

BOOK REVIEW

Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity: Art, Opera, Fiction, and the Proclamation of Modernity. By Simon GOLDHILL. Martin Classical Lectures. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011. Pp. viii + 352. \$45.00/£30.95. ISBN 978-0-691-14984-4.

The relationship between the Victorian Age and the discipline of Classical Studies is complex and, according to Goldhill, can be understood through a variety of narratives. One narrative sees Classics as the preserve of conservatives concerned with training gentlemen in the service of British imperialism. Meanwhile, Shelley and others issued the battle cry of philhellenic Romanticism. Classics and sexuality comprise a third narrative in the full story: figures like Oscar Wilde set about trying to construct a revolutionary sexual world with Classics as a weapon in the struggle. Next, Classics was used in the defense of democracy: Grote's history challenged Victorian perceptions of ancient Athens. While acknowledging the importance of these different narratives, Goldhill is concerned with a topic that has received little attention: the role of Classics in undermining the dominant place of Christianity in Britain (6). Some mourn this decline. In *The Rage Against God*, for example, Peter Hitchens, committed Christian and brother of atheist Christopher, traces the decline of Christianity in Britain and Europe to World War I, when the leaders of national Churches gave their support to the war-making of democratic politicians. Goldhill traces the decline further back to the imperialist, political, sexual, and educational battlefields of the Victorian Era. His approach to Reception Studies is nuanced and carried out in relation to a number of artistic genres: visual art, music and cultural studies, and fiction, and he deals with both high culture, popular culture, and the "slippage" (15) between them. He is not concerned with a simple tale of how artists, composers, and authors engaged on a personal level with the Classical past. The approach he takes includes the larger study of how meaning takes shape within society: that is, within "the frames of comprehension—the social, political, intellectual contexts" (45) in which artworks are produced, viewed, and read. The book demonstrates an astonishing breadth of knowledge I imagine few Classicists can match. Scholars and students of the

Classical past and those with an interest in nineteenth-century studies will learn much from this lucid and entertaining study.

Part 1 deals with “Art and Desire.” Chapter 1 considers a number of paintings by J. W. Waterhouse. In keeping with Goldhill’s method, the *viewer’s* reception—not just the artist’s conception—contributes to an understanding of the meaning of a work of art. (He finds significance also in the lines of sight displayed by the figures *within* the paintings discussed.) The employment of Classical subjects, he says, worked to shape the general Victorian discourse regarding sexuality. Chapter 2 (“The Touch of Sappho”) looks at the *Sappho* (often called *Sappho and Alcaeus*) of Alma-Tadema and describes not only what viewers and critics made of it when it was painted but also how it invites us to see ourselves reflected in its mirror.

Part 2 is concerned with “Music and Cultural Politics.” “Who Killed Chevalier Gluck?” is the question asked in Chapter 3. The storm of controversy aroused by Strauss’ *Elektra* relegated Gluck to the realm of the safe and respectable: Goldhill tells the story of the reception of Gluck that evolves through a process whereby a musical revolutionary eventually became an icon of a traditional, conservative view of Greek antiquity. Chapter 4 (“Wagner’s Greeks”) deals with the reception of Wagner by contrasting the composer’s own production of *The Ring* with that of grandson Wieland in the 1950s. Goldhill sees Richard Wagner’s Greeks as being at heart Germans, so that through this route Wagner’s Hellenism became linked to his anti-Semitism. The resolutely *Germanic*-looking nature of costumes and settings in the composer’s original production thus carried with it overtones of the composer’s feelings about Jews. Wieland’s production, with its aesthetic of what has been called “empty space,” is dismissed by Goldhill as “bad faith,” an attempt to re-write and disguise the unpleasant aspects of his grandfather’s production (150). Music critic Patrick Carnegy, however, sees Wieland’s production, which removed many of the trappings of Germanic saga, as an attempt both to overcome all the practical problems inherent in realistic productions of *The Ring* and, in addition, to penetrate to the mythic core of the operas.

Part 3 takes up the subject of Victorian novels set in the Greco-Roman world, over 200 of which were published between 1820 and World War I. Goldhill seems to have read them all or most of them! In this era, Classics served as a bastion of conservative religious ideology and at the same time, he says, as a vehicle through which religion could be challenged. Much of nineteenth-century fiction can be viewed in terms of the Victorian reaction to Gibbon’s history of

Rome. "In fiction," Goldhill says, "Gibbon's hard gaze is softened..." (168). Walter Scott also has an important place in the background story.

Readers will surely admire the amazing depth and breadth of Goldhill's knowledge. However, while much is *implied* in Parts 1 and 2 about challenges to Christianity made through Classics in the Victorian Age, little is actually *said* until Gibbon ushers in the age of Victorian fiction dealing with Greece and Rome. But even here, the extent to which Christianity was being undermined is not made very clear. Particularly relevant to Goldhill's study, but largely ignored, is the story of the so-called Victorian "aesthetes" (Pater, Field, Lee, and others), who were satirized by Gilbert and Sullivan in *Patience*. The aesthetes used Heinrich Heine's theme of "the gods in exile" to construct a Victorian-Age view of the gods as exiles from Olympus, who were toppled from their thrones as the artistically and sexually liberated paganism of antiquity was overthrown by the repressive forces of Christianity. This theme of "the gods in exile" long survived the Victorian Age. Aestheticism itself went into exile but has reemerged in modern guise, I think, as recently as Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, where Dionysus appears to be the revenant god.

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