

## Classics in Italy and Great Britain

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My contribution focuses on classical literature, and offers a brief discussion of its readers in Italy and Great Britain. I start, however, with a more general observation about that literature. Homer, the central author of the classical canon, has continuously featured in education for over 2,600 years. Xenophanes observed, in the sixth century BCE, that “from the beginning everyone learnt from Homer” (fr. 10 DK): we can now trace the history of Homeric education from Xenophanes to the schools of Athens (cf. Aristophanes, fr. 233 K–A), the library of Alexandria in Lower Egypt, the first Latin translation by the teacher Livius Andronicus, the scholarly commentaries and notes produced in the monasteries of Byzantium, the (largely disastrous) efforts of Boccaccio and Petrarch to establish the first chair of Greek in Florence, and the school and university programs that have followed since. Homer’s *Iliad* has been translated into all major languages worldwide: Young<sup>1</sup> offers a catalogue of Homeric translations, from the *editio princeps* to the year 2000. The catalogue, though not quite as complete as he claims, offers a precious starting point for considering the geography as well as the history of Homeric readers. What emerges, of course, is the extraordinary status of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as texts that were, and are, relentlessly passed on – not just across generations, but also across linguistic, cultural and political barriers of all kinds.

There are at least two perspectives from which to view the extraordinary status of classical literature. From one standpoint, the centrality of the classical canon may seem like a fact of life. Harold Bloom, for example, makes the following claim: “Everyone who now reads and writes in the West, of whatever racial background, sex or ideological camp, is still a son or daughter of Homer.”<sup>2</sup> Emily Greenwood and I have criticised Bloom’s restriction of Homer’s influence to “the West,”<sup>3</sup> but even leaving that issue aside, it seems that Bloom’s genealogical model of literature unhelpfully plays down the active role of readers in the making of the text. We are not simply born the sons and daughters of Homer – and then engage in some Oedipal anxiety of influence – we actually become readers of Homer, largely through education. And if we take seriously the perspective of educators, the centrality of Homer no longer looks like a fact of life, but rather depends on one’s own commitment, evaluation, and choices – as well as on those of other people (colleagues, parents, publishers, and managers in a position to decide what needs to be passed on). This is where a different kind of anxiety sets in – not an anxiety of influence – but an anxiety of extinction. For professional classicists that anxiety quite simply comes with the job: there is a perennial concern that classical literature may not matter, or that it will not matter (and that therefore those who devote their lives to it may not, or will not, matter themselves). Generation after generation, specific people invested in classical antiquity and thus perceived the

risk that ancient texts, objects, and ideas may no longer be valued. Their lives were sometimes quite literally on the line. When faced with that kind of pressure (or even the lesser pressures of current educational reforms), the resilience and creativity of individuals and institutions become the focus of attention.

The status of classical literature is then simultaneously a given, and something that is continuously given, or passed on, between specific people. This dual perspective helps one to approach the specific contexts in which classical authors are read. I offer here some remarks about education (and its effects on publishing) in Italy and Great Britain – two national contexts with which I am familiar – as a contribution to this more general discussion of the future of Classics.

The principles that inspire Italian education are, fundamentally, those of the French Revolution: school is conceived of as public, compulsory, and free of charge. While private schools do exist, they are numerically and culturally insignificant: they largely cater to special needs and are, in any case, bound by the national curriculum. Employers and higher education institutions recognise only state examinations and, therefore, private institutions prepare their pupils for those (and often struggle to achieve the set standards). In 1940 the  *riforma Bottai*  created the  *scuola media inferiore* , a middle school for students aged between 11 and 14, which included three years of mandatory Latin instruction. After the abolition of schools for professional training in 1962, the middle school became compulsory for all students, and Latin requirements were reduced from three years of instruction to two. This means that all those who have been educated in Italy between 1962 and 1977 have been exposed to some Latin and can – or could, at some point in their lives – translate basic sentences. In 1977, Latin was abolished from the middle school curriculum, but classical literature in translation (particularly epic) was, and remains, a core subject.

After middle school, Italian students can choose between several different options. The most prestigious secondary schools are the  *licei* : the influential  *riforma Gentile*  of 1923 distinguished between the  *liceo classico* , with an emphasis on the humanities, and a new  *liceo scientifico*  with an emphasis on mathematics and experimental sciences. The  *liceo classico* , still arguably considered the most prestigious secondary school in Italy, includes five years of compulsory instruction in ancient Greek and Latin: the final examination includes unseen translation, seen translation of canonical authors and literary interpretation. The  *liceo scientifico* , which gradually gained in popularity over the  *liceo classico* , includes five years of compulsory instruction in Latin only, at the end of which students are examined in unseen and seen translation from canonical authors and on literary interpretation. In 2011, roughly 103,000 students graduated from the  *liceo scientifico*  and 51,000 from the  *liceo classico* . Several other secondary schools, such as the  *licei delle scienze umane*  and the  *licei linguistici* , also offer instruction in Latin, though not up to the same level as the two traditional  *licei* . Today, about one-third of the eighteen-year-old population of Italy has studied some Latin. The average for the population as a whole is much higher, largely because of universal training in Latin between 1962 and 1977.

