Ovid Revisited

Locating the *Heroides* in Michael Drayton and Madhusudan Dutt

Sukanya Dasgupta

Abstract

It has been fairly well established by now that the European Renaissance provided a model that has been modified to suit other periods and cultures. In this context, the article will seek to compare and explore the ways in which Ovid's *Heroides* was received, appropriated and manipulated by two writers: the English Renaissance poet Michael Drayton and the 19th century writer of the Bengal Renaissance - Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Separated as they are by time, context and language, Drayton's *Englands Heroicall Epistles* (1597) and Dutt's *Bīrāṅganā Kābya* (1862) engage in highly productive and transformative relationships with Ovid's *Heroides.* Not only do both texts show a remarkable sensitivity to the generic implications of the Latin work, but they also become sites for the exploration of the cultural competition fostered by the interaction of old texts with new.

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"The letter, the epistle…is not a genre, but all genres, literature itself"
(Derrida 1980, 48)

The history of the English reception of Ovid's *Heroides* has begun to be written rather recently. Whereas the impact of the *Metamorphoses* on English literature forms part of the mainstream of English literary history, the *Heroides* has perhaps only received the attention it deserves in connection with the history of the epistolary novel and feminist literary history (see Kaufmann 1992). Both areas often engage with issues which are at the heart of Ovid's text – such as the finding of a literary voice, the articulation of emotion, and the attempted heroization of the domestic and the private. In particular, the *Heroides* provides the stimulus for the extensive attention paid to the writing of the female voice and the articulation of female desire. What has not been fully explored however, is the epistolary dimension of Ovid's text; how later writers were deeply influenced by the immense generic possibilities of the *Heroides*, and how this in turn became a means to resist literary and political authority.

This paper will seek to compare and explore the ways in which one Ovidian text – the *Heroides*, was received, appropriated and manipulated by two writers: the 16th century English Renaissance poet Michael Drayton and the 19th

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century writer of what was termed the 'Bengal Renaissance'– Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Separated as they are by time, context and language, Drayton's *Englands Heroicall Epistles* (1597) and Dutt's *Bīrāṅganā Kābya* (1862) engage in highly productive and transformative relationships with Ovid's *Heroides.* Not only do both texts show a remarkable sensitivity to the generic implications of the Latin work, but they also become sites for the exploration of the cultural competition fostered by the interaction of old texts with new. How do the two writers manipulate genre to comment on gender dialectics in their poems? Are both these works responses to rhetorical imperatives within their respective cultures as they adapt Ovid's text? Do Dutt's heroines, like Drayton's, recover a degree of textual authority through an independent critical engagement, by turns resistant and identificatory, with their Ovidian sources? What parallels do we see in the two poets' engagement with Ovid's text and what are the points of departure? I will attempt to explore whether the reception of an Ovidian text by two poets – Drayton and Dutt – can be seen as a marker of the concept of a cultural paradigm of the Renaissance, occurring as it were, in two different periods of history and in different cultures. Each writer represents different degrees of engagement with a source text; each discloses something about the conditions of its production and the immediate concern of its author, and about the potential for meaning of Ovid's text itself. Dutt, writing during the Bengal Renaissance, must have been acutely aware of the difference from the European Renaissance in historical circumstances and cultural location. Yet, both Drayton and Dutt, by their adaptations of Ovid's text, carefully construct a narrative of loss and recovery and attempt to shape a textual culture, taking cognizance of Elizabethan politics and the constraints of the colonial situation in India respectively. The *Heroides* thus become a paradigm for resisting literary and political authority by two poets in two entirely different time periods and locations.

In Drayton's case, by the 1590s there had been a broad shift in English secular culture, away from models like Virgil's *Aeneid*, long approved by humanist scholars, towards a less stable but more vivid and pliable Ovidian corpus. Although Ovid's oeuvre had a place in humanist educational programmes, educators were cautious if not apprehensive, particularly about a text like the *Heroides*. Erasmus stressed that a letter should be amusing and novel like Ovid's love letters, but warned against using them in "classroom exercises for those of tender years" (Erasmus 1985, 24). For Elizabethan writers like Spenser, Chapman, Drayton and Nashe, Ovidianism was not a retrospective mode but an immediate allusive language through which poets competed with one another in the literary marketplace. One feature of the *Heroides* which might account for its popularity in the sixteenth century is the work's overt rhetoricity, the prominence of the role of language in the construction of character. The construction of the self in the text, the fashioning of a persona and the way that the role of the addressee just as much as the role of the writer is defined by language, are concerns common to all types of letter writing in the early modern period. In the case of the *Heroides*, the distinction between the voice of the author and the assumed persona of the poet is at its clearest. In Latin poetry this distinction already exists to some extent in subjective elegy and in the Horatian and Ovidian epistle, but much more prominently as performance in the *Heroides*. The work's 'duplicity' has interested readers since the Middle Ages. R.J. Hexter shows how the writer of an accessus to a twelfth century manuscript edition of the *Heroides* makes the distinction between the authorial intention and that of the letter-writer herself: "In qualibetepistulahabetur duplex intention actoris et mittentis" (Hexter 1986, 163). (In each of the epistles there is a double intention, of the author and of the sender). This doubleness that underwrites every utterance in the text – the basis for much of the linguistic ingenuity and wit in the *Heroides*, would have been specially attractive to Renaissance writers and the octavo format of

