Paraquel Lines

Time and Narrative in Ovid’s Heroides

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The present is simply the forgotten past of the future, and the characters sense the forgetting to come. Thus the present, with no staying power in memory, has no weight even as it happens. In elegy, at least, the poem itself acts as memorial.

Gary Saul Morson, Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time

Ovid’s poetry has power over time. Or so he tells us time and again. His epic *Metamorphoses* will—along with his name—live forever. Or at least as long as Roman *imperium* and the Latin language last (15.871–79). His elegiac *Amores*, like the magical *carmina* of the witch, bear the power to draw down the moon, slow the sun in its course across the sky, and turn back time. To say nothing of seducing married women (2.1.21–28). His epistolary *Tristia* offer the poet the power and opportunity to escape from his Tomitian exile, and to transcend both time and space. At least, for a little while (4.1.41–48). And his epistolary/elegiac/epically *Heroides* appear to make time stand still, freezing both time and narrative. Yet, as we shall see, in the alternative futures, counterfactual histories, and virtual lives imagined and written by Ovid’s heroines, time and narrative move in unexpected directions. Indeed, I will argue here that the interplay of time and narrative in the *Heroides* invites us to identify the heroines’ epistles as narrating “What if?” stories, virtual histories, or counterfictional narratives—side-shoots from the established time lines and the established narratives of canonical tales and classical source texts.

Critics repeatedly describe the *Heroides* as poems which “freeze” the master narratives of Homer, Virgil, et al. In particular, the epistolary form of the *Heroides* is seen to freeze its heroines and their narratives at a pregnant
moment in their source texts, “stopping the clock” in the story time of their external “master” narratives. So the reader knows (even if the letter writer herself may not) that Penelope writes at the very moment of Ulysses’ return to Ithaca; that Briseis writes on the very day—or night—of the infamous doloneia at Troy, having heard of Agamemon’s failed embassy to Achilles and fearing that he is about to set sail for home;2 and that while Dido writes (between the lines of Aeneid 4.413–15), Aeneas is at that very moment preparing his ships to leave Carthage.3 Moreover, as if to draw attention to the static “time out” which their epistles represent, some heroines explicitly evoke a temporary suspension of time and concomitant hold-up of temporality in their letters. So, Penelope writes of her continuous delay (immensas moras–1.82) in putting off the suitors in the expectant hope of Ulysses’ return. So, Dido attempts to slow down time, narrative, and Aeneas himself, begging her lover for a brief delay (exiguas moras–7.176) and a little more time (tempora parva–7.178). Indeed, in her analysis of the Heroides, Efi Spentzou suggests that:4 “this mora is the appropriate time for the stories under discussion here. During its reign and under its influence, action is suspended and time moves slowly. [ . . . ] the Heroides’ short stories are a delay in the charting of what we may call ‘official time.’”

However, Jacobson complains that this is “the one great disadvantage that the genre-form inevitably entailed” for Ovid’s retelling of his heroines’ stories. For, he argues, “in freezing the poem at one particular moment, he seemingly condemned it to bear a static character.”5 Jacobson sees the restricted temporality of the Heroides as the principal barrier stopping the development of dramatic narrative, with the time interval suggested by the letter-writing fiction necessarily limiting the passage of time within each poem.

Yet, at the same time, the epistolary mode of the Heroides points to the possibility of transcending time, of escaping from the confines of the present

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2. On the complex temporal relationship between Heroides 1 and the Odyssey, see Kennedy (1984). On the significant timing of Heroides 3, see Barchiesi (2001), 11–12, 30. Barchiesi notes (163 n.6) that: “the letter’s temporal frame coincides with the short pause before the iliad’s plot reaches its dramatic resolution. Briseis writes after having been informed of the failed embassy (I1. 9), and she fears that Achilles may set sail the next morning (v.57: cum crastina fulserit Eos). Homer’s reader knows, on the contrary, that the morning will bring an unexpected resolution: it is the day of battle when Patroclus dies and Achilles’ wrath comes to an end.”
4. Spentzou (2003), 175. See also Stroh (1991), 201–44.
5. Jacobson (1974), 363. Jacobson quotes Otis (1966) on this subject: “The chief inspiration of the Heroides is the neoteric short epic, and the device of the letter served to enhance and focus the fundamental weakness of this model—that is, its lack of real dramatic quality, its reduction of a story to one or two disconnected moments of static pathos.”
moment. For just as a letter creates an illusion of spatial connection between writer and addressee by evoking the fantasy of dialogue between them, so it also suggests that the temporal gap between the two may be bridged. Its correspondents necessarily separated by and in time and space—the condition that calls for a letter to be written and sent in the first place—an epistle allows its writer to imagine herself (through her letter) in the presence and the present of her addressee. Yet the temporal delay that must necessarily come between the present moment of writing and the future moment of reading the letter is at once conceded and elided according to the conventions of the epistolary form. So, an Ovidian heroine can bid her addressee to respond or to act “now”—eliding the temporal space between them—while simultaneously acknowledging the delay that must intervene between the present “now” of her writing and the future “now” of any such response when the moment of crisis is “now” passed and past. As Duncan Kennedy has noted of *Heroides* 1:

