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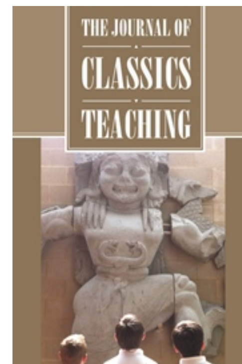

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Citizens' Classics for the 21st Century

by Edith Hall

The recent general election has exposed the danger inherent in vote-based democracies – that they inevitably entail large disaffected minorities being excluded from executive power. The ancient Greek inventors of democracy vigorously debated this issue, having painful historical experience of it (recorded by Thucydides) and theoretical solutions (discussed by Aristotle). Yet our state educational system almost completely deprives our secondary-school children of the opportunity to think about democracy afforded by the dazzling thought-world of the ancient Greeks. This is despite the availability of excellent translations of all their writings – free online – into modern English.

The foundations of the Greeks' exciting culture, to which few of our teenagers are ever introduced, were laid long before the arrival of Christianity, between 800 and 300 BC. Greek-speakers lived in hundreds of different villages, towns and cities, from Spain to Libya and the Nile delta, from the freezing river Don in the north-eastern corner of the Black Sea to Trebizond. They were culturally elastic, for they often freely intermarried with other peoples; they had no sense of ethnic inequality which was biologically determined, since the concepts of distinct world 'races' had not been invented. They tolerated and even welcomed imported foreign gods. What united them was never geopolitics, either. With the arguable exception of the short-lived Macedonian Empire in the later 4th century BC, there never was a recognisable, independent, state run by Greek-speakers, centred in and including what we now know as Greece, until after the Greek War of Independence in the early 19th century.

What bound the Greeks together was an enquiring cast of mind underpinned by a wonderful shared set of stories and poems and a restlessness which made them more likely to sail away and found a new city-state than tolerate starvation or oppression in a venerable mainland metropolis. The diasporadic, seafaring Greeks, while they invented new communities from scratch and were stimulated by constantly interacting with other ethnic groups, made a rapid series of intellectual discoveries which propelled the Mediterranean world to a new level of civilisation. This process of self-education was much admired by the Greeks and Romans of the centuries which followed. When the texts and artworks of classical Greece were rediscovered in the European Renaissance, they changed the world for a second time.

Yet over the last two decades the notion that the Greeks were exceptional has been questioned. It has been stressed that they were, after all, just one of many ethnic and linguistic groups centred in the eastern end of the ancient Mediterranean world. Long before the Greeks appeared in the historical record, several complicated civilisations had arisen – the Mesopotamians and Egyptians, the Hattians and Hittites. Other peoples provided the Greeks with crucial technological advances; they learned the phonetic alphabet from the Phoenicians, and how to mint coins from the Lydians. They may have learned how to compose elaborate cult hymns from the mysterious Luwians of Syria and central Anatolia. During the period when the Greeks invented rational philosophy and science, after 600 BC, their horizons were dramatically opened up by the expansion of the Persian Empire.

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, our understanding of the other cultures of the Ancient Near East advanced rapidly. We know far more about the minds of the Greeks' predecessors and neighbours than we did before the landmark discovery of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* on clay tablets in the Tigris valley in 1853. There has been a constant stream of newly published texts in the languages of the successive peoples who dominated the fertile plains of Mesopotamia (Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians). The words of Ḫittites on the tablets found at Hattuša in central Turkey and the phrases inscribed on clay tablets at Ugarit in northern Syria have been deciphered. New texts as well as fresh interpretations of writings by the ancient Egyptians continue to appear, requiring, for example, a reassessment of the importance of the Nubians to North African history. Many of these thrilling advances have revealed how much the Greeks shared with and absorbed from

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their predecessors and neighbours. Painstaking comparative studies have been published which reveal the Greek 'miracle' to have been one constituent of a continuous process of intercultural exchange. It has become a new orthodoxy that the Greeks were very similar to their Ancient Near Eastern neighbours, in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Levant, Persia, and Asia Minor. Some scholars have gone so far as to ask whether the Greeks came up with anything new at all, or whether they merely acted as a conduit through which the combined wisdom of all the civilisations of the eastern Mediterranean was disseminated across the territories conquered by Alexander the Great, before arriving at Rome and posterity. Others have seen sinister racist motives at work, and accused classicists of creating in their own image the Oldest Dead White European Males; some have claimed, with some justification, that northern Europeans have systematically distorted and concealed the evidence showing how much the ancient Greeks owed to Semitic and African peoples rather than to Indo-European, 'Aryan' traditions.