Drayton's *England's Heroicall Epistles* – rather than the quarto of Drayton's earlier publications – conveys as much the author's ambition as the publisher Nicholas Ling's confidence that it would sell well (Marotti 1995, 288).Claudio Guillen draws attention to what he calls the Renaissance "awareness of the letter" (1986, 91) as a form that presents or declares itself as a piece of writing or correspondence. To write a letter was to define and create a 'self', to shape an image of oneself (91). The primary generic affinity of the letter was not to the verse epistle as Ovid writes it, but to the 'familiar' letter as cultivated by Cicero. By using historical and not mythological characters who write these "heroicall epistles" to each other, Drayton is able to create fictional selves who select and interpret historical events to offer their versions of the past (1931). This interaction and indeed fusion of historical and personal factors are not found in Ovid's *Heroides*. Ovid's epistolary interpolations into the mythological record from the perspective of wives and mistresses left behind by the patriarchal traditions of epic and tragedy serves Drayton as a means rather than as an end to his desire to reconstruct an Ovid he may imitate in a positive manner, offering his readers a patriotic and indeed politically subversive work.

During the Elizabethan period, the most pervasive model for feminine epistolary discourse was Ovid's *Heroides.* George Turberville's translations of this Ovidian text was published in 1567 as *The Heroycall Epistles of the Learned Poet Publius Ovidius Naso* and it went through five editions between 1567 and 1597, the year in which Drayton's *England's Heroicall Epistles* was first published. The *Heroides*, already a work of some 4000 lines, was doubled by Turberville's translation and went through four editions by 1600, no doubt helping to make the legendary heroines and their stories much more familiar. That Michael Drayton fully intended to build his *England's Heroicall Epistles* on a dual principle is suggested by their very title and confirmed quite explicitly by the poet in the section addressed to the Reader where he states that an endeavour to

imitate Ovid's *Heroides*has been coupled with that of disseminating historical information (Drayton 1931, 130). Drayton's intention of manipulating the genre itself is evident from his comments on the use of the term "Heroicall": he refers to "Ovid (whose Imitator I partly professe to be)" but goes on to explain that he has "interwoven matters historicall" so that his epistles do not seem unduly passionate (1931, 130). It was inevitable that this conscious departure from Ovid and an enlargement in subject matter would have repercussions on the form and the content of Drayton's text. As I will contend, Drayton clearly had a political purpose behind the inclusion of historical characters who give their distinctive versions of English history. Drayton deals with personalities drawn from different ages and introduces a format of paired epistles – the letters between two lovers constituting a unit. Consequently, while the psychology of the women writers is revealed in their respective letters, it is always countered by a male point of view that the paired epistles encapsulate. This in turn radically alters the orientation of the work. The title of Ovid's work indicates that his letter writers are all women taken from mythology. Drayton may have derived the term "heroicall" from Ovid and indeed directly from Turberville's title, but he puts it to a completely new use (Ovid, Turberville and Sabinus 1567).

In the *Heroides* where mythological women write letters to their lovers lamenting their lost loves, Ovid uses the epistle form to define and illuminate character. The narrative context is rendered irrelevant as each letter focuses on the condition of the heroine's mind – her anger, remorse or anguish. The interest chiefly lies in the subtle variation of tone and mood and the world of concrete events is replaced by a world of psychic projections. Different characters, according to their narrow, self-contained preoccupations, interpret myths and legends. For instance, Cassandra's prophecy of the coming war becomes for Paris' lover, Oenone, a forecast of a personal calamity rather than a national disaster:

> That day spoke doom for wretched me
> On that day did the awful storm of changed love begin. (Ovid 1914)

In Ovid's text, single epistles illustrate aspects of the human psyche and each heroine is seen in the light of the myth to which she belongs. Duncan F. Kennedy has noted that Ovidian scholarship has often downplayed the epistolary form, viewing the *Heroides* more as tragic soliloquies (Kennedy 2002, 219).One question that engages us in any discussion of epistolarity is the ultimate *destination* of letters. Often the addressee is spatially and temporally absent and though letters may have an intended destination, there is no guarantee they will ever reach or that the addressee will ever get to read it. There is however, another addressee at hand in the *Heroides*: i.e. the reader of Ovid's poem or the 'external reader' who imposes a further perspective beyond that of the heroines and heroes or their formal addressees. Similarly, there are two notional authors: the figure from legend as well as Ovid the writer. It is this complex figure of the addressee/reader and a kind of dual authorship in Ovid's text that would attract later writers of epistles like Drayton and Madhusudan Dutt who would wish to manipulate the literary tradition for distinct political or subversive purposes.

