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**Review of Eran Almagor and Lisa Maurice (eds.):
*The Reception of Ancient Virtues and Vices in
Modern Popular Culture. Beauty, Bravery, Blood
and Glory***

Brill (Leiden/Boston 2017) (= *Metaforms* 11), XIV + 424 pp.,
32 mostly color illustrations. ISBN: 9789004347724, € 149.00
(hb, also available as e-book)

How important is the reception of antiquity in modern pop culture, and how does it work? Eran Almagor and Lisa Maurice intend to contribute to these simple, yet ever up-to-date questions. In their introduction to the collected volume of conference proceedings¹, the editors position themselves in the field of

Reception studies. They concisely sketch the development of the field and state that the scope of the contributions is the interaction between the ancient Greek, Roman and Jewish world, and 19th, 20th and 21st century popular culture (1–3). The editors then introduce a concept of virtues and vices in the ancient world

¹ As the editors do not note which conference has been the basis for this volume, I assume it to be *Beauty, Bravery, Blood and Glory: Ancient Virtues and Vices in Modern Popular Culture* at

Bar Ilan University and Ben Gurion University of the Negev on 10–11 June, 2013 (explicitly mentioned only in Emma Southon's n. 1, p. 187).

based on the three main characteristics “balance”, “completeness”, and “happiness” (3–11). Albeit well-documented both through ancient sources and modern scholarship, the introduction of this concept seems rather expendable, as it is never picked up in any of the contributions—indeed, ancient virtues and vices are the underlying topic of every paper, but no more in-depth connection is discernible. Pondering different approaches (and the resulting benefits) of Reception studies, the editors declare to steer a middle course between “historicism” and “presentism” by not privileging either side in order to contribute to the understanding of both modern and ancient cultures (11–19). They clearly refute approaches to classical reception in popular culture which overemphasize the simplification of ancient content: rather, they see the possibility of increased access to antiquity as a “democratic turn” and argue that “the study of the reception of the Classical world in popular culture is an intellectually enriching and fascinating field” (16). Although two defining aspects of popular culture are identified (form, that is regarding the possibility to reach the *populus*, and content, that is a lowest common denominator of understandability, 13–15), the contributions are not subjected to any definition of popular culture.² By

juxtaposing contributions concerning reception in similar media, the layout of the sections underscores different shades of the reception. The volume progresses from theatre with its rather small audiences to the mass audience of film (main part one) and then to classical reception in ‘real life’ (main part two). Pretzler’s paper—concerning both film and politics—poses a neat transition between these main parts. The introduction is concluded by the customary short summaries of the contributions (19–24) and is rounded off by an extensive bibliography (25–31).

Lisa Maurice’s contribution opens up the section on reception in theatre. First, she considers the relevant methodological questions (in accordance with Edith Hall) regarding performance reception: as stagings are based on translations (which in most cases rather are adaptations), ancient material is rather appropriated than ‘received’. Every new appropriation may have an effect on another later production, thus creating a “chain of receptions” (38). Hence, performance reception “provides insight in to the human experience at a particular time and place in history” (39). She then analyses several stagings of *The Oresteia*, comprising “the most representative” (37) anglophone productions. Consis-

² As a clear definition of pop culture remains disputed, anyway: cf. e.g. the introduction in

Storey, John (2015): *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–17.

tently following Hall's methodological basis, she convincingly argues that the plays always emphasize issues of major social interest at the time of production. She identifies feminism for the outgoing 20th century, anti-war sentiments for the 2000s and the corrosion of public life for the most recent time.

Thornton Wilder's *The Alcestiad* (1955) is at the heart of Hanna M. Roisman's contribution. Wilder himself criticized his own play as 'a failure' (61). Roisman uncovers some reasons for this self-criticism (against Wilder who locates them in his failure to convey his idea of the Supernatural): she shows how the play lacks a depiction of the characters' motivations. This makes it impossible to identify with the protagonists (as it is possible in Euripides' *Alceste*). Roisman's approach to reception studies by considering what went wrong in a case of reception is unusual but proves to be constructive here (especially as she still stresses that Wilder's *The Alcestiad* is of great artistic value, too).

Another instance of theatrical reception is presented by Ariadne Konstantinou: she analyses the modern Greek production *Candaules' Wife* by Margarita Liberaki (1997), which stages the story of Candaules, his wife and his bodyguard Gyges. This story (found in Herodotus 1,6–12) has had a long-lasting history of reception in different media (especially in theatre, as already Herodotus himself used dramatic elements). Konstantinou gives a detailed

account of the rather little-known play and compares it with Herodotus' account of the story, concluding that Liberaki strongly emphasizes the queen's position: she is able to break out of her dull routine and gains actual power.

