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RESPONSIBLE POPULARIZATION: AN INTRODUCTION
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Why, you may ask, should classicists popularize in the first place? And, if popularize they must, why bother to do so "responsibly"? The very notion of "responsibly popularization" invokes distasteful images of sordidly plebeian amusements for some readers; for others it smacks of boring monotony and empty cant. "For heaven's sake," our imagined interlocutors on either side exclaim, "either be serious" (teach and write for fellow specialists) or "have some fun!" (revel in the free-play zone where fact and fiction have no recognized bounds). This introductory essay anticipates those objections by arguing that classicists should engage in the attempt to "responsibly popularize" the classical world, and should welcome such attempts on the part of their colleagues. The authors of the essays that follow demonstrate that it is not only desirable but possible to popularize material that forms the subject matter of professional classical studies and to do so responsibly in this, the last decade of the twentieth century. They attempt to popularize and to discuss popularization in ways that are at once accessible and serious, to be responsible without losing their sense of fun. The reader of these essays will have to decide for himself or herself how successful each of us has been in the endeavor. There are a variety of approaches to popularization, and each will be best suited to a particular audience. But we believe that a sincere attempt on the part of a wide range of classicists to popularize responsibly is essential to the hope that classicists will thrive well into the next millennium.1

Readers of Donna Tartt's Secret History, a best-selling novel of 1992 chronicling the shocking lives of several classics majors in a thinly disguised New England liberal arts college, were pointedly reminded that classics can easily be portrayed as a peculiar field of endeavor appealing mostly to other-worldly intellectuals and social misfits.2 Tartt conjures up a world in which a small band of students — under the spell of an erudite and (you guessed it) quirky professor of classics — struggle to develop linguistic competence, delve deeply into the mysteries of Greek and Latin literature, act out murderous nocturnal Dionysian rites, and thereby create their own little circle in sharp contrast to the tawdry modern society just outside the circumscribed realms of their tiny classes, esoteric books, and private rituals. Tartt's sassy tale casts classicists as idiosyncratic in their intellectual tastes and exotic (when not pathological) in their social attitudes, but it also suggests a deep and widespread public fascination with the classical past and those who study it.

The fascination upon which Tartt's book depends is predicated in part on the field's perceived esotericism — it's all just so marvelously hoary and obscure! — and that perception is not completely amiss. I find it hard to imagine any classicist reading The Secret History without the occasional insider's (irresistible) shock at character and situation strike close to his or her own experience of growing up in the field. But despite some pockets of genuinely cultish esotericism, (and we hardly need fear that these will disappear any time soon) the times are surely changing for the field of classical studies as a whole. We (or many of us at least) sincerely want to communicate. The preface to the classical monograph now typically details the author's painstaking efforts to ensure the accessibility of his book to a relatively broad nonspecialist audience — the appeal to "the intelligent lay reader" now threatens to overtake the absorption of one's mentors for lingering factual and interpretive pecadillos as the dominant topos.

Even if occasionally overstated, recent assertions by authors of books on classical subjects regarding accessibility are seldom utterly specious — diligent professional editors and editorial boards, faced with the stark economic realities of...
modern scholarly publishing, generally make sure of that. Although mountains of highly specialized work are still published each year in the academic journals and in European monograph series (not the increasingly, depressingly vast 'girth of the last several numbers of L'année philologique') most American university presses are less and less willing to publish narrowly conceived monographs in any field of the humanities. Meanwhile, slickly packaged book series, notably Routledge's "New Ancient World," actively seek the broadest scholarly readership. In growing numbers, authors who hope to publish books with "good presses"—traditionally an important avenue to professional advancement—are embracing the principle of responsible popularization. As a result, a growing body of serious and influential work in classical history and literature is in fact becoming available to those wholly or largely innocent of Greek and Latin. The availability of such books allows and encourages productive dialogues between classicists and other scholars. And that, I think, is a very good thing for our field. But it is not only a gain for our field. Many classicists who write with nonspecialist audiences in mind have been rewarded by the discovery that classical scholarship is eagerly consumed by their colleagues in various other disciplines. Classicists tend both to overestimate the level of technical mastery needed to benefit from classical scholarship and to underestimate the inherent interest (and the lingering implicit authority) of what we study and how we study it. And so we are too often surprised that we really do have something compelling to say to the wider world of scholarship. If we really desire to communicate, other scholars are often enough eager to meet us halfway.

