two textual problems in ovid, ex ponto 3.3*

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Ex Ponto 3.3.71-76:

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\begin{align*}
\text{utque hoc, sic utinam defendere cetera possem!} \\
\text{scis aliud quod te laeserit esse magis.} \\
\text{quidquid id est (neque enim debet dolor ipse referri,} \\
\text{nec potes a culpa dicere abesse tua),} \\
\text{tu licet erroris sub imagine crimen obumbres,} \\
\text{non gnavior merito vindicis ira fuit.}
\end{align*}
\]

Would that I could ward off other charges as I can this one! You know that it is another thing which has done you greater harm. Whatever this is (for the pain itself should not be brought back, nor can you say that you are untouched by blame in your own case), though you may cover your offence under the representation of an error, the anger of the avenger was no heavier than deserved.

Here Cupid, appearing in a famous vision to the poet, has just stated that he can justify and defend the poet’s carmen (the Ars); he then goes on to say that he cannot do the same for his (famously mysterious) error. The problem here is line 74: the combination of needing to understand te ipsum as the object of dicere and the oddness of the phrase a culpa … abesse tua makes the expression dubious. *Tristia* 1.2.98 a culpa facinus scitis abesse mea provides some kind of parallel, but there as in the other Ovidian cases of the metaphorical use of abesse … a the expression is used of a specific quality X lacking from object or person Y (Her. 12.170 et tener a misero pectore somnus abest, Her.20.68 cur suus a tanto crimine fructus abest?), and the use of an implied personal subject is unique here.

*I cite the text of J.A. Richmond (Teubner, 1990). It is a special pleasure to offer this small tribute to a scholar who has made such a major contribution to work on the exile poetry of Ovid. I am most grateful to the anonymous referees of Acta Classica, whose comments improved the piece.
I suggest nec potes, a!, culpam dicere abesse tuam. The apparently prepositional a can be interpreted as the ‘neoteric’ exclamation a!, found in other passages of the exile poetry where Ovid laments his downfall and its causes – cf. Tristia 2.77 a! ferus et nobis crudelior omnibus hostis. | delicias legis qui tibi cumque meas, 4.4.40 a! sine me fatis non meminisse mei; for its mid-clause position and the metrical shape of the line in general we can compare Tristia 5.10.51 quid loquer, a, demens, Ex Ponto 4.3.29 quid fecis, a, demens. Once exclamatory a! was misinterpreted as the preposition, an original culpa … tuam would be easily changed to culpa … tua, especially if the accusatives were written compendiously with suprallineal abbreviations for the m’s. The Latin now makes much better sense: ‘alas, you cannot say that blame on your part is absent’: for culpa … meam in a similar sense cf. Tristia 5.11.10 mollior est culpam poena secuta meam. Here as elsewhere in the exile poetry the poet admits freely to culpa (cf. Tristia 1.2.98, 1.3.38, 2.104, 208, 3.5.51, 4.1.24, 4.4.37, 5.4.18; Ex Ponto 1.1.61-62, 1.6.25-26, 7.7.39, 2.2.15).

Ex Ponto 3.3.99-102:

conueniens animo genus est tibi; nobiles namque
pectus et Herculeae simplicitatis habes.
Liior, iners utium, mores non exit in altos
utque latens ima uipera serpit humo.

Your family well matches your disposition: for you have a noble heart and one of Herculean simplicity. Jealousy, that vice of inactivity, does not burst out to lofty characters, and like a low-moving viper is concealed and moves along the ground.

Here Ovid praises his addressee Fabius Maximus: Hercules was the legendary ancestor of the Fabii (cf. Fasti 2.237; Plutarch Fab.1.2). The problematic phrase here is 101 exit in. Though exit as a verb of motion seems to cohere with serpit in 102, its metaphorical force here is unclear; exire in in Ovid normally means ‘emerge into’, as at Amores 3.12.41 exit in immensum, and the recurring Ovidian phrase exit in auras (Ars Amatoria 3.741; Met.7.127, 13.610), and this makes no sense with an abstract such as mores. This difficulty is shown in the impressionistic translations given in the two most used modern editions, Wheeler’s ‘enters not into lofty character’, almost translating init rather than exit, and André’s ‘n’atteint pas
un caractère supérieur’, where ‘atteint’ suggests tangit not exit.\(^1\) Leumann in the _Thesaurus Linguae Latinae_ (V.2.1366,49-53) compares Seneca _De Tranquillitate Animi_ 9.1.14 [animus] ambitiosus in uerba est altiusque ut spirare ita eloqui gestit et ad dignitatem rerum exit oratio and glosses ‘exsurgit, effertur’, but surely exit there means ‘emerges, results’ as in the recent translation by John Davie (‘so that language emerges in keeping with the dignity of the topic’);\(^2\) in the _Ex Ponto_ passage, by contrast, we need some verb which implies that mores … altos are the potential object of an attack by the serpentine Livor which it is in fact too cowardly to carry out.

I suggest _mores non uescitur altos_, ‘does not feed on lofty characters’; _uescar_ would be used with the accusative, a rare construction but firmly found in elegy at Tibullus 2.5.63-64 _sic uesque sacras inuxia laurna_ [ _uescar_]. This would appeal to the traditional topos of _Livor edax_ (cf. _Amores_ 1.15.1, and especially _Tristia_ 4.10.123-24 _nec, qui detractat praesentia, Livor iniquo silium de nostris dente momordit opus_), and the image would cohere nicely with the cowardly snake of 102: the serpent tooth of envy does not feed on morally elevated in dividuals such as Maximus but on the inferior forms of life found in its naturally lower habitat. _Non uescitur altos_ could easily be corrupted into _non exit in altos_ given the common confusion in MSS of _x_ and _sc_ and the frequency of _in_ before a part of _altus_ at the end of the Ovidian hexameter (cf. e.g. _Tristia_ 3.9.29 _scopulo proponit in alto_; _Ibis_ 375 _pila minuaris in alta_; and 18 other Ovidian examples).

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