Classical patricide

by Victor Davis Hanson

On the state of the classics in higher education.

Should the formal study of Greece and Rome die—or be killed off? Some classicists seem to think so. An April 2021 New York Times piece focused on the young Princeton classical scholar Dan-el Padilla Peralta and his apparent advocacy of ending classics, at least as it now exists or as he envisions it to. The subtitle of the hagiography reads, “Dan-el Padilla Peralta thinks classicists should knock ancient Greece and Rome off their pedestal—even if that means destroying their discipline.”

The metaphor “pedestal” is revealing of the author’s general ignorance of how few Americans, on or off campuses, know anything of Greece and Rome. Classical antiquity for a long time has not been towering over anything. The idea that it still does reflects more the self-importance of a few privileged Jacobin classicists who dream they are fighting on the barricades of the current American revolution. A better simile is functionaries rearranging the deck chairs on their sinking Titanic. Or perhaps envision Padilla’s Princeton Classics Department as the chosen parlor-suite class being paddled out on half-empty lifeboats away from the wreckage of their discipline, as thousands locked in steerage go down with their abandoned ship.

Throughout the Times portrait, Padilla is quoted extensively on why racism is thematic within classics today. This supposedly baneful legacy from the classical world, and from those who subsequently canonized it, perpetuate what he calls, but does not define, “whiteness.” The pathology apparently is a sort of science-fiction idea that binds tens of millions of whites on the basis of their shared skin pigmentation—including a few thousand classicists.

Is Padilla, the classics patricide, an outlier? Apparently not. His former Stanford Ph.D. advisors and mentors are quoted as seconding that theme of pernicious Eurocentric whiteness deeply embedded in, or indeed now defining, “classics.” “I don’t think it should exist as an academic field,” opines the ancient historian Walter Scheidel. His colleague Ian Morris adds, “Classics is a Euro-American foundation myth. Do we really want that sort of thing?”
So spoke two highly compensated academics, who, we now learn for the first time at the sunset of their Stanford professorships, had hinged their long careers on a mere “Euro-American foundation myth” that should cease. But, if so, why did they continue aiding and abetting such a purportedly pernicious and fraudulent discipline? Why, for example, if requiring some course work in Greek and Latin for a classics major was exclusionary and systemically prejudicial, did Princeton University only now in 2021 drop such a requisite?

One of the strangest developments in the current woke revolution has been the endless stream of opportunistic confessionals from the professional classes. They now strangely fess up that they had been all along de facto but silent racist co-conspirators in an implicitly racist discipline—until recently when, *mirabile dictu*, they acquired the insights and courage to renounce their complicity.

Who exactly is the “we” of the classics community? Does Morris include the thousands of unknown high school Latin teachers and untenured undergraduate Greek lecturers who are trying to keep their understaffed and underfunded programs alive? Is perhaps elitism, rather than racial bias, killing off their dying profession?

After all, the idea that classics in higher education is an effective pathway to privilege is absurd. Classics has always been smothered by more “practical” disciplines that promise far greater status and immediate compensation upon graduation. The non-spoken classical languages are hard; the referents of Greek and Roman names and places remain opaque. Until now, there were lots of traditional challenges to the former academic discipline by “outsider” opponents who claimed classics was mostly a waste of time for nerds, and by “insider” defenders, who in recent years sought to save the discipline with more Foucauldian theorizing and less undergraduate teaching.

Yet now the end of classics is envisioned not by unthinking suicide, civil war, and misplaced self-interest, but by the premeditated patricide of classicists boasting that their own profession must be killed off in service to a wider cultural revolution. In the indictment brought by Padilla, classics’ new first-degree crime is old racism. Those who study Greece and Rome, in the era of Black Lives Matter and the *annus horriblis* of 2020, are to be prosecutors who assume that their morally superior age has earned the right to condemn the classical world and all those who studied it in the past by the standards of the present.
It was in midsummer 2020, after all, when a mini-industry of academic “experts” piped up on social media, offering the mob their own supposed proficiency in destroying monuments of various sorts. The Egyptologist Sarah Parcak tutored rioters online about her expertise in removing obelisks without hurting their iconoclastic destroyers, and even included schematics showing how the toppling should be properly done. Erin L. Thompson, who is listed, hilariously, as a professor of “art crime” at the City University of New York, in banal fashion urged statue topplers to abandon their ropes and instead adopt chains. That way, she enthused, “it’ll go faster.” Who would have known?

Madeline Odent, an American curator in charge of preserving artifacts of the past at the Royston & District Museum & Art Gallery in England, tweeted out advice on how to supersede mere paint in desecrating “marble memorials of racists.” She instead advised stronger chemical solvents, whose defacing properties would be “irreversible.” That way, the destruction of bronze and other iconic materials would become “practically impossible to stop.” Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

Padilla himself is mostly recycling tired charges from the now-ancient culture wars of the 1980s and 1990s. Almost thirty years ago Bernard M. W. Knox (The Oldest Dead White European Males: And Other Reflections on the Classics) warded off such puerile attacks as he unapologetically defended the Greeks and Romans as singularly enlightened, especially in comparison to the alternatives in the contemporary European, Mediterranean, and Near Eastern worlds. We were, Knox thought, lucky to have inherited their norms of free thought and expression. And over twenty years ago John Heath and I in Who Killed Homer? argued for an academic populism that valued classroom teaching more than postmodern theorizing and suggested what was killing the profession were too many grandees who wrote for too few and taught even fewer. So the latest classics psychodrama differs only in its trendy fixation on race—and the deliberate rather than insidious killing of the discipline.

