

Lecture 1

The Stories Behind the Stories 1

Greece and Rome

- Literature and literary criticism in Western cultures cannot be understood without understanding its relationship to classical antiquity - Greek and Roman. Why?
- Because European and Western literature and cultures were produced as a **recreation, a revival** of the classical cultures of Greece and Rome.
- From the 16th to the 20th centuries, Western cultures considered Greece and Rome the most perfect civilizations, and Western drama, poetry, literary criticism, art, education, politics, fashion, architecture, painting, sculpture were ALL produced in imitation of classical antiquity (Greece and Rome).
- But the West's relationship with antiquity is not simple. It is full of contradictions and ambivalence.

Two aspects to this relationship need to be illustrated.

1. Rome's ambivalent relationship to Greece (Lecture 1)

2. The West's ambivalent relationship to classical antiquity (Lecture 2)

Roman poet Horace writes:

"Captive Greece took its wild conqueror captive"

Source: Horace, "A Letter to Augustus," in *Classical Literary Criticism*, p. 94.

Horace expresses a sense of inferiority and ambivalence because Rome conquered Greece politically and militarily but Rome could never produce a refined culture (poetry, philosophy, rhetoric, etc) like Greece.

We find this sense of ambivalence and inferiority everywhere in Roman (Latin) literature: in Horace, Quintilian, Seneca, etc.

The Romans conquered Greece militarily, but they always felt that the culture of Greece remained infinitely more sophisticated and refined in poetry, in philosophy, in rhetoric, in medicine, in architecture, in painting, in manners and in refinement. Hence the sense of inferiority.

Seneca, for example, writes:

"No past life has been lived to lend us glory, and that which has existed before us is not ours."

"[A] man who follows another not only finds nothing; he is not even looking."

Seneca, *Epistulae Morales* (44).

Source *Seneca: Epistulae Morales*, trans. Richard Gummere (Cambridge, MA and London: Heinemann and Harvard University Press), 1920.

For centuries, education in Rome consisted simply in IMITATING Greek masterpieces in literature, rhetoric, painting, etc. Horace, for example, advised his readers to simply imitate the Greeks and never try to invent anything themselves because their inventions will be weak and unattractive:

But he that hopes to have new words allowed
Must so derive them from the Grecian spring

As they may seem to flow without constraint....
New subjects are not easily explained,
And you had better choose a well-known theme
Than trust to an invention of your own;
For what originally others write
May be so well disguised, and so improved,
That with some justice it may pass for yours;
But then you must not copy trivial things,
Nor word for word too faithfully translate.

(Source: *Latin Literature: An Anthology*, Michael Grant, ed., Penguin, 1979, pp. 214-5)

The Romans so desperately wanted to imitate the Greeks and so constantly failed to match them. The reason is simple. Imitation cannot produce originality. As Seneca puts it with bitterness, "a man who follows another not only finds nothing; he is not even looking."

The Romans were a simple rural and uncultivated people who became successful warriors, and at the height of their success when they ruled the biggest empire in the world, they still felt that they were inferior culturally to their small province Greece.

This situation strongly affected how culture was produced in Rome and will also strongly affect how culture will be produced later in Europe and the West

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Lecture 2

The Stories Behind the Stories 2

Rome and Europe

In the Renaissance, Europeans rediscovered the books of the Greeks and Romans and that allowed them to develop a literature and a culture. The period is called the Renaissance because across Europe people wanted to “**revive**” the ancient learning of Rome and Greece.

During the Renaissance, Europe was far less sophisticated than Rome and Greece were. There were no written languages in Europe. The only written language was Latin and people who could read Greek, like Erasmus, were very rare. So we have an under-developed continent, largely illiterate that all of a sudden discovers a vast legacy from the ancient world - hundreds and hundreds of texts and books that no one had seen for hundreds of years. This material will transform the mind of Europe, and lead to the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment and the modern technological world in which we live today

- Contradictions and Confusions

Like the Romans, Europeans wanted to produce poems, books and sophisticated culture because they thought, like the Romans did, that high culture, great books and poems were what great and mighty nations have.

Great nations do great deeds (like conquering lands and people) and record those great deeds and conquests in great books and poems.

The reason why "*les gestes* [the glorious deeds] of the Roman people" were unanimously celebrated and preferred to the deeds of the rest of humanity, Joachim du Bellay explains in the 1520s, was because they had "a multitude of writers." That is the reason, he says, why "in spite of the passage of time, the fierceness of battle, the vastness of Italy, and foreign incursions, the majority of their deeds (*gestes*) have been in their entirety preserved until our time."

Joachim du Bellay

So the emergence of what we call today "literature" in Renaissance Europe had a strong political motivation and purpose.

What we call today literature emerged because Europeans were becoming politically and militarily powerful. They were conquering lands and taking over trade routes, and as the passage of du Bellay cited indicates, poetry and literature were necessary accessories of political power.

