

BOOK REVIEW

Ovid on Cosmetics: Medicamina Faciei Femineae and Related Texts. By MARGUERITE JOHNSON. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016. Pp. xi + 171. Paperback, \$29.95. ISBN 9781472506573. Hardcover, \$94.00. ISBN 978-1472-5144-24.

Ovid's *Medicamina Faciei Femineae*, a fragmentary work on cosmetics, is one that scholars and students alike have often overlooked or set aside in favor of his love poetry or the epic *Metamorphoses* that guaranteed his literary immortality. In recent days, however, in the footsteps of his *Fasti*—also once maligned but now deservedly rehabilitated—the *Medicamina* may be emerging from obscurity.

Intriguingly, the vanguard came not from academics, but from other interested parties of wildly varying temperament, physicians and essayists: in 2013 the *Journal of the American Medical Association Dermatology* published an article on the *Medicamina's* treatments for certain skin conditions, and in 2014 the *Paris Review of Books* printed a humorous sketch of the poem that offered it to modern pharmaceutical corporations as inspiration for new products.¹ Marguerite Johnson now presents a classicist's perspective, and her volume will both increase the *Medicamina's* visibility and help readers approach and appreciate this poem: admirably, Johnson declares that her goal is to cast a wide net and present "useful information to divergent lines of enquiry" (xi).

Comprised of selected Latin texts, their English translations (but not facing), literary-historical commentary, and appendices, Johnson's book is an accessible and well-researched addition to Ovidian studies. While the *Medicamina* has not been completely ignored in scholarly studies (see for instance the article-length treatments of Peter Green 1979, T. J. Leary 1988a and 1988b, Anastasios Nikolaidis 1994, Patricia Watson 2001, Victoria Rimell 2005, Francesca Cioccoloni 2006, and Kelly Olson 2009) Johnson's is the first book in English to focus on the poem in its own right. Furthermore, the *Medicamina* has not been the subject of a

¹ Ali FR, Fox J, Finlayson AET. "Medicamina Faciei Femineae: Roman Skin Care." *JAMA Dermatol.* 2013; 149(5): 591. doi:10.1001/jamadermatol.2013.350 and <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2014/03/20/ovid-ancient-beauty-elixirs/>

commentary since Gianpiero Rosati's 1985 effort. Clearly this book fills a gap in the field, and in this sense it is on point.

Johnson begins with a succinct introduction that serves as primer for all that follows. From general ancient historical context (1–8), Johnson treats the Roman body (8–15), Ovid on *cultus*, *munditia*, and *ars* (15–18), and Ovid *vis-à-vis* Augustus' famous moral legislation (18–22). The inclusion of photographs such as that of a Roman woman's toilette set is a nice touch broadening the scope beyond the exclusively literary. Prefatory overviews of the selected texts are clarifying segues into the consideration of those texts: the *Medicamina Faciei Femineae*, *Amores* 1.14, *Ars Amatoria* 3.101–250, *Remedia Amoris* 343–356, and *Ars Amatoria* 1.505–52, all linked by their interest in beauty, cosmetics, presentation, and the art of artifice. Johnson both examines the *Medicamina per se* and uses it as her springboard to a synthesis of Ovid's treatment of beautification throughout his erotic didactic work. An extensive bibliography offers the interested reader many avenues of further research.

A general caveat: Johnson's work focuses on explicating the *Medicamina*, but it is not a school text. Her commentary does not contain a Latin glossary or grammatical aids to help Latin students pore over the text. Such concerns confine themselves to the first appendix (137–139) and there briefly to textual matters. Johnson's commentary is of the literary-historical ilk, and in that vein it is consistently engaging and informative as she seeks to illuminate Ovid's work and its cultural context, usually in a pragmatic sense. For instance, one section offers a discussion of how a Roman curling iron (*calamistrum*) might operate (93–94); another explains the use of charred Turkish saffron as a high-end eyeliner versus less expensive *favilla*, ashes, sometimes of rose petals (120). Johnson also adds a creative wrinkle by rewriting the *Medicamina's* cosmetic recipes in modern style with an ingredient list and step-by-step method (e.g., recipe #1 based on lines 53–68, page 60). (It does tempt one to experimental archaeology.)

The book does have a few blemishes. The writing contains too much passive voice, and on at least one occasion slippage occurs between Ovid the historical figure and "Ovid" the poetic *persona*: the phrase "Ovid's amoral attitude toward sexuality" (18) can be confusing. The poet later would insist that while his verses were saucy, his own life was not. In the Introduction, the dating of the *Fasti's* composition to AD 3–7 (xiii) is true yet misleadingly incomplete; internal evidence indicates Ovid reworked it in exile until his death. The English translations occasionally stumble into clunkiness: for instance, *Amores* 1.14.28's *ferrea* becomes "girl-of-iron" (85) and *Medicamina* 19's *vultis odoratos positu variare capillos* "you want to

variegate your scented locks by means of styling” (45). The inclusion of appendices is useful, but the glossary of pharmaceutical terms seems sparse: it contains nine English terms where an extensive list of Latin vocabulary might be expected, given the specialist nature of the subject matter.

Lest this review seem too astringent, let us gloss over these small points and accentuate the positive as makeup artists ancient and modern have always done. Johnson’s book is a useful new resource that provides a fresh foundation for studying Ovid not only as cosmopolitan *praeceptor amoris*, but also *praeceptor cultis*, with all the humorous undertones, elegant contours, and historical highlights that it entails.

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