

## THE POWER TO INSPIRE: CLASSICAL ANTIQUITY AND MODERN IMAGINATION

**Brett M. ROGERS, Benjamin Eldon STEVENS (eds.),** *Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2017, X, 367 pp., ISBN 978-0-1906-1006-7 (pbk.), £86.00 (hb.)/29.49 (pbk.).

**Jesse WEINER, Benjamin Eldon STEVENS, Bret M. ROGERS (eds.),** *Frankenstein and Its Classics. The Modern Prometheus from Antiquity to Science Fiction*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018 (Bloomsbury Studies in Classical Reception), XII, 233 pp., ISBN 978-1-3500-5487-5 (pbk.), £65.00 (hb.)/21.00 (pbk.).

**Brett M. ROGERS, Benjamin Eldon STEVENS (eds.),** *Once and Future Antiquities in Science Fiction and Fantasy*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019 (Bloomsbury Studies in Classical Reception), XIV, 273 pp., ISBN 978-1-3500-7488-0 (pbk.), £65.00 (hb.)/19.99 (pbk.).

These three impressive volumes, appearing one per year like clockwork, were preceded by an earlier one in 2015, *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction* produced by the same editors ROGERS and STEVENS, in the series *Classical Presences* directed by reception experts, Lorna HARDWICK and James I. PORTER. They may be followed by a fifth volume (or more) in the future, on yet undisclosed themes, judging by the “(...and counting?)” comment in the preface to *Once and Future Antiquities in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (p. XII). As it would be difficult to exclude the first book from the present review, especially since it has never been reviewed in “Eos”, I will treat the four publications first as a multivolume opus, and then provide brief information about the content of each volume.

## THE SERIES AS A WHOLE

ROGERS and STEVENS conceived and edited the four books; for the volume on Frankenstein they were joined by another editor, Jesse WEINER, who had already contributed a chapter on Frankenstein to the 2015 *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*, an essay comparing modern fantasy to classical epic to the 2017 *Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy*, and a chapter in *Once and Future Antiquities in Science Fiction and Fantasy* on an early twentieth-century German novella by Wilhelm Jensen, one of many modern variations of the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea inspired by the tragedy of Pompeii and a Roman bas-relief of a walking woman.

All four volumes display fantastic artwork on the covers, and while the first two, from Oxford University Press, are of a marginally smaller format, they are a good one hundred pages longer than the more recent two from Bloomsbury. In spite of this slight variance in format, they look good standing together on a library shelf, having appeared there in a timely manner and having been received with considerable interest by reception scholars and other readers.

The series allows us to observe the creation of a remarkable network of scholars who have contributed to the volumes during the four years of their production (2015–2019). The two editors (joined by the third one for the book on Frankenstein) brought together thirteen researchers for SF, twelve for fantasy, eleven for Frankenstein and thirteen for *Once and Future Antiquities...* There were four different teams of scholars, with minor overlaps: one scholar participated in all four groups, and three scholars in two of the groups. An amazingly diverse and creative crowd of, all together, fifty-one contributors, whom the editors managed to coordinate successfully. It is impressive to observe how editorial experience accumulates and the learning curve progresses from volume to volume.

The entire series is composed of collections of papers stemming – at least in part – from conferences debating the theme of each volume and bearing the same titles. While this is a universal

model of the research cycle in today's scholarship, conference volumes rarely do justice to their titles and seldom provide comprehensive treatment of the subject. Gathered according to the larger theme and then grouped in sections, the contributions included in a conference book appear every now and then to be randomly selected and resulting from external circumstances rather than from a purposeful design; occasionally, conference books take the form of a set of case studies with an introduction but without a conclusion. They may leave the reader, especially a fellow scholar, with a feeling of discontent and a longing for a solid monograph. On the other hand, a series of conference volumes provides a satisfying accumulation of various aspects of the general theme discussed by different authors from various points of view, which is a huge advantage in itself.

The titles *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction* and *Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy* imply a comprehensive treatment of the subject, while *Once and Future Antiquities in Science Fiction and Fantasy* sounds poetic but is vague enough not to create expectations of a definitive inclusiveness. *Frankenstein and Its Classics. The Modern Prometheus from Antiquity to Science Fiction* by its clear focus on the fictional bicentennial character<sup>1</sup> and its classical roots is the most precise and appropriate title in the series. Tony KEEN<sup>2</sup> in *Once and Future Antiquities...* (p. 11) declares the vastness of the field of science fiction (and presumably fantasy) as the first methodological challenge – and says: “There is really nothing we can do about this. No study can be comprehensive”. Clearly, the challenge is real, but it is nothing new in scholarship, where various solutions have been advanced and attempted in the past. KEEN's comment sounds curiously defeatist.

