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FOREWORD

CLASSICAL RECEPTION AND THE POLITICAL

Miriam Leonard and Yopie Prins

In a well-known passage from the *Eighteenth Brumaire* Karl Marx famously formulates the role of Rome in the French Revolution as an instance of history repeating itself: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes, in order to present the new scene of world history” (10). One reading of Marx might see him as exposing the illusion of any claim to innovation. There can never be such a thing as an unprecedented event. Marx seems to be suggesting that the French Revolution was an event not despite but because of the fact that it had a precedent. On the other hand, one might see Marx asserting that the very innovation of the event is predicated on the return of some “spirit of the past.” The “newness” of the French Revolution consists in its untimely reenactment of what Jacques Derrida has called the “very ancient” in the “very modern” (Kearney, 112). Marx continues: “The heroes as well as the parties and the masses of the old French Revolution, performed the task of their time in Roman costumes and with Roman phrases” (11). The active agents of the French Revolution achieve the “task of their time.” “Men” as Marx says “make their *own* history.” This is no regressive, nostalgic backward gaze, but rather a progressive and active mobilization of the past in the present.

Marx is just one in a long line of modern thinkers who have formulated their political thought through an engagement with antiquity. If Marx could not understand “revolution” without thinking about Rome, Hannah Arendt for her part could not conceive of the modern city without reference to its ancient Greek counterpart, locating an alternative conception of politics in the space of the *polis*. So too Sigmund Freud’s groundbreaking concept of the modern psyche could not exist without its reference to antiquity; in his reading of Greek tragedy and in his reflections on the Acropolis, Freud, like Marx, turns atavism into a revolutionary reclamation of the past. Through his encounters with antiquity Freud made the psyche part of the political vocabulary of modernity. From the Enlightenment to the present, then, the very concept of “the political” has been heavily informed by references to the classical past. Modern attitudes toward such issues as citizenship, political subjectivity, democratic versus totalitarian politics, and the status of women and outsiders repeatedly replay ancient debates about the political process. As Marx’s comments about the 1848 revolution suggest, the progress of the modern subject has been constantly measured against the citizens of the past.

In this special issue, “Classical Reception and the Political,” we seek to understand contemporary thinking about the political by making visible the “spirit of the past” that haunts even the most presentist of cultural critiques. But the contributors also reveal in various ways how modern constructs of “the political” have conditioned our receptions of the past. Just as Marx’s arresting vision of Rome as a bourgeois Republic has indelibly shaped our understanding of the ancient Empire, our vision of Athens has been forever changed by political theorists like Arendt. A new relationship to the past has been forged in their imaginings, making the reception of the past a political activity; far from a passive process of reception, the past is being mobilized to enact a new future. Thus Fredric Jameson has recently asserted that Marx himself “is classical, and the whole Marxist and Communist tradition, more or less equal in duration to Athens’s golden age, is precisely that golden age of the European left, to be returned to again and again with the most bewildering and fanatical, productive and contradictory results,” leaving us to ponder how “the category of classical antiquity may not be the least productive framework in which a global left reinvents an energizing past for itself”(117).

Classical reception, as Jameson suggests, can become contemporary political activism.

The essays collected here grew out of a collaboration between the Contexts for Classics consortium at the University of Michigan and the Institute of Greece, Rome, and the Classical Tradition at the University of Bristol. Our groups organized two conferences on the theme “Classical Reception and the Political,” one at Michigan in 2005 and one at Bristol in 2007, as a transatlantic interdisciplinary dialogue. Our goal was to historicize modern political concerns through a reading of Greek and Roman antiquity, and to rethink classical accounts of “the political” from various contemporary perspectives. Our dialogue was also a critical engagement with classical reception studies, as a field that has come into prominence over the past decade.¹ We paired papers to represent new work in this field on both sides of the Atlantic, and in responding to each other, we placed special emphasis on the interrogation of our interpretive methods. We have retained the dialogic format of our exchange in preparing this special issue by pairing British and American contributors and asking each pair to introduce their essays with a theoretical concept that has been central to the definition of classical reception studies. The following descriptions were written by the contributors and reflect the dialogue that gave rise to their individual sections. We conclude with some more general remarks on reception as dialogue.

