

BOOK REVIEW

Transformations of Ovid in Late Antiquity. By IAN FIELDING. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. xi + 257. Hardback \$105.00. ISBN: 978-1-107-17843-4.

I an Fielding's excellent book on the reception of Ovid in the late antique poetic corpus is a timely consequence of the recent reassessment of Ovid and a hopeful provocation for a more appreciative assessment of the tragically understudied late antique poets. Fielding begins by recognizing the valuable analysis that Ovid has received recently, beginning with Hermann Fränkel's position that Ovid is a "poet between two worlds" and emphasizing Ovid's importance as a poet of transformations and exile. "It stands to reason," he argues, "that Rome's most important poet of transformations would have something to add to our understanding of [the late antique period]," itself a time of political, religious and cultural transformation (2).

Each of Fielding's chapters are close readings designed to highlight Ovidian poetics as a sort of "code model" for late antique poets, privileging the themes of exile and transformation. He argues persuasively that Ovid's generic innovations offered a valuable intertextual framework upon which the poets could build their poetry and express the realities of their own turbulent lives. Importantly, and I think most fruitfully, he contextualizes his studies as "not conceived as an overview of Ovid's reception in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries; rather ... as close readings ... that display an exceptionally deep engagement with Ovid" (17). Indeed, one of this book's strengths is Fielding's emphasis on the late antique poets as foreground while never losing sight of Ovid as background. Impressively, there is not a moment where the late antique poet is lost in the Ovidian woods. One learns much from Fielding about these poets and their specific motivations via Ovid's poems. Further, Fielding shows a real talent for a careful, yet imaginative, study of intertexts in Ovid and the works under analysis. He is able to balance productively the clear verbal allusions to Ovid—from the *Tristia*, *Epistulae ex Ponto*, *Heroides*, et al.—with the more atmospheric echoes of Ovid, in particular to the Ovidian themes of exile and transformation—showing that not all allusion is obvious,

although it can be influential for the success of a poem. To be sure, he has written a stimulating book about the sophistication of late antique poetry with Ovidian poetics as a kind of psychopomp.

In Chapter 1, Fielding highlights Ovid's role in some verse epistles between Ausonius and Paulinus of Nola, touching upon a lack of correspondence since Paulinus, Ausonius' former student, converted to an ascetic form of Christianity. Fielding argues that both Ausonius and Paulinus use Ovidian poetics to represent different aspects of Ovid's persona in the exile poetry. Ausonius uses intertexts, mostly from the *Tristia* and Ovid's worries about becoming *barbarus* in Tomis, to express his worries that Paulinus will become "despondent and [poetically] debilitated" (24). Paulinus, in response, revises Ovid's worries about living in the hinterlands in light of Christian revelation, and argues that *his* intellectual life will be elevated by God in his isolation rather than debilitated (39). Chapter 2 argues for a more pervasive Ovidian influence on Rutilius Namatianus' *De reditu*. This poetic account of Rutilius' journey to Gaul, written not long after Alaric's sack of Rome, presents an Ovidian sense of exile in Rutilius' departure from Rome. Fielding argues that Rutilius "sought to interpret the empire's crisis not as ... collapse, but as a sort of transformation" (53) and that Rutilius shows, via both Vergil and Ovid, that what may appear to be an ending, may actually be a new beginning. In Chapter 3, Fielding examines Dracontius' *Satisfactio*, an apology to the Vandal king Gunthamund and a clear imitation of *Tristia* 2 and Ovid's *carmen et error* (*Tr.* 2.207). Dracontius asks the king for mercy using the "rhetorical technique of insinuation and dissimulation, which Ovid employs in his works from exile" (93). Fielding argues that Dracontius uses an Ovidian rhetoric to "[renegotiate] the terms of engagement between poets and potentates that Ovid had sought to establish [with Augustus]" (126).

Chapter 4 again deals with Ovidian exile as it reads the proem to Boethius' *De consolazione Philosophiae*, written as he awaited execution, as a rejection of the elegiac muses, and their implied moral compromise, for a more philosophical and virtuous outlook on his impending death. Additionally, this chapter looks at the obscure elegist Maximianus and a series of poems that appear to assume the elegiac muses that Boethius had rejected, and Maximianus' attempt to use elegy as a cure for the disease of desire. Finally, in Chapter 5, we find a new reading of Venantius Fortunatus' *De excidio Thuringiae* (*Appendix* 1), written in his patron Radegund's persona as she asks the Byzantine rulers Justin II and Sophia for a relic from the Holy Cross for her convent. Fielding presents here a fascinating argument that Venantius portrays Radegund, and her approach to speaking with the East Roman

rulers, as a counterpart for Ovid's *Heroides*. As Venantius portrays Radegund, we see a particularly feminine voice, and, in the poem's approach to Queen Sophia, the possibility of an Ovidian community of powerful women.

In his learned appreciation of Ovid's poetic influence on the late antique corpus, Fielding is able to present not only Ovid's powerful legacy, but also, and perhaps more importantly, draw needed attention to the great intellectual potential in reassessing the late antique Latin poets. As he notes in the introduction, "[a] better appreciation of Ovidian poetics can lead to a better appreciation of the Latin poetry of late antiquity" (2) and that "by highlighting what is familiar ... [he] can prepare modern readers to appreciate better what is new and unusual about them" (17). With such a stimulating example of this potential as Fielding has shown here, perhaps the late antique Latin poets can join other recently reassessed Latin poets, such as Statius and Lucan, in disproving the age-old accusations of mannerism, poetic decadence and derivation and be seen as vibrant poetic expressions on their own.

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