

WHAT'S BEHIND THE LABEL?

LORNA HARDWICK

If classicists are to make their full contribution to what Adorno has called “seriously working upon the past”, then this publication and the conference that led to it give a crucial lead in asking us to re-examine and reflect on what may be understood by the term ‘popular’. The multi-directional cultural agency offered through study of Greek and Roman antiquity and its reception has been opened up by the displacement of classics from its hegemonic position in education and in the historical understanding, critical thinking, and imagination of the wider public. Modes of encountering Greek and Roman material have been revolutionized. As a result, scholars are developing a range of strategies that recognize that practitioners, readers, and the wider public have a myriad of entry points into this rich field. When ancient cultures are recuperated into contemporary consciousness they once again, but in very different ways, contribute to understanding of the past and its roles in the construction of cultural memory, and also to perceptions of the present and aspirations about the future. Brooke Holmes has referred to a new *cosmopoiesis* (2016, 285). The Postclassicisms Collective has proclaimed the positive advantages of the dismantling of the “traditional supports” that actually restricted appreciation of what the study of antiquity has to offer (2020, 201). Jacques Bromberg has called for a “global” frame to the study of antiquity, emphasizing comparative analysis, ethics, and community engagement (Bromberg 2021, 1-15). Ngugi wa Thiong’o has discussed and advocated the role of translation and network theory in enabling and evaluating local and global interactions (Ngugi 2012, 60-62). Edith Hall has documented the importance of translations in providing a route into knowledge about antiquity (Hall 2008; see also Hardwick 2021a on adaptations). The challenge now is to bring forward new narratives that engage with the old, challenging weaknesses and recognising strengths. Doing this requires scholars to practise and promote subtlety of reading and discussion, and to recognize that ‘popular’ engagements between the public imagination and Greek and Roman material and its mediations are crucial not only to “working seriously on the past” but also to working seriously with the future.

One of the necessary starting points for that endeavour is a focus on the implications of key terms used in classical reception studies. Key terms – and ‘popular’ is one – encode imperatives about what participants should look for, in both content and medium. They direct the gaze and the intellectual and affective responses. Yet (or perhaps therefore), cultural historians are continually reconstructing and adapting these concepts. For in-

stance, recent and current debates have revealed the cultural freight around use of the term ‘Neo-Latin’, as opposed to ‘Early Modern Latin’. Another example is the tension between the designations ‘classical tradition’ and ‘classical reception’. Indeed, the terms ‘classics’ and ‘classical’ are themselves increasingly perceived as problematic. I think that the term ‘popular’ requires similar attention.

Key terms often operate as labels, carrying with them assumptions about cultural value and appropriate epistemology, which in turn governs methodology. Key terms reflect and shape the questions that are considered to be worth asking and the means of tackling them. The study of Greek and Roman antiquity throughout the centuries has largely focused on extant sources, both written and material, that were created by and for an elite – that has become a conventional wisdom.¹ People who have inherited that conventional wisdom have also inherited its perspectives and terminology. The study of popular culture in the modern world includes attention to the specific impact of modern technologies and new genres, from print to film to computer games. Further questions then arise concerning how these select and situate material from antiquity, and how they might act as a conduit and shaper of its transmission into the public imagination. In terms of relationships with antiquity, a focus on the ‘popular’ in contemporary culture is sometimes seen as a counterbalance, even an antidote, to perceptions of antiquity that have been skewed by restricted routes for transmission and labelling in elite contexts.

Shifts in terminology are markers of deeper cultural and geopolitical shifts. The development of theories and methods for investigating popular culture within antiquity and in its subsequent reception therefore deserves scrutiny both on its own account and for its place in a wider dynamic. For example, as fellow contributors and other colleagues have shown in their research and publication, ancient epic, drama, and mythology were part of a broad-based culture; Greek tragedy and comedy were part of the community culture associated with and refined by democracy (but a democracy that excluded women, slaves, and non-citizens from its deliberations). In the history of the reception of Greek and Roman material, particular texts, images, and ideas have moved in and out of mainstream and sub-cultures at different times. Recent research on the relationship between ancient culture and, for example, nineteenth-century burlesque; film in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries; animations and comics; and poetry gigs indicates that rigid polarization of ‘popular’ culture and ‘elite’ culture is misleading.² It is rather that modern cultural phenomena are broad-based in terms of participation and audience/spectator cohorts. They are also multi-faceted in how the creators and the

1 How an elite is defined, and by whom, and how it is constituted, and by whom, is of course another thorny question. It is not the main concern of this essay, but the problem usefully reminds us of the pitfalls of setting up a straw-man ‘other’ against which to define and promote our own concerns.

