

## SHORTER NOTES

I SEE YOU: AN OVIDIAN ACROSTIC (*REM. AM.* 681–5) AND CATULLAN ACROSTICS\*

## ABSTRACT

*This article demonstrates that Ovid placed an incomplete reverse acrostic at Rem. am. 681–5 reading DESIN-. I will argue that it is intentional, noting that it fits the context in which it appears. Additionally, I will discuss how Ovid is drawing the reader's attention to his engagement with the poetry of Catullus by referencing another possible acrostic in Catullus 36, as well as by playing with themes (and acrostics) from Catullus 8.*

**Keywords:** Ovid; *Remedia amoris*; acrostics; incompleteness; Catullus; intertextuality

## AN INCOMPLETE ACROSTIC FOR AN INCOMPLETE LOVE

Scholars have long noted Catullus' influence on Ovid, and much has been written on the subject.<sup>1</sup> In the following pages I pursue two different goals: proving the existence of an acrostic in Ov. *Rem. am.* 681–5, and noting that this wordplay is part of an interaction with the poetry of Catullus.

With the *Remedia amoris*, readers face a didactic poem that aims to teach them how to fall out of love. Ovid takes on the role of *praeceptor* and provides his reader–pupil with many recommendations on how to endure, resist, forget and stop loving the object of their affection. In one of his digressions in lines 681–8, Ovid laments that often lovers wait too long to give up hope that their love is reciprocated:

Nulla sit ut placeas alienae cura puellae;  
 Iam facito e multis una sit illa tibi.  
 Sed quid praecipue nostris conatibus obstet  
 Eloquar, exemplo quemque docente suo.  
 685 **Desinimus** tarde, quia nos speramus amari:  
 dum sibi quisque placet, credula turba sumus.  
 at tu nec uoces (quid enim fallacius illis?)  
 crede, nec aeternos pondus habere deos.

Take no trouble to please a woman now estranged; see that she now is one out of many to you.  
 But what particularly hinders our endeavours I will relate, though each may learn from his own

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<sup>1</sup> Without claiming to be exhaustive, see, for instance, D. Wray, 'Ovid's Catullus and the neoteric moment in Roman poetry', in P.E. Knox (ed.), *A Companion to Ovid* (Chichester and Malden, MA, 2009), 252–64; K.S. Myers, 'Catullan contexts in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*', in I.M. Le M. Du Quesnay and T. Woodman (edd.), *Catullus: Poems, Books, Readers* (Cambridge, 2012), 239–54; T. Somerville, 'Catullus' *passer* and Ovid's *psittacus*: the dirty and the dead', *G&R* 70 (2023), 271–80.

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case. We are slow in breaking off, because we hope that we are loved: while each of us flatters himself, we are a believing crew. But do not you believe that words (what more deceiving than they?) or the eternal gods have weight.<sup>2</sup>

This excerpt of Ovid's *Remedia amoris* contains what appears to be a reverse acrostic reading *DESIN-* (lines 681–5), which seems purposeful, rather than incidental, since it represents the root of *desinere*, and the word providing the first letter for the acrostic is precisely *desinimus* (685). Although this acrostic is seemingly incomplete, the root represents what can be considered a complete grammatical unit, and it fits the context in which it is placed. The poet reflects on the reasons why unrequited lovers give up late, and concludes that it is because there is always hope.<sup>3</sup> This is a love that is never fulfilled, and the same seems to have happened to the acrostic.<sup>4</sup> The wordplay follows the same logic as the so-called gamma-acrostic, but is to be read from the bottom up rather than top-to-bottom: instead of taking the shape of the Greek gamma, as is more common, it has the shape of the Latin letter 'L'.<sup>5</sup> Besides its meaning and context, the number of letters that comprise the acrostic may also be an indication of its purposefulness, as Morgan has noted regarding another specimen: 'I am forced to assume that any gamma-acrostic of five or more letters is deliberate.'<sup>6</sup> *desinere* is also a verb with a fairly strong presence in the *Remedia amoris*, appearing in eight other places.<sup>7</sup>

One should not be surprised to find an incomplete acrostic in Ovid since others have been identified, notably the well-known *INCIP-* at the end of the *Metamorphoses* (15.871–5).<sup>8</sup>

### CATULLAN WORDPLAY AND CONTEXTS

For the attentive reader, Ovid's acrostic at *Rem. am.* 681–5 might bring other associations to mind, especially if one is fond of acrostics and of seeking them out. Here I am thinking of the *DESI(N)* acrostic found in Catull. 36.5–9:

<sup>2</sup> Ovid's texts from E.J. Kenney, *P. Ovidi Nasonis Amores, Medicamina faciei femineae, Ars amatoria, Remedia amoris* (Oxford, 1961); translation from J.H. Mozley (rev. G.P. Goold), *Ovid, Art of Love. Cosmetics. Remedies for Love. Ibis. Walnut-tree. Sea Fishing. Consolation* (Cambridge, MA, 1929 [1979<sup>2</sup>]). My emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> To reinforce the message, the words *tarde* and *speramus* have a strong spondaic rhythm.

