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Reception

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More than any other avenue of classical research, the study of reception connects the ancient world to how we live our lives, and why we think the things we do. It has become a familiar name for that part of the discipline committed to examining the role that Greek and Roman texts, images, and ideas have played in subsequent cultures, and continue to play in contemporary life. While studies of the classical tradition were a familiar presence in previous generations, the greatly expanded place given to reception in the discipline's structure and self-perception is one of the major shifts in the field over the past three decades, and work in this area is now a key component in pedagogy and public-facing scholarship as well as research. This chapter provides an accessible overview of classical reception studies, its history in debates over the role of the reader and the nature of interpretation, and its current transformation into a more diverse conception of 'global classics'. While I argue here for the vital importance of reception studies to the future of classical scholarship, I also examine the limitations of the concept of reception itself, questioning whether the name adequately communicates the breath and ambition of current work in the area. At its best, the word categorises and unifies an important strain of research, a term of institutional organization rather than genuine intellectual self-description. At its worst, it risks dulling the ideological force of our analyses, classing as 'reception' acts and images that might better be described as instances of challenge, appropriation, resistance or rebellion.

Despite having become a familiar component of the discipline, the position of reception studies is in many ways far from central. It is true that a large number of outlets are now dedicated to reception research, including journals (*Classical Receptions Journal*, *The International Journal of the Classical Tradition*), book series (Oxford's *Classical Presences*, Cambridge's *Classics After Antiquity*, Bloomsbury's *Classical Receptions in Twentieth-Century Writing* and *IMAGINES – Classical Receptions in the Visual Performing Arts*), and professional organizations (the Classical Receptions Studies Network; the Society for Early Modern Classical Reception). The term is increasingly

found in job advertisements and on department websites in the US, and as a classification for work in the REF (Research Excellence Framework) in the UK.¹ Yet assumptions of institutional acceptance are belied by the more complex realities of hierarchy within the discipline. In my experience, few young classicists go on the job market, at least in the United States, listing reception studies as their primary research area, because it would raise inevitable questions about their capability to teach the main line of language and literature courses in Latin and Greek.² Books devoted to a postclassical period are frequently scholars' second projects – I admit to this myself – after a book on a classical period or author. With these hierarchies unshaken, it is no doubt riskier for a junior than a senior scholar to undertake work in classical reception, and that senior scholar is likely only to have been formally trained in Greek and Latin, not in the 'other' field of research. In the United States, a tenure case based primarily on publications in reception would almost certainly raise the sort of questions about disciplinary fit and measures of achievement that a body of research in a traditional area would not. From this perspective, Charles Martindale's call in *Redeeming the Text* (1993) for us to reconceive of *all* classical scholarship as a form of reception still seems radical, and pointedly unrealised. Reception may be familiar now as a subsection of the discipline, but its institutional acceptance cannot be taken for granted. It still has the air of being many classicists' second jobs.

Yet in many ways reception studies could be the best face for the discipline as a whole, given its range, diversity, responsiveness to political critique, and capacity to challenge the associations of cultural elitism and insularity that 'classics' – as long as it is so called – will always accrue. Debates over the homogeneity and Eurocentrism of the canon that were fought in the 1980s and 1990s have recently been renewed in a pedagogical context in waves of general education reform and continuing controversies over Great Books

¹ The publication of the *Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature* (2012-9), under the general editorship of David Hopkins and Charles Martindale, is another milestone.

² For the UK perspective on the job market's marginalisation of reception studies, see Richardson 2017; and on the persistent bias against reception scholars as 'real' classicists, Rankine 2019: 353.

programs in the United States.³ But reception studies is, or at least is potentially, unmoored from any canon, not limited to the Western literary tradition, and not restricted to particular modes of cultural production, ‘high’ or ‘low’. As Emily Greenwood (2016: 42-3) writes, the emergence of reception as a prominent part of the discipline ‘marks a shift away from a fixed and hierarchical classical tradition, which emphasised a single lineage traced through European culture to the present day, to an unruly, uncanonical, and unpredictable series of encounters and responses to Greek and Roman classics in diverse cultures and contexts’. A large number of recent volumes consider the reception of the Greek and Roman world outside of Europe⁴ and in popular culture.⁵ Its premise of investigating links between eras and cultures offers unique opportunities in the classroom to connect what is familiar to what is new, or to explore similarities and differences between students’ own cultural traditions.⁶ Even areas that have previously been lamented as blind spots are now being filled, such as the reception of late antique Latin literature.⁷ But a bias towards certain subjects remains. Philip Hardie (2013: 193) has observed the tendency for reception scholars to ‘gravitate to modernity, the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries’. I would add a tendency to focus on poetry and drama over prose. Michael Squire (2015) has drawn attention to different sort of blind spot, arguing that reception scholars overemphasize written texts at the expense of visual art and material culture.

Reception is simply too broad and varied a field of scholarship to describe in one chapter, so it has been impossible to be comprehensive here. I have focused on Rome and Latin literature specifically, aiming to give a sense of exciting critical developments and suggesting some ways forward. For the case studies in the latter half of this chapter, I

³ See Peirano in this volume on the context of these debates.

⁴ Torlone, Munteanu, and Dutsch 2017 on East and Central Europe; Parker 2017 on South Africa; Burton, Perris, and Tatum 2017 on New Zealand; Laird and Miller 2018 on Latin America; Johnson 2019 on Australia; Renger and Fan 2019 on East Asia; and see also my section later this chapter on ‘global classics’.

⁵ See e.g. the volumes edited by Rogers and Stevens 2015, 2017, 2018; on television and video games, Lowe & Shahabudin 2009; on children’s literature, Hodkinson & Lovatt 2018; on rock music, Fletcher & Umurhan 2019.

⁶ Friedman 2013; Bakogianni 2018.

⁷ Formisano and Fuhrer 2014; Culhed and Malm 2018.

have drawn examples from my own research in the eighteenth century, but I do so more as an admission of the limits of my own expertise than as a claim for any special status of texts in that era. Indeed, quite the opposite: I argue in the section on ‘global classics’ below that some of the most exciting current work in reception moves beyond English-language writing and beyond Europe. After a section examining the background of the term ‘reception’, the three subsequent sections pursue three specific claims. First, allusions and antiquity frequently occur within a broader cultural matrix of challenge and contestation. A critical classical reception practice needs to pay attention to voices that challenge the values accorded to classical literature, as well as to voices that embrace them. Second, a focus on the history of education can help us see classical allusion as a social challenge rather than simply a submission to prevailing literary or cultural norms. ‘Classicising’ – a word that too often suggests literary ornamentation rather than dynamic intellectual work – can signal a rebellion against societal prejudices about the proper boundaries of knowledge. Third, the study of reception is at its most vital as a mode of communication outside of classics, whether to the public, to students, or to scholars in other fields. The more reception is perceived as a ‘subfield’ of classics, the less impact its insights will have.

Background: Hermeneutics and Reception Theory

Anglophone classics draws its theoretical master-term ‘reception’ (*Rezeption*) from Hans Robert Jauss and the so-called School of Konstanz, and through Jauss from the broader philosophical tradition of hermeneutics. As Charles Martindale and Lorna Hardwick emphasised in influential early accounts of reception for classical scholars, Greece and Rome offers a particularly fertile ground for studying the processes of textual reinterpretation from one author to the next, given classical writers’ obsessive allusions to literary tradition and competitive referentiality. Antiquity is itself a hothouse for the study of classical reception.⁸ Modern philosophical debates about the nature and practice

⁸ Martindale 1993; Hardwick 2003. Hardwick in particular classifies as reception an array of phenomena that we might group under an array of other analytical headings: canon formation, translation, intertextuality, cultural memory (*exempla*), pedagogy (*paideia*).

of interpretation have also been convincingly traced to classical antiquity, to debates enacted in ancient rhetoric, grammar and early Christianity.⁹ But the hermeneutical tradition from which Jauss drew his ideas has its own origin in the Protestant thought of nineteenth-century Germany. Without the aid of centralised Church authority to help decide vexed points of scriptural exegesis, Protestant ministers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries looked to a growing body of treatises to guide biblical interpretation, and these treatises led in turn to a body of philosophical texts in the nineteenth century that grappled with the role of the interpreter in determining meaning.¹⁰ Twentieth-century hermeneutics continues to examine the active role of the individual in construing meaning. As Martindale has observed, though, such debates about the role of the interpreter appear infrequently in scholarship on classical reception, which tend towards more conventional forms of literary history. There is little of the drive of philosophical hermeneutics towards investigating the place of the reader's own beliefs, and rarely an impulse to dissolve the boundaries between subject and object, interpreter and text. As it has developed in classical scholarship, reception studies is to some extent at odds with the philosophical tradition to which it owes its name.¹¹

Key for the School of Konstanz was the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), whose *magnum opus* was *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode, 1960)* – a somewhat misleading title, since Gadamer offers no singular or objective method for interpretation. For Gadamer, understanding is fundamentally dialectical. The reader must bring the historical text back to life by pulling it into a process of dialogue with the present, and thereby becoming sensitive to the questions to which the text is an answer.¹² Gadamer rejects any firm separation of reader from text, since the mental background

Porter (2008, 494-5) correctly predicted reception within antiquity as a growth area of research; see e.g. Hardie 2009, Goldschmidt & Graziosi 2018, Goldschmidt 2019.

⁹ Bruns 1992; Eden 1997.

¹⁰ Palmer 1969: 34-8.

¹¹ As the editors of this volume suggest to me, a parallel might be drawn with the movement away from a more radical notion of Kristevan intertextuality – a component of all textual meaning – to a more familiar use of intertextuality in classical scholarship; see O'Rourke and Pelttari in this volume. On the continuing utility of Jauss' ideas for biblical interpretation, see Evans 2014.

¹² Gadamer 2004: 363.

that the reader brings to the process of interpretation is the product of accumulated tradition, a tradition that the historical text has itself helped to construct. ‘History does not belong to us’, he writes; ‘we belong to it’ (2004: 278). Gadamer also does not argue that the reader should aspire to any objective or presupposition-less position from which to interpret meaning. Rather, the prejudices (*Vorurteile*) that each reader brings to the interpretation of an historical text are both inevitable and desirable, since they constitute the present situation from which a contemporary person can and should enter into dialogue with the past. In order to reach the point of understanding, though, a point of connection needs to be reached between the worldview of the text and that of the reader, a process which Gadamer calls the ‘fusion of horizons’ (*Horizontverschmelzung*).¹³ By engaging in a dialogical process of question-and-answer with the text, we reach a point at which the horizon of the reader and the horizon of the text – the range of what each can ‘see’ from its vantage point in history – begin to overlap. Gadamer rejects research into the prior meanings of text as irrelevant to this process, and indeed as a failure to bring the written work back into living dialogue with the present. We must instead *apply* the ideas of the historical text to the present, since understanding is ‘always application’ (2004: 308). As Gadamer and his interpreters freely acknowledge, this model fits theological or juridical interpretation better than it does the reading of literature, since in those cases the reader does indeed seek the wisdom of an authoritative text to solve a spiritual or legal problem in the present.¹⁴

It is worth noting that despite the importance of Gadamer’s ideas for reception theory, his conception of understanding has been criticised on several fronts. Jürgen Habermas argued that Gadamer’s idealised vision of free dialogue between individuals and tradition ignores the fact that tradition has itself frequently been shaped by force rather than consensus, and that appeals to tradition have long been a convenient way to mask expressions of power.¹⁵ The collaborative ideal between present and past underplays the social and cultural forces that have shaped the discourses from which we make meaning.

¹³ Gadamer 2004: 305.

¹⁴ Palmer 1969: 236.

¹⁵ Habermas 1985: 316.

Feminist thinkers have similarly critiqued Gadamer's insistence that individuals 'belong' to history. Whose history? Far from willingly entering into dialogue with tradition, a feminist or queer reader may justifiably want to resist or challenge its 'wisdom' as a force that has historically repressed, persecuted, or excluded them. While Gadamer specifically rejects the negative representation of prejudices – he dismisses this as an unwelcome legacy of the Enlightenment's praise of reason over tradition (Gadamer 2004: 272-3) – other thinkers have been less willing to assume the inevitability of prejudices shaping understanding, or to valorise them as a necessary dialogic partner for understanding in the present.¹⁶ Marie Fleming has also critiqued the model of 'fusion of horizons' in Gadamer's thought, arguing that it reduces readers to abstract instantiations of the period they inhabit rather than individuals characterised by differences of power, gender, and class. His model of interpretation, she argues (2003: 116), dissolves 'all traces of concrete individuality, the site of differences, otherness, embodiment, and history'. In the call to fuse the horizons of present and past, opposing values of challenge and difference are downplayed or erased.

