

The Reception of Ancient Greece and Rome in the Victorian Period

Summary

Allusions to ancient Greece and Rome are pervasive in Victorian culture, in literary texts and material artifacts, on the popular stage, and in political discourse. Authors such as Matthew Arnold, Thackeray, Tennyson, Clough, Pater, Wilde, and Swinburne studied Latin and Greek for years at school or university and exploited their classical learning for creative purposes. The sheer familiarity of classical culture, based on years of studying Homer and Virgil at school, made it possible for intellectuals to draw parallels between contemporary political reforms and the democratic context of Greek tragedy, or to insist, like Arnold, that Periclean Athens should be a model for 19th-century Britain. At a time when the predominance of Latin and Greek in formal education was beginning to be questioned, there was increasing demand for translations and adaptations of classical literature, history, and myth, so that a wider readership could share in the richness of the classical inheritance. Outsiders were particularly eager to learn Greek or read Greek texts in translation, and authors such as Robert Browning, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and George Eliot achieved a remarkable degree of proficiency with little assistance. Greek epic and tragedy were appropriated by the authors of dramatic monologues, novels, and theatrical burlesques to engage with contemporary concerns about marriage and divorce, the role of women, and the apparent impossibility of heroism in the modern world. Toward the end of the period, classical literature was increasingly scrutinized from new perspectives: approaches based on anthropology, archaeology, and sociology presented familiar texts in new ways and opened up possibilities for redefining aspects of gender and sexuality in the contemporary world.

Keywords

Greece, Rome, Victorian Hellenism, reception studies, classical education, gender, translation, epic, tragedy

Studies of Greek and Roman Influences

The prevalence of allusions to ancient Greece and Rome makes 19th-century British culture a fruitful area of research for classical reception studies.¹ In looking at the influence of antiquity, literary studies intersect with cultural history, gender and sexuality, the history of education, art, sociology, translation studies, philology, anthropology, archaeology, and history of science. Two influential studies, Richard Jenkyns's *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (1980) and Frank M. Turner's *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (1981), provide a wealth of detail about Hellenic influences on Victorian public and cultural life.² Jenkyns's themes include classical education, poetry, sculpture and art, and the reception of tragedy, Homer, and Plato. Turner examines religion and mythology, the Hellenism of Matthew Arnold, and the reception of Homer, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. He also examines the political implications of competing assessments of Athenian democracy in the context of 19th-century reforms of Parliament.

The focus on Athens rather than Rome follows a resurgence of interest in Greek culture in the Romantic period, in what Frank M. Turner describes as a reaction against the Latinate Augustanism of the earlier 18th century.³ Matthew Arnold insisted on the relevance of Hellenism to the concerns of the present day: his lecture "On the Modern Element in Literature" presented the claim that 5th-century Athens was a high point of civilization, a rare example of a culture that matched a "significant, a highly-developed, a culminating epoch" with "a comprehensive, a commensurate, an adequate literature."⁴ He argued that the culture of the age of Pericles should act as a model for 19th-century Britain.⁵ However, Jonathan Sachs has argued that Hellenism should not be interpreted as making Roman influences less significant, especially in political terms: "Greece is firmly associated with liberty, democracy and popular will, while Rome comes to stand for the spread of ideas and institutions through empire."⁶ Victorian Hellenism was inextricably involved with the responses to Roman

literature, history, and philosophy documented in Norman Vance's *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (1997).⁷ The intertwining of Greek and Roman literature was evident in the works of Augustan writers such as Virgil and Horace, who reworked the classics of Greek literature for their own era, providing a model of intertextual engagement that many Victorian writers chose to emulate. A sense of the ease and familiarity with which classical allusions might be produced in the Victorian period is hard to recapture. An account of a private debate between Gladstone and Tennyson over the best way to translate Homer suggests that those who read a small stock of classical texts repeatedly in their schooldays might retain a lifelong habit of readily translating or adapting those texts from memory.⁸ Laura Eastlake has explored the "relationship between manhood and reading," arguing that the study of Latin texts contributed to the formation of masculine identity, that ancient Rome was "the maker and the marker of elite Victorian manliness in both its physical and intellectual varieties."⁹ Poets such as Horace, whose aphorisms were easily recalled, shaped the language of parliamentary debate and provided a model of masculine friendship.¹⁰

