

## PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 2024

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# The State of the Society

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*The following text is an edited transcript of the presidential address delivered on January 6, 2024, in the Society for Classical Studies Plenary Session of the 2024 Annual Meeting. The address speaks to “the state of the Society” at that moment. Significant developments that have occurred in the five months between the annual meeting and the finalizing of this text (mid-June 2024) are noted as updates and provided in the footnotes.*

IT IS THE SINGULAR HONOR and privilege of serving as president of the Society for Classical Studies (SCS) to be granted the time and the audience to deliver this address. The question of how to use this opportunity and, more broadly, how to use most appropriately and effectively the platform that the presidency provides, has weighed on me throughout this year, and I will say more about that weight in what follows. Specifically regarding the presidential address, however, it was not long ago that the distinguished scholars whose shoes I now try to fill used this occasion to present their current scholarly work. I vividly remember, as a young assistant professor, hearing my own mentors and teachers Robert Kaster and Susan Treggiari employ their presidential addresses to speak about, respectively, the “Shame of the Romans” (1996) and “Cicero between ‘Public’ and ‘Private’” (1997). As recently as a decade

ago, presidents Denis Feeney and Kathryn Gutzwiller spoke, respectively, on “First Similes in Epic” (2014) and “Fantasy and Metaphor in Meleager” (2015).

But times are changing. Scholarly organizations like the SCS, which originated and have long histories as learned societies, are evolving—incrementally and over an extended period—into what might better be described as “professional associations.” The SCS continues to provide fora for scholarly exchange, to be sure. However, its efforts and resources are increasingly devoted to supporting the professional development and careers of its members. Even though the Society no longer organizes and hosts a full-scale placement service at the annual meeting—at one time a very substantial and burdensome commitment—it has continued to post advertisements for academic (and sometimes para- or even nonacademic) positions. Increasingly, the events that the SCS organizes and hosts, both at the annual meeting and outside of it, focus on networking, mentoring, and relationship building. The Society has a very busy Professional Ethics committee, whose job is to field ethics complaints and grievances raised by members regarding the behavior of other members or organizations. The Classics Advisory Service offers advice and interventions when programs that support teaching and research in our field are in danger of elimination. Some of the Society’s liveliest committees and affiliated groups are those that convene members who share a particular professional status, such as contingent faculty or graduate students or K–12 educators; or that provide fora for members who face professional challenges related to their race, socioeconomic status, gender or sexual identity, disability status, or other factors. The Society provides various types and levels of organizational and budgetary support to such committees and groups, which for their part often organize social events, professional development sessions, and/or scholarly paper sessions at the annual meeting, thereby leaving a significant imprint upon the program. Further, the SCS devotes ever more resources, via small grants, awards, and programming, to supporting the professional development of members employed in positions that do not provide such resources adequately. The COVID pandemic has accelerated this process of turning the Society’s collective attention to matters of professional development, as its members have confronted fundamentally altered landscapes of research, teaching, resource availability, and the timing of career advancement. In short, the SCS has for some time been evolving in ways that reflect profound changes in the world of scholarship and teaching and in the landscape of higher education generally. To be a classicist in 2024 is simply not the same thing as it was a decade or two ago—let alone in 1994, the year in which I first took up a professional position.

