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Home (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/index>)
 / Archives (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/issue/archive>)
 / 2020 Reviews (<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/issue/view/1982>)
 / Reviews

20.06.28 Reid, Shakespeare's Ovid and the Spectre of the Medieval

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Reid, Lindsay Ann. *Shakespeare's Ovid and the Spectre of the Medieval. Studies in Renaissance Literature*. Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2018. pp. xiii, 267. ISBN: 978-1-84384-518-8 (hardback).

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This book investigates a key point in the reception of the classics in early modern culture: the development and change in the reception of the Ovidian corpus from the late Middle Ages to the Renaissance. Lindsay Ann Reid charts this development by using a number of instances from the early works of William Shakespeare, and reconstructs the changes in a number of myths by looking not only at major medieval authors, such as Gower and Chaucer, but also at fifteenth-century and early Tudor rewritings and translations. Such an approach is timely and thoughtful, and the volume will be appreciated by both medievalists and students of early modern literature. In her attempt to "gauge how ostensibly *classical* allusions in Shakespeare's works are simultaneously inflected by the vocabulary and heuristics--as well as the hermeneutic and affective legacies--of *medieval* literature" (3), Reid shows us how we are perhaps making too much of the classical/medieval distinction, and invites us to look at classical reception in terms of developing and fluctuating patterns.

The Introduction has a very practical, calmly paced approach, while also offering a timely review of critical studies on the topic. Reid clearly states her aim, and explains her decision to focus on Shakespeare's early work, though recognising "medieval" influences also in the late plays. Perhaps for this reason, I was at first puzzled by her choice to begin her book with an analysis of a poem printed in 1672, *Chaucer's Ghoast*. She justifies this choice as offering her the opportunity to underline the ambiguity of the term *antiquity* in early modern usage, but the chronology, and the choice of an obviously loaded instance, makes me wonder if she did not need this to strengthen her point. The text under investigation is a curious semi-fake, deliberately presenting itself as an antiquarian piece. It does,

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however, offer the scholar a perfect opportunity to discuss the meaning of antiquity from an early modern perspective. The risk of working with case studies, especially when the case is a slightly bizarre, wholly forgotten text, is that of suiting the case to one's preconceived agenda. However, the discussion of this case study fully justifies the choice: the great merit of *Shakespeare's Ovid* is that Reid, while focusing on an individual text, never loses sight of the larger scenario. In this case, *Chaucer's Ghost*, offering twelve "Ovidian" fables in a pseudo-medieval retelling, is also a means to introduce a discussion on the status of English medieval literature in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century construction of the canon. Chaucer in particular is raised to the status of classical *auctoritas*, and Ovidianism becomes the marker of this status. But the study of this forgotten text also allows Reid to discuss the role of another medieval writer who remained central in early modern English literature, although his role is today somewhat overshadowed by Chaucer: John Gower. As Reid rightly notes, "Chaucer's and Gower's vernacular writings overlapped not only with one another's but also with Ovid's classical corpus" (27). If, in Chapter 2, I find the pairing of the Induction of *The Taming of the Shrew* with Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* less convincing, it is because the dream structure is a recurring motif in much medieval literature besides this particular text, so that any closer analogy may appear fortuitous, rather than being the result of deliberate borrowing; I found the analogy between Chaucer's poem and the description of Innogen's bedroom in *Cymbeline* far more persuasive.

