

Sympathy for the Roman-Americans? *Causae* and Controversy in the *Aeneid* and *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009)

Rome has long been “good to think with” in relation to the United States, including in popular political discourse and as a setting for film and television programs (e.g. Murphy 2007; Cyrino 2005). But these comparisons are not likely to be complementary, as Rome also has long served as the synecdochic villain in projects critiquing imperialism, militarism, decadence, moral corruption, and resistance to Christianity. Perhaps for this reason, the *Aeneid* has not proven popular for adaptations, as it assumes sympathy for the Trojans as proto-Romans and incorporates glorification of Roman history culminating in the ascendancy of Augustus, himself retroactively synecdochic for the Roman Empire in the modern imagination. However, as Charlotte Higgins noted in her blog on *The Guardian* online in 2009, the Sci Fi Channel’s reboot of the science fiction space opera *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-2009) bears significant structural resemblance to Vergil’s epic; Corinne Pache (2010) has further proposed how to read two of *Battlestar Galactica*’s main characters as adaptations of Aeneas and Dido.

Since *Battlestar Galactica*’s overt external point of reference is the attack against the United States on September 11, 2001 (e.g. Potter and Marshall 2008), utilizing the *Aeneid* as an underlying narrative template encourages or even assumes audience sympathy for these “Trojans,” even though their world bears the hallmarks of political and moral corruption that typically link Rome and the United States in the popular imagination. Yet as scholars have been arguing for the past two generations, the *Aeneid* is also deeply ambivalent about the Roman project (e.g. Johnson 1976 [reissued 2015]), an ambivalence that is also reflected in *Battlestar Galactica*’s integration of sympathy for its protagonists with critical examination of the American response to 9/11. This paper contributes to interpretation of both works by examining

an element of epic form that also serves an ideological function, including as a flashpoint for political controversy when myth serves as historical allegory: the cause of the world-ending catastrophe, with its implication of culpability. Like the ancient epic, *Battlestar Galactica* incorporates the concepts of divine intervention, fate, and eternal return into its narrative, which enables authors to decide when to divest humans of responsibility for all manner of actions—and when to place causation on their shoulders. This politically sensitive choice further points to similarities and differences in the conditions of reception for the first audiences for each work.

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