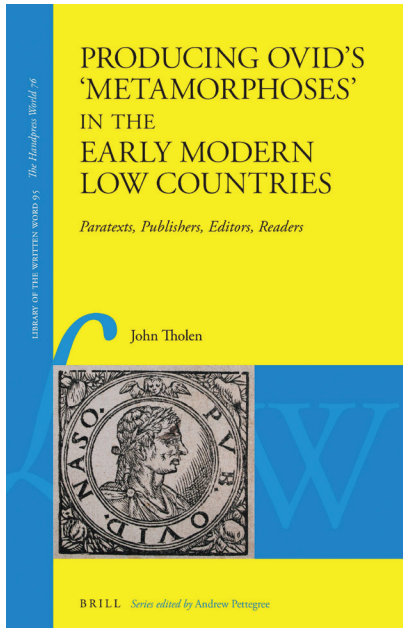


Review

John Tholen, *Producing Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' in the Early Modern Low Countries. Paratexts, Publishers, Editors, Readers*, Leiden, Brill, 2021, 335 pp. ISBN 9789004462380.



Over the past decade, studies into the reception history of classical authors have increasingly ventured into the territory of book history. Following in the footsteps of Craig Kallendorf and Ada Palmer, among others, John Tholen studies the material reception of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* which, despite its often explicitly erotic, violent, and pagan contents, was amazingly popular in the early modern period. To explain this paradox, Tholen has examined the many editions of Ovid's text that were printed in the Low Countries between 1477 and 1700, with particular attention to their paratexts.

His research corpus consists of 152 individual editions, which are listed and carefully described in the appendix. Interestingly, following the list of surviving editions – printed either in Latin or in the vernacular, and containing either the full text of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or a selection of stories – Tholen also included forty-one 'lost' editions, of which not a single

copy could be identified but which are known through early modern sales catalogues. As the author notes, these titles help to sketch a more representative view of early modern book production (227). However, since their paratexts can no longer be read, they are not very useful for determining how Ovid's work was presented, and thus not further employed in this book. Of the 111 surviving editions, Tholen has personally inspected 87 editions, sometimes in multiple copies, which allows for a thorough comparative study.

Following the introduction, which sketches the theoretical and methodological background to Tholen's study and introduces the reader to Ovid's reception in the Low Countries, come four dedicated chapters. Each focuses on a specific kind of paratext and explores the various strategies used by book producers in selling Ovid's potentially dangerous text to a variety of readers. While the title page specifically served to create

commercial credibility (chapter one), the front matter – that is, any dedications, prefaces, and *vitae Ovidii* – was employed to face criticism (chapter two), the commentary to deal with obscenity (chapter three), and the index to filter and frame the contents (chapter four). As Tholen notes, ‘the functionalities were interconnected: to create commercial credibility, editions had to respond to criticism’ (95).

At the start of every chapter Tholen helpfully surveys the evolution and functions of the various kinds of paratext, before examining their manifestation in the printed editions of Ovid, on both a textual and a visual level. This dedicated and systematic thematic approach to paratexts within a single classical author proves highly rewarding, as it shows in detail how various intermediaries appropriated Ovid’s work for different readerships. While this leads to interesting observations throughout, for this reviewer perhaps the most surprising and stimulating findings occur in chapter four, concerning the indices that were present in over sixty percent of the editions considered. Indexes have been studied for very few printed classical texts, as it is not exactly the most exciting part of any edition and only very little is known about who compiled them. However, Tholen convincingly demonstrates that the indices to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* were more than just a finding aid, for the index words were carefully selected and phrased to promote a specific reading of the text.

However, it is essential to realise that these individual paratexts did not stand on their own but were embedded in what Tholen calls the ‘paratextual infrastructure’ of early modern editions. He argues that book producers designed the integral ensemble of paratexts as a well-considered construct to create a particular reading experience. In his fifth chapter, he focuses on a few specific early modern editions to highlight how this happened. In one of his case studies (on three successive Antwerp editions printed between 1538 and 1545) Tholen demonstrates how the cluster of paratexts worked together to cater to the needs of widely diverse readerships, while in the case of Vondel’s Dutch *Herscheping* (Amsterdam 1671) the paratextual infrastructure was applied to present the text as part of Vondel’s cherished oeuvre, rather than as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

The present study offers an invaluable overview of both the Latin and vernacular transmission and reception of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in the early modern Low Countries, while also shedding light on book production in this area more generally. Throughout, Tholen shows himself thoroughly familiar with previous scholarship and provides the reader with all the necessary background information by introducing, for example, the chapter on ‘negotiating obscenity’ with a consideration of what obscenity meant in early modern Europe and how humanists dealt with it (127). In fact, the volume as a whole is well-researched and well-documented, as Tholen’s apt analyses of the primary sources are illustrated with ample textual examples, and thirty-three illuminating colour plates.

While painting a full and vivid picture of Ovid’s textual tradition in the early modern Low Countries, this book also indicates several areas for further research. For one thing, Tholen’s approach could be fruitfully adopted for editions printed outside of the Netherlands – which was admittedly a vital centre of book production, but only accounts for one third of all editions of the *Metamorphoses* printed in this period (judging by the numbers mentioned in footnote 52 on page 16). In chapter five, for example, Tholen shows how several Antwerp printers adopted the paratextual infrastructure of books first printed in Basel, a praxis which was far from unusual in the early modern period. To understand

just how innovative or traditional the Dutch editions were, and to test Tholen's statement that the early modern print tradition of Ovid's text in the Low Countries is 'especially interesting, compared to Ovidian printing elsewhere in Europe' (16), further comparative research is needed. Another path worth pursuing would be the (allegedly) lost editions, which Tholen has helpfully listed in the appendix in the hope that copies may still resurface in libraries not yet searched. Finally, it would be worthwhile to further investigate the actual readers of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Though these are explicitly *not* the focus of this book (225), Tholen does include some tantalizing examples of readers supplementing the existing indices or simply creating new ones (157), and in the appendix he has taken great pains to identify contemporary owners, thus paving the way for new research.

As is befitting a book dealing with the materiality of books, it is carefully produced. The volume – which is a revised and expanded version of Tholen's doctoral dissertation defended in 2019 at Utrecht University – is clearly structured and generally well-written, though it is regrettable that so much useful, and in some cases crucial, information has been relegated to the footnotes. To give but one out of many examples, the fact that 'the Vondel edition is an eclectic construct of several paratexts that frequently accompanied Ovid's *Metamorphoses*' is important enough to be included in the main text instead of being buried in footnote 36 on page 199, as it shows that even if the 1671 edition was presented as 'a deviation from the Ovidian tradition' (201), it was part of that tradition all the same.

Overall, *Producing Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' in the Early Modern Low Countries* is a tremendously rich, instructive, and inspiring book, which I expect many people will happily read from cover to cover. A welcome addition to Ovidian scholarship, it is warmly recommended not only to anyone interested in Ovid and the reception of his *Metamorphoses* but also to those studying the *Nachleben* of other classical authors, as well as to book and art historians.

Marijke Crab, KU Leuven