

Tiberius and New Jersey, *Mietjes* and *Monsters*

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An analysis of the studies by David Rijser and Toon Van Houdt, or: how their efforts illuminate the inner workings of reception studies and illustrate their value

Classicists have become dull old geezers, typing away at dense and boring articles in their dusty offices, cut off from the real world. This is an idea that any classicist, myself included, would consider to be untrue, and yet this image of the classicist seems to arise from academic discussions about the future of the classical studies, as classicists everywhere are faced with the need to “valorise” their research and prove its worth to society. Whereas a fifteenth-century Italian humanist could garner attention and even admiration with a new manuscript he had discovered, a twenty-first century scholar is forced to watch their findings be overtaken by more economically lucrative results in other fields of research.ⁱ In response to their reduced role in society, classicists try to illustrate the value of their studies for society.

In this new era of “valorisation”, the discipline of classical reception studies has prospered. Since reception studies inquire into the “reception” of classical texts, concepts, and ideas by later eras and societies, they are ideally equipped to show how elements of our contemporary world are founded on ideas, notions, and stories from that bygone age and thus give the classics a contemporary edge. But reception studies are much more than this. Research on the reception of antiquity by people of later eras and times flourishes because “receiving antiquity” can mean so many things, and not just regarding the era in which the reception takes place – the reception of antiquity in the Renaissance is no less interesting than the reception of antiquity in modern times, despite the fact that the former topic cannot be advertised as being immediately applicable to our own society. There are many different elements from antiquity that can be adapted by later recipients, whether that be motives or passages from literary works, art styles, political ideas, or philosophical theories. Furthermore, some 1500 years have passed since “the end” of antiquity.ⁱⁱ There are countless cultures, peoples, or persons who have engaged with classical material and started a dialogue with this material. This article will review two recent studies in the field of reception, namely the publications of the accomplished scholars David Rijser and Toon Van Houdt. The two



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books – Rijser’s *Een telkens nieuwe Oudheid* and Van Houdt’s *Mietjes, monsters en barbaren* – showcase the basic tenets of reception studies, but they also illustrate the immense multiformity of the reception process and illuminate why this discipline is ideally suited to “valorise” academic research into antiquity to a larger audience.

How to receive reception studies?

Before I delve into the two publications, a short introduction to the field of reception studies is necessary.ⁱⁱⁱ Research on the heritage of the ancient world is not new, of course. Researchers from various disciplines, such as classical studies, cultural studies, art history, and philosophy, have already devoted much work to mapping the influence of antiquity in later times. In 1949, the British classicist Gilbert Highet coined the term “Classical Tradition” – from the Latin *tradere*, meaning “hand over” or “pass down”. Research on the heritage of antiquity was subsequently categorized under this term.^{iv} Within this framework of “tradition”, most researchers analysed classical elements in later literary works through the lens of antiquity,^v with the assumption that the classical literary tradition formed a singular “linear progression of ‘influence’.”^{vi} The ancient sources were seen as having a set meaning that tinkled down into later works. However, such an approach has, in Hardwick’s words, “fallen out of fashion.”^{vii} The newly coined framework of reception studies has very much been designed in reaction to the pitfalls of the model of “tradition”. Instead of a river that flows down from antiquity, reception scholars now tend to conceptualise the process of receiving antiquity as a dialogue between the recipient of the ancient world and the ancient world itself, in which both sides attain a new meaning. The process of reception not only influences the works or deeds of the recipient, but also the classical elements that are received. “The focus is no longer on the lasting influence of the ancient source but on the different meanings, functions and forces an ancient element acquires at the moment of reception.”^{viii}

In establishing this new framework of reception, scholars have looked back to influential theories of the late twentieth century for support.^{ix} Essential for what Maarten De Pourcq calls the “invented tradition”^x of classical reception studies is the literary theory of *Rezeptions-ästhetik* by Hans Robert Jauss.^{xi} In summary, Jauss’s theory posits that the meaning of a literary work is determined by the interaction between the work and its reader. The reader brings with him- or herself a set of expectations and a certain worldview, and this “horizon of expectations” influences the way in which the reader interprets the text. Equally of great use to reception scholars were the theories of Wolfgang Iser and Hans-Georg



Gadamer. The former expanded on Jauss's reader by distinguishing the "actual" reader and the "implied" reader (or the target audience of the author), while the latter emphasized that the reader's interpretation of a literary work is also influenced by the interpretations of the work's previous readers. We shall see that Rijser places special emphasis on this factor of the reception process.

The process of classical reception can thus be summarized (in general terms) as follows: a recipient – whether this be a person, group, or culture – interacts with a text, material item, or concept from antiquity. The recipient has his or her own "horizon of expectations" – grounded in the context they situate themselves in – which influences their interactions with the ancient material. This interplay between the recipient and the ancient material gives new meaning to both sides. The ancient material in some way contributes to the goals of the recipient. However, through his or her interaction with the ancient material, the recipient also lends a new meaning to said material, because a reception scholar may now contrast the context of the recipient to the "original" context of the classical material.^{xii} I deliberately define "reception" here in very abstract terms, because there are so many forms the interaction between recipient and antiquity can take. The works of Van Houdt and Rijser, which I shall now discuss, provide illustrative examples of these various ways.

