

Latin Is Neat!

An Open Letter to University Programs in Classics

from one of their fortunate daughters

After college, I went directly to graduate school, so that now, two years later, I have a master's degree in Greek and Latin. I am interested in Classics, you see; it's the subject that inspired me and excited me in college, the subject that ended up as my major, even though I never intended to be an academic.

To spend two years getting a master's degree in a subject in which one is "just" interested may be irrational. Surely it is impractical. If I had been practical, I could have spent those two years acquiring a marketable skill set like accounting or veterinary technology. By now I would have a career (not "just" a job), earn twice as much money and work half as many hours. And anyway, I could never have done it – gotten that master's degree in a subject in which I am "just" interested – unless I had had a teaching assistantship to support myself.

It is equally impractical, I'm sure, for a master's degree program to admit students who are "just" interested. One might question their commitment. One might wonder whether they are "serious" about Classics if they don't see their future financial security and professional prestige riding on their ability to explain the uses of the ablative case or discuss the Homeric question. When I say students who are "just" interested, I mean students who don't have expressed career goals in the field. For Classics, that comes down to students who don't want to become secondary school teachers or professors, and even students who don't know if they want to become secondary school teachers or professors. Most Classics departments are small, graduate degree programs even smaller—not for lack of interest in my experience, but lack of

resources. When there are only so many TA slots, and only so much funding to go around, departments need to get the most out of their graduate students. Will he come to class unfailingly prepared, or will the class stop dead in the water every time he's called on to translate? Will she be a reliable TA in whom to entrust test grades and impressionable freshmen minds? Will he complete the program (and his thesis)? Will she bring honor and glory to the department and university ever after? An applicant who knows what (s)he wants to be when (s)he grows up is a safer bet. At least you know what you're getting.

But graduate school is still school. School means learning. Learning is not just acquiring data, but getting to know other people, and places, and figuring out what one wants to be when one grows up. I had to come to graduate school to figure out a lot of things, not least of which were why Hippolytus has to die and Ascanius has to shoot Silvia's stag, but also little things like, do I want to teach high school Latin? Do I want to be a university professor? What do professors do, anyway? I had some ideas at the end of four years of college, but two more years didn't seem like much time, in the span of a life, to devote to further investigation. I had never taught a college course before. I had never made up a syllabus. I had never been to an academic conference. I had never read Vergil or Cicero! What the hell did I know?

There is this, too: a degree in Classics at any level is not a professional degree. And it shouldn't be. To say that studying Classics prepares one to do one of two things – to teach Classics or to study *more* Classics as an academic – is disingenuous, and poisonous to the field itself. It makes Classics a field of classicists, for classicists, and by classicists, with no regard for anyone or anything else. Scholarship becomes a self-important game: I write a paper arguing one way, and you write a paper arguing the other, and no one else outside our little circle ever reads or cares what we say or do, because we're just talking about a bunch of dead people who

spoke dead languages. And in our spare time, we'll teach the eight students who will become the high school teachers who will teach the next generation of students who will come to college and take our classes and pay our salaries.

But the harvest of students grows every year, and their teachers and professors don't die out fast enough. So not everyone who studied Latin can find a job as a Latin teacher. Before we know it, there are several generations' worth of Classics students who have nowhere to turn but outside of Classics for their bread and butter. Former Classics students are cleaning our hotels, making our coffee, driving our buses, maintaining our computer systems, writing our books, directing our movies, selling our movie tickets, running our NGOs and making our laws.

And that is okay in my book. I would rather live in a world of former-Classics students doing jobs outside of Classics. I am enough of a humanist to believe that the humanities make people better. In medieval China, folks took a civil service test that measured compassion. The test-taker had to write a poem. A good poem, and not just technically. The thinking, as I understand it, is that learning to write a poem forces the poet to sympathize with the poem's subject. Learning to read a poem does the same thing. Any piece of literature, any work of art, when you really want to study it to understand it, is a plea and an invitation to see the world from the artist's standpoint. Those opportunities are intangibly valuable. Dr. Lillian Doherty explained it well to her mythology class, and I wish I could remember her exact words. But the gist of it is, studying another culture requires us, from time to time, to try to imagine what it is like to be in another person's shoes. That is a skill worth having, and once learned, it can be applied to other cultures and people. Even people who aren't all dead, who don't speak dead languages. Even people we meet face-to-face, or through a newspaper article, or a computer

screen. Every interaction I have everyday with every person is informed by my classical education.

Two years ago, I prepared my application for MA and Ph.D programs. After reading the first draft of my personal statement, one of my undergraduate professors explained the problem with it: "When I was in school, there were a lot of people around who were there because they thought Classics was 'neat.' You don't want to sound like one of those people." My undergraduate advisor put it another way: "They just want to hear that you're going to go on and become a professor. It's not a contract. No one is going to find you ten years from now and say you didn't live up to the promises you made in your personal statement." So I understood how the game was played. Like a dutiful child, I wrote down in my career goals that I was going to get my Ph.D in Classics and become a scholar and a teacher, even though I was dubious about all of those projections.

At the time, I didn't think much about the goals of the departments I was applying to. For the Classics department where I ended up (as I suspect is true of most MA programs in the field) those goals include educating and preparing students who want to teach secondary school and students who want to go on to a Ph.D program. I applaud those twin goals, and applaud my colleagues who will follow those twin paths. If I had the will and the fortitude to join them, I would. I know (I am in the state of having learned) that I don't. Not now, maybe not ever. And it may not be in any department's practical interest to include a third goal: to educate students who are "just" interested, who think Classics is "neat." It is risky. All the same, I'm awfully glad for the department that was willing to educate me. I don't regret it and I hope they don't either.