

BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO THE ANCIENT WORLD

A COMPANION TO THE  
**CLASSICAL  
TRADITION**

EDITED BY  
CRAIG W. KALLENDORF



# A COMPANION TO THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

*Edited by*

Craig W. Kallendorf

*Advisory Editors*

Ward Briggs

Julia Gassner

Charles Martindale



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## Notes on Contributors

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**Jerzy Axer**, Professor Ordinarius at Warsaw University, is founder and director of the Centre for Studies on the Classical Tradition in Poland and East-Central Europe. His interests include classical and Neo-Latin studies, the texts of historical sources (sixteenth–nineteenth centuries), and theatrical studies; his main research focuses on the reception of the classical tradition in Polish and European culture (sixteenth–twentieth centuries). His publications include *M. T. Ciceronis oratio pro Q. Roscio Comoedo* (Leipzig, 1976), *Filolog w teatrze* (Warsaw, 1991), *Españoles y polacos en la corte de Carlos V* (Madrid, 1994, with A. Fontán), and *Łacina jako język elit* (*Latin as the Language of the Elites*), as co-author and editor (Warsaw, 2004).

**Alastair J. L. Blanshard** is Lecturer at the University of Sydney, Australia. He has published a number of articles in the fields of gender, sexuality, and the classical tradition. He is the author of *Hercules: A Heroic Life* (London, 2005) and is one of the founders of the Australasian Classical Reception Studies Network (ACRSN).

**Ward Briggs** is Carolina Distinguished Professor of Classics and Louise Fry Scudder Professor of Humanities at the University of South Carolina. He has published widely on the history of American classical scholarship and is at work on a biography of the American classicist Basil L. Gildersleeve.

**William J. Dominik** is Professor of Classics at the University of Otago, New Zealand. He is the author or editor of a number of books, including (with Jon Hall) *The Blackwell Companion to Roman Rhetoric* (Oxford, 2006), and is a contributor to *The Blackwell Companion to Ancient Epic* (Oxford, 2005). He has also published numerous chapters and articles on Roman literature and other topics and is the founding editor of the journal *Scholía*.

**Katie Fleming** is Lecturer in the School of English and Drama, Queen Mary College, University of London. Her research interests lie in the classical tradition, particularly in the intellectual and political thought of the twentieth century. She has published articles on the relationship between the politics of reception and the

feminist appropriation of Antigone, and the use and abuse of the past.

**Philip Ford** studied French and Latin at King's College, Cambridge, before embarking on a PhD there on the neo-Latin poetry of George Buchanan under the supervision of Ian McFarlane. After a research fellowship at Girton College, Cambridge, his first teaching post, at the University of Aberdeen, was in seventeenth-century French literature. Since 1982, he has taught in the Cambridge University French Department, where he is now Professor of French and Neo-Latin Literature, as well as holding a fellowship at Clare College. His research, funded for two years by a British Academy Research Readership, is on the reception of Homer in Renaissance France.

**Karl Galinsky** is Floyd Cailloux Centennial Professor of Classics and University Distinguished Teaching Professor at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of numerous books and articles and has received awards both for his research and teaching.

**Bruce Graver** is Professor of English at Providence College. He edited Wordsworth's *Translations of Chaucer and Virgil* for the Cornell Wordsworth series (1998), and coedited *Lyrical Ballads: An Electronic Scholarly Edition* for Cambridge University Press at Romantic Circles ([www.rc.umd.edu/editions/LB/](http://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/LB/)). He has published numerous articles on Romantic classicism and the history of classical scholarship in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

**Lorna Hardwick** teaches in the department of Classical Studies at the Open University, UK, where she is Professor of Classical Studies and Director of the Reception of Classical Texts Research Project ([www2.open.ac.uk/Classical](http://www2.open.ac.uk/Classical)

*Studies/GreekPlays*). Recent publications include *Translating Words, Translating Cultures* (London, 2000) and *New Surveys in the Classics: Reception Studies* (Oxford, 2003). She is working on a monograph analyzing the relationship between modern classical receptions and cultural change.