Tradition and reception united

The observant reader will have noted that all of the aforementioned theories which reception scholars have taken to be the foundation for the "invented tradition" of reception studies, primarily concern the realm of literature. This is no surprise, of course, since literary theory and philology are arguably the cornerstones of classical research, alongside art history and archaeology.^{xiii} Reception of antiquity governs a far wider range of subjects than those mentioned, as we shall see, but the reader will be hard pressed to find a book that provides a more fitting introduction to the cultural dimensions of the reception of the classical world than the expansive work of David Rijser.

Rijser is very much interested in art and literature, and the scholar's definition of the reception process and methodology conform to the characteristics of that field of research. Rijser conceptualizes the reception of ancient literature and art by way of an analysis of Raphael's famous painting *School of Athens* in the introduction to his book. The ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle, walking side by side in the middle of the painting, represent the ancient world. Raphael himself and the librarian Tommaso Inghirami are visible on either side of the painting, showing that the dialogue between the cultures of the ancient world and



that of the Italian renaissance transcends time. Furthermore, as Rijser notes, Raphael explicitly paints the Graeco-Roman architecture as unfinished. For Rijser, the implication is clear: Raphael means to show that the culture of antiquity was not a self-contained phenomenon. Instead, it formed the building blocks for the Christian world – in the painting, Plato and Aristotle are shown walking towards the court of pope Julius. Thus, as Rijser explains, the painting not only illustrates how Raphael places himself and Inghirami on the same plane as the ancient philosophers – thus creating a space for interaction – but also that they aim to continue what the ancients started. With his painting, Raphael not only shows his interpretation of the ancient world, but he also holds up a mirror to antiquity (as Rijser fittingly articulates).^{xiv} The result is that the audience inspecting the painting can cognize what antiquity meant to Raphael. At the same time, this painting provides the viewer with a new understanding of antiquity itself, because they can now contrast the “present” of Raphael to the ancient past – it is this contrast that Rijser’s mirror-metaphor alludes to.

This multifaceted interaction between works of literature and art from antiquity and those from later eras forms the subject of Rijser’s studies. As a result, all of the objects of inquiry in Rijser’s expansive work are either literature or art – and Rijser occasionally makes rather daring connections between literature and art.^{xv} As with Raphael’s *School of Athens*, Rijser aims to analyze the way works of art or literature from all ages reinterpret the works from antiquity but also how their reception of ancient literature and art provides material to contrast that ancient material to. The whole book is filled with analyses of various kinds of interactions between specific works of literature or art. The levels at which recipients interact with classical material are also shown to be numerous. Rijser scrutinizes a great many “borrowings” from ancient material in postclassical works which range from narrative, to thematic, to formal, to philosophical “borrowings” – not infrequently all at once.

Rijser’s analysis of the figure of Petrarca (in the tenth chapter)^{xvi} and his interaction with antiquity nicely illustrates another cornerstone of the process of cultural reception: it never occurs in isolation. Incidents of reception are inextricably linked to cultural traditions. As posed by Jauss, the recipient of an ancient work of art or literature brings his or her own expectations to their reading of the ancient material. In the case of Petrarca, Rijser points out that the humanist’s reading of letters written by Cicero – which Petrarca himself rediscovered – as well as his own epistles addressed to Cicero, were influenced by the tradition of “letters of instruction”,^{xvii} which are didactic or philosophical in nature. Petrarca’s extensive knowledge of this tradition lead him to project the same philosophical contemplation on to Cicero’s ruminations in his *Epistulae*, and it shows in Petrarca’s own letters to Cicero. The



recipient who interacts with classical material always has an “horizon of expectations”, and here the cultural tradition of the “letter of instruction” has shaped Petrarca’s horizon of expectations in his reading and emulation of Cicero.

Furthermore, the reception of ancient material is never an end-point. Rijser shows how receptions can themselves become part of a literary tradition and thus influence later receptions of the same ancient material – building on the framework of Gadamer. Take chapter eight.^{xviii} This chapter opens the second section of the book, which takes the focus away from the classical texts to the works of Renaissance authors – the first section of the book takes the analysis of classical works as a starting point and then traces the reception of those works throughout later times. In this eighth chapter Rijser inspects the *Confessiones* of Augustine. Augustine might at first glance seem a poor fit to a discussion of the receptions of antiquity in the Renaissance. However, Rijser establishes Augustine’s writings to be both a reception of the characteristics of pagan literature and the cornerstone of a new Christian literary tradition, of which the Renaissance authors are part. On a thematic level, for example, Rijser traces the motive of a divine power that oversees a larger picture that mortal minds cannot grasp back to Homer (chapter one) and Vergil (chapter six). In both chapters, Rijser analyzes the contrast between the divine perspective and the narrower perspective of the human heroes.^{xix} Augustine’s *Confessiones*, on the other hand, shine a light on the inner thoughts of their author. Classical authors never really developed a language to explicate the inner minds of their Achilles and Aeneas.^{xx} Rijser proceeds to identify this new Augustinian theme of introspection in numerous Renaissance reception pieces – which is why his discussion of the *Confessiones* precedes the part of the book devoted to Renaissance receptions of antiquity. In this chapter, Rijser thus illustrates how receptions of ancient material influence traditions as much as they are influenced by those traditions. On the one hand, Augustine responds to the writing styles of the pagan authors. On the other hand, his adaptation of this ancient literature into a Christian framework was to influence the way later Renaissance authors received antiquity. Thus, Augustine shapes tradition just as much as he is influenced by it.

