
The third volume of Donald Hill’s edition of Ovid’s Metamorphoses in the Aris and Phillips series follows the same pattern as the earlier volumes. It has a brief eight-page introduction (printed more or less unchanged in each volume), outlining Ovid’s life and works, explaining the dactylic hexameter, and giving the rationale of the text, translation and notes; a readable standard text without serious pretensions to originality but benefiting from access to drafts of Tarrant’s forthcoming OCT; a facing line-by-line translation into a loose six-beat blank-verse metre; and fairly extensive notes (at the average rate of one page of notes to forty lines of text) of which the declared purpose is to elucidate passages likely to be unclear and to trace Ovid’s sources and his influence on literature and art. There is a bibliography of authors frequently cited amounting to some ninety items, many of which are editions or translations of authors other than Ovid.

The problem for any commentator on a classical text is to define the target reader, and this problem is exacerbated in the Aris and Phillips series which aims to serve the needs of the student working in translation as well as the Latinist. The acknowledgement of the former group in Hill’s introduction reads somewhat strangely (‘and some readers will surely fall into that category’, 8) but he has clearly had them in mind both in his translation and in his notes. The notes contain almost none of the grammatical explanations which the Latin student might have found helpful but they do include some discussions of textual matters and a large amount of comment on style (including transferred epithets, polyptoton, jingles, word order, parenthesis, simile, metaphor, technical terms, syllepsis, metonymy, and so on).

Hill evidently believes that the appreciation of Ovid’s style is an important aim for the translation student. The translation is written in such a way as to mirror the style of the Latin as closely as possible: Hill states in his introduction that he has ‘tried to preserve either the order of Ovid’s words or his sentence structure, whichever seemed more significant in each case’ (7). He has also sought to reproduce Ovid’s variations in diction,
translating poetic, archaic, coined or common Latin words by English words of similar character. However, the result is, to the reviewer’s ear at least, stilted rather than poetic, and students working primarily from the translation will not find it easy or graceful. This is Hill’s version of the first twelve lines of Book 9:

What was the reason for the god’s groans, asked the Neptunian hero, and for his mutilated forehead; the Calydonian river began thus
to him, his dishevelled hair wreathed with bulrushes:  
‘It is a grim favour you seek; for who that has been conquered would be willing  
5 to recall his battles? Even so, I shall tell it in order, and it was not so shameful to be conquered as it is glorious to have striven, and so great a conqueror gives me great solace.  
If in talk there has come by name to your ears some Deianira, she was once a most beautiful maiden  
10 and the jealous hope of many suitors.  
And when with them the house of the sought after father-in-law had been entered,  
“Take me for a son-in-law,” I said, “O son of Parthaon.”

This is an accurate translation (indeed, Hill scores very highly in this respect), and it would actually serve very well as an aid to students picking their way through the Latin. In places, for example in line 11, it verges on ‘translationese’, but the literalness of that line turns out from the note to be deliberate: Hill is reproducing Ovid’s curious domus est intrata (for domum intraui), but one wonders whether the point was worth making. Hill also points out in the notes where the translation has for one reason or another not done justice to the original, but this becomes a laborious process. For example, the note on line 7 apologises for the ‘ugly jingle’ in the translation ‘great ... great’ (Latin magna ... tantus): why not replace the second ‘great’ by ‘much’ and have done with it?

According to the introduction the notes ‘make no pretence whatsoever of completeness and ... reflect one man’s tastes and prejudices’ (8). In fact, they contain a wealth of interesting and important material, and range far more widely than the introduction would suggest. Other versions of the myths (notably those by Apollodorus) are helpfully given in full in
translation, but apart from this sources and later influence are treated fairly briefly. The appropriate mythological, historical, and geographical information is duly given, and, in addition to the textual and stylistic comment mentioned above, echoes and imitations of other writers, notably of Horace and Virgil, are carefully noted, with parallel passages often quoted in translation. What Hill does not provide is the kind of ‘continuous reading’ of the various episodes provided in Anderson’s edition of Books 6-10, or any deeper analysis of them from a psychological, feminist, or narratological kind along the lines of more recent scholarship.

A complete English-language commentary on the Metamorphoses with a reliable text and a close translation is something to be warmly welcomed. One suspects that Hill’s edition will prove to be as useful to Latin students as to non-Latin ones; it will also be a handy first reference point for scholars working in other fields. The first volume of this edition was published in 1985, and the second and third have appeared at seven-year intervals, but the indications are that we shall not have to wait another seven years for the fourth and final volume covering Books 13 to 15. The whole will represent a considerable achievement.

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