

Wiley Blackwell Handbooks to Classical Reception

A HANDBOOK TO THE  
**RECEPTION  
OF OVID**

EDITED BY JOHN F. MILLER AND CAROLE E. NEWLANDS



**WILEY** Blackwell

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# **A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid**

Edited by

**John F. Miller and Carole E. Newlands**

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# Introduction

Carole E. Newlands and John F. Miller

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Ovid has proved the most influential and indeed the most versatile by far of all the poets of Latin antiquity. His works have exerted a fundamental influence on the literature and art of the West, beginning in ancient times and continuing with astonishing vitality to the present day, inspiring in recent times not only poetry and painting but novels, plays, and films. The present volume explores how Ovid's poetry, and indeed Ovid's life itself, has been interpreted, rewritten, critiqued, adapted, translated, and metamorphosed in later periods of time and different cultures.

One of the requirements of such a handbook is to offer a broadly based survey of significant research. Thus this volume provides an extensive temporal sweep in the West from Ovid's times to our own. It encompasses all of Ovid's major works and it explores key players in their reception, many of them familiar figures in the Western literary canon but viewed afresh through an Ovidian lens, others less well known and here brought significantly to our attention. The contributors represent a variety of geographical and cultural backgrounds. But so rich and diverse is the afterlife of Ovid and his works that this volume cannot, and does not, aim to be comprehensive. The history of the reception of Ovid's poetry covers many periods of human history and involves many geographical regions and disciplines, in particular literature, dance, drama, film, and the visual arts. While chronologically ambitious, our volume nonetheless is necessarily selective. Its focus is literary, but also pays attention to the influence of Ovid's poetry on the visual arts (Barolsky, Casid, Knox, Winkler) and music

(Solomon). While its surveys of recent research on Ovid's impact also offer fresh ways of thinking about Ovid's poetry, the volume's emphasis falls squarely upon reception, that is, upon documenting and exploring from multiple perspectives how Ovid's poetry has been interpreted and transformed over time in response to the individual circumstances of a writer or artist, to be sure, but also to the major intellectual, social, and political changes that have shaped that response.

As a whole, this volume identifies culturally specific moments in the reception of Ovid's poetry while also tracing historical continuities and discontinuities. An interesting case is how women writers through the ages engage with Ovid's poetry. Although his works explore the intricacies of the female voice and psychology, in some eras women seemed to play little part in the acquisition of Ovidian cultural capital. The resulting gendered imbalance in reception reveals the historical pressures upon the reception of Ovid, pressures which begin with the *Art of Love* itself when Ovid tells Roman matrons that this poem is definitely not written for them—surely a tongue-in-cheek remark, for they would have been among his most literate readers (*Ars* 1.31–34). Nonetheless, during the Middle Ages Christine de Pizan and Heloise responded in important ways to that very *Art of Love* as well as to the *Heroides*, Ovid's fictional letters by heroines (Desmond). Much later, a handful of women writers shared in an early modern craze for the *Heroides*—writers like Aphra Behn, Mary Wortley Montagu, and Jane Barker (Horowitz). More recently, we find a large number of women writers reacting to Ovid's poetry: the enormously successful play *Metamorphoses* by Mary Zimmerman, granted the Tony award in 2002, and two recent novels, Jane Alison's *The Love Artist* (2001) and Benita Jaro's *Betray the Night* (2009), both of which adopt a provocative feminist

perspective on the poet. Charlotte Higgins recently updated the *Ars Amatoria* in her delightful mock-didactic *Latin Love Lessons: Put a Little Ovid in Your Life* (2007). In the visual arts of the modern era, women have responded to Ovid's poetry in ways that are both playfully deferential (for instance, Mme Yyonde) or alienating (Casid); New York artist Kiki Smith's sculpture *Daphne* shows a bare, mutilated, headless stump, a tree stripped of its leaves, a woman devoid of face, hands, and feet. A large group of modern and contemporary women poets likewise meditate on Ovid's Daphne from female points of view; Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, A.E. Stallings, Alice Fulton, Eavan Boland, Jorie Graham, and others give a voice to the beautiful nymph unsuccessfully chased by Apollo, and then transformed, in the first love story of the *Metamorphoses* (Martindale 2005: 200–17).

We start neither from the idea that poetry “hands down” a tradition in a linear progression nor from a simple perspective of afterlife or *Nachleben*; rather, we begin from the understanding, outlined by Andrew Laird (2010: 356), that reception is a dynamic two-way process in that texts do not retain a continuous identity but are constituted by their interpretation over time—all the more insistently the case with the poetry of the master of change. Ovid was an acutely self-reflexive and self-conscious poet about his relationship to his predecessors and to posterity. Our study of the reappropriations and reworkings of Ovid's texts thus starts with Ovid himself (Feldherr; Myers), and, to paraphrase Lorna Hardwick, thereafter crosses boundaries of place, language, and genre as well as time (Hardwick 2003: 4). Central questions of this volume include what new meanings the author and his works acquire through migration to often quite alien registers; and to what ideological ends—aesthetic, intellectual, cultural, and political—Ovid's poetry has been adapted. The definition of

reception studies is constantly changing. But by stimulating debate, the rewritings, translations, and revisions of Ovid's poetry over time encourage a greater critical and historical awareness in its readers and indeed further creativity.

