

Book Review

Wake, Siren: Ovid Resung

Maclaughlin (N.) Pp 354, London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019. Paper, £10.99. ISBN: 978-0374538583.

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It is not a small task to take on the stories of Ovid, that have been resung in a multitude of different ways throughout the ages. However, it is one that Maclaughlin takes on with a clear and forceful vision. The volume takes us through a plethora of different stories, not a single one without emotional charge and an acutely stylised attention to form. In keeping with her retelling of 'Ivory Girl' – the story of Pygmalion – Maclaughlin takes the characters that mythology formed and gives them flesh and blood through her storytelling.

As is to be expected with any tale about a woman in the ancient world, a content warning should be woven into the spine of this volume. The feminist lens through which Maclaughlin presents these stories can often evoke visceral, gut-wrenching feelings of disappointment in how little we have progressed as a society in the 2,000 years since these tales were once told, summarised aptly in the story of Caenis in which she wishes to be turned into a man because she 'never want [s] to suffer like that again.' Maclaughlin's retelling explores how those in power make their moral judgements hinged upon their own agenda and ideals; on the rare occasions where the gods aren't the ones causing harm and destruction, they often sit and watch whilst others suffer. Particularly affronting is her depiction of Procne and Philomela: although the devastating nature of the tale in itself is enough for most other authors, the gentle way through

which Maclaughlin oxymoronically frames the narrative whilst swooping as a bird through the sky is simultaneously harrowing and beautiful.

However, in between the affronting honesty of her storytelling, cracks of hope shine through Maclaughlin's writing through her depiction of female friendship and unconditional love. Her story of Scylla – which focuses in equal parts on the story of Galatea – demonstrates the strength of female allyship. She makes the tale relatable through framing it in memories of teenage sleepovers and secret sharing, creating a vehicle through which to highlight the frighteningly everyday manner through which women have to deal with unwanted attention. Similarly, the story of Baucis (which, I will admit, made me shed a tear on the DLR) shows the simple goodness of some people and a metamorphosis which is, for once, not prompted by pain to escape the world, but by a desire to stay entangled with someone as long as possible.

Maclaughlin should be applauded for her use of form throughout this piece which is a pleasure and a highlight. Her combinations of poetry and prose allow the reader to understand the pain and confusion of the characters contemporaneously to their own understanding, allowing you to immerse yourself in their world. Particular highlights were the use of the therapeutic conversation in Myrrha, the visually and semantically beautiful depiction of Semele and the apt singing of Canens.

Although I enjoyed the stark contrast between the portrayals of the characters, her varied use of language and tone may be divisive: summed up by the 'anyway, this is Karen' tone of the story of Agave, although there are clear artistic choices made with the depictions of characters, the almost 'TikTok' Ovid that we see would be an excellent teaching resource for older classes to analyse characterisation and modern reception of these tales. Similarly, Alcmena's paragraph-less stream of consciousness felt as if it had been directly lifted from a VT monologue. However, from a purely literary standpoint, Maclaughlin's use of language is so beautiful, I did find myself trying to race through some of the very modern interpretations to get back looking to the Ali Smith-esque lyricism of tales like Tiresias.

From a teaching perspective, this book would be a masterclass in how Ovid uses form in the *Metamorphoses*. Maclaughlin makes this transition palatable whilst still giving the due care and attention to the nuanced meter and style of the original. Although tales would need to be carefully selected depending on the age group, this book would certainly suit a sixth form audience and act as a brilliant gateway into wider reading. Outside of Classics, this would also make an interested read for any English literature students analysing the use of form or any students looking to study sociology and gender studies at a higher level.

doi: 10.1017/S2058631023000466