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FURIOSA LIBIDO. OVID ON LOVE AND MADNESS

ABSTRACT. Bielecka Elżbieta, *Furiosa libido*. Ovid on love and madness.

This paper presents Ovid's views on the concept of love madness. Taking *Ars amatoria*, in particular the distich (1.281–282) in which the poet blames woman's love fury on her lust as its research material, the paper investigates how the notion in question has been realized in this "textbook for lovers." There, Ovid uses the mythological figures of women who committed crimes against social rules to illustrate the said concept; the paper, in turn, juxtaposes it with the narratives in *Metamorphoses* (the stories of Byblis and Myrrha). Additionally, it makes use of the tale of Iphis, a story not included in *Ars amatoria* which can nevertheless be also treated as illustrative of how madness can overcome enamored women. The paper both contrasts the above mentioned stories with the narratives showing men's inclinations to insanity caused by passion and examines the notion of love madness in the context and with regard to the style of Ovid's works.

Keywords: madness, love, Ovid, women, *Ars amatoria*.

Madness has always been considered an inherent element of love. This paper will demonstrate Ovid's views upon who is the most prone to madness in love, how such madness is manifested and to what ends it leads. Many authors have tried to unravel the mysterious nature of the two phenomena so often bound together, i.e. love and insanity, as well as depicted the tragic outcomes that this combination usually brings.¹ Roman poets before Ovid also played with this subject in their works. For example, Catullus considers Cupid as responsible for instilling madness (*furores*) in people's hearts together with happiness (*Carm.* 64.94–95):

heu misere exagitans immiti corde furores,
sancte puer, curis hominum qui gaudia misces.

¹Probably the most extensive treatment of the matter is Euripides' *Medea* and *Hyppolitus*. An interesting description of Medea's manic love can be found in *Argonautica*, and in both Apollonius' original work (Book 3) and Valerius Flaccus' translation (Book 7.300–322) at that. Cf. P. Toohey, *Melancholy, Love and Time*, 2004, p. 59.

Virgil refers to love as *dementia* (*Ecl.* 2.69) and depicts the sufferings of Gal-lus using the phrasing of Apollo's question to the poet; "quid insanis?" (10.22)

The above examples from Roman poetic works briefly refer to the madness caused by love and do not pose questions about the possible origins of madness. The paper aims at finding out, however, whether Ovid – an ancient world expert in all aspects of love, the *tenerorum lusor amorum* – treats this issue more extensively in his works. The paper will attempt to do this by taking two poems: *Ars amatoria* and *Metamorphoses* as its research material. Furthermore, it will also juxtapose the point of view included in the former poem with that presented in the poet's greatest work, *Metamorphoses*.

Ars amatoria, Ovid's famous and controversial textbook for lovers comprises an extensive description of insanity caused by love (1.269–342). In the most recent Polish translation the poem has been entitled "A catalogue of women madly in love."² Although not a concept that Ovid conjured up, this title seems to express the poet's views on love and madness, with "women" constituting its core. This is because the poem catalogues the mythological female characters who committed some extreme acts out of the madness caused by their feelings for men (or at least masculine characters, *vide* Pasiphaë). Ovid meant the said catalogue as a warning for men so that they could ponder over women's twisted "nature." A woman, Ovid says, unlike candid men who are incapable of disguising their feelings (*vir male dissimulat* v. 276), pretends to be uninterested in man's affection. She will therefore act as though she were insensitive to courtship; yet, as soon as the man withdraws his interest, the woman will cease pretending, desperate for love and attention. This moment in the text the poet finds fitting for introducing the readers to the following distich (1.281–282):

Parcior in nobis nec tam furiosa libido:
Legitimum finem flamma virilis habet.

It is the *libido* then – passion, or lust – which is crucial in understanding Ovid's way of presenting how madness is related to love. In the above presented short passage the poet juxtaposes women's and men's *libido* only to discredit the former.³ After that he expresses his fondness in mythological tales. The catalogue of women lists the heroines who, as we already know, are remembered due to the idiosyncratic acts which they performed so as to satisfy their feelings. Byblis, for example, fell in love (*vetito amore arsit*) with her twin brother Caurus (1.283–284), while Myrrha, daughter of Cinyras, loved her father "not as a daughter ought to" (vv. 285–288). In the later part of the poem Ovid also mentions Pasiphaë's passion for the white bull (vv. 289–326), a story which cannot

² „Katalog kobiet szalonych z miłości”, cf. Owidiusz, *Sztuka kochania*, przeł. E. Skwara, Warszawa 2008, pp. 87–92.

