

Approaching Classical Reception through the Frame of Social Class

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1. Frames, Prisms, and Definitions

'Classical Reception Studies' denotes an enormous area of cultural and intellectual history. It is commonly understood as consisting of the study of the continuing presence of the ideas, texts and material culture of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds since the end of pagan antiquity. 'Reception' of ideas, texts and objects of course actually begins the moment each one is created, and is a continuous (if fluctuating) process. Ancient Rome 'received' ancient Greece, and ancient Greece 'received' elements in its culture from all of its ancient neighbours, especially those in western Asia and North Africa. A few studies have traced the history of the reception of a specific piece of ancient material from antiquity continuously until the present day, for example those explaining the impact made by ancient Greek plays in Roman and Byzantine culture as well as from the Renaissance onwards.¹ Yet 'Classical Reception Studies' is not normally understood as addressing itself to reception in the ancient world. Within academic institutions, the 'reception' of pagan ancient Greece and Rome by the cultures of Byzantium and Medieval western Europe is usually studied by specialists in Byzantine and Medieval history. 'Classical Reception Studies' is usually taken to focus on the period beginning with the fall of Byzantium in the 15th century.

But the continuing presence of ancient Greek and Roman ideas, texts and artefacts in European and world culture since the 15th century is probably the biggest single, discrete area of Humanist study ever invented by the human brain. Its relatively recent emergence as a central sub-field within the traditional discipline of Classics, an emergence which can be traced to the 1970s, has coincided (and is connected) with the increasing secularization of society and the almost universal decline of the teaching of Latin and Greek in schools and universities. It is a significant development

and is changing the nature of our practices as Classicists, not only when we are doing 'Reception' but in all our scholarly endeavours. Yet it presents an acute challenge. How do we delimit its scope and define its objectives? Nobody can claim to be an expert on everything connected with Mediterranean antiquity that has happened in the world since the 15th century, which is what 'Classical Reception Studies' implies.

Although this emergent field is still engendering its own immanent boundaries, certain trends in the choice of subject-matter and in method of approach are now apparent. Individual research may be focused on an ancient author, text, genre, medium, figure, concept, practice, region, or historical period: Sophocles, Sophocles' *Antigone*, satire, frescoes, Pericles, piety, athletics, Crete, or the Hellenistic era. Or it may focus on the 'receiving' element—an author, text, genre, medium, figure, concept, region, or historical period: Shakespeare, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, novels, oil painting, feminism, France, or World War I. It may use more than one of these categories to define the evidence it analyses—the reception of Aristophanes in colonial British India, for example.² In our project, *Classics and Class in Britain 1789-1939*, we mark off our area of interest both geopolitically and chronologically. But the other 'frame' we impose is that of social class. We are looking for the presence—or absence—of engagement with Greek and Roman antiquity, in Britain, between 1789 and 1939, through the frame of our consciousness of the class structure of the society conducting that engagement.

It is important that we clarify what we mean by the word 'class' in the framing of our project, especially since 'class' is such a contested term. We use it in the sociological sense. 'Class' in the sociological sense, however, means two different things, although they are often commensurate: 'objective class' is an economic category, while 'subjective class' defines the way individuals and groups are perceived by themselves and others. Everyone has an 'objective' class identity in that everyone has a position in the economic working of society. Everyone acquires their subsistence (food etc.) from somewhere, and plays a role in the way that goods and services are

consumed and distributed. Objective 'class analysis' simply asks what the source of subsistence and the role are.

All the people in our historical period of study derived their subsistence from one or more of a number of sources, just as everyone does today. There are nine basic ways to acquire it:

- 1) Earn it: this means people who work for pay, selling either their physical or mental labour to other people or to organisations. A very few people are self-employed and employ nobody else.
- 2) Extract it legally from the labour of others. This includes people who own factories, restaurants, farms, or other businesses and derive their income from the profits made by work of people they hire.
- 3) Steal it or otherwise obtain it illegally, e.g. by fraud or blackmail.
- 4) Live off interest on capital or rent on property. This category includes people who possess sufficient means to provide a constant income flow without requiring them to work.
- 5) Inherit it. Some people receive unearned financial capital or goods that can be converted into money from when their parents or others die.
- 6) Win it or be given it. A few people acquire large amounts of money suddenly from betting, lotteries, competitions or receiving gifts.
- 7) Derive it from the state. People on state pensions, studentships, unemployment or other benefits financed by taxation of other citizens fall into this category.
- 8) Derive it from charity, whether institutionalised or begging on the street.
- 9) Be supported by another individual (this includes 'marry it'). Children, and dependent relatives, spouses and partners, if they do not earn money, fall into this category.

