

Classics For All

Classics For All:
Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture

Edited by

Dunstan Lowe and Kim Shahabudin

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SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

Classics For All: Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture,
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PREFACE

The essays in this volume originated from a highly successful conference held at the University of Reading in April 2007. The editors would like to express their gratitude to the Dept of Classics and the School of Humanities at Reading, and to the Classical Reception Studies Network for their generous support of this event. We should also thank the attendees at the conference for their lively contributions to our debates, and those participants whose papers are not represented in this volume, but whose ideas and insights are echoed in its contents. It is a commonplace in the prefaces of academic books to thank your fellow academics and students, but no less necessary in this case, especially for those of us finding our way in this still relatively new field of study within Classics.

The critical approaches showcased in this volume are as diverse as the media which they illuminate. While much common ground is discovered, we hope that it will motivate future explorations as much by provoking debate as by raising mutual awareness.

With such a wide variety of media represented, establishing conventions for citing works has been a challenge. Our solution has been to list primary sources at the end of each chapter where appropriate, and to cite non-literary texts in footnotes. All other sources are cited in full in the Bibliography. All translations are the chapter author's own, unless stated.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a widespread assumption that the longer something has been studied, the less there is to discover or say about it. The civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome have been studied continuously for the intervening two millennia. Surely these wellsprings of knowledge must, by now, have run nearly dry? This view is understandable, but misconceived. New knowledge becomes available to us all the time: new texts are peeled from the recycled paper cartonnage of Egyptian mummy-masks, rooted out of uncatalogued archives in European universities and monasteries, and extracted from the incinerated bookshelves of Herculaneum's Villa dei Papiri; new artefacts, buildings, and sometimes entire ancient cities are brought to light by increasingly sophisticated archaeological techniques; and, most importantly of all, our own modern concerns shed light on areas neglected or differently understood by previous generations, such as sexuality, ethnicity and religion.

However, this volume addresses a very different reason why Classics demands our attention. If the wellspring metaphor is to be applied properly, then the ancient world itself, like the Scaean Gates of ancient Troy (*Iliad* 22.147-152), actually offers *two* founts: knowledge is one; the other is inspiration. Lying at its core, antiquity has saturated Western culture so thoroughly as to be present everywhere, and it is continually revealing itself in new ways. The aspects of the ancient world which we imitate, ridicule, fantasise about, shudder at or privilege tell us who we are—as they always have. As long as our culture continues to evolve, there will always be new things to be learned about its ancient Greek and Roman heritage.

Classics For All invites both academic (from a variety of disciplines) and non-academic readers to take a fresh look at the ancient world as inspiration in mass culture. This collection is on the leading edge of a new current in classical studies, which is an increasingly diverse field. It is now widely recognised that “the classical tradition” is an important object of study, and not only within other fields of inquiry which have become canonical in themselves, such as Shakespeare, Renaissance painting, or neoclassical architecture, or in contemporary but nonetheless highbrow

media, such as opera, theatre or poetry.¹ *Classics: A Very Short Introduction*, published in 1995 (number one in the well known series of Very Short Introductions published by Oxford University Press now containing more than 180 volumes) contains prominent “reception” elements, even more so the recent *Classical Mythology* (number 167).² In the late twentieth century, classical scholars first began to give serious attention to representations of the ancient world in Hollywood film.³ They found a wealth of material through which vast numbers of people had imagined the classical past, with a contemporary boost from a new wave of sword-and-sandal blockbusters from *Gladiator* to *300*. This became a solid basis not only for broad-appeal undergraduate lecture topics in Classics (in Britain and, to some extent, in the USA), but also for further research into other public arenas where Classics thrives. In the last three years alone, three major collections of studies in classical reception have included non-traditional media;⁴ public perceptions of archaeology have continued to grow into a subdiscipline;⁵ and not only the films *Troy* and *Spartacus*, but even the BBC/HBO television series *Rome*, have been the subjects of dedicated essay collections.⁶ There is increasing recognition of the diversity of classical presences outside traditional academic circles. Many, including the contributors to this book, refuse to limit their interests to cultural products old enough or elitist enough to be designated worthy

¹ In this volume, we use the phrases “classical tradition” and “classical reception” more or less interchangeably. This is a conscious rejection of the notion of classical studies as the handing-down of a sacred and intact artefact (most notably promoted in Gilbert Highet’s 1949 *The Classical Tradition: Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature*). We prefer a reading of tradition as “living tradition”: in Steve Hodkinson’s formulation, “drawing on past precepts but undergoing active change and remoulding in modern times” (in a discussion for the Facebook group, *Classical reception studies are vital...if you do it right*, posted 23 Nov 2007).

² Beard & Henderson 1995; Morales 2007.

³ Jon Solomon’s 1978 *The Ancient World in the Cinema* (revised in 2001) was the first, still quite tongue-in-cheek, survey of this topic by a classicist. More serious analysis of particular themes followed in Marianne McDonald (1983), *Euripides in Cinema: The Heart Made Visible* and Kenneth McKinnon (1986), *Greek Tragedy into Film*. The seminal methodological texts for the study of classical reception in popular culture are Martin Winkler’s edited 1991 collection, *Classics and Cinema* (later revised as *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* in 2001) and Maria Wyke’s 1997 *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History*.

⁴ Kallendorf 2007a; Stray 2007; Hardwick & Stray 2008.

⁵ Clack & Brittain 2007; Holtorf 2007.

⁶ Winkler 2006; Winkler 2007; Cyrino 2008.

of attention. The results have helped to revive and expand an extremely long-lived discipline, enhancing its venerable prestige with contemporary relevance, and pointing toward new avenues of investigation.

