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**THE ROLE OF CLASSICAL STUDIES IN THE 21ST
CENTURY: AN ASSESSMENT OF THEIR POSITION IN THE
EDUCATION SYSTEM AND THE SOCIETY**

Final dissertation of Chiara Cremona

Main supervisor: Prof. John Walsh, University of Guelph

Co-supervisor: Prof. Leonor Santa Bárbara, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa

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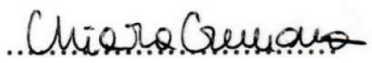
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Abstract

This Master dissertation wants to explore the current status of classical studies in the education system and the society, in order to present an overview of their presence in different fields. After having been the very core of Western culture for centuries, at the base of every scholastic and academic programme, starting from the end of the 20th century they seem to have been suffering a sort of decline, which has seen them being replaced in their role as the main educational tool by other subjects, considered more suitable to tackle our increasingly scientific and technological world. The different historical, cultural, political and economical context of our modern-day society has caused the study of ancient Greek and Latin language and literature to be regarded as an out-of-date, boring and unnecessarily demanding subject, a privilege of the small group of people who have the time and resources to dedicate themselves to it. Most importantly, the classics appear now to be quite ineffectual in the context of the professional world, since, as statistics show, graduates with a classical (and, more in general, humanities) degree encounter many difficulties in finding an adequate, well-paid job. Despite all of these setbacks, the debate around the position of the classics in the academia as well as the society continues to this day, while teachers and educators are proposing new didactic approaches and strategies to make the learning of classical subjects more appealing and engaging for students. And also outside the field of education, the classics are very much alive and well: the countless references to them in books, films, TV shows, comics and games prove that they can still be used, centuries after, to talk about important issues in an innovative and original way, addressing a modern and wider audience.

Introduction

Starting from my personal experience of high school study of Greek and Latin language and literature, and after studying languages, and consequently cultures, at an academic level, I started to ask myself why the learning of French, German, Spanish, Russian, Chinese and all the other modern languages – and their respective cultures – is encouraged, while that of Greek and Latin is questioned. The answer resides precisely in that they are “modern”, that they are needed for communication, while the other two are, by definition, dead. It’s certainly fundamental to know and understand the present civilisations of our multi-cultural world, but why the need to know and understand the civilisations that have shaped this present world is now being called into doubt? This dissertation aims at investigating the status of classical studies in the modern world, presenting an objective survey of their current position in various areas of society. The expression ‘classical studies’ typically indicates the study of classical antiquity, which, in the Western world, traditionally refers to ancient Greek and Roman literature and their related languages, that is, ancient Greek and Latin. The study of the classics has been the foundation of the broader discipline known as humanities, which is to say the very essence of culture and knowledge for many centuries. Historically, they have been at the centre of anything that was related to education, learning, scholarship, and culture. It is undeniable that they were held as the most noble and liberal discipline of all, the only one capable of forming the individuals, of giving them the abilities to navigate the world confidently. With the approaching of the new millennium, the changing economical, political and social conditions have forced a redefinition of the characteristics that one must possess in order to be able to confront the society of our times. The scientific and technological shift experienced by our increasingly globalised world favours practice over theory, technique over knowledge, knowing how to do something over just knowing something. In this context of fast thinking and even faster doing, the classics and all their baggage of ancient traditions,

dead languages and archaeological ruins seem quite out of place, as a look at the numbers quickly shows. From the point of view of building a professional career, it seems illogical to choose the classics as a university path, since the graduates with a classical degree are those that struggle the most in the labour market. Nevertheless, from the other side of the debate, many affirm the continuing validity of studying the ancient Greek and Roman world, bringing as proofs, amongst others, the persisting influence of classical antiquity in our society and culture. As I will try to demonstrate with my case study, stories, characters, ideas and values that were born in those times can fit perfectly even in a modern setting, and can be used to explain, justify, contrast or simply discuss issues that are very much grounded in the present. The simple fact that we are still talking about the classics, whether it is for criticising or praising them, should make us reflect on whether they are really useless or, once again, *Graecia [et Roma] capta ferum victorem cepit*.

Objectives and methodology of the research

The main objectives of this work are, first, to provide an account of the trajectory of classical studies from their origin to the present; to that end, from an historical overview I will proceed to an insight into the status of the classics in modern times. And to better understand that, I will focus especially on the economic side, considering factors like the employment rate of graduates coming from a classical (and, more generally, humanistic) university course, their monthly wage, and the level of effectiveness in which they hold their degree, in terms of its usability in their actual job. I will therefore examine different charts and statistical data, related mainly to Italy and Canada; the decision to choose these two countries as the object of a more extensive analysis has been made on the base of my geographical (as I am of Italian nationality) and academic background (since I have carried out the majority of my Master's studies in Canada). These elements will help us understand which is the current position of

classical studies within the society and the education system, and will lead to a survey of the different arguments and theses that animate the debate around it. Another objective of this paper is to present the approaches and didactic methods which are being employed in the 21st century in the teaching of the classics, both at the secondary and at the university level, with the intention of fostering a new appreciation as well as a new way of studying these subjects. A last point I plan to make concerns the never-ending influence of the classical world on literature, art, architecture, up until the most modern forms of culture, such as films, TV shows, and even comics and videogames. After stating the copious presence of the classics in contemporary culture, I will take into consideration the example of the modern representation of two prominent figures of Greek mythology: Eurydice and Antigone. By analysing the way in which they have been depicted through different formats, including literature, theatre and cinema, we will see how this millenary tradition can still be relevant in the modern discourse, and how it can be used outside its natural habitat, the academic world, to speak to a new audience about timeless matters.

1. Overview of the study of the classics during history

What do we mean when we say ‘the classics’? The discipline that goes under the name of classics or classical studies is essentially the study of classical antiquity; it traditionally revolves around Greek and Roman literature and their respective languages, ancient Greek and Latin. It also includes other subjects such as philosophy, history, archaeology, art, epigraphy, etc.¹ The etymology² of the word is linked to the partition into classes characteristic of the ancient Roman society: the Latin adjective *classicus* originally indicated a citizen belonging to the highest class, that of the patricians. It then passed into the literary terminology to describe writers that were considered to be authoritative. From here derives the meaning of classic as something considered to be of the highest quality, and therefore worthy of being inserted into a canon, that we now apply to the literature of all times. This etymology, however, is also the premise for the understanding of the classics as a subject suitable only for a restricted group of people, the wealthy ones, as if they were another indication of their rank and status; consequently, it is also the starting point for the accusation of being an élite and discriminating discipline that has been moved to the classics countless times (and on which I will return later).

¹ Two clarifications are needed: firstly that, when speaking of classics, we are referring to the Western world; and secondly, that no confusion must be made between the classical period of ancient Greece, that covers roughly the 5th and 4th centuries BC, and classical antiquity as a whole, that goes broadly from the 8th century BC to the 6th century AD, and of which classical Greece forms part.

² Ziolkowski, Jan M. “Middle Ages.” *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*, edited by Craig W. Kallendorf, Oxford, Blackwell, 2007, p. 17.

The study of the classics began, needless to say, during classical antiquity. The first part of the schooling was dedicated to grammar: a rigorous and systematic study of literature, in order to acquire critical and analytical knowledge. After that came rhetoric, the art – it was actually conceived as a real art that had to be mastered, not as a mere scholastic subject to be studied – of talking, of speaking well, and more specifically of persuading with words. To be able to deliver a speech that was moving and convincing, impactful and effective, was a skill required not only in public assemblies, for political reasons, but also in private conversations, in order to be regarded as a man of culture. The training in rhetoric constituted, for a young Greek or Roman man, the equivalent of our higher education³, and its aim was to form a *vir bonus dicendi peritus*⁴, that is, a good man expert in the art of speaking: the focus is both on the moral qualities and on the eloquence. Indeed, the oral ability was a very important component of the concept of *paideia*, which encapsulated the educational ideal for the members of the ancient Greek polis (at least, those that could afford to be educated): a well-rounded man, who cultivated the mind as well as the body, and was trained in both intellectual subjects such as the above-mentioned grammar and rhetoric, and then philosophy, arithmetic and medicine, but also music and poetry; and physical activities like gymnastics and boxing. This model later spread to all the Graeco-Roman world, and was called *humanitas* in Latin. The journey of the study and reception of the classics continued in the Middle Ages: “in no era have the classics [...] and education been bundled together more tightly.”⁵ This is the

³ Simmons, Tracy Lee. *Climbing Parnassus: A New Apologia for Greek and Latin*. Wilmington, Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2002, p. 76.

⁴ The definition is attributed to Cato the Censor by the orator and educator Quintilian, in his work *Institutio oratoria*.

⁵ Ziolkowski, Jan M. *Op. cit.*, p. 19.

period in which we assist to the rise of the Catholic Church as the (almost exclusive) custodian and preserver of the ancient tradition. First, it sanctioned Latin as the language of the West⁶, a means of cultural unity in the territories of the Western Roman Empire; Greek, that was still spoken in much of the Roman world in late antiquity⁷, slowly became used only in the Eastern Roman Empire, and remained as a philosophical and literary language elsewhere. Latin, despite the development of regional tongues throughout the Middle Ages in all of Europe, managed to maintain its status as the language of power, government, and scholarship. The unifying power that was attributed to Latin was so deeply felt that all Christendom was referred to not as Europe, but as *omnis Latinitas* (all Latinity)⁸. The Catholic Church also became the leading institution in the field of knowledge, preserving most of the classical texts in its monasteries, through the work of copyists and miniaturists. However, a compromise had to be reached between the instances of culture and those of faith, since all the classical authors were pagans; this is why it often happened that, during the copying of some texts, passages were expurgated or replaced in name of the Christian values. Still, we owe it to that age if such a large part of the classical tradition was able to reach us. Latin became also the language used in the other educational institution that was born during these centuries: the university. The great universities of Paris, Bologna, Oxford and Cambridge, all used Latin for their textbooks and their lectures, and Latin was compulsory

⁶ Waquet, Françoise. “The ‘Latin Stronghold’: the Church.” *Latin, or, The Empire of a Sign: From the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Centuries*. Translated by John Howe, London, Verso, 2001.

⁷ It wasn’t classical Greek, but a dialect form known as *koine* (this Greek term means precisely “common”).

⁸ Ziolkowski, Jan M. *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

in all sort of universities studies. To be granted the access, everyone needed the previous knowledge of the disciplines known as liberal arts, for the teaching of which specific preparatory schools existed. The liberal arts curriculum (that stood in contrast with a type of education that was mainly vocational or technical, that is, devoted to the learning of a profession) was made up of seven subjects⁹: the arts of the trivium, namely grammar, rhetoric and dialectic; and the arts of the quadrivium, that is, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music¹⁰. It appears clear how such an academic course was adopted from the classical tradition.

After the Middle Ages came the Renaissance, which, from its very name, gives the idea of a rebirth, in this case the rebirth of the classical tradition. A widespread interpretation nowadays tends to disregard the perception of the Middle Ages as “Dark Ages”, because, as we argued, the recovery of classical antiquity and the recognition of a tight bond with the classical world were also present in the previous historical period. However, some aspects characterise the Renaissance as a true novelty: the wide circulation of the movement (in all of Europe, not just in some isolated religious and court environments) and its continuity in time; and the awareness of a separation between the modern world and antiquity, with a considerable interruption represented by the so-called Dark Ages. It is worth mentioning though, that the concept of Dark Ages originated precisely in this period, first employed by the Italian scholar Petrarch, who considered the previous centuries “dark” compared to the

⁹ The partition was outlined in a fixed form by Martianus Capella in his *Marriage of Mercury and Philology* (5th century).

¹⁰ It is interesting to notice how music, that today is conceived as pertaining to the fine arts, was then placed in the same group with the scientific subjects.

“light” of classical antiquity¹¹; the traditional image of the opposition between light and darkness was used to contrast the supposed ignorance and intellectual obscurity of the Middle Ages with the knowledge and understanding of the Greco-Roman world of the Renaissance. This cultural movement, that covers roughly the 15th and the 16th centuries, originated in Italy and later reached the rest of Europe; one of the initiators was precisely Petrarch, who, through his gathering of ancient manuscripts¹², promoted the recovery of ancient Greek and Roman texts in their original form. He, along with the Italian poet Boccaccio, encouraged a translation of Homer works into Italian by the Greek scholar Leontius Pilatus, thus starting a new era in classical studies. These intellectuals were amongst the first promoters of Humanism, the revival of the study of classical antiquity that marks the Renaissance period as a whole. Humanists like Petrarch and Boccaccio were interested in the rediscovery of Greek and Latin classics within their historical and cultural context, discarding the allegorical interpretations of the medieval period. In order to achieve this, they implemented what can be considered as the predecessor of modern philology: a method that aims at reconstructing the original form of a text through the critical and comparative analysis of the different versions available. On a more general note, the term humanist designated scholars in the field of the humanities (*studia humanitatis*), who, through the studying of classical literature, history and philosophy, wanted to recover the culture of ancient Greece and Rome and apply its values to the society of their times. The message that Humanism conveyed was one of emancipation, independence and self-assertion: the objective of these centuries was to put the

¹¹ Thompson, Bard. *Humanists and Reformers: A History of the Renaissance and Reformation*. Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996, p.13.