During the period under consideration in our project, the vast majority of British people fell into the first category, in that they earned their livelihood from physical labour, or were dependent on someone who did. This means that they were objectively 'working-class'.

In everyday usage, however, most people understand class as a subjective category rather than the (actually more significant) objective socio-economic status and role. Class position is often 'subjectively' diagnosed or conjectured by noticing a whole cluster of identifying markers, ranging from style of speech and accent, hairstyle and clothing, to recreational tastes and educational attainments. The 'subjective' markers of class, especially where there is social mobility, are by no means always co-extensive with 'objective' class position. People whose lifestyle define may define them as 'working-class' may be very rich and employ others; some people, especially the young unemployed, whose speech patterns and appearance and education are subjectively 'middle-class', are often struggling to survive in low-paid 'working-class' jobs in catering and service industries. Moreover, any individual or group may subjectively define themselves as members of one class, while other people may place them, through identifying class markers subjectively, in another. Identifying a class position in oneself also requires positioning others in classes lower or higher, constructing a *relative* relationship. Class *identity*, as perceived in both self and other, is subjective and relative.

We are interested in both types of class definition—objective and subjective—and in subjective class as a constituent of personal identity, appraising others, and relating to them relatively. We preface our analysis of any manifestation of interest in ancient Greece and Rome by asking a series of class-conscious questions, taking both objective and subjective class identities into account. A provisional formulation of these questions was published by Edith several years ago in the *Blackwell Companion to Classical Receptions*, edited by Lorna Hardwick and Chris Stray.³ The two primary questions are the class profile (both objectively and subjectively defined) and political position of the 'Receiver' of the ancient Greek or Roman text. Conservative Members of Parliament

with inherited wealth will have talked differently about, for example, Thersites in the *Iliad* book II from the way in which a committed Chartist labourer is likely to have talked talk about him. On the other hand some aristocrats have always espoused radical causes, and some working-class people have always espoused conservative views. But there are several other questions which we need to ask before we can interpret the relevance of the engagement with antiquity to the issue of social class. Who were the intended and actual audiences? What was the amount of classical education, formal or informal, to which everyone involved had enjoyed (or not enjoyed) exposure? What were the ancient materials involved? Through what cultural intermediary—translation, edition, performance, painting, fiction, edifice etc—were they consumed, and what were the 'class' associations of that intermediary at the time? Is the pertinent ancient material frequently to be found in contexts where social class distinctions are prominent (for example, in Parliamentary debates, where quotation in Latin was once standard practice)? Is the issue of social class disguised by euphemism or made explicit, and if so, what language used and what attitudes are manifested?

The multiplicity of these fundamental questions, involved in the practice of class-conscious Classical Reception, even within a firmly demarcated geopolitical and chronological frame, means that the metaphor of the 'frame'—commonly understood as a two-dimensional structure delimiting a visual field—becomes inadequate. At the Nijmegen conference, Edith proposed that it was more helpful, in our particular project at least, to think in terms of the metaphor of a prism, in particular of what in Optics is called a dispersive prism. We refract the metaphorical white light, as given off by the 18th-, 19th- and 20th-century cultural phenomena we analyse, through a prism which breaks the white light down into a series of different constituent spectral colours, according to their frequency. Class-consciousness is our prism, and the bands of coloured light which we try to distinguish are the objective and subjective class position, political agenda, and classical experience of everyone involved—receiver or creator as well as imagined and actual audience. This leaves the question, however, of the precise nature of the beams of white light to which we apply the prism. In our project, three principles guide our selection of the white light beams—the primary evidence—to

prioritise from amongst the plethora evinced by our vast historical period. First, we are committed to a multidisciplinary approach, using resources which have long been central to social history, theatre history, history of the book, and translation studies, for example, but which classicists have largely been unaware. Here previous 'crossover' scholars, such as Christopher Stray, a sociologist and historian of education as well as classicist, have proved invaluable.⁴ Secondly, we privilege sources with the potential to afford opportunities to listening to lost voices and recreating lost experiences, such as the unpublished writings and artworks of autodidacts and working-class individuals in regional collections and archives. Thirdly, we have designed four subject headings under which to range our findings as we assemble and collate them:

- 1) recreation (e.g. sport, theatre, games, lighter forms of literature designed primarily to entertain);
- 2) education (not just the history of school and universities, but of autodidacticism, workers' reading groups, public libraries, mass-market translations of ancient authors);
- 3) activism (the presence of classical imagery, narratives and ideas in the political arena, especially the Trade Union Movement, radical journalism, Chartist oratory);
- 4) environment (the presence of classical material in the material world in Britain during our period—in public statuary and architecture, advertising, public house signage, design, museums and art galleries).

