

J. M. BLANCO MAYOR, *Power Play in Latin Love Elegy and its Multiple Forms of Continuity in Ovid's Metamorphoses*, Berlin-Boston: De Gruyter, 2017, X + 382 pp. € 109,95, ISBN 978-3-11-049028-2.

Let there be no doubt. Behind the long and complex title of this volume, there is a crucial issue at stake. This issue is love, poised between asymmetrical relationship dynamics and ideals of mutual affection. Its importance emerges from the book's well-founded claims that an ideal of affectionate reciprocity is latent, and a few times made manifest, in Latin love elegy as well as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Although this is not an uncontentious argument,¹ it is all the more welcome for that, as it is firmly grounded in the poetry in question. Throughout, the study rests on two fundamental assumptions about this poetry: first, that there is a connection, a sense of development even, between the genre of Latin love elegy and the epic of Ovid; and next, that this development is particularly conspicuous in representations of relationships between lover and beloved.

The book thus touches a nerve in Augustan literature, represented by the kind of love that expresses itself in a mostly asymptotic desire for passionate parity between human beings who are socially incompatible. Although frequently dismissed in scholarship as frivolous and unimportant, this kind of love is, in actual fact, precisely because of its longing for emotional equality, hugely revolutionary in a society that is bound for absolute monarchy and where the mere idea of any form of egalitarianism is virtually impossible.

In his study, Blanco Mayor (BM) touches slightly on these socio-political circumstances but refrains from exploring them further. Instead, he focuses on the less controversial, yet still important metapoetic implications of love's desire for reciprocity. Ultimately, BM interprets occurrences of erotic symmetries and asymmetries in terms of elegiac poetics, where – both on a fictional and a 'supra-fictional' level – the lover is associated with the poet and the beloved with his poetry. Although relationships in Latin love elegy display a tension, even a 'power play', between lover and beloved, BM argues that, in the end, the lover *qua* poet has the upper hand, and that the 'power' of the beloved only serves to underscore his artistic mastery.

As is required of the review genre, the following appreciation is laced with some criticisms. For while BM in this book has identified a crucial nerve in Augustan poetry, questions remain about how BM uncovers that nerve further and proceeds to appreciate what is revealed in the process.

¹ See e.g. D. Konstan, *Sexual Symmetry: Love in the Ancient Novel and Related Genres*, Princeton University Press 1994, 150–60.

BM's book is divided into two sections, one on Latin love elegy and asymmetrical relationships, and the other on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which, according to BM, displays a gradual progression towards more symmetrical love-constellations. In the first section, the asymmetrical relationships are interpreted as signposts of the author's power over his art, and in the second, the symmetrical constellations are regarded as an expression of Ovid's metapoetic need for variation, which also, ultimately, demonstrates his artistic mastery.

The work as a whole is introduced by a lengthy discussion of the generic nature of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which argues in favour of the work's affinity with Latin love elegy. Then, in the first section, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is set aside for a time, while the poetry of Catullus, Tibullus, Propertius and Ovid, the last represented by poems from his *Amores*, excerpts from his *Ars amatoria* and *Heroides* 20 and 21, are discussed over the course of three chapters. These chapters are organized thematically around various aspects of the *puella* (despite also discussing the beloved *puer* of Tibullus, Marathus). BM argues that the *puella* 'de-codes the text' (pp. 43–71), and functions 'as subject-matter' (pp. 72–124) and 'as literary work' (pp. 125–48) in ways that ultimately serve the supreme power and authority of the poet.

In the next section, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* re-enters the stage, and now several points drawn from the analyses of the elegiac corpus are brought into a discussion of that work. This discussion pivots on the episodes of Daphne and Apollo, Io and Jupiter, Callisto and Jupiter, Herse and Mercury, Philomela and Tereus, Byblis and Caunus, and Pygmalion and the statue, which BM refers to as 'Eburna' (despite the fact that Ovid consistently refers to her as 'Eburnea'), which are mainly characterised by asymmetrical love, as well as the stories of Pyramus and Thisbe, Cephalus and Procris, Ceyx and Alcyone and Pomona and Vertumnus, which are regarded as examples of mutual love either *in spe* or already realized. Through a single introduction to this second section and its two chapters, BM implies that the increased frequency of the latter kind of stories in the latter half of the *Metamorphoses* indicates that the relationship between the lover and the beloved is changing from elegiac asymmetry towards a new form of epic-elegiac symmetry.