That Drayton invited a political and topical reading of his epistles is evident from the design of the entire work. He returned to the epistolary form of the Ovidian original and, developing the paired letter and reply form modelled in some of Ovid's epistles, he places the heroine's emotional complaints in dialogue with their addressees, the other writers of verse epistles, the dedicatees and the reader. Thus he recasts women as letter-writing agents in English political history and they also serve as commentators in a discussion upon the rights of subjects and the appropriate limits to sovereign power directed at print readers. Drayton has largely been viewed (rather uncharitably) as an old fashioned minor poet with modest talent and a follower of Spenser who was lacking in individual talent (see

Bush 1945, 76-80; Norbrook 1992, xxxii; Grundy 1969). It is only recently that Drayton's political or literary intentions have begun to be noticed (Helgersen 1992, 14-15; van Es 2007, 256-7; Hadfield 2004). By adapting Ovid's epistolary form and making a personalised identification with it, Drayton positions his poetry within literary traditions. His women letter writers continue to be women who are violated or abandoned by politically powerful, sovereign men, but by granting these women a kind of epistolary agency and autonomy, Drayton is also proclaiming the value of authorial labours as his own, that can circulate without sovereign or courtly patronage.

Drayton wrote this work in 1597 but it was revised in 1598 and 1599 with the incorporation of new sets of epistles. In the first edition, four sets of epistles refer to the reigns of the deposed kings Edward II, Richard II and Henry VII. The epistles between Walter de la Poole and Queen Margaret also portray the characters against the background of a complex struggle for power during the War of the Roses. In the last years of Elizabeth's reign the delicate question arose as to who her successor should be and when Peter Wentworth raised the succession question in his "A Pithie Exhortation to her Majestie for establishing her successor to the crowne" (1593) he was promptly sent to the Tower (Hurstfield 1961, 372). Francis Osborne points out how Parliament encouraged the Queen to marry but "they were so moderate as to pass by all mention of a Successour, every ungratefull to her ears during the whole Series of her raigne…" (1658, 58). The succession question was thus a delicate and risky topic but in his first 1597 edition of *Englands Heroicall Epistles* Drayton includes a set of epistles between Mary Tudor, Queen of France and Charles Brandon, whose descendants complicated the Elizabethan succession question. In the last set of epistles in this edition, Drayton sympathetically portrays Lady Jane Grey, granddaughter of Mary and Charles Brandon, who was proclaimed Queen after Edward VI's death but subsequently executed in 1554. Lady Jane Grey had close contacts with the

Genevan and Calvinist communities and her marriage to Guilford Dudley, son of the Duke of Northumberland signalled the opening moves in a campaign to set aside the established line of succession. Jane Grey's nephew Edward Seymour was the Suffolk claimant to the crown during Elizabeth's time and Drayton's sympathetic portrayal of Jane Grey as a Protestant martyr at this time was both clearly a political move.

If commenting directly on the succession question was legally prohibited, writing about deposed monarchs was equally hazardous. The deposition of Richard II was frequently seen as an analogy to the overthrow of the Queen. That Shakespeare's play dealing with the deposition and murder of Richard II was arranged to be performed by the Earl of Essex's supporters the night before his return to London from Ireland and the possible use of the deposition scene (never printed in Elizabeth's reign) in Essex's rebellion, have been noted by various critics. Against this background, Drayton introduces a set of epistles between Queen Isabel and Richard II, the latter making the dangerous admission in the 1597 edition that his deposition was just punishment for his sins:

> Our Empire's bounds did never stretch so farre,
> So wise in peace, so politique in warre,
> Never did all so suddenly decline
> But justice is the heavens, the fault is mine. (Drayton 1941, Vol V, 115)

These, as well as other politically volatile lines referring to the king as a "barraine trunk" were removed in Drayton's revised 1599 and 1600 editions. Having lost sovereign power, Richard lacks rhetorical agency and is stripped of his identity: the hand that guided a sceptre can now barely govern a pen.

Equally subversive were the dedications that Drayton used at the beginning of each set of epistles. It was generally perceived that Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex was the successor of Philip Sidney. Drayton's 1597 edition had as the dedicatees, members of the Russell and Bedford families as well as Lord

Mounteagle and Henry Howard – all of whom were associated with Essex, whose favour with Elizabeth was beginning to wane, leading to his final revolt and execution. This seems to me to be a specific political intervention on Drayton's part. After Essex's campaign against the Earl of Tyrone in Ireland failed however, Drayton replaced these dedicatees with new ones in his revised 1598 edition. Although this move may suggest that Drayton was indeed careful not to offend the political powers that be, he also points out in a letter to the Reader appended to the epistles that his dedicatees are "over-matched" by the letter-writing English kings and queens in his work. In other words, Drayton seems to give the reading public and their judgement regarding his work precedence over courtly patronage and royal endorsement: he draws the terms of an emerging literary discourse from the Ovidian verse epistle, the dedicatory letter and chronicle history to articulate pluralist ideas of community and sovereignty.

