

# Bryn Mawr Classical Review

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**Laurel Fulkerson, *Ovid: A Poet on the Margins. Classical world.* London; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. Pp. xiii, 104. ISBN 9781472531346. \$25.95 (pb).**

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## Preview

As the Preface to this new volume by Laurel Fulkerson points out, this book aims to offer an introduction to Ovid and suggest a stimulating way to read his works; the intended audience consists predominantly of undergraduates and teachers who are looking for an accessible guide to learning and teaching Ovid either in school or University study. Through a “synoptic way” of approaching the subject and a selection of more and less famous examples, Fulkerson proposes to give the inexperienced Ovidian reader the “most compelling interpretative tools for understanding Ovid”, preferring a poetical rather than a biographical or a historical point of view. The book is divided into three main chapters: the first (entitled “Life on the Margins”) is dedicated to Ovid’s biography and a summary of his literary production during the age of Augustus; the second (“Repetition-Compulsion and Ovidian excess”) focuses on some poetical motifs and “habits” of Ovid’s writing; and the third (“Romans at Home and Abroad: Identity and the Colonial Subject”) takes as its focus the poet’s exile and examines the representation of relationships of power, together with some reflections about Ovid’s “Augustanism”.

The first chapter begins with some considerations about Ovid’s exile: “let us begin at the end” (p. 1). Such a statement lends itself straightaway to the interrogative atmosphere of a detective story: both the lack of information about Ovid’s famous *carmen et error* and the notoriously mysterious causes of the poet’s banishment to Tomis are so intriguing even today that the temptation is great to ‘find traces’ of Ovid’s exile and its possible motivations in his entire poetic oeuvre. Fulkerson shows herself to be very aware of the possibility of Ovid’s concrete revision of the *Metamorphoses* during his exile; the choice to focus on the end of Ovid’s life and poetic career as a starting point for her general introduction, however, implicitly validates and encourages a ‘retrospective gaze’: the poet’s entire corpus, which shows itself to possess an obsessive inclination to the repetition of certain themes, cannot be read without his experience of exile, altering our perception of what was written before. “The lenses of exile” and those “of revision and repetitions” also constitute the “structural metaphors” that Fulkerson lays as the foundation of her study (p. 3).

On the basis of these assumptions Fulkerson traces a chronology of Ovid’s works in which she highlights the Ovidian tendency, already nascent at the time of the *Amores*, of generic experimentation and indeterminate endings; the poet plays not only with his earlier and contemporary literary tradition but also with what he had already written and formally “ended”. Examples of this tendency from the *Ars Amatoria* and the *Remedia Amoris*, in both of which Ovid demonstrates his skill in reinventing elegy and transforming it into didactic poetry through a process of continuous addition and

self-repetition, are especially convincing: if the *Remedia Amoris* intends to teach the reader how to cure his suffering in love, the best way is to find a new girl, and that means to read the *Ars Amatoria* again from the beginning. Less remarkable are the parts dedicated to *Metamorphoses* and to the *Fasti*: here Fulkerson is interested in speaking about the problem of the supposed incompleteness of the two poems more than in the presentation of their contents.

The theme of the poet's exile is the focus of the first section about the poet's exilic literary production. Fulkerson pays attention to the question of Ovid's "Augustanism"/"Anti-Augustanism" and harbours doubts about the reality of the exile, recapitulating the thesis that it could ultimately have been a fabrication, on the grounds of Ovid's unrealistic and literarily conventional description of Tomis and the literary topoi of ethnographic narratives about barbaric places. Fulkerson thus allies herself with those critics who believe that in his 'exile' Ovid plays with fiction and reality, exactly as he did in the *Amores*. An author that loves '*repetitio cum variatione*' of the same themes could find it amusing to fashion himself as a mythological figure, such as the heroes represented in the *Heroides* or *Metamorphoses*. Nevertheless, Fulkerson does not explicitly state whether she is finally inclined to agree with such positions or whether she simply finds them fascinating. The last section of the first chapter provides a useful overview of the historical period in which Ovid lived: on the margins between Republic and Empire, during a time of rupture and continuity, war and peace, reform and tradition. She cautions against regarding the issue of 'Augustanism' as a "monolithic entity" (p. 19) and as something with which Ovid could either assent or dissent. I agree with her final considerations: Ovid was "a profoundly Roman poet" (p. 26), whose attempts to categorize and at the same time change the way that his audience viewed their contemporary political reality shows a profound similarity to the manner of thinking and acting shown by Augustus himself.

