



Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* through the Lens of Modern Psychology: The Static Culture of Sexually Objectifying Women



Noa Raskin
Union College

Abstract

An examination of Ovid's *Ars Amatoria*, an Ancient Roman elegy, can help a modern audience better understand how sexual objectification of women occurs today. Ovid promulgated problematic gender roles and ideals, which created a systemic culture of objectification of women. Using modern sexual objectification theory and psychological research, we can gain insight into the often-forgotten experience ancient Roman women had. Although written in a vastly different culture and society than today, *Ars Amatoria* is still relevant to a modern audience and illustrates how ideas put forth by Ovid about gender are not so distant from modern ones.

Ars Amatoria

- 3 books written by Ovid, an Augustan Age Roman poet
- Circa 1 B.C.
- Gives love advice to men and women
- Serves as an example and offers insight into modern sexism and objectification of women

Gender Roles Propagated by Ovid

Active & Passive Roles

- Men take on the active roles and women the passive roles. Women take in the passive roles because they exist as objects (passive role) for men to use and benefit from (active role). Characteristics for women and men are based on active and passive gender roles (eg. women as incapable and dainty and men as strong and dominant). These gender roles do not overlap despite the fact despite the fact that women and men are more similar than different.
- "Women don't brandish flames or cruel bows"

Rape Myths

- Are stereotyped and false beliefs about sexual assaults, rapists, and rape victims. They are encouraged by traditional gender roles. Used as a justification for sexual violence and sexual objectification.
- "Though she might not give, take what isn't given. Perhaps she'll struggle, and then say 'you're wicked': struggling she still wants, herself, to be conquered"

Traditional gender role endorsement → Sexual objectification of women → Higher rape myth beliefs

Example: Men should always take the active role and women the passive role → Men know what women want without them explicitly saying → Women say no but they mean yes

Violence

- Traditional gender roles (e.g., men always being dominant) encourage violence against women and justify it.
- Dehumanizing people endorses aggressive behavior because it is easier to disrespect and be violent toward people who are not seen as human.

Culturally Constructed Roles Conflated with Biology

- Biology is used to justify gender roles but gender roles are relative to culture. How men and women should be is culturally constructed, but is often conflated with biology.
- "Men often cheat: it's seldom tender girls"



Evaluating Ovid's Ideas about Gender Ideals

Male Hypersexual Ideal

- Men expected to always want to be with women physically and, if they do not, they are looked down upon. But for men to meet this standard they must sexually objectify women. This ideal is used as an excuse of why men objectify women, like the modern "boys will be boys" argument.
- "Who takes a kiss, and doesn't take the rest, deserves to lose all that were granted too"
- "We advertise our nocturnal acts, and nothing's bought if it can't be boasted of!"

Female Beauty Standards

- Standards are created by men to benefit men and align with gender roles. Women are mainly valued on their physical appearance. Ovid says women should have elegant fingers, slender feet, paleness, youthfulness, not have leg or armpit hair, have good hair and hairstyles, and look elegant. Women adhere to these standards and perpetuate the culture because it is validating in the short term, but the long term consequences outweigh the short term benefits.
- Women should not dress or act extravagantly because it is immoral and male attention seeking.
- "You too shouldn't weight your ears with costly stones...nor show yourself in stiff clothes sewn with gold, wealth which you court us with, often makes us flee"
- Women should "take good care that they don't appear old"

Different Standards

- While women are mainly valued on their appearance, men are not. Instead they are valued based on their personality and wealth, according to Ovid. Women are also expected to improve their appearance for men, but men are not expected to do the same. Essentially, female ideals are primarily physical and objectify women, while male ideals do not objectify men.
- "Barbarians themselves are pleasing, so long as they're rich"
- Women criticized for being manipulative but men are allowed to be
- "If tears (they don't always come at the right time) fail you, touch your eyes with a wet hand"

Behavioral Ideals

- Expected to act femininely in all aspects of life (e.g., walking, eating, singing, writing, laughing, etc.)
- Women are also expected to be seen out in public for men to objectify them.

