

Performing Empresses and Matronae: Ancient Roman Women in Re-enactment

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Abstract – The great success of historical re-enactments is a product of the “affective turn” (Agnew) which characterises the postmodern approach to history and a clear symptom of the changing perception of time and temporality in contemporary culture (Assmann, Gumbrecht). Forms of “presentification” of the past are thus widespread in popular as well as “professional” history (e.g. experimental archaeology, living history museums, and even in University classes). Such a presentification can project back into the past and “naturalise”, in a non-argumentative and emotional way, values and roles, thus becoming part of the construction of an often very conservative normativity. The aim of this paper is to investigate the ways in which Roman women are represented and performed in re-enactments in order to identify, in different contexts and with different performers and audiences (from masked parties to shows in theme parks, historical re-enactments to photo-shoots), how these propose and represent expected gender roles in contemporary society.

Key words – humanities; archaeology; Re-enactment; Affective Turn; Postmodernism; Living History; Classical Receptions; Roman Women

Titel – Kaiserinnen und Matronen vorführen – antike römische Frauen im Reenactment

Zusammenfassung – Der Erfolg von historischen Reenactments ist eine Konsequenz des „affective turn“ (Agnew), die Wende, die den postmodernen Ansatz zur Wahrnehmung der Vergangenheit charakterisiert und gleichzeitig eine Folge der veränderten Wahrnehmung von Zeit und Zeitlichkeit in der zeitgenössischen Kultur ist (Assmann, Gumbrecht). Formen der Vergegenwärtigung der Vergangenheit werden deshalb immer präsenter, in der populärwissenschaftlichen wie in der akademischen Geschichte (etwa in den Living-History-Museen, in der experimentellen Archäologie oder auch im Unterricht). Diese Vergegenwärtigung bildet eine Projektion der Gegenwart in die Vergangenheit und überträgt dadurch – in einer nicht-argumentativen und emotionalen Art – Werte und Normen in eine andere Epoche, sie trägt häufig auch zur Konstruktion einer konservativen Normativität bei. Dieser Beitrag untersucht, wie römische Frauen in Reenactments dargestellt werden. Mit Beispielen aus verschiedenen Kontexten (Kostümpartys, Themenparkshows, Reenactment, Fotoshooting) wird gezeigt, wie die rekonstruierten römischen Frauen normative und „erwartete“ Geschlechterrollen für die zeitgenössische Gesellschaft verkörpern.

Schlüsselwörter – Wissenschaft; Archäologie; Reenactment; Affective Turn; Postmoderne; Living History; Antikenrezeption; römische Frauen

Introduction

That historical re-enactment is a field enjoying an astonishingly successful period of growth is difficult to deny. Theatrical experiences of “re-staging” the past are nothing new: the Romans re-enacted a naval battle between the Athenians and the Persians in 2 B.C. (Dio 55.10.7). Prior to this, in 46 B.C. Julius Caesar organized the staging of a “historical” naval battle between the Tyrians and the Egyptians (Suet., Iul. 39.4). More generally, it is well known that many executions of convicted criminals were carried out as a re-staging of mythological or historical narratives (COLEMAN, 1990) – but these early forms of re-enactment, as well as the re-staging of events narrated in the Bible and the lives of the Saints in the medieval Mystery and Miracle Plays, are radically different from today’s forms of re-enactment. Here the participants are not meant to be actors, separated from a public of spectators (even if there are crowds simply watching, who may sometimes be physically separated from the re-enactors), but to be members of an immersive environment (DE GROOT, 2009, p. 106, “they are both actors and audience”).

It is not a world made of actors, but a variegated scene involving historians and artisans. Most of the re-enactors’ knowledge comes from their own

research through books, material culture and art. This includes the long process of recreating their garments (dresses and underwear), starting from extant pieces or manuals. Every detail of this attire needs to be studied in depth, from the cut to the trimming, paying attention to past sewing techniques, period tastes and historical accuracy. The world of re-enactment, not by chance also known as Living History, is thus perceived by the re-enactors as a way not only to explore history, but to revive centuries past. They do not perform, they experience; they do not act, they live (Fig. 1).¹

As in the title of a recent publication, the shift – even if it is not necessarily a chronological one – is “from realism to the affective turn”: “the uneasy relationship between realism, authenticity and affect is further evident in cases where the boundaries of re-enactment are pushed towards improvisation”, in particular when the re-enactors feel authorized to “change history” (MC-CALMAN & PICKERING, 2010, p. 9). This substantial difference derives from the radically new, postmodern approach to time and temporality which has characterised Western cultures since the 1980s.

