

## Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity: Art, Opera, Fiction, and the Proclamation of Modernity

**Review Number:**

1292

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 26 July, 2012

**Author:**

Simon Goldhill

**ISBN:**

9780691149844

**Date of Publication:**

2011

**Price:**

£30.95

**Pages:**

368pp.

**Publisher:**

Princeton University Press

**Place of Publication:**

Princeton, NJ

**Reviewer:**

Anastasia Bakogianni

Simon Goldhill throws down the gauntlet to the entire field of classical reception studies in his new book *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity*. This flourishing sub-discipline of Classics has, in the last two decades in particular, explored a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. It has also attempted to forge connections with and creatively borrow from other academic disciplines including History, Literary Studies, Art History and Cultural Studies to name but a few. Interdisciplinary by its very nature classical reception requires researchers working in the field to engage both with antiquity and its cultural products, as well as with their reception in later periods and cultures. Research projects of this nature are intellectually challenging because they necessitate the crossing of disciplinary boundaries. Therein of course lies the inherent danger, namely of producing work that has too broad a remit and therefore, as some detractors would have it, adds nothing of value to our understanding of classical antiquity. Goldhill's contention, however, is that we have not gone far enough down this road.

Goldhill urges a move away from the currently favoured two-way model of the analysis of the influence and impact of a classical source (whether that be an ancient text(s), an artefact(s), or more generally the history and culture of the Graeco-Roman world) in subsequent centuries. Instead he proposes that researchers working in the field examine more fully the complex dynamics of this process as 'an event within cultural history' (p. 124). In other words he advocates that we adopt a broader definition of the term 'reception' and that we widen the scope of its remit. In order to illustrate his point and as an example of his methodological approach he offers his readers three case studies in the mediums of art, opera and fiction drawn from his own research interests in the reception of Graeco-Roman culture in the Victorian period. Collectively this tri-

partite analysis is designed to illustrate the richness of the Victorian responses to the classical past and the corresponding widening of the scope of analysis required in order to do full justice to such a complex topic.

What are the advantages of Goldhill's methodology for researchers working in the field? This by necessity brief summary is intended to provide an answer to this question as well as to draw attention to some of the specific problems and possible pitfalls of adopting this particular approach to classical reception research projects.

Goldhill raises his doubts about the suitability of the current model of reception studies in his introduction by drawing attention to the privileged position that antiquity held at the very heart of Victorian culture. It is precisely because of its cultural cache that Classics became such a heavily contested ideological arena and one that necessitates a multi-layered response from all scholars engaging with the topic. Antiquity was used and abused in a variety of ways in support of opposing points of view. On the one hand, Classics was used to sustain and perpetuate contemporary power structures, particularly through the key role it played in education. Equally however, it could be used to undermine established certainties and to threaten the construction of Victorian self-identity. The ancient worlds of Greece and Rome was a means of understanding and negotiating the modern world with reference to an idealized past. Goldhill argues that in order to provide a full analysis of these complex and contesting strands of the reception of antiquity in the Victorian period one needs to explore multiple frames of reference. In other words an 'inclusive' model of reception is required, if one wants to explore all the facets of the reception phenomenon.

Goldhill's own response to this challenge was to divide his own project into three thematically linked sections that explore different aspects of the Victorians' reception of the classical past (very broadly defined to include late antiquity). Part one is entitled 'Art and Desire' and in it Goldhill explores the theme of erotic desire and the role of the spectator in the classicizing art of John William Waterhouse and in Lawrence Alma-Tadema's reception of the figure of the archaic poetess Sappho. In his discussion Goldhill destabilises the current prevailing view of these artists as outmoded and demonstrates how they used the classical past creatively as a means of confronting the taboo subject of erotic desire.