The origin of this collection was a conference held at the University of Reading in April 2007 entitled “Classics Hell: Re-Presenting Antiquity in Mass Cultural Media”. The title playfully acknowledged that, for some sceptics within the Classics community, the diversifying trend in classical reception studies is a descent into the ruin of the discipline. By contrast, the name of this book, “Classics for All”, sums up the crucially important goal of such work: a form of classical studies which embraces the bigger picture, both by taking contemporary culture seriously as an object of study, and by inviting non-classicists and non-academics to collaborate in its exploration and interpretation.

Critics’ potential concerns over this project can be encapsulated in three key objections. First, most or all of reception studies—especially in popular culture—isn’t really Classics at all, and should be left to other disciplines (for example, gladiator-themed novels to English Literature, and cartoons starring Hercules to Media Studies). Secondly, if it does count as Classics, the study of contemporary culture is superficially interesting, especially to trivia nerds, but unlike “proper” academic work it has nothing to show us. Thirdly, if we must study recent and contemporary receptions, we should at least research high-quality, sophisticated texts, and not disposable popular rubbish that anyone could understand. The following chapters will speak for themselves, but it will nevertheless be helpful to offer some general responses here.

To the first claim, that *Classics for All* isn’t real Classics, there are two responses, one theoretical and the other pragmatic. On the one hand, it has never been possible to draw a line around the limits of the discipline: the histories of science and philosophy, Bronze Age and Late Antique history, art history, and linguistics all cause blurring, not to mention the study of Greek and Roman interactions with Egypt, Africa, Gaul, Byzantium, India and numerous other ancient cultures. Boundaries between disciplines should be areas of intersection and discussion, not gaps for things to fall through. On the other hand, it seems neither necessary nor desirable to draw that line: the relative health of Classics as a discipline (certainly in Britain) owes largely to its practitioners’ ability to discover useful connections with ideas from outside, and to reach audiences without years of “classical education”. Ironically for a subject which has shaken off former imperialistic connotations, Classics can engage in a healthy “intellectual imperialism” by extending its borders into new territory. And as long as we remember that reception studies are vital *as well as*, not

instead of, the more traditional classical activities, advances into popular culture can be recognised as gains and not losses.

The second objection—that this kind of research produces “trivia”—does not bite particularly deep for academics, since all research is information-gathering and connection-making, and therefore the sole differentiator between “trivia” and valuable data is relevance. If writing on mass culture informs and stimulates its audience, both academic and otherwise, then it cannot be discounted as self-indulgent. Of course, each of the chapters in this book *is* motivated by a strong personal interest in its subject, and many classicists happily identify themselves as the “fans” of one subject among many others.⁷ This is healthy.

The preconceptions behind the third point must be unravelled before a proper answer can be made. One is that some cultural products are inherently “better” than others; another is that critical attention is a limited resource that must be rationed out to the most deserving causes. The first of these is self-evidently true, although not subject to any single essential criterion; some texts, performances, recordings and so on are undoubtedly more skilfully made than others, or more original, or more commercially successful, or more privileged subsequently, or more widely disseminated and so on. (We have only to decide which of these criteria is the important one, and when.) The other is more open to debate: studying some things must always, in a sense, mean neglecting others, at least in terms of educational syllabuses, but creating canons is a matter of cultural politics. To take a literary example, if permitting a novel to be studied depended on proving in some sense that it were, in absolute terms, equal to or better than those already in the canon, English Literature would scarcely find room for anything more recent than *Sense and Sensibility*. Most classical archaeologists would be horrified at the suggestion that we confined our attention to the major cities and most valuable artworks of the ancient world; equally, those who work on Greek poetry would call it a disaster if they were limited to “great works” like the *Iliad* and Pindar’s *Odes*, and forced to shelve “minor” texts like Nicander’s two poems on poisons, or Oppian’s verse fishing manual. They would say that all the evidence has something to tell us, both in itself and as part of the bigger picture. We should take the same attitude towards our own culture.

There are many other benefits to pursuing the new direction in mass cultural receptions. For example, the continuing enthusiasm and interest of non-specialist audiences is valuable evidence for the inherent talent of the

⁷ See Nisbet (2006: 131-140 and in this volume). Tellingly, many areas of close engagement with antiquity in mass culture occur within “subcultures” and “fandoms”.

ancient world to fascinate. It is easy for academics who have been working in the field for many years to forget the excitement of their early contacts with Classics. Reconnecting with that excitement through the enthusiasm of non-specialist audiences might help to inform the communication of their work to the world outside the academy: perhaps especially to young people who have become interested in Classics primarily through playing *God of War* or watching BBC/HBO's *Rome*. Again, by acknowledging that Classics is interesting outside formal education environments, we can avoid prolonging the long heritage of elitism which was once Classics' greatest strength, but in recent decades became its greatest threat. Classical studies must keep pace with the wider cultural status of its subject matter, which continues to thrive, flourish, and diversify. Finally, studying unfamiliar media means learning new methodologies, which we may then apply to our studies of more traditional materials, revealing new insights.