2 For discussion of how classical material in burlesque actually brought together ante-texts, myth, and new genres in leisure activities that included different social classes, see Hall & Macintosh 2005, especially chs 10–15. Similar points could be adduced in respect of modern comics and computer games.

participants conceive and understand the relationship between ancient and contemporary. The ‘dark side’ of this aspect has been probed in the analysis of appropriation of Greek and Roman material by imperial, fascist, and other totalitarian regimes.

Researchers have analyzed some of the ways in which modern media have selected and deployed Greek and Roman material for mass audiences and for ‘niche’ users. As is usual with new-ish areas of research and teaching, emphasis tends to be on case studies (and I know that many of the chapters in the present publication will supply detailed analysis and discussion of key examples). These case studies in their turn influence scholarship, theoretical frames, and the key terms used in further research and in teaching. In a short essay I cannot hope to do justice to the acuity of these investigations. Instead, I shall try to stand back and identify some key areas that may provoke debate and which will need to be tested through scholarly practice. This aim involves attention both to ‘framing’ (how patterns are constructed and interpreted) and to ‘experience’ (how people actually access and interact with Graeco-Roman antiquity, the ways in which it is presented to them, and the contexts in which they reflect on it). The scope of ‘framing’ and the agency it delivers have been helpfully summarized by Maarten De Pourcq, Nathalie de Haan, and David Rijser:

Framing refers to the set of terms, paradigms, theories or frames of reference according to which we reflect and speak when we are teaching, doing research or criticizing. It defines the sort of questions that we ask and the ways in which we try to find answers to them. The term ‘framing’ points to the importance of ‘perspectives’, of the stances taken when considering any material.... ‘Framing’ implies an awareness of relativity: to assess the value of our findings, it is important to be conscious of the identity of our position, our collaborators and intended public. (De Pourcq et al. 2020, 1)

One of the major aims of this chapter, therefore, is to probe the range of associations, in academia and beyond, that are triggered by the term ‘popular’, both in itself *and* in its elasticity when it is linked to Graeco-Roman antiquity, the associated scholarship and receptions, and the cultural phenomena that all of these generate. In particular, I want to question rigid polarizations of ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture in the creative and scholarly practices involved in the reception of antiquity. I shall also try to show how rigid distinctions between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the academy can be problematic. By discussing some so-called ‘key’ terms in the light of specific examples I hope to reveal some elements of the infrastructure that underlies how ‘labels’ are constructed and disseminated – by whom, for whom, with what purpose, and with what effect over time. I hope that this approach not only suggests some critical tools for the study of antiquity and its reception but also opens the way for the perhaps urgent resetting of teaching and research, so that they take account of new situations and insights. Such analysis requires probing of the layers and lateral dynamics that constitute ‘thick’ receptions. Among the helpful recent scholarship on this aspect is *Deep Classics: Rethinking Classical Reception*, edited by Shane Butler. In his introduction, Butler proposes that the multi-layered

processes involved in reception studies – processes that involve reading and thinking laterally and well as temporally – constitute a “deep exploration – and, when needed, a close interrogation – of our whole discipline’s *raison d’être*” (Butler 2016, 16).³

The recent context for the discipline of classics as a whole has sometimes been precarious. Much attention has been paid to pressures on teaching and research, and to the unwillingness of some universities to continue teaching classical subjects and/or their desire to remove advanced language study from the undergraduate curriculum. Sometimes this has led to mergers of departments in the arts and humanities; sometimes it is the arts and humanities themselves that have been under threat. Furthermore, within and beyond institutions, classics has been discredited by association (real and imagined) with exclusive social and political elites and with the ideologies of modern empire. Responses to this situation within academia have varied from the constructive to the pessimistic, but in many cases have embraced changes in the curriculum and aspired to broaden constituencies of students. It is salutary to note the wise comments of the editors of a recently published collection of essays on crises and recovery in antiquity: “the crisis of one group can be the desirable ‘normal’ of another. Crises do not simply happen, but are in large part created when influential actors decide to present an event or a state of affairs as such. When such labelling is successful, the target audience will experience the events affecting them as a crisis” (Klooster & Kuin 2020, 3). The subtitle of the book concerned is *Remembrance, Re-anchoring and Recovery*, all of which are emotive and complex concepts, intensively researched by classical reception scholars and beyond.

