

Is the Study of the Greek and Latin

Classics Elitist?

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Every one of us in the Lit & Phil and in the wider world has a different experience of Classics. There will be a wide divergence in the amount we do or do not know about them. But this was not always so. In the early 18th century, the subject matter rather grandiosely called ‘*The Classics*’ was adopted as the bedrock of elite school and university curricula. It is not hard to find expressions of the usefulness of a Classical education to maintaining social hierarchies and reinforcing social exclusion. Philip Dormer Stanhope, Fourth Earl of Chesterfield, wrote to his son in 1749: ‘Classical knowledge, that is, Greek and Latin, is absolutely necessary for everybody...the word *illiterate*, in its common acceptance, means a man who is ignorant of these two languages.’ⁱ Classical knowledge is here limited to linguistic knowledge, education to men, and literacy to reading competence in Greek and Latin. This letter was later published in a collection under the title *Letters to His Son on the Art of Becoming a Man of the World and a Gentleman*. Some of the letters are in Latin.

The association of the Greek and Latin Classics with the maintenance of the British class system has left scars on our culture in this country which are still affecting debates over their place in schools and universities today. It is difficult to find access to tuition in the Latin language in the state school system; when it comes to Greek, in my view the language of the foundational texts not only of literature but of science, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, history and geography, there is scarcely a state school in the land where you could hope even to learn the alphabet. A small number of state schools teach Classical Civilisation or Ancient History both to GCSE and A Level. But in general (and I speak as one who has taught at British Universities for nearly 30 years, and been involved in Admissions at the Universities of Reading, Oxford, Cambridge, Durham and London), most applicants seeking to study any degree course relating to our ancient Mediterranean cultural ancestry were privileged from the day they were born.

Since my own conviction is that the study of ancient Greece and Rome, if taught imaginatively, can play a transformative role in contemporary society, I

choose as our escort on this journey the radical Tom Paine, born a decade before the Earl of Stanhope wrote that letter. Paine was one of Britain's most original radical thinkers, and far from the knee-jerk opponent of the study of antiquity he is usually thought to have been. A key player in the American revolutionary war, through the influence of his pamphlet *Common Sense* (1776), and in the French Revolution, which gave rise to his epoch-making *Rights of Man* (1791), it was his *irreverence* towards classical antiquity which scandalized his contemporaries and has ever since been misunderstood by scholars who only read his most famous writings. Paine did, however have four considered objections to the classicism of the writings favoured in ruling-class pedagogy.

First, he objected to its *stance in relation to human progress*: he believed that permanently looking backwards into the past produced inherently conservative attitudes. Secondly, he objected to much of its *content*: classical culture was produced by and for the ancient elite in a hierarchal society, and therefore its appropriateness for general education in a society moving towards greater egalitarianism must be suspect. Thirdly, he objected to the actual *practice* of elite pedagogy, since, he urged, the amount of time required to master the ancient languages would better be spent learning about the modern world. And fourthly, Paine knew that the *history* of Classics showed that it had dominantly been used by its ruling-class aficionados to fulfil reactionary purposes.

To take these objections one by one, Paine saw Classics as inherently atavistic and backward-looking. He thought that it prevented the living generations from looking forwards into a better future, and thinking how it might be achieved. Always to peer into the past is like looking at history from a seat of a carriage facing backwards, seeing everything that happens as vanishing towards the most distant horizons of the past, rather than sitting in a front-facing seat and looking to the horizons of the future. In modern terms, he might have said that it was like eternally looking in the rear-view window at what is behind your car, obscuring what can be seen through the windscreen ahead of you. This leads to accidents. It impedes flexible and innovative thinking. With this objection I personally agree. My idea of the appropriate place of the study of the past—not just the Greeks and Romans, but of all periods of history—is that it should occupy a relatively small corner of our collective field of vision, and yet a very necessary one. Knowing what is behind you, if used carefully, is essential to keeping the car of the present moving forwards safely and progressively into the future.

