

BOOK REVIEW

Ovid's Early Poetry: From his single Heroides to his Remedia Amoris. By THEA S. THORSEN. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. Pp. xii + 223. Hardcover, \$95. ISBN 978-1-107-04041-0.

The title of this book is misleading, since it is essentially a discussion of *Heroides* 15 (Sappho's letter to Phaon) disguised as an attempt to say something about Ovid's early poetry as a whole. Thorsen argues two things: that "*Heroides* 15 represents a key text in order to achieve a profounder appreciation of Ovid's earlier poetry" (96), and that Ovid's early poetry is consistent. In the latter case she is more successful than in the former, though no one familiar with Ovid will find the claim revelatory.

The book falls into two halves, in the first of which Thorsen argues for the primacy of the *Heroides* and then for Sappho's letter as the key poem in the collection, asserting that Sappho is Ovid's *altera ego*. She does this in part by pushing aside all of the complicated arguments about the dating of Ovid's early works and accepting the idea that Ovid released a collected edition of his early works in 2 CE, with them in the form and order he wanted them to be read. Having done away with historical chronology, she relies on what she refers to as the "fictional chronology" constructed among the works themselves. It is this chronology that is hinted at in the book's subtitle, as she identifies the *Heroides* as the first and the *Remedia* as the last of Ovid's early works. Positioning the *Heroides* first is part of Thorsen's plan for arguing that they—and the Sappho letter in particular—are a window into the rest of Ovid's early production.

In this first half she also argues for the authenticity of *Heroides* 15. The review of the issue is detailed and mostly accessible, and she presents the arguments with which she disagrees fairly. Her arguments against critics of the poem's authenticity will likely convert some, but the parallels she cites between this poem and Ovid's other poetry could arguably be taken as signs that it is Ovidian pastiche. Furthermore, many critiques of the poem involve its perceived lack of the talent we associate with Ovid, but because Thorsen is trying to champion this poem, there is no

room in her argument for saying that what some view as the poem's infelicities may arise from its early composition (or even to admit that it contains any infelicities).

The second half of the book is a reading of the rest of Ovid's early poetry to show how his other works (i.e. *Amores*, *Ars Amatoria*, and *Remedia Amoris*; Thorsen essentially neglects the *Medicamina Faciei Femineae*) echo *Heroides* 15 and reveal similar concerns. The results are underwhelming for two reasons. The first is that readers of Ovid have long recognized his consistency across his corpus, in terms of style, humor, metapoetic concerns, etc. The second is the absence of a larger framework to tie everything together. In lieu of a much-needed conclusion, Thorsen includes only a two-page postscript, in which she claims that, "Ovid's portrait of Sappho in *Heroides* 15 features the qualities of a self-portrait, cross-dressed, transgendered, metamorphosed: Ovidian" (194). Variations of this provocative claim appear several times throughout the book, but in no way does it serve as an organizing principle, and there is no sustained argument meant to prove this point. As a result, it is often unclear how everything is supposed to come together. Many sections that get their own headers only go for a page or two, often to point out one parallel or one idea, with little sense of how they add to a larger picture. Those interested in individual poems will find numerous useful observations, but those familiar with Ovid's early works will likely not find their views of Ovid altered in any significant way by this book.

The book's greatest potential value lies in its treatment of Ovid's reception of Sappho, though Thorsen generally seems reluctant to frame her discussion in such terms. She demonstrates that Ovid uses Sappho more than most would perhaps expect, and uses the recently discovered "Brothers Poem" to show that we are almost certainly missing even more allusions to Sappho in Ovid's poetry. Her attempts to situate Ovid's Sappho within a larger Roman reception of Sappho is promising, but the treatment is far from exhaustive.

The book is generally well produced, though it is less accessible than it may have been, especially to those with little or no Latin. Because the author generally relies on Loeb translations (sometimes tweaked), the English does not always illustrate her points as well as it could. Likewise, when she underlines key terms in a Latin passage she quotes, she does not underline the corresponding words in the English translation, meaning that some will have a harder time following the point (especially so when she talks about words or phrases that are not underlined). Furthermore, at times not all of the Latin in a passage is translated, while at other times an English translation is given for parts of the Latin that are not quoted.

The focus on Ovid's Sappho will be of most interest to many—if not all—

readers, which makes the absence of her name from the title puzzling. But Thorsen never convinces that this one poem—regardless of whether it embodies all of the themes of the single *Heroides*—is in any way key to reading the rest of Ovid's early poetry.

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