If this were 1994—or even 2014—I would be talking to you now about Roman civil courts in the late republic and early imperial age, and more specifically about the *Causa Curiana*, a trial from the 90s B.C.E. that Cicero made famous largely by declaring repeatedly how famous it was. This case, which concerned a contested will and was tried in the Centumviral Court, is presented by Cicero as exemplifying the inevitable and necessary outcome of a competition between a full, elaborate, grand style of oratory, victoriously deployed in this trial by the celebrated orator Lucius Licinius Crassus, and a stripped-down, plain style deployed in a losing cause by the opposing advocate, Quintus Mucius Scaevola Pontifex. Cicero, himself an exponent of the full, grand style, seeks to make Crassus's triumph prefigure the outcome of Cicero's own competition in the 40s B.C.E. with his so-called Atticist rivals, whose stripped-down oratorical style aligns them with Scaevola. Nor is this all that the *Causa Curiana* does for Cicero. He also deploys this trial and its speeches to exemplify the arts of peace, which he increasingly poses against the rash, norm-exploding behavior of the big military men of the 50s and 40s B.C.E.. He, further, presents Crassus as a kind of artist whose work rivals the best that the Greek world has to offer: he compares Crassus not just to Demosthenes, but even to Phidias. Cicero thus makes this old trial intervene in a competition, largely between himself and Caesar, regarding the correct form of political action in this era, as well as in a competition for cultural prestige between Romans and Greeks. The *Causa Curiana* and its advocacy, in the context of Roman civil litigation and of Roman culture and politics more generally, has been a major focus of my scholarly work in the past year and would likely have been the topic of this address, had I held this office a decade or more ago. Even today, I would love to have found a clever way to weave aspects of this work into my remarks about our organization's mission and governance. But the sad truth is that my efforts as president to navigate and manage the challenges facing the Society over the past year required an entirely different set of mental muscles. This lengthy *praeteritio*, then, may stand as a synecdoche for the larger change described earlier—the slow but unmistakable shift of attention and focus within the SCS from the exclusively scholarly domain of the old “learned society” to matters of career development, workplace culture, work-life balance, and the like, that concern the modern professional association.

In light of these reflections on the kind of organization that the SCS finds itself becoming, I would like to describe some of the Society's initiatives and activities in the past year, as well as certain challenges the Society has confronted. At the end I will dive deeper into one particular challenge that, in this world, the Society's board of directors regularly finds itself facing.

The adage “follow the money” points us to the most important activity of the Society, now and for many years past: this very meeting, which we have been holding annually for a long time, and in conjunction with the Archaeological Institute of America for at least four decades. By design, the expenses of putting on this meeting roughly balance the revenue generated from registration fees and other sources, so that the whole event is a financial wash for the Society. Though the SCS may run a surplus or deficit in any given year due to conditions specific to that event (for example, the 2018 “bomb cyclone” meeting in Boston when about a quarter of registered attendees were unable to get to the meeting site, necessitating a large insurance claim), the SCS does not *seek* to run a surplus from the annual meeting in order to subsidize other activities it wishes to carry out, as many other academic organizations do. The income and expenses of the meeting amount to between a quarter and a third of the SCS’s total annual revenues and expenditures, assuming the overall budget is more or less in balance. The meeting also requires the full-time attention of one out of three staff members in the New York office—namely Cherane Ali, the SCS’s experienced and skilled director of meetings. In recent years, meeting-related work has also required a large plurality, if not the majority, of the executive director’s time. So in addition to following the money, we also need to follow the time spent by salaried staff and consider the opportunity costs. For our staff could support other activities and initiatives if they were not so heavily tasked with the meeting. As officers and members of the SCS, we have to ask ourselves whether this kind of meeting, in this form, as we have been doing it for many decades, is really the best or most important thing we should be doing with our money and staff time in the world as it is now. The pandemic, and the cold bath of virtual everything into which it plunged us, did reveal that there are other, cheaper (and in key respects more accessible) ways for members of our tribe to meet.

In light of these considerations, one year ago my predecessor as president, Matthew Santirocco, announced the creation of a task force whose charge was to examine every aspect of the annual meeting. The task force was to hold no traditional practice sacred, but to rethink the meeting’s purpose, aims, modalities, frequency, locations, partnerships, and so on, in light of the Society’s mission statement and that mission’s pillars of advocacy, growth, and inclusion. The task force was convened under the able leadership of Joe Farrell. It met monthly throughout 2023, collecting reams of information, seeking input from individual members, and consulting with many committees and affiliated groups whose own activities are crucial to the overall functioning of the annual meeting. The task force submitted its final report