In *Een telkens nieuwe Oudheid*, reception and tradition intertwine. For Rijser, to study reception in literature or art is to study an interaction between classical material and a postclassical recipient, where the recipient reinterprets the classical material for a new context and simultaneously shines a light on the original context of the classical material. Furthermore, the study of the reception of antiquity is firmly embedded in literary traditions, which reception itself also shapes. Rijser agrees with other reception scholars in rejecting the



rigid notion of “the” classical tradition according to which the ancient material is a fixed entity with its meaning set in stone. He instead adopts a framework for tradition that bears some resemblance to the literary theory of Gadamer. Rijser considers the study of literary traditions to be essential in understanding the greater significance of classical receptions, but the notion of tradition must not predominate the research.

Antiquity and self-presentation

The main focus of *Een telkens nieuwe Oudheid* is firmly placed on culture, specifically literature and art, and the forms of classical reception that occur in that realm. Toon Van Houdt is interested in a different type of reception. *Monsters, mietjes en barbaren* illustrates the various ways in which antiquity can be used to understand or present oneself or others, or how classical concepts and ideas are used in (early) modern discourses and debates. The book elucidates the intellectual or anthropological history of Europe rather than its literary history.^{xxi} Rijser primarily devotes the first third of his book to classical works such as the *Iliad* or Plato’s *Symposium*, so that he can trace the traditions that flow forth from those works through the various receptions by later authors, and inspect how each reception reshapes tradition. Van Houdt, on the other hand, is much more interested in the discourse that surrounds the recipients of the ancient material at the moment the reception occurs.

Van Houdt clearly defines the process of reception itself in a similar manner to Rijser’s literary reception, however. He also illustrates how the interaction between the classical material and the recipient helps the recipient give new meaning to the classical material, while the recipient’s own context also functions as a mirror for the context of the material they receive. In the seventh chapter of his book^{xxii}, for example, Van Houdt discusses the academic debates on notions of homosexuality that arise in the nineteenth century. He not only illustrates how the German scholar Karl Ulrichs reinterprets the speech of Pausanias in Plato’s *Symposium* so that it illustrates a distinction between earthly love and the more divine “uranian” love – the German scholar then identifies the latter with the love between two men – but also how Ulrichs’ connection between the distinctions earthly/uranian and heterosexual/homosexual highlights the complete lack of the latter distinction in classical notions of sexuality. Furthermore, Van Houdt illustrates how processes of reception do not occur in isolation, but rather respond to certain traditions and then reshape those traditions. Karl Ulrichs follows in the footsteps of previous German scholars who have (rather clinically) analyzed the ancient customs of pederasty, and his writings have later elicited reactions from Walter Pater and John Symonds, who denounce Ulrichs’ association of homosexuality with



femininity and combine in their understanding of homosexuality the spirituality of Plato with the more masculine relationship between a young adult and his mentor in the Spartan civilization. The processes of reception as Van Houdt presents them thus function not unlike they do in Rijser's study.

This same chapter shows how Van Houdt's focus diverges from Rijser's. Ulrichs, Pater and Symonds do not necessarily communicate with the writings of Plato on a literary or artistic level. They rather seek to understand their own sexuality through reading Plato. The type of reception of antiquity Van Houdt studies is not a dialogue between various forms of art. The scholar discloses how antiquity serves to help a receiving person or group to understand, define, and present themselves or others. When Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda describes the customs of the Native Americans and connects these people to Aristotle's theory of natural slavery on the basis of their primitive nature, he means to present an image of Native Americans as naturally inferior and thus liable to be subjugated.^{xxiii} This reception does not concern the realm of literature. De Sepúlveda uses Aristotle to strengthen his arguments in actual debates on the conduct of the European colonists in the New World that were held at the time. Similarly, Hans Günther's reinterpretation of the eugenic model of Plato's *Republic*, rather than forming new literature, serves as a categorization of races which supports the rhetoric of the Nazi-party, which presented racially "pure" Arians as the superior humans.^{xxiv} The reception processes studied by Van Houdt do not take place in the realm of literature and art, as is the case with the type of reception Rijser is interested in, but in political and social discourse. Van Houdt seeks to prove that antiquity does not just serve authors and artists, but that it also has a fundamental role in the way people or groups identify themselves and others throughout European history.^{xxv}

The approach of David Rijser

Studying different types of classical reception takes different approaches. Rijser's interweaving of tradition and reception requires that the researcher establishes the ancient literary traditions that recipients respond to, and also that he takes into consideration how those recipients in turn influence subsequent receptions. Van Houdt's focus on the role of antiquity in self-identification asks for a more lateral perspective on the moment of reception, meaning that the researcher must mainly focus on the political, social, or personal context of the recipient.

