CHAPTER 3

“An Open Account from the Past Always Needs to be Settled”: Chimaira (2001) / The Ancient Curse (2010) and Receiving the Past

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The fictional works of Valerio Massimo Manfredi are rarely subject of academic papers with exception perhaps for two articles written on his Alexander Trilogy (1998).1 Writing from a historical and archaeological perspective, Manfredi’s novels are thoroughly researched and although at times certain poetic liberties are taken and deviations made in terms of characters and events, his fictional works seek to present a ‘real’2 or authentic historical narrative. In the “Author’s Note” following Alexander: The Ends of the Earth, Book 3 of the Alexander Trilogy, Manfredi takes great care to explain the process he followed when writing the novels, the historical inaccuracies and the ‘deviations’ made for dramatic effect:

My aim in writing this ‘romance’ of Alexander in a contemporary style has been to recount, in the most realistic and involving way possible, one of the greatest adventures of all time. I have always sought, however, to remain as faithful as possible to the sources, both literary and material.3

In many respects, Manfredi’s approach to historical fiction aligns itself with Alessandro Manzoni’s idea that, the historical novelist is not only required to

2 ‘real’ in the sense that history can never be recounted ‘as-it-really-was’ because of the gaps that exist in the present. The over-reliance on the positivistic view adopted by many an Anglophone classicist is a point that Charles Martindale both discusses and criticises in his work Redeeming the Text (1993) and takes up again in Classics and the Uses of Reception (2006). The past will always be recounted from a certain perspective and when dealing with the ancient past, these gaps in perspective can only be filled by the data at the researcher’s disposal and the deductions that are made from that data.
write “the bare bones of history, but something richer, more complete. In a way you want him to put the flesh back on the skeleton that is history”. Browne and Kreiser maintain that although it may be the historian’s task to separate truth from fiction, it is as important for him / her to discover the truth in fiction.

Although the same research method used in the writing of his historical novels may apply to Manfredi’s popular narratives, they do tend to present a challenge both for the literary scholar and for the general reader, often being described as ‘a guilty pleasure’ by writers and readers of historical fiction alike. However, looking beyond what may be ‘lost-in-translation’, the difficulty faced by readers when approaching these works of popular fiction is Manfredi’s re-invention of the historical artefact. In novels such as *Chimaira* (2001) / The *Ancient Curse* (2010), *L’oracolo* (1990) / The *Oracle* (2005), *La torre della solitudine* (1996) / The *Tower* (2006) and *Il faraone delle sabbie* (1998) / *Pharaoh* (2008), historical artefacts and their (his)stories are transported through time and allowed to speak new stories that resonate from the past in the present. In these works of popular fiction, Manfredi taps into the past through the use of original archaeological artefacts, historical events and texts that relate back to an authentic historical incident but which are, in fact, shaped and re-interpreted to create a new (hi)story that defies historicism. If one acknowledges Martindale’s view that the past and present are ‘always implicated in each other’ (Martindale, 2006: 5%), in as much as the narrative of present is shaped by the resonating narrative created by the ‘text’ of the past, then in terms of Manfredi’s popular novels, rather than careless inaccuracy, this bending and realignment of the historic allows for the interrogation of the present in its

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6 A possible reason for this statement could be that the majority of Manfredi’s Anglophone readers would be accessing his works in translation and not in the original Italian. Most of Manfredi’s works are translated by his wife, Christine Feddersen-Manfredi with the exception of the *Alexander Trilogy* translated by Iain Halliday.
7 To the historical purist, this re-invention of the historical artefact could be considered a form of looting, as the text or object is displaced from its original historical and locational space, thus situating it in a time-space limbo. It is however this time-space limbo that allows of the reception of the classic to speak through its ancient past to the present. Reception itself thus becomes akin to looting.
8 The term historicism for the purposes of this discussion is taken to mean the reconstruction and retelling of the past ‘as-it-really-was’.