

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Long Shadow of Antiquity: What Have the Greeks and Romans Done for Us?* By GREGORY S. ALDRETE AND ALICIA ALDRETE. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2019. Pp. 411. ISBN: 978-1-3500-8338-7.

This book offers a survey of “how the Classical world came to permeate all different aspects of society many centuries after its decay” (325) and how every era has added its own adaptations of classical antiquity. It covers such topics as food and housing, life stages, entertainment and leisure, government, architecture and science, superstition and religion, philosophy, and literature. Most of the book is a reprint of a 2012 edition, but there is a new concluding chapter on “Ancient and modern parallels: Environmental problems, celebrities and fashion, and globalization and cultural assimilation.” The focus is on classical civilization rather than classical language *per se*; readers interested in a passionate defense for studying the latter should check out Nicola Gardini’s *Viva il Latino* (published in English under the title *Long Live Latin*).

Those already knowledgeable about the topics discussed will probably find the book annoyingly superficial. It hardly needs pointing out that people still follow the “Mediterranean diet,” play dice games, enthusiastically follow sports, write graffiti, idealize the past, or include classically inspired columns in buildings. And yet there are bits of information that may well be news even to those who have extensively studied classical antiquity. For example, the authors posit a connection between Pythagoras’s beliefs on numbers and the modern concept of binary number systems used in computers (201). There are also some challenges to what we think we know. We generally think of the Greeks as the abstract thinkers and aesthetes and the Romans as the practical warriors and engineers, but the chapter on architecture and science suggests Hippodamos of Miletos (not the designers of Roman *castra*) as the originator of cities’ grid plans. Then there are parallels between the Greeks and Romans that have hidden in plain sight, as it were: In both cultures, the transition from monarchy/tyranny to a more democratic form of government was precipitated by an act of sexual misconduct. Harmodios and Aristogeiton assassinated Hipparchos for his unwanted advances to Harmodios; the Roman monarchy ended following Sextus Tarquinius’s rape of

the virtuous wife Lucretia (147). The last chapter on “Ancient and Modern Parallels” is devoted to issues we think of as “modern” but which in fact have a long history. This chapter includes a discussion of deforestation that dates back to the *Iliad* and to the pollution caused by various Roman industries such as silver-smelting. There is even an examination on the role climate change played in the rise and fall of the Roman Empire (342-350).

The book tends to sidestep many of the darker aspects of the classical cultures. Slaves are mentioned in passing from time to time, but there is no detailed discussion of the role they played in Greek or Roman society. There is very little about gladiator games, even though the 2000 film *Gladiator* revived the “sword and sandals” epic in American cinema. (There are, however, several pages devoted to discussion of the architecture of the Colosseum and to the gladiator riots in Pompeii in AD 59.) The less problematic (though still often violent) Greek sports and athletic competitions, including the Olympic Games, receive much more attention from the authors. The misogyny of much classical culture is not ignored, but not dwelt on either. On the other hand, the authors make an important point about the uses of antiquity by people with very different world views:

At first glance it may seem odd, or even contradictory, that people as enlightened as many of the Founding Fathers and as depraved as Adolf Hitler would both find inspiration in the political forms and symbols of classical antiquity. What this really demonstrates, however, is the complexity and the originality of the systems of government that the Greeks and Romans developed, and the influence that their political models have exerted over subsequent history. (166)

This is an important point to keep in mind when we consider how the far right has recently championed Greece and Rome as models for a return to a society dominated by white men and the resulting stigma suffered by the field of Classics.

All in all, the book is an enjoyable read. It is definitely a survey for the general reader rather than the specialist in archaeology, literature, history or any of the other fields that are included under the broad name of Classical Studies. The topics that the chapters cover have been discussed in many book-length studies of their own and the chapter bibliographies (mostly secondary sources, all in English) are useful for those wanting to know more.

The authors’ comments on Roman tombstones also make a fitting description of the book: “Many of the messages were plainly drafted to amuse and entertain

the reader, and the fact that some of them can still do so after 2,000 years is one of the best testimonials to the humanity shared by the people of the ancient and the modern worlds. (76)

MARIANTHE COLAKIS

*Townsend Harris High School, MColakis@schools.nyc.gov*