

# To Cut Up Nightingales: What Makes an American Classicist?

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**Abstract** If the American “classic” is involved in the dynamic of canons, value, and style, then what is the role of Classics as a field, and of the professional classicist? I argue that with the emergence of the professional classicist came significant anxiety, particularly regarding the transformative and unsettling consequences of specialist research. By discussing ostensibly established classicists like Basil Gildersleeve or Paul Shorey alongside Helen Magill, the first American woman to receive a PhD in Classics, I aim to destabilize the center of what establishment may or may not have meant in light of a shared, unsettled preoccupation with what a professional approach to a canon and a classic could be and ought to be.

**Keywords:** Basil Gildersleeve (1831–1924), Helen Magill White (1853–1944), Paul Shorey (1857–1934), American classical scholarship, Bacchylides, Aristophanes, Cambridge Tripos

## Introduction

The “classic” inhabits a paradoxical and malleable place between popular value and exclusivity: it ought to be there for all, and yet enjoys a special status. This raises questions of access: not just who can approach a classic, but also the emotional and intellectual labor required to do so. How challenging should it be to read, comprehend, or engage with a classic? If a classic holds value, should it also offer pleasure? And if it does, to what extent is this pleasure contingent on the effort expended to attain it?

These questions inevitably arise for any professional reader, but they feel especially prominent in the discipline of Classics, a field in which questions of access, benefit and labor collide in outspokenly ambiguous ways. I will take a step back into the nineteenth century, where arguably the origins of many of the structures and features of the modern American Humanities lie.<sup>1</sup>

I will argue that however strongly a nascent field advocated for attending to the classical, the emergence of the professional classicist also caused significant anxiety, particularly regarding the transformative and unsettling consequences of specialist research.

## I.

On Christmas Eve 1896, the *Times* of London published an editorial about the recent “recovery of a lost classic”: a papyrus find in Egypt of a substantial amount of lines by the early classical Greek lyric poet Bacchylides of Keos. That the British Museum had at the time of writing proudly acquired it is symptomatic of the close implication of value generation, imperial and colonial power, and the classical.<sup>2</sup> Bacchylides was, until then, really only a name—very few fragments of his work had survived, and if so then mostly in texts by other writers, even though it was clear from ancient sources that he was considered part of a list of “top lyric poets.”<sup>3</sup> Suddenly coming into that amount of complete poems was not only a big event—it was also, in effect, a re-canonization.

A first edition of the papyrus was made in 1897 on behalf of the British Museum by Frederic Kenyon, a biblical and classical scholar and close collaborator of the institution. It was followed by a German edition, reshuffling the fragments, by Friedrich Blass, and then a complete edition and translation by the British classical scholar Richard Jebb, in 1905—all of whom had been involved with the study of the papyrus from the beginning.

In 1897, the American classical scholar Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve published a piece about Kenyon’s first edition in the *American Journal of Philology*, which he himself had founded in 1880. In his regular, stylistically free-flowing editor’s column “Brief Mention,” Gildersleeve commends what new things are to be learned from poems by the “honey-tongued Keian nightingale,” as Bacchylides was known to refer to himself. He compliments all the scholars involved, their distinction, ability, and skill, and he is emphatic about the importance of the find: “like Cortes’ men, scholars are looking at each other with a wild surmise” (“Bacchylides” 46). By reappropriating a line from John Keats’ poem “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” (1816),<sup>4</sup>

Gildersleeve might be making a point about his own fluency in European literary classics, as much as he reinforces the link between intellectual and imperial expansion. But even more significantly, Gildersleeve goes on to describe with intention the current and passing moment of having the text available while still unencumbered by the build-up of scholarship which it is set to provoke:

Twenty poems, some of them entire, have been brought to light and a new chapter in the history of Greek literature has to be written. Before many days the philological world will be flooded with literature on the subject, with emendations, restorations, characteristics. The happy hours of the first possession will be succeeded by weeks muggy with extemporized learning – extemporized, for relatively few are the scholars who have earned the right to speak authoritatively by reasons of special studies in this too much neglected domain of Greek poetry; and in the dense air which is about to envelop Bacchylides, the memory of these three or four undisturbed days will come back with the sigh, *fulsere vere candidi tibi soles*. (45)

The Latin quote that ends his thought, “suns then truly shone brightly for you,” taken from the Roman love elegist Catullus, projects the scene of immediate access to Bacchylides into the nostalgic future perfect, leaving it ambiguous whether the feverish scholarly air that will envelop the poems is an advance or a regression. Pitching the rediscovered classic as an exotic marvel is combined with the created memory of the sweet spot before authoritative learning takes over (and it is, by way of Catullus, an erotically charged moment of physical closeness too). This combination exemplifies two things that are symptomatic of the emergence of the American professional classicist: that the classical is always set in relation to an elsewhere, and that specialist research is a highly ambiguous and anxious affair.