POLITICS OF RECEPTION

In the phrase “Classical Reception and the Political,” the “and” joins two terms without specifying their relationship, opening instead the field on which we may interrogate the various modes of their conjuncture. This is no less true of the rubric under which the two first essays are grouped: “Politics of Reception.” On the one hand, “politics of reception” refers to the different models of politics that may underlie the activity of reception. On the other, it may refer to the different political structures generated by competing acts of reception. The essays by Katherine Harloe and Vivasvan Soni address the “politics of reception” from both these perspectives, revealing how classical reception studies and the history of political thought can mutually

inform one another. Harloe appeals to political thought to find alternative ways of conceptualizing processes of classical reception. She uses Arendt's notion of "action" to develop a *model* of reception that refuses the trap of understanding reception either as entirely passive ("tradition") or entirely active ("appropriation"). Soni engages in an *act* of classical reception, turning to Solon and Aristotle in order to restore the importance of the question of happiness for political thinking. He wants to recover a conception of happiness that might serve as the basis for a utopian politics.

Yet the differences in emphasis between the papers—especially the stark opposition of "theory" and "practice"—mask deeper continuities. Both Harloe and Soni demonstrate that there is a close reciprocal relationship between theorizing reception and the act of reception. The starting point for Harloe is the claim that all who are engaged in classical reception studies employ, implicitly or explicitly, some model of the process of reception, which conditions how they themselves "receive" their subject of study (their "acts" of reception). She turns to Arendt's self-consciously classicizing, narrative-based understanding of interaction ("remembrance") in order to offer an alternative to what she sees as one widespread model of reception as domination/appropriation, which she argues occludes the potential for genuine interaction between past and present. In order to rescue a viable political conception of happiness, Soni must theorize the failure of another act of classical reception, namely the failure to develop a viable politics of happiness in the American Revolution (and in Arendt). The political translation of happiness goes awry because the Americans seek to preserve many aspects of the classical idea of happiness without preserving its implicit relation to narrative. So, the papers argue that "classical reception" must involve some implicit theoretical reflection on the act of reception itself.

There is a second affinity between the two papers. In each case, "reception" of the classical conception—"interactivity" or "happiness"—requires us to reconstruct or reactivate the relevant concept for readers. Rather than turning to the classical world to discover a ready-made concept we can simply appropriate, Harloe and Soni point to a conception of "classical reception" that involves far more than the inheritance of ancient ideas. Classical reception must be active as well as passive, engaged not only with the past but also with

the present. Moreover, beyond the interaction it establishes between past and present, classical reception may also open the way to an alternative future, a future that has been concealed or obscured by the present, and to which the past, paradoxically, allows us access. Thus, an act of classical reception is not a matter of just looking back to the past, nor is it simply being trapped by the obsessions of the present. It draws its inspiration from what the past makes possible for the future. In a Heideggerian vein, the essays suggest that to be political, an act of classical reception should involve all three “temporal ek-stasies,” orienting us simultaneously to past, present, and future.

SOVEREIGNTY

Sovereignty—the exclusive right to wield power over a territory, a system of governance, or a population—is an inextricable feature of that realm of life and interaction designated by “the political.” Whether exercised in the name of a single ruler or the people as a whole, sovereignty is implemented by a state whose functionaries and institutions make systemic control—of territories and persons—possible. The essays by Ika Willis and Elizabeth Wingrove foreground this aspect of “the political” by interrogating the connection between state power and the circulation of classical texts: how does the exercise of sovereignty affect their reception, and conversely, how do the practices of classical reception affect the exercise of sovereignty?

At issue are both the material and rhetorical dimensions of reception. Inasmuch as the state can impede or enable access to written and spoken texts, it can delimit hermeneutic possibilities: what might be called the imaginative resources available for interpretation will contract or expand as a function of the exercise of sovereign power. Insofar as sovereignty is figured in and by classical texts, their reception can itself provoke recognition of state power that then becomes a condition of the text’s intelligibility. In both instances, analyzing the effects of sovereignty directs our attention to processes of transmission, those moments and modes of dialogic possibility critical to any account of reception.

