

Dear Ovid, My Problem Is . . .

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If the Roman poet Ovid were living in our time, Dear Abby wouldn't have a chance. He would be writing the most widely read syndicated column of advice to the lovelorn in the nation. Of course, there would be letters of protest to the editor from scandalized readers who might feel that Ovid's advice is not exactly moral. But he is not interested in the question of what is right or wrong. He is interested in only one thing -- what will "work" in this competitive sport known as love -- and he sets about shrewdly outlining the most effective strategy for winning in this battle of the sexes. As he says, *Militiae species amor est* ("Love is like a military maneuver."). And since human nature has not changed drastically since Adam, almost 2000 years after Ovid made his observations on How to Be a Winner in the Game of Love, they are as timely as if they had been written last week.

We must remember that Ovid is thinking in terms of flirtations, not deep passions. His *Heroides* are letters written by people consumed with passion, with the general implication that love, when too intense, can destroy a person. Twelve of these letters are written by women whose love is not being returned; and five of these are suicide notes. But Ovid's so-called "love" poems are in a much lighter vein; and in the *Remedia Amoris* he reminds Cupid that as a boy he should be concerned with play, not serious business.

But before you can play this game, you must find somebody with whom to play. Both Ovid and Gladys Blair of the *Chicago Daily News* classify this under very minor problems. Ovid says: *Roma habet quidquid in orbe fuit* ("Rome has whatever the world has ever offered"). And Gladys Blair says: "Meeting men is easy. . . . We brush shoulders with dozens of men every day." Ovid lists the temples of the gods and the busy forum as propitious places for such meetings; Miss Blair calls the church and office the "usual places recommended." But both feel that the places most conducive to the start of a beautiful friendship are places for recreation and entertainment. Specifically, Ovid lists the theater, parades, and athletic events -- especially such events as the races, where people sit very close by necessity. As he says: "You watch the races, and I watch you -- what a wonderful system!" Today he would classify races as only one of the many spectator sports where proximity is a necessity. The Kentucky Derby is not more crowded than the World Series or the Rose Bowl football game.

And now that you are sitting next to the person with whom you want to become acquainted, how do you get her to notice you? One TV advertisement says to put your money where your mouth is and buy Close-up toothpaste. Ovid's suggestions have more finesse, and also, I suspect, more success. In order to start a conversation, he suggests that you simply ask her a question, even though you know the answer, like "What do they mean by a 'cut off'?" or "What is a sacrifice bunt?" Then during the game, show her little attentions that are not too personal but indicate your interest in her comfort. Brush some dust from her sleeve, whether any is there or not. Glare at the man sitting behind her, as if his knees are crowding her. *Parva leves capiunt animos* ("Little things captivate shallow minds"). And when she asks you questions about what is going on, (for instance, what is a spit ball? or why was that called a strike instead of a ball?) answer every question confidently, whether you know the answer or not. This will make her think that you are a man of the world, with wide knowledge.

But after the initial contact has been made, you have simply reached a second, more difficult step -- how will you win her? Something more subtle is needed for this than just blurting out, "Hey, I dig you!" Ovid's entire philosophy on this point can be summarized by the old saying, "Faint heart never won fair lady." Remember, he says, that every woman can be won if you play your cards right. (I'll let you determine whether this is an exaggeration. But exaggeration or not, the idea is certainly a morale booster to to a timid young lover). Also, if she says no, don't take it too seriously. In his *Heroides* a woman's use of "no" is illustrated when Helen writes Paris, saying no and implying yes. Nobody can tell me that this coyness has gone out of style. As Allen Ludden commented on a TV program, "One cannot accept at face value the 'no' of a woman or a politician." But even if she really means no, Ovid feels that you don't have to be afraid that you have offended her, for every woman is flattered by the thought that she is desired. Even nice girls like to be whistled at.

Ovid feels that there is no point in being naively honest. With a twinkle in his eye, he says that he knows that dishonesty is very bad and should in general be avoided; but you have to fight fire with fire, and poison with poison. Since women will not play fair in this battle of the sexes, it is the one area in which a man's dishonesty is justified. As he says, "It is proper to cheat cheaters with cheating." Then he proceeds to list some of the tricks and little white lies that are effective, whether you were born in 17 B.C. or 1960 A.D.

Tell her that her beauty is driving you crazy. Even if she is as ugly as a mud fence, she'll love this kind of flattery. As I heard a girl say one time: "I don't believe a word you are saying, but keep on saying it anyhow."

Don't forget that tears are an extremely effective weapon. Certainly modern young people have not forgotten this, and they use them for everything from begging for candy at the age of three to shedding them in college as a substitute for a term report not handed in. And Ovid says, if you are not a good actor, if you can't work up a good cry spontaneously, have the presence of mind to put a little something like ammonia on your handkerchief, so that when you rub your eyes with it, tears will come.