KEEN provides access (<http://tinyurl.com/ctsfmfdatabase>) to a database of classically inspired science fiction and fantasy compiled by ROGERS and STEVENS; it contains (as of September 30, 2019) 801 entries, theoretically in alphabetical order of genres and within genres, of the authors', or creators' names, but in fact, the order is not fully maintained, which may be confusing; there are well over 500 literary entries, 35 or so films, about 200 games including videogames, and a marginal numbers of television series, theatre and opera. Surprisingly, the database lists only three television series, *The Adventures of the Wonder Woman* (1976–1979), *The Man from Atlantis* (1977–1978), and *Stargate Atlantis* (2004–2009).

A year before *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction...*, a French collection of texts on classical antiquity in fantasy and science fiction came out, thematically corresponding to the four ROGERS' and STEVENS' volumes, and even sharing one of the authors<sup>3</sup>. In the preface to their volume on science fiction (p. VIII), the editors briefly acknowledge the existence of BOST-FIÉVET's and PROVINI's book and single out the introductions to each section without mentioning that they provide an impressive rationale for the structure and contents of the collection. Regrettably, ROGERS and STEVENS were content with one general introduction for each volume and did not follow the French editors' example; it would have made their publications more cohesive if the division in sections and the choice of essays were convincingly substantiated.

KEEN, a contributor to the French volume, lists as methodological challenge #4<sup>4</sup> the problem of Anglophone scholars ignoring research in other languages, and gives BOST-FIÉVET's and PROVINI's publication as an example of such unfairly disregarded scholarship. The book is included

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<sup>1</sup> The first edition of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus* appeared in London in 1818.

<sup>2</sup> In *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*, he authored a chapter on Lucian and H.G. WELLS using Antony as his first name.

<sup>3</sup> Tony KEEN, *Femme parfaite sur commande: Le mythe de Pygmalion dans deux romans de science-fiction et de fantasy*, in: Mélanie BOST-FIÉVET, Sandra PROVINI (eds.), *L'Antiquité dans l'imaginaire contemporain: Fantasy, science-fiction, fantastique*, Paris 2014, pp. 205–213. In his paper KEEN compares Chris Beckett's *The Holy Machine* and Jeffrey Ford's *The Cosmology of the Wider World*.

<sup>4</sup> In *Once and Future Antiquities...*, p. 14.

in the *Works Cited* in all the volumes, and in the last one its general introduction is listed separately, but is not discussed in any detail. The footnotes in the four volumes, not having been fully indexed<sup>5</sup>, make any verification time-consuming and soporific – I may have easily missed a mention or two, for which I apologise. This particular shortcoming (of ignoring scholarship in languages other than English) is of course hardly an issue limited to this series, and in any case, the editors are conscious of it and make an effort to correct it.

A last minor observation is that occasionally the editors and some of the authors use cumbersome academic jargon, making the text difficult to follow, certainly for an average reader, but also for a fellow scholar.

### THE ORPHAN OF THE SERIES: TELEVISION

The volume on science fiction discusses four TV shows: *Battlestar Galactica*, *Doctor Who*, *Rome* (HBO), and four series of *Star Trek* – *The Original Series*, *The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, and *Voyager* – no *Enterprise* (George KOVACS' chapter on *Star Trek* is a delight to read). In the preface to the volume on fantasy, the editors try to pre-empt censure, echoing KEEN's disarming comment that "Diverse as its chapters are, the present volume is only a chapter to an entire world of rapidly burgeoning scholarly interest in the topic" (p. VII). The television series mentioned in this volume are *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Game of Thrones*, both reduced to minor footnotes.

The last volume, *Once and Future Antiquities...*, includes an analysis by Claire KENWARD (pp. 32–37) of the four-episode segment of *Doctor Who* series 3, 3 (BBC 1965), *Myth Makers*, now preserved in audio-only. The story takes place in Troy besieged by the Greeks; it begins during Achilles' and Hector's duel and ends with *Doctor Who*'s characters helping Odysseus build the Trojan horse. Analysing a television series based only on the audio (with some stills and clips of footage) theoretically presents an unsurmountable handicap, a bit like assessing a painting based on its black and white photograph. Curiously, it does not prevent the author from treating the mutilated show as a complete work. On the other hand, not many people who watched the show in 1965 are still active enough to contest KENWARD's interpretation which, preceding comments notwithstanding, remains quite stimulating. Classical scholars are, after all, fairly skilled in dealing with fragmentary texts.