## II.

The most striking thing about an American classic is how contested it is. For a European scholar of classical scholarship, such as myself, what is notable about the American context in which the ancient Greek and Roman world was studied—“classic” here in the sense of “classical”—is how little some of the European certainties hold. The study of “the classics” may have held value as a tradition, a form of professional qualification, or a carrier of sta-

tus—but it just as easily and simultaneously could be sidelined, considered secondary, or be a cause for suspicion.<sup>5</sup>

Historically, American classical scholarship formed from three strands: a particular vocational rhetoric of Christian humanism; traditions of genteel, “gentlemanly” classical learning and education familiar from the UK; and, increasingly throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, models of German-style specialized research institutions.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Greek and Roman antiquity could be invoked as resources for personal morality, political and civic practice, and rhetorical style, and it could support a wide number of cultural narratives and images of the professional academic.

The American research university of the late nineteenth century formed its institutional identity in strong interaction with an industrializing capitalist society, which willingly invested in higher education, but also created the need to justify non-utilitarian learning; at the same time, universities retained socially legitimating power for a rising entrepreneurial middle class. The large number of so-called land-grant colleges and public universities established after the Morrill Act(s) of 1862 and 1890 encouraged a focus on agricultural and industrial technical sciences over more traditional ones and changed the American educational landscape. Those new institutions could question the prerogative of classical learning, as much as they would also foster it. Training in the classical languages persistently carried and endowed status, much as it could also offer new ways of marking difference and contesting the *status quo*. Classics as a guarantor of “class” (as in England) or of qualification (as in Germany, with its direct line from university to the teaching profession and the civil service) was, from the beginning, as much contested as it was embraced. In many ways, the American constellation upends several of the cultural conditions about the centrality of Classics to education and society that, in Europe, tend to be taken as a default.

Classical scholarship emerged self-consciously from a dynamic set of tensions: between relations of dependence and independence *vis-à-vis* European (specialist, advanced) scholarship; between belatedness and self-affirmation, additionally bound up with the “Lost Cause” narratives of the Southern states after the Civil War; between historicist and explicitly presentist

impulses; between moral and scientific precepts; between canonicity and marginality; and between narratives of progress and of decline. The conflict between classical erudition and specialized scientific knowledge made Classics a site for experiencing social and intellectual dissonance, where the experience of foreignness could be geographical and cultural, as much as methodological and disciplinary. Many classicists were trained abroad, and many also came to the United States from abroad. But also, not to forget, the study of a historically remote ancient culture is *per se* an exercise in indirectness and alienation. This is also the case in Europe—but at a remove from Europe, the question of how culture relates to either origins or precedent, or, differently put, how culture relates to its classics, could come to the fore all the more easily.

Any answer to what the American relationship is with a classic, or with the classical, thus also has a relational and transatlantic component, whether it keeps operating under the surface or above it. It is equally important to pay attention to how this spatial relationship has been expressed, and I am particularly interested in how rivalry or contentiousness could also become implicated with a rhetoric describing the work of knowledge itself in language marked by power, violence, and aggression, towards the “classic” as much as towards the self.

This is certainly true of the historiography of classical scholarship. In his 1978 account of the experience of American students in Germany, the historian Carl Diel combines within the space of one single page imagery that stretches as far West and East as is possible to capture a sense of the complex relationship between continental scholarly models. Highlighting the sense of exploration and agency of individual scholars, he concludes that “[t]he assimilation of the modern form of scholarship was therefore much more the aggregate of individual American experiences abroad, the nineteenth century settlement of the frontier of German knowledge” (Diel 152). And yet, while new American institutions were not merely blueprints of the German research university, still “like the earliest Japanese imitations of Western technology and ideas, they tended to be mechanistic and rigid” (152–53).

The relationship with classical scholarship sits somewhere between the “Westward Ho!”-style expansion of the frontier, and a different notion of the West, the European-oriented mimetic pursuit. The American classicist is both heroic explorer and belated follower. The ambiguity about the act of catching up with the protocols of the professional classicist is no less evident in a programmatic and frequently cited article, which the Plato scholar Paul Shorey published in 1919, on “Fifty Years of Classical Scholarship in America.” Here Shorey, who himself had a PhD from a German institution, details the increasing ability of American scholars “to play the game according to the German rules and possibly to devise American improvements,” with the ultimate aim “to establish a tradition of the independence of American scholarship” (Shorey 44).