<sup>4</sup> This might be what Marouzeau called a 'lesson by example'. Cf. J. Marouzeau, 'La leçon par l'exemple', *REL* 14 (1936), 58–64, at 58: 'le curieux procédé d'exposition didactique qui consiste, au moment où on énonce une règle, à la formuler dans une phrase qui en fournit justement l'illustration'. I am grateful to Alessandro Schiesaro for calling my attention to this.

<sup>5</sup> Hanses discovered and analysed the telestich *AMOR/ROMA* in *Ars am.* 3.507–10 in the shape of an inverted 'L'. Cf. M. Hanses, 'Love's letters: an *amor-Roma* telestich at Ovid, *Ars amatoria* 3.507–10', in P. Mitsis and I. Ziogas (edd.), *Wordplay and Powerplay in Latin Poetry* (Berlin and Boston, 2016), 199–212, at 202–7. For more on these acrostics, see J.D. Hejduk, 'Was Vergil reading the Bible? Original sin and an astonishing acrostic in the *Orpheus* and *Eurydice*', *Vergilius* 64 (2018), 71–101, at 91–4; J.D. Hejduk, 'Acrostic reflections on divine violence in the *Aeneid*', *Vergilius* 68 (2022), 31–55, at 34.

<sup>6</sup> L. Morgan, 'Nullam, Vare ... chance or choice in *Odes* 1.18?', *Philologus* 137 (1993), 142–5, at 145.

<sup>7</sup> *Ov. Rem. am.* 21, 22, 404, 531, 647, 650, 658, 792.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. A. Barchiesi, 'Endgames: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 15 and *Fasti* 6', in D.H. Roberts, F.M. Dunn and D. Fowler (edd.), *Classical Closure: Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature* (Princeton, 1997), 181–208, at 195. On this acrostic and a possibility for its completion, cf. G. Vos, 'Opus imperfectum? Completing the unfinished acrostic at Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 15.871–5', *CQ* 73 (2023), 243–9, at 244–6. I have also identified another possible incomplete acrostic at *Fast.* 6.267–70, reading *V(E)STA* (I will explore this in a forthcoming publication).

- 5 **Desissemque** truces uibrare iambos,  
 Electissima pessimi poetae  
 Scripta tardipedi deo daturam  
 Infelicibus ustulanda lignis.  
 et hoc pessima se puella uidit  
 10 iocose lepide uouere diuis.

[If] I were restored to her love and ceased to dart fierce iambics, she would give to the lame-footed god the choicest writings of the worst of poets, to be burnt with wood from some accursed tree: and my lady perceived that these were the ‘worst poems’ that she was vowing to the merry gods in pleasant sport.<sup>9</sup>

Like Ovid’s *Remedia amoris* acrostic, Catullus’ is firmly rooted in its context, as the poet mentions the possibility of abandoning ‘fierce iambics’.<sup>10</sup> This wordplay in Catullus 36 has been noted before,<sup>11</sup> but further textual engagement is needed since not every scholar agrees on the transmission of this text, and later emendations have been proposed.<sup>12</sup> Heyworth has offered a correction of line 9,<sup>13</sup> thus giving the reading:

- 5 **Desissemque** truces uibrare iambos,  
 Electissima pessimi poetae  
 Scripta tardipedi deo daturam  
 Infelicibus ustulanda lignis.  
 Nec uos pessima se puella uidit  
 10 iocose lepide uouere diuis.

Accepting Heyworth’s reading, one finds the acrostic reading *DESIN-* (as in Ovid), in which the word providing the first letter belongs to the same verb, thus giving a gamma-acrostic.<sup>14</sup> However, leaving aside the arguments for and against Heyworth’s conjecture, the presence of this gamma-acrostic does not seem to be mere coincidence because of its context. Even if it were a coincidence, Ovid might have spotted it and played with it in the *Remedia amoris*, expecting readers to notice this connection, as Robinson has argued for another acrostic.<sup>15</sup> As a matter of fact, Catullus 36 has already been scrutinized because of the six-letter acrostic *CACATA* found in Verg. *Ecl.* 4.47–52, which could have reminded readers of Catull. 36.1, *Annales Volusi, cacata charta*, although there has been

