

ISSN: 2514-0612

Journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE>

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Source: *Brief Encounters*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (March 2019), pp. 39-47.

URL: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE/article/view/150>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24134/be.v3i1.150>

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An Ovidian Poetics of Exile: Renaissance Crossovers with the *Tristia*

Sophie Jane Buckingham

In order to establish an Ovidian poetics of exile we must first look at what it *is* to be an exile, for the word has multiple derivative meanings. Distance may be physical or metaphysical, and a key aim of this article is to examine the way in which English court-based writing of the Renaissance was often decentred and evasive, becoming re-centralised only when these same courtiers were themselves displaced. As exile defines the pronouncement, the participant, and the future state they will endure, it is at once a contrarily passive and active expression and experience. The term *in esilio* [in exile] can therefore be as difficult to stabilise as the seas that carry us to Tomis on Ovid's arduous journey in Book I of the *Tristia*. This article re-imagines the effect exile has on an author's creative license by drawing on resonances of Ovid's *Tristia* in Renaissance England. It also deals with three parameters of interpretation as a means of understanding this classical text: reading, subreading and translation.

The *Tristia* was written whilst Ovid was exiled to the Black Sea in AD 8 and draws upon the influence and literary style of previous poets, such as Horace and Propertius, both of whom are named throughout its five books as significant authorities. Horace's epicurean-inspired works, which do not merely look inwardly upon his life, but expose a virtuous and enjoyable way of thinking and living, find new vigour in Ovid's *Tristia* and later inform texts such as *The Consolation of Philosophy*, in which Boethius (an exile), reaffirms the need for self-counsel and guidance. Further parallels between Ovid and his contemporaries may be highlighted in the thirteenth of Horace's *Epistles*, where the author advocates the cautious voyage and presentation of a text bound for Augustus in Rome. This epistle clearly foregrounds Ovid's own introduction to the *Tristia* in which haste and deference to the Emperor are advocated. Ovid's personified book is advised, 'vade, sed incultus, qualem decet exulis esse; / infelix habitum temporis huius habe, / Nec te purpureo velent vaccinia fuco — / non est conveniens luctibus ille color' [Go, but go unadorned as becomes the book of an exile; your misfortune wear the garb that befits

these days of mine. You shall have no cover dyed with the juice of purple berries — no fit colour is that for mourning].¹ The opening envoy to Ovid’s unfortunate book did not lose its currency and became a common feature of later English Renaissance literature.

Ruth Ahnert has discussed the prevalence of imprisoned writers who focused upon disseminating literature outside of their confined cells and influencing their readership, not with their self-centric accounts of life ‘inside’, but with more general arguments and declamations intended to sway the wavering Tudor subject to their religious or political cause. Far from being destabilising, we begin to see that ‘Exile’ and ‘Prison’ textual traditions were used to reaffirm beliefs and values in sixteenth-century England and add structure to the literature of the Elizabethan period. As first posited in this article, exile is used as a multifaceted weapon for forwarding one’s cause, rather than defining an author’s literary ‘end of life’. It is rejuvenating, rather than poetically destructive. For example, Sir Thomas More uses a ‘selfless’ but self-publicising technique and, according to Ahnert, ‘transformed personal experiences, fears, and insights into material that would be edifying for a general readership. In so doing he wrote himself out of the prison’.² Such foresight in literary style, and content in prison literature raises the question of how this trope of impersonality emerges within exile-focused literature of the sixteenth century, based upon Ovid’s *Tristia*.

In Renaissance England, when one was exiled or imprisoned, it was as a result of disobedience to the monarch, a faux-pas which could extend all the way from marrying contrary to the sovereign’s wishes, to encouraging politically damnable relations and groups. For instance, Sir Walter Raleigh’s secret marriage to Queen Elizabeth I’s lady-in-waiting, Elizabeth Throckmorton, resulted in his imprisonment in the Tower of London, and an identical punishment was bestowed upon Henry Wriothesley for his treasonous involvement in the Ridolfi Plot, which aimed to overthrow the established religion.³ In 1572 — the same year as Thomas Churchyard published *De Tristibus* (the first English verse translation of the

¹ Ovid, *Tristia*, trans. by A. L. Wheeler (London: Heinemann, 1924), Book I: i, ll. 3-6, pp. 1-2.

² Ruth Ahnert, *The Rise of Prison Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 161.