Gadamer's student Hans Robert Jauss developed many of his ideas, but with an explicit focus on literary interpretation, and with a key distinction: for Jauss, the history of a text's reading is not an antiquarian occupation severed from contemporary concerns, but lies at the heart of our aesthetic and hermeneutic project. In his inaugural lecture at the University of Konstanz from 1967, 'Literary History as a Provocation to Literary Theory' (*Literaturgeschichte als Provokation für die Literaturwissenschaft*), Jauss presents his ideas as a counter to both Marxist and formalist modes of literary analysis.¹⁷ Both fail to grasp the full historicity of texts, he argues, reducing literary works (respectively) to the means of their production or to formal categories such as meter or genre. Like Gadamer, Jauss emphasises that meaning is fundamentally dialectical; it emerges through a process of dialogue between the world of the text and that of the reader. But rather than emphasizing a single encounter in the present, Jauss argues that the full potential of a literary work is disclosed across time, in the successive series of readings from the

¹⁶ Code 2003: 6.

¹⁷ Jauss 1982: 3-45.

work's origin to today.¹⁸ The literary work establishes an 'horizon of expectation' [*Erwartungshorizont*] for its initial audience, appealing to their presuppositions based on their knowledge of synchronic factors (is this text similar to others of the era?) and diachronic factors (is this text like others in its genre?). Some texts aim merely to satisfy their readers' expectations. Others challenge them, thereby forcing a sideways shift in readers' horizon of expectation, and leading to the broadening or alteration of that horizon in the next generation of readers.¹⁹ Hence a work of literature which might seem dissonant or strange in its initial context is sometimes later discovered as a classic; its challenges have led to a broadening of readers' horizon of expectation, and so the entirety of its qualities and achievements can only be realised in the fullness of time. Jauss' boldness consists partly in describing reception as a mode of *aesthetics*. Rather than understanding the aesthetic qualities of a work in terms of its formal features or its mimesis of the culture around it, his conception of *Rezeptionsästhetik* (reception-aesthetic, usually translated into English as 'aesthetic of reception') assesses literature according to the degree to which it has challenged or confirmed its readers' expectations, a process studied historically by reconstructing the ongoing dialogue between readers and text.

The influence of the School of Konstanz in Anglophone scholarship split along disciplinary lines. The work of another student of Gadamer, Wolfgang Iser, arrived earlier and made a deeper impact in English literary studies, where it helped to create what became known as 'reader-response criticism'. (Iser was himself a professor of English literature, and participated in the translation of his own texts from German into English). Iser also adopts the language of 'horizon', though on the micro-level of the reading experience. Each sentence, he writes, 'opens up a particular horizon, which is modified, if not completely changed, by succeeding sentences' (1974: 278). When we read a text, we create a world, and that world will vary in its details from reader to reader. In visualizing the hero of a novel, for example, the outlines are established by the author

¹⁸ So Jauss 1982: 20, on the relationship between aesthetics and literary history: the 'understanding of the first reader will be sustained and enriched in a chain of receptions from generation to generation; in this way the historical significance of a work will be decided and its aesthetic value made evident'.

¹⁹ Jauss 1982: 23-8.

(he is blond, green-eyed, wears a tuxedo), but each reader will shade in the details differently and create a slightly different picture of the character in their minds. Thus there is often a sense of disappointment when we see the film version of the novel: the potential multiplicity of the literary text has been reduced to a singularity, and the role that our own imagination can play has been correspondingly diminished.²⁰ Iser describes moments of indeterminacy in the text as ‘gaps’ that each reader is invited to fill (1974: 283). In much the way as two people looking at the same set of stars might trace out the pattern of different constellations in the night sky, so ‘the “stars” of a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable’ (282). Reader-response theory was a critical battlefield in the early 1980s, and Iser quickly came under fire from Stanley Fish, who attacked the distinction between determinacy and indeterminacy by asserting that *every* detail in a text is subject to interpretation.²¹ Yet Iser’s ideas are still productively invoked by classical scholars in describing the dynamics of ancient texts, since Greek and Roman authors frequently depends upon their audience to supply part of their texts’ meaning from a knowledge of literary and mythical tradition. As Sharrock (2018: 29) says, ‘Latin poets seem to be particularly interested in gaps, including back stories, alternative versions, and missing expectations’.

These debates were translated most influentially to Latin literary studies in Charles Martindale’s bracing and still-important *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* in 1993, a work that was cited frequently in classical scholarship in the decades that followed, particularly for the statement in its opening pages: ‘Meaning... is always realized at the point of reception’.²² The book was by no

²⁰ Iser 1974: 283.

²¹ Fish 1981: 7 (‘the stars in a literary text are not fixed; they are just as variable as the lines that join them’). In *The Return of the Reader* (1987), Nancy Freund already announced the end of reader-response criticism, stating that it has ‘a past rather than a future’ (at 10). Yet critical theories that enjoy a frantic career in English literary studies can frequently count on a longer lifespan in other parts of the humanities.

²² The phrase was originally made a condition (1993: 3): ‘*Meaning, could we say, is always realized at the point of reception; if so, we cannot assume that an ‘intention’ is effectively communicated within any text*’ (italics original). The book was one in a trio (with Hardie 1993 and Kennedy 1993) that inaugurated the series *Roman Literature and*

means a call to institute a new section of the discipline called ‘reception studies’.

Redeeming the Text instead aimed to dislodge the naïve hermeneutic assumptions of classicists working in the mainstream of Latin literature, by emphasizing the Gadamerian point that there can be no pure or unmediated access to the classical text. The desire to peel back the layers to access the ‘original’ meaning of Virgil or Horace is an illusory task, since our reading of their texts is inescapably shaped by the preconceptions of our own period. Martindale challenges the idea of Jauss that the process of reception reveals or discloses the potential of the ancient work. How could its future meanings have all been there already? Instead, he argues (with reference to Derrida) that traces of previous readings inhere in our current readings. Hence, for example, ‘no reading of Homer, at least in the West, has been, or *could be*, wholly free of a vestigial Virgilian presence’ (at 8). He encourages Latinists to abandon the historicist approach to ancient literature, the desire to see Virgil as he ‘really’ was, and embrace a new critical self-consciousness regarding our own position within the tradition. Martindale’s book is itself self-conscious in its appeals to the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics (especially Gadamer and Jauss), right down to the theological implications of its title and its use of scriptural interpretation as a paradigm for understanding the relationship between reader and text.²³ That relationship, again in accordance with the tradition of German hermeneutics, is frequently presented by Martindale in interpersonal terms. He imagines our reading of the classics variously as a human encounter, a domestic argument, and an erotic tryst.²⁴

The phrase ‘meaning is realized at the point of reception’ was repeated regularly by Latinists. Stephen Hinds called it an ‘axiom’ in *Allusion and Intertext* in 1998, and William Batstone called it the ‘founding claim of reception study’ in 2006.²⁵ Yet the

its Contexts (edited by Denis Feeney and Stephen Hinds), which did more than any other in the 1990s and 2000s to shape the critical notions of a generation of Latinists.

²³ See esp. Martindale 1993: 103-4.

²⁴ Martindale 1993: 32 (reading is ‘an encounter’); 91 (‘dialogue, like love, requires at least two participants’); 105 (the reconciliation between power and freedom is like that which occurs in ‘millions of homes’ every day). R.E. Palmer’s influential theoretical overview, *Hermeneutics* (1969), similarly imagines interpretation as a ‘loving union’ between text and interpreter (at 244).

²⁵ Hinds 1998: 49; Batstone 2006: 14.

version of reception described in *Redeeming the Text* differs significantly from the field of reception studies as it later evolved. Although Martindale argues that every reading of classical literature produces a new version of the text, he ends up returning to a very specific set of readings – the Western canon – and calling for a renewed faith in the writers of the past. By reading Virgil or Lucan through Milton, Dante or Eliot, he says, we can ‘bypass twentieth-century criticism’ (1993: 55). The book’s democratising conviction that every exercise of understanding is a fresh production of meaning sits oddly with its hierarchical conclusion that some understandings are richer and more worthy of study than others.²⁶ Dante may of course be a ‘better’ reader of Virgil than a contemporary scholar, but if this is the criterion of what we read and study, it should be obvious how limited and conservative the field would become. Martindale’s Gadamerian vision of reception as intimate dialogue with tradition is equally distant from the aims of the field as it is currently constituted, which seeks to include representations of Greek and Roman civilization mediated by translation, adaptation in art and film, and popular culture. Few Latinists will deny the pleasure of reading an ingenious close reading of an ancient text we know well, or the pedagogical usefulness of using such close readings to explain or expose new aspects of the ancient text. But as a theoretical model, the figurative representation of reception as a direct, interpersonal relationship between ancient author and modern reader excludes, in reality, the range and vitality of contemporary appropriations of ancient images and ideas. Scholars who work in this area have tuned their ears to hear a wider crowd of voices, each of whom are more or less empowered and eager to interact directly with Greek and Latin texts.

As Martindale’s own interests turned to transhistorical notions of value and beauty in subsequent years, he increasingly critiqued the ‘collapse’ of reception into ‘cultural studies’, which focuses on the historical context of a work’s production to the exclusion

²⁶ This hierarchical point was reiterated more strongly later. Cf. Martindale 2006: 11: ‘Already a classics student is far more likely to spend time analyzing *Gladiator* than the *Commedia* of Dante. I find this trend worrying... [W]e form ourselves by the company that we keep, and... material of higher quality is better company for our intellects and hearts than the banal and the quotidian’. Again (2013: 176): ‘Classics is more alive to my thinking in Joyce’s *Ulysses* or the poetry of Seamus Heaney than in *Gladiator*...’. For a response to Martindale from a scholar of classics and film, see Winkler 2000: 12-13.

of literary or aesthetic questions about the work itself.²⁷ Yet a critical attention to the forces that have shaped our perception of Latin texts is a natural and even necessary consequence of accepting Martindale's argument for the historical situatedness of any act of interpretation.²⁸ In an important recent essay, Patrice Rankine argues for the fallacy of appeals to 'purely' philological readings of texts, the claim that we could read Virgil or Horace without our vision of both the poet and ourselves being shaped by larger historical and cultural forces. The dream of seeing the text in its antique purity – a dream that Martindale attacked as hermeneutically naïve – is also politically naïve, Rankine argues, since it is one that has traditionally been used to exclude certain participants. The incapability of women and non-white readers to attain a state of philological purity has been asserted throughout the history of classics as a discipline, and thus 'classics, and especially philology at its essence', has never been a 'neutral and disinvested test of intelligence'.²⁹ If meaning is realized at the point of reception, then our study of that reception can and should involve self-consciousness about the forces that have shaped those exercises of critical judgment. On this model, reception is not a flight from aesthetics to cultural politics but a fresh investment in analysing their interconnection. This in turn raises a new question: is our current term of choice the best way of achieving that goal?

The Limits of 'Reception'

In Germany, the term *Rezeption* has the ring of an earlier critical era, and other phrases are currently used to denote the study of classical texts in later cultures (compare *Transformationen der Antike*, the title of a book series published by De Gruyter). Among Anglophone classicists, the word's breadth and popularity have long been accompanied by disputes about its usefulness. While 'reception' is not inaccurate as a literal rendering

²⁷ Martindale 2005: 124; 2006: 9. Lorna Hardwick's *Reception Studies* (2003) already took a strikingly different tack, elevating public performance over private reading as the paradigmatic act of classical reception, and stressing that reception 'is and always has been a field for the practice and study of contest about values and their relationship to knowledge and power' (at 11).

²⁸ So also Harloe 2010: 17.

²⁹ Rankine 2019: 352-3; and see below on 'reading for exclusion'.

of Jauss' *Rezeption* (or perhaps rather *Rezeptionsgeschichte*), the English word is more common and less markedly academic than the German *Rezeption*, and Hans Robert Jauss himself joked that it was more likely to evoke the language of the hotel business than literature for non-speakers of German.³⁰ If 'reception' is to be more than simply a contemporary rebranding of the classical tradition or the *Nachleben* of Greek and Roman texts, then what additional meaning does it bring? Or to put it the opposite way, what presumptions or limitations does the term import when we are analysing the role that classical texts played in later cultures? In this section, I outline a series of objections that have been lodged against the phrase 'classical reception', and argue that we should be mindful of its limitations as a master-term for our analyses when we use it.

