Veleia, 2026, 43, 137-153
https://doi.org/10.1387/veleia.27583

VELEIA

ISSN 0213-2095 – eISSN 2444-3565

"Εἰ δὲ πλέκω τὸν βρόχον, ἀπάνθρωπε, οὐκ ἀφαιρήσεις". THE THREAT OF SUICIDE AS A WAY OF PERSUASION AND PROOF OF LOVE IN LATIN AND ANCIENT GREEK EPISTOLOGRAPHY

«Εἰ δὲ πλέκω τὸν βρόχον, ἀπάνθρωπε, οὐκ ἀφαιρήσεις». *LA AMENAZA DE SUICIDIO COMO FORMA DE PERSUASIÓN Y PRUEBA DE AMOR EN LA CORRESPONDENCIA LATINA Y GRIEGA ANTIGUA*

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ABSTRACT: In the literary epistolary tradition, the senders of literary letters exploited the threat of suicide as a rhetorical tactic in order to convince for their love feelings to the recipients, who were either the people they desired or people in their close family circle who stood in the way of the senders' happiness. First Ovid (1st century) in *Heroides*, and to a lesser extent the later Alciphron and Philostratus (2nd-3rd century) chose this way in some of their epistles —concerning people and places that echo the past— so that the writers could convince the reader of their feelings and the intensity of those emotions. The aim of this paper is to make an aggregated list of the literary letters, both Latin and Greek, where this phenomenon is observed and in which verbal ways the threat of suicide is expressed and whether the threat is a sincere expression of despair from unrequited love or only a means of manipulation.

KEYWORDS: threat of suicide, Ovid, Heroides, Alciphron, Philostratus

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Cómo citar / How to cite: Bointas, Theocharis (2026), «"Εἰ δὲ πλέκω τὸν βρόχον, ἀπάνθρωπε, οὐκ ἀφαιρήσεις"; The threat of suicide as a way of persuasion and proof of love in Latin and Ancient Greek Epistolography», *Veleia*, 43, 137-153. (https://doi.org/10.1387/veleia.27583).

Recibido: 30 mayo 2025; aceptado: 5 septiembre 2025.

ISSN 0213-2095 - eISSN 2444-3565 /

RESUMEN: En la tradición literaria epistolar, los remitentes de cartas literarias explotaban la amenaza de suicidio como táctica retórica para convencer de sus sentimientos amorosos a los destinatarios, que eran o bien las personas que deseaban o bien personas de su círculo familiar cercano que se interponían en el camino de la felicidad de los remitentes. Primero Ovidio (siglo I) en las *Heroidas*, y en menor medida los posteriores Alcifrón y Filóstrato (siglo II-III) eligieron esta vía en algunas de sus epístolas —relativas a personas y lugares que se hacen eco del pasado para que los escritores pudieran convencer al lector de sus sentimientos y de la intensidad de esas emociones—. El objetivo de este trabajo es hacer una relación acumulada de las cartas literarias, tanto latinas como griegas, en las que se observa este fenómeno y con qué formas verbales se expresa la amenaza de suicidio y si esta es una expresión sincera de desesperación por un amor no correspondido o solo un medio de manipulación.

PALABRAS CLAVE: amenaza de suicidio, Ovidio, Heroidas, Alcifrón, Filóstrato.

LABURPENA: Gutunei buruzko literatura-tradizioan, literatura-gutunen igorleek suizidio-mehatxua taktika erretoriko gisa erabiltzen zuten hartzaileak beren maitasun sentimenduez konbentzitzeko. Hartzaileak igorleek desio zituzten pertsonak izan ohi ziren edo, bestela, igorleen familia hurbilekoak, igorleak zoriona lortzeko bidearen erdian jartzen zirenak. Lehendabizi Ovidiok (I. mendea) *Heroidas* lanean, eta neurri txikiagoan, ondorengo Alzifronek eta Filostratok (II-III. mendea) bide hori aukeratu zuten epistola batzuetan —iraganaren berri ematen duten pertsonei eta lekuei buruzkoak dira—, beren sentimenduez eta emozio horien intentsitateaz konbentzitu ahal izateko irakurlea. Lan honen helburua da suizidio-mehatxua agertzen den latinezko zein grezierazko literatura-gutunen zerrenda egitea eta fenomeno hori adierazteko zer aditz-forma erabiltzen den jasotzea, eta, halaber, azaltzea suizidio-mehatxua igorlea maite ez duen amodio batek eragindako benetako etsipen adierazpena den edo manipulatzeko modu bat baino ez den.

GAKO HITZAK: suizidio mehatxua, Ovidio, Heroidas, Alzifron, Filostrato.

Introduction

In Latin and Greek literary epistolary tradition, writers and representatives of this genre write forged letters which concern persons experiencing an unrequited love. The letters are signed by prominent female figures in Ovid's *Heroides* and by regular imaginary people from the city in Alciphron, while their identities remain unidentified in Philostratus' letters. In these letters, a sense of desperation is evident, as the recipients are the objects of the senders' desire, but they do not intend to reciprocate their feelings. Hence, the senders try to convince their loved ones of the genuineness and intensity of their passion by a variety of rhetorical devices —techniques

that will be examined in the analysis of the selected letters— with the ultimate ploy being the threat of suicide[1].

The sender threatens the recipient that they will commit suicide if the latter doesn't give in to their love or, in one case where the letter-writer in love addresses her mother, if her parents do not allow her to be with the man she loves, as a last-ditch attempt to convince the recipients of the depth of their love and their inability to overcome this feeling. First in Ovid and his work[2], *Heroides* —an example of *écriture feminine*[3], according to Fulkerson (Fulkerson 2005, 1-22)—, from the first century AD, representative of Latin epistolary writing, and then in the case of Alciphron and Philostratus, from the third century AD, representatives of Greek epistolary writing as a literary genre in the Second Sophistic Period[4], the emphasis will be on the motif of the threat of suicide in their letters as a rhetorical figure and how it is expressed verbally; either directly or indirectly indicating the decision of desperate lovers, or as a question implying the author's resolution, aimed at pressuring the recipient.

Furthermore, it will be examined to what extend each letter-sender intends to realise the threat, more extensively how much capable he or she is of carrying it out, or whether the threat is simply a way of exerting pressure without any chance of realising it. As far as Ovid and his literary figures are concerned, with the senders of the long letters being mythical female figures of Greek and Latin tradition and the recipients being their loved ones glorious heroes, the knowledge of the evolution of each woman's story will provide the answer[5]. In contrast, in Alciphron and Philostratus, it should be studied the way in which each letter unfolds and how each anonymous sender is profiled through their writings, as the authors in Alciphron's letters are inspired by ordinary people from the city and the surrounding rural areas, while the authors' social status in Philostratus' letters is unknown.

