

Edited by S. J. HARRISON

LIVING CLASSICS

Greece and Rome in Contemporary
Poetry in English



CLASSICAL PRESENCES

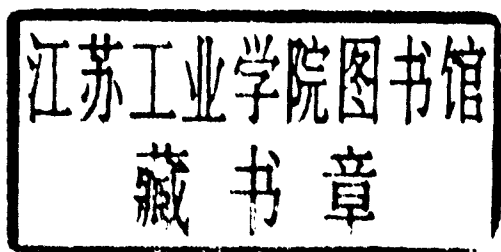
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*Greece and Rome in Contemporary
Poetry in English*

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S. J. HARRISON



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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

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Published in the United States
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

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First published 2009

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Living classics : Greece and Rome in contemporary
poetry in English / edited by S. J. Harrison.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-19-923373-1 (acid-free paper)

1. English poetry—20th century—Classical influences. 2. American poetry—20th
century—Classical influences. 3. New Zealand poetry—20th century—Classical influences.
4. Classical literature—Influence. 5. English poetry—English-speaking countries—20th century.
I. Harrison, S. J.

PR508.C68L58 2009

821'.9140935838—dc22

2009016664

Typeset by SPI Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India

Printed in Great Britain
on acid-free paper by the
MPG Books Group, Bodmin and King's Lynn

ISBN 978-0-19-923373-1

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

For Christopher Nicholson
10.4.2008

Editor's Preface

The initial stimulus for this book derives from a conference on the same theme held in Oxford in September 2005 at the Third Passmore Edwards Colloquium. Chapters 1–3, 5, 8, 9 and 11–14 are revised versions of talks given on that occasion. My thanks go to Corpus Christi and Oriel Colleges, Oxford, for hosting the conference, and to their respective staffs (especially Sam Cunningham at Corpus) for their assistance. The conference was generously funded by the Passmore Edwards Fund of the Faculty Board of English at Oxford, which sponsors academic activity linking Classics and English: I thank the Board and its then administrator, Paul Burns. Thanks are also due to all the speakers and attenders, especially Helen Eastman and Floodtide for their performance of Seamus Heaney's *The Cure at Troy* and Yopie Prins (whose paper will appear as part of her forthcoming larger project 'Ladies' Greek') for making the transatlantic trip. My warm thanks also go to Emily Greenwood, Isobel Hurst, Anna Jackson and Oliver Taplin for their positive responses to subsequent invitations to contribute to the volume. Thanks are also due to Hilary O'Shea of OUP for her encouragement towards publication, to Lorna Hardwick and Jim Porter for their acceptance of the volume in their 'Classical Presences' series, and to Tom Chandler for his copy-editing.

Acknowledgements of origins, copyrights and permissions to reprint are due as follows. In the case of poets citing their own work, I am most grateful to Maureen Almond (Chapter 1), Josephine Balmer (Chapter 2), Robert Crawford (Chapter 3), Anna Jackson (Chapter 4), and Michael Longley (Chapter 5) for permissions to reprint. An earlier version of part of Chapter 3 was published in the *Yale Review* (95.1) in January 2007; I and Robert Crawford are both grateful to the editor of the *Yale Review* for allowing the re-use of some of that material. Chapter 4 is a revised version of a piece published in *Antichthon* 40 (2006). Chapter 6 reprints the preface to Tony Harrison, *Euripides: Hecuba* (Faber and Faber, 2005); I am most grateful to Tony Harrison for permission to reprint. The quotations

from Michael Longley's work in Chapters 8–10 are reprinted by the author's kind permission. Chapter 7 reprints Seamus Heaney's 2004 Jayne Lecture from the *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 148, no. 4 (December 2004); I am most grateful to Seamus Heaney and the American Philosophical Society for permission to reprint that lecture, and also to Seamus Heaney for permission to reprint the extracts from his work in Chapters 10 and 14. The quotations from Sylvia Plath's 'Electra on Azalea Path' in Chapter 12 are reprinted by permission of Faber and Faber. The illustration in Chapter 13 is used by kind permission of The National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne (full acknowledgement is made in the caption). In Chapter 14 (where individual publication details are cited in each case) acknowledgements are due for kind permissions to reprint to Fleur Adcock, Eavan Boland, U. A. Fanthorpe, Rachel Hadas, Medbh McGuckian and The Gallery Press, Faber and Faber (for that of Paul Muldoon) Carcanet Press Limited (For that of Anne Ridler and Louise Glück) and HarperCollins (for that of Louise Glück); likewise to Jorie Graham for Chapter 16. The work of James K. Baxter quoted in Chapter 17 is reprinted by the permission of Oxford University Press, that of C. K. Stead cited in the same chapter by the author's permission. All other copyright work quoted in this book is cited in conformity with the guidelines for 'fair dealing for criticism and review' proposed by the Society of Authors.

