

*Inclusive classics and pedagogy:  
teachers, academics and students in  
conversation*

Book or Report Section

Accepted Version

Goff, B. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0598-2843> and Petsalis-Diomidis, A. (2023) Inclusive classics and pedagogy: teachers, academics and students in conversation. In: Libatique, D. and McHardy, F. (eds.) Diversity and the Study of Antiquity in Higher Education: Perspectives from North America and Europe. Classics in and out of the Academy. Routledge, London, pp. 121-130. ISBN 9781032235127 doi: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003278016-11> Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/111466/>

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To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781003278016-11>

Publisher: Routledge

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*Inclusive Classics and pedagogy: teachers, academics and students in conversation*  
**Barbara Goff (University of Reading) and Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis (University of St Andrews)**

This chapter reflects the opening panel of the 2021 Classical Association annual conference which took place online.<sup>1</sup> We were invited to organise a panel because of our Inclusive Classics Initiative launched in 2020 which offers an inclusive platform for conversations – sometimes difficult ones – that aim to help shape our discipline in a more equitable and liberatory mould.<sup>2</sup> A key feature of this initiative and its events is to enact inclusivity by actively seeking out voices which have been, and still are, marginalised, and by eschewing polarising discourses. The exchange of ideas amongst academics at a variety of levels and their students, as well as schoolteachers and pupils, has been an important feature from the outset. The use of online events is a way of reaching diverse and international audiences, while we have continually experimented with formats.<sup>3</sup> The Inclusive Classics Initiative foregrounds successful modes of making classics increasingly inclusive, thus amplifying positive work and voices which might otherwise not be heard. At the same time it recognises that there is yet much work to be done for the discipline to become truly inclusive, in its demographic makeup and in the objects of scrutiny and its epistemic modes.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://classicalassociation.org/conference/ca-online-conference-2021-videos/>. The panel began five with 3-minute ‘spotlight talks’. These were: Lauren Canham on ‘Ancient Paradigms of Disability on the Curriculum’; Hardeep Dhindsa on ‘Chromophobia: Recolouring the Classics’; Victoria Leonard on ‘Caring and the Classics’; Joe Watson on ‘Queer Classics and Classics for Queers; or, Beyond Gay Men Reading Plato’; Bobby Xinyue on ‘Race, Inclusivity, and the Future of Classics’. These talks were followed by a conversation among Tristan Craig (student, University of Edinburgh), Florence Heaton (student, Runshaw College), Justine McConnell (Senior Lecturer, King’s College London), Claude McNaughton (teacher, Pimlico Academy), Rosie Tootell (teacher, Runshaw College) and Aaron Zeleke (student, Pimlico Academy). The panel closed with a series of short reflective comments by Amy Coker (Cheltenham Ladies’ College and University of Bristol), Katherine Harloe (University of Reading), Arlene Holmes-Henderson (King’s College London), Neville Morley (University of Exeter), Isabel Ruffell (University of Glasgow) and Tim Whitmarsh (University of Cambridge). The contributions published here represent all parts of the panel and a range of approaches.

<sup>2</sup> 2020: <https://ics.sas.ac.uk/events/towards-more-inclusive-classics> and <https://cucd.blogs.sas.ac.uk/files/2020/09/GOFF-AND-PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS-Inclusive-Classics-Report.pdf>. 2021: <https://ics.sas.ac.uk/events/towards-more-inclusive-classics-ij> and <https://cucd.blogs.sas.ac.uk/files/2021/12/Inclusive-Classics-II-report.pdf>. Planned events: (1) Panel on ‘Neurodiversity and Classics’, CA annual conference 2022 (2) International online workshop 2023, ‘Towards a more Inclusive Classics III: Material Culture’.

<sup>3</sup> In 2020 we requested pre-circulated materials to be posted on the ICS website, in order to be more inclusive to varied learning modes and disabilities (such as visual or hearing impairments); these materials were then summarised in short oral presentations at the workshops and far more time was given over to discussion. For our second international online workshop we held themed break-out rooms and project updates as well as more traditional presentations and roundtables.