Yet were the Greeks and Romans themselves racists? And does it then follow that subsequent focus on the classical world perpetuated centuries of racism? Hardly. Whiteness itself was a concept completely unknown to the Greeks and Romans. No such word exists in the classical vocabularies of the ancient world, the supposed font of endemic Western racism.
Classical antiquity’s rare interests in unfamiliar white skin, or what anthropologists might call “Nordid” phenotypes, were usually in reference to tribal peoples of more remote and colder climates. In general, the Greeks and Romans thought these were pre-civilized clans—such as the Gauls, Germans, or Thracians. True, on occasion, historians like Tacitus romanticized the Germani as noble savages freed from the burdens and complexities of civilization. And Roman women sometimes wore blonde wigs and dabbed their face with lighter makeup. But such cultural appropriation was often seen as a tic of the wealthy and pampered, emulating the perceived wilder, and perhaps more mysteriously dangerous, life beyond the Rhine and Danube. What we might call “whiteness” was not associated by Mediterranean people with “supremacy,” “privilege,” or anything much at all other than perhaps bored and sophisticated slumming.

Snowden concluded that the Greeks and Romans, while like most peoples at times ethnocentric, were nonetheless mostly oblivious to modern notions of racial prejudice. As Snowden showed, classical references to black people were often favorable, while northern European “whites” were usually assumed to be savage and tribal. The Roman emperor Septimius Severus, the comic poet Terence, and the novelist Apuleius were all “darker” North Africans. But in no sense was their skin color felt to convey a stigma of inferiority—or much of anything other than being typical non-Italians, whether from North Africa, Spain, Gaul, or Dalmatia, who rose to the highest positions of influence and authority in the Empire.
Howard University just announced the closure of its classics department, ensuring there will be no more brilliant Snowdens there, but his views until recently were canonical. Classics departments in contemporary Africa saw no contradiction in their focus on classical thought, ideas, and values—perhaps illustrated best in the near-half-century career of the classicist Nigel Henry, who more or less created the classics department at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria and believed his discipline might offer a superb education to the underrepresented. Certainly Spike Lee thought the classical legacy was his as much as anyone’s; when he drew on and updated Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* in his 2015 film *Chi-Raq*, he adapted ancient comic tropes to try to end the senseless gun violence of contemporary Chicago.

But did the insidious radar of conservative white men nevertheless pick up secret racist signals from classical antiquity missed by others so as to perpetuate contemporary privilege? There is no evidence to suggest that white males today have a stranglehold on education in general and classics in particular. Currently about 60 percent of all bachelor’s degrees are awarded to women. There have been radical gains in degrees awarded to black and Latino students over the last two decades as both groups near national graduation averages.

Oddly, the one group that is “losing ground” is composed of low-income white males, who are now underrepresented as college graduates in comparison to their percentage of the population. They are certainly not eligible for traditional race-based affirmative action. Nor do they enjoy the networking advantages of the wealthy white, who are truly privileged. In terms of professional degrees, women are currently awarded doctorates in classics—as well as in related fields such as art history, history, comparative literature, and anthropology—in numbers slightly greater than their percentage in the population.

There seems to be no evidence for conspiracy theories that alt-right, white-male-supremacist cliques are perpetuating the biases of the discipline, except in the feverish minds of campus radicals. In the University of Maryland classicist Eric Adler’s 2016 study of the field, *Classics, the Culture Wars and Beyond*, he reported that 72 percent of classicists self-identified as far left or liberal, in contrast to the 7.8 percent who saw themselves as either conservative or far right. Adler also found that by 2012–13 the annual number of doctorates awarded in classics per year was only about ninety-two to ninety-nine, while the number of beginning tenure-track positions had dipped in 2010–11 to thirty, a drop of nearly two-thirds from a decade earlier (eighty-seven positions in 2001–02).
Far from postulating a far-right takeover of classics, an empiricist might conclude that there is a vast leftward imbalance within the discipline. Yet did such ideological conformity and its embrace of “new” approaches to classical studies at least staunch the hemorrhaging of the profession? Perhaps not so much. In the latest 2020–21 job listings for the Society for Classical Studies, there are fifty-four tenure-track openings versus eighty-two non-tenure-track/part-time billets—and seventy-one recently minted Ph.D.s.

A recent subsidiary trend has been to blast classics as innately appealing to the alt-right, white-supremacist subset of a larger toxically white population. So Donna Zuckerberg, the former editor of the now-defunct online classics journal *Eidolon*, which she ran and subsidized, warns:

The Far Right studies Classics because it loves to look back to an idealized past where there was patriarchy and white supremacy (allegedly) and also tremendous cultural flourishing. This idealized past then serves as an argument for reinstating that kind of society in the present day. This is a political, identity politics-based argument for studying the Classics.

