Reception

Chris Davies' *Blockbusters and the Ancient World*[1] is the latest addition to a growing body of scholarly literature on cinematic receptions of antiquity. The author takes as his focus the swathe of ancient world epics produced since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, ranging from movies set in the ancient Greek world (including the 2004 films *Troy* and *Alexander*, and, from 2007, *300*) to the Roman occupation of Britain – as seen in *King Arthur* (2004), *The Last Legion* (2007), *Centurion* (2010), and *The Eagle* (2011) – as well as those which concentrate on aspects of Christianity (*Agora*, of 2009, set in Alexandria in the early fifth century CE, as contrasted with the 2004 biblical epic *The Passion of the Christ*). Structured around a series of case studies of these individual films, the book undoubtedly adds a set of valuable contributions to the scholarly literature on each piece; its real strength lies, however, in the way in which the author draws comparisons between these case studies while simultaneously situating the movies within their wider historical, political, and cultural contexts. Davies' introduction alone – with a broad overview of the development of cinematic depictions of antiquity from the birth of cinema to contemporary productions, along with definitions of key terms – provides an excellent starting point for those new to thinking about ancient world films, and a comprehensive filmography of works referenced is a useful research tool. There is much here too, however, which will be of value to those seeking more in-depth discussion. Detailed analysis of the films themselves – with attention to staging, casting, and characterization – is accompanied by discussion of critical responses and evidence from published interviews with directors and producers. The author is careful to point out that artistic products often resist straightforward interpretation, and that multiple readings of each film are possible (for example, the critical reception of a movie may infer a different relationship to contemporary politics than the stated intentions of its creative team). He also explores the development and fluidity of genres, and the ways in which several of these films hybridize more than one genre (for example, traces of the western are strongly evident in the Roman Britain epics; and *The Passion of the Christ* carries striking elements of the horror genre). What results is a sensitive exploration of the films' relationship to US politics, in the particular context of the 'War on Terror' and the US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, which examines ways in which the films 'have inspired allegorical and metaphorical readings in which the past has been used to contextualise, warn or parallel the present' (209).

From contemporary cinema we move back in time several centuries to the focus of Giancarlo Abbamonte and Stephen Harrison's edited volume *Making and Rethinking the Renaissance*.[2] This collection of essays – stemming from a conference organized in 2016 by the late Paola Tomè – looks at the processes by which Greek language and culture influenced European thought from the very late fourteenth century CE onwards. Together, the papers in this edited volume, produced by a group of scholars whose

[1] *Blockbusters and the Ancient World. Allegory and Warfare in Contemporary Hollywood*. By Chris Davies. London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2019. Pp. ix + 245. 30 b/w illustrations. Hardback £85, ISBN: 978-1-7883-1311-7.

[2] *Making and Rethinking the Renaissance. Between Greek and Latin in 15th–16th Century Europe*. Edited by Giancarlo Abbamonte and Stephen Harrison. Trends in Classics Supplementary Volume 77. Berlin and Boston, MA, de Gruyter, 2019. Pp. x + 261. 27 illustrations. Hardback £91, ISBN: 978-3-11-066096-8.

expertise spans multiple humanities and linguistic disciplines, augment understanding of this little-studied phenomenon. The book brings together valuable insights into the tools which were produced to aid the understanding of Greek texts during the Renaissance – grammatical works like Manuel Caleca's *Grammar*, discussed here by Fevronia Nousia, as well as vast numbers of Latin translations – with discussions of the transmission of specific ancient works or authors. These range across geographical contexts and literary genres: Wes Williams, for example, looks at Heliodorus' *Aethiopica* in sixteenth-century France, while Giovanna Di Martino focuses on a Latin translation of Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* published in Italy in 1556. A fascinating piece by Marta Celati draws out the way in which reception is often a multi-layered process, examining Orazio Romano's 1453 *Porcaria*, a historical epic which draws on classical sources, themes, and vocabulary in its representation of a historical conspiracy against Pope Nicholas V. Along the way, the authors shed light too on the many writers, translators, and thinkers responsible for the transmission of the ancient material. Many of the essays also provide food for thought on the process of translation itself – and its methods and motivations – as reception (Martin McLauglin's piece comparing two very different Latin versions of Lucian's Greek *Encomium of the Fly* is particularly insightful here), as well as on the factors influencing the transmission and interpretation of texts in new contexts. On this latter theme, Stefano Martinelli Tempesta's paper is a delightful piece of detective work in which the author traces the transmission of a manuscript of Aristotle's *Physics* and *De anima* to speculate – on the basis of fingerprints and ink traces left by its readers – that this was used in Aldus Manutius' printing house as a source for the Aldine Aristotle. The diverse range of texts and the multiple processes of reception unearthed by the contributors to this volume make for an illuminating collection of insights into this period of intellectual history.