The metaphorical association of reception with an interpersonal relationship carries with it certain theoretical baggage. To speak of one text receiving another evokes a process of voluntary communication between two equal participants – unsurprisingly, since, as we have seen, our critical notion of reception has its origins in a hermeneutical tradition that conceptualises interpretation as a dialogue between reader and text. But that model of interpersonal communication fits encounters between two authors far better than it does interactions between authors and anything broader: cultural discourses, ideologies, social structures, political movements. 'Reception' is an awkward metaphor for understanding the role of classical texts in structuring ideology or discourse, a process that is anything but voluntary, interpersonal, or intentional. No matter how congenial imagery of talking, exchanging, giving or receiving is to liberal conceptions of civic discourse, in this context it risks eliding power differences by feigning a sort of ontological equality between reader and tradition. To speak of an individual 'receiving' the classics also risks underplaying the authority of a tradition when it is mobilised as part of cultural norms. Reception is a convenient label for classicists' work on Cavafy, for example, but it hardly captures the force of Greek and Roman history upon that poet's life and work, the overwhelming pressure exerted by the past upon articulations of his personal and sexual

³⁰ Jauss 1980: 15, cited at Holub 1984: 1 ('Le mot allemand "Rezeptionsästhetik" suggère malheureusement un malentendu fatal: en français et en anglais, on ne rencontre le mot *réception* que dans le langage de l'hôtellerie!').

identity.³¹ Here the word ‘tradition’, even if it falsely implies a unified lineage of ancient thought, at least communicates the idea that individuals are faced with ideas that have cultural power and cachet, so that the adaptation of ancient ideas is a confrontation or co-optation of time-bound forces much larger than themselves.³² Gadamer’s insight that individuals are themselves shaped by the historical texts they seek to interpret is important and bears repeating. An author’s choice to refer to certain classical texts may overshadow the fact that fundamental aspects of his or her identity might already have been structured by ideas drawn from those texts, or others in the tradition.

This raises another problem: the question of attitude or motivation that an individual brings to the classical text. When we talk of one author ‘receiving’ another, it is hard to escape a specific metaphorical image: the image of a host admitting a guest into his or her space. The image implies willingness and presupposes a sort of voluntary acceptance. Stephen Harrison makes the imagery of hospitality explicit when he is describing the relationship between what he calls the ‘receiving’ and the ‘visiting’ genres in Latin poetry: ‘In what follows I will sometimes use the metaphor of hospitality to describe this relationship: in this sense the dominating genre of the text is the ‘host’ which entertains the subordinate genre as a ‘guest’’.³³ The passivity suggested by the image of the author as benign host has commonly been lamented. Reception, writes Simon Goldhill, is ‘too *passive* a term for the dynamics of resistance and appropriation, recognition and self-aggrandisement’ of successive contests over the nature of Hellenism.³⁴ By evoking an act of hospitality, the image fits authors who eagerly allude to the classical tradition better than those who are forced to confront it as part of a system that they wish to challenge. In

³¹ See e.g. Jeffreys 2015: 159-68; Orrells 2011 on antiquity and modern sexual identities.

³² On the opposition between tradition and reception see below on globalising classics; also Hardwick 2003: 2.

³³ Harrison 2007: 16. On this aspect of the metaphor, see the analysis by O’Rourke 2017, who argues that the particular quality of ancient hospitality – a relationship between strangers, not between friends – allows for a more aggressive conceptualization of reception.

³⁴ Goldhill 2002: 297, emphasis original. Also Wood 2012: 171: ‘the word “reception” suggests an unenviable state of passivity’. Whitmarsh 2006: 115 makes a different objection to the term, arguing that it implies a completed process, rather than the constant ‘shuffling back and forth’ of meaning between readers and texts.

order to achieve a complete picture of the later influence of classical works, the full range of responses they engendered – awe, fear, horror, suspicion; even boredom, contempt – are as crucial to their history as appreciation or affirmation. In *Leviathan* (1651), Hobbes compares the reading of Greek and Roman authors to the bite of a rabid dog; the ancients, he says, infect the modern populace with the venom of their mistaken notions of liberty.³⁵ Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), a pivotal text for the English Romantics, imagines Virgil and Horace as demons: writers must exorcise them, as Constantine did pagan spirits, if they are ever to produce their own original literary works.³⁶ Larry Norman's *The Shock of the Ancient* (2011) explores the emotions of horror and repulsion, as well as love and intimate connection, inspired by canonical Greek and Roman texts in the seventeenth-century French *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*. In short: the classics have always been something to be confronted, not just received. The history of resistance against and within classical texts is integral to a full picture of their afterlife.

A different but related problem of attitude relates to our tendency to idealise or identify with the authors we study. One particular danger for classical receptions scholars is that of transforming artists, film-makers, and writers of all eras into classicists or proto-classicists like ourselves, influenced by the same texts as us, caught up in a formalist circle of allusion and intertext, fired by a familiar desire to engage with an unchanging body of works. Usually the assumption that a writer or artist must have known this or that ancient text, even when shaky or 'fuzzy', helps our case.³⁷ Part of the regular business of making an argument in reception studies is the statement (and frequently the overstatement) of an author's awareness or interest – or even desire or love – for the very texts about 'our' texts as classicists. Yet it is all too easy to project our attitudes, our professional enthusiasm for Greece and Rome, on to other generations and disciplines. That sort of critical idealisation is an alienating aberration to scholars working on the same material from other disciplinary perspectives, and in any case risks underplaying

³⁵ Hobbes 1996: 226; on this passage, Skinner 2008: 140-2.

³⁶ Young 1759: 77-8. On Young's Gothic vision of antiquity, and on the legacy of antiquity as a spectral 'haunting' of modernity, see Uden 2020.

³⁷ On 'fuzzy' connections, see Hardwick 2011.

the matrix of contestation and challenge in which references to antiquity have frequently taken place.³⁸ We need a study of the uses of antiquity not burdened by the recuperative instinct that so easily slides into critical self-representation.

Scholars have also raised a number of objections to the imagery of dialogue between reader and text with which reception theory has long been associated. The image has raised some basic questions, since it is, after all, an imaginative construct. What does it really mean to have dialogue with a text? Or, as Katherine Harloe (2010: 18) puts it: ‘How strong a notion of agency would we need to attribute to such works in order for the comparison to hold?’ Is this merely a way of justifying our own interpretive decisions with a false sense of to-and-fro? Jonathan Culler (1982: 74-5) has argued against the tendency of theories of reading to dissolve into a sort of ‘monism’, in which every aspect of the reading process takes place in the reader’s own mind; for, if we are not interacting with something other than ourselves, he argued, how can we learn from what we read? Yet we might equally argue that the personification of the books as dialogue partners is mystificatory and overly abstract, and that it risks eliding aspects of the material, social and commercial circumstances of reading. The book itself has no voice: it is a physical object that must be produced and bought; its meaning is mediated through conventions of printing and formatting; we cannot simply ‘speak’ to it but learn to decipher its signs, a process that requires labour, time and expense; and so on.³⁹

Margaret Litvin, in her study of twentieth-century readings of *Hamlet* in the Arabic world, raises a different concern about both ‘reception’ and ‘dialogue’. These terms, she argues, tend to imply a two-party interaction (source culture and receiving culture), which imposes a misleading linearity on what are often multidirectional phenomena. For the communities she studies, *Hamlet* has become a ‘global text’, no longer specifically English but interpreted through adaptations in French and through the prism of German literary criticism. Rather than ‘writing back’ to the coloniser by transforming an English

³⁸ See Matzner 2016 on the particularly close personal connection between critic and the object of study in receptions research.

³⁹ This is not to exclude the *desire* that a text might let us hear a voice: Butler 2015.

text, then, she demonstrates that Arabic intellectuals sought to participate in a kaleidoscopic discourse deliberately unmoored from any desire for the original.⁴⁰ Litvin's critical reflections could benefit analyses of responses to classical works, which similarly take place in a shifting and complex set of cultural and literary frames, recording a crowd of voices rather than a singular and unidirectional conversation with the ancient world.

Resisting Antiquity

In the remaining sections of this chapter, I alternate between theoretical discussion and close readings of particular authors and works. In the close readings, I do not abandon reception but try to balance it with a sense of *resistance* to the classical - although I am aware that that is itself a word too often 'poorly defined and theorised' (Greene 2013: 81). Here I mean the invocation of the classical as a challenge to its power, but the classical as more than individual words or images – the classical as a mode of cultural authority, as something that has come down through time and has accumulated weight and force along the way.⁴¹ Resistance suggests a confrontation with something different and bigger than oneself. Of the three case studies, Mary Wollstonecraft resists the authority of classical *exempla* as part of her declaration of a rational modernity not bound to the inherited structures of the past. Anna Letitia Barbauld inhabits new and unexpected subject positions *within* Roman poetry in order to challenge assumptions about what a woman of her period should say or do or know. Erasmus Darwin uses allusions to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in his botanical writing to underline the limitations of myth in describing the universe, asserting an epistemological distinction between 'Imagination' and 'Science' that he sees as fundamental for the exploration of the new. True, a capacious interpretation of reception to mean any sort of contact with a prior text or idea would include all of these examples. A guest can be received badly or well. But resistance suggests a mode of reference to the past that does not idealise or romanticise the classical world, nor does it sentimentalise its continuing presence as a partner for personal

⁴⁰ Litvin 2011, esp. at 6-8, 58-9.

⁴¹ See Goff 2005: 11: 'because classics bears with it the weight of tradition and authority, it can easily be pressed into service as a *sign* of tradition and authority in general'.

communication and affection. It is a mode of questioning or challenge, either *of* antiquity or *through* antiquity, against literary, social, and political forces that wield lasting power.

Case Study 1: Mary Wollstonecraft

The two great polemical works by the feminist pioneer Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), are products of the anxious, early period of responses to the French Revolution in England, a period of intellectual upheaval and reassessment of all aspects of the civic life, from the family to the state.⁴² After the Bastille fell on 14 July 1789, Edmund Burke vigorously condemned the revolutionaries in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Liberal thinkers rushed to respond to Burke and defend what had become pejoratively known as ‘French principles’. Among the over fifty responses published were the classic works of political theory *The Rights of Man* (1791) by Thomas Paine and *Political Justice* (1793) by William Godwin (later the husband of Mary Wollstonecraft, and the father of Mary Shelley). But the first response was Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790), written at furious speed and published less than a month after Burke’s work appeared. That was followed, after the sensational success of the first tract, by *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* two years later. Both of these works explicitly reject emotional rhetoric – what Wollstonecraft calls memorably ‘the drapery of factitious sentiments’ – and yet are also highly rhetorical, full of vivid images and pointed maxims.⁴³ Characteristic of their period, they reflect a sense of a dramatic temporal breach, a consciousness that the modern is, and must be, very different from the inheritances of the past. They also express a deep suspicion of ‘sensibility’ and the aesthetic, sharpened by a sense of political betrayal by Burke, who had acquired fame decades earlier by theorizing influentially about aesthetics and the sublime.⁴⁴ Wollstonecraft’s works encode a mode of what we might call resistant allusion, which interrogates the connection between inherited political power and classical words and

⁴² Wollstonecraft 1993; all citations are to this edition. On the context, Butler 1984.

⁴³ Wollstonecraft 1993: 231.

⁴⁴ In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) [= Burke 2015].

ideas even as she is citing them. The image of the Roman Empire is one of the structuring metaphors for her analysis of gender and power, but her invocation of classical ideas is consistently accompanied by critique. As a test case for reflection upon the limits of classical reception studies, she offers a paradigm of a resisting reader whose attention was drawn to structures of authority more than specific texts, and who aimed to speak against the power of antiquity rather than speaking with it.

Wollstonecraft's vision of the classics was shaped by her views on educational reform.⁴⁵ One of the cornerstones of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is the advocacy for day schools that would educate girls and boys together, and would train women not merely in taste and politeness but rigorously to think for themselves. She allows that young people of 'superior abilities, or fortune' might be taught the 'dead and living languages', but 'reading, writing, arithmetic natural history and some simple experiments in natural philosophy' form the basic curriculum in the more egalitarian schools she envisions, where 'boys and girls, the rich and poor, should meet together'.⁴⁶ The classical images that appear intermittently in Wollstonecraft's prose are therefore the traces of a learned discourse whose influence she seeks to question. Indeed, at stake for Wollstonecraft in the reverence paid to Greece and Rome are core questions of individual autonomy and responsibility. Repeatedly throughout the *Vindications* she associates the rhetoric of men such as Burke with an unreflective obeisance to classical authority. 'I perceive, from the whole tenor of your *Reflections*', she tells him cuttingly, 'that you have a mortal antipathy to reason', since the entire result of the argument is that we should 'reverence the rust of antiquity'.⁴⁷ Like other writers who supported abolition, she attacks the 'servile reverence for antiquity' that underlay arguments for the slave trade, which was sanctioned by 'our ignorant forefathers', but 'outrages every suggestion of reason and religion'.⁴⁸ Any argument from inheritance or custom is a failure of individual rationality; 'reverence for superiors or antiquity', she asserts, is 'reason at second-

⁴⁵ On Wollstonecraft's views on education in the context of her political thought, see Sapiro 1992: 237-49.

⁴⁶ Wollstonecraft 1993: 253.

⁴⁷ Wollstonecraft 1993: 8.

