

Laurel FULKERSON, *Ovid: A Poet on the Margins*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016 (Classical World), XIV, 104 pp., ISBN 978-1-4725-3134-6, £15.99.

The “Preface” to the Ovidian book by Laurel FULKERSON [=F.] assures us that her main aim was to furnish the reader with the “most compelling interpretative tools for understanding Ovid”; at first sight, the word “compelling” seems particularly apt here, given the slightly sensational way the titles of the chapters and subchapters in the book are phrased (most evidently: “Truth Stranger than Fiction: Poet Exiled Under Suspicious Circumstances!”). But it is not only the decoy that matters; the “attractive” attitude fits neatly in the book with a much less frivolous and more demanding approach, and this is but one of the paradoxes that marks this study. After all, we are dealing with a tiny volume trying to investigate one of the most prolific poetic corpora in Roman literature; the well-known book of almost three hundred pages (by Karl GALINSKY) dubbed as “an introduction to the **basic** aspects” [emphasis added] of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* can bring to mind the scale of the risk of the endeavour. As regards the set of tools gathered by F., it is of course not new and she offers rather a rearrangement of previous statements and queries, situating them in a context that is supposedly most appealing for the modern reader.

The very first sentence (“Let us begin at the end”; p. 1) of the introductory chapter of the book (entitled “Life on the Margins”) indicates clearly some of its strategic premises, which consists in delivering paradoxes, along with emphasising some contradictions and ambiguities allegedly permeating the poetry of Ovid. (Interestingly, at least one scholarly paper concerning Ovid opens with the opposite declaration: “we start at the beginning...”¹.) “The end” from the above quoted sentence means of course the final stage of Ovid’s biography, his mysterious banishment to the foreign land far from Rome by order of emperor Augustus. The key word in the title of the book (i.e. “margins”) also alludes to this fact, and margins will serve throughout F.’s text as one of the capacious metaphors describing the core features of Ovidian poetry, namely its multifaceted “marginality” (being one of the first specimens of colonial literature, Ovid’s exilic poetry is of course remarkably rewarding material for this kind of study). Some bafflement concerning topography should be noted: Ovid was made even more “marginal” than he in fact was, because despite being a resident of the town of Tomis, identified correctly on p. 1 with the Romanian city of Constanța, some suggestions in the book apparently situate him on the verge of the Graeco-Roman world, that is in Asia Minor or even in Colchis (!); see the combined information on pp. 1 (about Tomis “in the Roman province of Pontus”), 2 (the map on which the town of Tomis is not shown, although we can recognise the province of Pontus in Asia Minor), and 97 (where the entry concerning Pontus in the glossary informs us that it was a Roman province in modern-day Northern Turkey, and part of it was Colchis, “homeland of Medea”).

Setting aside the initial statement, F. duly returns to the proper chronological order in dealing with Ovid’s biography and historical events, briefly characterising all the Ovidian works and touching upon the political atmosphere of Augustan Rome and the question of artistic patronage. The topic ends with a provocative statement about the puzzling similarity between Ovid and Augustus. As regards the interference between Roman history and the poet’s biography, maybe it would be convenient to add to the list of important historical events (p. 4) the date of Augustus’ first consulate; after all, it was also the year of Ovid’s birth and Ovid is probably alluding to this coincidence at the beginning of the *Metamorphoses* in the phrase announcing *mea tempora*.

¹ See S. CASALI, *Quaerenti Plura Legendum: On the Necessity of “Reading More” in Ovid’s Exile Poetry*, *Ramus* XXVI 1997, p. 80.

From the series of questions concerning the poet's exile posed at the beginning of the book, perhaps the most interesting one is expressed in this way: "How do we read the literally alienated stance Ovid presents in the poetry from exile in light of the figurative alienation discernible across all of his work?" (p. 3). Another of these questions, in turn, is not only difficult to answer, but it is even problematic to think about a way of gathering the proper data to deal with the dilemma it indicates (I mean the question about "a change of heart": "If a work reflects its author, does revision entail a change of heart?"). As it is easy to notice, the exilic experience is treated here as the most important factor shaping the entire artistic personality of the Roman poet; besides, such aspects of the poetic discourse as the inclination to generic experiments, as well as irony, playfulness, ambiguity (for instance, in mingling together fiction and reality), unreliability (of the people speaking in the texts), contradictions, inconclusiveness, and complexity, are underscored throughout. We are constantly encouraged (and at times not without some exaggeration) to think about Ovidian poetry as a kind of "open work" (in the sense of *opera aperta* from Umberto Eco's famous essay), full of "deceptive surfaces", insolvability, incongruency, vagueness, multivalency... Perhaps sometimes the notions of "incongruity" and "insolvability" may serve as an excuse for some sort of critical escapism, but in most cases F. proves convincingly that the Ovidian textual tactic of creating the aura of intricacy demands even more detailed scrutiny. And what would be worth considering here (given the fact that Ovid chose Pythagoras to be the patron of the **material** instability of his world of changes) is the possible philosophical background of the epistemological issues concerning the "instability of meanings" or "plurality of truths", discernible, according to F., in Ovid's works.

