

BOOK REVIEW

The Ovidian Heroine as Author: Reading, Writing, and Community in the Heroides. By LAUREL FULKERSON. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. Pp. xi + 187. Cloth, \$75.00. ISBN 0-521-84672-2.

Recent scholarship on the *Heroides*, indeed on Ovid in general, has pursued four major lines of inquiry: genre, allusion, narrative and relationship to Augustus. How does the poet manipulate generic conventions? In what ways does he display his obsessive awareness of the literary texts that come before him? How does he tell his story? What kind of connection does he draw, implicitly or explicitly, between himself and the *princeps*? Laurel Fulkerson's (F.) study of the *Heroides* engages with all these issues, adding to the mix a feminist interest in the representation of the literary and mythical heroines who write elegiac epistles to heroes who have abandoned them.

Asserting her place among feminist interpretations of the *Heroides* that seek to explore what happens when female characters, usually secondary to the traditional, canonical versions of their stories, take control of the narrative,¹ F. suggests that we reconsider the failure generally attributed to these female authors. While interpreters often emphasize the heroines' inability to persuade their lovers to return, as readers know from their intertextual habits of suturing endings from source texts onto the Ovidian epistles, F. asks us to measure success otherwise. The heroines engage intratextually with one another's letters; they avidly peruse each other's missives, finding within their counterparts' epistles compelling readings of stories and/or actualizations of women. At times, suggests F., a heroine might even influence events, becoming the catalyst for the outcome we expect from the literary tradition. The turn from intertext to intratext, from isolated heroines to women in a community, offers new insights into the poems, and especially into the repetitive nature of the women and their stories in the *Heroides*.

In her first chapter, "Reading dangerously," F. argues that Phyllis has carefully read the letters written by Dido, Ariadne and Medea, and actively chooses to construct herself in the manner of her abandoned sisters despite the contrary evidence available from her

¹ An early and influential article is Marilyn Desmond, "When Dido Reads Vergil: Gender and Intertextuality in Ovid's *Heroides* 7," *Helios* 20 (1993) 56-68. The most recent book-length studies are Sara H. Lindheim, *Mail and Female: Epistolary Narrative and Desire in Ovid's Heroides* (Madison, 2003), and Erossini Spentzou, *Readers and Writers in Ovid's Heroides: Transgressions of Genre and Gender* (Oxford, 2003).

source text, and despite the alternative model provided by Penelope in *Heroides* 1. The second chapter, "Reading the future," however, shows that power within the community of heroines circulates in more complex ways. Medea and Hypsipyle, the only women who write letters to the same hero, seem to influence each other: Hypsipyle introduces herself as a witch (like Medea), while Medea attempts to downplay those parts of her character that detract from a self-representation as an innocent, inexperienced woman (like Hypsipyle). Hypsipyle, *qua* sorceress, utters a blood-curdling curse that Medea, now enjoying Jason's loving attentions, should herself be abandoned by Jason for another, bereft of her children and forced into exile. Does Hypsipyle's curse cause Medea's literary afterlife? Does Oenone, who immediately precedes Hypsipyle in Ovid's collection, find in Hypsipyle a powerful model, as the nymph launches her own curse against Helen?

Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate the surprising power that epistles, deemed a failure in their intertextual context, have on an intratextual audience. Canace, sentenced to death by her father, sends her brother a letter she has expressly crafted for a double audience, her brother-lover and her father. While this strategy of composition fails Canace, since she herself does not escape death, her rhetoric saves her son, and also Hypermestra who, in *Heroides* 14, appropriates Canace's rhetorical strategy of writing for a double audience (lover and father), and lives. Like Canace, Briseis fails; the captive woman's attempts to locate herself in the center of the story of the Trojan War gain little traction. Hermione, however, benefits tremendously in her self-presentation from her reading of Briseis' missive.

F. explores the connections between the letters of Laodamia and her aunt Deianira in Chapter 5, "Reading magically." The women in this family possess considerable skill in killing their husbands. Viewing her situation through the prism of her aunt's example, Laodamia suffers from an excessive suspicion which leads her to write down things that should not be written; unwittingly she curses Protesilaus to the death awaiting him in the source texts. Other family bonds prove equally problematic, as F. shows in Chapter 6. Phaedra draws on the example of her mother Pasiphae, who entered into an extra-marital relationship with a bull, and of her sister Ariadne, who betrayed her family because of her love for Theseus, only to be callously abandoned by the hero while she was sleeping. Phaedra appropriates Ariadne's version of Theseus in *Heroides* 10, casting herself in her own epistle as another of his victims, while simultaneously seeking to recreate the intensity of her sister's innocent passion in a relationship with Hippolytus. But Hippolytus is Phaedra's stepson, and her attempts to reprise the story of her sister fade into a restaging of Pasiphae's monstrous yearning.

If Phaedra has misread, Ariadne appears rather powerful. The heroine of *Heroides* 10, argues F., exerts tremendous influence over the Ovidian collection. In her conclusion, F. links the power of the heroine to that of the poet, particularly in the face of the political power of Augustus. With a glance toward Ovid's exilic poetry, F. shows that the *princeps* can exile Ovid to Tomis, but ultimately Ovid's literary reception is out of Augustus' hands.

F.'s analysis invites consideration of the epistles from angles that do not receive explicit treatment in her monograph. One question already on the table in Heroidean scholarship is the extent to which we as readers, and the heroines as writers, remain at the mercy of source texts.² While F.'s readings of the heroines' words demonstrate that she sees considerable latitude for them, she might have explored this issue more fully where Ovid is concerned. To what extent does the poet consider himself caught in the prison of the literary texts that precede him? To what degree can he change a story we all know? And why, when he seeks to explore this issue, does he use a woman's voice?

That F.'s work raises further questions, however, is only to the good. This book, clear, well-written and tightly organized, belongs on the shelf of all those interested in the *Heroides*, Ovid and the power of literature.

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² The key text here is Alessandro Barchiesi, "Future Reflexive: Two Modes of Allusion and Ovid's *Heroides*," *HSCP* 95 (1993) 333–65.