The Fantastika and the Greek and Roman Worlds1

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[This was written as the Foreword to a special issue of Foundation that included papers from 2013’s conference Swords, Sorcery, Sandals and Space: The Fantastika and the Classical World. The original publication (Foundation 118, 2014: 5–8) had to be edited for space reasons; I present here the full text, with a few minor amendments. My thanks to Foundation’s editor, Paul March-Russell, both for the original opportunity to edit this issue, and for permission to reproduce this version of the text online.]

Everything we do is shaped by the past. We live in an eternal and ever-fleeting present moment, each experience rapidly passing from the future to the past. What we do is influenced by the entirety of our experiences, to one degree or another, and what we know of the experiences of others. It is therefore only to be expected that the worlds of the imagination that human writers create are influenced by elements of human history.

The six articles included in this issue of Foundation are taken from over sixty papers delivered at the Science Fiction Foundation’s conference Swords, Sorcery, Sandals and Space: The Fantastika and the Classical World, which took place in the University of Liverpool’s Foresight Centre from 29 June to 1 July 2013, just over a year ago as I write this. The speakers focused on the influence in modern science fiction and fantasy of a particular geographic and chronological era, that is often referred to as the ‘Classical World’, the Mediterranean world of Greece and Rome, from approximately the ninth century BCE to the fifth century CE.2 I’ve written about this conference before (Keen 2013; for reports on the conference see Bourke 2013, Pak 2013, C.L. Wilson 2013, and other reports cited in Keen 2013). This issue doesn’t represent the first product of the conference — versions of Liz Gloyn’s and Stephe Harrop’s papers have appeared in Strange Horizons (Gloyn 2014; Harrop 2014). Other articles will be appearing soon, and we hope for a more substantial publication at some point in the future.

Rather than provide any form of overview on sf and Classics (for recent articles along these lines, see Rogers and Stevens 2012, and Provini and Bost-Fiévet 2014), what I would like to do here is introduce the six articles following, and, first, briefly discuss some of the methodological issues arising.

What is described as ‘Reception Studies’, the study of how Greece and Rome are received in later cultures, nowadays forms a significant part of scholarship in Classical Studies.3 The study of Reception in popular culture is an important strand in this, particularly in relation to cinema (see Lowe 2012; Michelakis 2012). However, sometimes Classical Reception Studies can be a little insular and inward-looking. In part (especially in the UK), this is a result of research funding protocols that privilege publishing in subject-related journals and series, and tend to militate against genuinely interdisciplinary studies. But it is also partly a product of ideas about what is important about Reception Studies. In 2003, Lorna Hardwick rejected the idea that studies of Reception only illuminate the receiving society; she insisted that they also ‘focus critical attention back towards the ancient source and sometimes frame new questions or retrieve aspects of the source which have been marginalized or
forgotten’ (Hardwick 2003: 4). This is very true, but an argument has built up that this should be the prime or only concern of Reception Studies. This has been most forcefully expressed by Charles Martindale, who argues (most recently in Martindale 2013: 175–7) that Classicists should only be interested in a reception if that reception ‘initiate[s] or inform[s] a significant dialogue with antiquity’ (2013: 176); Martindale argues this in such a way as to privilege a focus upon antiquity. This, according to Martindale, justifies the presence of courses on Reception in the portfolio of Classics departments.

Whilst I understand Martindale’s desire to justify Reception within university Classics departments, I see a number of issues with this inward-looking approach. First, whether a dialogue is ‘significant’ is subjective, though Martindale writes as if it is objective. Secondly, this approach of privileging certain receptions over others seems to me to be an attempt to reaffirm the canon of literature, at a time when others see Reception Studies as a means of democratizing the subject (this is discussed from a number of angles in Hardwick and Harrison 2013). Thirdly, it has the potential to demean the academic areas in whose fields of study the receiving texts lie. As Martindale himself recognizes (2006: 9), it is important in Reception to be credible both to Classicists and to those who study the receiving text. It also follows, then, that the best scholars in Classical Reception will be those who are able to become credible both as Classicists and scholars in the receiving field. \(^4\) In sf, one might point to Nick Lowe, one of the plenary speakers at the Swords, Sorcery, Sandals and Space conference, who is a Reader in Classics at Royal Holloway, University of London, and award-winning writer of the ‘Mutant Popcorn’ column in Interzone; and to Liz Bourke, one of the contributors here, who is just completing a Ph.D. in Classics at Trinity College Dublin, and is also a Hugo-nominated columnist and reviewer for Tor.com and Strange Horizons.