in mid-December 2023. Since then the board of directors has been reviewing the report and considering how to approach the many ideas and recommendations it contains. Soon the report will be released to the membership, and the discussion will be broadened.<sup>1</sup> For now it suffices to say that posing the question of what kind(s) of meeting(s) the SCS could or should put on is also, inevitably, to pose the question of what kind of society the SCS should be. Let me take this opportunity to thank the members of that task force for their dedicated effort and deep thinking over the past year. It is important to recall that all elected and appointed roles in the SCS are voluntary, discharged by colleagues who are all juggling the demands of their paying jobs in other organizations, their family commitments, and all the other activities that fill their lives. Their service to the SCS is *additional* to all that, and some roles, including those of the task force members, may consume very considerable amounts of time, energy, and attention. Yet these colleagues do such work anyway, entirely unremunerated, just because they value the Society for the scholarly and professional services, support, and connections it provides. We owe our colleagues who serve the Society in such capacities—everyone who has stood for election, served as a director or vice president or other officer, or volunteered (or accepted an invitation) to serve on a committee—a debt of gratitude for their efforts.

A second noteworthy development for the Society this year has been the departure of its executive director of seven years, Helen Cullyer. The executive director is in many respects the public face of the Society. Presidents are certainly not that public face: every year presidents come and go, they are hard to keep track of, and, as I discovered this year, some of my dearest and oldest friends in the profession were not even aware that I was serving as president this year. But everyone knew Helen Cullyer, and her predecessor Adam Blistein: they were the durable, reliable contacts and communicators, the presences year in and year out with whom every member, sooner or later, had some kind of business or interaction. The executive director plays a central role in keeping the Society afloat financially, overseeing its communications, and maintaining its relationships with its many and varied partners, contractors, and grantors. The executive director is also the Society's principal node for information flow, fielding queries and input from all directions and directing them to the proper recipients. These are some of the day-to-day duties of the role; but as noted earlier, carrying off the annual meeting is also a large part of

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<sup>1</sup> Update: the task force's final report is publicly available at <https://classicalstudies.org/sites/default/files/2024-01/Task%20Force%20on%20Annual%20Meeting%20Final%20Report%2012.15.23.pdf>.

the job, and in recent years many challenges have arisen around the meeting. In Toronto 2017, a member of the SCS staff passed away in his hotel room during the meeting; in Boston 2018, as mentioned earlier, a major snowstorm kept roughly a quarter of registered attendees from arriving, triggering a variety of difficulties on site and leaving a messy financial tangle afterward; in San Diego 2019, the meeting was marred by shocking episodes of racial profiling and racially inflammatory speech, which have forced an overdue and ongoing reckoning for the Society.<sup>2</sup> Thanks to the COVID pandemic, the Society undertook an unprecedented, technologically challenging all-virtual meeting in 2021, and the “Omicron surge” the following winter necessitated a last-second pivot from in-person to all-virtual in 2022. Managing all such matters lands on the executive director’s plate in the first instance, and Helen Cullyer did an extraordinary job managing these challenges, along with many others. Clearly, identifying and hiring the Society’s next executive director is our most crucial task in the early months of 2024. In November 2023 I appointed a search committee, whose work should begin in earnest in the next several weeks. This committee will review, update, and revise the position description for the executive director role in light of current needs and best practices (obviously we cannot simply “repost” the description from eight years ago—the world, and the Society, have changed fundamentally since then), and it will consult key constituencies within the membership. More information will soon be coming regarding the search committee’s activities and timeline.<sup>3</sup>

In the meantime, the Society is fortunate to have secured the services of John Vitali, who in mid-December 2023 assumed the role of interim executive director and will bridge the gap until the next ongoing executive director is appointed. Mr. Vitali has long experience in finance and administration at universities and nonprofit organizations. In recent years he has worked as a consultant and accepted interim engagements like this one, aiming to help organizations navigate careful and thoughtful executive transitions. He is in the audience here this evening and has been present and visible around the meeting over the past few days. If you have not met him yet, I encourage you to do so.