The question has thus become painfully politicised. Critics of colonialism and racism tend to play down the specialness of the ancient Greeks. Those who maintain that there was something identifiably different and even superior about the Greeks, on the other hand, are often die-hard conservatives who have a vested interest in proving the superiority of 'Western' ideals and in making evaluative judgements of culture. My problem is that I fit into neither camp. I am certainly opposed to colonialism and racism, and have investigated reactionary abuses of the classical tradition in colonial India and by apologists of slavery all the way through to the American Civil War. But my constant engagement with the ancient Greeks and their culture has made me more, rather than less, convinced that they asked a series of crucial questions which are difficult to identify in combination amongst any of the other cultures of the ancient Mediterranean or Near Eastern antiquity.[1]

Taken singly, most Greek achievements can be paralleled in the culture of at least one of their neighbours. The Babylonians knew about Pythagoras' theorem centuries before Pythagoras was born. The tribes of the Caucasus had brought mining and metallurgy to unprecedented levels. The Hittites had made advances in chariot technology, but they were also highly literate. They recorded the polished and emotive orations delivered on formal occasions in their royal court, and their carefully argued legal speeches. One Hittite king foreshadows Greek historiography when he chronicled in detail his frustration at the incompetence of some of his military officers during the siege of a Hurrian city. The Phoenicians were just as great seafarers as any Greeks. The Egyptians developed medicine based on empirical experience rather than religious dogma and told *Odyssey*-like stories about sailors who went missing and returned after adventures overseas. Pithy fables similar to those of Aesop were composed in an archaic Aramaic dialect of Syria and housed in Jewish temples. Architectural design concepts and technical know-how came from the Persians to the Greek world via the many Ionian Greek workmen who helped build Persepolis, Susa and Pasargadae, named *Yauna* in Persian texts. But none of these peoples produced anything quite equivalent to Athenian democracy, comic theatre, philosophical logic, or Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

I do not deny that the Greeks acted as a conduit for other ancient peoples' achievements. But to function successfully as a conduit, channel, or intermediary is in itself to perform an exceptional role. It requires a range of talents and resources. Taking over someone else's technical knowledge requires an opportunistic ability to identify a serendipitous find or encounter, excellent communicative skills, and the imagination to see how a technique, story or object could be adapted to a different linguistic and cultural milieu. In this sense, the Romans fruitfully took over substantial achievements of their civilisation from the Greeks, as did the Renaissance Humanists. *Of course* the Greeks were not by nature or in potential superior to any other human beings, either physically or intellectually. Indeed, they themselves often commented on how difficult it was to distinguish Greek and non-Greek, let alone free person from slave, if all the trappings of culture, clothing and adornment were removed. But that does not mean they were not the right people, in the right place, at the right time, to take up the human baton of intellectual progress for several hundred years.

And that period of intellectual ferment produced ideas that have subsequently informed the most significant moments in western political history. Thomas Jefferson, framing the *Declaration of Independence*, took the idea of the pursuit of happiness from Aristotle. Toussaint Louverture read Plutarch's account of Spartacus before leading the first successful slave rebellion on Haiti in 1791. Tom Paine argued that issues like the relationship of religion to the state should be discussed with reference to historical examples from antiquity onwards. Chartist leaders were inspired by the Athenian democratic revolution. Women suffragists recited at their meetings the resounding speech which the tragedian Euripides gives his heroine Medea on the economic, political and sexual oppression of the entire female sex.

The Greeks, more even than the Romans, show us how to question received opinion and authority. The earliest myths reveal mankind actively disputing the terms on which the Olympian gods want to rule them, and the philanthropic god Prometheus rebelling against Zeus in order to steal fire – a divine prerogative – and give it to mortal men. Sophocles' Antigone refuses to accept her tyrannical uncle's arbitrary edict, draws crucial distinctions between moral decency and contingent legislation, and buries her brother anyway. Aristophanes, in his democratic comedies, subjected politicians who wielded power to satire of eye-watering savagery. Socrates dedicated his life to proving the difference between the truth and received opinion, the unexamined life being, in his view, not worth living. No wonder Hobbes thought that reading Greek and Roman authors should be banned by any self-respecting tyrant, in *Leviathan* arguing that they foment revolution under the slogan of liberty, instilling in people a habit '*of favouring uproars, lawlessly controlling the actions of their sovereigns, and then controlling those controllers*.'