⁴⁸ Wollstonecraft 1993: 13.

hand'.⁴⁹ Burke's call to faith in tradition suggests to Wollstonecraft that he has relinquished the greater duty of considering for himself the moral integrity of society's beliefs. 'I am not accustomed', she says, 'to look up with vulgar awe'.⁵⁰

Wollstonecraft particularly takes aim at moral reasoning founded on the examples of previous generations, and in particular at the convention of apotheosizing the heroes of Greece and Rome as a standard of political action in the present. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke chastised revolutionaries for their failure to imitate a 'more early race of ancestors':

Under a pious predilection for those ancestors, your imaginations would have realized in them a standard of virtue and wisdom, beyond the vulgar practice of the hour: and you would have risen with the example to whose imitation you aspired. Respecting your forefathers, you would have been taught to respect yourselves.⁵¹

Philip Ayres has described Burke's habitual invocation of ancient examples in his oratory: he frequently cast himself in the role of Cicero and his political opponents as contemporary avatars of Verres or Catiline.⁵² In Wollstonecraft's response to this passage of the *Reflections*, she begins by deflating attempts to ennoble the present by constant reference to antiquity. The morality or immorality of ancestors has little bearing on the behavior of their descendants – although, she concedes, it might be maintained that the Romans' origin in Romulus' asylum was consistent with their later savagery and lack of civility (they were 'private robbers' who 'became public predators', glorying in the 'vicious elegance' of the amphitheater).⁵³ But she also doubts whether recursion to ancient example is a sound basis for moral thought at all. A principle that would be praiseworthy for an artist – to study carefully the 'noble models of antiquity, till your imagination is inflamed' – is an insecure and dangerous principle for ethical or political

⁴⁹ Wollstonecraft 1993: 30.

⁵⁰ Wollstonecraft 1993: 17.

⁵¹ Burke 1993: 36.

⁵² Ayres 1997: 42-6. Cf. Sachs 2010: 60: Burke alludes to Roman literature to 'consolidate a consensus among the governing elite and to position himself within it'.

⁵³ Wollstonecraft 1993: 40.

thought. To base the new civic structures in France on ‘the *imagined* virtues of their forefathers’ would not be a rational foundation for a political system; it would merely assent uncritically to the inequities of the past.⁵⁴

Yet in fact the Roman Empire is pervasive as a metaphor in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and is fundamental in structuring its vision of the enforced relationship between men and women. In a much-quoted phrase, Wollstonecraft assured readers that she did not wish women ‘to have power over men; but over themselves’.⁵⁵ The beauty system, she argues, turns women into either ‘abject slaves or capricious tyrants’, encouraging them either to assume a position of weakness and subordination, or to exercise control by physical attractiveness and sexual charms.⁵⁶ This undesirable social control is represented – in a choice of metaphor clearly shaped by the political situation in France – as a decadent imperialism, a corrupt empire doomed to fall. She laments that women, taught the arts of allurements from a young age, are ‘bred up with a desire for conquest’, taught to wield ‘the iron sceptre of tyranny’, intoxicated with the ‘insipid grandeur and slavish ceremonies’ of domestic rule.⁵⁷ At times the connection with Rome is explicit. A ‘woman of fashion’, she writes, ‘is not a more irrational monster than some of the Roman emperors, who were depraved by lawless power’. Female sexual jealousy resembles Cato’s desire to expand Rome in the period of the Republic by crushing Carthage, ‘not to save Rome, but to promote its vain-glory’.⁵⁸ More often, it exists as traces in the negative paradigm of empire. We have to catch its reflection indirectly, as part of broader invocations of concepts of tyranny and rule. The classical world is here less a target of specific allusion than a mobile structure of thought through which Wollstonecraft articulates her powerful rejection of gender norms. Rome is simultaneously a metaphor of enormous rhetorical productivity and a metonym for the paradigms that progressive thinkers aimed to reject.

⁵⁴ Wollstonecraft 1993: 40-1.

⁵⁵ Wollstonecraft 1993: 133.

⁵⁶ Wollstonecraft 1993: 113.

⁵⁷ Wollstonecraft 1993: 169, 175, 223.

⁵⁸ Wollstonecraft 1993: 111, 277.

Are Wollstonecraft's writings works of classical reception? Aspects of her thought certainly become visible through attention to classical ideas. Yet to speak of the work as 'receiving' the classical risks misdescription on a number of fronts. Her writing stands apart deliberately from classicizing rhetoric such as Burke's – indeed it is largely motivated by rebellion against it – and it rejects the classical examples and narratives that shored up aristocratic power in her age. Her proto-feminist ideal was, to use Ronald Paulson's word, an aspiration towards the 'unmythical'.⁵⁹ Wollstonecraft's suspicion of the seductions of sensibility clearly differentiates her from the poets and dramatists who adapted classical ideas in the Romantic writing of her decade. Her motivations are political, not aesthetic. Her references are rarely to specific texts, but instead to systems she traces back to antiquity: exemplary ethics, slavery and empire, gender norms. Wollstonecraft's work, in short, emerges as a challenging test case: it is not a work of reception so much as rejection, of resistance to the classical, and yet it is also an indirect testament to the cultural force of the Roman world in her era. Yet if classicists remain drawn only to writers whose enthusiastic affection for ancient writers most resembles their own, we will miss the opportunity to foster a critical as well as an appreciative mode of reception studies – one that could include thinkers like Wollstonecraft, who hold such a vital place in the history of ideas.

Reading for Exclusion

In a famous article published in 1959, Walter J. Ong described Latin language learning in the Renaissance as a rite of passage, a puberty ritual which offered male students admittance to a separate and privileged environment. For boys learning Latin in the Renaissance, he wrote, the 'cleavage between the vernacular world and the Latin world' coincides with the 'division between family life and a certain extra-familial life, and with a division between a world in which women had some say and an exclusively male world'.⁶⁰ For most of its history – and, many argue, still today – classical education has

⁵⁹ Paulson 1983: 55.

⁶⁰ Ong 1959: 108; on the gender division in Renaissance classical education, Stevenson 2015.

constituted what Ong calls a ‘marginal environment’, limited by barriers of gender, geography, race and class.⁶¹ Penelope Wilson, writing about women writers of the eighteenth century, calls the study of Latin and Greek an ‘exclusion zone’, observing that the ‘relationship of women writers with the classics is a complex and essentially agonistic one’.⁶² Much recent work in classical reception studies has sought to emphasise these barriers as part of a candid acknowledgment of the forces that have shaped the legacy of classical literature, and to draw out, therefore, the spirit of challenge with which many writers and artists approached their own experiments in classical adaptation and allusion.

Yet classicists working in other periods also need to confront a different misapprehension, one familiar to anyone who has worked on classical material in new periods and fields. This misapprehension associates Latin automatically with what is conservative, stifling, and obscure, and the vernacular with the democratising of literary culture, with freedom, imagination, anti-elitism, and the other values of the modern liberal academy. Jürgen Habermas’ description of the development of the bourgeois public sphere, culminating in the expansion of print in the eighteenth century and the creation of new spaces for private citizens to engage in debate outside the control of the state, has been particularly influential in this respect. According to this still-dominant narrative, the tyranny of Latin was broken by the expansion of newspapers, coffee-houses, and circulating libraries, which fostered a new, middle-class readership according prestige to vernacular history and language rather than to the aristocratic preserve of the classical languages.⁶³ The model has many problems: the public sphere was not exclusively monolingual; periodical writers and readers still made recourse to classical literature; people still aspired to learn Latin and Greek. The sense of extreme distance between Latin and vernacular languages is more a product of modern disciplinary politics than the realities of literary production in the period Habermas described, since, as many scholars of classical reception have shown, Roman literature retained its imaginative and

⁶¹ On the history of social exclusion in the teaching of classical languages from antiquity to the present, see the essays in Archibald, Brockliss & Gnoza 2015; Morley 2018.

⁶² Wilson 2012: 497.

⁶³ Habermas 1989 (original text 1962).

expressive powers long after the use of Latin is supposed to have ‘broken down’.⁶⁴ The task of classicists working on later periods is therefore one of balancing different objectives: to acknowledge the barriers that long excluded certain readers and writers of Latin, or imposed additional and extraordinary burdens on their acquisition of classical knowledge, while also showing that allusions to Latin literature could communicate a range of different emotions and ideas. This is what I call here ‘reading for exclusion’. When we are reading allusions to antiquity in the work of writers to whom classical education was denied, a focus on education can help us cast those moments – however conventional – as a *rebellion* against, rather than a capitulation to, expectations of gender, class and race. Every demonstration of classical erudition potentially tells its own story about why and how the author came to that knowledge.

For a woman of Wollstonecraft’s generation, Latin learning was a difficult attainment, and one of questionable propriety. In the eighteenth century and earlier, modern languages were seen as appropriate accomplishments for women, but the classical languages were taught in schools traditionally restricted to male students. If a woman did have classical learning, she risked being seen as an intruder on traditionally masculine ground. A striking example is a celebrated member of the ‘Bluestocking’ circle of learned women, Elizabeth Carter (1717-1806). She was taught classical languages by her father as a child and then followed a punishing routine as an adult, waking every morning between four and five o’clock to read, and keeping herself awake with tea, coffee, snuff, and wet towels around her head. Her most famous work, the first complete English translation of the lectures of Epictetus (1758), won her condescension and suspicion as well as acclaim. Samuel Johnson quipped that she could ‘make a pudding as well as

⁶⁴ For a representative example of the Habermas-derived model, see e.g. Kramnick 1999: 21, 43: the ‘linguistic foundation [of the public sphere] could not be Latin, the cosmopolitan script of the old aristocracy... During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century uniform Latinity breaks down as the cultural capital of the elite classes and variously cultivated vernaculars take its place’. Marilyn Butler’s analysis in *Mapping Mythologies* (written in 1984 but published posthumously) encapsulates similar assumptions: ‘by the eighteenth century, classicism was now too familiar, and above all too much the main plank of aristocratic education, to retain its radical force among the educated population at large...’ (2014: 13).

translate Epictetus', and another man said more bluntly that would only subscribe to a work of female scholarship if it were a 'treatise of œconomy for the use of the ladies'.⁶⁵ Her reputation was made earlier, though, in a celebrated Latin poetic exchange that marked her as an invader in a jealously guarded male preserve. By the late 1730s, the precociously talented Carter had won some early fame as a poet of learning. In 1738, a Latin epigram was published in *Gentleman's Magazine* – anonymously, although almost certainly by Johnson – commemorating a visit by the twenty-one-year-old Carter to Alexander Pope's gardens at Twickenham:

Elysios Popi dum ludit laeta per hortos
En auida lauros carpit Elisa manu.
Nil opus est furto. Lauros tibi, dulcis Elisa,
Si neget optatas Popus, Apollo dabit.

[While happy Eliza sports in Pope's Elysian groves,
 Look! – she snatches the laurel with a greedy hand.
 There is no need for theft. Sweet Eliza, if Pope should deny you
 the laurel you desire, Apollo will give it to you].⁶⁶

The epigram's ostensible compliment is undercut by its overtones of appropriation and theft. By imagining Carter 'snatching' the laurel – the phrase alludes to a line from Virgil's second *Eclogue* – the poet represents her erudition as an encroachment on the exclusion zone of masculine learning.⁶⁷ The epigram set off a flurry of back-and-forth in the periodical's pages, including one translation of the Latin epigram that picks up on the allusive potential of the laurel tree. It imagines Carter not as a nymph but as the male god Apollo in the first book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in violent and farcical pursuit of the innocent Daphne ('Cease, lovely thief! my tender limbs to wound,/ Cry'd *Daphne* whisp'ring from the yielding tree').⁶⁸ Carter responded in an epigram, written in Latin, humbly pleading that Pope's 'laurel' was too lofty for her and would only droop on her

⁶⁵ Boswell 1887, vol. 1: 142; Pennington 1807: 143.

⁶⁶ *The Gentleman's Magazine*, July 1738, p. 372, with my translation.

⁶⁷ *Ecl.* 2.54: *et uos, o lauri, carpam...* ('And you, o laurel, I will snatch...')

⁶⁸ *The Gentleman's Magazine*, August 1738, p.429. For a nuanced reading of this exchange and its role in Carter's career, see Wallace 2003.

brow.⁶⁹ Scholarly work on contemporary women's writing and classical literature has shown how the discovery of new and silent voices in ancient texts can still constitute a continuing mode of transgression.⁷⁰ This narrative of female movement into forbidden space has its prehistory in the anxious contestation of the spaces of proper knowledge in earlier eras – in snatching the laurel from a bounded garden.

In the nineteenth century, classical education in women became more familiar and even desirable, and training in Latin became more widespread in schools and colleges. Class, however, remained a formidable barrier. As Hurst (2006: 53) writes, the 'classics were an irrelevance to working-class women who came from an environment where the struggle to read the Bible or English literature was difficult enough'. In his work on the history of classical education in Britain, Christopher Stray has done more than any other scholar to demonstrate in detail how the study of the classics became a means of 'social closure'.⁷¹ Knowledge of Latin and Greek, long a symbol of the educated elite, became an attractive marker of social status among an aspiring middle class in England throughout the nineteenth century, but its cultural prestige was bounded by a number of factors. Entrance to public schools, 'seedbeds of social exclusion', was increasingly regulated by written entrance examinations, which were largely based on classical learning.⁷² This in turn led to the spread of preparatory schools for families who could afford the fees, while local schools with non-classical curricula were established for those families who could not.⁷³ While the quotation of ancient Greek in casual conversation remained for most people a scholarly affectation or an eccentric obscurity, Latin quotations were a more accessible, 'semi-public field', which nonetheless functioned as a marker of education for the

⁶⁹ *The Gentleman's Magazine*, August 1738, p.429.

