

# Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 12 (2019)

Recomposed: Anglophone Presences of Classical Literature



**New Voices on Anglophone Antiquity:  
Contemporary Women's Writing and Modernist  
Translation**

*Laura Jansen*

doi: [10.12681/syn.25261](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.25261)

Copyright © 2020, Laura Jansen



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

## **New Voices on Anglophone Antiquity: Contemporary Women's Writing and Modernist Translation**

Laura Jansen

Cox, Fiona. *Ovid's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing: Strange Monsters*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018. Hardback. pp. 272. £ 63,00.

Hickman, Miranda and Kozak, Lynn. Eds. *The Classics in Modernist Translation*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019. Hardback. pp. 264. £ 76.50.

What new forms of expression does Ovid's oeuvre open for contemporary women's writing? And what does this engagement with the Roman author reveal about his presence in today's Anglophone literature? In what ways have early twentieth-century translations of the classics shaped the makings of classical modernisms? And how does this practice expand our understanding of the range and scope of Anglophone classical receptions? The two volumes under consideration offer innovative and timely responses to these overarching questions. Despite pursuing different lines of investigation, i.e. Ovidian presences in contemporary writing and modernism's translation of the classics, both studies draw attention to some of the less explored histories of Anglo-American classicisms, especially those of women writers, such as modernists H.D. and Laura Riding, and contemporaries Ali Smith, Mary Zimmerman, and Jane Alison, to name a few. The volumes also investigate how antiquity continues to offer a platform for aesthetic innovation, but also for a creative form of literary activism focused on questions of gendered reading and writing, politics, domesticity, the environment, immigration, illness, war and conflict, and the virtual world. In tracing this material, these studies furthermore probe dynamic and productive interdisciplinary dialogues, either at the intersections of Ovidian poetics and third-wave feminism, or amongst classical, modernist and translation studies.

In *Ovid's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing: Strange Monsters*, Fiona Cox maps out the ongoing appeal that Ovid's oeuvre, especially the *Metamorphoses*, *Heroides*, and exile poems, has for thirteen contemporary women authors. Most of the writers in Cox's entries are Anglo-American writers of fiction, poetry, drama, and autobiography, as well as translators of classical texts, e.g. Ali Smith, Marina Warner, Alice Oswald, Mary Zimmerman, Jo Shapcott, Josephine

Balmer, Averill Curdy, Michèle Roberts, Clare Pollard, and Jane Alison. At the core of Cox's argument is her careful alignment of the Ovidian themes of fluid change and isolation of the self with the main tenets of third-wave feminism, which Cox locates in her chosen authors. For instance, in her novel *The Leto Bundle* (2001), Cox successfully shows how Marina Warner reconfigures Ovid's myth of Leto across space and time to underscore questions of homelessness and the plight of refugees, which evoke Ovid's concerns with exile, separation, remoteness, and loneliness in the *Heroides* and *ex Ponto* collections. Likewise, in her poem *Dart* (2002), which follows the geography of the English Devonshire river Dart, both as a water course and a biddable resource, Alice Oswald reconstructs closely Ovid's personification of rivers in the natural landscape of the *Metamorphoses*, giving the Dart a multiplicity of voices, as she examines the current plights of the river brought by pollution, global warming, and low-paid labour, as well as how these conditions will impact the river's future. And in *Of Mutability*, Jo Shapcott reflects on the pleasures and dangers of Ovidian metamorphosis in dealing with her own experience of illness and bodily change, or in considering the repercussions of the financial crisis, the Iraq war, and, like Oswald, global warming. Readers will appreciate Cox's close identification of her thirteen authors with third-wave feminism. Her thesis is convincing in terms of offering a framework of investigation that makes a clear distinction between second-wave feminism's "reclaiming of a female voice and of writing oneself into a male-authored tradition" (4) and third-wave feminism's shift into a more defined sense of individualism and calls for inclusion, diversity, and environmental protections. Her entries, while featuring markedly different engagements with Ovid, do voice together the various concerns of the third wave. Arguably less persuasive is the characterisation of these women authors as 'strange monsters.' Here, Cox contrasts Cixous' presentation of Medusa's monstrous laughter as a liberating symbol of *écriture féminine* with the Latin semantics of *monstrum* as something "worthy of being shown" (22), but also "wondrous" (24) and "marvellous" (24). As 'strange monsters,' Cox's authors are thus simultaneously portrayed as shockingly transgressive and/yet wondrous representatives of a new brand of feminist thought. Yet one wonders how telling this slogan is when it comes to writers like Josephine Balmer or Alice Oswald, whose profiles are so distinct, and whose creativity, poetic practice, and multiple influences and interests transcend this kind of restrictive categorisation. For me, the strength of Cox's book lies in the sheer novelty of her research material, as well as what she does with it to draw our attention to a catalogue of writers who politicise and problematise Ovidian poetics for our contemporary literature and life. In doing so, her book powerfully reenergises Ovid, one of the most overly studied of Roman authors, while introducing a cast of innovative classicisms to his broader audiences.