The portrayal of the naked human body was the cause of a great deal of anxiety and debate in Victorian culture. Clothing it in classical 'dress' made its depiction acceptable, but as Goldhill demonstrates both Waterhouse and Alma-Tadema, for all their devotion to archaeological authenticity, did not simply sanitize their subject matter. The undercurrents of transgressive desire are still visible in their paintings; they are just disguised under several layers of classical reception. The more familiar the viewer is with the classical sources themselves the more the veneer of respectability is destabilised to expose the underlying anxiety over the transgressive nature of desire. It is only at the nexus of classical source, reception, artist and audience, however, that this complex relationship is negotiated.

Goldhill is at some pains to remind his readers of another complicating factor. With the passing of time the meaning of this confluence is renegotiated and its meaning changes. In part two, 'Music and Cultural Politics', Goldhill demonstrates this point more forcibly by examining the change of fortunes undergone by Christoph Willibald Gluck's classicizing operas. Originally they were viewed as a welcome return to ancient Greek models of drama. They also heralded the democratization of the art form, from a spectacle that only aristocratic audiences were privileged to watch to a more commercial appreciation of the medium. In the centuries that followed, however, Gluck's operas came to be viewed as deeply conservative examples of the eighteenth-century's reception of antiquity. Goldhill charts this change of fortunes from revolutionary to conservative interpretations of the same works of art by exploring in details the historical, political and socio-cultural contexts of their original performance and subsequent re-performances that engendered these wildly differing responses in their audiences.

This phenomenon of the cultural silencing or forgetting of the revolutionary potential of Gluck's operas was repeated in the much more disturbing case of Richard Wagner's operatic oeuvre. Wagner believed that the German people were the true heirs of the ancient Greeks and therefore enjoyed a special relationship with their culture. His nationalism and his belief in racial theory found expression in his operas as well as in his

theoretical writings. This darker aspect of his operas had to be whitewashed out of their performance following Germany's defeat in World War Two. In the post-war era a decision was made to return to a classical aesthetic for the staging of Wagner's operas to replace the Germanic trappings that he had envisaged when he founded the Bayreuth Festival. This new approach signalled an attempt to 'silence'/'forget' Wagner's pernicious racial theories and political beliefs so integral to the creation of his operas. Goldhill's analysis which draws attention to this act of deliberate 'forgetting' is a disturbing reminder of just how often the ancient world has been used to endorse and to promote such dangerous ideologies. It is crucial that we resist all such attempts to expunge the record of the darker side of the reception of the classics.

Classical antiquity is not a stable entity. Its meaning is renegotiated over time and it remains in constant flux. The performance of its receptions must always be considered in the light of their contexts. Antiquity means different things to different audiences. This essential point is again demonstrated in the third part of Goldhill's book 'Fiction: Victorian Novels of Ancient Rome', which examines the phenomenon of the depiction of early Christianity under the Roman Empire in the novels of the period. In this case study it is important to consider the contemporary religious debates that shaped the reception of ancient Rome in these novels. Edward Gibbon, in his seminal work *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, drew attention to the inherent problem faced by Christian readers when they asked themselves why the pagans they held in such high regard refused to accept Christianity. The authority of the Church faced new challenges in the nineteenth century and religion became a hotly contested arena. Ancient history played a key role in this debate; in many ways the equal of the challenge posed by science. The questioning of miracles and of the validity of the Gospels in general grew out of the trend to problematize ancient history and in particular the foundation myths of the Graeco-Roman cultures. Once the authority of the ancient historians and authors was questioned the accounts of the early Christians also came under close scrutiny. The boundaries between history and fiction were thus blurred and in this in-between space the genre of the historical novel flourished.

Goldhill explores the representation of antiquity in these novels with a particular focus on the relationship between pagans and early Christians. The genre proved particularly popular in the nineteenth century, so his analysis focuses on several key texts including Edward Bulwer Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), Lee Wallace's *Ben Hur: A Tale of Christ* (1880) Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) and Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis* (1896). These four authors and many others often adopted a scholarly persona in their writing thus further blurring the line between academic discourse and fiction. This self-conscious writing style, embellished with direct authorial interjections and scholarly references, provided the means for staging contemporary religious debates in the past.