Yet in today's Britain, few secondary school students are ever challenged by the ancient Greeks and Romans or their ideas. This is despite the existence for half a century of excellent GCSE and 'A' Level courses in Classical Civilisation, which have been a resounding success wherever

introduced, and can be taught cost-effectively across the state school sector. The failure to include Classical Civilisation amongst the subjects taught in every secondary school deprives us and our future citizens of access to educational treasures which can not only enthral, but fulfil what Jefferson argued in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1782) was the main goal of education in a democracy – to enable us defend our liberty. History, he proposed, is the subject which makes citizens so equipped. To stay free also requires comparison of constitutions, utopian thinking, fearlessness about innovation, critical, lateral and relativist thinking, advanced epistemological skills in source criticism *and* the ability to argue cogently. All these skills can be learned from their succinct, entertaining, original formulations and applications in the dazzling works of the Greeks.

The situation is aggravated by the role that training in the ancient languages, as opposed to ancient ideas, plays in dividing social and economic classes. The dreadful rich/poor schism in the British nation is now clearly defined, in terms of the curriculum, by access to Greek and Latin grammar. In 2013 (the last year for which figures are available), 3,580 state-sector candidates took 'A' Levels in Classical Civilisation or Ancient History. Greek 'A' Level was taken by 260 candidates, 223 of whom were at the independent schools which only seven per cent of our children attend; Latin was taken by 1305, a depressing 940 of whom were at independent schools. High grades in the ancient languages – easily enough won by solicitous coaching – provide near-guaranteed access to our most elite universities. For those without Greek and Latin 'A' Levels there are indeed Oxbridge opportunities: a four-year Classics course at Cambridge and at Oxford the fast-track 'Course II' as well as two smaller courses (Ancient and Modern History, Ancient History and Archaeology) focussing on history and material culture rather than literature and philosophy. The chances of admission for these are in line with other courses such as English and History. But it is easier to get into Oxbridge to read the long-established Classics courses, requiring an ancient language 'A' Level, than any other subject: between 2012 and 2014, for the traditional Classics 'Course I' at Oxford, 51 students were accepted from the state sector and 233 from the non-state. There is nothing like such a high percentage of privately educated students on any other course; there is no similarly high chance of admission—at 45 per cent or so. Classics applicants have a comparable chance of getting into Cambridge, at 45%, and only a slightly better ratio of state sector acceptees.

To me, as a Greek scholar, educated in the 1970s and 1980s entirely at the taxpayer's expense at a Direct Grant school and at Oxford, this is profoundly embarrassing. Instead of Greek ideas expanding the minds of all young citizens, Greek denotes money and provides a queue-jumping ticket to privilege.

How can we eradicate the apartheid system in British Classics? (1) We need to support Classical Civilisation qualifications, campaign for their introduction in every school and recognise their excellence as intellectual preparation for adult life and university. Specifically, Classical Civilisation needs to be recognised in the English Baccalaureate and given the same governmental support as Latin. (2) We need to expand the currently tiny number of teachers trained to teach Classical Civilisation via Classics-dedicated PGCE courses, and also, crucially, encourage qualified teachers of other subjects in schools—English, History, Modern Languages, Religious Studies—to add Classical Civilisation to their repertoire. Take Christ the King Sixth-Form College in South London. A committed Philosophy teacher there, Eddie Barnett, was inspired by the enthusiastic response elicited by the (small) Plato element on the 'A'-Level Philosophy syllabus. After school talks on the Greeks from myself and other members of the Classics Department at King's College London, he has recently secured an agreement that Classical Civilisation will be rolled out at all three campuses of that excellent institution. (3) Classical Civilisation qualifications are embraced at most universities already, and this is the first year in which it has been possible for Open University students to graduate with single honours in Classical Studies, even if they have had no contact with the Greeks and Romans previously. But Oxford and Cambridge, with their fame and brand, now need to lead by example and offer challenging Classics courses which do not fetishise grammar and consequently repel state-sector students who have been excited by reading Classics in English. This means engaging with literary texts fearlessly in translation and raising the proportion of critical thinking to language acquisition. Undergraduate degrees are supposed to produce competent citizens. Traditional Classics courses are not making the most of those ancient authors on their curriculum who enhance civic as opposed to syntactical competence.

There is, however, an obstacle to such citizen-friendly proposals for the future of Classics. The obstacle is posed by the contempt directed from some upper echelons of the Classics community against GCSEs and 'A' Levels in Classical Civilisation. Some Classics scholars and alumni happily maintain the exclusive private-school/Oxbridge monopoly on the Greeks. Almost all the energy currently expended by some Classics-friendly charities on supporting a classical presence in the state system is directed towards Latin. Of course I have no objection to Latin teaching, but focussing on it exclusively entails three dangers. First, plenty of meritorious young people with a great deal to offer society don't particularly enjoy grammar and are put off the ancient world forever by being offered a diet over-heavy on language when they might be thrilled by other aspects of antiquity. Second, omitting the broader, more conceptually stretching study of the ancient world, and especially of Greek thought, implicitly suggests that Latin has a prior claim on our citizens' attentions. Third, focussing on training in Latin grammar encourages classical Luddites (who would rather destroy the modern study of the ancient world than see any overhaul of pedagogical tradition) *publicly* to disparage Classical Civilisation's in-depth study of ancient society.