So spoke the classics expert Dr. Zuckerberg who has never held an undergraduate teaching position and is a member of one of the richest families in the history of civilization, one that currently operates a $120 billion enterprise (Facebook) that exercises a near-monopolistic hold on social media and shares her own distrust of free expression and dissent.
The philologist Zuckerberg never defines the “far right.” Nor does she demonstrate how such purported racists and sexists seek to use their classical expertise, real or imagined, to perpetuate their own privilege. Does a beleaguered part-time Latin teacher at a Cal State campus really proselytize for larger Latin classes because she wishes to enhance her current privilege and that of her “race”? Of course, all people can discover in a distant culture any mirror they wish and can sometimes use such reflections for their own agendas and career ascendancies. But in the real world, the boosters of the usc Trojans are no more victimized underdogs than the supporters of the San Jose State Spartans are militarists. The romance of the Roman slave Spartacus may have infected the Trotskyite Spartacus League in Weimar Germany and subsequent generations in the West, but such groups’ often violent communist activism was no more a referendum on classical culture than is young U.S. Army soldiers reading Steven Pressfield’s Gates of Fire while serving in combat units in Iraq. When embedded there in 2007 during the surge, I was asked by one combat veteran how he could fix the accent of his tattooed μολὼν λαβέ (Molon labe)—a circumflex was wrongly inked over the omega in place of the correct grave accent. He was no “alt-right” racist, but rather someone who felt, rightly or wrongly, that he was helping Iraqis resist al Qaeda, Saddamites, and ex-Baathists for the chance of a constitutional government.

So is the glorious last stand of Thermopylae a right- or left-wing rallying trope? Al Gore has invoked Thermopylae at Davos to inspire his version of modern heroic Spartans to fight climate change (“This is Thermopylae!”). But then again so did Hermann Göring, who claimed ownership of the three hundred when he falsely compared their “last stand” to that of the trapped Nazi aggressors at Stalingrad. Indeed, there is a rich genre in classics of chronicling the historical uses and abuses of classical texts, examining how iconic events are made to resonate with contemporary ones, from Thermopylae to Xenophon’s Anabasis to Tacitus’s Germania.

What is striking about the current group of critics of classics, especially the most vehement who call for the profession to end, is their own apparently unrecognized privilege as tenured professors and their uninterest in matters of class, ancient and modern, particularly within their own field.

When endowed tenured professors agree that classics is toxic and should be ended, they rightly assume that they would simply gravitate over to other departments and interdisciplinary programs. Not so for the thousands of adjuncts and professors of endangered departments who would be vaporized, and the hundreds of thousands of students who would be deprived of a course of study that can empower the marginalized.
Natalie Haynes in *The Guardian* in 2016 sounded such populist concern in complaining about efforts in Great Britain to cut back Latin instruction in publicly funded schools: “there is something grubbily elitist about restricting classics to those who can afford to pay for it.” She assumed rightly that among its many virtues, classics is a class leveler, not a multiplier of privilege. In *Who Killed Homer?*, John Heath and I charged that classics was dying largely because of its insufficient efforts to reach the uninitiated. We noted that self-described radicals and theorists who sought to replace philologists had no more interest than the latter in becoming popular advocates of their field. The book anticipated the paradoxical career of a Dan-el Padilla Peralta, who was given a great deal of encouragement and financial help through prep school, an Ivy League undergraduate education, and Stanford doctoral training in hopes of widening the field, but whose own careerist jargon, hothouse theoretical fixations, and stated desire to kill the discipline that nourished him help his own academic trajectory but hurt thousands of others.

Classics as a discipline, however, ultimately rests on the unheralded work of classroom teachers of Latin and Greek, ancient history and philosophy, Western Civ, and classical literature in translation. For the most part, these classicists are high school and undergraduate teachers, often poorly paid, sometimes “contingent” or part-time faculty. The majority of them are terribly exploited as adjuncts. Yet the continuance of classics as a college discipline rests upon their helot shoulders alone.

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Such teacher advocates are not much in evidence in the Ivy League, the major public research universities, or at a Stanford, Yale, or University of Chicago—although many were trained at such places as graduate students. They have fanned out to small colleges and satellite-campus public universities, often as missionaries and proselytizers, teaching three to five courses a semester, which frequently entails as many as four different class preparations. They don’t keep up on who’s the chair at which Ivy League classics department and usually could not care less about the most recent academic “superstar” who does “theory” or the grandee who declares their field deservedly “dead.”

To persuade a student, often heavily indebted with student loans, to continue second-semester Greek or a second year of Latin is to learn how to argue that hundreds of hours of further study will enrich his intellectual and moral life, or eventually accelerate career opportunities, or make him a better-informed citizen who understands the roots, values, and contradictions of his own culture. That is a hard sell to a nineteen-year-old. The effort often contends with a student carrying $100,000 in debt over the next four years, with a twenty- to thirty-hours-a-week job. Few classicists, other than the legions of undergraduate teachers, attempt even to make such a missionary sale.

Classics programs at most colleges need to justify their existence by enrolling certain numbers of students. As a result, the classicist becomes counselor, advocate, confessor, and enabler of eighteen- to twenty-one-year-olds. For over two decades, to sustain interests in classics at a state university, our small staff at csu Fresno showed movies on Friday nights, lent our cars and trucks out to students who were moving, gave dozens of independent studies in particular classical authors, met parents, gave away most of our books that came in the mail, and held office hours all day long.

