

## Ovid online: the story of *15 Heroines*

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An illustrated version of this conversation is available on the Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies website:

<https://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2021/littler>

### Introduction

In this article, I discuss the theatre-on-film project *15 Heroines* – a series of fifteen plays inspired by Ovid's *Heroides* – in the context of classical reception. *15 Heroines* was a project I produced, commissioned, and co-directed for Jermyn Street Theatre, London, and Digital Theatre in 2020. I begin by discussing its origins, which lie in my own academic interests in Ovidian reception in the long eighteenth century, and in the wider cultural and social landscapes of 2020. In the second section, I describe the process of commissioning the fifteen contemporary playwrights who wrote one short play each as part of the project. In the third section, I discuss the challenges of staging these pieces, the different approaches taken by the three stage directors (myself included), and the questions arising around the shift from the epistolary to the dramatic form. In the fourth section, I write about Ovidian wit and its transmission within *15 Heroines*. In the fifth part, I discuss the nature of isolation and the ways in which the social isolations of 2020 might inform our reading of Ovid and the myths. In the sixth and concluding part, I consider *15 Heroines* as a feminist and antiracist project, and I reflect on the implications of this for wider Ovidian reception.

*15 Heroines* draws on Ovid's *Heroides* to create new dramatised versions of fifteen letters by the women of classical mythology. These fifteen short plays (each roughly fifteen minutes long) were then grouped into three films called *The War*, *The Desert*, and *The Labyrinth*. For a taste of *15 Heroines*, readers may [view the original trailer](#). This was produced to market its commercial broadcast in November 2020. Subsequently, the three films have been made available to educational subscribers to [Digital Theatre Plus](#).

Fifteen plays, writers, and actors are not equally well served in this article. I dwell disproportionately on the six plays I directed or co-directed, at the cost of the other nine; I have more insights to offer into these plays and the ways in which they were developed during rehearsal and filming. That said, I have a deep respect and fondness for all fifteen pieces and have tried to bring them all into the discussion. Where my treatment of a play is brief, my reading careless, or my knowledge of its evolution partial, I offer apologies in advance to those who worked on it. *15 Heroines* was, above all, a team effort from seventy-five remarkably talented and dedicated theatre and film freelancers, working in the most trying of circumstances during 2020. All their contributions – from camera teams to producers, marketing to lighting, sound to costumes – were remarkable, and my gratitude goes to every person involved.

### Origins

'Ariadne! Ariadne!' a grandmother called, urging the little girl back into shallower water. On the island of Naxos, where the sandy beach slopes into the sea, a Greek child was splashing into the deeper water,

waving her arms, and looking out to the ocean beyond. Struck by the impossibly neat nature of the metaphor – a young Ariadne on a beach where her namesake once stood abandoned – I asked around: how common a name is Ariadne on Naxos? Oh, very, the locals told me: more so, [since the German sculptor Wolf Broll's statue was erected in the town harbour in front of the temple of Apollo](#) in 2004. Broll's statue exemplifies much that is delightful and difficult about Ariadne and her abandoned sisters. Carved in white marble, Broll's Ariadne stands alone, looking out to sea, towering over the tourists traipsing past on their way to the ferry or the bus stop. She is faceless; from above her neck and below her upper thighs, she is rendered in a tangle of pockmarked marble that surrounds her body, as if she is gauzily clad in the seabed itself. Her torso stands out, naked, smooth and supermodel-thin, with small breasts and ribs standing out against the skin. The moment of legend in which Ariadne is immortalised – standing on the shoreline looking after her departed lover Theseus – is a compromised one. It is this moment that brings Ariadne fame, and in which she finds her voice, but it is also a moment of victimhood, ruthlessly eroticised by male artists for millennia.

In Ovid's *Heroides*, the Roman poet writes letters from the abandoned women of classical mythology to the men responsible for their fates. *15 Heroines* saw fifteen female playwrights adapt each of Ovid's first fifteen *Heroides* (we set aside the 'Double *Heroides*', in which the menfolk write back) into dramatic monologues; these were then performed in the empty [Jermyn Street Theatre](#), London, in October 2020 and broadcast online during the second lockdown of November 2020. The project, which I produced, commissioned, and co-directed for Jermyn Street Theatre and Digital Theatre Plus, was born out of the year of coronavirus and isolation, but it was also part of a lifetime's interest in classical mythology and in Ovid's *Heroides*. My career combines theatre directing – primarily as Artistic Director and Executive Producer of Jermyn Street Theatre – with a double-life as a supervisor and part-time doctoral candidate at the University of Cambridge. My research and teaching focus on classical reception in the long eighteenth century, and particularly on constructions of female desire and sexuality in the love-letter. In some sense, then, an Associate Producer credit on *15 Heroines* should have gone to two literary giants of the Restoration era: Poet Laureate John Dryden, and publishing tycoon Jacob Tonson. Tonson and Dryden collaborated on the 1680 *Ovid's Epistles*, a translation of Ovid's *Heroides*. To the modern reader, the distinctive thing about the 1680 *Epistles* is that it is multi-authored: Dryden twinkles brightest among a minor galaxy of star authors including Nahum Tate and Thomas Otway; a group of leading writers translated one or two letters each. Dryden spent the final two decades of his life increasingly immersed in classical translation, and for the Tonson publishing house, the enormous commercial success of the *Epistles* – which was reprinted in multiple editions including more and more ephemeral letters and alternative translations – kickstarted a craze for multi-authored translations in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

*15 Heroines* was inspired by the multi-authored translations of Dryden and his contemporaries, but some of its other aims were distinctly contemporary. Although I had long nursed an ambition to dramatise the *Heroides*, the mode of *15 Heroines* was very much a response to the conditions of 2020. The three primary impulses could be described as: a study in isolation; an exercise in polyvocal and diverse storytelling; and a feminist response.