³ The idea of woman's lust as less controllable in e.g. Propertius 3.19.1–4.

be ignored when making a list of conducts that the ancient society considered outrageous.

In the passages that follow the poet does not mention the names of the women he speaks about; rather, he expects the reader to distinguish them via their actions: e.g. the Cretean (Aerope) who betrayed her husband Atreus with Thyestes and who was thus responsible for all tragedies of the Atreides (vv. 327–330). Ovid subsequently dedicates two verses to Scylla who cut her father's miraculous hair thus depriving her city of protection and leaving it to the mercy of her gallant Minos (vv. 332–333). The list would not be complete without Clytemnestra or Medea, both to be identified by their bloody deeds (vv. 331–332). This register of misfortunes closes with four verses dedicated to Phthia, Phaedra and Idaia (vv. 337–340) whose affections for their stepsons were rejected and who, seeking revenge, thereby provoked tragedies.

Ovid's catalogue groups women's love-madness stories. There is the story of incest (Byblis and Myrrha) followed by the horrifying tales both of Pasiphaë as well as the betrayals (inflicted by Aerope, Scylla and Clytemnestra) and rejected lovers (Medea and the three stepmothers). It is interesting how differently various kinds of the love-madness dyad crop up, according to the poems. For example, both Myrrha's and Byblis's insanity, when tangled with incest, eventuates as these women's transformations into a tree and a river respectively thus harming hardly anyone but themselves. Pasiphaë's extremely unnatural passion has long-term consequences in the form of the deadly activities of the queen and the bull's son, Minotaur. The actions of all the remaining women, however, bring forth immediate harm, and to third parties at that. Thyestes' and Medea's children, Scylla's fellow citizens, Clytemnestra's betrayed husband Agamemnon, Jason's bride-to-be, finally the young men Phoenix, Hippolytus, Plexippus and Pandion either die or are badly hurt⁴ as a result of madness brought out by women's lust.⁵

All the women listed in the catalogue share what, in the eyes of an ancient reader can only be seen as a mad streak. Still, is love a "mad" feeling in itself, or does it only provoke madness? And where does this madness originate in?

According to Ovid, the catalogued women commit offences against social rules and laws: adultery, incest, betrayal, murder – all these crimes are enumerated in the poems. What induces women to undertaking such actions is obviously the unbridled, mad lust, *furiosa libido*. The poet persuades the reader that this *libido* is an innate factor independent of the will. Although common for both sexes, in women *libido* is uncontrollable. It does not succumb to reason or

⁴ Amyntor's son Phoenix, as well as the sons of Phineus took the same punishment (blinding) from the hands of their fathers for the alleged attempts at raping their own stepmothers.

⁵ It is noteworthy how the lovesickness in the ancient literature causes violence, which is particularly striking since nowadays we tend to associate unhappy love with melancholy and depression rather than with anger. Cf. P. Toohey, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

rules. Coming from a poet so often described “sympathetic to women,”⁶ such a statement has all the marks of a strongly misogynistic opinion. It is true that in Ovid’s works the female point of view is frequently revealed, a practice atypical for Roman literature, yet, with reference to a woman’s passion, the poet seems to be prejudiced.⁷

The female characters from the above mentioned catalogue can also be found in *Metamorphoses*, and their tales are told more extensively there. The poet relates the story of Byblis and her love to Caunus once again in *Met.* 9.450–665 presenting an image of a suffering woman and describing her as “carried away by lust for her brother” (v. 455):

Byblis Apollinei correpta cupidine fratris.

In Ovid’s story Byblis struggles against passion that overcomes her and to which she will eventually yield. The poet presents to us the phases of falling into self-propelled insanity. At first, Byblis behaves like an average woman in love: she cares about her looks, is jealous of other women, and she “burns inside” (*aestuat intus* v. 465). Then she has a dream which temporarily quenches her burning, a pivotal moment, for it effects in her thoughts and actions surprisingly becoming more self-destructive: the girl rejects her family ties, makes up stories that would justify her desire, expresses a wish to die. Finally, although still terrified by the passion that controls her, she decides to write a letter to Caunus, revealing her feelings (v. 519):

“viderit: insanos” inquit “fateamur amores!”