Drayton's continuous use of paired epistles is not only one of his innovative departures from his Ovidian source but is also an interesting device by which he is able to contrast male and female states of mind. The women deliberately resist flattery realizing that it leads the way to distortion and semantic manipulation and emphasize on historical facts and concrete experience. For instance when Owen Tudor concludes that the union between him and Queen Katherine is sanctioned by destiny, Katherine immediately counters that by rejecting the imposition of chance and by asserting her freedom of choice: "So I (a Queene) besoveraigne in my choyse" (1941, II, 1.1145, 205).The men on the other hand seek to control the flux of events through language. Their greater involvement in the realm of public affairs acts as a contrastive factor. The male suitors use elaborate Petrarchan and Ovidian rhetoric in the description of their heroic deeds, their noble lineage or their military prowess and see the women primarily as objects of their desire. The women counter this by being sceptical of appearances and by rejecting flattery of any kind. This kind of gender

confrontation provides a parallel to the encounter of the sexes on a historical or political plane when the women are often victimized. Rosamond has to be kept in a labyrinth away from Henry II's jealous Queen since she has no status in his family or in society; Mistress Jane Shore is viewed by Edward IV as a material possession and hence compared to rubies, pearls and diamonds. The public, orthodox stance in the letters written by the men may be contrasted with the subversive, deconstructive and private stance adopted by the women writers. The women are also brought into the foreground by presenting a critique of the male point of view. In his epistle to Alice, Countess of Salisbury, Edward the Black Prince uses the blazon to describe Alice's beauty but also views her as his potential, personal possession:

> Thy Cheeke, for which mine all this Penance proves,
> Steales the pure whitenesse both from Swans and Doves:
> Thy Breath, for which, mine still in Sighes consumes,
> Hath rob'd all Flowers, all Odours, and Perfumes. (1941, II, 135-138, 179)

In her answer to his epistle, Alice ironically highlights the dilemma of women who are expected to conform to the desires of men and society:

> To men is graunted privilege to tempt,
> But in that Charter, Women be exempt:
> Men win us not, except we give consent,
> Against our selves unlesse that we be bent.
> Who doth impute it as a Fault to you?
> You prove not false, except we be untrue;
> It is your Vertue, being Men, to trie,
> And it is ours, by Vertue to denie.
> Your Fault it selfe serves for the Faults excuse,
> And makes it ours, though yours be the abuse. (1941, II, 33-40, 182-3)

The Ovidian feminine voice is also used by Drayton to challenge and question the masculinist understanding of English chronicle history. A case in point are

Drayton's epistles between Edward IV and Mistress Jane Shore. This story was already in circulation due to Thomas Churchyard's "Shore's Wife" published in the 1563 edition of the *Mirrour for Magistrates* (Campbell 1938). Jane Shore is a commoner, a mere goldsmith's wife, unmoored from her social class by being the king's lover, but who is ultimately used, commodified and abandoned. From this subaltern position she provides an impassioned but rational and articulate critique of sovereign power (see Steible 2003). Here, Drayton extracts the feminine complaint from chronicle history, drawing it into a discussion about English nationhood. But Drayton is doing something interesting here: his Jane Shore acknowledges the dangers of the Ovidian legacy (that Drayton is using by choosing the epistolary form) when she accuses Edward IV: "Romes wanton Ovid did those rules impart; /O, that your nature should be helped with Art." (1941, II, 102-103).By making Jane Shore wary about Ovidianism, the King is shown as a letter-writer who uses the Ovidian rhetorical arts for nefarious purposes. Like Ovid's epistles, Drayton's women letter-writers remind the reader that they are grounded in certain conditions, practices and equipment (there are many references to events unfolding as the letter is being written, or to instruments of pen, ink, paper etc.) but here the material context locates their discursive agency in a debate about English politics.

Fame, power, public recognition and ambition – all so important to the men –are consciously repudiated and disdained by the women writers of the epistles. In *England's Heroicall Epistles*, Drayton opens up a private, personal perspective, particularly a feminine perspective, but he goes beyond that in creating paired epistles. Drayton's heroines critique and comment on male conduct, particularly sexual conduct, whilst manipulating early modern culture's norms for women's textual production; his female letter-writers manage to negotiate the impediments to self-expression they initially encounter, going on to articulate morally and politically incisive forms of complaint. The opening letters

between Matilda and King John for example, generate a cogent critique of power relations. Using the hyperbolic language of flattery to distort reality, King John ignores Matilda's religious sensibility, interpreting her refuge in a convent as an indication of her devotion towards him. Matilda, in her reply, recognizes John's "flatt'ring Tongue" as distorting the truth:

> So from the Rocks, th'alluring Mermaids sing:
> In greatest Wantst'inflict the greatest Woe
> Is ev'n the utmost Tyrannie can doe. (1941, II, 108-110)

Similarly, Rosamond's letter to Henry II, written from the labyrinth in which she is imprisoned, opens with a cogent, almost legalist critique of sovereign power. Implying that when a sovereign acts as a private man he should be subject to the law as everyone else is, Rosamond invokes her rights and questions Henry's abuse of monarchical power, asking why he should buy "unlawful pleasure" with "kingliemagestie" (Drayton 1941, II, 29-30). Henry's powerful masculine rhetoric in his reply to her does not, as Deborah Greenhut contends, reflect the "failure of feminine speech" (1988, 142). On the contrary, Henry pledges that if his name has offended Rosamond, "If written, blot it, if engraven, raze it" (Drayton 1941, II, 123, 128), offering her the kind of discursive power over his name and his destiny that he has wielded over her earlier.