Also, try to be pale and thin to show your anguish. Staying up to watch the late show for a few nights should help you acquire "that haggard look."

All of these stratagems assume that a woman's Achilles' heel is her pleasure in her power over somebody else. If these don't work, then tell her that you want to be "just a good friend." This trap has caught as many girls as any other. Another trap is to ask for a kiss, nothing more. After you have gained this, Ovid says, if you can't go on from there, you don't deserve what you already have.

A very important element in the success of any campaign is proper timing. Teenagers give this serious consideration when they plan to ask for the use of the family car. Ovid insists that careful analysis of this point is also essential to the success of your "love campaign." He warns that one day to avoid especially is her birthday. In our highly commercialized society, he would quickly add St. Valentin's Day and Christmas, for what he is driving at is that you must avoid a time when a gift is expected. Of course, if you can afford to give jewelry and flowers, you don't need any strategy, for women are gold-diggers by nature, and you will get along just fine. But if you are not filthy rich, if you are just a poor poet (or, I might add, a school teacher), then you had better not lead her to expect lavish gifts every time you show up. For when she has got from you all you can give, she will leave you for some one more affluent, and you will end up with nothing except a stack of unpaid bills. It is far better to promise her nice things in the future, for as long as she is expecting something from you, she will not desert you.

The question of the role gifts play in the man-woman relationship seems to keep bobbing up in Ovid's thinking. In his advice to the girls, he says, "Don't ask for gifts all the time; that's not a nice thing to do." And Ann Landers also says, "Be considerate of the boy's wallet when out on a date." In the *Amores*, Ovid makes the rather bitter comment that woman of all female animals is the only one who exults in the spoil she can take from the male. In another one of the *Amores*, he presents the approach of the genuine gold-digger. He has a character say: "Get your ideas of a man from the presents he brings...Homer a genius? Perhaps, but diamonds are a girl's best friend." And in telling a man how to fall out of love, Ovid suggests that you itemize what the girl has cost you. That will cure you.

Ovid feels that overemphasis on the "little" things is impossible. All practical men who study the art of pleasing agree. This is the point stressed most frequently in the letters of Lord Chesterfield to his son, which, by the way, form an excellent manual on How to Win Friends and Influence People.

Section III of the *Ars Amatoria* is ostensibly a handbook for the opposing team; it is a discussion of how a girl can catch a man. Mrs. Caroline K. Simon, once secretary of State for New York, was quoted in the *New York Times* as saying that a woman needs to know only four things to get along with men: how to look like a girl, act like a lady, think like a man, and work like a dog. Ovid's program for the girls can be summed up in two words: Be attractive. After some preliminary advice on gathering rosebuds while one may, he gives some detailed instructions on such fundamental points as choosing the most becoming clothes (both in color and style), on the most suitable hairdos (he is almost obsessed with the importance of attractive hair), and on personal cleanliness. He adds to this a discussion of the proper use of make-up, emphasizing that it should never be applied in public. As he says, *Multaque, dum fiunt, turpia; facta placent* ("Many things, while they are being done, are ugly, but the finished product is pleasing"). In telling a man how to fall out of love in the *Remedia Amroris*, he says to call on the girl unexpectedly before she has her make-up on (catch her with curlers in her hair); or better still, watch her put on cold cream or a mud pack.

A girl can always play up her best features and play down her less attractive ones. Ovid gives specific suggestions for this. For instance, if you are short, sit down; if tall and lanky, wear billowing skirts; if you are pale and colorless, wear vivid colors; if your foot or ankle is large, don't wear conspicuous shoes; if your neck is bony, wear jewelry; if you are flat-chested, wear falsies; if your hands are ugly, avoid gestures when you talk; if your teeth are uneven, don't open your mouth when you laugh. Learn to smile so that your dimples will show, and learn how to cry without looking a mess. All of these Ovidian ideas are as modern as the beauty culture program Miss America is put through. Michi Wegeyn, who was in charge of costumes for some of the big TV shows, said that her job was to cover faults of stars. For instance, Ginger Rogers had what Miss Wegeyn called "tennis arms"; therefore, she designed all her dresses to have sleeves or jackets. She also said that corduroy and velvet add pounds to the slimmest silhouette, and a dress length that is too short makes a woman look "squat." And Zina Provendia, an MGM drama coach, filled two pages of an article, with illustrations, on how to walk gracefully (something every model must study) and how to sit down gracefully; and she devoted another page to putting on a coat gracefully, and giving and accepting an item by hand graciously.

