

Patricia J. Johnson, *Ovid Before Exile. Art and Punishment in the Metamorphoses. Wisconsin Studies in Classics.* Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2008. Pp. x, 184. ISBN 978-0-299-22400-4.

Ioannis Ziogas, University of Adelaide,
ioannis.ziogas@adelaide.edu.au

Recent trends in interpreting Latin literature show a systematic tendency to move beyond the principles of New Criticism. Unlike the old-fashioned autobiographical approach to literature and the reaction to this approach, which questions the value of history and sociology in interpreting literary texts, recent studies focus on questions of authorial voice and the construction of a literary world deeply enmeshed with specific social, political, and religious milieux.¹ Patricia Johnson's slim volume takes part in this critical discourse and is full of fresh ideas and brilliant readings of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Johnson examines three pivotal episodes in Ovid's epic: the singing contest between the mortal Emathides and the Muses in the end of Book 5, the weaving competition between Arachne and Minerva in the beginning of Book 6, and Orpheus' recitals in Book 10. What links all these episodes is the recurring motif of art and punishment. Mortal artists face powerful gods and the success of their works depends on their willingness or ability to please powerful figures. While the Emathides and Arachne are deliberately provocative and subversive, Orpheus first wins over the gods of the Underworld because he composes a prosaic encomium aiming to flatter his target audience. But he is finally torn to pieces by Thracian women (a hidden audience) because his second song- a denunciation of

¹ See, for instance, Pavlock 2009. *The Image of the Poet in Ovid's Metamorphoses*. Madison, WC; Hardie and Moore (eds.) 2010. *Classical Literary Careers and their Reception*; Ingleheart (ed.) *Two Thousand Years of Solitude: Exile after Ovid*. Oxford University Press (forthcoming).

heterosexual perversion and an approval of homosexuality-offends the social *mores* of married women.

Johnson is right to point out that Ovid invites us to cross the biographical barricades modern literary critics are trained never to breach (cf. p. 115). The downfall of mythical artists whose work looks very much like Ovid's poetry cannot be unrelated to the politics of censorship and freedom of speech under Augustus. Ovid meets the fate of his mythical characters when the emperor relegates him to the fringes of the Roman world and actually presents himself as a character from his *Metamorphoses* in the exile poetry. Ovid seamlessly weaves the punitive transformations of mythical artists with the reality of his exile, casting Augustus as a vengeful god.

The book is written in a lucid and clear style, which makes it a pleasure to read. Although Johnson sheds light on subtle and intricate narratological aspects of Ovid's *ekphrases*, she entirely avoids theoretical jargon. Her close readings of Ovid's text are one of the book's greatest strengths. I particularly liked the interpretation of *tempora* (cf. *ad mea tempora* 'down to my own day', *Met.* 1.4) as opening the whole poem to a reading against the circumstances of Ovid's day and the fortunes and misfortunes of his own life (p. 20). Johnson shows that new and exciting nuances can be discovered in much-discussed passages. The discussion of historical evidence is less detailed and text-oriented and I would like to have seen a more systematic approach to the interaction between historical sources and Ovid's work. Yet, there are many excellent readings of the historical background to Ovid's poetry. The mention of Caesar's saying after Cato's suicide ("I begrudge you your death, Cato, because you begrudged me my clemency" Plutarch, *Moralia* 3.206.13) in relation to the ironies of Minerva's pity is particularly intriguing. In an excellent analysis, Johnson shows that Minerva does not let Arachne kill herself only to make her available for a more degrading punishment (p. 94-5).

However, I am not entirely convinced that Calliope's portrait of Venus is negative and that Ovid presents "Venus as an

unwelcome imperialistic aggressor” and hence “comments negatively both upon sexuality and empire” (cf. p. 63-71). I see no strong evidence for such broad claims and find the argument far-fetched. And that the supposedly negative portrait of Venus would please Minerva (cf. p. 67) is only incidental since a Muse repeats verbatim a song composed in Minerva’s absence. But the overall analysis of the Muses’ appropriation and distortion of their rivals’ song is very convincing and interesting.

Johnson’s suggestion that Minerva weaves her tapestry as a response to the developing content and style of her opponent’s work (p. 88) is intriguing but speculative. Arachne and Minerva weave simultaneously and in fact Minerva’s tapestry is described first. And although this order by no means suggests that Arachne first views Minerva’s tapestry and then weaves hers, it weakens Johnson’s argument that Minerva first inspects Arachne’s artifact and immediately responds to it. But overall this chapter is full of brilliant readings. Johnson is right to argue that Ovid shifts the emphasis of the *ekphrasis* to the artists and the circumstances surrounding the production of art and her detailed analysis of Ovid’s diction in the *ekphrasis* of Arachne’s tapestry demonstrates that the mortal virgin actually depicted scenes of graphic sex meant to provoke Minerva.

The bibliography is up-to-date, but there are some striking omissions. There is no mention of Lundström, S. *Ovids Metamorphosen und die Politik des Kaisers* (Upsalla 1980), Schmitzer, U. *Zeitgeschichte in Ovids Metamorphosen. Mythologische Dichtung unter politischem Anspruch* (Stuttgart 1990), and Davis, P. *Ovid and Augustus. A Political Reading of Ovid’s Erotic Poems* (London 2006). The book is beautifully produced and typos are few and insignificant.

In sum, this is a very welcome contribution to Ovidian scholarship and the controversial topic of the politics of Ovid’s poetry. It is highly recommended to anyone studying Augustan literature or the intricate nexus between literature and politics under authoritarian regimes.