

BOOK REVIEW

Brill's Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Edited by HELEN ROCHE AND KYRIAKOS N. DEMETRIOU. Leiden, NL: Brill, 2018. Pp. xiii + 471. Hardback, \$190.00. ISBN 978-90-04-24604-1.

The numerous crises of recent years have so saturated the present that the past has become a foreign country even to those of us in near-permanent residence there. Nonetheless, it is now more important than ever to continue the *Selbstkritik* of Classics, lately intensified, by scrutinizing how racist governments and the scholars who benefited from and supported these regimes used reductive conceptions of the Greco-Roman past to justify murderous ideologies and their enactment. Brill's *Companion to the Classics, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany* offers a multidisciplinary, multinational selection of essays on "totalitarian Classicism," examining the way a particular *idea* of Rome and Greece was deployed in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany respectively, in order to construct (and sacralize) a nationalistic identification with the past.

Though aimed at "modern historians and scholars of fascism" (4), this volume has much to offer scholars of antiquity already acquainted with 19th and early-20th- century Europe's appropriation of the Greco-Roman past and includes a few stand-out pieces of interest to the generalist new to this difficult period in the history of classical scholarship. The editors, Helen Roche and Kyriakos N. Demetriou, are to be commended for so successfully juxtaposing the totalitarian Classicism of Fascist Italy with that of National Socialist Germany, as there is much to be gained by examining these two approaches to "totalitarian Classicism" together. For Classicists already worried about the way we continue to invoke the authority of the Greco-Roman past to justify racist, sexist and imperialist (among others) agenda, the issues raised in this *Companion* make for some seriously uncomfortable reading.

The most successful chapters in the *Companion* are those in conversation with other essays in the collection, rather than with their own bibliographies. To Classicists specializing in Film Studies, I highly recommend Daniel Wildmann's "Desired Bodies: Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia*, Aryan Masculinity and the Classical

Body” and Arthur Pomeroy’s “Classical Antiquity, Cinema and Propaganda.” Wildmann shows how Riefenstahl, in her documentary of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, transforms a variety of references to ancient Greece (the Acropolis, Myron’s discus thrower, the torch-bearer relay from Greece to Germany, etc.) to construct an image of an ideal male body on which an “imagined national character can be inscribed” (79). The viewer, argues Wildmann, both desires this idealized body as object and wants it as his own. With reference to 18th and 19th-century bourgeois interest in Greek art and German associations of nudity with health, Wildmann describes Riefenstahl’s use of specific film techniques to transform actual Greek sculptures into Aryan bodies, thus implying through their absence that dark and ugly bodies are unhealthy, undesired and undesirable: Jewish.

Pomeroy takes a different tack, focusing on the differences between the film culture of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany with reference to the Italian epic, *Scipione l’Africano*, which portrays Scipio Africanus and his nemesis Hannibal as “representatives of their races,” their states; the depiction of Scipio’s defeat of Hannibal in the film thus “will prove the superiority of the Roman race over the decadent Carthaginians” (274). The amount of work invested in this film, including the recreation of the temples of the Roman Forum, the Capitoline, and the Tarpeian Rock, the hiring of elephants from circuses throughout Europe, and the use of soldiers and university students to recreate the Battle of Zama on the recently-drained swampland of Sabaudia, is astonishing. Scipio’s victories in Africa obviously also reference Italy’s recent invasion of Ethiopia, reinforcing the idea that the nation was destined to succeed in its imperialist aims. Even so, unlike newsreels and films of national events such as the 1937-1938 Augustan Exhibition of *Romanità* in honor of the bimillenary of the emperor’s birth (explored in detail in Joshua Arthurs’ “Bathing in the Spirit of Eternal Rome: The Mostra Augustea della Romanità” in this volume), which were vital to spread Mussolini’s messages given the high rates of illiteracy at the time, *Scipione l’Africano* neither attracted a large audience nor revived the Italian film industry as hoped.

Architecture in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany has a very different tale to tell. Specialists interested in the neoclassicism of that period can read about the successes and failures of the classicizing of public building projects in both Italy and Germany in Flavia Marcello’s “Building the Image of Power: Images of *Romanità* in the Civic Architecture of Fascist Italy,” Iain Boyd Whyte’s “National Socialism, Classicism, and Architecture,” and James J. Fortuna’s “Neoclassical Form and the Construction of Power in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.” Marcello discusses Fascist-era building in terms of a “theater of consent,” examining the relationship

between the styles of ancient and modern public monuments and highlighting the value of inscriptions to architecture. Whyte suggests that National Socialist building projects were both traditional and modern in their inspiration, but often only superficially referenced ancient models (“carcass classicism”). Most interestingly, he argues convincingly that, despite a general preference for Greek culture among the leadership of Nazi Germany, Hitler favored the monumental imperial architecture of ancient Rome for war memorials and a new capital. Fortuna’s essay picks up on themes of both Marcello and Whyte’s, analyzing Hitler’s 1938 visit to Rome, contending with Whyte’s claims that National Socialist architecture was “death-obsessed,” and briefly dealing with how Italy and Germany dealt differently with architectural remains in the post-war period.