In the 21st century, attention has shifted to the aesthetic and decadent writing of the late 19th century, when new interpretations of the Greek and Roman past supported radical challenges to established notions of gender and sexuality. Stefano Evangelista argues that "the experience of ancient Greece stands at the very heart of literary aestheticism in its polemical and counter-cultural identities."¹¹ The preeminence of the writers of Periclean Athens and Augustan Rome was disputed by writers who valued the culture of the Hellenistic era and the late Roman Empire as closer parallels to fin-de-siècle decadence. The challenge to orthodoxy began with reforms to the classical curriculum at Oxford, which displaced Aristotle from his central role and replaced him with Plato: the *Republic* was a key text for the influential scholar Benjamin Jowett. However, as Linda C. Dowling has shown, writers like Pater, Swinburne, Symonds, and Wilde went beyond Jowett's prescribed texts and

developed a fascination with less sanctioned works such as the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. In their readings of these works, they found the basis of a discourse of homosexual love.¹²

Lesley Higgins describes Pater's lectures on Plato, later published as *Plato and Platonism* (1893), as challenging Jowett in "an intense intellectual and ideological struggle for control over the Platonic canon."¹³ Pater's audience was not limited to the undergraduate auditors of the original lectures—his ideas about Plato were disseminated in periodicals and in volume form, intended to reach a popular readership with an interest in philosophy and aesthetics.

While many studies of Victorian classicism illuminate a largely masculine culture, Rowena Fowler's 1983 essay "'On Not Knowing Greek': The Classics and the Woman of Letters" drew attention to texts by women writers whose literary responses to the ancient world showed that the lack of a formal education in Greek did not inhibit their efforts to access the texts in the original language.¹⁴ Further studies by Yopie Prins, Isobel Hurst, Shany Fiske, and T. D. Olverson have explored the extent to which versions of Hellenism enabled women writers like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, Augusta Webster, Amy Levy, Michael Field, and Emily Pfeiffer to articulate their desire for intellectual fulfillment and access to masculine provinces of knowledge, their literary ambitions in the context of a male-dominated canon, and their anger at the mistreatment of women and children in a patriarchal society.¹⁵ As women were largely excluded from the institutions associated with classical education until late in the 19th century, reading Greek was a luxury granted only to the most determined and industrious of autodidacts, often members of families associated with the Church of England or the universities. Many of the women who studied the classics to a high level were high achievers who made a name in literature or education. Once women began to establish themselves as students and teachers of classics in universities from the 1870s onwards, one of the dominant emblems of the Girton Girl (a student at Girton College, Cambridge, and a figure associated with the New Woman) was a

Greek text in the original language. For female aesthetes such as Jane Ellen Harrison and the poetic duo “Michael Field,” Yopie Prins suggests, the combination of Pater’s writing and the context of Greek studies at a Cambridge women’s college opened up “new configurations of sexuality and gender.”¹⁶

Ancient Texts and Contemporary Life

After years of education based on the study of Latin and Greek texts, history and philosophy, the men who entered Parliament, the Church of England, and the Civil Service saw the problems of the present day refracted through the eras that they knew best. Notable controversies of the day therefore became bound up with ancient literature, so that the debates about divorce and child custody in the 1850s were framed in classical terms. One of the most celebrated politicians of the period, W. E. Gladstone, wrote what Turner describes as “the single most extensive body of Victorian Homeric commentary,” in which he commented on the indissolubility of marriage based on the lack of a precedent for divorce in the Homeric epics (the closest available historical approximation to prelapsarian life, in Gladstone’s view). This is one example of a prevalent tendency to idealize aspects of Greece and Rome in aid of a particular vision for modern Britain, so that the speaker’s prescriptions for contemporary social problems might appear to be authorized by the ancients. Gladstone makes some questionable claims about the absence of modern evils such as prostitution and homosexuality in the world of the Homeric epics. Such interpretations were, as Norman Vance suggests, “selective and often ahistorical,” and the appropriation of historical and literary exempla for such purposes led to an increasingly partial and fragmented understanding of antiquity.¹⁷

In the divorce debate, Gladstone's condemnation of divorce was countered by arguments based on Euripides' *Medea*. A heroine who kills her own children might seem an unlikely model for advocates of divorce, but Medea's eloquent speech to the women of Corinth about the suffering of women in marriage and motherhood offered a perhaps unexpectedly potent example of the kind of parallel that classically educated male Victorian thinkers liked to discover between ancient Greece and the 19th century. Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh have established that a series of popular dramas based on the Medea myth, both versions of Euripides' tragedy and burlesque reworkings of the plot, at once drew on and later influenced debates about infant custody and divorce by emphasizing the powerlessness of married women and putting the case for extending women's legal rights.¹⁸ In burlesque versions, the authors did not risk alienating the audience with the inclusion of infanticide. The audience for such dramas, largely uneducated in the ancient classics, responded sympathetically to portrayals of Medea in which Jason's callous disregard of the poverty and suffering of the wife from whom he is separated (lacking any support, she becomes a beggar) and neglect of his children was interpreted critically. The title of Robert Brough's 1856 burlesque, *Medea: or, The Best of Mothers with a Brute of a Husband*, suggests the extent to which the story was adapted to the rhetoric of the day. In tragic dramas by Heraud and Legouvé, Medea kills her children to protect them from the vengeance of the Corinthians for the deaths of Jason's new wife Glauce and her father, and Jason's culpability is emphasized. Following the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, the portrayal of Medea shifted toward a fascination with the complexities of the violent and socially deviant woman, a figure connected with the sensation fiction that came to prominence in the 1860s (and which Sharyn Fiske traces back to the sensationalism of the 1830s and 1840s).¹⁹

