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SPYRIDON TZOUNAKAS – STELLA ALEKOU – STEPHEN J. HARRISON (eds), *The Reception of Ancient Cyprus in Western Culture* (Trends in Classics, Supplementary Volumes 139). Berlin: De Gruyter 2023. VIII, 314 S. – ISBN 978-3-11-099665-4 (\$126.99, € 109.95)

• YOUNG RICHARD KIM, University of Illinois at Chicago  
(ymrkim@uic.edu)

Cyprus has a unique way of capturing the imagination, and as an object of imperial desire it has exchanged hands many times over the millennia. The island exists with a constant paradoxical tension, between insularity, that is, a seagirt isolation that has given rise to cultural distinctives, and interconnectedness, for Cyprus has often functioned as a hub, with the swirling movement of people, goods, and ideas an essential feature of its history and destiny. Even though in terms of distance it is the island furthest away from the western Mediterranean, there has been and continues to be an impression, a memory, even if faint, of the isle in European art and literature. The volume under review brings together an introduction and fourteen essays (originally presented at an online conference in February 2021, organized by the Department of Classics and Philosophy at the University of Cyprus), which collectively explore the literary reception of Cyprus in western culture, from antiquity to modern times.

The editors suggest at the beginning of their introduction that the literary depiction of Cyprus has been largely underappreciated in scholarship and that their volume will serve as a corrective. Their central thesis is, “that a number of Cypriot literary and cultural traditions constitute a unique example of intercultural and multi-level fusions of diverse European civilizations, and thus participate in a pan-European cultural heritage” (p. 2). The essays together certainly illustrate this.

Part I: Cyprus in Latin Literature, begins with an essay by COSTAS PANAYOTAKIS, who considers every reference to Cyprus in extant Roman comedies and concludes that the island does not feature prominently in any. However, in the Roman *palliatae*, retellings of famous Greek myths, references to Cyprus do appear, and for playwrights and their audiences the island and its mere mention were enough to evoke well-known tropes, especially those associated with Aphrodite/Venus and the seedier side of

the sexual marketplace. STEPHEN HARRISON surveys classical and neo-Latin poetry, looking for brief lists of sanctuaries to Aphrodite/Venus, and finds several examples that highlight an ancient literary awareness of such sites and their specific locales (in Cyprus and elsewhere), albeit not without some textual difficulties. Neo-Latin poets of the Italian Renaissance received and revived ancient authors, reproducing similar sanctuary lists, perhaps more as an act of imitation. Still, HARRISON does suggest that the references to Cyprus might reflect an increased interest in the island due to its status as a Venetian possession.

Continuing the examination of Latin poetry, BORIS HOGENMÜLLER studies Catullus 36, a poem with a scathing critique of the *Annales* of an otherwise unknown Volusius, which, the poet suggests should be burned in fulfillment of a vow to Venus. He invokes the goddess and names several sites sacred to her (including in Cyprus), as a literary ritual that serves as a standard for good writing. THEODORE ANTONIADIS considers the legendary Teucer, son of Telamon of Salamis, in the Greek tradition, where he traditionally appears as a marginalized “bastard archer”, always in the shadow of his brother Ajax. However, ANTONIADIS argues that the Romans embraced the mythical figure as the embodiment of an exile, wanderer, and refugee in their literary imagination. In particular in Horace 1.7, Teucer experiences a “complete rehabilitation”, cast as a founder par excellence, in his case of the new Salamis in Cyprus, and a parallel to another vagrant veteran, Aeneas. The essay is an insightful glimpse into how the Romans reimagined figures from Greek myth, although the relevance of the contribution to the question of Cyprus in western culture is perhaps more incidental. The island is also tangential in an otherwise sophisticated, literary critical essay by ROBERT KIRSTEIN on Ovid’s Pygmalion story (which occurs in Cyprus) examined through the lens of aesthetic theory. He argues that beauty is to be found in this narrative through balance, albeit potentially unstable, both in its content and its structure.

RICHARD JENKINS raises a valuable observation, that Crete was an island rich with mythology, while Cyprus was generally lacking, save the connection with Aphrodite/Venus, which in turn had the effect of intensifying the link. After surveying Greek literature and its impressions of Cyprus, JENKINS turns to Virgil and Ovid, the former on the encounter between Venus and Aeneas, and the latter, once again on the Pygmalion story, and elucidates evidence for this unbreakable link between the goddess and her birthplace. MARGOT NEGER discusses two epigrams of Martial (8.45, 9.90) that address his patron and friend Flaccus and his journey

to Cyprus. Through philological and intertextual analysis, NEGER shows how the poet imagined the island to be an idyllic (even if hot) and erotically charged place. Conversely, in an epigram by a contemporary Greek poet Ammianus, Cyprus is lamented as a place where good spoken Greek goes to die.

SPYRIDON TZOUNAKAS brings us into Late Antiquity with a fascinating analysis of Claudian's epithalamium (marriage poem) on the occasion of the wedding of the young emperor Honorius and Maria, daughter of Stilicho, in 398 CE. The poem includes an extensive and evocative ekphrasis of Venus's palace, which together with the surrounding territory constitutes a *locus amoenus*, a land where love rules. TZOUNAKAS skillfully shows how Claudian's description is full of allusions to literary forebears, thus creating an intertextual image of an imagined palace and place, which by the late Roman period, was imagined as a paradisaical locale. Beneath this imagery, however, lurks a political agenda, the framing of Honorius as a soon-to-be Golden Age ruler in the guise of a new Augustus.

