

****Teaching the Classical Reception Revolution****

4. Teaching the Classical Reception ‘Revolution’

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When asked to take part in a round table on teaching Classics, Classical reception, and revolution I was initially unsure of what approach to take. On one hand I have spent much of the past three years teaching Classical reception¹ and could happily offer observations on what I have learned in that time. But a more pressing question was raised by my own experience. My teaching has all been as a postgraduate teaching assistant, or with doctorate in hand, a course here and there. I’ve never been employed by a university part-time, full-time, fixed or permanent. My PhD is in the broad field of Classical reception studies, as is all of my teaching experience, publications, even my Master’s degree.² I am, in short, a professional Classical receptionist. And I am unemployed, in part at least, because there are no jobs in Classical reception. A discipline has been born and raised to relative maturity, without achieving the goal of sustaining employment for the first generations of students who made it their vocation. I was fully aware that if I were to offer some reflections on how reception is best taught, I would be doing so to people who on the whole had not studied it doctorally, but rather for whom it is a side-line, a distraction, something on the CV which shows depth. So I decided not to do that. I decided instead to think a little about why this was happening. Classical reception was, in many ways, promised to us as a revolution. Something that would shake the foundations of Classics and make us re-think everything, question every assumption. I intend to ask whether or not it has done this.

One observation I will offer from teaching is something I have noticed increasingly in the nature of enquiries students choose in reception-based courses. These tend increasingly towards 1) comparative (ancient has X, modern has Y, they differ/are similar), 2) ameliorative (modern can only/is better able to express X through recourse to ancient Y), or 3) restorative (ancient X has been corrupted/misused by its use in modern Y, which misses its essential truth). Far less common are projects that seek to explore a critical approach to Classics and what its intellectual, social and cultural legacies might be. The question and validity of a “Classical” reception is unchallenged. The ancient exists to either improve, contrast with or be saved from the modern. There is little sense of the ancient, and its history of invocation, as being harmful, of our own role in which ancient we choose to study, of why a Classical reception project is worthwhile in the first place. But I’ll come back to these questions shortly.

First I want to go back to something I said a moment ago, about the majority of Classical reception being taught by non-specialists. What do I mean by that exactly? Classical reception

¹ Or courses that thought they bear mildly different names are in fact that.

² UCL’s MA Reception of the Classical World.

is a part of Classics, naturally. They are not exclusive. But two phenomena occur, 1) that most teaching of reception courses is undertaken by academics who did not complete a doctorate in Classical reception and 2) whilst doctoral Classical reception projects are a relatively new occurrence,³ most holders of such doctorates are either unemployed or have found employment by falling back on a history and ability to teach non-reception Classics, such as an ability to teach Greek and Latin languages.⁴ There have been no teaching posts advertised dedicated to Classical reception in the past five years.⁵ So, on one hand why is this an issue? Should reception teaching be banned for all but specialists? Yet on the other, imagine if another topic, say Latin epic, was largely taught by people with degrees in Greek literature, while early career academics who wrote doctorates on Ovid and Lucan could only achieve employment if they had an ability to also teach Homer. Something would clearly not be quite right with that picture.

The question, then, is what is being looked for when early career academics are being employed? Largely an ability to teach Greek and Latin is mandatory.⁶ To a degree that is quite natural and correct, in departments of Classics. Yet, Classical reception offered a potential for the enlargement of the subject to encompass not only the languages but also a broader idea of the role of European antiquity in modern cultural discourse. The languages could have been retained, while allowing more teaching on reception type courses. But that on the whole has not happened, and efforts to scale back language teaching is met with violent resistance.⁷ As stated, most people I know who have doctorates on reception topics and academic jobs have teaching loads that are substantially linguistic. I, in the interest of full disclosure, did not do a Classics undergraduate degree and have neither language to a level where I could happily teach. Neither language was relevant to my doctoral study or to any of my teaching. Yet the lack of them has certainly cost me opportunities. I introduce this fact here so you can allow it to colour your reading of the next few paragraphs if you so choose.

