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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 2021

Virtual Conference

Old News

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MOST OF THE CONVERSATIONS I HAVE HAD in the last few weeks have included some reference to 2020 as the year that everyone was glad to leave behind. Speaking for myself, 2020 has certainly been a strange year in which to be President of the Society for Classical Studies, but that has not been a wholly negative experience. I feel lucky to have had this vantage point from which to observe the resilience, perseverance, and good will with which members of our profession have confronted the past year's many waves of bad news: the pandemic with its immediate losses and far-reaching assaults on the field of education, and the unending series of insistent, cumulative reminders, crystallized for many by the killing of George Floyd, that we live in a society shaped by systemic racism.

Before turning to my somewhat more academically focused main topic, I would like, therefore, to take note of what I have been privileged to witness. I have in mind especially, of course, the far-sightedness and adaptability of the SCS's over-stretched and dedicated staff. Before I myself had any idea what was hitting us, our executive director Helen Cullyer had drawn up a full-scale contingency plan for how our operation could be kept going remotely and online, which she and her colleagues then implemented with impressive efficiency. Helen saw and seized the opportunity to apply for an NEH grant designed to preserve humanities jobs, which has significantly mitigated the financial damage to the SCS of these hard times. Cherane Ali, working closely with our Vice President for Program Cynthia Damon, redirected her meeting planning skills to the organization of a completely different kind of event, the highly successful virtual gathering which we have all been experiencing over the last few days. Erik Shell, who directs our placement service, has risen to the challenge of a year in which very little placement is happening at all with

an innovative series of career development webinars. And those are only a few of the ways in which the three of them have pivoted to handle unforeseen developments.

The extraordinary efforts of the SCS staff have been echoed throughout the Classical Studies community, with many people devoting large amounts of time and energy to the transition to remote teaching. Particular recognition is owed to the K-12 teachers who have been delivering a fulltime curriculum to students whose access to broadband internet is especially variable, while dealing with a host of other issues. The stresses of this moment have also been especially severe for graduate students, international students, contingent faculty, and those at early stages of their careers. SCS was pleased to join with the Women's Classical Caucus (WCC) in establishing the Covid-19 Relief Fund, also supported by CANE, CAAS, and CAMWS, which provides immediate micro-grants to classicists, particularly graduate students and contingent faculty, who are experiencing precarity as a result of the pandemic. Heartfelt thanks to all of you who have contributed to the sum of just over \$100,000 which has been raised so far, through which we have been able to make a small but meaningful difference for many of our colleagues. This need will be ongoing, and it is vitally important that those who are in a position to support this initiative continue to do so.

The effects of the pandemic on college and university budgets have also made this a busy and taxing year for the Classics Advisory Service, an important arm of the SCS that does not always get as much recognition as it deserves, partly because its most effective work is done behind the scenes. We owe a big debt of gratitude to Jeff Henderson, the current director of the CAS, a rather misleading title, since this is essentially a one-person operation. Jeff has been my valued ghost-writer this year, drafting too many letters of concern addressed to administrators enacting or contemplating the elimination or diminution of programs in classics. But those letters, which tend to arrive late in the game, are only one especially visible sign of what the CAS does, and Jeff has devoted much time and energy to advising and strategizing with those whose programs are under threat.

We cannot yet know what the post-Covid landscape will look like, but the pandemic has undoubtedly accelerated trends that were already leading to more such threats. Looking ahead the SCS will certainly need to step up its advocacy for the continued study, not just of the premodern past and the particular geographical and chronological portion of that with which we are concerned, but also of the humanities as a whole and of the liberal arts in general. One thing that recent events have brought home to me is that our advocacy has to be fully integrated with another urgent priority, which is our

commitment to becoming in fact, as well as in words, a truly inclusive and anti-racist organization, representing a truly inclusive and anti-racist profession. I am mindful that this can be easier said than done: it is tempting, when faced with what feel like existential threats, to revert to familiar claims about the specialness, the firstness, and the outsize cultural significance of ancient Greece and Rome. It can be hard to reconcile openness to honest critiques of those claims for their bad faith and their implication in histories of elitism and exclusion, with the impulse to fight for our survival with any argument that might work. But I am confident that, with Victoria Pagán in the newly created position of Equity Advisor, and with Shelley Haley as our President, the SCS will be keeping those dual priorities of advocacy for our field and progress towards true equity well aligned.

