10. *Amores* 1.4: Secret signs
If Ovid’s book is telling us the story of a love affair, the fourth poem suggests at first that the poet has made a lot of progress. The previous poem gave us nothing but arguments, which did not in the end seem to be those likely to win a girl’s heart; in Amores 1.4, it seems, she is the poet’s willing lover. But of course there is a snag: she is not free to be with the poet, much as she might want to, as she has a man.

The identity, or rather the legal status, of this man is unclear. The Romans could use *vir* to mean “boyfriend” as well as “husband,” just as “stand by your man” is ambiguous in English, at least in country-western music. We will discuss this problem after we have considered the poem as a whole.

The poem opens with the poet speaking, at least in theory, to the girl. He’s heard that the *vir* is going to be at dinner with her, and he’s jealous. In the best traditions of male jealousy he focuses on the physical facts: the *vir* will be able to touch the girl, and he (the poet) won’t (lines 4–6). But it is harder to sympathize with our poet when he goes on to compare their situation to that of the Lapiths and Centaurs. This famous battle was provoked, supposedly, when the centaurs got drunk at the wedding feast in honor of Pirithous and Hippodamia, and tried to abduct the bride; the story (immortalized at Athens on the Parthenon metopes) exemplified primal conflict, between humans (the Lapiths) and the grotesquely semi-human centaurs. For the poet to compare himself to a centaur is a grotesque exaggeration: we can only laugh at the poet’s attempt to compare a fairly pedestrian sexual jealousy with a clash between civilization and chaos. Our amusement is only heightened when he explains, with the heavy-handed clarity of the truly self-absorbed, that of course he is not really a centaur (line 9).
Most of the poem consists of the poet’s “instructions” to the girl. The poet tells her to arrive as early as possible, not because they can have any real contact but because he just can’t wait to see her; all he can hope for is some quick footsie when they take their places at the table (lines 13–16). The poet then gives the girl elaborate instructions for secret communications (lines 17–28). And it is here that we get our first clear sense that he is not being reasonable or realistic. The notion that lovers could get away with writing notes on the table with wine is absurd (line 20), and that detail calls into question the practicality of the whole discussion: surely a husband, and the other guests, would notice if the girl watched our poet with the intensity that he demands.

Once we start wondering about practicalities, we perhaps ask ourselves an even more fundamental question: whether the girl is actually listening. Is she even present at all? Could this simply be an internal monologue? The earlobe signal (lines 23–24) could be a real signal. But some of the poet’s other suggestions seem oddly ambiguous: a girl could touch her cheek (lines 21–22), twist the ring on her finger (lines 25–26) or touch the table (lines 27–28) without thinking of these instructions at all. If a modern dinner guest were to decide that a woman who asked for the sugar was making a coded statement about him we might suspect he was fooling himself. Lovers, especially unrequited lovers, are notorious daydreamers.
The poet moves gradually from his fantasies about communication to simple jealousy (lines 33–34), and he becomes increasingly preoccupied with the physical contact between the girl and her *vir* (lines 35–44). He knows about this physical stuff, he says, because he’s done it himself (lines 45–48), with his mistress (*dominaeque meae*). This sudden use of the third person presents a problem, since up to this point, supposedly, he has been talking to the girl herself (note the striking return to the second person in line 49: *hoc tu non facies*). The solution offered by McKeown is to see these four lines as an aside: the poet, like a character in comedy, comments on his own speech in words not to be heard by the addressee. If this is right it has an important consequence: we learn for the first time that the poet and the girl really have been having an affair.

The alternative is to see this *domina* as a different girl, with whom the poet had had exactly the kinds of dalliances he’s worried about here. This, as McKeown observes, would hardly be tactful: we would not expect an ardent lover to remind his new girl of her predecessors. But, in my view, this is precisely the point. The poet has lots to say, including things that in real life would be tactless: he can say what he wants in his own head.

