

BOOK REVIEW

Film and the Classical Epic Tradition. Classical Presences. By JOANNA PAUL. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xii, 334. ISBN 9780199542925. \$150.00.

Joanna Paul's valuable new reception-oriented study clears important paths for scholars, demonstrating the merits of a comparative approach that uses tradition rather than genre as its interpretive model. Chapter 1 ("Surveying the Epic Tradition in Literature and Film") addresses the manifold popular and scholarly understandings of the word 'epic'. From the standpoint of genre identification, competing definitions of epic constitute a problem to be solved, even when they share common characteristics. By contrast, a film may participate in the classical epic tradition, as long as it possesses elements that make the presence of that tradition felt.

Chapter 2 ("Homer on the Silver Screen") broaches its discussion of Homer's cinematic adaptations through the lens of Godard's *Le Mépris* (1963). Paul contends that attempted fidelity to recreating Homeric epic in its oldest form cannot guarantee access to it. Rather than trying to channel an (allegedly) authentic Homer, as the director depicted in *Le Mépris* wishes to do, filmmakers have tended to build upon select aspects of Homeric epic (e.g. fame in Petersen's *Troy*). It is through such elements, tinged with each film's own interpretive spin, that the tradition makes itself felt.

Chapter 3 ("The Cinematic *Argonautica*") examines both versions of *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963 and 2000), finding overlap with the classical epic tradition in their apparent departures from expectations of epic gravity. 'Belated' epic poets, such as Apollonius and Valerius Flaccus, not only embrace the models of their illustrious forebears, they also resist them by adapting story material from other genres (e.g. tragedy in the *Argonauticas*) or reconfiguring epic plot structure. The Jason films, like other receptions of epic oriented toward younger audiences (e.g. *Percy Jackson*), adopt a comparable strategy when they eschew heroic and tragic tensions in favor of story material from other registers, such as fantasy and adventure.

Chapter 4 ("The Dynamics of a Tradition in *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and *Gladiator*") moves from belatedness to successorship. Reversing the linear model of tradition, Paul inquires not about the influence of *The Fall of the Roman Empire*

(1966) upon *Gladiator* (2000), but of the latter film upon perceptions of the former. Paul further reconstructs the shifting critical assessments of *The Fall of the Roman Empire* and the various ways of figuring its relationship to *Gladiator*.

Chapter 5 (“Spartacus: Identifying a Cinematic Epic Hero”) investigates modern constructions of heroism in the context of the classical epic tradition, using *Spartacus* (1960) as its primary case study. Classical epic’s many contrasting models of heroic conduct offer ancient points of contact for the profound disagreements that animated debate among the film’s writer, director, and star over how to represent Spartacus’ heroic identity. These shared ancient and modern dynamics of hero creation suggest that films can and do participate in the classical epic tradition, even when depicting a figure such as Spartacus who did not belong to that tradition in antiquity.

Chapter 6 (“‘The Biggest Epic Yet’: Spectacle and *Ben-Hur*”) selects the chariot race for its case study of spectacle, demonstrating its centrality to classical epic, as well as to *Ben-Hur* in both its novel form and theatrical adaptations (no less than its filmic ones). In theater, creativity in the presentation of spectacle has tended to win out over scale and budget in retaining audience interest. Paul argues against the notion, however, that viewing film spectacle is necessarily a less active process than a live version, citing in particular Barthes’s comment that the widescreen format liberates the eye to explore different parts of the film image. Further, film can serve as a space for viewers’ energetic engagement with its spectacles through the internal audience’s mediation of their experience. So, for example, the crowd’s reactions in *Ben-Hur*’s chariot scene cue those of the external audience.

Chapter 7 (“Epic Audiences”) offers public performance as an element common to film (theatrical release) and ancient epic (e.g. *recitations* and pantomime). In the absence of evidence for ancient experiences of public performance, recourse remains to the considerable body of comment on its perceived social impact. Thus Juvenal’s denunciation of how epic *recitationes* induce apathy in their audiences offers an implicit parallel for similar criticisms of film. Non-literary performance contexts also assert their presence through filmic depictions of the games, importing in turn the body of social comment that it provoked in antiquity.

Chapter 8 (“Makes *Ben-Hur* Look Like an Epic: Cinematic Parody and the Classical Epic Tradition”) puts parody, ancient and modern, in this context of anxieties over the social consequences of performed spectacle, while also stressing the potential for symbiosis between parody and the classical epic tradition. The former trades on its audience’s ability to recognize the latter’s conventions in order to transform them into sources of humor, thus giving them prolonged cultural life.

Films may even perform the presence of the epic tradition by reclaiming parodied conventions, as for example in the case of *300's* (2007) Spartan warriors whose hyper-masculinity seems to come already equipped with the (self-) subversive comic energy of parody.

Film and the Classical Epic Tradition ranges widely, but remains a coherent, well-organized read. The argumentation is careful, the editing is excellent, and the writing clear. All in all, this book is an important asset for teaching and scholarship.

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