2020 saw the world's population isolated or connected only by technology – the contemporary equivalent of the letter. Running a theatre, I knew of the hundreds of freelancers we would normally work with, and thousands of audience members we would usually welcome, all living at home, many alone, connected through the squares of our laptop screens and the vibrating of our phones. The essential loneliness and, in many cases, the literal isolation of Ovid's heroines, provided a mirror for our pandemic-ridden times. It seemed that Ovid's letters might resonate as never before with writers, actors, and an audience experiencing – for the first time, in some cases – the condition of isolation.

Polyvocality and diversity were not addenda to *15 Heroines*, but in its DNA. A few days after the first lockdown of March 2020, I began inviting actors to selftape Shakespeare's sonnets from their homes,

and Jermyn Street Theatre broadcast the videos on our YouTube channel. For a continuous 154 days, we broadcast the complete sonnet cycle performed by a mixture of household names, working actors, and recent graduates from drama schools. We were not alone in distributing art on the internet – there were plenty of well-known actors offering similar services in those lockdown days – but [the Sonnet Project](#) stumbled upon the importance of polyvocality. Shakespeare’s words were spoken by actors of all ages and ethnicities, in multiple accents and languages including British Sign Language; actors performed on horseback, in bathrooms, from swimming pools, from rooftops. The variety became interwoven with the larger aim. As the Sonnet Project gained traction, I was looking for a project on a larger scale, but which could capture that same polyvocal sense of a story told by multiple voices – distinct, unblended, but each contributing to a larger whole. Around the same time, the protests at the murder of George Floyd and the wider conversation about race, racism and monoculturalism in the British arts scene made me and the team at Jermyn Street Theatre highly conscious that whatever projects we embarked on next must embed diversity among their core values. The idea of fifteen miniature commissions thus presented the chance to reflect some of the voices of modern Britain in a single, multi-part piece of work.

*15 Heroines* was always a feminist project, insofar as it aimed to hand women’s stories back to female writers. It had no anti-male or anti-Ovidian agenda, but it seemed simple and right that the single woman who worked on the 1680 *Epistles* (Aphra Behn) should now become an all-female team. We took the view that nonbinary artists would have an equally interesting and valid perspective on these stories, and one writer used they/them pronouns. I discuss the commissioning and dramaturgy process below, but there was never a political objective behind *15 Heroines*, beyond the simple act of handing Ovid’s letters to a diverse group of contemporary women, and then seeing what happened next.

Like many projects, *15 Heroines* began as a failed pitch to the BBC, who launched a commissioning round called Culture in Quarantine. Our original plan, for actors to record the monologues at home as selftapes – like our Sonnet Project – went nowhere, but having written our pitch, the team at Jermyn Street Theatre got excited about it. We got a grant to cover some initial commissions from the City Bridge Trust. I then pitched a new plan – to perform the monologues in our empty theatre – to Digital Theatre, who were enthusiastic about coming on board as partners to film the pieces. A deal was done, and soon afterwards the Backstage Trust committed further funds. The project evolved erratically during the early summer of 2020, and by late June we were beginning the process of approaching leading British playwrights with an absurdly unattractive offer: a tiny fee to adapt some Latin poetry for performance in an empty theatre.

### **Commissioning *15 Heroines***

Diversity was the commissioning watchword. We wanted to find fifteen writers who were individually compelling, but who contrasted with each other as much as possible. Within the final group, there are notable and regrettable gaps in representation: none of them, to my knowledge, write with lived experience of disability; none represent the rich dramatic traditions of the Far East, South Asia, or South America. Our commissioning period coincided, post-Black Lives Matter, with a major drive by theatres and particularly film and TV studios to commission more writers of colour; many agents reported bittersweetly that their Black writers were busier than ever before. Nevertheless, five writers have Mediterranean, Middle Eastern or Egyptian heritage – the wider birthplace of the myths being retold – and four are Black British. But diversity goes wider than ethnicity. Although the order of the plays, and their eventual division into three programmes of five plays each, was not fully settled at this point, I was also trying to imagine the finished plays side-by-side. Without knowing how the writers might respond to Ovid, I drew on my knowledge of the writers’ previous work to make guess how the finished products might sit together – the poetic beside the political; the tender beside the sensual; the humorous beside the intense.

The 1680 *Epistles* is nowadays best known for Dryden's preface, an essay in which he outlined a persuasive theory of translation. There is, argues Dryden, a sliding scale of translation. Close, word-for-word translation he terms 'metaphrase'; a looser translation making more substantial adaptations is a 'paraphrase'; and at the loosest, or most 'libertine', end of the scale is an 'imitation', a new work based on the old. In approaching playwrights about contributing to *15 Heroines*, I offered the widest possible brief. My Call for Writers – the commissioning callout sent to literary agents and individual writers – hedged its bets by also referring to 'Playwrights' and 'Adaptors', and made this licence obvious:

Approaches to adapting a letter could vary:

- A relatively faithful verse or prose translation
- An updated verse or prose adaptation, substituting modern events and references for Ovid's classical ones – or relocating the story
- A radical departure from Ovid's text inspired by the story, the characters, or the themes, and responding to Ovid

There is room for a variety of approaches to create fifteen contrasting adaptations.

