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Review of Geraldine Herbert-Brown, *Ovid and the Fasti: An Historical Study*

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GERALDINE HERBERT-BROWN. *Ovid and the Fasti: An Historical Study*. Oxford Classical Monographs. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994. xiv + 249 pp.

This revised doctoral thesis is a learned and closely argued work that reads Ovid's *Fasti* essentially as a historical document. This clarity of purpose is at once the book's great strength and its principal weakness. To summarize the basic argument: The *Fasti* is a particularly reliable witness to the development of Augustan ideology. Its form not only attests the regime's use of the state calendar as a vehicle for propaganda, but is so inherently unpoetic that only under official compulsion can Ovid have accepted the challenge it presented. Passages written at Rome and dealing with Augustus himself and members of his family must closely reflect how the ruling house wished to be portrayed at any given time. The revisions made during Ovid's relegation to Tomis are pathetic attempts to curry favor on the part of a poet who is no longer in touch, with the result that they should be seen as producing exactly the opposite of their intended effect. Herbert-Brown's argument is set forth in five chapters—(1) Why *Fasti*? (2) Augustus, (3) Julius Caesar, (4) Livia, (5) Germanicus—a brief epilogue, and a substantial appendix on omissions in the *Fasti*, all of which are accompanied by a bibliography, an index of passages cited, and a general index. The book is well organized and produced, despite quite a few annoying typographical errors.

There is no question but that the author has a thorough command of the historical evidence that bears on her subject. Her imagination is vivid and detailed, her attempts to reconstruct the ideological forces that shaped Augustus' Principate and Ovid's poem always challenging and instructive. In placing the *Fasti* within this milieu she makes several important advances. Her method of assessing the presence of Julius Caesar in the poem (109–129) is exemplary, and the argument concerning Vesta (66–80) is in a similar class. But the author's claim "to have revealed how a mythology could be created to transform Republican titles into roles of monarchical stamp" (214) is overstated: that the Augustan regime relied on and worked to promote such a mythology is hardly a revelation. Nevertheless this study does manage to extend our understanding of how the state religion was manipulated so as to suggest that Augustus and his family ruled almost by divine right.

The idea that the unfinished, partially revised condition of the poem makes it not a snapshot of, but something like a running commentary on, a developing imperial ideology is a reasonable and promising hypothesis. On the other hand, the author's insistence on treating the *Fasti* only in this way seems to me to distort her understanding not only of the poem but to some extent even of the historical forces that shaped it. So intent is she on minimizing the poetic character of the *Fasti* that she argues, "It is difficult to believe that [Ovid] would choose something as problematic and unwieldy as the Roman calendar to set to verse unless extraneous pressure were being applied. For this reason it is

more feasible that Ovid's decision to produce a major work as a tribute to Caesar Augustus came first; his decision to versify the calendar was the result" (1). There are of course two glaringly obvious problems with these assumptions. In the first place, Roman poets had for a long time been following their Hellenistic predecessors in taking up challenging and unpoetic topics. The generation that preceded Ovid had produced wonderful poems that masqueraded as farming manuals, treatises of literary theory, astronomical guides, and so forth. Ovid too had already distinguished himself in the mock-didactic tradition; the more serious, but still light-hearted *Fasti* represents a greater challenge of a not dissimilar kind. In a related vein, Herbert-Brown's effort to distinguish the *Fasti* as much as possible from Callimachus' *Aetia* strikes me as particularly unfortunate. Differences, of course, there are, but when all is said, the *Fasti* is the single surviving ancient poem that most resembles Callimachus' fragmentary masterpiece, and an informed appreciation of their close relationship ought to enhance our understanding of both poems. Of course I have no wish to deny Ovid the credit he deserves as an innovator, but the fact is that the decision to write a calendar in verse was, by the norms of Hellenistic, Neoteric, and Augustan poetry, hardly as odd as Herbert-Brown would have us believe.

To admit as much, however, would be very inconvenient for her argument. If Ovid took up the challenge of versifying the calendar because he actually found the material promising and congenial, then there is no need to tie the project so closely to the imperial propaganda machine, and much more reason to entertain the possibility that we shall find throughout the poem evidence of the same irreverent sensibility that enlivens all of Ovid's other works. It follows that, absent a warrant to read every line of the poem as simple flattery (and in the case of the portions thought to have been revised in exile, increasingly abject and misguided flattery at that), Herbert-Brown's method is deprived of its theoretical justification.