The gender dialectics that this device of 'pairing' generates, become in turn a reflection of the historical dialectics that form the basis of these epistles. The women, through their interpretations of 'history' offer a perspective that is different and often a critique of the kind of 'history' presented by the men. It is precisely this merging of personal and historical elements that mark Drayton's most interesting departure from Ovid's *Heroides*. But Drayton does not move merely from the historical to the personal: rather, he gives history a human angle by viewing the historical *through* the personal, that is in terms of its impact on the lives and personalities of individual historical characters. At the same time the

paired epistles suggest that he views historical problems as reflecting more general human problems – for instance, gender encounters. Raphael Lyne contends that in Drayton's *England's Heroicall Epistles* poetic conventions "are recruited to a patriotic cause" but while he suggests that this is not an overt mode of political engagement (Lyne 2001, 147), I would argue that Drayton's use of an apparently apolitical, aesthetic form itself becomes a strong political statement.

Madhusudan Dutt was of course, writing in an entirely different era and context, when he took up Ovid's *Heroides* as a source text for his *Bīrāṅganā Kābya*. The philological affinity between Greek, Latin and Sanskrit gave the latter a seminal status not just as an Indo European language but also as a direct input for the study of the *litteraehumaniores* in India. In the late 18th century, Sir William Jones, for instance, considered the kinship between the Graeco-Roman and the Hindu worlds to be linguistic, but also cultural and intellectual. This late-eighteenth-century phase of British engagement with Indian culture had an enduring status in the imagination of the indigenous Hindu elite in Bengal. Subsequently in the 19th century, Indians saw themselves as heirs to the legacy of European letters and culture. Just as European Renaissance humanists like Pico della Mirandola and Pietro Bembo had fostered the development of the vernacular languages, in 19th century Bengal one felt entitled to apply similar methods to shape one's own language and culture. The flowering of culture and the arts in the long nineteenth century is often referred to as the 'Bengal Renaissance'. Misleading though the term may be, it will be used here for the sake of convenience and there is no doubt that it introduced certain social and cultural changes and that it inaugurated and opened the way to a fresh encounter between two modern vernaculars (i.e. English and Bengali) and culture systems. Because the 16th century European Renaissance was assimilating the past, it could define its own cultural context; 19th century Bengal was interacting with an expanding contemporary culture, and being colonized by that culture, could not interact with

the same independence of operation, being controlled by various press acts and a British controlled education system.

Madhusudan Dutt was born in 1824 in a remote village in Jessore district (now in Bangladesh). In 1843 he converted to Christianity, but took the name Michael only in 1847. His education at Hindu College and Bishop's College, Calcutta would lay the intellectual and cultural foundations for his later literary career. Although at Hindu College Madhusudan encountered a significant quantity of Western classical literature in translation, it was not until he enrolled at Bishop's College in 1844 that he began to master Latin and Greek. In his later Bengali works, Orientalist Indo-European scholarship would serve as a key cultural filter through which the poet read Graeco-Roman and indeed Sanskrit literature. His works include a Bengali play dramatizing a Hindu version of the Judgement of Paris, a retelling of the Sanskrit epic the *Ramayana* using a number of Vergilian and Homeric tropes, a Hindu response to Ovid's *Heroides* and a Bengali prose version of the first half of Homer's *Iliad*. Though steeped in contemporary British literary culture, his Bengali works bypassed the literary trends of his British contemporaries and by subverting contemporary British constructions of what constituted "classical", he also highlighted counter-currents within the Western classical discourse.

I will attempt to examine in the following section, Madhusudan's response to the Graeco-Roman classics in his 1862 text, the *Bīrāṅganā Kābya* (based on the *Heroides*) and try to highlight the subversiveness that underpins it. It is in this text's complex engagement with Ovid's *Heroides* that its originality lies. While it is clearly evident that Ovid's influence lies beneath the generic surface of this text, the work shows a kind of proto-nationalist antipathy towards the West; at the same time, I suggest that he uses this text as a tool to resist and undermine the hegemony of elite Hindu culture as well. In *Englands Heroicall Epistles*, Drayton was using English historical characters through whom he could assert a sense of

patriotic pride while adopting a kind of anti-establishment stand, often against monarchical power; Madhusudan draws extensively on the Sanskrit and medieval Bengali epic traditions by choosing heroines from Hindu mythology who write epistles to their husbands or lovers but the *Bīrāṅganā Kābya* is also perhaps his most antinomian reception of a Graeco-Roman text. It may be noted at this juncture that Madhusudan prefaces the *Bīrāṅganā Kābya* with a citation from the *Sahityadarpana*, a Sanskrit treatise composed by the Bengali aesthetician Visvanatha. The citation goes thus: "It is agreed (by the learned) that women may reveal their feelings – by the sending of letters" (Kane 1923). Although the Hindu literary tradition has no genre of epistolary poetry as it were, Madhusudan cites this passage from a Sanskrit aesthetics treatise to suggest that the potential for such a genre is embedded in the indigenous tradition itself. Madhusudan's import of a Roman genre, the Ovidian epistolary elegy becomes an extension of an idea already present in nascent form, in the Hindu tradition.