Unlike Tonson and Dryden's stable of writers, we were approaching writers mostly not steeped in a classical tradition, and we knew that these stories would be reaching an audience most of whom would be hearing the tales for the first time. I knew that few, if any, of the writers would work directly from the Latin original. Of the final fifteen playwrights, quite a few – ranging from Isley Lynn, who was writing about myth, to Stella Duffy, many of whose novels are set in the classical past – have drawn on aspects of mythology elsewhere; Sabrina Mahfouz, Timberlake Wertenbaker and Natalie Haynes all have a classical background, though to my knowledge only Haynes wrote with the Latin in front of her. This freshness was mostly an asset to the project, but it did create a practical challenge: in what form would Ovid's texts reach the writers? The Call for Writers contained a paragraph-length synopsis of each letter. Conscious that for many writers this would be their introduction to a story, I tried to keep my synopses as neutral and factual as possible, but to convey some sense of the immediacy of Ovid's text and of any helpful mythological context:

#### **Ariadne (to Theseus): The Minotaur's Sister**

Ariadne helped Theseus to kill her brother, the Minotaur, by guiding him through the Labyrinth with a thread. She and Theseus fled to Naxos together, but now she has woken up and found that he has gone. She beat her breasts, climbed the rocks, saw his sails disappearing, screamed out after him. She returns to their bed and touches the bed where he lay. There's nobody on Naxos and she cannot return to Crete, which she betrayed. She wishes he'd clubbed her to death instead of her brother. Then she begins to panic about animals on Naxos who might attack her - threats from land and sea and the gods. She catalogues all the things that have hurt her, betrayed by the wind, by Theseus and by sleep. She imagines she'll die alone on the island. She demands Theseus tell the story of how he abandoned her so her name lasts... After the poem ends, Ariadne is found by the god Bacchus and marries him. Theseus will be punished by the death of his father.

We also provided a link to [a freely available translation of the \*Heroides\*, by A.S. Kline](#). Frequently, I also emailed a link to the relevant part of [Natalie Haynes' 'Ovid Not Covid'](#) series posted on her Facebook page, knowing that Haynes' short videos would provide exactly the sort of brisk, engaging reading of the text that may lure in a wavering writer, unsure about the virtues of dusty Latin tomes.

In the early stages of commissioning, the letters were offered up on a first-come, first-served basis, and as the process rolled on, I offered playwrights a choice of two or three pieces. Wertenbaker bagged Phaedra, whose story she already knew from translating Racine's play. Isley Lynn was interested in

defending a taboo relationship and picked Canace. Juliet Gilkes Romero was drawn to the idea of restoring Medea's side of the story. Some writers asked me to choose a letter for them. I suggested to Charlotte Jones that she might like Laodamia's story, and she initially responded sceptically: was a letter full of that much husband-worship really what she wanted to write in 2020? But a second read convinced her that she could find a humour to match the letter's pathos.

It was quickly apparent that many writers wanted to do more than a straightforward translation, however 'libertine'. Sometimes, that took the form of what the long eighteenth century called a 'travesty': a thorough domestication of the original, dragging it into the present day. April De Angelis, Charlotte Jones, Lettie Precious, and Hannah Khalil were some of the writers who said in early conversations that they wanted to modernise the story: all four were true to their word, shifting the classical landscapes into the respective worlds of footballers' wives, *Love Island*, contemporary racism and colourism, and coronavirus. On other occasions, the process of adaptation meant that Ovid's *Heroides* formed just one of several sources. Bryony Lavery, responding to Ariadne, remembered a youthful love of Mary Renault's novels. Juliet Gilkes Romero, whose background is BBC reporting, dived into researching the evolution of the Medea myths; with a journalist's nose for a story, she went beyond Ovid to find older versions in which Medea is quite differently portrayed.

Once we had appointed my co-directors, Adjoa Andoh and Cat Robey (also Deputy Director at Jermyn Street Theatre and a key figure in the creation of the project), each stage director worked with their writers on final drafts. Before that point, I had given notes on several early drafts appearing during August. My notes were usually about running time (too long/short) or, more significantly, about the distance the play could travel from Ovid's original. Some early drafts wore their debt to Ovid; I encouraged the playwrights to be irreverent, to 'write back' to Ovid's originals, and to claim the pieces as plays of their own.

### **Staging Letters: from Epistle to Dramatic Monologue**

Patsy Ferran as Ariadne enters the stage backwards in her silk pyjamas, wheeling a suitcase and warding off potential attackers with a short stick. She notices the audience and screams. In Bryony Lavery's play:

*She watches us intently.*

Are you friends?

*We don't speak.*

Are you foes?

*We don't speak.*

Are you gods?

*Of course, we don't answer. We just watch her.*

You're here to observe me.

*She is most used to being silently observed.*

I understand.

I will try to inform.

*She realises she may need to explain what she is doing.*

Lavery grasps the nettle: what are these people doing on a stage anyway, and who are the audience? Part of the playwrights' ownership of the pieces was about the generic transformation from Ovid's

letters – ‘heroic epistles’, as they would be called in the long eighteenth century – to dramatic monologues. Such a transformation done incompletely or ineptly risks stasis and prolixity. Letters summarise a writer’s condition – albeit a shifting condition or a developing argument – at a fixed moment; in drama, only soliloquy does the same task, and a soliloquy lasts only a couple of minutes. Drama is an aural and a visual artform, and it requires fewer words to make the same point.