The central part of the book proceeds by means of the analysis of individual instances in Shakespearean plays. As happens in the early chapters, these instances are never considered in isolation, but become cornerstones in the construction of a reliable portrait of Shakespeare's Ovidianism. Thus Reid takes us through a review of Shakespeare's actual knowledge of the Latin poet by way of his education, his acquaintance with classical languages, his use of the current translations (such as Arthur Golding's famous version of the *Metamorphoses*), but always reminding us that, if the standard Tudor educational curriculum was based on the study of the classics, the English medieval canon was as much part of Shakespeare's cultural heritage as what he might have learned at school. Chapter 3 focuses on *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and especially on Julia's fictitious account of her playing the female role in a theatrical rendition of the Theseus and Ariadne story, a story featuring in Ovid's *Heroides*. Reid's reading of the Ovidian passage is impressive, as is her study of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, which underlines how the image of Theseus developed in medieval imagination. The critic carefully explores the development of the Theseus-Ariadne myth from Ovid to Shakespeare by way not only of Boccaccio, Chaucer and Gower, but also of Chaucer's disciple, John Lydgate, of the early European printers such as Colard Mansion and William Caxton, and of early Tudor writers such as Thomas Elyot, too often overlooked in studies of Shakespeare's reception of the English medieval legacy. It is an impressive reconstruction, embracing also a number of European analogues; starting from an individual scene in Shakespeare's early play, Reid's analysis comes to embrace the motif as it recurs not only in Shakespeare's early (*Midsummer Night's Dream*) and late (*Two Noble Kinsmen*) work, but also in post-Shakespearean works such as Beaumont and Fletcher's *Maid's Tragedy*. The postclassical reception of Ovid is thus beautifully highlighted, as we see how Theseus turns into an oath-breaker, and the character of Phaedra is added to the story to transform the lovers' confrontation into a love triangle.

Chapter 4 turns its attention on the myth of Philomela as explored in Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*. This gives Reid the opportunity to expand on the theme of dawn as a motif in the amatory context. The original source is Ovid's *Amores* 1.13. Reid retraces similar motifs in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, whose Book 4 explicitly reworks the Ovidian passage, and more controversially in

Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*. If this chapter is less interesting than the previous one, it may be because *Troilus* is among the most studied of Chaucer's works, and Reid is slightly overwhelmed by the range of critical studies at her disposal. In the last chapter, the relation of *Twelfth Night* 1.5 with Ovid's and medieval versions of the Narcissus myth is analysed. This chapter is notable for its scope: the writer goes from Latin to French to Middle English to Italian culture, teasing out parallels and analogies from an incredibly wide range of texts.

The very spectrum employed by Reid, as she moves from classical to early modern writers, shows Shakespeare not as the end-point of a cultural development, but as one instance of a much wider and articulate movement. While doing so, Reid constantly offers also an updated excursus on critical studies. This feels occasionally a little pedantic, as the author from time to time gets slightly bogged down by critical jargon, but it makes this book an invaluable repository. At the same time, it allows her to define and gauge the scope of her book, though her reiterations made me occasionally wonder whether she did not need reassurance on this point. For the same reason, I found her occasional reference to the book under scrutiny by title (in sentences such as "the convoluted intertextual dynamic under scrutiny throughout *Shakespeare's Ovid and the Spectre of the Medieval* is well encapsulated...", 72) slightly irritating and repetitious. These are, however, very minor quibbles.

The study proceeds by a number of parallel lines: a more traditional, historically-based close reading of the texts goes hand in hand with a study of paratextual material, book layout, and typographical presentation that is much indebted to recent work such as that by Ann Coldiron. Occasionally the author feels the need to invoke masters of critical theory, as in the case of Derrida's celebrated ghost. Some variations in tone and approach may be attributed to the fact that, as the author acknowledges in the prefatory material, various chapters were born in different moments and for different occasions, so that, bizarrely, chapter 1 feels much more mature and sophisticated in its approach than chapter 5. In the Afterword, Reid dwells at length on a copy of the Aldine edition of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, sometimes said to have belonged to Shakespeare, on the basis of its frontispiece, which bears what some scholars have interpreted as the playwright's abbreviated signature. Rather than adding to the somewhat tortuous palaeographic history of the volume, Reid muses on the probability of Shakespeare having actually owned, if not this, an analogous volume--a meditation that irresistibly brought to my mind the Italian proverb, *se non è vero è ben trovato*. As with the study of *Chaucer's Ghost* in the first chapter, the attempt seems to draw much meaning from a comparatively marginal instance. Reid concludes her work by stating that her aim has been "not to summarily dismiss but rather to interrogate and complicate the implications of the direct and 'special' [...] relationship between Shakespeare and Ovid" (209), and her work throughout has been driven by this generous curiosity, occasionally at the expense of a more streamlined structure. Reid's scholarship, curiosity and intellectual generosity make this book a precious contribution to the study of the relation of Shakespeare with his literary sources.

Issue
2020 Reviews (https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/issue/view/1982)
Section

Reviews

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