

### The Influence of Classics on White Supremacy

The Classics, the study of Ancient Greek and Roman civilisations, have long been considered the foundations of Western culture, with literature, art and architecture all adorned with marks of the Classics. Yet, since its renewed interest during the Renaissance the study of Ancient Greek and Roman literature has found itself amalgamated with pro-white notions of the time, riddled with misinterpretations and a prejudiced subject focus. Continued to the present, the Classics are still often weaponised to bolster racist ideologies of the far right who admire its cultural potency. Despite the pursuit of knowledge often being noble, the legacy of classical education threatens to be tarnished by those abusing its promise of being the foundation of Western society for no good. In this paper I will examine both Classics' influence on white supremacy and societal efforts striving to reverse such influences.

Historically, Classics has held a strong appeal for politicians. Thomas Jefferson, James Garfield, and Boris Johnson all studied Classics at university. Consequently, many public speeches made by politicians have employed classical motifs to reinforce their rationality. However, in light of the prejudiced past, classical ideas have often been used to justify, on the basis of their roots in our society, racist views. In 1968 Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech was brandished with lines from Virgil's Aeneid to incite hatred against racial groups, particularly immigrants. The most famous line - "like the Roman, I seem to see "the river Tiber flowing with much blood" – is almost ironic how Powell, a Classics scholar, intensifies modern racial division through comparison to the Aeneid – a story of immigration. Additionally, the comparison grows stronger as he complains that immigrants take "spouses they have never seen" much like Aeneas and Livinia. Here, Powell is promoting a zero-sum game in that one race must dominate another. Despite a clear idea of domination in ancient Rome, this was impartial of race since the empire enveloped dark-skinned Syrians to the paler Germans, all of whom were subject to the empire's benefits and takeaways. Also, credit to Roman success was the symbiotic relations between its provinces and their citizens' ability to climb the social ladder. One marching song even joked about how Caesar first triumphed over the Gauls, then packed the senate with them! There were mixed responses to Powell's speech. Some paraded that "Enoch was right" whereas other groups such as the Beatles insulted him as "dirty Enoch Powell" in their song "Get Back (1970)".

Perpetuated into modern politics, the Capitol riots in January 2022 were flourishing with classical symbols. As rioters swooped upon the neoclassical senate house, they waved Spartan flags sporting Spartan helmets also, forcing thousands of bodies through the Capitol's gate, painting a picture much alike to the battle of Thermopylae. Their obsession with Spartan culture lends to its misrepresentation by Zack Snyder's '300'. The film contorts the historically complex battle of Thermopylae into the straitjacket of a Hollywood action film. Like any Hollywood-style villain, the viewer grows to resent the villainous Persians while Snyder simultaneously illustrates their effeminate, dark-skinned, barbaric nature. Therefore, the juxtaposition promotes a white Spartan force above their eastern invaders. Portraying themselves – like the Spartans - as defenders of Western culture, rioters waved flags inscribed with "Molon Labe" (translated as come and take it) – supposedly Spartan general Leonidas' reply to demands he lay down his weapons. Whereas none of the symbols independently advocate for white supremacy, the Capitol riots provide a fitting example for how classical ideas have been twisted to align with their racist agendas. Such agendas have been enacted by groups such as the 'Proud Boys' who display a Roman eagle on their shirt declaring "SMWE" (Six million wasn't enough – talking of the nazi genocide of Jews) or the group 'Stormfront' who include the acropolis as the banner for their neo-Nazi website. Groups like these declare and admire the Greeks and Romans as the founders of white civilisation and proclaim themselves as heirs of their tradition. Furthermore, by its assimilation with

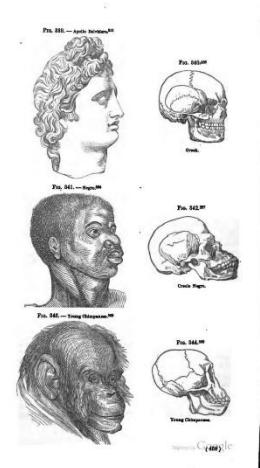
the education of the white elite in the Renaissance, individuals believe, through appropriating their take on Graeco-Roman ideologies, that their viewpoints are granted intellectual credibility.

