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“καλὸν ἀνθρωπίνου βίου κάτοπτρον”: Popular Culture as a Pedagogical Lens on Greco-Roman Antiquity (Essays in honor of Kirsten Day)

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“καλὸν ἀνθρωπίνου βίου κάτοπτρον”: Popular Culture as a Pedagogical Lens on Greco-Roman Antiquity (Essays in honor of Kirsten Day)

Kirsten Day and Benjamin Haller

The contributors would like to dedicate this volume to Associate Professor Kirsten Day of Augustana College. Kirsten’s outstanding research and often-unheralded labors have made the Classical Representations in Popular Culture area of the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association (SWPACA) a vital force for scholarship and teaching in the field of Classics.

Under Day’s leadership, the Classical Representations in Popular Culture area at SWPACA became a veritable symposium of ideas, sparking collaborations that pushed the scholarly conversation in new directions. We, her fellow contributors, wish to take this opportunity to express our tremendous respect and gratitude.

Diu verba et facta sapientium benignarumque vivent postquam corpora nostra pulvis et umbra inanis fient.

One generation’s popular culture is the next generation’s rarefied air – one more musty tome to add another stratum to the Monte Testaccio of history. There these once visionary and groundbreaking works of art lie, forgotten in plain sight, until someone stumbles across one of these fallen icons of popular culture of days gone by, brushes the dust from the surface, and invites us to view them with fresh eyes.

And so it was that in 1978, at a time when the works of classical antiquity themselves were viewed as erudite arcana and seemed doomed to obscurity, Jon Solomon’s groundbreaking study *The Ancient World in the Cinema* kick-started a movement to rescue the classical world from this *agger immanis*, using critical examination of popular culture productions based on antiquity both to demonstrate the continuing relevance of classical culture in the modern world and also to gain new insights into ancient works. The subfield that Solomon initiated gained momentum in the 1990’s with the appearance of Martin Winkler’s *Classics and Cinema* and Maria Wyke’s *Projecting the Past*, and the trend continues today. Helped along by a renewed interest in classical subjects in mainstream media, from the success of the Coen brothers’ *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and Ridley Scott’s *Gladiator* in 2000 to the more recent *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* films (2010 and 2013) inspired by Rick Riordan’s books and the *Spartacus* series on the Starz network (2010-2013), reconsideration of the classics is hot. Indeed, we look forward to more, such as the upcoming release of two films based on the life of Hercules (Brett Ratner’s *Hercules* and Renny Harlin’s *Hercules: The Legend Begins*) and Noam Murro’s sequel to *300* (*300: Rise of an Empire*) sometime in 2014, the BBC’s anticipated development of a remake of the *I, Claudius* miniseries, a rumored spinoff to Starz’s *Spartacus* series focused on Julius Caesar, and Paul W. S. Anderson’s *Pompeii*, which is scheduled for release at the time of this journal’s launch. In addition, recent volumes such as Monica S. Cyrino’s *Screening Love and Sex in the Ancient World* (2013), Joanna Paul’s *Film and the Classical Epic Tradition* (2013), and Konstantinos Nikoloutsos’ *Ancient Greek Women in Film* (2013) continue to further the scholarly conversation by offering new ways of considering ancient works and innovative strategies for teaching them to a new generation of students. This is vital, particularly at a time when the liberal arts have come under increased scrutiny and higher education has taken an unfortunate turn towards a more vocational approach.

The appeal of this subfield and its usefulness to scholars and teachers is also suggested by its popularity on the conference circuit, where panels devoted to classical receptions or classics in popular culture have become regular features both at meetings of classical associations and at those focused on modern media. The Southwest Popular/American Culture Association itself has featured an area devoted to Classical Representations in Popular Culture since 2002.^[1] Since then, we have enjoyed well over one-hundred and fifty presentations in this area, many of which afterwards saw print, and most of which have either stemmed from or contributed to our teaching in one way or another.

The launch of this journal provides another welcome venue for the wider dissemination of the sorts of ideas that this conference helps to foster. We are thrilled to be part of the inaugural issue, an opportunity which comes at the very time when the reins of our area are being passed from Kirsten Day, who initiated it, to Ben Haller, a past presenter eager to take on the mantle of leadership. In making this transition, we have been reflecting on successes of the past and considering new directions for the future of our area, and the launch of this journal at this juncture has prompted us to draw on our strong pool of presenters to assemble this collection of articles, most of which had their beginnings at this conference.

