

Milton and the Metamorphosis of Ovid. By MAGGIE KILGOUR. Classical Presences. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. Pp. xxiii + 373. \$135.00. ISBN 978-0-19-958943-2.

Maggie Kilgour's *Milton and the Metamorphosis of Ovid*, presented as part of Oxford's Classical Presences series, delivers a robust examination of Ovid's influence on Milton. Kilgour places particular emphasis on the top billing poetic works of Milton's literary career (*Comus*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Samson Agonistes*) but does not hesitate over treating minor works as well. The study focuses on Milton as a poet reading Ovid within a cultural and historic milieu where Ovid and the received 'readings' of Ovid were often shifting and disparate.

As noted in the preface: "While studying Ovid closely, Milton was equally attentive to the reworkings of his great precursors: Dante, and especially his English ancestors, Shakespeare and Spenser. While noting their individual adaptations, Milton responds also to the fact that Ovid stands for a chain of continuity and metamorphic activity" (xiv). To untie the knots of Ovidian intertexts, knots that Milton himself unties and rebinds, is a bold undertaking. Despite being somewhat discursive, a feature that Kilgour confesses when she cautions that Milton does sometimes drop out of sight (xviii), the work nevertheless promises what it delivers: "an exercise in practical criticism that explores a specific relation between two very distinct authors" (xviii).

After a preface, which sketches the straits and difficulties of *Quellenforschung* and surveys the ground to be covered, the introduction offers a collegial review and critique of the scholarly tradition that surrounds Milton's classical and Ovidian inheritance. The first two chapters treat Milton's early writings. Kilgour nests these discussions within careful analysis of early modern receptions of Ovid's work and their often-antagonistic redeployment.

"Choosing Ovids (1)" leads with Milton's somewhat grotesque and puerile handling of the *rapere* motif in "On the Death of a fair Infant dying of a Cough". She then pursues *Comus* in light of Milton's handling of the ways Ovid could be competitively appropriated and re-presented. "Choosing Ovids (2)" revisits the Ovidian rape motif, and builds to an engaging discussion of poetry and politics

surrounding *Comus*. The stress here is on Milton's burgeoning political interests by way of Ovid's *Fasti*, Spenser's *Mutabilitie Cantos* and *The Shepheardes Calender*, as well as Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*, embroider the discussion. Here Kilgour also engages the agonistic legacy between libertine elegy and court masques on which Milton cut his teeth. She is, however, reluctant to assign Ovid too prominent a part in shaping Milton's politics and chooses instead to emphasize the difficulty in disentangling poetry from life.

Chapters three and four take up *Paradise Lost*. "Reflections of Narcissus"—probably the jewel in the crown—puts forward an insightful reading of Ovid's tale of Narcissus as "the *locus classicus* of artistic self-reflection" (193). Kilgour begins the discussion with Satan's creativity in the making of Sin, and his own metamorphosis into a serpent, before taking up Adam and Eve to explore the Narcissistic subtexts of their creation/separation, Eve's gazing at her reflection, and the couple's later recoupling. "Self-Consuming Artists" continues the discussion of *Paradise Lost* and looks to career intersections between Ovid and the image of the fallen artist. The concern here is *invidia* within the creative process.

The conclusion, a chapter of its own and likely originally planned as such, explores Milton's later writings, especially *Samson Agonistes*, and Milton's concern with his own poetic reception by way of Ovid as an exilic poet. Kilgour pays homage to Ovid's *Tristia* with a final short codicil on *Ad Joannem Rousium*, "Go Little Book", which also treats concerns over career and reception.

The text is written in a lively and engaging style and I mark here a few of Kilgour's greatest hits: "... reading Ovid is a bit like sex: intercourse with him means intercourse with all the authors he has known" (19); "Ovid, apolitical flibbertigibbet" (21); and "her ... assumption of a more aggressive role, causes him to lose, shall we say, interest" (90). The book is also handsomely produced, and I count only a few venial editing errors: a wrongly identified 'Chapter 5' in the acknowledgements section, a wayward 'him' (65), read 'premise' for 'premiss' (266), a redoubled 'a' (275), and read 'lines replay' for 'lines replays' (281). It is probably over-pedantic to mention, but some might find jarring Latin words proceeded by 'of' in their nominative or accusative forms. Also, there is an odd mash-up in "Tarquin Superbus" (122), as he is conventionally either 'Tarquinius Superbus' or 'Tarquin the Proud'. None of this, however, should detract from such a fine and very commendable work.

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