It is the aim of this paper to investigate the role of this turn¹, as well as its consequences for how we approach history, by looking at the ways in which a presentified past corroborates the con-



Fig. 1 & 2 Danielle Fiore as Roman matrona during the event “Acqui e Saponi”, Acqui Terme, 24-25 October 2015, as a member of the “Nona Regio: Gruppo di Divulgazione Storica Romano-Ligure”. Copyright: Danielle Fiore.

struction of normativities, which are often of a strongly conservative nature². We will then in particular analyse what this means for the representation of gendered roles and how they are projected backwards onto the times represented, while at the same time speaking of and to contemporary society³. In doing this, we believe this paper will be enhanced by the twin perspective we are allowed to adopt in consideration of our biographical experience, namely as both a scholar of Classical Receptions and as a former student who holds a major in History while being very active in the field of re-enactment and historical modelling as well as a creator of historical female dresses.

Postmodernism, the “broad present” and the “affective turn”

Postmodernism is characterised, as Fredric Jameson realised, by “the waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality”: “we now inhabit the synchronic rather than the diachronic, and I think it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time” (JAMESON, 1991, p. 16). While modernity

was characterised by a particular time regime, or *chronotopos*, which had come into existence in the 18th century and was defined by the strict separation of the three layers of past, present and future (KOSELLECK, 1979, p. 130-143), this time regime – which is a cultural construct – broke down in the second half of the 20th century. For the purpose of this essay it is unimportant to investigate the reasons for this nonetheless significant cultural shift, as it has been widely discussed in literature on the subject (see ASSMANN, 2013 and the bibliography referenced there). What is more important to this article is to highlight that the collapse of this regime is visible in the “death of the future” (HÖLSCHER, 2002), which cannot be conceived anymore as the realm of completely different social, political, and economic structures towards which everybody works, but as either a hyper-technological version of the present, or the frightening realm of a future apocalypse and the end of resources (Torpey, 2004; Assmann, 2013, p. 67-69).²

The disappearance of one of these time layers is one of the clearest elements in the collapse of the idea of linear, physical time, objectified as a natural dimension, which since the Enlightenment has kept the present and the future strictly separate (ASSMANN, 2013, p. 132-148). The present,

in particular, has been inflated within the new time regime and reached a breadth which has allowed it to swallow both the future and the past – with significant consequences for how they are perceived. The modernist *chronotopos*, with its clear-cut separation of time spheres, implied that the past had a somewhat minimal significance in shaping the activities and values of the present, and that history, no longer *magistra vitae*, could become an academic subject with a pretence of scientific objectivity (KOSSELLECK, 1979, p. 38-66; ASSMANN, 2013, p. 179-191). The past, now pressed onto the present, in the new time regime regains an enormous space in human conscience and daily life (ASSMANN, 2013, p. 9-22) in the form of a real “need for history” which develops in the typically postmodernist forms of nostalgia and retro-taste (see e.g. REYNOLDS, 2012). The two traditional approaches to history, the “evolutionary” (stressing the historical “facts” and their sequences) and the “political” (stressing on the contrary the construction and representation of different pasts in different presents) have gained a third in the last few decades, namely “time travel”: “an experience and social practice in the present that evokes a past (or future) reality” (HOLTORF, 2009, p. 33, emphasis original; see HOLTORF, 2007).

