

## BOOK REVIEW

*Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*. Edited by BRETT M. ROGERS and BENJAMIN ELDON STEVENS. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xiii + 380. Softcover, \$35. ISBN 978-0-19-022833-0.

In *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*, Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens have compiled a wide-ranging collection of fourteen essays that explores modern science fiction “for complex points of contact with classical traditions” (4). The volume demonstrates how an understanding of SF’s classical lineage helps to mediate the many ethical and epistemological questions SF raises, particularly the question of how technology has come to define human culture and our relationship with the natural world. While understandably skirting the thorny issue of SF’s precise definition, the essays nevertheless contribute greatly to the discussion, explaining that SF employs narrative fiction to explore empirical claims while also participating in contemporary scientific speculation. Throughout, the collection provides compelling evidence for the importance of classical literature to modern SF.

The volume contains four thematic sections. Part I, “SF’s Rosy-Fingered Dawn,” explains links between the earliest SF and classical literature. Often focusing on literary aspects such as structure, language, and imagery, the essays in this section highlight unsuspected philosophical connections. Dean Swinford’s “The Lunar Setting of Johannes Kepler’s *Somnium*” argues that Kepler’s 1634 satire shows the influence not only of Lucian’s *True History* but especially of Plutarch’s *De Facie in Orbe Lunae*, as Kepler appropriates not just the motif of travel to the moon but the treatment of the moon as a material object with its own landscape. Ultimately, Kepler argues against geocentrism by displacing his narrative viewpoint to the moon.

Similarly, Antony Keen’s rather one-note “Links between the *True History* and *The First Men in the Moon*” discusses “possible connections” between Lucian’s work and Wells’s 1901 novel (105). In “Lucretius, Lucan, and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*,” Jesse Weiner focuses on the novel’s intertextual relationship with *De Rerum Natura* and the *Bellum Civile*, while volume co-editor Benjamin Eldon Stevens’s “Virgil in Jules Verne’s *Journey to the Center of the Earth*” elucidates the

novel's engagement with Virgil, pointing out deep structural parallels with Aeneas's *katabasis* as well as specific echoes of Virgil's Latin in Verne's text.

Part II, "SF 'Classics,'" considers the classical influence on SF during the heyday of the genre in film and literature, the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In "A Complex Oedipus: The Tragedy of Edward Morbius," Gregory Bucher reconsiders the character of Dr. Morbius in the 1965 film *Forbidden Planet*. Whereas most analyses of the film acknowledge the combined influence of Freudian psychology and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Bucher emphasizes the screenplay's debt to Sophocles, arguing that Morbius "is intentionally portrayed as a tragic figure" (141).

Erik Grayson's essay, "Walter M. Miller, Jr.'s *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, the Great Year, and the Ages of Man," analyzes the relationship of Miller's 1961 Hugo winner to the Greco-Roman cultural tradition, a facet previously neglected in favor of the more obvious influence of medieval monastic traditions. Grayson suggests that Miller's cyclic vision of human history, with its "inversely correlated intellectual and moral development of humankind," echoes visions articulated by Hesiod and Ovid, and that Miller uses them as warnings against the destruction of civilization (150). In "Time and Self-Referentiality in the *Iliad* and Frank Herbert's *Dune*," Joel Christensen compares the temporal strategies of the *Iliad* with those in Frank Herbert's *Dune*, while Rebecca Raphael discusses "artificial" life in classical myth, such as Hephaestus's Golden Maidens, in relation to the replicants of Ridley Scott's 1982 *Blade Runner*, referencing Scott's source material, Philip K. Dick's 1968 "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?" in passing, thus qualifying for this section's "mid-20<sup>th</sup> century" parameter.

The essays in Part III, "Classics in Space," focus literally on SF set in space. George Kovacs' "Moral and Mortal in *Star Trek: The Original Series*" examines how man's potential to attain greater intelligence and technology must be balanced within moral parameters such as the often-violated Prime Directive. Brett Rogers' "Hybrids and Homecomings in the *Odyssey* and *Alien Resurrection*" reads Odysseus as an ethically challenged hybrid who, having changed drastically during his adventures, comes home as alien as Ripley. In "Classical Antiquity and Western Identity in *Battlestar Galactica*," Vincent Tomasso emphasizes the influence of Greek mythology on the 2003-09 television series.

Part IV, "Ancient Classics for a Future Generation?," suggests that an important theme in modern SF is the capacity of other worlds (future, past, or alternative) to serve as thought experiments about important aspects of this world—though such a general observation is not applicable only to SF. Here, Marian Makins's "Refiguring the Roman Empire in *The Hunger Games* Trilogy" explores

the “Romanness” of Panem, which, as a “critical dystopia,” provides its YA audience with hope that they, like the novel’s characters, may succeed in changing society (282; 289). Less effective is Gaël Grobéty’s “Revised Iliadic Epiphanies in Dan Simmons’s *Ilium*”; he essentially notes how science explains phenomena that earlier societies interpreted as miracles.

In “Jonathan Hickman’s *Pax Romana* and the End of Antiquity,” C.W. Marshall’s analysis of the time-travel-based graphic novel emphasizes Hickman’s ability to identify specific moments from antiquity that have helped shape our present-day world, such as the First Council of Nicaea (at which Christian orthodoxy was established). Lastly, Robert Cape’s “Suggestions for Further Reading and Viewing,” provides a list of literature, film, and television series that “have made serious use of classical elements and themes” (327).

Despite the occasionally strained nature of the classical connections in several of the essays, Rogers and Stevens have produced an interesting and timely collection, one that forges a connection between various academic disciplines. The volume may be less useful outside of academia; although a number of the essays, including those of Keen, Bucher, Kovacs, and Makins, are so clearly written as to be accessible to a broader audience, others are weighted down with academic jargon. The Introduction in particular obscures the significance of its subject matter with such sentences as, “More important for our purposes is the methodological implication that a physical or metaphysical fact of ‘the author’s empirical environment’—namely, ‘materialism,’ has epistemological consequences” (17), or “the texts are self-contained, syntagmatic structures of narrative for which the reader must always supply a missing paradigm” (18). But such concerns do not outweigh the book’s importance. Rogers and Stevens have been at the forefront of the movement to engage classicists with SF and vice versa; this volume greatly strengthens that engagement, and opens the door for future volumes on the subject.

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