The contributors to this volume share an intense interest in how classical antiquity is utilized, appropriated, and re-envisioned in contemporary culture, either explicitly, or through the more subtle appearance of persistent themes, characters, and narratives. We also recognize that introducing the history, literature, and culture of antiquity through the medium of popular culture is a useful and effective way of demonstrating for students the continuing relevance of topics that often initially seem dusty and remote. In examining these themes, the authors of these essays utilize a variety of approaches, deconstructing classical elements in specific works, discussing the recurrence of important mythological tropes in modern film and fiction, analyzing the applications of ancient history to our own society, and examining how both mythology and history are rewritten for modern audiences. Yet throughout, the authors maintain a firm grounding in classical reception theory while remaining dedicated to pedagogical applications. As a group, they strengthen and reinforce each other, forming a diverse yet cohesive collection.

Part I of the issue, “Epic Reconsiderations,” offers new perspectives on the epics of Homer, works that are still fundamental in our educational system but are often viewed by students as irrelevant in today’s world. Carl Rubino’s “Wounds That Will Not Heal: Heroism and Innocence in *Shane* and the *Iliad*” offers thoughtful reflections on the connections between George Stevens’ 1953 film and Homer’s ancient work, drawing on the now well-recognized connections between Greek epic and the Western genre.[2] As such, Rubino’s article helps today’s students understand the unfamiliar and at times alien culture of Homer’s heroes through a comparison grounded in more familiar ideologies. Mallory Young’s “O Homer, Where Art Thou?: Teaching the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* through Popular Culture” offers explicit strategies for teaching Homer’s epics using the lived experiences of Vietnam-era soldiers to help students understand the violent, battle-centered world of the *Iliad* and capitalizing on the very different tones and approaches of two films that reference the *Odyssey* – Peter Fonda’s *Ulee’s Gold* (1997) and the popular Coen brothers’ film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) – to help students appreciate the more “dialogic” approach of this epic with its constant shifts between tragic and comic narrative possibilities. Next, Mary Economou Bailey Green offers a variety of generic approaches in “*The Odyssey* and its *Odyssey* in Contemporary Texts: Re-visions in *Star Trek*, *The Time Traveler’s Wife* and *The Penelopiad*.” By drawing on a science fiction television series from the 1960s, a novel that was made into a major motion picture, and a critically-acclaimed novella, Green effectively demonstrates the broad scope of influence Homer’s *Odyssey* continues to have on our own culture and prompts us to consider why this ancient epic continues to exert such appeal. All three articles offer new and useful strategies for teaching these works so fundamental in the classical canon and in world literature more broadly.

The two articles in Part II of the issue, “Reception and Re-narrations,” draw attention to theoretical considerations of the reception and retelling of Classical narratives. In “Theseus Loses his Way: Viktor Pelevin’s *Helmet of Horror* and the Old Labyrinth for the New World,” Alison Traweek offers a sustained examination of how Pelevin adapts the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur to explore the idea of memory in a modern technological context. In doing so, Traweek encourages the reader to reflect on how and why ancient narratives continue to draw us in, compelling modern authors to rethink, remake, and adapt these stories from the past to “make meaning in the present.” Leanne Glass’s “*300* and *Fellini-Satyricon*: Film Theory in the Classroom,” on the other hand, draws on two very different cinematic productions to encourage teachers of classical reception to include the off-

neglected question of the role of *auteur* in their courses. Using Zack Snyder’s popular film *300* (2007) as an example of profit-driven mainstream-media and contrasting this film with Fellini’s art-house offering *Fellini-Satyricon*, Glass demonstrates the importance of considering the role of authorial autonomy and intent in teaching classical receptions.

The three articles in Part III, “Gender in Cinematic Narratives,” address the manner in which modern cinema appropriates and represents classical narratives to query gender dynamics. In “The Labyrinth of Memory: Iphigeneia, Simonides, and Classical Models of Architecture as Mind in Chris Nolan’s *Inception* (2010),” Ben Haller suggests that a recent film and three ancient works (Homer’s *Iliad*, Simonides’ notion of the “memory palace,” and Euripides’ *Iphigeneia Among the Taurians*) employ architecture as a metaphor for mind to critique generic expectations for male heroic behavior. Haller offers that by drawing on metaphors that stem back to antiquity, Nolan’s aporetic presentation of the protagonist’s linear, rational approach to surmounting obstacles invites viewers to question the familiar detective-novel narrative in which a hard-boiled, male detective savior-figure rescues an irrational, damaged heroine from herself. Next, Geoff Bakewell and Kirsten Day both find classical connections in unexpected places and draw on feminist theory to look more closely at gender and power relations in antiquity and in today’s world. In “Ovid and Mel Gibson: Power, Vulnerability, and *What Women Want*,” Bakewell demonstrates the surprising connections between Nancy Meyers’ 2000 cinematic comedy and the story of Teiresias and other Theban myths from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In the end, Bakewell exposes the faux-feminist stance of the modern film and contrasts it with the far more progressive and nuanced position Ovid took two thousand years earlier. Bakewell’s examination will not only help students better understand the ancient work, but also encourage them to interrogate and scrutinize modern works more thoughtfully, while offering them the perhaps surprising revelation that our modern world does not represent across-the-board “advancement” from the world of antiquity. Day also offers perspectives on the relationship between gender, power, and violence in “Experiments in Love: Longus’ *Daphnis and Chloe* and Henry de Vere Stacpoole’s *The Blue Lagoon*.” Day compares Longus’ ancient pastoral novel to Stacpoole’s modern work and the 1980 film inspired by it, exploring the dynamics behind power structures in patriarchal societies. In doing so, Day also reveals surprising connections that, like Bakewell’s essay, will lead students to question assumptions they have made about the improvement of gender relations from antiquity to modern times.

