

BOOK REVIEW

Greece on Air: Engagements with Ancient Greece on BBC Radio, 1920s-1960s. By AMANDA WRIGLEY. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xxi + 384. Hardcover, \$150.00. ISBN 978-0-19-964478-0.

Radio broadcasting has received comparatively little attention within the burgeoning field of classical reception studies, but Amanda Wrigley has done much to change that. Her previous work, including a fine edition (together with Stephen Harrison) of Louis MacNeice's classics-themed radio plays (also in the Oxford Classical Presences series), has drawn valuable attention to the importance of radio as a medium for the "popularization" of classics in 20th century Britain. In *Greece on Air*, Wrigley offers us the most comprehensive treatment to date of the ways in which radio drama has responded to, transmitted, and transformed the legacy of the classical world.

The book falls neatly into two parts. In the first, Wrigley puts the topic into context by exploring radio as a mass medium. She discusses in detail the collaborative process through which BBC radio programs were created, as well as their reception by the listening audience, for which we have invaluable evidence in the form of Listener Research Reports collected and archived by the BBC. Drawing upon recent theoretical work on the process of listening, Wrigley argues convincingly that the exclusively auditory medium of radio has a unique capacity to stimulate the imagination of its audience. She points to listener comments that display keen "imaginative engagement" (to borrow her term) with classical radio dramas, and uses these comments to stress the active role of listeners in the process of reception, as opposed to earlier models that portray reception as a one-way process of transmission and neglect the role of the audience. Particularly intriguing is her argument (94–96) that radio worked in tandem with other mechanisms of popularization, such as Penguin Classics, to break down the walls between academia and the general populace and transform the cultural atmosphere of postwar Britain.

The second part of the book is a series of case studies of particular authors/translators (Gilbert Murray, Louis MacNeice) and genres (Homeric epic, tragedy, comedy) that had a prominent place in the history of the classics on BBC radio. The detail Wrigley offers in these chapters is rich and compelling; thanks to

her extensive research in the BBC archives, including the personal correspondence of many major figures at the network, she gives us remarkable insight into the creative process. We can see how various forces, whether external (the Second World War and the ensuing need to raise domestic morale) or internal (the tastes of certain BBC executives, such as the aesthetically conservative Val Gielgud, long-time head of the Drama Department), shaped both the choice of material to translate/adapt and the freedom—or lack thereof—with which it was adapted for radio broadcast.

A running theme throughout is the enormous importance of radio in making the classics—hitherto thought of as the domain of a learned few—accessible to ordinary people throughout the British Isles and beyond. As Wrigley notes (e.g. 262–263), many listeners to radio dramas were stimulated to explore the subject further, whether through reading texts in translation, forming discussion groups, or putting on amateur performances of Greek plays they had encountered through the BBC.

Unfortunately, the volume is marred by a frequent sloppiness in editing and proofreading that has made itself felt before in the *Classical Presences* series. The earliest chapters, in particular, are very prone to repetition, sometimes verbatim; Wrigley refers to radio as “an uncharted realm of activity/engagement that by any measure is of great importance to cultural history” no fewer than three times (pages 8, 21, and 58). This may be due to the volume’s genesis from various earlier independent articles of Wrigley’s, but one would still have wished it to be smoothed out in the editing process. There are also quite a few typographical errors, including incorrect source citations in the footnotes, and a smattering of factual errors (e.g. on page 169 Apuleius is dated to the second century BC, rather than AD—an error which also occurred in Wrigley’s edition of MacNeice’s radio plays).

Nonetheless, this remains a fascinating and worthwhile monograph. Studies like Wrigley’s remind us that it is not only ivory-tower academics who are capable of engaging with the classical heritage in complex, creative ways. There is much yet to learn about the relationship between classics and mass media, and *Greece on Air*, like the rest of Wrigley’s work, will no doubt open up many fruitful paths of future investigation.

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