Some Concluding Thoughts

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The introduction of this book stated that there are multiple ways in which ancient Greeks, Romans and Jews feature in popular fiction. It is to be hoped that the essays in this volume, featuring both direct reception (straight retellings of ancient tales, books set in classical times and settings) and less direct influences (texts and elements drawn from the ancient world but recast in the modern), have demonstrated this. It is now time to examine briefly, therefore, what conclusions may be drawn as a result of these studies as to the nature of these receptions.

Firstly, the sheer range of receptions is notable. Although this book references only a tiny, albeit representative, number of works, these works cover, to name just some variations: both Greece and Rome, from the Bronze Age to the late Empire; geographical locations that span the whole of the ancient world; varied genres; and different target audiences. Just as Classical Studies is the examination of an entire culture and period (or more accurately cultures and periods), so the receptions of the ancient world in popular fiction are myriad in style, content, genre and ideology.

Secondly, this output is not only striking in terms of breadth but also in absolute figures. To give some idea of just how many books are available, with regard to historical fiction alone, the ancient Roman section of amazon.com lists more than 13,693 works; a search for ancient Greece within fiction produces 10,897. Ancient Egypt, by way of contrast, yields only 7,854, and “medieval England” only 8,099, in both cases a noticeable drop. While examination of Amazon listings is, of course, not a scientific method of judging popularity,1 they do reflect trends clearly enough for our purposes. The ancient world has held, and continues to hold, a fascination for both readers and writers, and one that seems more attractive than many other historical periods.

Why then, does the ancient world hold such an abiding allure for authors and their audiences? Some reasons present themselves readily; both Rome and Greece are perceived to have provided the cultural backdrop for modern

1 Not all the listings, for example, are even of popular fiction; some classical texts in translation are also included, as well as some works of non-fiction; other works with very limited connected to the ancient world also seem to have slipped in.
Western society, and as such, are regarded as known and familiar. This perception of familiarity stems from awareness of ancient physical remains and belief in classical influences on language, education, societal values, as well as a feeling of shared heritage, particularly in the case of Britain, conquered and settled by ancient Roman ancestors.

These aspects all did undoubtedly influence the modern world. Similarly the traditions of Jews and Christians, for all the secularity of the modern world, are recognisable both as accepted mainstream religions, and as part of that same cultural fabric, especially in the context of the Greco-Roman world, where they are often presented in popular culture as heroic ancestors of Western society. Perhaps the strongest influence on the average twenty-first century global citizen's feeling of familiarity with ancient society, is the depiction of that world in modern popular culture, particularly on screen. The popularity of both ancient Rome, the great military power (identified according to need with ideas as wide-ranging as imperialist, oppressive, fascist, communist, anti-Christian, corrupt, grimy, sophisticated, romantic, and immersed in luxury and wealth), and Greece (natural home of culture, homosexuality, gods, heroes, mythology, freedom, democracy and war against the barbarian East), has created a proprietary mindset whereby the classical world is familiar and recognisable. Films based upon early Christianity (The Robe, The Greatest Story Ever Told, Ben-Hur etc.) have long captured the popular imagination, and the trend shows no sign of slowing. It is, in fact, perhaps coming to saturation point, as the explosion of movies and television programmes set in the ancient world over the past fifteen years testifies. Movies focussing on classical mythology (Troy (2004), Clash of the Titans (2010), The Immortals (2011), Wrath of the Titans (2012), The Legend of Hercules (2014) Hercules (2014), Percy Jackson (2010, 2013)) and series such as HBO-BBC's Rome (2005–7) and Starz' Spartacus (2010–13) dominate the popular cultural consciousness, and this impacts on the novels being written as well. In the case of the most recent works, books and movies have been produced almost in tandem, creating a fascinating interplay of influences between the two media that can be seen for example in the fanfiction the (combined) works have produced.

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2 See Peter N. Stearns, Western Civilization in World History (NY and London: Routledge, 2003) 38–44 for the limitations and selective nature of the connection between the ancient classical world and Western civilization.

3 The Hunger Games trilogy of novels was published in 2008, 2009 and 2010; the movies were released in 2012 and 2013 and 2015. For examples of fanfiction, see https://www.fanfiction .net/book/Hunger-Games/ (accessed 14/04/2015).