⁷⁰ Note, e.g. Theodorakopoulos 2012: 149: 'When it comes to the classical tradition... women are indeed transgressing into a territory they have not previously owned'. Cf. Balmer 2012 on transgression as the key mode for a modern female poet engaging with Greek and Latin literature; Cox 2018: 175-8.

⁷¹ Stray 1998, 2015.

⁷² Stray 1998: 12.

⁷³ Stray 1998: 36, 52.

socially elite (or those who aspired to be so).⁷⁴ In a sense, the content of classical learning was irrelevant to its usefulness as a dividing social line. Stray quotes Lord Macaulay, who argued that if Greek were replaced with Cherokee on examinations for the East India Company, the exams would still be able to distinguish the ‘superior man’ for the job.⁷⁵ Yet Henry Stead and Edith Hall have shown that Greek and Latin language and literature were in fact an object of closer interest for working-class readers and theatre audiences than has generally been assumed, and icons from antiquity could be recruited for progressive as well as conservative causes. ‘The dominant classes may have had the master key to the Classics’, they write, ‘but this means neither that others could not gain entrance to the classics... nor that some did not make it their life’s work to cut and distribute new keys, promoting access to all areas’.⁷⁶

The same metaphor of crossing into bounded space finds expression in a different educational debate across the Atlantic about the appropriateness of classical education for African Americans. ‘This is a study in transgression and transcendence’, begins Michele Valerie Ronnick in her introduction to the autobiography of William Sanders Scarborough, the first Black member of the Modern Language Association and one of the first Black members of the American Philological Association (now the Society for Classical Studies). The outlines of Scarborough’s successful career look misleadingly ordinary for a professional classicist: he wrote a Greek textbook, *First Lessons in Greek* (1881), published over twenty papers in the journal of the APA (*TAPA*), and rose to the position of President of Wilberforce University in Ohio. But born into slavery in Macon, Georgia, 1852, he was forced to face, like other Black scholars of the period, the humiliating prejudice that his erudition was either an embarrassment or an impossibility. His success as a philologist was in fact the product of extraordinary struggle, as recent scholars have emphasised.⁷⁷ Scarborough’s later career was witness to a broader

⁷⁴ Stray 1998: 79. The distinctive focus of Richardson 2013 is on the failure of hopes for social mobility through classical learning.

⁷⁵ Stray 1998, citing Keith 1922, vol.2: 253. Note that Macaulay was defending the place of Greek in the examinations, not attacking it. See further Vasunia 2013: 201-3.

⁷⁶ Stead and Hall 2015: 4; also McElduff 2006.

⁷⁷ See Ronnick’s introduction in Scarborough 2005: 1-22; Cook & Tatum 2010: 93-107.

educational debate about the relevance of classical education for African-American students, which is associated primarily with the opposing figures of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. Washington advocated for practical education and a focus on economic advancement. Du Bois, in his seminal *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and other writings, defended the importance of classical education and the equal right of Black students to cultivate the mind. Du Bois' critical engagement with Cicero, Ovid and other Roman authors is evident in his own writing, which looks to antiquity 'not merely for ideals to imitate, but for questions to debate, and for habits of thought that compel us to recognise and reconsider our assumptions about the present'.⁷⁸

At the very origins of the African-American literary tradition is an earlier figure of obvious interest to classicists, the remarkable Phillis Wheatley (c.1753-1784), who published the first book of poetry by a Black American writer, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773).⁷⁹ Wheatley was born in West Africa and transported to Boston on the *Phillis*, the source of her first name. She learnt English at prodigious speed and made 'some progress in Latin' according to John Wheatley, identified as 'the Master who bought her' in a notice attached to the opening of her book. The classical imagery through which Wheatley expresses herself, with its apparently conventional appeals to the Muses and the Greco-Roman gods, was long seen as a disappointingly opaque lens through which to view the subject of *real* interest to modern critics: her own experiences and emotions as an enslaved woman. Yet the wave of reevaluation of Wheatley has stressed the boldness of her subtle inversion and transformation of classical paradigms and the scope of her poetic output, which includes an epyllion retelling the anguished story of Niobe in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Fertik and Hanses 2019: 9. This introduction to a special issue of the *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* on Du Bois' classicism offers a helpful orientation to current debates about black classicism.

⁷⁹ Text in Wheatley 1989.

⁸⁰ 'Niobe in Distress for her Children Slain by Apollo, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book VI, and from a View of the Painting of Mr. RICHARD WILSON' (Wheatley 1989: 98). On the poem's reshaping of Ovid: Thorn 2008; Cook & Tatum 2010: 35-47. Wheatley also owned copies of Pope's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: see Rezek (forthcoming).

Her book begins with ‘To Maecenas’, in which she blends Virgilian pastoral with Horace’s praise of his patron in the first of the *Odes*. Wheatley had written in her preface that her poems were the products of her ‘leisure Moments’.⁸¹ Yet the very notion of leisure for an enslaved woman is immediately put under question at the beginning of this programmatic poem, in which it is the free Maecenas, not the poet herself, who enjoys pastoral *otium* (‘Maecenas, you, beneath the myrtle shade,/ Read o’er what poets sung, and shepherds played’).⁸² Wheatley moves through a series of classical poetic figures in distinctly personal and bodily terms: a ‘deep-felt horror thrills through all my veins’ when she reads Homer, she writes; ‘ardors’ arise in reading Virgil; and Terence, finally (out of chronological order), is ‘one alone of *Afric*’s sable race’ who was accorded ‘grace’ by the Muses, language redolent not of inspiration but of manumission.⁸³ In the penultimate stanza, she declares her own intentions:

Thy virtues, great *Maecenas!* shall be sung
 In praise of him, from whom those virtues sprung:
 While blooming wreaths around thy temples spread,
 I’ll snatch a laurel from thine honour’d head,
 While you indulgent smile upon the deed.⁸⁴

‘I’ll snatch a laurel’. In Yopie Prins’ book on women learning Greek in the Victorian era, she describes the need to read female writers engaging with classical literature in more than biographical terms, as participants in a broader ‘recurring narrative of desire that has its own conventions’.⁸⁵ It is hard to miss here the adoption by Wheatley of the same image that was used to describe Elizabeth Carter’s entrance into the male garden of poetic activity, with the same overtones of transgression and theft. In other ways, the story we hear is completely distinct. The image of benign supervision (‘you indulgent smile upon the deed’) gains a new and more literal force in Wheatley’s poems, since it appears immediately after the preface by her master, which authenticates and permits her pursuit of literary activity. The image of ‘snatching’ the laurel resonates with the

⁸¹ Wheatley 1989: 45.

⁸² Wheatley 1989: 49; see Cook & Tatum 2010: 13-24.

⁸³ Wheatley 1989: 49-50; on this representation of Terence, Bennett 1998: 67-8.

⁸⁴ Wheatley 1989: 50.

⁸⁵ Prins 2017: 243.

experience of classical education for a Black person of Wheatley's era, since before the Civil War enslaved people would have had to acquire their learning in Latin from their masters 'through stealth', not through any formal schooling.⁸⁶ The verb has an even more fundamental and painful resonance within the poetry book, since in a later poem, in a rare moment of direct autobiographical description, Wheatley says that she was herself 'snatch'd', stolen from her family in Africa by 'seeming cruel fate'.⁸⁷ Her embodiment of this poetic convention is in fact a radical realignment of the classical poet's voice, and an expression of her own unique subject position.

What does it mean for classicists working on later eras to read for exclusion? It is a way of making meaning out of allusions to the ancient past, even – or especially – where the author does *not* appear to be speaking in personal terms, but merely inserting her or himself into the familiar tropes of classical texts. By emphasising the struggles and exclusions of classical learning during the period in which the author was writing, and incorporating the realities of education into our interpretation of aesthetic tropes, even apparently conventional allusions communicate a particular and ungeneralisable stance towards the norms of that era. That stance could be an expression of conformity, the reassertion of an expected coherence between mind, expression, reading patterns, intelligence, body, skin colour, gender, class. Or it could rebel. The rebelling voice, sometimes loudest to those who are familiar with classical texts, should also be heard.

Case Study 2: Anna Letitia Barbauld

In a long footnote in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft had criticised Anna Letitia Barbauld for parroting masculine language and ideas. In 'To a Lady, with some painted flowers' (1772), Barbauld had written:

Flowers to the fair: to you these flowers I bring,

⁸⁶ 'Through stealth': Ronnick, in Scarborough 2005: 6. Many readers have assumed that Corydon, the speaker of the Virgilian line to which the image refers (*Ecl.* 2.54), was himself enslaved (see Leigh 2016: 416 on the history of this question), which would give additional pertinence to Wheatley's allusion.

⁸⁷ Wheatley 1989: 83.

And strive to greet you with an earlier spring.
 Flowers sweet, and gay, and delicate like you;
 Emblems of innocence, and beauty too.⁸⁸

The final couplet of Barbauld's poem is the antithesis of Wollstonecraft's argument, though a foreshadowing of Wollstonecraft's political metaphor:

Nor blush, my fair, to own you copy these;
 Your best, your sweetest empire is – to please.

Wollstonecraft despaired that even a learned woman such as Mrs Barbauld could perpetuate a system of ideas that robs women of their dignity, which classes them with 'the smiling flowers that only adorn the land'.⁸⁹ By unthinkingly replicating the cultural association of women with beauty and the private sphere, the poem contributes to male society's empire over women. 'This has ever been the language of men', wrote Wollstonecraft, 'and the fear of departing from a supposed sexual character, has made even women of superior sense adopt the same sentiments'.⁹⁰

Although Wollstonecraft omits it from her quotation of the poem in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 'To a Lady, with some Painted Flowers' in fact begins with lines quoted from Virgil's second *Eclogue*, the famous homoerotic account of the shepherd Corydon's unsatisfied yearning for the boy Alexis. When Barbauld imagines bringing flowers to the unnamed Lady, she puts herself in the position of Corydon in that poem, who enumerates the flowers he imagines as gifts for his ungrateful lover.⁹¹ The striking epigraph, with its suggestions of queer eroticism, has aroused surprisingly little comment from contemporary scholars, although we know that the homoerotic theme of this particular poem of Virgil was a point of difficulty for eighteenth-century readers.⁹² If

⁸⁸ McCarthy & Kraft 1994: 77. The poem was first published in Barbauld's 1772 collection *Poems*.

⁸⁹ Wollstonecraft 1993: 122.

⁹⁰ Wollstonecraft 1993: 122.

⁹¹ *Ecl.* 2.45-6: *tibi lilia plenis/ ecce ferunt nymphae calathis* ('look, the nymphs bring you lilies in full baskets').

⁹² Fredericksen 2015: 433-6. He quotes the botanist John Martyn in his edition of the *Eclogues* (1749: 27): 'some indeed have ventured to affirm, that this whole Eclogue is nothing but a warm description of pure friendship: but I fear an impartial reader will be

Wollstonecraft noticed Barbauld's quotation at all, she presumably saw it as a textual ornament of little weight, much like the painted flowers themselves. But I take Barbauld as my second case study to prove a more general point. Given that knowledge of the classical has always involved the emplacement of a writer in a cultural hierarchy, *no* classical allusion, even the most apparently conventional or trite, is merely 'decorative' or inert. Each classical reference tells a story about education, confirming or challenging assumptions about how or why that learning was acquired. Nor is the use of the classical necessarily a means of reasserting the oppressive aspects of that hierarchy; for if Wollstonecraft engages in resistance against the classical, Barbauld articulates her ideals of compassion and empathy from *within* the classical, rejecting Rome's association with empire and control, and finding her learned voice through complex allusion to Latin texts.

Pedagogy formed the constant backdrop of Barbauld's life and writing. She spent her early years at the Dissenting academies in Kibworth and Warrington (the 'Athens of the North'), where her father taught. Later in life, she and her husband directed the Palgrave Seminary in Suffolk. These schools were attended only by boys. Nonetheless, Barbauld acquired strong convictions regarding the importance of learning for herself and other women, convictions fostered also by the liberal orientation of her branch of Protestantism (Unitarian Dissent), which put a particular emphasis on education. She maintained throughout her writing that even classical learning – typically reserved for men – was a desirable attainment for women. Greek and Roman authors, she wrote in one essay for young female readers, are 'so frequently referred to both in books and conversation, that a person of cultivated mind cannot easily be content without obtaining some knowledge of them'.⁹³ Yet despite being raised in as congenial an environment for learning as was possible in the period, Barbauld faced significant barriers. A later biographer tells us that her father long resisted to teach her Latin despite her 'earnest desire' to learn, and he only

soon convinced, that many of the expressions are too warm to admit of any such interpretation'.