The collapse of temporalities onto the broader present implies the possibility of “presentifying” these different time layers and thus experiencing them directly – time travelling, indeed, in first person. This is the basis of the new approach to history which has been contextually developed and successfully defined as an “affective turn”, deriving from a “*privileging of experience over event or structure*” (AGNEW, 2007, p. 301). The “new past” thus requires a direct approach, a presentification that allows a personal and sensorial (possibly pan-sensorial) experience of a different period (DE GROOT, 2009, p. 103-104). The knowledge of history to which one aspires to – even when the “big events” of narrative history, such as famous battles, are at stake – is the knowledge of human needs, challenges, feelings, heartbeats and fears of people living in a different time. Once again, the destruction of linear time is both the precondition and the consequence of such an approach, and the past constructed is thus not only educational but also personalised, emotional and strongly connected to individual structures of memory and identity (ASSMANN, 2013, p. 291-293). Within modernity, history used to be an aseptic field to be investigated without emotional involvement; it is now a field of affectivity and self-discovery (ASSMANN, 2013, p. 296-297).

All this is not without consequences for the concept of authenticity, which has shifted from being a

quality of the object observed to being a subjective reaction of the observer. “Real” is not what really comes from the past, but what generates “real feelings” of identification (HOLTORF, 2005, p. 135-136). “Museological authenticity” is replaced by “existential authenticity” (FRIEDMAN, 1992, p. 845-846), while the past disappears as a precondition for historical authenticity and is replaced in this role by pastness, i.e. the quality of an object which is perceived as old, independent of when it was actually produced (HOLTORF, 2010). A building just recently constructed in the Roman style can thus be authentically ancient – especially when it can draw a particular atmosphere from other elements, whether it be a precise reproduction of an existing building or the fact that it is built on the site of a Roman settlement (DE GROOT, 2009, p. 113-115; PUCCI, 2013; more generally on the strategies of authentication, GROSCHWITZ, 2010, p. 151-153).

The importance and extent of such a change in how we perceive and approach history can be seen in particular in two sectors. The first is the educational one, since the “affective turn” has caused clear revolutions in both museology (DE GROOT, 2009, p. 116-119) and didactics, for example with the development of living history museums and experimental archaeology as a growing field. Indeed, many spaces with a historical theme have been developed with a primarily educational objective, as a support, or actually as the real way to teach (and learn) history. This is the case for what Hjemdahl calls “*historical theme parks*”, where school children are allowed to spend one or more days recreating past living conditions, thus apparently learning history in a much more effective way, through direct experience with which the detached and aseptic atmosphere of traditional museums cannot compete (HJEMDAHL, 2002). The visitors to a living history museum experience a form of “transformation of the self” of a theatrical nature, which gives way to an affective identification with the members of the past society represented (OESTERLE, 2010; see also DE GROOT, 2009, p. 116-119; more generally on living history museum see also CARSTENSEN – MEINERS – MOHRMANN 2008).

The second point, in which the *affective turn* clearly manifests itself, and which must be read in conjunction with the postmodern destruction of the distinction between “high” and “popular” culture (JAMESON, 1991, 2), is the ever growing challenge against “professional history”. This new way of expressing interest in and experiencing the past is in strong contrast with the ideals of academic history, as defined in the 19th century in the context of the modern “time regime” (see HARTOG &

REVEL, 2002, p. 1-2). Forms of cooperation between academic history and new forms of academic consciousness are slow to develop, mostly because of strong reciprocal prejudices (*“the profession appears to be bent on ignoring re-enactment, as if by closing their eyes it will go away. It won’t”*, McCALMAN & PICKERING, 2010, p. 2). Meanwhile, the debate about popular and public history, as well as the possibilities and dangers of these and the much more complicated debate on *“who possesses history”* (JORDANOVA, 2000) has reached its peak, thus requiring urgent re-evaluation. This paper aims to partially show a way of constructing a dialogue and interaction between these two parties.