**Kenneth Haynes** teaches in the Department of Comparative Literature at Brown University. His most recent books are *English Literature and Ancient Languages* (Oxford, 2003) and *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English*, vol. 4: 1790–1900 (Oxford, 2005), which he coedited with Peter France. He is preparing an annotated translation of selected philosophical works by Johann Georg Hamann, to appear in the Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy.

**Richard Jenkyns** is Professor of the Classical Tradition at the University of Oxford; he has been a Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall since 1981 and was previously a Fellow of All Souls. His books are *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), *Three Classical Poets* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), *Dignity and Decadence: Victorian Art and the Classical Inheritance* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), *Classical Epic: Homer and Virgil* (London, 1992), *The Legacy of Rome*, as editor (Oxford, 1992), *Virgil's Experience* (Oxford, 1998), *Westminster Abbey* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), and *A Fine Brush on Ivory: An Appreciation of Jane Austen* (Oxford, 2004).

**Craig W. Kallendorf** is Professor of Classics and English at Texas A&M University. A specialist in the reception of the Roman poet Virgil, his books include *Virgil and the Myth of Venice: Books and Readers in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford, 1999), *Humanist Educational Treatises*, as editor and translator (Cambridge, Mass., 2002),

and *The Other Virgil: Pessimistic Readings of the Aeneid in Early Modern Culture* (Oxford, forthcoming). He is working on a bibliography of the early printed editions of Virgil.

**Thomas Kaminski** teaches in the English Department at Loyola University in Chicago. He is the author of *The Early Career of Samuel Johnson* (New York, 1987) as well as of a number of articles on the development of English neoclassicism.

**Andrew Laird** is Reader in Classical Literature in the Department of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Warwick. He has held visiting positions at Princeton University, the University of Cincinnati, and the Institute for Research in the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin. His publications include *Powers of Expression, Expressions of Power* (Oxford, 1999), *A Companion to the Prologue of Apuleius' Metamorphoses* (Oxford, 2001), *Ancient Literary Criticism* (Oxford, 2006), and *The Epic of America: An Introduction to Rafael Landívar and the Rusticatio Mexicana* (London, 2006).

**Gail Levin** is Professor of Art History, American Studies, Women's Studies, and Fine and Performing Arts at Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. She is the author of numerous books and articles, including *Edward Hopper: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New York, 1995), *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (New York, 1995), *Aaron Copland's America* (New York, 2000), and *Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography* (in press). Her writing has often been translated and has been published in more than a dozen countries. Her scholarship has been supported by grants from Fulbright, National Endowment for the

Humanities, Andrew Mellon Foundation, American Council of Learned Societies, Pollock-Krasner/Stony Brook Foundation, Harvard University, Yale University, and Brandeis University, among others.

**Luisa López Grigera** was born in La Coruña, Spain, and studied at the Universidad Nacional de Buenos Aires and at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, where she received her doctorate in romance philology. Catedrática at the Universidad de Deusto (Bilbao, Spain) and Professor at the University of Michigan, she specializes in Spanish literature of the Middle Ages and of the Golden Age, with a particular interest in the evolution of rhetoric in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries. She has published many books and articles in these areas.

**David Marsh** studied classics and comparative literature at Yale and Harvard, and is Professor of Italian at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. He is the author of *The Quattrocento Dialogue: Classical Tradition and Humanist Innovation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980) and *Lucian and the Latins: Humor and Humanism in the Early Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1998). He has translated Leon Battista Alberti's *Dinner Pieces* (Binghamton, N.Y., 1987), Giambattista Vico's *New Science* (London, 1999), and Paolo Zellini's *Brief History of Infinity* (London, 2004). His recent editions of humanist Latin texts include Francesco Petrarca's *Invectives* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003) and the anthology *Renaissance Fables: Aesopic Prose by Leon Battista Alberti, Bartolomeo Scala, Leonardo da Vinci, and Bernardino Baldi* (Tempe, Ariz., 2004).