Emotional Ideals

- Women are expected to control their emotions (such as jealousy, impulsivity, pride, and anger). These emotions are not passive and not attractive to men, so they are expected to contain them.
- "It's important to banish looks of anger from your face"
- "We hate (believe the expert) extravagant disdain: a silent face often sows the seeds of our dislike. Glance at a glance, smile tenderly at a smile"

Impossible Standard

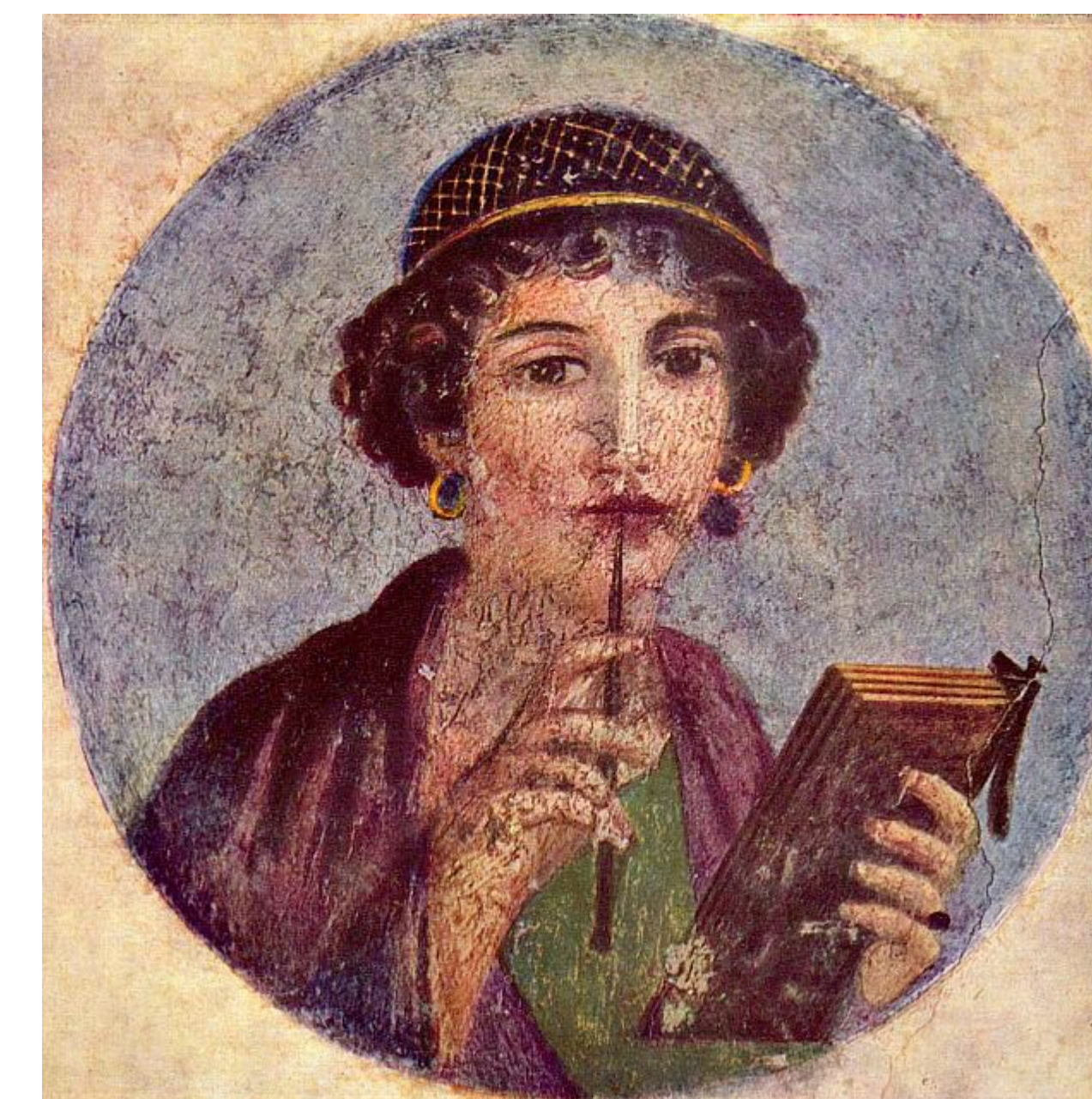
- Beauty standards are exhaustive and impossible to achieve, yet women are encouraged to achieve them in many ways.
- The fact that women are expected to work on their appearance implies that women are not good enough for men naturally. It also conveys that women must suffer to be considered attractive.
- "Taking pains brings beauty: beauty neglected dies"
- "Beauty's granted or denied by a hand's touch"