The sense of development is underscored by the way in which BM refers to the Apollo and Daphne episode as *primus amor* (quoting *Met.* 1.452), a love which, according to BM, is marked by sexual violence (although no sex act is consummated in this episode, unless Apollo's kisses, from which the transformed Daphne shrinks, are counted as such). By contrast, the final selection of examples is presented under the heading *ultimus ardor* (*Met.* 14.682–3), with reference to the final story in the *Metamorphoses* that may be regarded as exemplifying mutual erotic desire, namely that of Vertumnus and Pomona. However, the neatness of this trajectory from a 'first' to a 'final' love, implied by the use of key terms from the *Metamorphoses*, is

disrupted by the story of Byblis, who, despite being firmly placed among the asymmetrical lovers in BM's study, also employs the term *ultimus ardor* (*Met.* 9.562, not in the 'index of passages cited' in BM's book) to refer to her passion for Caunus.

BM's 'conclusions' make it clear that the main object under scrutiny has really been Ovid all along, as 'reader of elegy' (p. 339), both in his elegiac corpus and his epic masterpiece.

From the hindsight of these conclusions, where Ovid emerges as the most important author in the study, it is hard not to ask why BM did not exploit Ovid's elegiac output more thoroughly and systematically in the first section of this book to corroborate his overall point. The dated concept of 'subjective elegy'² seems to represent a problem in this regard. BM explains that Ovid's *Heroides* and *Ars* cannot strictly be understood as 'subjective elegy', and excerpts from these works therefore have a secondary, supportive function (p. 63) for the arguments based on some of Catullus' poems and the collections of Tibullus and Propertius, as well as Ovid's *Amores*.

However, BM connects the latter collections to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by arguing that they share a focus on relationships between lover and beloved. This underlying assumption creates several problems in terms of the material studied in this book. If the presence of uneven relationships between lover and beloved is the one defining trait of the material under scrutiny, why is only that which BM identifies as 'subjective elegy' compared to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*? In many ways, whether broadly or narrowly understood, this definition calls for a wider scope than that of BM's study.

If broadly defined, its scope should include comedy: new Attic and Roman comedy abounds with uneven relationships between lover and beloved, these relationships are marked by sexual violence in a way that is much more explicit than is seen in Latin love elegy, and the whole comic genre is among the most established models for Latin love elegy in scholarship. True, the inclusion of comedy would perhaps have widened the scope of the book too much. And yet, given that the comic genre prominently displays the traits under scrutiny in BM's book, the disregard of this genre should at least have been addressed and justified.

More problematic is the narrower range of additional works relevant for this study that is offered by Ovid's other works in elegiac couplets that are explicitly about love. Given that BM argues for a connection – through uneven lover-and-beloved relationships – between 'subjective elegy' and the mythical world of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which BM regards as elegiac in many ways, why do e.g. the *Ars* and especially the *Heroides* not 'strictly belong to the textual corpus at the centre of this study' (p. 63)? The question

² See T. Thorsen, 'Introduction', in T. Thorsen (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Latin Love Elegy*, Cambridge 2013, 15, n. 15.

is all the more pressing considering the extensive use that BM actually makes of the latter work, and rightly so, because if there is any work lamenting love, in elegiac distichs, purportedly penned by a first-person narrator, that shares the legendary world of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – and that pivots on uneven lover-and-beloved relationships – it is Ovid's *Heroides*.

As has been demonstrated in the past,³ Ovid was already metamorphosing the genre of Latin love elegy not only in his *Amores*, but also, and especially, in his *Ars amatoria*, his *Remedia amoris* and his *Heroides*. Considering how all these works exploit various traits of the genre as it had been established by Catullus and pre-Ovidian elegists, it should come as no surprise that Ovid's masterpiece is permeated with elegiac qualities. In fact, this is also the case for Ovid's *Fasti* and exile poetry, in which he repeatedly self-identifies as an elegist (*tenerorum lusor amorum*, cf. *Tr.* 3.3.73; 4.10.1): two parts of Ovid's corpus that are absent from BM's discussion, and conspicuously so, one may add, as these works too include many (a)symmetrical relationships between lover and beloved.