In addition to playing up your best features, it is well to play up your skills. A beautiful singing voice will win more men than a beautiful face, according to Ovid. Graceful dancing catches a man's eye, and the ability to discuss literature, both the current best sellers and the classics, attracts a man's attention. Learn skill in games, he urges, like bridge and tennis. Avoid

chess (it is too intellectual) and unfeminine activities like softball and wrestling. But how you "play the game" can reveal much to another person. Remember that your beauty can be spoiled by anger, snobbery, and by discontent. *Odimus et maestus*. As Rolfe Humphries translates this: "I hate glum girls!

Moderation seems to be the key word in many of Ovid's gems of advice. In his *Remedia Amoris* he suggests that one way to get a girl out of your system is to see so much of her that you get sick of her. To the girl seeking the admiring glance he says: Don't be too boisterous, but don't carry around a look of poker-faced contempt. Don't waddle into a room, but don't just mince along. Don't pick at your food nor gobble it. Learn to drink but, for heaven's sake, don't get drunk -- nothing is so disgusting as a drunk woman. Don't keep a man waiting too long, but don't be too much of an eager beaver. On this point of the aggressive girl, Ovid speaks many times, both in the *Ars Amatoria* and in the *Amores*. For instance: What we are kept from we want all the more. Easy things nobody wants, but what is forbidden is tempting. Love too sure of its ground never endures very long. He even tells the man that he might find it useful to arouse the girl's jealousy once in a while, because for a woman as well as a man "it is not easy to bear Fortune's continual smile."

One final point worth noting in Ovid's advice to the girls is: For heaven's sake, don't become gooeey and unbearably sweet. Several times he makes the observation that too much sugar repels a man, both physically and emotionally.

His suggestions on how to forget a girl, in addition to those already mentioned are basic and universally applicable: Don't ask about her. Don't keep her picture around, and don't reread love letters. Don't go to the places where you two had fun together, for it will be the old story of "I saw you last night and got that old feeling." Don't keep insisting that you don't love her any more, for *Qui nimium multis "non amo" dicit, amat* ("He who keeps insisting, 'I am not in love,' is in love"). Stay in crowds and keep busy. If necessary, join the army or start farming. If you are doing farm work, you won't have much time for anything else. Or think about your other problems; you'll find that you have so much to worry about that you won't have time to think about her. When you do think about her, look at her through unfriendly eyes. Even her charms can be seen as faults: if she is petite, think of her as a runt; if she is slender, think of her as skinny.

Here and there, Ovid tosses in an unexpected bonus bit of advice, mostly in the form of things to beware of. For instance, parties, he says, present many opportunities for easily becoming acquainted with new people. But be careful -- wine and soft light can make all women seem beautiful. Also, don't praise your girl too much to your best friend, or you'll end up singing the Tennessee Waltz. And, if you are the girl in this game, be careful that you do not run around with another girl who is too pretty, or "you" will become the third person.

Of all Ovid's "minor" works, I think Book 2 of the *Ars Amatoria* comes nearest the quality of his masterpiece, the *Metamorphoses*. The theme of this book is how to "keep" the interest of the one you love. Among the qualities essential for this, Ovid lists patience, tact, tolerance, and affection -- none of which has lost potency with the passing of centuries. Kindness, he says, will tame even lions and tigers. Here he mentions the importance of gifts again. They do not have to be expensive, just thoughtful -- something chosen especially for her, when you care enough to send the very best.

He suggests that you never hang around until you become a bore, but be around enough to let her get used to you. *Nil adsuetudine maior* ("No force is greater than habit"). Don't stay

away, not once, till you are sure that she will miss you; and even then *mora tuta brevis* (“the short separation is safest”), for absence makes the heart grow fonder -- of somebody else.

Here is Rolphe Humphries' translation of what I consider the heart of this book:

If you want her to love you, be a lovable man;
a face and a figure won't do.
You might have all the good looks that appealed
to the sea-nymphs, or Homer;
That's not enough, you will find;
add some distinction of mind.
Beauty's a fragile boon,
and the years are quick to destroy it,
Always diminished with time,
never enduring too long.
Violets always fade,
and the bloom departs from the lily;
When the roses are gone,
nothing is left but the thorn.
Look, my handsome young man,
gray hairs will come in your lifetime,
Soon the wrinkles will plow
furrows in cheek and in brow,
So make a soul to endure,
a spirit to go with the body;
Spirit and soul will abide,
up to the ultimate fire.

All of Ovid's advice on love can pretty well be summed up in four points. And while I was writing this paper, it occurred to me that these points outline an effective program of approach not only for a boy or a girl seeking romance, but also for anyone wanting to make a favorable impression:

1. Be attractive in manner and appearance.
2. Know yourself and play up your best feature and talents.
3. Be considerate, not forgetting the importance of “little” things --

and finally:

4. *Ut ameris, amabilis esto* (“In order to be loved, be lovable”).