Penelope does not know where Ulysses is; she writes a letter to give to every passing sailor who visits Ithaca in the hope that he will be able to give it to Ulysses (1.59–62). The implication of her words is that she does not know when Ulysses will read it. . . . Epistolary discourse must manipulate both space and time in order to overcome these barriers so as to make communication relevant rather than anachronistic at the moment when the letter is read.

At the time of writing, then, each of the heroines must look ahead to the future time at which her letter may (or may not) be read, anticipating the shape of an unknown future and writing, as it were, under the shadow of that future. Yet, that future is in part determined and foreshadowed by a further chronological tension between the divided temporalities of letter writer and reader—in this case the external reader rather than the letter’s addressee. For the stories from which Ovid draws his heroines and their letters are already familiar to the external reader of the *Heroides*. The external reader of the epistles already knows that Ulysses has just arrived home, that Bacchus

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6. See Lindheim (2003), 19: “While absence is the condition that engenders the necessity of an epistle, presence is the illusion the letter writer attempts to create. And yet, the epistle itself, an attempt to bridge the gap separating writer from addressee, points, by its very existence, to the distance—spatial, temporal, emotional—between the correspondents.”

7. Kennedy (2002), 221. He suggests that: “the epistle is ever caught up in the logic of its temporality, as it attempts to bridge the ‘present’ of writing and the ‘future’ of reading, and to elide that tense distinction.” See also Hardie (2002a), 227–57 on absences and presences in Ovid’s writing.
will imminently rescue Ariadne, and that Dido is about to die—because, in the anterior source texts, these future events have already been narrated. In a literal sense, the futures of Ovid’s heroines have been foretold.

By playing with his readers’ foreknowledge of these future events, Ovid effectively bridges the temporal gap between each of his heroines’ narrative past and future, connecting the “now” of her present moment of writing to the chronological “past” and “future” of her (his)story.8 But this is not to say that this temporal gap is therefore sealed. Or that the outcome of each heroine’s story is concomitantly closed. Indeed, the dramatic tension of each epistle clearly depends upon a degree of “openness” in the outcome of its heroine’s fate. Barchiesi suggests that, “the letters are much more interesting if they are allowed to play not only with the past but also with a still undecided future.”9 In the case of Heroides 1, we know from our prior reading of Homer’s Odyssey that, at the moment of Penelope’s writing, Ulysses is just about to make himself known to his long-suffering, patient, and faithful wife and then to rout the suitors who have been pressing for her hand. But in altering what we thought we knew about the past—that is, Penelope’s unwavering chastity and devotion to her absent husband—Ovid simultaneously alters what we think we know about her future—that is, a happy (if impermanent) reconciliation with the errant Ulysses. Recast in the Heroides as an elegiac puella (1.115), Penelope’s letter is full of sexual puns and double-entendres which challenge her idealized image as a virtuous and faithful wife. She describes her suitors in erotically charged language as a “lustful crowd” who “press against” or even “press into” her (turba ruunt in me luxoriosa proci–1.88), and who, in Ulysses’ absence, “plunder” and pillage his possessions—including his wife’s “body” (viscera nostra, tuae dilacerantur opes–1.90). Chaste Penelope, Ovid’s narrative hints, may not have held out against the suitors, resisting their sexual advances and offers of marriage, quite as virtuously or as successfully as literary history tells us—and her imminent reunion with her husband may yet surprise us too.