The 2021 CA panel, and this chapter, are purposely multivocal: they include the perspectives of both learners and teachers from the university and school sectors. Contributors were asked to consider the question ‘In your experience in what ways is classics suited to inclusive teaching and learning?’. The most important themes which arise in these reflections are recognising diversity in the ancient world and its receptions, and in working to centre that diversity. Responding to the varied needs of learners, particularly the desire to see themselves reflected in the objects of study, emerges in a number of pieces. The contributions demonstrate in miniature form the critical reassessment that our discipline is undergoing. We highlight two elements crucial to the process of reflecting on how we want to shape our discipline: putting aside the fantasy of classical exceptionalism, and foregrounding classical reception studies in order to confront and analyse the multifarious responses to classics in and beyond academia.

**Tim Whitmarsh, A. G. Leventis Professor of Greek Culture, University of Cambridge**

John Pentland Mahaffy wrote in the introduction to *Social Life in Ancient Greece* (1874) that ‘if one of us were transported to Periclean Athens, provided he were a man of high culture, he would find life and manners strangely like our own’ (p. 3). Mahaffy wrote as an Anglo-Irish apologist for the British Empire, and there is little doubt to whom Mahaffy’s ‘us’ refers. This kind of gesture is very familiar: ‘men of high culture’ have often identified closely with aspects of the Greco-Roman world. Mahaffy’s pact of complicity is, in fact, doubly exclusive: not only does he marginalise those in the modern world who are not men or ‘of high culture’, but also he explicitly (a little beforehand) declares that other ancient societies, such as the Egyptians and ‘Hebrews’, would find the modern western world utterly alien.

The position Mahaffy adopted was neither neutral nor self-evident. He set himself firmly against those historians who would ‘reduce the motives of society to rude violence and successful force’ (p. 5). He wrote at a time when new models were emerging that questioned the idea that Greco-Roman culture was founded in civilised rationality. These ideas would in due course issue into the anthropologically-influenced scholarship loosely identified with the ‘Cambridge Ritualists’, who emphasised the strange otherness of the ancient world, deliberately challenging the idea that Greeks and Romans were ‘proto-Europeans’ (let alone proto-Christians). This ethnographic focus on the ‘otherness’ of Greeks and Romans has often carried with it a political charge. Nicole Loraux and Jean-Pierre Vernant, the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century’s primary champions of ‘anthropological’ Classics, were intellectually shaped by the climate of post-war left-wing anti-fascism.

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century we are still to an extent locked into this debate. How like ‘us’ the Greeks and the Romans were remains a live issue in scholarship, blogs and wider culture, and on social media. In its modern form, this discourse typically manifests itself either as a crypto-Mahaffian celebration of the Greeks and the Romans as the originators of western civilisation, or as a pugnacious assault on them as embodiments of values that all right-minded people should reject. Both approaches, however, are reductive and simplistic, and rest upon an implicit assumption that both ‘we’, modern observers, and ‘them’, the ancients we contemplate, are single groups unified by shared values. One positive thing we have learned in our fragmented

age is that societies (all of them) are extraordinarily diverse. It is time to kick our addiction to looking to classical antiquity for grand paradigms of moral behaviour, whether positive or negative, and acknowledge instead that diversity and social complexity are the very stuff of history.

**Tristan Craig, undergraduate in ‘Ancient and Medieval History’, University of Edinburgh**

As a then twenty-six-year-old, entering Higher Education after a gap of some five years, my route into undergraduate study was quite unlike that of most of my peers. Not only did I have a significant hiatus in my education, but my introduction to Classics had consisted of just a few weeks studying Herodotus, Suetonius, and Ovid during a year-long Access Programme. Despite my anxieties about entering a field in which I had very little background knowledge, I was pleasantly surprised to find that there was no presumption that I would have undertaken any Classical Studies before entering university. Language arguably presents one of the biggest barriers to studying Classics at undergraduate level; however, I do not feel at all disadvantaged by choosing a non-language-based Ancient and Medieval History degree. Rather, it has given me the freedom to select from a wide range of courses covering a broad period and to discover my own equally broad research interests within that. I have also managed to grasp some basic ancient Greek vocabulary throughout the course of my studies, which may not be quite enough to read Herodotus in ancient Greek, but has certainly served me well in analysing primary literary sources in conjunction with the archaeological record.

