

## Vergil and Ovid: Poets of Their Times, and of Ours

The notion that Vergil's poetry is peculiarly emblematic of the Augustan age is in some sense a permanent feature of the thought world of Western Civilization. On the other hand, until very recently it was not unusual to regard Ovid as a somewhat belated and frivolous follower of the earlier Augustans, especially Vergil, and so as a harbinger of the "debased" literary culture of the "Silver Age" who does not adequately represent the ideals and accomplishments of Augustus' regime. But though such ideas continue to be discussed and debated with increasing nuance, and particularly among specialists, the conception of these poets relative to one another has changed significantly. Almost a quarter-century ago, Fergus Millar (1993: 1) pointed out that Ovid alone among the "Augustan" poets actually spent his entire career writing under the principate, and that it is he, if anyone, who best exemplifies and bears witness to the nature of Augustus' regime. By the same token, it has become more common to stress Vergil's formation as a "Triumviral" poet and even, according to Stephen Hinds, as a pre-Ovidian poet in important respects, literary as well as political. It would be obviously wrong to say that scholarly and critical attention to Vergil has actually abated in recent decades to any important extent, but during that time Ovid's fortunes have certainly risen considerably.

It can be, and has been, asked to what extent this change in perception corresponds to a better understanding of the two poets themselves, brought about by (so to speak) objective advances in research and criticism, or whether it is the result of a much broader change in the context of reception defined by our culture as a whole, quite apart from any developments that might be peculiar to the field of Classics. It was once common to disparage "pessimistic" interpretations of Vergil in particular as ahistorical reflections of a mentality defined by the New Left and the protest culture of the 1960s. Subsequent discussion of that issue has produced an

awareness, difficult to refute, that both sides of this debate, the “optimists” as well as the “pessimists,” take their bearings from reactions to contemporary political events, especially World War II and the Vietnam War. On both sides, the Vergilian themes of duty, loyalty, sacrifice, and group identity have been paramount concerns. It is tempting to map this scholarly *disputatio* onto the highly polarized political climate of the Cold War era. By the same token, in the initially unipolar, now increasingly multipolar, chaotic, and insecure environment that has prevailed since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the destruction of the World Trade Center, Ovidian themes of unpredictable change, alienation, and self-absorption seem to speak with increased urgency to contemporary readers and interpreters.

In addition to sketching this landscape of reception in greater detail, I will attempt to illuminate this issue further by commenting on the shared Vergilian and Ovidian themes of love and exile. The result, I hope, will be to make better sense of the ways in which critical reactions to these poets have changed in recent years, and perhaps to guess at what the next few years may have in store.

#### Bibliography

Millar, Fergus. 1993. “Ovid and the *Domus Augusta*: Rome Seen from Tomoi.” *JRS* 83: 1-17.