To inquire into the relationship between sovereignty and classical reception, the essays in this section therefore foreground dialogue,

but they do so from perspectives that reflect distinct disciplinary locations. Willis, a classicist and literary critic, draws on Derrida's accounts of textual mediation in her readings of the Latin epic poetry of Vergil and Lucan. Wingrove, a political and social theorist, engages debates in scholarship on the modern public sphere in her intertextual reading of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the clandestine correspondence of an eighteenth-century prisoner who took the name Philoctète. These very different theoretical and textual preoccupations converge at crucial junctures. The first concerns the textual location of "the political." Focusing on a dialogue comprised of illicit letters, Wingrove reconstructs an episode of criminal communication that was both an effect and elusion of sovereign power. Willis, by contrast, focuses on the networks of transmission necessary to any dialogue, asking how the histories of Rome composed in the *Aeneid* and *De Bello Civili*, respectively, incorporate structures of sovereignty that then become mechanisms of those histories' transmission.

A second conjuncture concerns address: that words arrive at their destination is a rhetorical and material feat essential to dialogue and sovereign control alike. Willis suggests that *Aeneid* and *De Bello Civili* configure "the political" as precisely the space of address: not only are both poems directed toward a sovereign but they also delineate the devices and techniques through which states aim to control interpretative options. From this perspective, the act of reception itself binds readers and listeners to the polis, as that very act recalls particular structures of sovereignty. Wingrove likewise suggests that reception configures "the political," but she emphasizes the interpellative possibilities retained by the Bastille's illicit letter-writers. While the sovereign inescapably remains a potential recipient, the prisoners' letters reveal challenges to reception that exceed those devised by the state. From this perspective, a politics of direct address—the axiomatic premise of much public sphere scholarship—becomes uncertain ground on which to stake claims for a democratic polis. Despite their divergent political emphases, the essays do not offer some stark choice between reception as a means of identifying sovereignty's omnipresent affects and reception as a means of resisting them. On the contrary, both analyses wend through mechanisms of state power that are simultaneously ubiquitous and porous, authoritative and unstable.

REPRESENTATION

Centering on the often disavowed connections between material objects and political formations, Duncan Kennedy and Basil Dufallo engage the rubric of reception as “representation” from a special angle. Although they address widely disparate authors (Catullus and Bruno Latour), their essays are linked by an interest in reception as an active rather than a passive process, one that always implies other participants. Hence Kennedy and Dufallo present their mutual concern with representation as both figuration and proxy, senses that Latour finds sundered in the “settlement” of the modern “constitution,” but whose interrelation the premodern Catullus makes central to his famous “miniature epic,” poem 64. From this emerges, in turn, the papers’ particular approach to “the political.” Strikingly, Catullus seems aware of the mythological Greek past as an “object of concern” in Latour’s sense: as one among a set of things gathering around itself an interested public, a body politic. This gathering constitutes an event, a staging, that both Catullus and Latour subject to intense scrutiny.

Such correspondences spanning centuries constitute a powerful argument for the continued relevance of classics and classical reception, for Latour himself, in rethinking “the political,” draws heavily on the same tradition of Greco-Roman rhetorical persuasion whose broader cultural dimensions Catullus’s poem (with its reminiscences of Greek tragedy, Alexandrian poetry, and Catullus’s own education as a member of the Roman elite) helps illuminate. The focus of both authors, moreover, on the political significance of aesthetic objects is of particular relevance to students of classical reception. Latour directs our attention to “things”: the material focal points, the neglected “concern” directing our political activity. Catullus trains a questioning regard on those who embrace the Greek past in all its objecthood and object richness: in its “thingness” and its “things,” with those words carrying the full significance that Latour would have us find in them. Latour presents a broad range of objects that may play this role within political discourse and practice. Catullus makes a particular set of Greek things objects of deep concern and contest; or rather takes them up as such, since, far from possessing some independent existence, they cannot be disassociated from the previous acts of literary and cultural reception toward which poem 64 continuously points.