Time travelling and the construction of normativity

One of the biggest problems in constructing such a dialogue is the very nature of the affective approach to history, and the kind of knowledge transfer it generates. Indeed, images of the past created and received through such forms of presentification do not have an argumentative structure as “traditional” scholarly historical publications do. On the contrary, they are naturalised and objectified owing to the fact that they are personally experienced and emotionally loaded. In this sense, history learned in re-enactments paradoxically appears to the visitor/re-enactor to be more objective and true than the positivistic historical science of the 19th century, with its pretence of being “objective” (BREWER, 2010, 81). As Agnew wrote, *“such experiences can only be validated, not disputed”* (AGNEW, 2004, p. 331, see also DE GROOT, 2009, p. 107-108). As previously mentioned, re-enactment strategies have been used for educational purposes and thus to raise historical critical consciousness – likely the biggest challenge such a use could face. Outside the institutional world of education, affective approaches to history imply a structurally continuous repetition, thereby reinforcing stereotypes and dominating discourses. To begin with, history enthusiasts need to recognize what their interests are in order to see and experience something which resonates with their previous knowledge, as derived from school, as well as historical movies, TV shows, videogames, paintings and so on; without this element of recognition, the sensorial and immersive experience cannot take place (HOLTORF, 2007, p. 129). Movies and TV shows can clearly reinforce these stereotypes, as can be seen with the example of period dramas. A period drama (or movie) is an attempt, more or less fictionalized, to give a portrait of a specific time period or set of char-

acters, often perceived by the public as an accurate transposition of the past. This subjective interpretation of history often diverges from accuracy and leads to a distorted vision of the past. Since recognition is at the very base of reception, historical illustration – of which re-enactment is a particular subcategory – has always been very conservative and repetitive (SAMUEL, 2012, 32). An example can be seen in Fig. 2 where the map shown, the best known and most immediately recognizable example of Roman cartography, is a copy of the *Tabula Peutingeriana*. This is a parchment scroll from the late 12th century, originally 34 x 675 cm, that was based on a model from the 4th century A.D., (therefore later than the period re-enacted). Nonetheless, it achieves its function perfectly, that of visualizing the “consultation” of a map or *itinerarium* during a Roman journey.

All historical periods are characterised by this popular and stereotyped vision of history, especially when once again considering the costumes worn during these performances. As previously mentioned, re-enactment can be a work of serious



Fig. 3 Danielle Fiore, historical model, during a Roman photoshoot with a dress she created herself. Copyright: Danielle Fiore.

research, created in order to give an accurate representation of past garments to the public – an aspect to which re-enactors often dedicate great attention, as they represent a consistent part of the “immersive” experience in the past (SAMIDA, 2013, 110-111). Fig. 3 is a good example of this since it shows one of the authors, Danielle Fiore, wearing a carefully studied dress composed of a tunic and a *palla*, thus representing the dress of a young, unmarried Roman woman. The dress is the result of in-depth studies of the secondary literature (most notably CARCOPINO 1939, but also the more recent CROOM 2000 and HOPE 2000) and iconographic sources,³ while the hair style is also directly inspired by a Roman sculpture of the early imperial period – more specifically by the bust of Agrippina the Younger from the National Museum in Warsaw (Fig. 4).

Nonetheless, in this case as with most others, the dresses and robes adhere closely to the popular vision of the past itself, in which stereotypes are reinforced and often brought to the stage with a progression of factual errors. The Byzantine period, on which more will be said below, is thus represented as rich and luxurious, while the “barbarians” are associated with cruelty, ugliness and poverty (as in the case of the Lombards and other Germanic peoples) and will accordingly wear furs and rags.

This implicit adherence to existing stereotypes is not the sole reason for re-enactments to be innately and unmistakably conservative. The *affective turn* and presentification are entirely based upon one, unspoken assumption: that human beings are always the same, that crucial aspects of human life, specific feelings and somatic experiences, are natural and not cultural, constant through time and space and therefore also possible to be experienced by actors belonging to a completely different historical, cultural, political, social and economic context (BREWER, 2010, p. 81; see also SAMIDA, 2013, p. 116, for a specific example). Without this implicit assumption, the entire experience of the re-enactment would not make sense, as obtaining direct knowledge of the feelings, needs, reactions and behaviors of people from the past would simply be unachievable.