Rijser divides his book into three main sections. As he explains in his introduction^{xxvi}, the first part of the book places an ancient source under scrutiny and then traces its reception



through later times. Each of these chapters takes a classical literary work as its main focus, but also fulfils a greater purpose beyond showing how later authors interacted with the classical material. These chapters establish the literary traditions that flowed forth from the selected classical works, and these established traditions are then to form the backbone of Rijser's inspection of reception processes in the two remaining sections of the book. Take the sixth chapter.^{xxvii} Here, the focus is mainly, but not exclusively, on the *Aeneid* of Vergil. Rijser focuses on a number of relevant themes in the work, which include continuity – placing the work in the tradition of Homer as well as in the context of the rule of Augustus – the contrast between the Greek and the Roman world, the contrast between the divine and the human perspective (mentioned above), and the moral ambiguity of the characters in the work. These themes are carefully chosen to illustrate the reception process as Rijser defines it. The discussion of continuity presents the *Aeneid* as a response to Homer's *Iliad*, as does the theme of divine and human perspective. The theme of moral ambiguity leads into an enquiry into later discussion on the *Aeneid*. However, Rijser also lays the foundations for later chapters. The interplay between the divine perspective and the human perspective was to be reinterpreted by Augustine, as written in chapter eight of *Een telkens nieuwe oudheid* (see above), who then creates a new Christian literary tradition of contemplative introspection. Rijser thus establishes themes here that reverberate through the later chapters of *Een telkens nieuwe oudheid* and thus lays the foundation for the thematic cohesion of his book.

In the second and third sections, the focus shifts from ancient sources to the works of those who receive these sources. I have already discussed the second part of the book, which is devoted to individual Renaissance authors, their reception of classical authors, and their place in various literary traditions (see the examples of Augustine and Petrarca above). Here Rijser inspects the reception process from the recipient's point of view. Rijser acknowledges the classical traditions of the Middle Ages when they explicitly influence the works of Renaissance authors and artists, but he avoids referencing the medieval traditions too heavily.^{xxviii} In the third section Rijser sets his sights on (early) modern authors and artists who interact with classical material. Since these (early) modern authors follow in the footsteps of their Renaissance predecessors, greater emphasis is put on the way writers, poets, artists, and musicians receive ancient material as it has been reinterpreted by their predecessors from the Renaissance. In the thirteenth chapter, for example, Rijser illustrates how Shakespeare combines in his *Romeo & Juliet* Catullan poetry and neoplatonic notions with the tradition of the sonnet, a decidedly un-classical tradition popularized by Petrarca.^{xxix} Furthermore, in these chapters Rijser frequently broadens his perspective beyond a single



reception piece, scrutinizing multiple occurrences of classical reception to illustrate how reception pieces in their turn form traditions. In the fifteenth chapter, for example, Rijser discusses both Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Vélazquez's *Las hilanderas*-painting and how an evolution can be traced in the way those works reinterpret the interplay between fiction and realism and the metapoetical dimensions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.^{xxx} In the nineteenth chapter, Rijser studies the genre of rhetoric and various discussions from antiquity to contemporary America on what the purpose of rhetoric should be.^{xxxi}

The chapter on Petrarca (see above) is also a fitting example of the various ways Rijser inspects his chosen sources. Firstly, in Petrarca's prayer to Apollo in the *Canzoniere* – a revolutionary collection of lyric poetry – in which the poet begs the ancient God to illuminate the darkened skies with his rays, Rijser identifies a statement by Petrarca. For, according to Rijser, the poet here states his intent to reinvigorate the genre of lyric poetry, which had been muddled in the Middle Ages, and return to the purer poetry of the ancients, hence the invocation of the classical god Apollo. Rijser also illustrates how Petrarca firmly grounds his poetry in the verses of Horace, arguably the most authoritative source on the short poetic form, as Rijser describes him.^{xxxii} This authority of Horace legitimizes Petrarca's supposed rejuvenation of poetry. Rijser shows the various levels on which Petrarca grounds his poetry in Horace, from the similar use of various metres, to the concrete biographical details and locations mentioned which create a sense of realism, to motives and themes, to the way in which Horace reflects the content of a poem of his in its metre. However, Rijser also points out that the Christian world in which Petrarca lives influences his interactions with Horace. As an example the scholar points to Petrarca's connecting the spring-motive in Horace to Good Friday in poem 221 of the *Canzoniere* – the date is explicitly mentioned, as Rijser points out. Furthermore, Rijser traces the introspective and contemplative undertones of the *Canzoniere* – emphasized programmatically in the first poem – back to Augustine's *Confessiones*. Rijser thus both very closely inspects passages of the *Canzoniere* in form and content and also casts a wider perspective on the place of the work in literary traditions.

The approach of Toon Van Houdt

Van Houdt focuses on a different kind of classical reception, and his book has a different approach from Rijser's. Whereas the Dutch scholar divides his book into three sections that each take a different approach to studying cultural receptions of antiquity, Van Houdt focuses on the role of antiquity in discourses of (self-)identification in (early) modern times. His chapters all study the reception of antiquity from the perspective of the life and times of the



recipient. At the start of each chapter, Van Houdt introduces (one of) his recipients, or the discussions in which the recipients participate. Thus, Van Houdt's chapters logically place far more emphasis on the context of the recipients than on the context of the received works of concepts. Furthermore, since Van Houdt, unlike Rijser, is not primarily focused on literary or artistic receptions of antiquity but rather on the way recipients conceptualize their world by means of antiquity, the material studied by Van Houdt does not primarily belong to the realms of literature and art. Instead, Van Houdt inquires into classical concepts or worldviews and their new meanings in the (self-)identification of the recipient.