**Charles Martindale**, Professor of Latin at the University of Bristol, has written extensively on the reception of classical poetry. In addition to the theoretical

study *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (Cambridge, 1993), he has edited or coedited collections on the receptions of Virgil, Horace, and Ovid, as well as *Shakespeare and the Classics* (Cambridge, 2004). His most recent book is *Latin Poetry and the Judgement of Taste: An Essay in Aesthetics* (Oxford, 2005).

**Volker Riedel** studied Latin and German at the Humboldt University in Berlin and since 1987 has been Professor of Classical Philology (Latin) at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena. A specialist in classical reception, Roman literature of the first centuries BC and AD, and German literature of the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, he is the author of many publications in these areas and has recently edited *Prinzipat und Kultur im 1. und 2. Jahrhundert* (Bonn, 1995), *Der Neue Pauly* (coeditor, 18 vols., Stuttgart and Weimar, 1996–2003), and *Die Freiheit und die Künste* (Stendal, 2001).

**Ingrid D. Rowland** is Visiting Professor of Architecture at the University of Notre Dame in Rome. Her most recent books include *The Ecstatic Journey: Athanasius Kircher in Baroque Rome* (Chicago, 2000), *The Correspondence of Agostino Chigi (1466–1520) in Cod. Chigi R.V.c.* (Vatican City, 2001), *The Scarith of Scornello: A Tale of Renaissance Forgery* (Chicago, 2004), and *From Heaven to Arcadia: The Sacred and the Profane in the Renaissance* (New York, 2005).

**Minna Skafte Jensen** was Assistant Professor of Greek and Latin, Copenhagen University, from 1969 until 1993 and Professor of Greek and Latin, University of Southern Denmark, from 1993 until 2003. A member of the Danish, Norwegian, and Belgian Academies of Sciences and Letters, she is the author of *The Homeric Question and the Oral-Formulaic*

*Theory* (Copenhagen 1980) and the editor of *A History of Nordic Neo-Latin Literature* (Odense 1995). *Friendship and Poetry: Studies in Danish Neo-Latin Literature*, ed. M. Pade, K. Skovgaard-Petersen, & P. Zeeberg (Copenhagen, 2004), was prepared in her honor.

**Fabio Stok** teaches Latin literature at the University of Rome, Tor Vergata. He has published extensively on classical Latin authors (e.g., Cicero, Virgil, Ovid) and their reception. He specializes in particular in textual criticism and in ancient medicine, ethnography, and the biographies of Virgil (he has published the critical editions of the *Vita Vergili* of Suetonius-Donatus and of other medieval and Renaissance lives). Professor Stok is also one of the editors of Niccolò Perotti's *Cornu copiae* (8 vols., Sassoferrato, 1989–2001), and he is working at present on several other humanist and neo-Latin authors.

**Christopher Stray** is Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Classics, Ancient History and Egyptology, University of Wales Swansea. He works on the history and sociology of classics teaching and learning, and also on the history of universities, on textbooks, and on family languages. His *Classics Transformed: Schools, Universities, and Society in England 1830–1960* was published by Oxford University Press in 1998. He is editing a collection of essays on Gilbert Murray, to be published by the same press in 2007. Other projects include an edited reprint of Charles Bristed's 1852 book *Five Years in an English University* (Exeter, 2007) and an edited selection of the letters of Richard Jebb.

**Gilbert Tournoy** is Professor of Classical, Medieval, and Neo-Latin and, since 1998, Director of the Seminarium Philologiae Humanisticae at the Catholic

University of Leuven. He is editor of *Humanistica Lovaniensia* and past president of the International Association for Neo-Latin Studies (1997–2000). He is the author or editor of 15 books, including two essay collections in honor of his longtime colleague Jozef IJsewijn and the catalogues to several important exhibitions on humanism in the Low Countries, especially relating to Juan Luis Vives and Justus Lipsius.

**Norman Vance** is Professor of English at the University of Sussex. He has published widely on Victorian and Irish topics. His books include *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 1997), *Irish Literature, a Social History* (2nd edn., Oxford, 1999), and *Irish Literature since 1800* (London, 2002), and he is editing the nineteenth-century volume of the *Oxford History of Classical*

*Reception in English Literature*. He is a Fellow of the English Association and Chair of its Higher Education Committee.