Yet the more one is praised for classroom excellence, the more dubious his scholarly credentials become, on the theory either that teaching ensures that there is hardly time left for serious scholarship or that it has become a self-fulfilling justification for an inability to research and write. For some strange reason, those who teach the most important courses in classics, introductory Latin and Greek—the initiations that will either entice or repel potential classics students—are usually the most junior faculty, or at least those with the least job security, or those with the least amount of research time and support.
Senior faculty who teach small upper-division language classes so often fail to note that their enrollments hinge on the success or failure of their more unheralded and less well-known subordinates. Just as innate philological ability and hard work are required of a skilled textual critic, so too the expertise to hold the attention of thirty students three to four times a week when differentiating the gerund from the gerundive or explaining why the sequence of tenses in Latin is different from the sequence of moods in Greek requires natural abilities and years of adaptation, improvisation, and self-reflection.

As for innate “privilege,” of the hundreds of classicists I have known over the last half century, few were especially wealthy, and none who taught undergraduates in public universities were. I went to a small-town high school in the rural San Joaquin Valley of California where Latin was not and has never been offered. Nor was it in any curriculum of the schools in the surrounding small towns. In graduate school, I had three colleagues in our first-year class. One was a decorated and wounded Green Beret Vietnam veteran, who was a brilliant philologist—and from an impoverished family. A second was a Polish-American veteran of the steel mills of Cleveland. I grew up on a farm, and when I arrived at college I thought the ability to drive a tractor might still be thought of as just as important as knowing Latin from grade school. Only one of us four in our graduate school class was an East Coast student who had pre-college Latin preparation, and he too was not wealthy.

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The graduate faculty were mostly European philologists. But only one or two were aristocrats. A few professors were poor, dressing shabbily and living in what in the late 1970s were cheap apartments, often in less than desirable places. My classicist colleague at csu Fresno used to argue with me a lot, but not so much over Latin syntax. He insisted that his growing up on a small cattle ranch entailed harder work than did my growing up on a raisin farm. I think I can state that after teaching twenty-one years at csuf, I never had a single classics student who had attended prep school.
Real outsiders and genuine renegades often created the great revolutions in classical studies, not necessarily incestuous academics haggling over trends and status. The banker Heinrich Schliemann almost *ex nihilo* founded Hellenic archaeology and the idea that the citadels of Troy and Mycenae and the cultures around them were not merely mythical. The architect Michael Ventris relied on the training and logic of his profession, and his cryptographical skills, to show that Linear B could be deciphered as an early form of Greek. The adventurer Milman Parry went to the Balkans to prove his theory that illiterate contemporary oral poets really could sing epic poems of some sophistication, in meter and drawing on epithet, formulas, and type scenes—not all that differently from the way that Homer composed the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. George Grote, the first “scientific” historian to offer a sweeping historical narrative of ancient Greece in English, was a banker and radical political activist.

What has distinguished American classics in particular has been the presence of the lower and middle classes, both as students and faculty, with non-academic backgrounds and pragmatic experiences. That fact explains, at least until recently, the populist nature of classical studies and the almost evangelical zeal of undergraduate teachers to devote their time and energy to sustain the Greek and Latin languages and to encourage the dissemination of classics beyond the campus.

An earlier version of the prep-schooled, Princeton undergraduate, and Stanford Ph.D. Dan-el Padilla Peralta once seemed to agree that classical themes, ideas, and tropes became “classical” precisely because they hold universal appeal across cultural or racial fault lines:

> And so my “Why” for “Why Classics?” has much to do with the exquisite thrill of discovery: the pleasures of finding old bodies changed into new forms, to paraphrase Ovid. Look at the Fugees’ rapping about the sword of Damocles in “Zealots,” or Jay-Z’s direct allusion to Plato’s *Euthyphro* in “No Church in the Wild”: more opportunities for pleasure as ancient Greek and Roman past(s) bubble up fresh in the hip-hop present. Or stalk that present like zombies, startling those whose eyes can see them.

All that giddiness seems a long way from his more recent dreary and warped denunciation of classics: “Far from being extrinsic to the study of Greco-Roman antiquity, the production of whiteness turns on closer examination to reside in the very marrows of classics.” Did the Greeks, and the study of them, abruptly change? Or was it Padilla and the academic political landscape?

The classical legacy has always encouraged social and cultural cannibalism. Athenians like the so-called Old Oligarch, Plato, and Aristophanes had worse things to say about their city and its culture than did its enemies. To read Petronius, Tacitus, and Suetonius is to assume the Principate was often a force of evil, toxic to Romans and non-Romans alike. So it is perhaps no surprise that classicists who devote their lives to such authors apply the same rule of self-criticism and occasional nihilism to themselves.
Nouns such as “comedy,” “parody,” and “irony,” and adjectives such as “sardonic,” “critical,” “sarcastic,” “misanthropic,” and “cynical” are all Greek words. They reflect the classical tradition’s greatest gift to civilization, a critical consciousness that questioned, cross-examined, and revised almost all received wisdom, orthodoxies, arguments from authority, and edicts from on high—including at times stereotyped views about women, the poor, and slaves. If later Western civilization inherited these classical tropes of questioning the status quo, of challenging authority, of reexamining and tearing apart its own art, literature, and thought to the point of near nihilism, why would it not question the foundations of the very system that created such self-reflection? If nothing is sacrosanct in these endless Western cycles of reexamination, then ultimately anything not perfect is up for debate, including the legacy of the Greeks and Romans themselves.

Autophagy and oikophobia represent an old and innate strain of Hellenism—one that German pessimists such as Nietzsche, Hegel, and Spengler saw as the source of the decadence of the later West and perhaps the ultimate wages of combining the radical individualism of consensual government with the material prosperity accruing from free-market capitalism. The difference now, however, is one of degree; in the past classicists pulled back from saying worse things about their subject—ancient Greece and Rome—than did the critics of their discipline. Now they outdo them.

