CONFRONTING THE CLASSICS

Traditions, Adventures and Innovations

MARY BEARD

PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2013 by
PROFILE BOOKS LTD
3A Exmouth House
Pine Street
London EC1R 0JH
www.profilebooks.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays, Bungay, Suffolk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 048 8
eISBN 978 1 84765 888 3

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PREFACE

This book is a guided tour of the classical world, from the prehistoric palace at Knossos in Crete to that fictional village in Gaul, where Astérix and his friends are still holding out against the Romans. In between we encounter some of the most famous, or infamous, characters in ancient history: Sappho, Alexander the Great, Hannibal, Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, Caligula, Nero, Boudicca and Tacitus (and that's just a selection). But we also get a glimpse of the lives of the vast majority of ordinary people in Greece and Rome – the slaves, the squaddies in the army, the millions of people across the Roman empire living under military occupation (not to mention my own particular favourite, from Chapter 19, Eurysaces the Roman baker). What made these people laugh? Did they clean their teeth? Where did they go if they needed help or advice – if their marriage was in trouble, or if they were broke? I hope that *Confronting the Classics* will introduce, or re-introduce, readers to some of the most compelling chapters of ancient history, and some of its most memorable characters from many walks of life; and I hope it will answer some of those intriguing questions.

But my aim is more ambitious than that. *Confronting the Classics* means what it says. This book is also about how we can *engage* with or *challenge* the classical tradition, and why even in the twenty-first century there is so much in Classics still to *argue* about; in short, it's about why the subject is still 'work in progress' not 'done and dusted' (or, in the words of my sub-title, why it's an 'adventure' and an 'innovation' as well as a 'tradition'). I hope that this comes across loud and clear in the sections that follow. There should be some surprises in store, as well as a taste of fierce controversies old and new. Classicists

are still struggling to work out what exactly the horribly difficult Greek of Thucydides means (we're doing better, but we're not there yet), and we are still disagreeing about how important Cleopatra really was in the history of Rome, or whether the Emperor Caligula can be written off as simply bonkers. At the same time, modern eyes always find ways to open up new questions and sometimes to find new answers. My hope is that *Confronting the Classics* will bring to life, for a much wider audience, some of our current debates – from what the Persian sources might add to our understanding of Alexander the Great to how on earth the Romans managed to acquire enough slaves to satisfy their demand.

Debate is the key word. As I shall stress again in the Introduction, studying Classics is to enter a conversation – not only with the literature and material remains of antiquity itself, but also with those over the centuries before us who have tried to make sense of the Greeks and Romans, who have quoted them or recreated them. It is partly for this reason – because they're in the conversation too – that the scholars and archaeologists of earlier generations, the travellers, artists and antiquarians, get a fair share of attention in this book. And that's why the indomitable Astérix gets a look in as well, because – let's be honest – very many of us first learned how to think about the conflicts of Roman imperialism through his band of plucky Gauls.

It is fitting that all the chapters of this book are adapted and updated from reviews and essays that have appeared over the last couple of decades in the *London Review of Books*, the *New York Review of Books* or the *Times Literary Supplement*. I shall have more to say about the craft of reviewing in the Afterword. For now let me simply insist that reviews have long been one of the most important places where classical debates take place. I hope that those that follow give a flavour of why Classics is a subject still worth talking about with all the seriousness – not to mention the *fun* and good humour – that we can muster.

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But *Confronting the Classics* kicks off with a version of the Robert B. Silvers lecture I was more than a little honoured to give at the New York Public Library in December 2011. The title 'Do Classics have a Future?' hits the nail on the head. It is, if you like, my manifesto.

Introduction

Do Classics Have a Future?

The year 2011 was an unusually good one for the late Terence Rattigan: Frank Langella starred on Broadway in his play *Man and Boy* (a topical tale of the collapse of a financier), its first production in New York since the 1960s; and a movie of *The Deep Blue Sea*, featuring Rachel Weisz as the wife of a judge who goes off with a pilot, premiered at the end of November in the UK and opened in the US in December. It was the centenary of Rattigan's birth (he died in 1977), and it brought the kind of re-evaluation that centenaries often do. For years – in the eyes of critics, although not of London West End audiences – his elegant stories of the repressed anguish of the privileged classes were no match for the working-class realism of John Osborne and the other angry young dramatists. But we have been learning to look again.

I have been looking again at another Rattigan play, *The Browning Version*, first performed in 1948. It is the story of Andrew Crocker-Harris, a forty-something schoolteacher at an English public school – an old-fashioned disciplinarian who is being forced into early retirement because of a serious heart condition. The Crock's other misfortune (and 'the Crock' is what the children call him) is that he is married to a truly venomous woman called Millie, who divides her time between an on-off affair with the science teacher and devising various bits of domestic sadism to destroy her husband.