Grounding the study in Ovid's love elegies more systematically would have made it harder to conflate the fictional *ego* of Catullus, Tibullus, Propertius and Ovid in his *Amores* with the extra-textual author by invoking the 'supra-fictional', which BM frequently does in his book. This is problematic, as such confluences run the risk of simplifying the genre in question. Indeed, one could easily argue that Ovid's metamorphoses of the genre in his different erotic-elegiac works conspicuously debunk such reductive approaches to 'subjective elegy'. Not only do the various poses represented by *Naso poeta* in his *Amores*, *Naso magister* in his *Ars amatoria* and *Naso legendus* in his *Remedia amoris* defy such reductions; his *Heroides* also play an especially crucial role here. The *Heroides*' throng of different, legendary, female first-person narrators, whose metapoetic poet-lover qualities are safeguarded through descriptions such as *scribentis imago* (*Her.* 7.183; 11.5), underscores the very fictionality of what may appear to be 'subjective elegy'. For, in this way, the *Heroides*, more than any of Ovid's other erotic-elegiac works, helps to underscore the idea that Latin love elegy is as fictional as any other.

Moreover, the fictionality of Latin love elegy is also the reason why the poet's ultimate mastery over the text, which is BM's main point throughout his first section, is no hallmark of this genre that distinguishes it or sets it apart from other genres. The point that the writer is the one who really controls every movement and individual in his or her fictional world, even if he or she should represent him- or herself as powerless and inferior in that

³ S. Harrison, "Ovid and genre: evolutions of an elegist", in Hardie, P. (ed.) *Cambridge Companion to Ovid*, Cambridge 2000, 79–94 and T. Thorsen, "Ovid the love elegist" in T. Thorsen (ed.) *Cambridge Companion*, 114–29.

world, is true of any work of fiction from any place at any time. What *is* elegy's distinctive hallmark is that its fictional framework rests on what I have elsewhere called an erotic-elegiac fundamentalism,⁴ according to which life for an elegist can only exist in one of two modes, depending on the presence or absence of the beloved. If the beloved is present, the elegist makes love; if the beloved is absent, the elegist makes texts reflecting on past pleasures, current torment and future hopes. From the perspective of this fictional fundamentalism (though perhaps not from the point of view of its 'supra-fiction'), lovemaking is always preferable to writing, which must remain a sad, deplorable substitute for the real thing. It is this substitution, the very act of writing-instead-of-lovemaking, that defines the genre of Latin love elegy; this is why the genre is pre-eminently metapoetic, predominantly *flebilis* (not discussed *per se* by BM) and why a letter-writing heroine may be an elegist on a par with any Tibullus or Propertius.⁵ Thus, referring to the first-person letter-writing, lamenting Cydippe (pp. 62–66) in order to stress the supremacy of the male author (Acontius/Ovid) remains problematic, as Cydippe too – within the fictional framework of Latin love elegy – is an author in her own right and, as such, a representative of the extra-textual poet Ovid.⁶ In sum, picking and mixing passages from the other elegists and Ovid, including the *Ars amatoria* and the *Heroides*, but at the same time explicitly excluding these works from the central discussion of the book, confounds how Ovid distils essential qualities of the genre in the different works of his output and thus, *inter alia*, paves the way for the further elegiac developments in his *Metamorphoses*, which, as BM rightly points out, are markedly present in his epic.

The indiscriminate employment of Ovidian and other elegists' poetry in the first section of this book also makes it hard to appreciate one of its fundamental premises, which is that the relationship between lover and beloved undergoes a distinct development from an earlier phase pivoting on the genre of Latin love elegy to a later phase in which the *Metamorphoses* is centre stage. I believe that BM is fundamentally right. Yet BM's argument would have benefitted from a clearer outline of the underlying timeline of the book, which covers the period from c. 60 BC, when Catullus was active, through to c. 8 AD, when Ovid, before completing the *Metamorphoses*, was banned from Rome, to c. 18 AD, when Ovid died, most likely having continued to revise his masterpiece throughout his years in exile. Again, Ovid's poetic career is particularly relevant to this timeline, especially the composition of his *Heroides*, which scholarship now regularly divides into

⁴ Ibid., p. 18.