This volume extends the inquiry, revealing new (and, at present, unconventional) areas into which classical influences have spread and flourished. "Classics for All" advertises the benefits of collaboration: its contributors are a mixture of scholars, teachers, enthusiasts and practitioners (and usually combinations of these). Dialogues between all of the different kinds of classicist, and between the Classics community and other academic disciplines, are becoming increasingly important. We hope, for instance, that collections such as this one will promote, in turn, insights into classical texts from the perspective of scholars in other disciplines. In many cases, the classical receptions in this volume are reciprocal activities, which cannot be fully understood without examining the communities of consumers ("Web 2.0" and otherwise) which help to fashion them. It is time for academic classicists, with help from others, to study not only those aspects of antiquity which they think *should* appeal to mass audiences, but those that *do*, daunting as this ambition might be. Indeed, a traditional comprehensive scholarly perspective would strain to take in all of the activity in this newly expanded and democratised field. Slow-baked consensus is no longer possible; recent and current material demands not just observation but interaction, and everything must in some sense be provisional, in the spirit of ongoing discovery.

Classics should not restrict itself to canons of what academics have considered intellectually worthy. Since these parameters are subjective, we should expand them to connect everything happening in the modern world, from academia to ephemeral pop culture, from the well-established to the cutting edge. Academics only have a responsibility to combat "inaccurate" receptions where the creators and consumers of classical reinventions advertise and/or desire accuracy. (Often, self-conscious disregard for

“accuracy” is part of the point.) We should also be aware that the intended meaning and the received meaning of a text—in other words, its “purpose” and its “function”—may be quite different.

Just as new voices have been found within antiquity (those of women, the unfree, the queer, “foreigners”, etc), new voices are appearing as commentators on it: Hollywood directors, children’s authors, politicians, computer gamers, broadcasters, pornographers, amateur authors, and many others are discussing the ancient world and casting it into new forms. We want to show both academics and the public that these transformations and the new viewpoints on the ancient world that they reveal are relevant, sophisticated, fascinating and valuable.

We have assembled our chapters in four parts, with each heading intended to convey a different relationship between ancient material and mass culture. The first part, *Ancient Worlds, Modern Audiences*, presents three chapters concerned with communicating ancient narratives (historical and mythological) through mass media, showing the influence different types of audience can have on this process. The second part, *Re-Purposing Antiquity*, considers ways in which the ancient world is put to the service of modern mass culture in videogames and popular journalism. In the third part, *Classica Erotica*, our authors re-examine the often-noted use of antiquity as a site for discussions of sexuality in popular culture. *Fantatising the Classics* is the final part, which focuses on some of the more imaginative uses of classical myth and literature in mass culture.

Appropriately enough, this collection of essays is opened by a well-known public face of Classics both in Britain and internationally: Bettany Hughes, broadcaster and independent academic, provides an experienced insight into antiquity on television. Her account reminds us of the commercial imperatives that influence many mass media receptions of Classics, revealing the struggles, the twists of fate, and the constraints imposed by the medium during the preparation of ancient-history documentaries for mass consumption. However, it also highlights the enormous benefits of such work—both for the public and for the discipline.

In the next chapter, Helen Lovatt offers a different form of practitioner perspective, casting light for the first time on a vast but rarely-considered audience for classical myth, with its own distinctive requirements: young people and children. In an unusual double consumption, these readers are offered retellings of classical narratives such as the voyages of Jason and the Argonauts passively, which are nonetheless mediated by the discerning consumer choices of parents. While a pedagogical agenda is clearly present in these adaptations, the mythological features included and

omitted suggest that their juvenile audience is hardier than might have been expected. Classicists and parents alike may be surprised at what these various new versions say and show.

We tend to think of the Internet as the great mass communicator of our time, and before that, television. However, Amanda Wrigley's contribution reminds us of the enormous popularising power of radio in the mid-20th century. Making excellent use of listener feedback collected by the British Broadcasting Corporation, Wrigley showcases the witty adaptations of Aristophanes for voices in the home by poet and educator Louis MacNeice in the 1930s and 1940s. Her analysis demonstrates, once again, that the two agendas of pedagogy and entertainment are often achieved most successfully when they are combined.

Finding an unexpectedly high profile for classical themes in contemporary American culture, Joanna Paul surveys the many responses in news journalism and related media to recent disasters, especially 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, which manipulated the evocative image of Pompeii. She shows that these allusions remain powerful, but at the same time multi-faceted. Her discussion brings to the foreground the unremarked, although (or perhaps, because) constant presence of classical references in the "constant, unnoticed background noise of our lives", to borrow Joe Moran's description of everyday culture.⁸

In the next chapter, Dunstan Lowe finds classical culture thriving in the modern media as an arena for recreation: computer games offer numerous "classical worlds" for (mainly) young and non-specialist audiences, inheriting traditions and stereotypes from other media and creating their own. Classical history is frequently aligned with strategic empire-building; classical myth with violent individual heroics. Treatments, however, range widely between attempted simulation and wild fantasy. Lowe uses the notion of "play" to demonstrate the utility of games as a productive arena for exploring and engaging with the ancient world, and for drawing out its meanings for contemporary mass culture.

Players make their own computer-game experiences, sometimes literally: Cristian Ghita and Georgios Andrikopoulos, as former members of the *Rome: Total Realism* team, contribute an insiders' view of game design. Outlining the aims and methods of the project, which redesigned the massively popular historical simulation *Rome: Total War* to the highest standards of historical accuracy, their chapter is a case study in how diverse mass audiences can want—and sometimes create—different things from the same material.

⁸ Moran (2007: 4).

Susanne Turner offers a classicist's perspective on *300*, a film huge enough to support not only an entire franchise but even its own parody.⁹ Turner casts Zack Snyder's film as a cinematic Pygmalion, bringing to life the nudes of Greek art via the illustrations of Frank Miller and Lynn Varley. She describes an interwoven web of adaptations and reading filters, from ancient Greek sources to Hollywood epic films, the graphic novel, and 20th century homoeroticism. Her discussion seeks the reasons why *300* succeeded after the "Greek failures" *Troy* and *Alexander*, despite jettisoning authenticity from its own bare-chested brand of "epic" grandeur.