The logic was this:

Great empires needed great literature, just like the Romans and the Greeks had.

In that sense, the study of classical learning, literature and criticism all emerged with the purpose of giving the emerging European states written and "civilized" languages comparable to those of Rome and Greece.

Europeans saw poems and plays and books and stories like they were national monuments. They judged the greatness of a nation by the monuments it builds, (the Coliseum in Rome) and saw books, poems, plays and literature as monuments of the greatness of nations.

"It was, above all, Rome which provided the ideologues of the colonial systems of Spain, Britain and France with the language and political models they required, for the *Imperium romanum* has always had a unique place in the political imagination of western Europe. Not only was it believed to have been the largest and most powerful political community on earth, it has also been endowed by a succession of writers with a distinct, sometimes divinely inspired purpose."

(Source: Anthony Pagden, *Lords of all the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France 1500-1800*, Yale University Press, 1995, pp. 11-2.

"Imitation of the Classics"

So to imitate Rome and Greece and develop "civilized" languages and cultures to go with their newly acquired military and political power, Europeans found a ready-made model to follow: the Romans.

From the Renaissance all the way to the 20th century, European writers called for the "imitation of the classics." This is how the concepts: "imitation of the classics," "imitation of the ancients," "*imitatio*" (Latin), "mimesis" (Greek) or simply "imitation" became, from the Renaissance to the 20th centuries, the most prestigious and classical concepts in European cultures. No other concept has

had a strong formative and foundational influence in modern European cultures like these concepts of imitation.

Imitation doesn't lead to Originality

In Rome, imitation led to frustration and produced a plagiaristic culture. Europeans simply ignored these complications. The desire to produce poetic monuments to go with their political and military power was more important.

As long as imitation produced "textual monuments" in the form of books, poems and plays, European writers were happy with it.

"it is a sign of greater elegance and skill for us," says du Bellay, "in imitation of the bees, to produce in our own words thoughts borrowed from others." Du Bellay advised his contemporaries **not to be "ashamed"** to write in their native language in imitation of the ancients.

It is "no vicious thing, but praiseworthy," he says, "to borrow from a foreign tongue sentences and words to appropriate them to our own." Du Bellay wished that his own language "were so rich in domestic models that it were not necessary to have recourse to foreign ones," but that was not the case.

Europeans adopted the Roman desire to produce a literary culture in imitation of the Greeks without realizing that this imitation method had failed in Rome and that it produced mainly an imitative and plagiaristic culture that remained inferior to the original Greek culture it tried to mimic and duplicate.

In addition, Europeans thought that they were imitating the classical cultures of Greece and Rome. In reality they imitated mostly the Romans. Very few Greek texts were available in Europe before the 19th century, and even those were

read, studied and imitated through Roman perspectives. European classicism, for example, always claimed to be based on the ideas of Aristotle, but research shows that they knew very little of Aristotle's work. In eighteenth-century England, for example:

Aristotelism Without Aristotle

"A first hand knowledge of Aristotle, even in translation, seem to have been exceptional: Walpole mentions him five times in his letters - usually coupled with Bossu and the 'Rules'; and Cowper, at the age of fifty-three, had 'never in his life perused a page of Aristotle.' The *Poetics* were much revered, but little read."

John W. Draper, "Aristotelian 'Mimesis' in Eighteenth Century England," *PMLA*, 36 (1921), pp. 373-4.

European writers knew Greek works "only... through the praise of (Roman) Latin authors."

Richard Marback, *Plato's Dream of Sophistry* (University of South Carolina, 1999), p. 46.

Renaissance scholars recognized that Roman art and literature were derived from the Greeks, but they could not discern, as Glynne Wickham notes, how plagiaristic the Romans were. Hence, the grotesque European rankings of Horace as a higher dramatic theorist than Aristotle, and of Seneca as a more accomplished dramatist than Sophocles and Euripides.

Glynne Wickham, "Neo-Classical Drama and The Reformation in England," in *Classical Drama and Its Influence*, ed. M. J. Anderson (Methuen, 1965), p.158.

Important to note:

Literature is not simply stories or beautiful words, and literary criticism is not simply a discussion of the content or style of those stories or beautiful words.

There are more important, fascinating and REAL stories behind the fictitious stories and the beautiful words of literature.

Studying literature involves:

1. understanding the historical forces - political, economic, cultural, military - that made literature as an institution, as a tradition and as a discourse possible and
2. understanding the new historical realities - political, economic, cultural, military - that literature as an institution helps shape and create.

We have to understand the historical forces that produce literature and the historical forces and transformations that literature then goes to produce. This is how we can study literature from a critical, analytical and scientific perspective. Do NOT just consume uncritically the stories and the dramas that you read or watch. You are critics, analysts and experts and you should adopt critical and analytical perspectives to this material.

best of luck

Mrs.Engli\$h