Although all three authors serve the literary genre of epistolary writing, their texts differ significantly in terms of content, as Ovid draws on characters and situations already known from ancient Greek and Latin mythology, whereas Alciphron and Philostratus invent circumstances and characters from post-classical Athens. Nevertheless, the focus lies exclusively on the expression of the threat of suicide in their texts and on how this is articulated within that particular literary category by desperate lovers, while acknowledging that the content and context employed by the three authors is different; more specifically, Ovid reworks myths already known in his letters, about famous figures in mythology, while Greek epistolary writers are inventing new characters and circumstances, creating original fiction, inspired from the simple everyday life of a time now past. It should also be taken into serious consideration that Ovid's letters are more extensive than those of Alciphron and Philostratus, with the latter two not emphasizing on building character or plot, mainly delivering brief incidents and stories about ordinary people, with the issues presented usually remaining open-ended, left to the interpretation of the readers (Rosenmyer 2006, 130).

[1] The threat of suicide is also a motif in comedy, with examples from Greek comedy being Diphilos' *Sappho* and Menander's *Lefkadia* and from Roman drama, Plautus' *Cistellaria*.

[2] On Ovid, see Knox 2009.

[3] On *écriture feminine*, see Cixous 1976, 875-893.

[4] For more information about Second Sophistic Period (Phil. *Vitae Sophistarum*, A 481), see Anderson 1993, Borg 2004. On the authors' reduction to classic Athens on their letters and the Attic Greek literary style, see Bowie 1970, 9-10, Anderson 1993.

[5] Björk states that *ethopoeia* is a tactic used by Ovid in *Heroides*, with rhetorical techniques blending successfully with poetry, in order to demonstrate how these abandoned or soon to be left behind women felt. On the subject, see Björk 2016.

https://doi.org/10.1387/veleia.27583

Ovid

The threat of suicide to Ovid's *Heroides*[6] may initially function as a rhetorical device that indicates blame from the senders of the letters to the recipients, lovers whom they felt had deceived and abandoned them[7]. Women who threaten to kill themselves live in an environment without protection and support from their family, trapped in their passions, doomed to be abandoned by their loved ones, according to Fulkerson 2005, 39, while they acquire a new dimension of tragedy, within an elegiac context (Martorana 2021, 201).

Thus, in the second letter, from Phyllis to Demophon (II. Phyllis Demophoonti), Phyllis, queen of Thrace, who hosted Demophon on his return from the Trojan War and had sexual relations with him, writes an accusatory letter, blaming him for her imminent death. Demophon has allegedly broken his promise to return to Phyllis in a month, as four months have already passed[8] and she mournfully finds that his speech was hollow (25-26: Demophoon, ventis et verba et vela dedisti; | vela queror reditu, verba carere fide[9]). She blames herself for acting impulsively and recklessly, while her turbulent speech —declaring her fragile mental state— reveals her naivety, since she trusted Demophon and his oaths, without a second thought[10].

Phyllis considers herself disgraced because she gave her virginity to him (115-116), while she states she would have preferred to die before surrendering to the hero's love, an unfulfilled wish expressed via the verb *mallem* ("I would rather") in subjunctive form (59-60: quae fuit ante illam, mallem suprema fuisset | nox mihi, dum potui Phyllis honesta mori[11]), while she begs her beloved through the letter to act on his words, even late, but now she is convinced that he will not return and has another lover (101-104: et tamen expect-redeas modo serus amanti, | ut tua sit solo tempore lapsa fides! | Quid precor infelix? te iam tenet altera coniunx | forsitan et, nobis qui male favit, amor[12]).

Phyllis, towards the end of the letter, writes to Demophon in despair about her thoughts. While waiting for her beloved to arrive, she is overcome by an impulse to throw herself from a cliff into the sea, and since the recipient has deceived her and has not kept his promise, she declares to him exactly she will kill herself (131-134: Est sinus, adductos modice falcatus in arcus; | ultima praerupta cornua mole rigent. | hinc mihi suppositas inmittere corpus in undas | mens fuit; et,

[6] On *Heroides*, see Fulkerson 2009, 78-89. Vaiopoulos *et al.* have also written a book (2021) with metrical translation of the first 15 epistles of *Heroides*, accompanied by an introduction on Ovid and detailed commentary.

[7] It is important to note that the suicide motif is not only present in the letters that will be analysed in this paper, but in these letters only the purpose of this threat is to pressure the recipients of the letters not to abandon or ignore the women who are in love with them. The only letter in which it is not clear whether its author is threating to commit suicide in order to put pressure to the reader or she's has already decided her fate, is the letter from Ariadne to Theseus (X. Ariadne Theseo). I tend to believe that Ariadne doesn't try to manipulate Theseus, so I have not included her letter in the analysis.

[8] On the impatience of Phyllis in contrast to the patience of Penelope, see Vaiopoulos *et al.* 2021, 312.

[9] Translated by Showerman 1914: "Demophoon, to the winds you gave at once both promised word and sails; your sails, alas! have not returned, your promised word has not been kept."

[10] Ironically, she considers herself to be credulous, as according to the myth Demophon eventually returns and has not broken his vows, but she is already dead.

[11] Translated by Showerman 1914: "The night before that night I could wish had been the last for me, while I still could have died Phyllis the chaste."

[12] Translated by Showerman 1914: "And yet I do expect — ah, return only, though late, to her who loves you, and prove your promise false only for the time that you delay! Why entreat, unhappy that I am? It may be you are already won by another bride, and feel for her the love that favoured me but ill."

quoniam fallere pergis, erit[13]). The threat of suicide, as is already known, was fulfilled, but Phyllis writes to Demophon, confiding her decision to end her life, in order to force him to return to her, while promising him that she will chase him dead into the sea (135-136: ad tua me fluctus proiectam litora portent, | occurramque oculis intumulata tuis![14]), so her suicide also has a vengeful tone.

Phyllis, in order to upset Demophon, lists a number of ways in which she could take her life, such as poisoning herself, being stabbed by a sword or being hanged, a juxtaposition in successive sentences of visually intense images referring to death, while she uses verbs of delight to refer to death such as *iuvat* ("I am pleased"), *sitis est mihi* ("I am thirsty") (139-142: saepe venenorum sitis est mihi; saepe cruenta | traiectam gladio morte perire iuvat. | colla quoque, infidis quia se nectenda lacertis | praebuerunt, laqueis inplicuisse iuvat[15]). She claims that she will give some time until she decides how she will die, with *parva* ("little") and the expression futura est giving a deadline, implying that she will give Demophon time to reach Thrace[16] (144: in necis electu parva futura mora est[17]). Her suicide will be accompanied by an inscription on her tombstone, stating who is responsible for her death[18] (147-148: PHYLLIDA DEMOPHOON LETO DEDIT HOSPES AMANTEM; | ILLE NECIS CAUSAM PRAEBUIT, IPSA MANUM[19]).