In our status-conscious fixation on academic classicists, we sometimes forget the field cannot be defined by a few dozen academics at a Princeton or Stanford. As was noted of the legions of undergraduate Latin and Greek teachers, there are all sorts of classicists: degreed, endowed, amateur, dilettante, self-described, autodidactic, and university-spawned and -nurtured—but employed at a safe distance from the campus.

One group comprises public intellectuals, academics, writers, curators, philosophers, critics, and artists. They are the “friends” of classics who appreciate the central role of the Greeks and Romans in their own educational development and career expression and thus become advocates without making any particular claim of scholarly authority about the ancient world. They exist apart from the campus and can neither be canceled nor legitimized on the whims of a professional elite classicist.

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T. S. Eliot, a student of classical languages, introduced thousands to the *Satyricon* by a single citation from a passage of Petronius about the Cumaean Sibyl as an epigraph in *The Waste Land*. Ezra Pound may not have had much Latin, and less Greek, but his ubiquitous references to antiquity in his *Cantos* invited curious readers to learn them. In the 1990s, the art historian Camille Paglia’s defense of classical learning and her brutal takedown of French-inspired postmodern classicism (“Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf”) fought the canard that the ancient world should not be central, in any positive way, to the contemporary study of literature and art. Even when classics becomes table-talk repartee and gotcha showboating among intellectuals and artists, there is still an advertisement of how Greece and Rome permeate modern film, art, and literature.

As are the popularizers within academia. The word “popularizer” is unfair given its affinity to the Latin “vulgarizer.” I would prefer “expander” in reference to those few who can introduce the ancient world into the present while accurately making accessible classical history and values to readers who otherwise know little about the ancient world.

The brilliant Greek scholar and translator Gilbert Murray and the historian Alfred Zimmern (*The Greek Commonwealth*, 1911) were liberal internationalists and League of Nations zealots who in the early twentieth century spread interest in ancient Greece throughout the United Kingdom and the United States. What was curious about the similar careers of Edith Hamilton, H. D. F. Kitto, Richmond Lattimore, David Grene, Moses Finley, E. R. Dodds, and Bernard M. W. Knox was not just that they were good stylists, widely read, and easily able to write for those outside academia, but also that their translations, surveys, and general works were often used by classicists themselves, given their own superb credentials as philologists and historians.

Equally important were somewhat different scholarly popularizers like Nietzsche, the historian Theodor Mommsen, the archaeologist T. E. Lawrence, and the poet A. E. Housman. Some were more known as public intellectuals, some as writers, and a few as men of action, but all were respected among classicists as brilliant scholars.
A second group of classics advocates are Christian apologists, also a world away from campus infighting. Hundreds of Protestant seminaries and Christian-affiliated colleges offer New Testament Greek, both as part of the curriculum of Christian education and as training of clergy. The Catholic Church, with its greater emphasis on Latin, both because of the texts of traditional church fathers and scholastics from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas and owing to its historic rivalry with the Greek Orthodox Church, still incorporates Latin and Roman rituals in its communiqués and services. Religiosity enriches classical study because it is a reminder of a central truth about the formation of the ancient world. Jerusalem was eventually incorporated into the ancient Greek and Roman worlds to form a new trinity, as the idea of the West thereby offered a more transcendent, monotheistic Sermon-on-the-Mount moralism than the pagan instruction of actively injuring enemies as much as protecting friends.

With the formal adoption of Christianity as Rome’s official religion in the fourth century A.D., classical texts were retooled and appropriated, especially if deemed useful for Christian exegeses. Yet what was known about the life and teachings of Jesus posed as many questions as provided answers for His later followers. And many of them were found in Neoplatonic visions of moral perfection and its role in the afterlife, the pagan idea that man is born stained by flaws innate to human nature, and the Aristotelian dictum of unmoved movers that helps to explain otherwise inexplicable phenomena.

A third, tiny advocacy group are the masters of classical languages. Greek and Latin philologists are a dying but still necessary clique of mandarins. Ultimately classics depends on linguistic expertise and authoritative mastery of Greek and Latin, a narrow but direct and uninterrupted window into the classical past. Philology is not a static or ossified discipline, as one might expect after two millennia of the copying, emending, collating, revising, and publishing of manuscripts and printed texts.

To translate accurately newly discovered papyri, graffiti, inscriptions, and palimpsests requires not just singular mastery of the languages, but also knowledge of scribal methodologies and textual quirks that have in the past produced authoritative texts. Such esoterica can range from identifying the particular habits of famous scribes and scholars of the past, to the arcane rules of the *apparatus criticus*, to the varieties of Greek dialects appearing in stone inscriptions.
A master philologist, then, publishes new additions to our knowledge of ancient texts in the manner that archaeologists yearly uncover new finds throughout the Mediterranean. But there is a paradox here. While not all philologists are by definition poor teachers, most spend thousands of hours reading Greek and Latin both as students and professors and sometimes are neither inclined nor equipped to become vibrant classroom teachers, wider public intellectuals, or popularizers.

So they survive mostly at a handful of well-endowed research universities that offer doctoral programs in classics and that mostly train the ninety or so annual Ph.D. graduates. Their numbers shrink yearly as graduate preparation insidiously shorts philology in favor of theory, even as the numbers of upper-division courses in Greek and Latin literature, along with undergraduate classics majors, continue to erode. As fewer have the time and inclination to study Greek and Latin at advanced levels, those who are custodians and guardians of these ancient languages disappear commensurately, and the advocacy of philology recedes along with them.