This volume is dedicated in honour of his seventieth birthday to Christopher Nicholson, who first opened up for me the world of poetry.

S. J. H

Corpus Christi College, Oxford
September 2008

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Michael Longley has published eight collections of poetry including *Gorse Fires* (1991) which won the Whitbread Poetry Award and *The Weather in Japan* (2000) which won the Hawthornden Prize, the T. S. Eliot Prize, and the Irish Times Poetry Prize. His most recent collection *Snow Water* (2004) was awarded the Librex Montale Prize (Milan). His *Collected Poems* appeared in 2006 and *Wavelengths*, a chapbook of uncollected translations, in 2009. In 2001 he received the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry, and in 2003 the Wilfred Owen Award. He is the present Ireland Professor of Poetry.

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Contents

<i>List of Contributors</i>	xi
Introduction: The Return of Classics <i>Stephen Harrison</i>	1
PART I POETS AND PRACTICE	
1. Horace on Teesside <i>Maureen Almond</i>	19
2. Jumping their Bones: Translating, Transgressing, and Creating <i>Josephine Balmer</i>	43
3. Reconnecting with the Classics <i>Robert Crawford</i>	65
4. Catullus in the Playground <i>Anna Jackson</i>	82
5. Lapsed Classicist <i>Michael Longley</i>	97
PART II POETS IN THE THEATRE	
6. Weeping for Hecuba <i>Tony Harrison</i>	117
7. Title Deeds: Translating a Classic <i>Seamus Heaney</i>	122
PART III SCHOLARS ON POETS	
8. The Argippaei (Herodotus 4. 23) in Belfast <i>Maureen Alden</i>	143

9. Michael Longley Appropriates Latin Poetry <i>Brian Arkins</i>	152
10. The Homeric Convergences and Divergences of Seamus Heaney and Michael Longley <i>Oliver Taplin</i>	163
11. Is 'the Frail Silken Line' Worth more than 'a Fart in a Bearskin'? or, how Translation Practice Matters in Poetry and Drama <i>Lorna Hardwick</i>	172
12. Electra in Sylvia Plath's Poetry: A Case of Identification <i>Anastasia Bakogianni</i>	194
13. The Autobiography of the Western Subject: Carson's Geryon <i>Edith Hall</i>	218
14. 'Purple Shining Lilies': Imagining the <i>Aeneid</i> in Contemporary Poetry <i>Rowena Fowler</i>	238
15. Shades of Rome in the Poetry of Derek Walcott <i>Emily Greenwood</i>	255
16. 'We'll all be Penelopes then': Art and Domesticity in American Women's Poetry, 1958–1996 <i>Isobel Hurst</i>	275
17. Catullus in New Zealand: Baxter and Stead <i>Stephen Harrison</i>	295
<i>Bibliography</i>	325
<i>Index</i>	345

Introduction: The Return of Classics

Stephen Harrison

This volume offers an eclectic account of engagement with the literatures of Greece and Rome by some contemporary poets writing in English. It includes both pieces by poets themselves, reflecting on their own use of classical texts, and analyses of these and other living poets (and of one no longer alive) by scholars of classical reception, showing how such poetic interactions work in detail and reflecting on some broader intellectual and cultural contexts. This introduction sets out a contextualizing sketch of the re-emergence of classical literary texts as a significant source for poetry in English since 1960 as a context for the pieces in this book.

It is an interesting but comprehensible paradox that classical texts have achieved a high profile in contemporary literature at a time when fewer people than ever can read these works in the original languages.¹ Since 1960 numbers learning Latin and Greek at school in the UK and elsewhere have declined substantially, and students are increasingly learning Latin and Greek (if at all) in universities rather than in secondary education. On the other hand, classics is perhaps livelier than ever as a set of intellectual disciplines, and study of the classical world in general continues to be vigorous in many schools and universities throughout the Anglophone world. In this same period, poets writing in English have shown an interest in classical material unparalleled since the nineteenth century, and certainly much more marked than in the period 1920–1960. Indeed, the

¹ For this and for some of the other ideas here see Taplin (2002).

main poetic tendency of the 1950s, the Movement,² combined ironic realism with an antipathy not only to Romanticism but also to the 'myth-kitty' of classical literature. This taste was notably articulated by Philip Larkin: 'To me, the whole of the ancient world, the whole of classical and biblical mythology mean very little, and I think that using them today not only fills poems full of dead spots but dodges the poet's duty to be original.'³ The return to classical texts in the poetry of the 1960s and afterwards may thus seem surprising; but it can be set against a broader cultural context which offers several strands of explanation.