The fourth chapter of *Mietjes, monsters en barbaren* is an excellent example of Van Houdt's approach.^{xxxiii} The Flemish scholar immediately establishes the classical object of the receptions he will study in this chapter. It is not a work of art of literature, nor a literary theme or style. This chapter studies the role of classical humoralism in the medical and ethnical theories of various scholars between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Little time is spent dwelling on the "original" humoralism of antiquity. After a short introduction to the basic framework of the four humors, Van Houdt immediately turns his attention to Andreas Vesalius and his reinterpretation of Galenus's classical medical theories. The ideas of Galenus are discussed insofar as they factor into the theories and practises of Vesalius, not on their own merits. The same approach is applied to the theories of other medical scholars discussed in this chapter, such as Juan Luis Vives's and Georgius Vivienus's division of the sexes, in which the various humors function to explain the natural temperament of men and women, or Carolus Linnaeus's humoral division of races in his *Systemae naturae*. The theories of the recipients are the main focus, rather than those of the classical thinkers whose ideas the recipients reshape for their own worldviews.

The received classical material thus consists mostly of ideas and notions, rather than literary motives. When Van Houdt inspects the Aristotelian elements of Vives's and Vivienus's divisions of the sexes, he discusses Aristotle's theory of the *animale imbecillum* as Vives uses it in his *De officio mariti*. Van Houdt does not necessarily need to compare the style of Vives' work to Aristotle's. He illustrates the integration of Aristotelian ideas into Vives' early modern worldview, rather than the integration of Aristotle's literary motives into the *De officio mariti*. This does not mean that Van Houdt eschews closer inspection of passages from the works of his recipients or their classical forbearers. When Petrus Cunaeus attempts to console his depressed colleague Caspar Barlaeus (this is also discussed in the aforementioned fourth chapter), who has determined an overabundance of black bile to be the cause of his melancholy, he refers to a specific passage of Aristotle's *Problemata physica*.

Van Houdt presents the passage to the reader and then explains the relationship between depressed melancholy and periods of (almost divine) inspiration that Aristotle implies there. Unlike Rijser, however, Van Houdt has no need to dissect the passage on the basis of its form and style. The passage illustrates an Aristotelian notion that informs Cunaeus's understanding of the melancholy of his friend, and that notion is the object of Van Houdt's study.^{xxxiv} Similarly, Van Houdt's discussion on the postal stamps printed under the rule of Benito Mussolini – and how these constitute a new variant on the coins that were minted by Roman emperors as well as what the function of the quotations from famous Roman authors on those new stamps was – does not simply revolve around the formal characteristics of the stamps in relation to their numismatic forbears, but is rather geared towards illustrating the role of those stamps in Mussolini's political program that presents him as a new kind of emperor, equal to, or better even than August.^{xxxv}

Some attention must also be given to the structure of Van Houdt's book. Each of his chapters is designed in such a way that it can be read on its own and presupposes little to no knowledge of the content of other parts of the book. This design prevents Van Houdt from bringing the overarching themes and traditions between the various cases of reception to the fore as much as Rijser does in his book. This is not to say, however, that *Mietjes, monsters en barbaren* lacks cohesion. On the contrary, Van Houdt has cleverly selected themes for the book's four sections – the discovery of the New World, notions of health and temperament, the new ideas on sexuality in the eighteenth century, and the role of antiquity in the political agendas of the main political powers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – that show an inherent coherence. As Van Houdt explains in his introduction, all of the debates studied in his book revolve around fundamental binary oppositions, such as the identification of the Self and the Other, the division between civilized and uncivilized, between healthy and unhealthy, or moral integrity and depravedness.^{xxxvi} Furthermore, *Mietjes, monsters en barbaren* often presents themes that subtly return in later chapters. Physiognomy, or the correlation between physical refinement and moral integrity, is the major focus of the fifth chapter,^{xxxvii} but Van Houdt illustrates its relevancy elsewhere too – examples include, but are not limited to, the opinions of Christoffel Columbus and Amerigo Vespucci on the moral integrity of the Native American tribes^{xxxviii} and the many manifestations of racial physiognomy in the ideology of the Nazi party.^{xxxix}

This subtler thematic cohesion provides the book with unity, and at the same time makes it slightly more accessible to a larger audience than Rijser's study. Both authors clearly mean for their books to be read by an audience beyond scholars of the classics, as stated in

their introductions. Overall, *Mietjes, monsters en barbaren* is slightly more successful than *Een telkens nieuwe Oudheid*. Rijser is to be commended for his effort to keep the wider audience up to speed by giving each work of art or literature a concise introduction, and his energetic writing style betrays a profound enthusiasm for the works he discusses. *Mietjes, monsters en barbaren*, however, has broader subject matter and is just as readable in chunks. Readers who are not willing to read the entire book are given the opportunity to read those chapters that catch their interest without much trouble, and if they have little interest in the topic of a particular chapter, another chapter may well offer them something more stimulating. Rijser's chapters each treat a specific subject, but the reader who skips chapter eight – on Augustine's *Confessiones* – for example, might have some difficulty with fully understanding some of the other chapters of the book's second part, since this eighth chapter establishes the Christian literary traditions that reverberate through the entire second part of *Een telkens nieuwe oudheid* (and beyond).^{xl}