But the title of the play takes us back to the classical world. The Crock, as you will already have guessed, teaches Classics (what else could he teach with a name like Crocker-Harris?), and the 'Browning Version' of the title refers to the famous 1877 translation by Robert Browning of Aeschylus' play *Agamemnon*. Written in the 450s BC, the Greek original told of the tragic return from the Trojan War of King Agamemnon, who was murdered on his arrival home by his wife Clytemnestra and by the lover she had taken while Agamemnon had been away.

This classic is, in a sense, the real star of Rattigan's play. It is given to the Crock as a retirement present by John Taplow, a pupil who has been taking extra Greek lessons, and who has gradually come to feel some affection for the crabby old schoolmaster. The giving of the gift is the key moment, almost the moment of redemption, in the plot. It is the first time that Crocker-Harris's mask slips: when he opens the 'Browning Version', he cries. Why does he cry? First, because it forces him to face how he himself is being destroyed, as Agamemnon was, within an adulterous marriage (this is not exactly a feminist play). But he cries also because of what young Taplow has written on the title page. It's a line from the play, carefully inscribed in Greek, which the Crock translates as 'God from afar looks graciously upon a gentle master.' He interprets this as a comment on his own career: he has made sure not to be a *gentle* schoolmaster, and God has *not* looked graciously upon him.

Rattigan is doing more here than exploring the tortured psyches of the British upper-middle class (and it's not just another 'school story', that quirky fixation of some British writers). Well-trained in the Classics himself, he is also raising central questions about Classics, the classical tradition, and our modern engagement with it. How far can the ancient world help us to understand our own? What limits should we place on our re-interpretation and re-appropriation of it? When Aeschylus wrote 'God from afar looks graciously upon a gentle master', he certainly did not have a schoolmaster in mind, but a military conqueror; in fact, the phrase – and this too, I guess, was part of Rattigan's point – was one of the last spoken by Agamemnon to Clytemnestra before she took him inside to kill him.

To put it another way, how do we make the ancient world make sense to us? How do we translate it? Young Taplow does not actually rate Browning's translation very highly, and indeed – to our tastes – it

is written in awful nineteenth-century poetry-speak ('Who conquers mildly, God, from afar, benignantly regardeth,' as Browning puts the key line, is hardly going to send most of us rushing to the rest of the play). But when, in his lessons, Taplow himself gets excited by Aeschylus' Greek and comes out with a wonderfully spirited but slightly inaccurate version of one of the murderous bits, the Crock reprimands him – 'you are supposed to be *construing Greek*' – that is, translating the language literally, word for word – 'not *collaborating* with *Aeschylus*.'

Most of us now, I suspect, are on the side of the collaborators, with their conviction that the classical tradition is something to be engaged with, and sparred against, not merely replicated and mouthed. In this context, I can't resist reminding you of the flagrantly modern versions of Homer's *Iliad* by the English poet Christopher Logue, who died in December 2011 – *Kings*, *War Music*, and others – 'the best *translation* of Homer since [Alexander] Pope's,' as Garry Wills once called them. This was, I think, both a heartfelt and a slightly ironic comment. For the joke is that Logue, our leading collaborator with Homer, knew not a word of Greek.

Many of the questions raised by Rattigan underlie the points I have to make here. I am not trying to convince anyone that classical literature, culture, or art is worth taking seriously; I suspect that would, in most cases, be preaching to the converted. I want instead to suggest that the cultural language of Classics and classical literature continues to be an essential and ineradicable dialect of 'Western culture', embedded in the drama of Rattigan, as much as in the poetry of Ted Hughes or the novels of Margaret Atwood or Donna Tartt – *The Secret History* could not, after all, have been written about a department of Geography. But I also want to examine a bit more closely our fixation on the decline of classical learning. And here too Rattigan's *The Browning Version*, or its sequels, offers an intriguing perspective.

The play has always been popular with impoverished theatre and TV companies, partly for the simple reason that Rattigan set the whole thing in Crocker-Harris's sitting room, which makes it extremely cheap to stage. But there have also been two movie versions of *The Browning Version*, which did venture outside Crocker-Harris's apartment to exploit the cinematic potential of the English public school, from its quaint wood-panelled classrooms to its rolling green cricket pitches. Rattigan himself wrote the screenplay for the first one, starring

Michael Redgrave, in 1951. He used the longer format of the film to expand on the philosophy of education, pitting the teaching of science (as represented by Millie's lover) against the teaching of Classics (as represented by the Crock). And he gave the Crock's successor as the Classics teacher, Mr Gilbert, a bigger part – making it clear that he was going to move away from the hard-line Latin and Greek grammar grind, to what we would now call a more 'pupil-centred' approach.