Another Trojan figure, Cassandra, is compared – let me say, rather surprisingly – to the strong female character of Kiera Cameron from the time-travel series *Continuum* (2012–2015) by Jennifer C. RANCK (pp. 135–145); both characters are presented as women of vision, having knowledge of the future, which is met with disbelief by the people around them. Two other shows are mentioned by title: *Firefly* (2002–2003) by RANCK (p. 135) and *Star Trek The Original Series* (besides KOVACS' excellent chapter in the volume on science fiction, the title is brought up *passim* by several authors).

Given the importance of SF and fantasy television series in popular culture, the predominant focus on literature produces a slanted picture of classical reception. The reasons for the decision to disregard to a large extent television's contribution to classical reception are not explained or discussed in any of the prefaces to the four volumes. The fact that film is also present to a much lesser degree than literature appears legitimate in view of the large number of studies published on Classics in films during the last two decades<sup>6</sup>. One can only hope that volume five, if it does

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<sup>5</sup> This should really be banned in scholarly books, especially the ones coming out in print. Another annoying practice is the use, preferred by some publishers, of endnotes instead of footnotes; in this case in volumes three and four by Bloomsbury. The ease of reading or consulting a publication should be a primary consideration for the book industry.

<sup>6</sup> For a bibliography, see for instance, Alastair J.L. BLANSHARD, Kim SHAHABUDIN, *Classics on Screen. Ancient Greece and Rome on Film*, London 2011, pp. 248–256; or Pantelis MICHELAKIS, Maria WYKE (eds.), *The Ancient World in Silent Cinema*, Cambridge 2013, pp. 347–368.

materialise, will target this gap and be devoted to classical traditions in audiovisual fantasy and science fiction beyond *Battlestar Galactica* and *Star Trek*. In fact, if the present contents of the editors' database are any indication, they point rather to a focus on games as the theme of the future volume, and quite a legitimate focus at that.

### SCIENCE FICTION & CLASSICS

ROGERS and STEVENS begin their introduction to the volume taking *Frankenstein*, the traditionally "first" SF novel, and its links to Antiquity as a point of departure and reference. Like every single SF book, this one deals with the longstanding lack of a generally accepted definition of science fiction combined with a plethora of attempts at defining the subject. The editors' solution is to talk about *modern* SF and treat SF's "rosy-fingered dawn" like Lucian and later Johannes Kepler, as kinds of precursors, or rather sources of inspiration and influence. On the other hand, the preface engages in a long reasoning leading to a complex justification for selecting Classics and science fiction for a joint scholarly inquiry. As if a wide-open door needed forcing. Any science fiction fan is familiar with the links between the two, and even half-expects them. Some reception scholars have no doubts about it either, judging for instance by the 2008 (2011 in paperback) Blackwell *Companion to Classical Receptions*, edited by Lorna HARDWICK and Christopher STRAY, and in particular, chapter 25 by Marianne McDONALD (pp. 327–335), and chapter 31 by Sarah Annes BROWN (pp. 415–427). Some others (SILK, GILDENHARD, and BARROW in their 2014 Wiley Blackwell *The Classical Tradition*), consider that "in atomistic terms, most science fiction, or the 'drip and slash' paintings of Jack Pollock, or the categories of contemporary genetics, are, in their different ways, so remote from the tradition that only an all-embracing discussion [...] would even bring the (non-)relationship into view" (p. 242). One wonders what kind of science fiction shows have they been watching, or what their definition of SF is.

A brief overview of classical authors and creators of science fiction included in the volume may give a better understanding of its rationale. Set up in chronological order, the contributions discuss Plutarch's *De facie quae in orbe lunae apparet* and Lucian's *True History* as sources of Johannes KEPLER's *Somnium* (Dean SWIFORD); Lucretius' *De rerum natura* and Lucian's *Bellum civile* as influences on Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (Jesse WEINER); Virgil's influence on Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (Benjamin Eldon STEVENS); Lucian's *True History* again, this time as a primary source for H.G. Wells' *The First Men in the Moon*, as opposed to its secondary sources, Kepler's *Somnium* and Francis Goodwin's *The Man in the Moone* (Antony KEEN).

The next section, *SF Classics*, consist of chapters on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Aristotle's *Poetics* as influencing the 1956 movie *Forbidden Planet* (Gregory S. BUCHER); the concept of the degradation of the ages of men as an inspiration for Walter M. Miller, Jr's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (Erik GRAYSON); Homer's *Iliad* lending epic characteristics to Frank Herbert's *Dune* (Joel P. CHRISTENSEN); classical myths about artificial life forms influencing Philip K. Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* and its film adaptation, *Blade Runner* (Rebecca RAPHAEL).