Madhusudan's interest in the *Heroides* itself was an unexpected mid-nineteenth century response to the Graeco-Roman canon. Ovid's oeuvre in general, and his *Heroides* in particular, were largely out of vogue and indeed out of favour in mid-nineteenth century Britain for his perceived moral decadence and aesthetic artificiality.[1] The title, Madhusudan's own Sanskritic coinage, literally means 'warlike women' or 'heroes' women' and takes Ovid's *Heroides* as a generic literary model though Madhusudan could only finish 11 of the intended 21 epistles. Like Ovid, the poems treat the elegiac themes of love and the plight of women separated from their beloved, but on a more fundamental level the text uses Ovid's *Heroides* to say something about the nature of illicit readership, to challenge the idea of what makes a classic and to resist literary authority – both European and Hindu. Given Ovid's reputation in the 19th century, Madhusudan's

[1]In 1842, Emma Garland, a female poet from Liverpool composed her English translation of the *Heroides,* but there is no evidence that Madhusudan had read her translation. He was, however, in all probability, familiar with Pope's *Eloisa to Abelard*.

reading would go against the grain of contemporary Western classical taste or even against the spirit of contemporary Western notions of what was defined as 'classical.' As an Indian living in colonial India, the very fact that Madhusudan could read extensively in Latin was itself somewhat illicit. By adapting the *Heroides* for the benefit of Bengali readers, Madhusudan was intensely conscious of his status outside the definition of the typical classical reader of Greek and Latin. The *Heroides* was a classical text that arguably belonged more readily to subaltern readers like Madhusudan than to traditional white, male readers of the Graeco-Roman classics.

There is no doubt that the basic generic architecture of the *Bīrāṅganā Kābya* is markedly Ovidian and many of the formal features recall the Ovidian model. Madhusudan intended to write 21 epistles (the same number as in the *Heroides*) and although only 11 were published he did leave notes for a further 6 epistles. The individual poems are of comparable length to Ovid's letters and they follow Ovid's apparent law of composition for *Heroides* 1-15 that "each individual epistle be autonomous" (Barchiesi 2001, 29) and do not invite a response. There is also an Ovidian distribution between well-known and obscure writers and one of the Hindu heroines Sakuntala certainly reminds one of Ovid's Medea in her dual role as both epic and dramatic heroine. Sakuntala's epistle to Dusmanta perhaps resonates most obviously with Penelope's letter to Ulysses in the *Heroides*. Both heroines are eminent figures in their respective mythologies and their stories are similar: both suffer the absence of a husband with whom she will be ultimately reunited. The distribution of the Hindu source texts in the *Bīrāṅganā Kābya* also reveals an Ovidian presence: some of the heroines inhabit the same source text and this leads to ironic contrasts of perspective. For instance, Bhanumati's epistle to Duryodhana (Epistle 7; Riddiford 2013, 238-9) comes straight after Draupadi's letter to Arjuna. The two addressees here are arch enemies in the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*. This ironic juxtaposition resonates with

Ovid's positioning of Briseis' epistle to Achilles (*Heroides* 3) and Oenone's epistle to Paris (*Heroides* 5). If Paris' seduction of Helen sparked the Trojan War, it was Duryodhana's shameful treatment of Arjuna's wife Draupadi that led to the great war in the *Mahabharata.*

But Ovid is not only present in the *Bīrāṅganā Kābya* in an architectural, formal sense. Sometimes a number of Ovidian situations and myriad resonances of Ovid are refracted in a single Bengali epistle. The *Bīrāṅganā Kābya*'s fifth epistle by Surpanakha recalls that of Helen's (*Heroides* 17), Ariadne's (*Heroides* 10) and her sister Phaedra's (*Heroides* 5). Like Ariadne's love for Theseus, Surpanakha's love of Lakshmana crosses the lines of enmity, both women being attracted to their kinsmen's sworn enemy. As a confession of love destined to fall on deaf ears, Surpanakha's epistle also recalls Phaedra's while her situation is reminiscent of Helen's, the difference being that while Paris' abduction of Helen leads to the Trojan War, it is Lakshmana's cruel rejection of Surpanakha that leads to the war of Lanka. At times of heightened elegiac tension Ovid emerges almost verbatim: Oenone's epistle to Paris (*Heroides* 5) is recalled in Kekayi's ferocious and emphatic denunciation of Dasaratha's faithlessness, accusing him of being the greatest exponent of heretical wickedness (*Bīrāṅganā Kābya* Epistle 4; Riddiford 2013, 238).