<sup>9</sup> Text and translation from F.W. Cornish, J.P. Postgate and J.W. Mackail (rev. G.P. Goold), *Catullus. Tibullus. Peruigilium Veneris* (Cambridge, MA, 1913 [1988<sup>2</sup>]). My emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> For acrostic possibilities in the work of Catullus, see M. Mitchell, ‘Acrostics and telestichs in Augustan poetry: Ovid’s edgy and subversive sideswipes’, *CCJ* 66 (2020), 165–81, at 169; see also Á. Tamás, ‘Sweet friendship: an acrostic at Catullus 14.19–23’, *Mnemosyne* 75 (2022), 1045–8.

<sup>11</sup> Cf., for example, Mitchell (n. 10), 169 n. 14. See also M. Robinson, ‘Arms and a mouse: approaching acrostics in Ovid and Virgil’, *MD* 82 (2019[a]), 23–73, at 64 n. 4; M. Robinson, ‘Looking edgeways: pursuing acrostics in Ovid and Virgil’, *CQ* 69 (2019[b]), 290–308, at 300 n. 64.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. J. Diggle, ‘On the text of Catullus’, *MD* 57 (2006), 85–104, at 89–90; D.J. Butterfield, ‘Three Catullan emendations’, *Emerita* 78 (2010), 67–76, at 67–70.

<sup>13</sup> S.J. Harrison and S.J. Heyworth, ‘Notes on the text and interpretation of Catullus’, *CCJ* 44 (1999), 85–109, at 91–2.

<sup>14</sup> Despite the textual problems of this poem, the form *desi* might suggest a contraction of the perfect *desiui*. The contracted form is more common in poetry. Cf. *TLL* 5.722.52. I am grateful to Alessandro Schiesaro for calling my attention to this matter.

<sup>15</sup> Robinson (n. 11 [2019b]), 300 noted ‘the possibility’ that Ovid’s *INCIP-* ‘looks to’ Catullus’ *DESIN-*: ‘we need to make no special claim about the intentionality or otherwise of the latter acrostic, only that Ovid noticed it and responded to it.’

a somewhat heated debate on this point.<sup>16</sup> Thus two of the Augustan poets who make the most use of acrotelestich technique seem to have particular fondness for this Catullan poem, which they mine for material.

None the less, I think that the relation between the acrostic in Ovid's *Remedia amoris* and Catullus 36 can be extended a little further to include other Catullan verse. Besides the connection with poem 36, Catullus 8 may further support my argument for the purposeful character of the Ovidian *DESIN*-acrostic. The first line has a self-reflexive address using the same verb *desinere* (*Miser Catulle, desinas ineptire*) in a complaint addressed probably to Lesbia. The first connection to Ov. *Rem. am.* 685 is the fact that both texts express the same idea: stop being a fool and stop yearning for one who does not love you. There is also an apparent Catullan influence (8.11–15) earlier in the *Remedia amoris* (641–50):

Sed obstinata mente **perfer, obdura.**  
 Vale, puella. iam Catullus **obdurate**  
 Nec te requirit nec **rogabit** inuitam.  
 At tu dolebis, cum **rogaberis** nulla.  
 15 Scelesta, uae te! quae tibi manet uita?

... but with resolved mind **endure, be firm**. Farewell, my mistress; now Catullus **is firm**; he will not seek you nor **ask** you against your will. But you will be sorry, when you are a nobody in favours **asked** for. Ah, poor wretch! What life is left for you now?<sup>17</sup>

nec si scire uoles quid agat, tamen, illa, **rogabis**;  
**perfer**: erit lucro lingua retenta tuo.  
 tu quoque, qui causam finiti reddis amoris  
 deque tua domina multa querenda refers,  
 645 parce queri: melius sic ulciscere tacendo,  
 ut desiderii effluat illa tuis.  
 et malim taceas quam te **desisse** loquaris:  
 qui nimium multis 'non amo' dicit, amat.  
 sed meliore fide paulatim extinguitur ignis  
 650 quam subito: lente **desine**, tutus eris.

