

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

THERSITES

7/2018



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[REVIEW]

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Review of K.S. Burns & W.S.S. Duffy (eds.), *Ancient Women in Modern Media* (Newcastle upon Tyne 2015), 145 pp. ISBN: 9781443880213, £ 41,99 (hb) in: thersites 7 (2018), 169-174.

IN the steadily flourishing fields of Classical Reception and Classical Tradition growing attention has been dedicated, in recent years, to aspects of gender – both in considering the world of reception from a gendered perspective, and therefore, for example, authors and target publics, and in paying more attention to ancient gender roles and gender models and to how they have been transferred into modern cultural products and received in modern social and cultural contexts. A seminal text in this sense is the special issue of *Helios* edited by R. Blondell and M.K. Gamel with the title *Ancient Mediterranean Women in Modern Mass Media*¹.

The volume under consideration provides a further contribution to this latter field of studies. The title of the collective volume, *Ancient Women in Modern Media*, is a bit misleading, as the book only considers ancient mythical women in modern media – and, additionally, only characters from Greek mythology, even if those are studied also in their relationships with Roman interpretations. Not only are queens and historical or pseudo-historical figures missing; heroines such as Lucretia are also not represented. Still, ‘*Ancient Greek Mythological Women in Modern Media*’ is a topic which provides enough material for a very broad set of studies and considerations, especially given the success of Greek myth throughout the centuries and the cultures, and the omnipresence of its reception forms.

In the very short introduction to the book (just three pages), the editors highlight this success, as they stress that the ways in which women from ancient myth speak to modern audiences makes them “a useful tool to explore ideas of gender, agency, and emotion” (p. 1). But still, this all-too-short introduction does not even try to either explain why the Classical myth, and in particular the women from Classical mythology, should have such a validity, transcending historical and cultural boundaries²; nor does it provide sufficient information on how the editors position themselves in relation to the growingly subtle theoretical discussions of Classical traditions and receptions, as they only see their work as “part of an ever-growing constellation of scholarly projects” (p. 2).

¹ *Helios* 32.3 (2005).

² For a tentative answer to this question, see F. Carlà – F. Freitag, “The Labyrinthine Ways of Myth Reception: Cretan Myths in Theme Park Rides”. *Journal of European Popular Culture* 6 (2015) 145-159, esp. 148-150.

As it often happens with collective volumes, and in particular with those which do not have a strong thematic and/or theoretical background that ties them together and leads all the contributions to a common goal, the rest of the book is of very varying quality, depending on the single author and chapter. All in all, the book consists of eight contributions, divided into two sections. The organization principle as exposed in the introduction foresees that the first part should deal with “new versions of old stories”, i.e. with modern re-elaborations of ancient mythical plots, while the second one should show “traditional characters used in new stories” (p. 2). This division is quite artificial as it is very difficult to draw the line between the categories. Thus, a chapter on Helen, in which the presence of Helen as such in plots derived from Classical mythology in literature for young adults is discussed, can be found in the second part, while the Eurydice of *Black Orpheus*—a Brazilian woman who definitely does not purely reproduce ancient myth—appears in the first. As it often happens, the forms of reception of Classical Antiquity, and of myth in particular, are too diverse to be divided into neat, ideal type categories and a stronger engagement with the theoretical discussions on this topic would have been necessary.

Still, as a lot of scholarship on Classical reception still concentrates on the “Global North”, this book provides a very valuable contribution in its at least proclaimed openness for different parts of the world – as in the case with Albania and Brazil, discussed in the first two contributions³. Both chapters are included in the section titled “Mythic Women Revisited”. Vassiliki Kotini analyzes Ismail Kadare’s novel *Agamemnon’s Daughter* (2003), the internal monologue of an Albanian journalist who uncovers similarities between his own life and the one of Suzana, who just broke up with him, and the myth of Iphigenia. Again, it is not quite clear why the chapter belongs to the first section and not to the second. In the second chapter, William Duffy explores *Black Orpheus* (1959), and in particular the role of Eurydice within the famous movie. Indeed, as Duffy claims, Camus creates a figure of the mythical woman which is extremely original. Duffy rightly highlights that *Black Orpheus* has strangely attracted less attention in the field of Classical Reception than one would imagine considering its popu-

³ But it is worth highlighting that the editors mistake Albania for Algeria when presenting the contents of the volume on p. 2.

larity; still, there have been relevant studies on the topic which the contribution fails to mention, most of all by Véronique Porra and Martin Winkler⁴.