An important but often overlooked aspect of Greek and Latin is their role as a buttress for class based educational privilege. Part of the point of learning these languages, traditionally, was that one would only be in a position to learn them at elite schools. It was in essence a hard skill, which you either had or did not have, and therefore demarcated your background. For example, Javed Majeed's article in *Roman Presences*.⁸ He surveys the entry requirements for the British Imperial officer corps in India and finds that Latin and Greek are worth considerably more than indigenous languages or engineering skills. While that seems illogical, of course the point is to ensure those of social privilege and the correct class obtain the correct ranks. This isn't a historical curio. It is something central to the continued importance of these dead languages in modern culture.

³ Really one or two generations of early career academics.

⁴ Most by no means all, and I am working here largely with circumstantial evidence and would be happy to be proven incorrect.

⁵ New Liberal Arts teaching posts have increasingly appeared, but that's not quite the same thing.

⁶ I gather this is less the case in Ancient History and Archaeology, but those aren't really what I'm talking about here.

⁷ Royal Holloway in 2011/12 for example.

⁸ Catherine Edwards (ed.) 1997

The *Classics and Class* project explored numerous examples of working class people who self-taught Greek or Latin as a means of autodidactic improvement – but in this research I felt left with a picture not of the power of Classics but of working class people desperate to learn the languages because of the potential social mobility that they offered. For a project that purported to explore the role of class in Classics’ dynamic, the essentialities of class and educational privilege that are at the heart of the discipline go unexplored.

But of course, it is not very complimentary to think of Classics in those terms and certainly we prefer to think of it as about the power of the original language and the importance of missed linguistic nuances lost in translation.⁹ Currently departments of Classics are structurally and constitutionally insistent that the teaching of languages remain and be central, thus creating a steady demand for teachers.¹⁰

But who are these teachers? Just as in the days of the India Civil Service and Officer Core, they are overwhelmingly people who went to elite, predominantly private schools.¹¹ The insistence on the continued essentiality of the languages means academic positions in Classics are overwhelmingly filled by people with backgrounds of class and educational privilege. We have to ask ourselves if we are happy with this.

As an experiment during the writing of this paper, I surveyed academics at the twenty largest Classics departments in the UK to see what percentage of them attended Oxford or Cambridge at some point in their education from undergraduate to doctorate.¹² Twenty university departments only offer a snapshot of the entire picture. As with the case of state vs. private schools take up of Greek and Latin, no centralised register of these figures is being maintained.¹³ The numbers were, however, quite striking. 84% of classicists had attended Oxford or Cambridge, 16% had not. Of the 16%, over half were entirely educated outside of the UK¹⁴, and therefore arguably had limited access to an Oxbridge application scheme. I ran a comparative study on English departments at the same twenty universities and the percentage to have not attended Oxford and Cambridge was a much higher 34%. In terms of an overall picture of where Classics departments sit in the larger picture of employment, a Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission study of several professions found for example 33% of BBC executives, 24% of MPs, 38% of the House of Lords attended Oxford or Cambridge.¹⁵ The most Oxbridge heavy profession, senior judges, had 75%. The Classics Departments I surveyed would top this list.

⁹ A point that MFL can make too, though survey courses are still broadly taught in English at undergraduate level.

¹⁰ And it is worth noting that a large part of this teaching load falls on people in their first jobs.

¹¹ Latin and Greek are offered at a far higher frequency at private than non-private schools. This is part of a much larger issue and maintaining consistent data on the issue is difficult, yet the picture remains fairly compelling: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/7457449/More-state-schools-should-teach-Latin.html> [accessed 14 March 2017] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/10776287/Top-head-attacks-prejudice-towards-Latin-in-state-schools.html> [accessed 14 March 2017]

¹² Limited to doctoral education or lower, not including any academic positions, research fellowships or postdoctoral positions held at Oxford or Cambridge after completion of a doctorate.

¹³ Something of a problem in itself.

¹⁴ Mostly American, some Australian and European.