The general decrease in the effective knowledge of classical languages marks a change, from a situation in the UK and elsewhere where the educated classes would have functioning Latin, to a position where few have Latin and a microscopic minority Greek. This development has necessarily placed the first-hand knowledge of classical texts on the cultural margins rather than in the centre of modern intellectual life. This might have led to the establishment of classics as an inaccessible subject for a self-regarding conservative in-group, as in the fictional US college of Donna Tartt's novel *The Secret History*;⁴ but as recent historians of the subject in the UK have documented, classics has reacted dynamically to the marginalisation of its languages with a vigorous process of outreach.⁵ The book trade has played an important part here: when it could no longer be assumed that the educated classes could read these authors in the original and despised or did not need translations, enterprising publishers moved into the production of readable and inexpensive versions of classical texts for the general public. This tendency was aided by the revolutionary introduction of the mass market paperback in the 1930s, appropriated for classical translations by the Penguin Classics from 1946⁶ and substantially augmented a generation later by the World's

² Morrison (1980).

³ Cf. Hamilton (1964), cited by Taplin (2002) 9–10; Griffin (1986) is a classicist's response to Larkin's views.

⁴ Tartt (1992). ⁵ See Stray (1997) and (2003).

⁶ Beginning in 1946 with E. V. Rieu's prose *Odyssey* but now with dozens of classical titles: for a brief history see <http://us.penguinclassics.com/static/html/history.html> (accessed 5/6/2008), and for a celebratory volume see Radice and Reynolds (1987). Dr Ika Willis at Bristol is currently engaged in a research project on the history of the Penguin Classics using the Penguin Archive.

Classics of the Oxford University Press.⁷ The classics of Greek and Roman literature (and especially poetry) were thus made accessible to a wide audience for the first time, in versions which had claims to be literary works in their own right rather than mere aids to deciphering the originals.⁸ This process of cultural diffusion has continued through the recent prominence of Greek and Roman topics in the broadly consumed media of film and television, itself now a major object of scholarly study.⁹

This 'democratization' of classical literature through widely available translations and other forms of diffusion has been matched by increasing interest in classical material from left-leaning and/or experimental writers, who might previously have been deterred by the canonical and establishment status of Latin and Greek. It has recently been argued that from the 1960s the 'non-establishment' area of poetry raised subversive issues of class, colonialism, and gender in order to challenge traditional classics as a perceived preserve of elite culture.¹⁰ Though poetry has never been a mass medium in modern British culture, this argument has something to commend it, and writers such as Tony Harrison, from the northern English working class, Margaret Atwood, Canadian feminist, and Derek Walcott, from St Lucia in the Caribbean, can indeed be seen as figures from the margins of 'traditional' Anglophone intellectual culture, engaging adventurously and provocatively with the central authors of classical literature. But it can also be argued that the interest of such writers shows that the 'establishment' aspect of classics was already beginning

⁷ The series was established in 1901 but first published paperback translations of classical texts in 1980, beginning with (amongst others) Walter Shewring's prose *Odyssey* and Robert Fitzgerald's verse *Iliad*.

⁸ That had been the main purpose of the translations in the bilingual Loeb Classical Library (founded 1915), and of the wide range of translations published by H. G. Bohn from 1848.

⁹ Of course, classical topics have been prominent in cinema since its inception, and flourished in the late 1950s and early 1960s (e.g. *Spartacus* 1959, *Cleopatra* 1963, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* 1964), but the recent revival since *Gladiator* (2000) has been striking. On classics in popular visual culture see e.g. Wyke (1997) and Nisbet (2006); 'Rome in film' is now a major research topic in reception studies (see Joshel et al. 2001, Solomon 2001, Winkler 2001, Cyrino 2005) and we now have academic treatments of individual classical films (Winkler 2004, 2006 and 2007, Lane Fox 2004) and of the 2006 HBO/BBC TV series *Rome* (Cyrino 2008).