**Jan M. Ziolkowski** is Harvard University's Arthur Kingsley Porter Professor of Medieval Latin. His books include monographs, anthologies, editions, translations, and collected essays. Three are in press: *Fairy Tales from before Fairy Tales: The Medieval Latin Past of Wonderful Lies* (Ann Arbor, Mich.), *Nota Bene: Reading Classics and Writing Songs in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout, Belgium), and, with Michael C. J. Putnam, *The Virgilian Tradition to 1500* (New Haven). A National Merit Scholar in college, he held a Marshall in graduate school. Earlier a recipient of Guggenheim and ACLS fellowships, he was at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in 2005–6.



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# Introduction

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*Craig W. Kallendorf*

The chapters that follow are designed to provide a guide to the study of the impact of the classics on postclassical culture, broadly defined. Each author has been asked to make his or her chapter comprehensible to nonspecialists, from advanced undergraduates and postgraduate students to general readers and professors in other fields. The goal has been to provide as much basic information as possible in one volume along with guidance on how a reader might pursue points of interest elsewhere, but also to convey what is new and exciting about a field that is currently experiencing a real “renaissance” in scholarship and teaching.

To use this book most profitably, one should have some idea of what the classical tradition has been understood to mean. There is, of course, no one moment when antiquity can be said to have ended, and as institutions, values, and cultures moved gradually away from Greece and Rome, it took many years – centuries, actually – for people to see that they were living in a fundamentally different society. This difference was self-consciously articulated in a decisive way in the fourteenth century by Petrarch, whose polemical call for a revival of antiquity led him to define the Middle Ages as the period between ancient Greece and Rome, now seen as definitively past, and a present that could be influenced by the best that had been said and done in that past. For the next several centuries, as the chapters in this volume show, the literature, art, and social structures of antiquity were handed down to successive generations, to be transformed and absorbed into new institutions and cultures.

The idea that the classics could be “handed down” derives from the etymology of the word “tradition,” which comes from the Latin *tradere*, meaning “hand down, bequeath.” While this is what was understood to be happening for several centuries, however, the idea of a “classical tradition” and a phrase to describe it are actually, as Jan Ziolkowski points out, a modern notion. For many scholars, the seminal studies are the ones by Gilbert Highet (1949) and R. R. Bolgar (1954), which convey their fundamental approach in their titles (*The Classical Tradition* and *The Classical Heritage and Its Beneficiaries*, respectively) and trace in great detail this handing

down of material from the past to the present. If someone wants to know which classical authors Milton knew, for example, a great deal of valuable information can still be found there. Since the 1950s, however, a good many more data have emerged. To take but one example, recent work in book history has led to the discovery of a large number of copies of Greek and Latin texts that were owned and annotated by later authors, helping us to see firsthand how they read and understood the classics. Highe knew that Montaigne had read Lucretius, but the recent discovery of his annotated copy allows us to trace Lucretius' role in the development of the *Essays* in ways that were simply not possible until now (Screech 1998).

While there have been significant changes recently in what is known about the classical heritage, the need for this *Companion to the Classical Tradition* has been driven as much, if not more by the changes in *how* we know what we know in this area. The last decades of the twentieth century saw the impact of the "theory revolution" in most areas of the humanities, and this field is no exception. As Charles Martindale shows, a key innovation derives from the development of reception theory, especially as practiced since the 1960s at the University of Constance by such critics as Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser. To quote Martindale (ch. 20), reception "operates with a different temporality" from the passive handing down of classical material from the past to the present: it involves "the *active* participation of readers (including readers who are themselves creative artists) in a two-way process, backwards as well as forwards, in which the present and the past are in dialogue with each other." This has profound consequences for how Greece and Rome are understood by later ages. Traditional classical philology aims to recover the meanings that ancient texts had in their original contexts. If, however, the reader is an active participant in the making of meaning, then it will be very difficult, indeed perhaps impossible, to recover the original meaning of any text. If interpretation is not simply grounded in original meaning, the different readings of a classical text over time become not misreadings, but the only readings we have, ours being simply the last in the chain of receptions. From this perspective, the chain of receptions moves from the margins to the center, as it has been doing in the works of an increasing number of scholars over the last several decades.