Paine was also correct that the civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome, in comparison with all other periods of history, were the ones most lauded and emulated. He considered that this attitude prevented his contemporaries from seeing what they had themselves achieved: 'I have no notion,' he affirmed, 'of yielding the palm of the United States to any Grecians or Romans that were ever born.'ⁱⁱ Great progress had been made already, and in pouring praise on 'the wisdom, civil governments, and sense of honor of the states of Greece and Rome, mankind have lived to very little purpose, if, at this period of the world, they must

go two or three thousand years back for actual lessons and examples. We do great injustice to ourselves by placing them in such a superior line.’ He also thought that excessive respect for the ancient aesthetic sensibility was daft: for Paine, the only thing more beautiful Wearmouth Bridge

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wearmouth_Bridge

than the he had designed was ‘a woman.’ⁱⁱⁱ

The second argument which Tom Paine and many others have made against adulating classical culture relates to its content. The texts, buildings, and artworks of ancient Greece and Rome were paid for and created by and for the elite. This means that these texts, buildings, and artworks were vehicles for social concepts, ideas, ideologies and tastes that upheld a phenomenally hierarchical society. Slavery was universally practised; women were universally oppressed. Non-democratic constitutions were the overwhelmingly the norm, from Sparta’s brutal oligarchy-of-the-warrior class to the revolting king-worship of the Ptolemies of Alexandria and the centralised dictatorship which was the Roman Empire. Do we really think that we have a great deal to learn from the literature, philosophy and art, however beautiful, of societies so unfair, so unequal, so *elitist*? The most important part of the ancient education remained, for more than a thousand years, the epic poems of Homer, which told very self-consciously of the deeds of kings and queens in the heroic Bronze Age, and celebrated their elevation over the ordinary masses.

There are times when I feel a certain amount of sympathy with this position. This happens when I teach courses on ancient women, and plough through the hundredth misogynist tract written by an ancient Greek and Roman male. It happens when I research ancient slavery and can’t find a single source which records the subjective voice and experience of a slave. It happens when I read the Olympic Odes of Pindar, celebrating the victories of the super-rich at the ancient athletics games, and insisting that excellence is inborn and thus exclusive to a tiny group of families. I *can* understand the question of whether old texts from undemocratic, sexist, authoritarian and unfair societies are necessarily edifying if we are to build a better world. I can understand why, after the Russian revolution, such an ideological battle was fought over the content of the new curriculum, when some of debates being aired—those about the role of the ancient Classics in people’s culture and on the curriculum—are again engaging us today. Culture was ‘one of the primary spheres of revolutionary contestation, like politics and economics’.^{iv} In revolutionary Russia, intellectuals discussed passionately what proletarian (as opposed to feudal) culture would look like. It obviously would not conform to aristocratic or *petit-bourgeois* taste, and in the quest for a new aesthetic for the new revolutionary state, ancient Greece and Rome offered paradigms that some took very seriously. The most radical intellectuals proposed that the new citizens of the brave new world they were creating should abandon *all* art produced by pre-revolutionary modes of production, whether ancient slavery,

medieval feudalism or bourgeois capitalism. Classical Greece and Rome did not get favoured treatment above other classics, but were discussed alongside Shakespeare and Pushkin, Beethoven and Wagner, Michelangelo and 19th-century painters.

If I had been in Russia defending Classics 96 years ago, on the other hand, I would have stressed that new finds had begun to yield *rich* access to the lives of the less advantaged in antiquity. From Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, a huge trawl of papyri—pieces of ancient paper on which provincial Greeks living in Egypt wrote—began in the early years of the 20th century to be slowly transcribed and published. Some papyri have added to our collection of ancient literary texts, but far more give us glimpses into the lives of tradesmen and craftsmen, selling donkeys to each other, hiring musicians for wedding feasts, and fighting over the paternity of babies. Scholars have also started to take a much greater interest in the relics of forms of entertainment which we know reached even the most illiterate and slave-class people in antiquity, such as danced versions of myth in the theatre, which was enjoyed in Roman imperial territories where the language was neither Latin nor Greek but Nubian, Dacian, Gallic.^v The fables of Aesop are being reassessed as the stories told by the lower and serving classes.

Yet surely the best answer to this objection lies in the contestation of authority and social hierarchies which is ingrained in the texts themselves. Arguments about how power is allocated in society occur in practically every ancient author. In our culture we may have Robin Hood and William Tell, but the ancients had at least ten fully paid-up heroes of the class war in their repertoire of stories: Spartacus, the Gracchi, Brutus the founder of the Roman Republic, Prometheus the rebel god who gave fire to man, Hercules who endured a long period of servitude and rescued manual labourers like Atlas, and many others. Even the earliest, and most king-obsessed text of them all, the Homeric *Iliad*, sets up the issue of inherited power *versus* status gained through merit in the first quarrel between the King of Kings, Agamemnon, and his best warrior, Achilles. But it is in the second great quarrel of the poem that the question of social class is directly raised. Thersites, an ordinary Greek soldier, suggests to the army that they have spent enough years at Troy fighting on behalf of arrogant social superiors, and that they ought to take to their ships and go home. For just a few minutes, there is great tension, before Odysseus takes hold of his kingly sceptre and bashes Thersites, turning *him* into a figure of ridicule. But the presence of that scene tells us much about the tensions always underlying ancient hierarchical society. The episode can still completely energise a classroom or lecture hall if acted out. And in tracing reactions to Thersites over the centuries, we discover that he has *both* been damned as a seditious mutineer by conservative critics, *and* celebrated as the first great spokesman of the people, and revolutionary democrat, by left-wing thinkers.

