

BOOK REVIEW

Our Ancient Wars: Rethinking War through the Classics. By VICTOR CASTON and SILKE-MARIA WEINECK, ed. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016. Pp. vi + 289. Paperback, \$45.00. ISBN 978-0-472-05298-1.

The present volume includes proceedings from the interdisciplinary “Our Ancient Wars” conference held in 2012 at the University of Michigan, organized by Victor Caston and Silke-Maria Weineck. In his introduction, Caston gives a brief account of the origins of a conference “on how Western thinking about war turns and returns to ancient Greek writing on the subject ...” Some of the richest rewards of such a project are illustrated when we read that an appreciable contingent of the veteran community attended and in some cases used the conference to identify themselves as veterans to the rest of campus for the first time. Reading about this interaction is very moving, and I hope that future volumes in this vein will give more participants a voice by including transcripts of particularly interesting colloquia or question-and-answer periods.

Part I is entitled “Rethinking Ancient War, in View of the Modern” and promises discussions that utilize modern theories and categories to reassess antiquity. Hans van Wees applies the concept of genocide to Classical Greek warfare when Greeks killed the free men of a rival *polis* and enslaved the rest. Kurt Raaflaub applies to the *Lysistrata* the concept of the “home front,” i.e. the civilian population and the mobilization of its military support—he argues that Aristophanes reverses an Athenian-imperialist home-front ideology by making war the destroyer, not guarantor of civilization. David Potter explores the concept of the “unnecessary war,” i.e. one that begins without clear and obtainable objectives, e.g. WWI, which Potter usefully compares to the Peloponnesian War (and the First Punic War). S. Sara Monson discusses Socrates’ military career; the discussion does not perfectly fit into the promised rubric of understanding the ancient in light of the modern but is interesting in its own right, and a few closing words on PTSD provide a useful transition to the next part.

Part II bears the converse title, “Rethinking the Modern, in View of the Ancient.” Nancy Sherman (citing Aristotelian self-love and Stoic moral progress) discusses the paradoxical concept of “self-empathy” as a therapeutic device for veterans. Paul Woodruff explores how Athenian tragedies pose questions of whether

character can be inherited, can be changed by circumstance, and can be recovered; he argues that tragedy addresses war's answers to these questions by exposing human vulnerability. In a particularly fascinating essay, Arlene Saxonhouse discusses the unitary-state model of modern international relations and a competing leader-centered model, both with antecedents in Thucydides' Mytilene debate; neither model displays a clear advantage in assigning responsibility for geopolitical actions. Peter Meineck argues that ancient tragedy offered "cultural therapy" to its original audience; no accounts of ancient audiences' reception survive, but responses of modern veterans to performances from Meineck's own Ancient Greeks/Modern Lives program indicated the possibility.

Part III is entitled "Other Moderns, Other Ancients" and comprises reception studies. Seth Schein assesses discussions of the human cost of war in four written responses to the *Iliad* in the 20th century, two essays and two poems. Susanne Gödde explores different depictions (mostly modern) of Achilles as the paradigmatic hero of the paradigmatic war and gives a gendered reading of these treatments of Achilles' violence, with women often introduced to counterpoint Achilles. Page duBois applies her interest in ancient slavery to a critique of the STARZ Network's *Spartacus* series and discusses two disparate sources that she sees informing the show: the Hollywood sword-and-sandals epic and military recruitment propaganda.

Weineck's epilogue reflects broadly upon interactions with the veteran community at the conference. She summarizes three points of the distance that emerged between many scholars and soldiers: an ideological distance (left-leaning scholarly community vs. right-leaning military community), a lifestyle distance (self-directed vs. regimented), and an aesthetic distance (valuing disengagement vs. valuing immediacy). Weineck optimistically suggests that discussions of ancient war can encourage dialogue across such distances.

The volume explores various viewpoints (e.g. civilian observer, social scientist, cultural critic, poet). Nevertheless, the focus tends to gravitate toward the combat veteran, an inclination firmly in the tradition of Jonathan Shay's *Achilles in Vietnam*, which is cited repeatedly—though the Shay-inspired approach is not without its critics.¹ In a time when we classicists feel pressure to explain and justify our

¹ E.g. James Romm, "A Misguided Impulse to Update the Greek Classics." *The New Yorker*. April 21, 2017. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/a-misguided-impulse-to-update-the-greek-classics>.

contribution to society, it is entirely right and proper to reach out to veterans for the simple reason that we have stories to tell each other.

This volume has great value as a starting point, but more conferences and more research on several points are needed. Meineck's findings are intriguing though anecdotal and not scientific, and more psychological or sociological study would be necessary. Almost or wholly unmentioned in the volume are the massacre of Melos, Euripides' Trojan Women, the siege of Masada, or Calpurnius' speech in Tacitus' *Agricola*—famous classical passages that unambiguously center the powerless in war, regardless of the psychological makeup of the powerful and their capacity for atrocity. For that matter, where is Alexander the Great in all this? Further discussion with attention to combat, command, atrocity, veteran recovery, and civic responsibility across millennia, and with more scholars of modern warfare and psychology, would enliven and expand this important ongoing discussion.

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