I have also had cause to think this year about some earlier models for whom being a classicist and advancing inclusion went absolutely hand in hand. One is Dr. Rudolph Masciantonio, the dedicated Latin teacher, and real estate investor, who attracted national attention as long ago as the 1960s for his work bringing Latin and Greek to students in underserved, majority African American Philadelphia schools.¹ Rudy died in 2016, but 2020 was the year when his generous financial legacy to the SCS and many other Classics organizations became available and could be put to use furthering his vision. I have also found inspiration in learning more about William Sanders Scarborough and the other Black classicists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who were the subject of this year's Presidential Panel. It is really energizing to think of ourselves as continuing the legacy of such precursors, figures for whom there was so very much at stake in the kinds of claims we make: claims that studying the humanities is tied up with being fully human and that the spiritual and intellectual benefits of learning are at least as valuable as the utilitarian ones.

One minor feature of our professional life that has been reshaped by recent events is this Presidential Address, which has morphed from a formal presentation of the President's scholarly research to something more topical, more concerned with the state of the profession, and much briefer—a trend reinforced in our online format by the new menace of zoom fatigue. So instead of trying to present any of my current research, and in keeping with the more scattered and news-dominated character everyone's thoughts over this past year, I am going to use my remaining time for a personal account of a few instances in which the news about recent history or current

¹ For a brief profile, see <https://dbcs.rutgers.edu/all-scholars/8914-masciantonio-rudolph> (accessed 4/28/21).

events that reached me in the seclusion of my leafy suburban home, through the mail or on the computer screen, has enriched or reinforced my thinking about ancient texts, and in particular the Homeric epics. These moments, in which I found a distant echo of Homer in some modern occurrence, could be said to authenticate Homer, confirming the ongoing relevance of the events described in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. But these episodes were important to me also because they connected with particular approaches to Homer that have played a role in my teaching and scholarship, and so they affirm not just the truth to life of what happens in the Homer epics but also the value of some of the ways that we are thinking about Homer these days in our more academic settings. This is in part to confirm a key tenet of reception studies, that later responses to ancient material can help us to see that ancient material more truly, but also to stress the further point that the questions we ask about ancient texts as scholars and teachers are rightly in tune with present day experience.

The first of these episodes is a memory that was sparked for me by reading a reference in an article in the *New Yorker* to an artist named Gin McGill-Prather.² Gin, whose writings, films, and mixed media canvases are often informed by her harrowing experiences as a combat medic in Iraq, is now based in Minneapolis, but she spent several years in Philadelphia, during which time she participated in a Homer reading group for veterans that I was leading through Eternal Soldier, an initiative based at the Penn museum that connects veterans with ancient material.³ Like many of us, I have been thinking about how best to describe the ongoing appeal of a work like the *Odyssey* at a time when we are less willing to overlook the questionable values the poem endorses as its hero reclaims his central position in a world that is patriarchal, militaristic, hierarchical, and dependent on slavery. This is an ongoing challenge that has been heightened in a constructive way by Emily Wilson's measured characterization of Odysseus as "a complicated man" in the opening line of her recent translation, and in a less helpful way by the recent ejection of the *Odyssey* from the curriculum of a high school in Lawrence, Massachusetts because of its unacceptable values.⁴ Any reading of the *Odyssey* has to reckon with the way that the pleasures it offers are bound up with the

² Khatchadourian, Raffi, "Michael Rakowitz's Art of Return," *The New Yorker* August 24, 2020. For "The Ballad of Special Ops Cody," a stop motion video in which an action figure of a contemporary soldier encounters ancient Iraqi votive statues, voiced by Gin and based on her experiences, see <http://www.michaelrakowitz.com/the-ballad-of-special-ops-cody> (accessed 4/28/21).

³ <https://www.eternalsoldier.org/> (accessed 4/28/21).

⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey*, translated by Emily Wilson (Norton 2017). Gurdon, Meghan Cox, "Even Homer Gets Mobbed. A Massachusetts school has banned 'The Odyssey,'" *The Wall Street Journal*, December 27, 2020.

appeal of its hero and the power of its invitation to enter imaginatively into his experiences. One approach I have found useful is to jettison the idea of Odysseus as a hero and to think of him instead as a survivor, someone whose experiences reveal the human costs of the struggle to survive, and this certainly resonates with veterans like Gin; another is to focus less on the social arrangements of Odysseus's world and more on the kinds of fantasies that his story of superhuman adventure and triumph engage for all kinds of readers. That is not necessarily a comfortable experience, since some of those fantasies involve violent revenge and the elimination of all possible competitors, but I have always been especially interested in the way the *Odyssey* expresses a deep and easily understandable resistance to the passage of time and the changes that time brings. I have been thinking about this since my early work on the poem's disguise plot, which turns on the conceit that the aged and timeworn appearance of someone coming home after twenty years of adventures is not his actual appearance but a false disguise that he can take off to become his real self again.⁵ But the pervasiveness and power of this theme, and its special pertinence to the experience of a warrior, was really brought home to me by hearing Gin say something like this (and this is, of course, my approximate memory of her words): "When I was deployed, I just couldn't stop thinking about home. And when I did, I imagined everything being exactly the way it was when I left. That's what I wanted to get back to." For me that was a valuable clue to the kind of satisfaction the *Odyssey* offers its readers, even if, as for many of the veterans I have read the poem with, it presents a poignant contrast to their own experience of returning to a home that was not the same at all and could not be restored or recovered.

My next example relates to the way I spent the early part of 2020 gaining a new perspective on the *Iliad*. I had the good fortune to co-teach a graduate seminar on "Troy and Homer" with my archaeologist colleague Brian Rose. And we and our students just managed to get in a spring break field trip to Turkey, to visit the site of Troy and relevant archaeological museums, during the second week of March, just before our lives were shut down by the pandemic. The work of the seminar involved looking at the *Iliad* and the broader Troy legend through lenses provided by the material record and by non-Greek evidence for Bronze Age Anatolia, especially Hittite sources. And those gave a very different picture from the story of a major east-west conflict that I had internalized. The site of Troy reflects plenty of disruption at the time associated with the city's legendary fall, but not the wholesale destruction that the poem anticipates, and it is a matter of ongoing, sometimes heated debate whether

⁵ Murnaghan, Sheila. 2011. *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey*. 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Troy was in fact the major power center that Homer suggests. The Hittite texts portray Troy not as occupying one side of a sharp east-west divide but as caught between the powerful Hittites, of whom the *Iliad* makes no mention, and the Ahhiyawans, who were probably the Achaeans or Mycenaean Greeks. The people of Wilusa, as Troy is called in those sources, were involved in shifting alliances, sometimes under Hittite power, but sometimes allied with the Ahhiyawans, and at one point having a king with a Greek name, Aleksandu, who could be the historical basis for the Trojan prince Paris, also known as Alexander.⁶ This made me look at the *Iliad* and the Troy legend with a new attention to the many forms of close connection between the Achaeans and the Trojans: intermarriages like that of the Greek hero Telamon and Priam's sister Hesione, an obscure mythical variant reported in Dictys' late antique account of the War in which Helen herself has a claim to Trojan ancestry,⁷ the family ties and cross-Aegean relocations that lead Glaucus and Diomedes to decide not to fight each other, and so forth. I began thinking about the Troy legend as an account of hostility arising among old friends and frequent allies rather than a sharp clash between foreign enemies and wondering how that story of relentless conflict had been imposed on this background of interconnection.

Having been preoccupied with this in the early part of the year, I then took the opportunity this October to attend remotely a program of the Classical Society in Northern Ireland. This was a session with the novelist Michael Hughes, who published in 2018 a novel entitled *Country*, a retelling of the *Iliad* set in Northern Ireland in 1996, towards the end of the "Troubles," the violent conflict between Catholics and Protestants living on top of each other in that small six county region.⁸ Hughes explained that he had not started out with the idea of rewriting the *Iliad* but had come to it from his reading and thinking about the Troubles, for which he then saw the *Iliad* as an especially apt paradigm: "... the more I engaged with the *Iliad*, the more I engaged with what seemed to me to be a very local conflict among groups of people who were strongly connected, who knew each other and who knew each other's people ... I became more seduced by the resonances there were." So it seemed to me that this contemporary writer, coming to Homer with a focus on recent history, had intuited something about the *Iliad* that I had slowly come

⁶ Rose, Charles Brian. 2014. *The Archaeology of Greek and Roman Troy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 23–33.