Gideon Nisbet's chapter on Roman-themed pornography develops a model for the study of classical receptions in the remarkable circumstances of a medium that is inherently subversive, and at the same time highly commercial. He situates productions like *Private Gladiator*, *Private Cleopatra* and *Gladiator Eroticus: The Lesbian Warriors* in the long shadow of Rome's own dubious former "glory" as a popular fantasy of orgiastic decadence. In contrast to other contributors, Nisbet offers the contentious conclusion that Rome's failure to provide "added value" in pornography reflects the decline of its impact in other cultural contexts.

Kate Fisher and Rebecca Langlands report on the lively chatter of personal voices on the Internet stimulated by actual and digital glimpses of Pompeii's "Brothel" and its erotic frescoes. The tourist experience (especially in photographs) is now discussed and disseminated rapidly online: everyday viewers' words reveal how evidence and stereotype interact within the popular imagination, above all over the magnetically controversial topic of ancient Roman sex. In this "write-your-own-Classics" environment, any chance of the topic remaining in the control of an academic elite disappears, and one of this volume's implicitly recurrent themes becomes an urgent question: what is "cultural" about antiquity, and what difference does it make?

Film has been the core and conduit of popular reception studies, but there remains a need to acknowledge its mass audiences and less critically-remarked examples. Kim Shahabudin analyses the "pepla", the mass-appeal film genre of the late 1950s and early 1960s whose action-packed muscleman adventures are often too readily dismissed as ephemeral and derivative. She argues for the potential richness of texts produced for such very large and varied audiences and shows how one example, *Hercules Conquers Atlantis*, engaged creatively with classical myth to produce a lively and, indeed, topical film that rewards close attention.

⁹ *Meet the Spartans* (dir. Friedberg & Seltzer 2008).

Amanda Potter's study of how popular entertainment reinvents Greek myth takes us back to the small screen, to examine why the US television series *Charmed* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* offer contrasting images of the Furies. Potter introduces another methodology to the classicist's repertoire, using audience research to establish how different types of viewer read the mythological references, comparing the reactions of "fans" to audiences with and without classical backgrounds. Unlike most other media, television creates long-term fanbases out of initially passive viewers: their responses and dialogue exert control over the product they "consume". This reciprocity is an increasingly important feature of modern receptions of antiquity.

Finally, Paula James shows that Classics provides enriching context for another hugely popular youth-oriented fantasy series on US television. An expert on *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* (having organised the groundbreaking 2004 conference *Greeks and Romans in the Buffyverse*), as well as a scholar of Roman poetry, she combines these specialisms in a "comparative literature" approach to the evocative theme of the underworld and other supernatural dimensions in *Buffy* and its spin-off *Angel*.

Open-minded inclusivity is the future of reception studies. Recent and contemporary culture has not yet had time to become canonised, and belongs to the discipline of Classics not despite this, but because of it. Despite bringing together a wide array of media under a classical perspective (in many cases, for the first time), this volume shows that the same important themes emerge wherever we look in recent and contemporary mass culture. The study of Classics is changing (for example, several chapters reflect the necessity for serious use of online content in research), but this is part of a wider picture. Ancient Greece and Rome are so embedded in Western culture that their legacy is being reworked in the newest and most unexpected places. In many of the following chapters, the close and even reciprocal relationship between producers and consumers of classics-related "texts" is shown to be leading them in creative directions. In some cases, audiences (whether specialist or non-specialist) actively seek "authenticity" in the sense of meticulous academic insight into the ancient world—classicists in the public eye find ways to give them such access to their subject. In other cases, antiquity is a means to different ends such as giving a twist to established genres, creating fantasy worlds, or supporting an ideological claim. Frequently, modern media do not reinvent Classics from scratch: they negotiate myriad stereotypes and preconceptions inherited from recent centuries, decades, and even years. The two commodities of knowledge and

inspiration, the hot and cold running water of our classical heritage, remain precious to mass audiences. Classicists cannot afford to miss out.

*Dunstan Lowe
Kim Shahabudin
October 2008*

PART I:

ANCIENT WORLDS, MODERN AUDIENCES

CHAPTER ONE

“TERRIBLE, EXCRUCIATING, WRONG-HEADED
AND INEFFECTUAL”:¹

THE PERILS AND PLEASURES OF PRESENTING
ANTIQUITY TO A TELEVISION AUDIENCE

BETTANY HUGHES

Mass media has an emotional relationship with the classical world: witness the above title, a quote from a Sunday Times columnist on a recent TV programme about Helen of Troy.² Television concerned with ancient history occupies relatively little airtime; in 2007 (the year of the conference giving rise to this book) only three hours of programming were produced by UK terrestrial networks, two hours on Channel 4 and one on BBC 2.³ However, critical scrutiny of the genre has been intense. The classics are re-presented in mass culture. That re-presentation itself is then chewed over by the mass media: in 2006, the BBC/HBO series *Rome* generated close on 35,000 column inches, by anyone’s standards an impressive measure of media coverage. The web community devotes chatrooms, Facebook groups and new web pages to arcane, Classics-related broadcasting and gaming projects. The mechanics of putting antiquity on screen have become a charismatic object for the academic gaze. One academic at Bristol University is conducting an oral survey of TV practitioners and their motivations and methods of working with archaeologists.⁴ The University of Lincoln is acting on a £324,000 grant to

¹ Bryan Appleyard, “TV needs a history lesson”, *The Sunday Times* (Culture Section), 6 November 2005.

