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Review
Reviewed Work(s): The Curse of Exile: A Study of Ovid's "Ibis" by Gareth D. Williams
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GARETH D. WILLIAMS, *The Curse of Exile: a Study of Ovid's* Ibis. The Cambridge Philological Society (Suppl. Vol. 19), 1996. 146 p. Pr. £25,–. (pb).

Among Ovid's works of exile there is a 642 line poem on an enemy called *Ibis*. This curse poem, clearly modelled on Hellenistic *arai* and full of partly abstruse mythological allusions, has never met with much scholarly interest or enthusiasm. Therefore, a new study on the *Ibis* seems a worthwhile and sympathetic undertaking.

In five chapters, Gareth Williams (W.) analyses the poem and its role in Ovid's exile poetry. He rejects the common view that it is merely a *jeu d'esprit* and a strictly literary display of verbal artistry. The countless mythological punishments invoked upon Ibis reflect, he argues, a condition of perverse obsessiveness on the part of "the poetic persona", and form a "display of an irrational psychology erupting in violence" (p. 23). The anger and the desire for revenge cannot be satisfied and inevitably render futile the cursing exercise. This leads to frustration and provokes the endless series of ever changing torments, which are intended to have a profound psycho-

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logical impact on the enemy but which also threaten Ovid himself: the obsessional hatred, W. argues, potentially becomes more ruinous for him than it ever could be for his enemy. It will be obvious by now that W.'s basic line of interpretation is a psychological and psychoanalytical one. This approach has the benefit of presenting a coherent view on the poem as a whole. The long catalogue of mythological *exempla*, for instance, often lightly dismissed as pointless, here appears to be firmly linked to the rest.

Nonetheless, I have some doubts about W.'s results. First, the question of the identity of *Ibis* remains rather inconclusive. It is, admittedly, fruitless to speculate about 'the real Roman' behind the pseudonym (there is simply no decisive clue in the text), whereas Housman may have been a bit too rigid in declaring Ibis a purely imaginary character. But when W. opts for a "fictional creation who nevertheless symbolically represents real people" (p. 19), he merely leaves us with an elusive 'Ibis', who remains somewhere halfway between real and unreal. It is not only 'Ibis' who remains a problem, much the same goes for 'Ovid'. As a matter of principle, W. clearly distinguishes between the 'poetic I' in the text and the historical person Ovid (e.g. on p. 115), although in many places this distinction tends to get quite blurred. But even if it is not the real Ovid who gradually succumbs to melancholy and mania, but only his poetic narrator who is styled and presented in such a state, this would nonetheless imply a profound psychological insight and interest on Ovid's part. Can we believe this? Even W. himself, in discussing violent scenes in the *Met.* and the *Ibis*, accuses Ovid of a lack of real empathy, as his scenes are "technically brilliant but emotionally shallow" (p. 83).

For my part, I am not convinced that this poem is a sort of exercise in practical psychology. Its norms and aims are, surely, literary, and follow the conventions of Ovid's own days. These norms are, obviously, far removed from our modern standards, as is the case in most Silver Latin literature. Generally speaking, W. takes Ovid's curses far too seriously, so it seems, and judges them as a modern psychiatrist. But in examining poetical scenes of violence and malediction, they should best not be labeled "obsessive", let alone "tasteless" (p. 83). Freudian vocabulary ("frustrated emotions", "irrational obsession", "sadistic", "masochistic") should be avoided as far as possible, if we wish to gain a better understanding of these texts.

But this may be the heart of the matter: not all readers will necessarily share this aim at all times. They may rather want to learn

more about themselves and reflect upon their own emotions and convictions by means of the ancient texts. This is, of course, a perfectly legitimate approach. But I want to emphasize that it does not advance our state of knowledge on the texts themselves: it only adds to the corpus of readers' responses to them. Since there are not so many readers' responses to Ovid's *Ibis* in the first place, W.'s book is a welcome contribution. One of its merits certainly is that it has reclaimed serious attention for this poem. But if we want to understand the *Ibis* as a piece of ancient poetry, this study offers only little help.

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