

Review

MEGAN O. DRINKWATER, *OVID'S HEROIDES AND THE AUGUSTAN PRINCIPATE* (Wisconsin Studies in Classics). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2022. Pp. 192. ISBN 9780299337803 (bound). \$79.95.

The relationship between Ovid's poetry and Augustan politics has been much debated. Was Ovid's unwillingness to promote Augustan propaganda an expression of a general lack of interest in political matters, or did he actually take an anti-Augustan stance? Are there critical messages in his works?

In her book *Ovid's Heroides and the Augustan Principate*, Megan O. Drinkwater, Professor of Classics and expert on Roman Elegy with a special interest in Ovid, claims to take a new approach to the political reading of the *Heroides*. The premise of the analysis is that Ovid, who wrote and published his famous works in the aftermath of what was the most turbulent time in Rome, was so strongly influenced by the dramatic historical changes around him that this must have affected his writing, intentionally or not. In these Ovidian poems, D. detects veiled critical comments on the recent civil wars and the subsequent proscriptions and land confiscations that affected Roman citizens.

The poems selected for this study include Penelope (letter 1), Briseis (letter 3), Oenone (letter 5) and Dido (letter 7), women from the single collection who, according to D., all give voice to this crisis of civic identity, and Paris (letter 16) and Helen (letter 17) from the double collection. The letter-writers have in common experience of the Trojan War, the myth that formed the basis of the foundation and greatness of Rome. The letters of Acontius (letter 20) and Cydippe (letter 21), though not concerned with the Trojan war, are included in a coda, as D. in her interpretation draws a parallel to Octavian's loyalty oath in 32 B.C.

Like much recent scholarship on the *Heroides*, D. focuses on the poems' translation from epic into elegy as well as the shift from a masculine to a feminine perspective, offering a fresh and unexpected explanation of these Ovidian deviations from ordinary literary conventions. In her view, Ovid's literary inventions represent the changed conditions for individual citizens in the new age of Augustus. By constructing a new literary landscape, Ovid reflects the disorientation in the new political landscape. Victimised women writers serve as parallels for the Roman people when they express anxieties felt by Ovid's contemporaries. Ovid's prioritisation of elegiac heroines instead of epic heroes becomes in this way an attempt to demonstrate how the *servitium amoris* of elegy symbolises a seduction into slavery orchestrated by the princeps.

D. starts her analysis by examining the widely discussed letters of Dido and Penelope and their epic counterparts in Virgil and Homer respectively. She interprets the former as a questioning of the whole Roman project, a critique of the ideology of Rome represented by Augustus' ancestor Aeneas. Similarly, Ovid uses Penelope as a tool for expressing the exhaustion and frustration caused by war. In this chapter, D. discovers eye-opening references to Virgil's first eclogue and *Georgics* 1, which contain overt comments on the land confiscations after the civil wars. I find this observation particularly valuable since Penelope's letter starts the whole collection and can thus be read as programmatic for the *Heroides*.

Briseis and Oenone also offer lamentations, but their new situation has made them powerless and unable to communicate or act. They are left behind, stuck in the world of elegy in its *servitium amoris*, dreaming nostalgically of a better past while looking on as their partners advance from their pastoral, elegiac past towards an epic future. Before moving on to the epic world, however, Paris, the former husband of Oenone, writes to his new love Helen. Here, D. questions the stereotype of Paris as the skilful and successful seducer who knows his *Ars amatoria*. Instead he is a headstrong young man, determined to achieve power and glory, regardless of its cost or consequences for his country and its inhabitants, claiming his right to pursue what he wants. He symbolises the young and ambitious new generation of Romans, or perhaps even Augustus himself. Helen, on the other hand, is the cautious and clear-eyed reader who warns her admirer of his short-sightedness, perhaps the *alter ego* of Ovid himself.

D. herself admits that these interpretations may seem audacious. Still, what seems far-fetched in the first instance becomes convincing when the pieces are joined together into an intriguing

pattern. Sometimes, though, I wonder if she perhaps goes too far. That Apollo in the letter of Oenone is said to represent Augustus does not convince me. My other reservation regarding this otherwise commendable project concerns the selection of poems. Only four of fifteen letters in the first collection are included, and this seems insufficient as a basis for a general interpretation of the whole collection. Neither is the letter of Laodamia (letter 13) included, although it concerns the Trojan War.

Despite these reservations, *Ovid's Heroides and the Augustan Principate* is a welcome addition to the ongoing discussion on Ovid's sceptical attitude towards Augustan politics. Moreover, D.'s book is clearly structured and well written, offering a careful and serious analysis grounded in solid scholarship.

Lund University

martina.bjork@klass.lu.se

doi:10.1017/S0075435823000801

MARTINA BJÖRK

© The Author(s), 2024.

Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies.