

EPIC AND FILM / TELEVISION

POTTER (A.), GARDNER (H.) (edd.) *Ancient Epic in Film and Television*. Pp. x+286, ill. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022. Cased, £90. ISBN: 978-1-4744-7374-3.

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In *Film and the Classical Epic Tradition* (2013) J. Paul sought to trace the links between the poetic genre of Greek and Roman epic and several Hollywood films that are generally described as ‘epic’. In her afterword to Potter and Gardner, Paul now notes that the variations (one might even say, transmogrifications) of epic as discussed in this volume are even greater than she had indicated and that, in particular, television presentations need to be taken into account. In the days of Netflix productions that rival or surpass those of traditional film studios, when one can hardly describe a 75-inch ultra-high-definition television with surround sound as ‘small screen’, traditional status hierarchies have been upended.

If Paul’s study was firmly rooted in the concept of a linear classical tradition, the papers presented here are much more representative of reception studies as presently practised. For instance, the homoerotic bonding of the protagonists in Bryan Fuller’s television series *Hannibal*, as discussed by L. Kozak, can help us to reflect on the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad*, while the Greek heroes are only a subset of the literary references that contribute to explicating the narrative in this television series.

Potter and Gardner have collected thirteen papers, by scholars based in different English-speaking countries. Some order is sought by dedicating one section to ancient epic conventions in film, the other on the same conventions on television, although approaches within the sections are sufficiently disparate so that the papers rarely reflect a specific shared line of investigation. Hence, I will review the chapters out of order to note connections between them that I regard as worth emphasising.

Two papers stand out as essential reading for Classicists, simply because of their implications. J. Solomon, in ‘Allusions to Homeric Epic in Contemporary Films’, shows that references to Homer tend either to project a prestigious parallel or to be hostile references to an elite education from which a character (and probably almost all the audience) is alienated. A prime example of this is Colonel Tall’s demeaning quoting of Homer in the original Greek to the modern Greek Captain Staros in Terence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*. In Malick’s film, which draws significantly on the *Iliad*, the use of classical Greek emphasises the power difference between the West Point educated and the enlisted men who must die for their glory. Even a cultured Art House audience can be expected to reject the blunt use of classical education as a status marker. This humbling conclusion is reinforced by Potter’s use of social science methodology (a simple questionnaire) in examining fans’ reaction to the television series *His Dark Materials* and comparing this with a similar study of *Game of Thrones*. While academics may posit audience reaction to screen material, it is much less clear that what fans see as ‘epic’ coincides with their assumptions. Given producers’ desire for a wide spread of viewers (although a reduced but dedicated audience may also suffice), such investigation of test audiences, broken down by geography, age and gender groups, and financial status, will be vital for the progression of reception studies.

Since G. Pastrone, D.W. Griffiths and Cecil B. DeMille monumentality has been a defining feature of traditional epic films. D. Curley analyses its use in Petersen’s *Troy* and Amenábar’s *Agora*, setting this against the more personal stories of the heroines of

these films. The next step would be to consider *Pompeii* (2014) and *Ben-Hur* (2016), the two most recent epics noted by the editors in their introduction: explaining failures is as valuable as celebrating success. By contrast, E. Stafford indicates that Hercules has never been truly epic (*pace* her argument [p. 53] that there were once at least two epic poems dedicated to his adventures – these forgotten exceptions prove the rule), but the episodes of his life are easily adaptable to many genres. Modern film depictions, instead of celebrating the hero's final divinisation, focus on a theme of 'becoming Hercules', a human measure that owes much to Steve Reeves 1958 portrayal, while also permitting a wide choice of incidents and attributes. The iconographic is similarly the focus in K. Day's investigation of the connection between the Trojan Horse and Helen of Troy, which highlights the links between misogynistic depictions of the wives of women and the deception that leads to Troy's fall. Notably, Day does not restrict herself to film, but includes television series that feature Helen and the Trojan War. The influence on one another thus serves to focus attention on their particular shared themes.

Of course, film and television depictions of the ancient world are constrained by the space allotted to the tale and the rhythm of the storytelling, which is especially important in the episodic style of television. S. Magerstädt seems to be the only contributor to examine this constraint, or indeed to note the expanding new field of television studies, when considering the failure of *Olympus* (2015) and *Troy: Fall of a City* (2018). She also records the reception of the shows, indicating sometimes considerable disagreement between 'expert' critics and the general audience. A modern emphasis on giving characters a rich psychology may in fact distract from the question of the extent of divine control of human destiny.

It is no surprise, then, that some modern recreations adopt the Homeric cosmology of the Olympian gods, while others preserve the heroic code, but not the theology. Virgil's *Aeneid*, itself a reception for a society that had long lost its warrior values, is thus treated as a model for a successful *nostos* by J.A. Rea in her analysis of *Snowpiercer*. The destiny that awaits *Snowpiercer*'s protagonist, Curtis, turns out to be as dystopian as the conclusion of the *Aeneid*. In the reboot of the *Battlestar Galactica* series, the Colonials (humans) worship an Olympic pantheon, but the real divinities of the series are the humanoid Cylons who manipulate the actions of the human survivors on their way to their prophesied destination on Earth. While the show's creator, Ronald D. Moore, admits Homeric influence from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, its post-Homeric ethos is (intentionally or not) Virgilian.

It would be interesting to consider the use of Olympians as a way of avoiding the patriarchal Judeo-Christian theology attacked by Philip Pullman in *His Dark Materials*. However, they also appear in non-Western mythologies, such as, for instance, created by Masumune Shirow in his *Appleseed* manga. M. Cyrino discusses the Japanese co-option of Roman bathing as a reverse cultural influence in the *Thermae Romae* world (manga, films, anime and now the animated *Thermae Romae Novae* series). By the magic of time travel the Roman architect protagonist of the series surfaces in a modern Japanese bathhouse, from which he derives various improvements that can be made to his own designs for public baths under Hadrian and even lead to the Empire's salvation. Cyrino links this narrative to Japanese nostalgia for their own, quite brief empire. Such an attitude to the past certainly exists in all modern societies. Still, I would suggest that the adoption of foreign influences shown in *Thermae Romae* parallels the way that Japan successfully adopted the practices of western communities (including building public bathing establishments as part of the hygienic reforms once associated with the British Empire) and can now proudly claim to have outstripped their models.

Indirect classical references may be informative, but they may also distract from other influences. While Gardner compares the travels and travails of Daenerys Targaryen to those of Odysseus and notes the prominent themes of *xenia* and vengeance in the Homeric epic and George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*, she tends to both overestimate Odysseus' sympathy for the lower classes (his crew did not fare so well, after all, nor the maids who were too close to the suitors) and undervalue the wide range of non-epic materials included in Daenerys's portraiture. The House Targaryen had already displayed a doomed history before the final attack on King's Landing; the parade of the victorious armies, with its echoes of the Nuremberg rallies, confirms the queen's change to tyrannical madness.

Film has an essential visual element that is more difficult to recreate in oral and written stories. This is illustrated well by J. Wynell-Mayow in her comparison of battle scenes in the *Iliad* and the television series *Into the Badlands*. In both, important characters have their own *aristeia*, but while the weapons and fighting style are similar for Greeks and Trojans, the protagonists of *Into the Badlands* have stylised clothing and fighting methods that visually distinguishes them in the chaos of battle. The Hong Kong film derived duels of the television series may be unlike those of the *Iliad*, yet they can inspire the Classicist to ask valuable questions about how Homeric scenes differ from modern counterparts. That some Homeric deaths in their tendency to Grand Guignol even approach the physiological exaggerations of Tarantino's *Kill Bill* films invite a regret that the papers in this volume almost entirely revolve around the epic triad (*Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*) to the exclusion of the highly visual Lucan and Statius.

Lastly, there is the genre of documentary, here discussed as a television form, but whose rules are equally adaptable to film. F. Hobden begins with explications of the travels and adventures of Odysseus via a prominent narrator, such as Simon Armitage in *Gods and Monsters*, or through expert 'talking heads', as seen in the *Odyssey* episodes of the HISTORY channel's *Clash of the Gods*. Dramatisation may add emotional appeal but clearly reduce the realism associated with documentaries, while focusing on the narrator may highlight modern concerns albeit overlooking the Homeric themes. Philomena Cunk casts a long shadow over such expert documentaries. More enlightening, as challenging typical viewer responses, is the analysis of *Akala's Odyssey*, an examination of the life of the hip-hop artist Akala. Raising questions about the reception of Homer by non-western artists and the challenges of working in forms that seem to lack the prestige of 'high art', the documentary suggests possibilities of inclusiveness in response to the cultural hierarchies associated with the colonial agenda.

Epic as an all-encompassing form in Graeco-Roman antiquity (along with Homer, think Lucretius or Manilius) maintains its protean capacity when applied as a standard to screen productions. The editors of this collection highlight its modern links with fantasy and science fiction, but literary analysis is only one approach. The incorporation of new critical techniques derived from the likes of cultural and media studies as well as the more established field of film studies may lead to greater diversity in analysis, but also increased rewards. That its papers do not cohere in their approaches is the greatest strength of this volume.

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