³ At the opening of the 1589 Parliament, Lord Chancellor Christopher Hatton delivered Elizabeth I’s warning not to ‘meddle with anie such matters or causes of religion, excepte it be to bridle all those, whether papists or puritanes, which are therewithall discontented’: *Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I, Vol. II, 1584-1589*, ed. by T. E. Hartley (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1995), pp. 419-420.

Tristia) — Thomas Howard, 4th Duke of Norfolk, was beheaded for his support of the plot to assassinate Elizabeth I. Such was the sixteenth-century political climate, which required one to tread exceedingly carefully. During the reign of Queen Mary I the rulings around matters of faith were no less volatile; Christina Garrett has estimated that a total of 472 men, 271 women and children, and 45 servants left England under the Marian regime to practise their Protestant faith abroad, uncensored.⁴ Contemporary sources such as Foxe's *Actes and Monuments* (commonly known as *The Book of Martyrs*), confirm the number of exiles to be around the 788 Garrett has posed in her comprehensive census, compiled in 1938. However, by considering the way in which this new state of exile was negotiated at the time, and upon closer examination, it is clear that these migrants were not sent, but left for the continent of their own accord, and continued to draw upon their rents and estates in England from abroad. As Melissa Franklin-Harkrider makes plain in her study of the Duchess of Suffolk, no preventative measures were put in place to put a stop to the income streams of wealthy exiles, who were able to maintain their servants and household relatively comfortably whilst biding their time and returning to England when the religious situation was more favourable to them.⁵

In classical Rome, where we find Ovid 'in furthest coast of all the earth, farre from our countrye wyde', the sentence of exile had starkly different connotations.⁶ In matters of the law an unblinkered approach was crucial because Rome's criminal justice system was by no means standardised at this point, and sentences did not fit a strict model.⁷ In fact, contrary to the belief of many, Ovid himself was not exiled, but placed in a state of *Relegatio* by Augustus Caesar in AD 8. Under Roman Senate law, *Relegatio* meant 'a temporary sentence or one that preserved the exile's citizenship', and as Ovid was also of an equestrian family (and therefore of senatorial class), the law stipulated that he could not be given a

⁴ Christina Garrett, *The Marian Exiles: A Study in the Origins of Elizabethan Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), p. 32.

⁵ For example, Lady Willoughby left her estates in Lincolnshire and moved to the continent with her second husband. She continued to draw upon her rents in England to support herself and her servants, who had travelled to the Netherlands with her. The process had been a slow, and very public one, and auctioning her goods and moving abroad had taken almost one year. Her actions were likely common knowledge at court. See Melissa Franklin-Harkrider, *Women, Reform and Community in Early Modern England: Katherine Willoughby, Duchess of Suffolk and Lincolnshire's Godly Aristocracy, 1519-1580* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008).

⁶ Thomas Churchyard, *De Tristibus* (London: Thomas Marshe, 1572).

⁷ For an outline of the emergence of a Roman, and later Italian, legal system, see Randolph Starn, *Contrary Commonwealth: The Theme of Exile in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (London: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 1-30.

harsher punishment, which raises the question as to what he could have suffered had this restriction not been in place.⁸ Augustus was lenient where in the past he had been known for his inclemency; Stephanio, a popular actor of the period, for example, was whipped through all three of Rome's theatres and then banished simply for having a married woman dressed as a boy in his company.⁹ If the contemporary accounts of Suetonius are true, banishment was not an exceptional circumstance, but was commonly accepted, which makes Ovid's pleas and constant bemoaning of his reduced state in Tomis even harder to pity from a Roman-contemporary point of view. Ovid's exclamation in Book V: ii of, 'me miserum! Quid agam, si proxima quaeque relinquunt? / subtrahis effracto tu quoque colla iugo? / quo ferar?' [Wretched me! What am I to do if all that is nearest abandons me? Do you too break the yoke and withdraw your neck? Wither shall I rush?], becomes perversely significant as an example of Ovid's continued freedom of speech and movement in the Scythian world.¹⁰

As outlined in the introduction, this article deals with three key parameters of interpretation: reading, subreading and translation. Reading practices in the sixteenth century alone are by no means without complexity, however, extrapolation can be made from the methods and texts laid down as guidance by John Holdsworth in *Directions* (1620).¹¹ In this text, Holdsworth interrogates all manner of reading practices and defines the readers belonging to each type.¹² His analysis on readership is extensive and thought-provoking:

Those linger and loiter like — o wanderers in a mistie wildernes, that know they have somewhither to goe but neither know whether nor how far, nor to what purpose. Others agin intend well but misemploy their time in books w[hi]ch might without prejudice be omitted; neglecting in the mean time such as are more necessary for the attain[men]t

⁸ Daniel Washburn, *Banishment in the Later Roman Empire, 284-486 CE* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 30.