¹⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/aug/28/elitism-in-britain-breakdown-by-profession> [accessed 14 March 2017]

On one level, it could be argued that elite universities will always reward jobs candidates who are educated at the most prestigious universities. One would therefore expect a high level of Oxbridge candidates to be successful. The comparison to English departments qualifies this assertion somewhat. Why is it that Classics is so much more elitist? One fact that is worth mentioning is that the breakdown of professions by private vs. state school education in the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission's report offers a very similar picture. This is not very surprising, considering the vast majority of Oxford and Cambridge's matriculants are from private schools.¹⁶ Five private schools sent more students to Oxbridge than two thousand others in 2011.¹⁷ So perhaps a broader picture emerges. Classics requires, for employment, knowledge of one or both of Latin and Greek. These languages are mostly taught at private schools. Private schools send a disproportionately high number of students to Oxbridge. Classics' disparity with English can be easily explained. Even if Classics departments wanted to hire more non-Oxbridge graduates, many simply do not have the requested skills. Greek and Latin represent a wall that those without educational and social privilege find it very hard to get over.

I am not saying the language skills are not good, should not be taught or do not have value – they clearly do and they clearly should. But I also think there is not enough self-examination on just what role they are playing and what kind of intellectual legacy that is bequeathing. This kind of self-examination is what Classical reception could have been doing. It could have both exposed this side of the discipline, opened conversations, kept abreast of the inequalities in the subject today. It could also have offered more courses centred on Greece and Rome in modern culture taught in survey and without need for languages. So far this has not happened, and reception has not provided an alternative.

But what is the nature of the alternative Classical reception could have arrived at? Part of it is a recognition not only of Classics' social role, but also of the contradictions and prejudices that are at its heart. Central to the notion of "Classics" or that which is "A Classic" being Greco-Roman is a sense of cultural hierarchy. Gilgamesh, Arabic geometry, Chinese art, etc. are not Classics. Studies of the "ancient world" largely do no such thing. In fact critical components of Classics itself, like the transmission of Greek and Latin texts through Persian and Arabic culture, have been politely elided and the division between the European Classic, and the non-European, remains stark.

Classical reception has a duty to attack this issue and in some way has, but equally reception topics on postcolonialism trend increasingly towards a cooperative understanding, where writers in the non-European world have found expressions of their subjugation through a reclaiming of Classical texts. Avoiding that beyond receptions and reclamations, that here and now, in our humanities faculties, that the privileging of two cultures, both European, both white, over all others as the (taxonomically loaded) "Classical" cultures, is, in fundamentally inescapable terms, an act of racial prejudice. What else can it be? What other reason do we have for this nomenclature? Like the working class autodidacts, why did writers in Africa or the Caribbean feel the need to speak in Classical refrains in order to make themselves heard? We're not so much missing the wood for the trees, but pretending there isn't a forest at all.

¹⁶ Another compelling study from the SMCPD <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/dec/12/oxford-cambridge-state-school-admissions-failure> [accessed 14 March 2017]

¹⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-14069516> [accessed 14 March 2017]

My own research¹⁸ centred in part of the excavation of Roman ruins in North Africa during the French Colonial period, especially the 1880 and 90s. These excavations were sponsored by the French Colonial Government and explicitly intended to prove a European “prior” claim to North Africa. The writers who celebrated the discoveries, and even the archaeologists themselves, were rabid pro-colonialists, Islamophobes and anti-Semites intent on demonstrating the superiority of European civilisation. This creates a complex intellectual heritage today. On one hand the ruins are some of the best-preserved Roman sites in the world¹⁹, but on the other they owe much of this to the morally ambiguous motivations of those who uncovered them. How does this affect our modern relation to them? How does it affect the reception of the Roman sites by non-Europeans in Algeria and Libya, for whom they were primarily sites of colonial dominance, especially in the age of the destruction of Palmyra? I, in short, set out to demonstrate an example where both Roman history and its study propose complex questions about the nature of how we relate to the ancient past in modern culture. (Anecdotally, I was once asked in a job interview at an institution that I will not name, where I had presented this case study, if I wasn’t putting a “negative spin” on the whole question.)