The second section on reception in film is opened up by Eran Almagor's treatment of "Heroes and Villains": he contrasts Walter Hill's movie *The Warriors* (1979) with both the novel it is based on (Sol Yurick's *The Warriors*, 1965) and Xenophon's *Anabasis*. He shows how the movie reverses the original novel's reception of Xenophon. While Yurick had deconstructed the ideal of the Greek Warriors by denying them any virtue, Hill again glorifies his protagonists to some extent. Thus, the movie is surprisingly closer to the Greek text than the novel. The contribution is substantially the only one of the volume to accomplish a golden mean between presentism and historicism by pointing out which new understanding of the ancient culture may be gained: against the backdrop of the novel and especially the movie he points out very well how the *Anabasis* starts with "unrestrained individualism" and ends with "disciplined community" (133).³

³ At most, the contribution lacks the identification of the mentioned video games that extend the reception of Xenophon's *Anabasis* into another medium and the 21st century by their titles. Almagor could have stated whether the

Emma Stafford deals with an aspect of the reception of the Hercules myth which is usually eclipsed by his role as a monster-slayer: his decision between personified virtue and vice at the *bivium*, a story attributed to Prodikos of Keos. After having outlined the continuous tradition of Hercules at the crossroads, she goes on to show that this aspect may be found in several Hercules movies of the 20th century⁴ (usually embodied by the choice between an ‘innocent’ good girl and a vamp). Whether this aspect of Hercules is (re)used consciously or not, she succeeds in showing that it has its place in every movie she treats.

Anna Foka turns to the myth of Oedipus in Woody Allen’s 1995 movie

reception of Xenophon plays a role here, too (114). Admittedly, the games bear (almost) the same title as the movie and may be found quickly via Wikipedia (*The Warriors* (2005) and *The Warriors: Street Brawl* (2009)). The latter is, contrary to Almagor’s opinion, not very “popular”, and has received poor reviews (Brett Todd/Gamespot: 4.5 out of 10, review available at <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/the-warriors-street-brawl-review/1900-6230722/> (accessed 23 February 2019)).

4 Pietro Francisci’s *Le fatiche di Ercole* (Italy 1958), released as *Hercules* in the US and UK in 1959, and his *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* (1959/*Hercules Unchained* 1960), Vittorio Cottafavi’s *Ercole alla conquista di Atlantide* (US: *Hercules and the Captive Women*/UK: *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, all 1961), and finally Giorgio Capitani’s *Ercole, Sansone, Maciste e Ursus gli invincibili* (1964).

Mighty Aphrodite. She identifies different levels of reception: on the one hand, Allen uses elements of the tragedy (like the chorus) for alienation. By this contrast, he creates comic scenes. Furthermore, the psychoanalytical reception of the Oedipus myth is taken up and satirized. The contribution is hard to follow for anyone not familiar with the movie, as it lacks a concise summary of the plot of the movie and especially an introduction of the characters.

Different renderings of the relationship between the emperor Caligula and Drusilla, his sister and alleged lover, are the focus of Emma Southon’s contribution. She contrasts the three very different implementations in Robert Graves’ novel *I, Claudius* (1934), its BBC adaptation as a TV series (1976) and the controversial Penthouse production *Caligula* (1979). Like Lisa Maurice, she links the depiction of the incestuous relationship to the sociopolitical background: in both versions of *I, Claudius*, Caligula’s incest is presented as a deviation from otherwise prevalent Roman virtue. Graves constructs his Roman world as basically virtuous, as it was seen as constitutive for the British Empire. The later BBC production deepens its characters in order to explain evil—a reaction to both the causes of the Second World War and the subsequent analogues of Rome and Nazi Germany in American film, as Southon argues. Lastly, *Caligula* picks up these analogues in a mixture of “joy and repulsion” (203).

Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones probes the causes of Rita Hayworth's performance as 'nice girl' Salome. First, he comprehensively illustrates the development of Salome from a (mostly innocent) child in Mark and Matthew to the libidinous dancer in Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* (1899). Against this backdrop he points out well how the renewed shift from devious dancer to nice girl in William Dieterle's 1953 movie *Salome* starring Hayworth is a result of various reasons: especially the guidelines of post-war Hollywood production required a kind of moral role model. Furthermore, the public perception of Hayworth as 'America's sweetheart' predetermined how the producer had to depict his Salome. Llewellyn-Jones concludes rightly that the movie does say much more about the contemporary society than about the tradition of Salome.

Christian female virtue in the movies *The Sign of the Cross* (1932) and *Quo Vadis* (1951) is Panayiota Mini's concern. Both movies alter their literary (and dramatic) predecessors in significant ways (in an almost crosswise manner): in *The Sign of the Cross*, Mercia is depicted as a passive and dutiful housewife, while in the play and novel of the same name by Wilson Barrett (1895 and 1896) she is much more independent. Lygia in Henryk Sienkiewicz's novel *Quo Vadis: A Narrative of the Time of Nero* (1896) is a submissive and dutiful Christian housewife, yet in *Quo Vadis* she stands for "American post-war ideals of lib-

erty, peace and equality" (233). Again, these alterations are explained by the social context of the production's times. The contribution fails to pick up observations already made by Anja Wieber (2015), who (albeit focusing on the 1953 movie *The Robe* and including modern productions as 2009's *Agora*) shows very well that "ancient religion is staged to discuss modern phenomena" respectively.⁵

In the first contribution of the second part of the book ("Ancient Virtues and Vices in the Modern World", first section: "Ancient Virtues and Vices in Modern Greece"), Maria Pretzler investigates the marking of ethnicity in film representations of the Alexander myth. Contrasting the most important productions (Robert Rossen's *Alexander the Great* (1956), Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004) and Peter Sykes' TV miniseries *The Search for Alexander the Great* (1981)), she shows how the representations of Alexander's and Philip's culture and ethnicity depend on both scientific progress (especially influenced by the finding of the alleged grave of Philip in Vergina in 1977) and on contemporary sociopolitical perception of Macedonia and Greece.