If notions such as ‘crisis’, ‘watershed’, ‘recovery’, and ‘receptivity’ are in themselves aspects of ‘framing’, it follows that the times, places, and contexts of use need further examination. Analysis may even point to dynamic ‘hot spots’ in which particular texts and themes from antiquity converge with contemporary experiences and aspirations, resulting in heightened receptivity to particular issues and particular texts that may even assist in the recuperation of classical studies (Hardwick 2018a; 2021b). Recent examples include the focus on Sophocles’ tragedy *Antigone* and its receptions, translations, and adaptations in mainstream and community theatre in Ireland, especially in the context of the Troubles (Torrance 2020; and more generally the essays in Mee & Foley 2011), and the re-awakening of interest in the historian Thucydides in the contexts of modern international relations theory and responses to conflict within nations (Lee & Morley 2015).⁴

In my initial pairing of ‘framing’ and ‘experience’, I mentioned the importance of interaction. Brett Rogers and Benjamin Stevens focused on this in the introduction to their 2015 edited collection *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction*. They were well aware that the introduction of options in modern science fiction writing and film into the

3 Richardson 2019 broadens this perspective by investigating ‘Classics on the Edge’.

4 There are many similar examples. For instance, 2004 became known as ‘the year of the Hecubas’ because of the number of different productions of Euripides’ play, often interpreted in the context of the wars and civic violence in the Balkans and the ways in which this fed into cultures of revenge (Hardwick 2022).

undergraduate classical receptions curriculum might be regarded by cynics as a way of getting ‘bums on seats’, and even of indulging fan culture among lecturers. Rogers and Stephens tackled this head-on by asking three fundamental questions: How might a comparative study of ancient classics and modern science fiction proceed? Could there be more at the intersection of these two seemingly disparate fields than a few signal texts – beyond individual stars, were there whole galaxies awaiting discovery? Above all, could such a comparative study be put on a firm conceptual or theoretical basis so that research could move beyond mere ‘scopophilia’, Freud’s term for a love of looking that is pleasing but ultimately pointless (Rogers & Stevens 2015, vii). They went on to propose that “ancient classics and modern science fiction have in common a deep epistemological similarity, that is in how each imagines the basic functioning of human knowledge”. They suggested that the joint study of classics and science fiction facilitates awareness and analysis of both the fictional future and the undiscovered past, an enmeshment that raises urgent ethical and epistemological questions about the relationship of the humanities, science, and technology, including whether technoscientific understanding of the world should be allowed to shape or even replace deliberative philosophy (Rogers & Stevens 2015, 7-9).

These three examples from recent scholarship point unequivocally to the potential of classics and ‘popular’ culture (ancient and modern) as interlocutors in the experiential, ethical, and epistemological fabric of the humanities. In the next section of the discussion, I briefly consider some possible implications of the concept ‘popular’.

I hinted above that simply distinguishing between inside and outside academia does not provide a secure site for discussing the relationship between ‘popular’ and ‘scholarly’, although mapping the growing dynamics of exchange between the two does reveal illuminating material (see Hall in this volume). Within academia, the shorthand ‘popular’ can refer to choices made about teaching texts, to experimentation with methods of analysis, and to the development of research initiatives. Academics, increasingly, figure in the media not just as ‘public intellectuals’ or ‘advisors’ but as presenters, commentators, and creative practitioners. When Greek and Roman material becomes better known and more ‘popular’ in the wider world, the process can refer to a range of aspects, from simplistic and cynical (mis)readings and appropriations to catalysts for creativity and the transformation of the public imagination. Public outreach is increasingly a means through which academics strive to recuperate the texts and contexts of antiquity, mining ancient popular culture to build bridges between antiquity and modern culture. There is rich material on which to draw – drama festivals, Aristophanes’ plays, Roman comedy, debate and decision-making in the Athenian Assembly, and public rituals such as funerals. The feedback loops operate in both directions. It is especially worth noting that the receptions of antiquity mediated through newer media are not necessarily more or less ‘popular’ on that account, and their place on the spectrum between ‘elite’ and niche’ may change over time. Film, for example, provides an interesting range from silent film (‘popular’ culture at the time of its first appearance and now a specialized area of study; see Michelakis & Wyke 2013) through to art films (Michelakis 2013), ‘sword and sandals’ blockbusters that have been box-office hits (Wyke 1997; Paul 2013; and in this volume),

film poems for TV and cinema (Byrne 2022), and radio broadcasts (Wrigley 2015).⁵ The ways and situations in which a subliminal or understated awareness of Greek and Roman antiquity can function as an almost unacknowledged touchstone corresponds to the ‘low intensity’ model that has been used to characterize the grey areas across and between spheres of cultural frameworks and confessional identities. These grey areas may carry implications of membership of a community or simply point to a shared cultural repository of allusions and metaphors, without implying that these bear the added freight of political affiliation or theological or academic orthodoxy. This ‘soft’, even ‘passive’ recognition of cultural hinterlands is often referred to as ‘low-intensity’ awareness and does not imply assent to an ontological or epistemological basis. However, ‘low-intensity’ adherence or complicity does serve to underpin processes and practices that can, in certain circumstances, become ‘high intensity’, either because they are perceived to be central to the material, emotional, or imaginative world of an individual or group, or because they resonate with heightened receptivity and sensibility in particular times and places. When there is conscious awareness of this material, and especially when it is accompanied by valorization of its authority and significance, the level rises to ‘high intensity’.⁶ This transformation can be brought about through interaction between personal and group experience and response to externally generated stimuli, including deployment of classical material.