The fact that Ovid’s heroines write not only epistles but also elegiac epistles is central to the strategic renarrativization in the Heroides of familiar stories such as these. Yet, at the same time, the bifurcated elegiac/epistolary form threatens to undermine the authority of Ovid—and his heroines—as storytellers. As with all poetry in this genre, the question of whether and how the elegiac Heroides narrate—of whether and how they tell stories—is

8. On the subject of Ovid’s gendered “ventriloquism” in the Heroides see in particular Spentzou (2003), Lindheim (2003), and Fulkerson (2005).
far from straightforward. Florence Verducci observes “Four Seminarrative Passages” in *Heroides* 15—Sappho’s letter to Phaon—but sees *Heroides* 11—the letter from Canace to Macareus—as the only epistle in the collection to effectively succeed in overcoming what she describes as “the limits of elegiac discontinuity” by following a “strict narrative unparalleled in the *Heroides.*” Citing Brooks Otis, she notes that:

though the limits of elegy might be stretched, they remain a barrier to both effective continuity of narrative and serious treatment of major themes. It is true that some short elegies do express grief or passion, but these are not usually narrative in any strict sense. Ovid perhaps came nearest to such narrative in a letter like that of Canace to Macareus.

But in the case of the *Heroides,* the always already problematic notion of elegiac narration is further complicated by the epistolary form in which Ovid sets out his heroines’ letters. The epistolary discourse employed by the letter writers of the *Heroides* offers each heroine the opportunity to play with time and temporality, to bridge the gaps between past, present, and future through textual discourse and so to narrate her own story. Yet, according to Efi Spentzou, within such discourse “there is no centre and no great moments around which the narrative is constructed, only retrospective memories of past landmarks and excited anticipation of delightful events to come.” For all their discursive manipulation of time, the heroines are necessarily restricted in what they can tell of their own stories in their epistles. Their letters can offer only fragments of a story—partial (in every sense) bits and pieces of (a) narrative. It might be argued then that the elegiac *Heroides* cannot be regarded as narrative poems because they do not “narrate”; the heroines do not tell their own stories so much as fragmented and discrete parts of other(s’) stories. Each poem in the collection offers us a tragic monologue or an elegiac complaint set out in letter form but not a conventional narrative. Yet, as Alessandro Barchiesi points out:

Any telling of a story is partial, made up of stories and diverse, autonomous parts thereof. The Muse at the beginning of the *Odyssey* is asked to tell from

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10. On elegy as “anti-narrative,” see the introduction to this volume.
12. Ibid., 234.
15. Barchiesi (2001), 15. He goes on to suggest that: “A text such as the *Heroides,* which emphasizes in its poetics the arbitrary nature of beginnings and endings, comes very close to evoking the ‘continuous’ poetics of the *Metamorphoses.*” Barchiesi (2001), 25.
somewhere (*hamothen*: v.10) in the macro-text of Odysseus’ heroic adventures. At the beginning of the *Iliad*, the Muse will tell from where (*ex hou*: v. 6) a partial story begins. This is how one narrates.

From such a perspective, Penelope’s epistle to Ulysses and Briseis’ epistle to Achilles are no less autonomous, partial stories than the epic “master” narratives from which they are developed. Yet, the conditions for narrative are usually considered to presuppose a succession of events in time, a movement in chronology. The events that constitute a narrative are deemed to happen in some kind of developmental order and within some kind of unfolding time period. The events narrated in the *Odyssey*, for example, construct a story or fabula that occupies the temporal space of twenty years—spanning the long twenty years of Odysseus’ absence from Ithaca and the final forty-one action-packed days of his homecoming. Indeed, as Irene de Jong has shown, it is possible to map a chronological timeline tracing all the events that are presented in the *Odyssey*, temporally locating each event to a specific year or day in what de Jong terms the “Odyssean fabula.” Thus, Odysseus departs for Troy in year 1; Troy falls in year 10; Odysseus visits Circe in year 12, and then the Underworld and Calypso in year 13; he is washed up on Scheria on day 31 of year 20; and lands back on Ithaca four days later. Upon this detailed timeline we can confidently locate the precise temporal point at which Penelope pens her Heroidean epistle: day 39 of year 20—the very point at which the disguised Odysseus/Ulysses himself has just returned to the palace. Effectively presenting just a single event—the writing of her letter—in contrast to the successive relation of events presented in the epic narrative of the Odyssean fabula, Penelope’s Heroidean epistle seems to encompass too brief a time-span to admit the unfolding of a narrative. Jacobson notices that: “the flow of the letter is the progress of Penelope’s emotions over a period of twenty years. But nothing really happens from within the poem itself. That is, the dynamics of the poem do not generate any such movement.” That is, Penelope first recalls the distant past, and her fears for Ulysses’ safety while he was fighting at Troy (1.1–56); she then reflects upon the more recent past and complains about Ulysses’ continued absence (1.57–80), before moving chronologically into consideration of her present unhappy circumstances in Ithaca (1.81–116). But nothing

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16. This is precisely the narrative model to which Jacobson appeals in his consideration of the *Heroides*’ “dramatic structure.” Thus, Jacobsen writes (1974), 365: “In examining the structural dynamics of the *Heroides*, certain (overlapping) questions must be kept in mind: (1) Does anything happen, is there any development within the poem? . . .”

