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Back Talk in Ovid's *Heroides*

Much recent scholarship on the *Heroides* has argued that, by writing in their own voices, the female authors exercise control over their textual representations. This paper, however, will contend that the women of the *Heroides*—with the possible exception of Sappho—ultimately remain circumscribed by the narratives constructed by their male authors. They may hold the pen, but it inevitably writes the same ending to their story—often death. The female voice is granted a certain authority within the process of writing, but is unable to avoid the masculine rewriting which occurs at the moment of closure.

Throughout the *Heroides*, the women draw attention to the epistolarity of their texts. When properly deployed, the epistle establishes a dialectical relationship between the writer and the addressee. The heroines can thus write back to their lovers but also to their male authors and the literary tradition. In writing a letter, each hopes to initiate a course of action that will rewrite the end of her story. Yet almost to a person they fail to negotiate the generic conventions. A number of writers confess their inability to manipulate language effectively; they seem unaware that the goal of letter-writing is to initiate a dialectic which results in some changed course. This ignorance is illustrated by their almost collective failure to ask for a response. Sappho proves the sole exception.

Sappho is the only heroine who possibly uses the epistolary form to rewrite her story favorably. A number of scholars, relying on philological criteria, have seconded Tarrant's unequivocal condemnation of the letter. Rosati, however, makes a compelling content-based argument for authenticity. Putting authenticity aside for a moment, it is remarkable that Sappho's letter, physically located between the single and double epistles, also bridges the gap between the unsuccessful female heroines and the successful male heroes of the double epistles. My reading of Sappho depends on reading Sabinus's reply to her (*Am.* 2.18.26) as positive. Sappho dedicates her lyre to Apollo because Phaon reciprocated her love. Of the heroines, Sappho alone manages the conventions of the elegiac epistle and avoids her mythologically inscribed fate. In so doing, she anticipates the successful epistolary relationships negotiated by the male authors of 16-21.