The “instructions” continue: get the *vir* as drunk as possible, because that will give them a chance to be together (lines 51–54), and perhaps they can do some touching (whatever body parts happen to be available) when everyone gets up from the table (lines 55–58). Then comes, apparently, a dose of reality: the poet realizes that whatever fun he can have during dinner will be trivial compared to what happens when the girl has to go home with her *vir* (lines 59–62). The *vir* is going to be kissing her, and much more. All the poet can do is urge the girl not to show herself willing: the *vir* should not enjoy himself, much less the girl herself (lines 63–68).

Finally, in the last couplet, the poet asks her to lie to him: whatever happened at home with her *vir*, she should say categorically that nothing happened. The poet, in other words, *wants* to be deceived, at least on this crucial point. This works well enough if we really are to see this as a real, if one-sided, conversation: there is a certain charm in a lover *asking* to be lied to, at least in these particular circumstances. But it works even better if we read the poem as fantasy. The poet’s imagination deals with the ultimate affront in two complementary ways: he first imagined the girl giving in to her *vir* only because she had to, and now he imagines her as so sensitive to his feelings that she will lie about it. She’s the perfect lover, at least in the poet’s own mind.
Appendix: the *vir*

Given the prominence of adultery in the western literary tradition, it is difficult for us to read *Amores* 1.4 without thinking of the *vir* as the girl’s husband. This might seem to be confirmed by the clear suggestion that the girl has to go home with her *vir* (lines 61–62), who will then exercise his legal rights (lines 63–64).

But in his authoritative commentary James McKeown accepts the suggestion (made by Ian Du Quesnay) that the girl is a freedwoman, and the *vir* is her patron (i.e. her former owner), who has retained legal rights over her. McKeown observes that in *Amores* 2.5 Ovid uses similar legal language about his own girl, who is certainly not his wife. More important, McKeown finds it hard to believe that anyone would imagine a married couple furtively having sex at a dinner party (lines 47–50); as he says, on the authority of Ovid himself (*Ars Amatoria* 3.585f), “husbands do not have to seize fleeting opportunities” (McKeown 2, 77). It is worth remembering, too, that adultery was more than just one of the sexual vices that so offended the puritanical Augustus: in a remarkable intrusion into Roman legal tradition, Augustus made adultery a state crime, prosecuted in the same manner as treason, forgery, and poisoning. An extended fantasy about adultery is about as anti-Augustan as a poet could get.

I would suggest, nonetheless, that “husband” remains the most likely translation of Ovid’s *vir*. As McKeown observes, the Roman dinner party had become a stereotypical venue for adultery (see esp. Horace, *Carm.* 3.6.25ff). And his argument about husbands and “fleeting opportunities” is not necessarily convincing. In the first place, outrageous sexual activity is not always, or even often, prompted merely by opportunity; it is easy enough to imagine a dissolute married couple flaunting their sexuality purely for the fun of it, especially in Rome.

More important, McKeown’s argument depends on a relatively “literal” reading of the poem as a whole. If it is a “real” set of instructions given to a “real” girl actually expected to pay attention, then the dinnertime behavior is, at least, very surprising. But if the whole speech is purely in the poet’s head, then the *vir*’s behavior makes perfect sense: with his beloved and his rival sharing a couch at dinner, our poet’s imagination simply gets the better of him.
Suggested reading


Vir tuus est epulās nōbīs aditūrus eāsdem:
ultima cēna tuō sit, precor, illa virō.

ergō ego dīlectam tantum convīva puellam
aspiciam? tangī quem iuvet, alter erit,
alteriusque sinūs aptē subiecta fovēbis?

iniciet collō, cum volet, ille manum?
dēsine mīrāri, positō quod candida vīnō
Ātracis ambiguōs traxit in arma virōs;
nec mihi silva domus, nec equō mea membra cohaerent:
vix ā tē videor posse tenère manūs.