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<sup>2</sup> On this matter, see the presidential address of Matthew Santirocco, delivered in January 2023, entitled “Reckonings” and published in *TAPA* 153 (2023): 287–302. His address also provides a detailed rationale for the creation of the annual meeting task force, discussed above.

<sup>3</sup> Update: this appointment process concluded successfully in the spring of 2024. Effective May 6, 2024, Zach Slates is serving as ongoing executive director of the SCS. See the announcement by President Alison Keith at <https://classicalstudies.org/scs-news/president-alison-keith-executive-director-announcement>.

I promised a deeper dive into one particular kind of challenge that the SCS's board of directors regularly faces in our current world: namely, requests from other organizations, from members, and sometimes from nonmembers for the Society to "issue a public statement" or otherwise take a public position on some current issue or event. In 2016, faced with repeated requests of this sort, the board of directors adopted an "SCS Policy on Public Statements," which it now uses to guide its decision-making on such matters.<sup>4</sup> This policy is wide-ranging, and I cannot discuss all its implications here. Crucially, however, it affirms that the Society may consider issuing a public statement if the matter in question is deemed consistent with our mission statement, which is "to advance knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the ancient Greek and Roman world and its enduring value." We also regard the principles of *advocacy* for the field, *growth* in the number of people engaged in the field, and *inclusion* of the widest range of perspectives on the field as central to this mission. As examples of matters that align with the SCS's mission and thus may come into consideration for public statements, the policy states, "These objectives [sc. as defined by the mission statement] are understood to include (but are by no means restricted to) maintaining the integrity of historical documents and artifacts, fostering communication and exchange among teachers and scholars, defending the fair and professional treatment of all members of the profession, and advocacy for the study of Classics and the humanities in general." The policy also cautions, "Normally the SCS will not issue public statements on issues that fall outside of the scope and concerns of the organization."

The SCS Policy also lays out the procedure for bringing a proposed statement to the board of directors for consideration. First, a proposed statement must be submitted, with appropriate rationale, to the president or executive director, who work together, in consultation with the board, to construct the agenda for board meetings. If the president and executive director deem the proposed statement to align with the Policy on Public Statements and to have a compelling rationale, then the proposed text is presented to the full board of directors for consideration, after which it might be moved for approval. "Approval," for this or any motion, means a majority vote of a quorum of board members in a synchronous, face-to-face meeting (i.e., a meeting that takes place either in person, via teleconferencing, or by conference call).<sup>5</sup> Alternatively, a motion can be approved via an email vote, dispensing with a

<sup>4</sup> <https://classicalstudies.org/about/scs-policy-public-statements>.

<sup>5</sup> For the quorum rule, see no. 19 in the SCS bylaws (<https://classicalstudies.org/about/revised-bylaws>).



synchronous meeting—but only if *all* voting members cast their vote *and* the vote is unanimous. If either of these requirements is not met, a synchronous meeting must be held. This rule about email voting by boards is imposed by Delaware state law, where the SCS is legally incorporated, and also by New York state law, where the SCS “does business” in that its main office is located there. So the board must, and does, observe this rule strictly. Now, the SCS has a large and diverse board of directors. The board currently has nineteen voting members, who by design span a wide range of professional positions and ranks and who also represent a range of specific clienteles within the profession whose interests need to be visible at the board level. Whenever the board has a difficult or complex matter to discuss, there is a lot of discussion. The board’s diversity and its propensity to engage in debate are excellent things, and as president I would not have it any other way. Yet, as I discovered this past year, email voting is not likely to work when such a group is dealing with complex and multifaceted issues. It is difficult to get every board member to respond to an email poll, and members do not all automatically agree on a text put before them. Commonly, several members will state that they *would* agree to a statement provided that certain changes are made. If changes are introduced into the text, then a revised version has to go around again, seeking everyone’s approval anew. The process tends toward being interminable, with the result that the matter ultimately has to be remanded to a synchronous meeting that operates under normal quorum rules. This, in turn, means either waiting until the next scheduled board meeting—which may be weeks or months away—or scheduling an *ad hoc* conference call or teleconference on shorter notice. Scheduling an *ad hoc* meeting requires a poll of board members’ availability, to which not everyone may respond promptly; and then inevitably a second poll when the first does not produce satisfactory options. All this amounts to a considerable outlay of time and energy by the SCS’s small New York staff, who have many other pressing issues to attend to.