The threat of suicide is intended to hold Demophon accountable, but Phyllis' impatience prevents her from giving Demophon the necessary time to prove his loyalty and love for her. Another interesting aspect is that by committing suicide at a young age, before the time set for her to die, Phyllis even believes that she will make amends for her lost honor (143: stat nece matura tenerum pensare pudorem[20]), so this act is not purely vengeful in nature.

The seventh letter from *Heroides*, from Dido to Aeneas (VII. Dido Aeneae), opens rather unexpectedly (Martorana 2021, 202), as it is the only one of all the letters in which the motif of the threat of suicide is expressed from the very beginning of the text[21] (1-2: Sic ubi fata vocant, udis abiectus in herbis | ad vada Maeandri concinit albus olor[22]), with the epistle being Dido's *swan song* ("albus olor")[23]. The narrative time of the letter is set shortly before Aeneas leaves Carthage and Dido herself, on Zeus' orders, to take the Trojans to Italy.

[13] Translated by Showerman 1914: "There is a bay, whose bow-like lines are gently curved to sickle shape; its outmost horns rise rigid and in rock-bound mass. To throw myself hence into the waves beneath has been my mind; and, since you still pursue your faithless course, so shall it be."

[14] Translated by Showerman 1914: "Let the waves bear me away, and cast me up on your shores, and let me meet your eyes untombed!"

[15] Translated by Showerman 1914: "Oft do I long for poison; oft with the sword would I gladly pierce my heart and pour forth my blood in death. My neck, too, because once offered to the embrace of your false arms, I could gladly ensnare in the noose."

[16] See Kauffman 1986, 58

[17] Translated by Showerman 1914: "In the choosing of my death there shall be but small delay."

[18] A pattern derived from Latin Elegy. On the various literary genres combined in Ovid's *Heroides*, see Michalopoulos 2015, 98, Martorana 2021, 208. On the connection of Philostratus with Roman Elegy, see Hodkinson 2023, 159-179.

[19] Translated by Showerman 1914: "Demophoon «twas sent pyllis to her doom; her guest was he, she loved him well. He was the cause that brought her death to pass; her own the hand by which she fell."

[20] Translated by Showerman 1914: "My heart is fixed to die before my time, and thus make amends to tender purity."

[21] For the resolution of Ovid to begin the epistle in medias res, without providing the reader with a background of Dido's story, but also the connection with the story of Vergil with the word *Sic*, see Martorana 2021, 202. On the controversy concerning an alternate opening of the letter, see Martorana 2021, 202, note 184.

[22] Translated by Showerman 1914: "Thus, at the summons of fate, casting himself down amid the watery grasses by the shallows of Maeander, sings the white swan."

[23] On the metaphor, which expresses Dido's imminent death, see Vaiopoulos *et al.* 2021, 429.

https://doi.org/10.1387/veleia.27583

The queen tries to persuade Aeneas to delay his departure. At first she puts pressure on him, claiming that he is breaking his vows to her (7-8: Certus es ire tamen miseramque relinquere Didon | atque idem venti vela fidemque ferent?[24]), while she poses a rhetorical question to him, whether he will manage to find a woman who loves him as much as she does in the new land he will inhabit (22: unde tibi, quae te sic amet, uxor erit?[25]). She continues by blaming Aeneas for his decision, which Dido perceives as a fraud against her, and he himself in her eyes is responsible for her predetermined death, uses the passive voice *coacta* to show that suicide is not her choice, but Aeneas' imposition, reinforcing his guilt (67-68: protinus occurrent falsae periuria linguae | et Phrygia Dido fraude coacta mori[26]).

The desperate lover begs Aeneas to stay close to her, arguing that her own death is enough as a misfortune, again indirectly repeating the threat of suicide (76: te satis est titulum mortis habere meae[27]), while she questions his achievements and accuses him of the death of his wife, Creusa, with the same story now repeating itself and Aeneas being in the same place, but now Dido is the victim of his decision (Lindheim 2003, 93-94).

Dido again indirectly reveals to Aeneas that death is her fate (96-97: Eumenides fatis signa dedere meis! | Exige, laese pudor, poenas! violate Sychaei[28]), while she foresees her reunion with her dead husband, Sychaeus, who beckons her close to him through a vision (101-103: hinc ego me sensi noto quater ore citari; | ipse sono tenui dixit "Elissa, veni!" | Nulla mora est: venio, venio tibi debita coniunx[29]). She keeps referring to her death as a fate already determined (111-112: Durat in extremum vitaeque novissima nostrae | prosequitur fati, qui fuit ante, tenor[30]).

The sender is the only one who so emphatically stands on the subject of her death, which she wishes to inflict on herself because of the abandonment by her beloved. But in order to put more pressure on Aeneas, she raises the doubt in his mind that she may be pregnant and that their child will be lost along with her, so Aeneas will be responsible for two deaths (133-138).

Then, she asks him to prolong his departure indefinitely, to stay with Dido in Carthage and raise his son there, but if his decision remains the same, then she will again end her life (181: Si minus, est animus nobis effundere vitam[31]). The epistle's sender insists on exerting pressure by means of suicide, describing to Aeneas how she writes with a sword close to her, ready to stab herself with it, recalling the tactics of the Phyllis (183-186: adspicias utinam, quae sit scribentis imago! | scribimus, et gremio Troicus ensis adest, | perque genas lacrimae strictum labuntur in ensem, | qui iam pro lacrimis sanguine tinctus erit[32]).

[24] Translated by Showerman 1914: "Are you resolved none the less to go, and to abandon wretched Dido and shall the same winds bear away from me at once your sails and your promises?"

[25] Translated by Showerman 1914: "Whence will come the wife to love you as I?"

[26] Translated by Showerman 1914: "Straight will come rushing to your mind the perjury of your false tongue, and Dido driven to death by Phrygian faithlessness."

[27] Translated by Showerman 1914: "For you, enough to have the credit for my death."

[28] Translated by Showerman 1914: "twas the Eumenides sounding the signal for my doom! Exact the penalty of me, O purity undone!"

[29] Translated by Showerman 1914: "From within it four times have I heard myself called by a voice well known; «twas he himself crying in faintly sounding tone: 'Elissa, come!' I delay no longer, I come; I come thy bride, thine own by right."

[30] Translated by Showerman 1914: "The lot that was mine in days past still follows me in these last moments of life, and will pursue to the end."

[31] Translated by Showerman 1914: "If you yield not, my purpose is fixed to pour forth my life."

[32] Translated by Showerman 1914: "Could you but see now the face of her who writes these words! I write, and the Trojan's blade is ready in my lap. Over my cheeks the tears roll, and fall upon the drawn steel — which soon shall be stained with blood instead of tears."