quae tibi sint facienda tamen cognosce, nec Eurīs
dā mea nec tepidīs verba ferenda Notīs.
ante venī quam vir; nec quid, sī vēneris ante,
possit agī videō, sed tamen ante venī.
cum premet ille torum—vultū comes ipsa modestō
ībis ut accumbās — clam mihi tange pedem;
mē spectā nūtūsque meōs vultumque loquācem:
excipe fūrtivās et refer ipsa notās.

verba superciliīs sine vōce loquentia dīcam;
verba legēs digitīs, verba notāta merō.
cum tibi succurret Veneris lascīvia nostrae,
purpureās tenerō pollice tange genās;
sī quid erit, dē mē tacitā quod mente querāris,
pendeat extrēmā mollis ab aure manus;
cum tibi, quae faciam, mea lux, dīcamve, placēbunt,
   versētur digitīs ānulus usque tuīs;
tange manū mensam, tangunt quō mōre precantēs,
   optābis meritō cum mala multa virō.
quod tibi miscuerit, sapiās, bibat ipse iubētō;
   tū puerum leviter posce, quod ipsa volēs:
quae tū reddiderīs, ego prīmus pōcula sūmam,
   et, quā tū biberīs, hāc ego parte bibam.
sī tibi forte dabit, quod praegustāverit ipse,
   rēice lībātōs illius ōre cibōs.
nec premat impositīs sinitō tua colla lacertīs,
   mīte nec in rigidō pectore pōne caput;
nec sinus admittat digitōs habilēsvē papillae;
   oscula praecipuē nūlla dedisse velīs.
oscula sī dederis, fiam manifestus amātor
   et dīcam “mea sunt” iniciamque manum.
haec tamen aspiciam, sed quae bene pallia cēlant,
   illa mihi caecri causa timōris erunt.
nec femorī committe femur nec crūre cohaerē
   nec tenerum dūrō cum pede iunge pedem.
multa miser timeō, quia fēcī multa protervē,
   exemplique metū torqueor ipse meī:
saepe mihi dominaeque meae properāta voluptās
   veste sub iniectā dulce perēgit opus.
hoc tū nōn faciēs; sed nē fēcisse putēris,
   conscia dē tergō pallia dēme tuō.
vir bibat usque rogā (precibus tamen oscula dēsint),
dumque bibit, fūrtim, sī potes, adde merum.
sī bene compositus somnō vīnōque iacēbit,
consilium nōbīs rēsque locusque dabunt.
cum surgēs abitūra domum, surgēmus et omnēs,
in medium turbae fac memor agmen eās:
agmine mē inveniēs aut inveniēris in illō;
quidquid ibī poteris tangere, tange, meī.
mē miserum! monuī, paucās quod prōsit in hōrās;
sēparār ā dominā nocte iuβente meā.
nocte vir inclūdet; lacrimīs ego maestus obortīs,
quā licet, ad saevās prōsequar usque forēs.
oscula iam sūmet, iam nōn tantum oscula sūmet:
quod mihi dās furtīm, iūre coacta dabis.
vērum invīta datō (potes hoc) similisque coactae:
blanditiae taceant sitque maligna Venus.
sī mea vōta valent, illum quoque nē iuvet optō;
sī minus, at certē tē iuvet inde nihil.
seȳ quaeqcumque tamen noctem fortūna sequētur,
crās mihi constantī vōce dedisse negā.
Notes on *Amores* 1.4

1–2: *Vir*: can mean either “husband” or “boyfriend/lover”; the ambiguity is perhaps intentional (see the introductory essay). The oblivious *vir* as a woman’s “significant other” is a standard figure in Roman love elegy. *nōbis*: dative of reference with *eāsdem* (AG §376; OLD *īdem* 2c); he will be attending the same banquet as you and I will be. *sit precor* = *precor ut sit*, “I pray that (that dinner) will be.” Verbs of praying, ordering, etc., usually introduce indirect commands with *ut* + subj., but occasionally *ut* is omitted (AG §565). Ovid’s prayer is rather harsh, considering that the *vir* is the wronged individual.