Inevitably, some of the phenomena we are studying belong in more than one category—public libraries may have self-consciously neoclassical architecture, and the reading societies which workers created often studied books for recreational and activist purposes as well as straightforwardly educational ones. But these four headings are useful in controlling our material

and honing our interpretations of the many hues refracted from the basic white light of the historical evidence when we apply the prism of class-consciousness.

2. Case Study: The Shoemaker who brought Cheap Books to

One type of voice that has hitherto been lost to the history of British Classics belongs to the people associated with the 'economy' bookshops which served the reading needs of the poorer members of society. These shops crop up in our discussion both of education and of recreation. An important example was the extraordinary bookshop opened in Finsbury Square, London, by James Lackington, who promoted his shop as both a "Temple of the Muses" and "the cheapest booksellers in the world." Cheap Classics was, in today's jargon, at the heart of Lackington's brand identity. Although the bookseller was a remarkable man and his shop a cultural oasis which literally changed lives by bringing literary and artistic nourishment to less-than-wealthy social groups in his locality, neither he nor his temple would attract much attention in the historical record had it not been for the reflected light of his soon-to-be-famous patrons.

As a schoolboy the English poet, John Keats—who was not working-class but whose family had neither the economic stability nor the inclination to send him to a school that taught ancient Greek—used to frequent this bookshop to marvel at the towering shelves and read the books for free in the 'lounging rooms'.⁵ It was in this shop that Keats first met his future publishers, John Taylor and James Augustus Hessey, who both worked there as young men under Lackington. As can be seen in its name and the shop's classicizing décor (think Greek temple façade and white busts strewn about), the Temple of the Muses was designed to feel like a classical shrine to reading and learning. You could even pay for books with specially minted tokens, bearing its eccentric owner's portrait on one side and a classical figure such as Fama, or Fame, on the other. One of our priorities is to examine the kinds of classical books that were sold by Lackington, how inexpensively, and to customers of what class background and class identity.

Lackington himself was born to working-class parents. His mother was a weaver and his father a journeyman shoemaker. The family was too poor to afford schooling for James for more than a few years. At the age of ten therefore he left home to become “the agent of an eminent pie merchant”. Four years later he took up his father’s trade, becoming apprentice to a Taunton shoemaker. In 1768 he moved to Bristol, where he met his cobbling partner John Jones. The money they made as shoemakers (and was not spent in the company of women) went on building their collection of second-hand books. Years later, after the death of his grandfather (who left a legacy of ten pounds, with which they opened up their first bookshop in in East London) these books would form part of their early selling stock.

Lackington, an entrepreneur who prided himself on his success as a businessman, shrewdly emphasized his working-class origins by appropriating, only to subvert, an ancient anecdote. Pliny the Elder in his *Naturalis Historia* (35.85) tells the story of how a shoemaker once pointed out that the famous painter, Apelles, had inaccurately rendered a sandal. On admitting the fault, Apelles corrected his work. Bolstered by his successful input the shoemaker began to criticise further the painter’s work, to which criticism Apelles responded shortly: *Sutor, ne ultra crepidam* – “a shoemaker [should not judge] beyond the sandal.” Lackington proudly (and wittily) twisted this adage, placing it at the head of the frontispiece of his memoir, directly above a defiant and deep-browed portrait: “*Sutor Ultra Crepidam Feliciter Ausus*” —“a shoemaker [who] dared successfully [to judge] beyond the sandal.” He continues in English, “Who a few years since, Began Business with Five Pounds, / Now sells one hundred thousand volumes annually.”

Inside his opulent Temple of the Muses, with its antique paintings, busts, classical knick-knacks, and Romanesque cupola, Lackington prided himself on selling affordable books, and claimed with pride that he had “been highly instrumental in diffusing the general desire for reading, now so prevalent among the inferior orders of society”.⁶ In an innovation in the world of bookselling, he bought in high volume and sold his books cheap, and by cash exchange only. On his carriage were inscribed the words ‘Small profits do great things’.

