



BOOK REVIEW:

*Once and Future Antiquities in Science  
Fiction and Fantasy*

*Amanda Dillon*

Rogers, Brett M. and Benjamin Eldon Stevens, editors. *Once and Future Antiquities in Science Fiction and Fantasy*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. ISBN 978-1350074880.

Interdisciplinarity, as anyone who has attempted to work across multiple fields at once knows, is a really tall order. There is always one more thing to check up on, a slew of theorists or primary material that it seems everyone in the discipline *just knows* that you inevitably miss out on, and you are inevitably attacked for these failings. To do it right requires a level of curiosity and intuitive rigour that so often only holds up for the individual scholar's more familiar discipline. I would love to say that Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens's collection *Once and Future Antiquities in Science Fiction and Fantasy* bucks this trend. Alas, no. But I would argue that it falls right into this trap in a rather interesting way, some contributions more than others, and in doing so provides some interesting areas for further development.

There appear to be two core concerns that this collection pivots upon: Suvin-style "displacement" (cognitive estrangement, more or less), and the reception and reuse/reworking of classical material. I suspect classical receptionists would see this last as a tautology, but in terms of the phenomenology of writing and reading science fiction and fantasy, and the ontologies of the worlds they create, reuse and reworking are two rather different endeavours. This inconsistency of approach leads to a problem that may just be the inevitable weakness of nearly all edited collections – that individual authors interpret the rubric differently to the point of actually dealing with different issues – and this means that the collection as a whole is unusually variable. This

is really unfortunate, because the good contributions here are *very* good and provide some fascinating insights in terms of the use and reuse of classical material, and they reflect in interesting ways on the change in the use of this material for creative ends over time. The weaker contributions, however, seem to set up easy questions to answer and do not quite get to the point of answering that all-important “so what” question. There is an underlying weakness of the literary criticism, in terms of both the actual doing of the exegesis and a clear lack of familiarity with the field of SF studies in particular, which means that these chapters struggle to become more than just lists of equivalences for the experienced SF and fantasy reader and critic.

Individual examples will help clarify this matter. The strong contributions from Claire Kenward (on time travel and the *Iliad*), Steven B. Moses and Brett M. Rogers (on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and the figure of Atlas), and C. W. Marshall’s utterly joyful chapter on Dungeons and Dragons and the impact of classical creatures on its bestiary all get one thing very, very right: they look at a tension between the classical/historical and the science fictional/fantastical. Kenward, for example, takes a fascinating approach where “SF engagements with ancient classics ... can offer speculative wish-fulfilment for those seeking to commune directly with the classical past” (45) – thus placing front and centre the dialogue between the SF tactic of cognitive estrangement in terms of time travel to a familiar-but-just-alien-enough past and the historical. This links beautifully to relatively recent work on language’s limitations in expressing the truly alien, such as in Susan Mandala’s *Language in Science Fiction and Fantasy* (2010): the classical material therefore allows readers to remain anchored to the familiar whilst just enough displacement happens for the reader to feel the disruption from the present. Moses and Rogers’s chapter takes a somewhat different but similarly satisfying tack, where they highlight the ways in which the hyper-masculine figure of Atlas is reinterpreted in terms of queer sexualities in *Rocky Horror*, an argument that feels particularly timely in terms of current arguments in identity politics. Marshall, meanwhile, asks the interesting question of why certain classical beasts continue to fascinate – and while I’m not sure if he entirely answers this, he certainly has fun attempting to do so.

The other contributions, though, lack this nuanced approach to the classics and the fantastic. Suzanne Lye provides some discussion of the Odyssean journey that Chihiro undergoes in *Spirited Away*, but seems to muddle audience studies with auteur studies: it is clear that Miyazaki knows *The Odyssey*, but a more pertinent question is whether or not Japanese audiences would, given that Homer is specifically Western. There is a double displacement here going on that Lye misses (even though she mentions “cross-cultural displacement” at work in the film [79]). Many of the other contributions do not make it much beyond identification and rough equation between classical narrative and the narrative in the chosen primary text: Foster, Tomasso, McAuley, and Weiner all do this, and I found myself wondering throughout why these equations mattered. Perhaps they do – but this needed to be made absolutely crystal clear, given that many readers may be approaching the collection from outside classical reception studies. Tony Keen’s contribution, a reflection on his “The ‘T’ Stands for Tiberius” blog post from 2006, seems particularly insular and at times unnecessarily taxonomical. If there is anything there is a *lot* of in SF and fantasy studies, it is taxonomies –

and I'm not wholly sure we need yet another one. Jennifer Ranck's analysis of the Cassandra figure in *Continuum* sets up and hits a very easy target: Cassandra's "empowered, suffering figure exposes similarities between dramatic depictions in Greek tragedy and modern SF, as well as fantasy" (144). Well, yes. The question that wants answering here is why this figure (and these other characters, and narrative shapes, and names) keep getting used again and again. Catherynne M. Valente's epilogue goes some distance towards providing an answer to this – that for many "there is no difference" between SF, fantasy, and the classics (203) – but it feels like an argument that ought to be absolutely welded to the displacement question throughout the collection.

But this weakness is illuminating. The tension between Suvinian estrangement and the kind of distantly familiar displacement seen in the texts under examination here is not played out on a broader scale. What does it mean to be displaced into the past rather than into space? What does it mean when the past is displaced *into* space, à la *Stargate*? Some consideration of Karen Hellekson's work on alternate history might have proven enlightening here, particularly given that what is at work in the collection is actually more closely aligned to temporal displacement of character and theme rather than physical displacement – and indeed, that of the past into the future (whether that of the author's present, or the characters' present, they bring the classical forward, rather than the futuristic into the past. These questions provide that next step, that fertile ground for further work in the area: where do the historical and the fantastic touch – and what happens when they do? Rogers and Stevens's collection provides some groundwork towards this question, but doesn't entirely manage to address it in any sustained or indeed novel way, even if individual contributions do. This book is thus likely only of interest to those already versed in classical reception but not SF and fantasy, rather than the other way around.

*Biography:* Dr. Amanda Dillon received her PhD in literature from the University of East Anglia in 2012, focusing on narratology, science fiction, and postmodernism. Academic life is unexpected, and she is currently a tutor in history at UEA, focusing on social and cultural Victorian history, historical fictions, and historical theory. She also manages *European History Quarterly*. She increasingly works right at the intersection of science fiction and history, particularly if it lets her play with time-travel fiction. She may be contacted at [a.dillon@uea.ac.uk](mailto:a.dillon@uea.ac.uk).