The American Philological Association (apa) was established in 1869 as the prominent learned society of classics scholars in North America. It reminded the profession that knowledge of Greek and Latin was at the core of the discipline and eventually became the clearinghouse for the hiring of classics professors. Yet in 2014 the apa changed its name to the Society for Classical Studies (scs). Ostensibly, the association commendably sought a wider outreach to those without knowledge of Greek and Latin who were nevertheless interested in the classical world. But perhaps the blander “classical studies” was also an admission that fewer and fewer students knew the classical languages—and even fewer still in the future would care to become acquainted with them.

A private complaint against current classics job seekers is not that of fifty years ago when I began the study of Greek and Latin: too many pedantic linguists exercised too much influence. Instead, freshly minted Ph.D.s may master many schools of critical theory but cannot sight-read Caesar and Xenophon. Indeed, confusing cause and effect, now many classicists themselves urge dropping the study of Greek and Latin from classics altogether. How fitting that those most responsible for the decline of the teaching of classical languages now declare it nonessential to most young minds who are interested in their discipline.

“Privileged” is a common writ against both the Greeks and Romans and those who study them. Yet here too there are more paradoxes. The ancient world’s discovery of consensual government alongside the sanctity of private property, the monetization of the economy, and what we might call proto-capitalism earned plenty of venom from ancient writers and thinkers. Poets like Theognis and, more than a half-millennium later, satirists such as Juvenal and Petronius were especially critical of a new breed of wannabes who had substituted money for the old tickets of birth and land to respectability. In contrast, there was a socialist or even communist strain in ancient culture and politics seen at the dawn of the city-state in Hesiod’s groans against the bribe-swallowers and in the late Roman Republican agitation of Catiline for “cancelation of debts” and “redistribution of property.” Plato’s Laws and Aristotle’s Politics both ponder the unfortunate impossibility of ensuring perpetually equal land allotments.
Another common criticism is that the classical world glorifies aristocracy and elitism and is thus welcomed as a tool for perpetuating class bias and privilege in the present. Certainly in the later West, the mastery of the classical languages soon became the property of scholastics, clergy, the nobility, and eventually the monied, in part given the difficulty of the languages and the time needed to master them. Of course, there was elitism inherent in classical terms like *hoi beltistoi* (“the best cultural citizens”), *hoi aristoi* (“the well-born”), and *kalokagathia* (“gentlemanliness”) that conflate society’s best with being well-born, or at least prepped with the means to emulate being well born.

Yet Aristotle’s *hoi mesoi* (“the middle ones”), or *hoi georgoi* (“the farmers”) and *hoi hoplitai* (“the heavy infantrymen”), are preferable both to *hoi aristoi* (“the well-born”) and to *hoi polloi* (“the many”). Often poets and historians such as Hesiod, Euripides, and Tacitus seem to side with the have-nots. G. E. M. de Ste. Croix (*The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*, 1981) spent much of his later scholarly life trying to explain the Greek-speaking world in terms of an empowered underclass in the democracies, often in perpetual and sometimes successful revolution against the hereditarily wealthy. I wrote *The Other Greeks* in 1995 after sensing in literature, archaeology, history, philosophy, and epigraphy a constant chauvinism of an agrarian and hoplite middle class, one that was perceived as lacking the covetousness and envy of the poor and the unmerited privileges of the rich—and which served as a bulwark against violent revolution from below and oppression from above.

To the extent that Greeks and Romans in blanket fashion deprecated foreigners, the bias was often linguistic (those who spoke gibberish like barbarbarbar) or observable in stereotypes that suggested foreigners were more prone to lying (Punica fides) or treachery (fraus Gallorum)—even as Romans themselves acknowledged the cultural superiority of the Greeks whom they had conquered.
How did Northern and Western Europeans later appropriate a culture centered on the Mediterranean that had colonized tribes west of the Rhine and north of the Danube? The spread of Christianity resulted in the adoption of Latin throughout northern and western Europe in the early medieval period, which was also the time when literature in vernacular languages such as Old Irish and Old English began to be recorded using Latin scripts. The later medieval period saw the development of the university as well as the rediscovery and translation of works by major classical thinkers. By the Renaissance, Greece and Rome were reenergized and globalized well beyond the boundaries of Italy. The expansion of classical study reflected the steady loss of influence by contemporary southern Europe after the fifteenth century, given the continuing Ottoman pressure on eastern Europe and the Mediterranean.

The discovery of the New World, the opening of maritime routes to the East, and the advantages of European nations with Atlantic ports combined with the spread of Protestantism to diminish the influence of Mediterranean-bound classical culture. The result was that what became England, France, the Netherlands, some German-speaking states, and Scandinavia often enjoyed far greater comparative regional wealth than these regions had during classical antiquity. And eventually formal states began to incorporate the legacy of the ancient world as if it were their own.