I also believe that Classical reception can play a vital role in promoting inclusivity as it allows us to bridge the gap between the ancient world and the present day. Exploring ways in which the past has been and is appreciated and appropriated can help make it more tangible and less alien to students; it can also help to reframe the narrative which associates the discipline with those at the upper end of the social stratum who have predominantly ‘owned’ it. Working with Dr Alex Imrie (National Outreach Co-ordinator for the Classical Association of Scotland), I developed a series of articles in conjunction with *Retrospect Journal*, the University of Edinburgh’s student-led History, Classics and Archaeological journal, which attempted to address some of the issues pertinent within the discipline today. Not only was it exciting to see the response to this series but as a non-traditional, working-class student, receiving the support to bring an idea like this to fruition was incredibly validating.

Ultimately, I think that the idea that Classics is a pursuit of the elite persists – that is, provided you have even encountered the term ‘Classics’ at all. That reputation is not entirely undeserved, but I do believe that a great deal is being done to challenge that position. If we remove those initial barriers to accessing undergraduate study, we may well find many more students like myself – who have the drive, the ability, and the desire to pursue study of the ancient world – are out there, and who are very much deserving of that opportunity.

**Joe Watson, PhD candidate, University of Durham**

Classics is a complex home for all queer people; although it has the potential to be a safe environment for everyone, at present, some people are able to feel more at home than others. I am a cis gay man who read Plato's *Symposium* as a teenager in what was a very formative experience for my conception of my own sexuality. Mine is not an unusual story: queer, white, cis men and women—inside and outside the academy—have read and worked on the Classics, uncovering *our* genealogies for decades. In 2021, most UK undergraduate Classics programmes provide the opportunity to study ancient sexualities to some extent, not least due to the richness of the Classical material which—however distantly—reflects us and our lives. I want to stress the potential within Classics teaching and learning to extend this inclusiveness to less dominant queer voices who have become marginalised, even within Classical queer communities. In my reading of the scholarship on queer identities outside cis male and female homosexuality, I consistently encounter views that are actively toxic, intentionally or otherwise. And such scholarship, of course, plays a key role in teaching and learning on the subject. Let us take as an example the character of Iphis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, whom we could productively and positively describe as trans masculine, given the way his narrative plays out; even recent articles about him happily print—intentionally or otherwise—problematic ideas and language about trans people which, if they had been written about gay men, would be recognised for their bigotry. Necessarily, teaching and learning on Iphis will follow these trends; students and their teachers will find it a hard job to push back on a tradition which is hostile to trans-centric approaches.

Classics, then, can—and should—do better by the trans and non-binary classicists existing in our discipline, whether as amateurs, students, researchers or teachers. We should do this by thinking about the people receiving our work, both colleagues reading our research output and students sitting in our classrooms. To stick with my example, it does not really matter whether the fictional character of Iphis, in the *Metamorphoses*, did, would have or could have identified as a trans man. What matters is that trans men—and indeed, other trans people—will be engaging with any material we produce about him. Therefore, the impetus is on us, as interested academics and teachers, to educate ourselves on what is inappropriate and why. It would be almost unthinkable to teach a course on ancient homoerotics which utilised homophobic slurs; the same cannot yet be said for work on other queer identities and people.

Classics is suitable for the types of teaching and learning which are inclusive of *all* queer people; at present, we are not meeting this potential.

### **Claude McNaughton, teacher, Pimlico Academy, London**

At Pimlico Academy, we have seen great benefits from prioritising inclusivity in the teaching of Classics, both through results and engagement. We deliver Latin to all students at Key Stage 3, regardless of setting or prior achievement. Grammatical rigour is balanced with an exploration of cultural history through translations. Every student starts on the same material to offer an inclusive approach. They may receive adapted lesson plans and resources but ultimately work towards the same tests. This has led to very successful outcomes from all sets. We have a diverse intake at GCSE with up to 50 students in a year and many pupils from lower

sets pursuing the subject and achieving fantastic results. The inclusivity of this curriculum allows all students equal opportunity.