Rüsen identifies four kinds of historical consciousness: a traditional one, which “furnishes us with traditions [and] reminds us of origins and the repetition of obligations”; an exemplary type, which through examples transmits rules and values; a critical one, which shows the existence of a rupture between a past perceived as other and us; and a genetic type, which accepts the change but not the rupture, and views the present as the product of successive transformations of the past (RÜSEN,

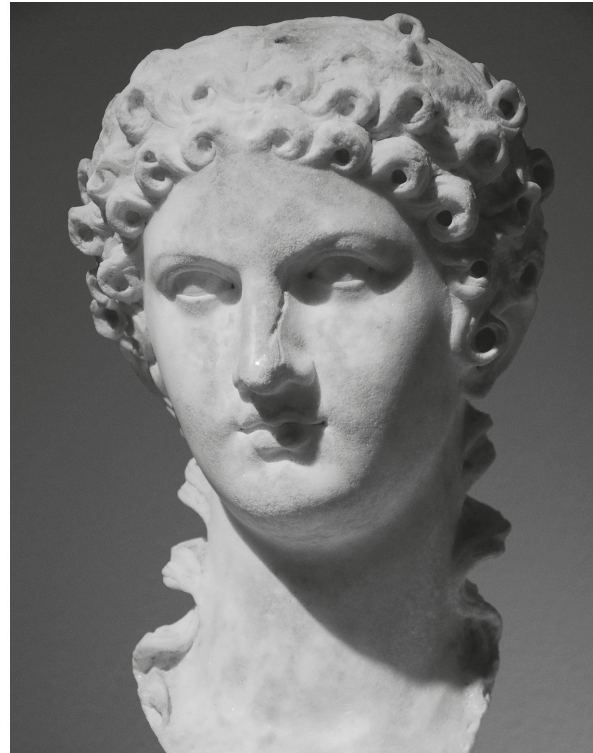


Fig. 4 Bust of Agrippina the Younger, Römisch-Germanisches Museum, Köln. Available under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.5 Generic Licence. Photo by MrArifnajafov. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Agrippina_RGM\(K%C3%B6ln\).JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Agrippina_RGM(K%C3%B6ln).JPG) [26.4.2016].

2004, p. 70-78). If we follow this example, we see that, with very few exceptions, the critical type is hard – but not impossible – to find in the context of re-enactments, while the other three forms are all relevant for the “affective and immersive past.”

What is of central importance, though, is that the mechanism through which the re-enactment, and any form of immersive history takes place, (see CARLÄ, forthcoming), is hidden, veiled by the emphasis on the personal acquisition of knowledge through experience. The affective turn and the postmodern time regime generate a situation in which cultural values and personal identities are strongly affected by and based upon the past, our personal origins and cultural memory (ASSMANN, 2013, p. 239-244). While the status of history as an academic discipline is challenged by the right of each individual and community to be interested in “their” history, as well as by an ever broader range of “history providers” (GAZI, 2003; ASSMANN, 2013, p. 276-280), the re-enactor also encounters, directly and in first person, situations created through the reproduction of stereotypes and a belief in the existence of natural constants in human behaviour, with the conviction that this



Fig. 5 James Lafayette, Jenny Churchill as Theodora. V&A Lafayette Archive, negative number: L1424 03-07-1897. © Copyright 2011, V&A.

will give her/him a true and authentic knowledge of how people in the past lived. As an example:

"What happened at the Battle of Vinegar Hill was perhaps that the re-enactment was actually too successful. I cringed afterwards as television journalists interviewed participants and spectators who recounted how 'that was just what it would have been like' and 'it was great to see the battle re-enacted right there on the actual site' – which was not the case at all. As the battlefield was in a cemetery, we used a local park a couple of kilometres up the road. [...] Indeed at the height of the battle we were forced to contain the Irish from actually trying to get even, and had to remind them that this was a re-enactment and that they had lost!" (GAPPS, 2010, p. 59)

Knowledge gained in this way has the strength that derives from being experienced rather than logically acquired, and thus appears less debatable, but it is ultimately the product of a circular process. More concretely, the re-enactment stages and re-

quires from the participants that they adhere to an identity and a series of values, for example in the case of the re-enactment of battles, a specific way of understanding masculinity based on courage, valour, self-sacrifice for the community or "fatherland" and so on (this is emphasised by DE GROOT, 2009, p. 105, in combat re-enactment: *"the membership is generally white, mainly male, and relatively well off in terms of money and time"*). These values are projected onto a more or less distant past, but after the facts are considered to belong to that past.

