

Ovid Game tip: Don't visit her on her birthday.

Dalrock | 20 March, 2017 | by Dalrock

In [The Allegory of Love](#) C.S. Lewis explains that because the concept of courtly love has fully transformed our view of sexual passion, we misread prior works as if they had the same theme. He uses the example of Ovid's Art of Love, which he describes as an ironic poem on the art of seduction:

Ovid sat down to compose for the amusement of a society which well understood him an ironically didactic poem on the art of seduction. The very design of his Art of Love presupposes an audience to whom love is one of the minor peccadilloes of life, and the joke consists in treating it seriously—in writing a treatise, with rules and examples en règle for the nice conduct of illicit loves. It is funny, as the ritual solemnity of old gentlemen over their wine is funny. Food, drink, and sex are the oldest jokes in the world; and one familiar form of the joke is to be very serious about them.

He offers the following example from the poem:

Go early ere th' appointed hour to meet
The fair, and long await her in the street.
Through shouldering crowds on all her errands run,
Though graver business wait the while undone.
If she commands your presence on her way
Home from the ball to lackey her, obey!
Or if from rural scenes she bids you, 'Come',
Drive if you can, if not, then walk, to Rome,
And let nor Dog-star heats nor drifted load
Of whitening snows deter you from the road.
Cowards, fly hence! Our general, Love, disdains
Your lukewarm service in his long campaigns.⁸

Lewis explains that this is a joke, mocking the foolish way men pedestalize women and set out to satisfy their every whim (truly a fool's errand). Since we have adopted the foolish view of courtly love, we can't imagine Ovid's mocking as anything other than sincere:

No one who has caught the spirit of the author will misunderstand this. The conduct which Ovid recommends is felt to be shameful and absurd, and that is precisely why he recommends it—partly as a comic confession of the depths to which this ridiculous appetite may bring a man, and partly as a lesson in the art of fooling to the top of her bent the last baggage who has caught your fancy. **The whole passage should be taken in conjunction with his other piece of advice—'Don't visit her on her birthday: it costs too much.'**⁹ But it will also be noticed—and this is a pretty instance of the vast change which occurred during the Middle Ages—that the very same conduct which Ovid ironically recommends could be recommended seriously by the courtly tradition. To leap up on errands, to go through heat or cold, at the bidding of one's lady, or even of any lady, would seem but honourable and natural to a gentleman of the thirteenth or even of the seventeenth century...

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