⁹³ Barbauld 1826: 73.

relented when she at length ‘overcame his scruples’.⁹⁴ Domestic instruction was the only available route for women’s classical learning, and it depended on women having someone willing and able to teach them. Indeed, when Barbauld herself was asked to establish a college for female students, she declined, arguing that the ‘best way for women to acquire knowledge, is from conversation with a father, a brother or a friend... and by such a course of reading as they may recommend’. Women’s ‘thefts of knowledge’, she observed with bitter irony, must be regulated with ‘Spartan’ severity, since any public display of learning is ‘punished with disgrace’.⁹⁵ When Barbauld displays her classical knowledge, then, it is no hollow or outmoded literary device. It is a point of contact with a charged pedagogical debate about what women can and should know, and how they can come to know it.

Her poetry revolves insistently around the contrast between big and small: trees and flowers, Muses and insects, ideas and objects. Barbauld describes, often in grand terms, a world of miniature things. ‘Embryo schemes’ emerge in the laboratory of the scientist Joseph Priestley in one poem, like matter from chaos – recalling the opening of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* – and like new-born babes, ready to be clothed in print.⁹⁶ In another poem, the ‘proud giant of the beetle race’ flashes his horns, as Barbauld attempts to describe the myriad ‘atom forms of insect life’.⁹⁷ Frequently she sets the grand trappings of classical literature and myth against the modern, domestic, and everyday. ‘Come, Muse, and sing the dreaded *Washing-Day*’, she announces, reimagining from a child’s eye-view the epic struggles of laundry day: of ‘dirt and gravel stains/ hard to efface, and loaded lines at once/ snapped short’.⁹⁸ In another poem, two chimney ornaments carry out

⁹⁴ Aikin 1825, vol.1: x.

⁹⁵ Aikin 1825, vol.1: xv. These comments have disappointed later readers; McCarthy 2001 argues that Barbauld aimed only to protect her time, not to object to the principle of schooling for women.

⁹⁶ ‘An Inventory of the Furniture in Dr. Priestley’s Study’, l.39-42: ‘A mass of heterogeneous matter,/ A chaos dark, nor land nor water; —/ New books, like new-born infants, stand,/ Waiting the printer’s clothing hand — (McCarthy & Kraft 1994: 39).

⁹⁷ ‘To Mrs. P[riestley], with some Drawings of Birds and Insects’, l.114-5, 104 (McCarthy & Kraft 1994: 8-9).

⁹⁸ ‘Washing-Day’, l.8, 25-7. The description of this domestic task in an epic setting is, of course, already in Homer (*Od.* 6.85-95). In *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1897), Samuel

a poetic dialogue in which one boasts of holding the ‘lamp of Science’, fed with Attic oil from the ‘stores of Greece and Rome’.⁹⁹ It is not by coincidence that Barbauld projects images of learning on to ordinary domestic objects, since, as for other learned women her period, her own classical learning came, unavoidably, from within the home.

Barbauld’s most beloved poem in her own time, ‘The Mouse’s Petition’, subtly proposes the reinterpretation of a canonical work of Roman literature in a distinctly compassionate and anti-imperialist mode. ‘The Mouse’s Petition’ again shows Barbauld’s close observation of a world of miniature beings. Joseph Priestley, the man credited with the discovery of oxygen, was experimenting with noxious gases one evening when Barbauld visited. There she saw a mouse in a trap, ready to be used as a test subject in one of Priestley’s experiments with ‘different kinds of air’.¹⁰⁰ The poem is spoken by the mouse, petitioning for its freedom:

Or, if this transient gleam of day
Be *all* of life we share,
Let pity plead within thy breast
That little *all* to spare.¹⁰¹

‘Little *all*’: the phrase captures in miniature Barbauld’s characteristic juxtaposition between the big and the small. A tiny mouse makes a grand appeal for its life, appealing by a series of moralizing tropes to the virtues of mercy and the community of all things. The mouse even reminds its tyrannical master that it may contain the soul of a brother, since, ‘as ancient sages taught’, mind shifts ‘thro’ matter’s varying forms,/ In every form the same’. Moreover, the Latin epigraph to the poem is *Parcere subiectis, et debellare superbos* (‘to spare the humbled, and war down the proud’), drawn from Anchises’ foundational statement of the mission of Roman civilization in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (6.853). Many scholars have observed that Barbauld’s poem reaches beyond its immediate

Butler notoriously used the ‘washing day episode’ as the cornerstone for his argument that Nausicaa herself wrote the *Odyssey*; see Porter 2018: 239-50.

⁹⁹ [Lines for Anne Wakefield on her Wedding to Charles Rochemont Aikin, with a Pair of Chimney Ornaments in the Figures of Two Females Seated with Open Books’, 1.5-8 (McCarthy & Kraft 2002: 151).

¹⁰⁰ McCarthy & Kraft 1994: 36-7; the quote is from Barbauld’s footnote.

¹⁰¹ Lines 37-40 (McCarthy & Kraft 1994: 37).

context by including words and ideas that carried particular weight in the liberal political arguments of her period, and the mouse's cry for freedom could resonate with any number of contemporary discourses: the treatment of the colonists in America, oppression of Dissenting Protestants in England, the cruelty of the slave trade (Barbauld spoke out publicly for the abolitionist cause).¹⁰² Wollstonecraft frequently invoked the image of Rome as a mutable symbol for oppression of all kinds, describing Rome's empire endlessly reproduced in culture and society, in domestic tyranny, class oppression, and national belligerence. Other writers of the eighteenth century used precisely this quotation as a positive endorsement of force; in Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747), for example, the villainous Lovelace invokes the same line of Virgil to symbolise his own imperious control, naturally stressing the second half of Anchises' injunction.¹⁰³ Barbauld, however, puts stress on the first half of the quotation. She invokes the spectre of Rome as part of a call for mercy, not control, finding within antiquity a model for her own compassionate ethical and political philosophy.

What, finally, of the 'sweetest empire' that Barbauld attributed to a woman in 'To a Lady, with some painted Flowers', the poem to which Wollstonecraft objected. Barbauld is not, despite Wollstonecraft's statements, legislating any general ideal for female behaviour. For readers of Virgil, the quotation from the second *Eclogue* subtly creates an imagined (or real?) context of seduction and disappointed love for the poem's praise of female delicacy and sweetness. In *Eclogue 2*, the lovelorn Corydon pledges gifts of flowers to Alexis, comparing his own rusticity to the beauty and sophistication of his beloved. Barbauld inserts herself here in the shepherd Corydon's role.¹⁰⁴ Once the Virgilian context is remembered, it seems impossible to imagine that Barbauld is

¹⁰² For political readings of the poem, see Ross 1994: 98-101, Myers 1995: 275-6.

¹⁰³ 'Many and many a pretty rogue had I spared, whom I did not spare, had my power been acknowledged and my mercy been in time implored. But the *debellare superbos* should be my motto, were I to have a new one' (1985: 165). See Weinbrot 2005: 287: 'Lovelace images himself as the triumphant imperial state imposing its will and law'.

¹⁰⁴ Barbauld's desire to cast herself and her world in pastoral dress places her in the eighteenth-century culture of masquerade described by Castle 1995, which allowed for an imaginative escape from the restrictions of the self, and temporarily gave women the 'essentially masculine privilege of erotic object-choice' (at 93). On the importance of the pastoral genre for female engagements with the classics, see Wilson 2015: 504.

articulating some kind of universal ideal. Indeed, the qualities for which Barbauld praises this particular lady are ones that she herself lacked. ‘I know myself remarkably deficient in gracefulness of person, in my Air and manner’, she wrote, ‘and in the easy graces of conversation, deficient even amongst those of my own rank, much more amongst those who move in so much a higher Sphere’.¹⁰⁵ Whether there was any real situation behind the text or it was a teasing exercise with the erotic ambiguities of the pastoral mode, we do not know. We should leave open the possibility, though, that Barbauld is using the fragment of Virgil’s homoerotic poem to give fleeting expression to some desire that she would have foresworn or never explicitly named in English. Far from dictating what a woman should say or do, the classical frame hints tantalizingly at what a woman might not have been able to say at all.

The ‘classicising’ moments of an author such as Barbauld tend to be viewed by modern critics as less connected to personal experience and less expressive of the poet herself. If we view her allusions within the contemporary cultural drama of classical education and its exclusions, though, these moments seem far less conventional and trite, and articulate something more challenging. To write in the classical mode is no withdrawal from reality. It is a demonstration of Barbauld’s own passions, and an expression of her identity as a learned writer. The charge of Wollstonecraft, therefore, that Barbauld had merely imitated the ‘language of men’, underplays the extent to which her classicising celebrates the work of having acquired that learning in the first place, and in doing so contests expectations of a ‘proper’ level of education for women. This is her empire. It is not a space of conquest or control. It is a space of intellectual labor, formidable challenge, and hard-won achievement.

¹⁰⁵ McCarthy 2001: 377. DeRosa 2016: 225-6 points to the prominence of imitation in the poem (the ‘painted’ flowers, flowers as ‘emblem’, the woman as ‘copy’) to argue that Barbauld highlights the artificiality of codes of gentility and female behavior, making her closer in spirit to Wollstonecraft than has generally been assumed

Global Classics

The study of classical reception has long been envisioned as a movement beyond the study of the classical tradition. ‘Tradition’ – the word is formed from the Latin *tradere*, to ‘hand down’ – presupposes a unified body of knowledge handed down from one generation of author and artist to the next. It is easily reified: it is all too often ‘*the* classical tradition’, a set of common values.¹⁰⁶ The idea of a unified Greek and Latin corpus or tradition is, as any classicist knows, a gross simplification of what was in fact a varied set of dialects and linguistic forms in antiquity, a highly dispersed array of sites of literary production, and a set of texts disparate in its ideological allegiances and ethical orientations. Tradition also implies direction. Knowledge moves from a centre (Europe) and is handed down to successive generations, which exist at an ever-increasing distance from the source. On the other hand, ‘reception’ as a metaphor emphasises individual encounters with antiquity. Its appeal has been to allow for a much less predictable mapping of the diffusion of Greek and Roman knowledge, so that, for example, adaptations of classical ideas in the art and literature of China, the Caribbean, and Central and South America can be interpreted as equally significant visions of the ancient world. To cast such interactions as participation in a shared cultural tradition would be to misrepresent the political and aesthetic contexts in which encounters with European antiquity take place. Reception, then, usefully highlights the breaks and fissures in the history of ideas rather than a genealogy of direct descent. Yet the more diffuse and global the study of antiquity becomes, the more strain it puts in the conception of reception itself as a unified scholarly field with a common set of assumptions, shared critical touchstones, and common methodological training.

In *Borges’ Classics: Global Encounters with the Graeco-Roman Past* (2018), Laura Jansen sets an invigorating agenda for ‘global classics’. A number of qualities mark this study apart from commonly accepted conventions of receptions research. First, it is

¹⁰⁶ Cf. the force of the plurals in the title of Laird and Miller’s *Antiquities and Classical Traditions in Latin America* (2018), and its opening sentence: ‘Antiquities and classical traditions in Latin America are not confined to those of Greece and Rome’.

decentred. It maps a new mental geography that expands beyond Europe and includes encounters with antiquity across the globe without imposing a hierarchy of centre and periphery. Instead, each site of classical allusion is its own centre, with its own ‘local, multi-local and global preoccupations and goals’.¹⁰⁷ Second, it emphasises interactions with ancient texts and ideas in fragments rather than wholes. Allusion to isolated phrases or quotations, partial knowledge of an ancient figure or text, the juxtaposition of detached objects in radically different, local contexts – all of these represent the global experience of antiquity better than the transmission of a unified tradition or the desire to identify entirely with ancient knowledge or ideas. Third, ‘global classics’ disrupts our familiar conception of chronology. It reminds us of the co-existence of different eras of knowledge in any one particular time. This aspect of Jansen’s model is particularly germane to the subject of her book, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges, whose fantastic narratives create a temporal universe in which literary time often turns back on itself, inverting the usual order of original and copy.¹⁰⁸ This sense of temporal co-existence is equally strong in Shane Butler’s conception of ‘deep classics’, which encourages us to develop a mode of reading comparable to the study of a cross-section of rock in geological research, in which the traces of different time periods appear simultaneously as a series of temporal strata. The object is not to get back to a single source or origin – a near-impossible task, since it is silted over by so many layers of classical reuse – but to incorporate the weight and expanse of those layers, as broad as they are deep, into our reading of any ancient object or text.¹⁰⁹

These potential models for a future ‘global classics’ demonstrate clear affinities with other movements. The comparative study of the dynamics of Greco-Roman literature and the literature of China, for example, has been pioneered by scholars such as Alexander Beecroft (2010) and Wiebke Denecke (2014), who stress the need to move beyond the

¹⁰⁷ Jansen 2018: 122. Greenwood 2016: 43 proposes an ‘omni-local’ category for ‘Greek and Roman classical texts that circulate widely in different historical and cultural contexts’; cf. Torlone, Munteanu & Dutsch 2017 who adopt Greenwood’s term in their survey of Eastern and Central European receptions of classical texts (see at p.10)

¹⁰⁸ Jansen 2018: 107-110.