¹⁰ Merten (2004)—see my comments in Harrison (2007b).

to weaken in the 1960s, and that classical texts could be more widely available and adaptable in the literary world. Some of these writers (e.g. Harrison) have the classical learning to work with the Greek texts, but increasingly it was felt unnecessary to have or show such expertise, usually acquired by a traditional elite education.

It is indeed interesting to observe that many of the most striking engagements with classical texts since 1960 in Anglophone poetry have come from writers who are in some sense on the periphery of the 'traditional' English metropolitan cultural world.¹¹ To those already mentioned we could add Harrison's fellow-northerner Ted Hughes, whose long history of engagement with the classics through translation (though without real working knowledge of the classical languages) effectively began with his extraordinary 1968 version of Seneca's *Oedipus*, written for the avant-garde director Peter Brook in a style which brought out the primitive, violent, and ritual aspects of the play, effectively 'declassicizing' it.¹² Here indeed we find a non-establishment figure producing a very non-establishment version of a classical text. The same marginality is shared by another famous experimental version of a Greek tragedy by an African writer, Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides: A Communion Rite* (1973)¹³ and more recently by the working-class Scots poet Liz Lochhead, author of a forceful *Medea: after Euripides* (2000) and *Thebans* (2003, based on all three great Greek dramatists).

Staged versions of ancient drama, indeed, have played a key role in the broader diffusion of classics in Anglophone literature since the 1960s. The founding moment of renewed interest in the performance of Greek drama is often said to be the production in New York in June 1968 of Richard Schechner's *Dionysus in 69*, an adaptation of Euripides' *Bacchae*, closely contemporary with Hughes's *Oedipus* (premiered in March 1968) and similarly radical in its interpretation of a classical play at a time of considerable political instability.¹⁴ Equally epoch-making in the UK was the production in London in

¹¹ I here omit discussion of the USA, though similar things might be said—see Isobel Hurst's chapter in this volume.

¹² For Hughes and the classics see now the full material in Rees (2009).

¹³ See e.g. Budelmann (2005); for more African adaptations of Greek tragedy see Goff and Simpson (2007), and for the post-colonial context see Hardwick and Gillespie (2007).

¹⁴ See Hall et al. (2004).

November 1981 of Tony Harrison's version of the *Oresteia*,¹⁵ which combined Harrison's forceful translation influenced by Anglo-Saxon verse with the music of Harrison Birtwhistle and the direction of Peter Hall, and Greek tragedy has since then been a regular feature on the British and Irish stage. Ted Hughes's late versions of Euripides' *Alcestis* and of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* have had less impact on stage than as quasi-autobiographical meditations (alongside his simultaneously written *Birthday Letters* to the dead Sylvia Plath) about marriage and familial dysfunction.¹⁶

These versions have (again) often emerged from directions which could be considered marginal from a metropolitan perspective. Especially important here has been the use of poetic versions of Greek tragedy by Irish writers to deal with the distress and issues of the political 'Troubles' of Northern Ireland since the 1960s.¹⁷ Amongst versions of Greek texts (usually accomplished by using translations rather than the original) are Tom Paulin's protest plays *Riot Act* (1984) and *Seize the Fire* (1989), which respectively adapt Sophocles' *Antigone*, the classic confrontation between oppressed individual and authority, and the *Prometheus Bound* traditionally attributed to Aeschylus, another drama about power and (in)justice. Seamus Heaney has taken on Sophocles' *Philoctetes* in *The Cure at Troy* (1990) with its celebrated intercalated lines about hope for a resolution of the Troubles,¹⁸ and the *Antigone* (again) with *Burial at Thebes* (2004), where the connections with Northern Irish politics are less overtly displayed but equally strong, as his chapter in this volume notes. Derek Mahon has written a witty and disturbing *Bacchae* (1991) and a more sombre *Oedipus* (2005, conflating Sophocles' two Oedipus plays), two slightly looser adaptations, while Desmond Egan (unusual in knowing Greek) has produced interesting close versions of Euripides' *Medea* (1991) and Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (1998).¹⁹

This processing and negotiation of major political issues through the mythical plots of Greek tragedy has been taken up by writers in England, especially in response to the Second Gulf War in Iraq from

¹⁵ Taplin (2005).

¹⁶ See the treatments of these works in Rees (2009).

¹⁷ See McDonald and Walton (2002).

¹⁸ See the discussion by Taplin (2004).

¹⁹ His *Medea* even has a version of the Greek text in an appendix. On Egan and the classics see Arkins (1992).