17. See de Jong (1987), Appendix A.


happens—except the writing of a letter and the recounting of a brief history of Penelope’s emotions—within the temporal frame of the epistle. Here, as in the other epistles of the *Heroides*, chronological movement appears to have been checked, story and time simultaneously stopped.\(^\text{20}\)

However, as Mieke Bal has illustrated, a story that covers but a single moment—representing a moment of crisis rather than a development of chronology—may also constitute a narrative. Bal identifies certain features characteristic of this type of narrative, which prove especially instructive in thinking about the narrativity of the *Heroides*. According to Bal, in contrast to a developmental narrative such as that presented in the *Odyssey*,\(^\text{21}\)

a crisis form implies a restriction: only brief periods from the life of the actor are presented. In narrative painting the crisis is a privileged form for the obvious reason that a still image can only accommodate a limited number of events. What art historians call “the pregnant moment” is the pictorial equivalent of a crisis. Such paintings represent a single moment, but one which can only be understood as following the past and announcing the future.

Indeed, there is one epistle in particular that illustrates Bal’s model of the crisis narrative form perfectly—Ariadne’s letter to Theseus—an epistle, moreover, that is composed by a heroine who has been seen to cast both herself and her letter as a self-reflexive paradigm for the other abandoned women of the *Heroides* (10.79–80).\(^\text{22}\)

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\(^{20}\) Byblis’ letter to her brother Caunus in *Met.* 9.530–63 offers an interesting parallel against which to assess the narrative qualities and qualifications of the elegiac *Heroides*. Like the heroines’ letters, the narrative context for Byblis’ epistle is configured as a moment of crisis, a “pregnant moment,” which the epic narrator freezes in order to permit Byblis the opportunity to reflect and comment upon her difficult situation. Byblis’ letter thus forms a clear part of the narrative of Book 9, but in that it functions to interrupt the development of that story it also seems temporarily—and temporally—to be separated from that surrounding narrative. And yet, as part of Ovid’s epic *carmen perpetuum*, this epistolary “break” in the narrative might as readily be seen as another of the author’s innovative storytelling devices—a narrative bridge no less than a narrative aporia. The letters scripted by Ovid’s elegiac heroines similarly form discrete parts of other larger narratives and, at the same time, also bridge gaps in the external stories (or master narratives) that surround them. See Knox (1995), 24 n.54.


\(^{22}\) “*nunc ego non tantum quae sum passura recordor, / sed quaecumque potest ulla relicta pati.*” (Now I recall not only the things that I am about to suffer, / But whatever things any abandoned woman may suffer.) Knox (1995), 247 (following Palmer), suggests that the lines may be spurious: “the Latinity is suspect: *recordor* with reference to future events, ‘to ponder,’ is unparalleled in the classical period. The couplet perhaps originated in a comment in the margin.” Verducci (1985), Lindheim
Catullus 64, Ovid’s Ariadne is more than an intertextual heroine—she is an ekphrastic heroine, the paradigmatic feminine subject of Roman narrative art.  Catullus famously presents Ariadne as the focus of a decorative bed-covering and the point of crisis, the “pregnant moment,” at which Ovid elects to represent his heroine writing coincides with exactly the same moment depicted in Catullus’ ekphrasis.

Thus, in both epyllion and epistle, we see the image of Ariadne represented at the very point at which she becomes aware of Theseus’ departure and her own abandoned status, calling out to the disappearing ship, tearing at her hair in grief, and raging like a bacchant. So much is compressed into a single extended moment of crisis. But that present moment, Ovid makes us understand, is to be read as “following the past and announcing the future.” Ariadne tells us in her letter the history of how she came to be abandoned on the lonely shore of Naxos, of how she helped Theseus slay her half-brother the Minotaur, and of how Theseus had promised to marry her. She even introduces her analepsis with a familiar formula for introducing a narrative in epic: *tempus erat . . .* (10.7).