Classics as a degree in the United Kingdom first appeared in the early nineteenth century at Oxford University. The subject contained a narrow focus on the imperial powers of Athens and Rome and even George Rawlinson, an early professor of ancient history at Oxford, admitted in a manual that “Chaldea, Assyria, Babylonia...” should be included in the subject - yet little of this was seen in his teaching. Consequently, the whitewashing of Classics ensued. Nineteenth-century scholars linked modern Europeans to Ancient Greeks by skin tone to claim an ancestral connection, a fact likely flawed by considering the Ancient Greeks’ more realistic olive skin tone and further ignoring dark-skinned people in antiquity. This led to the historical fascination over the pearly white marble sculptures excavated from classical sites. These were adorned as beautifully “pure” and, as Nathaniel Hawthorne writes, were “so pure and celestial a light”, in response to their white hue. Additionally, since fragments of paint were clearly apparent on statuary, one can only attribute their ignorance of the statues’ originally coloured appearance to the admiration for the racial superiority the wholly white pigment provided. Some even made erasures to perpetuate this white domination. In Euripides’ tragedy, *Helen*, Helen exclaims she would “shed her beauty ... the way you wipe colour off a statue” although some translations have erased any reference to colour or even a statue in this section. A similar idea is seen in translations of the *Odyssey*, where Athena enhances Odysseus’ beauty by turning his facial hair “kuaneai” (blue) and his skin darker, yet many interpret this as merely meaning “tanned”. Therefore, if colour was core to classical identity, why is this not widely accepted? By the appropriation of classical history to suit white ideals, the integrity of the subject is lost, and the door is opened to white supremacists to wield a whitewashed Classics as the hilt of their sword against social progression.

Still burdened by classical education’s troubled beginnings, universities have come under fire for racism rooted in the study of Classics. Two hundred and fifty-four alumni, of June 2020, have expressed their concerns in response to Oxford’s Faculty of Classics’ statement on racism, in an open letter urging the university to take more urgent action on the situation. The faculty’s statement highlights the diverse nature of the subject - “The first Greek poetry belongs in a tradition also seen in the epics of south Asia” - and the link between “endorsing racial superiority” and “the conditions of the slave-run silver mines of Athens”. As a result, the university has implemented modules representative of the subject’s diversity, exemplified in the recently implemented module “Persian Achaemenid History”. In American universities also, a statue known as ‘Silent Sam’, outside the University of Carolina, has been torn down due to its racist origins, particularly for its abhorrent reveal speech in which there are many classical allusions. The speaker proclaims that all history written about “Andromache or Penelope, of Virginia or Lucretia ... was for the women of the Confederacy” and in the same speech that he had “horse-whipped a negro wench until her skirts hung in shreds”, deplorably affiliates Classics to racism in the sphere of education.

Classical art has historically been used as a measure of white beauty. In 1938, Adolf Hitler set the precedent for classical art as a weapon for white supremacy. Purchasing the ‘Lancellotti Discobolus’ for five million lire, Hitler flaunted the statue in Munich’s Glyptothek. He professed at its opening to a Nazi audience that they may “speak of progress only when we have not only attained such beauty but even, if possible, when we have surpassed it (referring to the Discobolus’ beauty)”. Therefore, the statue is reframed as a standard for perverse Nazi ideologies, and, by these new standards, Hitler aims for the rebirth of the glories of classical Greece in Nazi Germany. Further elucidated by the 1938 two-part film “Olympia” documenting the Berlin Olympics, Leni Riefenstahl, the director, pans the camera across the Acropolis before finally focusing on the Discobolus. The scene transitions from the classical sculpture to an Aryan male holding the same pose exhibiting the statue as a parallel for pro-white

ideals. Taking a similar approach, Josiah C. Nott, and George R. Gliddon's 1854 book 'Types of Mankind' incorporated a racist illustration comparing the angle between the line from one's forehead to their upper teeth and the horizontal running along the ear's aperture. With Dutch anatomist Pieter Camper claiming the formula for perfect beauty lay in facial angles, the image establishes a hierarchy pinning this white unachievable 90° angle as god-like, represented by Apollo (top), and compares an image of a black skull with an ape skull, racistly assimilating the skin tone with a wild, primal background. Looking forward, an alt-right group known as "Identity Evropa" struck US campuses with posters reading "Protect Your Heritage" and "Our Future Belongs to Us" before the backdrop of the same bust, as before, of Apollo Belvedere and other statues. Coupled with other racist posters, they plague Greco-Roman art with bigotry and tarnish the respect for the discipline.