Paine's third objection to Classics was more utilitarian. It is, he argued, a waste of time to learn the elaborate grammars and vocabularies of languages not spoken in the modern world when children and young people already had so much

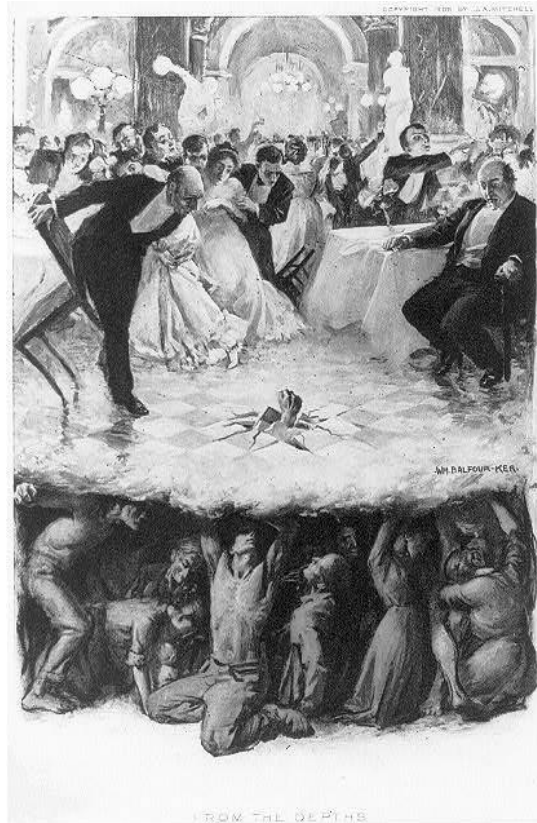
information to absorb that had a direct practical application—science, engineering, mathematics, the law and the conventions of commerce. True learning, he insisted, ‘does not consist, as the schools now make it consist, in the knowledge of languages, but in the knowledge of things to which language gives names.’ Children who were forced to learn classical languages were left no time to understand the real world around them, especially science. Children in the traditional school, said Paine, had their ‘genius . . . killed by the barren study of a dead language.’^{vi} Although he had attended the grammar school in Thetford, Norfolk, he had himself not learned Latin because his Quaker father objected. Yet he still managed to gain an impressive general education by the time he was apprenticed to a corset-maker at the age of just 13. He also thought that the goals of the imposition of the study of dead languages by the leaders of the Christian establishment were to shore up its dogmatic versions of history and the material world and occupy the minds of the young to impede the advancement of physical science. ‘It became necessary to their purpose to cut learning down to a size less dangerous and this they effected by restricting the idea of learning to the dead study of dead language,’ he wrote.^{vii}

This argument is difficult to refute. We definitely do not want to revive the 18th-century and Victorian classical syllabus, imposed on boys in a wide range of schools with the aid of the birch and the terrors of translating *into* the ancient tongues as well as out of them. *Of course* the Latin and Greek languages should be optional rather than compulsory, and then probably only in the last four or five years at school. I do not think that composing in Latin and Greek, although fun and surprisingly appealing to children, is any substitute for learning to express themselves in their own languages and acquiring skills and information necessary to operate in our technologically advanced modern democracies. But Paine’s arguments do not apply to the teaching of classical civilization, myth and history to the young.

Paine’s fourth argument against traditional classical education was that it had already in his day been dominantly used to fulfil the reactionary purposes of rich and powerful people with elitist agendas. And here I do disagree with him. It is not difficult to document the elite taste for the antique in most periods of cultural history. It *is* admittedly a little more difficult to document the interest in antiquity of the lower classes and the under-privileged, but it is not impossible, and evidence for this interest in Britain, between 1789 and World War 2, is what I have received funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to research. For every example of ancient Greece or Rome being adopted as the cultural property of the elite, it is possible to find a progressive counter-example, and Dr Stead and I are building up just such a collection of evidence.^{viii} We hope that it will stand as a permanent resource for people advocating the importance of engaging with antiquity in modernity. To illustrate what I mean, I here break the types of engagement down into four categories—aesthetic uses of antiquity, educational uses, religious uses, and uses in terms of social and political argumentation and ideology.