Section III, *Classics in Space*, starts with *Star Trek: The Original Series'* exploration of specific Greek myths (George KOVACS); goes on to the connections between Homer's *Odyssey* and the 1997 *Alien Resurrection* (Brett M. ROGERS); and ends with evocations of ancient Greek religion in the second *Battlestar Galactica* (2003–2009) (Vincent TOMASSO).

Section IV, *Ancient Classics for a Future Generation*, discusses the "capacity for other worlds, whether future, past, or simply alternative" (p. 23) in three papers: Homer's *Iliad* as retold by Dan Simmon in *Illium* (Gaël GROBÉTY); Petronius' and Tacitus' critical portrayals of imperial excesses, combined with Juvenal's satires, influencing Suzanne Collins' painting in *The Hunger Games Trilogy*, a sinister picture of future America closer to modern interpretations than to antiquity (Marian MANKINS); the final chapter is devoted to Jonathan Hickman's four-issue comic book *Pax Romana*, a time-travel story about how, in the mid-twenty-first century, genetically enhanced Vatican troops armed with super-tech weapons go back to the times of Constantine the Great before

Christianity becomes the state religion, to fix the young Christian church and prevent the Roman Empire from “decline-ing and fall-ing”, a clear echo of Gibbon and his interpretation of history rather than the reception of antiquity (C.W. MARSHALL, the editor, with George KOVACS, of *Classics and Comics* 2011 and *Son of Classics and Comics* 2016).

The volume ends with an oddly meagre set of suggestions (each title provided with a mini-summary) for further reading and viewing by Rober A. CAPE, some of which have been already discussed in the volume and look out of place on such a list.

### FANTASY & CLASSICS

As in the case of science fiction, the question of definition and scope returns with a vengeance in the volume on fantasy, especially since these two elusive concepts frequently overlap. The editors distinguish SF from MF (Modern Fantasy), calling the former Promethean and the latter Protean. Theoretical reflections fill the first section of the book, starting with Jesse WEINER on the presence in MF of the classical epics, analysing the case of George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*, followed by Cecilie FLUGT on parodic reception of various ancient texts present in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Brambilla* and *Master Flea*, on classical and Nordic myths in Christian Andersen’s stories, and on the concept of enchantment and disenchantment. In the only paper about fine arts in the volume, Genevieve S. GESSERT discusses classical inspiration in “Pre-Raphaelites and Victorian Illustration”. Robinson Peter KRÄMER writes about Howard Philips Lovecraft’s longstanding fascination with Antiquity, which bordered on obsession. He most often takes inspiration from Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil’s *Aeneid*, but also Lucian’s *True History*.

Part II regroups papers about the two giants of fantasy literature, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis. The first paper centres on the Underworlds in *The Hobbit* (Benjamin Eldon STEVENS); the second explores the links between Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* and C.S. Lewis’ *The Voyage of the “Dawn Treader”* (Jeffrey T. WINKLE); the third tackles Apuleius again retold in C.S. Lewis’ *Till We Have Faces* (Marcus FOLCH).

Part III begins with Sarah Annes BROWN’s paper on the place of ancient gods of various origin in children’s literature, featuring the following authors: C.S. Lewis, E. Nesbit, P.L. Travers, Joan Aiken, Diana Wynne Jones, Rick Riordan. Kelly McCullough, John C. Wright, and two authors for older readers, Marie Phillips and Neil Gaiman. It is followed by Brett M. ROGERS’ analysis of “ghosts of Aeschylus” in the *Harry Potter* Series. Antonia SYSON discusses Harpies in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* Trilogy. The section ends with a comparison of Disney/Pixar’s *Brave* with Greek myth and legends about girls and bears (Elizabeth A. MANWELL).

Part IV brings Anne Carson’s translations of Mimnermos, and a fictional interview with this seventh-century BCE elegiac poet is discussed by Sasha-Mae ECCLESTON. Joe Graham’s novel *Black Ships*, an American version of the *Aeneid*, is analysed by Jennifer A. REA as a story of a war hero who is out of place in the post-war reality he fought for. In the last paper, we revisit George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* and read about the Virgilian themes developed there (Ayelet Haimson LUSHKOV).