² *Helen of Troy* was produced by Lion Television and first screened in 2005 on Channel 4 in the UK and Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) in the USA.

³ Statistics derived from telephone conversations with the Channel 5 specialist factual department, Channel 4 press office and BBC press office, March 2007.

⁴ Angela Piccini, “Oral Histories of Televisual Archaeologies: Meeting the Makers”.

realise a four-year research project on “Televising History 1995-2010”. *The Spartans* (a documentary series which I co-wrote and presented) has become part of Classical Civilisation modules in a number of American universities.⁵ (One enterprising cheat in the United States sells coursework essays deconstructing the series over the Internet.) A television programme that takes three years to make may be broadcast once, for 45 minutes, but its tail—to use marketing speak—is surprisingly long.

This essay is adapted from the keynote address given at the conference “Classics Hell: Reworking Antiquity in Mass Culture”, at the University of Reading in April 2007.⁶ My purpose is, briefly, to open discussions on the theme “Classics For All”, by investigating specific instances where “the classics” have been shared with audiences of between 1 and 8 million; much to the curiosity of the academy, the pleasure of a mass audience, and the occasional consternation of cultural commentators in the broadsheet and tabloid press. The problems and the advantages of putting the ancient world on television will be discussed; the process from project genesis to viewer response will be outlined. By this account I hope to demystify, to some degree, the provenance of this genre of specialist factual TV documentaries and to examine their success or failure.

By day I am a historian, by night a broadcaster. True to my hybrid professional status, what follows takes the form not of a traditional academic paper, but a sophistic address: part intellectual debate, part public display and an *apologia* for the, apparently hubristic, mission of sharing ancient and pre-history with a mass audience. The majority of examples given here have been chosen because I have had some kind of direct involvement with the end product. This is not the hideously inflated ego of the broadcaster in play (I have included some of the worst reviews my TV programmes have ever had), but rather because television production is so fluid and fickle that it is often unhelpful to theorise about its motives: case-by-case studies are more eloquent.

Critical Attention

Of all the history television programmes made, it is those that deal with the ancient world which are most consistently reviewed in the print media and the blogosphere. Why? A fascination driven by nostalgia for *I*,

⁵ *The Spartans* was produced by Lion Television and first screened in 2002 on Channel 4 and 2004 on PBS in the USA.

⁶ The original address was written with the use of film clips from *The Spartans* and *Helen of Troy* embedded in the structure.

Claudius, Roger Lancelyn Green's *Tales of Greek Heroes*, or “double Latin”? Whereas other factual output slips under the net, dramas and documentaries featuring Egyptians, Greeks and Romans attract surprising levels of scrutiny. These are programmes about which critics and commentators need to show they care. *Helen of Troy* was not the only offering to command the interest of the double spread from which the title of this paper is taken: the subject of TV history was newsworthy thanks to the BBC/HBO series *Rome*, which had come in for some praise and no little criticism. The headline “TV needs a history lesson” was complemented by a large archive picture of me with the flattering caption “The maul of Troy: Hughes uses ‘gimmickry’ in her search for Helen”. Following a discussion of the merits of A.J.P. Taylor's static, studio-bound television lectures on history (popular over a number of years between 1955 and 1978), the article continues:

Today, different teachers teach us history in different ways. Now we are shown ladies in tight jeans getting on a train, the lady is shown on a boat, or driving a car; sometimes she walks about on rocks. She is obviously a clever lady to be able to do all these things....Television, in common with, if I am honest the rest of the media, is currently making a huge mistake. This mistake is to think that, because large parts of the British population are demonstrably stupid, it is therefore safest to assume that everybody is stupid. This assumption leads genres such as TV history to pursue stupid people with the sort of devices stupid people seem to like.

The *Sunday Telegraph* took a similar view of another recent series:

Bettany Hughes was soon up to her old tricks—in particular climbing over ancient ruins a lot, and pretending that she was bravely overthrowing a long-established piece of received wisdom. By now the truly revolutionary line to take would be that it was everything it was cracked up to be: a haven of tolerance and social equality. Hughes of course argued that this is what everybody still thinks—before she came along and fearlessly reminded us about all the city's slaves, its systematic discrimination against women and so on. Luckily if you could ignore the programme's self-serving framework, the story was pretty well told.⁷

⁷ James Walton, “Last night on television”, *Sunday Telegraph*, 23 July 2007. *Athens: The Truth About Democracy* was produced by Lion Television and first screened in 2007 on Channel 4 in the UK and (as *Athens: The Dawn of Democracy*) on PBS in the USA.

The excited language of reviewers demonstrates the self-evident fact that television viewing is an emotional as well as an intellectual pursuit. The viewer expects to be moved by programmes. Because TV delivers opinions and individuals into the security and intimacy of our homes, it is a needy, provocative medium: a medium that demands to be cherished or abandoned, loved or derided.

As a sometime-academic, sometime-TV practitioner, such reviews remind me to ask a number of questions. Who are these programmes for? What is their provenance? Who has ownership of and responsibility for their editorial content? Do they pollute or revive learning? What is their point? And, with a little more personal neurosis attached, what value can there be in waving a lone flag for “thinking TV” and expanding the audience for the classics when one becomes, or so it feels at times, not one of the good guys, as one fondly imagines at the outset—but a demon, an evil-doer? These are live issues. Although the delivery mechanism for television programmes will change, recorded material (both sonic and visual) gives us the image stimulation a human brain craves—and it gives us stories, both fabulous and actual. The documentary format, whether it be current affairs or specialist factual, also feeds a basic human yen: for a place where people reflect on other people, other places; and on the world before and behind them.

