
Roxanne Gentilcore
Saint Anselm College

Follow this and additional works at: https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj

Recommended Citation

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Classical Journal by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.
Len Krisak (trans.) and Sarah Ruden (intro.),
Ovid’s Erotic Poems: Amores and Ars Amatoria.


Len Krisak’s translation of Ovid’s Amores and Ars Amatoria, is wonderfully fresh, modern, and a delight to read aloud. It excels in capturing Ovid’s playful tone and the spirit of his verse. This new edition is in keeping with current interpretations that emphasize a metapoetic reading of Ovid’s erotic poetry. This is an Ovid who plays with elegiac conventions while partaking in them, who engages with his reader and his literary predecessors more than with his ostensible subject, who revels in being sophisticated, ironic, and subversive. Ovid’s Erotic Poetry is an excellent translation for the English reader, but those with Latin will derive even more pleasure from the play between the ancient and modern poetics.

The ideal form for narrative that comments on itself, according to Rudens in her excellent introduction, is the elegiac couplet (p. 14). It is the perfect vehicle for Ovid’s preoccupation with art for art’s sake, as it encourages interplay within the couplet, undercutting, and antithesis. Many readers will ask why Krisak chose the rhyming couplet for his translation. In the preface, he argues that rhyme best captures the quantitative nature of Latin poetry. In Latin elegiac couplet, the music comes from the long and short syllables, the tone from the play of words and sounds within the couplet. Krisak decided that, “my versions of Ovid would try for the snap and elegant closure of a finished-off, rhymed couplet” (p. 21). I believe that the rhyming couplet successfully imitates Ovid’s end-stopped lines. The rhyme echoes the fixed, repeating rhythm of the second-half of the Latin pentameter with its two dactyls and ancesps syllable. Although the rhyming couplet by nature can get repetitive and jingly, a skilled poet like Krisak employs enjambment, metrical variations, off-rhymes, and other poetic devices to ensure variety. Krisak wisely chose to write in iambic hexameter and iambic pentameter couplets since, as he explains, that is the meter most suited to English verse.

A comparison of Krisak’s translation with Guy Lee’s may be helpful here in illustrating their differing approaches to elegiac poetics. In Amores 3.2, the Ovidi-
an speaker attempts to pick up the girl beside him at the races through a running monologue. Lee uses free verse and a line for line translation in order to, “above all catch the spirit and persuade the reader to go on reading” (Lee, *Ovid’s Amores* [New York, 1968] p. 205). He argues that the heroic couplet in English is not equal to the variety displayed in Latin elegiac poetry and “is haunted by the ghosts of Dryden and Pope” (p. 207). Let us compare Lee’s free verse translation of lines 21-24 in which the speaker chastises his fellow spectators for their rudeness toward his would-be *puella*. Here is Lee’s version:

> You on the right, sir – please be careful.
> Your elbow’s hurting the lady.
> And you in the row behind – sit up, sir!
> Your knees are digging into her back.

And here is Krisak’s:

> “Hey, Whosis on the right there; watch those elbows, churl.
> Those are *her* ribs you’re poking; that’s *my* girl!
> And you behind: scrunch up those legs. Discretion, please.
> Just keep them to yourself, those bony knees.” (*Amores* 3.2.21-24)

Lee employs a refined diction with words such as “please”, “lady”, and “sir”. The speaker urges propriety, as conveyed in Ovid’s “*si pudor est*” (l. 24). This is fittingly rendered by Krisak with “discretion, please”. However, the anaphora with “*tu*”, three imperatives, and the belittling phrase “*quicumque es*” indicates a harsher tone on the part of the would-be seducer. In contrast, Krisak’s lines are livelier and more colloquial than the Latin, as in line 21 with its insulting “churl” (added). Lee achieves clarity and succinctness. Although his couplets are flexible and keep to the two-lined elegiac verse, they lose much of the spirit and poetry of the Latin. Neither translator imitates the alliteration of *parce puellae* (l. 21) and *lateris laeditur* (l. 22) nor the juxtaposition of *terga* and *genu* in line 24. Krisak focuses on the humor derived from the characterization of the speaker by amplifying the tone of the Latin. The modern reader’s expectation of the rhyme at the end of the couplet re-creates the delight the Latin reader could take in word order and word-play. This is not to say that Krisak’s translation always lacks Ovidian word-play. Here is his rendering of lines 41-42:
But while I’m babbling, your white dress has caught some dust.
Leave her, dust. Depart that snow-white bust. \textit{(Amores 3.2.41-42)}

