
Frederick T. Griffiths
Amherst College

Follow this and additional works at: https://crossworks.holycross.edu/necj

Recommended Citation

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by CrossWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in New England Classical Journal by an authorized editor of CrossWorks.
In *Antiquity Now*, Thomas E. Jenkins reports from the front lines of art-making where plays, novels, films, poems, and comic books put Greco-Roman texts to fresh and provocative use. By “American imagination” he means creativity, while avoiding any laments for the “American imaginary” as the graveyard of classical education, the Western tradition, or general literacy. With an open mind and much digging, he claims important new ground for reception studies. He gives the Culture Wars their due but does not venture a totalizing argument beyond noting the impossibility of making one now. Instead, the book lives in its chapters’ essayistic progressions of smart, absorbing reviews of works highbrow and fanboy, mass market and local, leftist and reactionary, monumental and ephemeral. In their afterlives, the Attic tragedians, the epic poets, Plato, and Plautus pop up all over the cultural map—except there’s no map.

Jenkins brings broad gifts to the project from his work in classical scholarship, reception studies, and drama reviewing. He has also staged his own *Haunted House* from Plautus. With wit and jargon-free prose, he distills classical scholarship and modern contexts case by case to engage his mixed academic and general readership with particular works. He does not shy away from tough cases, such as classicists’ debates about the politics of Euripides’ *Helen*, which has been recruited for war protest. Material culture remains in the background, though he makes good use of the score of eye-catching illustrations of theater productions, graphic novels, and much else.

The introductory first chapter opens with a photograph of Sappho’s ode to Aphrodite tattooed onto a woman’s back on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2000). Having inscribed the love that dare not speak its Greek name on network TV, that ink leads Jenkins to a compressed, but nuanced survey of the proliferating meanings of “Sappho” over the ages and an account of how a reactionary adaptation of Horace, *Odes* 3.6 (“To the Romans”), was litigated on a poetry blog. With these demonstrations in hand, he explains his method. Bidding an affectionate adieu to the “classical tradition,” he moves to the unbounded realms of reception, appropriation, consumption and, finally, “surgical strikes” (224) on ancient art and thought. He foregoes forms such as translations, historically faithful productions, and other attempted
recuperations of original intent. Instead, he addresses “appropriations that dovetail with contemporary ideological concerns” (25) and “adaptations of ancient texts and themes that are outrageously, violently, wonderfully un-literal” (29). Classical texts provide sites of contestation without any privileged claim on human universals or the cultural center. As he recapitulates at the end: “Specific works, themes, and events are adapted by specific authors, groups, and societies for specific arguments, objectives, and policies; reception is goal-oriented” (224).

The second chapter, “It’s Greek to them: Gay and lesbian receptions of the ancient world,” constitutes a quarter of the book as Jenkins threads the maze of sexuality. He does brief justice to the problems of retrojecting modern identities into antiquity, notes the Foucauldian moment, and then proceeds to the gay scripture of Plato’s Symposium as it echoes in “The Origins of Love” sung in Hedwig and the Angry Inch (1988). A subsection on “Homosexuality, Psychology, and the Ancient World” beats the dead horse of homophobic pre-1970s myth interpretation by post-Freudians. There follow trenchant analyses of Richard Schechner’s Dionysus in 69 (1968); Mark Merlis’s An Arrow’s Flight (1999), based on Sophocles’ Philoctetes; and, under the rubric, “X-rated Sophocles,” Alice Tuan’s Ajax (2005). While an intervening subsection, “Queering the Canon,” deals with how anthologies evoke an empowering gay antiquity, the two plays and the novel strike the dissonant chords of an endemic Western degeneracy and of the HIV epidemic. The conflicting agenda of these works dismantle the clichéd link of “gay” and “Greek” but also demonstrate how powerfully and variously ancient texts can fuel current debates.

The third and fourth chapters deal with the aftermath of the Gulf War, 9/11, and the invasion of Iraq. “Classics and ideology” consists mainly of a subsection entitled “Orientalism and 9/11,” which addresses appropriations of Aeschylus’ Persians and then the flamboyant racism of 300: the graphic novel (1998), the film (2005), and the board game (2007). After a look at Oliver Stone’s confused Alexander (2005), Jenkins concentrates on Barry Unsworth’s The Songs of the Kings (2002), with its references to Euripides’ Iphigenia in Aulis. The following chapter, “September 11th on the Western stage,” further complicates the ideological picture. Notable here is a poignant account of the premier on September 9, 2011, of Mary Zimmerman’s Metamorphoses, whose tales of loss had been transformed for New Yorkers by the fall of the towers.

The fifth chapter, “From the borders: Contemporary identity, community, and the ancient world,” addresses the resistant perspectives of “historically marginalized groups” (159). On the topic of race, this brisk survey from fresh angles runs the risk of misunderstanding, which Jenkins’s brief introduction does not avert. For commu-
nities of color, “margins” sends one signal; “borders” sends another, as does the surely unintended implication that race drives the American imagination only from those borders. The six pages on “Race and classics—and musical theater” (race = African American) begin with the iconic moment when Nathan Lane sang Sondheim’s “Free” from *A Funny Thing* (1963) for the Obama family in the White House in 2010. Jenkins then cites other scholars’ work on African American receptions, mentions Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* and some Cleopatras, and devotes a fine paragraph to Will Power’s hip-hop version of Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes* (2006). The sequel is also surprising, but impressive. “Alfaro’s Chicano/Greek Trilogy” offers an extensive and compelling profile of Chicano playwright and activist Luis Alfaro’s *Electricidad* (2002, from Sophocles’ *Electra*), *Oedipus El Rey* (2011), and *Bruja* (2013, with a Medea figure undocumented and abandoned in Los Angeles)—a “must read” in the book.

Under the title, “Power, the canon, and the unexpected voice,” the penultimate chapter yokes three disparate topics: feminist and feminizing rewritings, eco-criticism, and some fascinatingly polarized political takes on the *Prometheus Bound*. The community of women is spoken for by some venerable figures who restore the muzzled voices of ancient women: Ursula Le Guin (*Lavinia*, 2008) and Margaret Atwood (*The Penelopiad*, 2005), as well as some younger women poets. These re-voicings advance an important project but one that, fifty years into Second-wave Feminism, is not unexpected or controversial. Jenkins’s supple readings lack the freshness and edge of his intersectional analysis of Alfaro and, earlier, of the book’s Dionysian prologue when Mark Morris dances as Dido and Hedwig hops sexes. The polymorphous gender genie has somehow slipped back into the bottle, leaving the word “feminist” behind. Still, this is worthy criticism, and the recent travails of Prometheus, including service to creation science, offer a strong close.

The brief final chapter, “In conclusion: On fractures and fracturing,” conjures the specter of a “modernity” that “explains itself to itself through ever-expanding technologies and media” (224). Jenkins explains his book as “ultimately kaleidoscopic” (224) in response to the “fractured antiquity” of our “fractured modernity” (224). Perhaps. I enjoyed the book more sedately as a linked collection of engaging essays, with a few misfires, by a gifted critic whose lively imagination emerges out of the balance and catholicity of his judgments.

*NECJ* 43.1

Frederick T. Griffiths

Amherst College