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Heather James. *Ovid and the Liberty of Speech in Shakespeare's England.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. x + 287 pp. ISBN 9781108487627. £74.99 hardback.

by Massimiliano Riviera

Not unlike Milton's *Areopagitica* detecting in Ovid's *relegatio* the first symptom of tyranny in the Roman Empire, Heather James's *Ovid and the Liberty of Speech in Shakespeare's England* sees through the much-discussed figure of Ovid the erotic poet and pays careful attention to the political edge of his works and their reception. In this superb new monograph, James puts at the center of her analysis the Greek concept of *Parrhesia*—*licentia*, for the Romans, “fearless speech” (9) for Foucault—and reflects on how Elizabethan poets turned to Ovid, its priest and its martyr, to engage with their own liberty of expression. Poetry is, James argues, a mode of engagement with freedom of speech, and Elizabethan poets—aware of the similarities between their own age and that of Augustus—took “deliberative liberties with decorous and often authoritarian forms of speech” and, in doing so, created “a new space for thinking about the liberty of speech in the domain of fiction” (5). James outlines this new model for working on the intersection between political philosophy and Elizabethan poetry in five chapters that range from the work of Edmund Spenser to that of Ben Jonson, before finally bringing her study to an end with a brief but incisive incursion into the poetry of the Restoration.

In the first chapter, James sees the *utile* in stanzas that are usually dismissed as undiluted *dulce*, finding “flower power” in Spenser's “lush flowerbeds of poetry” (20). Or, rather, she sees the *utile* in the *dulce*: reading lush lines from his two entomological *Complaints* (“Virgils Gnat” and “Muiopotmos”), the episode of the Garden of Adonis in *The Faerie Queene*, and *The Shepheardes Calender*, James finds moments in which

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Spenser ostensibly refuses to moralize, thus eluding the expectations set on allegory and epic. Particularly convincing is James's reading of Hobbinol's tribute in the "Aprill" eclogue of the *Calender*, in which a stanza usually read in praise of Eliza(beth) turns into mourning for the silence of the fellow poet Colin. This is paradigmatic of the chapter's argument: by withholding or misplacing what James calls "floral gatherings" (21), Spenser's occasional refusal to write poetry that is politically teleological betrays a dissatisfaction with patrons and nurtures the utopic dream of a new model of patronage based on freedom of expression. After all, as James acutely observes in her compelling analysis of "Muiopotmos," Arachne must admit her own defeat after having seen the iridescent butterfly Pallas has embroidered in her tapestry: it is because she can foster freedom for poetic wit that all-powerful Athena wins the contest.

The second chapter, "Loving Ovid: Marlowe and the Liberties of Erotic Elegies," raises the stakes: the importance of Christopher Marlowe's translation of Ovid's *Amores* for late-sixteenth-century poetry has long been demonstrated, and now James discloses their political dimension. The chapter outlines how the erotic elegies were—both for Ovid and Marlowe—the "first venture into the politics implicit in poetic license" (61) and by pretending to dismiss them as *ioci* or "toyes" their authors polemically used them as weapons against "the tyrannical dimensions of a state that ... inhibits the liberties of its own subjects" (60). It is in this disguise that, in James's persuasive reading, the resonances of the *Amores* remerge in Marlowe's own *Edward II*, *Doctor Faustus* and, to a lesser extent, *Tamburlaine*. In *Edward II*, Ovid's erotic poems provide "the language of desire for and diffidence about power" (77) that the barons use to discuss the relationship between the king and Gaveston. In *Doctor Faustus*, James shows the shift of the protagonist who, after having accepted the medieval moralization of Ovid's aspiring figures (Daedalus, Phaethon, Icarus) for most of the play, discovers the "liberty of speech and imagination in Ovid" (89) in his final words before damnation, introduced by a line from the *Amores* and studded with metamorphic images. This chapter also has the merit of reassessing the web of influences among the group of poets that started writing as Elizabeth I's reign drew to a close. James downplays the ideas of poetic rivalry among Elizabethan poets—always at odds with the collaborative practices in contemporary playhouses—to focus on community: "ambitious poets," she writes, "were allies in a project to expand and extend the authority of imaginative writing in the vernacular" (55). In doing so she

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also diminishes, if not entirely dismisses, the extent of the fracture between Spenser and Marlowe, which in turn helps to bridge the gap between the first chapter and the more cohesive unit of the other four.