I now have a visceral understanding of this dynamic. In the spring of 2023, a series of attacks on academic freedom were directed by the government of Florida against the public colleges and universities of that state, including a full-scale government takeover of one institution with the avowed aim of imposing a specific ideological orientation on its curriculum. This matter transparently fell within the SCS’s Policy on Public Statements, as it directly impacted the working conditions of SCS members in those institutions. Of course, these issues were by no means restricted to Classics: they concerned academic inquiry, teaching, and freedom broadly, across all disciplines. In this case, as president I brought to the board of directors the proposal that the



SCS sign on to a pair of statements regarding these matters that the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), an umbrella organization for societies like ours, had already issued. Here, then, the board of directors was not even attempting to produce its own text. But several months elapsed, and two in-person meetings were required, in order to obtain valid board votes to add the SCS as a signatory (along with many other organizations) to these ACLS statements. The process was so time consuming for board members and office staff that I promised the board I would bring no further proposals for public statements before them during my presidency, barring a dire emergency. For at that time, and indeed as always, many other pressing matters were demanding our attention.

In the summer of 2023, the United States Supreme Court ruled that the application of affirmative action principles in college and university admissions is unconstitutional. This ruling, reversing decades of settled jurisprudence, caused and understandably continues to cause consternation across the US academic world and among many members of our profession and Society. Yet it was not clear to me that this matter fell within the SCS's Policy on Public Statements, as the potential impacts on the Society as such are indirect (the SCS is not a university and does not run an admissions office). And while many SCS members work and teach in higher education, it is not yet clear how this ruling's impacts will be manifested within our field, or across higher education generally, hence how our members will experience them. In light of all this, and being mindful of my prior promise to the board, I elected to issue a "presidential letter," posted to the SCS website and emailed to the membership, in which I expressed my personal opinions, views, and concerns about the ruling.<sup>6</sup> One personal opinion I expressed in that letter was that Classics as a discipline has a particular reason for concern about this ruling, since our field has been and continues to be appropriated in the service of racist ideologies. Now, producing such a letter is another privilege of serving as president of the SCS, affording the officeholder a platform for expounding personal views about matters concerning the Society and the field. It in no way constitutes a formal public statement approved by the SCS board of directors. However, some of the responses I received after posting that letter revealed (perhaps unsurprisingly) that not everyone recognized that distinction—some people incorrectly took that letter to be a public statement communicating an board-approved stance of the SCS as an organization.

In sum, given the size and diversity of the SCS Board of Directors and the procedures the board currently follows, the Society seems likely to issue public

<sup>6</sup> <https://classicalstudies.org/scs-news/president-matthew-roller>.

statements sparingly. Perhaps that is a good thing: the Society can maximize the impact of its (very small) voice by using it only occasionally and for matters close to the heart of its mission. It can also amplify its voice by joining sister organizations' statements on matters of more general academic concern, as with the ACLS statements discussed earlier. Personally, I am comfortable with this minimalist approach to public statements, for reasons both political and practical. However, the SCS Board of Directors includes members who probably take a broader view of the kinds of issues the mission statement encompasses and authorizes the Society to comment on, and would therefore prefer the Society to speak up more frequently on a wider variety of matters. Lively debate around this topic, as around many others, is liable to persist in board discussions for years to come. For this aspect of the board's diversity and engagement, and for so many others, I as president am grateful.