

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



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Edited by Philip Hardie

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EDITED BY

PHILIP HARDIE

*University Reader in Latin Literature
in the University of Cambridge,
and Fellow of New Hall*



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PREFACE

Ovid is arguably the single most important author from classical antiquity for the post-classical western tradition. This *Companion* aims to locate Ovid's dazzling *œuvre* within the history of ancient Roman culture and literature, and also to illustrate some of the many ways in which his texts have been used by later writers and artists. It is designed both as an introduction to basic aspects of Ovid's works and their reception, and as a sample of the range of approaches that have emerged during what has been nothing less than an explosion of critical and theoretical studies of Ovid in recent years, after a period of neglect; we hope that the volume may also provide signposts for future work. Our intention is to stimulate as much as to inform.

I am grateful to all the contributors for their good-humoured responsiveness to a sometimes importunate editor, and also to our copy-editor, Muriel Hall. For their expertise and understanding I owe especial thanks to Pauline Hire of Cambridge University Press, who first suggested that I might undertake this volume, and to her successor at the Press, Michael Sharp.

The quotation from *Tales from Ovid* by Ted Hughes printed in the epigraph to the Introduction has been reproduced with permission from Faber and Faber Ltd, London and Farrar, Strauss & Giroux Inc., New York.

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PHILIP HARDIE

Introduction

Descend again, be pleased to reanimate
This revival of those marvels.
Reveal, now, exactly
How they were performed
From the beginning
Up to this moment.¹

As the twentieth century drew to its close Ovid's star shone brightly in the sky, at least of the Anglo-Saxon world. Two volumes of adaptations of stories from the *Metamorphoses*, published by Faber & Faber, turned out to be bestsellers.² One of these, *Tales from Ovid* (1997), was the last but one collection published before his death by the Poet Laureate Ted Hughes, to be followed by *Birthday letters* (1998), poems written to his wife Sylvia Plath over the decades following her suicide. The juxtaposition has a certain irony. *Birthday letters*, addressed to one of the heroines of modern poetry, is written in a confessional mode that caters to a continuing post-Romantic craving for a literature of sincerity and truth to life. *Tales from Ovid* reworks the most self-consciously fictive poem of a white male poet, dead for almost two millennia. His works were to become a byword for a playful detachment from the serious business of life, and as a result went into a critical eclipse during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries.

Life, it might be said, caught up with the poet when Ovid was sent into exile on the shore of the Black Sea in AD 8. Thereupon he did turn to a plangent self-expression in the verse letters from exile. But even so Ovid could not win, for these confessional works in the first-person singular were for long dismissed as inferior; their repetitive self-obsession was not read sympathetically as the history of a soul in pain, but taken as an index of Ovid's expulsion from the fertile garden of poetic feigning.

¹ Hughes (1997) 3, translating *Met.* 1.1–4.

² Hofmann and Lasdun (1994); Hughes (1997).

With the recent flood of scholarly criticism of the exile poetry, the reanimation of Ovid's poetic *corpus* has been completed, at least in the academic world. One of the fruits of the intense cultivation of the exile poetry has been an appreciation of the complex links between the poetry of after AD 8 and the earlier works, a continuity bridging the drastic change in the poet's circumstances consequent on his removal from the metropolitan centre to an outpost of the Roman empire. With a hindsight to which Ovid himself steers us, all parts of his dazzlingly varied and shape-shifting poetic career seem to form themselves into a single plan, beginning with an elegy of erotic complaint in which the lover attempts to gain entry to the locked door of his girlfriend, and ending with the elegies of an exile vainly (as it turned out) trying to win the right to return to Rome.³ Stephen Harrison (chapter 5) traces the change-in-continuity of Ovid's elegiac career.

Both bodies of first-person elegy, the youthful *Amores* and the late exile poetry, are concerned to relate the private experiences of the poet to the wider worlds of Greek mythology and of Roman history and politics, worlds explored more directly in the works of the central section of Ovid's career, the *Heroides*, *Metamorphoses*, and *Fasti*. As Richard Tarrant (chapter 1) and Gareth Williams (chapter 14) show, the exile poems construct themselves by superimposing the 'facts' of Ovid's exile on features, both of form and content, from all three of these earlier works (at least one of which, the *Fasti*, continued to be revised in exile). Most striking is Ovid's conversion of his own exile into a real-life example of the kind of incredible story told in the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid complains that in exile he has lost the powers that enabled the poetic triumph of the *Metamorphoses*, yet this disassembles the fact that business continues as usual. From hexameter mythological epic to first-person elegiac letters from exile seems an almost inevitable progression.

Perhaps Ted Hughes' apparently disparate closing brace of poetry books also has an Ovidian logic. An easy way to trace continuity would be to lean on Ted Hughes' own location of the secret of Ovid's enduring popularity in the fact that 'Above all, Ovid was interested in passion.'⁴ Raphael Lyne points out that Hughes' version of the *Metamorphoses* ends with the Pyramus and Thisbe story, and with two lovers 'closed in a single urn' (chapter 15, p. 263). But consider the following: a collection of fantastic mythical tales, followed by a collection of letters prompted by the fact of an irreversible loss, and including as addressee a wife whom the writer will never see again. Is the author Ovid or Ted Hughes?