⁹ Emperor Augustus's misdemeanours and rage towards his daughter and granddaughter (who were both named Julia), and his paranoia about their adulterous behaviour, which led them to be exiled to the island of Pandateria, is explained in Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, trans. by Robert Graves (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1989).

¹⁰ Ovid, *Tristia*, Book V:ii, ll. 39-41, pp. 216-217.

¹¹ John Holdsworth, *Directions for a Student in the Universitie* (1620). Taken from the transcription printed in H. F. Fletcher, *The Intellectual Development of John Milton*, Vol. II (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1961), pp. 623-655.

¹² Holdsworth endorses the kinds of traditional texts used by Edmund Spenser, Philip Sidney and Michael Drayton, such as Aesop's *Fables* and Virgil's *Eclogues*.

of true Scholarship. Others are of a despairing humour, and thinke they can never have studied enough bec: they looke upon Learning as a taske without End or Limits.¹³

There are, therefore, three groups of reader discussed here: the disengaged and lost scholars, who need thorough and comprehensive guidance; those who choose their reading matter but procrastinate and prioritise ineffectively; and lastly (one with whom we might empathise), the perpetual academic who feels they have never read enough to be truly knowledgeable.

Whilst clearly every staple author should be read to establish a good solid grounding in the classics, the method for reading these authors differed starkly from the way we read today. Rather than survey a work in its entirety, it was common practice to pick out parts of interest and moral significance. These would be collected in a commonplace book or equivalent, the contents of which would then vary between readers, who isolated sections of text that meant something to them, as well as reading entire texts for academic reasons. Raphael Lyne discusses this impetus to study parts of texts in *Ovid's Changing Worlds*, which considers humanist methods of reading and how they share common practices with the medieval action of moralization.¹⁴ A further botanical metaphor encompassing the entire process is found in Eugene Kintgen,

what is lacking in this whole process, from our point of view, is any conception of reading as an end in itself, as a pleasurable aesthetic experience in its own right [...] the text is, to use a favourite Tudor metaphor, a garden from which the reader gathers old booms for his own nosegay.¹⁵

Mary Thomas Crane's study on selfhood in Renaissance England provides additional evidence of this pragmatic and praxis-orientated reading:

Instead, literary texts were imagined as fields or containers from which fragments of matter could be gathered. Early in the century, intertextuality often seemed to involve not the deep incorporation and imaginative recreation of classical works, but the recycling of significant fragments of text.¹⁶

It is necessary to understand the above approaches in order to create a broader picture of how the *Tristia* was read in Tudor England, and from this to then trace the way in which it emerges in the work of multiple

¹³ Holdsworth, *Directions*, p. 624.

¹⁴ Raphael Lyne, *Ovid's Changing Worlds: English Metamorphoses, 1567-1632* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 36.

¹⁵ Eugene Kintgen, *Reading in Tudor England* (Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996), p. 44.

¹⁶ Mary Thomas Crane, *Framing Authority: Sayings, Self, and Society in Sixteenth-Century England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 5.

renaissance writers. The challenge of excerpting Ovid's tropes of exile from these latter works is not easy. To address this problem, subreading (a term further explained below), is used as a methodological tool.

What is commonly found in Renaissance interactions with the *Tristia* is a combination of florilegia-like reading, and a more general tendency to utilise all five books of the *Tristia*. Ovid's exile poetry was utilised in sermons and medical treatises, as well as informing poetry by two of the most prolific writers of the sixteenth century: Thomas Wyatt, who had brought the Petrarchan sonnet-form to England, and Edmund Spenser, whose *Faerie Queene* would earn him a handsome pension from Elizabeth I. As such, the *Tristia*'s themes were applicable to a wide array of genres and authors with differing literary agenda.¹⁷ Even the *Tristia*'s first translator, Churchyard, used Ovid's exile poetry as a means of fashioning his own comeback into Elizabethan society. Indeed, the most pressing concerns of Ovid's *Tristia* are: Fame, Marital Constancy, Defence of Poetry, and the reassertion of Poetic Identity. All of these concerns establish themselves via a series of literary devices, including the famous anthropomorphic 'Go Little Book' structure of the *Tristia*'s opening Envoy. These preoccupations later connect to a well-established Renaissance aptitude for self-publicity.