¹² The most important of these discoveries was that of a collection of letters of Cicero not previously known, in the Chapter Library of Verona Cathedral.

individual at the centre of the philosophical investigation, appreciating all of men's resources and affirming the dignity of a man that builds his own destiny (*homo faber fortunae suae*). In this perspective, the classical concept of paideia was very much appropriate for the new ideal of man sought by humanists: a combination of intellectual ability and moral virtue, a modern embodiment of the classical *kalokagathia*¹³. During the Renaissance, classical education gradually took the form it retained almost until the 20th century: the curriculum expanded to include history, moral philosophy, ethics, and poetry, considered the most perfect of all forms of literature. One of the most notable consequences of the reform of education that occurred in this period was the full-fledged return of Greek amongst the subjects a cultured man had to master to be worthy of such a definition. If Latin was used to teach grammar and rhetoric, Greek was studied for its contribution to history, poetry and science; Greek had to be learned, Latin to be imitated, since poets and scholars alike used it as a guide to compose their own literary works. Imitation was not limited to literature, but invested the plastic arts as well: the architecture and sculpture of the Renaissance are a clear reference to the classical world, with their resuming of the ancient architectural orders, their simple and precise lines, their clear forms and their wide use of columns. Latin continued to be, as it was in the Middle Ages, the language that equated all educated men, since it was still at the base of every scholastic or university curriculum; it was necessary for a career in the church, in the government, or in education itself. Consequently, since these professions were a prerogative of the noble and wealthy, Latin functioned also as a sort of class indicator, pointing out that someone had taken advantage of their leisure and resources, allowing themselves the luxury of spending time in the learning of something that didn't have any

¹³ A typical expression of ancient Greek writers, to signify the harmony of mind and body, the achievement of both good thoughts and actions.

immediate and concrete application¹⁴. But, even if it wasn't a craft job, classical studies did provide a professional future, being that in politics, religion or law.

Throughout the 17th century the classical curriculum was established as the base of education at all levels¹⁵; the Latin language evolved to become an exclusively literary language, with its own rules by which students, teachers, poets and writers had to abide, and that were modelled on the usage that the great classical authors like Cicero had made of the language. Classical education, in the same period, made its way across the Atlantic to America, too: many colleges and universities started to be founded, where the fundamental prerequisite for admittance was being a student of the classics¹⁶. In the 18th century, during the period that has been denominated (not by chance) Neoclassicism, the connection with the classical world is once again the protagonist of the cultural life. This artistic and literary movement coincides with two historical and social phenomena of the time: the extensive archaeological excavations inaugurated with the rediscovery of Pompeii and Herculaneum; and the practice of the Grand Tour, the traditional trip through Mediterranean Europe undertaken by upper-class young men (usually British or American) when they came of age. The protagonist of this new season of renewed interest for classical antiquity was Johann Winckelmann, the German archaeologist and art historian who was a pioneer in both these disciplines, and owes much of his experience to his stay in Rome and his visit to the sites of Pompeii and Herculaneum. The spreading of Winckelmann theories and of the newly rediscovered

¹⁴ Waquet, Françoise. ““Class.”” *Op. cit.*

¹⁵ A concrete example of this were the English grammar schools, preparatory schools for university level studies, where the grammar taught was that of Greek and Latin, and not of English.

¹⁶ Simmons, Tracy Lee. *Op. cit.*, p. 132.

Graeco-Roman ideals was then possible thanks to all the young men that visited Italy and such excavation areas during their Grand Tour. Therefore, unlike previous historical periods, the study of the classics during the 18th century was conducted mainly through physical evidences rather than written texts. It is not surprising to find architecture and the visual arts amongst the most remarkable fulfilments of Neoclassicism; going back to the principles of simplicity and symmetry that had guided Renaissance artists after the parenthesis of Baroque and Rococo, Neoclassical sculptures, monuments and buildings were conceived as direct references to the classical world, especially the art of classical Greece¹⁷. The same was also true for Neoclassical literature: “The writers of the age consciously adopted the genres and conventions of ancient literature and applied ideas and techniques derived from the classics to their own literary practice.”¹⁸ In the field of English literature, the first half of the 18th century is known as Augustan age, the definition originating from a satirical imitation of Horace’s epistles to the emperor Augustus made by Alexander Pope. During Neoclassicism then, the classics were used in a political sense as well, and this is also the case for the intellectual and philosophical movement that dominated the century, that is, the Enlightenment, of which Neoclassicism was “the basic aesthetic theory”¹⁹. The influence of the classical world manifested itself also in the other significant political and social event that marked the 18th century, the French revolution, which in its proclaimed motto of freedom and equality refers to the model of democracy of the ancient republics, as the realisation of the

¹⁷ Although many of the sculptures that served as models were Roman copies of Greek originals.

¹⁸ Kaminski, Thomas. “Neoclassicism.” *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*, edited by Craig W. Kallendorf, Oxford, Blackwell, 2007, p. 57.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

anti-tyrannical ideals of the polis²⁰. Nevertheless, between the 17th and the 18th century, the unquestioned superiority of the classics started to crack, and some voices began to advocate the value of the modern world, that could even have surpassed that of the ancient one. What has been called the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns began in France, with a debate that opposed the literary critic Nicolas Boileau, who affirmed that the modern culture had its roots in the appreciation of antiquity, and that the classics were a continuous source of wisdom and knowledge; and the writer Charles Perrault, who, exalting the achievements of the moderns in the arts and in science, claimed that the present century was worthy of its own recognition. This argument, that extended also to other countries, is the first instance of a social and cultural attitude that contrast the progressive and scientific nature of modernity and the traditional ideas and values of antiquity.

During the centuries that led up to the 19th, the classical curriculum was still at the base of the education system in all the schools, colleges and universities, and Latin persisted as the language of culture and religion, also against the by then established national languages. Academic programmes broadened to include subjects such as history, philosophy, and more general studies of the classical civilisations as a whole. The classics, despite the advent of the cultural and artistic movement of Romanticism, which was an explicit reaction to the Enlightenment and Neoclassicism, continued to be read and to work as a source of inspiration for many intellectuals, writers and poets in different countries, such as Shelley, Coleridge and Byron, who all went through the classical studies courses at Oxford or Cambridge; or Giacomo Leopardi, who, before becoming one of Italy's greatest authors, was an erudite philologist. Leopardi, one of the most prominent figures of the Italian and European

²⁰ Canfora, Luciano. "Il classicismo della politica giacobina." *Ideologie del classicismo*. Torino, Einaudi, 1980.

intellectual world of the time, also intervened in the debate that had arisen in Europe between classicists and romanticists. This literary controversy followed up after the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns in confronting the modern and the ancient world; responding to the essay of the Genevan intellectual Madame de Staël, who invited the Italians to stop looking at past authors and be more open to foreign, contemporary literatures, Leopardi claimed the undying validity of Greek and Roman literature, from which that of Italy could only benefit. The 19th century then witnessed another step in questioning the suitability of the classics to direct the cultural life of contemporary times. But the interest for classical antiquity was still thriving, as testified, for example, by a new phase in the study of classical texts, with the establishment of the modern discipline of philology²¹, that builds on the work of the humanists of the Renaissance and employs scientific principles, resulting in a series of rules through which it is possible to determine the most accurate version of a text; the ultimate goal is to reconstruct a sort of genealogy of all the different editions of a text, in order to retrieve that closest to the original²².

In the first half of the 20th century, the classical world was exploited by new fields, such as psychology: a famous example is Freud's theorisation of the Oedipus complex, that draws from ancient Greek mythology. We find again the use of the classics in politics: if the French revolution took as an inspiration the ancient republics, the model of Italian Fascism and

²¹ It's curious to notice how, after centuries in which Italy had maintained its position as the epicentre of classical studies, it is now Germany who takes the lead, with the systematisation of classical philology.

²² Santoli, Vittorio, et al. "Filologia." *Enciclopedia Treccani Online*, Istituto dell'Enciclopedia Italiana, [FILOLOGIA in "Enciclopedia Italiana" \(treccani.it\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/filologia_(Enciclopedia-Italiana)/). Accessed 30 May 2023.

German Nazism is rather the Roman Empire, conceived as a form of autocratic government²³. To connect themselves to those times, they made full use of Roman symbolism: from the Nazi eagle that referred to the imperial *aquila*, and the Roman salute common to both, to the very name of the Italian dictatorial regime, directly linked to Roman history²⁴. In the second half of the century, after the experience of the war(s), with the inevitable social and cultural changes that it entailed, the perception of classical culture began to change too: “the slaughter of a generation of the educated class in the trenches during the Great War casts into radical doubt the value of classical literature that had served as the basis for their education.”²⁵ In the post-war society, the study of dead languages and old civilisations was seen as “‘useless’ knowledge”, and a new kind of knowledge, “commercial and ‘useful’”²⁶, was praised as the most appropriate to keep up with the scientific and technologic developments that were taking place increasingly faster. Despite this blow to their dominant position, the classics were still holding their place in the education system, both in secondary schools and in universities, a situation that will continue until the present day. In this context, it is worth mentioning the particular case of Italy with respect to secondary education; in fact, although Greek and Latin

²³ Canfora, Luciano. “Cultura classica e fascismo in Italia” and “Cultura classica e nazismo.”

Op. cit.

²⁴ The Italian term ‘fascismo’ comes from ‘fascio’, that means ‘bundle’; according to the Fascists themselves, the name was associated with the ancient Roman fasces, a bundle of sticks tied around an axe, used a symbol of authority by a magistrate, that was carried for him by his lictors (a sort of personal guards) and could be used for corporal punishment.

²⁵ Haynes, Kenneth. “Modernism.” *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*, edited by Craig W. Kallendorf, Oxford, Blackwell, 2007, p. 111.

²⁶ Simmons, Tracy Lee. *Op. cit.*, p. 147.

are studied in other European countries, such as Austria, Denmark, the Netherlands²⁷, in Italy the number of hours dedicated to these subjects (especially Greek) is higher. Better said, Italy has a type of high school entirely dedicated to the study of the classics, the ‘liceo classico’. For many years it represented the only possibility in terms of secondary level education in Italy (excluding the schools that provided technical or professional education). The first established form of the liceo classico was the ‘liceo ginnasio’²⁸, effective from the second half of the 19th century; it was meant to form the governmental class of Italy, and it is here where its reputation, which still persists today, of an elitist school began. With the next reforms the liceo classico emphasised even more its position as the school for the future élite of Italy: in fact, only graduates from the liceo classico could access every university course available at the time, while those who came from other types of high school couldn’t apply for humanities or law courses; this was quite a problem, since law was the chosen degree for most of those who aimed to form part of the government. This role of supremacy will end only in the ‘70s, when the admission to all university courses was liberalised; as a result, the number of students of the liceo classico started to decrease in favour of, for example, the ‘liceo scientifico’, an high school more centred on scientific subjects. We can say that this trend reflects the more general tendency (also in other countries) of the sciences being endorsed over the humanities in the academic and professional world, which I will further discuss in the next chapters.

²⁷ Skurzak, Teresa. “Panoramica sull’insegnamento delle lingue classiche nei paesi europei.” *Disegnare il futuro con intelligenza antica. L’insegnamento del latino e del greco antico in Italia e nel mondo*, edited by Luciano Canfora and Ugo Cardinale, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2012.

²⁸ From the Greek γυμνάσιον, the place where young people used to train in ancient Greece.

2. Classical studies in contemporary society

Despite having been the foundation of Western culture and civilisation, as explained in the previous chapter, at the end of the 20th century the studying of the classics started to become less common: schools and universities progressively abandoned classical curricula²⁹, in favour of a different kind of knowledge, more appropriate to face the (prominently) scientific and technical world in which we are living today. In our globalised, technological, fast and ever-changing society, the suitability of the classics as the reference to guide men's life and behaviour has been called into doubt. In this chapter I will explore some reasons behind these affirmations on the loss of "popularity" of classical studies, as well as delving into the discussion about their present – and possibly future – relevance in the academic world and in the society.

2.1 Classical studies and the world of work: a statistical investigation

In our present-day society, there is a widespread perception of education as almost exclusively directed to the subsequent search for a job³⁰, based on the fact that every job needs some kind of prior learning, whether practical or theoretical. In this context, one of the strongest and more quoted arguments against the study of the classics is that they are not

²⁹ One authoritative example illustrates this tendency: the universities of Oxford and Cambridge stopped requiring students to have qualifications in Greek in order to be admitted in the '20s, and in Latin in the '50s; see Stray, Christopher. "Culture and Discipline: Classics and Society in Victorian England." *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1996, pp. 83-85.

³⁰ As pointed out by Martha Nussbaum in her book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010 (especially Chapter II).

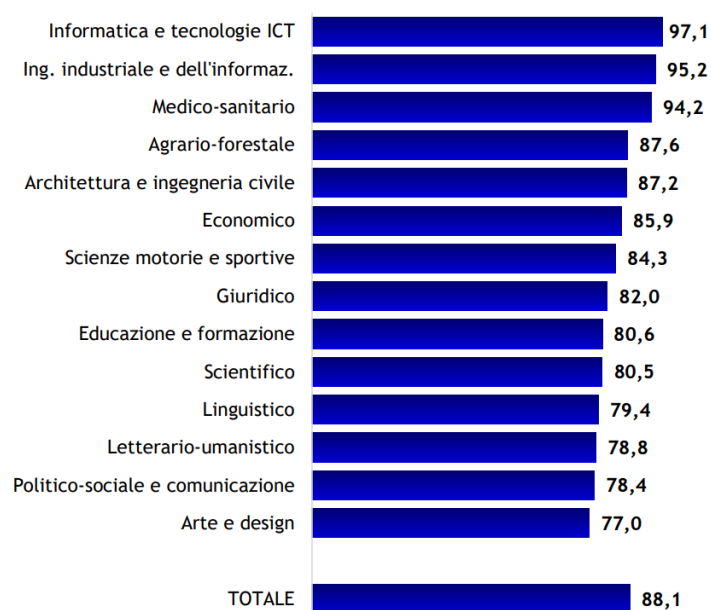
useful when it comes to finding a placement in the job market³¹. For this reason, I chose to illustrate the current situation of classical studies in the society through some statistical data regarding the graduates in this heterogeneous discipline and their integration into the work world. As mentioned in the introduction, the focus will be on Italy and Canada. For the former, the statistics will be taken from the annual report of the year 2021 of AlmaLaurea, which is an interuniversity organisation, formed by a consortium of Italian universities, dedicated to connecting university students and professional world; its activities include statistical enquiries, workshops, recruiting events, showcasing of companies, orientation and training. Each year they publish a report on the occupational status of graduate students, both at the Bachelor and at the Master level, in which they analyse several aspects such as the percentage of graduates that continue their university education against that of those who start looking for a job; the employment and unemployment rate; the type of working activity and the monthly wage; the effectiveness of the degree obtained in their actual job; and for each of these elements they consider gender and geographical differences, as well as the disciplinary group of origin. The charts I will be commenting³² show the results of the interview to first-level graduates (that is, with a Bachelor's degree) within five years from

³¹ As an Italian politician put it a few years ago: “School must prepare students more and better for work: [...] in countries that are close to a full employment rate like Germany, they are looking for engineers and specialised workers more than Latinists”, from “Bonino: meno latinisti e più ingegneri. E scoppia il caso.” *Corriere della Sera*, 3 Jan. 2018, [Bonino: più ingegneri e meno latinisti. E scoppia il caso - Corriere.it](#). Accessed 30 May 2023.