5 Wieber, Anja (2015): "Women and Religion in Epic Films: The Fifties' Advocate for Christian Conversion and Today's Pillar of Paganism?", in: Carlà, Filippo and Berti, Irene (edd.): *Ancient Magic and the Supernatural in the Modern Visual and Performing Arts*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 225–240, quoted from p. 240.

The political theme is taken up by Luca Asmonti's far-reaching contribution on the *Use and Abuse of Ancient Greece in the Debate on Greece's EU Membership*. Asmonti does not stop at providing an outline of the discussions leading to Greece joining the EU but connects the dots to very up-to-date questions of democracy as base value of the EU. Finally, Asmonti argues that the ancient Greek *polis* may well serve as a backdrop against which democracy may be rethought, especially regarding the directness and openness of debate.

Aggeliki Koumanoudi turns to a very different instance of classical reception in Greek culture. She links the ancient god Pan to the modern Greek custom of warding off the Kallikantzaroi, demons appearing the Christmas period, and to Carnival festivities. She then turns to Pan intruding modern Greek politics: the leader of the neo-facist party "The Golden Dawn" claims that Pan is alive, yet only to be seen by "true believers". She concludes that this neo-pagan approach is rather restrictive opposed to Pan being traditionally 'common good'. Besides poor proofreading,⁶ the contribution shows a blatant error: Koumanoudi claims that the Roman senate had put a ban on the Bacchanalia in

⁶ As are some of the other contributions, e.g. Roisman: "They first face off takes place ...", 66, "The first is philosophical one of the Herdsmen puts ...", 68.

186 AD (rather than BCE), thus erroneously defining Plutarch as prior to this event (305).

The last section on ancient virtues and vices in modern Jewish culture is opened up by David M. Schaps. He analyses the somewhat paradoxical afterlife of the Maccabees: although the Old Testament actually depicts them as despising physical workout, modern Israeli sports teams frequently bear 'Maccabi' in their name. Schaps traces this identification as far back as the formation of the 'muscular Judaism'⁷ at the end of the 19th century, ultimately stating that the Maccabees do not serve as a full-fledged model for modern day society, but as a metaphor rather provide parts of their history for appropriation.

Haim Weiss takes a very similar line of thought: he deals with Bar-Kosibah as physically able model for the 'Warrior Jew'. He shows very well how the figure of Bar-Kosibah is ambivalent in rabbinic literature: his physical powers are rendered problematic, as they make him arrogant towards God; yet the physical

⁷ Here, the contribution fails to outline any relation to 'muscular Christianity' and does not mention Athena Leoussi's publications on the same matter, e.g. Leoussi, Athena (1998): *Nationalism and Classicism. The Classical Body as National Symbol in Nineteenth-Century England and France*. Basingstoke et al.: Macmillan, or even more pertinent, Leoussi, Athena (2002): "Hellenism and Jewish Nationalism: Ambivalence and its Ancient Roots", in: *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25 (5), pp. 755–777.

ability is the most important aspect of the figure in modern popular culture. A vital role in shaping the perception of Bar-Kosibah is the story of him fighting a lion in the Roman arena: this tale is introduced only around 1840 by Samuel Mayer in Bavaria, apparently in order to color the otherwise undetailed narrative, showing how important new literary traditions may be.

The volume is concluded by Gabriel Danzig, who analyses the disputation between Turnus Rufus, Roman governor of Judaea, and Rabbi Akivah in Rabbinic literature. He diligently shows that both employ arguments not stemming from their own cultures, but that are purpose-based, and often are a part of the opponent's culture. Interestingly, this mode of argumentation is figured in modern day's defences of Jewish writers against criticism of religious practices. Thus, this contribution aptly concludes the volume, as it highlights the importance of the reception of ancient virtues and vices in modern public discourse again.

In retrospect, the (admittedly high-set) bar of aiming at a golden mean between historicism and presentism is almost never achieved, because the contributions tend to focus on the meaning of the reception for the modern society; mostly, the readers have to ponder for themselves, whether the papers add to the understanding of the ancient cultures. The volume's introduction does not really have a connection to the con-

tributions. Apart from the preliminary remarks on the field of reception studies, which are definitely useful for someone wanting to get to know the field, the theoretical sketch of virtues and vices in antiquity is neither picked up in any of the contributions nor used as a backdrop for a comprehensive conclusion at the end of the book. Yet, this does not diminish the value of each single contribution. Every paper is in itself highly interesting, and the reader gets to know very different forms of the reception of ancient virtues and vices in modern pop culture. Still, considering the high price of the volume and the low added value of having these contributions combined in a comprehensive volume, one can only hope that the individual contributions will find their deserved readership.

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