When, after receiving the letter, the brother angrily rejects his sister’s advances, she feels embarrassed for a short time. Yet, as the embarrassment wanes, madness returns (*mens tamen ut rediit, partier rediere furores* v. 583) and Byblis sets out to conquer her brother’s heart again, claiming that her love is a godsend – she does not want to be seen as “conquered by lust” (*victa libidine*).⁸ However, according to the poet, her actions contradict her words. When Byblis’ brother,

⁶Alison Sharrock concludes that, however condescending this opinion might be, when put in an appropriate cultural context, it is most valid. Ovid devotes generally much space in his works to a woman’s point of view, a practice uncommon among male Roman poets. Cf. A. Sharrock, *Gender and sexuality*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, ed. P. Hardy, Cambridge 2002, p. 95.

⁷As Pierre Grimal observed, the poet’s attempt to keep his narrative impersonal and objective obliged him to accept some well-worn opinions on women’s psychology. Cf. P. Grimal, *Miłość w Rzymie*, Warszawa 1990, p. 132.

⁸The use of military terminology when referring to love pursuits is characteristic of Ovid’s poetry. Cf. *Ars* 1.511, *Am.* 1.1, and especially 1.9 (*Militat omnis amans*) where the concept is fully developed. As for Byblis, she refers to herself as defeated, *superata*, later in the text (v. 545).

horrified by her importunate courtship, leaves the country, she finds herself falling into madness (vv. 635–637):

Tum vero maestam tota Miletida mente
defecisse ferunt, tum vero a pectore vestem
diripuit planxitque suos furibunda lacertos.

When the moment comes that Byblis tears her robes and scratches her arms, and then runs through the fields, howling, the poet compares her to a furious maenad (vv. 641–642):

utque tuo motae, proles Semeleia, thyrsos
Ismariae celebrant repetita triennia bacchae.

The external signs of her bacchic frenzy seem to represent an extreme stage of Byblis' madness, the same which we have already encountered in *Ars amatoria*. I am referring here to the poet's description of Pasiphaë courting the Cretean bull. Her behavior is without doubt an example of some extreme madness (1.211–212):

In nemus et saltus thalamo regina relicto
Fertur, ut Aonio concita Baccha deo.

A similar tale is told in *Met.* 10.298–518, a tale about Myrrha, another woman listed by Ovid earlier in the catalogue. Like Byblis, Myrrha is conscious of the viciousness of her desire, too, and she is also defeated by it. However, in her case the poet makes an exception and engages himself in judging the girl's actions. At first Myrrha attempts to accuse Cupid of her own actions but the god refuses to take this blame on himself (10, 311):

Ipse negat nocuisse tibi sua tela Cupido.

Such a crime is too much even for the god of love, blamed for many mischiefs. Therefore, the poet presents us also with an image of the Fury who hemmed the girl in with a Stygian firebrand and whirling vipers (10.313–314):

Stipite te Stygio tumidisque adflavit echidnis
e tribus una soror.

There should be no doubt about the fact that the poet engages one of the three sisters-Furies not to clear Myrrha of the accusation. Rather, the image of the Fury seems to be a purely conventional way of describing the state of madness itself,⁹ yet, it also shows how tightly the girl got entangled in her disturbing

⁹Cf. A. O'Brien-Moore, *Madness in ancient literature*, Weimar 1924, p. 180.

passion. In the story Myrrha, unlike Byblis, does not experience the first phases of infatuation. Instead, she is severely disturbed from the beginning and almost instantly moves on to anger, discards her descent and falls into self-destruction. Rescued from a suicide attempt by an old nurse, the girl eventually satisfies her lust, with great remorse though (a similarity to Byblis' story is conspicuous) and her crime is severely judged afterwards. The poet did not highlight the story in *Ars amatoria* in any way but in *Metamorphoses* his indignation and shock is mirrored in the frequent use of the noun *scelus* which determines and marks Myrrha's actions as sinister.¹⁰