³² All the charts and the data are taken from Chapter 4 of AlmaLaurea. *XXIII Indagine Condizione Occupazionale dei Laureati. Rapporto 2021*. 2021, [almalaurea_occupazione_rapporto2021.pdf](#). Last accessed 30 May 2023.

the attainment of their degree. The first chart is about the employment rate by area of study: the literary/humanities (to which the discipline of classical studies belongs) and the linguistic categories are almost at the bottom of the graphic, with 78.8 percentage points for the former and 79.4 for the latter. These groups are also amongst those that register the highest unemployment rate, with 29.7 percentage points for the linguistic one and 27.1 for humanities; it is also significant that, compared to the previous year, there has been an increase of the unemployment rate especially in these two groups, with plus 10.2 percentage points in the linguistic one and 9.2 in humanities.

Figura 4.4 Laureati di primo livello dell'anno 2015 intervistati a cinque anni dal conseguimento del titolo: tasso di occupazione per gruppo disciplinare (valori percentuali)

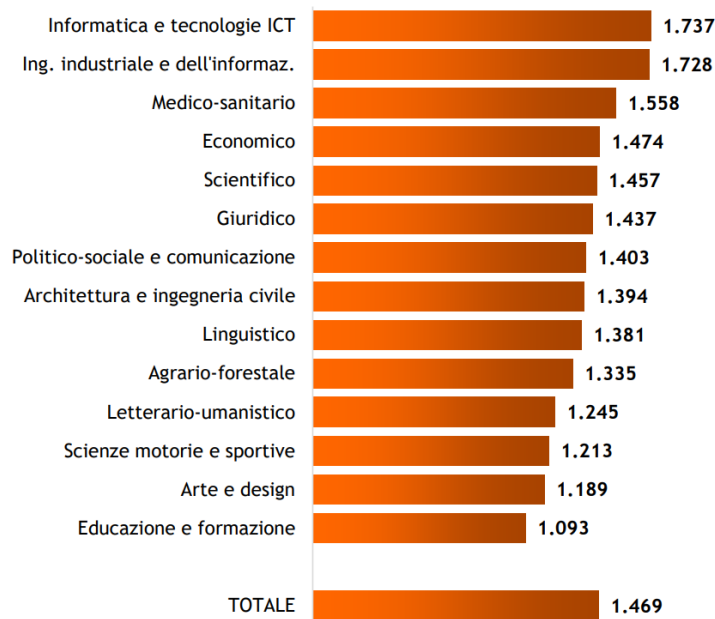


Nota: si sono considerati solo i laureati non iscritti ad altro corso di laurea; il gruppo Psicologico non è riportato.

Fonte: AlmaLaurea, Indagine sulla Condizione occupazionale dei Laureati.

In terms of monthly wage, the graduates of the linguistic field are in a better situation than their colleagues from the humanities group, with an average value of 1.381 euros against 1.245. For both of them, however, the salary levels remain below the national average, as they don't even arrive at 1.500 euros per month.

Figura 4.12 Laureati di primo livello dell'anno 2015 occupati a cinque anni dal conseguimento del titolo: retribuzione mensile netta per gruppo disciplinare (valori medi in euro)

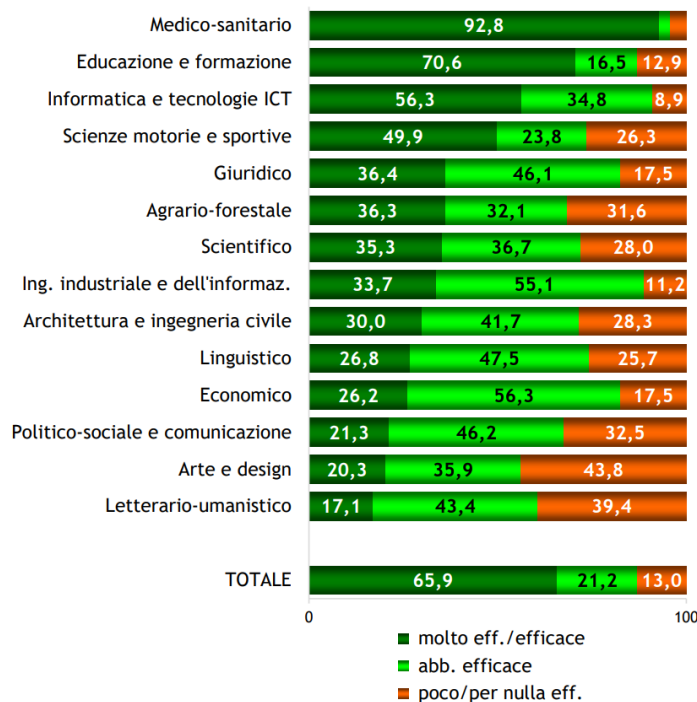


Nota: si sono considerati solo i laureati non iscritti ad altro corso di laurea; il gruppo Psicologico non è riportato.

Fonte: AlmaLaurea, Indagine sulla Condizione occupazionale dei Laureati.

The third chart shows the statistic regarding the effectiveness of the degree obtained in the job found by the graduates, that is, the actual application of the knowledge and the competences learned at university. The dark green part is the percentage of graduates who think their degree is very effective, the light green part is the percentage corresponding to sufficient effectiveness, and the orange part that for little effectiveness. The graduates from the humanities group are at the very bottom of the graphic, with the 39.4 percent of them affirming their degree is of little effectiveness, which means that they believe they're not taking advantage of what they studied at university; the linguistic group instead holds their degree to be more useful, with only 25.7 percent of graduates considering their degree of little benefit. Apparently then, the Greek and Latin language and literature are not helpful when it comes to searching for a job.

Figura 4.15 Laureati di primo livello dell'anno 2015 occupati a cinque anni dal conseguimento del titolo: efficacia della laurea per gruppo disciplinare (valori percentuali)



This is the situation in Italy. For Canada, I will use the data provided by Statistics Canada in its National Graduates Survey. The Canadian National Graduates Survey is conducted every 5 years, and collects information on students who graduated from postsecondary institutions, recording their academic path and their transition into the labour market. The annual survey I will be referring to is the one released in 2020, involving the graduates of 2015 interviewed three years after their graduation. As it is possible to read on their website, the data collected are mainly on topics such as the more or less successful obtainment of an employment by graduates of postsecondary programmes since their graduation; the relationship between their field of study and their actual employment; the type of employment and the qualification requirements needed for it, amongst others. All the charts and tables consider variables such as ethnicity, sex, province of study, level of study and especially field of study. The statistics I'm showing in this chapter are all taken from a research paper published on the agency's

website, along with other analyses accompanying the information³³. This article focuses on the labour market outcomes of postsecondary graduates³⁴, including employment status, job permanency, relatedness of their job or business to their field of study, extent to which they feel qualified for their job, median employment income and job satisfaction. The first interesting aspect is the proportion of 2015 graduates working part time in 2018: the fields of study with the highest proportion of graduates working part time at most levels of study are education, visual and performing arts and communications technologies, and humanities. On the contrary, the fields of mathematics, computer and information sciences, and architecture, engineering and related technologies show quite a low proportion of graduates working part time at most levels of study.

³³ The data and their analysis can be found on the website of Statistics Canada, in the section dedicated to the National Graduates Survey: [National Graduates Survey \(statcan.gc.ca\)](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/95-02/2020001/article/00001-eng.htm). I'm specifically referring to Reid, Alana, et al. "Labour market outcomes of postsecondary graduates, class of 2015." *The Daily – Statistics Canada's Official Release Bulletin*, 17 Nov. 2020, [The Daily — Study: Labour market outcomes of postsecondary graduates, class of 2015 \(statcan.gc.ca\)](https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/95-02/2020001/article/00001-eng.htm). Last accessed 30 May 2023.

³⁴ The survey takes into consideration only graduates that did not pursue further postsecondary education after graduating in 2015.

Table 1
Proportion of 2015 graduates working part time in 2018, by level of study, sex and field of study

Field of study	College		Bachelor's		Master's		Doctoral	
	Men	Women (ref.)	Men	Women (ref.)	Men	Women (ref.)	Men	Women (ref.)
	percent							
Total	6*	15	5*	10	4*	8	7*	12
Education	27	27	9	15	4	7	15	18
Visual and performing arts, and communications technologies	25	11	17	19	x	14	53*	32
Humanities	x	7	20	20	17	12	14	20
Social and behavioural sciences, and law	x	15	6	12	7	9	19	17
Business, management and public administration	7	13	3	3	2*	5	x	x
Physical and life sciences and technologies	x	18	6	3	x	10	3	4
Mathematics, computer and information sciences	x	25	2	x	3	3	x	15
Architecture, engineering and related technologies	3	9	0	x	2	8	4	6
Agriculture, natural resources and conservation	x	x	x	x	x	3	x	x
Health and related fields	14	19	11	13	8	10	x	10
Personal, protective and transportation services	9	14	6	x	x	x	x	x

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

* significantly different from reference category (ref.) ($p < 0.05$)

Source: 2018 National Graduates Survey (class of 2015).

When it comes to job permanency, as we can see from the next table, the humanities group is amongst the least likely to hold a permanent job, regardless of the level of study; conversely, the fields of study that seem to guarantee a permanent job are mostly mathematics, computer sciences and engineering. For example, at the Bachelor level, the humanities graduates with a permanent job are 81%, and 78% at the Master's, against the respective 94% and 92% of the graduates in architecture, engineering and related technologies.

Table 2
Proportion of graduates of 2015 working in permanent jobs in 2018, by level of study, sex and field of study

Field of study	College	Bachelor's	Master's	Doctoral
	percent			
Total	86	86	86	63
Men	88	91*	88*	64
Women (ref.)	85	83	84	63
Education	67*	61*	85*	67
Visual and performing arts, and communications technologies	82	85*	50*	54*
Humanities	73	81*	78*	59*
Social and behavioural sciences, and law	83	88*	80*	69
Business, management and public administration	88	92	92	76
Physical and life sciences and technologies	92	84*	68*	52*
Mathematics, computer and information sciences	92	93	87	69
Architecture, engineering and related technologies (ref.)	90	94	92	71
Agriculture, natural resources and conservation	76*	80*	78*	56*
Health and related fields	87	86*	85*	58*
Personal, protective and transportation services	85	91	85	x

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

* significantly different from reference category (ref.) ($p < 0.05$)

Source: 2018 National Graduates Survey (class of 2015).

Another noteworthy line of enquiry regards the proportion of graduates who feel overqualified for their job: graduates from the humanities group, at all levels of study (and

especially at the doctoral level), present the highest percentage values, from which we can infer that humanities graduates in many cases haven't been able to find a job that corresponded to their academic path and to the qualifications they had obtained.

Table 4
Proportion of 2015 graduates who felt overqualified for their job in 2018, by level of study, sex and field of study

	College	Bachelor's	Master's	Doctoral
	percent			
Total	22	23	28	24
Men	23	23	30	23*
Women (ref.)	22	24	27	26
Field of study				
Education	21	19	29*	34*
Visual and performing arts, and communications technologies	28*	26*	24	33*
Humanities	26	34*	38*	41*
Social and behavioural sciences, and law	24*	34*	32*	23
Business, management and public administration	24*	26*	31*	17
Physical and life sciences and technologies	21	29*	32*	21
Mathematics, computer and information sciences	24	14	25	22
Architecture, engineering and related technologies	24*	17	28	23
Agriculture, natural resources and conservation	19	22	28	23
Health and related fields (ref.)	15	12	19	20
Personal, protective and transportation services	27*	18	33	x

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

* significantly different from reference category (ref.) ($p < 0.05$)

Source: 2018 National Graduates Survey (class of 2015).

Looking now at the income of postsecondary graduates in Canada, we can see that, even if it's not the lowest of all (the group of visual and performing arts and communication technology has lower percentage points at most levels of study), the median employment income of the humanities group is amongst the lowest of the table. Indeed, being 24.000 dollars at the college level, 40.000 at the Bachelor's, 50.900 at the Master's, and 47.000 at the doctoral level, it contrasts, for example, with the mathematics, computer and information sciences group, which has a median employment income of respectively 44.000, 55.000, 62.000 and 78.000; and with the health and related fields group, which has 40.000, 65.000, 67.000 and 80.000.