Dido's letter closes with the epitaph she wishes to have written for her, on which it will be revealed that Aeneas is the author of her death, the one who gave her both the reason and the sword to commit suicide (195-196: PRAEBUIT AENEAS ET CAUSAM MORTIS ET ENSEM; | IPSA SUA DIDO CONCIDIT USA MANU[33]). Dido in this way highlights exactly this moral guilt of Aeneas, as did Phyllis in the previous letter examined above[34]. Another common thread worth emphasizing between these two heroines is the moral aspect of suicide, as is evident in verse 96, as Dido also believes that she has dishonored herself and did not honor her dead husband, Sychaeus[35]. Therefore, her death will bring catharsis, as in the case of Phyllis' lost honour, with their suicide taking on a special dimension.

In the eighth letter from the *Heroides*, from Hermione to Orestes (VIII Hermione Oresti), the authoress informs her beloved that she's married to Achilles' son, Neoptolemus, who is introduced by the name by which he is known in Cypria, Pyrrhus — a match arranged by his father and Hermione's father, Menelaus. Throughout the letter Hermione expresses her attempt to resist Neoptolemus, but unsuccessfully (5-6: quod potui renui, ne non invita tenderer; | cetera femineae non valuere manus[36]).

Hermione urges through her letter Orestes to take action (15-16: At tu, cura mei si te pia tangit, Oreste, | inice non timidas in tua iura manus![37]) and she appeals to the character and morals of Neoptolemus, describing her ill-treatment, worse than that of Andromache, who came as a slave to his house, while he is reminded of the campaign in Troy, which was conducted for the sake of a woman by her lawful husband, Hermione's father and father-in-law Orestes. Hermione makes it clear to him that she does not wish to start a war in her name, but to claim her himself, as befits a rightful husband for his wife (24-26: ipse veni! | sic quoque eram repetenda tamen, nec turpe marito | aspera pro caro bella tulisse toro[38]).

Orestes' obligation to save Hermione from her involuntary marriage to Neoptolemus derives from both his qualities as her husband and relative[39], while legally the marriage ordained by Tyndareus between Orestes and Hermione[40] invalidates the marriage ordained by her father, since Tyndareus as the eldest has more power in his house (35: cum tibi nubebam, nulli mea taeda nocebat[41]). Then, the desperate woman moves on to exalting Orestes as a personality, making references to the glorious past of his ancestors, but also to the terrible crime he committed[42], without blaming him, the way Neoptolemus does. Hermione, in order to convince of her love, declares

[33] Translated by Showerman 1914, 195-196: "From Aeneas came the cause of her death, and from him the blade; from the hand of Dido herself came the stroke by which she fell."

[34] On the similarities between the two *Heroides*, Phyllis and Dido, see Fulkerson 2005, 26-32, Björk 2016, 296-297, 299-300, while on the similarities between the abandoned women's stories, see Jacobson 1974, 65.

[35] It is important to note the inscription on her tombstone, in which she will not be listed as the wife of Sychaios, as she believes that she has dishonored him (193: nec consumpta rogis inscriber Elissa Sychaei).

[36] Translated by Showerman 1914: «I have refused consent to be held; farther than that my woman's hands could not avail.»

[37] Translated by Showerman 1914: "But do you, if your heart is touched with any natural care for me, Orestes, lay claim to your right with no timid hand."

[38] Translated by Showerman 1914: "Yourself come! Yet even thus I might well have been sought back, nor is it unseemly for a husband to have endured fierce combat for love of his marriage-bed."

[39] The incestuous relationship between the two characters is well known, as they are cousins.

[40] On the anachronism in this letter, see Vaiopoulos *et al.* 2021, 456.

[41] Translated by Showerman 1914: "When I was wed to you, my union brought harm to none."

[42] Euripides dealt with the matricide committed by Orestes and his subsequent punishment in the tragedy of the same name, as did Aeschylus in his trilogy *Oresteia*.

https://doi.org/10.1387/veleia.27583

her anger and resentment at the unfair criticism against her beloved one (59-60: Hermione coram quisquamne obiecit Oresti, | nec mihi sunt vires, nec ferus ensis adest?[43]), while her tears work as a rhetorical pattern used by Ovid to demonstrate the woman's sense of powerlessness (61-62: flere licet certe; flendo diffundimus iram, | perque sinum lacrimae fluminis instar eunt[44]).

Lastly, she also invokes mythological examples[45] of women of Tantalus' generation who experienced the fate of the abduction[46] and she does not fail to lament the absence of her mother for years and the lack of a mother figure in her life, as another sign of her helplessness.

Hermione, before closing the letter, hints at her erotic-sexual relationship with Neoptolemus (107-116), in order to arouse Orestes' jealousy[47], while her last rhetorical device is the expression of the threat of suicide, which in this case is prepared four verses before it is explicitly written, with Hermione swearing an oath in the name of her dead relatives (117-120), as a sacred commitment that underscores the seriousness of the threat, with the verb *iuro* ("swear"). Hermione states flatly that if she does not become Orestes' lawful wife, she will kill herself (121-122: aut ego praemoriar primoque exstinguar in aevo, | aut ego Tantalidae Tantalis uxor ero![48]).

The threat of suicide in Hermione's case has a dual aspect; on the one hand, the aim is to motivate Orestes, as it is the ultimate way of persuasion that she can use and in the conclusion of the letter it has a threatening tone. On the other hand, Hermione is captive to a husband she does not love and is not happy with, so her despair is genuine. Her feelings towards Orestes, who, based on the myth as presented by Euripides, has attempted to murder her, are not clear; whether there is real love for her cousin or whether she prefers to live with her relative, a man who understands her trauma, having himself experienced the consequences of this devastating war for their house. There is no reason to doubt, however, that Hermione is not prepared to carry out her threat.

In the fifteenth letter of the *Heroides*, Sappho writes to her beloved Phaon (XV Sappho to Phaon). Already at the beginning of the letter, Sappho seems to be in an intense emotional state, since the rejection by Phaon causes her to weep and feel that she's being burned, while she is unable to compose new poems and her beloved girls who form her court are unable to offer her any joy.

Her desire is an outgrowth of Phaon's youth and beauty —as will be the case in Philostratus' letter— (21-22: Est in te facies, sunt apti lusibus anni — | o facies oculis insidiosa meis![49]), and compares him to a god, even citing examples of gods who fell in love with mortals, as a way of convincing them of the possibility of their own love. She acknowledges that in comparison to him she lacks beauty, but is gifted with intelligence, and goes on to cite examples of paradoxical love affairs where beauty was not the standard, because if Phaon is looking for someone of similar beauty, then he is doomed to be alone (39-40: si nisi quae facie poterit te digna videri, | nulla futura tua est, nulla futura tua est[50]).