Another success of this approach has been to remove some of the academic and social stigma which, unfortunately, is still associated with Classics. We have had success in taking our students away from purely Greek and Roman culture to different corners of the ancient world. While students still enjoy traditional topics such as Roman theatre and dinner parties, we also look at different cultures of the period. Egyptian papyri offer the chance to explore local voices and concerns while shifting the focus away from the political elite. We also look at Ethiopian culture and India, which has allowed many to connect with their own cultural heritage. Moreover, we have great success in encouraging pupils to think about different voices that can be accessed. Year 7 pupils are asked to think about the subtext in the fables of Aesop and Phaedrus. Further along, they access different reactions to empire, such as the Persian and Bactrian response to Alexander the Great. While we feel we are in a strong position in terms of the curriculum, we are working on how best to communicate the aims to students ensuring that they understand the diversity of the ancient world rather than viewing it purely through the lens of the Western male.

As our curriculum shows, Classics is a perfect subject for encouraging inclusivity in classrooms. Beyond KS3, our A-level classes have greatly enjoyed exploring aspects of queer theory in the set texts. The reversal of gender roles in Apuleius and the allusions to Catullus in Aeneid XI have prompted many student-led discussions where they can bring in their own experiences and understand how far back such ideas go. Furthermore, we have found that, because so much of what they learn does not take place in the West, the students feel that this history belongs to everyone. Classics is a way for students to experience not just the history of one country, but to explore the roots of culture and the human experience.

**Aaron Zeleke, Year 10 Latin GCSE student, Pimlico Academy, London**

Having gone to a public secondary and primary school, it was very encouraging that Latin was taught early on. Since about year 5 I was taught Latin and throughout secondary it has been taught as if that's just normal which just makes it much easier to take part in especially when there is none of that stigma of how "privileged we must be" and rather it's become the norm.

My only real criticism is that it's not taught everywhere and that this stereotype that you must be rich and going to a private school to be able to do Latin is still widespread. So I would really like to see Latin become something that is common in schools nationally. Most people I meet with outside of school are surprised I do Latin and think it is unusual and just for posh people. But it is not like this in the school.

**Florence Heaton, Year 13 Classical Civilisation A level student, Runshaw College, Lancashire**

Based primarily on how the subject was taught in my college, I found it to be relatively inclusive. Choosing this subject stemmed from my interest in antiquity, but I still had a few preconceptions before I started studying – since I'd never done it before – namely the idea that we would have to focus a lot on the white male history. However, when studying the art, religion and literature, there was a fairly good balance. Specifically in the religion topic we were able to look into the role of women and slaves, and examine the art that backs up their participation, such as at religious sites of Dodona and Delphi. Being taught by two younger female tutors was also refreshing, and throughout my two years studying Classics I have never felt that the content has been watered down or whitewashed – with themes such as the role of women and ancient attitudes towards sexuality and relationships, which formed the context to our analysis of the Odyssey and the Aeneid.

Learning was a very different experience during my second year, but in the classroom – both physical and online – everyone has always been encouraged to offer their own ideas; to start relevant discussions about the evolving study of Classics, and debate the views of the modern scholars in relation to the ancient attitudes. One key element of the course involves incorporating those scholarly opinions into our essays, and that's possibly one area that could be expanded to be more inclusive, as it seems slightly dominated by older white men. Of course there is a difficulty with a subject like this, as that is the demographic leading Classics, but going forward it would be great to explore a wider range of scholars and their opinions, such as more women or people of colour. It would also be interesting to look specifically at the role of ethnic groups in the ancient world, as there is so much to work with outside of just the mainstream euro-centric content.

**Rosie Tootell, teacher, Runshaw College, Lancashire**

A key issue faced by teachers of A Level Classical Civilisation at a college within the state sector is that the subject is not well-recognised by 'outsiders.' Prospective students, largely from state secondaries who have no prior experience in the study of Classics, do not always recognise the name of the subject and therefore do not know just how broad and inclusive Classics can be. In reality, sexuality, gender, social class, race, religion, disability, any and all of these topics can be touched upon in just one module, even one lesson, of A Level Classical Civilisation.