In another review for our documentary on the Late Bronze Age and Helen’s place (or not) within it, the headline trumpeted “Must Troy harder”. Quite funny, although the final line from “The *Times*’ resident classicist” mollifies, “Do not let me put you off. This film is more interesting than 99% of programmes on TV”.⁸ And there’s the rub. The night that one of our “wrong-headed, ineffectual, ignorant” programmes went out, terrestrial choices included *The X-Factor*, *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Fifty Favourite TV Disasters from the 1980s*. Such output is the norm. Some might judge an atypical, alternative Saturday night programme that translates Hittite cuneiform on air and investigates Late Bronze Age diplomacy and gender-politics as “stupid television for stupid people”—but I have to say I’m not one of them.

The subjective nature of my editorial is intentional and, I hope, useful. The reception of the classics in the 21st century, and in particular television programmes that deal with the classical world is at once so particular and so mutable that it is better served by precise and discrete analysis than sweeping statements or an attempt at a comprehensive overview. It is unhelpful, and often misleading, to generalise. Television

⁸ Philip Howard, *The Times* (The Knowledge section), 22 October 2005.

projects are each spawned for a different reason, by different people with different aspirations. There may be strategy in television, but there is no cohesive policy. Given the range of broadcasting, satellite, digital, cable and online channels available, the speed at which technology evolves and the rate of personnel movement within the television industry, it can feel remarkable that any programmes at all emerge from the shifting sands of the televisual world.

One of the greatest mistakes made when analysing history documentaries is to categorise them all as constituting a single species: each, in fact, belongs to a very distinct genus. As historians and linguists we should be the first to know that records and resources need to be judged on their own merits. We have to understand the circumstances under which a product is produced, who it was produced for, and the motivation for its generation. Television, by definition, transmits visual, aural, popular history. But within that broad brush-stroke there are very many different shades. A series such as *Lost Worlds* where the producers are allocated three weeks pre-production in which to research (excluding more general series development), script and organise their films—and in which the titles include *The Lost World of the Kama Sutra*, *The Lost World of the Pirates of the Caribbean* and (my favourite) *The Lost World of Secret US Bunkers*—is very different from a costume drama co-produced by the BBC with a budget of anywhere between £150,000 and £1 million.⁹ Different again to the kind of mid-range documentaries I make, where a production team of four or five works for six months with a budget of between £80,000 and £120,000 to produce a film that includes an authored script and thesis, encounters with niche-experts, location filming, access to archives and artefacts, and perhaps some Computer Generated Imagery or dramatic reconstruction.¹⁰

Making *The Spartans*

To give our exploration of “Classics For All” nuance and context, I thought it would be illuminating to describe, in detail, the genesis of *The Spartans*, a three part series made in 2002 with Lion Television. The story begins with my own education in the ancient world.

⁹ The *Lost Worlds* series was produced by Atlantic Productions. It ran for 31 episodes over two seasons, first screened between July 2006 and December 2007 on The History Channel in the USA. Time frames discussed in telephone conversation with development department of Atlantic Productions.

¹⁰ This excludes an indeterminate period, sometimes months or years, of unpaid project development by the author.

I write this essay as I approach my 40th birthday, which places me in that generation who were brought up indoctrinated with the dogma that Greek and Latin were dead and done for. State-educated until I was eleven, at age fourteen I had the chance (along with just three other girls who opted for Ancient Greek “O” Level) to learn Attic Greek. I then went on to be the only female undergraduate in my year at Oxford who studied Ancient History. I had no sense that I was involved in a comfortable, elitist discipline; instead, it was made clear that my choice of subject was eccentric and that I was being taught the tricks of a vanishing trade. That certain knowledge, and the satisfaction of postgraduate research, made me want to fight for others to have access to the intellectual and (for me) sensual, heartfelt and humanist delight of exploring and attempting to understand the distant past.

Fast forward fifteen years. Mid-way through a decade of research on an academic book about Helen of Troy (originally titled *Helen of Sparta*), I was travelling through the Peloponnese. Since this book was to be the biography of an idea, it needed rooting. I had decided that one way to pin Helen down would be to examine how the image of *orea Eleni* (fair Helen) was couched in the Greek landscape—to identify what physical remnants there were of the stories that, through time, had been told about Menelaus’ wayward wife, and to look at the evidence left by those ancients who fervently believed in her, as an epic heroine and as a demi-goddess. Of course, my travels took me to Sparta. Standing on the hill of Therapne next to the Menelaion, the archaic shrine which surmounts the river-bluff five kilometres north of modern-day Sparta, on a particularly beautiful May morning, I had an epiphany. This had to be one of the most striking and evocative landscapes in the whole of Greece. The Taygetan mountain ranges keep their snow long into the summer; the River Eurotas below winds through a flat, fertile plain. The sanctuary of Artemis Orthia—with all its stories and artefacts and memories of blood spilt to entertain a Roman crowd of sado-tourists—was just visible in the distance.¹¹

Here, up on Therapne, was the cult site of a female character who had never left the written record in 28 centuries, a mythical creature honoured by one of the most intriguing states in the ancient world. In the Spartan Museum lay proof of her cult: a cult that thrived for well over six hundred years. A bronze perfume bottle inscribed with Helen’s name (circa 7th century BCE). An eight-clawed *harpax*, a meat-hook (or *kreaga*)