However, Ovid’s writing is enriched by a dramatic sense; there is a Euripidean quality to his heroines’ attempts to punch their way out of the tragic cage locking around them. The first question for all the playwrights – who is my heroine talking to? – can also be asked of Ovid’s letters. Yes, Ariadne is writing to Theseus, but Ariadne emphasises that she is alone on Naxos, with only the wild beasts for company. She will not be popping to the post office with her letter: it is itself an Ovidian literary construction. Theseus will never read Ariadne’s letter. Moreover, for a contemporary Roman reader, Ariadne is a mythical figure from a bygone era. Ovid’s form is self-consciously literary; a textual performance that makes few claims to realism.

The writers of *15 Heroines* had to choose whether to adopt Ovid’s use of the second person (talking to the man), or to switch to the third person (talking about the man). Just over half of the monologues – Oenone, Laodamia, Penelope, Hypermestra, Sappho, Phaedra, Phyllis, and Hypsipyle – are written to the lover-figure in the second person. The other seven heroines – Hermione, Briseis, Deinaria, Dido, Canace, Ariadne, and Medea – speak about their men in the third person. Some of these seven plays create a specific addressee as a substitute: Sabrina Mahfouz’s Hermione is giving her statement to the police; April De Angelis’s Deinaria is talking to the press (‘I’m happy for you to take notes’), although the play slides cleverly into apostrophe; Juliet Gilkes Romero repeatedly addresses an unnamed ‘Sister’ whom she entrusts with her story.

For the three stage directors, this question of who the heroine is addressing, and how, was key to staging. Those plays written in the second person posed an obvious challenge – how to represent the addressee. Adjoa Andoh staged Lettie Precious’ Oenone and Timberlake Wertenbaker’s Phaedra directly addressing an invisible Paris and Hippolytus respectively; Ann Ogbomo as Oenone, and Dona Croll as Phaedra, sometimes appear to react to these invisible presences, using lines such as ‘Don’t look away!’ or ‘Turn’ to create a dynamic connection between actor and viewer. Andoh also reconfigured the camera plan: in her pieces, three of the four cameras were tightly grouped; her actors rarely look right down the lens, but the cameras create a claustrophobic and confrontational sense that the viewer himself might be the feckless lover addressed.

Contemporary technology played a part in the second-person monologues. In Charlotte Jones’s Laodamia, which I codirected with Cat Robey, Sophia Eleni began speaking into a laptop, as if leaving a video message or creating a vlog for Protesilaus, and the piece ended with her blowing a kiss into the laptop and going to sleep with it cradled in her arms. Gemma Whelan’s dressmaker Penelope fiddled constantly with her phone, as if it somehow contained the absent Odysseus; and Olivia Williams’ wine-soaked executive Hypsipyle began tapping out an email (‘Dear ... Jason’) and ended by completing it. Across these fifteen plays adapted from letters, only one physical letter is seen in the filmed productions: Sappho’s break-up letter to her lover, whose identity is finally revealed to be Britain itself.

In contrast to Andoh’s more camera-aware approach, Robey and I urged our actors to use the audience – or the empty chairs in which the audience should have been sitting – to represent the addressee. To Eleni, Whelan, Williams, and Laird, I offered the same dramatic device: use the laptop or phone to locate the monologue’s directionality, but after establishing that relationship, peel the focus away from the object to address the audience. Such a trick is common to opera, musical theatre, and classical theatre: to begin and end the aria, song, or speech addressing someone on stage, but to share the heart of it with the audience.

In the plays referring to the lover in the third person, there is a different dynamic. The audience here is not a substitute lover, but it takes on other roles: friend, confidant, jury, voyeur, interviewer. As Lavery's *Ariadne* explores above, such a relationship must be established for the drama to function. *Ariadne* understands that we are 'here to observe' her – in return, she 'will try to inform'. If *Ariadne* is here to *inform*, different verbs suit Stella Duffy's *Dido*, played by Rosalind Eleazar. Duffy, whose rich knowledge of the ancient world is informed by a lifetime of writing historical novels, invokes a ritualistic sense in her play, and although Robey and Louie Whitmore, the director and designer, passed on the play's invitation to create a full funeral pyre, their production and Eleazar's performance explore a sense of a public figure's public statement. For Duffy and Eleazar, a sense of empowerment was found throughout the monologue's requirement for its audience to bear witness to the heroine's story, right through to the final, suicidal 'I did this. I built this. I do this.' This demand to be heard, read, and remembered is itself Ovidian. Adjoa Andoh's camera settings create a confrontational relationship with the audience in Rebekah Murrell's performance as *Hermione*, by Sabrina Mahfouz: the screen audience becomes the police officer, unable to reply or act. A similarly challenging audience relationship is explored in Isley Lynn's *Canace*. Lynn structures her play around a series of rapid-fire but unheard (and unwritten) questions: the text provides *Canace*'s answers; it is for the performer and director to work out the questions. Eleanor Tomlinson, playing *Canace*, was drawn to the context of a television interview. I directed with Robey, and together with Tomlinson we explored different interview styles, finally settling on the softest of chat shows to give *Canace* space to open up and then be ambushed by hostile questioning. *Canace* begins open, friendly, and poised, and retreats into defensiveness and finally outright contempt, as the audience slowly discovers that *Canace*'s love-story is, in fact, her incestuous relationship with her brother and the resultant death of their child. In rehearsals, Robey and I played the friendly interviewers, asking increasingly prurient questions and nudging Tomlinson towards the character's final breakdown and walkout. In the final film, you can see Tomlinson looking directly at us, creating a dynamic, shifting relationship with the viewer.