One prominent Oxford-trained journalist, Harry Mount, recently described Classical Civilisation qualifications in the *Telegraph* as 'intellectual baby food' with which students are 'spoon-fed', and as 'Classics Lite'.[2] This was to insult the entire community of state-sector classicists and anyone who ever reads an ancient author in translation. He and his associates have forgotten Gilbert Murray's injunction that it is the Greeks, not Greek, who are the true object of the humanist curriculum. They have forgotten Milton,

who wrote in his treatise *Of Education* that language study *'is but the instrument convaying to us things usefull to be known'* If a linguist '*have not studied the solid things in them as well as the words and lexicons, he were nothing so much to be esteem'd a learned man, as any yeoman or tradesman competently wise in his mother dialect only…'* Thomas Jefferson said exactly the opposite to Harry Mount: he proposed that impressionable minds of the ablest younger children, including the poor ones he wanted to be funded by the state, could be kept safely occupied with rote learning of the minutiae of ancient languages, until they acquired sufficient intellectual robustness in mid-adolescence to cope with truly rigorous education in argumentation. That is, he saw language learning as the intellectual baby food.

The instrumentality of ancient languages in social exclusion has an inglorious history which we surely do not want to perpetuate. In 1748, the Earl of Chesterfield wrote to his son: *'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.'* Classical knowledge is here limited to linguistic knowledge, education to men, and literacy to reading competence in Greek and Latin. Greek was also handy when white people wanted to deride the intellectual abilities of black ones. In 1833-4, American pro-slavery thinkers were on the defensive. The Senator for South Carolina, John C. Calhoun, declared at a Washington dinner party that only when he could 'find a Negro who knew the Greek syntax' could he be brought to 'believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man'. This snipe motivated a free black errand boy, Alexander Crummell, to head for Cambridge University in England. There he indeed learned Greek as part of his studies, financed by Abolitionist campaigners, in Theology at Queens' College (1851-3).

The best-known example is the hero of Thomas Hardy's tragic novel *Jude the Obscure*. Jude Fawley, a poor stonemason living in a Victorian village, is desperate to study Latin and Greek at university. He propels himself into the torment that results from harbouring such unrealistic aspirations at the moment when he gazes on the spires and domes of the University of Christminster (a fictional substitute for Oxford). They 'gleamed like the topaz' in the distance. The lustrous topaz shares its golden colour with the stone used to build Oxbridge colleges, but is one of the hardest minerals in nature. Jude's fragile psyche and health inevitably collapse when he discovers just how unbreakable are the social barriers that exclude him from elite culture and perpetuate his class position. Fawley may have been fictional, but Hardy was writing from personal experience. As the son of a stonemason himself, and apprenticed to an architect's firm, he had been denied a public school and university education; like Jude Fawley, he had struggled to learn enough Greek to read the *Iliad* as a teenager. Unlike Jude, Hardy rose through the social ranks to become a prosperous member of the literary establishment. But he never resolved his internal conflict between admiration for Greek and Latin authors and resentment of the supercilious attitude adopted by some members of the upper classes who had been formally trained in them.

Hardy might have found inner peace had he been fully aware of the splendid history of the reading of ancient authors by Britons far beyond the privileged elite, a history which has been wilfully obscured by those rich enough to be able to afford for their children the opportunity to learn ancient languages. Pope's early 18th-century translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* brought Homer to a far larger audience, including women, than ever had access to an elite education. Take Esther Easton, a Jedburgh gardener's wife, visited by the poet Robert Burns in 1787. He recorded that she can repeat by heart almost everything she has ever read, particularly Pope's 'Homer' from end to end' and 'is a woman of very extraordinary abilities'. Pope's Homer also captured the childhood imagination of Hugh Miller, another Scot, a stonemason and a distinguished autodidact, who grew up to become a world-famous geologist. He saw the *Iliad* as incomparable, and wrote in *My Schools and Schoolmasters* (1854) that he had learned early 'that no other writer could cast a javelin with half the force of Homer. The missiles went whizzing athwart his pages; and I could see the momentary gleam of the steel, ere it buried itself deep in brass and bull-hide.'