Part II: Cyprus after Antiquity, starts with THEA SELLIAAS THORSEN's exploration of Shakespeare's poem *Venus and Adonis*, which portrays Venus failing in her seduction of Adonis, contrary to the mythological tradition. THORSEN argues that this inversion has a much older Ovidian basis, in which the tales related by Orpheus reflect a complex (meta)poetics of love and hate, creation and consummation. The Venus and Adonis narrative resonates with other literary and cultic traditions from the Near East, but the specific Cypriot setting in Ovid's version creates an incestuous lineage for Adonis, which in turn reveals complex themes of misogyny and narcissism. Shakespeare returns in the conclusion of this essay, but in large part is more a heuristic device for a deep study of Ovid. One does wonder if this contribution ultimately belongs in Part I.

With LAURA ARESI's article on Cyprus in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, we are on much firmer ground with respect to the reception of the island in post-antique western literature. ARESI investigates how in Boccaccio's day, Cyprus was for his readers both a real place, an important hub for pilgrims, traders, and crusaders traveling to and from the Holy Land, and an imagined locale, with the echoes of amorous themes from Ovidian myth resonating into the eve of the Italian Renaissance. The tale of Alatiel in particular showcases Boccaccio's deep familiarity with Ovid and how he artfully manipulated the ancient literary images of Cyprus to create and explore what ARESI calls a "Holy Land of secular love" (p. 196).

The Humanists of fifteenth-century Italy, galvanized by the rediscovery of numerous ancient Greek writings, reimagined the received literary image of the Venus of Paphos and infused it with newfound philosophical, natural, and cosmological energy. HÉLÈNE CASANOVA-ROBIN examines the poetry of this era (especially that of Giovanni Pontano [1429–1503], which invoked the image of the Paphian Venus with added Hellenized and near eastern subtleties, and the traditional goddess of love and sensuality became a more universal figure whose provinces include generative power and order.

Ovid is once again front and center in STELIA ALEKOU's contribution. The author first offers a survey of interpretations of the Orphic Cyprus cycle of myths in the *Metamorphoses*, in particular the Pygmalion tale, and then explains how the ancient text became popular in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance, especially in English literature. Medieval Christian authors reinterpreted Ovid's sexual poetics to proffer *exempla* of how (not) to live, displaced from their original Cypriot context, while among Renaissance writers, the strong Ovidian connection to the island returns as writers focused on the varied interpretations of Pygmalion's statue. ALEKOU closes the essay with a deep analysis of a poem by Carol Ann Duffy, in which the statue (finally) gains a voice and articulates her experience of sexual abuse and rape, revealing layers of patriarchy and misogyny.

STAMATIA KITOU's article begins with a literary analytical dive into Ovid's tragic narrative on Myrrha and her incestuous desire for her father Cinyras, which serves as the basis for a discussion of Vittorio Alfieri's *Mirra* (1792), a tragedy set in Cyprus that casts the titular character as a protagonist. In his reimagining, *Mirra*, possessed by the Furies themselves, is a tortured character whose unconsummated, incestuous passion drives her to suicide on the eve of her marriage to a prince, but not before confessing her forbidden desire. KITOU's deft analysis of the play ends with the suggestion that Alfieri has transformed *Mirra* into a Romantic heroine.

Finally, BRUCE GIBSON's fascinating examination of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British and French travel writings offers a fitting coda to the volume. By this era, the island was of course an Ottoman possession, but nevertheless western travelers sojourned there for both personal and professional reasons. Their reflections on the island exhibit a paradoxical tension, on the one hand an impression of Cyprus as an exotic, eastern locale, on the other, memories of it as a familiar, classical place. With the respect to the latter, the political realities of the day contributed to a sense of loss

and disappointment at what it once was and what it was now, ruined by the neglectful rule of the Sublime Porte. But western travel writers also saw possibilities in the ancient remains they saw and gave life to a colonial impulse, turning Cyprus (once again) into an object of imperial desire. The power of Venus and her isle, so it seems, was still irresistible.

Although the stated emphasis of the volume is on the literary reception of ancient Cyprus in western culture, one still cannot help but feel the absence of reflections on artistic and architectural dimensions, granted that this was not part of the project. Perhaps also the Lusignans and the Venetians had something to say about the ancient image of the island, as also *Othello*. For obvious, Ovidian reasons, poetry is the focal point of almost all of the essays, and this possibly at the expense of other relevant literary genres like history and hagiography. One would also search in vain for intersections with the literary traditions of Byzantium, which arguably are also part of the western story.

Scholars of Latin poetry, Ovid, classical reception, literary criticism, and medieval and Renaissance poetry, will find much of value in this collection of articles, albeit at a hefty price tag. The editors and contributors should be applauded for producing a book virtually free of any grammatical, orthographic, or typographic errors. The volume concludes with a list of contributors, a general index, and an index locorum. In the end, the task which the editors laid out in their introduction has been accomplished successfully, and the essays in this publication offer a firm foundation for continued study of the literary reception of Aphrodite's isle.

#### **Keywords**

Cyprus; reception studies