Contradictory Standard

- Women can never win because their standards are contradictory, so they can be criticized no matter what.
- Women are judged if they are not solely feminine but are seen as less than human if they adhere to this standard.
- Women are criticized for being attention-seeking, but also if they do not show themselves off enough.
- Women are criticized when young for being immature and wasteful but criticized when old for being unattractive and undesirable.
- Ovid tells women to alter their behavior for men but conflictingly says men will not want them if they change how they act.
- Women are expected to be pure but also sexual for men.
- Women are viewed as passive and incapable, but are capable of deceiving men.
- "Some will attack you with a lying pretence of love, and through that opening seek a shameful gain"

Theme of Control

- Strict standards exist for women so that men can control women by socially dominating them. Men want to control women because they are taught to hate and be scared of femininity.
- Men are also expected to dominate women based on traditional gender roles and when they cannot meet this standard it frightens them.



Objectification

- **Objectification:** When people are dehumanized and diminished to entities lacking thoughts and feelings
- **Sexual Objectification:** Dehumanizing and diminishing women to a body or body parts, whose primary purpose is for use by men
- Objectification is a systemic issue that is pervasive for all women and has a variety of consequences that decrease women's quality of life.

Ovid Objectifies Women as Animals, Objects, & Nature

Equating women with animals, nature, and objects is inherently objectifying.

Animals

- Hunting metaphors (women as prey and men as predators)
- Women compared to stereotypically feminine animals
- Compares women to non-feminine animals to insult them ("bright peace suits human beings, anger the wild beast")
- Compares women to animals because women cannot control themselves like wild animals

Objects & Nature

- Compares women to feminine objects
- Insinuates that women benefit men by providing them with children by comparing women to fertile crops that produce something desirable
- Compares women to nature to warn women that their beauty ages fast so they should never say no to men ("violets and open lilies do not flower forever")
- Explains through these metaphors that women must put effort into their appearance.
- "The fields when rested repay the loan, and parched earth drinks the heavenly rain"

Natural Excuse

- Ovid uses these metaphors to justify that objectifying women is natural, which removes the responsibility and blame from men. However, this is culture not nature.
- "Birds will sooner be silent in the Spring, cicadas in summer, an Arcadian hound turn his back on a hare, than a woman refuse a young man's flattering words"

Misogyny

- Men dislike women but are attracted to them. They dislike women because they are taught to be threatened by and hate femininity.
- This is why Ovid associates love with pain and suffering and compares love to violence, hunting, and battles.
- "Look closely at the images that shine all golden in the decorated theatre, and you will think them worthless"
- "What delights a lover is little, what pains him more: many sufferings declare themselves to his heart"
- "Love is a kind of warfare"

Modern Relevance of Ovid

- Sexual objectification of women is still a systemic problem that is often overlooked.
- Through reading and analyzing this text, sexual objectification of women can be more readily understood.
- Sexual objectification has so many detrimental consequences on women's quality of life, and this was likely the case in Ancient Rome, as well.
- Many fundamental ideas about gender from Ancient Rome have remained static to this day.

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