

BOOK REVIEW

Roman Error: Classical Reception and the Problem of Rome's Flaws. By BASIL DUFALLO, ed. Classical Presences. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. xi + 284. Hardback, \$88.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-880303-4.

Error is a slippery concept indeed. One can go astray in many ways – philological, artistic, philosophical, moral – and the repercussions can be negative, positive or some mixture thereof. Not surprisingly, *Roman Error: Classical Reception and the Problem of Rome's Flaws*, which arose from a conference at the University of Michigan concerning the various ways in which classical reception has dealt with Rome's "mistakes," reflects this complexity. The volume's sheer scope is impressive: essays cover everything from error in Roman aesthetics (Caroline Vout) to error in Freudian psychoanalytic interpretations of antiquity (Richard Fletcher). What is more, the contributions play a double game: as Basil Dufallo outlines in his stimulating introduction, the question of how later eras "err" in their understanding of Rome is just as engaging as the question of Rome's own "errors," and the collision of the two strains is part of what makes reception studies the rich discipline that it is (1-14).

With so many diverse contributions, some from authors whose principal scholarly focus is only tangentially related to "the classics" as traditionally understood, the volume can come across as somewhat unfocused. Not all contributions are of equal salience (though this is par for the course in edited volumes of this sort). I shall focus here on a few of the contributions that offer exceptionally rich material for further investigation.

Margaret Malamud's "Receptions of Rome in Debates on Slavery in the U.S.A." (Chapter 5) fruitfully illuminates how both sides in the antebellum slavery debate drew upon the same classical learning and exempla to uphold their diametrically opposed ideologies. Defenders of the plantation system, such as Jefferson, argued that American slavery was actually less cruel than its Roman counterpart, citing notorious slaveowners like Vedio Pollio (106-107); abolitionists countered by pointing to the morally corrupting effects of slavery, both on the individual (a Senecan theme – see the famed Letter 47) and the body politic (109-

113). They also linked the collapse of the Roman Republic to slave-worked *latifundia*, and saw a potent analogy with Southern plantations that likewise depended upon chattel slavery, rather than free labor, to function (113-116). Malamud's most striking case study is that of Joseph Cinqué, leader of the rebellion aboard the *Amistad*; when the abolitionist painter Nathaniel Jocelyn depicted Cinqué as a classical Roman, it aroused outrage, and spurred a debate as to whether the notion of classical heroism could be applicable to a black man (101-105). Here we see but one facet of a complex ongoing debate: to whom does "the classical heritage" (a loaded term if ever there was one) rightfully belong?

Catharine Edwards' lengthy and engaging essay "The Romance of Roman Error: Encountering Antiquity in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*" (Chapter 6) reminds us that Rome, in all its beauty, mystery and (alleged) "depravity," was central to the early 19th-century Gothic movement in literature and art. She demonstrates that Hawthorne's characters are at one and the same time, perhaps inseparably, entranced and repulsed by Rome, then goes beyond *The Marble Faun* to sketch a cultural history of the 19th-century American Protestant experience in Rome. For Edwards, Hawthorne and those of his mindset could not separate the city of Rome from their prejudices against Catholicism, which they found to be debased and dangerous – a classic source of "error" – even as they admired the cultural artifacts it had produced (130-132, 149-151).

Maria Wyke's "The Pleasures and Punishments of Roman Error: Emperor Elagabalus at the Court of Early Cinema" (Chapter 10) addresses one of the emperors most associated with debauchery and moral "error," the notorious teenage emperor Elagabalus, and argues that the "constructed" or "imagined" Elagabalus has had a potency in the Western imagination far exceeding that of the "real" Elagabalus (insofar as he can ever be known) (214-219). Beginning with the late 19th century and the immense popularity of the *Historia Augusta's Life of Elagabalus* among Decadents such as Oscar Wilde and d'Adelswärd-Felsen, Wyke suggests that the "imagined" Elagabalus was an enormously fruitful subject for spectacle (227-229). It is thus no wonder that the great early filmmaker Louis Feuillade chose him for his subject in *The Roman Orgy* – a film that, as Wyke cogently notes, walks the line between decadence and orthodoxy, first showing Elagabalus' notorious excesses, then concluding with his receiving violent punishment for his crimes (219-223). For Wyke, this Janus-faced attitude arose from necessity; Feuillade and his studio Gaumont needed both to draw in viewers hungry for spectacle and simultaneously convince conservative critics of cinema that it was, in fact, a "moral" art form (211-213; 230-231).

There is much indeed to take away from this handsome, well-produced and rich volume. Even the essays that are arguably less successful will no doubt provoke thought and debate as to what “error” means, whether we ourselves commit “error” in our attempts to understand antiquity and whether “error” need always be condemned, or can instead stimulate creativity and innovation. Basil Dufallo and the contributors are to be commended for making an important contribution to classical reception studies.

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