City Clothes." In *Latin Erotic Elegy: An Anthology and Reader* (ed. Paul Allen Miller), 366-385. New York: Routledge.