

BOOK REVIEW

The Epic Journey in Greek and Roman Literature. Edited by THOMAS BIGGS and JESSICA BLUM, eds. Yale Classical Studies, Volume 49. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 2019. Pp. xiv + 323. Hardback, \$99.99. ISBN 978-1-108-49809-8.

“Arms and the exile,” wrote C.S. Lewis in his incomplete translation of Vergil’s *Aeneid*;¹ Lewis’ rendition of the famous incipit shows us that wandering and the journey lie not just at the beginning of the Greek literary canon (Odysseus’ *nostos*), but indeed recur throughout the Greek and Roman textual traditions. Having gathered papers from a series of conferences and colloquia held at Yale University in 2014, our editors Thomas Biggs and Jessica Blum have done well to bring us this useful and learned examination of over 2000 years of classical journeys. 12 contributions roam all the way from Odysseus’ journey beyond the Ocean to NASA’s Voyagers probing the limits of our solar system.

The conceptual power of Odysseus’ *nostos* binds many of the essays together as they examine how *the* epic journey is refracted through various texts and genres—not just epic, as one might suspect from the book’s title. Admittedly, the collection suffers one flaw typical to its genre, namely that it is difficult to discern a single, coherent approach to the journey; many of the chapters, while provocative and compelling on their own, are difficult to describe in relation to one another. While this does not detract from the quality of the essays, given my abbreviated space, I will describe and respond to a few of the particularly successful chapters from each of the book’s 4 sections.

¹ See A.T. Reyes’ *C.S. Lewis’ Lost Aeneid: Arms and the Exile* (Yale 2011).

Noteworthy in Part 1, “Odyssean Journeys,” is Alexander Loney’s piece on “*Pompē* in the *Odyssey*.” Loney observes that Odysseus’ successful attempts at *nostos* are won through collaboration rather than heroic self-determination; when Odysseus attempts to exert his will over others, such as in his attempt to remain awake on his 10-day trip from Aeolia, he fares more poorly than when he goes to sleep and allows the Phaiakians to convey him home (55). Loney’s observation reveals that even in a genre like epic, there is a danger of rigid self-determination when one meets with many and diverse “others” on the road. Jessica Blum follows up on this point nicely by showing the many ways in which Valerius Flaccus’ Argonauts impose their own “martial epic script in the face of the multigeneric landscape” (61) of the peoples they encounter on their journey. What ensues in the *Argonautica* is a sometimes gross over-exaggeration of epic’s traditional ethics of *virtus*, resulting at times in civil war (77–80). An ethics of *virtus*, however, presupposes a guiding, ancestral tradition providing both *exempla* and witnesses to heroic deeds. And yet, since the *Argonautica* takes place so early in mythic time, the “Argonauts have no tradition to which to return” (65), leaving Valerius’ characters and audience uncertain whether “the ethical guidelines of the past remain valid” (64).

Particularly standing out in Part 2, “Gendered Maps,” is Emily Baragwanath’s essay on “Heroes and Homemakers in Xenophon.” Baragwanath argues that “finding Home” in Xenophon’s *Anabasis* is a process achieved “by forging relationships ... especially [with] women” who are sources of “survival and salvation” in the *nostoi* of men (111). Women like Hellas in *Anabasis*⁷ become a home away from home for an Odysseus-like displaced Xenophon (126–7). The Women of Xenophon’s text reveal not just the possibility for new homes but indeed for new, Panhellenic identities that eschew traditional geopolitical divisions (118–19). Alison Keith’s “Women’s Travels in the *Aeneid*” takes a somewhat different approach, showing that journeys in Vergil’s epic are traditionally masculine acts; women who undertake a journey do so at their own peril (Dido) or become otherwise aligned against the aims of Aeneas’ journey. Keith’s discussion of Andromache and the Trojan Women (140–4) reveals them to

be aligned not with Aeneas' victorious and teleological journey but rather with a desire to return fruitlessly to the Trojan past.²

In the third part of the volume, "Rome's Journey," we find the most cohesive group of essays, among which Timothy M. O'Sullivan's investigation of "Epic Journeys on an Urban Scale: Movement and Travel in Vergil's *Aeneid*" stands out. For O'Sullivan, Vergil's Aeneas travels along two axes, the horizontal and the vertical. On the horizontal plane, we are encouraged to ask, "are the Trojans wandering lost or are they moving purposefully towards Italy?" (152). The former carries negative and the latter positive implications for the growth of Roman power;³ in turn, Vergil privileges upward journeys on the vertical axis as being representative of the future expansion of Roman *imperium* (159–64). O'Sullivan also astutely links the chaotic motion of Aeneas' exilic journey and Augustus' euphemism for civil war in the *Res Gestae* (10), *civilis motus*. Also not to be missed is Thomas Biggs' "Roman and Carthaginian Journeys." His reading of pious Dido (!) in the accounts of the Carthaginian heroine's journey predating Vergil's *Aeneid* (170–83) is equal parts useful compendium of sources and cogent insight into the history of a quintessential Vergilian *topos*. I must confess that I was not as convinced by Biggs' subsequent comparison of Plautus' *Poenulus* to the Dido tradition; the argumentation would benefit from further expansion.

Part 4 is the volume's most exploratory, as it were. Karen ní Mheallaigh's investigation of so-called *gaiaskopiai* ("visualizations of the Earth") in "Looking Back in Wonder" provides a compelling overview of material spanning from the *Iliad* to modern space probes. Her analysis of the ancient material, especially Lucian's *Icaromenippus*, ingeniously pieces together a "continuum of cognitive experience" (291) in ancient and

² One bibliographical *desideratum* for this argument: Maurizio Bettini's "Ghosts of Exile: Doubles and Nostalgia in Virgil's *parva Troia* (*Aeneid* 3.294ff.)" in *ClAnt* 16 (1997) 8–33.

³ This reviewer would like to have seen cited Andrew Feldherr's "Putting Dido on the Map: Genre and Geography in Vergil's Underworld" in *Arethusa* 32 (1999) 85–122.

modern accounts of seeing the Earth from space. She rightly observes, for instance, that the very act of a human envisioning the Earth renders human experience significant even against the vast panoply of the universe: Achilles' shield, bound as it is by the vast river Ocean, makes the realities of human life its focus (267–8); just so, Apollo 9 astronaut Rusty Schweickart realized on a spacewalk that “on that small spot, that little blue and white thing” existed “all of history and music and poetry and art and death and birth and love, tears, joy, games,” all human *realia* making irreplaceable and noteworthy an otherwise insignificant orb suspended in the infinite darkness of space (277–8).

As a whole, this book displays the virtues and vices typical to collected volumes: some contributions will be opaque to non-specialists, and some do not deal with the “journey” in a clear or easily discernible way. The bibliography has mostly been kept up to date from the time of the papers' initial delivery, although one may note a few exceptions.⁴ These minor quibbles aside, this is a well-produced and successful volume; those interested in displacement, wandering, space and landscape, as well as scholars of reception and the individual authors covered in the volume, will surely find many new and stimulating ideas to consider.

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⁴ Victoria Rimell's *The Closure of Space in Roman Poetics: Empire's Inward Turn* (Cambridge 2015) would have fit in well with the volume's introduction and with the discussion of *claustra* on p. 197. Ian Fielding's *Transformations of Ovid in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge 2017) presumably appeared too late to be cited at p. 244.