

—David Mirhady

The study of the Greek and Roman languages and cultures (classics) has been a mainstay of western education. But things have changed. Latin is increasingly a rarity in high school education, and a familiarity with classical languages and cultures is no longer the *sine qua non* of an educated person. Moreover, the fate of classics is not isolated. The liberal arts curriculum in general is increasingly marginalized in favour of technical and above all business skills. In western Canada, departments of classics have recently been forced to merge with other disciplines, such as history and religious studies. At the same time, student interest in classical mythology and history has arguably never been higher.

Classics and Simon Fraser University

It was in part that student interest that brought me, a classicist, to the fledgling Humanities Department at SFU in the fall of 2000. The department's course in classical mythology was its biggest draw. Students are fascinated by its stories, excited by its great literature, and seduced by the evocative sculptures and vase paintings that bring the myths of the classical Greeks alive not only through texts and in our imaginations but before our eyes. Few would argue about the foundational role these stories play in a humanities curriculum. But they are also products of the specific cultures that created and nurtured them. It's appropriate that a specialist in the classical languages and cultures teach them.

Before my arrival, SFU had not had a full-time classicist with a regular appointment. Robin Barrow in the Faculty of Education is actually one of the world's authorities on ancient education. But he specializes in educational issues, and he's currently Dean with little time for teaching. By the same token, I had never taught in a humanities department before. With an undergraduate degree in philosophy, graduate degrees in classics, and teaching stints in history departments, however, I had wide experience with different disciplinary cultures in the humanities. Now we are trying to shape the disciplinary focus of our Humanities Department. Some like the term 'interdisciplinary,' but perhaps we're better off defining ourselves as "multi-disciplinary".

There is need for new considerations of the roles of classics as a discipline and its place as

one of a number of interdependent humanities disciplines, such as English, history and philosophy, as well as disciplines that may not identify themselves within humanities, such as anthropology, archaeology, and linguistics. Classics has traditionally defined itself in terms of the classical languages, ancient Greek and Latin—thus the synonym "classical philology". But nowadays very few classicists are actually engaged in pouring over the medieval manuscripts and ancient papyri and inscriptions that made years of study in Latin or Greek composition a key to reconstructing fragmentary or mistakenly copied texts. Some classicists define themselves strictly in terms of one of the sub-disciplines, ancient history, philosophy, or archaeology. Others draw on various areas. Some have seen the discipline as a whole "in crisis."

Papers have been invited for a conference (see page 42) that deal with all aspects of classical studies. They will give attention, implicitly or explicitly, to how their subject matter and methods may be defined within and outside the context of the humanities disciplines. Interdisciplinary panels, which invite participation from individuals outside classics, are being particularly encouraged.

Spartacus

The keynote speaker for the conference will be Brent Shaw. For twenty years he was at the University of Lethbridge before succumbing in 1996 to the lure of the Ivy League and a senior position at the University of Pennsylvania. Trained first as a classicist, he studied at Cambridge with Moses Finley and is one of the world's most important scholars working on Roman social history, particularly slavery. In the abstract for the paper he will deliver, he writes the following:

There can be no doubt that if there is one slave from all of Greek and Roman antiquity who is known by name to the wider public, that slave is Spartacus. The Thracian gladiator who led the last of the great slave wars against the Roman state in the late 70s BC has been the subject of numerous treatments in the principal media of the twentieth century. As a popular figure, however, both Spartacus and his rebellion seem to have faded rather quickly from view since the 1960s. Why?

Part of the answer must lie in the reasons why he was even born in the first place, not as an auxiliary soldier and a gladiator who fought for the entertainment of Romans more than two millennia ago, but as a popular figure in the modern age. Spartacus, it turns out, has a rather intriguing pre-twentieth century history that might well explain some of the current attrition of his image. What were the precise circumstances of a modern rebirth of interest in a Roman slave, the leader of a great slave war? And why should that interest have determined the shape and longevity of his image? In short, what is the relationship between the courses

of eighteenth and nineteenth century European and American ideologies that created the basis for a twentieth century Spartacus whose life seems in real danger of extinction?

Shaw clearly has in mind the enormous success of the film *Gladiator*, which reflects in so many ways the time in which it was produced, just as Kubrick's *Spartacus* did forty years before. Shaw thus betrays an awareness of the historical contexts of his own writing and marks a departure from the work of classical historians a generation or two before.

With the support of the Institute for

the Humanities at SFU and the Social Sciences and Humanities research Council of Canada, the conference is taking place under the aegis of the Classical Association of the Canadian West (CACW).



Classical Learnings Conference Topics:

- Roundtable on the Teaching of Latin and Greek
- Modern Philosophy and its Classical Antecedents
- Modern Literary Criticism and Classical Literature
- Greek and Roman History and Culture
- Classics and Beyond: Interdisciplinary Programs
- Presocratic Philosophy and its Modern Analogues
- Modern Approaches and Parallels to Greek Literature
- Ancient Rhetoric in the Modern Classroom
- Children's Literature and Movies
- Ancient Science and the Modern Scientist



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An Interdisciplinary
Conference hosted by the
Classical Association of the
Canadian West
on the theme

CLASSICS AND THE HUMANITIES

February 22-23, 2002

Simon Fraser University at
Harbour Centre
515 West Hastings Street
Vancouver, British
Columbia

Keynote Speaker
Brent Shaw,
University of Pennsylvania
"Slavery and Freedom:
The Image of Spartacus"