At the same time, one must take cognisance of Madhusudan's own description regarding literary appropriation: "In matters literary, old boy, I am too proud to stand before the world, in borrowed clothes. I may borrow a neck-tie, or even a waist coat, but not the whole suit" (Murshida 2004, 107).Madhusudan's interest in the *Heroides* as a literary model had much to do with the subversive possibilities entailed by the Latin work's generic identity. What then, could possibly be the literary and cultural purposes for which Madhusudan may have turned to Ovid in the first place? The Bengali epistles, which are imagined to have taken place before the narrative of the *Mahabharata* was composed, seem, like

Ovid's *Heroides* to have the paradoxical advantage of "temporal priority" over their source texts, making the source texts look like "later…appropriations or recuperations of the legendary authors' works" (Kennedy 2002, 206). The epistle thus becomes a vehicle for elegy to challenge the authority of epic. The special capacity of epistolary elegy to challenge the authority of epic was perhaps one of Madhusudan's chief reasons for being attracted to the *Heroides* as a model for the *Bīrāṅganā Kābya*. Madhusudan was keen to challenge Hindu religious doctrine in his revisions of the Hindu epic tradition where the hero Rama is seen as an avatar of the supreme deity Vishnu. The *Bīrāṅganā Kābya* is filled with elegiac denunciations of members of Rama's family: Kekayi and Surpanakha (in Epistles 4 and 5) take it in turns to cast doubt on the probity and heroism of Rama's father and brother, respectively. While Kekayi attacks Dasaratha, Rama's father for his preferential treatment of Rama over Bharata, Surpanakha's humiliation and anguish in the hands of Lakshmana (Rama's brother) is emphasized. Similarly, in the extraordinarily vitriolic Epistle 11 where Queen Jana writes to her husband King Niladhvaja to avenge the death of their son Prabira who has been killed by the hero Arjuna, Jana notes that her husband has made peace with Arjuna, their son's killer because Arjuna is apparently divine. Arguing that Arjuna is not a god at all and that her husband is mistaken to treat him as one, Jana addresses a key theological issue of the *Mahabharata*, challenging the Hindu doctrine of *Naranarayana* which holds that the hero Arjuna is in fact the deity Nara (conjoined with the god Krishna as Narayana).

It is also interesting to note the disparity of knowledge and power between the male epic narrator and the female elegiac voice. Bhanumati, for instance, says of Sanjay's epic narration in Epistle 7: "I cannot understand what I hear – I am a simple woman!" (Riddiford 2013, 159). Here Bhanumati describes herself as ignorant and naïve in the face of the authoritative account given by the *Mahabharata.* Yet, despite this public declaration of female weakness, one sees

an appropriation of the epic narrative and an attempt by the women to affect the events related to them. Like Briseis in *Heroides 3*, who appeals to Achilles to reinvent himself as an epic hero who is also an elegiac lover, Bhanumati thrusts her elegiac, feminine and subjective point of view on to their male addressees. Indeed, women like Bhanumati go one step further than Ovid's heroines by mediating their husbands' 'reading' of their own epic story: Duryodhana hears his wife's elegiac interpretation of Sanjay's epic narrative even before being able to consider it for himself.

From a very early stage, the discourse of colonial politics in British India was gendered: the colonized society was 'feminized' as opposed to colonial 'masculinity' and this was seen as a justification for India's loss of independence (Bandyopadhyay 2004, 381). In his lecture entitled "The Anglo Saxon and the Hindu", delivered in Madras (1854), Madhusudan uses a Vergilian allusion from the *Aeneid* at the beginning: "quisnovus hic nostrissuccessitsedibushospes!" (Madhusudan translates this as "Who is this stranger who has come to our dwelling?"; Dutt 1942). Here Madhusudan is following the familiar trope of gendering the European power as masculine and the colonized Indian as feminine, whereby Aeneas stands for the Anglo-Saxon and Dido for Hindustan, but the citation chosen by Madhusudan of course prepares us for one of the most tragic episodes in the *Aeneid* and reminds us of intrusion and violation that one associates with the Aeneas-Dido relationship. By foregrounding the women in the *Bīrāṅganā Kābya*, Madhusudan gives this 'feminine', colonized society a voice in the face of the 'masculine' colonial power whose authority it lives under. He is the 'colonial-feminine reader', so to speak, articulating his (feminine) colonial society's attitude towards the (masculine) Anglo-Saxon rulers.

What conclusions can one infer then, about how and why Ovid was reworked in two different cultures? Can one generalize about these two specific instances being a cultural marker of the concept of a paradigm of the

Renaissance? The operation of language and textuality as a guiding factor behind a civilization is perhaps the most basic criterion of what one would call a 'renaissance'. The late Middle Ages in Europe and indeed in England, like the 'medieval' or Islamic period in Indian history, produced vast quantities of texts. But literacy and textuality were then viewed as the defining condition of particular pursuits, for instance the clergy, but also groups of rulers, administrators and merchants. To view these factors as basic to the entire functioning of society implies a paradigm shift, whether in sixteenth century England or in nineteenth century Bengal. European Renaissance humanism had fostered the development of the vernaculars by an organic development from classical humanist philology. As time elapsed, the potential for the vernaculars for all literary and intellectual purposes was more stridently asserted. In the nineteenth century, both in Britain and on the continent, oriental studies developed from a general interest in the languages, originating with classical Greek and Latin in the Renaissance. The philological affinity between Greek, Latin and Sanskrit was instrumental in the latter's importance. Its mythology and ancient history provided a ready parallel with Graeco-Roman culture. This affinity, rooted in language, created a deep bond between cultures otherwise alien and considered hierarchically unequal and it led to Orientalist scholars like Sir William Jones composing nine odes, Homeric in conception and Pindaric in form to nine Hindu deities. The Oriental Renaissance thus underwent a turn of intent on being transmitted to Indian soil. Greek, Latin and Sanskrit all harked back to the same source and thus conqueror and conquered could independently trace a comparable line of growth.

