

BOOK REVIEW

Imagining Empire: Political Space in Hellenistic and Roman Literature. Edited by VICTORIA RIMELL AND MARKUS ASPER. Heidelberg, DE: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2017. Pp. x + 264. Hardback, \$40.04. ISBN: 978-3-8253-6754-1.

This volume offers a wide range of free-standing essays on the notion of “imperial space” real and/ or imagined, in the Graeco-Roman world, prompting critical considerations about the construction of social identities, power and knowledge. This book takes the form of a collection of proceedings of a conference entitled ‘Imagining Spaces of Empire,’ which took place at Humboldt-University at Berlin in May 2013, under the aegis of TOPOI II ‘Space and Knowledge in Ancient Civilisations.’

Space and spatiality as a lens of investigation of social structures of power, gender and ethnicity have been in use for quite some time in several disciplines, including post-colonial studies, social sciences and critical theory.

Comparatively, classicists have jumped on the bandwagon only recently. As Rimell explains in the introduction to the volume, although Classics is catching up, one of the challenges faced by scholars is ‘the inadequacy of academic language as a tool to communicate the non-linear or multidimensional, as well as the impossibility of getting outside a critical idiom of margins, fields, borders, faultlines and thresholds that is endemic in academic discourse across the humanities [...]’ (5). Despite these linguistic barriers, Rimell aptly sets out the key issues driving the topic of space in the existing scholarship (e.g. space as a dynamic, multifaceted and heterogenous concept – ‘geographical, geopolitical, architectural, urban, domestic, bodily, metaphorical, fantastic’ (1) - the correlation between space and time, space as cultural/ political construct(s) that can be (re-)invested with meaning(s) to justify conquests, ideologies and elite configurations of power, etc). The self-professed ambition of the volume is to ‘knock perspectives on the ancient imperial space off their conventional axis’ (4) by making use of postmodern thought.

There are eleven contributions in total taking us on a Mediterranean tour which amounts to space-time travel, starting with Hellenistic Egypt, passing by Homeric Greece, all the way to Imperial Rome, with an incursion into the Virgilian

coast of African Carthage. The usual dichotomies centre vs periphery, civilisation vs wilderness, East vs West, to name a few, are tested, and often rendered obsolete.

Two contributions face up to the challenge of Ancient Alexandria (Stephens and Acosta-Hughes), a city now under water. Stephens ("Geopolitics of Imagining Ancient Alexandria") takes Alexandria as a case-study of how an ancient city with both a Greek and a Roman past, is far too often considered by classicists in isolation from its Egyptian pharaonic origins, with which the Ptolemies strongly reconnected. Modern Alexandria comes across as a perfect example of space inhabited by competing narratives jostling for dominance and how ultimately the cultural identity of a city is cherry-picked to suit current political demands. Acosta-Hughes ("The Homeric Shore of Alexandria: A Narrative of a Culture in Motion") looks at how Alexandria is represented in archaic and Hellenistic poetry, from Homer to Augustan Rome, and how it was used as a political platform under Augustus to create a sense of fusion between Egyptian Rome and Roman Egypt, so as to showcase Roman imperial power.

Thalmann ("Space and the Imperial Imaginary in Apollonius' *Argonautika*") tackles the Hellenistic epic from a post-colonial perspective by showing how the journey of Apollonius' Argonauts help construct and deconstruct simultaneously Greek imperial colonialism at the expense of local history. Thalmann's shrewd analysis on limits of Greek hegemony challenges old binary distinctions between Greek and barbarian, self and other, as the Argonauts' relations with people on the way develop. As such, Thalmann concludes, the *Argonautica* would have generally resonated with the Greeks in Alexandria following their experience of migration and cultural difference.

Asper ("Imagining Political Space: Some Patterns") examines visual representations of imperial spaces in Homer's *Iliad*, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Callimachus' *Aetia*, revealing illuminating patterns of power relations in the ancient world ('Clytemnestra's narrative of beacons' is a particularly cogent example), and how these spaces were conceptualised (the circle, the path and the integrated area) to bolster contemporary configuration of imperial power. Real space, Asper argues, does not matter, since 'the model constructs different places as belonging together in one imperial space.' (72)

Gildenhard ("Space and Spin: Geopolitical Vistas in the 40s") explores how Caesar's *Bellum Civile* 1 and Cicero's *Letters* help create geopolitical maps of Roman power in the 40s BCE. Gildenhard convincingly demonstrates how Caesar creates a narrative of political necessity that calls for a new world order and the shift towards an imperial republic to support his autocratic aspirations. Cicero's *Letters*

prove significant in documenting Caesar's re-drafting of Rome's power playground and Cicero's attempt to 'sustain a virtual republican community flung across the Mediterranean' (97) for a while. Fuhrer ("Leave the City, Catiline! – Sallust on Imperial Space and Outlawing") looks at Rome's space in Cicero's *Catilinarian* 1 and Sallust's *De Coniuratione Catilinae* and reads the latter as a commentary on Cicero's failure to divide space (inside/ outside) as a means to exclude and outlaw people due to the collapse of the civic and legal fabric of the Roman state.

Schmitzer ("Mapping Foundations: The Italian Network of City Foundations in the Poetic and Antiquarian Tradition") draws a complex map of competing cities from which Rome pulled ahead, and whose constructed narrative of significance and domination conceals an active network of urban interrelationships across Italy.

Giusti ("Virgil's Carthage: A Heterotopic Space of Empire"), in applying Foucault's concept of heterotopia (space as 'other,' real and imagined simultaneously and exhibiting alternate meanings) to Virgil's re-conceptualisation of Carthage in *Aeneid* 1 and 4, produces thought-provoking results. The resemblance of Virgil's heterotopic Carthage with Augustan Rome compellingly points to the latter's parallel constructedness.

Barchiesi ("Colonial readings in Virgilian Geopoetics: The Trojans at Buthrotum") takes the Trojan colony at Buthrotum, in Greece, as a case study of a larger phenomenon in the *Aeneid*, which concerns itself with Roman colonisation as a mode of duplicating a model city across space to foster an overarching cultural identity.

Kirichenko ("*Beatus carcer / tristis harena*: The Spaces of Statius' *Silvae*") examines how Statius' conception of private spaces in his epigrams (e.g. the parrot's cage in *Silvae* 2.4) function as a microcosm of empire, 'intertextual enclosures' projected as their owners' inner worlds' (174). On the other hand, imperial monuments (e.g. The Flavian Amphitheatre, Domitian's colossal equestrian statue) conjure up poetic images of an everlasting empire. Monuments, however, by deriving their significance from the materiality of the emperor, as a 'super-signifier endowing these spaces with meaning' (188), expose the autocratic system as a fiction, given the emperor's mortal status and the lack of an heir.

Geue ("Free-range, Organic, Locally-Sourced Satire: Juvenal Goes Global") brings closure to this volume by deconstructing the subversive relationship of Roman satire with the empire through the theme *urbs-orbis*. This dense chapter reveals how much satire is obsessed with space and how the elastic borders of the

empire trigger the adverse reaction of a satirical commitment to localism, which in the context of economic globalism, amounts to a castle in the sky.

The present volume does not always escape the trap of binary thinking, but it has the merit of mapping out a complex and growing field of study, boasting all the hallmarks of interdisciplinarity. This is a most fascinating area of study that would benefit from a greater engagement with critical theory. Overall, this book is rather successful in its endeavour, and could certainly do with a sequel.

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