As a precondition (and at the same time a consequence) of this, such values are then considered to be universal constants, which have always shaped and will always shape masculinity in the same objectified and naturalised way, in every human society,⁴ thus generating a strong, generally very conservative normativity. This is built into history in order to create further legitimacy and strength from its supposed historicity, while the growing care for details in the realization of the clothes, weapons, etc. – a *"form of fetishism, in which authentic objects supposedly provide the subject with a complete experience of the past"* (BREWER, 2010, p. 81) – reinforces the sense of "truth" for the ideological messages highlighted by the entire re-enactment (GAPPS, 2010, p. 51-53 on the re-enactors being perceived as *"walking, talking archives"*). This forms a loop, from which it is extremely hard to escape.

Past women from the present

The aforementioned inherently conservative and objectifying manner in which re-enactments transmit these historicised "truths" is also clearly the case with gender roles. In particular, historical figures (real and invented) are used in connection with specific values, which simultaneously reinforce the stereotypical reception of the historical content itself and the widespread perception of gender roles and gender boundaries in the contemporary societies in which the re-enactments take place. The paradox is that this also happens when re-enactments are undertaken in a supposedly subversive way. One example is particularly applicable, even if it comes from a masked ball rather than from a real re-enactment: in 1897 Jeannette Jerome, better known as Jennie Churchill, went to a party organized by the Duchess of Devonshire. While the host was dressed as Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, and Daisy of Pless as Cleopatra, Jennie dressed up as Theodora, the Byzantine Empress of the mid-6th century A.D. (Fig. 5). Theodora had been a very popular figure in those years, ever since Victorien Sardou's play *Théodora*

premiered in 1886 with Sarah Bernhardt in the role of the Empress. From that moment on Theodora was, in popular European culture, one of the most powerful embodiments of the idea of the dangerous *femme fatale*, unable to control her passion, a path that led to her self-destruction as well as that of entire cities and empires. Jennie's decision to dress as Theodora was motivated by a strong awareness not only of how Theodora was perceived, but also of the rumours which were circulating about her, which she clearly and openly challenged through her dress (CARLÀ, 2015a). However, even if Jennie's act was a provocation, since she positively and proudly reclaimed her role as *femme fatale*, she did it inside the culturally recognized and established models of her time, while at the same time adopting and reinforcing the vision of the Roman Empress which was widespread in popular culture (on the reception of Theodora, see in general CARLÀ, 2013). The re-enactment of the byzantine Empress did not contain anything subversive; it was, on the contrary, an established and recognized *topos* which ultimately achieved only the right to claim a special kind of (modern) life through a form of "naturalisation" by referring to another person who adopted this lifestyle in a distant past.

Theodora reappears in another performance, this time within a re-enactment in the narrower sense. The Italian town of Baiso organizes an event every year called "La Tavola di Bisanzio",⁵ during which the town moves back in time for two days, becoming a medieval or rather byzantine town, with medieval markets, falconers, demonstrations of Lombard warfare, etc. One of the recurring components of the event, if not its main event, is a large historical procession, during which a huge amount of re-enactors as well as the general public follow the Emperor Justinian and his wife Empress Theodora (who have historically never been in Italy) to the main square of the town, where a Byzantine dinner is then served (Fig. 6). In this case Theodora, chosen among the girls of the town, is simply an attractive walk-on model representing the exoticism and luxury often attributed in popular perception to the Byzantine world (with gold and purple coming to the fore as dominant colours). Nothing of the complexity of Sardou's Theodora is left – indeed, the Empress is not as well-known, nor as popular anymore – and the re-enactment reinforces once again existing perceptions of a "natural order" by presenting a heteronormative ruling couple, rich and beautiful, to the spectators.