[43] Translated by Showerman 1914: "Has anyone in hearing of Hermione said aught against Orestes, and have I no strength, and no keen sword at hand?"

[44] Translated by Showerman 1914: "I can weep, at least. In weeping I let pour forth my ire, and over my bosom course the tears like a flowing stream."

[45] On the mythological examples in Ovid, a motif adopted by the later Philostratus, see Michalopoulos 2006, 98-111.

[46] On the motif of abduction, see Vaiopoulos *et al.* 2021, 459.

[47] The jealousy of Orestes is also the subject of another of Ovid's works, (Ovid. *Remedia Amoris*, 771-772).

[48] Translated by Showerman 1914: "Either I shall die before my time and in my youthful years be blotted out, or I, a Tantalid, shall be the wife of him sprung from Tantalus!"

[49] Translated by Showerman 1914: "You have beauty, and your years are apt for life's delights — O beauty that lay in ambush for my eyes!"

[50] Translated by Showerman 1914: "If none shall be yours unless deemed worthy of you for her beauty's sake, then none shall be yours at all."

Sappho recalls the moments they lived together, and parallels her despair with a mother's grief for her dead child (113-116: postquam se dolor invenit nec pectora plangi | nec puduit scissis exululare comis, | non aliter quam si nati pia mater adempti | portet ad exstructos corpus inane rogos[51]), a description intended to convince Phaon of the intensity of her passion, while the sender fantasizes about their love encounters. The first hint of suicide appears with reference to the myth of Deucalion who committed suicide in Lefkas from a mountain cliff because of his love for Pyrrha, Sappho is urged on by a Naiad —showcasing her irrationality caused by love— with the love-struck woman deciding to search for this high spot, unafraid, as she believes she will be better off than the situation she is now in (*melius*) in any other circumstances (quidquid erit) (175-177: ibimus, o nymphe, monstrataque saxa petemus; | sit procul insano victus amore timor! | quidquid erit, melius quam nunc erit![52]). The threat of suicide is purely pretextual, as Sappho gives the solution to avoid this tragic outcome; the return of Phaon (187: tu mihi Leucadia potes esse salubrior unda[53]). Sappho sees her savior (*salubrior*) from death to Phaon. However, the sea is seen as salvation from rejection, while Phaon's return is seen as salvation from death itself. It is Phaon, in any case, who holds Sappho's fate in his hands.

Sappho continues to exert psychological pressure on Phaon with the threat of suicide being indirectly repeated, as the poet poses the rhetorical question whether Phaon himself can bear the defamation of his reputation as the one responsible for her death (189-190: an potes, o scopulis undaque ferocior omni, | si moriar, titulum mortis habere meae?[54]). The sender insists that Phaon has robbed her of her talent, while she urges her followers to bring him back to her and she will regain her inspiration, closing the letter by addressing Phaon himself again, begging him to inform her by a responding letter of his resolutions, so that she too may determine her fate. Sappho asks him to grant her a definitive answer; if he does not intend to return to her, to seek her fate in the sea of Lefkas (217-220: sive iuvat longe fugisse Pelasgida Sapphon — | non tamen invenies, cur ego digna fugi — | hoc saltem miserae crudelis epistula dicat, | ut mihi Leucadiae fata petantur aquae![55]).

The threat of suicide allusively closes Sappho's letter, but at the same time it is a rhetorical ploy to put pressure on Phaon, but not at all effective. According to the legend, Phaon does not return to Sappho, with her committing suicide by falling off the cliff into the sea[56]. Glaucippe is threatening to follow Sappho's example, as it will be further discussed.

[51] Translated by Showerman 1914: "After my grief had found itself, I felt no shame to beat my breast, and rend my hair, and shriek, not otherwise than when the loving mother of a son whom death has taken bears to the high-built funeral pile his empty frame."

[52] Translated by Showerman 1914: "I shall go, O nymph, to seek out the cliff thou toldst of; away with fear — my maddening passion casts it out. Whatever shall be, better «twill be than now!"

[53] Translated by Showerman 1914: "You can better help my state than the Leucadian wave."

[54] Translated by Showerman 1914: "Or, if I perish, O more savage than any cliff or wave, you can endure the name of causing my death?"

[55] Translated by Showerman 1914: "But if your pleasure be to fly afar from Pelasgian Sappho —and yet you will find no cause for flying from me— ah, at least let a cruel letter tell me this in my misery, that I may seek my fate in the Leucadian wave!"

[56] On the tragic fate of Sappho after her abandonment by Phaon, see Men. *Leucadia*. 1.11-14: οὗ δὴ λέγεται πρώτη Σαπφὼ / τὸν ὑπέρκομπον θηρῶσα Φάων' / οἰστρῶντι πόθῳ ῥῖψαι πέτρας / ἀπὸ τηλεφανοῦς (from Str. 10.2.9 = Sapph. T 23 Campbell), P. Oxy. LX 4024 by P. J. Parsons (ed.). On the subject, see Benner & Fobes 1949, 63, Vaiopoulous *et al.* 2021, 570-571, Thoma 2024, 305. On Sappho and how Ovid presents her on his work, see Lindheim 2003, 136-176.

https://doi.org/10.1387/veleia.27583

Alciphron-Philostratus

The remarkable thing about Alciphron's letters[57], the first of the two Greek epistolary writers in whom the suicide threat motif occurs, is that it is found in only two letters that constitute part of a correspondence, as a way of persuasion for someone's love and despair[58].

First in eleventh letter of the Letters of Fishermen[59], Glaucippe, a young girl, writes to her mother, Charope, about being forced to marry a man chosen by her father. She expresses her outrage and refusal of this impending event, as the circumstances have changed and she has now fallen in love with a young man from the city, whom she met while she was away in Athens for the festival of the Oscophoria; Glaucippe is no longer willing to marry the man who is appointed to her[60] (Οὐκέτ' εἰμὶ ἐν ἐμαυτῇ, ὦ μῆτερ, οὐδὲ ἀνέχομαι γήμασθαι ᾧ με κατεγγυήσειν ἐπηγγείλατο ἔναγχος ὁ πατήρ, τῷ Μηθυμναίῳ μειρακίῳ τῷ παιδὶ τοῦ κυβερνήτου, ἐξ ὅτου τὸν ἀστικὸν ἔφηβον ἐθεασάμην τὸν ὠσχοφόρον[61]).

It is significant that Glaucippe blames her mother, as she sent her to the city feast (ὅτε με ἄστυδε προὔτρεψας ἀφικέσθαι Ὠσχοφορίων ὄντων[62]), so if Charope had not urged her on, she herself would never have met this man. This implicit accusation is accompanied by an extended description of the extraordinary beauty of the young man she met at the feast (καλὸς γάρ ἐστι, καλός, ὦ μῆτερ, καὶ ἥδιστος…[63]), as two means of persuasion to allow the correspondent to stay with the person with whom she is in love.