¹⁰⁹ Butler 2016.

constraints of direct influence and embrace a far more global – indeed, planetary – scope of analysis for literary interactions. This work has come not out of classics *per se*, but out of comparative literature, and particularly from its split into World Literature, a body of critical work that seeks to avoid imposing Eurocentric theoretical paradigms, canons, and chronologies on the many various centres of global literary production.¹¹⁰ As classical reception moves potentially towards global classics, it should lead us to similar questions about hierarchies of centre and periphery, the dominance of particular canons, and the prioritizing of aesthetic engagements with antiquity. In this context, ‘reception’ itself seems increasingly an insular critical paradigm, since its use is predominant only in English-language scholarship and it is not widely recognised as a critical term in cognate fields such as English, history, and film studies.¹¹¹

There is also evidence that even scholars from other fields who *are* familiar with classical reception work are wary of some of its implicit presumptions. John Levi Barnard’s *Empire of Ruin* (2018) is a particularly sophisticated and thoughtful example. His study examines the ways in which African-American authors and artists from the eighteenth to the twentieth-first centuries subverted hegemonic, classicising visions of America as the ‘new Rome’, by insistently associating the classical legacy with slavery, decadence, and ruin. These subversive strategies are partly textual and literary, as for example in the works of Phillis Wheatley, for whom ‘the concept of freedom provides a center of gravity on which almost every classical reference can be grounded’, and of the satirist Charles Chesnut, who sets out to reorient the archive of Western, classical culture ‘from the perspective of the oppressed and enslaved’.¹¹² But Barnard also studies more oblique strategies for resisting the classicizing rhetoric of power in the United States, as for example when images or narratives of the kidnapping of free people to be sold in the South are juxtaposed visually or in narratives with the neoclassical Capitol building in Washington DC.¹¹³ At the beginning of the study, Barnard, a scholar of American

¹¹⁰ Damrosch 2003.

¹¹¹ Willis 2018: 3, 31 remarks on the term’s lack of use in an equivalent sense in other fields.

¹¹² Barnard 2018: 43, 121.

¹¹³ Barnard 2018: 69-75.

literature rather than a classicist, acknowledges the foundational and important work done by classical receptions scholars who have studied the pioneering careers of Black scholars, or who have explored the adaptation of Greco-Roman texts in African American literature. But that work tends to have assumed, Barnard writes, a ‘certain type of affirmative appropriative relationship between Black writers and classical tradition’, focusing on the ways in which the classical tradition proved empowering or useful to writers of colour. Barnard does not doubt that Greek and Latin languages and texts sometimes held that function. His research aims to uncover, though, ‘a specific and pointedly critical strain’ in the adaptation of classical ideas by African-American writers and artists. The subjects of his study are less interested in participating in any classical legacy than in diagnosing the connection between neoclassical imagery and political power, the role that evocations of the ancient past played in the system that ‘underlies and authorises the regime of oppression and enslavement’.¹¹⁴

In conversation, a colleague of mine once summed up the difference between our university’s departments of Religion and Theology in this way: one studies religion from the outside, and the other from the inside. Does something similar exist in the division between those studying the legacy of classical texts inside and outside of classics departments? Is classical reception studies, in other words, only for believers? The question is not meant to undermine the work done, for example, by Barbara Goff and Phiroze Vasunia on colonialism and the classical tradition – work that more than meets the call for a politically engaged classical reception studies.¹¹⁵ Yet Barnard’s academic self-positioning does suggest a perception, at least, that classicists’ work speaks less well to those who seek to approach the same material in a more critical spirit. Examples could be added of recent books that study the appropriation of ancient ideas without identifying as works of ‘classical reception’ (or even using that phrase). Jared Hickman’s *Black Prometheus* (2017), for example, examines how the character of Prometheus became coded as Black in abolitionist writings of the Romantic period, and how his bondage became a symbol of racial struggle. Caroline Miriam Jacobson’s *Barbarous Antiquity*

¹¹⁴ Barnard 2018: 8.

¹¹⁵ Goff 2005; Vasunia 2013.

(2014) examines the ways in which Early Modern writers blend characters and motifs from classical texts with words and images drawn from trade in the Levant, thereby accentuating the ‘Eastern’ elements of the antique world. The fact that scholars of other disciplines are producing this invigorating work is encouraging, but why do these scholars not identify as scholars of classical reception? We should be skeptical of a field of work that encourages conversation mostly among ourselves. Is it simply a difference of classification and citation habits within different departments and fields? Does it reflect the challenges of genuine interdisciplinary conversation? Or is there an actual or perceived intellectual distinction in the work being done by classical reception scholars and work on the same legacy by scholars in other fields?

One way to lessen the risk of insularity is to encourage classicists to communicate as much as possible across disciplines, and to subject that work to refereeing processes outside the field. That would involve working not as classical receptions scholars at home within that sub-discipline, but as classicists abroad, working seriously within the disciplinary frameworks of medieval studies, Romanticism, critical theory, film studies, and so on. It is hard work. Testing the credibility of one’s findings against scholarship in different fields is a difficult bar, in part because it necessitates learning new scholarly conventions and new bodies of scholarship as well as surmounting the initiation rituals of a new field. It also takes time, and any investment of time in a particular area of research without ‘output’ entails considerable risk in the modern academy. Ruby Blondell makes a similar point in relation to the study of classics and film (2016: 283):

Few classicists have the leisure to acquire real expertise in even one of the many fields bearing on the interpretation of screen texts (fields including not only cinema and television studies but the study of twentieth and twenty-first century social history and popular culture); but this does not free us from the obligation to approach such texts, as best we can, on their own terms, and not just as comparanda for ancient narratives.

If we are working on postclassical periods and media, our work has to speak to specialists in those fields, and be judged credible by them.¹¹⁶ By engaging deeply and seriously with work outside of classics, we stand a chance of gaining an audience outside the field. We also stand to transform the centre and periphery of Classics itself, reconceptualising work on Latin literature in later periods as part of the core of the discipline.¹¹⁷ An investment in serious work in other scholarly areas can help expand ideas of what the field as a whole can and should do.

One potential aspect of that interdisciplinary work, and one illustrated in this chapter's final case study, is a movement away from aesthetic receptions, and an emphasis instead on more varied uses and reuses of ancient texts in different discourses. The transformation of ideas from Roman literature in scientific texts, for example, is a necessary and established element of Neo-Latin;¹¹⁸ and the boom in work on Lucretius by scholars of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment is a promising expansion of attention.¹¹⁹ Yet the study of the transformation of Roman literature in later mathematical, astronomical, philosophical, and medical thought has stayed on the outskirts of classical reception studies, which still tends to be conceptualised primarily around aesthetic interactions with antiquity. Classical 'reception' is, again, an uneasy heading for this sort of work, if it implies that the receiving of ancient literary texts was these writers' primary goal. To study classical allusions in scientific or philosophical texts is to analyse the routes through which an author has traveled to arrive at somewhere new entirely. Yet by continuing to broaden the range of texts studied by classicists – with diligent attention to critical work on those texts by scholars in other disciplines – classicists can show how widespread Greek and Latin was as a conceptual resource for

¹¹⁶ Martindale 2006: 9: 'Research on, say, the Victorians must be credible to Victorianists as well as classicists'. Cf. Keen 2018, writing both as a classicist and a scholar of science fiction: it is 'possible to be credible as both – but the work has to be done' (at 14).

¹¹⁷ As Güthenke & Holmes 2018 helpfully observe, the ideal of complete competence in all of classical literature and its afterlife is impractical. Instead, each scholar should work to bring different points of knowledge into productive contact, as part of a network rather than a 'self-constituting whole' (at 70).

¹¹⁸ See Haskell 2005, for example, for an overview of the Neo-Latin didactic poem as a pervasive Early Modern form of information technology.

¹¹⁹ So, e.g. Greenblatt 2011; Passannante 2011; Kramnick 2012.

writers and artists. The benefit is a global vision not only of classical material, but of the range of opportunity of our own work.

Case Study 3: Erasmus Darwin

When Erasmus Darwin published *The Loves of Plants* (1789), an exuberant versification of Linnaeus' sexual system of plant classification, he explicitly cast the poem as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in reverse. The Roman poet had transformed gods and humans into plants. Darwin, however, would give poetic life to vegetation, visualising their vibrant world of promiscuous eroticism. His grandson, Charles Darwin, would later quote a journal entry written by his grandfather at age sixteen, in which he says that his journal is so stuffed full of Greek and Latin 'translation, verses, themes' that it would be 'perfectly unintelligible to any but Schoolboys' (another telling reflection of the gender division underlying classical education), and *The Loves of Plants* is certainly an extraordinary chapter in the reception of Ovid's poem.¹²⁰ But Darwin's use of antiquity is fundamentally forward-looking. He aims not to encourage rereading of Ovid, or to help readers see what was already there in the original poem. He uses the ancient models to illustrate and generate new knowledge, enlisting, according to his poem's advertisement, 'Imagination under the banner of Science'. Darwin consistently emphasises the inadequacy of the poetic imagination to describe the reality of his observations, recalling the memory of myths and characters only to expose their imprecision as a means of describing the natural world. While *The Loves of Plants* luxuriates in the licensed eroticism of Ovidian myth, this grand and bizarre poem is premised above all on the *mismatch* between myth and science – a mismatch which, for Darwin, is the vital seed of modernity itself.

As well as cataloguing the different reproductive processes of his plants, the 1700-line poem also includes descriptions of recent discoveries in physics and engineering, anecdotes drawn from historical and travel narratives, a series of prose interludes theorizing about the relationship between poetry and other arts, and a rousing indictment

¹²⁰ Cited in Hassler 1973: 29.

of the slave trade, all supplemented by Darwin's loquacious footnotes and endnotes. The 'love' of the poem's title is between the male (stamen) and the female (pistil) parts of the plant. Since Linnaeus' classes were based upon the number and position of stamens in each plant – anywhere between one and twenty (or more) – it is easy for Darwin to turn plant reproduction into a sex comedy. *Genista* or dyer's broom, for example, has ten stamens and one pistil, so Darwin writes: 'sweet blooms GENISTA in the myrtle shade,/ and *ten* fond brothers woo the haughty maid'.¹²¹ Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae* was written, of course, in Latin, and the classicising imagery of *The Loves of Plants* is no doubt inspired partly by the references to the ancient pantheon in that work.¹²² Thus Galatea, riding a dolphin and inspiring love from all who see her, is used to describe the movement of seaweed spores.¹²³ The Adonis genus of plants, each flower of which contains many stamens and pistils, is the site of a wild, promiscuous 'marriage', presided over by the god Hymen ('As round his shrine the gaudy circles bow,/ and seal with muttering lips the faithless vow').¹²⁴ These sexual aspects of botany were profoundly disturbing to conservative readers, especially because flowers and plants had traditionally been coded as feminine spheres of knowledge. The conservative polemicist Thomas James Mathias claimed that Darwin's poems 'debauched' their (implicitly female) readers, seducing them 'in filmy, gawzy, gossamer lines,/ With lucid language, and most dark designs'.¹²⁵

Indeed, Darwin's proem seems calculated to generate moral alarm. The voice of the proem flits from *persona* to *persona*, hovering over an ambiguous and ever-changing space. At first he is a hawker advertising a magic trick to a reader and ushering us into

¹²¹ Darwin 1789: 5. On Linnaeus' sexual system, see Morton 1981: 268-9. It is currently replaced by the so-called APG (Angiosperm Phylogeny Group) system of plant classification.

¹²² Heller 1945 and 1971. Haskell 2013 is an innovative account of the 'Latin Enlightenment', the understudied network of scientists, philosophers, and theologians communicating in Latin throughout Europe in the eighteenth century. See further Haskell in this volume.

¹²³ Canto 1.354-72 (Darwin 1789: 34-6); cf. Ovid, *Met.* 13.738-879.

¹²⁴ Canto 4.387-406 (Darwin 1789: 164-5).

¹²⁵ Mathias 1798: 56-7. He claimed that the poem was decadent in both style and content; it 'is to England', he wrote, 'what Seneca's prose was to Rome'.

some magical space, an ‘enchanted garden’. Then the space we are led to imagine is a woman’s boudoir (a ‘lady’s dressing room’); the poet is a pimp, comparing the plants in his poem to a series of beautiful women he has invited the reader (a man, or still a woman?) to admire. I print the entirety of the proem here, complete with Darwin’s quirky, excitable typography:

GENTLE READER!

Lo, here a CAMERA OBSCURA is presented to thy view, in which are lights and shades dancing on a whited canvas, and magnified into apparent life --- if thou art perfectly at leisure for such trivial amusement, walk in, and view the wonders of my INCHANTED GARDEN.

