
In the past decades the letters composed by Ovid’s heroines have become increasingly popular with Latinists, whether peeping Toms or sympathetic sisters. First the authors of the single letters “lost their innocence” (James Reeson), then the paired letters came into focus. The Epistulae Heroidum gave rise to inspired discussions of reading and writing, elegy and epic, gender and text, both in studies and commentaries. As far as I know, this commentary by Andreas Michalopoulos (henceforth AM) on Heroides 16 and 17, Paris to Helen and Helen’s reply, is the next youngest member of the family after Pestelli’s (2007; 8); among older siblings we find the Green-Yellows by Knox (1995; 1, 2, 5-7, 10-1, and Ep. Sapphus) and Kenney (1996; 16-21), the Italian commentaries by Barchiesi (1992; 1-3), Casali (1995; 9), Bessone (1995; 12), and Rosati (1996; 18-9), and the Brill ones by Heinz (1997; 12) and Reeson (2001; 11, 13 and 15). The next off shoot may well be that by AM’s brother Charilaos (4 and 7).

In a substantial Introduction AM discusses literary and linguistic matters, followed by a Text and apparatus and the 250-page Commentary, which forms the bulk of this book. This commentary is elaborate, learned, and useful. That it does not convince me on every account, and that, inevitably, I have some criticisms of details does not detract from its explanatory and interpretative value. I have somewhat more difficulty with certain linguistic questions in the introduction and especially with the text and textual matters.

The introduction largely omits questions of authenticity and datation (justifiably so), in order to concentrate on the two poems themselves, their interrelationship and more general literary aspects of Ovidian male and female epistolarity. AM comments on the letters’ relations to the Aeneid, and on Paris as both Aeneas and Dido (the writer of Heroides 7), and also on Helen as Dido. His interpretations of the correspondence as a power game between the two, his reconstruction of the dramatic dates of the letters and the implications in terms of humour and dramatic irony (in the wake of scholars such as Farrell, Rosati and especially Barchiesi), the intertextualities with elegiac poetry, and in particular with the Ars (a relationship emphasized in Cornelia Hintermeier’s 1993 book on Briefpaare), are well worth reading, especially his discussion of metapoetical and intratextual relations between Heroides 16-7 and 5, Oenone’s letter to Paris.

Sometimes AM seems slightly to overstate his case: does eastern splendour “inevitably” (p. 11) recall Aeneas—as his enemies see him? Is Ovid’s version really the first and only time that we can see the story in a way different from traditional mythology (25)—after the tragic poets, Simonides, Gorgias, etc.? The statement “Even the differences between the two letters [7 and 16] emphasize

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their relationships” (p. 16) in itself suggests some rather far-fetched interpretations. On the other hand, on some literary issues AM’s views could be a bit more sophisticated, such as authorial intention, fictionality, focalisation: How can Paris-Ovid introduce double-entendres deliberately and Helen-Ovid do the same unconsciously (32)? What are the implications of Heroides 5 filling in the gaps of the story of 16 and 17 (37; but the examples on 38-9 are good)? AM’s remarks on the Alexandrian footnotes memini and repeto remain a bit on the surface (34-5).

The section on “Style” is the weakest of the introduction, I think. Here, and throughout the commentary, linguistics is reduced to the impressionistic sticking of old-fashioned rhetorical labels on words and combinations of words without any theory, definitions or quantifications. One does not have to be a hard-core supporter of modern linguistics such as functional grammar or discourse theory to realize that this kind of approach does not bring into focus the characteristics of Heroides 16-7, or of all the letters, or of Ovid’s elegiac poetry. Actually a combined approach from a literary perspective (epistolarity, time, focalisation) and a discourse-linguistic perspective (tense, deictic elements, stance) could certainly be fruitful for the Heroides. AM’s distinctions between “Rhetorical Figures”, “Antithesis”, “Sententiae” and “Language” (!!) in 58-74 are unclear. Under these headings we find instances of figures as diverse as alliteration and litotes, repetition and first person plural. Categories are vague, statements impressionistic: apart from the notion ‘style’ itself, hyperbaton, for instance, is circumscribed as dislocated word order (74). Dislocated in respect to what? Or of what is “a symptomatic case [of synecdoche, 62]” a symptom? Prosaic and colloquial are equated. The presence of poetic plurals is “not particularly felt” (65), and phrases are qualified as “readily recognizable as typically Ovidian”. If many features are quite common in Latin poetry or in Ovid (polysyndeton, postposition of particles and relatives), what is the use of heaping instances from Heroides 16-7? Or if chiasmus “is very frequent” in Heroides 16-7, but the word-order a-b-a-b is “as frequent” (71-2), how could either of them tell us anything about Ovid’s way of writing poetry here? In this whole discussion of ‘style’ it remains unclear whether instances are exhaustive or not, and no statistics are given.

My other difficulty with this book is with the text, or rather the apparatus and the textual criticism in the commentary. If the text of the Epistulae is “an unholy mess” (L. Morris), this may also be stated of AM’s apparatus. AM has “consulted” the editions by Palmer, Dörrie, Showerman/Goold, Rosati and Kenney (but not Bornecque, Giomini or Häuptli, though the first two put in one unexpected appearance at 17.17), and he has included all of these into his apparatus, on a par with manuscript readings and conjectures. I cannot imagine why anyone consulting this book would wish to know which text is printed by these five other editors. For all information on text and transmission AM refers to other literature; there is