Despite some early resistance from scholars who viewed the reworking of classical themes as exploiting Greek and Roman culture and devaluing ancient history and texts,^[3] most classicists now view popular culture productions that revisit ancient themes, both intentionally and unconsciously, as helping to keep the classical tradition alive, contributing to renewed interest in the field, and demonstrating the relevance of Greek and Roman culture to a society that is increasingly less interested in the humanities. A sustained scholarly exchange of ideas on this topic works to keep classics in touch with modern theories, methodologies, and societal trends, while utilizing film and fiction in teaching classical antiquity enhances students’ understanding and appreciation not only of Greek and Roman civilizations, but of their own as well, prompting them to engage critically in a dialogue with the past rather than view it from a comfortable, detached distance. While numerous

recent books on classics in the cinema have made a good start in addressing the need for serious scholarly contributions to this subject, the field when viewed more broadly is rich with possibility, and there is far more work to be done.

Alcidamas famously termed Homer’s *Odyssey* a “Beautiful Mirror of Human Life” [4] (as our title translates in English^[5]). While Aristotle regarded this as a failed metaphor for the *Odyssey* (does it really reflect *all* human life?), the phrase in many ways represents an apt description of the role played by classical subjects in contemporary popular media like cinema, television, novels, and video games. Because of their canonical status, the theater, epics, stories, art, and religious beliefs of the Greeks and Romans enjoy an unparalleled cultural currency in the West and are hence employed in modern cultural productions to reflect contemporary issues ranging from love and war to narrative technique and gender in a new light. When looked at with a discerning eye, however, these modern productions can also offer us new ways of viewing the ancient source material and of seeing our own image in the works of the distant past can also offer us new ways of viewing the ancient source material and of seeing our own image in the works of the distant past.

Just as Monteverdi found inspiration for his *Orfeo* in Ovid and Raphael found his Parnassus in the ponderous, creaking codices of antiquity unearthed by Poggio’s patient proddings in the libraries of monasteries, modern authors and cinematic directors likewise often find themselves turning to this “Beautiful Mirror of Human Life,” the literature of classical antiquity. So, too, the critical articles included in the present volume assay to follow in the footsteps of the eclectic tradition of Homer’s polytropic hero who “saw the cities of many men, and knew their minds” [6] and brought the knowledge gleaned in his travels home to instruct his child. Though hardly composed in hexameters, and wanting Homer’s Caystrian wings, these articles, like the great Maeonides’ Odysseus, survey a wide range of universal human experiences. It is the authors’ contention that the considered reflection on such universal experiences first given expression in the classics and subsequently reinvented in contemporary popular culture is a foundational cornerstone for the instruction of the liberal arts in the classrooms of today’s schools and colleges. With this in mind, we offer this collection of papers as a tribute to the labors of the many scholars who have met at the SWPACA’s annual meetings to exchange ideas, explore new methodologies and theoretical approaches to literature and film, and seek connections between classical antiquity and the world of popular culture.

Endnotes

[1] The “Classical Representations in Popular Culture” area was originally entitled “Classical Myths in Recent Literature and Film” (2002-2006); the organization itself was renamed in 2013, previously having been known as the Southwest Texas Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association.

[2] This parallel was first identified by Martin Winkler in 1985 but more fully elucidated by Mary Whitlock Blundell and Kirk Ormand in “Western Values, or the Peoples Homer: *Unforgiven* as a reading of the *Iliad*” in 1997.

[3] See Wyke 1997.5-8 and Day 2008.2-4.

[4] *Rhetoric* 3.3.4.

[5] Translations from the Greek in this introduction are by Ben Haller.

[6] *Odyssey* 1.3.

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