The Classics are cool again

The greatest merit of *Een telkens nieuwe oudheid* and *Mietjes, monsters en barbaren* is undoubtedly the way they present antiquity. The ancient Greek and Latin languages are long dead, and the cultures that surrounded those languages have passed away. Classicists furiously combat the dwindling prominence of the classical studies, and reception studies are among the most crucial tools for researchers who are faced with the necessity to prove the worth of their research to the rest of the world. To Van Houdt and to Rijser, however, reception studies are much more than a simple tool in the struggle against obsolescence. They have absolutely proven their worth,^{xli} a sentiment I wholeheartedly agree with (especially after reading *Mietjes* and *Oudheid*). Both authors recognize the futility of lingering on the framework of “the Classical Tradition” that was cultivated by Hightet. Instead, they illustrate how the processes of reception give the classical world a new shape, a new identity, and thus, new life in the ideologies or works of the recipient. Rijser's final chapter^{xlii} makes a strong case, albeit somewhat implicitly, for the worth of reception studies and how they keep the classics alive. Rijser presents the figure of A.E. Houseman – whom, by way of clever anticipation, he has already mentioned in the introduction to his second chapter – and his rigid division between classical studies, which are to be strictly philological and are to avert any sort of reinterpretation of the classical source on the one hand, and Houseman's own poetical writings on the other. Rijser illustrates the paradoxical nature of such a division by analyzing Houseman's philological efforts and his poems as well as the play *Invention of Love* by Tom

Stoppard, in which Houseman is presented as struggling to uphold his philosophy while he teaches Horace to his students. The passage from Stoppard that Rijser reads is furthermore illustrative of the reception process. Stoppard interprets Houseman, who, much as it is against his will, is in the process of interpreting Horace, and he struggles to read the classical poetry in a purely philological manner.^{xliii} The ideal of holding on to the Classical Tradition and avoiding the realm of reception studies seems almost destructive.

Rijser presents reception as an inevitability. Any work of art or literature that engages with themes or styles from the ancient Greek and Roman cultures is going to reinterpret that culture. In doing so, the recipients respond to tradition – *a* tradition, not *the* tradition – and subsequently reshape that tradition and the ways later recipients will interpret the “same” classical material. This inevitable process is not presented as something that dilutes the essence of the classical material, an idea Houseman deeply feared. It is not a bad thing that antiquity is not a rigidly definable entity, and Rijser even postulates that antiquity did not truly end. The scholar proves how the classics have been a constant factor in the evolution of our European cultures. Rijser also makes a strong case for the value of reception studies. He observes a conflict in the humanities between the legacy of postmodernism, which left all meaning to the judgement of the reader or viewer and thus totally relative, and a desire by scholars to recuperate some sense of cultural cohesion. The “prism of reception and tradition”^{xliv} allows scholars to mediate between both extremes. Individual processes of reception illustrate the importance of the recipient in giving meaning to classical material, while the traditions that form around the individual and their fellow recipients give our cultures cohesion.^{xlv}

Since Van Houdt similarly conceptualizes the process of reception as an interplay between the interpretation of the recipient and the traditions in which the recipient is situated, his book proves the value of reception studies and the classics in general as much as Rijser does. Van Houdt illustrates the latter on a different, and perhaps more fundamental, level than Rijser. Whereas the Dutch scholar focuses his attention on the continual evolution of antiquity throughout European literature and art, his Flemish colleague illustrates that antiquity has always been a fundamental cornerstone in our understanding of our own identity and that of others. I shall simply cite Van Houdt’s own subtitle, since it eclipses any paraphrase I can conjure. *Mietjes, monsters en barbaren* illustrates “how we use classical antiquity to understand ourselves”. Reception studies allow us to see that cornerstone of our self-understanding.

The books present a very hopeful image of antiquity. Its heritage constantly evolves, is

continually reshaped in new eras, but antiquity is also a beacon that we – Europeans – invariably return to for support, something that helps us understand ourselves and the world around us. Those that are interested in art and literature, but feel that the classical arts are dusty and out of fashion, should definitely read *Een telkens nieuwe oudheid*. Rijser’s carefully selected themes and attention to detail leave the reader with a cohesive overview of the cultural heritage of antiquity, and the memorable sneak peeks at some of the highlights of Western culture will hopefully implore the reader to inspect some of those great works for themselves. For those readers to whom neither antiquity or philological analyses hold much interest, *Mietjes, monsters en barbaren* will be an eye-opener. Van Houdt’s variety of subject matter and careful interweaving of larger themes into accessible parts, coupled with his smooth writing style, will give even sceptics a memorable overview of the afterlife of antiquity.