3. Conclusions: Back to the Future

In principle, our model could work for any form of social category and consciousness, in any location, at any time. We could investigate the Reception of Classics in Britain during the long 19th century from a viewpoint which privileged gender, or age group, or race, or religious denomination (in practice, we find it impossible to avoid addressing these perspectives alongside class, especially those of gender and religion). Or we could be conducting a class-conscious analysis of French classical Reception in the 17th century, or of England, France, and the Netherlands in the years 1939-89. But we believe that the most pressing sub-fields within the vast territory of international Classical Reception since the 15th century are those which are most relevant to contemporary concerns and to debates within today's society. It is good to frame the questions asked in Classical Reception, or to chisel the faces of the hermeneutic prism, in a dialectical way that allows investigating the past to reflect and direct rays of light—illumination—into the present and future state of things.

In the specific case of class and classics, these two phenomena remain today, or have become once again, locked in the love-hate struggle which (at least in Britain) has characterized their historical relationship. There is an urgent need to prevent access to education in Classics being commandeered by the small minority of people with sufficient money to send their children to private school. Public access to education of the quality enjoyed by children and teenagers at the elite schools (Eton, Harrow, Charterhouse, etc), and therefore the potential for social mobility, was made at least a possibility after the Education (Administrative Provisions) Act of 1907. This required all grant-aided secondary schools (mostly known as 'grammar' or 'high schools') to make at least one quarter of their places free to pupils from public elementary schools by means of 100% scholarships. A new, heavily subsidized system was introduced in England and Wales by the 1944 Education Act (in Scotland the circumstances are different). This created three different tiers of school after

'primary' or 'elementary' level. Which type of school each child attended was decided by a controversial intelligence test (the 'Eleven Plus' exam) taken at the age of eleven. The highest achieving quarter of the entire population, theoretically regardless of class background, was then awarded full scholarships, funded by a direct grant from the state, to attend either an otherwise fee-paying school, or a new, purpose-built grammar school. The overall effect of this policy was to make Classics accessible to a minimum of one in four children, supposedly based on intellectual merit, as assessed by the 'Eleven Plus', rather than on the financial and class profile of their parents. In practice, however, the proportion was even higher than this, since some parents continued to purchase their children's places at the elite schools, and some of the second tier of schools—the 'Secondary Modern' schools—offered at least some Latin and Ancient History.

This all changed after the Education Act 1976, which abolished the state-funded grammar schools and private schools receiving direct grants (as well as the third tier, the 'technical schools.')

They were all required to convert and sometimes amalgamate either to form comprehensive schools, which were fully funded by the state, or to become private schools. The latter might offer a few scholarships if they chose and had the resources, but were fundamentally for children whose parents were able and willing to pay fees. In terms of Classics, the abolition of state-funded places at grammar school has proved disastrous. Although some comprehensive schools put up a struggle to maintain teaching in classical subjects, especially Latin, Ancient History and the new subject of 'Classical Civilisation', the Greeks and Romans have now died out now in all but a depressingly small minority. It is very difficult to get access to Latin in state schools in Britain, and it is virtually impossible to learn Greek. Even where schools would like to (re)introduce teaching in any of the classical subjects, they face serious problems finding teachers. There are only two institutions left in Britain where graduates can qualify to teach Classics in state schools, at Cambridge University and King's College London, so there is a dire shortage of manpower available in the state sector (no teacher training qualification is required to teach in the private sector).

A similarly regressive pattern marks Classics in Higher or Tertiary Education. The 'Robbins Report' (1963) recommended extending free public education to universities, and the expansion of the number of university places available. Maintenance grants were also awarded, depending on the assessed means of the parents. But public access to Higher Education has over the last decade been drastically affected by the step-by-step removal of all state funding not only for maintenance grants but for tuition fees in Arts and Humanities subjects, a process which began with the Dearing Report in 1997 and culminated in 2010.

The restructuring of secondary schools, and introduction of full university fees in Britain, mean that we have swiftly returned to the position prevalent in our designated period of study, when schooling in Classics, or lack of it, functioned to distinguish members of the lower classes from those with means to educate their children, rather than put them out to work at young ages. Because knowledge of Latin and Greek now, once again, comes with a price tag, it will begin again to appeal to people who want to display their financial assets and demarcate themselves from those who have none. A classical education, moreover, indicates not just possession of money but the type of cultural refinement which has ramifications for subjective class identity—Classics and classicists are inherently elitist, or 'posh' in common parlance.

We feel, therefore, that our project has a contemporary relevance. Despite the undoubted function of classical education as of social division and exclusion, there have been countless ways in which people who did not go to elite schools have historically been informed about the classical world and often inspired by it. By investigating this 'alternative' history of the social role and cultural presence of the ancient Greeks and Romans, we want to offer the contemporary struggle to make this exciting material available to everyone its own 'back-story', ancestry, heroes and aetiology.

