

BOOK REVIEW

Ovid's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing: Strange Monsters. By FIONA COX. Classical Presences. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xiii + 251. Hardback, \$74.00. ISBN 978-0-198-77988-9.

As this volume demonstrates, Ovid's poems, vibrantly reflecting the triumphs, vicissitudes and traumas of life's stages and circumstances, live on and resonate in the works of modern writers, and particularly, as Fiona Cox shows us, in the works of feminist writers. Cox engages in research on the reception of works by Virgil and Ovid in 19th, 20th and 21st-century literature and culture, particularly French literature and culture. In this volume she provides in-depth analyses of the influence of Ovid upon the works of thirteen women writing in recent decades within various cultural and geographical contexts (American, Australian, British, French, German, Japanese and Romanian): novelists, short story writers, poets and playwrights – some of them also translators of Ovid and other Greek and Roman authors.

The key phrase that dominates the approach to this study is "third-wave feminism," where the word "wave" refers to a progression within the feminist movement. First-wave feminism sought to gain political rights for women, principally enfranchisement; second-wave feminism sought to extend those political rights into civil rights. In a literary sense, second-wave feminism sought, and still seeks, to reclaim the female voice and "write oneself into a male-authored tradition" (4). Third-wave feminism seeks to redefine ideas about womanhood and gender and re-examine the reifying aspects (beauty, health, body-image, etc.) that accompany assumptions about womanhood. Female writers have certainly earned literary recognition in the last fifty years, but as we all know, obstacles remain. Indeed, the subtitle of the volume, "Strange Monsters," is an allusion to a 1946 poem by May Sarton ("My Sisters, O My Sisters") expressing the difficulties of women throughout history to write and be recognized as writers. Cox identifies in third-wave feminist writers a desire to find new directions and new purposes for literary creation: "an urge both to explore issues of gender and also to write from a consciously gendered position about matters of wider political and ecological concerns" (4).

Thirteen women and their writings receive analysis in eleven chapters; I list the authors and their work(s) which receive particular analysis in order by chapter: (1) Ali Smith, *Public Library* (2015) and *Autumn* (2016); (2) Marina Warner, *Mermaids in the Basement* (1993); (3) Yoko Tawada, *Opium für Ovid: Ein Kopfkissenbuch von 22 Frauen* (2000); (4) Alice Oswald, *Dart* (2002); (5) Mary Zimmerman, *Metamorphoses* (1998); (6) Saviana Stanescu, 'GOOGLE ME!' (2006) and *For a Barbarian Woman* (2011); (7) Jo Shapcott, *Of Mutability* (2010); (8) Marie Darrieussecq, *Truismes* (1996) and *Tristes Pontiques* (2008, a translation of Ovid's exile poetry); (9) Josephine Balmer, *The Word for Sorrow* (2009) and Averill Curdy, *Song and Error* (2013); (10) Michèle Roberts, *The Book of Mrs Noah* (1987) and Clare Pollard, *Ovid's Heroines* (2013); (and 11) Jane Alison, *Change Me. Stories of Sexual Transformation from Ovid* (2014).

The subject of chapter five, Mary Zimmerman, is the author perhaps most familiar to scholars of Classics. Her 1998 play *Metamorphoses* features creative and emotionally powerful enactments of ten stories from Ovid and one from Apuleius. Zimmerman's play won the 2002 Tony Award, a reception influenced, according to reviewers, by the trauma of the 2001 attacks which effected in New York City the transformation of "twin towers of steel and glass to two insubstantial beams of light" (114). According to Cox, Zimmerman's play accomplished two things: first, it revived an ancient mythology that imaginatively treats change and trauma without flinching. As a result, we, the modern audience, can experience the needed catharsis to reflect meaningfully upon the effects of change within our lives. Secondly, the play provides us with "an Ovid of the new millennium, an Ovid whose tales are voiced and interpreted not just by males, but also by women of different classes and different levels of education" (115).

Each of the authors Cox features here has her own unique conversation with Ovid and the poetry he has left us. Occasionally the volume lapses into granular details of analysis that can cause wanes in concentration. Even so, this volume by Cox is a welcome exploration of these themes: transformation (in its many contexts) and women's depictions of these forces of change. For scholars of Classical Studies who work on Classical reception, or who wish to find new directions of interpretation useful for Ovidian studies or ancient literary studies in general, this volume has much to offer, and I recommend it.

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