1. Illustration from Josiah C. Nott and George R. Gliddon's *Types of Mankind* pinning the Apollo Belvedere as the pinnacle of human beauty

Such beauty ideals have also affected the canon of Western art. Originating from Giorgio Vasari's book "Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors and Architects", he promoted artists mainly of Italian, Florentine descent, white and male. This has sustained to the present as Michelangelo, Claude Monet, Pablo Picasso, J.M.W. Turner, Jackson Pollock, and Andy Warhol – all white, European/American, males – dominate the Western art canon. This is coherent through classical art. When searching "famous statues in antiquity" in Google it returns the Discobolus, Venus de Milo, Aphrodite of Knidos, and the Farnese Hercules – all sculptures depicting white figures. What about the archaic art style or sculptures depicting black figures? Why are these not famed in the same way? While admittedly the Pelops Kore is an exception to the argument, the overall picture of classical art represents white bodies. Reasons attributed to the disproportion could be the Eurocentric beauty standards they represent, providing further realism than the archaic art style, displaying symmetry, proportion, and balance. Above all, these statues portray white, idealised figures, reinforcing a narrow and exclusionary concept of beauty. This perpetuates a hierarchy that excludes and marginalises non-white cultures and strengthens racist notions of superiority.

There have, however, been efforts to reverse the negative implications of Classics on our modern world as a weapon for white supremacy. Museums have begun to make the colouration of statuary clearer with colourful reimaginations of the originals occasionally coupled with the artefacts, such as the British Museum's "Luxury and Power: Persia to Greece" which displays an estimated, coloured depiction of Persian temples. Furthermore, The Glyptotek held an exhibition by Michael Armitage, "The Account of an Illiterate Man". The exhibition displayed classical artefacts, including ancient Egyptian creatures and marble sculptures depicting myths such as that of the god Apollo and King Juba II of Numidia, juxtaposed by Armitage's own work, representative of his African heritage, painting on Lubugo, a Ugandan bark cloth. As a result, Armitage is helping to start a dialogue on how classical artworks have influenced and been influenced by African culture. Moreover, even music artists have helped to spark conversations on what art is valued in our societies. Beyonce and Jay-Z in their music video "Apeshit" perform in Paris' Louvre, famous for the Mona Lisa and Venus de Milo, reinterpreting Western paintings and sculptures to celebrate black bodies in an artistic canon plagued by histories of colonialism. They achieve this by contrasting the animated, coloured figures with the frozen white figures in the past in the Louvre's paintings. Additionally, modern scholars have been striving to re-educate Classics and to diversify the study to combat the misinformed obsession over the Eurocentrism the study has provided. Martin Bernal's "Black Athena", Donna Zuckerberg's "Not All Dead White Men" and Mary Lefkowitz's "Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to

Teach Myth as History” are just a few examples of books written by scholars to combat white supremacy in Classics. Overall, there is a multifaceted endeavour to reverse the inimical impact inflicted upon Classics, highlighting a collective commitment to counteract racial prejudice caused by the small few.

It is apparent that Classics’ influence on white supremacy has originated from narrow means of education and contemporary misconceptions. These can be attributed to the representation of the classical world in modern forms of media and, in history, by its appropriation to suit the times’ white ideals. Additionally, such misconceptions have been stretched to encompass all sectors of society, particularly in areas with significant cultural potency such as politics and art. The idealised identity of the Classics, manifested in Western beauty standards, architectural principles, and cultural recognition, has led to a prolonged ideological fascination over Graeco-Roman history. This, coupled with a narrow frame of mind, demonstrated by the examples above, has been used historically to inflict hatred upon racial groups. Thus, it is impossible to dismiss the detrimental legacy of Classics, which has been wielded to buttress arguments attacking immigrants and African Americans and to value white identity cardinally, whilst erasing and disregarding coloured history. Despite such idealisation being firmly entrenched in the subject, a novel and, in my view, immensely worthwhile effort to reverse such effects strives to recast Classics in a more constructive manner. Gravitas has been placed upon the re-education and diversification of the subject to provide an accurate and critical assessment, avoiding the promotion of ideas sweet to the lips of the white supremacist. As a discipline frequently subject to the question “What is the purpose of Classics today?”, it is critical to confront the bigoted abuse of Classics, so that the discipline may continue to develop and prosper.