The third and fourth chapters discuss *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, plays belonging to contrasting genres but united “by the shared ambition to bring Ovid’s audacious play with the rhetorical, sexual, and political proprieties of Augustan Rome to Shakespeare’s London and stage” (140). In Chapter 3, James sees in Juliet the first Shakespearean character shaped in relation to Ovid and, more specifically, “the tragic protagonist who most fully inherits Marlowe’s bold Ovidianism” (101). In a feat of textual scholarship, James finds the emergence of Juliet’s Ovidian girlhood in her extended (or untruncated) speeches in the second quarto from 1599 (the year in which the Bishops’ Ban hit Marlowe’s *Amores*). These speeches “form an extended but implicit argument about the liberties and duties of subjects in the family and the state” (118) that finds its origin in Ovid’s characterizations of Medea, Scylla, Iphis, Byblis and Myrrha as heroines who also wrestled with patriarchal order and socially treacherous love. In her gripping and rigorous reading, James argues that Shakespeare uses Juliet to interrogate and shape the future of late-Elizabethan theatre, recasting Marlowe’s parrhesiastic rebels as a head-strong teenage girl played by a boy actor. While Juliet incarnates the erotic elegies and Marlowe’s mediation in Shakespeare’s reading, in *Dream* Shakespeare prioritizes, as James shows in Chapter 4, his own relationship with *Metamorphoses*, the anti-epic that “presents a mandate for creative dissent from paternal authority in the family, the state, and its educational system” (145). If Bottom undergoes the most overt metamorphosis and the rude mechanicals bring Ovid’s wit to the stage, it is Hermia and Helena that inherit Juliet’s Ovidian love of liberty of speech: an inheritance they demonstrate while arguing their case before Theseus in the first act and later on while conversing parrhesiastically in the woods about their feelings and desires. As for Juliet, there is a price to pay in the final act: when their wishes are granted, and they are recast in maternal roles, Hermia and Helena lose their distinctive voices and a context in which speaking boldly can offer rewards. Incidentally, it would be interesting to see James explore this final point in relation to other examples in Shakespeare’s plays: in particular, the change in the relationship between Lorenzo and Jessica after they elope to Belmont and their Ovidian-themed

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skirmish in Act 5, Scene 1 of *The Merchant of Venice* would complement and counterbalance nicely her point concerning Hermia and Helena's post-nuptial fate.

The final chapter reassess Jonson's much-speculated rejection of Ovid, whom, James argues, he places "in the company of classical Rome's moral authorities" (184) precisely for the liberties he took in his poems. Relying more extensively on archival work than in previous chapters, James uses Jonson's marginalia (albeit not always to their full potential) to uncover his attentive reading of more salacious poets, including Ovid, and his support of commentators who praised the Roman elegist and scoffed at his punishment. It is precisely Ovid's *relegatio* and exilic poetry that seems to preoccupy Jonson: in his lyric collection *The Forest* the undercurrent tapestry of allusions to Ovid's poems spans through his whole oeuvre, but it is the complaints written from Tomis that set the melancholic tone. James also notices how in *Poetaster* the prologue ostensibly shifts the action from contemporary England to Augustan Rome, which is the first step Jonson takes to make the play political. Horace might emerge as the exemplary poet, but Jonson rebels against the Bishops' Ban from two years earlier by quoting *Amores* in Marlowe's banished translation, which he saves from the fire just as the child actor playing Ovid saves the burning pages containing the elegies. This radical act from a playwright, who had experienced personally the limits of liberty of speech and the consequences of transgressing them, complicates the distaste of Ovid usually attributed to him. James makes a strong case for a reevaluation of Ovid, not just as a political figure but also, and Jonson would agree, as a moral one when speaking truth to power becomes necessary.

In the epilogue, James moves to the third quarter of the seventeenth century to discuss the "radical changes possible in the social contract that emerge from the interaction of women with Ovid" in the hands of Milton and the "insufficiently known" Anne Wharton (238). Almost fifteen years after Mandy Green discussed *Milton's Ovidian Eve*, James goes one step further in describing Milton's Republican Eve. Although her observations suffer from the constraint of brevity and being relegated into an epilogue, James intriguingly goes beyond a Pauline reading of the line "He for God only, she for God in him," mapping a political interpretation that sees in Adam's body the image of absolutism, while in Eve's body—biblically made in God's image and Miltonically conceived as layer upon layer of Ovidian references—the suggestion of

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republicanism and the “sovereignty of every human being” (242).¹ After having found new depths in seemingly exhausted texts, James turns her attentive eyes to Wharton, whose state of critical neglect is unlikely to remain such for much longer. In her play *Love’s Martyr* (unpublished until 1997), Wharton shifts the attention from Ovid to Julia, Augustus’s (grand-)daughter who faced similar accusations and a similar sentence. Like Jonson, Wharton imagines Julia and Ovid as lovers, but casts the young woman as both protagonist and protector of liberty of speech in the tragedy. She might have turned to Shakespeare to learn about jealousy, but Wharton’s reading of Ovid is highly original and chiefly her own: her idea of love as candor and emotional transparency, James demonstrates, comes from the exile poems (thus bypassing the Marlovian focus on the elegies), and in the finale Julia herself becomes an Ovid-like figure that, like the narrator of the *Metamorphoses*, predicts her immortality through poetry. *Love’s Martyr* is not only an exciting addition to the canon, but also a cogent assessment of the political implication of Ovidian liberty of speech from a writer whose gender limited its expression.

While very occasionally we lose sight of *parrhesia*, James’s important monograph stands out in an overcrowded field for the clarity of her readings and the depth of her own Ovidianism: she is equally at ease when discussing Ovid among both his Augustan contemporaries and his Renaissance (and, in her discussion on *Doctor Faustus*, medieval) translators, readers, and commentators. This scrupulous command of the material is strongly underpinned by her detailed knowledge of Ovid’s exilic poetry (*Tristia*, *Ex Ponto*, *Ibis*), with which Elizabethan poets tended to have much more familiarity than many of their modern critics. And, speaking of the difference between Renaissance and contemporary readers, Elizabeth Fowler has complained about the fact that the boundaries among academic disciplines seem to be harder to cross today than in Elizabethan England: she would not find such a flaw in this book, as James moves swiftly but incisively between literature and political philosophy, while also offering insights that will benefit not just readers interested in classical reception and the history of freedom of speech, but also, among others, scholars of the theatre, translation studies, and book historians.

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¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler, second edition (London: Longman, 1998), Book IV, l.299, p. 238.