In his 1982 work, *The Light in Troy*, Thomas Greene identifies four distinct types of *imitatio* [imitation]: clear transcription of the classical source with minimal amendments; exploitative or mingled allusions to source texts that may become anachronistic (dubbed by Greene as *contaminatio*); heuristic attempts at distancing from the classical source in the re-worked text, and a dialectical interwoven exchange or conversation in method and subject matter between the renaissance and the classical texts.¹⁸ All of these facets of *imitatio* make up what Greene terms subreading, which is defined as a reminiscence within Renaissance literature of the original classical text or source that it reinterprets and presents in an altered format to a new readership. However, we must not be complacent, but recognise that, as Greene states: '[e]ach cultural moment, each writer, each poem asks us to learn its tropes all

¹⁷ Geoffrey Whitney's *A Choice of Emblemes* (1586) and John Skelton's *The Garland of Laurell* (1523) both rely upon Ovid's *Tristia* as a source. Ben Jonson's *Poetaster* (1601) also takes a large proportion of contextual information for its caricatures of Ovid and his contemporaries from the exilic works. See Sophie Jane Buckingham, 'A Poetics of Exile: The Reception of Ovid's *Tristia* in Tudor England' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia, 2018), Chapter 2.

¹⁸ For comprehensive definitions of each of the four types of *imitatio*, see Thomas M. Greene, *The Light in Troy: Imitation and Discovery in Renaissance Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), pp. 28-53.

over again, and each learning is unique because each trope is unique'.¹⁹ In relation to the study of Ovid's *Tristia*, this approach and methodology proves to be especially applicable as it enables the examination of many Renaissance authors who were tackling this Roman classical text in different ways and with alternative motives. Du Bellay's *Regrets*, which is closely based on the 'Tristian' position of the exile, is an obvious example of sixteenth-century Ovidian interaction. Each of Greene's definitions of *imitatio* may be partnered with any one of the authors referred to in this article, and a creative channel of discussion thus provided on the *Tristia* in an attempt to highlight new areas of the text that are particularly fruitful for ongoing critical focus.

Translation theory can further aid us in understanding the principles of subreading. Complementing Greene's distinctions between different types of imitative texts, Skopos Theory maintains that a new reading or translation of a source text is as significant and unique as the original. This strays from notions of a type of *equivalence* in translation studies that might be found in the first of Greene's four imitative types highlighted above. There is reasoning behind any translation or subreading of a classical text under this model, which invites us to consider some potentially fascinating aims of sixteenth-century writers in taking this material, revaluing it, and reappropriating its meaning. As Lawrence Venuti has summarised:

Translation is an inscription of the source text with intelligibilities and interests that are specific to the translating language and culture, even when the translator maintains a strict semantic correspondence and incorporates aspects of the cultural context in which the source text originated.²⁰

According to Venuti, the translator can make themselves visible or invisible, depending on whether they embrace the text in relation to 'foreignization' or 'domestication'.²¹ The act of translation can be fallible, and can also be approached from many different perspectives, presenting us with an array of different textual outputs. Of these outputs, there is always a case to make for a cautious approach because, from origin to translation, multiple processes and word-choices are made which alter the meaning of whole swathes of text, sometimes misleading the reader. Likewise, Ovid's *Tristia* is meticulously constructed to

¹⁹ Greene, *The Light in Troy*, p. 22.

²⁰ Lawrence Venuti, *Translation Changes Everything: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 96.

²¹ For further discussion of these terms and their definitions, see Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 17-36.

escort readers down paths of interpretation almost against their will. Ovid's *Tristia* made such an impact upon its Renaissance readership that it formed the bedrock of Latin translation exercises for students for centuries to come. These readings were far from doleful or apologetic; in fact, they inspired active poetic license and creativity across a range of textual sources, from poetry and emblem books, to prose sermons and vituperative plays such as Ben Jonson's *Poetaster* (1601). Ovid's expectation of the *Tristia* representing the poet *ad perpetuum* was certainly accomplished in the sixteenth century, confirming a crossover in subject matter between the Roman classical world and Renaissance England. Such crossovers hinge upon the universality of Ovid's text and its avid and varied readership. To read Ovid's exilic work was to come to terms with the otherworldly and barbaric and make it one's own native tongue.

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