

BOOK REVIEW

Abused Bodies in Roman Epic. By ANDREW M. MCCLELLAN. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. xi + 310. Hardback, \$99.99. ISBN: 978-1-108-48262-2.

The topic of corpse mistreatment holds major significance in the epic tradition, and even more so as we proceed along historically. McClellan's book is particularly enlightening in showing how poets' historical backgrounds inform their attitudes to violence, and in turn inflect the manner in which they engage with their predecessors (but not sadly with their contemporaries, as in the case of Statius and Silius Italicus, for instance). One of the best features is McClellan's use of historiographical references to the violence of the Roman civil wars and how these references help create "cultural intertexts" specific to the poets, recognizable to Roman audiences but which modern readers are yet to connect with emotionally. These references, McClellan argues, are designed to "snap us back to reality" (273), e.g., the reality of violence as a lived experience beyond the sanitized and cushioned realm of fiction-reading.

The introduction begins by creating links between modern spectacles of violence as seen in Isis' propaganda videos and ancient epic. The aim is to illustrate the enduring nature of corpse abuse as a historical phenomenon, the stylization/theatricality of violence as an artistic imperative on either side of the spectrum (e.g., Isis borrowed from Hollywood, ancient poets borrowed from the poetic tradition) and the so-called "pleasure" of viewing/reading violence, which is here bestowed upon audiences regardless of their sensibilities. McClellan's argument that the medium through which audiences experience violence creates a form of detachment which "must not blind us to our own capacity to strangely enjoy the abuses" (6) tends indeed to create a homogenous, blanket reaction to spectacularized violence, either read or watched. Issues surrounding excess in content potentially designed to disrupt "pleasure" in viewing/reading violence are somewhat eschewed in the opening discussion. Still, the book has plenty to offer.

The methodology is a “mélange” allowing the author to shift focus depending on the interest of a particular episode in its treatment or allusion to corpse abuse. Various intertextual networks are inherently mapped out for each discussed scene, making for very enriching and spirited readings. McClellan uses the corpse as a point of entry into a particular text, a ‘character with a bizarre *post-mortem* existence’ (17), he argues, and more broadly into violence and warfare in Latin epic. Previous scholarship tended to focus on the behavior of the abuser and far less on the corpse. McClellan reverses that dynamic. Building up from Charles Segal’s seminal study, *The Theme of the Mutilation of the Corpse in the Iliad* (Leiden, 1971), the book ventures further afield. Six chapters follow.

Chapter 1 sets out the *Iliad* as a baseline for reading corpse mistreatment in epic. Sarpedon, Patroclus and Hector all threaten and/or receive some form of abuse as corpses but they are eventually rescued by the gods, so that fully-fledged corpse abuse remains ultimately unfulfilled. McClellan, however, reads Imbrius’ decapitation by Locrian Ajax as an anomaly, a deviation from Homeric standards. Contrastingly, in the *Aeneid* Virgil is prone to ‘narrative silences,’ whereby we know that corpse abuse has taken place but the reader is only presented with its aftermath: Priam’s headless body on the shore, Nisus’ and Euryalus’ heads on pikes and Mezentius’ pierced breastplate all illustrate how Virgil uses certain elements from the poetic tradition to create expectations within his audience, but in interpretation of what has passed sits with the reader. McClellan erects here corpse abuse as a big symbol of the civil wars in Rome and brings in Virgil’s personal history. The author vividly demonstrates how the stream of graphic violence on display from Sulla’s proscriptions up until the grisly vindictive campaigns of the Second Triumvirate and the civil war that brought down the Roman Republic became part of the socio-cultural fabric of the Roman psyche.

Chapter 2 explores decapitation in Lucan, Statius and Silius Italicus, and how Statius and Silius respond to Virgil through Lucan via three main scenes: Pompey’s death and decapitation in Lucan, Tydeus’ cannibalism of Melanippus’ severed head and his own subsequent abuse by the Thebans in Statius’ *Thebaid*, Theron’s mutilation of Asbyte’s corpse and his own corpse abuse by Hannibal and the Numidians in Silius Italicus’ *Punica*. Silius, surprisingly, is much closer to Lucan in his use of vivid description. Flavian poets are viewed as more ‘reactionary’ in ‘re-staging’ previous scenes and filling in the gaps, an ‘attack’ on earlier models (113). Again, socio-historical contexts are used to explain the shift in focus/attitude to corpse abuse.

Chapter 3 looks into Lucan's 'obsession' with distorted funeral rites through three case studies: Pompey's funeral, Caesar's rejection/indifference to funeral rites and Erichtho's necromantic scene and handling of the dead soldier's funeral, post-prophecy. McClellan argues that Lucan's blurring of boundaries between life and death illustrates the poet's "view of the Neronian Rome as a slave-state," and "a struggle to negotiate," like his characters, "a space between life and death" (169).

In Chapter 4, unlike Apollonius Rhodius who does not shy away from describing Absyrtus' murder and subsequent dismemberment in the *Argonautica*, Valerius Flaccus, despite showing *post-mortem* violence here and there (e.g., Lemnian massacre in Book 2, the Colchian civil war in Book 6), is oddly closer to Virgil through his distancing effects. Chapters 5 and 6 examine funeral 'rights' in Statius' *Thebaid* and funeral rites in Silius (with a focus on Hannibal), respectively, offering further layered readings of specific scenes.

McClellan's book is a fascinating read, challenging at times given the graphic nature of the discussed material, but ultimately rewarding to any student of epic.

DALIDA AGRI

University of Manchester, dalida.agri@manchester.ac.uk