Ovid describes the relationship of father and daughter very diligently and emphasizes the woman's awareness of the committed sin. As opposed to the comical narrative of Pasiphaë's actions in *Ars amatoria* presenting the queen as entirely ignorant of the oddity of her advances, the stories of Myrrha and Byblis in *Metamorphoses* stress their awareness of the degenerate nature of their feelings. Thus, the two women make an effort to defend themselves against the overwhelming urge to satisfy their incestuous love. Byblis makes an attempt to convince herself that she should not take any action but her arguments are scarce and it is evident from the beginning of the passage that she will eventually succumb to her lust. It is Myrrha who almost wins the battle between reason and lust.¹¹ She attempts a suicide, a dubious victory, to be sure, but also one which protects Myrrha from experiencing inevitable shame. The battle, however, is lost, with the aid of an old nurse who helps the girl (struggling to the last moment) to overcome her doubts.

Interestingly, among Ovid's tales of madness and love there is one that ends well (and is therefore not a part of the *Ars amatoria* catalogue). This tale is the story of Iphis (*Met.* 9.666–797) brought up as a boy for fear of her father's wrath at her being a girl. She falls in love with another girl, Ianthe and, since no one is aware of the woman's beau being a woman herself, preparations for their wedding become reality. Still, Iphis feels guilty and describes her affection as even more insane than the one which possessed Pasiphaë (9.735–738):

Non tamen omnia Crete
monstra ferat, taurum dilexit filia Solis,
femina nempe marem: meus est furiosior illo,
si verum profitemur, amor!

Nonetheless, "woman's nature" so eagerly evoked by the poet, does not come to the fore: Iphis does little to seduce Ianthe and is rewarded by the goddess Isis who transforms her into a man. Unlike the previous examples, this tale ended without bloodshed or damnation. Still, even the idea of two women's relationship

¹⁰ Cf. *Met.* 10, vv. 314, 315, 322, 323, 341, 342, 367, 413, 460, 468, 474.

¹¹ The poet uses the "battle vocabulary" once again when he assures Myrrha "fights against" (*repugnat* v. 319) her madness.

deserves to be called *furiosa*. Had the girl been left without the divine help, she would have probably followed the pattern of all the furious women.

The examples from the catalogue in *Ars* as well as the few from *Metamorphoses* aim at demonstrating how a woman obsessed with passion can easily break social rules. A man's passion, on the other hand, can be restrained by the boundaries of law and convention: *legitimum finem flamma virilis habet* (v. 282). If this is the acknowledged model of male love, what should the reader say about Tereus who felt such desire towards his sister-in-law that he raped and detained her taking out her tongue so she could not tell anyone about it? Or what should we say about Paris who violated the laws of hospitality by kidnapping his host's wife? Are these the cases of *legitimus finis*?

Let us see how Ovid treats these characters in his poems. In *Ars amatoria* Menelaos, not Paris, is guilty of the kidnapping (2.361–362):

Quis stupor hic, Menelae, fuit? tu solus abibas,
Isdem sub tectis hospes et uxor erant.

The real culprits – Helen and her lustful nature – have been concealed under a witty accusation that the Spartan king left home while the wife stayed with the guest. The convention of *Ars* demands of the subject to be described in such a way. However, Tereus, the other of our two male characters bound by lust, the poet treats differently: in *Metamorphoses* he is condemned and found guilty.¹² Here is how Ovid describes his uncontrolled affection (6, 458–459):

Digna quidem facies, sed et nunc innata libido
Exstimulat.

Is this a depiction of a man overcome by love-madness? Not entirely, for the verses (6.459–460) end as follows:

pronumque genus regionibus illis
in venerem est: flagrat vitio gentis suoque.

The passage explains Tereus' behavior: his *genus* is Thracian, he is a *barbarus* (v. 515), so neither a Greek nor a Roman, otherwise he would certainly have restrained himself from satisfying the urges that were overcoming him.¹³

Both Tereus and all the above mentioned women cross a boundary between what is civilized (and crops up as laws and rules) and what is savage. Tereus shares with women the fate of being predestined “by nature” to break the principles to satisfy his cravings.

¹²The necessity to include in *Ars amatoria* only those stories that suited his theory of women's lust might be the reason for this.

¹³Cf. A. Sharrock, *op. cit.*, p. 101 and footnote 23.