Classical Education

For much of the period, formal schooling in the classics was linked with social class because Latin and Greek had few practical applications and could not easily be acquired without a substantial investment of time and money. Lessons involved memorizing grammar and vocabulary, scanning and sometimes composing verses, sometimes with an emphasis on the cultivation of a gentlemanly literary style rather than attention to the content of the texts. Classics possessed a cachet that the newly prosperous sought to obtain for their sons, as Victorian novels such as Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848) and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) make clear.²⁰ Yet, as Eliot emphasizes in her representation of Mr. Tulliver's confused understanding of what Latin is for, those who aspired to enhance the family's prestige did not necessarily understand that what they were paying for was rote learning of grammar and syntax, and that a more practical education might be a better investment.

Edmund Richardson has shown that classical studies could lead to instability and failure rather than social advancement in life as well as in fiction.²¹ Although Latin and Greek remained prominent in formal education by the end of the Victorian period, there had been extensive and impassioned debates about the function and scope of classical studies. The traditional curriculum was increasingly challenged both by those who wanted to prioritize skills relating to scientific and technological innovation, and by advocates of a broader education in which the study of modern languages and English literature would be enhanced. With the need to provide elementary education for the newly enfranchised skilled working classes and the pressure of competition from countries with more modern education systems, such as Germany, the importance of mathematics and science was increasingly stressed.

Most schools focused on teaching Latin and reserved Greek for a select group of pupils if it was taught at all.²² In the second half of the century, girls' schools also began to offer formal education, including Latin for some students and Greek for the elite.²³ The exclusivity of Greek was associated with "intellectual ambition and the values that are attached to the

intellectual lifestyle; [. . .] feelings of belonging to or exclusion from the educated elite.”²⁴ In *Who Needs Greek?* (2002), Simon Goldhill analyses “an argument that brews throughout the century about the place of knowing Greek in the education system and what the *point* of knowing Greek might be.”²⁵ Gilbert Highet, in *The Classical Tradition* (1949), argues that repeated complaints about the repetitive and uninspiring teaching of Latin and Greek in schools and universities indicate that “something went profoundly wrong with the study of the classics in the nineteenth century.”²⁶

Those who sought to reform classical education were responding not just to complaints about the irrelevance of Latin and Greek, but also to the profound dissatisfaction expressed by men who had experienced a conventional public school and university curriculum. Memoirs, essays, and novels such as *The Mill on the Floss* and Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* echo Byron’s condemnation of the “drill’d dull lesson / Forced down word by word / In my repugnant youth,” “the daily drug which turn’d / My sickening memory.”²⁷ Anthony Trollope regarded his twelve years of studying Latin and Greek at two of the country’s most prominent public schools, Harrow and Winchester, as a waste of time, yet when he returned to the study of Latin later in life, the training he had received enabled him to pick up the language with relative ease.²⁸ Even an accomplished scholar like Arthur Hugh Clough, who had won prizes for Latin and Greek at Rugby School, became disenchanted with the classical curriculum offered at Oxford around the time of Victoria’s accession to the throne. Clough found that too many of the texts he was expected to study were already familiar from his earlier education; without any significant difference in the approach to classical studies at university level, any serious student of the classics could meet the required standard with little effort.²⁹

Writers such as Arnold, Thackeray, Tennyson, Pater, Wilde, and Swinburne experienced at least some traditional classical education at school, university, or both, yet it is striking that

many of the writers who most frequently employ classical allusions in Victorian literature did not. Those who escaped years of tedious drilling might never feel entirely secure in their linguistic achievements, but their enthusiasm for classical studies was motivated by a love of ancient literature and culture. Like Keats “looking into” Chapman’s translation of Homer, they chose to explore the “realms of gold” in whatever ways they could.