At the closing of the letter, Glaucippe, afraid that the accusations and the idealized presentation of the man with whom she has fallen in love are not enough to convince her mother to take action and stand by her side, threatens that she will either marry the man she desires or commit suicide by throwing herself into the sea from the port of Peiraeus, just as Sappho did (ἢ τούτῳ μιγήσομαι ἢ τὴν Λεσβίαν μιμησαμένη Σαπφὼ οὐκ ἀπὸ τῆς Λευκάδος πέτρας, ἀλλ' ἀπὸ τῶν Πειραϊκῶν προβολῶν ἐμαυτὴν εἰς τὸ κλυδώνιον ὤσω[64]). The verb ὤσω, the future tense of the verb ὠθέω-ὠθῶ gives the sense of will or intention in fulfilling the threat, but the way it is expressed via this tense doesn't ensure that it will be executed[65]. Glaucippe blackmails Charope, giving two choices essentially, but only one ensures her salvation.

[57] On Alciphron, see Benner & Fobes 1949, 3-21 and on his connection with Second Sophistic Period, see Schmitz 2004, 87-104.

[58] The threat of suicide in Alciphron is also evident in the twenty-fifth letter of the category Letters of Farmers, but as a way for the author to demonstrate her disgust over her lover, while in the Letters of Parasites the motif of suicide is prominent as a way for parasites to escape their bad fortune.

[59] For the letters of Alciphron, cf. to the critical edition of Schepers, who in 1905 distinguished four themes based on the status of the senders of the letters — fishermen, farmers, parasites and courtesans. For a more extensive analysis of the subject of the organization of Alciphron's letters, see Marquis 2018, 3-23.

[60] On the elegiac literary *topos* when a young girl falls in love with another man and not with the one her father intends her to marry, see Vox 2018, 111.

[61] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "I am no longer myself, mother; I cannot endure the thought of being married to the boy from Methymna, the sea-captain's son to whom father recently promised to betroth me; I have felt this way ever since I saw the young guardsman from the city, the one who carried the vine-branch…"

[62] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "When, at your bidding, I went there on the occasion of the Oschophoria."

[63] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "He is beautiful, mother, beautiful, the sweetest thing…"

[64] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "I intend to have this man, or, if I can't, I shall follow the example of Lesbian Sappho: not indeed from the Leucadian cliff but from the jutting rocks of the Peiraeus I shall hurl myself into the surf."

[65] On the future tense's value in Greek to express will and desire, but not certainty, see Cooper 1998, 650 & Rijksbaron 2002, 33.

The way Glaucippe threatens to commit suicide is particularly tragic and her choice to parallel herself with such an important female figure, who, desperate for her failed love, killed herself, reveals the intensity of her feelings. Nevertheless, her threat seems empty, especially to her mother, who in the very next letter, advises her to come to her senses. Charope finds her behavior irrational, claims that she needs a magic herb to cure herself, and challenges her in a comic tone to slap herself in order to dismiss this shameful thought of disobedience to her father from her mind (Μέμηνας, ὦ θυγάτριον, καὶ ἀληθῶς ἐξέστης. ἐλλεβόρου δεῖ σοι… δέον αἰσχύνεσθαι κορικῶς, ἀπέξυσαι τὴν αἰδῶ τοῦ προσώπου. ἔχε ἀτρέμα κατὰ σεαυτὴν καὶ ῥάπιζε, τὸ κακὸν ἐξωθοῦσα τῆς διανοίας[66]).

The mother's letter concludes by belittling the seriousness of the daughter's threat, since her father, if informed of her disobedience, will throw her overboard himself (εἰ γάρ τι τούτων ὁ σὸς πατὴρ πύθοιτο, οὐδὲν διασκεψάμενος οὐδὲ μελλήσας τοῖς ἐναλίοις βορὰν παραρρίψει σε θηρίοις[67]). Charope therefore reveals the emptiness of Glaucippe's threat and her inability to oppose the will of others for her future[68].

The threat of suicide is also found in the eighth letter in the category of Letters of Courtesans. Simalion, a heartbroken lover, receives scorn from the courtesan Petale and, along with other clients she rejects, finds solace and companionship in the maidservants of her house and in wine at symposia.

In its entirety, the lovelorn man's letter is full of despair, but Simalion refuses to speak ill of the courtesan or threaten her or take her to court with a charge, as her other lovers would do in his position (ἕτερος ἂν λοιδορούμενος ἔγραφε καὶ ἀπειλῶν, ἀλλ' ἐγὼ δεόμενος καὶ ἀντιβολῶν[69]), a rhetorical device of persuasion in order to demonstrate his good character and a verbal ploy to discredit the rival lovers of Petale. Simalion wraps up the letter by concluding that his fierce love for Petale and his desperation may lead him to suicide, the worst fate of those who have experienced rejection by the person they fell in love with (ἐρῶ γάρ, ὦ Πετάλη, κακῶς. φοβοῦμαι δὲ μὴ κάκιον ἔχων μιμήσωμαί τινα τῶν περὶ τὰς ἐρωτικὰς μέμψεις ἀτυχεστέρων[70]). Simalion with the verb φοβοῦμαι moderates the threat he expresses indirectly, as he does not write clearly that he will take his life, he leaves only hints to the addressee, but explicit of his intentions.

In her reply letter, Petale doesn't seem moved or frightened by the words and threat of Simalion —a threat that stems from her own attitude toward the man. The courtesan mocks the love-stricken man, claiming she wishes her household could be sustained by tears, for then it would thrive on Simalion's constant complaints and whining (Ἐβουλόμην μὲν ὑπὸ

[66] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: «My dear, you are mad, and truly out of your wits. A dose of hellebore is what you need, and not the common kind either, but the kind that comes from Anticyra in Phocis — you who, instead of being shamefaced as a girl should be, have wiped all modesty from your countenance.»

[67] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "Why, if your father should hear of any of these goings-on, he will not stop to think but will throw you to the sharks for food."

[68] Hodkinson argues that Charope reduces the threat of Glaucippe to childish stubbornness and immaturity, the result of the frustration of her dreams of marrying the man she has fallen in love with, see Hodkinson 2007, 297. On the other hand, Björk compares the women in Alciphron's corpus with Ovid's Heroides, resulting in the similarities of an unhappy life and bearing a difficult situation, but in contrast there is some comedic tone, see Björk 2016, 123.

[69] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "Another man would have written you an abusive and threatening letter, but I write with prayers and supplications."