Table 5
Median employment income of 2015 graduates who were working in a job or business in 2017 by level of study and field of study

	College	Bachelor's	Master's	Doctoral
Field of study	dollars			
Total	35,000 ^A	48,000 ^A	61,000 ^A	65,000 ^A
Education	33,000 ^{B*}	47,000 ^{A*}	72,000 ^A	84,000 ^A
Visual and performing arts, and communications technologies	28,000 ^{B*}	29,000 ^{B*}	47,000 ^{B*}	27,900 ^{B*}
Humanities	24,000 ^E	40,000 ^{B*}	50,900 ^{A*}	47,000 ^{A*}
Social and behavioural sciences, and law	31,400 ^{A*}	40,200 ^{A*}	50,000 ^{A*}	70,000 ^{A*}
Business, management and public administration	35,000 ^A	47,600 ^{A*}	66,000 ^A	97,000 ^{A*}
Physical and life sciences and technologies	35,000 ^B	38,800 ^{A*}	50,000 ^{A*}	55,000 ^{A*}
Mathematics, computer and information sciences	44,000 ^B	55,000 ^{B*}	62,000 ^A	78,000 ^B
Architecture, engineering and related technologies	40,000 ^A	57,600 ^{A*}	60,000 ^A	70,000 ^{A*}
Agriculture, natural resources and conservation	36,000 ^B	40,000 ^{B*}	51,000 ^{A*}	56,000 ^{A*}
Health and related fields (ref.)	40,000 ^A	65,000 ^A	67,000 ^A	80,000 ^A
Personal, protective and transportation services	31,000 ^{B*}	48,000 ^{B*}	82,000 ^{B*}	x

x suppressed to meet the confidentiality requirements of the *Statistics Act*

^E use with caution

* significantly different from reference category (ref.) (p < 0.05)

A excellent - Coefficient of variation is less than or equal to 0.05

B very good - Coefficient of variation is greater than 0.05 and less than or equal to 0.15

Source: 2018 National Graduates Survey (class of 2015).

The analysis of these sets of data show that both in Italy and in Canada a classical degree, and generally one pertaining to the humanities group, doesn't help students to access the most well-paid jobs; and when they do find a job, it is often something below their level of study, that doesn't allow them to fruitfully apply their skills in their actual occupation or, anyway, to put into use the things they learned during their university studies. It seems reasonable to affirm that humanities graduates encounter more difficulties in finding their place in the labour market than their colleagues from other disciplinary groups, such as informatics and computing, mathematics and engineering, or health professions. In view of these considerations, the question about the real benefit of pursuing a classical formation arises spontaneously. What is the point of spending years of your life (and a lot of money) to study something that, in the end, doesn't provide you with a guaranteed work?

2.2 The current and future status of classical studies: an ongoing debate

How do the academic world and the society respond to this change in the status of the classics – from being the very base of education and the essence of cultural and social life, to one of the less useful tools for the construction of a professional career? I will now enter into the

debate around the situation of classical studies in the 21st century, presenting opinions in favour of as well as against their continuing presence in our society and school system.

Beginning with the latter, the cases that have been used against the classics are mainly two: Greek and Latin are not languages used for communication and, on a more general note, the whole discipline of classical studies is not an adequate preparation for modern-day society and the labour market; in addition, it is an elitist subject, a privilege of the small group of people that have the time and resources to dedicate themselves to it. The first objection is a serious one, as we saw from the statistic I presented in the previous section. Since nowadays it is a luxury to study for the sake of learning, and not for a profession, it seems pointless to invest in a classical education that doesn't provide any expertise expandable on the labour market: ancient Greek and Latin are, by definition, *dead* languages, so it appears more logical to learn one of the modern languages now in use; and the history and culture of ancient Greece and Rome could hardly be of any advantage in a society that inclines increasingly towards scientific knowledge and practical skills. This contrast between science and the humanities, which is so widespread and so profoundly well-established in today's world, has however a recent origin³⁵. Since the Graeco-Roman times, in fact, the idea of learning was much more comprehensive, and the figure of the scholar corresponded to someone educated in many fields, from literature to music, to architecture and mathematics, and so on. The idea of a separation between humanistic and scientific subjects started during the course of the 20th century, due also to the growing technical complexity of the latter, and marked the beginning

³⁵ Russo, Lucio. *Perchè la cultura classica. La risposta di un non classicista*. Milano, Mondadori, 2018, Chapter XI. See also the section "Un paio di culture" in Condello, Federico. *La scuola giusta. In difesa del liceo classico*. Milano, Mondadori, 2018.

of an era of specialised sectors in the different fields of knowledge, unable to communicate between each other³⁶. To quote W. H. Auden on this matter:

the bewildered comment of any fifth century Athenian upon our society from Dante's time till our own, and with increasing sharpness every decade would surely be "Yes, I can see all the works of a great civilization, but why cannot I meet any civilized persons? I only encounter specialists, artists who know nothing of science, scientists who know nothing of art, philosophers who have no interest in God, priests who are unconcerned with politics, politicians who only know other politicians."³⁷

There are various reasons behind the classical culture's loss of its role as the main educational tool: a new economic system, which being more focused on the industrial and then the tertiary sector, required mostly applied expertise and technical abilities; the emergence of what is known as mass culture, that entailed a redistribution of knowledge and replaced schools as the main source of shared information; and the distinction between the various disciplines of which we just talked³⁸. Whether we are in favour of or against the way in which the society has evolved, it is undeniable that this is the situation graduates must face coming out of university, and therefore this charge against classical studies seems particularly difficult to

³⁶ This phenomenon was effectively reported by Charles Percy Snow in his 1959 book, *The Two Cultures*, stemmed from a lecture he gave at Cambridge University in the same year. His position is one critical of the British educational system, which he thinks had favoured excessively the humanities (for nothing more than a sort of traditional nostalgia) at the expense of a scientific instruction, despite achievements in the sciences were what enabled the Allies to win the Second World War.

³⁷ Auden, W. H. "The Greeks and Us." *Forewords and Afterwords*. New York, Vintage Books, 1974, p. 8.

³⁸ Russo, Lucio. *Op. cit.*, Chapter XI.

answer. To illustrate the second accusation I mentioned, that of elitism, I will draw upon the writings of Thomas Paine, a British radical thinker of the 18th century, who played a crucial role in the American revolutionary war. Paine expressed his objections to classical culture with respect to the society and educational system of his time³⁹: firstly, he believed that always looking at the past prevented the achievement of a better future, besides producing a somewhat conservative attitude towards the present, and that the unconditional praise of the civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome hindered his contemporaries from acknowledging their own accomplishments. Secondly, classical culture was produced by and for an élite group in what was, undoubtedly, a hierarchal society, and therefore it was not suitable for a society that was trying to promote equality, since it conveyed the ideas and social concepts supporting that hierarchy, such as misogyny, slavery, non-democratic forms of government⁴⁰. Moreover, the history of classical studies and of classical culture's reception shows that they have repeatedly been used by the ruling classes to maintain their status and preserve their reactionary ideologies. Many examples could be made of this last assertion: the use of Latin by the Catholic Church⁴¹; the type of education dedicated exclusively to members of the nobility, the clergy and the government (not only at the time of Paine); the

³⁹ See Hall, Edith, and Henry Stead. "Is the Study of the Greek and Latin Classics Elitist?" Classics&Class Project, Manchester Lit. and Phil. Society, 4 Nov. 2013, Lecture.

⁴⁰ Even what is now considered the first democracy of history, that of Athens, despite being the most liberal form of government of the time, was not really "democratic" in the modern sense of the word: all the citizens could vote and propose new laws, but the citizens were only less than a fifth of the total inhabitants. See Dionigi, Ivano, editor. *Di fronte ai classici. A colloquio con i greci e i latini*. Milano, BUR (Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli), 2002, p. 37.

⁴¹ See the already mentioned work by Françoise Waquet.

political agenda of European imperialism, that considered itself an heir of Odysseus and the Roman Empire; and, going outside the chronological scope of Paine, the recovery of classical imagery by the regimes of the 20th century, as outlined in the first chapter⁴². In this general scenario, I would also like to briefly mention the case of the Italian liceo classico⁴³, which from its first steps has always been the school for the formation of the future ruling class of Italy, since, until almost the end of the 20th century, it was the only secondary school that didn't provide a technical or professional education. The reputation of the liceo classico as a school for the offspring of the wealthy families is one hard to die even today; after all, it is true that until not many years ago it was the school typically attended by the children of doctors, lawyers, professors⁴⁴.

Let's now turn to the other side of the debate, and to the many arguments that over the years have been brought forwards in defence of the study of the classics⁴⁵. Those more concrete concerns mainly the benefits that can derive from the rigorous and laborious process of assimilating the Greek and Latin language, starting from the creation of a study method and a predisposition to learning, which stem from the fact that the study of these ancient languages is a pursuit that requires discipline, concentration and memory. As I was pointing out in the

⁴² Another of Paine's arguments addressed not the elitism of the classics, but rather the other accusation I was talking about: he thought that the time spent in the study of the ancient languages could be better used to learn about the modern world, and all its practical application – science, law, commerce.

⁴³ See the end of Chapter 1.

⁴⁴ See Condello, Federico. "Un liceo di classe?" in *Op. cit.*

⁴⁵ See, amongst others, Dionigi (2002); Simmons (2002); Morwood (2003); Gruber-Miller (2006); Anders (2017).

first chapter, during classical antiquity eloquence was one of the most required and praised skills a man could develop; and today there are still many professional careers that require a mastering of the art of speaking, from journalist to lawyer, to professor and politician. Learning Greek and Latin can help students develop a wider vocabulary, as well as know how to structure a sentence and to use figures of speech. It has been argued that the same results could be achieved by studying one's own native language, or other modern languages, which would also be much logical, since they could be used for actual communication. The answer of the classics' advocates is that Greek and Latin can help understand how language works precisely because they are so different from modern languages, and because they are fixed, not subject to change⁴⁶. Understanding their grammatical, syntactical and rhetorical rules, allows to acquire some fundamental principles that can be used in many other languages. Let's make a practical example: the concept of *consecutio temporum*, in Latin grammar, is what guides the agreement between the verb of the main sentence and those of the subordinate clauses. Having learned this, one will forever be able to properly construct a sentence with the right verbal tenses, in any language, or even just to recognise, within a sentence, which word is the verb, since the first thing they teach you when translating Greek and Latin is to identify the main verb. Honed abilities in oral and written communication can also help us distinguish truth from falsehood, right from wrong: in an age where fake news are commonplace, the power to reflect on the words can surely prove beneficial, if nothing else, to "spot when charlatan politicians cover their deficiencies with Cicero quotes."⁴⁷ The same advantages derive not only from the study of the ancient languages, but also from that

⁴⁶ Simmons, Tracy Lee. *Op. cit.*, Chapter 3.

⁴⁷ Cunliffe, Rachel. "Latin and Greek are not just for the elite." *The New Statesman*, 26 Jul. 2022, [Classics are not just for the elite - New Statesman](#). Accessed 30 May 2023.

of ancient history: not many years ago Boris Johnson, then England's Prime Minister, claimed that the Roman empire fell due to "uncontrolled immigration."⁴⁸ Affirmations like this are not just wrong (population movements are merely one of the many reasons behind the weakening of Rome's power), but also dangerous, because they legitimise a distorted version of history that could lead to rushed assumptions about very delicate matters of contemporary society, such as immigration. The knowledge of our common past is then quite necessary if we want to better understand the present and judge it correctly. More in general, the study of the ancient world in its entirety – literature, art, history, philosophy, etc. – can provide us with a more flexible and liberal mind, able to think freely and question, if necessary, the status quo, thanks to the habit of reflecting on causes and consequences, pondering all the aspects of a problem, and trying to find answers that the studying of these subjects impart. After all, the ancients "placed great faith in the power of Reason, and it was the object of the *artes liberales* to discover truth."⁴⁹ All these arguments might seem too abstract, especially if someone hasn't experienced such an education personally. But they can have a tangible impact, extending up to the notorious professional world, since nowadays "Employers want to hire college graduates who write well, speak clearly, work effectively in teams, and know how to analyse complex problems. All those virtues [...] are embedded [...]"

⁴⁸ ---. "Boris Johnson's claim that the Roman empire fell due to 'uncontrolled immigration' is wrong – and dangerous." *The New Statesman*, 1 Nov. 2021, [Boris Johnson's claim that the Roman empire fell due to "uncontrolled immigration" is wrong – and dangerous - New Statesman](#). Accessed 30 May 2023.

⁴⁹ Simmons, Tracy Lee. *Op. cit.*, p. 51. For a definition of liberal arts, see the first chapter.

in the concept of *critical thinking* [...].”⁵⁰ George Anders, in his book on the advantages of a liberal arts education, summarises the components of this much quoted and not always understood skill: thinking outside the box and adapting to changing environments, filtering information and finding insights, choosing the right approach in order to take complex decisions, understanding the big picture, be organised and able to convey information enough to build a team and manage it; in a word, analytical methods and problem solving⁵¹. All these abilities fall under the umbrella label of ‘soft skills’, that is, skills that are applicable to different fields, which has been at the centre of many job-related discussions in the recent years. Seen from this point of view, it seems untrue to say that classical studies should be abandoned because they are not in line with the competences required in the labour market⁵². Taking a further step in this direction, I would like to present a contribution that situates the expertise acquired from the study of the classics in a much broader setting, including almost all fields of human knowledge. Lucio Russo, an Italian physicist, mathematician and historian of science, after his high school studies in the liceo classico, approached again classical culture from his position as a non-classicist, showing how the debt of Western culture to the

⁵⁰ Anders, George. *You Can Do Anything: The Surprising Power of a “Useless” Liberal Arts Education*. Boston, Little Brown and Company, 2017, p. 29.

⁵¹ For an analysis of these competences with practical examples see Anders, George. *Op. cit.*, Chapter 2.

