

## Metal Reception(s) of Classical Antiquity: Its Place and Future Direction

Although this panel explores the various manifestations of classical material in heavy metal music – classical icons, themes and individuals in its lyrical content, Greek musical modes, the creative and technical processes behind composition, and nationalistic uses of Roman history –, its papers represent a mere preface to the wealthy store of material that engages with the Classics, both in content and methodology. This paper addresses two major questions that justify the continued study of this musical genre as it relates to classical antiquity: What other facets of the musical, lyrical and video content of metal can help us engage with the classical past in a responsible and critical manner? In what category do we place heavy metal music within the wider field of reception?

While metal first began in the 1970s as male-dominated and restricted to Western Europe and North America, today it eclipses many other musical genres in fan support and record sales, and even boasts a transnational and transcultural community with a global reach stretching far into five continents, featuring acts from Brazil, Israel, Scandinavia, Japan, Iraq and Malaysia (Wallach, Berger and Greene, ed., 2011). Metal bands, moreover, no longer principally consist of male musicians, but feature female lead vocalists who recast the material of antiquity beyond the typical metal narrative of physical violence and masculinity. For example, the Slovenian band, Shadow Icon, and its debut album *Empire in Ruins* (2011) offers a full concept album and narrative about the end of the Republic. Its female-fronted vocalist, and band lyricist, focuses on the psychological and emotional cost of the relationship between Antony and Cleopatra in the tracks “King of Kings”, “The Alliance” and “The Haunting.” “King of Kings” offers the perspective of Antony foreseeing a bright future for Caesarion whose rule over Rome

will presumably end civil strife at Rome. Furthermore, the track “Battle of Actium” offers another narrative that exclusively favors Antony’s motives for engaging in battle. Yet, unlike other metal representations of this battle such as Ex Deo’s “The Final War: Battle of Actium” (2008), with its concentration on the violence and carnage of battle, Shadow Icon’s representation instead focuses on an introspective Antony who reflects upon his personal and political decisions leading up to this decisive battle. None of the song’s narrative describes Antony’s death in violent terms, unlike the traditional battle narratives in Plutarch or Arrian. A comparative discussion of Ex Deo and Shadow Icon’s treatment of the same subject matter reveals the wide range of voices whose modern engagement with classical material is simultaneously creative, nuanced, and erudite while drawing on several sources, both historical and contemporary.

Last, I will turn to the issue of reception studies. The papers on this panel suggest that heavy metal music deserves a place in some branch of reception, but where? The current debate about the nature and definition of classical reception theory demonstrates an ongoing process and strong desire to situate classical receptions within existing theoretical frameworks of interpretation (Porter 2008, Paul 2010, Martindale 2013). Because the study of ‘reception’ in Classics is still relatively new, the overall body of interpretative approaches is continually evolving and shifting rendering its proper location in the field of Classics a problematic task. To date reception studies appear to center around research areas that favor certain periods (the Enlightenment, Victorian, early modern periods) and themes (icons of classicism), with literature and performing arts as the predominant manner of expression, namely in theater, cinema, graphic novels, gaming, and to some degree, opera and classical music.

I suggest that heavy metal does not neatly fit into any one of these categories exclusively and should, therefore, be considered its own independent branch, since its communication of classical antiquity is rather comprehensive in its use of several media. Like other forms of reception, it engages with antiquity dialogically (Martindale 2013), or in a two-way process of understanding that illuminates both antiquity and modernity, but with the use of several platforms that include not only the historical text, but also cinematic, gaming and graphic novel landscapes of Greece and Rome so prevalent in the last 20 years.

#### Works Cited

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