

OVID AND TRAGEDY

CURLEY (D.) *Tragedy in Ovid. Theater, Metatheater, and the Transformation of a Genre*. Pp. xii+275. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Cased, £67, US\$103. ISBN: 978-1-107-00953-0. doi:10.1017/S0009840X17000798

In this book C. offers ‘a study of tragic theatricality in Ovid’s *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses*’ (p. vii). Chapter 1 situates C.’s work in the context of the reception of Ovid as a tragedian not only on the basis of his now lost *Medea*, for which he received acclaim already in antiquity, but also for the theatrical qualities of his extant poems, especially the *Metamorphoses*. C. acknowledges recent contributions to this subject, especially by A. Keith and in the several co-authored studies by I. Gildenhard and A. Zissos, but he argues, rightly, that a ‘full and systematic examination’ (p. 7) is still needed, a *desideratum* his book admirably addresses. C.’s approach relies heavily on intertextuality and, in particular, on the engagement of the Ovidian texts that are his focus with their tragic models. He is also concerned with the productive interactions between different genres. His aims are nicely summarised on p. 17: ‘Reading tragedy in Ovid is an active enterprise, one necessarily involving texts that, at least formally, are not tragedies. The Ovidian reader naturally seeks out traces of tragic models (language, plot, characters), yet also expects to find them transformed – not into static genres but into dynamic new forms’.

Most interesting in Chapter 2, ‘Ovid’s *Medea* and Roman Tragedy’, is C.’s argument for a poetic career arc for Ovid that differs both from that which is most obviously based on his extant work (‘elegist-epicist-elegist’, p. 2) and from the more ‘Virgilian’ path, fashioned by Ovid himself (as argued by J. Farrell), that progresses from love elegy to the eroto-didactic *Ars Amatoria* and thus would culminate in the *Metamorphoses* (pp. 37, 49). As a third alternative, C. posits an arc that progresses from the *Amores* through the lost tragedy *Medea*, then continues its ‘tragic’ path with the *Heroides* (‘the poet’s next best alternative to writing tragedy’, p. vii) and culminates in the *Metamorphoses*, described by C. as ‘a further milestone in Ovid’s career as a Roman tragedian’ (p. 132). While not all will find C.’s argument for Ovid’s ‘tragic program’ convincing, this chapter, and especially C.’s reading of *Amores* 2.18.11–26, is both thought-provoking and engaging.

In Chapter 3, ‘Epistolary Theater’, C. considers the *Heroides* as Ovid’s first foray into ‘the textualization of tragedy’ (p. 61). While most readers of the *Heroides* will not require convincing that the letters, or at least those purportedly composed by tragic heroines, engage, through intertextuality, both with the tragic texts in which the heroines first appeared and with the generic conventions of tragedy itself, often with resulting irony, C. usefully collects and examines passages that illustrate the variety of ways in which this engagement works. I offer two minor criticisms. First, C.’s assertion that the emulation of tragedy in the *Heroides* works the same for all heroines, regardless of the original genre in which they appeared, but is ‘more palpable in the texts of tragic characters’ (p. 12, again on p. 81), requires better explication. Second, absent from the chapter is any discussion of the *Heroides* as written versus spoken discourse, or of their representation as deliberate, calculated productions. Chapter 3 ends with a reading of the Byblis episode in *Met.* 9, which allows C. to reflect on issues raised in his treatment of the *Heroides* and provides a nice segue to the upcoming chapters.

