

On Not Knowing Greek: Victorian Women Writers and Classical Antiquity

Heretical Hellenism: Women Writers, Ancient Greece, and the Victorian Popular Imagination.
Shanyn Fiske. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008.

Reviewed by **Lee Behlman**, Montclair State University

<1> Simon Goldhill has argued that the term “reception” is “too blunt, too *passive*” to adequately describe modern authors’ responses to classical antiquity, with their “dynamics of resistance and appropriation, recognition and self-aggrandisement.”⁽¹⁾ While the value of the term “reception studies” remains a subject of some debate among scholars, Goldhill’s vivid attempt at a corrective to this term serves well in describing Victorian women writers’ dynamic relationship with classical antiquity. The last decade of scholarship has begun to expose the full range of their responses. Yopie Prins and Isobel Hurst in particular have moved beyond an earlier scholarly focus on an almost exclusively male group of Victorian Hellenists and Hellenophiles such as Arnold and Newman, and this has also involved a welcome turn away from these writers’ relatively static notion of a discrete classical “inheritance.” Prins’ chapter in *Victorian Sappho* (1999) on Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper), her recent essays on late-Victorian women translators and performers of Ancient Greek drama, and Hurst’s *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics* (2006) all explore how Victorian women appropriated the classics for themselves while at the same time challenging male writers’ cultural hegemony.

<2> Hurst’s book offers an instructive comparison for Shanyn Fiske’s project, for it suggests what a notable procedural departure Fiske offers: whereas Hurst delivers in her early chapters a broad historical survey of women’s self-education and formal education in classical languages, Fiske addresses how women writers and scholars not trained in systematic Greek philology or not having Greek at all nevertheless used and responded to Hellenism (and to a lesser extent, Roman antiquity) to make their own space as creative artists and scholars. As Fiske notes in her introduction, “the patchwork classical education that women acquired outside of institutions and their tendency to bypass grammatical technicalities for ‘the general sense’ also engendered a way of knowing that differed productively from the classical inheritance of men” (8). While Fiske acknowledges that these women “did feel deeply alienated from classical literature because of their lack of formal training,” nevertheless “this sense of alienation” made the classics “so alluring and such a powerful means of self-expression” (9). It was, in other words, the very foreignness of classical languages and history that invited not only ideological resistance but also a chance for selective identification and even free play.

<3> In Fiske's hands, Victorian Hellenism is thus redefined to include a potentially much fuller range of authors and texts, beyond the usual female suspects such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, and Jane Harrison. In less capable hands, this opening-up of the interpretive landscape might have resulted in a book-length pastiche of references to classical texts by a host of major and minor Victorian women authors; but Fiske's approach is blessedly deeper than it is broad. Though she gives a sense of the range of possible subjects in her introduction, her selection of authors and texts is well-tailored to her approach, and in fact includes two of those usual suspects, Eliot and Harrison, who are dealt with in productive new ways. In chapters focusing on sensation culture and Victorian productions of Euripides' *Medea*, on Charlotte Brontë's Belgian essays and *Villette*, on George Eliot's *Romola*, and on a scholarly dispute between Jane Harrison and a fellow classicist, M. R. James, Fiske uses periodical and scholarly literature, letters, public lectures, plays, and novels to explore "Heretical" female representations of Greek antiquity.

<4> Fiske's chapters on Brontë and Harrison strike this reader as the strongest in *Heretical Hellenism*, and they also complement each other best. Both chapters present a woman writer embedded in an agonistic relationship with a male authority figure, and both women articulate their resistance to this male interlocutor by referencing contemporary debates about classicism. In Brontë's case, the male interlocutor is Constantin Heger, her French teacher at the Belgian *pensionnat* where she lived between 1842 and 1844, and in Harrison's it is M. R. James, the Cambridge provost, scholar of classical Greek, and celebrated writer of ghost stories. In each case, Fiske shifts fluidly between biographical or social contexts and close readings. Although she does not draw attention to the parallel, there is a further common element crucial to these confrontations between female writers and male authority figures: there is a second male author to whose work the female writer makes recourse to develop claims and to validate her authority. Brontë's exterior resource is the work by Thomas de Quincey and other male authors on classical subjects that she encountered reading the *Edinburgh Review* and similar publications during the 1830s; for Harrison, it is her friend Gilbert Murray, the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford University and an authority in the classical field she felt least confident about, Greek philology. With the use of these "authoritative" male resources, a theme touched on by Hurst is developed further and made more concrete by Fiske: the anxiety of these women writers in dealing with their lack of Greek (in the case of Brontë) or their perceived lack of *sufficient* Greek (in the case of Harrison).