³ On the unity of the work of Ovid as elegist see also Holzberg (1999) 60 'It is actually possible to read Ovid's works from the *Heroides* through to his exile poetry as a series of "metamorphoses" of the elegiac discourse found in the *Amores*.'

⁴ Hughes (1997) p. ix.

Hughes himself perhaps never saw things in this way. Is it then illegitimate for the reader aware of the Ovidian pattern to discern it in the shape of Hughes' *œuvre*? That would at least be a highly Ovidian appropriation. Of all ancient poets Ovid is perhaps the most aware of the rewards and hazards of his own reception. The *Metamorphoses* closes with a reworking of Horace's ode on his own monumental fame (*Odes* 3.30), in which Ovid looks forward to an eternity in which 'I shall be read on the lips of the people' (*Met.* 15.878). The Latin words, *ore legar populi*, could also be translated 'I [i.e. my soul] shall be gathered on the lips of the people', hinting at an image of poetic tradition and transmission as a Pythagoreanizing re-embodiment of dead poets in the bodies of living poets – or living readers.⁵ Metempsychosis allows texts to have a life of their own after the death of their original owners and producers. The history of Ovid's reception starts with Ovid himself, who after the figurative death of exile rereads and redeploys his own unfinished *Metamorphoses* to reflect his own altered circumstances. 'By *rewriting* its opening lines, Ovid will force us to *reread* the entire poem in a slightly different way.'⁶ But an interest in his own reception predates the exile: Duncan Kennedy (chapter 13) shows that the uncertainty of the legendary writers of the *Heroides* as to whether their letters will ever reach their destination, and, if they do, what reception they will find, figures Ovid's own concern for an appropriate readership. This is the poet who addresses one of his own missives from exile to 'posterity' (*Trist.* 4.10.2).

Colin Burrow (chapter 18) considers further aspects of Ovid's self-imitation and auto-reception. Ovid's concern for his standing with posterity is of a piece with his constant awareness of previous literary tradition and of his place within that tradition, as discussed by Richard Tarrant (chapter 1). The urge to shape his own career into an overarching unity is motivated not just by the wish to assert some kind of control over the caprices of external fortune, but by the desire to forge for himself a literary stature comparable to that of his immediate and greatest predecessor, Virgil, whose three major works became a model of the poetic career apparently prescribed according to a sequential structure of unity in diversity, imitated by poets such as Spenser and Milton.⁷ Raphael Lyne shows how the sequence of the several personae of the Ovidian career offers an alternative model to the Virgilian for post-classical poets' self-fashioning (chapter 17).

Burrow suggests that one reason for Ovid's popularity with Renaissance poets was that he offered these writers ways of handling their own place within the classical tradition, with the dominant model of continuity in

⁵ See Hardie (1999b) 268 n. 44.

⁶ Hinds (1985) 25, discussing *Trist.* 1.7.

⁷ See Theodorakopoulos (1997).

change, or metamorphosis. In the earlier twentieth century the titular subject of the *Metamorphoses* was often seen as little more than an excuse for bizarre tales in an Alexandrian vein, and, even as that, often marginal to the poem's real concerns.⁸ Recently metamorphosis has moved to centre stage as a dominant trope of Ovidian criticism, a way of thinking about change and continuity not just in linguistic and literary areas such as genre, allegory and personification, allusion and intertextuality, and reader response, but also in Ovid's dealings with the extratextual worlds of psychology, culture, history and ideology: a number of these areas are discussed by Andrew Feldherr (chapter 10).

As academic classicists have found new and (for us) compelling ways of talking about Ovid's construction of his place within literary traditions, for the wider readership it may be increasingly difficult to recapture the Renaissance conviction that the relationship of the present to a classical past, perhaps to tradition of any kind, is central to a modern cultural awareness. In the rest of this 'Introduction' I point to some of the other features of the Ovidian texts that have brought about nothing less than a sea-change in their critical fortunes over the past few decades, and restored them to something approaching the centre of the cultural mainstream.

What formerly was seen as superficial wit and an irredeemable lack of seriousness has been reassessed in the light of a postmodernist flight from realism and presence towards textuality and anti-foundationalism.⁹ 'Parody', a term often used in dismissive acknowledgement of Ovid's entertainment value, has moved to the theoretical centre of studies of allusion and intertextuality. Ovid exults in the fictiveness of his poetry, that written in the first person singular quite as much as self-evidently tall tales like that of the beautiful girl Scylla changed into a hideous sea-monster (*Met.* 13.732–4). At the heart of the *Metamorphoses* we come across a debate on the truth or fiction of stories of metamorphosis, conducted by fictional characters at the dinner-table of a river-god, himself a shape-shifter (*Met.* 8.611–19).¹⁰

The later twentieth-century novel saw a significant shift from the prevailing nineteenth-century realist tradition that concealed its own devices, back towards the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century self-conscious novel, defined by Robert Alter as 'a novel that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between

⁸ For an early exercise in widening the scope of metamorphosis from subject matter to a 'functional principle' see Galinsky (1975) 42–70.

⁹ Don Fowler was unmatched as a postmodernist critic of Latin literature, and also for his ability to bring popular culture into his scholarship; he published little on Ovid, but there is a gem in his 'Pyramus, Thisbe, King Kong: Ovid and the presence of poetry', in Fowler (2000) 156–67.

¹⁰ Discussed by Feeney (1991) 229–32; on the general issues see also Feeney (1993).