

BOOK REVIEW

Ovid: A Poet on the Margins. By LAUREL FULKERSON. Classical World Series. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016. Pp. xiv + 104. Paperback. ISBN 978-1-472-53134-6.

The concise format required for Bloomsbury's *Classical World Series* offers a unique challenge to any author brave enough to venture a representative introduction to one of the most prolific and versatile, if not *slippery*, members of the Latin poetic canon. Fulkerson more than meets the challenge, managing to include clear applications of most of the more recent literary theories to the very slipperiness of Ovid's style and multifaceted versatility. Fulkerson's Preface explains that she sees Ovid "as animated by a unified set of concerns... rather than as a man destroyed by circumstances" and that the book is more "a study of poetics ... than a biography". All this is pitched, so her Acknowledgements, at a level that will ensure that "normal people might enjoy reading [it]" (xii). Throughout Fulkerson signposts her own arguments with reference to both what went before and what she is to discuss next.

To the extent that undergraduates and other less initiated students of Latin poetry are also "normal people," this slight book offers them an ideal introduction to Ovid's life and works, with emphasis, as the title implies, on all those aspects that set Ovid aside from the "normal" in Roman literature. Three chapters, with subdivisions, cover Ovid's life story and contemporary historical background, his style (with emphasis on his use of repetition), and his allure as an *exemplum* of victimization and marginality.

Chapter 1, "Life on the Margins" (1-27) starts with Ovid's banishment, working back to a schematic chronology that offers at a glance (4) a complete list of his works set against the major literary and historical events of his time. This is followed by a brief discussion of his literary output that combines brief overviews of content with concise stylistic discussion. Next, the historical context of his poetry is offered through the filter of Ovid's final status as "an outsider, looking yearningly at Rome" (18). Augustan Rome and the Augustan settlement,

including his marriage laws, get due emphasis, ending with a provocative, short comparison between the poet and the prince that points out similarities (both were “shap[ing] the world to [their] own image”) and differences (Ovid served as Augustus’ “negative mirror reflection”) (26).

Fulkerson’s style is evocative of that of her subject: the chapter ends with a striking apothegm: “Ovid for his part needed both to be understood and to be misunderstood” (27). Such a very Ovidian paradox may puzzle a tyro; a teacher who is also an expert in Ovidian studies will need to guide undergraduates toward fully understanding Fulkerson’s arguments.

Chapter 2, “Repetition-compulsion and Ovidian excess” (29–58) covers the most salient aspects of Ovid’s style, starting with another paradox as sub-heading: “Now you see him, now you still see him: Ovidian style and metre”. The content is, however, clearly aimed at the non-initiated (the “normal people” of Fulkerson’s Acknowledgements), starting with a concise explanation of ancient poetic conventions (including metrics and generic range) and Ovid’s adaptation of these conventions. Next, Ovid’s style proper is addressed, with due emphasis on his apparent simplicity that hides subtle complexities. Throughout Fulkerson illustrates her various points by reference to, rather than quotations from, the whole range of Ovid’s poetry, both individual elegies and episodes from the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid’s debt to his own rhetorical training (such as his explorations of alternatives that suggest inconsistency) is duly noted, also salient aspects of modern criticism of his style (for instance, his ubiquitous “absent presences”, a term first coined by Philip Hardie). Discussion includes Ovid’s narrators, narrative transition, his manipulation of readerly perceptions and the intrusion of comment that undercuts what went before.

The second half of the chapter considers Ovid’s frequent reworking of his own topics and themes as well as the “recycling” (*sic*, page 49) of the poetry, both words and themes, of others. Discussion of Ovidian revision (explicitly claimed as such, merely mooted, or either noted or just suspected by modern critics) includes his generic adaptation of the same material in, for instance, both the *Amores* and the *Ars*, or the *Fasti* and the *Metamorphoses*. Fulkerson gives due acknowledgement to feminists’ concern about Ovid’s repetition, with slight differences, of disturbing tales of rape in the earlier books of his epic. Finally, Fulkerson summarises various critical approaches to what she terms “repetition and repetitiveness”, ending with an own considered judgement of the appeal that his poetry has had through two millennia.

The third and final chapter (59–87) gives due emphasis to what (fortuitously) has been this reviewer's abiding interest: the universality with which Ovid's exilic yearning represents the feelings of all those on the margins, with more than a nod also to the concerns of post-colonial literary theory, as implied in its title, "Romans at home and abroad: Identity and the colonial subject". The first subsection deals with Ovid's penchant for "narratives of individuals out of place, taken away from the familiar", either temporarily displaced, or permanently outcast (as he was himself). Refugees of all kinds are considered, such as the innocent Evander in *Fasti* 1, or the (in some way) "guilty" Dido, Medea and Ariadne of the *Heroides*. The next subsection treats of "victims and victimizers" and Ovid's portrayal of loss of speech as a frequent punishment of "female and other victims". Again the concerns of feminist readers are briefly treated: why would Ovid so often portray women as victims, and why would there be a "disjunction between Ovid's compassion and his exploitation" of the victims' pain, as in the gory details in the story of Philomela, Procne and Tereus?

This section ends with reference to literary theorists' ideas regarding Ovid's equation of women with poetic material, his verbal voyeurism and his metaphorical portrayal of women as "unexplored territory". Criticism of the differences in approach to pleasing the opposite sex between *Ars* 1–2 and 3 (where women are advised to become complaisant in their own victimisation) leads to a further consideration of Ovid's apparent concern with status-based relationships at Rome. Fulkerson notes the suggestion that elite males' anxiety about erosion of their own power under Augustus may have served as "one of the wellsprings of elegy" (75). Next Fulkerson returns to Ovid's portrayal of "victims that become villains", such as Procne and Philomela, or Daedalus in his treatment of his own nephew, from which she turns to speculation about the degree to which Ovid saw himself less as victim of injustice than as some form of perpetrator.

Her final subsection illustrates the joint topics of empire and colonialism with reference to Ovid's own view of himself as loyal Roman, his apparently guileless celebration of Roman civic life and politics, but also the way in which his own undercutting (or not?) of his professed loyalty has led critics to wonder about his attitude to Augustus. Fulkerson ends with two observations: that Ovid and Augustus "each intruded into the sphere of the other" (86), and that "each generation creates its own Ovid to suit its particular concerns" (87). For her, the twenty-first century is very "Ovidian" in its suspicion of authoritarian power-relations.

Fulkerson's list for "Further reading[s]" (89-92) is necessarily short in such a slight volume, as are her "Glossary of proper names and Latin terms" (93-9) and brief Index of topics (with page references, 101-4). The latter two rubrics could perhaps have been combined, but not much space would have been saved. In all, this is an admirable first guide to Ovid that also rewards reading by more advanced Ovidian scholars for the breadth of topics Fulkerson covers.

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