The other two chapters composing this section deal with Anouilh's *Antigone* (1944), and with the representation of Alcyone in Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses* (2002). This brief overview should make clear that the volume in general does not seem to have looked for consistency, nor for completeness, either from the perspective of the myths analysed, nor of the media taken into consideration. Two theatre plays stand next to a movie and a novel, and are integrated in the next section as young adult literature, television, and comics. At the same time, there is definitely no concentration on minor or less known mythological figures (such as Alcyone), but some of the main protagonists of ancient myth in reception are missing – above all Medea, on the subject of which not a single word appears in the volume. One must unfortunately also note that important literature on the relevant subjects has been completely neglected: Krantz's article on Anouilh and his *Antigone*, for instance, never mentions Miriam Leonard's seminal book on the importance of Greek tragedy and Greek philosophy in French political discussions of the 20th century, in which one entire chapter is dedicated to the importance of Antigone and her interpretation in a political sense from Hegel, through Anouilh, to Lacan, Irigaray and Derrida⁵.

The second section opens with Krishni Burns' contribution on Helen's transformations in young adult literature. The chapter takes an interesting approach, promising to investigate how Helen has been used to provide "female role models that are neither victims nor villains", through which young

⁴ V. Porra, "Sur quelques Orphée noirs. Reproduction, adaptation et hybridation du mythe d'Orphée en context post-colonial". *Revue de littérature comparé* 4 (2012) 441-455; M. Winkler, "Ovid and the Cinema. An Introduction", in J.F. Miller / C.E. Newlands (eds.), *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid* (Chichester 2014) 469-483. Further literature is surprisingly missing, as, e.g., C. A. Perrone, "Don't Look Back: Myths, Conceptions and Receptions of Black Orpheus". *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* 17 (1998) 155-177; see now also C. Schliephake, „Orpheus in Black: Classicism and Cultural Ecology in Marcel Camus, Samuel R. Delany and Reginald Shepherd". *Anglia* 134 (2016) 113-135.

⁵ M. Leonard, *Athens in Paris. Ancient Greece and the Political in Post-War French Thought* (Oxford 2003) 96-156.

adults can be confronted with the idea that “it is possible to be self-determinant even in the face of a pre-determined destiny” (68). In this sense, it might be of little relevance that the author demonstrates a relevant lack of understanding of the Homeric Helena, qualified as “not especially clever or skilled”, while forgetting that she is of divine nature (69), as the ancient Helena is in the end irrelevant to the main question of the article. It might have been interesting to expand some of the considerations of the article to traditional and stereotypical female figures and role models, thus revealing how Helena fits and adapts to existing moulds and forms; in Cooney’s *Goddess of Yesterday*, for instance, the topos of the femme fatale which lurks beyond the descriptions of Helena and of her actions is evident

L. Guillhaume deals with the presence of the Amazons in the comic book series *Y: The Last Man* (2002-2008); in this case, too, it is necessary to highlight a degree of ingenuity in approaching the topic, as the author starts with a long discussion about the Amazons and their representation in ancient sources, which is not exactly relevant to the topic of his analysis, which, in turn, is then relegated to more or less half of the article. In this case, as in many other in the volume, this approach reveals a rather incompletely developed scholarly approach to classical receptions, which makes the authors linger on the ancient side of the story much more than it would be needed. Also, in this case as well, it is a pity to have to note that some European publications which would be relevant to the subject have been ignored⁶.

The volume is completed by a very interesting chapter by S. Skelley on masculine receptions of Artemis, which shows how modern works generally distinguish neatly Artemis from Diana, and the reception of the first seems to interpret the element of hunting sometimes as a masculine character, thus generating a series of male figures named Artemis (as in *Artemis Fowl*) or Artemus (in *The Raven Boys*), and by J. Christensen’s reflections on the reception of classical models of heroism in *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*. While Christensen dedicates much attention to the gender aspects

⁶ In particular, as the article also discusses the representation of the Amazons in *Wonder Woman*, A. Gietzen / M. Gindhart, “Project(ion) Wonder Woman: Metamorphoses of a Superheroine”, in F. Carlà/I. Berti (eds.), *Ancient Magic and the Supernatural in the Modern Visual and Performing Arts* (London – New York 2015), 135-150.

connected to his investigation, he seems to underplay the homosexual component visible in the series and which has been correctly highlighted by T. Jenkins in an extremely relevant monograph that Christensen seems not to have had the chance to consult⁷.

All in all, the book contains some very interesting chapters and some interesting contributions, particularly with regard to a more intensive and more frequent analysis of Classical receptions outside the Global North. It is a pity that the single chapters are not tied together by a clearer and firmer structure and therefore do not combine into a harmonic movement towards answering a common research question. The too-short introduction does not manage to generate unity and the lack of conclusions seems to show that such a unity was not among the aims of the editors. The very choice of the book title is, in the opinion of this reviewer, quite unfortunate as it should at least have been called “*Ancient mythical women in modern media*” and also reveals a similar lack of attention for structure, as it tries to subsume a series of quite disparate studies under a very general definition, without much attention for representativeness or completeness.

⁷ T. Jenkins, *Antiquity Now: The Classical World in the Contemporary American Imagination* (Cambridge 2015)..