Some classical scholars are bold enough to go a significant step further in the direction of popularization, and are more than likely to find a reading audience measurable in four figures, into the "trade" or mass market. The going can get a bit rougher here: real conflicts can arise between an author's notions of "responsibility" and a publisher's sense of "marketability." But the game can often be worth the candle. Classical art and archaeology remain popular with relatively vast audiences—Joan Connelly's theories about the iconography of the Parthenon frieze and its relationship to Athenian myth have been avidly reported in the national press. Archaeology magazine has a circulation of ca. 200,000. Many hundreds of thousands of the recent artifact and sculpture exhibitions associated with the 2500th anniversary of Athenian democracy, "But I care about looking right, not looking odd, isn't it?" you reply. Fear not. Work by classical scholars that focuses on other aspects of Greek and Roman culture—warfare, women, sexuality, political practice, ethical and moral thought, to name only a few—also manages to find large audiences. Books by a number of professional classicists have successfully bridged the gap between the academic and "trade" markets. The ranks of veteran popularizers such as Peter Green and Michael Grant have been augmented of late by, inter alios, Victor Hanson, Donald Kagan, and Martha Nussbaum. Other scholars, including Brent Shaw, Mary Lefkowitz, Daniel Mendelsohn, and Alexander Nehamas regularly contribute articles and reviews to journals well outside what was once regarded as the classicist's purview—The New Republic, New York Review of Books, The New Yorker, etc. The world of trade publishing and large markets is open to the classicist with literary flair, energy, a good topic and (in the world of publishing) a bit of luck.

But what is the relationship between "responsible" popularization and the familiar forms of "vulgar" popularization? Appropriately, classical motifs have long played a powerful role in Western culture. We must keep in mind that responsible popularizers can only hope to temper, and never to replace, the free-form popular exploitation and consumption of an imagined Greco-Roman past. One need only glance through the startling images of sublimated ancient sexuality, perpetrated by fin de siècle European artists and surveyed recently in B. Dijkstra's Idees of Perversion, to be reminded that the interpretation of classical myth and history is not, and can never hope to be, a monopoly of professional classicists with an ingrained sense of intellectual integrity. But there is no need to limit ourselves to pondering the meaning of the classicizing fantasies of a century past. Today, as we approach the twenty-first century, the appropriation of classical imagery and stories continues at a feverish rate. Both of these television shows offer their viewers a remarkably energetic, and, to my eye, truly outlandish mish-mash. Classical geography and legend (Delphi and the Olympic pantheon feature prominently) and "Conan the Barbarian"-style sword and sorcery fantasies are freely intertwined. Both series are filmed in lush New Zealand locations—the ancient Mediterranean never looked odder or more inviting (but then one recalls Plato's antediluvian fantasies). Plot lines, which center on liberation of one sort or another, are uplifting in a New Age sort of way. Perhaps unsurprising, in light of classical appropriations by European artists of the late nineteenth century, strong hints of exotic eroticism are a big part of the draw. Xena, we are told in the series trailer, was formerly a wicked person, now reformed but haunted by memories of her (exciting) criminal past. She is accompanied on her adventures by a pretty sidekick, Gabriella. The series plays heavily on the ambiguous nature of the relationship between the two warrior women. The twin MCA series have, predictably, spawned a sprawling Hercules/Xena Internet subculture. Net tourists who visit MCA's official "Xena" site (www.mca.com/tv/xena/ xena )—there are dozens of unofficial sites established by fans—are currently greeted by (inter alia) a photographic image of Gabriella provocatively attempting to remove one of Xena's high leather boots.