Hence the classical Renaissance of Europe did not simply clone itself in Bengal by a direct resort to classicist premises. Instead, the 'old' European humanism nurtured on Graeco-Roman antiquity and now extended to the Sanskritist Oriental Renaissance came to support a 'new' humanism founded on

the encounter of English and Bengali: this absorbed the scientific, religious and social thought of the times, melding two current orders of learning and ethics. Once lodged in India, especially in Bengal, the Oriental Renaissance turned its creative paradigm to new purposes. This textualization of culture seems to constitute the defining principle of a "renaissance". It opened the way to a fresh encounter between modern vernaculars and culture systems, fostering a new organic growth from Bengal's cultural condition. In Madhusudan Dutt's later Bengali works, Orientalist Indo-European scholarship would thus serve as a key cultural filter through which the poet read Graeco-Roman and indeed Sanskrit literature. For him, traditional Hindu culture becomes the dark force from which salvation comes through modern learning routed through the English language, purveyed through a vernacular when that vernacular has been developed on lines derived from European materials and practice. Contemporary anglocentric culture entered the current Bengali vernacular and placed it within an English oriented education system. Most importantly perhaps, this new learning reflected a desire for socio-political change. The vindication of the vernacular makes textuality a general factor in social exchange.

In the light of this, many similarities may be seen between Drayton's and Dutt's endeavours. Drayton uses the *Heroides* subversively to forge a sense of community, to question ideas about sovereignty and to challenge existing power relations, not just between men and women but also between monarch and subjects. By specifically using *English* historical characters rather than classical mythological ones, Drayton endorses the importance of the vernacular and asserts the importance of English history, contributing to the later notion of English nationhood. For Drayton the old classical language was Latin, the new vernacular was English. For Madhusudan Dutt, the old Sanskrit is replaced in his work by the vernacular Bengali but his adaptation of a western classical form itself is facilitated by his English-style education in a colonised land. In this sense, the two

writers respond to rhetorical imperatives within their respective cultures as they adapt Ovid's text. Dutt's heroines, like Drayton's, also recover a degree of textual authority through an independent critical engagement with Ovidian sources. In the *Bīrāṅganā Kābya*, Madhusudan gives many of the heroines of Hindu mythology a voice that had been denied to them in traditional accounts, just as Drayton's historical women letter-writers, abandoned by their lovers are given a voice denied to them in English chronicle history. In Madhusudan Dutt's work, Kekayi, Rukmini, Bhanumati, Jana, Surpanakha and others are merely marginal characters in their source texts and the elegiac epistles provide them with the opportunity of articulating views that were not accommodated in the older Hindu tradition. Drayton's epistles, as we have seen earlier are not merely 'historical' – indeed we cannot really rely on these subjective notions of history that each character provides, which is why Drayton attached 'Notes' to each epistle to provide a corrective idea of history. The motivating factor behind Drayton's work was political. Madhusudan's interest in the *Heroides* and his reception of this text may be also seen to reflect many processes of social reform in 19th century Bengal as well as a comment on contemporary politics. The status of women became the focus of the reformist agenda among modern, educated Bengalis, who urged reforms of customs that they considered distortions. The consequent promotion of women's education, the Widow Remarriage Act and the outlawing of "suttee" were legitimated among the Hindu community on the authority of revisionist readings of the ancient Sanskrit treatises. At the same time, by giving Hindu mythological women a platform to assert their views, Madhusudan is not only engaging in gender politics but may be subversively commenting on the contemporary colonial situation.

Can one then conclude that, despite the differences in detail, both case studies reflect a kind of encounter of languages and cultures that could make us extend the term "renaissance" to these processes? In both cases an ancient

language and cultural site are assessed against a new one as contrastive, but they participate in each other's being even when they are seen to be in apparent conflict. A comparable process may be seen in all other movements that are designated "renaissance": we have what is called the "12th century Renaissance" in Europe when there is a modification of West European Latin civilization by the indirect re-entry of Greek elements as mediated and extended by Arabic and Islamic culture; more recently we have the "Harlem Renaissance" with the decisive entry of the American Black community into a new universe of metropolitan literary expression even while using it unprecedentedly to articulate their new distinctive culture. By their respective critical engagements with their Ovidian sources, I would submit that these two texts, in their own ways, refract Ovid's *Heroides* to suit their own age and time and assert themselves as quintessentially "renaissance" in spirit.

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