First, Aesthetics. If you follow the classical precepts of Aristotle, tragic drama must feature a hero from one of the old aristocratic royal families of myth, like Oedipus, King of Thebes. In an ideal tragedy, a nobleman's happiness is overturned; it seems to have been agreed by all ancient audiences that it was worse to have your happiness overturned if you had previously been rich and powerful than if you had been of low estate. This theory of tragedy, putting kings centre stage, was agreeable to the Renaissance and Early Modern creators and sponsors of neoclassical theatre and the new media of opera and ballet. Most of the royal families of Europe actually traced their genealogies directly from the ancient Trojans, and they were usually the people with the money, power and leisure to finance the production of art and literature. But two points can be made here. First, the tragedy of Oedipus, as Sophocles wrote it, actually has the people of Thebes at its centre, suffering because of the corruption and crime in their ruling class, and expressing surprisingly mutinous sentiments. This had been noticed already by the early 18th century in France, and fundamentally informs e.g. Voltaire's *Oedipe*. But, more importantly, there is no reason why the endlessly fertile medium of tragic drama can't have a non-elite hero at its centre, as many playwrights including Arthur Miller have demonstrated. Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* (1949) can be read as the nearly director descendant of Sophocles' Oedipus—he is the wilful head of the family, whose psyche is dissolving. His sons are destined to inexorable strife and his inevitable self-destruction provides the climax to the taut action. But Loman's tragedy is that he has worked all his life for 50 weeks a year at a job he hates—a different form of unfreedom from that of Sophocles' aristocratic hero, since the forces of postwar capitalism have replaced Sophocles' ruthless gods. Miller's transformation of the classical paradigm of tragedy still gains much of its power from that critical classical under-text.

Or take this image, entitled 'From the Depths', created by socialist artist William Balfour Ker in 1905. A Canadian of Scottish background, he created it to



illustrate a novel on class struggle called *The Silent War* by John Ames Mitchell (New York 1906). To represent the decadent life of luxury enjoyed by the North American *fin-de-siècle* wealthy, he inserts replicas of two of the most widely familiar of all ancient statues, the Discobos:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discobos>

and the Venus de Melos:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus_of_Melos

They act as shorthand for elitism, snobbery, wasted wealth and reactionary taste. The image became famous, circulating as a print suitable for framing. The prosperous class are dancing at a society ball, dressed in expensive clothes. Their backward-looking cultural aspirations and tastes are symbolised by the two large copies of the famous antique statues, representing ideal male and female beauty respectively. But the fantasy world enjoyed by the ball-goers only thinly masks the real, murky, subterranean world of labour which makes their wealth possible, seen here irrupting from literally beneath the dancers' feet and threatening to overturn the class system altogether. The smashed ceiling/floor represents a call to socialist revolution. Ker uses a shocking aesthetic technique whereby an abstract idea from economic theory literally breaks apart the conventional realism of the upper-class world in the top half of the engraving. But the clean lines and shapes created by the limbs (both present and missing) of the classical statues are also echoed in the postures and bodies of the oppressed working-class men and women. This

complicates the equivalence between the taste of the elite and classical iconography. Who in this picture are really the idealised humans, after all?

In terms of education, the trope of the elitist function of Classics pervades the Victorian novel. The most famous example occurs in chapter 17 of Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* (1850). In the complex class politics of this novel, the envious Uriah Heep sees David as a privileged young snob. Heep is studying law in order to try to better his income and social position. Without knowledge of Latin, the mark of an educated gentleman and much used in legal discourse, it is difficult for him to achieve his dreams of self-improvement. David offers to teach him Latin. Heep refuses:

'Oh, thank you, Master Copperfield,' he answered, shaking his head. 'I am sure it's very kind of you to make the offer, but I am much too umble to accept it.'

'What nonsense, Uriah!'

'Oh, indeed you must excuse me, Master Copperfield! I am greatly obliged, and I should like it of all things, I assure you; but I am far too umble. There are people enough to tread upon me in my lowly state, without my doing outrage to their feelings by possessing learning. Learning ain't for me. A person like myself had better not aspire. If he is to get on in life, he must get on umbly, Master Copperfield!'

