

BOOK REVIEW

Ovid's Lovers: Desire, Difference and the Poetic Imagination. By VICTORIA RIMELL. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Pp. viii + 235. Cloth, \$90.00. ISBN 0-521-86219-1.

Recent scholarly focus on Ovid's interest in change and boundary transgression has raised new questions about how constantly transforming subjects relate to one another. Victoria Rimell's book addresses some of these questions by seeking out moments in Ovid's poetry when a competition between desiring subjects, rather than the decisive mastery of one subject over another, shapes the poet's verse. Borrowing Irigaray's concept of the "being-in-relation" (p. 4), R. has chosen to reconsider power in Ovid as relational, rather than hierarchical (p. 3). Her study of relationships between subjects looks primarily at the *Ars*, *Heroides* and *Medicamina*, though there is some discussion of the *Metamorphoses* and occasional reference to the *Amores* and exilic poetry. By using a less hierarchical approach to explore how subjects relate to one another, R. hopes to revise predominant models of the Ovidian artist, which view Pygmalion (e.g., Anderson (1963)), Orpheus (e.g., Segal (1989)) or most recently Narcissus (e.g., Hardie (2002)) as the artist *par excellence*. Though Narcissus and Orpheus play significant roles in the development of R.'s argument, she offers Medusa as totemic for the Ovidian artistic process, since her myth implies a more dialectical process of viewing and creating. R. suggests that within the Medusa myth we find an "aition of poetry to rival that of Narcissus" (p. 16).

The book has some impressive moments, and R. is good at tracking internal reminiscence throughout Ovid's erotic poetry. In Chapter 2, her reading of the Cephalus and Procris story (pp. 97-103) at the end of *Ars* 3 reveals how the tale replays and brings to tragic conclusion the contradictory signals prescribed throughout the *Ars*. For R. a frustrating "mirror-logic" (p. 96) governs the relationship between books and lovers in the poem, and the author demonstrates a proliferation of reflections and mimicry among male and female pupils. R. also highlights, especially in the *Heroides* (Chapters 4-6), how traces of the *praeceptor's* advice on epistolary discourse inform our impression of Ovidian erotics as fuelled by two creating, and often competing, subjects.

Unfortunately, these positive contributions are undermined by an overall lack of clarity, evident initially in R.'s haphazard chronological grouping of Ovid's works. R. concedes that she is not concerned to "plot a teleology of Ovidian erotics" (p. 8), yet she explains her choice of texts (*Heroides*, *Ars*, *Medicamina* and *Metamorphoses*) as an attempt to define a period of the poet's life, an impulse toward relationality. Thus, "...[a]ll these texts, with the exception of *Heroides* 1-15, were written between four and eight years of each other, and

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make up the backbone of Ovid's life's work" (p. 4). By omitting the *Amores* from her list of core elegiac texts (!) and describing their presentation of lover and beloved as "more straightforwardly formulated" (p. 4), R. bypasses the difficulties of dating the twice-published work, though a good deal of composition and revision of these poems probably occurred around the same time as that of the *Ars*, *Medicamina* and *Heroides*.¹

A more significant problem is the methodology, by which links proposed between texts are often based on a single word. Though careful use of a word may constitute literary allusion, R.'s efforts to establish verbal parallels are weakened when, for example, a common participle (e.g., *repercussus* linking *Met.* 2.110, 3.434 and 4.783; pp. 28–9) or an emendation not found in the manuscript tradition (e.g., *sponte* at *Her.* 18.76 ties it to *Aen.* 4.361; p. 196) is said to relate one passage to another. R. is careful not to claim allusivity for many passages she cites (p. 29 n. 88), though she does not explain to my satisfaction any other rationale for her constant comparison of passages sharing but a single word. Similarly, Narcissus and Medusa show up in places that lack obvious verbal or thematic parallels. In R.'s discussion of *Met.* 10, decapitation (or neck-breaking) seems to link the death of Hyacinth with Euryalus in *Aen.* 9, Catullus' poet-lover in 11.22, and Medusa (which Medusa? which text?). Perhaps R. has a conceptual basis for connecting these passages with her omnipresent gorgon, but she does not linger over any of them long enough for us to find out.