In 1994 another movie version was made, this time starring Albert Finney. It had been modernised: Millie was renamed Laura, and her science-master lover was now a decidedly preppy American. There was still some sense of the old story: Finney held his class spellbound when he read them some lines of Aeschylus and he cried at the gift of the 'Browning Version' even more movingly than Redgrave had. But in a striking twist, a new narrative of decline was introduced. In this version, the Crock's successor is in fact going to stop teaching Classics entirely. 'My remit,' he says in the film, 'is to organise a new languages department: modern languages, German, French, Spanish. It is after all a multicultural society.' The Crock is now to be seen as the very last of his species.

But if this movie predicts the death of classical learning, it inadvertently appears to confirm it too. In one scene, the Crock is apparently going through with his class a passage of Aeschylus in Greek, which the pupils are finding very hard to read. Any sharp-eyed classicist will easily spot why they might have been having trouble: for each boy has on his desk only a copy of the Penguin translation of Aeschylus (with its instantly recognisable front cover); they haven't got a Greek text at all. Presumably some bloke in the props department had been sent off to find twenty copies of the *Agamemnon* and knew no better than to bring it in English.

That spectre of the end of classical learning is one that is probably familiar to most readers. With some trepidation, I want to try to get a new angle on the question, to go beyond the usual gloomy clichés, and (with the help in part of Terence Rattigan) to take a fresh look at what we think we mean by 'Classics'. But let us first remember what recent discussion of the current state of Classics, never mind their future, tends to stress.

The basic message is a gloomy one. Literally hundreds of books, articles, reviews, and op-ed pieces have appeared over the last ten years or so, with titles like 'The Classics in Crisis', 'Can the Classics

Survive?', 'Who Killed Homer?', 'Why America Needs the Classical Tradition', and 'Saving the Classics from Conservatives'. All of these in their different ways lament the death of Classics, conduct an autopsy upon them, or recommend some rather belated life-saving procedures. The litany of gloomy facts and figures paraded in these contributions, and their tone, are in broad terms familiar. Often headlined is the decline of Latin and Greek languages in schools (in recent years fewer than three hundred young people in England and Wales have taken classical Greek as one of their A' levels, and those overwhelmingly from independent schools) or the closure of university departments of Classics all over the world.

In fact, in November 2011 an international petition was formally launched to ask UNESCO – in the light of the increasing marginalisation of the classical languages – to declare Latin and Greek a specially protected 'intangible heritage of humanity'. I am not sure what I think about treating classical languages as if they were an endangered species or a precious ruin, but I am fairly confident that it was not great politics, at this moment, to suggest (as the petition does) that their preservation should be made the particular responsibility of the Italian government (as if it did not have rather too much on its plate already).

What has caused this decline attracts a variety of answers. Some argue that the supporters of Classics have only themselves to blame. It's a 'Dead White European Male' sort of subject that has far too often acted as a convenient alibi for a whole range of cultural and political sins, from imperialism and Eurocentrism to social snobbery and the most mind-numbing form of pedagogy. The British dominated their Empire with Cicero in hand; Goebbels chose Greek tragedy for his bedside reading (and, if you believe Martin Bernal, he would have found confirmation for his crazed views of Aryan supremacy in the traditions of classical scholarship itself). Chickens have come home to roost, it is sometimes said, for Classics in the new multicultural world. Not to mention the fact that, in England at least, the learning of the Latin language was for generations the gatekeeper of rigid class privilege and social exclusivity – albeit at a terrible cost to its apparent beneficiaries. It gave you access to a narrow elite, that's for sure, but committed your childhood years to the narrowest educational curriculum imaginable: nothing much else but translation into and out of Latin (and when you got a little older, Greek). In the movie of *The*

Browning Version we find Crocker-Harris making his pupils translate into Latin the first four stanzas of Tennyson's 'The Lady of Shalott': an exercise as pointless as it was prestigious.

Others claim that Classics have failed within the politics of the modern academy. If you were to follow Victor Davis Hanson and his colleagues, you would in fact lay the blame for the general demise of the subject firmly at the door of careerist Ivy League, and no doubt Oxbridge, academics who (in the pursuit of large salaries and long sabbaticals) have wandered down some self-regarding postmodern cul-de-sac, when ordinary students and the 'folks out there' really want to hear about Homer and the other great paragons of Greece and Rome. To which the retort is: maybe it is precisely because professors of Classics have refused to engage with modern theory and persisted in viewing the ancient world through rose-tinted spectacles (as if it was a culture to be admired) that the subject is in imminent danger of turning into an antiquarian backwater.