[70] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "For I love you, Petale, to distraction. And I fear that, if I get any worse, I may follow the example of one of those to whom lovers' quarrels have brought overwhelming calamity."

https://doi.org/10.1387/veleia.27583

δακρύων οἰκίαν ἑταίρας τρέφεσθαι λαμπρῶς γὰρ ἂν ἔπραττον ἀφθόνων τούτων ἀπολαύουσα παρὰ σοῦ[71]). She goes on to explain that a courtesan needs gifts to maintain herself— such as gold, clothing, jewelry, and maidservants (νῦν δὲ δεῖ χρυσίου ἡμῖν, ἱματίων, κόσμου, θεραπαινιδίων. ἡ τοῦ βίου διοίκησις ἅπασα ἐντεῦθεν[72]) —things Simalion is unable to provide; as a result, she appears disheveled and feels ashamed in front of her fellow courtesans and friends. Her sarcastic tone completely undermines the emotionally charged letter of the disappointed lover, as she believes his tears and pain will soon dissipate (ἀλλὰ δακρύεις; πεπαύσῃ μετὰ μικρὸν[73]). The closing of Petale's letter makes her cynical view of male lovers clear; she considers them as clients, with whom she shares no emotional attachment. She allows him to visit her, provided he brings a gift and comes without tears— otherwise, she warns, he will end up heartbroken again (ἐὰν φέρῃς τι, ἥκε μὴ κλάων, εἰ δὲ μή, σεαυτὸν οὐχ ἡμᾶς ἀνιάσεις[74]). It is therefore evident that she does not succumb to the emotional pressure exerted by Simalion and remains unconvinced that he is truly capable of carrying out his threat[75].

Last comes Flavius Philostratus[76], clearly influenced by Latin Elegy[77], and his fifty-seventh letter, in which the anonymous male sender attempts to persuade the recipient —a young boy— to yield to his love. The sender assumes that the boy shares similar feelings but hesitates to express them (Πέπεισαι μέν, ὡς εἰκάζειν ἔχω[78], τοῦ δὲ ἔργου τὴν αἰσχύνην ὀκνεῖς[79]). He begins by presenting the benefits of such a love, namely the friendship that inevitably arises between two men[80] —one that signifies affection and deep love, rather than mere fleeting passion (εἶτα πρᾶγμα ἀποδιδράσκεις, ἀφ᾽ οὗ τις φίλος γίγνεται;[81]).

The letter continues with the typical pattern of most of Philostratus' love letters; in order to persuade the recipient of the power and greatness of love, the author draws on examples from epic tradition, Greek mythology, and historical facts and figures, citing cases of exceptionally beautiful men who, at times, fell passionately in love. The author places particular emphasis on the physical beauty of the figures he references —Admetus, Branchus, and especially Ganymede— presenting beauty as a unifying force among men. The sender attributes this elevation exclusively to the aesthetic appeal of the boy, implying that beauty alone grants access to the divine realm and that only those of exceptional appearance are deemed wor-

[71] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "I wish that a courtesan's house were maintained on tears; for then I should be getting along splendidly, since I am supplied with plenty of them by you!"

[72] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "But the present fact is that I need money, clothes, finery, maidservants; on these the whole ordering of my life depends."

[73] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "You're in tears, are you? you'll get over them soon."

[74] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "If you're bringing me a present, come without weeping; otherwise it will be yourself, not me, that you're tormenting."

[75] On the threat of suicide on the corpus of Alciphron, see Thoma 2024, 304-310.

[76] On Flavius Philostratus, see Benner & Fobes 1949, 387-404.

[77] On the influence of previous writers and literary genres upon Flavius Philostratus work, see Schmitz 2017, 275, whilst especially of the influence by Elegy in his Erotic Epistles, see Hodkinson 2023, 77-104. On Philostratus' connection with Latin Elegy and also *common topoi* with Ovid, see Hodkinson 2023 159-180.

[78] See Benner & Fobes 1949, 520. εἰκάζω] εἰκάζειν ἔχω.

[79] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: «You are persuaded, I fancy, but you hesitate for fear the deed might bring disgrace.»

[80] Cf. to the Latin word *amicitia* meaning "friendship", which —although it is contrasted with *love* as an emotion— ultimately derives from the very noun *amor*.

[81] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "Are you, then, shirking an act that makes a friend?"

thy to dwell among the gods[82] (μόνοι γὰρ ὑμεῖς οἱ καλοὶ καὶ τὸν οὐρανὸν οἰκεῖτε ὡς πόλιν[83]).

Despite the recipient's superior appearance, the author initially pleads with him to give in to his feelings and not to reject him especially since he is willing to sacrifice his life for him (μὴ φθονήσῃς ἐραστοῦ σεαυτῷ δοῦναι μὲν ἀθανασίαν οὐκ ἔχοντος, τὴν δὲ αὐτοῦ ψυχὴν προτείνοντος[84]). To validate his words, the sender promises the reader of the letter that he is prepared to die immediately if asked to do so (εἰ δὲ ἀπιστεῖς, ἕτοιμος ἀποθνήσκειν, ἂν ἐπιτάττῃς τοῦτο νυνί[85]). The letter concludes with a veiled threat of suicide, as the author of the letter wonders whether, if he were to tie a noose to hang himself, the recipient would not save him by taking it from his hands, forming a beautifully harrowing image (εἰ δὲ πλέκω τὸν βρόχον, ἀπάνθρωπε, οὐκ ἀφαιρήσεις;[86]).

It becomes evident that the letter follows a pattern of rhetorical escalation; the author initially adopts a gentle, persuasive tone in an attempt to convince the object of his desire to surrender to his love. He then proceeds to lavish him with flattery, employing a series of exemplary figures to elevate the youth's allure. As the letter approaches its conclusion, the sender gradually prepares the recipient for the threat he is about to express; firstly, through the solemn promise that he is willing to die for his beloved; then, with the affirmation that he would do so at the very moment the youth requested it; and finally, through a question that seems more literal than rhetorical — whether, should despair drive him to hang himself with the noose he is braiding, the recipient would not intervene to save him?

In an effort to emphasize the urgency of the beloved's response, the author addresses him with the vocative ἀπάνθρωπε "inhuman one", a direct appeal for immediate action. On the surface, he begs that the young man take the noose from the hands of the desperate lover; on a deeper level, however, it functions as an implicit call for emotional reciprocation. Without such a response, the author implies, his life is devoid of meaning. The threat of suicide thus constitutes the final expressive and rhetorical device employed in the letter —a last resort in the author's persuasive arsenal. It is, however, not to be taken as a genuine intention, but rather as a calculated attempt at recipient's emotional manipulation. The ultimate aim is to extract a reaction —either written or personal— from the otherwise reluctant recipient[87].