Equally important to the substance of R.'s argument about erotic relationships in Ovid is the matter of the poet's elegiac predecessors. R. occasionally cites Tibullan or Propertian precedents, and insightfully points to the dream recounted in Propertius 2.26 as one background against which the Hero and Leander epistles are staged. Propertius had already presented, within the context of drowning, a rivalry between lover and beloved for poetic *nomen* (2.26.7; p. 12), and thus Hero's identity as a creator, rather than poetic *materies*, may constitute "the point at which Ovid's vision of female identity unleashes its ambitious edge" (p. 184). In general, however, R.'s treatment of Propertius and Tibullus is less astute. For instance, in her discussion of the *Medicamina*, evidence for the natural look advocated by the two elegists is problematic. Propertius 1.2 foregrounds poetic artifice and complicates its own prescriptions for unadorned

¹ The *Amores*, first composed as a five-book edition, were later published in three volumes not before 16 BCE, the *Ars* around 1 BCE/CE, though the revised edition of the *Amores* may have been published about the same time as the *Ars*. See J.C. McKeown, ed., *Ovid: Amores*, vol. 1 (Liverpool, 1987) 84–9.

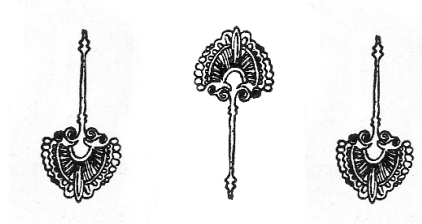
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beauty,² and in Tib. 1.8, the speaker gives advice not to Delia (as R. asserts) but to the *puer* Marathus (p. 49). The same lack of attention to the details of previous elegy can be felt in the opening of Chapter 2, where R. confirms the existence of a seriously doubted three-book edition of Tibullus' elegies (p. 71). While a third book is attached to the corpus, the overwhelming scholarly consensus is that it is not Tibullan. Also, while Ovid may be the most overt of the elegists in juxtaposing the *puella's* disturbing lack of self-fashioning with the elegist's artistic *auctoritas*, R. fails to mention Propertius 3.24–5 (joined in the manuscript tradition), in which the poet-lover holds a mirror up to Cynthia in an attempt to erode her fictive allure (3.24.1–2, 25.13–16).

Regarding more formal matters, readers will find R.'s prose difficult to follow, in part because she equates terms, often through liberal use of the slash mark (e.g., "textual ecstasies/fallacies," p. 8; "creative forces of desire and/as alterity," p. 105; "epistolary/romantic contract," p. 129), when the equation needs more explaining. She is also imprecise in her use of the term "empire" and its variants. R.'s study rarely engages with the Augustan socio-historical context (in itself not a failing), yet she describes a "high imperial culture which ... seems to breed self-awareness" (p. 41) without external evidence to substantiate the characterization. R. also refers in a confusing way to the Ovidian poet: she names the poet of the *Ars* the "poet lover," "*praeceptor*" and even "Ovid," collapsing the distinction between the poet and his persona (p. 101). R. admits that she has created a "portrait of the proliferating and at times bewildering reflections" that define Ovid's concept of self (p. 13) rather than a "jigsaw of precise and detailed arguments" (p. 12). Indeed, her portrait has many insightful strokes; I would recommend it to anyone who wishes to trace the topos of letter-writing or mirroring within the lesser known works. One only feels that for the book to be an effective piece of scholarship, it might have been less of a portrait and more of a jigsaw puzzle.

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² See esp. Curran, "'Nature to Advantage Dressed': Propertius 1.2," *Ramus* 4.1 (1975) 1–16.