Equally thought-provoking is *The Classics in Modernist Translation*, edited by Miranda Hickman and Lynn Kozak. This important volume focuses on the interplay of antiquity and modernism as it emerges in the creative translations of Ezra Pound, Cummings, Eliot, Joyce, and Yeats, but also those of the much less explored H.D. and Laura Riding. The editors have done an excellent job in producing a study which covers a wide chronology and a varied set of thematic

perspectives. At the book-ends of the volume, readers will find enlightening discussions of the histories of the classics, modernism, and translation (Stephen Yao), of the short-lived 1915-19 *Poet's Translation* series (Elizabeth Vandiver), the uses of classical modernism in university instruction and the gallery space (Marsha Bryant and Mary Ann Eaverly), and the potential that modernist studies have for expanding classical reception theory and practice (J. Alison Rosenblitt). The argumentative design is also extremely well-thought out. The core of the book is organised around three thematic groupings, or parts, on "Ezra Pound and Translation," "H.D.'s translations of Euripides," and "Modernist translations and Political Attunements" in Laura Riding, Joyce, Eliot, and Yeats. Each of these thematic parts is accompanied by mediating essays by Michael Coyle, Eileen Gregory, and Nancy Worman, which helpfully capture commonalities emerging in the diverse contributions, while making poignant observations for the volume as a whole. Within this scheme, all the contributions are of a high quality, some more technical than others, and some taking the debate to matters of translation theory and methodology vis-à-vis the politics of reading modernist aesthetics. Readers will find food for thought in most of the discussions of Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and Yeats, especially on the question of how their renderings of Greco-Roman materials deploy the classical as the language of the new. Yet, it is the contributions that look at H.D.'s translations of Euripides (Anna Fyta; Jeffrey Westover; Catherine Theis; Miranda Hickman, and Lynn Kozak) and the historical novel in Laura Riding (Anett K. Jessop) that are arguably the most revealing. For instance, in H.D.'s *Ion*, *Helen in Egypt*, *Hippolytus Temporizes*, and the translations of the chorus of *Iphigeneia of Tauris*, we find an acute and radical interpreter of Euripides, who uses the space of translation not just to inflect a modernist aesthetics, or reflect on antiquity's place in deep time, but also crucially to challenge the dominant narratives of the classical tradition by male writers of her own literary generation. Likewise, in her historical fiction *A Trojan Ending* and *Lives of Wives*, Laura Riding rewrites Hellenistic history as bio-fiction from a female-oriented perspective, focusing on marginal and obscured female figures as a counter-narrative of the idealised and romanticised females who tend to figure in modernist male writing. In their appeal to creative forms of translation, these writers reconfigure the male narratives of classical modernism, their aesthetic principles, and central messages. In doing so, they contribute, like Cox's study, to a more gendered articulation of antiquity and its uses. *Classics in Modernist Translation* is a most welcome addition to *Bloomsbury's Studies in Classical Reception*. In terms of the interdisciplinary field, it successfully draws on the most recent rethinking in translation studies and classical reception, while advancing the agenda of modernist studies. As for its audiences, the volume invites readers with expertise in classics to trace the translation of classical texts as a form of cultural criticism, and readers of modernism to rediscover the movement's key authors through their innovative refiguration of the classics.

At a time when classical reception studies in North America and the UK look actively beyond its own regional scope in search for new visions of the classical legacy, *Ovid's Presence in Contemporary Women's Writing* and *Classics in*

*Modernist Translation* innovatively re-examines the Anglophone presences of classical literature with up-to-date analyses fit for global readerships. I suspect that both volumes will propel further study in the subject, especially if coupled with research on creative practices and pursued from comparative perspectives. They can also be adopted for enhancing reception syllabuses, or as comprehensive introductions to the Anglophone classical tradition in modernist and contemporary authors at upper undergraduate and taught master level. Highly recommended.