Krisak uses repetition of “dust”, keeps Ovid’s personification, and sets up an internal rhyme with “dust / bust”. The word “bust” is racier than “\textit{niveo corpore}”, rhymes delightfully with “dust”, and playfully continues the alliterative “b” sounds of “but” and the humorous “babbling”.

Krisak’s use of the rhymed couplet is perhaps even better suited to the style and tone of the \textit{Ars Amatoria}. Ovid wittily plays with the expectations of the didactic genre by writing his parody of the form in elegiac couplets, thereby combining erotic subject-matter with the conventions of traditional didactic verse. The pentameter line of the couplet and its end-rhyme readily supply the antithesis so central to the style of the \textit{Ars}, where seriousness is constantly undercut by irreverence and triviality. In particular, Krisak captures the distinctive voice of the \textit{praeceptor amoris} in contemporary idiom. He also keeps Ovid’s mythological allusions. Those who wish can consult the helpful notes unobtrusively provided at the end of Krisak’s edition (or continue on, uninterrupted, without suffering much confusion.)

Krisak’s translation of the circus section of the \textit{Ars} provides us with another example of his ability to capture the spirit and colloquial tone of the original through his use of modern idiom. Furthermore, we can examine how Krisak shifts his tone and style to suit Ovid’s treatment in the \textit{Ars} of the same scene explored in \textit{Amores} 3.2. As we have seen, \textit{Amores} 3.2 takes the form of direct address to a \textit{puella}. The pandering, manipulative, persuasive character of the speaker provides much of the elegy’s humor. But in the \textit{Ars} we are in the world of didactic poetry, not elegy. Here, Ovid playfully has his \textit{praeceptor} remind us he speaks through experience. Even if it is just the experience of the poet Ovid himself crafting an elegiac poem to the object of his affections, success was his! Krisak’s speaker retains the cynical and experienced persona of Ovid’s poem. The narrator is more restrained here because the focus is on the instructions that follow, and, as part of a longer narrative, this episode cannot result in immediate gratification. In the \textit{Ars}, the humor arises from the narrator’s systematic treatment of a trivial subject. Krisak echoes the simpler syntax and didactic emphasis of the episode in the \textit{Ars} with straightforward imperatives:
Remember gallant horses, too (I mean the races):
The Circus has so many useful places,
With no necessity for secret-signaling hands,
Or nods that tell you that she understands.
Just sit beside her; it’s the open-seating plan
So nudge against her thigh the best you can.  (Ars 1.135-140)

Krisak is at his best with contemporary idioms such as “open-seating plan” (which also provides a gloss to the modern reader concerning the seating arrangements in the Circus Maximus.) His version of line 140 is even more specific and evocative than Ovid’s. A few lines later, the narrator urges his pupil to flick away dust from the girl’s lap. Krisak translates wittily; “If nothing’s there, then flick that nothing away./ Find any old excuse, then . . . seize the day!”  (Ars 151-152). In order to ensure variety in the couplet, Krisak, following Ovid, occasionally makes use of enjambment, thus avoiding an end-stopped line. In 159-160, for example, he writes; “The simple mind will find delight in trifles; much/ May come from cushions lent an artful touch.”

Len Krisak’s translation has plenty of artful touches of its own. Lovers of poetry will particularly enjoy its post-classical literary allusions. For example, Krisak’s translation of the end of Amores 3.1 in which Elegy wins out over Tragedy, runs as follows: “Convinced, she heard my prayer. Coy mistresses, come here;/ I’m free, but fear Time’s winged drawing near” (pp. 69-70). The wit, word-play, and spirited tone of Ovid’s Erotic Poetry will ensure its popularity and longevity with classicists and readers new to Ovid.

NECJ 42.3
Roxanne Gentilcore
Saint Anselm College