C. turns in Chapters 4 and 5 to the *Metamorphoses*. A passage from the book’s conclusions summarises what C. aims to demonstrate in these chapters: ‘Ovid’s achievement in the *Metamorphoses* was to re-appropriate the stories, themes, and techniques of tragedy

back into epic. Only these elements are not quietly assimilated into the poet's text. Rather, they are appropriated with a full measure of metatheatricity, retaining their associations with tragedy and fulfilling the totalizing ambitions of the *Metamorphoses*' (p. 218). Both chapters focus on three characters and episodes: Hecabe in *Met.* 13, Hercules in *Met.* 9 and Medea in *Met.* 7. C.'s strengths in close reading and in the development of broader arguments from focused discussions are displayed at their best here. Chapter 4, 'Space, Time, and Spectacle', explores the different ways in which Ovid both re-appropriates, to new purpose, and expands the spatial and temporal aspects of tragedy. C. shows that in the Hecabe episode, while Ovid retains the *skene* of Euripides' *Hekabe* as the primary setting for his narrative, he also takes advantage of epic's more expansive spatial and temporal range by displaying in their natural sequence events that were outside the scope of Euripides' tragedy, and instead were either recalled in memory or envisioned as occurring offstage and reported after the fact by a messenger. These events – which Ovid narrates with language that evokes visual and aural spectacle – include the destruction of Troy and the deaths of Astyanax and, more extensively, Polyxena. C. draws our attention, in his reading of the Medea episode, to the fact that Ovid equips his epic Medea early in her story with the flying chariot best known from the finale of Euripides' tragedy. The chariot then serves as a vehicle for Ovid's extreme transformation of the spatial and temporal range of Medea's narrative, so that eventually 'Medea's perspective shifts outwards and assimilates to that of the external narrator' (p. 130).

Chapter 5 examines the epic-dramatic monologues of Hecabe, Hercules and Medea with particular attention to Ovid's employment of rhetoric as he re-appropriates for his epic instances of speech from these characters in their previous tragic representations. C. explores, for example, the implications behind Ovid's choice to have both Medea and Hecabe speak on different occasions in his epic than they do in Euripides' tragedies. C.'s treatments of Hercules are the least successful. Hercules, even more than Medea, has a wide-ranging literary background of appearances in epic and tragedy (and in other genres). Thus, C.'s reading(s) of Hercules in *Met.* 9 almost exclusively against his counterpart from Sophocles' *Trachiniaiæ* seem unnecessarily limited. In Chapter 5, when C. notes that Hercules' speech includes 'nothing whatsoever about Deianira', but that he 'holds Juno accountable instead', and his speech 'is an indictment of divine justice from start to finish' (p. 162), the reader is disappointed to find no consideration of a potential contribution from Euripides' *Hercules Furens*, especially since *contaminatio* is a feature of Ovid's epic highlighted by C. elsewhere.

In fact, in Chapter 6, on 'tragic intratextuality', C. begins by acknowledging his debt to D. Larmour's study (1990) of 'tragic *contaminatio*' in the *Metamorphoses*, a practice adapted from the Roman dramatists and employed by Ovid in his epic as a means by which elements or paradigmatic qualities of one character's story find expression in the episode of a different character. Most readers will find much to appreciate in C.'s readings of intratextuality in the *Metamorphoses* and between the epic and the *Heroides*, including especially his excellent explication of linkages between the stories of Iphigeneia and Polyxena in the literary (and especially Greek tragic) tradition prior to Ovid and between their episodes in the *Metamorphoses* itself. Fewer, however, are likely to embrace readily his concept of the 'intratextual footnote', introduced on p. 184, according to which abbreviated episodes or descriptions such as that of Iphigeneia's sacrifice (or in some instances, the omission of information altogether) operate as 'signals' to the reader to 'seek out analogies elsewhere in the poem'.

The book's final chapter, which serves as a conclusion and includes a brief consideration of the 'imperial' implications of Ovid's tragic project, is recommended reading not only for Ovidian scholars but also for those engaged in work on Senecan tragedy. As

C. rightly suggests, his readings of Ovid's appropriation and refashioning of tragedy in the *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* have highlighted some of the strategies Seneca himself recognised and appreciated in the textualisation of tragedy in the epics of both Virgil and (especially) Ovid and that he, in turn, creatively re-appropriated for tragedy proper.

Brown University

JERI BLAIR DEBROHUN
jeri_debrohun@brown.edu