But wait, there's more! The Xena fan with a scholarly cast of mind may want to skip past the boots and focus on the icon for the "Xena scrolls"—ancient Greek papyrus, perhaps discovered in Macedonia (MCA's text is a bit vague) or a Euro-centric representation. The Greeks were African (or Afro-Asian)? proclaims one camp. "No way! Such unsubstantiated chauvinism requires an immediate return to the strictest canons of historical positivism!" responds the other side. "A plague on both their houses," our offended reader exclaims. She throws the journal aside and resolves not to let her attention (or that of her students) ever again drift away from "the classical texts themselves" with thite the frustration and irritation of our hypothetical beleaguered scholar at the seemingly
willful abuse of the literature, history, and ideals she holds dear. In this sort of atmosphere, can we really speak of popularization that is genuinely responsible? \(^8\) 

Those American classicists who would simply abandon the battlefields of modern culture and turn their backs on post-modern culture wars, who would deliberately popularize to the happily ignorant or to a few colleagues with a stomach for public controversy and a nose for publicity, make a momentous and, I think, disastrous choice — for the field of classical studies, and (more important) for American culture. Not only is popularization of classical culture inevitable, but the current generation of classicists will be sadly derelict in our duty to our field and to the culture at large if we fail to popularize broadly and responsibly. That bald claim is predicated on the following four points which I present here in pretty blunt terms:

1. There are currently, in America, a relatively large number of professional classicists and a severely limited (whether and how fast it is shrinking is controversial) pool of students willing and able to embark upon beginning or advanced work in classical languages. We may wrangle (and surely should) about the exact figures, but the overall, long-term trend seems clear enough: the ratio of students-of-classics to professional-classicists is too small.

2. The likely pool of serious students of classical languages will not be sufficient to maintain the set "teachers of classics" (at the high school, college, or graduate level) at its current size if the classical profession continues to define its only truly important mission as teaching Greek and Latin. Classics departments were a standard fixture of American universities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the mastery of classical language and literature was a central part of liberal education. Later, like many other academic fields, classics benefited (if indirectly) from the explosion of higher education and the relative flourishing of the humanities and liberal arts in the 1960s and 70s. Those favorable conditions no longer pertain, for cultural and demographic factors far beyond any classicist's control.

3. Therefore, as a professional field of study, classics will wither if classicists cannot and will not communicate with nonspecialists — i.e. with a public at work, and one not limited to enrolled students (that remains fascinated by the ancient world, but is unwilling or unable to devote the time and energy necessary to learn ancient languages. We must not blithely expect that classics will remain a major force — even within the humanities — just because the public remains deeply interested in the civilizations we study. We have stark object lessons before us in the fields of ancient Near Eastern studies and Egyptology. Popular interest in Egypt and the ancient Near East is unabated (recall Indiana Jones, the first scenes of The Exorcist, or the recent movie Stargate) and both of those academic fields once enjoyed considerable followings. Yet both ancient Near Eastern Studies and Egyptology are now tiny and obscure specializations. No doubt many factors contributed to this phenomenon, but one clear symptom (whether cause or effect) is the wide gulf between professional and popular interpretations — the absence of a substantial cohort of well-trained professionals who teach courses and write books and articles aimed at interpreting Egypt and the ancient Near East for nonspecialist audiences. This sort of radical downsizing could happen to the field of classics and in much the same manner. Under this unhappy scenario the study of the classical languages will not die but will end up limited to a handful of practitioners tucked away in a few research universities.

4. If the scenario envisioned in (3) actually happens, if classics declines as an academic field and the relatively few remaining classicists retreat to the production of highly specialized studies that are of interest to themselves and their necessarily sparse intellectual progeny, American culture at large will be diminished. Discussions among professional classicists regarding what to do about the potential downsizing of the field of classics should not begin and end with specifically professional concerns. Rather, American classicists must forthrightly address — in discussions among themselves and in public fora — the prior question of the place of classics in the wider culture. I speak here more explicitly of conditions prevailing in the United States only in part because I happen to live, work, and owe patriotic allegiance to that nation. Clearly "the future of classics" is no more a parochial American concern than the field of classics is a parochial or national field of study. But it is arguable that classical studies have a particularly important cultural role to play in a nation that originally defined itself in self-conscious contradistinction to existing European forms of social structure. Those social forms had strong and obvious medieval roots. And so, early American republican thought turned for its primary inspiration to the classical Greco-Roman past — a usable past that was seemingly "European" in origin but was not the "possession" of any given European cultural or political entity.\(^9\)