Conclusion

Reception studies are very much in fashion. The classical arts face increased divergence from the public consciousness and the nightmarish vision of classicists as dusty old researchers, no longer relevant to the world, plagues many scholars who are ordered to “valorize” their research. In these circumstances, reception studies have formed a welcome instrument in the struggle to stay relevant. However, the discipline is far more than a simple tool to remain important. Classical reception studies began as the study of the Classical Tradition, which assumed antiquity to be an established entity whose influence flowed down into the works of later authors. Reception scholars have since renounced this rigid conception of antiquity in favour of a contingent heritage that is constantly redefined and reinvented by those who receive it. Reception scholars grounded this new approach in authoritative literary theories from the late twentieth century, most notably Hans Robert Jauss’s theory of *Rezeptions-ästhetik*, which claims that the reader of a literary work interprets its meaning based on his or her own “horizon of expectations”. Other theories that were reinterpreted as the foundations to the new “invented tradition”^{xlvi} of reception studies include those of Wolfgang Iser and Hans-Georg Gadamer.

The works of David Rijser and Toon Van Houdt both deliver a unique demonstration of the processes of reception in various contexts. Rijser is primarily interested in the cultural “afterlife” of antiquity. This continued existence is ensured by an interplay between individual cases of reception by postclassical authors and artists, and the cultural traditions they respond or add to. The individual recipient engages with specific works from antiquity or

larger artistic and literary themes and (re)interprets the meaning of those classical elements through the prism of their own horizon of expectations. As they give new meaning to the classical material, their own context provides scholars with a mirror to the original work which they may utilize to gain greater understanding of either. At the other end of the spectrum stands tradition. Rijser illustrates how recipients respond to traditions as well as individual works of art and literature, and how the results of their receptions in turn shape the traditions the recipients work with. The three approaches taken in the three parts of the book reflect various aspects of this complex interplay between reception and tradition. In the first part, Rijser establishes the classical works that will become important objects of reception later on. He traces their heritage beyond antiquity, but keeps the focus on the classical material itself. These chapters also establish many of the themes that Rijser returns to in the two remaining sections. The second part of the book focuses on individual works of reception by Renaissance authors and artists. Often, the recipients under scrutiny engage with themes or material Rijser has treated in the first section of the book. In the third part of the book, Rijser sets his eyes on the eras after the Renaissance. These chapters discuss individual occurrences of reception, as in the book's second section, but now Rijser also emphasizes on the role of previous receptions in shaping the reception pieces under scrutiny. Most of the chapters in this section are no longer limited to a single occurrence of reception as they were in the second part of the book. All of Rijser's analyses cover a broad range of topics with astute attention to detail. Recipients engage with classical material in content, theme, form, and style, and Rijser analyzes all of those aspects closely.

Van Houdt does not inspect the cultural afterlife of antiquity *an sich*. Instead, he illustrates the fundamental role that concepts, theories and ideologies from antiquity have played in the way (European) people, groups, and societies understand themselves and the world around them. For Van Houdt, as for Rijser, "reception" designates a complicated process in which a recipient incorporates a classical concept or notion into his own postclassical worldview, thus giving new meaning to the notion and providing contrast to the original context of the classical material. Since the Flemish scholar is primarily interested in the new function of classical concepts in the views their recipients hold of their own image or that of others, he views occurrences of reception in larger contexts or discourses, and never in isolation. Unlike his Dutch colleague, however, Van Houdt devotes most of his attention to the context of the recipient and their conceptualization of themselves or others. The fact that almost all of his chapters open with naming one of the recipients under scrutiny reveals much about the approach of Van Houdt. Furthermore, he does not eschew analysis of specific

passages from the writings of classical authors or their recipients, but he needs not comb through them as thoroughly as Rijser does. The notions or ideas expressed in these passages, not the passages themselves, are the object of Van Houdt's study. *Mietjes, monsters en barbaren* is also slightly more accessible to a broader audience, in part because of the broader reach of its subject matter – *Een telkens nieuwe oudheid* is very much directed to those interested in art or literature – but also because Van Houdt manages to make each chapter stand on its own while retaining the thematic cohesion of the book. A curious reader may thus read some chapters of *Mietjes, monsters en barbaren* and skip others, while I feel that a full reading of *Een telkens nieuwe oudheid* is required to obtain a satisfactory understanding of its themes and goals.

Nevertheless, both books are written extremely well. Van Houdt offers his readers an accessible, varied, and smoothly written look into the fundamental role of antiquity in the way European societies and people define themselves and others. Rijser presents those interested in the cultural afterlife of antiquity with a detailed and stimulating overview of the many ways in which ancient literature and art has evolved since the supposed “end” of antiquity. Both books show antiquity to be far from the rigid entity that was the centre of the framework of Classical Tradition. Instead, they present the ancient world as something flexible that is constantly reinvented for new times. Thus, besides being excellent reads, the books conclusively prove the value of the Classical Reception Studies.

Bibliography

The two books under review in this paper are:

- D. Rijser, *Een telkens nieuwe oudheid, of: Hoe Tiberius in New Jersey belandde*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam (2016).
- T. Van Houdt, *Mietjes, monsters en barbaren: Hoe we de klassieke oudheid gebruiken om onszelf te begrijpen*, Uitgeverij Polis, Antwerpen (2015).

Other sources:

- M. De Pourcq, “Classical Reception Studies: Reconceptualizing the Study of the Classical Tradition”, *The International Journal of the Humanities*, Volume 9, Issue 4 (2012), 219-25.
- L. Hardwick, “Reception Studies”, *New Surveys in the Classics*, No. 33, Oxford University Press, Oxford (2003).

- R. Selden, P. Widdowson, and P. Brooker, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory (Fifth Edition)*, Pearson Longman, Harlow (2015).

