

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

[BMCR 2020.08.30](#)

Lozano Gómez, Fernando, Alfonso Álvarez-Ossorio Rivas, and Carmen Alarcón Hernandez. *The present of antiquity: reception, recovery, reinvention of the Ancient World in current popular culture*. Institut des Sciences et Techniques de l'Antiquité (ISTA), n°1476. Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2019. 398 p. €49,00 (pb). ISBN 9782848677149.

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[Authors and titles are listed at the end of the review.]

As the editors' Prologue explains, the collection of papers under review originated in an international conference sponsored by the Departamento de Historia Antigua at the Universidad de Sevilla in 2014 and includes many of the more than twenty papers originally presented, as well as some additional works. We have here a welcome addition to the growing literature on classical reception. The organizers took care to emphasize the context of popular as opposed to high culture, in the manner of Thomas Jenkins's remarkable study *Antiquity Now*, unfortunately unknown to the authors of the papers here. [1] The greatest value of the collection lies in its Hispanic orientation: it will give Anglophone readers access to current scholarship coming out of Spain (the authors also engage the scholarship from elsewhere on the continent and in Great Britain and North America), and most of the papers are in English. In addition, many have an interesting perspective on classical reception in the European Union, pondering whether antiquity contributes to the formation of modern Europe, justifies the ideal of European Greco-Roman and Christian values especially against the threat of immigrants and refugees, or challenges that ideal on the analogy of the moral and political decline of the Roman Empire. The collection suffers from several shortcomings—notably a tendency toward cataloging and away from analysis—and missed opportunities: it is unusual that in a set a set of conference papers, these authors take no notice whatsoever of each other's presentations.

After noting the boom in classical reception studies in recent decades and describing the conference, the editors explain that they have grouped the papers into three general areas and a concluding essay. They give brief summaries of each paper (abstracts at the end of the volume also summarize the papers). Most of the papers have a thematic character, though a few offer case studies. A dedicated bibliography follows each paper.

The first section treats antiquity in movies and television. Sánchez Casado's "Lin blanc" surveys numerous film treatments of ancient Egyptian priests in terms of their costuming (white linen, leopard skins, shaved heads), which turns authentic elements into clichés even in movies that strive for accuracy, and of their typically negative, roles (access to dangerous magic lets them complicate plots). Antela-Bernárdez, "Agamenón," categorizes the many film adaptations from ancient sources according to theme: historical, such as battles (e.g., Thermopylae in movies such as Ted Post's *Go Tell the Spartans*, 1978) or biographies (e.g., Alexander's in movies such as John Huston's *The Man Who Would Be King*, 1975); themes from tragedy (e.g., the *Agamemnon* and remakes of James M. Cain's 1934 novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* by Tay Garnett, 1946, and Bob Rafelson, 1981); and mythological themes, notably the stories of Odysseus. Lillo Redonet, "Ancient Rome," draws heavily on Spanish-language scholarship to categorize an extensive list of films that use a Roman setting to provide satisfying spectacles of violence and sex; or that portray male and female heroes and villains, usually one-dimensional but sometimes with complexity and nuance (like Russell Crowe's Maximus and Joaquin Phoenix's Commodus in *Gladiator*, 2000)—this section offers more analysis than the others; or, less commonly, that inculcate cultural and political values (pro-fascist Italian films of the 1930s). Lillo Redonet often refers to the advertising posters for these films but does not illustrate any of them. The final paper of this section, Martínez Maza's "The Classical Spirit," seems out of place as it has nothing to do with film and television (after an introductory mention of fraternity films like *Animal House*, 1978) but instead describes the founding of elitist academic societies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The next section treats antiquity in novels and comic books, though the first paper, Romero Recio's "Eternal Pompeii," lists television shows and films as well as novels that have their setting in Pompeii on the eve of the city's destruction or in the modern ruins.^[2] Rosillo López, "La novela histórico-policiaca," lists female detectives from Amelia Butterworth and Violet Strange in Anna Katherine Green's 19th- and 20th century crime novels to Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski, before turning to settings in ancient Rome and the detectives Claudia Seferino and Flavia Albia in the novels of Marilyn Todd and Lindsey Davis, respectively; these characters reflect the feminists'