3–4: *tantum*: can be construed either with *convīva* (“only a dinner guest”) or with *aspiciam* (“Shall I only look upon?”). *convīva*: in apposition to *ego*: “Shall I, a mere table companion, look upon?” *tangī quem iuvet* = *is quem iuvet ā tē tangī*, “he who enjoys being touched by you.”

5–6: *sinūs … fovebis*: “will you warm the chest.” *sinus* refers to the fold produced by the draping of clothes; the folds of clothing most commonly referred to (for men and women alike) are those at the breast, hence “bosom, breast,” and therefore “embrace,” in plural as well as singular. *subiecta*: “snuggling closely against.” A dining-couch could accommodate two or three people. *iniciet … manum*: a double entendre: *manum inicere* + dative can mean “to put one’s hand on” or, in a legal sense, “to seize,” as a way of making a formal claim on a person or thing. *collō*: dative with the compound verb *iniciō* (AG §370).

7–8: *positō quod … vínō*: construe *quod* first, “that”; verbs of perceiving, such as *sciō*, *crēdō*, *videō* and even *mīror* often introduce a *quod* clause acting as the direct object of that verb. *positō … vínō*: “after wine was served,” ablative absolute (AG §420). Drunkenness was a factor in the centaurs’ attack. *Ātracis* < *Ātracis*, -idis, f. “the woman from *Atrax*”¹ (a town in Thessaly). The reference is to Hippodamia, whose wedding to Pirithous, king of the Lapiths, turned violent when the centaurs, who were guests, were so aroused by her beauty that they tried to carry her off. *ambiguōs … virōs*: the centaurs, half-man/half-horse creatures; hence, humorously, “ambiguous men.”

¹ [http://pleiades.stoa.org/places/540682](http://pleiades.stoa.org/places/540682)
9–10: nec mihi Silva domus: understand est; dative of possession. The poet explains that he is not an uncivilized beast prone to uncontrolled acts (as the centaurs are). equō: dative with the compound verb cohaerent (AG §370); again, a reference to the centaurs. ā tē: “from you,” with tenēre manūs. tenēre: “to keep (away), to restrain, to hold back.”

11–12: quae tibi sint facienda: “(the things) which must be done by you,” i.e., what you must do. The gerundive injects a matter-of-fact tone. sint is subjunctive in an indirect question (AG §574). nec Eurīs … nec tepidīs … Notīs: “neither to the east winds nor to the warm south winds.” ferenda: the gerundive with a verb meaning “give” expresses purpose (AG §500.4).

13–14: ante … quam = antequam “before, early, in advance”; the splitting of a compound word is called tmesis. venī: present imperative; note the scansion (āntĕ vĕnī). nec quid … video = nec videō quid possit aġi, sī vēneris ante. quid possit is impersonal “what can be done”; subjunctive in an indirect question. The repetitions of ante convey a sense of urgency.

15–16: torum: “couch”; at formal dinners the Romans ate lying down. vultū … accumbās: this clause is a second cum clause, with the cum supplied by cum premet ille torum; the asyndeton suggests that the speaker is in a highly emotional state. comes: note that comes, comitis “companion” can be feminine as well as masculine. accumbās: “take your place (reclining) at the table.” mihi: dative of advantage (AG §376).

17–18: furtīvās … notās: with both excipe and refer. referō can mean “return” (see OLD 12); for nota, -ae, f. as “signal,” see OLD 7.

19–20: supercilīs … digitīs: ablative of means with notāta (AG §409). < supercilium, i(i) “eyebrow.” merō: “with wine,” ablative of means; merum strictly speaking is “wine not mixed with water” but is often used to mean wine in general.


23–24: quid = aliiquid (AG §310a); antecedent of quod. dē mē tacitā quod mente querāris = quod dē mē, tacitā mente, querāris; poets sometimes postpone
conjunctions for metrical or stylistic reasons. tacitā ... mente = tacitē (an anticipation of the Romance languages’ use of the –mente ending to create adverbs, e.g. Italian facilmente. querāris is potential subjunctive (AG §447.2). extrēmā ... aure: scansion shows that these words are to be taken together; extrēmus can mean “the lowest part,” so she is presumably supposed to touch her earlobe.