The plurality of writerly voices was multiplied by three stage directors: three ways of thinking not just about theatre, but about myth. When first reading the scripts, Andoh – like me, a great Hellenophile – was on a Greek island, and was filming natural elements – rippling water, scudding clouds, leaves on the earth – on her phone, in the hope that the videos could be used as a projected background to her pieces. Her impulse was to ground her pieces in the natural and timeless Greek world, and the projections (eventually we used different, but similar footage) supported that vision. Each of Andoh's six plays begins with a vocal cacophony, which plays with the projected video, and then snaps out as the play begins. Nicola Chang, the sound designer on those plays, used multiple voices to create what Andoh described as a 'primaevial soup' of voice and image. At the start of each of Andoh's pieces, the heroine walks out of that tumble of voices and imagery, and comes into sharp focus to begin speaking in a localised – often socially or politically conscious – reality. This sense of the mythic as an emergence of the specific from the timeless was one of the aspects that originally drew Andoh to the project. By contrast, in Robey's three solo-directed pieces, *Dido*, *Briseis* and *Phyllis* all addressed the audience directly. Robey's stagings were, in the cases of *Dido* and *Phyllis*, elemental: the stage was washed with haze; a tree-woman swayed in the wind. 'Ethereal' was a favourite Robey note – except in *Briseis*' hotel room, she eschewed contextual specificity in favour of ritualism and, indeed, theatricality. My own staging instincts were partly born of thinking about Ovid's intentions in turning these old myths into letters. I reached for the relatable: *Ariadne* and her suitcase – a posh girl dumped on an island; harassed *Hypsipyle* trying to run a country alone; *Penelope* halfway through cutting the fabric for a dress. Max Pappenheim's sound designs for my pieces were predominantly realistic. The exceptions to realism in my pieces are brief: the rushing water heard by *Sappho* as an echo of the Leucadian gulf; an eerie drone accompanying the very long, slow camera push into close-up on Ferran's face as she curses *Theseus*.

## Witty Ovid: Dealing with Humour in the *Heroides*

In his introduction to the 1680 *Epistles*, Dryden worries that Ovid's wit might be problematic. The trouble with Ovid, writes Dryden, is that he is 'witty out of season'; that his suffering characters make excellent jokes. The Restoration translators tended to dampen this effervescent wit, fearing that it would destabilise their project's gravity, and the women's situations. But within months of the *Epistles*' publication, a range of travesties and burlesques were circulating. The travesty form relocates the classical story in a modern setting, but it does not necessarily mock or traduce. Burlesque, on the other hand, is an aggressive form, which topples prestigious classical writing from its perch, often by dragging it through scatological gutters. Both travesty and burlesque add fresh layers of humour to Ovidian reception: a pleasurable double-reading, in which we are entertained by the cleverness of the transpositions. In Alexander Radcliffe's 1681 travesty of Canace's story, for example, 'Canny' and her brother 'Mac' are the children not of Aeolus, the god of the winds, but of the trumpeter of the guards – a wind-player. It is a 'geddit? geddit?' humour reliant on some knowledge of the original.

Our fifteen playwrights had all these options, but most of them eschewed the opportunity for travesty. There are exceptions: April De Angelis' handling of Deianira sees Hercules' wife reimagined as a footballer's wife taking her revenge through the media; Charlotte Jones' Laodamia engages with pop culture such as *Love Island*. Perhaps Hannah Khalil's Penelope is the closest to travesty, as Khalil seeks contemporary parallels at every turn. When I received Khalil's first draft, I was excited by her parallels: the Trojan War reimagined as an office team-building exercise; Odysseus' heroic exploits travestied as drunken camping adventures. I encouraged Khalil to have as much fun with these parallels as possible, and in a second draft she added a persistent next-door neighbour (for the suitors) and the masterstroke of Penelope as a 'virtual dressmaker' – a gesture that brought Penelope's weaving into the 2020 world of clients fibbing about their 'lockdown lard-arses'. Our designer, Louie Whitemore, showed Gemma Whelan how to cut a dress from a pattern, and in the film you can see Whelan's attention wandering from dress, to mobile phone, and back to dress again, as if the dress is her Ithacan challenge and the mobile phone contains her absent husband. Khalil's approach demonstrates the dual potential of travesty: first, engendering a familiarity for the locked-down audience; second, creating a subcurrent of comparative entertainment for those familiar with the original. As Natalie Haynes says in her introduction to the collection: 'Ovid doesn't demand that you know all these other plays and poems, but he certainly wants you to notice that he does.'

Haynes was the only playwright translating directly from Latin, and she was therefore closest to Ovid's verbal wit. Haynes has a distinctive diction familiar to her listeners and readers: a breezy modernity which clashes creatively and humorously with the reader's expectations about the antiquity of her material: 'I feel like I'm making this up'; 'none of them gave a shit about me'; 'you know what?'. For Haynes, however, the modernity of such diction is the modernity of Ovid, whose own project was one of linguistic and cultural rehabilitation, from Bronze Age mythology to Roman letter-writing. Haynes' play does not relocate or recontextualise Hypsipyle's story – of all the plays, it most closely renders the original. To Olivia Williams – herself an existing fan of Haynes' work – the play invited a playing style that could blend modernity and classical influence. Without making any textual changes, we imagined Hypsipyle as a contemporary businesswoman or politician: working late at the laptop, running her island (or company, or department of state) alone and deserted by her partner, children sleeping. 'I'm the granddaughter of Bacchus, an actual god. I outshine her in my ancestors as in every way,' declares Hypsipyle – the 'actual god' a feature of Haynes' wit fully justified by Ovid's own: 'Bacchus avus; Bacchi coniunx redimita corona praeerat stellis signa minora suis.'