Ancient slavery was not particularly associated with race. It was defined either as the collective misfortune of a conquered people—Julius Caesar claimed that he had enslaved over one million (white-skinned) Gauls—or an individual’s poor luck either to be born into slavery or to be captured during a war or by pirates. One of the reasons why occasional philosophical distaste for slavery never fully translated into formal political abolition movements—although there were frequent slave revolts—was the reality that slavery was not customarily encumbered with the pseudoscience of racial difference or innate inferiority. When anyone can be a slave through misfortune, then misfortune and not so much slavery is scapegoated as the culprit. Nowhere is this point made more eloquently than in Euripides’ play *The Trojan Women*.

If a slave proved wiser than his master, and many did, the master thereby felt no threat to the institution of slavery because it was never invested in the first place with ideas of innate racial inferiority. Aristotle might have lamented the fact that supposedly naturally servile people were not always singled out for slavery. But his spirited philosophical rejoinder is a reminder that his idea of natural inferiority certainly was not the litmus test of slavery in the ancient world. It was opposed, for example, by many Stoic and later Cynic philosophers. Aristotle’s views of “natural slaves” may well have been more popular in the antebellum American South than they were among his own fourth-century B.C. contemporaries, again suggesting that racists can find reassurance in places never intended.
When in rare cases slavery or indentured servitude was applied to entire ethnic groups such as the helots of Messenia, the vagaries of slavery became more transparent. Opposition grew to the idea that an entire people, at least a Greek-speaking one, was somehow not fit for freedom. So the fourth-century rhetorician Alkidamas wrote in his *Messianiakos*, in his praise of the Messenian helots, “Nature has made no man a slave,” likely voiced near contemporaneously with their liberation by Epaminondas the Theban. True, the great liberator may have been spurred as much by the goal of emasculating Sparta as by his own moral imperative to free the helots. Yet his Pythagorean training likely gave his invasion a moral edge, given that the philosophical sect had long cherished the need to treat slaves with respect, to see women as equals, and even to view animals as deserving of humane treatment.

Sexism and oppression of women in the ancient world have been widely studied over the last half century, given the preponderance of ancient male authors, artists, philosophers, and statesmen, and their institutions that were mostly male-dominated. But here a number of anomalies also exist that make the idea of a West built on Greek and Roman sexism problematic, along with its analogue that such a legacy permeates higher education at the expense of women.

In the materially impoverished world of southern Europe, and Western life in general before the Industrial Revolution, most women might become pregnant a dozen times to see three or four offspring reach maturity, given the hazards of miscarriages, infant mortality, and childhood diseases. In a world without modern appliances, and always a day or two away from possible hunger, the agricultural drudgery of the ancient world explains some of the sex differentiation as it did in every other contemporary culture of the past.

That said, there were nonetheless plenty of singular female writers, politicians, and rulers in the Greco-Roman world. Males themselves recognized that fact, when the heroes of Athenian tragedy and Old Comedy were so often women and the dullards so often men. Sexism and misogyny were commonplace the world over, and certainly prevail mostly outside the West today. But the idea that women were not innately inferior but were denied a proper voice in consensual societies certainly did not just originate in modern Europe or the contemporary United States, but rather began with literary characters like Lysistrata, Antigone, and Medea and the lives of powerful and influential Greek and Roman writers, rulers, and influence-makers such as Artemisia, Aspasia, Cleopatra, Hypatia, Praxilla, and Sappho.

Finally, before killing something, we must know what the target is and thus why it must die. Academics rarely define “classics,” perhaps because they have neither the power nor the authority to destroy something that transcends their academic atolls. “Classics” instead has always been defined in a number of mutually inclusive and expansive ways.
Chronologically, the generic term often refers to the discipline’s encompassing of the rise and early fruition of “Western” civilization in the late eighth century B.C. with the advent of the Greek polis or city-state, continuing until the end of the Western Roman Empire in the late fifth century A.D. Within that broad era, “classics” focuses on the linguistic, literary, historical, philosophical, and artistic achievements of Greco-Roman culture.

Early Mycenaean Greek-speakers of the southern Balkans were not a completely culturally different people from their polis-inhabiting successors. Nor was life in late fifth-century A.D. Spain, Gaul, or Britain abruptly cut completely off from the prior Roman civic, political, military, literary, and intellectual foundations of a millennium. But what had been Europe before the city-state did not leave a comparable legacy in the West, while the traditions of the Greeks and Romans did permanently change what followed them.

Early Greek writers assumed that Eastern societies were older and richer and yet without the energy of the poorer but more consensual city-states anchored by the middle agrarian classes. “A little state living orderly in a high place,” wrote the mid-sixth-century B.C. Milesian poet Phokylides, “is stronger than a blockheaded Nineveh.” Or as he also made clear, the Greek city-state’s strength was its free people, neither rich nor poor: “Much advantage is theirs who are midmost, and midmost in a city would I be.”

This envisioned twelve-hundred-year Greco-Roman continuum is often referred to as “classical antiquity” or even just “antiquity.” Both the study and appreciation of Greece and Rome, especially since the nineteenth century, have always been approached from a variety of scholarly and non-academic emphases: Greek and Latin language and literature at its center, enriched by ancient history, art, and philosophy and the more technical specialties of classical archaeology, architecture, epigraphy, and numismatics.