Just as Latour calls attention to the enormous activity needed to stabilize the objects of science as bearers of a “truth” about reality, that is, one that an observer might “passively” receive, so Catullus makes his audience aware of receptivity to the Greek mythological past as anything but a passive state: the poem’s staging of receptiveness to this past, through the figure of its narrator, implies, rather, a large number of very active choices about what to perceive and what to occlude, and subtle but unavoidable inconsistencies when the ramifications of certain of these choices are followed up. Catullus’s poetics, in this respect, instantiate Latour’s cognitive discourse breaking down the opposition between two senses of the word “represent”: for Catullus, representing the Greek past in the sense of depicting it is also representing it in the sense of standing, however problematically, both with it and for it; seeing and hearing it; enlisting it in one’s particular cause. The represented Greek past is here, to borrow from Latour’s description of the true subject of a democratic politics, something of a “fermentation . . . never exactly in accordance with itself” and never entirely “led or commanded or directed from above.”

DESIRE

In their readings of Greek and Roman narratives, Ellen O’Gorman and Silke-Maria Weineck explore the politics of human sacrifice. Sacrifice tends to be analyzed in terms of religion, anthropology, or culture, but here, *facere sacra*, the making of the sacred, emerges as the making of the polis. Why do so many myths of the ancient city suggest that the political community needs the blood of its progeny in order to endure and thrive? These essays move from an analysis of the desires that structure these stories to the desires that shoot through their reception.

O’Gorman reflects on the story of a gaping void in the middle of the Forum Romanum, an abyss at the center of Rome that can only close once the soldier Marcus Curtius, fully armed, leaps into its depth. Weineck returns to Oedipus, modernity’s favorite ancient subject, in order to stress that Oedipus, too, was once a sacrifice to the future of the city, exposed not in order to save the king’s life but the future of Thebes. In each case, the tension between individual and collective

needs and desires is discharged in acts of violence the logic of which continues to reverberate in contemporary political speech. There is, however, a crucial difference: the sacrifice of the soldier succeeds, and Rome rises—the sacrifice of Oedipus fails, and Thebes falls.

Reading Livy's account of Marcus Curtius, O'Gorman turns to the discourse of history and the desires it both exposes and conceals. If the historian's task implies the designation of the historical subject, this subject emerges as a political being that must be understood in relation to civic, military, and religious demands—culminating in the demand for self-sacrifice to the well-being of the community. Weineck, in turn, reflects on the desires that have driven the reception of Laius as either dead father or bad father, in order to *conceal* his sacrifice. In both articles, the political is thematically organized around the city's demand for sacrifice; the individual must give up something (his life, his son's life, his identity) in order for the community to be initiated or sustained.

At first glance, sacrifice mediates between the needs and desires of individual and community. However, it also confronts the individual with a split *within* his desire, an ambivalent wish both to preserve and to destroy the precious object, the desire both to "let the city go to hell" and to participate in the libidinal investments of the collective, to go to hell oneself. Weineck explores this dilemma through narratives of Laius and Oedipus that set *oikos* and *polis* into violent conflict, while O'Gorman analyzes the paradox of the soldier's agency in Roman myths and historical representations. What needs drive the reception of sacrificial myths? The active participation in the "expectations, desires, fears, and projects" of characters in myth, narrative, or history is a mode of reception that renders representations of the past particularly alive to the needs and desires of their later readers. Both father and soldier stand forth as figures who appear at the apex of patriarchal structures, and who stand for the *logos* of their respective politico-historical discourses. The classical past occupies a privileged position in such discourses, and it has from the outset served as a touchstone for critical theory as much as for political thought. But the concept of sacrifice reveals a fault line not only between individual and collective desires, but even within individual desire itself, and thereby opens up a gap in this "foundational" logic.

PERFORMANCE

The essays by Pantelis Michelakis and Yopie Prins take up the popular reception of Greek tragedy in order to reflect further on the contradictory politics of performing tragedy, on the stage and on the page. Both have a historical interest in the circulation of classics at the turn of the twentieth century, which they combine with a critical interest in questions of performance and identity. Their approach to classical reception and the political is therefore defined in terms of performance. Drawing in different ways on the critical concept of performativity, Michelakis explores the performative context of large-scale national theater festivals for the revival of classical drama, while Prins considers translations of Greek tragedy by women as a gender-inflected performance.