Some women did learn Latin and Greek to a remarkable extent, with the assistance of mentors and access to impressive private libraries, reading outside the canon of texts used in education and bringing a freshness of approach to their interpretations of ancient literature. The ways in which George Eliot and Elizabeth Barrett Browning engaged in prolonged exertions to comprehend ancient texts informed their distinctive creative responses to classical materials. Jennifer Wallace has examined 19th-century women’s sense of themselves as outsiders encountering the classics in non-institutional settings, exploring the “metaphors by which women articulated their strategies for accessing the classical world.”³⁰ Barrett Browning emphasized that she saw herself as a poet rather than a scholar in her reading of Homer; R. C. Jebb marveled at Eliot’s grasp of Sophoclean tragedy and her ability to translate it to the modern age in her novels. Men might also be excluded from universities for reasons of religious affiliation or financial limitations and yet earn the respect of more conventional scholars: Benjamin Jowett admired the extent of Robert Browning’s “homespun” classical learning. Lacking the leisure to assimilate the classics to the extent that Browning did, Thomas Hardy learned Latin at school and continued to teach himself in the early years of his training as an architect. He later attempted to acquire knowledge of Greek from grammar books, immersing himself in the tragedies of Aeschylus and Sophocles, and following the development of anthropological approaches to Greek tragedy through the essays of Pater and others.³¹

Although Hardy's access to classical culture was considerably less limited than that of Jude Fawley, the hero's frustrated determination to master Latin and Greek outside the academy in *Jude the Obscure* (1895) vividly portrays the obstacles a classical autodidact would encounter, and the dismissive attitude of those for whom the acquisition of classical learning was considered a birthright, a marker of proper social distinctions. Sue Bridehead, whose interest in the classics is briefly furthered by her relationship with an undergraduate at the university, recalls the women who made use of friendships and family connections to achieve access to higher education by informal means and thereby prove that women were capable of studying at the university level. Once her access to books ends with the friendship, her progress is halted, leaving her only with a fascination with the pagan gods. Neither Jude nor Sue can afford the resources and the time required for serious study. Their non-fictional counterparts, however, were sometimes more successful. Countering the narrative of working-class exclusion from the classical inheritance, Edith Hall and Henry Stead have collected many examples of men and women who engaged with ancient Greece and Rome at The People's History of Classics website, based on their research project "Classics and Class in Britain 1789–1917."³²

Universities

Innovations at the university level both broadened the disciplinary base of classics and encouraged professional scholars to cultivate expertise in specific areas of research. In *Classics Transformed* (1998), Christopher Stray documents a transition from "culture to discipline," from "the relaxed amateurism of the mid-Victorian gentleman to the methodical activity of specialized academics."³³ James Turner notes that German-inspired *Altertumswissenschaft* (the science of antiquity) was slow to be accepted in British

universities. Nevertheless, in the late Victorian period, the study of texts in isolation was gradually supplemented by more modern approaches to the classics, which upset the comfortable sense of identification that had connected Victorian male classicists with the authors they studied, and “licensed scholars to find difference in the pagan past.”³⁴

In the 1850s, Royal Commissions recommended major reforms at Oxford and Cambridge, and at both universities there were radical changes to the classical curriculum. Campaigns for the abolition of preliminary examinations in Greek at both universities recurred throughout the second half of the century, but “Compulsory Greek” survived until just after the First World War in both cases. The *Literae Humaniores* degree at Oxford was divided into two parts: in the first five terms, students focused on Latin and Greek language and literature. The rest of the course, known as “Greats,” was dominated by ancient history and philosophy (particularly Plato and Aristotle).³⁵ Students were expected to demonstrate knowledge of Latin and Greek by translating ancient texts, answering questions on grammar, and composing prose and verse in Latin and Greek.

The distinctive feature of the Oxford Greats syllabus was that it encouraged students to compare Greek and Roman literary texts, philosophy, and history with the work of modern authors, historians, and philosophers, and to comment on parallels between the ancient and modern worlds.³⁶ Dowling argues that Benjamin Jowett, Regius Professor of Greek, encouraged students such as Walter Pater (whose own students included Oscar Wilde and Gerard Manley Hopkins), A. C. Swinburne, and J. A. Symonds to go beyond a “narrowly grammatical emphasis” in the reading of ancient texts and to adopt a “powerfully engaged mode of reading which insisted on the vivid contemporaneity and philosophical depth of these works.”³⁷ The Greats curriculum helped to shape late Victorian literary culture and public life: politicians and imperial administrators were accustomed to interpreting the challenges facing modern Britain in terms of Athenian or Roman examples.³⁸ Oxford’s

training was less well adapted to the needs of professional classical scholars struggling to keep up with German universities: Henry Nettleship lamented that he knew how “to read the classics, to translate them on paper, to think and talk about them, to write essays on them,” but had learned very little of “the higher philology, of the principles and methods of textual criticism.”³⁹

