

Why I Love the Classics

Maybe it started with Elizabeth Taylor in Cleopatra. Or maybe it was Charleston Heston in Ben Hur.

I've often asked myself how a kid in southern Illinois, born to working-class parents and living in cornfields, could develop a passion for the classical world so deep that it led to studies of Homeric Greek and Ciceronian Latin, journeys to archeological sites throughout the classical world, and intimate relationships with men whose genetic material carries a 'recent' script, biologically speaking, of these lands and peoples. Even the man I lived with for 14 years—whose chromosomes have a slightly more distant claim on the cradle of Western civilization—I met at the Acropolis in Athens. We returned to the islands and to the Peloponnese throughout our relationship. Our son was conceived in the Cyclades not far from where Jason found the Golden Fleece. We named him Alexander.

Of course not everyone who has an interest in the classics goes to these lengths. But I was, and I continue to be, driven to possess knowledge—something about the way my mind works, a kind a disability perhaps. Often I get it intellectually right away, but it may take me months, or even decades, before it sinks in, assimilates, becomes a part of how I live and think, almost as if those odd neuronal loops had to be polished before their messages reflect enough synaptic spark to really shine. The classic world is so exquisitely complex and bizarre that I've really had to struggle, sorting through the data, recombining the info, adding mental hyperlinks, and finessing the navigation. I've had to touch the stone bathtub where Clytemnestra slit Agamemnon's throat to make the story 'real', translate Sappho in order to really understand what she was saying. Like any discipline worth looking into, the more you know about the classical world, the more you want to learn.

It's the weird stuff that hooks me, always. Three women sharing a single eye, passing it around like a saltshaker. Two pairs of twins born from twin goose eggs. The *omphalos*, navel of the world—Zeus released two super-sonic eagles in opposite directions, and when their paths crossed, they knew they had it: X marks the spot. I stood in Delphi and looked at the *omphalos*, a smooth, conical stone. By then I could link the object to meteorites and to other forms of Bronze Age stone worship, but it didn't really help make sense of a culture that could conceive of, must less institute, a terrestrial umbilical plug. The list of weirdnesses goes on and on. Just the other night at a party I recounted the story of the guy who claimed that women enjoy sex more than men—he knew, of course, because he'd lived as both a mortal man and a woman—and was blinded for his observation. His story baffles me still, even in the context of a Feminist critique that deploys a patriarchal usurpation of an archaic matriarchal culture. One thing about the myths: you can pick your theory—psychological, social, political, historical, linguistic, Darwinian—and make a case for interpretation, enriching your understanding along way.

After mythology, I branched out to philosophy and science, where things in the classical and Hellenistic world maintain a curious, unrepentant edge. I kept seeing concepts that made sense to me—the notion of a Republic seems like perfectly reasonable territory—and things that didn't, such as the *agathos* daemon who protects Socrates from harm, or the curious Pythagorean injunction (among other curious Pythagorean injunctions) to put on the right shoe before the left shoe, except after bathing. Eratosthenes's contributions to geometry, Aristotle's inauguration of the natural sciences, Ptolemy's promotion of empirical astronomy, Archimedes's genius in engineering, and all the rest, seem so logical until you realize that they existed side-by-side with a firm belief in various mystery religions whose initiates, like Plato, were sworn to secrecy. Plato never spilled the beans—and how could he? Some of his contemporaries maintained that beans contain the souls of the dead.

Given their torch-bearing role, how did the Greeks, I wondered, process the tension between rationalism and irrationalism at different periods and epochs of their ascendancy? How could one tiny country that peaked over 2000 years ago have such resilient impact across the humanities and sciences? How come what they said still matters so much that our own culture feels belated, almost as if we were destined to walk in the furrows made by those who plowed the fields so long ago?

The classical Greek world pointed me, Janus-style, in two directions—back through the Minoans to Egypt and forward to Rome, Byzantium and beyond. The more I learned, the more continuities I was able to recognize. Three-and-a-half thousand years of Dynastic Egyptian civilization was, and continues to be, a big help in decoding the classical *ethos*—both at the beginning, with the primordial Egyptian myths (Leda has a precedent, after all), and at the end, with Alexandrian scholarship, which forks back to Athens and Rome. Hearing Homer sung as we think it might have been sung—and trying to sing it myself—was a watershed moment in the development of my own poetry and prose stylistics. Then came the Etruscans, wielding their by-now customary lightning bolts; the Sumerians with their impassive ET eyes; the Akkadians with their mysterious, acrobatic goats; and the Phoenicians, with their furious, even grotesque, poppy addictions. As I moved in and around the Mediterranean basin—literally, from home to home, and in my scholarship—I saw patterns everywhere, and read the experts who know more about those patterns than I ever will.

While the imaginative freedom of classical culture—an imagination I envy because it's so much more creative, more plastic than my own—continues to draw me into study, little by little over the years my awareness of abstruse 'otherness' is coupled with an equally strong notion of down-home familiarity. Them is me. Jack Kerouac and Homer tell the same basic story. Lucretius and Roger Penrose are not so far apart. The Arab scholar, Ibn' Arabi, and the Hebraic scholar, Abulafia, who both were influenced by the classics, have a lot in common because of the classics. And Shakespeare, who was poised to riffle through the re-release of the scrolls, really hit the nail on the head. The bang still echoes. *Star Wars*. The *Matrix* trilogy.

Just the other day, I stood in the Roman Forum and looked at the Roman Senate for the first time. Such a small building, I sighed. It's almost apologetic. I remembered sitting on Hadrian's Wall in the Northern reaches of the Roman Empire near Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, and years later, marveling at triumphal Roman arches in Palmyra, Syria, not far from the border of Iraq. Nearly every day in Provence I cross the Via Domitia, the Roman fast track through France to Spain. I wondered how such a small group of men could maintain their power in a violently heterogeneous world from such a teeny, tiny place so very long ago. I'm just now beginning a closer study of Rome, and I hope to fill in various historical gaps (and sort out confusions) along the way. The fact that the lights went out in the classical world at the moment monotheistic religious fanaticism took root—appropriating images, concepts and story lines already in circulation for millennia—disturbs me, given political struggles for monolithic religion on the current world stage.

If I had my druthers, I'd make study of the classics a required component of *every* college degree. I really can't think of any better way of helping students understand the world they live in and the struggles they face, no matter what discipline they specialize in. Context determines content, after all. And our main frame is the classical world.