

BOOK REVIEW

Victorian Epic Burlesques: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Theatrical Entertainments after Homer. By RACHEL BRYANT DAVIES. Bloomsbury Studies in Classical Reception. London, UK and New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2018. Pp. xi + 284. Hardback, \$120.00. Paperback, \$39.95. ISBN: 978-1-350-02717-6.

In her commendable book, Davies turns her attention to four Victorian burlesques that are send-ups or spoofs of Homeric texts. Salient features of the work as a whole include numerous illustrations, insight into the culture and politics of Victorian England, copious (though not cumbersome) footnotes on Classical characters and subjects as well as 19th-century historical figures who are named in the scripts. There is also much discussion of Victorian references to Shakespeare and how the playwrights melded such allusions with stories from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

The first chapter presents a chapter summary, noting that many audiences of Victorian England may have had scant familiarity with Homeric epic. These humorous, sometimes bawdy plays worked to ameliorate that problem, setting mythical characters in contemporary settings. Davies argues that the elite, more educated members of society who created and produced such works showed a willingness to satirize their own elite status (4). In the process, audience members would get an introduction to (or refresher on) historical figures such as Hannibal and Scipio, and contemporary history, including the American Civil War. Davies gives readers a preview of the plays' many anachronisms (e.g., telegrams and postage stamps).

Chapter 2 is "Melodrama Mad! or the siege of Troy," by Thomas Dibdin. The play is about theatricals putting on a play about the siege of Troy, or the "squeege" of Troy, as one of the 19th-century characters says. Numerous jokes and plays on words such as these fill the lines of dialogue: When Juno delivers news of what is happening with Troy from the "Greek Gazette," Jupiter says, "Let Argus read it with his hundred eyes," to which Juno replies, "he's lost his spectacles." Ulysses, described as a "two-handed highlander from Ithaca" (Act 1, 3; l.

86), has dialogue written as if he spoke with a Scottish brogue, which the original viewers recognized as a rough-and-tumble stereotype.

“Telemachus, or the Island of Calypso,” (Chapter 3), is based on the story by French poet Fénelon. This story fills in gaps in the *Odyssey*, and is parodied by playwrights Charles Dance and James Robinson Planché. Telemachus comes upon Calypso’s island and falls in love with Eucharis, one of her maids. He must leave her, however, to fulfill his duty. Telemachus longs to stay, but Athena (disguised as Mentor) physically shoves him onto the boat in which he leaves. There are many geographical and cultural references that post-date Homer and Fénelon but that made sense to the Victorian English, such as Jamaica, brandy, rum and grog. Other anachronisms include modern timekeeping (“5 a.m.”) and biblical allusions. Highlighting the aural nature of some comedy and wordplay, some rhymes work best with particular English accents: “And if some precious trick she doesn’t serve her, / Why, then my real name is not Minerva” (1.4, l. 7-8). Other rhymes are eye-roll-inducing with any accent: “trip so” and “Calypso” (1.4, l. 28).

“Iliad, or The Siege of Troy” in Chapter 4 shows that even ancient warfare can be made into a comedy, if enough liberties are taken. Playwright Robert Brough tells the story in rhyme and makes use of innumerable puns. In Act I, scene 1, Agamemnon declares, “Though in Phrygia I feel, if the heat doesn’t cease / I shall speedily die in a state of native Grease.” Again, some Greeks like Ajax and Odysseus are written as having Scottish accents, while Paris is portrayed as a socialite, nibbling on foie gras and sipping champagne. Even better, no one is seriously injured in the war, and at the end, (spoiler alert) Hector lives!

Chapter 5 is “Ulysses; or the Iron-Clad Warrior, and the Little Tug of War.” Of the plays in this book, this one may be the most difficult for readers to contend with. Sadly, but not surprisingly, language of the mid-19th century that relates to the American Civil War (the setting for this adaptation) uses racial slurs. Further, the dialogue of the African-American characters is written in a drawling, Stepin-Fetchit vernacular. Bits and pieces of the *Odyssey* appear in this burlesque, which is heavy on puns and rich in opportunity for sight-gags, but short on plot. The footnotes are very helpful in explaining the casual racism that may be less familiar to some readers (e.g., the term and name “Sambo”) and in explaining the prevalence of the use of blackface in the 19th century.

A salient feature of this work is its very helpful footnotes for those who may not be familiar with Homer’s original and/or names and terms from Victorian England. One drawback of these plays, which is hardly the fault of the editor, is the rhymed-couplet nature of the dialogue. Modern readers may wonder if the 19th-

century playwrights were not in some way precursors to Dr. Seuss – but then, such wording and cadence could lend to the comedic effect of the scripts. More context for the musical settings of some of the soliloquies and songs of the plays may have also been helpful, but that is a minor shortcoming of this interesting and entertaining volume.

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