⁵² In fact, the labour market is not the only sector of human society for which the classics have been considered useful: Martha Nussbaum argues that classical studies are as important to form competent democratic citizens now as they were in the ancient times; see Nussbaum, Martha. *Op. cit.*

ancient Graeco-Roman civilisation is much greater than what is usually acknowledged⁵³. And not only because it involves many more aspects other than those normally considered part of the humanities, but also because classical sources have been the foundation of Western thought at least until the 19th century. The heritage of the classical world in areas such as fine arts and literature is well known and often mentioned everywhere, as well as the vast amount of vocabulary that most European languages have taken from Latin. Less highlighted are, I believe, the fact that modern grammatical systems owe their classification of words and parts of speech to the ancient Greek culture; and the quantity of loan words that modern languages have imported from Greek, quite surprising if we think that they are all languages derived from Latin⁵⁴. Similarly, whereas the relationship of modern European philosophy with the ancient tradition is commonly admitted, the influence of the classics on fields such as politics may profit from a deeper insight. In fact, the very concept of ‘political thinking’ was born in the Greek world, with the revolutionary idea that the ruling power has a human origin and can be held by different social forces: this thought was totally unknown to all the previous civilisations, that believed in the divine provenance of power, and in the divine right of a

⁵³ Russo, Lucio. *Op. cit.*; see especially the first section. Russo is also the author of *The Forgotten Revolution. How Science Was Born in 300 BC and Why It Had to Be Reborn*, that places the birth of modern science in the Hellenistic period. The same ideas can be found in the section titled “Le ‘due culture’: un pregiudizio moderno”, in Canfora, Luciano, and Ugo Cardinale, editors. *Op. cit.*

⁵⁴ The reason is that the Greek words were needed to define concepts which had been elaborated for the first time by Greek culture, and therefore couldn’t be expressed in other languages. An example: the Greek noun for ‘war’, *pólemos*, was never imported, because every language had an equivalent term, while words like ‘strategy’ and ‘tactic’ were adopted as loan words.

single individual to possess it. The debate about the different forms of government and their realisation started with the Greeks; and the most consequential result of that theorisation is, of course, democracy. The two most famous examples of democracy of the modern era, America and France, couldn't have been born without the help of classical thinking: the Founding Fathers of the United States and the French revolutionaries had a great familiarity with classical literature, and this is visible in their references to their ancient antecedents (Athens' democracy for the United States and the Roman Republic for France). However, the sector in which the implications of classical culture have been most neglected is science, and two examples will serve to illustrate this point. Many of the astronomic revolutions that have been considered an indicator of modernity have supposedly been realised by modern scientists in an effort to overcome the ideas of the ancients. With a thorough historical survey⁵⁵, Russo shows that the reality is different: the theory of heliocentrism, the idea that the Sun is nothing more than one of the innumerable stars in an infinite universe, and the concept of gravity, respectively ascribed to Copernicus, Giordano Bruno and Newton, can actually be traced back to classical sources. Only by reconstructing their real origin, it is possible to understand the passages from the hypotheses to the theories and explain them. Analysing, then, a fundamental work for the history of mathematics such as the *Elements* of the greek mathematician and philosopher Euclid, Russo argues that besides inheriting from it specific notions like the scientific method, theorems and postulates, we have also accepted the results of the problems and theories presented, absorbing them as a cultural product. For example, the famous Pythagorean theorem has always been articulated in the form it was expressed by Euclid, but this is not as obvious as it may seem: we could enunciate the initial problem in another manner, we could solve it in a different way, using different postulates.

⁵⁵ Russo, Lucio. *Op. cit.*, Chapter II.

This is to say that without going back to Euclid's original explanation of the whole process, we will just use the result as it is, without an enquiry into the previous passages, thus losing the ability to employ the same method to solve other mathematical problems. Ultimately, the point of Russo's book is that it would not be possible to study the modern world, and to advance in most fields of human knowledge, overlooking the classical origin of these disciplines and failing to understand their relevance.

The main goal of this survey of arguments pro and con classical studies is not to support one side over the other, but rather to present an objective assessment of the attitude towards the classics in our century, in order to better contextualise the discussion of the following sections of this dissertation.

3. Teaching classical studies in the 21st century

This chapter is focused on exploring how the educational system is facing the precarious position of the classics in our century, which I've been presenting in the previous chapters of the paper. Teachers and instructors, at both the secondary and the university level, seem to be well aware that the traditional methods of teaching Greek and Latin language and literature – although they cannot be dismissed completely (in the sense that they can be helpful to achieve a solid foundational preparation) – should be integrated with new approaches and practices in the direction of a teaching that is more innovative, dynamic and in step with the times. But before going through some practical examples of these didactic strategies, let's consider what we mean when we talk about classical education. In the first chapter, I tried to illustrate what classical education has been for many centuries: a curriculum based on the study of the ancient Greek and Latin, and that developed into “a prolonged inquiry into Greek and Roman achievements in literature, history, thought, and art.”⁵⁶ This kind of education, at least in its intentions, “led not to knowledge alone, but to the cultivation of mind and spirit”⁵⁷, and had the aim of forming an ideal man and citizen, a complete scholar, a competent intellectual. Nowadays, the expression has come to indicate more generally a liberal arts education, or an education in the humanities, expanding to include subjects such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, pedagogy, linguistics, visual and performing arts⁵⁸. At this point,

⁵⁶ Simmons, Tracy Lee. *Op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ It is important to note that the term ‘classics’ is also employed in relation to the great literary works and authors that have entered into the (Western) canon, while the classics which I'm referring to, and that form the foundation of a classical education, are those coming from the legacy of the ancient Graeco-Roman civilisation.

a distinction needs to be made between classical *scholarship* and classical *education*: the first indicates specifically the academic discipline of Classic Studies, which emerged as a specialised field of research mostly in the 19th and 20th century, building on a tradition that dated back to the Renaissance. Classical education, on the other hand, is not dedicated exclusively to specialists, but is directed to a more general public (which remains, however, a scholastic and academic public); its aim is to instruct students at the secondary and university level, and it encompasses all the subjects we were listing before, then literature, history, art, archaeology, etc.⁵⁹

Having set the context for classical education, let's now turn to some concrete methods that are being carried out in the classical teaching world, starting from the two ancient languages at the base of it. A tendency that is gaining more and more supporters is that of treating the classical languages in the same way as other modern foreign languages, and teaching them accordingly⁶⁰. Traditionally, modern language students are expected to speak and have conversations in the language they are learning, understand what they listen to and be able to write in that language, while classical language students are usually required to only read and translate a text. But why not include the “active” part of the learning process – listening, speaking and writing – in the acquisition of Greek and Latin, too? John Gruber-Miller outlines three important aspects that support this view, deriving them from the *Standards for*

⁵⁹ See Simmons, Tracy Lee. *Op. cit.*, p. 30-31, and Williams, Brian A. “Editorial: Introducing *Principia* and Classical Education.” *Principia: A Journal of Classical Education*, vol. 1, no. 1, Fall 2022, pp. 12-13.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Gruber-Miller, John, editor. *When Dead Tongues Speak: Teaching Beginning Greek and Latin*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, and Hunt, Steven. *Teaching Latin: Contexts, Theories, Practices*. London, Bloomsbury, 2022.

*Classical Language Learning*⁶¹: communication, context and community. To start with, communication is not just talking to one another, actually it's "something we do every time we read a text, write a letter, or discuss a problem"⁶²; the *Standards* identify three modes of communication: interpersonal, interpretative and presentational⁶³. Greek and Roman texts display all three, through, for example, the interpersonal exchange that takes place in dialogues, the interpretation of meaning required from the audience listening to a play, or the message that the playwright wants to convey with their work. In a time and society where culture and literature were oral as much as – if not more than – written, we must not forget that poems, plays and speeches of various kind were meant to be read out in front of a public. Therefore, it seems reasonable to retrieve the oral component in the teaching of these languages. Then, even if it may seem obvious, knowing the historical and cultural environment in which a text was written is of fundamental importance for the subsequent understanding of its meaning. Since cultural and situational contexts influence the message of ancient (and modern) texts, one cannot learn a language without learning about its corresponding culture. If this is true for modern languages, all the more so for classical languages, that have today no other means of expression apart from their language, being it oral or written. Lastly, as we were saying before, in Graeco-Roman times communication

⁶¹ These five standards – Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities – were created by the American Classical League and the American Philological Association, who adapted them from the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning* (1996).

⁶² Gruber-Miller, John. "Communication, Context, and Community. Integrating the *Standards* in the Greek and Latin Classroom." *Op. cit.*, pp. 9-23, p. 10.

⁶³ Gascoyne, Richard, et al. *Standards for Classical Language Learning*. Oxford, OH, American Classical League, 1997.

always occurred in a community, of speakers and listeners, writers and readers. Similarly, it can be helpful for classical language learners to form a sort of community in the classroom, by asking questions and providing answers to each other, elaborating ideas and receiving feedback, in order to better understand and interact with the texts under analysis. Here comes into play the notion of ‘peer teaching’, of which Neal Whitman identifies five types (mainly within higher education)⁶⁴: undergraduate teaching assistants, undergraduate tutors and undergraduate counselors, identified as ‘near-peer’ teaching situations, in which the assistants are students to a certain extent more experienced or advanced than the students they are helping; and partnerships and work groups, described as ‘co-peer’ teaching situations, that is, cooperative learning between students of the same class. Kathryn Argetsinger shows⁶⁵ how these teaching methods can fit into the classical languages (specifically Latin) classroom; for space reasons, here I will limit myself to mentioning only some practical exercises for collaborative learning, whose effectiveness she experienced in her own university courses. Starting from the most traditional, like translation of prepared passages or sentences, both from Latin to English and from English to Latin; then quizzes with vocabulary flashcards, or having the students devise their own drill about a new grammar or morphology rule; and sight reading in groups where each student is assigned a section of the text. This kind of cooperative learning not only offers a variation from the

⁶⁴ Whitman, Neal A. *Peer Teaching: To Teach is To Learn Twice* (ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 4). Washington, D.C., Association for the Study of Higher Education, 1988.

⁶⁵ Argetsinger, Kathryn. “Peer Teaching and Cooperative Learning in the First Year of Latin.” *When Dead Tongues Speak: Teaching Beginning Greek and Latin*, edited by John Gruber-Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 68-85.

conventional pattern of a language class, they also provide a more relaxed atmosphere that brings the students in closer contact with the material and encourages them to ask questions and give answers. Going back to the discussion about a more active approach in the teaching of Latin and Greek, Steven Hunt⁶⁶ describes several strategies to implement listening, speaking and writing in Latin teaching. Listening activities include, for example, dictation, that can be simple – the teacher or a student read a sentence and the other students write it down – or delayed – the students wait for a short time before writing the sentence down; the physical re-enactment of a word or phrase, based upon the principle of the Total Physical Response (TPR) developed by James Asher; the use of podcasts, such as *Nuntii Latini*, a news bulletin produced by the Finnish Broadcasting Company; and last but not least, films, television shows⁶⁷ and music, from the world-famous *Carmina Burana* to a collection of Disney songs rearranged in Latin and ancient Greek⁶⁸. One of the most notable speaking activities proposed by Hunt involves a method now known as Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS), that works in three steps: first, new vocabulary structures are taught using a combination of translation and gestures; then, those structures are used in a spoken story; and finally, after having heard the story, the students will have to read it. So, in the speaking activity, the teacher tells a simple story to the class (in Latin that is appropriate to the students' level), and the students are asked comprehension questions about it, such as “Quis est?” (“Who is?”), “Ubi est/sunt?” (“Where is/are?”), “Quid est?” (“What is?”), “Quid facit?” (“What is s/he doing?”), progressively increasing the level of complexity. Similar

⁶⁶ Hunt, Steven. *Op. cit.* See Chapter 2, 4 and 5 as a reference for what I'm discussing here.

⁶⁷ Noteworthy are, for instance, the Italian film *The First King* and the TV show *Romulus*, both narrating the history of Rome's foundation and using archaic Latin as their main language.

⁶⁸ On the YouTube channel @01ivette.

exercises could be applied to the teaching of ancient Greek as well, but in addition, Paula Saffire affirms the value of conversational Greek in the classroom practice, instead of speaking activities based on fixed texts and stories⁶⁹. The basic principle is that communication should be genuine and spontaneous, with the teacher asking questions that don't have a previously known answer, and that cannot, for example, be inferred from a piece of writing; the questions can either be about the material studied in class – grammar, vocabulary and syntax, as it is normally done in the students' native language – or more personal, starting from a simple “Χαίρετε, ὦ φίλοι!” (Hello, friends!) With regard to writing, Hunt argues for both prose composition – which, he says, is more rightly defined as reverse translation from English to Latin – and free composition, which “is increasingly common at school and university level in the US.”⁷⁰ One of the most straightforward methods for prose composition is the following: the student analyses the parts of speech of an English sentence, then identifies the Latin vocabulary to translate the English words, modifying them in the correct grammatical and syntactical form; finally, rearranges the words into a standard Latin word order. It is also possible to help the students by providing them with set of words for each part of speech, amongst which they have to choose the right ones for the sentence. Free composition, on the other hand, necessarily needs to start from a very basic level, for example by rewriting a passage in a different verb tense, from another character's point of view, or into indirect speech; or also by expanding the sentences with the addition of new vocabulary or the use of subordination. In the same way, Gruber-Miller explains how a possible writing

⁶⁹ Saffire, Paula. “Ancient Greek in Classroom Conversation.” *When Dead Tongues Speak: Teaching Beginning Greek and Latin*, edited by John Gruber-Miller, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 158-189.

⁷⁰ Hunt, Steven, *Op. cit.*, p. 125.

activity in ancient Greek could be, stressing the importance of dividing it into sequences⁷¹: starting from a picture of daily life in ancient times or of a mythological episode, the students have first to form a list of Greek words identifying all the objects and people in the picture; then, they will write simple sentences describing what is happening, that will later be developed into a short paragraph; finally, the students can elaborate on their paragraph by adding descriptions and dialogues. An original approach to prose composition involves the translation of famous pop songs from English to Latin (the same activity could be put into practice for Greek, too⁷²), which, according to the classroom experience of Stephen Kershner, allows students to “learn how to recognize, comprehend, and use as a basis for analysis rhetorical and literary devices found in Latin poetry as well as poetic compositional style.”⁷³ The effectiveness of this assignment derives from the fact that it is much easier for students (especially for those that don’t have a previous knowledge of the mechanisms of a text’s syntactical analysis) to learn poetic analysis from a kind of “poetry” they are more familiar with, belonging to a world whose linguistic vocabulary and cultural references they know well, written by an author they can almost identify themselves with. And, of course, working with a song by your favourite singer can be way more appealing than studying a text on agriculture, stoicism or military strategy. The first step of such an assignment would be to do

⁷¹ Gruber-Miller, John. “Teaching Writing in Beginning Latin and Greek: *Logos*, *Ethos* and *Pathos*.” *Op. cit.*, pp. 190-219.

