

BOOK REVIEW

Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Receptions in the British Poetry of the Great War. By Elizabeth VANDIVER. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. xvii + 455. Hardcover, £83.00/\$140.00. ISBN 978-0-19-954274-1.

Sitting in a quiet university library or in a classroom, we can all too easily forget that many of the Classics we read are narratives of war or of its aftermath: the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, much of the surviving corpus of Attic tragedy, the histories of Herodotus, Thucydides and Xenophon. Indeed, many classical authors were, as citizens of Athens, soldiers themselves, as were their readers and spectators. In many ways, in fact, the lived experience of the academic is nearly opposite to that of the authors whose legacy she is entrusted to preserve. Elizabeth Vandiver's *Stand in the Trench, Achilles*, which exhaustively details the use of classical themes in the verses of the British soldier-poets in World War I, is, therefore, a startling and welcome reminder that it was not always thus, that for most of history, the Classics were, if not more, at least as resonant on the battlefield as in the ivory tower. (I was recently reminded of this when I requested Marvel Comics' *Iliad* through interlibrary loan and received a copy from the U.S. Marine Corps Library.)

In the first of the volume's three sections, "Education, Class, and Classics," Vandiver describes the ways in which the curriculum in British schools used the Classics to instill a specific set of ideological values among those social classes that would become Britain's imperial administrative and military elite as well as its common soldiers. Vandiver neatly makes this distinction by dividing these two classes into those that had access to the primary sources and those that had to rely on an intermediary source. The primary insight that Vandiver elucidates in this perhaps too long section is that the pedagogical application of the Classics as they were taught in Britain at the time was—regardless of class—to instill in future imperial servants the value of personal sacrifice that made them not just willing but even eager to die for national honor. There seems to me, however, to be another possibility that Vandiver does not take into account: rather than instil-

ling in these soldiers a desire for a *kalos thanatos*, the glorious death of the epic hero, it is equally possible that, to young men facing an early death, Classical models offered some consolation for this inevitability rather than the motivation to seek it out.

The much more interesting second and third sections, “Representing War” and “Death and Remembrance,” address more directly the poetic articulation of the experience of war and of its aftermath, respectively. In “Representing War,” Vandiver offers extracts from a variety of different poets writing about World War I. As one would perhaps assume, the Trojan War was one of the most frequent and compelling paradigms for these soldier-poets. Interestingly, however, the paradigm was constantly shifting. When the carnage described is being inflicted on British and Allied civilians on the Western front, the poets cast themselves in the role of Trojans suffering under Greek aggression. During the Gallipoli campaign on the Eastern front, however, when British forces sought to conquer the land on which Troy itself once rested and where now they faced off in some of the bloodiest contests the world had ever seen against determined Ottoman forces of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, they cast themselves as the Greeks re-enacting a second Trojan War.

The final section analyzes the ways in which active-duty soldiers used poetry and classical paradigms to cope with death, both that of their comrades and of their own imagined deaths. Of particular interest is Vandiver’s discussion of the problem of “corpselessness” in the sub-section entitled “Thwarted *Nostoi*.” Ancient Greek (and, to a lesser extent, pre-War British) military ideology placed great value on the treatment of the dead (the burial of Hector at the conclusion of the *Iliad* and the Athenian institution of the funeral oration being but two examples). During World War I, however, due in part to the sheer number of dead and missing persons and the complete destruction of many bodies (as the result of artillery, bombs and grenades rather than spear wounds), most soldiers and, more importantly, their surviving families and communities were denied customary funeral rites. It was during the war, in 1917, that the British addressed the problem of “corpselessness” through “the establishment of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, the creation of memorials to the missing that listed their names [and] the burial of the Unknown Soldier in Westminster Abbey” (321). Vandiver offers an excellent discussion of the poetic counterpart to this commemorative act.

It is difficult to imagine another volume superseding this one on the subject of classical themes in the soldier poetry of World War I. Despite its many

strengths, however, I could not help but wish that Vandiver had made some attempt to address certain closely related issues: was the use of classical paradigms a feature exclusively of British poetry, or did German, French, Australian and Turkish soldiers also make such comparisons? And if so, did their use of paradigms differ? And if so, in what ways? Was this phenomenon unique to World War I and its aftermath, or was it also a common feature of British soldier poetry in other periods? How do poems with classical themes compare to similar poems without such references (which, I imagine, must have been the vast majority of World War I soldier poetry)? Some engagement with these questions would have offered a better understanding of the poems she does describe by locating them in their broader historical and literary contexts. It is impossible for any one book to address everything, however, and perhaps the highest praise that can be given to a book is that, in answering some questions, it raises far more that the reader did not even know he had. This is such a book.

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