25–26: quae = ea quae; the antecedent of the relative pronoun is often omitted, AG §307c. mea lux: a term of endearment; vocative case. usque: “continuously” (OLD 5).

27–28: tangunt: understand mensam, normally “table” but also “altar”; touching an altar was a normal gesture of prayer. quō mōre: “in the manner in which.” optābis ... cum: “when(ever) you hope for”; cum is postponed. cum takes the indicative when it means “on every occasion which.” meritō: “deservedly, as he deserves.”

29–30: quod = id quod. miscuerit: future perfect; the subject is the vir. Romans normally drank their wine mixed with water; the implication here is that the vir will add relatively little water, but our poet wants the puella to drink a weaker mixture. sapiās: hortatory subjunctive, used to express a proviso: “may you be wise” means “if you are wise” (AG §528a). But the expression seems to be a colloquial way of saying “be wise,” “be sensible.” bibat ipse iubētō = iubētō ut bibat ipse. iubētō is second person singular future imperative (AG §449); the future imperative suggests the language of formal legislation. ināebō normally takes accusative + infinitive, but can also take ut + subjunctive. For the omission of ut with verbs of commanding see AG §565a (cf. line 2 above). puerum: i.e. the cupbearer; a male slave, of whatever age, could be called puer. leviter: “quietly” (adverb). posce: “call for, demand,” with double accusative (ask x for y, AG §396); the word is often used of asking for wine in particular. quod = id quod, as in line 29: “that (only) which.”

31–32: quae: the antecedent is pōcula. reddideris ... biberis: future perfect, but translate as imperative, “return.” The final syllable of the second person singular in the future perfect is often lengthened in poetry immediately before the caesura. quà: “on whatever part (of the cup)”; construe with parte (line 32); ablative of place where.
33–34: libātōs < lībō (1) here “nibble, taste.” illius: in poetry the second i is sometimes long, sometimes short, as here (see OLD).

35–36: nec premat ... sinitō = nec sinitō (ut) premat, “do not allow him to press”; sinitō (future imperative) is mock formal in tone, like iubētō in line 29. colla: plural for singular. Note the chiastic word order, with words for arms surrounding the words for neck. mite ... caput = nec pōne mīle caput in rigidō pectore. nec pōne = nē pōne; for this archaic and poetic form of a negative command see AG §450a; here it has a religious or legal tone. mīte < mītis, mite “soft, gentle.”

37–38: sinus: “the fold of your dress.” Refer to the note on sinus in line 5. digitōs = dīgitōs eius. papillae: understand admittant, from the preceding sinus admittat. nulla dedisse velis: “may you wish to have given no (kisses),” i.e., don’t give any. The tone is mock formal, as with the future imperatives above.

39–40: sī dederis: future perfect indicative, in a future more vivid condition (AG §516c). manifestus amātor: a play on legal language; fūr manifestus is the technical term for a thief caught red-handed. iniciamque ... manum: for manum inicere see above on line 6.


45–46: protervē: “boldly” or “shamelessly.”

47–48: mihī dominaeque meae: datives of advantage (AG §376). voluptās: used explicitly of the pleasure connected with sex, see OLD 5; here possibly personified (OLD 3). veste sub iniectā = sub iniectā veste. perēgit opus: an explicit sexual reference, with dulce opus as a euphemism for sexual intercourse

49–50: nē fēcisse putēris: a negative purpose clause (AG §531); putēris is present passive subjunctive. pallia: here probably plural for singular. dēme < dēmō, dēmere, dempsī, demptum “remove.”