The voices insisting that we should be facing up to the squalor, the slavery, the misogyny, the irrationality of antiquity go back through Moses Finley and the Irish poet and classicist Louis MacNeice to my own illustrious nineteenth-century predecessor in Cambridge, Jane Ellen Harrison. When I should be remembering the glories of Greece, wrote MacNeice memorably in his *Autumn Journal*,

> I think instead
> Of the crooks, the adventurers, the opportunists,
> The careless athletes and the fancy boys …
> … the noise
> Of the demagogues and the quacks; and the women pouring
> Libations over graves
> And the trimmers at Delphi and the dummies at Sparta and lastly
> I think of the slaves.

Of course, not everything written on the current state of Classics is irredeemably gloomy. Some breezy optimists point, for example, to a new interest among the public in the ancient world. Witness the success of movies like *Gladiator* or Stacy Schiff's biography of Cleopatra or the continuing stream of literary tributes to, or engagements with, Classics (including at least three major fictional or poetic re-workings of Homer in 2011 alone). And against the baleful examples of

Goebbels and British imperialism, you can parade a repertoire of more radical heroes of the classical tradition – as varied as Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx (whose Ph.D. thesis was on classical philosophy), and the American Founding Fathers.

As for Latin itself, a range of different stories is told in the post-Crocker-Harris world. Where the teaching of the language has not been abolished altogether, you are now likely to read of how Latin, freed of the old-fashioned grammar grind, can make a huge impact on intellectual and linguistic development: whether that's based on the studies from schools in the Bronx that claim to show that learning Latin increases children's IQ scores or on those common assertions that knowing Latin is a tremendous help if you want to learn French, Italian, Spanish, or any other Indo-European language you care to name.

But there's a problem here. Some of the optimists' objections do hit home. The classical past has never been co-opted by only one political tendency: Classics have probably legitimated as many revolutions as they have legitimated conservative dictatorships (and Aeschylus has over the years been performed both as Nazi propaganda and to support liberation movements in sub-Saharan Africa). Some of the counterclaims, though, are plain misleading. The success of *Gladiator* was absolutely nothing new; think of *Ben-Hur*, *Spartacus*, *The Sign of the Cross*, and any number of versions of *The Last Days of Pompeii* right back almost to the very beginning of cinema. Nor is the success of popular classical biography; countless people of my generation were introduced to antiquity through the biographies by Michael Grant, now largely forgotten.

And I am afraid that many of the arguments now used to justify the learning of Latin are perilous too. Latin certainly teaches you about language and how language works, and the fact that it is 'dead' can be quite liberating: I am forever grateful that you don't have to learn how to ask for a pizza in it, or the directions to the cathedral. But honestly, if you want to learn French, you would frankly be better off doing that, not starting with some other language first. There is really only one good reason for learning Latin, and that is that you want to read what is written in it.

That is not quite what I mean, though. My bigger question is: what drives us so insistently to examine the 'state' of Classics, and to buy books that lament their decline? Reading through opinion after

opinion it can sometimes feel that you are entering a strange form of hospital drama, a sort of academic ER, with an apparently sick patient ('Classics') surrounded by different doctors who cannot quite agree on either the diagnosis or prognosis. Is the patient merely malingering and really fighting fit? Is a gradual improvement likely, but perhaps never back to the peak of good health? Or is the illness terminal and palliative care or covert euthanasia the only options?

But, perhaps even more to the point, why are we so interested in what's going to happen to Classics, and why discuss it in this way, and fill so many pages with the competing answers? There is something a bit paradoxical about the 'decline of Classics debate' and the mini publishing industry that appears to depend on a large number of key supporters of Classics buying books that chart their demise. I mean, if you don't give a toss about Latin and Greek and the classical tradition, you don't choose to read a book on why no one is interested in them any more.

Of course, all kinds of different assumptions about what we think 'Classics' are underlie the various arguments about their state of health: from something that comes down more or less to the academic study of Latin and Greek to – at the other end of the spectrum – a wider sense of popular interest in the ancient world in all its forms. Part of the reason why people disagree about how 'Classics' are doing is that when they talk about 'Classics' or (more often in America) 'the classics' they are not talking about the same thing. I do not plan here to offer a straightforward redefinition. But I am going to pick up some of the themes that emerged in Terence Rattigan's play to suggest that Classics are embedded in the way we think about ourselves, and our own history, in a more complex way than we usually allow. They are not just from or about the distant past. They are also a cultural language that we have learned to speak, in dialogue with the idea of antiquity. And to state the obvious, in a way, if they are about anybody, Classics are, of course, about us as much as about the Greeks and Romans.

But first the rhetoric of decline, and let me offer you another piece of gloom:

> On many sides we hear confident assertions … that the work of Greek and Latin is done – that their day is past. If the extinction of these languages as potent instruments of education