The supreme god Jupiter is another male figure that needs to be mentioned as regards the topic of love, lust and madness. Volumes can be written on the way Ovid depicts Jupiter in his poems, the first observation being that the poet does not treat the deity with an appropriate amount of respect. Jupiter appears in the narrative often to seduce a mortal, a result of yielding to his rampant lust.¹⁴ Allison Sharrock has observed that “In his loss of control over his sexual power, Jupiter is at once both hyper-masculine and feminized.”¹⁵ The poet suggests rather than says explicitly that he does not think the god differs much in his manner from lustful women and barbarians.

Continuing on the subject of the derisive manner of narrative presentation, let us return to *Ars amatoria* and look at the longest of the series of tales, the story of Pasiphaë (*Ars* 1.289–326). The story demonstrates in detail how, bewitched by the white bull, the Cretean queen holds herself up to ridicule. The courtship involves picking up flowers for the lover, constant glances into the mirror to improve her looks and an angry revenge on the rivals (the cows) by making them suffer under the yoke or as sacrificial animals (vv. 318–322). Within this description there lies ridicule, Ovid’s most powerful instrument. It is culminated in the story of Pasiphaë, yet can be found throughout the entire catalogue of women. Still, even if the poet maliciously laughs at every situation he describes, he does not moralize. The reproaches given by him to Pasiphaë (“Sive virum mavis fallere, falle viro!” v. 310) emphasize the humoristic effect when put between the scenes of courting. After the Cretean queen’s story there come the stories of Aerope and Scylla, also treated with a dose of humor and even Agamemnon ceases to be as tragic a figure as he should. The last examples from the catalogue are briefer, less witty, and lead to an ending that concludes the entire passage with a reminder of the leitmotif (*Ars* 1.341–342):

Omnia feminea sunt ista libidine mota;
Acrior est nostra, plusque furoris habet.

Among the generally humorous passages *Ars amatoria* consists of, the seriousness of the crimes committed by furious women fades away. The poet returns to the topic of madness in love later in the work for the purpose of describing a jealous woman’s fury (2.449–452):

Quae, simul invitas crimen pervenit ad aures,
Excidit, et miserae voxque colorque fugit.
Ille ego sim, cuius laniet furiosa capillos:
Ille ego sim, teneras cui petat ungue genas.

¹⁴Cf. e.g. the stories of Callisto (*Met.* 2.401–530 with particularly comical verses 423–424 where Jupiter expresses fear of his wife finding out about the love affair), Europa (2.833–875) and Semele (3.251–313).

¹⁵Ibidem, p. 97.

This time, no harm is done but for pulling hair out of one head and tearing the unfaithful lover's cheeks with fingernails. The matter is treated in the same way as in the catalogue: lightly and with humor although not without the omnipresent prejudice against the "women's nature."

Let us conclude these deliberations with a brief note on the language which the poet uses to describe the madness of love (or lust). The noun *furor* principally designates the feelings which overcome an enamored person, and are caused by the influence of the innate *libido*.¹⁶ Madness burns in Tereus when he looks at Philomela (*Met.* 6.480). *Furores* are the feelings that rage in Byblis after her brother rejects her: the plural form used here accents the intensity and the scale of the girl's increasing insanity. Both Byblis and Myrrha wish for their beloved ones to feel the same *furor* as they do;¹⁷ both women are also referred to as *furibunda*. This epithet, however, is used to describe not so much the feelings but rather the actions performed by the two unhappy characters. The word crops up in the text both when Byblis tears her robe in a bacchic frenzy (9.637) and when Myrrha struggles away from her nurse's arms and sobs, ready to confess the horrific truth (10.410). Only once in the mentioned passages does the poet use the adjective *insanus* to describe mad love: *insani amores* is how Byblis calls her feelings towards her brother. In all other cases the epithet *furiosus* is applied (apart from *furiosa libido* there are also *furiosa vota* in 10.370 and *furiosior amor* in 9.737–738). Additionally, two stories from *Metamorphoses* abound in the vocabulary that introduces a moralistic tone to the narrative. I have already mentioned the frequently repeated noun *scelus* in Myrrha's passage; it also occurs once in the story of Tereus (6.473). The similar terms occur in the remaining text as well: apart from *scelus* there are also words *nefas* and *crimen* used, and both characters in question are described as *impius et impia*.¹⁸

In Ovid's two works the vocabulary used to describe madness in love mainly consists of the forms of the noun *furor*. In both *Ars amatoria* and *Metamorphoses* the "fury" originates in lust and is generally understood as a feeling that overtakes a person in love and leads to mad behavior. Only in the above mentioned two stories from *Metamorphoses*, the "criminal" vocabulary gives additional meaning to the whole concept of *furor* so that it becomes more vile and sinister. In the textbook for lovers, however, according to its comical concept, all grave, moralistic issues would be out of place.