After the first chapter about "Life on the Margins", we encounter two main parts of the book arranged according to a theoretical frame based on two "structural metaphors" (p. 3): repetition and exile (a synonym for marginality). The chapters are entitled, respectively, "Repetition-Compulsion and Ovidian Excess", and "Romans at Home and Abroad: Identity and the Colonial Subject".

Some stylistic features of Ovid's poetry and his poetic technique are addressed in successive parts of the second chapter; F. lays stress on the rhetorical components in Ovidian style along with the variable narrative patterns, and, once more, recalls Ovidian "incongruity" – with reference, e.g., to his ambiguous sense of humour, sometimes labelled as the (in)famous "gruesome wit". By the way, calling the second, pentametric part of the elegiac couplet "distich" (p. 30) is somewhat confusing, since "distich" is usually synonymous with the couplet itself. Another part of the chapter is devoted to some metapoetic, intertextual (referring to the relationship with Vergil in particular) and intratextual elements in the Ovidian oeuvre. Maybe not coincidentally, F. inserts some repetitions and revisions into her own text; for example, almost the same statement about ethnographical literature and its influence on Ovidian descriptions of Tomis can be found on pp. 15 and 17. As an example of revision, in turn, we can perceive two somewhat different interpretations of the pair of elegies from the *Amores* collection (II 7 and II 8) on pp. 6 and 46; the second interpretation more convincingly refers to the amusement caused by the story instead of treating it as a text that "frustrates the reader's desire to know where to stand" (p. 6).

The last chapter focuses on the question of how different versions of displacement are depicted (both literally and figuratively) in the works of Ovid and thus demonstrates the utmost interest devoted to refugees and outsiders in his poetry (especially in the *Metamorphoses*) – in the context of the "colonial subject" recognisable in his texts. We are reminded that the poet existed on the borders of times and political systems (in the transitional period marking the shift from Republic to Empire) and on the geographical periphery of the Roman world. Part of this chapter could be labelled as the Ovidian "victimology", and the last pages, with the title "Empire and Colonialism", apply the idea of "liminality" to the different borderlines in the poet's life and work. Finally, the author tries once more to examine some political issues by drawing further parallels between the poet and the prince.

The final, and by no means accidental paradox is manifest: it turns out that by emphasising his "marginality", F. tries to make Ovid in fact more "central" and accessible to the modern public (as she asserts on p. 6, "Ovid is both a poet of his own time and of ours"; the phrase "our own"

relating to ancient times is subsequently repeated twice on the final page of the study; moreover, on p. 58, we can find the opinion of some “contemporaries” claiming that we may easily “call our own times another ‘age of Ovid’”).

As regards some shortcomings, the concise form of the book comes at a price: sometimes the reader is left without any examples illustrating a given statement (see, for instance, the comment about the similarities between elegy and epic on p. 30). Some omissions are more evident than others; curiously enough, although the myth of Pygmalion from the *Metamorphoses* is discussed (p. 70), there is no mention about any films influenced by this myth (and there are many of them, as the long list at the end of Paula JAMES’ book, *Ovid’s Myth of Pygmalion on Screen*, undoubtedly confirms). Another strange omission concerns the eclogues, excluded from the discussion of the forms of hexameter poetry in Augustan times (p. 31). Generalisations and oversimplifications are probably also inevitable in a book offering a “synoptic view” in a condensed way (one of them I cannot but quote: “Most readers will find sex a more interesting topic than exile, but that is perhaps merely our prejudice”; pp. 16 f.), but the overall impression is that F. managed to create a coherent, balanced view of the entire world of Ovidian poetry, avoiding an overt presentism. Additionally, most of the examples were carefully chosen, and indeed illustrate perfectly the crucial features of Ovidian poetry.

There are, however, some noticeable errors of a different kind. Books published in English speaking countries are notorious for the misspelling of foreign words; the reviewed book, unfortunately, is no exception, so we should read “discussioni” instead of “Discuzione” in the title of an Italian periodical (p. 90), “Ransmayr” instead of “Ransmyer” (twice), and, in the title of a poem by Ovid, “*faciei*” instead of “*facei*” (thrice) as well as “*femineae*” instead of “*femina*” or “*feminae*”. One may also wonder why a person as important to the Augustan period as Horace does not deserve his own entry in the glossary. In the index, oddly enough, only one modern person among the few listed has been given his first name (James Joyce, p. 102; why him?), whereas Seneca the Younger, mentioned (albeit adjectivally) on p. 8 in the context of the Ovidian tragedy *Medea*, is missing, and the elegiac poet Tibullus (absent from the index although referred to in the main text) seemingly yielded his place to Tiberius (indexed with Tibullus’ page numbers; p. 104).

Despite the aforementioned remarks, F.’s study is an inspiring and insightful introduction to Ovid, especially for a non-professional reader; the whole book’s tag line (which seems to be more universal, not only “Ovidian”) could read as follows: “repeated readings are richly repaid” (p. 16). They surely are. Vote for Caesar! And read Ovid...

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