### FRANKENSTEIN & CLASSICS

The smallest of the four volumes, *Frankenstein and Its Classics. The Modern Prometheus from Antiquity to Science Fiction* is composed of two parts, each numbering six papers. The first part deals with Mary Shelley’s use of ancient sources and discusses Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Genevieve LIVELEY), variants of Prometheus’ myth – in Hesiod, Aeschylus, and Ovid directly and via Benjamin Franklin, Immanuel Kant, and Erasmus Darwin (Martin PRIESTMAN), links to Lucan’s *Bellum Civile* (Andrew MCCLELLAN), Mary Shelley’s influence on Romantic Prometheism (Suzanne L. BARNETT); David A. GAPP provides a context for the circumstances surrounding the conception of the novel in 1816, based on the weather resulting from Mount Tambora’s eruption

in 1815. Concluding the first part, Matthew GUMPERT presents Victor Frankenstein as Prometheus and the creature as Pandora.

Section 2, entitled *Hideous Progeny*, includes papers by Benjamin Eldon STEVENS (on the Apuleian version of Cupid and Psyche); Carl A. RUBINO (on echoes of Aristotle and Lucretius); Neşe DEVENOT (on the Promethean figure of Timothy Leary and his links to Frankenstein); Jesse WEINER (on Horace and Cicero in Morrison's *Spark of Being*); Emma HAMMOND (on *Frankenstein's* legacy in Alex Garland's 2015 film *Ex Machina*); while the final paper of the section discusses Frankenstein's influence on Riddley Scott's 2012 film *Prometheus* and Matt Fraction's and Christian Ward's 2014 comic book *Ody-C* (Brett M. ROGERS). The volume ends with Samuel COOPER's set of "Further Reading and Viewing" which briefly describes the listed titles of literary, film and television works (quoting only three series: *Star Trek*, *The X-Files*, and *Penny Dreadful*).

### SCIENCE FICTION, FANTASY, AND CLASSICS

When, after a book on science fiction and a book on fantasy, comes a third one combining the two areas, a logical assumption would be that the editors intended to compare the two in their treatment of antiquity. However, a suspicious reader could think that it is an attempt to complete what was missed – for whatever reason – in the initial offerings. Neither guess is correct. *The Once and Future Antiquity...* focuses on a concept shared by Classics, SF and fantasy, that of *displacement*, and then discusses different varieties of this concept, making it the theme and anchor of the collection. It is an original idea resulting on the one hand in the better cohesion of the essays, and on the other, being well suited to the unexpected and appealing contribution ending the volume: a personal view of ancient heritage from a popular and prolific SF and fantasy writer, Catherynne M. VALENTE (*The Labyrinth* 2004, *The Ice Puzzle* 2004, *Yume No Hon: The Book of Dreams* 2005, *The Grass-Cutting Sword* 2006, *The Orphan Tales* series 2006–2007, *Palimpsest* 2009, *Deathless* 2011, *Fairyland* series 2011–2016, *Radiance* 2015, *The Glass Town Game* 2017, *Space Opera* 2018, *Mass Effect Andromeda: Annihilation* 2018).

Some of the essays in this volume have been discussed above. All of the essays are grouped in four sections: (1) displacing points of origin: Tony KEEN, Jesse WEINER, Claire KENWARD, Laura ZIENTEK (Jack McDevitt's *The Engines of God* and "a 'displacement' of perspective on academic disciplines that imagine themselves as *simply* factual or true", p. 3); (2) displaced in space: Ortwin KNORR (Pullman's *Dark Materials* seen as Lyra's *Odyssey*), Suzanne LYE (the classical concepts of *nostoi* and *katabaseis* in Hayao Miyazaki's 2001 animated fantasy *Spirited Away*), Benjamin Elton STEVENS (classical motifs in Helen Oyeyemi's novels); (3) displaced in time: Stephen B. MOSES and Brett M. ROGERS (Jim Sharman's 1975 musical horror comedy *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* seen in classical reception terms), Frances FOSTER (the influence of Odysseus' meeting with the dead on Diana Wynne Jones' *The Time of the Ghost*), Jennifer C. RANCK; and (4) displacing genre: C.W. MARSHALL (classical monsters in *Dungeons & Dragons* Monster Manuals), Vincent TOMASSO (the mixture of 'mythologising' and 'rationalising' modes of explanation in Gene WOLFE's novel *Soldier of the Mist*), and Alex MCAULEY (Virgil and Augustus in *Warhammer 40K* universe of games and novels).

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate my initial comment that the four books look good on the shelf and that there is a place reserved there for the fifth one. The diversity of topics and the originality of the authors' approach make sure that the books will often be off the shelf, being read and consulted.

Elżbieta Olechowska  
University of Warsaw  
elzbieta.olechowska@gmail.com