The study of the reception of Ovid is particularly complex because he produced such a large and diverse body of work. As we see from this volume, his epic *Metamorphoses* consistently stands out over time. No epic poet subsequent to Ovid could ignore his innovative reshaping of the Roman epic code, his challenge to Virgil's epic; the *Metamorphoses* is crucial for understanding imperial epic (Keith). For Dante, Ovid is the poet of the *Metamorphoses* (Clay), and the *Metamorphoses* reaches the peak of its influence in the Renaissance (Casali; Hardie; Keilen) as well as, perhaps, our own times (Godel; Brown; Winkler; Casid); translation involving radically different approaches by prominent English poets allowed Ovid's epic to reach a wide audience from the sixteenth century to our own time (Hooley).

However, Ovid's elegiac poetry was extremely influential, too, in charting new generic territory; the *Heroides*, the *Amores*, the *Ars Amatoria*, the *Fasti*, the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* all represent different, experimental approaches to the elegiac genre, a monumental achievement for a traditionally slender genre. Several of the essays show how later writers, beginning with the Flavians Statius and Martial (Rosati), capitalized on the creative range of Ovid's experimentation with elegy and his language of luxury and desire. Despite its title and central trope, Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* drew on the erotic tropes of Ovid's *Amores* as well as on his epic (Harrison). Moreover, the reception of Ovid's poetry in late antiquity and the Middle Ages was far from being dominated by allegorical interpretation, even with regard to the *Metamorphoses* (Hays; Fumo). The sixth-century poet



Maximianus revived erotic elegy with the ironic persona of an elderly lover (Fielding). At the height of the Middle Ages Ovid's amatory elegy was instrumental in the development of the courtly discourse of a language of desire (Desmond). The structuring of the *Amores* as a sequence charting the rise and decline of the poet's engagement with *eros* provided an influential template for love poetry, from Petrarch's development of the sonnet sequence to Goethe's elegiac love poems (Braden). Even the puritan Milton in the seventeenth century found in Ovid's elegiac poetry a potent source for his creative imagination, beginning early in his career with his Latin elegies (Green). The elegiac, etiological *Fasti*, in its negotiation with imperial ideas of time, introduced the concept of the calendar poem that became an important political genre in the Renaissance (Kilgour). Well before the twentieth century made urban alienation a major theme, responses to the exile poetry in the Middle Ages explored this concept (Keen). Moreover, the return of elegy in the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* to its origins in lament and its adaptation to the politics of Ovid's imperial exile laid the basis for subsequent social and cultural interventions in situations not necessarily of geographical displacement but of censorship and cultural alienation (Keen; James; Kahn). But despite its thematic and generic complexity, Ovid's poetry also consistently confronts common major issues of erotic and political power, and crises of identity involving personal loss, betrayal, and cultural alienation—in short, the fundamental themes of love and death. The return of his poetry to these major issues again and again in different ways, and different genres, constitutes part of Ovid's enduring fascination.

The study of the reception of the poetry of Ovid is particularly rewarding as well as complex, for Ovid himself was a poet obsessed with his future reception and in all his

works he attempted to control how they would be read by posterity (Feldherr; Myers). Essentially there are two strands to the reception of "Ovid": there is the poet himself, a fascinating case study of tragic downfall and poetic transcendence, and there is the poetry itself; the proximity of the "life" to the poetry means that these two strands often become interwoven, for it is almost entirely through Ovid's poetry that we know of his "life," or at least as he chose to represent it both for his critics and supporters in Rome and for posterity. The scripting of his own life in exile as a case study in metamorphosis became an open invitation for later writers to write speculative biographies that focus on the mystery of his exile, harnessing it to a variety of ideological agendas. For instance, in the thirteenth century a three-book elegiac poem, *De Vetula*, presented itself as "the last will and testament of Ovid" found on his tomb. In this popular pseudonymous work Ovid has renounced the erotic life for Christianity; his particular life thus models that of the "everyman" in religious thought who necessarily suffers on the path to spiritual redemption. On the other hand, a popular story included in many of the medieval *accessus* ("introductions") to Ovid's works reflects historical and aesthetic concerns in a comic vein. According to this narrative our poet, climbing up a ladder to enter Livia's turreted bedroom, was compelled by a call of nature to descend; Virgil, however, had removed a rung from the ladder and Ovid fell and broke his leg. The story plays off Ovid's enigmatic statement at *Tr.* 4.10.51, *Vergilium tantum vidi*, "I only saw Virgil," and thus makes a crude attempt in the vein of the *fabliau* to explain both the historical reason for Ovid's exile (adultery with the emperor Augustus' wife) and his perceived rivalry with Virgil. In recent times novelists have imaginatively explored Ovid's exile through the lens of contemporary culture and politics. For instance, Austrian novelist Christoph Ransmyer in *The*