By way of further ground-clearing, therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between ‘popular’ and ‘populist’. ‘Popular’ establishes common ground for experience, communication, and imagination inside and outside academia and at its best has a multi-directional transformative effect. ‘Populist’ attitudes and practices tend to undervalue (or reject) this richness, and sometimes positively attack cultural relationships that reach across the constructed markers of class, ethnicity, gender, language, and religion. It would be tempting, but too easy, however, to omit mention of one extreme aspect of populist activity – the appropriation of Greek and Roman figures and themes as embodiments and justifications of hate language and violence.⁷

The website *Pharos*, based at Vassar, has been at the centre of the identification and rebuttal of appropriations of classical figures and myths by hate groups (<https://pharos.vassarspace.net>). *Pharos* has three main aims: to document examples of the appropriation of Greek and Roman culture by hate groups (for example for purposes of white supremacy, misogyny, antisemitism, violence, and terrorism); to expose the fundamental weakness of these appropriations; and to provide a locus for people who wish to resist

5 Michelakis 2013, 6-9, discusses the diversity of models in terms of their aesthetic, public, and economic reach.

6 Eidinow 2019a and 2019b discuss this in relation to religion, but the model can accommodate a range of cultural memes and agencies.

7 Vandiver 2022 discusses the modern context of right-wing nationalist movements in the USA as a prelude to her analysis of the pitfalls facing modern translators of key excerpts from Herodotus, in which ancient and modern meanings and associations of violence and racial and sexual abuse may vary.

them and to problematise them. The *Pharos* team also recognizes that such appropriations not only distort and misrepresent but may also draw on authentic aspects of the Graeco-Roman past that are congenial to hate-orientated polemic in the present – for example, ancient xenophobic practices, misogyny, hypermasculinity, violent imperialism, and antisemitism. The discussions on the site also recognize that these aspects of antiquity sometimes reappear in mainstream outlets that involve receptions of antiquity, such as film (*300*; *Gladiator*).⁸ By providing teaching resources and the opportunity for debate, *Pharos* also aims to serve the needs of educators who wish to make students aware that the traditional idealization of the Graeco-Roman past overlaps with white supremacist and misogynistic interpretation of the past, use of its emblems, and other associations.⁹ These cannot be ignored and are not the only objectionable threads in the relationship between antiquity and modern popular culture.¹⁰ They are the dark underbelly to the better-known histories of appropriation of antiquity by ruling hegemonies.¹¹

In recuperating ancient popular culture into discussions about modern receptions of antiquity, I also want to avoid the temptation to elide ‘popular’ and ‘democratic’. Instead, I will be drawing on the associations between ‘democratic’ and ‘deliberative’ – in the sense that both the classical ante-texts themselves and the modern receptions are subject to readings and interpretations that are contested and may vary in content and emphasis over time, as well as between places, contexts, and languages. Equally important, I am not drawing an artificial polarity between ‘popular’ and ‘elite’ culture (which, although it may carry varying associations, is not necessarily ‘unpopular’ and may actually be an aspirational target, as discussed in Hardwick 2015a). To do so would not only be misleading conceptually; it would also close down discussion of important aspects of contemporary changes in cultural hegemonies and the role in these of attitudes in Greek and Roman antiquity and its receptions. Indeed, the associations between Greek and Roman culture, its receptions, and modern cultural and political hegemonies have been tested to the point at which they are no longer hegemonic.¹² However, there is invariably a gap, sometimes a very long one, between tectonic cultural shifts and public awareness. When I use the term ‘The Label’ in the title of this chapter, I refer to

8 Selection, stereotyping, and the impact of modern cultures of ‘stardom’ may be intertwined. The box-office success of these cultural artefacts may be aligned with moments of heightened receptivity to themes and situations derived from antiquity. In the process a ‘low-intensity’ public awareness of classical material may be transformed into a ‘high-intensity’ impact, which is damaging both to understanding of antiquity and to modern social attitudes.

9 The summary of aims is taken from the *Pharos* website. The *Pharos* project was also launched on the *Eidolon* website, which includes some of the resulting comments and blogs (*Eidolon.pub*).

10 Hardwick 2021b discusses some issues classicists and ancient historians have in getting to grips with the ancient past and the histories of its receptions, including the positive and negative aspects of identity scholarship.

11 See further Nelis 2011; Van Steen 2015; Roche 2021.

12 I recently discussed some of these issues at the Gramsci Network conference *Democratizing Classics*. My paper ‘Cultural Hegemonies: Subaltern Agency through Greek and Roman Texts’ has been made available on You Tube and as a heavily revised published version (Hardwick 2024a).