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## **Achilles heel; Perspective**

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A generation of classical scholars is emerging who cannot read Latin and Greek in the original. Ilsa Godlovitch talks to traditionalists and modernists

The days are long gone since the perfect English gentleman had a Greats degree from Oxford and could recite reams of The Iliad in flawless Greek. The modern classics student is probably better versed in the lyrics of Richmond Lattimore's translation than in the minutiae of Homer.

More than two-thirds of those who study classical subjects as undergraduates now do so mainly without a fluent grasp of Latin and Greek. While the number of traditional classics students is fairly static, the number of classical studies enthusiasts is rising rapidly.

There is no longer debate that such courses should exist. With the deterioration of Greek and Latin in state schools any enthusiastic convert is welcomed. Whether the new breed will pass the test and be admitted to the academic fraternity as serious candidates to carry out research is another matter. For many traditional classicists brought up on a diet of Greek declensions and conjugations the new languageless classical civilisation student is like a flightless bird.

Jasper Griffin, of Balliol College, Oxford, says: 'If you met someone who was reading Shakespeare as a Frenchman and you asked what he was reading and it turned out to be a translation of Shakespeare into French prose you would think he was going to lose rather a lot of it.

'Of course studying in translation is not just as valuable. It's better than nothing. It's important for the health of the nation that people know that there was a man called Aeneas who founded Rome and that they know who Achilles was. Now of course it's sad that people can't study Greek but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't teach them who Achilles was and who Zeus was. That would be a gesture of petulant self-destruction. But if we're going to go on having professional scholars they at least will have to learn the languages at some time.'

The linguistic shortcomings of modern classics students are not a problem Oxford has to deal with often. Even so, the decline in classics teaching at schools has led Oxford to introduce a patchwork range of options this year to deal with everyone from the Eton scholar whose first word was mater, to the student who has not studied either of the classical languages beyond GCSE. All the courses will have a high linguistic content. People with less linguistic experience will simply be expected to work harder to iron out their deficiencies.

In some other universities, classical studies courses with scant language content have been an increasingly popular option for some time and even traditional courses have been modified to make the content broader with easily digestible texts in translation. Students in the United States have for some time been starting classics at undergraduate level and sometimes acquire one or two classical languages only as postgraduates.

Allowing people who are not linguistically competent free rein in the world of academic research is a scenario that gives British traditionalists nightmares. 'You'll certainly finish up with some professors who don't know very much Latin and Greek,' says Professor Griffin. 'There are already some in America now. It is not absolutely impossible to learn the languages if you don't learn them at school, but if you don't tackle them until you're an undergraduate your memory is not quite as good as it was and you don't want to subject yourself to this immediately unrewarding discipline of learning the verbs, and the syntax and so on. So there are certainly people in America who make the most gross mistakes in the translations of the texts they research.'

In the *Classical Review* of 1981 Griffin said of Virgil's *Georgics*: A new interpretation by Gary B Miles, published by the University of California Press: 'The book has interesting moments, but they are outweighed by the evident fact that the author is not sufficiently at home either in the Latin language or in Latin poetry to embark on such a study. The entrance fee which should be charged for admission to discuss an author like Virgil is the ability to understand his text.' Fourteen years later he has not forgotten the book, and he has not changed his mind about the linguistic abilities of Professor Miles's fellow classicists.

'Most people in America know that in certain universities it is not very likely that you will get first-rate research, and that in other universities if you want first-rate research you tend to go to A and not to B. The people who have never learnt a language properly don't know what it is to know a language properly and they just slash away, putting down whatever comes to mind. Actually understanding a literary text in another language is not absolutely simple.'

Away from the classical pillars of Oxford, John Betts, head of the classics department at Bristol University and general editor of the Bristol Classical Press, faces the job of presenting digestible classics to students whose Latin and Greek is by no means at the high standard Griffin prefers. Bristol Classical Press's texts in translation, commentaries based on translations, and texts with extensive notes and vocabulary are in stark contrast to the hard-backed Oxford Classical Text series which provides an expert scholarly text with apparatus criticus and not an English word in sight.

'I was brought up as a very straight philological classicist and I've come to realise over the years that there are other ways of looking at things .. We tell our students in classical studies that they are doing a different job, and that while their classical colleagues are studying the text of one book of Virgil in the original, the classical studies people are reading the whole of Virgil in English and are therefore getting an overall literary picture which is perhaps denied to the linguist or which the linguist can only get if they take the trouble to read the whole thing in translation.

'I think it's a valuable degree. In Bristol we are one of the only places which admits people for an MA in classical studies who come with very little language and we encourage them to take beginners courses. I think the pattern is going to be much more like America. To say that American research is worse is a very British and Oxford prejudice. It is in many respects different from ours. It's very much based in theoretical ways of thinking - in psychoanalysis, in literary critical theory. I

don't think that makes it less valid because its practitioners may not have the same grasp as Jasper Griffin on the words of the actual language.

'There are some ancient authors who are really difficult such as Pindar and some of the obscurer reaches of Greek philosophy. In these things it is very easy to go into a whole lot of literary criticism on the basis of an English translation and find that you're discussing the wrong point, but most things are open to students of classical studies.'

The linguistic minutiae of text is still a British speciality and one so hotly in demand for all branches of classics that the shortlist for senior ancient history professors at Yale regularly contains more Oxbridge academics than Americans. But some 2,000 years after the ancients discovered textual analysis for themselves and started a trend that enveloped every known classical author in swathes of critique, some US scholars are moving away from linguistic research to a style almost touching on literary criticism and political theory which does not require such a great degree of competence in language. Needless to say, these US techniques are not always welcomed by British academics.

Richard Saller's chaotic route into this sort of analysis is probably typical of a new generation. He started his first degree as an engineer at Illinois, fell into ancient history after a side course in Roman history in translation, and did his PhD in Cambridge. He is now a professor of classics and ancient history at the University of Chicago.

'In some ways not having that Greek and Latin background can be liberating. As a result I read a much richer variety of things than a lot of my friends in Cambridge, and the work that I've done is in social history that comes from reading in sociology and anthropology. In a book that I just published on the Roman family I tried to tackle it from the angle of a cultural understanding of family ideals of the Romans but also in terms of demography, and I think I did that in a way that nobody with British training had done. I don't know whether they could have done it. They tend not to be much educated in quantitative methods.

'On the other hand, when it comes to editing new epigraphic texts that are discovered I don't think that I have the same kind of skills as somebody who has had that long British training. The long training is certainly good for some things but it's not the whole qualification for doing interesting research by any means,' says Saller.

Moses Finley, Professor Saller's tutor in Cambridge, was instrumental in changing the school programme in England because he thought that before 1960, students came to university better prepared to write Latin and Greek prose than they did to write a coherent argument in English about a particular problem in history.

Whether other British linguistically trained classicists will be so sympathetic to Saller's mode of investigation or to that of some of the two thirds of Britain's non-linguistic classics students who might chose to break the barriers to research is more doubtful.

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