

BOOK REVIEW

Louis MacNeice: The Classical Radio Plays. Edited by AMANDA WRIGLEY and S.J. HARRISON. Classical Presences. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xiii + 436. Hardcover, \$125.00. ISBN 978-0-19-969523-2.

While the field of reception studies has undergone something of a boom in recent years with the appearance of many studies on classical themes in film, television, and even comic books, the comparatively unglamorous medium of radio has largely been neglected. In this volume, part of the ongoing “Classical Presences” series from Oxford University Press, Amanda Wrigley, an expert on the history of the BBC, and Latinist S.J. Harrison have combined forces to rectify this shortcoming. They present the scripts of eleven radio plays written between 1941 and 1960 by the renowned Irish poet and classicist Louis MacNeice (1907–1963), all of which relate in some way to classical antiquity. Each play is prefaced by a brief introduction and copiously supplied with footnotes that elucidate both the historical allusions of the plays and the circumstances of their production.

The amount of scholarly diligence on display here is remarkable. Wrigley has delved deep into the BBC archives, unearthing not only the original scripts and their associated production notes, but also surveys compiled by the BBC after each presentation to gauge listener response; as a result, we are given unique insight into how the “man on the street” reacted to MacNeice’s attempts to popularize the classics for a broad audience. The overall introduction to the volume does a superb job of outlining MacNeice’s intellectual and creative development, and will be of use to anyone researching the reception of classical themes in MacNeice’s corpus.

The plays themselves are a mixed bag, though even the weakest of them have their merits. MacNeice had an exceptional knowledge of the possibilities and limits of the radio play format, as well as a firm command of his source material, but he sometimes struggled to find a suitable framing device for the classical content he sought to present. “The Glory that Was Greece” (1941), which compares the Spartans’ stand at Thermopylae to the desperate resistance by Ioannis

Metaxas against the invading Germans, is vitiated by its nature as propaganda (it was written to whip up British popular support for the Greek war effort), and tries far too hard to stress cultural continuities between ancient and modern Greece. “A Roman Holiday” (1945), an account of an aristocratic dinner party given on the Saturnalia in the year of Jesus’ birth, was written “to show how Roman society in the early Empire was affected by the lack of those spiritual values which Christianity was to provide” (181); it suffers from the uncomfortable fit between its dramatic format and MacNeice’s didactic aims, as well as a teleological sense of history as the march of Christian triumphalism.

On the other hand, MacNeice is at his best when adapting Greek and Latin literary texts, especially those with a humorous bent— not surprising, given that he had at one time planned a book on humor in Latin literature (6). He maintains a wonderfully light touch in modernizing “The Golden Ass” (1944) and “Trimalchio’s Feast” (1948), while “Cupid and Psyche” (1944) ably captures the fairy-tale quality of Apuleius’ narrative. “Enemy of Cant” (1946) is a masterful journey through Aristophanes’ career, linking scenes from his best plays, all superbly translated, into a coherent and enjoyable whole.

The only problem of note with the volume as a whole is a certain carelessness in editing, which manifests itself in a number of typographical and factual errors. Names in transliteration are particularly problematic: we are treated to “Proxemus” (38), while the scene from *Birds* included in “Enemy of Cant” in which Peisthetairos meets the divine envoys [323–325] varies seemingly at random among “Triballian,” “Triballion,” and “Triaballion”. Where mistakes of fact are concerned, we are told (31) that Germany invaded Italy in April 1941 (Greece is clearly meant); Apuleius’ date is initially given (18) as the second century BCE, rather than CE; and Catiline’s *praenomen* is given in the notes to “Enter Caesar” (224 n. 43) as Gaius, instead of the correct Lucius.

That caveat aside, Wrigley and Harrison have done a valuable service to reception studies. Film and television may still draw the lion’s share of attention, but with the appearance of this impressive volume, it will now be impossible to deny the important place of radio in the history of twentieth-century reception of the classics.

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