**Bibliography**

<https://www.ensemblepublished.com/blog/gender-and-power-relations>

<https://www.frieze.com/article/crazy-louvre-how-beyonce-and-jay-z-exploit-western-art-history-ask-who-controls-black-bodies>

[https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/SS7731005\\_7731005\\_10784869;prevRouteTS=1678320000154](https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/SS7731005_7731005_10784869;prevRouteTS=1678320000154)

<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150324-hitlers-idea-of-the-perfect-body>

*Exposed – Caroline Vout*

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0132%3Alife%3Djul.%3Achapter%3D80>

<https://eidolon.pub/turning-the-tables-on-dominance-and-diversity-in-Classics-2467fe45734c>

<https://eidolon.pub/a-historian-annotates-the-horrific-speech-given-at-the-dedication-of-silent-sam-96acf5cea5af>

[Not Just Hitler and Mussolini: Neo-Nazis Love Neoclassical Architecture too – Pharos \(vassarspaces.net\)](#)

[Capitol Terrorists Take Inspiration from Ancient World – Pharos \(vassarspaces.net\)](#)

[Faculty of Classics | Oxford and Colonialism](#)

<https://classicalwisdom.com/people/top-11-most-famous-people-who-studied-the-classics/>

<https://gradesfixer.com/free-essay-examples/an-analysis-of-the-historical-inaccuracies-in-the-movie-300-by-zack-snyder/>

<https://www.cbr.com/zack-snyder-300-remains-intensely-problematic/>

<https://www.newsweek.com/nazi-amazon-proud-boys-holocaust-1555192>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stormfront\\_\(website\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stormfront_(website))

<https://genius.com/The-beatles-get-back-no-pakistanis-version-lyrics>

<https://confluence.gallatin.nyu.edu/context/interdisciplinary-seminar/whitewashing-antiquity>

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2021/the-classical-roots-of-white-supremacy>

<https://www.glyptoteket.com/exhibition/michael-armitage/>

<https://arthive.com/exhibitions/5835>

<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/learn-speak-act/2018/02/15/classics-and-the-alt-right/>

<https://www.michigandaily.com/campus-life/over-200-students-and-administrators-protest-racist-posters-found-campus/>

<https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150324-hitlers-idea-of-the-perfect-body>

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/thousand-years-of-the-persian-book/classical-persian-poetry.html>

<https://www.classics.cam.ac.uk/prospective/undergraduate/course>

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/admissions/undergraduate/courses/course-listing/classics>

<https://www.thedailybeast.com/molon-labe-is-the-gun-loving-rights-favorite-greek-taunt>

<https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/michael-armitage-ra>

<https://talesoftimesforgotten.com/2019/11/03/debunking-the-movie-300/>

<https://www.frieze.com/article/crazy-louvre-how-beyonce-and-jay-z-exploit-western-art-history-ask-who-controls-black-bodies>

<https://www.ensemblepublished.com/blog/gender-and-power-relations>

[https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/SS7731005\\_7731005\\_10784869;prevRouteTS=1678320000154](https://library.artstor.org/#/asset/SS7731005_7731005_10784869;prevRouteTS=1678320000154)

<https://eidolon.pub/turning-the-tables-on-dominance-and-diversity-in-classics-2467fe45734c>

[https://www.salon.com/2013/04/14/no\\_pakistanis\\_the\\_racial\\_satire\\_the\\_beatles\\_dont\\_want\\_you\\_to\\_hear/](https://www.salon.com/2013/04/14/no_pakistanis_the_racial_satire_the_beatles_dont_want_you_to_hear/)

<https://pharos.vassarspaces.net/2020/10/01/proud-boys-ancient-western-civilization-trump-presidential-debates/>

<https://www.massolit.io/courses/homer-women/helen-in-the-iliad?autoplay=true>

<https://talesoftimesforgotten.com/2021/01/08/heres-what-the-costumes-and-flags-on-display-at-the-pro-trump-insurrection-mean/>

<https://pharos.vassarspaces.net/onomasticon-of-classical-pseudonyms-and-avatars/>

<https://pharos.vassarspaces.net/2018/06/15/spqr-and-white-nationalism/>

<https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/proud-boys-bigotry-full-display>

<https://www.justsecurity.org/72339/qanon-is-a-nazi-cult-rebranded/>

<https://www.historyextra.com/period/modern/classics-racial-hatred-how-far-right-hijacked-ancient-greco-roman-world/>

British Museum's "Luxury and Power: Persia to Greece" Exhibition

The Louvre

Caroline Vout – talks on classical art.