Ariadne also looks forward to the future, not only in anticipating the horrible death that she imagines must await her on the uninhabited island, but in foreshadowing the futures that the reader of her epistle knows lie ahead for her and for Theseus. Thus, Ariadne begs Theseus to turn his sails and his ship, to come back for her and avert disaster—that is, her death: “*flecte ratem, Theseu, versoque relabere velo*” (10.151)—“Turn around your ship, Theseus, change your sail and come back.” But her words also warn him to “change” his sails, to swap the black sails that she can hardly see against the dark sky (10.30f.) for the white sails that will forewarn his father of success, and so avert another disaster—the death of Aegeus. Ariadne’s prediction of the multiple possibilities for her own “end” and for the end of her story makes similar use of foreshadowing. Enumerating just some of

(2003), and Kauffman (1986) take the couplet to be genuine and as evidence for the view that Ariadne is Ovid’s paradigm of the abandoned woman in the *Heroides*.


the thousand ways of dying (pereundi mille figurae, 10.81), she focuses upon her most vivid and present fear (10.83–86):

iam iam venturos aut hac aut suspicor illac,
qui lanient avido viscera dente, lupos.
quis scit an et fulvos tellus alat ista leones?
fortisan et saevas tigridas insula habet.

Now, now, here and there I look to see wolves rushing up, to tear at my flesh with their greedy fangs. Who knows whether this shore also breeds the tawny lion? And perhaps this island also has the savage tiger.

As Barchiesi has reminded us, Ariadne’s reference to her fear of tigers is highly significant: “Roman poets mention tigers only in a specific mythological context, the same in which their Greek predecessors mention panthers instead: the retinue of the god Bacchus.” Ariadne’s fear of wolves and lions on the island may be reasonable given her present circumstances, but her fear of tigers, given the imminence of Bacchus’ arrival along with his retinue of wild animals, is also fair—in its foreshadowing of a familiar “end” to her story. In fact a few lines later, Ariadne literally “foresees” Bacchus’ arrival from the sky. Looking out to sea and over the land, she sees nothing but danger: “caelum restabat—timeo simulacra deorum” (10.95)—looking to the sky, she is frightened by proleptic visions of gods. Catullus, of course, steps outside of his ekphrasis to give us the story of Ariadne’s rescue by Bacchus, but Ovid maintains the epistolary fiction of her letter to the end, revealing (or rather projecting) his heroine’s future—just as he reveals her past—through the narrative of a single moment.

The ekphrastic source text for Ariadne’s epistle, and the parallels that this source invites us to draw with narrative painting, makes Heroides 10 an obvious exemplar for Bal’s model of the crisis narrative. Yet each of the Heroides might similarly be identified as corresponding to this crisis form, and the dramatic moment at which each epistle is shown to intersect with its source text can be seen to represent precisely the “pregnant moment” to which Bal refers. Thus, as we have seen, Penelope writes at the moment of Ulysses’ return; Dido, sword in lap and pen in hand, writes in the minutes before her suicide as Aeneas prepares his ships to leave her; and Canace too writes in the final moments before her suicide, as her brother and lover Macareus rushes to save her. Indeed, Barchiesi appropriately employs Bal’s

27. Ibid., 24.
very phrase when he suggests that “[e]ach letter is meant to occur at a precise temporal intersection, a ‘pregnant moment’ taking its place in a narrative continuum.”

In these epistles, the reader’s understanding that the present moment of crisis follows on from events in the past and looks forward to events yet to come is necessary to locate that moment in a narrative continuum. In fact, as we shall see, the reader’s prior familiarity with these events will contribute significantly in the configuration of that sense of narrative and continuity.

With significant parallels to Bal’s model of the crisis narrative, Paul Ricoeur’s theory of narrative similarly stresses the importance of recollection and anticipation, and their role in bridging the gaps between past, present, and future in storytelling. Ricoeur’s hypothesis in *Time and Narrative* maintains that narrative is dependent on time—in order for there to be narrative, there must not only be events, but events unfolding in time. Summarizing this hypothesis in *From Text to Action*, Ricoeur maintains that:

> . . . the common feature of human experience, that which is marked, organized and clarified by the fact of storytelling in all its forms, is its temporal character. Everything that is recounted occurs in time, takes time, unfolds temporally; and what unfolds in time can be recounted. Perhaps, indeed, every temporal process is recognized as such only to the extent that it can be, in one way or another, recounted. This reciprocity between narrativity and temporality is the theme of my present research. (emphasis in original)

For Ricoeur, such reciprocity between narrativity and temporality is what makes storytelling possible. In order for stories to be recounted through and in narrative they must negotiate any “aporias,” any paradoxes, gaps or discontinuities in time, to constitute a coherent and “joined-up” temporal

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29. Barchiesi (2001), 19. See also Spentzou (2003), 162, who argues that “while the letters position themselves within pre-existing longer stories, the positions they occupy are blank points in the narratives of the arch-models, interstices between the ‘major,’ ‘important’ events.”