¹¹ In the Spartan *agoge* system, boys had to brave a line of lashing whips wielded by older boys as they ran to steal cheeses from the altar in the sanctuary. In the Roman period this ritual was revived in a particularly brutal form.

dedicated “for Helen”: both of these tools could be used for the hanging of strips of flesh following a sacrifice, supporting the literary evidence that Helen was worshipped with what Isocrates described as “sacrifices worthy of gods, not just heroes” (*Encomium of Helen*, 10.63). And yet there were no visitors, no obvious signs to the archaeological site, no chapters on Helen’s worship in the text or guide-books. There were scant academic articles examining why Helen’s cult was so tenacious, particularly with the women of Sparta, no popular book touching on the subject. Asking all personal and chance acquaintances over a period of fifteen years, “Think of the name Helen of Troy. Who do you see?” indicated that the majority imagine Homer’s Queen of Sparta as a pre-Raphaelite painting, all flowing curls and rosy-coloured chiton, rather than as a cult figure who was part of the ritual landscape of the Eastern Mediterranean. Surely, I thought, this was a visually rich, intellectually stimulating historical phenomenon, fresh enough to be academically challenging, but with a sufficiently familiar hook to be ripe for mediation. And so I thought I would try my luck with the television people.

Having been “accepted” as a “viable” broadcaster (following written and recorded dispatches I sent back from Romania—where I was studying female figurines—at the time of the Romanian revolution), I started in 1992 to suggest to BBC television executives that they should consider making more history programmes *per se*, and in particular, more programmes about the ancient world. Almost without exception, I was regarded as if I had crawled out from under a stone. The date of these sorties is significant: well before the first broadcast in 2000 of Simon Schama’s successful *A History of Britain*, which made history television acceptable once more.¹² I remember that after I had given one commissioning editor the line about needing to share this wealth of under-appreciated, little-known material with a wider audience, an audience whose appetite was clearly unsated, he told me: “We don’t want missionaries in this business”. On another memorable occasion my rejection was comforted with: “Let me tell you three things, my dear: no one is interested in history anymore, no-one wants to watch history programmes on TV, and no-one, but no-one wants to be lectured at by a woman”. (As you can imagine, my resolve was strengthened rather than weakened by this particular encounter. While continuing to write, teach and pursue my own research projects, I put my mind to developing TV proposals. I researched a twenty-page pitch for a landmark series on Sparta

¹² *A History of Britain* was produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in association with The History Channel. It first screened in 2000 on BBC 1 in the UK and in 2001 on The History Channel in the USA.

to be called *The Spartans: from Therapne to Thermopylae*.¹³ Finally, after three years of abortive meetings, emails and phone-calls, I received one positive response from a deputy History Commissioner at Channel 4. “I’ve got six proposals from TV companies about the Spartans”, he said, “but yours is the only one that mentions Spartan women. Come in to talk about it”.

The commissioner suggested I collaborate with a production company to turn my ideas into something that could be realised as a film. This is a significant staging post; discussions are often held about the role of “public” or “popular” history without sufficient weight being given to the nature of the medium. Historians of the ancient world should be the first to recognise the different merits, different demands, and different impact of different media. A stele inscription should never be interpreted or analysed by precisely the same criteria as those used to interrogate a vase painting; a papyrus fragment does not operate as a piece of articulate evidence in the same way as an engraved bronze offering bowl. So too with television history. History documentaries, history on film, sword-and-sandal movies; these works do not mediate history in the same way as a conference such as “Classics Hell”. Films about the distant past may in fact be making history—adding to the corpus of historical evidence—but first and foremost they must be true to their genetic constitution. They are not PhDs on film; they are investigative, introductory, recorded visual and aural essays that serve the needs of a broad television audience. The vocabulary of film is very different from that of academia: and in some senses history and television make for uncomfortable bed-partners. Without footnotes, for example, broadcast output can of course never completely satisfy the rigorous demands of traditional academic scholarship.¹⁴ Think, too, of a televisual impossibility. A story with little remaining or accessible pictorial evidence; a cast of characters without a single living voice; a patchy, disputed and attenuated narrative and an absolute absence of *actualité* (that is, real-life caught on film). Add to that a viewing public of whom only 0.5% will have studied your subject and a commercial industry increasingly geared to overseas sales, ratings and profitability. On the face of it, the prospects are dim.

Another six months of unpaid development on *The Spartans* followed. During this period I continued to work in the field; I developed script

¹³ Much of the programme material exploited my academic research on the cult status of Helen of Sparta and her significance to Spartan women.

¹⁴ The same observation has been made about film. See I.C. Jarvie, “Seeing through movies”, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 8 (1978), 378.

outlines and filming “wish-lists” with Lion Television; and I spoke with academic colleagues such as Professors Paul Cartledge and Antony Spawforth about their current research projects. Together we tried to make sure our approach was as robust, scholarly and fresh as possible. After the fourth draft proposal was submitted, the word came back that Channel 4 liked the idea but needed convincing. Could we make a fully scripted pilot film? We agreed. I remember at this point broaching the question of whether there might be any money to cover the time spent on the project, and got a curt response, indicating I should think myself lucky to have such an opportunity. Eventually I did manage to get £150 to cover childcare for the days I was actually away filming. Another six months passed and then, three years after the initial contact and long after I had suppressed the hope that this programme might ever be incarnated, the word came through that we had the green light.