Of course, Shorey writes in 1919 at a time when German scholarship had taken a significant downturn on the international scene after the First World War. But the ambivalence precedes this post-1914 moment. One material proof of past progress is, for Shorey, precisely the larger number of doctorates acquired in Germany, or, as he rhetorically puts it, “several had tracked the Ph.D. thesis to its native lair in the Teutoburger Wald, and had triumphantly brought back desiccated and mounted specimens as trophies to America” (42–43). The criticism cuts both ways: the learning promises advancement, yet it is a form of knowledge that is shriveled up and inflexible, whether the fault lies in the process of transmission or in the character of the PhD thesis in the first place. In either case, the triumph is predicated on hunting down and killing its prey, in a country that remains foreign and yet is still trespassed on and appropriated.

### III.

Paul Shorey and Basil Gildersleeve both write from positions of some institutional authority—Shorey as a professor of Classics at the University of Chicago, and Gildersleeve as a professor of Classics at Johns Hopkins, two institutions founded with a view to the research university of German style and proportion.<sup>7</sup> But the rhetoric affects not only those of equal credentials.

Helen Magill was the first woman to receive a PhD in Classics in the United States, with a short dissertation on *The Greek Drama* submitted in 1877 to Boston University, a new co-educational institution. Written in a rather tentative voice, the dissertation was largely based on engagement with some standard German sources (among them A. W. Schlegel and K. O. Müller), and is not a piece of specialist research by any means. Keen to continue her scholarship, Magill persuaded herself to gain further training at the University of Cambridge, where she was the first American woman to sit the Classical Tripos—that is, the Cambridge degree course and examination—leaving her with a missionary sense of national pride, as is clear from some of her letters, but also with deep personal misery. The Tripos was a grueling set of language-heavy exams that were, in her tutor Richard Dacre Archer-Hind’s description, about “the maximum quantity of facts and opinions in the minimum of time,” and she barely scraped through with a Third Class degree, coming close to a physical and mental breakdown (Altschuler 52).<sup>8</sup>

In a telling echo, Archer-Hind is no stranger either to the language of territorial competition. Trying to encourage and persuade Magill to stay on for her exams when she had expressed significant doubts, he wrote to her that he knew her too well “to imagine you capable of returning across the Atlantic ... allowing the examiners to retain possession of the field and set up a trophy over your pusillanimous flight” (51). This makes herself the hunted rather than the hunter—something that Magill might have appreciated, given that in a letter home she describes Archer-Hind thus: “Has not he a name? It represents an entire hunting scene, pursued and pursuer” (48). But Magill is also herself self-conscious about the violence and potential for destruction that is implicit in the pursuit of scholarship.

Among her papers, now at Cornell University, is a manuscript lecture on “Opportunities for Post Graduate Study,” likely written in 1882, a year after her return from England.<sup>9</sup> Discussing England as one possible destination, she speaks of her affection for Cambridge in the following way:

As long as I live, whenever I turn the pages of the books I read there, its walls of grey stone and ancient brick will rise before me, green branches will wave down the vista of its long avenues and the voices of its nightingales will sound through the soft-spring sunlight. I can not say what effect these influences

may have upon those who go there upon serious thoughts intent to break stones, to tear plants to pieces, and to cut up nightingales. But at least I have never heard any of these modern vandals, among whom I found some of my own friends, speak disparagingly of them. (Magill 25)

Breaking stones, tearing plants to pieces, and cutting up nightingales describes the destructive force of science and the approach of those future travelers, presumably including the American audience of prospective (female) graduates she is addressing, who seek out dedicated specialist knowledge there.