For there is an alternative history of classical scholarship – the history of many individuals, brave, stubborn, naïve, or all three—who, in the face of every kind of obstruction did succeed in 'entering Minerva's temple', as the working-class imagination often framed the project of autodidacticism. This is the subject of my current research project *Classics and Class* (http://www.classicsandclass.info/), for which I have gratefully received funding from the British taxpayer via the Arts & Humanities Research Council. The most prodigious of British autodidacts was Joseph Wright, a Victorian workhouse boy who became Professor of Comparative Philology at Oxford. Illiterate at the age of 15, he discovered his aptitude for languages at a Wesleyan night school, funded a PhD in Greek at Heidelberg by teaching incessantly, and, before appointment to his Chair, lectured for the Association for the Higher Education of Women. The Reverend John Relly Beard was a crucial force behind the movement for popular education in Lancashire and never wavered in his zeal for universal educational to the highest level. He wrote accessible works on classical and biblical subjects, the sections on Latin, Greek and English Literature for *Cassell's Popular Educator*, *Latin Made Easy* (1848) and *Cassell's Lessons in Greek…Intended Especially for those who are Desirous of Learning Greek without the Assistance of a Master*. In this teach-yourself manual he is explicit about the readership he assumes: 'The wants of such, the want of what may roughly be termed *the uneducated*, will be carefully borne in mind by me, while I prepare these lessons… My purpose is to simplify the study of Greek so as to throw open to all who are earnest the great work of self-culture'.

Organised working-class libraries reveal a fascinating alternative canon of books relating to the ancient world, from the first workers' libraries in Europe established in the 1750s at Leadhills and Wanlockhead in Dumfries and Galloway to the foundation of the Workers' Educational Association. By the end of the 19th century, these libraries' holdings were often influenced by 'Lubbock's List', the one hundred books in 1887 deemed 'best worth reading' by John Lubbock, Principal of the Working-Men's College in London from 1883 to 1899. Lubbock, who became the first Baron Avebury, was

himself from a privileged banking family, and educated at Eton. Although he did not attend university, he was a polymath, specialising in archaeology and biological sciences. The proportion of classical authors in his list is remarkable: Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Plato's *Apology*, *Crito* and *Phaedo*, Xenophon's *Memorabilia* and *Anabasis*, Demosthenes' *de Corona*, Cicero's *De Officiis*, *De Amicitia*, and *De Senectute*, Plutarch's *Lives*, Homer, Hesiod, Virgil, Aeschylus' *Prometheus* and *Oresteia*, Sophocles' *Oedipus*, Euripides' *Medea*, Aristophanes' *Knights* and *Clouds*, Herodotus, Thucydides, Tacitus' *Germania*, and Livy. In addition, two famous works on ancient history – Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and Grote's *History of* Greece – make it onto the list, along with the most popular novel set in antiquity, Lytton's *Last Days of Pompeii*. More than a quarter of all the books are classical authors, and more than a third addressed to classical antiquity. The classical riches on the working-class self-educator's library and private bookshelves after 1887 can partly be attributed to Lubbock's ideal curriculum.

The 109 libraries of the South Wales Coalfields are a wonder of labour history, and the books really were taken out. At Ebbw Vale, each reader borrowed an average of 52 volumes a year. The 'Condensed Accessions Book' of Bargoed Colliery Library details its holdings by 1921-2. Texts in Latin and Greek don't feature: until 1918 almost all miners had left school on their 13th birthday. But the 'alternative classical curriculum' of the miner was wide-ranging. He read translations and biographies such as J.B. Forbes' *Socrates* (1905). He learned about the Greeks from H.B. Cotterill's *Ancient Greece* (1913), the Egyptians from Rawlinson's Herodotean *History of Ancient Egypt* (1880), and mythology from several books by Andrew Lang.

The inspiring past of people's Greek can help us to look forward. It is theoretically in our power as British citizens to create the curriculum we want. In my personal utopia, the ancient Greek language would be universally available free of charge to everyone who wants to learn it, at whatever age, as would Latin, Classical Civilisation, Ancient History, Philosophy, Anglo-Saxon, Basque, Coptic, Syriac and Hittite, for that matter. But Classical Civilisation qualifications are the admirable, economically viable and *attainable* solution which has evolved organically in our state sector. Classicists who do not actively promote them will justifiably be perceived as elitist dinosaurs.

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This article originated as the Gaisford Lecture, based on research she had conducted with Dr Henry Stead for the project http://www.classicsandclass.info/. It was later reprinted in *The Guardian* newspaper.

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[1] *I outline these questions in my latest book,* Introducing the Ancient Greeks *(Bodley Head, 2015).*

[2] *'The Greek Tragedy in our classrooms', The Telegraph* March 20th 2015.