This all means that interdisciplinary collaboration is vital, and that requires a meeting of equals, and that means that Classicists need to take an interest in the receiving text in its own right, not just as a means of illuminating Classical Antiquity, and not act as if all other disciplines are merely means of understanding the ancient world better.

Finally, to privilege the illumination of Antiquity detracts from the question of how later societies, including our own, engage with the Classical past. Contrary to some opinions I have had presented to me, this is surely a question in which Classicists should be interested. Without wanting to invoke the dreaded term ‘relevance’, Classical Studies as a discipline should be engaging with the wider world, and understanding how the wider world engages with our subject matter is an important part of strengthening the position of the discipline.

The fact that these articles come from a conference sponsored not by a Classical Studies institution, but by an sf body, and are now being presented in that body’s journal, clearly signals that we reject such insular methodologies. Indeed, of the contributors, only Liz Bourke, Frances Foster and Cara Sheldrake (and myself) are from Classics departments – Scott Brand, Mariano Martín Rodríguez and Andrew Wilson are all trained in other disciplines. This reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the conference – indeed, bringing such people together was an explicit conference objective (Keen 2013: 82).

Perhaps disappointingly for Foundation’s editor (March-Russell 2014: 4), there is little in these articles that challenges Andrew Milner’s rejection in Foundation 117 (Milner 2014) of Lucian of Samosata’s True History as ur-sf. Indeed, Milner’s view that the True History cannot be considered sf is one with which, as I shall argue elsewhere (see Keen 2015), I have

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considerable sympathy, though the work clearly sits early in a tradition of the fantastic from which sf would later draw. Of the articles here, only Mariano Martín Rodríguez (2014) claims an ancient work for sf, arguing that Cicero’s *Dream of Scipio* deserves to be placed alongside Olaf Stapledon’s *Star Maker* (1937).

The other articles are concerned not with finding generic origins for sf in the Greco-Roman world, but with showing how modern sf appropriates notions, motifs, imagery, etc., from that world. Frances Foster’s comparison of the lands of the dead in Homer and Ursula Le Guin (Foster 2014) does not necessarily suggest a direct influence (though Le Guin’s interest in Classical mythology is well-known). Rather, Foster is placing the *Odyssey* and the Earthsea sequence together as what Paula James would call ‘cultural companions’ (James 2009: 239), where a side-by-side comparison can illuminate both texts.

The other contributions look at more obvious influences. One can seek these in a single work, as Scott Brand (2014) does with *Watchmen* (1987), or one can choose the work of a single author, as in Andrew Wilson’s treatment of C.L. Moore (A.J. Wilson 2014). Or one can choose, as Cara Sheldrake (2014) does with time travel, to examine how an sf trope is used in a particular ancient milieu, or take a single ancient culture and see how sf has used that, as Liz Bourke (2014) does with the Minoans.

All these approaches are productive, as these articles show. And what unifies them all is demonstrating a continuing fascination with the Classical world, both amongst those who write sf, and those who write about it. The reason for this is obvious: as Juliet McKenna says in a blog post (McKenna 2014), ‘however different externals like hemlines and hairdos might be, humanity’s concerns remain constant and eternal’.

**Works Cited**


Harrop, Stephe. 2014. ‘“To Keep Out Bad Things”: Exploring the Wall in A Song of Ice and Fire’. *Strange Horizons* 25 August 2014.


Rodriguez, Mariano Martín. ‘From Stapledon’s Star Maker to Cicero’s Dream of Scipio: The Visionary Cosmic Voyage as a Speculative Genre’. Foundation 43.118: 45–58.

Endnotes

1 My thanks to Paul March-Russell and *Foundation* for the opportunity to present these articles as a set, to the six contributors, and to everyone who made the original conference such a success.

2 For a discussion of the usual boundaries for this period, see Perkins 2009b: 21–2. For the contentious term ‘Classical’, see Perkins 2009a: 10–11.

3 The key introduction to Reception Studies remains Hardwick 2003, but see also Martindale and Hardwick 2012.

4 In the original publication I wrote ‘the best scholars in Classical Reception are those who are already credible both as Classicists and scholars in the receiving field’. I decided that was exclusionary.