The complexity of the framework against which these novels about ancient Rome have to be considered is further complicated by Goldhill's acknowledgement that the life and work of the artist has to be given its place in the discussion. In order to demonstrate this point he provides a close reading of two novelists and their output: Charles Kingsley and Frederic William Farrar. These two Victorians represented two very different ideological positions. Kingsley, a protégé of Queen Victoria, represented the forces of Anglicanism and was staunchly anti-Catholic. In his novels, most famously perhaps in *Hypatia* (1853) he condemned excessive religious fervour as fundamentally un-British. Farrar preferred to tread the middle ground and believed in universal reconciliation, the idea that eventually everyone would be saved. In his *Darkness and Dawn* (1891) and *Gathering Clouds* (1896) he portrayed a series of pagan characters struggling to come to terms with Christianity. The novels also demonstrate Farrar's belief in the importance of a classical education. Both writers had their own agendas when they constructed their versions of ancient Rome, but they also build upon models created by earlier contributors to the genre, who had established many of the stereotypes about ancient Rome still current today.

In the 'Coda' that provides the epilogue to the book Goldhill reinforces his argument that the Victorian vision of antiquity continues to inform our modern understanding of the ancient world. He uses one last example that of Andy Warhol's reception of Wilhelm von Gloeden to illustrate his conclusions. This Victorian photographer posed his models in order to create a series of 'classical' studies of the male body.

Warhol, in turn, creatively borrowed from Gloeden in his own work with male models in the photographic medium. He thus received these ancient artistic models by means of their Victorian reception and updated them for his own time. Goldhill's argument is that artists, composers and writers have engaged with contemporary debates and anxieties with recourse to the past. They have thus paradoxically proclaimed their modernity by reinventing the past, because as Goldhill puts it ultimately classical reception is about 'finding one's own place in history' (p. 272). This is an on-going process that continues down to the present, but in Goldhill's opinion the Victorian period offers us a very useful model for examining and discussing this dialogue with the past.

I hope that this brief outline of Goldhill's volume immediately makes apparent the wide scope of his project and the complexity of his analysis. His breath of coverage is nothing sort of impressive and it is matched by his detailed knowledge of his case studies. This type of approach demands nothing less than a thorough knowledge of the period under examination. This is a project that has obviously developed over many years and this is reflected in the number of threads that Goldhill can pull together in order to construct the different sections of his discussion. The effect is cumulative leading to a better understanding of the multiple facets of the reception of antiquity in the Victorian period. It thus also demands a lot from its readers asking them to absorb such a wealth of material without getting lost in the details. In all honesty not all research projects can hope to match the breadth of Goldhill's approach; this is after all the product of a long gestation period. It is, however, a timely reminder that we should at least make the attempt; failing that we should be honest about our limitations. It is good practice after all to acknowledge the boundaries of one's enquiry and to be prepared to continuously extend them as one's familiarity with the material grows deeper over time.

In this reviewer's opinion, Goldhill's challenge is one to which researchers working in the field of classical reception studies should respond, by taking up the gauntlet that he has thrown down and by developing their own responses to the problems he has raised. If the aim is to keep the field of classical reception studies vital and open to new theoretical and methodological approaches we need to engage with and respond to the questions raised by Goldhill's work.

#### **Other reviews:**

Times Higher Education

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp> [2]

Research Features

<http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/features/past-versus-present-in-an-age-of-progress-the-victorians/> [3]

Rogue Classicism

<http://rogueclassicism.com/2012/07/03/cj-online-review-goldhill-victorian-culture-and-classical-antiquity/>  
[4]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1292>

#### **Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/26275>

[2] <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=417890&sectioncode=26>

[3] <http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/features/past-versus-present-in-an-age-of-progress-the-victorians/>

[4] <http://rogueclassicism.com/2012/07/03/cj-online-review-goldhill-victorian-culture-and-classical-antiquity/>