*15 Heroines* is a witty collection, but it frequently chooses not to be so. This is a question of whom we are meant to laugh at, or with. In a story such as Phaedra's, part of the Ovidian fun is to endow Phaedra with a range of rhetorical devices so that she can logically argue Hippolytus into bed. It is one of the moments in reading the *Heroides* where one senses that Ovid's adoption of his heroines' psychological



perspective is no contraceptive against his instinct to mock. Phaedra as specious rhetorician was simply not of interest to Timberlake Wertenbaker, who wanted to use the story to write about ‘monstrous desire’: the societal horror at an older woman’s desire for a younger man. One result of the decision to hand the re-telling of the *Heroides* to an all-female group of writers is that the space for mockery of the heroines is closed down; the collection’s humour aims outwards at male targets instead. Such targets draw some of *15 Heroines*’ biggest laughs, whether Paris (‘a fuckboy from Phrygia’: Charlotte Jones’s Laodamia) or Achilles and Patroclus (‘glorious nipples for days’: Abi Zakarian’s Briseis). But – as I explore below – the laughter often hardens into anger.

### **Isolation: The Loneliness of the Long Distance Writer**

In my introduction, I explain that *15 Heroines* was a project born out of lockdown and the unusual isolation prevalent throughout 2020–21. To minimise the risks of infection, the entire project was created in isolated conditions – the actors never met, because they rehearsed and filmed entirely separately, and they were hurried out of their sanitised dressing rooms before they could breathe the same air. Writers could not attend rehearsal or filming, though a few Zoomed in (the laptop linking Bryony Lavery to the rehearsal room became dislodged, and Lavery spent fifteen minutes watching a wall while Patsy Ferran did her finest work). Rehearsal rooms – normally scenes of bustle and gossip – typically had just three occupants – director, actor, stage manager. Even on filming days, only twelve people were allowed to be present within the auditorium – a tiny slice of the seventy-five-strong team. The project was consumed in isolation too. The second full UK lockdown came into force just before *15 Heroines* was broadcast. Audience capacity was capped at 250 households for each broadcast across a two-week run, but the geographical spread of those few thousand people made the audience seem both larger and lonelier. Twitter and other social media platforms became an important part of how it was watched; some viewers live-tweeted. Other viewers organised post-watching video-calls to replicate the experience of a post-show drink. These circumstances applied to many of the theatre—film hybrid projects of 2020–21, but were perfectly attuned to *15 Heroines*, itself a study of isolation.

Khalil’s Penelope, the only pandemic-set play – with a face-mask and hand-sanitiser on the dressmaking table – is fuelled by the fear that organising ‘a work jolly in the middle of a global pandemic’ will result in Odysseus’ death. Penelope’s references to Zoom and her obsessive phone-checking were specific references to the 2020 context. More widely, all fifteen of Ovid’s letters are written in geographical or psychological isolation. Some of the heroines are literally isolated on islands, and others haunt the shorelines where their menfolk departed. Stella Duffy’s Dido, ready to kill herself on her pyre, can see her departing Aeneas:

From here I can see the ships I gave him, the oars I provided.  
They all take him  
away.

Phyllis has metamorphosed into a sea-facing tree; the waves crash on Ariadne’s Naxos beach; Laodamia runs to the shore. Sound designers Max Pappenheim and Nicola Chang used the sounds of seascapes and shorelines extensively throughout the films and across the introductory titles.

The *Heroides*, and *15 Heroines*, reframe isolation as an active state. It is in their isolation and abandonment that these women have found their voices. Their societies deny the heroines uninterrupted, recorded speech, but a letter – especially one which probably will go unanswered – is a free form and statement entire. Ovid’s Oenone begins: ‘perlegis? an coniunx prohibet nova – perlege’ (‘Will you read my letter through? Or does your new wife forbid? Read!’). This insistence on being read is the *Heroides*’ key drive, both locally and as the motivation of the larger work, which platforms and centres the women traditionally silenced and decentred from patriarchal mythology. Despite the absence of any writerly collaboration across *15 Heroines*, the demand to be heard burns through the collection. ‘Tell me Paris, don’t look away – I want to see your eyes’, says Lettie Precious’ Oenone in place of ‘perlegis? ...

perlege'. Deianira tempts the media pack with offers of wine and stuffed olives. Phaedra begins by pronouncing her own name, and ends by inviting Hippolytus, or the viewer, to come to her. In part, the impulse that makes Juliet Gilkes Romeo's Medea tell her story to her unnamed sister is simply the tragic impulse – the 'tell my story', that the dying Hamlet implores of Horatio. But male heroes live public lives: much of the *Heroides* and *15 Heroines* is private and confessional.

In *Canace: A Good Story*, Isley Lynn wrestles with this question of self-justification and autonomous storytelling. The televisual setting in the filmed production is not specified by the text, which only requires that 'We cannot see or hear who Canace speaks to'. Lynn's sophisticated grasp of narrative control acknowledges that Canace has arrived voluntarily to tell her own story:

No, I get it, it is. It's a good story.

Absolutely. I want to tell it.