⁵ This is arguably also why Byblis is 'elegiac'.

⁶ See Thorsen, 'Cydippe the poet', forthcoming in *The Classical Journal*. Curiously, BM's summary of the story omits an important piece of information: that Cydippe cannot yield to Acontius' wooing, as she is already betrothed to another.

the single (*Her.* 1–15) and double *Heroides* (*Her.* 16–21). Now, the single *Heroides* was certainly composed in the earlier phase of Ovid's career, as the work is referred to in what is presented by Ovid as the second edition of his *Amores* (*Am.* 2.18), while the double *Heroides* displays a number of metrical features that are elsewhere found only in Ovid's later works and consequently a growing number of scholars assume that it was produced in exile. This means that it is highly likely that Acontius' and Cydippe's Heroidean letters were composed after Ovid wrote his *Metamorphoses*. Therefore, as BM argues that 'the *Heroides* ... prefigure the extensive treatment of mutual love expressed fully in the *Metamorphoses*' (p. 63), the now fairly well-established late date of the double *Heroides* should at least have been discussed in a little more detail than it is in the footnotes on p. 63.

As a final note, I wish to stress that one of the most important 'treasures' (cf. p. 350) offered by BM's book is the identification of a desire for emotional equality, if only *in nuce*, in Latin love elegy. In this, BM is surely right. One may discuss whether the examples BM has chosen in order to corroborate this observation are the best. The understanding that 'the tale of Pygmalion has a happy outcome and demonstrates the triumph of love' (p. 234) depends on where the lines of this story are drawn. If one zooms out to include its immediate narrative context, the tale may rather prove, in the words of Philip Hardie, to be both 'narcissistic and incestuous'.⁷ The disastrous aspect of Pygmalion's love is most conspicuously embodied by Venus, whose indulgence of Pygmalion's self-absorbed wish to turn his ivory statue into a living doll ultimately results in her own greatest defeat as a goddess of love, in the loss of her beloved Adonis. When Pygmalion procreates with his own work, his incestuous legacy manifests itself in their grand-daughter Myrrha's erotic love for her father Cinyras, and when Venus falls in love with the child of their union, Adonis, she also really falls in love with her own workings. Thus, for Venus, who links these tales of incestuous succession together, the story does not have 'a happy outcome', nor does it demonstrate the 'triumph of love'. Hardie's approach to the tale of Pygmalion and his 'Eburnea' is very different from that of BM. Nevertheless, this approach also serves BM's argument, which is that the artist's self-absorption is striking, even unsettlingly so, in the poetry he explores. Likewise, the episodes of Procris and Cephalus may be much less romantic and much more about the dangers of artistic manipulation than they seem.⁸ Also, the story of Leander and Hero should perhaps have been categorised among the kinds of love that

⁷ Hardie, P. 'Approximative similes in Ovid: Incest and doubling', *Dictynna* 1:2004, § 47. The article is referred to in BM's bibliography.

⁸ See e.g. T. Thorsen, "The second Erato and the deeper design of Ovid's *Ars amatoria*: Unravelling the anti-marital union of Venus, Procris and Romulus", in Luis Rivero, M^a Consuela Álvarez, Rosa M^a Iglesias, Juan A. Estévez (eds.) *Vivam: Estudios Sobre La Obra de Ovidio. Studies on Ovid's Poetry, Exemplaria Classica Supplements*, Huelva 2018, 141–68.

BM places under the heading *ultimus ardor*⁹ alongside that of Pyramus and Thisbe and Ceyx and Alcyone, but then again, this would also have corroborated BM's argument, as the double *Heroides*, to which Leander and Hero's mutual affection belongs, is a work that most likely represents a later phase in Ovid's poetic career. Such important discussions about (a) symmetrical relationships in Ovid have at least now started, thanks not least to BM.

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⁹ See T. Thorsen, "Ovid the love elegist" in Thorsen, *Cambridge Companion*, 129.

