



BOOK REVIEW:

*Ancient Greece and Rome in Modern Science  
Fiction: Amazing Antiquity*

*Noah Slowik*

Clare, Ross. *Ancient Greece and Rome in Modern Science Fiction: Amazing Antiquity*. Liverpool UP, 2022. ISBN: 978-180085-631-8.

The exigency for Ross Clare’s monograph comes from observing a trend of SF creators inspired by Greco-Roman culture. Through “classical reception studies” (1), Clare traces numerous examples of SF that implement stories and figures from antiquity. His objective is essentially to identify texts that fit the parameters of this phenomenon and to examine what the authors’ use of “ancient-SF” (Clare’s hyphenated term) says about the legacy of classical thought in popular culture. Ultimately, *Ancient Greece and Rome in Modern Science Fiction: Amazing Antiquity* (2022) is a handy reference book for tracking the various SF texts that deploy this adaptive type of narrative device. All the while, Clare provides in-depth coverage of the most exemplary cases that match his criteria, rather than encyclopedically listing every example that counts as ancient-SF.

As with any good project of this kind, the texts Clare chooses to analyze range from mainstream favorites to deep-cut hidden gems. That is, he includes in his study both works that most people will be familiar with, whether they are scholars of either topic or not, and some works that few people have likely heard of, unless they are specifically seeking how ancient Greece and Rome appear in SF. The four main chapters in Clare’s book are organized by medium (two chapters for literature, one on film and TV, and the last chapter for video games). Perhaps to be expected, the arguably most niche works are included in the literature chapters – the first on early- to mid-twentieth-century literary SF and the second on late-twentieth to twenty-first-century SF literature.

From chapter one onwards, Clare takes us through curated deep dives into concise case studies on works that incorporate antiquity as part of their worlds. At times, such as with the first novel he covers, Clare takes his examples from lesser-known works by famous authors. Though Arthur Conan Doyle is likely more recognizable for his Sherlock Holmes series, Clare instead draws attention to the novel *The Maracot Deep* (1928), which is one of the first of several SF tales about underwater expeditions to discover the lost city of Atlantis. Clare's analysis of this novel demonstrates his methodology of allowing the most prevalent aspects of the texts to remain the focal point, even as his discussion underpins the main thread of classical studies. For Doyle's novel, he focuses on the fictional explorers' surprise at the Atlanteans' dark complexion (Clare 10–12). Thus, while ancient-SF is the umbrella category binding each of these cases together, Clare's emphasis on the role that race, for example, plays in Doyle's novel nonetheless lets the text speak for itself as well. As a further example of Clare's capacious application of his framework, in addition to the racial component to the story of Atlantis, there are also women figures from Greco-Roman culture that SF writers of this period evidently turned to for inspiration. Authors employed the likes of the Amazons, Circe, or Medusa, such as in John Russell Fearn's *The Golden Amazon* (1944), Henry Kuttner's *Mask of Circe* (1948), or Theodore Sturgeon's *To Marry Medusa* (1958). Clare wrestles with the tendency of male writers of this kind of mid-century ancient-SF literature to depict women solely as villainous. That is, practically any time a female Greek or Roman figure is adapted into SF of this time and medium, their purpose is to instill fear into the hearts of men. Clare does not offer an explanation as to why women are portrayed this way, but he nonetheless tracks the problematic impulse.

The following chapter also extends the engagement with the genre of ancient-SF literature, although the progression in chronology alone is not a drastic enough change to warrant a new chapter altogether, which leads Clare to number this chapter 1.5 instead. As chapter 1 laid a lot of the groundwork on Clare's key themes and methods, the beginning of this subsequent chapter comes off as its direct continuation, arranged by SF novels of the 1980s and 90s that were particularly interested in adapting Roman militarism. This leads to first presenting the analyzed work as almost entirely wrapped up in hyper-masculinity and gratuitous violence, but then offering a contrast in the next section which examines another set of novels that use ancient Rome to potentially critique rampant colonialism and imperialism rather than celebrate those horrendous ideologies. In his discussion, Clare reads texts such as Jerry Pournelle and S. M. Stirling's *Go Tell the Spartans* (1991) or John Ringo's *The Last Centurion* (2008) as ancient-SF adaptations of the Roman military that are ambiguous as to whether they are praising or critiquing right-wing politics. Similar to his analysis of race and gender in earlier works, Clare acknowledges the prominence of nationalism in some of these SF novels and offers a few interpretations of their underlying ideological purposes. While Clare does not attempt to explain the reasoning behind such troubling -isms and the phobias of the right that are present in this literature – using his knowledge of classical antiquity – he nevertheless offers valuable insight into the connections between ancient Rome and SF. Through a less distressing case study, Dan Simmons's duology of *Ilium* (2003) and *Olympos* (2005), Clare concludes his literary examples and examines how these two novels can be seen to adapt the Greek

gods in a way that calls for questioning and rethinking standard Western notions of spirituality – an apt theme to end on for “when we move from page to screen” (Clare 105).

