

thersites

11/2020

Annemarie Ambühl (Ed.)

tessellae –
Birthday Issue for
Christine Walde



Imprint

Universität Potsdam 2020

Historisches Institut, Professur Geschichte des Altertums
Am Neuen Palais 10, 14469 Potsdam (Germany)
<https://www.thersites-journal.de/>

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ISSN 2364-7612

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Layout and Typesetting

text plus form, Dresden

Cover pictures:

- 1 – Medallion of the Mainz Orpheus Mosaic. Photo by J. Ernst.
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Published online at:

<https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol11>

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Review of Rachel Bryant Davies:
*Victorian Epic Burlesques. A Critical Anthology
of Nineteenth-Century Theatrical Entertainments
after Homer*

Bloomsbury (London & New York 2019) (= Bloomsbury
Studies in Classical Reception), xi & 284 p., 12 illustrations.
ISBN: 9781350027176, £ 26.09 (pb)/£ 81.00 (hb)

The Victorian era had an immense interest in Classics, and Homer was considered a pillar of Western civilisation. Rachel Bryant Davis (BD) explores the complicated relationship between the patron saint of European literature and the frivolous popular genre that was Victorian burlesque. Four plays are edited in full text and commented on in the present volume: Thomas Dibdin's *Melodrama Mad!; or, the Siege of Troy* (1819), Charles Dance's and James Robinson Planché's *Telemachus; or, the Island of Calypso* (1834), Robert Brough's

Iliad; or the Siege of Troy (1858), and Francis Cowley Burnand's *Ulysses; or the Iron-Clad Warrior and the Little Tug of War* (1865).

In her introduction, BD gives some much-needed explanations for the modern reader considering the nature and popularity of the genre. Burlesque was more definitely separated from traditional forms of theatre by the Licensing Act of 1737, which forbade all but two London theatres from producing uninterrupted spoken drama. The resulting burlesques, burlettas or extravaganzas

combined spoken drama with song, pantomime and dance, elements which today are nearly impossible to reconstruct. However, it was precisely the act of censoring that enforced 'official' written librettos which have in some cases survived until today. One interesting aspect of the burlesques is the question of authorship. The complex interactions of author, censorship and actor interpolations are amusingly evocative of scholarly discussions of ancient drama.

The underlying theme that makes Homeric reception in Victorian burlesque so fascinating today is addressed by BD throughout her introductory notes: What is Classical Antiquity? Who does it belong to? What are we allowed to do with it? While the satirical degradation of the almost sacred Homeric texts was harshly criticised by certain contemporaries, epic burlesque also demonstrates an impressive update of the Homeric texts by incorporating them into modern popular culture. This genre was not the only place where such a clash of reverent classicism and popular modernisation was apparent: BD traces both the scholarly and literary popularity of Homer in the Victorian era and cites examples of satire such as the ridicule of the Wellington monument, a colossal nude statue of the Homeric warrior Achilles in Hyde Park. As Classical references were omnipresent in Victorian society, so the burlesques informed their retellings of Classical

literature with contemporary and genuinely British jokes, allusions to politics, or specific local or social accents of various figures, such as a Thersites' low class accent in Dibdin's *Melodrama Mad!*. While the successful actress-producer Madame Vestris increased the popularity of her plays with historically accurate costumes that clashed with the characters' manner of speaking and other anachronisms, Robert Brough had his Achilles wear the Greek uniform established by King Otto. Contemporary allusions were additionally intermingled with canonic references, to Shakespeare, for example.

All these updates of the Homeric texts, are, of course, designed for a limited European audience, enabling jokes at the expense of other groups, such as African-American slaves. These aspects are difficult to handle within a contemporary discussion, especially as the theatrical practice included phenomena like blackface or the use of racial slurs. While addressing these elements, BD's conclusion that they were "not perceived differently from other sorts of intertheatrical reference" (p. 23) does not seem satisfying, especially since the references do not only point to theatrical practices like minstrel shows, but to the very real and contemporary institution of slavery.

The first burlesque in the anthology is Thomas Dibdin's *Melodrama Mad!; or, the Siege of Troy*, basically a very short comical adaptation of Homer's *Iliad*.

The text still proves a very amusing read with its countless breaches of the fourth wall and anachronistic jokes: Ulysses, the “Highlander from Ithaca” (p. 58, l. 86) has a thick Scottish accent, the warriors get information from the Trojan Chronicle and the Greek Gazette, Venus and Thetis call Jupiter “Dearest of daddies” (p. 50, ll. 48 and 56), the puns on Paris abound (“she left her home, because she was too fond of going to Paris; it has been so much the fashion of late, that if it isn’t speedily discouraged, we shall all be left in the same way”, p. 56, ll. 32–34), and Hecuba mentions Julius Caesar, only to be rebuked by Hector: “He did not live after Troy was burnt, therefore Caesar’s not born yet” (p. 75, ll. 132f.). Several characters take on auctorial roles and comment on the plot. Especially striking is Thersites, already a clownish figure in Homer, who is wise-crackingly present throughout the play, flirting with Briseis and Chryseis and observing the doings of other characters. The main part of the plot is introduced by contemporary figures, i.e. actors, critics, wardrobe-keepers, the ‘author’ etc. In the first scene of the play, they discuss what is going to happen on stage, including the anachronistic elements.