51–52: vir bibat usque rogā = rogā (ut) vir bibat usque; for the omission of ut with verbs of commanding, see AG §565a. merum: here perhaps undiluted wine (contrast line 20); the point then would be that she is secretly making his drink stronger than he expects. But it is possible that she is simply
supposed to keep adding ordinary wine, secretly, so that he will drink more.

53–54: *compositus*: “settled in a position of rest.” *somnō vīnōque* = *somnō vīni*, by hendiadys (the use of two substantives connected by a conjunction, instead of a substantive with an adjective or genitive). *cōnsilium*: accusative; here “plan of action” (OLD 4b).

55–56: *surgēmus et omnēs* = *et (cum) omnēs surgēmus*. *in medium turbae … agmen*: “into the middle part of the crowd’s line of march”; *agmen*, *agminis* n. can refer to any group of people or things moving in the same direction together, but is often used of a column of soldiers on the march. *fac memor … eās* = *fac ut memor sīs ut eās*; *eās* is present subjunctive of *eō*. For the omission of *ut* with certain verbs of commanding see AG §565a.

57–58: *inveniēris*: future passive indicative; the future perfect active would be *invenieris*. *in illō* = *in agmine*. Notice that the words for the poet and the *puella* are placed within the words for the *agmen*. *meī*: partitive genitive, with *quidquid* (AG §346a3).

59–60: *mē miserum*: accusative of exclamation (AG §397d). Ovid speaks to himself in an aside. *paucās quod prōsit in hōrās*: “I have given the sort of advice which is useful (only) for a few hours.” *prosit* is subjunctive in a relative clause of characteristic (AG §535). *nocte iubente*: ablative absolute (AG §420).

61–62: *inclūdet*: understand *tē* as direct object; the address to the *puella* resumes. *quā*: “where, to what extent”; adverb. *prōsequar*: “I will accompany (you).” *saevās … forēs*: the “savage doors” are the front doors of his girlfriend’s house; front doors provide the typical setting in Roman poetry for expressions of unrequited love by an excluded lover (*exclūsus amātor*). See further on *Amores* 1.6.

63–64: *iūre*: this may indicate that the woman is bound “by law” to kiss her *vir*, who would then have to be a husband; but it is also possible that Ovid is speaking more metaphorically of the “rights” of a rival lover.

65–66: *vērum*: “but.” *invīta*: feminine nominative singular, agreeing with the subject of *dato*. *datō*: another future imperative (AG §449) like *iubētō* in line 29; understand *ōscula* (line 63) as the direct object. *potes hoc*: *possum*
can be construed with a simple accusative, meaning “be able to do.” **similisque coactae:** “like a woman who has been compelled”; participles, like all adjectives, can be used as nouns (AG §494a).

67–68: **illum quoque nē iuvet optō** = optō nē iuvet illum quoque. *iuvet* is impersonal: *mē iuvat*, for example, means “it helps me,” i.e. “it’s good for me to” or “I enjoy it.” So the poet hopes that the *vir* (*illum*) “won’t enjoy it.” The point of *quoque* becomes clearer after the next line: the poet claims that his mistress won’t enjoy her encounter with her *vir*, and here he hopes that this will be true for the *vir* as well (*quoque*). *sī minus* = *sī mea vōta minus valent*; *minus* here = *nōn*. **at certē:** “then at least,” an emphatic and colloquial way of introducing the apodosis of a condition. **inde:** “from there, thence,” but used sometimes to express causation; adverb. **nihil:** internal accusative with the impersonal *iuvet* (*me nihil iuvat* means “I enjoy it *not at all* when”).

69–70: **quaecumque ... noctem fortūna sequētur:** “whatever fortune attends the night,” i.e., whatever happens tonight. The verb is future in Latin—regular, and more logical than English, which uses the present tense in this type of clause. **constantī:** agrees most naturally with *voce*; it could also agree with *mihi*, which would add a distinct note of irony to the poem. **dedisse:** picks up *das, dabis, and datō* in lines 64–65; but *dō* can also be used absolutely to mean “grant sexual favors.”