I tell this tale for two reasons. First, because it is typical. Those who operate outside the television industry frequently ask how it is that particular programmes are commissioned, the short answer is this: you can ‘land’ a commission by possessing sympathy for the medium you are working with, clear consideration of not just the academic arguments but the filmic and narrative potential of a programme, dogged—some would say, obsessive—belief in the merits of your project, and a skin thick enough to cope with serial rejection. Secondly (and perhaps most importantly, because it raises the question of the ownership of onscreen material), how can voices, particularly academic ones, be fairly represented when there is such a wealth of input to the end-product, and the project development is so unpredictable? Television depends on collaboration—between experts, researchers, writers, producers, cameramen, directors, assistant producers, executives and commissioning editors. With so many voices competing—although the distant past is mute—there is the distinct danger that the voice representing antiquity is the one that will go unheard. Directors and researchers feed into factual content and turn of phrase; editors produce visually entrancing sequences and cut out vitally important editorial links; executive producers drop sequences because of budgetary constraints; commissioning editors come in during edits and hone the thrust of programmes; marketers write press releases which, by definition, desire headlines. The production of a television programme risks bulldozing through the subtleties of historical analysis. But if its genesis is honest, if it tries its utmost not to misrepresent the past or the precepts of sound historical investigation, it should also clear a path wide enough for vast numbers of viewers, listeners, and web-users to walk together. There is a danger that classics on

TV can become compromised and reductive. However, I think we should all be a little Greek about this state of affairs and turn the paradoxical, vexatious, agonistic situation to the general advantage.

So with all this said, and given the blood, sweat and tears it takes to get just one show on the road, is this all still merely a grand vanity trip? Was that early BBC executive right? Does anybody care, do the wider public *need* this stuff? *The Spartans* has now been broadcast around the world to close on 25 million people. A highly-respected ancient historian told me at a conference hosted by Manchester University and Manchester Museum in 2004 that the documentary had done more than any other popular publication or film to raise non-specialist awareness of Spartan society. Christopher Middleton recently cited our documentaries, along with the Boris Johnson and *Gladiator* effects, among the reasons that the uptake of Ancient History and Classical Civilisation has risen over the last few years, to the extent that more state schools in the UK now have Latin on their syllabus than independent schools (463 to 408).¹⁵

More direct evidence of popular audiences' enthusiasm for the ancient world on television can be found in the 6,000 or so unsolicited emails that have been sent to my own website between 2005 and 2007. Some excerpts are below. (Peer reviews can be found at www.bettanyhughes.co.uk.)

"I couldn't believe that so much of this history was unknown to me. I cried as I learned of the missing pieces that had been erased. I would like to thank you for your contribution because you rendered visible what had been systematically removed from history".

"I just wanted to congratulate you on the superb presentations you have made to bring history and archaeology to a wider audience on the screen and in print. They provide authoritative information and great enjoyment".

"I'd also like to thank you for your inspiring historical piece, helping young people like myself to discover the great stories of history".

"Thank you for bringing me to the attention of a topic that I have known about but not fully appreciated or understood".

"Complicated matters become very clear when you present them".

¹⁵ Christopher Middleton, "Vivat Latin, vox pop for a new age", *The Daily Telegraph* (Weekend section), 8 September 2007, 11. The former MP and current Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, has been a vocal supporter of Classics in his role as president of the Joint Association of Classical Teachers (JACT).

“Making history come alive”.¹⁶

This is of course a selective sample of the views of motivated individuals (in order to make contact individuals have had to log on, search for the name of the project, seek out the enquiries email on a website and type a message). However, of over 6,000 missives only three have been negative.¹⁷ These emails do not give the impression of “stupid” people. Nor do they suggest that by producing programmes on these subjects we are telling the whole world what it already knows. Nor does it seem that the public appetite (in the UK and around the world) for such specialist factual subjects is waning.

For good or ill, television documentaries are no longer ephemeral. Their re-circulation on YouTube, Google Video, Deenport, social networking sites *et alia*, as well as official DVD and video releases and within the studios of Hollywood, ensures a contemporary immortality. The crew of Zack Snyder’s *300* (2006) watched *The Spartans* during production. The film is unashamedly a fantasy and yet the screenwriter included a number of (almost) direct quotes from Herodotus. The Special Edition DVD includes commentaries from historians on “real” Spartan society. *300* took \$70 million in its first weekend alone. The producer Deborah Snyder told me: “I still can not believe how much *300* has infiltrated pop culture...It’s also hard to believe that it took us so long to convince a studio to make the film, no mainstream press wanted to come up to the set and then WHAM, the film just explodes! We are pinching ourselves still. Your documentary inspired us in so many ways. Hopefully even more people will get a chance to see it and learn from it as well”.¹⁸ And the effects of ancient history on the screen (be it small or big) are felt on printed texts too. A book entitled *The Spartans: An Epic History* was written by Professor Paul Cartledge (who acted as historical consultant on the series) in 2002; it has now sold over 50,000 copies worldwide. The theatrical release of *300* spurred 23,000 sales of another title by Cartledge,

¹⁶ In addition to the programmes previously mentioned, comments related to: *The Minoans*, produced by Lion Television, first screened on Channel 4 in the UK in 2004; *When the Moors Ruled in Europe*, produced by Wildfire Television, first screened on Channel 4 in the UK in 2005.

¹⁷ One came from a Spartan who disliked the reference to male-male sexual bonding in the 5th century BCE, one from an Athenian who disliked our programme *Athens: The Truth About Democracy*, and one from a neo-fascist group: a personal death threat for making a programme that dealt with Islam.

¹⁸ In personal correspondence with the author.