In *Antipodean Antiquities*, Marguerite Johnson has curated a formidable and impressively diverse collection of essays which, in spite of certain candid reflections on a so-called 'cultural cringe', stakes a claim for Australian and New Zealand (ANZ) scholarship being front and centre of the increasingly global field of classical reception studies.[3] The volume showcases a rich variety of theoretical and methodological approaches, and has the added benefit of presenting familiar classical materials in distinctly unfamiliar contexts, replete with their own unique social and cultural pressures and local systems of scholarship. As the reader of this collection quickly appreciates, the reception of the classical 'down under' has been an ethically and ideologically complex phenomenon since the arrival of the first colonists in the late eighteenth century, and there are few signs of it becoming any less so.

The first section is devoted to the colonial past. As Johnson explains (Chapter 1), the British elite invaders frequently recorded their experience of this supposedly primitive 'other world' by recourse to their experience of the ancient Mediterranean. Her term 'black out' captures well the brutality of the neoclassical lens which served to anonymize and dehumanize the Aboriginal Australians and Māori whom they encountered (13). While British colonists fantasized about 'noble savages' and disturbing groups

[3] *Antipodean Antiquities. Classical Receptions Down Under*. Edited by Marguerite Johnson. Bloomsbury Studies in Classical Reception. London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2019. Pp. xi + 293. 35 b/w illustrations. Hardback £85, ISBN: 978-1-3500-2124-2.

of bathing divinities, the convicts used to populate the expropriated land envisaged their journey as an infernal one to a colonial underworld. In similar ways to the exploited working classes at home, the pawns of empire who landed in Australia communicated their misfortune by singing classical songs. In illustration of this convict katabasis, Rachael White presents the poetry of John Thompson and Francis ('Frank the Poet') McNamara in Chapter 2 (29–38).

The second section focuses on theatre. In addition to a richly illustrated chapter by Laura Ginters on the origins of student drama in Sydney and John Davidson's study of the New Zealand classical theatre productions of Phillip Mann, Michael Ewans and Johnson home in on Wesley Enoch's *Black Medea*, staged in 2005 in Sydney and Melbourne. As a Noonuccal Nuugi man from Minjeribah, Enoch writes into Euripides' play an Aboriginal Medea whose allegiance is divided between her strong attachment to the 'Lore of her Country' and her attraction to the white-dominated urban culture, represented by Jason, who arrives in her home territory as a mining company rep. The classical frame enables Enoch to explore sensitive issues surrounding the treatment of indigenous communities in Australia and to 'see the violence in a distanced manner' (86). Part 2 finishes with Jane Montgomery Griffith's 'impolite' take on the fascinating cycle of critical and creative reception of her adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone* (2015). 'What Women Critics Know That Men Don't' (Chapter 6) is the aftershock of what appears to have been a tectonic shift in the relationship between Australian drama and its criticism – a strident feminist broadside against patriarchal condescension, with a classical play at its heart.

Part 3 focuses on New Zealand poetry. It begins with Geoffrey Miles's study of James K. Baxter's poetic engagement with a classically inspired yet hybrid symbol of the moon. Dominant literary culture in 1960s New Zealand rejected classicism as an elitist marker of a colonial educational system in favour of nationalist realism. This was 'unfortunate for Baxter's critical reputation'. Baxter, however, persevered and, as Miles shows, used classical mythology as 'a vehicle for his. . .idiosyncratic kind of Christian mysticism' (105). In Chapter 8, Anna Jackson, the author of *Catullus for Children* (2004) and *I Clodia* (2014), explores and introduces her creative practice for the latter publication. In 'Clodia Through the Looking Glass', Jackson describes her writing as 'refracted through the work of an imaginary translator' (124). She translates into English the imagined Latin poems of Clodia Metelli, voicing the pregnant silence felt in the Lesbia poems of Catullus.

Parts 4 and 5 address, in turn, antipodean receptions of the classical in prose fiction and visual culture, and the final part is given to 'Antiquity on the Australian Screen'. For a reader more versed in European classical reception, each study illuminates the essential difference of these ANZ receptions. Ika Willis explains in Chapter 15 that 'it is impossible for us [in ANZ] to ignore the ways in which continuity, tradition and the past are actively constructed, not just passively received' (211). In western Europe, she contends, this 'ongoing and active process of selection by which the Classical Tradition survives' is 'harder to see' (212). Equally hard to make out is the subsequent 'displacement' of the local for the universal classical. As Willis says, and the contributors to the volume frequently make plain, the 'hyper-visibility' of the mechanics of tradition in ANZ makes the study of antipodean antiquity 'a particularly rich site for exploring and analysing the processes by which specific pasts are remembered, evoked, and/or appropriated in specific present-day contexts' (212). We look

forward to seeing how the bright light of antipodean approaches to classical reception can illuminate other reception contexts, particularly where the mechanics of tradition are less visible.