We had previously fallen into the trap of focusing on the aspects of Classics which are most recognisable, but which do not fully represent the scope of inclusivity that Classics can offer. We have tended to look solely to Greece and Rome, promoting the cultures of these two civilisations above all. Doing so has had the comfort of familiarity. For a long time it has been the main way Classics has been taught – it was the way we were taught, after all – and there have certainly been more resources available following this path. Such a limited approach, however, can have negative consequences, such as perpetuating the myth that the Greeks and Romans (and their modern European descendants) were somehow superior to



others, a line of argument hijacked by the far right to bolster their claims of western, and white, superiority.

Upon reflection, it was clear that we needed to do Classics justice and break this cycle. We have therefore made several adjustments to our course in order to promote inclusivity, highly influenced by the work of Warwick University's Global History centre and of the Institute of Classical Studies – the conferences 'Towards a more Inclusive Classics' hosted by the ICS inspiring our progress. For example, we have provided an opportunity in induction week to give students a new perspective on the bustling and globalised trade network of the ancient world, of which Greece and Rome were just a part. We have incorporated activities which demonstrate that historical timelines are not as linear – or as Anglo-centric – as once thought. We have also highlighted the fact that Classics does have a darker side by showing the arguments adopted by the alt-right, in the belief that introducing students to the key issues that are faced in the subject today and raising awareness of them is one step further towards combatting them. Additionally, we continue to diversify our reading list of selected scholarship and of further reading which students can use in their extended essays. Although not exhaustive, these are just some steps towards further improving the inclusivity of our course, and this will remain an ongoing challenge.

**Justine McConnell, Senior Lecturer in Comparative Literature, King's College London**

Counterintuitively perhaps, one of the reasons the discipline of Classics is so well-suited to inclusive teaching and learning is directly related to its problematic history of exclusion. That the Graeco-Roman world has, at times, been co-opted for racist, sexist, and elitist purposes – and that, in some circles, this remains the case – requires our teaching to incorporate considerations of why that is the case, how it came about, and how it can be avoided in future.

Creative writers and artists have led the way in this, exploring and contesting the uses to which the discipline has been put, and highlighting damaging and distorted appropriations of the Graeco-Roman world. I take my cue from these artists, centring their receptions of antiquity in my teaching.

Twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers such as Toni Morrison, Aimé Césaire, Bernardine Evaristo, Derek Walcott, and Marlene NourbaSe Philip, to name just a few, have engaged with classical myth to explore contemporary issues, especially related to the long legacy of slavery. They engage with the Graeco-Roman world in both critical and appreciative ways, and in doing so, also offer a model for how we might teach Classics in more inclusive ways. For each of these writers sets Graeco-Roman myth within fresh comparative contexts, rejecting the elevation of the 'classical' to a position of primacy and instead putting it into a wider dialogue that lays bare the power dynamics of Classics' history of exclusivity.

In my teaching, we often begin from these modern works. Examining Ishmael Reed's satirical syncretisation of Egyptian myth with Judaeo-Christian traditions in *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) or

Zora Neale Hurston's combination of a dash of Aeschylus with Haitian myth in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), we ask why these two writers turn to antiquity in novels set in, and reflecting on, the contemporaneous United States. We consider Wole Soyinka's identification of the myopia of claiming roots in Greek drama for Yoruba tragedy, even while he has explicitly engaged with ancient Greek literature in *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (1973). And we contrast Soyinka's stance with that of Ralph Ellison, who asserted his identification with Odysseus as much as with Brer Rabbit, as we see in *Invisible Man* (1952).

This focus on writers who have historically been omitted from the study of Classics, both because they are modern and because, as writers of colour, their work has been marginalised, begins to break down some of the barriers of exclusion surrounding the discipline. Their comparative approach allows students to see that, even before they have gained expertise in the Graeco-Roman world, their existing knowledge stands them in excellent stead and the impression of Classics as the preserve of only certain people is a pernicious mirage.