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Helena Taylor, *The Lives of Ovid in Seventeenth-Century French Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xi + 195 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$85.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-879677-0.

Review by Kathleen A. Loysen, Montclair State University.

This engrossing monograph by Helena Taylor, Lecturer in French Studies at the University of Exeter, opens with a central paradox that will remain predominant throughout its five chapters: the notion that Ovid, the great Latin poet of the Augustan era, became a key figure for the side of the Moderns in the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns that captivated French society in the latter half of the seventeenth century. Through Taylor's analyses, the reader learns just how Ovid came to represent modernity and France for the poets and historiographers of this period.

Based on Taylor's doctoral dissertation, the volume includes some previously published material, but also greatly expands on this prior work. The focus of the book is to examine not the reception of Ovid's work in early modern France, but rather the representation of the life of Ovid during this period. In this way, the volume successfully links textual analysis of a variety of genres (translations, *histoires galantes*, biographical dictionaries, etc.) to larger debates regarding the practice of life-writing, the principles of historiography, and the place of ancient patrimony in French culture, as well as questions of authority and authorship in narrative and history writing. Taylor therefore uses the representation of Ovid's life-story and persona as a vehicle for analyzing the goals and concerns of the authors in her corpus. Her chief premise is that "life-writing was a way of reading and such readings reveal the concerns, trends, and strategies of the authors writing about Ovid as much as they deepen our understandings of Ovid and his reception" (p. 1).

Seventeenth-century France had a keen affinity for Ovid, and representations of his biography and persona were widespread in both literary and visual culture. Taylor establishes, however, that the representations of Ovid that were prevalent in the second half of the seventeenth century began to reveal the changing nature of the reading public. Cultivated circles now included, alongside the men, many more women, whose educational backgrounds cannot be assumed to be as rooted in the classics as among the university-educated male populations. Taylor shows that the humanist culture of sixteenth and early seventeenth-century France was giving way to *galant* culture, with its women-led salons, modernist aesthetic, and emphasis on Ovid's poetry of love and exile (the *Amores*, parts of the *Ars Amatoria*, the *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*), rather than on his mythological, epic, and epistolary works (the *Metamorphoses*, the

Heroides, and the *Fasti*). Taylor thereby brings Ovid into the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, and into debates surrounding the role of women, salon culture, *galanterie*, and changing definitions and practices of historiography. She argues that an important way to determine the shifting status of ancient culture is to examine trends in how specific ancient figures were portrayed. Thus, “although he was an ancient poet, Ovid became key to the formulation of aspects of self-consciously ‘modern’ cultural movements, genres, and aesthetics” (p. 3).

The work is heavily referenced and performs a complete review of the existing scholarly literature around Ovid, *galanterie*, salon culture and the rising influence of women, and the Quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns. The introduction lays out the author’s main premises involving the representation of the life of Ovid in seventeenth-century France and continues with an explanation of her methodology, one in which she organizes her source material by genre. The first chapter, “Lives after Life,” provides a survey of the lives of Ovid written over time, beginning with his own in his (presumably) autobiographical poetry and continuing with descriptions of how this initial version came to be modified during late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. This chapter then turns to its main focus, the Latin-language humanist *vitae* devoted to Ovid in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century France. These *vitae* were later reprinted as introductory matter to both Latin and translated versions of the works of Ovid. Vernacular-language authors then used these *vitae* as models for composing their own versions of Ovid’s life, French-language *vies*, drawing from the multiple layers of source material those bits that suited their often polemical purposes. Taylor therefore shows how strong a role the interpretative voice of the author played even in the composition of biographical works such as authors’ *vies*. This is all the more striking in Ovid’s particular case since he himself created an “unstable” (p. 19) authorial persona in his own works, “troubling...the distinction between fact and fiction” (p. 19), creating a “deliberately complex pact with the reader” (p. 29), and thereby inviting “readerly interpretation” (p. 19).

Chapter two, “Translating Ovid,” also focuses on the depictions of Ovid in paratextual materials found in the prefaces to seventeenth-century French translations of his poetry. Expanding on chapter one’s focus on the specific and strict genre of the *vie*, Taylor turns here to other sorts of textual representations of the biography and persona of Ovid: poems, portraits, and a variety of other original forms that developed over the course of the seventeenth century. It is here that Taylor begins to build her strong case that the figure of Ovid was often used by those in the Modernist camp as a “figure associated with...innovation and change” (p. 17), principally as it relates to evolving theories of how best to translate ancient poets. She examines three specific moments of Ovid translation and accompanying representational material: first, the translations of the 1620s by such authors as Jacques Du Perron, le Sieur de Bellefleur, and Nicolas Renouard, which sought both to translate Ovid faithfully and to adapt him to “contemporary taste” in order to better “please the audience” (p. 47). This adaptive method also proved useful for illuminating the capacities of the French language to express all manner of thought and all genres of noble poetry, in a current reminiscent of the French humanist Joachim Du Bellay. Such translations included in their prefaces *avertissements*, dedicatory epistles, and poems which made plain the authors’ sympathies as they pertained to various details of the biography of Ovid. Second, Taylor considers the burlesque parodic translations of Ovid’s poetry composed in mid-century by Louis Richer, Charles Dassoucy, and Du Four de la Crespelière. Dassoucy’s version of the *Metamorphoses*, for example, included a burlesque engraving, depicting Ovid in contemporary garb, conflating the boundary between