⁷² See Irby-Massie, Georgia L. “‘That ain’t workin’; that’s the way you do it’: Teaching Greek Through Popular Music.” *Teaching Classical Languages*, vol. 1, no. 1, Fall 2009, pp. 30-66.

⁷³ Kershner, Stephen. “What can Taylor Swift do for your Latin Prose Composition students? Using popular music to teach Latin poetry analysis skills.” *Teaching Classical Languages*, vol. 10, no. 2, Fall 2019, pp. 48-70, p. 48.

a grammatical, syntactical and lexical analysis of the contemporary song, trying to detect literary devices and figures of speech. The following step would then be to think about the possible Latin translation of the lyrics; this would just be an intermediate phase though, because the ultimate goal would be to turn the song into a construable Latin text, “translating for sense rather than for exact dictional matching and phrasing [...]”⁷⁴ Here is an example of one of the translations produced by Kershner’s class, the song *Simultates (Bad Blood)* by Taylor Swift:

’Cause baby, now we’ve got bad blood
You know it used to be mad love
So take a look what you’ve done
’Cause baby, now we’ve got bad blood, hey!

Quod, care, nunc malum sanguinem habemus.

Scis id fuisse insanissimum amorem

Aspice ad facta a te

Quod, care, nunc malum sanguinem habemus. Ecce!

The ability to listen to, speak and write ancient Greek and Latin appears, along with the reading competence, in the *Standards for Classical Language Learning*; and, even if there aren’t native speakers of ancient Greek and Latin anymore, the point in teaching students oral abilities in these languages “must be to make them good receivers of written communication, that is, good readers”⁷⁵, as well as offering them some of that “rhetorical training

⁷⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

⁷⁵ Saffire, Paula. *Op. cit.*, p. 158.

recommended by the ancients.”⁷⁶ In this survey of proposals for the teaching of classical languages, it is also worth mentioning two particular cases of learning resources: the Cambridge Latin Course (CLC) and the *Minimus* series of books. The Cambridge Latin Course, part of the Cambridge School Classics Project (CSCP), is a Latin language course initiated in the late ‘60s, primarily addressed to secondary school students and composed of a series of textbooks (published by the Cambridge University Press and now at its 5th edition). A variety of digital materials is also available on the CLC website: a digital version of the textbooks, vocabulary quizzes, comprehension and grammar exercises. Besides linguistic content, the CLC also features a great amount of contextual information about the culture, history and daily life of ancient Rome, in the form of interactive stories with images and audio recordings. Its success is testified by its popularity, in and outside school: an episode of the famous British TV show *Doctor Who*, set in Pompeii, uses as characters those from the CLC lessons. The *Minimus* project is an introduction to the Latin language and to the culture of Roman Britain directed to primary school children; it consists of a series of books, as well as online resources for teachers and students, all based on the adventures of the eponymous mouse, who lives in the house of a Roman family in the fort of Vindolanda, in northern Britain. The evident benefit of this initiative is that of introducing students to the classical world from a very young age, with something that is not only instructive, but also entertaining. These two last examples are indicative of a tendency that is increasingly affecting classical teaching (as well as, of course, the educational world as a whole): an ever-growing presence of the digital world in the classroom, and a general reliance on computers and the internet for the learning process. What some years ago was just a handful of CDs

⁷⁶ Gruber-Miller, John. “Teaching Writing in Beginning Latin and Greek: *Logos*, *Ethos* and *Pathos*.” *Op. cit.*, pp. 190-219, p. 190.

accompanying the textbooks, has now expanded to include a huge variety of different materials. Moreover, the experience of the Covid lockdown has forced teachers and students to move the classroom in a virtual space, and even after the emergency passed, solutions of hybrid teaching remained in place. The concept of Computer Assisted Language Learning, before applied to the field of modern foreign languages, is now being used also with reference to the classical languages⁷⁷. Amongst the digital instruments that can be employed for the teaching of Greek and Latin we can find even apps and social media. An example of the first is Duolingo, a popular app for language learning, that includes Latin as one of its available languages. The basic principle of Duolingo is that of making learning fun: the app is structured almost as a videogame, with quests to fulfil and treasure chests with prizes to unlock, lots of images and colourful animations. The Latin taught here is of a basic level, and the focus is primarily on the translation into and out of the target language, on speaking and listening to dictation, without any grammatical explanation. However, it is certainly appealing because it's free, easy to use and accessible to everyone, whenever and wherever they want. The same benefits can be ascribed to social media, as shown by the case of Frederico Lourenço, a Portuguese university professor who, during the Covid pandemic, started to teach beginner Latin on his Facebook page *Latim do zero* (Latin from scratch), which soon started to have an impressive amount of followers⁷⁸. Digital technologies aren't employed only in the teaching of classical languages, but in that of the classical civilisation as a whole. Examples of this are online databases such as the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae

⁷⁷ See Hunt, Steven. "The Future: Is it Digital?" *Op. cit.*, pp. 191-211.

⁷⁸ Frederico Lourenço, specialised in classical languages and literatures, is also a writer and translator: he translated in Portuguese the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and wrote his own adaptation of the latter for children.

(TLG) and the Perseus project. The TLG is a comprehensive digital collection of most surviving Greek texts belonging to a time period that goes roughly from Homer to the fall of Constantinople; founded in 1972 at the University of California, its creation was the result of the team work of classicists and technology experts alike, that have continued to improve the project since, by expanding the body of texts, moving the collection online and developing new systems to search into and manage the corpus. Similar to the TLG is the Perseus Digital Library, founded in 1987 at Tufts University, whose ideal mission is “to make the full record of humanity – linguistic sources, physical artifacts, historical spaces – as intellectually accessible as possible to every human being, regardless of linguistic or cultural background.”⁷⁹ Originally focused on the Graeco-Roman world, it has expanded to include other historical periods; and, differently from the TLG, it has an open-source access. Both of these digital libraries can be consulted by teachers and students for list of occurrences of particular words, statistic on their frequency, lexical information, and tools for the grammatical analysis of texts. Combining “the traditional methodologies of philological and literary study with the most advanced features of information technology”⁸⁰, the TLG and Perseus can be considered amongst the first applications of the field that will later be called Digital Humanities, broadly defined as the intersection of the discipline of humanities and computer science⁸¹. The possible outcomes of this collaboration include projects of Digital

⁷⁹ “The Mission of Perseus.” *Perseus Digital Library*. Tufts University, [Perseus Digital Library \(tufts.edu\)](https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/). Accessed 30 May 2023.

⁸⁰ “The Thesaurus Linguae Graecae: Our Mission and our Projects.” *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*. University of California, Irvine, [TLG - Home \(uci.edu\)](https://www.tlg.uci.edu/). Accessed 30 May 2023.

⁸¹ A discussion on Digital Humanities falls outside the purpose of this paper; see, for example, Burdick, Anne, et. al. *Digital_Humanities*. Cambridge, MA, The MIT Press, 2012.

Humanities, and Digital Classics more specifically, such as digital archives, analysis of corpora, online publishing. For example, *EuphoriaEDU* is a system for the digital annotation of ancient texts, developed by the Laboratory of Anthropology of the Ancient World (LAMA) at Pisa University, and conceived in order to simplify the textual analysis activities in the classroom; *Mapping Ancient Texts* is a project undertaken by a team of classicists and instructional technologists at Kenyon College (Ohio), that uses digital visualisation to study ancient Mediterranean travel narratives and investigate the geographical environment of the authors⁸². Finally, the use of virtual and augmented reality, as well as videogames, represents an interesting trend. VR and AR technologies are still not widespread in schools, but museums and archaeological sites are using them to recreate ancient cities, monuments and artifacts; an example is the *Virtual Reality Oracle* project of the University of Bristol, that wants to replicate the experience of a visit to the oracle of Zeus at Dodona. As for videogames, there are many which make use of classical settings and characters, like *Rome: Total War* and *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey*, and even if they may not be always historically accurate and they don't revolve around learning, they can still prove useful to engage the young generations in the classical world⁸³. A last case I would like to describe is the use of theatre as a means to put the students in closer contact with the ancient texts. Italy is a good illustration of this educational practice, for mainly two reasons. First, because the students, besides reading Greek and Roman plays in the classroom, are often taken by their teachers too see them on stage, sometimes even in an ancient theatre, like the ancient Greek theatre of

⁸² For these projects and more, see Feuser, Stefan, et al., editors. *Teaching Classics in the Digital Age*, vol. 2 of *Think! Historically: Teaching History and the Dialogue of Disciplines*. Kiel, Kiel University Publishing, 2021.

⁸³ See Hunt, Steven. "The Future: Is it Digital?" *Op. cit.*, pp. 191-211.

Syracuse in Sicily, which since 1914 hosts the major festival of classical theatre in Italy⁸⁴. And while only students of the liceo classico study those texts at school, students of other types of high school have the opportunity to attend theatrical performances of classical dramas as well. Secondly and most importantly, the Italian model is significant because classical theatre workshops are carried out in many high schools (principally in the liceo classico, but not only) and universities, often with the aid of professional directors. The students have thus the possibility of becoming directly and concretely involved in the staging of the play, almost experiencing personally a bit of the Graeco-Roman world. Usually, the students are encouraged to take part in every aspect of the realisation of the play, including scenography, costumes, music, and not just the acting, which gives them the opportunity to express themselves in the way they prefer, since it is likely that not everyone will want to be on stage. Each year, the International Festival of Classical Theatre for Youth⁸⁵ takes place in Palazzolo Acreide, near Syracuse, bringing students and teachers from all over Italy together. Martina Treu, university teacher and theatre practitioner, analyses a particular and meaningful instance of the use of classical theatre in school, the Italian company Teatro delle Albe⁸⁶, a professional theatre company that runs workshops in high schools, and often works

⁸⁴ Organized by the INDA foundation, the Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico (National Institute of Ancient Theatre).

⁸⁵ “Festival dei Giovani.” *INDA – Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico*. Fondazione INDA, [Festival dei Giovani | INDA | Istituto Nazionale Dramma Antico | Fondazione ONLUS | Siracusa \(indafondazione.org\)](https://www.indafondazione.org/). Accessed 30 May 2023.

⁸⁶ Treu, Martina. “Back to the *Demos*. An ‘Anti-Classical’ Approach to Classics?” *Classics in the Modern World: A ‘Democratic Turn’?*, edited by Lorna Hardwick and Stephen Harrison, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

with students in deprived and marginalised areas. One of their endeavours involved the schools and the local community in Scampia, a very poor and dangerous suburb of Naples, where they also managed to reopen the local auditorium. A similar project was carried out in Mazara del Vallo, an important harbour in Sicily as well as one of the main landing places for immigrants coming from the southern and eastern Mediterranean. Here, the director adapted Sophocles' play *Trackers*, working with children of immigrants, who added to the performance their own voices and experiences, including different languages, such as Arabian and Sicilian dialects. Another interesting work was the staging of Sophocles' *Lysistrata* by university students in Ravenna, with an adaptation based on the point of view of (mostly) female students opposed to the ruling power of political leaders and university professors, that in Italy are for the most part male. These experiments show how the combination of theatre and school can be a gateway to widen the access to the classics, and engage people of different ages and backgrounds in the classical world.

Most of the examples outlined here possess a common feature: they are meant for an inclusive audience, for students of private as well as of public schools, for those that study Greek and Latin and for those who don't. The Duolingo app, Disney songs, videogames and online beginner courses are clearly thought for people that don't have familiarity with the ancient world; theatrical representations, being usually carried out in a modern language, are ideal to put the general public in contact with it; the CSCP states clearly, as one of its aims, the goal to "make the classical world accessible to as many students as possible - whatever their age or background [...]."⁸⁷ This overview may then function as an answer to the accusation of

⁸⁷ "About CSCP." *Cambridge School Classics Project*. University of Cambridge, [Cambridge School Classics Project | \(cambridgescp.com\)](https://www.cambridgescp.com). Accessed 30 May 2023. On the democratic pedagogical value of the CLC, see Paul, Joanna. "The Democratic Turn in (and through)

elitism that so many times has been made against the classics. All the theories, experiences and contributions I have presented in this chapter come from different geographical and cultural environments, besides being addressed to different educational levels – primary, secondary and university – and consequently don't represent a common and uniformly widespread course of action. Nonetheless, they are an indicator of the innovation ferment and the wish for renewal (a renewal that, paradoxically, has as its goal the preservation of a tradition) that pervade the classical teaching world, proving that Greek and Latin, and everything they bring with them, are far from being dead.

Pedagogy. A Case Study of the Cambridge Latin Course.” *Classics in the Modern World: A ‘Democratic Turn’?*, edited by Lorna Hardwick and Stephen Harrison, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013.

