

“Print the Legend”?: Epic Meets Western in John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*

In 1997, Mary Whitlock Blundell and Kirk Ormand’s article “Western Values, or the People’s Homer: *Unforgiven* as a Reading of the *Iliad*” blazed a trail for scholars interested in classical representations in popular culture, opening up the genre of Western film as fertile ground for examining epic themes. Since then, comparative studies of various Western films with ancient epic have appeared regularly at conferences and in print. This line of inquiry has been a particular interest of mine as well. When I recently turned my attention to John Ford’s 1962 Western *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, I once again found clear epic echoes in plot, themes, values, and characterization, connections to which Ford himself alerts us with an allusion to Achilles at a crucial point in his film. Yet despite this *Iliadic* reference, perhaps because *Liberty Valance* stands both at the end of Ford’s long career and at the twilight of the Golden Age of Westerns, the most interesting and pervasive epic parallels here are drawn not with Homer’s works, but with Virgil’s *Aeneid*. As a hero who must sacrifice his personal desires for the project of nation-building – and who cannot himself actively take part in the benefits of the society he helps to create – *Liberty Valance*’s Tom Doniphon recalls Virgil’s somewhat reluctant, duty-bound hero Aeneas. At the same time, the film’s conscious problematization of the role mythologizing plays in the advancement of civilization and in politics in particular evokes the subtle questioning of imperial propaganda that many scholars discern in Virgil’s epic, so that Ransom Stoddard, the film’s alternate heroic figure who represents the new order, in some ways works as a counterpart of the emperor Augustus himself. As such, each work serves both to glorify the heroic past that forms

the foundation of its respective civilization and to call into question how society draws on and uses that past, thereby calling attention to what has been lost in the process.

Works Cited

Blundell, Mary Whitlock and Kirk Ormand. 1997. "Western Values, or the Peoples
Homer: *Unforgiven* as a Reading of the *Iliad*." *Poetics Today* 18.4: 533-569.