Cambridge’s Classical Tripos was also reorganized into a two-part structure, with a focus on accurate linguistic knowledge in Part I. One justification for the continuing importance of classical studies was that students could develop problem-solving skills: Stray notes that the prioritizing of close textual analysis at Cambridge was influenced by the prominence of mathematics in the curriculum.⁴⁰ The optional Part II gradually introduced opportunities to explore archaeology, anthropology, sociology, and art history, along with options such as literature, philosophy, or ancient history.⁴¹ Such options often proved attractive to women students who had struggled to catch up with the years of linguistic training their brothers had received at school, and were able to excel in the newer subjects.⁴² Scholars such as Jane Ellen Harrison developed controversial theories about Greek art, ritual, and myth, based on developments in archaeology and anthropology and challenging the traditional text-based approach to the ancient world. Harrison’s work on Greek religion belongs to the “dark side” of late Victorian Hellenism, in which writers such as Pater focus on the Archaic Greece of Dionysus and the Maenads, Demeter and Persephone instead of the Apollonian classicism praised by Matthew Arnold.⁴³

Translation and Adaptation

John Talbot observes that translating the classics operated as a “mode of reception” that both flourished and diminished in the 19th century, with a “great increase in the number of

translations, spurred in part by rising literacy and an acceleration of the book trade,” but also a decrease in prestige for translators as creative translation was supplanted by the demand for accurate cribs.⁴⁴ For those who had not learned Latin or Greek, translations offered access to an intellectual inheritance that was still strongly associated with the culture of the most powerful in modern society. Jonathan Rose comments that working-class autodidacts sought to glean the “artistic excellence, psychological insights, and penetrating philosophy” to be found in the “great books” valued by the elite, and to pass on such intellectual riches to their peers.⁴⁵ The assumption that reading Latin and Greek texts in the original language (a marker of social status for men in the 19th century) was the only acceptable method of studying classical culture was contested by classicists who wanted to provide resources for a general readership. In addition to the broadening of the readership of translations, Lorna Hardwick notes that the backgrounds of translators became more diverse as “there were more opportunities for those outside the traditional aristocratic or scholarly fields to publish their work.”⁴⁶

Professional classical scholars were generally more occupied with textual emendations and linguistic problems than with producing readable translations or interpretations of ancient texts.⁴⁷ Some classicists objected to the production of translations and commentaries because students might lazily make use of them: F. W. H. Myers complained that the “educative power” of problems in Greek and Latin had diminished since “Sophocles is gradually depositing his invaluable obscurities as he filters through the brain of Professor Jebb.”⁴⁸ Those scholars who did engage in large-scale works of translation and commentary include Benjamin Jowett, R. C. Jebb, and Gilbert Murray. Jowett’s monumental work *The Dialogues of Plato translated into English with Analyses and Introductions* (1871) was followed by his translation of Thucydides (1881) and Aristotle’s *Politics* (1885). Jowett’s involvement in the

political and literary culture of his time extends beyond his influence on former students such as Pater, Swinburne, and Symonds.

Jowett also befriended writers who had not been able to study the classics at Oxford, such as Robert Browning, whom Jowett gave an Honorary Fellowship at Balliol College in 1867 and invited to the 1880 performance of *Agamemnon*. This production reflected Browning's recent translation of the play as well as a contemporary fascination with Schliemann's archaeological discoveries. Jowett's correspondents included Florence Nightingale, whose comments helped to shape some elements of Jowett's translations of Plato. R. C. Jebb translated *The Characters of Theophrastus* (1870), published two volumes of selected Attic oratory (1876 and 1888), wrote an introduction to Homer (1887), and produced an edition of Sophocles' tragedies with text, critical notes, commentary, and translation (1883–1896). Jebb was also involved with politics and culture outside the university and encouraged George Eliot with praise of the allusions to Sophoclean tragedy in her novels.

Despite the increasing production of new translations, some of the versions of ancient texts that had the greatest influence over the literary culture of the period were those read in childhood. Alexander Pope's translations of Homer and Dryden's *Aeneid* feature prominently in accounts of childhood reading by Tennyson, Ruskin, Thomas Hardy, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Robert Browning's poem "Development" (1889) places the reading of Pope's Homer as a crucial stage in his progression from play-acting stories of the Trojan War to reading the text in Greek. Meilee Bridges draws attention to Browning's evocation of "an intense, personal contact with the epic heroes of Homer's poetry" in childhood, by comparison with which his later engagement with classical scholarship and archaeological discoveries was disappointing.⁴⁹ Frank M. Turner remarks that in the 19th century Homer's epics were interpreted as "the Bible of the Greeks [. . .] with myths, heroes and historical narratives wherein lay both a store of moral precepts and the foundation of a sense of cultural

unity.”⁵⁰ How to translate the form and language of the *Iliad* in a suitably elevated and solemn idiom was a problem that engaged Matthew Arnold (as Professor of Poetry at Oxford) in an intense and hostile debate with contemporary translators such as Francis Newman in “On Translating Homer” (1860–1861). Arnold acclaims the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* as “the most important poetical monument[s] existing.” Although the “study of classical literature is probably on the decline,” he argues, a flourishing interest in Homer exists outside the existing structures of formal education, “as instruction spreads and the number of readers increases.”⁵¹