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And yet, as our growing website⁸ shows, there are plenty of counter-examples to Heep—individuals whose education, however hard-won, empowered them and helped them challenge elitism.^{ix}

In terms of religion, there is no doubt that Latin did often play a role in to prevent the emancipation and self-education of ordinary people, who in Britain turned to translations of the bible in English, and also consulted the original new Testament Greek, as they struggled to liberate themselves from the control of the Roman Catholic church. By teaching even science in Latin, 18th-century schooling even in Anglican Britain perpetuated the connection of this ancient language with exclusive cultural property. An excellent book has been written on this topic by Françoise Waquet.^x

Our last category of contestation of Classics as cultural property concerns the promulgation of social and political ideas. The centrality of the ancient Greeks and Romans to the European curriculum precisely coincides with the era of European imperialism. The conquistadors saw themselves as heirs of Odysseus, facing strange beings on far distant shores. The Portuguese sailed to India convinced that they had inherited the baton of European domination of the planet from the Romans, and in particular from Virgil's epic hero who arrives from Troy to found Rome, Aeneas. The epic poem of Portugal, Camões' *Lusiadas*, is in our

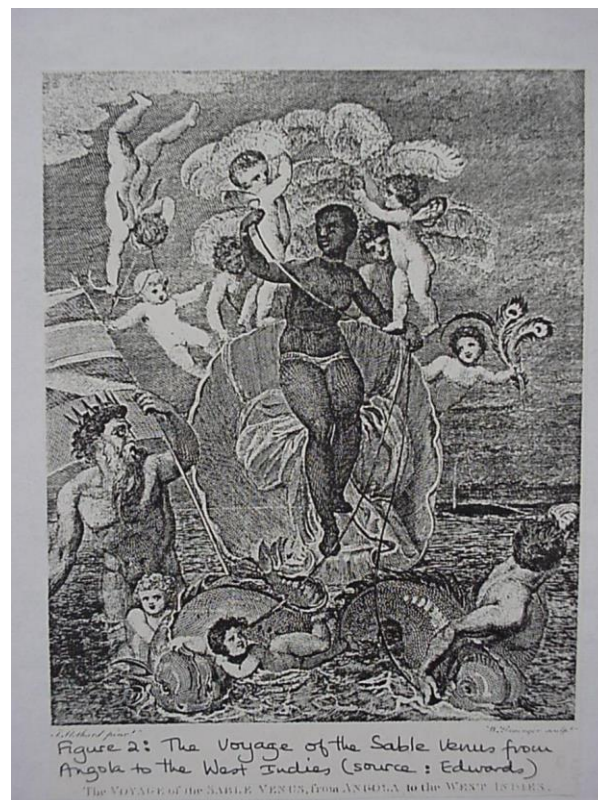
postcolonial days embarrassing in its smug appropriation of the ancient story to the Renaissance Christian imperial project:

ARMS and the Heroes, who from Lisbon's shore,
Thro' seas where sail was never spread before,
Beyond where Ceylon lifts her spicy breast,
And waves her woods above the wat'ry waste,
With prowess more than human forc'd their way
To the fair kingdoms of the rising day:
What wars they wag'd, what seas, what dangers pass'd,
What glorious empire crown'd their toils at last,
What kings, what heroes of my native land
Thunder'd on Asia's and on Afric's strand:
Let Fame with wonder name the Greek no more,
What lands he saw, what toils at sea he bore;
Nor more the Trojan's wand'ring voyage boast,
What storms he brav'd on many a perilous coast:
No more let Rome exult in Trajan's name,
Nor Eastern conquests Ammon's pride proclaim;
A nobler hero's deeds demand my lays
Than e'er adorn'd the song of ancient days,
Illustrious Gama, whom the waves obey'd,
And whose dread sword the fate of empire sway'd.^{xi}

Slavery, similarly, was both justified and criticized by classical iconography and literature. The Abolitionists found the world of classical culture just as useful as the plantation-owners did. An important publication in the defence of slavery was Bryan Edwards' *History Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, which was first published in 1793 and ran into several editions. In the second volume, Edwards sidestepped the issue of sexual relationships between white men and black slave women (which, provided there was no official marriage, he implicitly condoned) by reproducing a poem which tackles the theme with what now seems breathtaking frivolity. Penned in Jamaica in 1765 by Edwards' private tutor there, the Revd. Isaac Teale, it is a 26-stanza ode, celebrating the arrival of