In the *Fiestas de Carthagineses y Romanos*, which take place every year in Cartagena, Spain,⁶ commemorating the double ancestry of the town, the Ro-



Fig. 6 The procession with Justinian and Theodora from the edition 2011 of "La Tavola di Bisanzio".

mans are divided into three groups, called "legions": a civil legion, re-enacting Roman daily life; a military legion, focussing on ancient warfare; and a naval legion, specifically re-enacting the Roman fleet. As in Baiso, this Roman world revolves around a main character, the general Publius Cornelius Scipio (the African), accompanied by his wife Emilia Paula, in a setting which projects back into the 3rd century B.C. a model of the heteronormative nuclear family which would have been abnormal to Roman culture.

At the same time, re-enactments in the 21st century A.D. require roles for women that are entirely different from the roles they would have had in Roman times – and once again the re-enactment is a way of "pastifying" and objectifying today's discourses and ideological structures. For example, in Cartagena there are female Roman soldiers, both in the regular troops as in the auxiliary infantry, and as the special cohort of the "Amazons of Cappadocia", an all-female group inspired by the mythological female warriors of antiquity and specialised in archery (Fig. 7). Once again, the re-enactment presents the participants themselves as well as the public with a strong image of gender roles as they are produced by

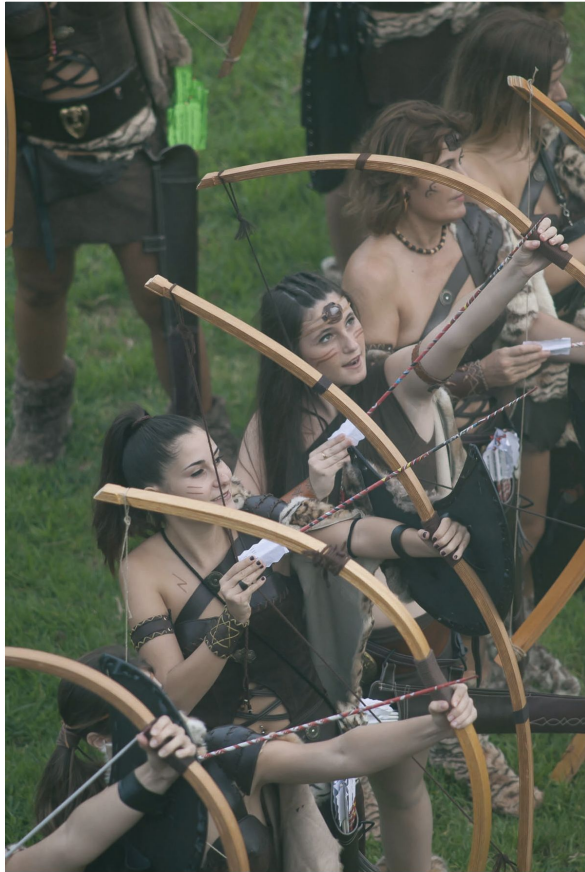


Fig. 7 Amazonas de Capadocia in the "Battle for Quart Hadast". © Copyright 2015, Carthaginians and Romans Annual Festival, Cartagena, Spain.

our contemporary society. Specifically, women can either be the noble matrona, normative mother of the family, beautiful and well-dressed, or the "G. I. Jane" of ancient Rome, a physical embodiment of Garber's "progress narrative" (the mechanism through which women can assume positive roles by becoming masculine, under which lies the unspoken assumption that the masculine is superior to the feminine and that "masculinization" is therefore an improvement; GARBER, 1992, p. 67-71).

Our last example is of a similar nature, based as it is on shows offered in the Spanish theme park Terra Mítica in the 2012 season. In the Greek area of the park, the show "Troya, la conquista" presented the visitors with a thoroughly re-examined version of the Trojan War – in fact, one in which the Trojans win. Indeed, during a moment from the final battle between Achilles and the Greeks on one side, Hector, Patroclus and the Trojans on the other, Helena – deeply in love with Patroclus – manages to distract Achilles so that he can be killed. Essentially, Achilles is punished for his pride and impiety (he clearly demonstrates that he

does not respect the gods), while Helena, characterised by love, piety and a little cunning, becomes the way through which gender roles and particular values are projected back in the mythical past. Later in the afternoon, visitors could go to the Roman area to see the show "Hispania". Here Roman legionaries, represented as villains who are weak and abusive, have captured Spanish men, who are freed in the end by their Iberian wives, who demonstrate (again, along the lines of the "progress narrative") the typical manly virtues of courage, physical strength and love of freedom (CARLÀ, 2015b, p. 31-32; CARLÀ & FREITAG, 2015, p. 247). The main ideological foundation of the park, that of strongly conservative Spanish nationalism, is thus reinforced and reproduced in the shows, which present to the spectators (many of whom are children) clear models: piety, courage and strength are good; disrespecting the gods, being weak and cowardly leads to defeat and transhistorical blame.

