

BOOK REVIEW

Ovid and Augustus: A Political Reading of Ovid's Erotic Poems. By P.J. DAVIS. London: Duckworth Publishers, 2006. Pp. viii + 183. Cloth, \$70.00. ISBN 0-7156-3559-X.

Few will take exception to Davis' (D.) thesis that Ovid's erotic poetry flouts many components of Augustan ideology. Indeed, a significant portion of this book is not new, but comprises revised versions of articles that have appeared elsewhere. It is therefore all the more significant that it makes an original and insightful contribution to the crowded discussion of Ovid's relationship with the Augustan regime.

After a brief opening chapter that probes *Tristia* 2 for Ovid's defense of his literary corpus, D. spends two chapters investigating the nature and manifestations of Augustan ideology. In the first, which is by far the most important in the book, D. seeks to undermine Duncan Kennedy's influential deconstruction of the terms "Augustan" and "anti-Augustan."¹ In particular, he adduces passages from Augustus' *Res Gestae* to challenge Kennedy's assertion that "no statement (not even made by Augustus himself) can be categorically 'Augustan' or 'anti-Augustan'." The strength of the argument lies in D.'s ability to confront Kennedy on his own terms, adroitly handling the complex issues of reception that form the basis of Kennedy's argument that the ideological allegiances of individual readers will determine their interpretation of a work, whatever the author's own loyalties may have been.

With similar skill, D. addresses the problems of authorial intent that necessarily accompany his counter-argument that Augustus wrote the *Res Gestae* to trumpet his accomplishments. D. concedes that the *Res Gestae* can be read negatively, reminding us of Tacitus' account of the interpretive communities that espoused positive and negative views of the document when it was first published (*Ann.* 1.9–10); but he does not allow that Augustus himself conceived of his work as anything other than a positive record of his accomplishments. D.'s disagreement with Kennedy might seem to stem merely from a difference in critical approach, but D. ultimately exposes fatal inconsistencies in Kennedy's subjectivism and proposes a more balanced approach that accounts for an intention-bearing author and the reception of his text by readers who may or may not share his ideological loyalties.

In the balance of his first chapter, D. tackles the issue of the literary persona, again rebutting a view held by Kennedy (and Gale and Cairns). Averring that "there is no separation between author and persona" in Roman poetry (p. 20), D. reminds us of Ovid's failed

¹ "'Augustan' and 'Anti-Augustan': Reflections on Terms of Reference," in A. Powell, ed., *Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus* (London, 1992) 26–58.

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attempt in *Tristia* 2 to base his defense on just such a division. He concludes with a call for “a better way of establishing whether a text is pro- or anti- or un-Augustan,” and suggests that “that way involves considering the relationship between the text under investigation and what we call ‘Augustan’ ideology” (p. 22).

Unfortunately, D.’s articulation of his proposed method for considering that relationship lacks the strength, clarity and organization of his analysis and refutation of Kennedy. Any single chapter that seeks to redefine the scholarly approach to Augustan ideology is bound to labor under such ambition. But D. seeks to limit the scope of his discussion to the Secular Festival and the Augustan Forum as the non-literary representatives of Augustan ideology against which he will read Ovid’s erotic works in later chapters. Because of the extent and interconnectedness of Augustus’ building program, the discussion necessarily expands to encompass much of the rest of Rome. It is accordingly easy to become distracted by digressions and superfluous details. Nevertheless, D. ultimately succeeds in showing how the Secular Festival and the Augustan Forum exude Augustan ideology, but at the cost of straying from his topic of Ovid and Augustus.

Ovid may make only a cameo appearance in the chapters on Augustus, but he is prominent in the remaining five. D. devotes a chapter each to the *Heroides*, *Amores*, *Ars Amatoria* and *Remedia Amoris*, and appends an epilogue in which he considers the erotic works as they appear in the exile poetry. Although it will be obvious to most readers that Ovid’s *Amores* and especially the *Ars Amatoria* contravene the morals espoused by the Augustan regime, D.’s subtle reading of these poems contributes much to the discussion, and his observations will be of interest to specialists in Ovidian poetry and non-specialists alike for their insight into the finer points of Ovid’s criticism of Augustus.

More innovative and striking is the chapter on the *Heroides*, in which D. argues that Ovid “focuses not on the glories of masculine achievement, but on its cost” (p. 49). Although the women of the *Heroides* are “committed to a specifically Augustan ideal of marriage” (p. 50), they receive nothing but grief as a reward for their fidelity. As examples, D. offers the letters of Deianira, Laodamia and Dido. Deianira laments the infidelity of her husband Hercules with a prisoner of war; Laodamia bewails the absence of Protesilaus and encourages her husband in vain to abandon his desire for military glory; Dido decries her abandonment by her unfaithful husband Aeneas, the ancestor of Augustus himself. D. concludes that the *Heroides* exposes a flaw in the flagship moral legislation of the Augustan regime. Strictly speaking, the *Julian Law on the Suppression of Adultery* (18 BCE) concerns only female sexuality and social status; its definition of adultery hinges on the standing of the woman involved. As D. dem-

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onstrates, "the law regulated male sexuality only to the extent that men were required to refrain from extramarital sex with 'respectable' women ... [but they] could have sex with 'unrespectable' women with impunity" (p. 70). For these reasons, however bitterly the women in the *Heroides* might complain of their lovers' infidelity, the law tacitly permits it.

Each chapter ends with a conclusion, but D. has not given us a conclusion to the book as a whole. Rather, he moves from his chapter on the *Remedia Amoris* to an epilogue that discusses how Ovid revisits his erotic poetry in the works from exile. This tactic suggests that work remains before any conclusions can be drawn. Indeed, the epilogue tantalizes the reader with what might be done with the *Tristia* and the *Epistulae ex Ponto*. Perhaps D. will turn his attention to them next.

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