



Barbara Ryan and Milette Shamir, eds. *Bigger than Ben-Hur: The Book, Its Adaptations, and Their Audiences*

Barbara Ryan and Milette Shamir, eds. *Bigger than Ben-Hur: The Book, Its Adaptations, and Their Audiences*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2016. xviii, 269p., ill. ISBN 978815634034. US \$34.95.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Lew Wallace's 1880 novel, *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ*, had sold more copies than any other novel. There were over 6,000 performances of the stage play adaptation between its debut in 1899 and 1920. Both the 1925 and 1959 films were blockbusters; the 1959 film won 11 Oscars (xi). *Ben-Hur* is an immensely important and largely neglected cultural text, and this is the first essay collection to address it from many perspectives, with particular emphasis on reception.

*Bigger than Ben-Hur* collects 10 essays, a foreword, a scholarly introduction, and a coda listing *Ben-Hur* related commercial products. It analyzes many texts in what the editors (following Howard Miller) call the "*Ben-Hur* tradition" (1). Four essays focus on aspects of Wallace's novel. Six essays focus on its major adaptations: the 1899 Klaw and Erlanger play; the 1925 Fred Niblo silent film; and the 1959 MGM William Wyler film starring Charlton Heston as Judah Ben-Hur. Contributors come from literature, film studies, classics, religious studies, history, American Studies, and gender/sexuality studies.

Ryan and Shamir introduce the collection by framing *Ben-Hur* as a text that engages "lived modernity," a term coined by Édouard Glissant. For their purposes, his insight "that lived modernity is de-authorized in seats of power, yet generative of alternative narratives that draw on past events" is critical (2-3). The collection traces the ways Wallace and his adaptors negotiated (old-fashioned) romance and realism, history and modernity at different cultural moments. For example, Eran Shalev argues that the depiction of ancient Rome in *Ben-Hur* is the decadent, decaying empire, *not* the virtuous republic that inspired the founding fathers. Shamir's magnificent "Ben-Hur's Mother: Narrative Time, Nostalgia, and Progress in the Protestant Historical Romance" compellingly argues that Wallace reconciled traditional (embattled) Christian truths with modernity (including modern "higher criticism") by combining a nostalgic backward-looking story of reunion with a loving mother and a future-oriented *bildungsroman* into a single text.

The collection's greatest strength is its diverse viewpoints. For example, Hilton Obenzinger's "Holy Lands, Restoration, and Zionism in *Ben-Hur*" makes the case for the 1959 film's engagement with Cold War ideology, recasting a story of Jews oppressed by the Roman Empire as an apology for American expansionism. Jefferson J. A. Gatrall traces the career of



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the novel through the history of the Sunday School Movement. Howard Miller argues that the 1899 stage play revolutionized the audience for theater in America by bringing the rural Christians who had frowned on those “corrupting entertainments” into the fold. Thomas J. Slater tells the story of the incorporation of Hollywood and the erasure of early women film pioneers through June Mathis’s *unmade* adaptation. Ina Rae Hark does a brilliant, theoretically informed queer reading of the 1959 film, placing it in a history of religious representations and the male gaze.

David Mayer’s closing “Challenging a Default *Ben-Hur*: A Wish List” offers three untapped lenses through which to adapt this tale for our own day: (1) as a tale of savvy entrepreneurship; (2) as a tale about popular uprisings and terrorism; and (3) as a story about Iras, the neglected “adventuress” (186) whom Judah Ben-Hur abandons to marry the meek and honorable Esther. This wish list and Timur Bekmambetov’s 2016 adaptation currently in theaters make clear that this versatile, popular text has more to teach us about modern life and modern audiences.

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