Performances of Greek tragedy assumed special significance within the consolidation of modern nation-states at the end of the nineteenth century, as Greek tragedy was reinvented within institutional frameworks that today we can easily recognize as “modern,” such as schools and universities, theater festivals, and professional theater. Michelakis and Prins engage with the historically specific practices and institutions that constitute the necessary “spaces” of performance reception. Both papers revisit the political potential of performance, of doing things with words and using classical drama as an agent for social change. Greek tragedy in performance has been a favored object of analysis within classical reception studies, often with an investment in tragedy as a politically radical art form. However, the essays argue for the territorialization of reception through performance, grounding reception within personal and institutional spaces that can be understood as constraining as well as enabling. The same acts can be understood as reiterating hegemonic discourses and potentially counter-hegemonic in challenging the discourses they embody.

In the collective performances of theater festivals, and in individual performances of translation by women, performativity emerges not only as a practice of representation and display but also as a practice of absorption and embodiment. The shaping of individual and collective identities through identification with Greek tragedy is based neither on a universalist conception of a timeless tragedy nor on a politically radical idea of tragedy confined to an idealized past; rather,

these identifications are acted out in the present moment of performance, turning the reception of Greek tragedy into a space for modern performances of the political.

ENLIGHTENMENT

The essays by Miriam Leonard and James I. Porter explore two historical periods in which the reception of antiquity found itself at the heart of political debates about European identity: the run up to the French Revolution and the Second World War. In reading Hellenized figures of the Jew in the work of Moses Mendelssohn and Theodor Adorno, the focus in each case is the relationship between German philhellenism and the question of enlightenment. In both periods, German explorations of the Hellenic ideal frequently alluded to a conceptual opposition between Hellenism and Hebraism as a key to understanding the conflicting traditions of European thought.

The Enlightenment's investment in Greek rationality had its corollary in the desire to model a new concept of European citizenship on the classical polity. Debates about whether Jews could have access to reason were directly linked to the problem of their political status. At the heart of both Leonard's and Porter's essays is the entanglement of notions of enlightenment with issues of political subjectivity. They investigate the inescapably classical vocabulary of modern concepts of the political and ask what room is left for those who are willfully excluded from this classicizing tradition. In the two periods the essays explore, where ethnic and cultural affiliations were key factors in ideological debates, being a "Greek" and being a Jew had become political. Classics was inescapably political—and therefore racialized, as well.

The foundation of modern classical studies on the exclusion of the "Jew" at the very dawn of the Enlightenment gives insight into the troubled history of German philhellenism. These investigations uncover a complex overlapping of complicity and defiance in the ideologically fraught dialogue between antiquity and modernity. An awareness of this multilayered history should put into new perspective the continued (implicit and often explicit) desire to found modern notions of European and Western identity on a classical ideal. Through their respective explorations of Moses Mendelssohn and Adorno the

essays highlight how their idiosyncratic identifications with Socrates and Odysseus open up the possibility of subversion. The papers thus explore both the violence of the political reception of antiquity and the potential for political resistance.

RECEPTION AS DIALOGUE

Embracing diverse approaches, the contributors to this special issue, “Classical Reception and the Political,” demonstrate that the emergence of the modern subject, whether it is understood individually or collectively, is mediated by different ways of reading classical antiquity. In collecting these twelve essays we represent an ongoing dialogue about classical reception studies, and we propose dialogue as a productive paradigm for new work in this field: our goal is to reflect further on some of its assumptions, offering a critique of classical reception while also insisting on classical reception as a form of cultural critique. This approach to reception is not a general hermeneutic method such as reader response theory, which would be valid for any text at any time regardless of its historical situation, nor do we wish to make reception into an empirical study for cataloguing historical data and trans-historical themes; rather we see reception as a theoretical practice that is constituted in the analysis of two clashing historical horizons. What has emerged in the course of our dialogue with each other, then, is a new claim for the future of classical reception studies: a hope that the practice of reception will constitute a new kind of theory.

Note

1. For general and programmatic introductions, see Hardwick; Hardwick and Stray; Lowe and Shahabudin; Martindale; Martindale and Thomas; Wyke and Bidiss. For some more specific interventions, see Armstrong; Barkan; Edwards; Goldhill; Hall, Macintosh, and Wrigley; Leonard; Marchand; Porter; Prins.

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