In the second chapter Fulkerson concentrates her analysis on the main tendencies of Ovidian poetry: repetition and excess. Her synoptic perspective allows her to make several interesting comparisons between Ovid's works, which are however perhaps not always easy to recognize for an Ovid newcomer. Together with her helpful introductions, Fulkerson is also impressive in giving acute and pregnant observations. The book underlines the apparent separation in Ovid between (on the one hand) 'basic' use of metre, largely linear syntax and a simple vocabulary and (on the other hand) a richness of puns, linguistic *double entendres* and "incongruous combinations" (p. 33); this contrast, according to Fulkerson, makes the reader uneasy and introduces "a disquieting element" (p. 33). The Ovidian tendency to the grotesque and the influence of contemporary schools of rhetoric on his style are well investigated, but the most interesting paragraphs are dedicated to an illustration of the particularly Ovidian interest in excess, for instance through the literal and/or radical use of metaphors that are typical of elegiac love (e.g. those of slavery, the hunt, or the *militia amoris*) or of *topoi* that are applied *verbatim*, such as when Augustus in *Am.* 1, 2, 51 is addressed as a relative of Cupid by virtue of his putative descent from Venus.

Another important aspect of Ovidian style is of course the problem of the narrative voice's point of view, which highlights how many different versions of a single story exist and how no single version can be defined as canonical: the love affair which Briseis in *Heroides* 3 alleges to have had with Achilles is very different from the epic exposition of the same facts which we are accustomed to read in the *Iliad*, raising the issue whether there is only 'one truth' or whether every narrator has its own. Fulkerson's analysis of the unreliability of the Ovidian *ego* shows her sympathies for deconstructionist interpretations: she points out not only that the poetic voice is untrustworthy and that "we are warned by Ovid not to make the mistake of conflating a poetic narrative with the real world" (pp. 44-45), but also that this "problematic narrator" (p. 40) is part of a broader play between reality and fiction that makes the reader feel uncomfortable and suspicious. Perhaps such observations are not

appropriate for the target audience, i.e. both for the students and teachers who introduce them to Ovid. An undergraduate should be invited to discover the richness of paths herself by which the Ovidian narrative highlights and varies the earlier mythical tradition: if this appears intuitively as disturbing or provocative or just amusing, this is a choice that Fulkerson should let his readers develop.

The same can be said about the ‘recycling’ of traditional models from earlier poets, especially Virgil, and about the question of authorial revision. With regard to the first aspect, Fulkerson says that Ovid will “undermine Vergil”, “as if his predecessors have missed a trick, either through incompetence or some more subversive motive” (p. 50); with regard to the second aspect, after the convincing presentation of Ovidian revision in the elegiac works, the myths of *Metamorphoses* 2-3 are presented as a problematic case of finding “a last word” (p. 52) in Ovidian production, “given that Ovid will tell us that one of the causes of his relegation was seeing something he should not have seen [i.e. as in the famous myths narrated in *Met.* 2 and 3]” (p. 52). In both cases, the motivation of Ovid’s inexhaustible inclination to experimentation is explained through a political and subversive aim (and through the retrospective lens of exile), that might better be set aside in a general introduction to Ovid.

In her third chapter Fulkerson’s attention moves on to topics that relate to social issues and gender studies. The experience of Ovid’s exile plays so important a role in Fulkerson’s analysis that she “focuses on Ovid’s habit of peopling his poetry with narratives of individuals out of place” (p. 59), and proceeds to divide them into characters that are temporarily displaced, such as wanderers and explorers, and others that are “permanent outcasts” (p. 59). According to Fulkerson, this distinction fits for Ovid too and entails additional metapoetic connotations. If the voyage is the symbol of adventure and desire for knowledge, Ovid himself is in his elegiac production “a bold adventurer” (p. 61), while if the exile is conversely a symbol of isolation and alienation as the result of a punishment for some act of *hybris* committed against the power of the gods, the inclination to such a theme in the *Metamorphoses* shows—if Ovid has not modified some passages during his exile—that the poet fears being controlled by state authority. His own biographical history proves that he had good reasons to think so.

Following these type of considerations, Fulkerson dedicates the last part of her book to an analysis of the relationships between victims and victimizers. On the one hand, in the innumerable narratives of violence that we read in the *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*, Ovid shows an attitude of pity towards the victims of his poems, almost all of which are women; on the other hand, in some passages of his erotic poems, he is an exploiter, who finds it normal to consider a woman as an object of sexual longing and largely accepts the ‘capitalistic’ system of slavery and exploitation on which the Roman empire was founded. Fulkerson delineates the presence of such contradictory attitudes in a convincing way and encourages the reader to find in Ovid’s corpus not only polished play with a variety of literary and generic traditions but also the presence of an ongoing debate about key existential conflicts within the individual. This having been said, Fulkerson’s attempt to interpreting such conflicts as gender-themed and/or postcolonial reflections goes against the balance that she has shown in the beginning and end of the book, since she has put a convincing case forward for the nonsensical nature of a binary debate between Augustan/Anti-Augustan positions and has elsewhere tried to read Ovid in his historical context.

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