Somewhat unsurprisingly, the roots of ancient-SF film and television are grounded in familiar content represented in the literature. For example, Clare opens this next chapter with several 1950s films that incorporate Amazon-like women into their audiovisual worlds. Further illustrating parallels between the varying mediums, he notes ancient-SF cinema’s tendency to adapt Atlantis as readily as the Amazons (Clare 115–17). From there, however, Clare begins to trace how SF implements the ancient world in ways that are relatively specific to screen media, starting with monsters in the King Kong and Godzilla universes. In the grand scheme of the book, this organization emphasizes the way different mediums generate particular opportunities to represent various aspects of antiquity through futuristic science and technology. Clare’s attention to form in addition to content shows that genre is a feature of ancient-SF, disguised as a bug in plain sight. My takeaway from Clare is that the vehicle by which the story is delivered has a profound effect on the reception of the science fictional elements within the tale itself.

Famous highlights in the film and TV chapter include *Star Trek* (1966–69), *Doctor Who* (1963–89), *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and *Star Wars* (1977). By addressing such popular franchises, Clare has the tall task of implicitly acknowledging and contributing to the plethora of ink that has already been spilt on these resonant universes. While much has already been said about these renowned examples, his stress on the influence of ancient Greece and Rome underscores how pervasive and embedded classical antiquity is in SF. It seems so prominent, in fact, that Clare even goes on to explain the ways in which ancient-SF appears in some children’s and young adult TV and film. To wrap up the chapter, he closely analyzes the use of Greek mythology in the *Battlestar Galactica* (2004–2009) television series (Clare 166–73). Although the space opera show does not advertise itself as preoccupied with Greek religion, I would find it difficult to watch it as anything but that after reading Clare’s elucidation.

Clare concludes his analysis with a chapter on video games, the newest of the various media he discusses. Opening with a defense of a burgeoning form that is still in the process of gaining scholarly reputation, Clare acknowledges that “humanities academics have really only just begun to devote serious time and effort to understanding games, compared with other pop-culture media” (176–77). After a brief overview of the function of video games in general, he theorizes how interactivity works uniquely within ancient-SF works. The first few of Clare’s examples actually date back to the 1980s, thus simultaneously providing an interesting history of the rapidly developing medium in addition to analyzing the games’ relevance to classical reception studies. In the latter half of his chapter on ancient-SF video games, Clare takes a closer look at three examples from the twenty-first century: *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), the *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007–2012), and *Assassin’s Creed: Odyssey* (2018). Through these three representatives, he studies how games afford opportunities to convey the ancient world in a manner previously unimaginable within the restrictions of preexisting media.

Overall, I find that *Ancient Greece and Rome in Modern Science Fiction: Amazing Antiquity* may be both entertaining and useful whether you want an

introduction to ancient-SF or if you are looking to write more about an example that has not yet been extensively covered. Personally, there are no other instances of Greece or Rome in SF I can think of that Clare did not include, so I am not disappointed that “your favorite SF story might well not be here” (5), as he forewarns in the introduction. Another reviewer, however, found it necessary to note that Clare omits a “fairly obvious classical allusion” (Cousins 102) from a certain episode of *Doctor Who* in his review. Although it is quite a specific example left out, I sympathize with this reviewer’s impulse because if a complete list of all uses of classical antiquity in SF is not included here, then where else should it be?

Clare humbly admits in a footnote of the introduction to referencing online resources like Wikipedia and IMDb “in those early days of source-locating” (5). I wonder about the possibility of including a subsection in the bibliographic information for a comprehensive record – to the author’s knowledge – of ancient-SF to date, even if the case is not referenced in the text. Such a catalog could have been a way to address the other reviewer’s concerns and provide a source for future scholars to pick up the project where Clare leaves off. Nonetheless, in this monograph, he has already addressed what must surely be a majority of examples fitting the criteria to count as ancient-SF. So, regardless of whether an extensive inventory is necessary here, the criticism Clare delivers for the texts he does consider is thorough and a terrific classical perspective to bring to the field of SF studies.

*Biography:* Noah Slowik (he/him) is a Graduate Teaching Assistant and a second-year English PhD student at the University of Delaware. He has previously reviewed Sarah Annes Brown’s *Shakespeare and Science Fiction* for volume 10, issue 1 of *Fafnir*. In November 2024, he presented at the Midwest Modern Language Association on “Theorizing *Forbidden Planet* as a Science Fiction Adaptation of Shakespeare.” His current scholarly research interest is studying the ways speculative fiction creators incorporate historical figures from scientific revolutions into their works.

## Works Cited

Cousins, Rick. “When Strange New Worlds Are Strange Old Worlds.” Review of *Ancient Greece and Rome in Modern Science Fiction: Amazing Antiquity* by Ross Clare. *Science Fiction Studies*, Mar. 2024, pp. 102–04.