ⁱ It should be noted that new manuscripts do still make quite an impact. The Sappho-poems that were discovered and subsequently analyzed by Dirk Obbink got international attention at the start of 2014. For an overview of the new poems see D. Obbink, “Provenance, Authenticity and Text of the New Sappho Papyri”, paper read at the *Society for Classical Studies* Panel, New Orleans, January 9th 2015, via <http://www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/Fragments/SCS.Sappho.2015.Obbink.paper.pdf> (last accessed 19-2-2017). For examples of the news coverage of these findings, see C. Higgins, “Sappho: two previously unknown poems indubitably hers, says scholar”, *The Guardian* (January 29th 2014), via <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/29/sappho-ancient-greek-poet-unknown-works-discovered> (last accessed 19-2-2017) and I. Sahadat, “Goud van oudheid; Spectaculaire vondst: nieuw werk van Sappho, dichteres uit de 7de eeuw voor Christus”, *De Volkskrant* (February 22nd 2014), via <http://www.volkskrant.nl/archief/goud-van-oudheid~a3601491> (last accessed 19-2-2017).

ⁱⁱ Of course, no conclusive agreement exists between scholars on the precise dating of the supposed fall of the ancient world. Some scholars might even argue that antiquity never truly ends.

ⁱⁱⁱ Those who crave greater insight into the workings and rise of reception studies are referred to Lorna Hardwick's 2003 *Reception Studies*, specifically its introduction, as well as the 2012 article “Classical Reception Studies: Reconceptualizing the Study of the Classical Tradition” by Maarten De Pourcq.

^{iv} Hardwick 2003; De Pourcq 2012.

^v De Pourcq 2012, 221-2.

^{vi} Hardwick 2003, 2.

^{vii} *Ibidem*.

^{viii} De Pourcq 2012, 221.

^{ix} Hardwick 2003, 6-8.

^x De Pourcq 2012, 221.

^{xi} See Hardwick 2003, 5-9 for a short overview of the theories that reception scholars have fallen back on. More information on the literary theories of Gadamer, Jauss, and Iser can also be found in the chapter “Reader-oriented theories” of the *Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literature* (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker 2015, 45-54).

^{xii} See also Hardwick 2003, 4 and 107-8.

^{xiii} Ancient history and philosophy are the other cornerstones of our understanding of the ancient world. Most universities now separate these disciplines from the ones mentioned above, however. The aspects of classical studies mentioned in the paper belong under the banner of literary studies, while ancient history is consigned to another department and philosophy has an entire faculty to itself.

^{xiv} See Rijser 2016, 11-16 for the complete analysis of the *School of Athens*.

^{xv} Especially striking is the connection that Rijser makes between the writings of Shakespeare and the art of Rembrandt in his fourteenth chapter; see *op. cit.* 313-39.

^{xvi} *Op. cit.*, 237-256.

^{xvii} *Op. cit.*, 243.

^{xviii} *Op. cit.*, 197-212.

^{xix} See, for example, Rijser's examination of the passage in the middle of the sixth book of the *Aeneid* in which Aeneas comes before an image of the labyrinth of Daedalus; *op. cit.*, 156-159.

^{xx} *Op. cit.*, 209-212.

^{xxi} Van Houdt 2015, 12.

^{xxii} *Op. cit.*, 161-187.

^{xxiii} *Op. cit.*, 67-71.

^{xxiv} *Op. cit.*, 253-54.

^{xxv} *Op. cit.*, 11-12.

^{xxvi} Rijser 2016, 20.

^{xxvii} *Op. cit.*, 143-167.

^{xxviii} I do not wish to imply that Rijser has in any way overlooked the Middle Ages. It is clear from Rijser's introduction and the instances where Rijser does reflect on the medieval reception of antiquity that he is well-versed in the literary traditions of that age. To include medieval topics would simply have made the book far too long. It makes sense that Rijser does not dwell heavily on medieval traditions in the second part of his book, because he simply did not have the space to give those topics their proper due.

^{xxix} Rijser 2016, 294-96.

^{xxx} *Op. cit.*, 343-65.

^{xxxi} *Op. cit.*, 423-38.

^{xxxii} *Op. cit.*, 248.

^{xxxiii} Van Houdt 2015, 91-118.

^{xxxiv} It should be noted that Van Houdt consistently presents cited passages in translation, whereas Rijser only does so if the passage under scrutiny is relevant for its content only and not for its form. Rijser often gives the passage in its original language along with his translation, especially when he cites poetry (since the meaning of a poem is equally grounded in its form as in its content).

^{xxxv} Van Houdt 2015, 229-31.

^{xxxvi} *Op. cit.*, 10-12.

^{xxxvii} *Op. cit.*, 119-138.

^{xxxviii} *Op. cit.*, 47-56.

^{xxxix} *Op. cit.* 241-66.

^{xl} It should also be noted that Rijser often refers to other chapters of his book in his various discussions of reception processes.

^{xli} Van Houdt 2015, 10.

^{xlii} Rijser 2016, 455-74.

^{xliiii} *Op. cit.*, 474.

^{xliv} *Op. cit.*, 20.

^{xlv} *Op. cit.*, 19-21.

^{xlvi} De Pourcq 2012, 221.