30. According to Bal, there are many possibilities for extending the chronological compass of the crisis narrative, primarily through “asides,” through “recollection,” and through “references to past and future.” What is more, with particular relevance to the *Heroides*, she suggests that (1997), 211: “There is another kind of diversion that can also serve to extend the time span of the crisis form: a minor actor can become the protagonist in his own fabula.” This style of “diversion” precisely describes the kind of narrative that we typically see in the *Heroides*: a bit part actor or minor character from one of the master narratives of the classical canon is transformed into the protagonist of her own narrative. Her crisis, her moment, thus represents a diversion or deviation away from that master narrative, but at the same time it also represents a related part and a continuum of that narrative—an event branching out from the original time-line of the fabula narrated in the source text.

experience for both their characters and readers. Adopting an Augustinian
model of time and temporality, Ricoeur suggests that attention, memory, and
expectation are the “connectors” with which both storytellers and readers
close the gaps between past, present, and future, and with which they bridge
the aporias of time and narrative to effect a narrative continuum. Thus,
even when presented with an isolated part of a story, a single moment or
event extrapolated from a broader narrative—as in the Heroides—it is pos-
sible to view that fragment as part of a narrative continuum: a continuum
that is enabled by the memory and recall of the familiar master narratives
that have inspired that fragment. Augustine’s reflections on the nature of
time nicely narrativize this aspect of Ricoeur’s theory:

Suppose I am about to recite a familiar psalm. Before I begin, my expecta-
tion is directed towards the whole. But when I have begun, the verses from
it which I leave in the past become things in my memory. The life of this
act of mine is stretched in two ways: into my memory, because of the words
I have already said, and into my expectation, because of those I am going
to say. But my attention is on what is present: and so the future shifts to
become the past. As I move further ahead, the shorter the expectation and
the longer the memory becomes, until all expectation is consumed, the
entire work is done and has passed into my memory. What happens with
the psalm as a whole happens also in its particular parts and individual syll-
ables. The same is true of a longer work in which perhaps that psalm may
be just a part. It is also true of the entire life of an individual person, in
which all actions are part of a whole, and of the entire history of “the sons
of men” in which all human lives are but bit-parts.

Applying this paradigm to Ovid’s Heroides, we can see clearly that, through
her own attention to the present moment, recall of past events, and expecta-
tion for the future—and, crucially, through the attention, recall, and expect-
tation that she evokes in the external readers of her elegiac letter—each of
Ovid’s heroines is also a (short)storyteller, effectively producing a complex
but complete fabula through her fragmented epistolary narration. But what
kind of stories do Ovid’s heroines tell? What kind of narratives tell of a crisis,
of a moment, an event that simultaneously seems both a continuum of and

32. See Ricoeur (1984b) and (1979).
34. Augustine, Confessions 11.38. My translation here is based on Chadwick’s (1986).
35. See Spentzou (2003), 161–96 on the Heroides as short stories. Indeed, as Barchiesi claims
(2001), 32, “There is no doubt that a single elegy can project its own narrative context, by laying down
the tracks for a temporal development, by taking its place in a plot already known in part.”
a branching out from the time line of a familiar fabula narrated in another text? If the *Heroides* are not to be read as intertextual anomalies but as narratives in their own right, how are we to read them?

Narratologists have identified as a relatively recent modern phenomenon the trend for writers to continue, fill in, or offer a prehistory to a well-known story written by another author. Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Alexandra Ripley’s *Scarlett*, and Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* are oft-cited examples of such “apocryphal” narratives that seek to satisfy our desire for additional information about familiar fictional heroes and heroines, grafting new developments onto a well-known story line. Indeed, such stories depend considerably upon the reader’s familiarity with an original fabula—a possible world in which alternative histories, futures, and presents can be imagined.