Nor must you **ask** how she fares, though you wish to know; **endure**! You will gain by being tongue-tied. You too who relate the cause of ended love, and recount your many complaints against your mistress, cease to complain; thus by silence you will win better revenge, so that she fades away from your regrets. And I would rather you were silent than say you had **ceased** to love; he who says o'er much 'I love not' is in love. But with better surety is the fire gradually extinguished than on a sudden; **leave off** slowly, and you will be safe.<sup>18</sup>

The vocabulary employed by Ovid in this passage strongly resembles that of Catullus at 8.11–15, especially concerning the exhortation to endure. The latter's expression *perfer, obdura* (8.11) is particularly striking, and Ovid seems very fond of it,

<sup>16</sup> J.T. Katz, 'The Muse at play: an introduction', in J. Kwapisz, D. Petrain and M. Szymanski (edd.), *The Muse at Play: Riddles and Wordplay in Greek and Latin Poetry* (Berlin and Boston, 2013), 1–30, at 5: 'Acrostics are seemingly straightforward, but the existence of C-A-C-A-T-A ("shitty") in *Eclogue* 4.47–52 will suffice to show that accidents happen.' For a strong defence of the authenticity of this acrostic, see N. Adkin, 'Acrostic shit', *ACD* 52 (2016), 21–37, especially 24–5 on the relationship with the Catullan acrostic. See also the discussion in Robinson (n. 11 [2019a]), 62: 'Here our story gets a little more interesting, since *Eclogue* 4 is awash with echoes of Catullus, in particular Catullus, 64.'

<sup>17</sup> Translation from Cornish, Postgate and Mackail (n. 9). My emphasis.

<sup>18</sup> Translation from Mozley (n. 2). My emphasis.

repeating it three times across his *œuvre*.<sup>19</sup> In *Rem. am.* 642 *perfer* conveys the same idea of resistance.<sup>20</sup>

The attentive reader might wonder if Ovid also took inspiration from another Catullan acrostic in the same lines of poem 8. These lines present the five-letter reverse acrostic *SANVS*, which also seemingly fits its context since it occurs as Catullus begins to accept the need to endure, having said farewell to his lover. When she is gone, he will be of sound mind and body, and this decision is reinforced at line 19, in a ring composition linked by *obdura*, repeated from line 11. A very similar idea is found in *Am.* 3.11a.31–2, where Ovid seems to have recovered his discernment: *desine blanditias et uerba potentia quondam | perdere: non ego sum stultus, ut ante fui*.<sup>21</sup> It is true that Ovid's *DESIN*- acrostic is closer to that of Catullus 36, but it is plausible that he noticed both acrostics (especially when we consider that both *DESIN*- and *SANVS* are reversed) and played with them in the *Remedia amoris*, a poem full of Catullan references. Also, as noted by scholarship, Catullus 8 and Catullus 36 share a thematic relation to the composition of iambs.<sup>22</sup>

### CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that Ovid had a perfect command of the literary tradition, both Greek and Latin, and often plays with his readers' knowledge and expectations. His intense dialogue with the poetry of Catullus manifests itself not only through verbal allusions and reminiscences but also through erudite wordplay. I believe that he created a web of connections in the *Remedia amoris*, using the incomplete acrostic *DESIN*- to allude to both Catullus 8 and Catullus 36. This becomes clear from Ovid's imagery, which is sustained by both the incomplete acrostic *DESIN*- and the hitherto-unnoticed Catullan reverse acrostic *SANVS* and key words and expressions.

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<sup>19</sup> *Am.* 3.11a.7 *perfer et obdura: dolor hic tibi proderit olim; Ars am.* 2.178 *perfer et obdura: postmodo mitis erit; Tr.* 5.11.7 *perfer et obdura, multo grauiora tulisti*. For the influence of Catullus on *Ov. Am.* 3.11, see H. Seng, 'Ovid, *Amores* 3.11 und Catull', *Paideia* 74 (2019), 955–66.

<sup>20</sup> P. Hardie, 'Lethaeus amor: the art of forgetting', in R. Gibson, S. Green and A. Sharrock (edd.), *The Art of Love: Bimillennial Essays on Ovid's Ars Amatoria and Remedia Amoris* (Oxford, 2006), 166–90, at 175: 'Injunctions to be firm at *Rem.* 218 and 642 (*perfer*) and 245 ... remind the reader of Catullus' attempt to put the past behind him'. Cf. also M.A. Oberlinner, *Intertextualität und Parodie in Ovids Remedia amoris* (Tübingen, 2022), 229–35.

<sup>21</sup> 'Cease wasting your caresses, and the words that once had weight—I am not a fool, as once I was!' Translation from G. Showermann (rev. G.P. Goold), *Ovid, Heroides. Amores* (Cambridge, MA, 1941 [1977]). My emphasis.

<sup>22</sup> See the commentary on poem 36 in D.F.S. Thomson, *Catullus. Edited with a Textual and Interpretive Commentary* (Toronto, 1997). On Catullus and the writing of iambs, see D.E. Lavigne, 'Catullus 8 and Catullan iambs', *SyllClass* 21 (2010), 65–92.