But her reflection raises the question whether it isn't also the scholar who suffers. Around 1877, while she was enrolled at Boston University writing her doctoral dissertation, she drafted an essay entitled "The Poor Little Birds." The essay was ostensibly a response to a recent newspaper debate about the cruelty or not of using birds for feathers to decorate ladies' hats, and Magill framed it as such when she submitted the piece for publication to the *Boston Advertiser*.<sup>10</sup> But "The Poor Little Birds" turns quite deliberately into a reflection on women's learning. The piece is written in a stringently ironic, confident, and punchy voice, notably different from her attempt at drafting a dissertation. Everyone would be better off, she argues, if women could have more agency to study dress in a serious way:

It is true, women might gain more stability in dress if they would go about it in a more serious way. If they would study dress as a fine art, as it deserves to be studied, they might reach some results more lasting because based on principles of more real significance....There is room for blame here, but let men remember from how many and what inspiring mental activities a large portion of their sex are still pushing back their sisters, as best they may, and pause before they say: you shall not read Plato or Newton or Mill, neither have ten birds on your bonnet. ("The Poor Little Birds" 8-9)

As it were, Magill continues, the instrumental use of birds always wins, as she calls out the hypocrisy of lamenting the killing of birds, while both keeping and eating them:

We destroy the "poor little birds" which are good to eat without compunction, we snare those whose existence interferes with our advantage without remorse: we make those who sing in a manner to please us live generation after generation the life of wretched prisoners and we see them hop from one bare stick to another in conscious (11-12) or unconscious regret for the leafy



boughs of their native or ancestral homes, and if they sing a little too strong for our exact taste we say “hush! Hush! The noisy, troublesome bird!” We sit at dinner and enjoy with entire complacency our tame or wild fowl, expressing at the same time not only grief but horror and a kind of moral repulsion if informed that natural taste and a defective musical ear have led the cat to appropriate the canary.

She is adamant, in her closing volley, that keeping the poor little birds unfree is worse than turning them loose in a world where they might end up as a dead piece of decoration: “I would rather for myself so far as cruelty goes wear a dozen stuffed birds on my bonnet than keep a caged canary” (13). Magill offers a punchy diagnosis of women’s desire for education and of the ways in which social and intellectual structures keep them away from it. In this context, her comment that the Cambridge system of examining women yet not awarding them a degree makes them “a sort of wingless bird” is all the more resonant (quoted in Altschuler 44). But what intrigues is also her deliberate engagement with a language of the grotesque and the cruel to reflect on those issues.<sup>11</sup> Magill’s attention to the violence implicit in disciplined scholarship hovers between critique, self-criticism, and a self-conscious embrace of the cruelty she detects.

Even though she is herself symptomatic of a gendered kind of exclusion, and addresses this exclusion explicitly, her tropes echo those used equally by male peers to express the unease about discipline and dependence in the emerging profession.

#### IV.

Magill’s nostalgic and pointed juxtaposing of the song of the Cambridge nightingales with the student desire to cut them up may seem a long way from Gildersleeve’s evocation of the fleeting moment when the voice of Bacchylides, “the Keian nightingale,” is heard without the heady and heavy interference of accumulating specialist scholarship. But they are arguably also much closer.

In an essay titled “The Spiritual Rights of Minute Research,” which Gildersleeve, though no fervent supporter of women’s education, delivered in 1895 as a graduation speech at Bryn Mawr of all places, he spells out explicitly what the trajectory of research is, though he remains ambivalent about the labor involved. Advocating for the enthusiasm that can arise from specialist engagement, he wishes to speak

of those before whom the meaning of the whole research swims in a golden haze, to become clearer and clearer as the final facts fall into place, somewhat as one spells out a jest in a foreign tongue, the smile trembling on the lip and twinkling in the eye, while the hand is turning over the pages of the dictionary to find the missing word....Perhaps there is no happier moment in a student’s life than the point of time at which the rebellious facts marshal themselves into orderly array, and the law which he has been seeking asserts its sovereignty. (“The Spiritual Rights” 100)

From the ordinary “conquest of detail,” he envisages a quite Platonic-sounding climb “[f]rom obedience to faith, from faith to vision, – this is the scholar’s progress” (101). The language of mastery, of conquest, of subservience, and of enforcing authority, is not a comfortable one, and recent scholarship has rightly revisited Gildersleeve’s outspoken political and Confederate agendas that both fed off and fed into his classical scholarship.<sup>12</sup> But what to make of the fact that it is the parsing and understanding of a joke in a *foreign* language that is made the exemplary summit of exerting the classical scholar’s control? He is undoubtedly thinking about Aristophanes here, as is clear from the disclaimer he adds after his auratic description of scholarly ascent.