4. The classics in popular culture

Although, as mentioned in the previous chapters, the changing economic, political and social conditions of our societies seem to take us in the direction of a fast-moving, scientific and technological world, in which the study of classical antiquity appears to be very much out of place, the influence of its myths, its personalities, its events, its languages and literatures can be easily observed in today's society. A hypothetical list of these "reutilisations" of the classics could start with the employment of ancient Roman symbolism by the two most prominent dictatorial regimes of the 20th century, Italian Fascism and German Nazism; it could continue with the innumerable literary examples, from the merely allusive, like Joyce's *Ulysses*, to the actual rewritings in the form of historical novel, as in Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (of 2012: as we can see, the time range spans various decades). The list could go on to give an account of all the movies, TV shows, songs, comics, board games and videogames, newspaper articles, artworks, fashion items, buildings and monuments, advertisements, that have, more or less extensively, made use of Greek and Roman imagery, being ultimately open-ended. The reason for this is probably that "the classical literature provide us with prototypes of virtually all later narrative forms and with paradigms of the processes which govern their interaction and evolution."⁸⁸ Given this ubiquitous presence of the classical world into our own, it doesn't seem illogical to argue that the classics, far from being something obsolete and by now useless, can still be relevant in the modern discourse, and be used to deal with contemporary problems. In this chapter I will analyse two particular instances of the modern version of a classical myth, taking into consideration a range of different formats, from the novel to the theatrical play to the film, in order to show that "the

⁸⁸ Scholes, Robert, et al. *The Nature of Narrative*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 57.

raw material of human existence remains ever the same, the molds by which it is given significance and recognizable shape are forever being recreated.”⁸⁹ Another consequence of the presence of the classics in popular culture (in the sense of not academic or institutionalised) and of their ability to deal with timeless matters, is the fact that they can reach a new audience, made up of all those people who never had the opportunity, the resources, the time or the desire to study classical antiquity, “turning the focus away from the association between the study of antiquity and a limited elite group with the necessary education, wealth, and leisure and towards a wider constituency of users.”⁹⁰ This could constitute, again, a valid reply to the assumption according to which the classics are an élite discipline, exclusive privilege of a limited group of intellectuals, closed in their ivory tower without any contact with the outside world. On the contrary, the modern rewritings of the classical tradition can be used to familiarise people with the Greek and Roman world, or to convey the discussion about contemporary issues in an innovative and impactful way.

4.1 The classics outside the academia: a case study

In order to show how the classical world can still be able to insert itself into the modern discourse, and participate in the discussion about important matters, I would like to turn my attention to two particular myths, and to analyse their modern representation and rewriting. The first myth I will analyse is that of Eurydice, seen through the eyes of Sarah Ruhl in her play *Eurydice* (2008), and of Claudio Magris in his short story *Lei dunque capirà* (*You Will Therefore Understand*, 2006). The original myth was narrated in the form we mostly know

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 156.

⁹⁰ Hardwick, Lorna, and Stephen Harrison, editors. “Introduction.” *Classics in the Modern World: A ‘Democratic Turn’?* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. xxii.

today by Virgil in his poem *Georgics* and by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*⁹¹: the nymph Eurydice, married to the poet-musician Orpheus, dies after being bitten by a viper. Orpheus, tormented by her loss, travels to the underworld to retrieve her, and with his music he manages to convince Hades and Persephone, lords of the underworld, to let him take his wife back, under the condition that he should not look at her until they will have both reached the world of the living. But, just as he arrives at the end of the path, desperate to know if she is really there, he turns around, losing her again. The American playwright Sarah Ruhl reimagines the classic story through the eyes of Eurydice, and here lies the real innovation of this version. For the first time, we see from her perspective the relationship with her husband, her descent into the underworld and, most importantly, her thoughts about Orpheus' rescue attempt. An aspect that is worthy of particular attention is Eurydice's relationship with her father, which is not present in the original myth⁹². When she first arrives in the underworld after her death, she doesn't remember anything: why she is there, who she was before, who her husband was, because she was immersed in the river of forgetfulness (the Lethe), as anyone who enters the underworld after death. So, when her father comes to meet her, she doesn't recognise him: from this point, they start (re)discovering and (re)knowing each other. Their acquaintance process is based on language, but not the language of the dead employed in the underworld: they use the language of the living, and the father explains to Eurydice some words, starting with her own name, then he teaches her how to read, using a passage of *King Lear* that talks about father-daughter love. Through this reacquisition of the language

⁹¹ Huss, Bernhard. "Orpheus." *The Reception of Myth and Mythology*, edited by Maria Moog-Grünwald and Duncan Smart, Leiden, Brill, 2010, pp. 478-494.

⁹² Eurydice was originally a nymph, and in classic mythology, nymphs were generically said to be daughters of some kind of terrestrial, aerial, or aquatic divinity.

of the living world, they are able to recover their memory as well: Eurydice remembers both her husband and her father, which then narrates her some episodes of his childhood, prompting her to recall bits of her own childhood, too. Therefore, it is possible to argue that they both use language, the written word, and knowledge more in general – in this case, the most basic and primary kind of knowledge, that is, learning words and how to read them – as a tool to retrieve the memory of the past; it's almost like their memories need words to acquire a “physical” consistency, to materialise themselves. The importance Eurydice assigns to language is a sort of discerning element that opposes her to Orpheus, who, on the contrary, believes much more in the power of music; traditionally he is both a musician and a poet, but in Ruhl's version his ability is limited to music. Orpheus seems to dislike the potentially infinite meanings of words, their ambiguity, their shifting nature, that changes according to the perspective of those using them: “Orpheus never liked words”, says Eurydice to her father, because “words can mean anything.”⁹³ Eurydice finds words and the concepts they can construct “interesting”, while her husband thinks that they should just be “right or wrong.”⁹⁴ Orpheus is not very interested in the books that Eurydice reads, and she, on the other hand, is not able to sing, to follow a musical rhythm, or to remember a melody. Maybe this is one of the reasons behind Eurydice's choice, when her husband finally comes down to the underworld to take her back, to not follow him and remain there with her newly found father, with whom she discovered that she has a lot in common: “Ruhl built the play around the image of Eurydice causing Orpheus to turn around by calling his name; to her, this

⁹³ Ruhl, Sarah. *Eurydice*. New York, Samuel French, 2008, p. 51.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

represented language overcoming music.”⁹⁵ Her father wasn’t present in her life, and most importantly, he wasn’t present on her wedding day, which makes her sad, because “a wedding is for a father and a daughter. They stop being married to each other on that day.”⁹⁶ When they meet again, her father does all the things that a parent usually does for a child, he builds her a room, teaches her how to read, in a word, he takes care of her. So when her husband comes to reclaim her, Eurydice exercises her will and decides to stay with her father. This is a great change from the character of the original myth, that didn’t really have an active role, but instead was just a diaphanous figure following her husband’s steps. Nonetheless, she doesn’t seem able to escape marriage, since at the end of the play the lord of the underworld demands to marry her, and she has no choice but to agree: “You can’t refuse me. I’ve made my choice.”⁹⁷ Is it really impossible for a woman, for a female character, to choose for herself? Eurydice, despite her efforts, has to meet the destiny intrinsic to her nature: she is a nymph, and the Greek word νύμφη means precisely young maiden, bride, young wife⁹⁸.

Also in *Lei dunque capirà* by the Italian writer Claudio Magris Eurydice is revealed, in the end, to be responsible for Orpheus turning around to look at her. This short story is essentially a monologue of Eurydice, in which she explains the reasons for her decision. Her speech is addressed to the director⁹⁹ of the rest home where she is residing, after having fallen gravely

⁹⁵ Al-shamma, James. *Sarah Ruhl: A Critical Study of the Plays*. Jefferson, NC, McFarland, 2011, p. 20.

⁹⁶ Ruhl, Sarah. *Op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

⁹⁸ It has the same root of the Latin verb *nubere*, which means to take a husband.

⁹⁹ In Italian, the personal pronoun ‘lei’ is a formal way of addressing someone in the third person, that in English is translated with ‘you’.

ill for some kind of infection: this Director, which we never get to see or know better, rules over the nursing home like Hades in the underworld. This afterlife, described here and there in Eurydice's discourse, looks more like a crypt or a cemetery rather than a hospital: everyone moves slowly and silently, the residents are more similar to shadows than to human beings, words are spoken quietly, lights are dimmed and it's always cold. Once someone arrives there, very rarely they leave again, and therefore the special permission accorded by the Director to Orpheus to come and take his wife back is really an exception, for which she thanks him many times. So far, the story follows the myth; but Eurydice's monologue contains also an account of her life as Orpheus' bride (memory plays an important role here, too), and here we discover some new information. For example, that she was the real poet, not her husband, who just interpreted and recited what Eurydice told him, gaining fame, recognition and the status of acclaimed artist; she was his muse, not in the sense of a beautiful woman that inspires the male artist, but like the Muses of ancient Greece, goddesses considered the source of knowledge, that instilled in the poet the words he then wrote down. "I was his Muse and a Muse must be obeyed, right? A poet faithfully repeats what she dictates and that's how he achieves the laurel"¹⁰⁰, Eurydice explains. She suggested him what to write, she typed, read and edited what he had come up with, and not only did she teach him how to be a poet, she also taught him how to be a man: "Yes, it was I who taught him everything. Not only love. That too, of course, but also everything else, courage, faithfulness, facing the dark and ignoring the shivers... – a man, not a scribbler who swaggers with his pen and then

¹⁰⁰ Magris, Claudio. *You Will Therefore Understand*. Translated by Anne Milano Appel, *Literary Intersections*. Claudio Magris and Marisa Madieri, special issue of *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, vol. XXXII, no. 1, 2011, p. 9.

slinks away.”¹⁰¹ As in Ruhl’s version, here too something is removed from Orpheus (the ability to use words) and is given to Eurydice, who now takes credit for her talent, something that she never did before, hidden behind her famous husband. She affirms her uniqueness and her independence also when she makes a decision just for herself, for an “egoistic” motive: while following Orpheus out of the rest home, she feels

exhausted, spent; the thought of starting all over again, cooking, washing, making love, going to the theatre, inviting people to dinner, thanking them for the flowers, talking, misunderstanding and misinterpreting one another, as always, sleeping getting up getting dressed... No, impossible, I couldn’t have done it, I couldn’t do it. I felt so tired all of a sudden. Still, perhaps I would have gritted my teeth and swallowed my fatigue and I would have carried on. Women can do that, they do it almost all the time, even when they no longer know why or for whom. Even the idea of having him always underfoot again didn’t exactly...¹⁰²

Eurydice, besides being a Muse, an artist herself, embodies also all the women in the world who take upon themselves the responsibility to look after the house, their husband, the family. Domestic and social life doesn’t appeal that much to her anymore, but she is ready to endure it and carry on, if it wasn’t for another thought, which turns out to be, once again, an act of protection over her husband, her last proof of love. Eurydice tells the Director that Orpheus longed to know the mystery of the afterlife, in order to pass it down to humanity through his poetry. The original desire of Orpheus to see his wife becomes here a (not very selfless) desire

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*, p. 24.

to discover the real truth of the world, to “see” in a metaphysical sense¹⁰³. But Eurydice, who has lived that experience, knows that there is not an ultimate and profound truth to be discovered, that the afterlife has no mystery, and that it looks very much like the world of the living, just colder and more silent. She thinks that her husband is not strong enough to bear this revelation, so she decides to spare it to him; therefore, like Ruhl’s Eurydice, she calls out Orpheus, causing him to turn around and look at her. Both these modern heroines then don’t settle for an existence that was already decided by others, but rather assert their independence by exercising their willpower.

The other mythological figure I will examine is Antigone, whose story has been reinterpreted by Kamila Shamsie in her novel *Home Fire* (2017) and by Sophie Deraspe in the film *Antigone* (2019). The most cited version when speaking of Antigone is the one narrated in Sophocles’ homonymous tragedy¹⁰⁴: after Oedipus was exiled from Thebes, his sons Eteocles and Polynices agreed to share the rule of the city for one year each, but at the end of his government period Eteocles refused to pass the title to his brother, and so Polynices marched against the city. Just as their father has prophesied, they kill each other in battle; while Eteocles is buried with all the honours due to a defender of the city, funeral rites for Polynices, who acted like an enemy, are forbidden by a decree of the new king Creon, their uncle. Their

¹⁰³ Parmegiani, Sandra. “The Presence of Myth in Claudio Magris’s Postmillennial Narrative.” *Literary Intersections. Claudio Magris and Marisa Madieri*, special issue of *Quaderni d’Italianistica*, vol. XXXII, no. 1, 2011, p. 127.

¹⁰⁴ Söffner, Jan. “Antigone.” *The Reception of Myth and Mythology*, Brill’s New Pauly, edited by Maria Moog-Grünwald and Duncan Smart, Leiden, Brill, 2010, pp. 73-88.

sister Antigone, acting against the law¹⁰⁵, buries Polynices' corpse, and for this act she is confined in a cave, where she hangs herself. *Home Fire*, by the Pakistani-British writer Kamila Shamsie, sets the story in modern-day London, within a family of Pakistani immigrants. After the death of their mother and grandparents, the older sister Isma has raised the twins Aneeka and Parvaiz; when Parvaiz decides to follow in the footsteps of their jihadist father and join ISIS, but realises soon that he has made a mistake, his twin sister tries to help him return to England, through her relationship with Eamonn Lone, son of the British Home Secretary. Parvaiz get killed trying to escape, and Aneeka's efforts to bring his body back fail when she dies in a terrorist attack. The book is structured like a play in five acts, each narrating the story from the point of view of a different character, and each containing a different interpretation of two central topics in the novel: the contrast between the law of men and the law of the heart¹⁰⁶ (which was also present in the Greek tragedy) and the theme of identity. The novel starts with Isma, a devoted Muslim, who also consider herself British, as "there was no other country of which she could feel herself a part."¹⁰⁷ She is the equivalent of Sophocles' Ismene, who refuses to help her sister to bury their brother Polynices: Isma decides to respect the law of men, reporting her brother to the British police when he joins ISIS. This doesn't mean Isma considers the law of men (the British law in this case) totally correct and just, but she understands that opposing it would only make things worst. The

¹⁰⁵ The tragedy establishes a difference between human, or written, law, the one Antigone defies; and divine law, not written but unchangeable, to which Antigone appeals to sanction the righteousness of her actions.

¹⁰⁶ As they are called by the character that in Sophie Deraspe's film corresponds to the blind seer Tiresias.