In most places it is easier to see the racist and cultural prejudices in the past but it is harder to apply to ourselves. Every other humanities discipline has been able to self-examine and take on board the lessons of various movements of textual criticism and theory which have attempted to destabilise assumptions and traditions. It is worth pointing out of course that what we call “reception studies” in Classics bears virtually no relation at all to the analytic theories of Jauss, Iser and Gadamer. They were talking about reader responsivity. The way in which the reader, through his or her own subjectivities, animates a text. Renders it into being. The reader is prime. You will search in vain for chains of reception, of dialogues with the past, of reading-backwards and forwards. Instead the assumptions and prejudices (or subjectivities if you like) of the reader, here and now, are all there is. It is a harsh spotlight that shines straight onto ourselves. A mirror which leaves no blemish unrevealed. That is pretty uncomfortable. Especially on the face of a subject which has plenty of about which it might feel shame.

So instead reception theory when applied to Classics has morphed into the notion of the dialogue, something that I have always found difficult on the basis that people who have been dead for thousands of years cannot speak. This notion that the past can answer us back in a conversant relationship, that we are at best only half to blame, is a comfortable notion that absolves us of having to consider ourselves fully. Every other humanity has survived this theoretical onslaught. There is no “French reception studies”, there is just French. Enquiries that we would bracket as separately “reception” are at the heart of the subject. Why can they do it but Classics cannot?

Classics, or the study of Greco-Roman culture (which in a perfect world would be what it was called), can still have a critical place in the humanities. It must do in fact. The humanities, certainly the cultural traditions of Western Europe, are impossible without Greece and Rome. If Classical Reception Studies were going to do anything it would be to make the case all the clearer. But critically that cannot happen without holding the elitist and culturally colonial

¹⁸ This is merely illustrative and not in any way intended to suggest I have all the answers.

¹⁹ Several are UNESCO heritage sites.

traditions of the subject to account. For me, it has failed to do that. I return to the questions undergraduates set themselves. They compare. They tell us how Classics invented democracy. How an artist was inspired by Homer. They don't ask the big questions. They don't ask why.

Perhaps Classics has understood on some level that to follow the breadcrumb trail to the logical end of reception studies runs the risk of annihilating the discipline. Of making Classics just another humanity. So instead it clings to the languages, and it clings to its traditions, and it allows reception studies only to become a kind of propaganda wing – telling us all how much its influence in modern culture proves how special and unique Classics is. That comes through in the teaching and how students are starting to respond to it.

If someone asked me whether they should write a PhD dedicated to Classical reception I would tell them no, because as I said earlier there are no jobs in Classical reception. If, like me, you do not have classical languages then definitely do not do it. If you do then you must accept that if you get a position you will spend a very large amount, a majority really, of your time doing something that is not your vocation. Like the prodigal son, you will need to return to the Classics fold. Research that exposes negative aspects of the discipline or interrogates the work of other more traditionally minded researchers will potentially limit your employability. To prospective PhD students, I say work in comparative literature departments, modern languages, film, art etc. where you will be surrounded by experts. Because, why is a project that imagines antiquity in modernity unique? Why is Shakespeare's reception of Homer different from his reception of English history? My PhD talked about Albert Camus' affinity for Greece but he had an equally strong affinity for Spanish culture. What makes Classical reception unique or any other receptions? Nothing I would say. Classical Reception just becomes a way of sanctifying the traditional view of Classics as the most important humanity. Questioning nothing. Even our receptions are "Classical" receptions. The best kind. If that is the future, it is a disappointing one.

As you have gleaned from this discussion most probably, I attended a state school where there was no Greek and Latin. I did not attend Oxford or Cambridge. I wrote a PhD that required neither, but was really a study of modern culture and Greece and Rome as a way of understanding it. I tried unsuccessfully for three years to secure an academic position, despite teaching extensively and publishing during my doctorate. If you would like to write this all off as a manifestation of the sourest of sour grapes I cannot blame you, and you may well be right. I do know that there is a disappointment and disaffection in my generation of doctoral students who worked in reception. A feeling that what we were doing was going to change things. That we were asking questions that needed to be asked. That ultimately, Classics would need us to help reinvent and not throw us overboard. While Classical reception's moment seems to fade from view, we are left wondering about the revolution that never was, and what happens to the discipline next.

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