

## BOOK REVIEW

*Once and Future Antiquities in Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Edited by BRETT M. RODGERS and BENJAMIN E. STEVENS. London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2019, Pp. 248. Hardback, \$85.90. ISBN: 9781350068940.

“I have spent the better part of my life in a torrid love triangle with Classics and speculative fiction” (199). The echoes of Greek and Roman Antiquity have actually become a burgeoning field of interest these last fifteen years. Consider, for example, the current French research project “Antiquipop,” exploring the relation between Classical studies and popular culture. This essay takes its place in such contemporary dynamics studying this aspect of the reception of Classics.

The volume puts together fifteen essays, which originated from the 2015 conference: “The Once and Future Antiquity: classical tradition in Science Fiction and Fantasy” (University of Pudget Sound). The essays are preceded by a short introduction, written by the editors, but the volume offers no formal conclusion. Instead, the last chapter is a personal essay about the experience a writer of speculative fiction can have with Classical literature.

This volume is built upon three main ideas, which are, in fact, the development of the initial thesis that the concept of “fantastic” is based on displacement, i.e. the fact that the “fantastic” does not point to a clear signification, but gives room to interpretation. The first part studies the link between classical scholarship or personal interest with Classics and Science Fiction/Fantasy. The second part focuses on the physical mapping of the displacement. The third part considers how time movements are used in fantasies inspired by Classics. The fourth part studies the concept of displacement in the field of literary genres. The pattern of the book is, in my opinion, a little cryptic and far-fetched at times, especially for parts 2 and 3. After an introduction (including the current introduction, plus Chapter 1), the editors could have considered the essays studying Classics

as a way of creating modern myths (chap. 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 13), then, as an avatar for personal fantasies and accomplishments (chap. 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 11), ending this introspective part with the final essay, with which any scholar, if they are Classical studies enthusiasts, can easily identify.

Chapter 1 (9-17) raises some theoretical issues, concerning the prospect of increased cooperation between classicists and scholars specialized in the field of science-fiction studies. However, as Tony Keen interrogates the problem of theorization and expertise, a broader and more specific definition and conceptualization would have been judicious. For instance, it would have been clearer for the reader – particularly if he or she is a poor, non SF-fluent classicist – to be given a brief conceptual definition of Fantasy and Science-Fiction (and also a clear explanation of the difference between those two literary genres), in order to define the corpus more accurately, especially since a confusion is made in Chapter 2 (18-31) between Fantasy and supernatural fiction, concerning the *Gradiva*, which can only anachronically be described as belonging to the genre of SF or Fantasy.

However, this collection of essays has the great merit of giving an original and interesting point of view on a varied, contemporary and little studied corpus including books (Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* (Chapter 5, 63-75), Jack Mc Devitt's *The Engine of God* (Chapter 4, 48-62), Dan Simmons' *Ilium* (Chapter 2, 32-47), Helen Oyeyemi's *Boy, Snow, Bird* (Chapter 7, 90-106 etc.), TV series (*Doctor Who* (Chapter 2), popular movies (*The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Chapter 8, 106-122), *Spirited Away* (Chapter 6, 76-89) and even games (*Warhammer 40k* (Chapter 13, 183-198). Having chosen to study the most contemporary works in the SF and fantasy field, this volume ignores – except for brief quotations – the giants of the genres, Isaac Asimov and J.R.R Tolkien.

The main interest of this volume is, in fact, to raise the crucial issue of the legitimacy of knowledge, considering this particular field of research, which needs literacy both in Classics and in fantastical literature. Who can call himself an expert? Obviously, most of the authors of the articles are, in view of their marked expertise in each field. Take, for example, Chapter 8. I was, being both a classicist and a RHPS (Rocky Horror Picture Show)

*amateur*, a bit confused by the title, which compared Rocky to a modern Atlas. But the author quickly succeeded in convincing me, by his very complete view on the critical literature both about Hesiod and Homer and about fantastical movies, as well as his very accurate description of the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* as a modern *Saturnalia*. In this way, this collection of essays gives interesting new lines of approach, in order to renew the study of Classics in general.

A copious bibliography concludes the volume and gives a good idea of the very recent publications concerning this subject. However, it would have been helpful to provide the novice with a cursory list of the most typical fantasy and SF novels, movies, games and series, revisiting Classical literature in one way or another, or even only of the works cited in the volume.

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