Whereas P. OVIDIUS NASO, a great Necromancer in the famous Court of AUGUSTUS, did by art poetic transmute Men, Women, and even Gods and Goddesses into Trees and Flowers; I have undertaken by similar art to restore some of them to their original animality, after having remained prisoners so long in their respective vegetable mansions; and have here exhibited them before thee. Which thou may’st contemplate as diverse little pictures suspended over the chimney of a Lady’s dressing-room, *connected only by a slight festoon of ribbons*. And which, though thou may’st not be acquainted with the originals, may amuse thee by the beauty of their persons, their graceful attitudes, or the brilliancy of their dress.

FAREWELL¹²⁶

In the middle is Ovid. The erotic aspects of the scene fit his reputation well: he is, after all, the poet not only of the *Metamorphoses* but of the *Ars Amatoria* and the *Amores*, and would be the ‘tutor’ of Byron’s Don Juan.¹²⁷ The wondrous reversal of Ovid in *The Lives of Plants* is likened in the proem to the experience of the camera obscura, a staple of Early Modern optic technology, in which an observer looks through a peephole lens in a darkened room and sees an image inverted on a screen. As Priestman (2013: 49) observes, the description of Ovid as a ‘necromancer’ in Augustus’ court conjures a sense of ‘fairytale wonder rather than the weary recognition of the site most often visited in any

¹²⁶ Darwin 1789: v-vii; on this proem, Priestman 2013: 46-50.

¹²⁷ Vance 1988: 217.

well-to-do boy's classical education'. The comparison with the camera obscura also gives the ancient text a startlingly new frame. In one of the literary critical interludes in the poem, Darwin further likens the structure of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to the fashion of the 'show box', a miniature moving panorama, in which a strip of prints was wound on rollers so that the viewer could scroll through them, and the images appeared to move sequentially before the viewer's eyes.¹²⁸ The comparison with these illusionistic technologies suggests a particularly modern vision of Ovid's antique epic. Its ever-moving mythological narratives are imagined as discontinuous, flickering images, flashes of imagination rather than legacies of tradition or learning.

When Darwin is describing each particular plant, his allusions to Ovid do not depend on any one-to-one correspondence between natural processes and classical myth. Instead he moves by a chain of loosely connected imagery rather than strict logic, allowing his reader's memory to fill in the gaps. When he comes to madder (*Rubia tinctorum*), for example, Darwin compares the color of the roots to a witch stirring up magic in her cauldron ('With nice selection modest RUBIA blends,/ Her vermil dyes, and o'er the cauldron blends').¹²⁹ The roots were cultivated for their red colour, which, Darwin tells us, will stain the bones of pigs or chickens red if they feed on the plant. Darwin then imagines men dying a white fleece red; a sexual image, since these 'four favour'd youths' represent the four stamens of the madder reproducing with the one pistil.¹³⁰ Finally, the combination of witch and fleece leads the poet to Medea, and he pauses to retell in nine lines Ovid's account of Medea boiling the body of Aeson in her cauldron in order to rejuvenate his body.¹³¹ Why Medea? The associative connections are never particularly tight. We might be tempted to look for some sophisticated allusion to the herbs and other

¹²⁸ Darwin 1789: 83: the images 'succeed each other amusingly enough, like prints of the London Cries, wrapped [*sic*] upon rollers, with a glass before them. In this at least they resemble the monsters in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*...'. An example of the sort of object Darwin describes is in the Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton: <https://blogs.princeton.edu/cotsen/2016/09/curators-choice-a-moving-panorama-of-london-cries/> [accessed Jan 19, 2019].

¹²⁹ Canto 1.321-2 (Darwin 1789: 31).

¹³⁰ Canto 1.325 (Darwin 1789: 31). The sexual overtones of the color combination of red and white are familiar from the *Metamorphoses*: Rhorer 1980.

¹³¹ Canto 1.329-338 (Darwin 1789: 32); cf. Ovid, *Met.* 7.159-293.

plants mentioned by Ovid in his narrative, but a more childlike delight in the sound of the words – madder/Medea – is likely Darwin’s launching point. Nonetheless, the sinister associations of the Medea character do lead Darwin to a new and different conception of the plant’s physical structure. In a discursive note at the bottom of the page, he speculates about why plants grow substances of particular colors, since they appear to be unrelated to the aim of camouflage in the colour patterns of animals. He postulates that they could instead serve as a weapon. ‘The colouring materials of vegetables... seem given to it as a defence against the depredations of insects or other animals, to whom these materials are nauseous or deleterious’. Although he personifies the madder plant initially as ‘modest’, blushing, and beautiful, the imagistic connection to the sinister witch Medea seems to lead to a new botanical theory: her dyes are poisons. In later poems, Darwin articulated the idea that ancient myths could be read allegorically, as describing or predicting scientific theories.¹³² Here there is no clear sense of whether myth or theory is logically prior. The poet dramatises the two emerging together, and moving, in no precise or complete fashion, towards clarity.¹³³

Medea returns later in the poem in Darwin’s description of the *Impatiens* (touch-me-not) genus, which shoots its seed capsules in a process botanists call ‘explosive dehiscence’. Darwin writes:

With fierce distracted eye IMPATIENS stands,
Swells her pale cheeks, and brandishes her hands,
With rage and hate the astonish’d groves alarms,
And hurls her infants from her frantic arms.¹³⁴

The image of infanticide leads once more to Medea. This time Darwin tells her entire narrative – exile from native soil, jealousy and murder of Creusa, inner struggle and then killing of her children, escape on the winged chariot – across forty-four lines of gaudy, grandiose verse, not sparing readers her story’s horrors:

¹³² Priestman 2013: 141-3.

¹³³ Ascribing a precise cause to this phenomenon of protective coloration would become a prominent point of argument in the evolutionary debates of the nineteenth century: Evans 1965.

¹³⁴ Canto 3.131-4 (Darwin 1798: 98-9).

Thrice with parch'd lips her guiltless babes she press'd,
 And thrice she clasp'd them to her tortur'd breast;
 Awhile with white uplifted eyes she stood,
 Then plunged her trembling poynards in their blood.¹³⁵

In one of his literary-critical prose interludes in *The Loves of Plants*, Darwin had discussed the line between the Tragic and the Horrid, and his expatiation on the Medea story reads as an exemplification of his literary ideas. Like any good tragedian, he can evoke 'distress' in his audience through horrid scenes, but also mingle 'the bitter cup of true Tragedy with some sweet consolatory drops' of pity, endearing his audience to the tragic heroine while at the same time inspiring pleasure in their knowledge that 'the scenery is not real', and they can awake from the scene as 'from a distressful dream'.¹³⁶ What about the seed capsules? Given that explosive dehiscence is a biological means of increasing the chance of plant reproduction, no reader can fail to notice that Medea's infanticide is a very vague analogy. Yet here too the inexactness is the point, since Darwin draws a line between the free semantic play of Imagination and the necessary precision of science. If a poet's simile too exactly resembles its subject, he says, then it becomes 'ratiocination', systematic reasoning, and it has lost the picturesque quality that makes it poetry.¹³⁷ Just so, the 'monsters of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* have entertained the world for many centuries', despite their deviation from nature as we know it.¹³⁸ Darwin may enlist Imagination under the banner of Science, but the distance between the two remains one of his basic principles.

If one of the tasks of reception studies is to ask what role the classics have played in various later cultures and eras, texts like *The Loves of Plants* can help to diversify our answers. In part, the appeals to classical mythology have the same benefit as appeals to botany in the Romantic era: they allow a writer to explore modes of sexuality that would otherwise have been taboo in eighteenth-century society. Darwin's never-ending array of

¹³⁵ Canto 3.167-70 (Darwin 1789: 101).

¹³⁶ Darwin 1789: 86-7.

¹³⁷ Darwin 1789: 84; cf. Priestman 2013: 48 on Darwin's gendered dichotomy between 'loosely dressed Imagination and strict reason'.

¹³⁸ Darwin 1789: 50.

Naiads and Nymphs create an imagined world of eternal erotic opportunity – a timeless place that exists seductively alongside modern conventions and restraints. It was always possible to step out sideways into that parallel universe and explore modes of coupling otherwise forbidden by the moral policing of contemporary society. The fact that Darwin presents his poem both as an inversion of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and as like the ‘diverse little pictures’ of a ‘Lady’s dressing-room’ also suggests that, despite the gendering of classical education in the period that restricted formal instruction of Latin in schools to boys – or because of it? – Ovid too could represent what was forbidden and erotic. When you have made your way inside Naso’s ‘enchanted garden’, through the gates and into its inner sanctum, there is Latin. Not the dead matter of schoolboys’ lessons but the mystic medium of the necromancer’s art, Latin literature too was able to conjure the fantasy of an eroticised ancient past.

The links drawn in *The Loves of Plants* between biology and metamorphosis are part of a long line of scientific thought. Goethe came independently to plants through Ovid in his didactic poem *Die Metamorphose der Pflanzen* (1790), although later he eagerly read Darwin’s works.¹³⁹ In later eras, Marjorie Garber has explored the persistence with which writers – beginning with Erasmus’ grandson Charles – cast evolutionary theory as a mode of metamorphosis. In order to communicate the ideas of evolution, scientists and poets drew connections between the processes of evolutionary adaptation and the much faster and externally imposed transformations described in Ovid’s epic.¹⁴⁰ When we study classical reception in texts like these, we are not observing a backwards glance towards the past. We study the role of Greece and Rome in looking forward, in the discovery of something new in society, in the universe, or in ourselves.

¹³⁹ King-Hele 1986: 169-71. On the conceptual indebtedness to Ovid in Goethe’s poem, Pfau 2010.

¹⁴⁰ Garber 2017: 23-6. See also Beer 2009: 104, who nonetheless draws an important distinction: while Ovidian metamorphosis is premised on the eternal transformation of matter from one thing into another, evolution inevitably involves extinction.

Conclusion

Too often reception study is given a marginal or secondary position in the discipline, but its call to explore and interrogate the connections between ancient texts and broader historical systems is crucial to the future of classics. Ideally reception would not be seen as a field or subfield at all, but simply a way of doing work on ancient texts, a mode of scholarship that is conscious of its own situatedness in history and ideology, the cultural forces implicated in the transmission of ancient ideas, and the impact that Greek and Roman culture has had on the private and public lives of others. In this chapter I have suggested a number of ways that we might go about this sort of study: by balancing reception with resistance and challenge in our analyses of later references to the antique world; by ‘reading for exclusion’, drawing out a story about classical education from each allusion to a Latin or Greek text; and by embracing a vision of ‘global classics’, challenging straightforward notions of center and periphery in understanding the circulation of ideas.

As I have suggested throughout this chapter, though, the word ‘reception’ itself has certain limitations, and its origins in the hermeneutical tradition lie at an oblique angle to the field as it has developed. Which word is better? While reception has largely been favored by contemporary scholars over the ‘classical tradition’ because that phrase imposes a false unity on a heterogeneous group of texts, and because it implicitly limits our focus to the study of those regions and cultures in which Greece and Rome did indeed congeal into a coherent tradition, the phrase does make more transparent the power dynamics involved in an individual person invoking a set of texts and ideas that have accrued historical and cultural weight.¹⁴¹ Terms like ‘appropriation’ and ‘use’ are also useful if they allow an ethical component in analyses of cases in which Greeks and Roman texts have been manipulated for pernicious political or moral ends, although as Basil Dufallo (2018: 13) notes, such judgments are necessarily tied to our own position in

¹⁴¹ See e.g. Goff 2005: 9 on the study of classical texts in African education systems, where ‘Latin is simply one more language’. Silk, Gildenhard, and Barrow 2014 retain ‘tradition’ over ‘reception’ but for a quite different reason, arguing that ‘reception’ is insufficiently expressive of the value accorded to Greece and Rome (at 5, 217-23).

time and ideology: ‘nothing prevents today’s “use” from becoming tomorrow’s “abuse”, and vice versa’. Ultimately, though, the search for one single word to cover such a diverse set of cultural phenomena is misleading, especially if it suggests the existence of some *essence* unique to the Greek and Roman past, some exceptional quality that distinguishes allusion to those cultures from references to ancient and authoritative traditions in other parts of the world. The provocation of work in this area lies precisely in its ability to connect us to other histories, other knowledge. Rather than somehow diluting or compromising the ‘core’ linguistic and interpretive skills of a classicist, we are reminded of the capacity of those skills to travel – so long as classicists have the humility and diligence to learn the principles of the new field first. Ultimately, the institutional success of reception as a name for this work may have held out an illusory promise of its equal ability to describe the range of our potential research. Rather than searching for a label or a theory that would capture any essence of Greek and Roman antiquity in later eras, perhaps it is time to embrace the area’s promise of diversity and emphasise difference.¹⁴²

¹⁴² My thanks to the editors for their invitation, my fellow contributors for commenting on a draft, Joseph Rezek for sharing unpublished material, and Peter J. Schwartz and Katharina Volk for their assistance and advice.

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