However, this phenomenon has its own ancient history: speculative, counterfactual, and apocryphal narratives considering a possible world in which characters may have behaved otherwise and events may have happened differently can be traced back to Livy, who wonders what might have happened if Alexander the Great had lived longer and, having subjugated Asia, had then turned his attentions to Europe and to the might of Rome (9.16–18).\(^\text{36}\) Indeed, one of the earliest examples of such “What if?” speculation appears in Ovid’s own *Amores* 2.14.9–22, where the poet speculates provocatively on what might have happened to mankind, to the outcome of the Trojan war, to the foundation of Rome, to the Julian line, to his own and Corinna’s lives, had abortion been practiced more widely in the past. But it is not until the *Heroides* that we see this style of literary counterfactual/counterfictional narrative fully sustained and developed into a form close to its modern parallels. Thus, Spentzou describes the *Heroides* as stories that represent “the traces and drifting aspirations of what could have happened in a different wor(1)d.”\(^\text{37}\)

According to narratologist Gary Saul Morson, reflecting upon the contemporary shape of counterfactual/counterfictional stories:\(^\text{38}\)

> These continuations may be set after the events in the original work (sequels); there are also “prequels,” taking place before, and “interquels” . . . which fill in temporal gaps within the original story. The precise timing is largely irrelevant to the interest that sustains the form: what is important is that

\(^{36}\text{On counterfactual or virtual history see Cowley (2002), Ferguson (1999), and Morley (2000).}\)

\(^{37}\text{Spentzou (2003), 194.}\)

\(^{38}\text{Morson (1994), 51.}\)
there be more events, other events, “side” events that could have happened. Because these [stories] usually do not explicitly raise philosophical questions about time—they presume but rarely discuss hypothetical temporality—a place must be found for them somewhere on the established time line. They are, in the root sense of the word, parodies—“beside songs”—but because that term has taken on the meaning of discrediting an original, the form might best be called *paraquels*.

The characteristics that Morson attributes to contemporary narratives of this form might similarly be applied to an ancient text like the *Heroides*. For in the sense that the *Heroides* fit into or fill-in temporal gaps in the “original” or source narratives, they too might be identified as narrative “interquels.” And in the sense that they occupy space upon a parallel chronology and narrative line to those originals, “parodying” them in this respect and more, the *Heroides* also correspond closely to Morson’s model of the *paraquel* narrative. We might identify the *Heroides*, then, as “What if?” stories, as virtual histories, or counterfictional narratives—plausible but speculative side-shoots from the established time lines and the established narratives of familiar tales.

Barchiesi, however, advises against seeing the *Heroides* as an early prototype of the sort of narrative form we find in Tom Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, which offers us a new look at Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* “from the wings”—an alternative history for two minor characters from a familiar story. He maintains that:

> Such literary operations in general presuppose that one perceive within the models an empty space to be filled (whether before the fact, after, or within the very body of the story), or at least that the plot may be supplemented in one of its interrupted branches. Silius Italicus 8.50ff., for example, fills us in on what happened to Anna, Dido’s loving sister, after we last saw her by the pyre in *Aeneid* 4. With Ovid it is not even the case that the narrator conceives a completely alternative plot to the traditional story line, using the latter as a ‘possible world’ into which new developments can be grafted. . . . The poetics of the *Heroides* suggest, more simply, that new windows can be opened on stories already completed.

Yet, as we have seen, it is precisely *within* the blank spaces within the body of familiar stories that the heroines’ letters are written, and it is upon the interrupted (because not yet written) lines that branch off from the plots of

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those familiar stories that Ovid locates his own newer narratives. It is true that neither Ovid nor his heroines seem to conceive or project an entirely different plot or alternative history to that with which we and they are already familiar—Ariadne does not think about building a raft, Penelope does not consider marrying one of the suitors, Dido does not plan to raise her unborn child. But this does not necessarily limit the treatment of Ovid’s literary models as “possible worlds” in and about which other possibilities, other possible stories, can be told. Following Vaihinger, Kermode argues that “the fictional as if is distinguished . . . from hypothesis because it is not in question that at the end of the finding out process it will be dropped.”

In reading the Heroides we may wonder (among many other speculative and counterfactual/counterfictional possibilities) what if Aeneas were to stay in Carthage, and Dido were to have his child, what if Theseus were to turn his ship around and come back for Ariadne, or Hippolytus were to accept his stepmother’s improper invitation. Yet, we know that “in the end” these things did not and will not come to pass; in the end, we drop the what if and we accept the familiar ending, the story as we know it. But this does not negate the significance of the speculation. For we have realized that what did happen may have been otherwise and that other outcomes were—for a time—possible.

As we saw in the case of Ariadne’s epistle, foreshadowing in the Heroides works to remind us that the future for each of Ovid’s heroines is predetermined, always already foretold in the original source texts that Ovid employs. Both time and narrative, from this perspective, are linear—moving forward along predetermined track lines already laid down by Homer, Virgil, Catullus, and others. The reader knows what will happen in the end of each heroine’s narrative—but to the heroine herself many possible futures may seem open at every present moment. Indeed, it is significant in this light that Ovid’s Oenone—famous in the literary tradition for her power to see and predict the future—has none of these powers of foresight in the Heroides. For Oenone, as for the other heroines, the future is not predetermined, somehow and somewhere already prescribed, it is unknown and open in many different possible directions.