In performance, Tomlinson put the faintest of quotation marks around 'a good story', as if nodding to the poisoned co-dependence of celebrity and media. A viewer's 'good story' – entertaining, salacious, remarkable – is the heroine's real experience. In the tumble of words towards the end of the play, Canace defends herself, now inverting the meaning of 'a good story':

I know you look at me and you see a a, abomination, a disgrace or shameful, tragedy, which is why I wanted to do this, thought that doing this... That's not what I am. Show you that's not – that's not what this story has to be, automatically. There are exceptions. There are good reasons why our story happened. I'm telling you, the reasons, they were good, it was good. It's a good story. A good story. It should just be our story, ours. I want to tell *our* story. It could have been so good.

The slide from abomination, to disgrace, to tragedy points to how often the tragic genre, when its protagonist is female, has its feet dipped in sexual scandal. Lynn acknowledges Ovid's authorial cruelty in requiring his heroine to narrate a story doomed to corrosion when exposed to the oxygen of a moralising world. The harder Canace tries to win her audience, the more the story slips from her control; the unheard questions mount in hostility, and the heroine's perspective diverges from her audience's.

### **Cancelling Ovid: Antiracism and Feminism**

2020 was the year in which Black Lives Matter dominated the airwaves, challenged the academy, and forced a major re-evaluation in the arts. Writing in autumn 2021, it is too early to say what the long-term cultural effects will be. The cultural climate provided an opportunity for the playwrights, creatives and actors involved in *15 Heroines* to put their feelings – and their rage – into the public sphere. The plays were written in the summer of 2020, when many white authors were confronting their relationship with privilege; and Black writers were stretched thinly, and belatedly commissioned. The influence of the Me Too movement is also apparent in several of the pieces; Ovid's enthusiasm for depicting non-consensual relationships itself becomes a target for the playwrights.

The play engaging most directly with Britain's 2020 politics is Lorna French's *Sappho*, in which Sappho's letter to her boatman lover Phaon is reframed as Sappho's break-up letter to the country of Britain itself. Sitting in front of a dressing room table mirror, the camera capturing her reflected image, Martina Laird's Sappho contemplated the history of her relationship with her country – her love, its neglect, her disillusionment – before leaving the tear-stained, handwritten note on the table, never to return. French follows Ovid's original with remarkable fidelity – indeed, it could be considered a travesty, insofar as French maps the source onto a set of modern references. As a white man, it was a humbling education to collaborate with French and Laird on this piece. I tried to bring to it a sense of disguise, so that it took the audience some time to realise that what they were watching was not the breakup of a romantic relationship.

Elsewhere, *The Labyrinth*, containing five plays clustered around the stories of Theseus and Jason, was ignited by a provocative contiguity between Natalie Haynes' *Hypsipyle* and the next play, Juliet Gilkes Romero's *Medea*. Hypsipyle speaks in disparaging, even racist, terms of Medea: in Olivia Williams' performance, she seems to search for the rumours on the internet as she recounts Medea's witchcraft. Medea – written, directed, performed, and designed by Black British creatives – feels like a rebuttal of the prejudices exhibited in the preceding play by Hypsipyle (herself queen of remote Lemnos). The word 'barbarian' provides both target and inspiration for Gilkes Romero. In her account of Medea, she clarifies the cultural differences of the original story: this Eastern witch is the cultural equal of the men who colonise her lands and write her out of history. In Corinth, Medea finds that women are unable to own property, choose a husband, or keep their children. She quotes her father as saying, 'We are not barbarians!', immediately before the blackout and the two gunshots that ring out: an ambiguous ending which suggests that Medea may have been compelled to kill her children to protect them from Jason's white supremacist thugs. A different racial question, that of colourism, is explored in Lettie Precious' *Oenone*. In the 1680 *Epistles*, Aphra Behn – the only female writer, and the only one whose adaptation was labelled a paraphrase – recontextualised the story of Paris' first wife as a pastoral, and she brought to its depictions of Paris and Helen a sense of seventeenth century royalist cult. In Precious' treatment, the Trojan Oenone finds herself abandoned by her black husband Paris, who – tasting a little success – has abandoned her for the white Helen of Sparta, now of Troy. The ease with which Oenone's myth can illustrate this contemporary story demonstrates the essential malleability of mythology.

Some writers were wary of working with Ovid – talismanic of the sort of patriarchal culture that they had spent whole careers trying to escape or critique. My response was simple: now Ovid is in your sights, here is your chance to give him a good kicking. One of the more combative approaches was by Abi Zakarian, whose plays include *Fabric*, which tackles sexual violence. Zakarian seized the opportunity to take on the dead white male. The director Cat Robey and actor Jemima Rooper had enormous fun with *Briseis*, in which it is slowly revealed that Briseis, no longer a concubine in thrall to Achilles, has in fact recently murdered him and left him to die on the floor of their honeymoon suite. The comic subversiveness was heightened by the casting of the heavily pregnant Rooper, who gave birth a few days after filming – her pregnancy revealed in shot halfway through – suggesting Briseis' escape is also for the next generation. Zakarian inverted all the traditional myths about Briseis, inventing a new figure whose response to early abuses was to work her way through classical mythology for her own advancement, and who was walking out to independence:

This is the one where I leave, again. Alive, intact. With money, a security I made for myself ...  
This is the one where I stoke the canon, light a fuse. Where my aim is ... well, the joy is in not knowing. Rather, the joy is being free to wander in a history I alone will make.

Rooper's delight in Zakarian's punning, playful text is evident in the closeups that end the film.