a female slave from Angola to the West Indies. The roguishly sexy tone is set by the epigraph, a line from Virgil's *Eclogue* 2.18: 'The white blossom of privet falls, while the dark blueberries are picked'. In Virgil, this is addressed to a youth by a shepherd who is erotically fixated upon him. In Teale's poem, the coy register is consolidated by conventional references to Erato, the Muse of love poetry, along with the love poets Sappho and Ovid. The 'sable queen' begins her journey from Africa in an inlaid ivory car drawn by winged fish, surrounded by peacocks, ostriches, and dolphins, soft breezes fluttering around her. Her skin surpasses 'the raven's plume, / Her breath the fragrant orange bloom'; she is as beautiful as the Venus of Florence (i.e. of Botticelli), and 'at night', we are with monstrous insensitivity told, it is impossible to tell the difference between white and black beauties. At this point the sea-god assumes the disguise 'of a Tar, / The Captain of a man of war', and the sable Venus smiles him with 'kind consenting eyes'. The result is the birth of a mixed-race Cupid, before his mother arrives, to a rapturous reception, in Jamaica.^{xii}

Edwards commissioned an emerging book illustrator, Thomas Stothard, to provide a design for a plate to illustrate the poem, and the result is indeed a shocking near-parody of Botticelli's 'The Birth of Venus' (1486).



An almost naked and very dark, curvaceous woman, with a blank, unreadable facial expression, drifts at sea surrounded by uniformly white flying cherubs and muscular white male gods. The impact of the poem and the engraving together creates an obscene travesty of what Africans really experienced on the Middle Passage, and legitimises white male fantasies about the black women in their possession. The

‘Voyage of the Sable Venus’ effaces all coercion from the relationship, turning sexual intercourse with slaves, and indeed reproduction with them, into a wholly consensual affair: this Venus looks on her ‘Tar’ with ‘mild consenting’ eyes. Moreover, in an extraordinary allegorical move, Venus and Neptune comes to stand for the entire institution of slavery itself, conceived as an ideal love affair which somehow unites the physical perfection of the African body with the desiring subject of the narrative, the male slave merchants and inheritors of the European cultural tradition.^{xiii}

Yet an almost exactly opposite use of classical imagery is made on the cover of the *American Anti-Slavery Almanac* for 1844. This offers an unmistakable allusion to the myth of Prometheus through the position of the vulnerable black slave mother, prone on the ground but shielding her baby from the onslaught of the aggressive eagle.



3. *American Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1844*, cover. Washington, D.C., Library of Congress.

Near the patriotic symbol of the Capitol building, the stars and stripes floating overhead (the symbolism of both of which is ironically subverted), the American eagle is co-opted as a vicious raptor in a clear but inexplicit reference to classical mythology.

It will have become apparent by now that I do NOT think that studying ancient Greece and Rome is inevitably elitist. Of Tom Paine’s four arguments, the most important is that learning the languages as if they are living tongues, in which poetry as well as prose must be fluently composed, can easily become a waste of

valuable educational time. But Paine never said that learning about the history of the world, including the ancient world, was anything but constructive. He clearly thought that ancient Greeks and Romans provided useful comparands from which to learn, provided that they were not held up as examples to emulate or invested with any special status or authority. They were just another set of humans, albeit very interesting ones, in another set of socio-economic circumstances. Paine in fact knew a good deal about ancient history and philosophy, even using pseudonyms such as Aesop, Atlanticus, Comus, Humanus, and Vox Populi. He shared the rest of the Enlightenment's interest in Plutarch's heroes, praising some of the actions of Epaminondas, Pericles and Camillus. He commended Solon's recommendation that 'the least injury done to the meanest individual was considered as an insult to the whole Constitution.' And in his passionate rhetoric against colonialism and tyranny, his love of ancient literature sometimes provides him with powerful images: what else was the status of colonial America to its British masters than Hector, cruelly tied to 'the chariot-wheels of Achilles'.^{xiv} But more important than his general education in the writings of our cultural ancestors, imbibed in English translation, is his recommendation that comparison with antiquity was a fundamentally useful endeavour. Tom Paine, I think, would have wanted us to use Classics like a rear-view window—that is, as an incredibly useful aid to understanding ourselves and our own position in time and human history. For Paine recommended, for example, that revolutionary new republics would do well to institute 'a society for enquiring into the ancient state of the world and the state of ancient history, so far as history is connected with systems of religion ancient and modern.'^{xv} Let us not throw the rear-view window out, but use it systematically to offer us the all-round vision which we will need to survive.

References

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viii

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ix

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