

## BOOK REVIEW

*Ancient Slavery and Abolition: From Hobbes to Hollywood*. Edited by Edith HALL, Richard ALSTON, and Justine MCCONNELL. Classical Presences. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xviii + 509. Hardcover, £90.00/\$150.00. ISBN 978-0-19-957467-4.

The reception of ancient slavery in modern culture has been the subject of growing academic interest in recent decades. *Ancient Slavery and Abolition: From Hobbes to Hollywood* reinforces this trend by bringing together papers presented at an international conference held at the Centre for the Reception of Greece and Rome at Royal Holloway, University of London, in 2007, on the occasion of the bicentenary of the parliamentary act that abolished the slave trade in the British colonies. Within the domain of cultural history, the aim of the book is to provide studies of the non-academic reception of ancient slavery. After an introduction by Edith Hall, highlighting the themes and methodologies covered by the book, there are eleven chapters which deal with the appropriation of Greco-Roman ideas in debates about slavery in England, the United States and South Africa, in literature from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, and even in Hollywood. A postscript by Ahuvia Kahane on “Slavery, Abolition, Modernity, and the Past” concludes the book.

The first chapter, by Richard Alston, draws attention to a central point of the reception studies throughout the book. If, on the one hand, the appropriation of ancient ideas of slavery by various social agents during the modern period helped to minimize the otherness of the ancient slave system vis-à-vis modern ones, it also represented, on the other hand, a substantial rupture between Antiquity and modernity, since the respective notions of freedom and slavery were located in quite different socioeconomic and ontological contexts. Examining the concepts of freedom in Pliny the Younger and Hobbes, Alston indicates that while for the former, slavery and freedom were embedded in a web of social and status relations, for the latter freedom meant the absence of impediment to action, something inherent in every individual regardless of status. By reinforcing this liberal perspective, the insertion of transatlantic slavery in the capitalist system prevented any actual recovery of the intellectual background of ancient slavery. However,

such a rupture did not prevent the generalized use of classical ideas in the debates about slavery triggered by abolitionism. This is illustrated by the numerous citations of the first book of the *Politics* of Aristotle by pro-slavery writers of the antebellum United States, a subject analyzed by S. Sara Monoson, and by appropriations of the image of Spartan helotage by British abolitionists, which reveal, as Stephen Hodkinson and Edith Hall argue, both positive and negative evaluations of this historical phenomenon according to the political interests and actors on scene. This ambivalence of the modern reception of ancient ideas about slavery is also noted in the chapters by John Hilton and Margaret Malamud, who treat the use of classical ideas in the abolition debates in South Africa and the antebellum U.S., respectively.

In this sense the figure of Prometheus, bound and unbound, analyzed by Edith Hall, proves to be a fine example of the difficulties of the appropriation of classical culture by the abolitionist movement, since it involved selecting some aspects akin to the abolitionist cause (such as victimhood and suffering) and discarding others related to social disorder (such as the desire for revenge). The presence of Greco-Roman culture in poetry, novels, historical accounts, and films related to abolitionism and its legacy is treated in five chapters. Brycchan Carey points out the relations between classical form and content in eighteenth-century abolitionist poetry and Emily Greenwood examines the work of Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved African poet in late eighteenth-century Boston. The novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) by Edward Bulwer is analyzed by Leanne Hunnings, who focuses on the characterization of Nydia, a blind slave. Lydia Langerwerf addresses L. R. James' portrait of Toussaint L'Ouverture as influenced by the representation of two ancient slave rebels (Aristomenes of Messene, as depicted by Pausanias, and Drimakos, whose story is preserved in Athenaeus), while Justine McConnell demonstrates how the script of the film *Sommersby* (1993) was inspired by the plot of Homer's *Odyssey* to represent the impact of slavery and abolition in the Deep South.

All these chapters have some points in common: the present-mindedness of the representation of ancient slavery, the tensions between the "outsiderness" of slaves and their possibilities of actual agency, and the classical education of the modern writers. This latter theme is well explored in the chapter by David Luper and Elizabeth Vandiver on Basil L. Gildersleeve, one of the founders of the professional study of Classics in the United States, who illustrates the close link between the development of classical studies and pro-slavery ideology.

In general, by its range of topics and insightful analysis of different sources, the book will surely give new impetus to reception studies. However, its focus on the Anglophone world suggests that future research should also consider the cultural framework of both pro- and antislavery movements in a broader Atlantic perspective. The Iberian slave system, for example, in which Brazil and Cuba played a central role, was strongly affected by the emergence of the British anti-slavery movement, the Revolution of Saint-Domingue, and the American Civil War. The debates on the abolition of slavery throughout the Iberian system also mobilized images of ancient slavery, and a comparison of them with those circulating in England, the United States, South Africa and the Caribbean would allow a more interconnected view—and one, therefore, less restricted to national boundaries—of what David Brion Davis has called the “problem of slavery in Western culture.”

FÁBIO DUARTE JOLY

*Universidade Federal de Ouro Preto*, joly@uol.com.br