But what of wings? Well, I too have dealt in wings from time to time, but this morning I find that my wings have been melted by the fervent heat of the examination-room, aided and abetted by the peculiar atmospheric conditions of this season. I have cancelled all my stock in Cloudcuckootown, and have learned to look distrustfully on the air-booms as on the land-booms. The titles of doctoral dissertations and the details of doctoral examinations are not calculated to inspire flights of fancy. (101)

The melting wings invoke simultaneously the soul of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, melted by desire and sprouting wings, and the hybristic aspiration and fatal fall of Icarus—all apropos the specter of the German-style exam room and its atmospheric yet deadening heat. The reference to Aristophanes’ Cloudcuck-

ooland, the utopian city of his fantastic play *Birds*, adds a reminder that at the end of this comedy of strategic rebellion, some of the liberated yet instrumentalized birds themselves end up roasted for a sacrifice and feast.

Does a “classic” need a “classicist”? Whatever the answer, the anxieties over what an American professional classicist would or should look like are shared, and they are explicit. The comparatist Ilan Stavans, in his recent *What Is American Literature?* (2022), comments on the prevalence of dystopian literature in a country that is obsessed with the notion of progress. “All these literary artifacts,” he argues, “showcase the degree to which the popular core of American literature is, in essence, gothic. By this I mean violent, destructive, and melodramatic, a literature of darkness” (107). If we treat American scholars also as American writers, this is not far off. Stavans also insists on the role of outsiders as both authors and as subjects of American literature: “Everywhere one turns, authors are outsiders writing about outsiders who end up becoming protagonists. That might mean foreign nationals. Or it might refer to dislocated voices; for literature, at its core, is the production of unhappy folk: people in discomfort, who don’t quite fit in. The act of writing is a form of expatriation as well as expiation” (29). The classic and the classical, predicated on an elsewhere, make sense in this logic, as do the classicist and the discipline of studying the classical: they are as close to idealization as they are to hostility, embracing and suffering the demands of specialist scholarship.

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## Notes

1. See, for example, Turner; and Reitter and Wellmon.
2. Fearn, "Imperialist fragmentation," 158–185; most recently on papyri and provenance, see Mazza.
3. On ancient canons, see Netz; on Bacchylides and canonicity, see the introduction to Fearn, *Bacchylides*.
4. "Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes / He star'd at the Pacific – and all his men / Look'd at each other with a wild surmise –" Incidentally, Keats' brother George had emigrated to America as a businessman and died in Louisville, Kentucky in 1847; see further Gigante.
5. On the emulation and caution regarding the rhetorical tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see e.g. Winterer, "Classical Oratory and Fears," 41–54; and Connolly 78–99. On the complex African-American engagements with Classics, see Cook and Tatum. On the contentious role of Classics as a discipline in the discussions over the Humanities, Adler, *Classics, the Culture Wars and Beyond* and *The Battle of the Classics*. For Classics as the object of necessary disciplinary critique now, see e.g. Greenwood.
6. For an excellent survey, Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*.
7. On the important role of those two institutions for the competitive dialogue with the German model, see Levine.
8. Women were allowed to enter for the exam and their results would be classified, though women were awarded degrees by the university only from 1948. Archer-Hind, only a few years older than Magill, was part of the group of classicists at Trinity College, Cambridge, who would teach female students privately and support the efforts for women's degrees. See Breay 49–70.

9. Magill's papers are at Cornell, thanks to her marriage to Andrew Dickson White in 1890, the first and then recently retired president of the University. The lecture is undated but a letter from Magill to her friend Eva Channing from January 1882 (box 2, folder 18) suggests that she was preparing a lecture on that subject at the time. My great thanks to Emmy Shanahan for reviewing, selecting, and transcribing a number of essays and letters in Magill's papers.

10. According to Altschuler there is no record of publication in the journal, so it is unclear whether it was accepted and printed or not (41). The manuscript essay is among her papers, box 16, folder 8.

11. Note her striking and quite developed aside about female cruelty, apropos the use of those birds, in the same essay: "I say nothing of killing for the mere pleasure of killing, as in hunting and fishing. While the line is drawn as sharply as at present between the office of the butcher and the amusement of the sportsman, and this to the advantage of the latter, I think men have very little room for horror at feminine cruelty. Especially when undoubtedly the prettiest bonnet, other things being equal, and I fear sometimes other things not being equal, stands the best chance of masculine admiration, feathers or no feathers" (Magill, "The Poor Little Birds," 2-3).

12. Gildersleeve is well documented. For a detailing of his political career, see Briggs; an excellent, up-to-date and critical account of his life and writings is in the full biographical note to his papers at Johns Hopkins University Special Collections: <https://aspace.library.jhu.edu/repositories/3/resources/13>; for recent accounts of his views on race, also as symptomatic of the field, see Lupher and Vandiver 319-52; and McCoskey 247-77.

## About the author

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