Classical reception is a broad church and welcomes works of cultural history. One such is Chiara Rolli's *The Trial of Warren Hastings*, which traces the intersections of classical culture and the theatrical and star-studded impeachment proceedings of the Governor-General of Bengal, Warren Hastings.[4] Hastings, who was defended between 1788 and 1795 by leading orators and politicians, including the radical politician and eccentric classicist John Wilkes, was up against a dream team of prosecutors, including none other than Edmund Burke, Charles James Fox, and the celebrated theatre-maker Richard Brinsley Sheridan. The trial was a media sensation and pulled in daily a large and impeccably turned-out audience of the great and the good of English society.

As Rolli explains, in prosecution of Hastings, Burke and his team courted the public imagination by extensive theatricality which extended to overt as well as implicit reference to Cicero, or 'Tully', whose writings were a crucial component of the contemporary British education system. The press, both at home and in British India, took the bait and revelled in this Ciceronian defence of the realm against a modern-day Verres. Over the eight years of the trial, the glitz of pageantry inevitably wore off. Burke, now most famous for his anti-revolutionary *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), considered his orations against Hastings, and the 'publick corruption, guilt and meanness' that the governor-general represented, to be his crowning achievement (136). Hastings, however – for many the champion of British India – was, unlike the scourge of Sicily, eventually acquitted of all charges.

Rolli's book sets out to interrogate the 'multi-layered classical influences that pervaded and informed the impeachment' (5). It provides an elegant and well-paced description of the trial and its critical reception, with a sharp eye on reference to the classical world. Its main course, delivered in Chapter 4, consists of what is described as a 'philological comparison' of Burke's celebrated 'Speech on the Opening of the Impeachment' with Cicero's orations *In Verrem*. Burke is rarely explicit in his engagement with Cicero, so Rolli's forensic readings of Burke's 'echoes' of Tully's expression and style are a particularly welcome and valuable aspect of the book. Further engagement with existing classical reception scholarship might have teased out some more penetrating insights into what was clearly an especially contested reception of Cicero et al. among these superstar orators of such different and shifting political and ideological allegiances over one of the most turbulent eight-year periods of British and imperial history.

It is no mean feat to bring this lengthy, complex, and fiendishly colourful impeachment trial to life, while also helping the reader navigate the omnipresent nexus of classical reference without recourse to jargon. This slender, accessible, but nonetheless minutely researched volume demonstrates how the comparative view embraced by classical reception studies can open up and reassess a historical event in ways that might otherwise escape historians and literary scholars, whose training might not always

[4] *The Trial of Warren Hastings. Classical Oratory and Reception in Eighteenth-Century England*. By Chiara Rolli. London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2019. Pp. viii + 209. 10 b/w illustrations. Hardback £85, ISBN: 978-1-7845-3922-1.

enable them to gain a sense of the classical education of, in this case, the eighteenth-century political elite.

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General

Nine years are allowed to authors for writing, for me, not even a span of hours is allowed. As soon as I have begun, the writing is harried by outcries and driven by excessive haste, no undertaking is carried out with care. One man taxes me with the frequency of his petty interruptions, another fetters me with the load of his miseries, others circle round with the raving contention of their disputes. Amid all this, why do you demand the eloquence of formal composition, where I am hardly able to hold a full conversation?

When I set out to read the new complete English translation of Cassiodorus' letters[1] (the quotation is from the preface to Book 1, paragraphs 4–5), I certainly did not expect to be transported to the picket lines of the currently ongoing industrial action of the British University and College Union, and yet the overwhelming administrative workload and the avalanche of tasks that Cassiodorus describes have much in common with the academic pressures many are facing today. Nevertheless, Cassiodorus persevered and published many works, including a collection of no fewer than twelve books of letters, the latter in the middle of the eighteen-year Gothic War (536–54). He did not have to worry about his pension, though, as he was a scion of long line of wealthy and prominent property owners and aristocrats from Calabria and was himself a highly placed magistrate at the court of the Ostrogothic Kingdom of Italy. Cassiodorus was responsible for official state correspondence, and his letters are either written in the name of the Amal kings Theoderic, Amalasuntha, and Athalaric, or are appointments to public office, honorary titles, and legal and administrative decisions. They span thirty years of his career in administration and are a prime source for the political and social history of Italy in the sixth century AD.

The first full translation of Cassiodorus' letters into English will be an indispensable resource to all interested in this turbulent period of European history. The letters are documentary, but they are also elaborate works of literature and very different from the hasty email format we use for the purposes of administration nowadays: they start with a general, often abstract introduction, move on to the practical issue or problem

[1] *Cassiodorus, The Variae: The Complete Translation*. By M. Shane Bjornlie. Oakland, CA, University of California Press, 2019. Pp. 530. 3 maps. Hardback £103, ISBN: 978-0-520-29736-4.