Refracting the history of classics through the prism of class has also made us newly aware of the continuing reverberations of the *integral* symbiosis between the social category of class and our subject area, the languages and cultures of Greek and Roman antiquity. That is the reason why we

have chosen to keep the traditional label 'Classics' in our title, as shorthand for everything which might be understood as belonging to 'the languages and cultures of Greek and Roman antiquity.' This is what the term most often meant in the period we are primarily researching (1789-1939), and is what it means in educational contexts today.

The words classic, classical and Classics all stem from the same Latin term, *classis*, as our word 'class'. When the Romans heard this noun, it contained a resonance that we do not hear when we say class: deriving from the same root as the verb *clamare* ('call out'), a *classis* consisted of a group of people 'called out' or 'summoned' together by a trumpet. In Virgil's *Georgics*, the plural neuter noun *classica* actually means 'trumpets' (2.539). A *classis* could be the men in a meeting, or in an army, or the ships in a fleet, or sub-divisions of such groups. The word has always been associated with Servius Tullius, the sixth of the legendary kings of early Rome, who held a census in order to find out, for the purposes of military planning, what assets his people possessed. It is this procedure that explains the ancient association of the term class with an audible call to arms.

In Servius' scheme, the men in the top of his six classes -- the men with the most money and property -- were called the *classici*. The Top Men were themselves the 'Classics'. This is why, by the time of a Roman writer in 2nd-century AD, Aulus Gellius, by metaphorical extension the Top Authors could be called 'Classic Authors', *scriptores classici*, to distinguish them from inferior or metaphorically 'proletarian' authors, *scriptores proletarii* (*Attic Nights* 19.8.15). The opposition between 'classics' and 'proletarians' was born!

From the early 16th century, the word *classicus* is used by scholars writing in Latin to describe admired authors of antiquity, both Greek and Latin. The German Protestant humanist Philipp Melanchthon called Plutarch a *classicus* writer in 1519. So when a term was needed in the 18th century to describe the canonical texts of Greek and Roman antiquity, the ones studied by youths privileged enough to receive more than a rudimentary education, it was inevitable that the

term Classics, meaning the 'top authors', was adopted to describe the subject area—the term is first used with this meaning in 1711.

We are acutely aware, therefore, of the social elitism inherent in the choice of the term to describe a particular type of curriculum in the early 18th century. Some British departments of Classics actually changed their names, or at least discussed changing them, during the debates over the imperial and colonial history of the subject at the time of the controversy surrounding Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* in the late 1980s. Some departments considered de-privileging the languages and cultures of the ancient Greeks and Roman relative to their ancient neighbours and widening the remit of 'Classics' to cover 'Ancient Mediterranean Studies'. We have, however, self-consciously retained the term in the title of our project, for three reasons. First, historical accuracy: it was the term used during the period of our project. Secondly, it is relatively all-embracing. We don't just mean the written texts of the ancient Greeks and Romans, but their entire cultures, following the example of the Victorian classicist and author Charles Kingsley, who referred to them jointly as 'classical civilisation'. Ancient philosophy, history and material culture were by the end of the 19th century added to the 'classical curriculum'. But the third and surely the most important reason for using the term is that it continuously reminds us of the historic connection between socio-economic hierarchies ('class') and also the differences between the cultural and imaginative lives of people in different classes. It helps us ask retrospectively whether and how 'Classics' has been used to maintain class distinctions, and to challenge them, but also prospectively, how to demonstrate that Classics' elite connotations are not inevitable. Classical Reception Studies need to excavate the past, but if they are to fulfill their potential, they simultaneously need to address the challenges inherent in moving forwards into the future.

¹ See e.g. E. Hall, *Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris* (New York, 2013).

² P. Vasunia (2007) 'Aristophanes' wealth and Dalpatram's Lakshmi', in E. Hall and A. and Wrigley (eds.)

Aristophanes in Performance 412 BCE-2005 CE, 117-34. Oxford.

³ E. Hall, 'Putting the Class into Classical Reception', in L. Hardwick and C. Stray (eds.) *A Companion to Classical Receptions*, 386-97 (Oxford, 2008),

⁴ See C. Stray, *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities, and Society in England, 1830-1960* (Oxford, 1998).

⁵ Nicholas Roe (2012) *John Keats* 18.

⁶ James Lackington, *Memoirs of the forty-five first years of the life of James Lackington, the present bookseller in Chiswell-street, Moorfields* (London, 1794).