Even as Arnold sought to protect the epics from unsuitable translators, versions of Homer proliferated on the popular stage, and in fiction, painting, and poetry.⁵² Victorian popular culture absorbed Greek and Roman history and mythology, reproducing classical figures and settings in children’s books, fiction with both historical and contemporary settings, on the stage, and using new visual technologies to create dioramas, panoramas, and other forms of spectacle. For example, Bulwer-Lytton’s hugely popular historical novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834) inspired the recreation of Pompeii at the Crystal Palace.⁵³ The thriving form of burlesque made ancient tragedy, comedy, and epic available to working people in the form of absurd and melodramatic rhyming verse, with sentimental songs, dances, and lavish settings.⁵⁴

Poetry

A notable early study of the classical allusions in Victorian poetry is *Illustrations of Tennyson* (1891) by John Churton Collins, based on a series of articles originally published in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1880–1881.⁵⁵ Collins argues that Tennyson, like Virgil, imitates literature rather than life, responding to poetic tradition instead of nature. Considering Tennyson’s veneration of Virgil, such a claim might not seem offensive, but as a post-

Romantic writer Tennyson resented the suggestion that his poetry was unoriginal.

Nevertheless, as A. A. Markley comments, the ambitious reinvention of classical models for his own time is a significant aspect of Tennyson's legacy, "a lifelong project of attempting to provide modern Britain with a new achievement in literature—a literature comparable to the great works of antiquity."⁵⁶

One of the problems facing Tennyson and other poets in the period was that of genre: What form could a modern Homer or Virgil employ? William Morris's epic experiments reflect the Pre-Raphaelite fascination with the past, and *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–1870) combines Greek myth, medieval literature, and Old Norse sagas.⁵⁷ Epic as a genre was popular in the Victorian period—as Herbert F. Tucker and Simon Dentith have demonstrated, there were many epics engaging with British history and legend as well as with contemporary life—yet the most conventional epics of the period are now unread.⁵⁸ Following the proliferation of hybrid poetic forms in the Romantic era, such as Byron's "epic satire" *Don Juan* and Wordsworth's autobiographical epic *The Prelude*, poets such as Tennyson, Arnold, Clough, and Barrett Browning produced poems which engaged with the epic tradition without taking the form of epic. As Stephen Harrison observes, these poets "declined to take on the full poetic enterprise of extensive epic, avoiding it through various strategies of diversification and miniaturisation."⁵⁹ They respond to Homer and Virgil through experiments in translation, mock-heroic verse and the use of formal features such as extended similes and epic formulae. In one of his most notable responses to the epic tradition, "Ulysses" (written in response to the death of Arthur Hallam in 1833), Tennyson developed the dramatic monologue, a poetic form also attributed to Robert Browning and strongly identified with the Victorian period. By making Homer's character speak at a moment that is not represented in the Homeric text, in a frame of mind more consonant with Romantic melancholy than with epic heroism, and with the mediating influence of Dante's portrayal of

Ulysses in the *Inferno*, Tennyson appropriates the hero for his own poetic purposes. He creates a memorable version of the character that earns the poet a prominent place among receptions of Homer.⁶⁰

Browning's use of madmen and murderers as speakers in his dramatic monologues drew attention to the potential of the form for poets to explore aberrant states of mind and to reveal the power dynamics between men and women in patriarchal societies.⁶¹ He provided a model for classical reception in which the characters of ancient tragedy could rage about the wrongs directed against women. Augusta Webster, who translated Euripides' *Medea* (1868), with a closeness to the original that impressed contemporary critics, also wrote a monologue in which Medea, hearing of Jason's death, passionately proclaims how he wronged her in terms that recall her speech to the women of Corinth about the suffering of women.⁶² Amy Levy articulated a different aspect of Medea in a fragmentary drama "after Euripides," in which Levy emphasizes Medea's painful experience as a foreigner (paralleling Levy's own encounters with anti-Semitism). Levy also wrote a dramatic monologue spoken by the wife of Socrates which condemns the waste of women's potential based on arbitrary gender standards. "Xantippe" shows a woman with intellectual ambitions embittered by her exclusion from the philosophical discourse that her husband and his friends share, and condemned to endure the tedium of domestic life in a house filled with uncongenial female slaves.⁶³

Romantic women writers such as Felicia Hemans and L. E. L. perpetuated the Ovidian story that Sappho leapt from a cliff in despair over her love for Phaon, and poets such as Tennyson and Hallam employed Sapphic forms and themes earlier in the 19th century.⁶⁴ Late Victorian versions of Sappho were very different, following the publication of a scholarly edition in 1885 which included recently discovered fragments. In *Victorian Sappho*, Yopie Prins examines changing constructions of Sappho from the embodiment of lyric poetry to a

figure of indeterminate identity whose ambivalent sexuality made her name as well as her poems an inspiration for poets such as Swinburne (in “Anactoria,” “Sapphics,” and “On the Cliffs”) and Michael Field (in *Long Ago*).⁶⁵