¹⁰⁷ Shamsie, Kamila. *Home Fire*. New York, Riverhead Books, 2017, p. 11.

second character we listen to is Eamonn, whose identity is many at a time: his father is of Pakistani descent, his mother is Irish-American. However, Eamonn, born and raised in upper-class London, had never really showed much interest for his origins, until he meets Aneeka, and his love for her makes him more involved in Pakistani and Muslim culture. As Eurydice with her Orpheus in Magris' version, Aneeka transforms Eamonn from an idle kid without a job and living on his parents' money, to a man willing to take responsibilities (marriage for example), and ready to stand up for what he believe is right, even if that means confronting his father – both as a paternal figure and as a politician. After comes Parvaiz, a boy whose only certainty in life has always been the bond with his twin sister, and who was never much invested in his cultural and religious background. He becomes radicalised not so much because he believes in the cause, but rather for personal reasons: he wants to know who his father was and become closer to him, while also emancipating himself from his sisters, who, contrary to him, seem to have found their way in life. So, “the novel presents an unusual jihadist, set askew from the simplistic portrayals of some psychological studies and many sections of the mainstream media which recycle clichéd portraits of terrorists as young, death-obsessed men [...]”¹⁰⁸ He chooses to follow the law of his heart, and by the time this leads him on a dangerous path, he has become mature enough to recognise that the law of men, which he despised before, is now the only thing that could save him. His twin, on the other hand, contemplates nothing else than the law of the heart in her life; the law of the family, and especially the relation with her brother, are everything, they take up her identity as well: she receives the news of Parvaiz's death as something “that made her singular for the first

¹⁰⁸ Chambers, Claire. “Sound and Fury: Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire*.” *The Massachusetts Review*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2018, pp. 202-219, p. 207.

time in her life [...].”¹⁰⁹ Paradoxically, since she is the character that more than any other fights the law of men, she studies law at university. But, knowing that the existing law doesn’t allow terrorists to return to their country, she does whatever it takes to help Parvaiz, including approaching a guy because he is the son of the Home Secretary, and standing with her brother’s corpse in a park to claim the government’s attention. After Aneeka, we read the version of Karamat Lone, Eamonn’s father and the newly elected Home Secretary. In this character, the two topics I am discussing appear at their climax: he is of Pakistani origins, but builds his political career on the rejection of his Muslim background, which facilitates his way into the Tory party¹¹⁰; he is torn between his fatherhood and his duty as a representant of the state, ultimately choosing the latter. In his intransigence towards Parvaiz, he is driven by both his paternal love, since he believes Aneeka manipulated his son, and by his patriotic love for England, which he is also trying to protect, in his own way, from the enemies of the state. All of the characters then prove, first, that identity is much more than a geographical concept, and secondly, that a choice between the law of men and the law of the heart is apparently inevitable.

Antigone, by Québécoise director Sophie Deraspe, takes place in contemporary Montreal; it narrates the vicissitudes of a refugee family from Algeria, made up of four siblings, raised by their grandmother after the death of their parents. When Étéocle is killed by the police and

¹⁰⁹ Shamsie, Kamila. *Op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹¹⁰ The same author had at first dismissed the idea of “a Tory with a Muslim background holding one of the great offices of state”, but changed her mind after assisting at the ascent of some Pakistani-British politicians; see Shamsie, Kamila. “True Story: Kamila Shamsie on predicting the rise of Sajid Javid.” *The Guardian*, 3 May 2018, [True story: Kamila Shamsie on predicting the rise of Sajid Javid | Fiction | The Guardian](#). Accessed 30 May 2023.

Polynice is arrested, Antigone decides to sacrifice herself to save him from deportation by replacing him in prison, an action for which she will have to face a trial. At the beginning of the film, we witness the normal life of a 17-year-old girl, but everything changes when one of her brothers dies, and the other is incarcerated. After a short grieving, Antigone resolves to do everything she can to save Polynice, and even if she's the youngest of the family, she seems to be the only one with the necessary clarity of mind to do it: in the scene where she takes the resolution, she stares in front of herself, saying "It's over for Étéocle. Now, we have to save Polynice", while her sister Ismène looks out of the car window and their grandmother Méni takes her head in her hands. So, Antigone has chosen the law of the heart, and commits a crime to protect her family, whose present state of distress is caused precisely by that same law of men she defies. In this case, the antagonist, the state that she opposes, is not represented by a single individual, but rather by the Canadian penal and judicial system, which Antigone openly accuses of unfairness and excessive attention to bureaucracy and its procedures, causing its short-sightedness for the real life experience of people. Actually, an inspiration from the story came to Sophie Deraspe from the shooting of Fredy Alberto Villanueva, a Honduran immigrant, in 2008 in Montreal, one of the many instances of ethnic minorities' killings by the police that are increasingly appearing on the news in the recent years. In the film, the Canadian system is a "criminal code in which Algerian immigrants can be punished in more extreme ways than their Canadian counterparts. Antigone's brothers have committed crimes but they have been singled out for excessive punishment on the basis of their identity."¹¹¹ Antigone, despite having lived in Canada for many years, doesn't identify with

¹¹¹ Carr, Georgie. "Fate and the State: Sophie Deraspe's *Antigone* – TIFF." *Another Gaze*, 13 Sept. 2019, [Fate and the State: Sophie Deraspe's 'Antigone' —TIFF - Another Gaze: A Feminist Film Journal](#). Accessed 30 May 2023.

the state, and she even scoffs at the court judge telling her that she is risking her chance at Canadian citizenship, which, she says, is just a piece of paper. She then turns to her family, the only institution she knows she belong to, and that she loves unconditionally, no matter what: “It is not their crimes I defend. I defend my family”; it is the law of her heart, as she declares in court: “My heart tells me to help my brother.” There is another way in which identity is explored, that is also present in *Home Fire*, and it is through internet and the social media. In Kamila Shamsie’s novel, Aneeka’s part of the story is interspersed with online articles, TV news, hashtags and tweets, that represent her brother as an inveterate jihadist, and her as a woman of easy virtue that corrupted the son of the Home Secretary, both of them worthy descendants of a terrorist family. A few leaked information is all the internet needs to construct a new identity for her, building on clichés and stereotypes, and giving her nicknames that will probably be stuck with her forever. Similarly, in Deraspe’s film, when Antigone is arrested for helping Polynice break out of prison, we see a montage of videos, photographs, news headings and social media discussion threads that either depict her as a symbol of resistance against police brutality, or mark her as a dangerous immigrant, member of the same gang of her brothers, using derogatory language and images, both racist and sexist. Again, the construction of an identity is based just on the outward appearance of facts, with no attempt at discovering the real story of the person in question. However, contrary to *Home Fire*, *Antigone* shows also what can be the good side of social media, how they can be used to achieve something meaningful and positive: Antigone’s friend Hémon starts a supporting campaign leaving posters and graffiti on the city’s walls with a sketch of her face and the slogan “Mon coeur me dit” (“My heart tells me”). His crusade quickly bounces on social media, where many young people start taking pictures of themselves with a mask of Antigone’s face, actively protesting in the streets and requesting her liberation. Internet as a way to bring the attention onto important matters, reaching as wider an audience as possible,

a way in which everyone, even from far away, can express their solidarity: something that we saw happening very recently all over the world in support of the protests of Iranian women. Unfortunately, this mobilisation turns out to be useless, because Polynice is captured again (having remained in Quebec instead of escaping to the US as Ismène told him), thus jeopardising all of Antigone's efforts. But her loyalty to the family is so strong that she still chooses to follow him and Méni back to Algeria, sacrificing her freedom and that serene lifestyle for which the family came to Canada¹¹². In this she is different from her sister, which on the contrary proclaims her desire for a normal life, with a normal job and a family of her own, even if that means parting from her relatives, a behaviour that corresponds to the Greek Ismene refusal to help her sister with Polynice's burial.

There are, of course, many more adaptations of these two myths; I chose these because they are able to weave some very current matters into the original stories: women's voice, the phenomenon of immigration and the identity issues that derive from it, Islamism and terrorism, police killings, the use of social media. The Eurydice of Sarah Ruhl and that of Claudio Magris go beyond the original character, a nymph that did nothing more than experience the consequences of the decisions made by others, mainly men: Orpheus decides to descend into the underworld to "save" her, Hades grants her the permission to go, and always Orpheus is the one that determines her second death. The new Eurydices instead aren't willing to let others determine how their life will be: Ruhl's Eurydice wants to remember, to feel, and so she learns to speak and to read, and builds a relationship with her father. Magris' Eurydice, now that she's far from the world of the living, can finally reveal her role in the life and the career of her husband, taking credit for it, and acknowledging her talent; she

¹¹² In the scene before the ending, Antigone allow herself to have sex with Hémon, almost as if she wanted to experience all that the life she is leaving behind has to offer.

knows that she is expected to return to that life and continue to take care of Orpheus, but she doesn't want to, and therefore, simply, she doesn't. Aneeka and Antigone are two 21st-century girls that, despite their young age, demonstrate to possess the strength and determination of their ancestor; but the world is changed, and they don't have to confront only the unfairness of a governmental law, but also racial prejudice, misogyny, the harshness of social media, while also trying to find their place within a society that is not kind with who doesn't fit. As I tried to show with these works, the classics can be the starting point for a narrative that mixes past and present, using ancient stories, characters, ideas and metaphors to talk about present-day society and its events, its problems, its personalities. If the classical world, to reach the audience of the new millennium, has to change its format and its outward appearance, in order to convey the same values in a different manner, then why not?

Conclusion

So, does the classical curriculum “remain at all relevant in a world that measures success in stock averages and megabytes?”¹¹³ After centuries of unchallenged authority in every field connected to education and culture, the maintenance of such a position in the 21st century seems at first glance unjustified by the profitability of the subject, so distant from the interests and immediate needs of today’s society. The objections that have been made to the teaching of the classics are certainly a result of the changing social and cultural environment in which we move, and as such, are difficult, but not impossible, to answer. It’s certainly true that studying Greek and Latin has for a long time been an exclusive privilege of the rich and wealthy, but in the recent years measures have been undertaken to counter the subject’s reputation as elitist: in England for example, where the classics have always been taught only in private schools, a scheme of the Department of Education was launched in 2022 to implement the teaching of Latin in state schools; and associations like Classics for All (again in the UK) encourage this course of action. Equally true, according to the numbers, is the claim that the classics are a hindrance more than a benefit when it comes to obtaining a successful position in the labour market, mainly because they don’t provide any useful ability or skill. Apart from the specific benefits that can derive from a classical education (outlined in the previous chapters), I would like to emphasise the “multi- and interdisciplinary nature of Greek and Roman studies”¹¹⁴, on which the solution proposed by the already mentioned scientist/classicist Lucio Russo is based. Until the 20th century, classical culture constituted, as we said many times, the base for education, acting as the “general culture” shared by

¹¹³ Simmons, Tracy Lee. *Op. cit.*, p. 34.

¹¹⁴ Gruber-Miller, John. “Communication, Context, and Community. Integrating the *Standards* in the Greek and Latin Classroom.” *Op. cit.*, pp. 9-23, p. 15.

everyone (everyone who could afford to attend schools and universities, of course). This common corpus of knowledge has suffered a crisis starting from the second half of the century, being replaced by what is called mass culture, whose products are created by the entertainment industry to be consumed on a large scale. In terms of quantity, certainly the diffusion of the products of the cultural industry has known an unprecedented expansion; on the other hand, the definition of their quality is trickier, because it inevitably leads to value judgements, which can be more or less acceptable. Focusing only on those areas of the shared culture that can be analysed objectively, and thus excluding sectors like music, the arts, or literature, it seems plausible to argue that the cultural level is lower than in the past. According to a survey of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), who operates internationally, functional illiteracy, that is, the inability to properly understand and use everyday information due to insufficient reading and comprehension skills, is worryingly high in Europe and overseas¹¹⁵. In such a context, Russo argues, it would be beneficial to retrieve classical culture as the general culture shared by many, to serve as a common framework on which to build the more specialised areas of expertise. Precisely for that multi- and interdisciplinarity I was mentioning before, a classical education could be the right one to give everyone a foundational preparation, even to those that will later choose other academic paths and professional careers. The classical curriculum as it is conceived today may seem unsuitable for such an undertaking, but we must not forget that originally it was much more comprehensive, as it is shown by the subjects that in the past made up the programmes of the trivium and the quadrivium¹¹⁶. The classics, the liberal arts, the

¹¹⁵ The survey is part of the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), and it's now at its third edition (2013, 2016, 2019).

¹¹⁶ See Chapter 1.

humanities: however it is called, the scholarship we have acquired from the Graeco-Roman world could fulfil the role of a unifying, preparatory culture for different kind of people. Because yes, even if it's not possible nor logical to expect everyone to learn the ancient languages, to read their texts in translation and to study the disciplines connected to classical antiquity could be the way to enable anyone to “engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective function of his or her group and community, and also for enabling him or her to continue use reading, writing and calculation for his or her own and the community's development”, as the UNESCO declare¹¹⁷. The validity of such a proposal is testified, for example, by the fact that in the last century, many Italian Nobel Prize winners in fields such as medicine or the hard sciences attended the liceo classico and received a classical education before pursuing their scientific career. These include famous scientists such as Camillo Golgi, after which the Golgi apparatus is named, and Enrico Fermi, the creator of the world's first nuclear reactor. A complete and inclusive preparation then, which could be advantageous for all kinds of specialised knowledge. As I have tried to demonstrate with this dissertation, the classics have their supporters and their opponents, both putting forwards reasonable arguments, but maybe the answer is neither to praise the classics as the only valuable instructional programme, nor to completely eliminate them, but rather to acknowledge their continuous presence in our culture and society and rethink them in the frame of a new educational method.

¹¹⁷ UNESCO. *Records of the 20th General Conference of UNESCO: Resolutions*. UNESCO Publishing, Paris, 1979, p. 18.

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