discovery since the 1970s of Roman women's agency. Álvarez-Ossorio Rivas, "Sword and Sorcery," notices that the fantasy novels of J. R. R. Tolkien, Robert E. Howard, George R. R. Martin, and Michael J. Moorcock have classical as well as medieval sources: their geographies and ethnographies often mimic those of Roman Europe (Martin's Westeros looks like Britannia, including a wall to protect civilization from northern savages; Howard's Zingara has Kordova for its capital); they have imagined ancient histories that recall the classical ages of man, series of invasions, or fallen civilizations (Howard sets his stories after the fall of Atlantis; Martin's Valyria reflects the fallen Roman Empire); and they locate the source of evil and dark magic in an Egypt-like land (Tolkien's Númenor, Moorcock's Melniboné or Pan Tang). Ferrer Albelda, "El Jabato," offers the strongest and most focused of the papers, a case study of a popular comic book by Victor Mora Pujadas that ran from 1958 to 1966 in Franco's Spain. Like his creator, El Jabato came from Spain and fought to uproot tyranny and secure peace and social justice, but El Jabato did so in many adventures all over the Roman Empire and as far away as India and Japan. Mora disguised the liberal message with his hero's Catholicism and Iberian nationalism. El Jabato's devoted companions include Claudia, whom he loves chastely and who defies the Falangistic ideal of domestic womanhood because of her independence and complexity. Finally, Gordillo Hervás, "Historical Fiction," lists many historical novels (mostly English and Spanish) chronologically by their setting in Republican and Imperial Rome. Then she describes Colleen McCullough's popular Masters of Rome novels, emphasizing McCullough's concern for authenticity and analyzing the moral imperatives of *dignitas* and *auctoritas* that drive the plots.

The final group of papers treats antiquity in music, games, and military history. Fletcher, "Classical Antiquity," provides a useful introduction to the genre of heavy metal, noting the performers' fascination with Viking costumes, instrumentation, and themes. In the new millennium, partly because of resistance to Europeanization and nationalistic nostalgia, many bands outside Scandinavia and Britain began to draw on their ancient ethnic sources in Germany, Greece, Italy, and Spain in the sub-genre Fletcher dubs Mediterranean or ancient metal. Although rejection of conformity and mass culture drives the popularity of this music more than its ties to nationalism, the latter make its "embrace of the Classical world" (243) problematic. Carbó García, "Living Antiquity," briefly evaluates in terms of their authenticity and educational potential many examples of role-playing games (in Spanish and English) set in antiquity, whose polytheistic religious systems and mythology allow the incorporation of magical elements. Many of them, such as *Saquedores de tumbas* (2013), let players choose to what extent gameplay moves beyond history to fantasy. In 2002 Carbó García designed a role-playing game, *SPQR*, that he used in the classroom, like the Reacting to

the Past games (not mentioned by the author) that many of us in the Anglophone academic world have used successfully. In “Antiquity in Videogames,” Secci lists hundreds of such games by category: strategy and tactical games like the *Total War* series (beginning in 2000); city-building games on the model of *Sim-City* (1989) like *Glory of the Roman Empire* (2006), which has a Latin option; platform games, where the player controls an avatar, and arcade games; action or “hack and slash” games on the model of *Street Fighter* (1987)—in the wake of the movie *Gladiator* (2000) many of these featured gladiatorial fighting, but they generally tend to abandon realism for the sake of gore and fantasy monsters (in *Spartan: Total Warrior*, 2005, Leonidas resists monsters and a Roman invasion led by Tiberius in 300 BCE!); adventure games where players solve puzzles; and role-playing games where players seek to enhance their heroic personas. Increasing computing power yields greater spectacle, not authenticity. Pérez Rubio and Aguilera Durán, “Storming the Ivory Tower?” present a straw-man argument about the marginalization and obscurantism of the humanities, the trivialization of popular culture, and the academy’s devaluation of military history, all of which they help to correct through their publishing house Desperta Ferro Ediciones. Finally, Gómez Valero, “La Antigüedad en los wargames,” surveys the history of wargaming in military education and as popular entertainment. He then categorizes with brief descriptions the large number of games set in the ancient world—strategic (including miniature wargaming), operational, tactical, and thematic—and shows how wargaming can enhance our understanding of actual ancient battles and introduce active learning into our classes.

Gonzales, “Les usages modernes,” offers a wide-ranging and evocative conclusion to the volume. He contrasts the ubiquitous appearance of antiquity in popular culture—where heroes, imagined out of historical and fictional sources, serve modern values—with the presentism of political discourse except for that of reactionary and nationalist movements. He observes that the (Christian) Roman Empire provides a model for Europe, either as the successful integration of multiple historical and national units or as the chaotic heir of diverse elements in tension with commercial and political homogenization. Either way, the political center fragments, declines, or grows decadent as outsiders force their way in. Yes, we use antiquity to escape the present in pursuit of a better or at least more entertaining world, but thereby we can also critique the present.

Many of the chapters have large and readable black-and-white or color illustrations, not always integrated with the text. The volume ends with indexes of names, places, titles (missing many of the titles of video games listed by Secci), and subjects.

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[1] Thomas E. Jenkins, *Antiquity Now: The Classical World in the Contemporary American Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); reviewed by Justine McConnell, [BMCR 2015.11.08](#).

[2] Romero Recio adds several novels written in Spanish to the works assembled by E. M. Moormann, *Pompeii's Ashes: The Reception of the Cities Buried by Vesuvius in Literature, Music, and Drama* (Boston, Berlin, and Munich: de Gruyter, 2015).