Poetry, science, and religion are united in responses to the Roman poet Lucretius, whose materialist epic *De Rerum Natura* offered poets ways of thinking about challenges to traditional religion without an explicitly Christian framework.⁶⁶ Rival groups of scientists who had grown up in an era of classical dominance over education—scientific naturalists, physicists, and engineers—appropriated Lucretius “as a forerunner of their own physical theories.”⁶⁷ Arnold, Tennyson, and Barrett Browning were fascinated by the melancholy persona of the Epicurean poet. Arnold had planned to write a tragedy with Lucretius as the hero, but following the publication of Tennyson’s dramatic monologue “Lucretius,” Arnold reworked the poem around another tormented Promethean figure, the philosopher Empedocles, who commits suicide by throwing himself into a volcano.⁶⁸ Having published “Empedocles on Etna” in his *Poems* (1852), Arnold withdrew the poem from the collection the following year, and his notable Preface to the 1853 volume explains that Empedocles did not evoke “the calm, the cheerfulness, the disinterested objectivity” that Arnold associated with Sophocles and Homer.⁶⁹

The Reception of Tragedy

The pervasiveness of Greek tragedy in Victorian literature and culture owes much to the availability of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in translation and to the influence of A. W. Schlegel’s *Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature* (1815). Richard Dowgun traces several different phases in the reception of Greek tragedy in relation to religion, from a tendency to regard Aeschylus as “approximating and intimating Christianity” to a view of

Sophocles as presenting the gods' indifference to human suffering and Euripides' rational criticism of religion.⁷⁰ Aeschylus was associated with Romantic tastes for the primitive and wild, and Sophocles was the preeminent tragedian for readers like Matthew Arnold and George Eliot. A production of *Antigone* in English first performed in 1845 inspired George Eliot's essay "The *Antigone* and its Moral," in which Eliot argued that the "dramatic motive" of the play retained its force despite differences in religious belief. Fiona Macintosh notes that Sophocles was "regularly and routinely domesticated by the Victorians, and increasingly became recognized as an exemplary tragedian for ancient and modern ages."⁷¹ Euripides was associated with modernity, radicalism, and psychological realism, highly valued by Robert Browning and Oscar Wilde.

In the aftermath of the French Revolution, *Prometheus Bound* offered the Romantics a hero who resisted tyranny and questioned divine authority, and was also a creator who might be seen as an artist. Byron, Shelley, and Mary Shelley, among others, responded to the myth of Prometheus. Elizabeth Barrett Browning translated *Prometheus Bound* twice, first a literal translation written in a fortnight and later, after much correspondence with Robert Browning on the subject of translation, a version in which the language of martyrdom, sin, and expiation reflects the Christian significance with which the Prometheus myth had been imbued by later readers.⁷² Augusta Webster also translated *Prometheus Bound*, with a note on the title page explaining that the text had been "edited" by her husband. Thomas Webster's brief Preface notes that the translator "wished for some better guarantee of accuracy than a lady's name could give" and vouches for her "conscientious adherence to the letter of the text."⁷³ Such assurances seem superfluous—not only had the play already been translated by a woman whose status as an exceptional classicist was already established, but Anna Swanwick's acclaimed translation of the *Oresteia* had appeared in 1865 and Swanwick went on to translate the remainder of Aeschylus' plays.⁷⁴

As Webster noted in her review of Robert Browning's version of *Agamemnon* (1877), Aeschylean language was notoriously difficult, but not as impenetrable as Browning's idiosyncratic and hyper-literal translation made it appear. Browning sought to reproduce for the Greekless reader the experience of reading the text "in as Greek a fashion as the English will bear." Browning employed linguistic features such as compound epithets and retained the Greek word order wherever possible. His two long poems *Balaustion's Adventure* (1871) and *Aristophanes' Apology* (1875) each embed a "transcript from Euripides" in a frame narrative containing observations about the play and the context of performance in ancient Athens. Kathleen Riley surveys the varied responses to Browning's translation of *Herakles* in *Aristophanes' Apology*, noting the bewildered irritation of Margaret Oliphant and more favorable assessments by J. A. Symonds and Thomas Carlyle.⁷⁵ Browning's reworkings of Euripides do not aim at making the plays more accessible to a wide audience but rather intervene in scholarly debates on the plays—as Yopie Prins has observed, in these texts "Browning could reflect critically on the history of classical reception in English literature, while making a creative contribution to this history that was distinctively his own."⁷⁶