Latin and Greek do not feature in the national school curriculum in Great Britain. There is some political pressure to change this (the mayor of London Boris Johnson, for example, prominently lobbies to add the Latin language to the curriculum) but, in any case, the national curriculum plays a more limited role in Great Britain than it does in Italy. Private education is extremely influential, not just because those who receive it often go on to hold positions of influence in society (Johnson himself being an example), but also because it contributes to the aspirations and values of the state-educated majority. Latin and Greek are important subjects in the most highly regarded “public” (i.e., private) schools of Great Britain, such as Eton College. Eton was the first school to call itself “public,” in opposition to private tuition offered at home, and the education offered by religious schools open only to members of a particular church. Latin and Greek define the education offered in the public schools and thereby have an impact on the state sector too. There they generally feature as extra-curricular subjects and activities. The work of teachers, volunteers and educational organisations (such as the Joint Association of Classical Teachers) is crucial in bringing Latin and sometimes even Greek to state-educated students: one frequent scenario is that of the inspired and committed instructor and her/his self-selected band of pupils meeting at lunchtime or after hours to learn Greek or Latin. Extra-curricular subjects and activities are important in British education, partly because the curriculum is thought of as guarding against deteriorating minimal standards, rather than as defining the highest levels of achievement.

The closest British equivalent to the Italian *licei* were the grammar schools: these institutions had their origins in the Middle Ages and, in the late Victorian period, were organized to provide secondary education across the United Kingdom (with the exception of Scotland, which developed a different system). From the mid-40s, grammar schools became selective, state-funded institutions. In the 1960s and 1970s, the state sector moved to a non-selective system of comprehensive schools, and the grammar schools either closed down, went comprehensive, or became private. Greek and Latin became marginal subjects in the state sector but – thanks to a visionary group of teachers and university lecturers – the subject of “classical civilization” became an attractive option for students, especially in the last two years of their school education. The focus of the final school exam in classical civilization are the cultures of Greece and Rome: ancient literature features, in translation, as part of that wider focus. A-level qualifications in classical civilization are proving to be an attractive option for students – to the point that there is now a shortage of teachers, and an increased interest in studying the languages of the Greeks and Romans as a result of learning about their cultures.

Publishing responds to school education much more directly than to University programs. In Italy, Greek and Latin grammars are very profitable, as are dictionaries: Franco Montanari’s new ancient Greek lexicon sells over 20,000 copies every year, for example. Pocket editions of classical authors, with introductions, facing translations, and commentaries also enjoy a large market: readers who know a little Latin or Greek often want to check the occasional phrase or sentence in the original, even if they read most of the work in translation. The academic quality of the editions, translations and commentaries published by BUR, Mondadori, Einaudi, Carrocci,

and several other Italian publishers is usually very high, even though they address the needs of a general, educated readership. Daily newspapers sometimes sell editions of classical works as weekly supplements. In short: many Italian editions found on the shelves of the most prestigious academic libraries around the world, can actually be bought in Italy at street corners, newspaper kiosks, and train stations. Trade publishing in Great Britain works differently: grammars, editions, commentaries, and dictionaries are not profitable: they rely on the support of academic institutions and charities. What does sell – and sells increasingly well – are books on classical civilization.

When discussing the future of Classics, it is useful to view the academic discipline as part of a wider engagement with classical antiquity. That engagement is fundamentally shaped by national traditions, as Vasunia and Stephens show in *Classics and National Cultures*.<sup>4</sup> In Italy, translation of ancient works (in school and in publishing) offers an important means of access to the ancient world. In Great Britain, people tend to focus more broadly on the civilization of the Greeks and Romans (again, in education as in publishing). That difference helps to explain the choices of individual academics, as well as broader trends and strategies. For example: my friend and contemporary, Lara Nicolini, who works in Italy, has published a Latin grammar and a translation and commentary of Apuleius' *Metamorphosis*: those are her most significant publications in terms of her impact on the general public. For me, working in Great Britain, my main trade publication is a (forthcoming) history of the Olympian gods: that book quotes and discusses a range of classical authors, but within a broader engagement with ancient culture. Predictably, my agent pitched it to publishers as a book on classical civilization. Beyond the differences, this short sketch of national contexts suggests, perhaps, one thing: that by reading Homer and other ancient authors (whether in the original, translation or quotation) we join a vast and diverse community of readers.

## Notes

1. Philip H. Young, *The Printed Homer: A 3,000 Year Publishing and Translation History of the Iliad and the Odyssey* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003).
2. *A Map of Misreading* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 33.
3. *Homer in the Twentieth Century: Between World Literature and the Western Canon*, eds. Barbara Graziosi and Emily Greenwood, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1–3.
4. *Classics and National Cultures*, eds. Susan A. Stephens and Phiroze Vasunia (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).