But why were the civilizations of the Greek and Italian peninsulas so “privileged” by subsequent generations, when both their areas and populations were, at least initially, so small in comparison to the vastness of northern and central Europe, the Near East, and northern Africa? Certainly, their cultures were “younger” than those of the Near East. The classical world drew variously upon the impressive architecture, material culture, and religions of the Near East, Egypt, the Minoans on Crete, and earlier Mycenaean Greeks, as well as the Babylonians, Lydians, and Persians. So what made them so different?
The Great Sphinx and Pyramids at Giza, the palace at Knossos, the Lion Gate at Mycenae, the famous Babylonian hanging gardens of Nebuchadnezzar II, the Achaemenid halls at Persepolis—all, in the Greeks’ own view, were testaments to the earlier, and often grander, or at least comparable, architectural skill of their creators. The organization of labor and capital to build such huge projects was often beyond the resources of the poorer, habitually querulous Greeks, but was also felt by them to represent unwise investment of the consensual city-state’s limited means.

Yet unlike Eastern temples and tombs, the Athenian Parthenon and the temple of Olympian Zeus near the Agora were not just the homes of patron gods. Much less were they divine tombs. Instead they were multiuse centers of monumental art, frequent rituals, and civic ceremonies, as well as more practical treasuries, repositories of dedications, and state archives. It would be as if the National Cathedral, the National Archives, the Smithsonian, and the Department of Treasury were all housed in one Washington, D.C., peristyle marble building.

Writing, as we would call it, with vowels, consonants, syntax, and punctuation was certainly an improvement upon cuneiform and pictographs. But the Greeks did not invent but rather borrowed, adapted, and improved a syllabary derived from the Phoenicians, with a zest that did not reflect insecurity over making their own the earlier superior contributions of the “other.” While court chronicles, religious protocols, and regal legal edicts were first written down by non-Greeks in the Near East and Egypt, they were not literary or even civic in the sense of consensual citizenship. Nor were they divorced from autocratic rulers or religious officials.

Before the Greeks, there was little formal concept of politics, literature, jurisprudence, and philosophy as we now envision them—autonomous disciplines mostly divorced from religious and political control and censorship and not envisioned as existing in service to the state or the gods. The old Babylonian poem *Gilgamesh*, for example, may be an early exception. But this earlier religious morality tale clearly lacks the rich characterization, plot, human paradoxes, moral development, self-reflection, and ironies of the Homeric oral poems.

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“Classical” literature does not just mean the first, or an inaugurating, literature, but “classics” that weather time and space by their universal appeal and challenges—and not through any racial, class, or gender conspiracy, formal or insidious. Instead, over centuries, because of their quality Greek and Roman texts become canonical, viewed as matching the excellence of intellectual and artistic expression of any subsequent age. Such permanence explains why Sophocles’ *Oedipus* or Euripides’ *Medea* are still staged, the aphorisms of Horace reappear in modern poems and prose, and Thucydidean insights on human nature in war are applied, even if often in mischaracterized fashion, to twenty-first-century challenges.

The Greeks first created a systemization of inquiry. They spent huge sums of material and human capital pursuing the somewhat arrogant idea that knowledge could be organized and accessed through a finite number of intellectual disciplines, in a methodical and systematic fashion of induction. What followed were huge repositories, archives, and libraries at Alexandria, Athens, Constantinople, Ephesus, Pergamon, and Rome. Tens of thousands of papyrus rolls were collected and catalogued at great expense, and the resulting huge corpus of research was sometimes as little known to the ancient public as university libraries are now to the modern.

We have the names of thousands of treatises, some of them mere fragments, concerning everything from grammar to agriculture, Euclidian geometry, Theophrastian botany, the agronomic ideas of Varro and Columella, Hippocratic medicine, and Plutarchian popular morality, even Athenian gossip. Compendia, epitomes, anthologies, and thesauri reflect this constant obsession to categorize, to differentiate, and to explore our dreams, the insects at our feet, and the constellations in the skies—but in the shared methodology of examining symptoms, forming a diagnosis, offering a therapy, and concluding with a prognosis.

The Greeks and Romans sought to replace folktales and divine explication of natural and human phenomena with empiricism, analysis, and logic. They did so for much of the history of classical antiquity without sanctions or threats from a despot or theocrat. What separated such systematic empiricism from contemporaneous Indian or Chinese inquiry was its freewheeling nature and the lack of religious or political censorship limiting the parameters of exploration. For all the persecutions of the Pythagoreans, Democritus, Protagoras, or Socrates, usually censure, exile, or trials followed from votes of the people. And yet popular odium usually did not extinguish unorthodox views on religion and government.

At its best, Greek and Roman literature provides us with archetypal characters—Achilles, Oedipus, Medea, Aeneas—who embody universal values and paradoxes. They often become tragic reminders that there are rarely good choices in life, that too often it is a dilemma of a bit better versus somewhat worse. When I ask students of our contemporary therapeutic culture why they continue with classics, some answer to “get help and advice.” I think they mean that Antigone teaches them there are consequences for being moral, and as many unwelcome complications for being unthinkingly zealous in pursing such morality. Euripides’ *Bacchae* reminds us that puritanical self-righteousness is as dangerous as reckless natural exuberance, as if
license is just the flip side of repression. One student remarked that he admired heroes like Ajax and Achilles and was happy there were lots of them around—as long as he did not have to be one himself. All can admire an epic or tragic hero—from a safe distance.

Race and gender are important modern and ancient areas of investigation. Yet they are aspects of the Greek and Roman worlds, like class, age, or legal status, and do not *ipsis factis* define the classics. The study of classical antiquity is a holistic and humane enterprise that transcends both race and gender—a fact forgotten by the self-interested who are either indifferent to the discipline or now eagerly promoting the end of something they have never really understood.

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