The chapters that follow reflect this shift in perspective in each of the three major sections of the book. After an essay on the role of the classics in education that serves as the first essay in the volume, the next seven chapters trace the transformations of the classical tradition chronologically, from the Middle Ages to the modern period. The period labels are in many ways conventional enough, but the understanding of how classical material was handled in different times is often not. Petrarch's periodization, for example, rests on the assumption that he could see the past as it had actually been, while those who had lived in the generations before him could not. This assumption remained unchallenged for hundreds of years, with the result that medieval classicism has been approached even by many modern scholars as narrow, primitive, and often simply wrong. By resting in the principles of reception theory, however, Jan Ziolkowski is able to show how "[m]edieval perspectives on classical texts and their contents are increasingly respected by medievalists and classicists alike, rather than being dismissed for having at best interfered with and at worst corrupted



a grand legacy” (ch. 2). Another period in which the role of the classics has been thoroughly reevaluated is the romantic. As Bruce Graver shows, “Highet resisted yoking the terms ‘Romantic’ and ‘classical,’ as if to do so would be an act of violence on both words” (ch. 6). Yet even here, when the emphasis on originality, nature, and emotion has seemed to offer little reason to highlight the classics, Greece and Rome remained very much alive. Keats’s classicism was different from Dryden’s, but both meditated deeply on the remnants of antiquity and created great art from those meditations. What emerges from the chapters in this section is that readers of different times have appropriated different fragments of antiquity: as Kenneth Haynes puts it, the “orientation toward an ever more remote antiquity – from Hellenistic sculpture to the marbles of classical Athens to preclassical Greek figures – parallels a broad feature of the classical tradition in western Europe since the Renaissance, where in successive periods the dominant focus of attention moved from the Rome of seventeenth-century classicism to the Athens of nineteenth-century Hellenism to the preclassical Greece of the modernists” (ch. 8).

If the reader participates in shaping the understanding of antiquity, it becomes important to take into account readers on the margins of scholarship on the classical tradition as well as readers in the center. The second section does this by surveying the geographical presence of the classical heritage. The length and level of detail in the treatments of Italy (David Marsh, ch. 14) and Germany (Volker Riedel, ch. 12), for example, confirm the importance of Greece and Rome in two countries whose creative engagement with the classical past has long been known. A quick look at Highet’s table of contents, however, suggests that much remained to be done when he was writing. When his book appeared it was severely taken to task for virtually ignoring Spain, an omission corrected by Luisa López Grigera’s chapter (ch. 13) in this volume. Rather surprisingly for someone writing at Columbia University, Highet also gave short shrift to the United States – the impact of the classics on the Founding Fathers is limited to a two-page addendum to the discussion of the French Revolution – a picture that is filled out by Ward Briggs’s chapter (ch. 19) here. Virtually nothing has been available in any western language on the classical tradition in central and eastern Europe; Jerzy Axer (ch. 10) corrects this oversight by exploring systematically what it meant to interact with the classical past on the borders of what had been the classical world. Moving further afield, Andrew Laird’s chapter on Latin America (ch. 15) and William Dominik’s on Africa (ch. 9) show that the classical tradition was alive and well outside Europe and North America.

In the classics, as in other areas, scholarship has taken some novel turns since, say, the 1980s, and the chapters in the final section suggest some of the transformations of the classical tradition that have taken place even since the publication of *The Legacy of Greece: A New Appraisal* (Finley 1981) and *The Legacy of Rome: A New Appraisal* (Jenkyns 1992). Alastair Blanshard, for example, shows how our ideas of what “masculine” and “feminine” mean go back to antiquity (ch. 22), and Lorna Hardwick illustrates some of the ways in which the classics have continued to provide cultural capital even after countries that were colonized by Europe achieved their independence (ch. 21). Christopher Stray’s chapter suggests that by all rights, classical themes should be difficult to find in contemporary art, since Greek and Latin no longer play the