Charles Dance’s and James Robinson Planché’s *Telemachus; or, the Island of Calypso* is the second burlesque featured. It tells the story of Odysseus’ son arriving at the island of the nymph, who is still pining after his father. The par-

odied model here is not just a Classical text but also the immensely popular didactic novel by François de la Mothe-Fénelon, *Les Aventures de Télémaque, fils d’Ulysse* published in 1699, recounting the travels of the eponymous hero with his wise advisor Mentor. Again, the play is full of anachronistic details. In the beginning Calypso, like Byron’s Manfred, conjures spirits to ease her pain; only in this case the ‘spirits’ are gin, brandy, rum and whisky. Consequently, the nymph is hungover when young Telemachus arrives. She desires to be loved by him and writes a note to Venus, who instantly materialises but is pressed for time, leaving her son Cupid behind instead. The mischievous child then creates havoc as he makes Telemachus and the nymph Eucharis, Calypso’s maid, fall in love. The mistress finds out and is furious. She fires Eucharis and tells Mentor to build a ship so that she will be rid of Telemachus. When the nymphs try to burn said ship, it turns out that it is a steamer and actually gets started by the flame. Mentor shows himself to be wise Minerva, who has triumphed over love. The breaking of the fourth wall in this case happens at the end of the play, when Calypso encourages the audience to visit her again in her grotto.

Robert Brough’s *Iliad; or the Siege of Troy* is by far the longest of the collected burlesques. The play consists of a complex intertextual web informed mostly by Homer’s epic and Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*. It amazes how inti-

mately the contemporary audience must have known the literary antecedents, since otherwise many of the jokes would have been lost: Hector falls for the ruse of the artificial horse despite being the 'horse-tamer' (ἵππόδαμος), Patroclus' decision to wear Achilles' armour is the consequence of his incessant imitation of the admired friend. As in *Telemachus*, Cupid is one of the main motivators of the plot, which is made plausible because of his role in the original reason for the war, Paris' love for Helen. The fourth wall falls again, insofar as Homer, the master narrator, is shown as a newspaper correspondent constantly reporting the events of the war—a portrait, BD informs us, of the Crimean War correspondent Sir William Howard Russell. This metafictional play culminates at the end of the drama, when Hector is found out to be still very much alive, Homer having reported his demise as a consequence of a miscommunication with Patroclus. Hector has the last word, informing the audience of its right to decide whether Troy will stand or fall. Troilus and Cressida walk in united, proving Shakespeare wrong as well.

Francis Cowley Burnand's *Ulysses; or the Iron-Clad Warrior and the Little Tug of War*, written in 1865, marks the end of the volume. In her introductory notes, BD warns us of the play's "weak structure" (220) as well as of its overt racism. Both prove to be true: The story about Jupiter trying to seduce Penelope in the guise of a suitor and ending up

friends with Ulysses does not make a lot of sense, and the wordplay that Burnand was famous for, indeed more intense here than in the other burlesques, is a matter of taste and sometimes seems forced. The issue of racism, however, makes the text a fascinating read and sheds some light on the role of Classics in forging a European identity which is white and supremacist. Produced in the midst of the American Civil War, Odysseus' home in Ithaca is depicted as a plantation employing Black slaves who are mocked on stage by elements common in minstrel shows: stereotypical characters like the lazy, happy slave and the simple nurse, played by actors using blackface. Whilst these elements make up just a little part of the text, they must have been more present in actual performance through constant visibility of the setting, a setting that has no implication whatsoever for the plot and seems to be an anachronistic joke on its own. It is a disturbing realisation that enthusiasm for Classical Antiquity and racist mockery of contemporary human beings is needlessly, and very easily, combined in Burnand's burlesque.

BD does an amazing job in commenting the plays and making them accessible to the modern reader. The comments range from simple information for the non-classicist (such as the use of Roman names for Greek gods (p. 35 *ad* 35) to intertextual references (for example the aforementioned allusion to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, p. 75

ad 129) and information about staging practices that would be almost completely inaccessible to someone not familiar with that specific literary genre (the explanation of “Allegoricals” in the *dramatis personae* as Latinised logos of the involved fire insurance companies, p. 37 *ad* 71–74). It is not ideal that the comments generally seem to be consecutive, not taking into account that one of the burlesques might be read individually (wordplay on the Scottish ‘dram,’ for example, is explained in the first burlesque, *Melodrama Mad!*, at “Mellow dram” p. 42 *ad* 20, but not in the second, *Telemachus*, at “DRAM-atic” p. 95 *ad* 13). However, there are some cross-references, for example from Brough’s reference to the Matrimonial Causes Act from 1857 (p. 139 *ad* 35) to the explanation given to Dibdin’s earlier joke about it (p. 79 *ad* 185).

The present volume is a very welcome addition to the canon of Classical reception. BD’s carefully and intelligently edited anthology provides quite a few different motives for reading: complex intertextual and metatheatrical writing, fascinating interactions between ancient and contemporary phenomena, including the politically sensitive subject of ancient and modern slavery. And, occasionally, great amusement.

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URL: <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/victorian-epic-burlesques-9781350027176/>

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Suggested citation

Katharina Wesselmann: Review of Rachel Bryant Davies: Victorian Epic Burlesques. A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Theatrical Entertainments after Homer. In: *thersites* 11 (2020): *tessellae* – Birthday Issue for Christine Walde, pp. 379–384.
<https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol11.181>