Despite the evident contrast in terms of form between the concentrated intensity of Greek tragedy, with its perceived unities of time, place, and action, and the capacious and sprawling three-volume novel that dominates the literature of the Victorian period, some of the most creative adaptations of ancient texts can be found in fiction. Novelists such as George Eliot and Thomas Hardy repeatedly invoke the tragedies as touchstones for the realist novel.⁷⁷ Shanyu Fiske argues that Romantic praise of the "naturalism, originality and intensity" of Greek sculpture in the form of the Elgin Marbles was central in "shaping the aesthetics of literary realism," as the imperfections and vitality of the Greek artifacts came to be preferred to the refined gloss of Roman statuary. Similarly, Greek tragedy appeared to offer unmediated "emotional truth" with a degree of psychological acuity that was lacking in more

polished forms of literature.⁷⁸ As dramatic monologues and performances in the popular theatre had adapted tragic archetypes to articulate the predicament of abandoned women using the figure of Medea, the novel could also exploit the power of the tragic heroine. George Eliot could use the figure of Medea to explore with some degree of sympathy the motivation (or rather, the terrifying lack of self-awareness) of a woman who leaves her baby to die in *Adam Bede*, or the repressed fury of a cast-off mistress who sends her rival a gift to poison her marriage in *Daniel Deronda*.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, just as poets accepted the impossibility of presenting an epic hero in 19th-century costume, Eliot acknowledges that tragic narratives must be adapted to the indignities of modern life. In the Finale to *Middlemarch*, she writes that it is no longer possible for a “new Antigone” to “spend her heroic piety in daring all for a brother’s burial: the medium in which [her] ardent deeds took shape is forever gone.”⁸⁰

Discussion of the Literature

The Victorian period attained prominence in classical reception studies with two books published in the early 1980s, Richard Jenkyns’s *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (1980) and Frank M. Turner’s *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (1981).⁸¹ Jenkyns and Turner demonstrate that elements derived from ancient history and mythology permeate Victorian literature, painting, sculpture, architecture, education, philosophy, and politics. A rich and extraordinarily varied theatrical tradition is documented in Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh’s *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre, 1660–1914* (2005). Studies of Greek influences emphasize a transgressive tendency in the Hellenism of the late 19th century: these include Yopie Prins’s *Victorian Sappho* (1999), Margot K. Louis’s *Persephone Rises, 1860–1927: Mythography, Gender, and the Creation of a New Spirituality* (2009), and Stefano

Evangelista's *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece* (2009).⁸² Scholarship on the dominance of the Greek contribution to classical reception was challenged and complemented by Norman Vance's wide-ranging account of the persistence of Roman influences in *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (1997).⁸³ In some studies the Greek and Roman contributions have been treated more equally and the significant interplay between the traditions has been explored, particularly in author-based works such as A. A. Markley's *Stateliest Measures: Tennyson and the Literature of Greece and Rome* (2004), and collections of essays such as *Pater the Classicist* (2017) and *Oscar Wilde and Classical Antiquity* (2017).⁸⁴ Women's access to the classics has been a significant theme in studies such as Isobel Hurst's *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics* (2006), Shany Fiske's *Heretical Hellenism*, T. D. Olverson's *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late Victorian Hellenism*, and Yopie Prins's *Ladies' Greek* (2017).⁸⁵ The broadening of classical studies in the late 19th century, to include new perspectives based on anthropology, archaeology, and sociology, has been reflected in modern cross-disciplinary scholarship, which has moved from purely and narrowly literary and textual influences toward a broader understanding of the reception of antiquity. Christopher Stray's *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities, and Society in England, 1830–1960* (1998) is an indispensable account of the shift from classics as an amateur pursuit and marker of gentlemanly culture to a professional discipline of scholarship.⁸⁶ James Turner's *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (2014) similarly examines the gradual evolution from classics as the primary subject of study to the creation of separate disciplines of literature, linguistics, history, politics, and classics.⁸⁷

The most comprehensive overview of classical reception in the 19th century is volume 4 of *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature*, edited by Norman Vance and Jennifer Wallace (2015), which includes essays on contexts (education and reading, politics, empire), genres (the novel, tragedy), and authors such as Alfred Tennyson, Elizabeth

Barrett Browning, Robert Browning, Matthew Arnold, William Morris, George Eliot, and Walter Pater.⁸⁸ As the reception of antiquity in the Victorian period continues to prove fertile ground for scholarship, new works can be found in series such as Classical Presences series from Oxford University Press, Bloomsbury Studies in Classical Reception, and Cambridge University Press's Classics after Antiquity.

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- ² Richard Jenkyns, *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980); and Frank M. Turner, *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).
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- ⁵² Edith Hall, *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer’s Odyssey* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008); Laura Monrós-Gaspar, *Victorian Classical Burlesques: A Critical Anthology* (London:

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