The examples of madness in love in Ovid's two works, although undoubtedly not exhausting the subject, suffice to depict the poet's views on it. First of all, as it has often been stated, it is the domain of women to transgress the bound

¹⁶ Called *furiosa*, as seen in *Ars* 2.281. As the inherent element of *libido* in 2.342.

¹⁷ *Met.* 9.512 and 10.355 respectively.

¹⁸ *Nefas* occurs in 6.524 and 10.307, 352 and 404; *crimen* is the word for Tereus' deed (6.474); he is *impius* in 6.482 and Myrrha is *impia* in 10.345.

of decency so as to gratify the lust, which is allegedly greater than in men. It is this lust (*libido*) that provokes madness, and the lack of control can in turn bring tragedies either upon women themselves, or on other people.¹⁹ Nonetheless, when speaking about the maleficence which the furious passion brings, the poet keeps his distance, not only via the light tone of *Ars amatoria*, but also in *Metamorphoses*. With the exception of the story of Myrrha and Tereus, he does not preach to the reader on morality.

It has been said that ancient authors, Romans in particular, used to limit their description of madness to the visible symptoms and the actions of the madmen without immersing into the nature of the phenomenon.²⁰ In *Ars amatoria* there was no need for limiting its description of madness, due to the concise form of the catalogue that Ovid had chosen. In *Metamorphoses*, however, this description is admittedly deeper, but it cannot be called a full psychological study of madness.

Ovid's method of bringing up the subject can be depicted as typical for this poet who, in his early works, does not take love very seriously. In most cases, he treats the amorous frenzy in the same way as the whole concept of love, that is, lightly and with a hint of mischief.

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Summary

The main aim of the paper is to examine the nature of the concept of love madness in Ovid's *Ars amatoria* and *Metamorphoses*.

The paper opens with a presentation of a distich from *Ars amatoria* (1.281-282) considering the notion of love madness, describing it as *furiosa libido*, furious passion. The poet presents it as innate to women and adduces evidence for his views in the form of a passage which can be entitled "A catalogue of women madly in love". It enlists mythological figures of women (Byblis, Myrrha, Clytemnestra, Medea etc.) who, controlled by *libido*, committed crimes against social rules. After a brief overview of the catalogue and its structure, the paper analyzes the specific character of the poet's depiction of the *libido*. It is presented in Ovid's works as being uncontrollable and independent from the will of women overtaken by it.

In the second part, the said passage from *Ars amatoria* is juxtaposed with two stories from *Metamorphoses*, which can also be considered as illustrating Ovid's views on love madness. The stories of Byblis and Myrrha who, however aware of their incestuous feelings being morally wrong, gradually fall into self-destruction, thus proving the lack of control over their passion. Also included is the analysis of the tale of Iphis from *Metamorphoses*, in which the main character is saved from the woman's fate of being overtaken by *furiosa libido*.

As a comparison for women's stories, two passages from *Ars amatoria* regarding men's lust are taken into consideration, one concerning Paris and the other Tereus. While Paris is cleared of

¹⁹As shown above, in Ovid's works it is the incestuous love that brings tragedy on enamored women. All the remaining kinds of love-madness affect innocent people.

²⁰Cf. A. O'Brien-Moore, op. cit., p. 9.

blame, Tereus, a barbarian, falls under the same category as lustful women, as his *libido* is similarly innate and impossible to control. Also in the part relating to the poet's depiction of men's passion, Jupiter is portrayed as a god of lustful nature, treated almost equally to women.

The paper concludes firstly with the overview of Pasiphae's story from *Ars amatoria* and then with an analysis of the language used by the poet in the discussed passages. Both illustrate Ovid's generally humorous and light tone of the narrative, almost entirely devoid of moral lecture, typical for the poet's views on all matters related to love.