We can see this most clearly in the alternative futures that some of the heroines sketch out for themselves in their letters. Phyllis imagines throwing herself into the sea to die—but she also writes of poisoning, stabbing, or hanging herself, all to punish Demophoon for his perceived neglect by

dying before what she sees as “her time” (2.131–43). If Achilles will not consent to take her home as his bride, Briseis imagines following him as his captive slave to be ill-treated—or not—by his future wife (3.67–82). And Laodamia seems to speak for all of the heroines in the collection when she writes (13:149f.)

nos sumus incertae; nos anxius omnia cogit,
quae possunt fieri, facta putare timor.

We are unsure; anxious fear forces us to imagine all things which might happen to have happened.

Ariadne, as we have seen, imagines the various different ways that she might meet her death (10.79–88); there are, she believes, at least a thousand possibilities (mille figurae–10.81), but she also fears another alternative—that, instead of meeting her death on the deserted island, she might instead be captured and enslaved (10.89–92). For Ariadne then, there are a thousand and one possible futures open to her, each one branching off from the present moment, the “now” of her writing. But for the reader of her letter, there is only one future awaiting her—time and narrative can and must move ahead in one direction only.

In line with her projection of many possible futures, Ariadne also imagines an alternative history that might have brought her to a different present moment. She imagines what might have happened if her brother Androgeos were still alive and if Minos had not sought retribution from Athens for his son’s death there (10.99–104):

viveret Androgeos utinam, nec facta luisses
impia funeribus, Cecropi terra, tuis;
nect tua mactasset nodoso stipite, Theseu,
ardua parte virum dextera, parte bovem;
nec tibi, quae reditus monstrarent, fila dedissem,
fila per adductas saepe recepta manus.

I would that Androgeos had lived! And that you, land of Cecrops, had not been made to atone for your impious deeds with the death of your children. And that you, Theseus, had not slaughtered with gnarled club in your hard right hand the thing that was part man and part bull. And that I had not given you the thread to show you the way back, that thread that was so often taken up through the fingers it led.
Had the past been different, then so, too, would be the present and, Ariadne logically surmises, so, too, would be her future.

Penelope also imagines an alternative or virtual history for herself and Ulysses, wondering “what if” Paris had been shipwrecked on his way to Sparta and there had been no Trojan war (1.5–10). Medea similarly wishes that she and Jason had both perished at sea (12.121–26) so that she might not have had to suffer as she does now. In each of these circumstances, the virtual past is imagined as branching out in various different possible directions. These heroines know of course—as do we—that actual events followed only one course and one history, but in their analeptic projections and consideration of counterfactual alternatives to the past, the heroines show us both what did happen and also what might have happened. And in their proleptic projections of future possibilities, they remind us that what is to happen may happen otherwise. These effects, according to Morson, are the result of “sideshadowing”—a side projection, not from the future or past as in a foreshadowing or backshadowing, but from an alternative present:42

Sideshadowing reminds us that the presentness we so palpably experience pertained as well to earlier moments and will characterize future ones. In this respect, it calls attention to the ways in which narratives, which often turn earlier presents into mere pasts, tend to create a single line of development out of a multiplicity. Alternatives once visible disappear from view and an anachronistic sense of the past surreptitiously infects our understanding. By restoring the presentness of the past and cultivating a sense that something else might have happened, sideshadowing restores some of the presentness that has been lost. It alters the way we think about earlier events and the narrative models used to describe them.

Thus, although each of the Heroidean narratives unfolds, to use Frank Kermode’s phrase, “under the shadow of the end,” and we read them fully conscious that the predetermined future for each heroine will unfold as it has always unfolded before, we also read as if other possibilities were also available, as if something else might happen. What is more, in the case of the Heroides, sideshadowing also alters the way that we think about the earlier source texts and the literary models that Ovid employs for his heroines’ letters. The intertextual Heroides cast a sideways shadow that falls upon each of the “original” stories from which Ovid’s narratives branch out, so that our future rereading of those stories is adumbrated by our prior reading of his

paraquels. And an anachronistic sense of what might have been, what will be, and what is, surreptitiously infects our understanding of time and narrative. We, like the heroines themselves, are unsure. For sideshadowing forces us to imagine that all the things which might happen, have happened—quae possunt fieri, facta. Or might yet.