Less playful perhaps, but blazingly impassioned, was Adjoa Andoh's production starring Rebekah Murrell of Sabrina Mahfouz's *Hermione*. Mahfouz, a classicist, reacquainted herself with Ovid's Latin, which she found wittier than the extant English translations, but then firmly departed from the original. *Hermione*, challengingly subtitled *Will You?*, explores the *Heroides*' generic potential as complaint: in this case, a complaint from the arrested Hermione to figures unseen, whom we assume to be police officers. In a year featuring multiple police abuses, with more to come, and campaigns to defund the police, the piece had great resonance. It was also the year in which allegations were levelled against Prince Andrew. Hermione concludes:

Take this statement from me instead  
and as long as I live it cannot be lost  
and I'll repeat it for as long as it takes  
to get the first royal in prison for rape  
[...]  
Will you, for Hermione, Princess of Sparta  
and lover of a mother murderer,

will you for every other woman frightened of a partner  
who does no partnering, only unstitching,  
fearing for the moment their blood spills a final time,  
will you now arrest Neoptolemus,  
my husband, the rapist?

Mahfouz's reading of the *Heroides* as social complaint is persuasive. Complaint is a troubling genre which admits an imbalance of power between speaker and listener. In Mahfouz's case, this is clarified by the listener's status as policeman (Andoh's characteristically close-set cameras are part of this 'casting' of the viewer), but it could also be more widely interpreted, such as Canace's appeal to an uncomprehending questioner, or Phaedra's appeal to Hippolytus. Complaint – a word that may signify the domestic and trivial, or the serious and professional – relies on a set of existing laws which, whether divine or human, are not created by the complainant. Complaint is thus a double-edged knife for the speaker to wield. In Ann Ogbomo's performance as Oenone, she invokes a sense of ritual complaint: palms to the sky, on her knees, she seems to chant:

You know, momma used to tell me,  
I come from gods and goddesses,  
Tribes and music way deep in Africa's lands.  
She would say my forest-green skin means I belong to the earth, to the rivers.  
I, nymph,  
I, Oenone,  
wounded, complain of you.

Oenone appeals to her ancestral myths, to higher powers, to give redress in a situation where a human justice system is failing her. Most richly embedded in cultures of complaint is Chinonyerem Odimba's *Hypermetra*, which mingles song and speech: Nicholle Cherrie alternating between the roles of Hypermetra herself and that of the chantress who walked outside Hypermetra's prison; as if a single body has become divided and mourns for its own fate.

One piece features Ovid himself. Phyllis, transformed into a tree in Samantha Ellis' play, slowly rotates her own story. What appears to be a tale of victimhood, grief, and atrophy grows into one of triumph and freedom; the arboreal metamorphosis newly interpreted:

And when you came, I burst into blossom.  
Because this is a love story.  
But this is not a love story.  
*She is realising this right now, and it hits her with some force.*  
It's never been a love story.  
I burst into blossom through sheer joy.  
Because you couldn't have me any more.

Phyllis, whom Robey and the actress Nathalie Armin elected to play in her post-arboreal throughout, reflects on her own literary reception, wishing she had told her own story 'before any men did':

Ovid.

He called me a heroine but he made me sound *miserable*. And everyone praised him. For writing the women's point of view. Giving us a voice. Making our stories heard. Centring our pain. You do have to ask: why did he write so many women? Why were all his women abandoned or pining or wounded or raped? Why did he write so many rapes? I know why he told my story. He thought he was cleverer than me. He said: 'Phyllis would have survived if she'd had me as a teacher'.

Her *teacher*?

Of everything in *15 Heroines*, it was this passage, teasingly delivered by Armin, that had me squirming on every viewing, not least because Samantha Ellis' summary of the praise of Ovid virtually paraphrases the words I used when commissioning the writers. What if such centring of the female experience was not a progressive move at all, but an exploitative one? And was I the latest in a line of male creatives to profit from Ovid's exploitation of women's stories?

I also knew that the diversity of the writers and actors, and the more avowedly feminist and antiracist interpretations, might provoke traditional viewers. Our carefully written titles, which introduce and separate the pieces, and which explain that these stories are not the property of a white Italian or Greek tradition, but come from 'across the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Africa', attempt to nip reactionary criticism in the bud. There are few myths more enduring than the whiteness of classical studies. The titles contextualised Ovid as one writer in a line of storytellers, and they gave our writers a little of Ovid's privilege to make the stories feel true to themselves, to their heritage, to their politics, and to the viewers of 2020. A project bylined 'Inspired by Ovid' in our marketing (and 'Adapted from Ovid' on the Nick Hern Books compilation) ran no risk of finding its inspiration cancelled. There is a difference between critique and cancellation.

Ovid was, as Natalie Haynes acknowledges in her introduction to the published text, a man of his time 'a time much more patriarchal than our own', but one who 'cares about writing fully rounded, multidimensional women'. One must acknowledge, as Ellis urges us to, the complexities of a male writer making financial gain, sometimes making fun of, and perhaps deriving aesthetic pleasure from, the suffering of women. With all those qualifications, I would still argue for the *Heroides* as a text that inverts male-centred narratology and places these mythical women, so frequently marginalised, as the authors of their own stories. *15 Heroines* was a project that always wore its plurality and diversity on its sleeve – part of its appeal is its polyvocality and multitude of perspectives; the ways it frees these myths from a single guiding hand, of whatever gender, ethnicity, or background. But as time has elapsed, I have come to see *15 Heroines* as a project conscious of its own temporality: the humbling aspect of laying down but fifteen stepping-stones along the multiple pathways that these myths have taken, and will go on taking, through the centuries.