Conclusions

From the study of literary epistolary letters, both Latin and Greek, whose central theme is the rejection of the sender's love and their attempts to persuade the recipient to reciprocate those feel-

[82] *Kallos*, beauty is directly associated with youth in the corpus of Philostratus' letters, therefore the recipient is considered with certainty to be a young man and the sender is probably an older man, since he praises the recipient's beauty (οὐκ ἐντεῦθεν ἐπληρώθη καλῶν τὰ Ὁμήρου ἔπη).

[83] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "For you handsome lads, and you alone, inhabit even heaven as your city."

[84] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "Do not begrudge yourself a lover who cannot indeed give you immortality but can give you his own life."

[85] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "If you do not believe me, I am ready to die if that is your command, at this very moment."

[86] Translated by Benner & Fobes 1949: "If I plait the noose, you inhuman boy, will you not take it from me?"

[87] Philostratus presents the motif of suicide out of love also in other letters, but not as a way for the recipient to indulge in the sender's desire. For instance, in fifth, seventh and twenty-third letter the authors are willing to sacrifice themselves for the persons that they love.

https://doi.org/10.1387/veleia.27583

ings —beyond the correspondence between daughter and mother found in Alciphron's corpus— it emerges that the motif of the threat of suicide represents the ultimate and most extreme rhetorical device employed by the authors of the letters, invented by the epistolary writers to exert pressure on their beloved or for the sake of their beloved, in order to convince of the depth of their emotions.

The big difference between Ovid and Greek authors is that Ovid writes and reworks myths already familiar to his readers' consciousness, and therefore uses the threat of suicide in his letters as a dramatic tool to demonstrate the passion of his *Heroides*. On the contrary, Alciphron and Philostratus innovate in the sense that the threat of suicide in their texts is an original invention and is not based on already known acts and stories from literary tradition. In both cases, however, the rhetorical goal of expressing the threat of suicide is to exert pressure and persuasion, but in the Latin letters it is expected, while in the Greek letters the reader is shocked by the climax of the senders' passion.

Initially, in Ovid's *Heroides*, where all the letter-senders are women renowned in Greek and Roman tradition who address men that reject or abandon them, the element of despair is explicit. For this reason, in some cases the threat of suicide does not merely constitute the climax of the rhetorical means employed but rather recurs as a repeated motif. Dido, in the seventh epistle, reiterates her threat multiple times even before Aeneas departs Carthage, in an effort to dissuade him (1-2, 67-68, 76, 83-84, 96, 110-112, 133-138, 181, 195-196). Similarly, Sappho in the fifteenth epistle repeats her suicide threat towards Phaon, who has abandoned her and, according to myth, does not return, resulting in her falling from the cliffs of Leucas (175-177, 189-190, 217-220).

Suicide as sender's intention typically appears towards the closing of a letter, so as to create a sense of urgency in the reader and exert pressure for the fulfillment of the sender's request. This leads to a climax in the rhetorical ways of persuasion. The aforementioned cases, where the threat is repeated throughout the letter, also include it in their conclusions, thus maintaining pressure throughout the text.

In Ovid's *Heroides*, for example, Phyllis writes to Demophoon, who failed to return at the appointed time as promised; she expresses her bitter decision to end her life near the letter's conclusion with declarative main clauses (131-134), and details methods by which she might carry out the threat (139-142) —a tactic also employed by Dido (183-186). Her suicide clearly carries a punitive character, as her epitaph indicates (147-148). Similarly, in the closing of the eighth letter, Hermione declares to her beloved Orestes that she will take her own life if he does not marry her and instead remains with Neoptolemus. Unlike Phyllis, Hermione's intention is not to punish Orestes but to pressure him to bring her closer (121-122).

Turning to Greek literary epistolography, in Alciphron Glaucippe is a lovesick girl who threatens her mother at the letter's conclusion that she will follow Sappho's example and leap from the cliffs into the sea if her parents do not permit her to be with the Athenian youth she loves. Likewise, the desperate and exiled Simalion threatens he will commit suicide indirectly at the letter's close. In Philostratus' fifty-seventh letter, the anonymous enamored male sender ends his letter with a rhetorical question implying suicide, urging his beloved to save him.

It is important to note which of these threats are ultimately carried out. In *Heroides*, Phyllis is the first to actually take her own life, as does Dido, who is ultimately abandoned by Aeneas, unable to persuade him to follow her fate. Conversely, Hermione does not die; after Orestes kills Neoptolemus at the Delphic oracle, she marries her cousin, thus it remains unclear whether she truly intended to sacrifice herself for her desires or whether her threat was merely a pressure tactic. In the fifteenth letter, Sappho is also a heroine who repeatedly threatens and decides on suicide, re-

vealing throughout much of the text her troubled psyche and preparing the reader for the possibility that she might act upon these thoughts.

When it comes to Greek literary letters, it's rather problematic to make a clear distinction regarding the author's intention, since, unlike Ovid's letters, which are based on already known myths and where the reader already knows the fate of the characters, these are fictional situations invented by Alciphron and Philostratus. A subjective but uncertain assumption is that in all cases the authors of the letters do not intend to carry out their threats. In particular, the two letters of Alciphron that include the threat of suicide —one from a lovesick young woman whose parents intend her for a man other than the one she loves, and the other from a young man rejected by a courtesan because he cannot provide her with lavish gifts— based on the responses they receive (the first from the mother of the young woman, the second from the courtesan herself), confirm that the threats made by the lovers are false and not intended to be carried out. Finally, Philostratus' letter also constitutes a hollow threat, aimed at exerting psychological pressure by the enamored sender on the recipient. The threat takes the form of a rhetorical question with a playful tone. In general, it can be concluded that suicide threats primarily aim to psychologically manipulate the recipients of the letters and only rarely are these threats actually carried out[88].

At a linguistic level it is evident that the senders of the letters employ poetic language appropriate to the literary genre of the letters. The threats are expressed either through declarative statements or rhetorical questions that do not seek a direct answer but rather prompt action from the recipients. In conclusion, these threats function primarily as a means of revealing the psychological state of the senders and evoking emotional response from the recipients[89], without constituting the sole methods of rhetorical persuasion[90].

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[88] On the threat of suicide as a means of exerting psychological and emotional pressure, see Thoma 2024, 304.

[89] On the purposefulness of expressing the threat of suicide in both Private and Greek Literary Epistolography, see Thoma 2024, 308-309, where it is revealed that this kind of threat in private correspondence aims at putting psychological pressure upon the recipient or the expression of threat may be the way for the authors of the letters to express their frustration and feelings or that the only solution for them is to commit suicide. The difference between papyri and literary letters is that the senders of preserved private letters are not dealing with problems of a romantic nature.

[90] On the politeness and rhetorical devices employed by epistolary writers, mainly in papyri private letters, see Papathomas 2007, 497-512, Dickey 2016, 237-62, Koroli 2021, 75-113.

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