ancient and modern and thereby claiming Ovid for the superior Moderns, given that he among all ancient poets was considered to be the most “transgressive” and “provocative” (p. 64). The final section of this chapter evaluates the *galant* translations of Ovid’s love poetry undertaken toward the end of the century. This affinity for Ovid on the part of *galant* poets such as Nicolas Bourdin, Thomas Corneille, and Etienne de Martignac is ascribed by Taylor to the fact that “Ovid’s poetry proved a rich tool with which to explore...the parameters of both the aesthetic and ethical codes *galanterie* espoused” (p. 70). That is, Ovid’s dualistic love poetry could be alternatively considered “refined and courteous, privileging the female addressee” (pp. 70-71) and “erotic, licentious, and parodic” (p. 71), thereby testing the limits of the acceptable and the *bienséant* for the *galant* poets charged with appealing above all to the women of the contemporary salon.

“Ovid in Fiction” is the theme of chapter three, in which Taylor traces how the story of Ovid’s life and exile was fictionalized within the *histoires galantes* composed by women authors of the late seventeenth century such as Madame de Villedieu and Anne de la Roche-Guilhen. Here, too, the figure of Ovid is used as a stand-in for debates on other pressing issues, such as the role of women as both authors and as constructed addressees of *galant* fiction and poetry, as well as “the boundaries between history and fiction” (p. 17) in the emerging genre of the *histoire galante*. Once again, the case of Ovid tended to be employed by these women “to explore the complexities of the gender dynamics of both *galanterie* and their own situations as writing women” (p. 79). Furthermore, Ovid’s status as an exiled poet allowed them to examine power differentials at court, both between monarch and courtier and between men and women.

Ovid as a poet of exile is the focus of chapter four, “The Exile Writes Back,” in which Taylor studies the autobiographical poetry of Théophile de Viau and Roger de Bussy-Rabutin, both exiled at opposite ends of the century for the content of their writings. In their exile poems, they used the figure of Ovid in an attempt to align themselves with the ancient poet and thereby burnish their suffering reputations and “elicit sympathy” (p. 17) from their respective audiences and monarchs. Here again, Taylor links the particular to the general, extrapolating from the specific case of these two poets’ use of Ovid to larger questions of the “problematic relationship between *homme* and *œuvre*” (p. 18), and whether scandalous and (seemingly) autobiographical poetry should ever properly be associated with the character of the poet himself. Moreover, references on the part of these authors to Ovid’s legitimate questioning of Augustus’s authority can be interpreted as oblique contestations of the authority of Louis XIV, highlighting the “relative authority, over both the present and the future, of the poet’s words and a monarch’s actions” (p. 140). Such poets attempted to suggest that the power of the pen would prove more lasting and influential than the fleeting, temporally limited power of even the absolute monarch.

Chapter five, “Ovid and Historiography,” focuses on the genre of the biographical dictionary and spotlights Pierre Bayle’s entry on Ovid in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1690s). By showing how Bayle sought and yet failed to resolve any remaining mystery or ambiguity surrounding the circumstances of Ovid’s exile, Taylor reveals how the historiographical discourse of the late seventeenth century began to grapple with the limits of authority and positivist knowledge and the overlapping of fact and fictionalization: “Ovid was a productive figure in debates about how to write about the ancient past not only because he was ancient, but because he posed questions about narrative, authority, and the representation of historical fact” (p. 18). Taylor shows how Bayle’s multi-voiced and ambivalent portrait of Ovid “reveals the

limitations of historiography...by stressing that history is made up of narrative, which renders readerly interpretation inevitable” (p. 147). Bayle comes to purport that all depictions of Ovid, including his own of himself, are unescapably, and perhaps purposefully, fictional, speculative, hypothetical, and imaginative (p. 154).

Helena Taylor’s detailed, erudite, and methodical study of the representations of Ovid’s life and persona in seventeenth-century France will be relevant to any student or scholar who desires a firmer understanding of the importance to the period of ancient culture in general and of Ovid in particular. She links early modern French understanding of Ovid to larger questions of the limits of authority and knowledge, contemporary processes of translation and historiography, the place of the poet in relation to his literary persona and to his sovereign, and the dynamic processes of readerly response and interpretation. Taylor thereby successfully shows how the uses of Ovid in seventeenth-century France uncover key moments in the development of the Modernist, *galant*, and woman-centered spirit of the period.

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