Conclusions

This article aimed to show how re-enactment, once understood in its broader cultural context, has become a central and non-renounceable part of contemporary Western approaches to the past. It also sought to highlight the dangers that lurk in taking an uncritical approach to the subject, in particular its strong contribution to an essentialistic understanding of humanity as well its morals, values and evolution. Nonetheless, this does not mean that scholars of history and archaeology, meant as academic disciplines, should warn of these dangers and keep themselves (and as many people as they can) far from such an experience. On the contrary, this should serve as a call for historians and archaeologists to engage more directly with re-enactment, its mechanisms and contents, to collaborate with its conception and organization and to help in the continuous development of this genre and its relation to the representation, perception and understanding of gender roles.

Women throughout history – Roman, medieval, early modern, Greek, prehistoric – were of course daughters of their own time, inserted in the social, political and cultural structures of their period and their civilization. Interpreting their potential to act independently, or even bear weapons as part of a "teleological" process towards modern emancipation is therefore a serious historical mistake – one which frequently occurs when, for example, it is claimed that women of the late Roman Republic and Early Empire were "more free" than their ancestors.

But this perception, in continuous comparison and dialogue with the present, reflects how we perceive gender roles today, since our culture presents a warrior woman, or a female soldier, as a representation of gender equality. Matching modern ideals with past perceptions of women and incorporating the daily experiences of the society in which we live with the desire to “feel” how an ancient woman felt are definitely the most difficult parts of the experience of being a female re-enactor, as it goes much further than having the technical knowledge required for the preparation of robes and implies an impossible change of mentality. Nonetheless, being aware of this is the first step towards a successful re-enactment experience, and one which can be successfully adopted in the teaching of history.

Notes

¹ Groschwitz, 2010, 142 tries to distinguish between a “re-enactment”, meant as a performance which reproduces a precise historical event, such as a famous battle, and “living history”, which refers to all the other performances recreating the “atmosphere” or the “daily life” of a past society (see also Samida, 2013, 106). This distinction is not followed in literature and indeed seems counterproductive as it generates two ideal types, both of which are impossible to find in their pure form – as already stated, the “reproduction” of historical events always creates something new and can never be performed in an identical fashion (Fischer-Lichte, 2012, p. 13). Closer to the definition adopted here is that provided by Hochbruck, 2013, p. 92-94. “Living history” is here accepted in its general meaning as a synonym of “re-enactment” – on this concept, see Hochbruck, 2013, p. 11-14.

² It is very interesting to analyse in this sense the evolution of the representations of the “future” in Disney Theme Parks, from the realization of Tomorrowland in Anaheim, CA in 1955, to the inauguration of Discoveryland in Paris, 1992, and the re-styling of the Californian Tomorrowland. These reveal the change from an optimistic consideration of the future to a predilection for a Steampunk representation of past representations of the future: see Mittermeier, forthcoming.

³ The way in which the dress was reproduced, as well as some iconographic references, have been presented by Danielle Fiore in her blog: <http://daniellefiore.blogspot.it/2015/11/sewing-ancient-roman-dress-short.html> [3.12.2015].

⁴ We therefore disagree with de Groot (2009, p. 105-106), according to whom re-enactment presents the past “as continually different from now”, based as it is on “cold, hunger, discomfort, difference”. While it is true that re-enactors experience life in times of less comfort and technological advancement, or life in war, the basic assumption is still that the bodily reaction, conceptualization and re-elaboration of such experiences of cold and discomfort would be exactly the same.

⁵ <http://www.latavoladibisanzio.it/> [20.10.2015].

⁶ <http://www.cartaginesesyromanos.es/> [20.10.2015].

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