My claim is that the classical tradition was, in a strong sense, foundational in the creation of the American national and cultural identity. And this means that regardless of how we, today, may seek to reconstruct and revise our collective identities (whether as Americans tout court or as "hyphenated Americans"), each citizen must, somehow, come to grips with an inheritance that includes the original, classicizing terms in which American identity was formulated. The cultural historian (as well as the sociologist et al.) will have much to say about the process by which that inheritance was formulated. But who, other than the professional classicist, is qualified to speak about the actual content of the classical inheritance? Who else can responsibly offer the culture at large an expanded set of cultural resources derived from classical civilizations by means of which the original deep inheritance can be augmented and honestly reinterpreted in accordance with contemporary concerns and needs? If an African-American student senses a deep need to connect to the Greco-Roman past, who but the professional classicist is in a position to present him with a legitimate alternative to deeply problematic claims of a genetic, ancestral connection by dint of bloodline and race?\(^10\)

Understanding America's classical inheritance and its role in the construction of American identity might actually help to explain the intensity of the Black Athena debate. That debate is, on one level, about how persons who self-consciously reject much of the European cultural tradition as useless or even as a source of life-experiences and expectations can nonetheless come to possess a part of the classical heritage. If we view it from the perspective of the responsible popularizer, the Black Athena debate actually holds out the possibility of raising a set of hard (i.e. philosophically interesting) questions and issues and thereby engaging the expertise of classicists of many stripes. A desirable, if not an easily achieved, goal for classicist-popularizers would be to extend the debate beyond the issue of whether or not Greeks were biological or linguistic Africans, to ask the much more important question of why so many of us care so deeply about who the Greeks (and Romans) really were and what they accomplished. Such a conversation might reasonably start by drawing in some of those white folk of European ancestry currently involved in the seemingly endless debate about Indo-European origin: language, homeland, culture, mythology. I would expect to learn a good deal from a well-moderated discussion in which an Afrocentrist sincerely interested in Greek or Indo-European origin asked an Indo-Europeanist why he chose to devote his life to the attempt at discovering precisely where and when Europeans got their start and with measuring how much they actually contributed to classical culture.\(^11\) If such a discussion is to go anywhere, the moderator must, I suppose, be a classicist and a deeply responsible popularizer.

If currently notorious, the Black Athena controversy is hardly a unique example of contemporary socio-cultural phenomena that require the intervention of classicists if they are to be sensibly discussed and (perhaps) adequately explained. The appeal by various figures within the U.S. "Militia Movement" to classical military exempla and ancient republican virtues, and their creation of a neo-conservative terminology meant to resemble Latin, cry out for comment by classicists. Absent the intervention into the Black Athena debate, or into the debate over the meaning of the Militia Movement, of numerous specialists in classical studies who are willing to address non-specialist audiences, the noise level inevitably rises and the potential for productive intellectual engagement recedes. For better or worse, Ameri-
can culture simply cannot and will not rid itself of its classical inheritance and professional classicists have an essential — although hardly a monopolistic — role to play in discussions about the meaning of that heritage. Responsible popularization will never and should never be all that classical studies is about. With some luck and much diligence, there will always be a body of serious students engaged in learning the classical languages and there will always be devoted experts to teach them. But by the same token, popularization has always been a part of what classical studies is about — a proper history of "popular classics in America" would, I think, reveal that the address to the populace is a familiar well that classicists have returned to, time and again, from the very beginning. If this is right, those classicists who seek to popularize are keeping faith with past generations of scholars, not compromising "the standards" of our intellectual predecessors. In sum, to the extent that we, as classicists, care about the wider culture and about the future of our profession, we have a duty to engage in the exciting work of popularizing as responsibly as we know how. Such an undertaking does not in any sense free us from critical attention: responsibility implies the willingness to be judged by one's academic peers. Popular work should be criticized by knowledgeable experts with the same vigor, and with the same collegial spirit of scholarly generosity, as the most esoteric scholarly monograph. But those who disparage the very enterprise of responsible popularization, those who choose to sneer at "mere" popularizers on general principles, are casting shame upon their intellectual forebears, putting the profession at risk, and failing in their duty to contribute to the betterment of the culture at large.

Notes

1. I make no claims here about the institutional form of classics' thriving; it may well be the case that the traditional structure of the college or university "department of classics" will no longer be the primary home for practitioners. But that is another topic — without a thriving field, issues of institutional locus are simply irrelevant for the great majority of American classicists.