For generalists new to “totalitarian Classicism,” I recommend three essays in particular, each of which addresses the three “overarching themes” of the volume as identified in Helen Roche’s introduction: the “relationship between the ‘academic’ and the ‘ideological’, particularly...in the realm of classical scholarship” (20), the influence of 19th-century ideals of Greek beauty and theories of racial essentialism on Fascist and Nazi “appropriations of the classical tradition” (21), and the way “both Fascism and National Socialism attempted to blend the two [antiquity and modernity], fusing and eliding past, present and future, whilst ennobling their claims to imperial greatness through the universal language of classicism” (22).

In the first, “The Aryans: Ideology and Historiographical Narrative Types in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” Felix Wiedemann carefully examines the complex history of the use of the term “Aryan,” arguing convincingly that the varied applications of the term became problematic for the Nazis themselves, offending eastern allies and necessitating a change to the term “Nordic” instead. This was an extremely interesting essay, which influenced my reading of all of the rest of the *Companion*; every time I encountered these terms I had to stop and think: now, does the author really mean “Aryan” here or would “Nordic” be more accurate? It was a game-changer for me and a lesson in the importance of a carefully chosen word.

My second recommendation is Roche’s own contribution, “Classics and Education in the Third Reich: *Die Alten Sprachen* and the Nazification of Latin- and Greek-Teaching in Secondary Schools.” Roche discusses Classics-teaching under National Socialism using the evidence of *Die Alten Sprachen*, a teaching periodical published by the National Socialist Teachers’ League. Roche’s essay may

provoke and disturb – to the good – current educators in the field. The questions some Classics teachers were asking themselves under National Socialism about whether or not to continue teaching Classics under the new regime, and, if so, how, and whether or not to submit “inoffensive” articles to *Die Alten Sprachen* to keep the humanities alive despite the periodical’s National Socialist affiliation, while others were wondering how to promote the National Socialist ideology through new readings of ancient authors, all hit rather close to home. We are asking many of these same questions of our field now as we fight for its survival.

Roche concludes with a section entitled, “Ideology in Practice: How to Read the *Anabasis* in the Third Reich,” which provides a concrete example of how Classics teachers in support of National Socialism advised their colleagues to focus on certain passages and emphasize particular events in Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, drawing parallels with recent German events and presenting Xenophon positively, as a “Führer-personality”; an avatar of Hitler” in order to “highlight the contemporary relevance of Xenophon’s work” (254). Yikes. How often have many of us labored to find passages and themes in ancient texts more likely to “highlight the contemporary relevance” of an author’s work, not intentionally to serve a particular ideology, but to demonstrate to our students that an ancient work really does have something to say about the way we live now? Every teacher of Classics should read Roche’s article. Posthaste.

Finally, for the generalist interested in the topography of Rome or the teacher who regularly takes groups of students there, I recommend Flavia Marcello’s second contribution to this volume: “*Forma urbis Mussolini*: Vision and Rhetoric in the Designs for Fascist Rome.” More focused than Marcello’s other essay (discussed above), this chapter examines the various plans concocted and sometimes implemented for the transformation of Rome itself under (and with much input from) Mussolini. Marcello examines the demolishing of neighborhoods and individual buildings and the removal of large numbers of people from the city center to new, poorly-constructed suburban apartment buildings far away from shops and jobs. She also analyzes the plans for Mussolini’s own Forum, which would ideologically align his rule with those of past emperors who left their mark on Rome. Although many of these plans were never executed, Mussolini nonetheless firmly stamped his own ideas on the city center, affecting the way we move through the urban space of Rome today, and where and how we encounter ancient monuments. When on the ground in Rome especially, this essay could become a useful resource for teaching students how and why so much of what they encounter in the city is either from Augustus’ time or Mussolini’s own.

As white supremacist groups and authoritarian governments continue to co-opt a particular vision of antiquity to lend authority to their own ideologies, this *Companion* serves as an important reminder of just how destructive these uses of history can become, especially when a charismatic leader and his cronies need only twist and turn the classical ideals already embedded in the culture to serve their own purpose. This *Companion* is also a disturbing reminder of how often scholars and teachers have instigated and conspired in the dissemination of a particular version of history that aligns with a corrupt leader's own identification with an idealized past. I very much hope it will help a new generation of scholars appreciate just how much is at stake and how important it is to understand the many complicated ways in which culture collaborates with power.

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