Some sense of the book's strengths and weaknesses can be gained from its treatment of Livia. Augustus' wife appears six times in the *Fasti*, including one passage connected with the restoration of a temple to Bona Dea on 1 May (5.148-58). Now in general Herbert-Brown assumes that Ovid, under "extraneous pressure," was following the calendrical investigations of Verrius Flaccus; but in this case we have no evidence to support the assumption, and she in fact argues that Livia's name did not appear in any actual public calendar on this date. Nevertheless she insists that Ovid is accurately reflecting the wishes of the ruling household in mentioning Livia here. Must we infer then that Ovid, an equestrian by birth and a poetic craftsman who fully exploited the possibilities for irony afforded by his medium, was a more slavish mouthpiece of imperial propaganda than Verrius Flaccus, a freedman and a salaried employee in Augustus' household, whose calendar took the form not of an elegiac poem but of a public monument? Or does the inclusion of the event in one calendar but not

the other reflect Augustus' iron-fisted control over the production of both? On what basis would he have determined to include the event in one calendar but not the other? Did the restoration of the Bona Dea temple seem disadvantageous when the *Fasti Praenestini* was erected, but not when Ovid's poem was commissioned? If the author has answers to such questions, she does not give them, and her silence damages her argument.

Of course, Livia's family background made any reference to the Bona Dea a dicey matter: it was her wayward collateral ancestor P. Clodius Pulcher who disgraced the secret rites of Bona Dea in December, 62 B.C., on an occasion when they were celebrated in the home of Julius Caesar himself. It is therefore not hard to see why Verrius Flaccus might have thought it prudent simply to pass over any mention of Bona Dea as embarrassing to both sides of the ruling family. By the same token, it is far from obvious why Ovid would have felt the need to include it. But on the other hand, Livia evidently did restore the temple and thus did not shun association with the cult, and Herbert-Brown's reading of the Ovidian passage as consonant with a redemptive effort is not unattractive. Livia's action resonates with the theme of Augustus as restorer of temples and would seem, as Herbert-Brown argues, an appropriate form of atonement for the sins of the relevant Julian and Claudian ancestors. At the same time, focusing on the restoration of the Aventine temple in May distracts attention from Clodius' December escapades in the *Domus Publica*; whereas emphasizing the chastity of the Vestal Licinia, who had dedicated the original shrine (*Fasti* 5.155–56), argues against the lascivious conduct associated with the cult by some ancient sources. But it is difficult to maintain that Ovid's purpose was both to call attention to Livia's family connection with Clodius and to avoid noticing the stain that he had inflicted on the Bona Dea cult. These two motives, either of which alone might be the cornerstone of a straightforward public relations effort, when taken together are revealed not as complementary, but contradictory, and such mischievous gestures mark the work of the ironist.

For that matter, when one inspects the passage more closely, it seems that if unvarnished praise were his aim, Ovid might have found some way of mentioning the Aventine other than as the hill where "Remus had stood in vain at the time when you, birds of the Palatine, gave the first omens to his brother" (5.151–52 H–B). About this reference to originary civil, and indeed intrafamilial, strife Herbert-Brown says nothing. She says a lot, however, about the identity of the Vestal Licinia (138–41), concluding that she is the same woman tried and executed in 114–113 B.C. on a charge of incest brought before the pontifical college, which also invalidated her dedication in 123 B.C. of the original temple. Herbert-Brown discusses with great tact the difficulties that Cicero had in summarizing this case when speaking before the *pontifices* and the Senate in connection with the restoration of his house. Strangely, however, she betrays no hint of noticing how odd it is for Ovid to mention this disgraced creature, even

if he appears to insist on her chastity, in connection with Livia the restorer of the Bona Dea temple. The more such details one notices, the less confidence one has that one is reading propaganda.

In this case I think it would have been perfectly possible to make the same basic argument about Livia's role in creating and maintaining a certain perception of the *domus Augusta* while illustrating Ovid's complicity in this effort and his characteristically ironic stance as commentator on both the effort and his own complicity. But the author's belief that the *Fasti* is a lens that does not distort will not allow her to entertain this possibility. This puts her at odds with practically all of the most interesting work being done on the *Fasti* as a poem. More important, it places this historical study in a somewhat retrograde position with respect to an emerging understanding that Augustan ideology did not emanate solely from the imperial *domus* and that failure to parrot the party line without a smile does not and did not qualify as an act of covert treason.

In conclusion, although this study shows evidence of great learning and imagination, the author's excessive adherence to *idées fixes* tends to undermine confidence in its conclusions. It can nevertheless be read with profit: it is full of useful information and challenging analysis, even where its conclusions do not carry conviction. A book to be used, then, but used with caution and assessed with an appropriate measure of informed skepticism.

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