

BOOK REVIEW

The Elegiac Passion: Jealousy in Roman Love Elegy. By RUTH ROTH AUS CASTON. Emotions of the Past. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. x + 176. Hardcover, \$74.00/£45.00. ISBN 978-0-19-992590-2.

Surprising though it may seem, a sustained examination of the importance of jealousy to Roman Love Elegy had not been attempted before Caston's thought-provoking volume on the subject. Her thesis moves far beyond a simple categorization and cataloguing of examples, elevating jealousy to something definitive of elegy itself. What might appear to be a stumbling block for the entire argument—that jealousy is seldom explicitly identified in any ancient literature, love elegy included—is carefully turned into an advantage. The very complexity of the emotion, the way it so often goes unrecognized even by the sufferer him/herself, the way it overlaps with other emotions, preoccupations, and prejudices, all help to explain both its refusal of simple definition and its subtle pervasiveness in Roman elegy. While love is elegy's "first mover," the elegists' responses to love, Caston argues, owe as much, if not more, to this other emotion: "[j]ealousy is not merely the subject matter of elegy: it creates and structures elegy's various generic features" (19). On this reading the lovers' obsessive recounting of their affairs, their repetitive recourse to stock scenes, and their inability to escape from the shadow of infidelity, whether demonstrated or anticipated, all revolve around jealousy. The traditional explanation of such elements in terms of generic necessity and literary tradition is thus challenged in a lively and creative way. The inclusion of philosophers' attitudes to the trials of love also offers an interesting way of seeing; although not unprecedented, it is, again, relatively rare for this intellectual context to be brought to the fore in a discussion of elegy. Furthermore, it gives a twist on the oft-noted didactic element in the genre: elegists are not simply issuing instruction on love, but promoting a "therapy of desire," an emotional education for themselves and their readers.

From the opening sections on the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of the study, the book moves through a series of linked investigations. In Chapters 2–4, Caston details the symptoms and triggers of, and responses to,

jealousy as seen in a variety of elegies. The argument is carefully paced, with frequent pauses for in-depth readings of particular poems as complements to briefer assessments of evidence drawn from elegy more widely. With Chapter 5, the focus shifts from the elegist as jealous lover to the elegist as jealous poet: once more, familiar critical themes—the poet’s ambitions for his work, his interactions with other poets, his slippery relations with his readership, both “internal” and “external”—are given fresh energy and a new twist. With the final chapter, the focus shifts once again, now to recast the theme as a means to explore elegy’s movement between the erotic, social, and political spheres. The elegist’s paranoia, his internal battle between the desire to trust and the desire not to be betrayed, seeps into his view of the wider world, and both he and his readers are left in a vulnerable state, where none seems entirely sure of any truth, nor entirely secure in any bond of trust.

The idea of elegy as therapy that threads through the book is, to employ a reviewer’s cliché, a source of both strength and weakness. It is a fruitful way of bringing together those elegies in which the poet sets himself up as teacher or even doctor and those in which he demonstrates a patent inability to control or reconcile himself to his emotions: in both cases, poetry can be viewed as therapy, whether useful for its readers or, more immediately, useful for its writers in understanding and enduring this emotion. However, the impulse to draw this general “message” from the poems at times effaces some of their differences. In particular, I thought more might have been said about how Ovid both assents to and dissents from the Propertian and Tibullan reactions to the philosophers’ views outlined in Chapter 1. That he wrote the *Remedia Amoris* is noted several times, but a more detailed examination of the therapeutic stance of this poem and its interplay with both elegy and philosophy would have been welcome.

Indeed, a more general criticism could be made that the otherwise helpful and clear structuring of the book in sections, with “Conclusions” for each chapter, entails—in the overarching argument, if not the detailed discussions—too much reliance on a sense of elegy as homogenous both across an individual author’s works and throughout the genre as a whole. For example, to use *Heroides* 5 and 6 to illustrate female jealousy (79–84) is, of course, legitimate, but little overt acknowledgement is given of these poems’ differences from other elegies, while they are, as it were, “read back” into the others to provide a contrast between male and female levels of skepticism.

Such reservations aside, however, this is an engagingly written, creative, and frequently very persuasive book. It may be bold to claim such centrality for jeal-

ousy in Roman elegy; I expect that not all readers will be entirely convinced by this bold claim, either. Nonetheless, this is not a book—or an idea—to be dismissed lightly, and it will surely stimulate debate and offer new paths for critics of elegy and students of ancient emotion to explore.

REBECCA ARMSTRONG

St. Hilda's College, University of Oxford, rebecca.armstrong@st-hildas.ox.ac.uk