

BOOK REVIEW

Antiquity Now: The Classical World in the Contemporary American Imagination. By THOMAS E. JENKINS. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. viii + 256. Hardcover, \$99.99. ISBN 978-0-521-19626-0.

Spike Lee's film *Chi-Raq* (December 2015) places Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* in gangland Chicago, where the women go on a sex strike to force their men to make peace. The strike spreads around the world. Via cinematic satire Lee uses rap and hip-hop, gospel music and preaching, production numbers and newscasts (including coverage of a demonstration of Athenian women on Hadrian Street above the Panathenaic Way!) to make his point: not only must the gangs stop killing each other and innocent children, but the city must address the underlying poverty, racism, and availability of guns that leave these young men with no future outside the county hospital, prison, or morgue. When Lysistrata, the gang members, and the mayor of Chicago make peace, Lee has them agree on concrete measures: good jobs from Fortune 500 companies, new health centers from the US government, and a new trauma center on Chicago's South Side. At the end Samuel L. Jackson, in his chorus-like role, raps into the camera: "Let's all together make Chi-Raq / back into Chicago . . . Wake up! / This is an emergency."

Thomas Jenkins's *Antiquity Now* provides us a model for how to think about and understand works of popular culture that draw on the form and content of ancient models in order to comment on modern social and political issues and to promote corresponding change. Although he includes a few academic treatments (George Devereux's perennially adolescent Greeks, Robert Eisner's queered Apollo, Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*), nearly all the works Jenkins studies come from popular culture and many of them serve as examples of the arts as social activism. A few of the usual suspects appear (Zach Snyder's *300*, Ursula Le Guin's *Lavinia*, and—in Jenkins's striking cold open—the episode "Restless" from Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which gave millions of viewers a Greek lesson) but this book's special value lies in its range and its treatment of less well-known works. I especially appreciated Jenkins's careful descriptions as

well as analyses of theatrical productions, ephemera those of us not in attendance can otherwise access only through reviews and still photographs, perhaps a script.

After he gets his audience's attention via the *Buffy* episode with its Sapphic poem in Greek and Robert Mezey's poem "To the Americans," which appropriates Horace's *Roman Ode* 3.6, Jenkins explains his take on classical reception. He first distinguishes it from the classical tradition so as to move from the timeless, changeless glory of the original texts to the accretions of meaning those texts acquire as their form and content appear in new settings for purposes unintended by their authors. Thus they "are continually refashioned as 'classical.'" He particularly wants "to examine appropriations that dovetail with contemporary ideological concerns" (25), for the classics have status because they continue to work even in new settings. "It's not enough to say . . . that classics remain classics because they appeal to universal concerns; classics remain classics because they appeal to *specific* concerns" (29). Jenkins thus, and most valuably, helps us understand why a body of texts produced long ago and far away continue to have such power.

The following chapters analyze the specific concerns raised in a host of movies, plays, poems, novels, musicals, and songs. Jenkins first turns to gay and lesbian reception, particularly of Plato's *Symposium*, and Euripides's *Bacchae* and other tragedies. I found notable here the extensive discussions of Richard Schechner's play *Dionysus in 69* (surprisingly, Jenkins does not mention Brian de Palma's experimental documentary of this 1969 production), which shifted the actors' genders in order to play with different shock effects on the audience, and Mark Merlis's novel *An Arrow's Flight* (1998), which transplants Sophocles's *Philoctetes* into the heroic age of AIDS and investigates "love in the time of pestilence" (73). These and some of the other works studied in this chapter *insert* gays and lesbians into antiquity; other works, such as Eric Shanower's comic-book series *The Age of Bronze*, *reinsert* gays and lesbians into antiquity, reclaiming an antique queerness that medieval and modern reception ignored, stripped away, or demonized. Either way, ancient sources force the modern audience to confront its sense of sexuality.

In chapter three, Jenkins acknowledges and treats some examples of the Cold War and subsequent clash of East and West deriving from Herodotus and Aeschylus's *The Persians*. But, noting how the invasion of Iraq "became an invasion of antiquity" (98), he devotes the bulk of the chapter to works such as Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004) and Zach Snyder's *300* (2007). Chapter four focuses the analysis onto the ideological reception of antiquity in the wake of 9/11, most-

ly in theater. Thus, for example, revivals of Euripides's *Helen* served to critique wars fought against phantom menaces, Richard Nelson's *Conversations in Tusculum* (2008) shifted the problem of Caesar onto George W. Bush and the hesitation to act onto modern liberals, and Craig Lucas's *Small Tragedy* (2004) restored political content to Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*: the ruler's blindness to tragedy itself constitutes the tragedy.

I especially enjoyed Jenkins's discussion of many less accessible works in the fifth chapter on reception as a tool to investigate borders. Had he published the book later, he could have included *Chi-Raq* here. The chapter stars Luis Alfaro's Chicano/Greek trilogy: *Electriádad* (2002), *Oedipus el Rey* (2010), and *Bruja* (2012). Set in the prison system and barrios of East Los Angeles, these powerful plays show the tragic situation of young people caught between cultures with violently conflicting values.

Finally, in chapter six, Jenkins offers a potpourri. He begins with works that use classical sources to give voice to women, especially Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* (2005) and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Lavinia* (2008). For a most vivid example of using antiquity for environmental activism Jenkins turns to James Lasdun's version (1994) of Ovid's version of the tale of Erysichthon. Lasdun's poem "greens" antiquity by having a native princess summon Hunger to curse the shyster-developer who has blighted the land; insatiable appetite turns him into a "double-orificed / Essence of greed and waste," nothing "but a yard / Of concrete pipe." Finally Jenkins considers several receptions of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, in particular Harold and Ruth Birnbaum's reconstruction of the entire trilogy (1978); in their third play, *Prometheus Firebearer*, they respond to a dearth of extant fragments by imagining the final confrontation of Prometheus and Zeus in the form of the meeting of Nixon and Mao in 1972 and with the content of a debate between atheism and creationism.

In his conclusion Jenkins invites us to image a Martian trying to reconstruct all of classical antiquity from *Antiquity Now* as the only surviving source. Such a perspective would have a highly fractured character, which Jenkins properly claims for *our* perspective on the past, despite the streamlined narratives of Greek and Roman history we like to tell ourselves and our students. Each segment of modernity has its own perspective on antiquity; hence the kaleidoscopic quality Jenkins attributes to his book.

Cambridge has provided us a handsomely produced, nearly error-free, but rather expensive book with large-format, clear black-and-white photographs.

Jenkins has his Martian wonder at the “the curious footnoting conventions” (221); I think his wonder would concern the inhumanity of the author-date system that properly puts notes at the bottom of the page but forces the reader, who knows his or her colleagues’ work by title and not by date, to turn constantly to the end of the book. Unfortunately, not all the works Jenkins discusses appear in the bibliography: for example, Le Guin’s *Lavinia* does while Atwood’s *Penelopiad* does not.

Every college library needs this book, as does everyone interested in classical reception, and every classicist should join Jenkins in reflecting how the classics still matter in popular culture. Attendees of the last Annual Meeting of the Society of Classical Studies (January 2016) had the opportunity to cross the street from their sterile, self-absorbed academic conference and sit with a vast, lively audience of people from the Tenderloin district—San Francisco’s version of Chi-Raq—in Glide Memorial Church and experience a performance of Rhodessa Jones’s *Medea Project*. Jones uses Greek myth as a springboard in her dramatic workshops to give voice to marginalized groups, especially incarcerated women and women living with HIV. Antiquity matters Now!

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