<5> The Brontë chapter merits particular praise. Here, Fiske describes how ongoing debates in leading 1830s periodicals about the "Homeric Question" became a resource for Brontë's resistance to Heger's Aristotelian aesthetic of formal unity. Brontë used writings by de Quincey about the recently translated German scholarship attesting to the oral origins of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* to articulate a counter-aesthetic centered on a Romantic notion of authorial creativity that precedes language. In reading "the dialogue between her essay[s] and [Heger's] comments on [them]," Fiske ably shows how Brontë "acts out at a level of personal conflict broader cultural debates about Greece's modern legacy" (68). Fiske goes on to show impressive historical range, bringing into her discussion other debates about the relation of the novel to Greek tragedy and the status of realism in nineteenth-century fiction. There are, however, some weaker moments that arrive late in this otherwise strong chapter. In a section on Brontë's essayistic retelling of the *Electra* myth, Fiske argues unconvincingly that Brontë's incorporation of details from all three

fifth-century B.C. Greek tragedians constitutes a “unique aesthetics of fragmentation” (99). It is not clear that such a breakthrough necessarily emerges from this relatively unremarkable “intermingling of literary texts” (99).

<6> Fiske’s wonderfully titled chapter on Harrison, “The Daemon Archives,” describes how in a 1916-17 scholarly controversy with James about the allegedly “daemonic” or “Dionysian” nature of John the Baptist, Harrison worked through career-long anxieties about her philological knowledge, eventually coming to assert “the privileged insight of her ‘sympathetic imagination’” (151). As Fiske notes, Harrison characteristically used archaeological and art-historical information as evidence rather than just literary artifacts from antiquity. By presenting this information through a self-consciously idiosyncratic voice “independent of institutional structures,” she sought to undermine “the ideological, religious, and institutional foundation of classical tradition” defended by James (178; 151). While Harrison’s friend Murray first appears as an authoritative male voice in support of her critical project, in a touching afterword Fiske shows how Harrison later became disillusioned by Murray’s jingoistic use of the classics to defend England’s “mission” in the Great War.

<7> The other two chapters in *Heretical Hellenism* differ in methodology. The first chapter, on “Victorian Medea,” correlates the rising popularity of Euripides’ play with the advent of mid-Victorian sensation culture, “bringing to spectacular prominence the image of the violent, manipulative, and socially deviant woman” (25). Fiske shows that as public attitudes towards women murderers changed later in the century, so did the reception and performance of *Medea*. Specifically, she locates “a shift from the sensational thrill of spectacle, which tended to objectify aberrant women, to an interest in the murderess’s subjectivity” (46). The increasing sympathy shown for these vengeful women was, as Fiske claims, further increased later in the century with Augusta Webster and Amy Levy’s poetic adaptations of the Medea story. The upward arc of social progress sketched out here appears oddly unswerving, but Fiske is resourceful in finding evidence to support a general late-Victorian trend towards subordinating “spectacle to [female] subjectivity” (47).

<8> While Fiske’s discussion of non-“literary” materials in this book is consistently acute, her discussion of two canonical novels, *Romola* and *Villette*, is less successful. The chapter on *Romola* makes the solid point that with the negative example of Tito, Eliot resists the “humanistic legacy whereby ancient knowledge was reduced to an instrument of egotism and social privilege” (148). Greek learning in *Romola*’s disinterested, unspoiled hands becomes a counter-example to Tito’s, and a vehicle for the moral sympathy that Eliot valued as a constitutive element of civilization. Implicitly, *Romola*’s relationship with Tito suggests another agonistic dynamic between a female creative figure and a restrictive male, but this point is not exploited fully, and much of the chapter is limited to a somewhat repetitive set of close readings of passages. In addition, in an earlier section on *Villette* and the *Odyssey*, Fiske seems to stretch too hard to draw connections between these works. At one point, a reference in *Villette* to the characters of Christian and Hopeful from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* is described as “not unlike that of Calypso on her remote, timeless island,” thus making one intertext stand in awkwardly for another (107).

<9> Despite these flaws, *Heretical Hellenism* is valuable not only for what it accomplishes but for how it points toward a new area of inquiry in Victorian “reception studies.” Fiske demonstrates that nineteenth-century women’s relation to classical antiquity cannot be properly understood by examining only the work of those rare individuals who were able to learn Greek. As she shows, though most women were denied a classical education, many of them constructed mediated versions of Hellenism that laid claim to, refigured, and challenged a male cultural legacy. With Brontë, Eliot, and Harrison, Fiske deals with well-known figures, but future scholarship might deal with less familiar writers who engaged with Hellenism in popular genres and venues such as historical fiction, women’s magazines, and even evangelical fiction. The book is equally valuable for its methodology: Fiske presents Victorian Hellenism as a field of ideological conflict, and she describes with obvious relish the give and take of debate between women and their male interlocutors. While Fiske accurately presents the world of Victorian Hellenism as vastly unequal, with male institutional authority set against marginalized female resistance, female and male figures alike emerge not simply as vehicles for ideas but as idiosyncratic, often delightfully pugnacious human beings. Fiske’s nuanced and sympathetic historical sensibility is evident throughout in this book’s subtle interplay of lives, texts, and ideas.

Endnotes

(1) Simon Goldhill, *Who Needs Greek?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 297 (italics in original), quoted in Charles Martindale, “Introduction: Thinking Through Reception,” Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas, ed., *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006): 11.(^)