⁷ Dictys Cretensis *Ephemeris belli Troiani*, 1.9–10.

⁸ Hughes, Michael. 2018. *Country: A Novel*. London: John Murray. A recording of the session is at <https://classicalassociationni.wordpress.com/2020/12/27/in-conversation-with-michael-hughes-2/> (accessed 4/28/21).

to through more scholarly routes. He had perceived the substrate of ongoing relationships and multi-generational familiarity that lies beneath the poem's plot of a singular and momentous confrontation.

And lastly, I turn to a really startling experience I had while sitting at the kitchen table one morning, eating my breakfast and reading the latest issue of *Mother Jones*. That issue contains a profile of Eric Butler, who is based in Oakland, California and works in the area of restorative justice.⁹ Most of the article details Butler's work using restorative justice in high schools, as a better way of dealing with the results of conflict than suspension and expulsion, but the article starts with an extraordinary anecdote. In 2010, Butler's younger sister Lanell was murdered by her abusive ex-boyfriend. Butler and his friends were consumed by a frustrated longing for revenge, which had no obvious outlet as the killer had been caught and put in jail. At this point, he received an unexpected phone call from the killer's mother, in which she announced that she was on her way from her home in Florida to see his and Lanell's mother in New Orleans, where the family was gathered. This woman quickly became the object of their hostile feelings and they were imagining various forms of revenge, like throwing her into a nearby swamp full of alligators. But when she arrived, Butler was confronted by the sight of a tiny old woman in a housecoat and flip-flops. As he put it, "She was like the cutest little old lady."

She's scooting up the driveway. Before she can knock, I open the door. She looks at me and her eyes are welling up.

And then she takes her hand and moves me out of her way. So she can see my mom. And she gets on her knees. And she says, "I am the mother of the person that killed your daughter. And I belong to you." Everything negative in this room—she just sucked it all out.

My mom stands up. And she stands this woman up. And they just start hugging. And they are crying and sobbing. And through the sobbing you can hear my mom say, "You was forgiven before you came here."

The room is silent. Except, one of my friends says, "Y'All feel that?"

I do not see how any classicist could read this story without thinking of Priam and Achilles in Book 24 of the *Iliad*. I of course do not want to minimize the differences between those two Bronze Age kings and these two contemporary Black American women. Any full and responsible comparison of the two episodes would avoid facile assertions of universality and would highlight significant differences involving status, gender, cultural context, and

⁹ Hochschild, Adam, "Break it Up," *Mother Jones*, November + December 2020, 46-53.

exact circumstances. But the commonalities are also unmissable: the difficult journey; the way the death of a child lies between these two people; the bald statement of their peculiar relationship; their ability nonetheless to come together in shared mourning; the centrality of parenthood and parental loss; the amazement of the men who witness the scene. In terms of my particular interest in how contemporary events reinforce our more academic ways of thinking about Homer, I am particularly struck by the common gestures: the one person on the ground assuming a posture of humility and supplication, the other getting up and raising them to a standing position in an expression of sympathy and reconciliation. To return to the world of classical scholarship, this resonates with important critical directions in our field, involving increased attention to the importance of embodiment and the expressive power of physical gestures, which has been explored especially in relation to the *Iliad* in an important new book by Alex Purves.¹⁰

Those, then, are some of the ways in which the news that filtered through to me during this difficult year from more recent contexts of violent conflict has not only confirmed the ongoing pertinence of the ancient texts that we read and study—bringing reminders that the news they report is not really old at all—but has also reinforced my conviction that we need today's news to fully understand those old texts.¹¹

¹⁰ Purves, Alex C. 2019. *Homer and the Poetics of Gesture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹¹ This is a very lightly edited version of the talk delivered during the Plenary Session on January 9, 2021. The images on PowerPoint that accompanied the talk have been omitted.