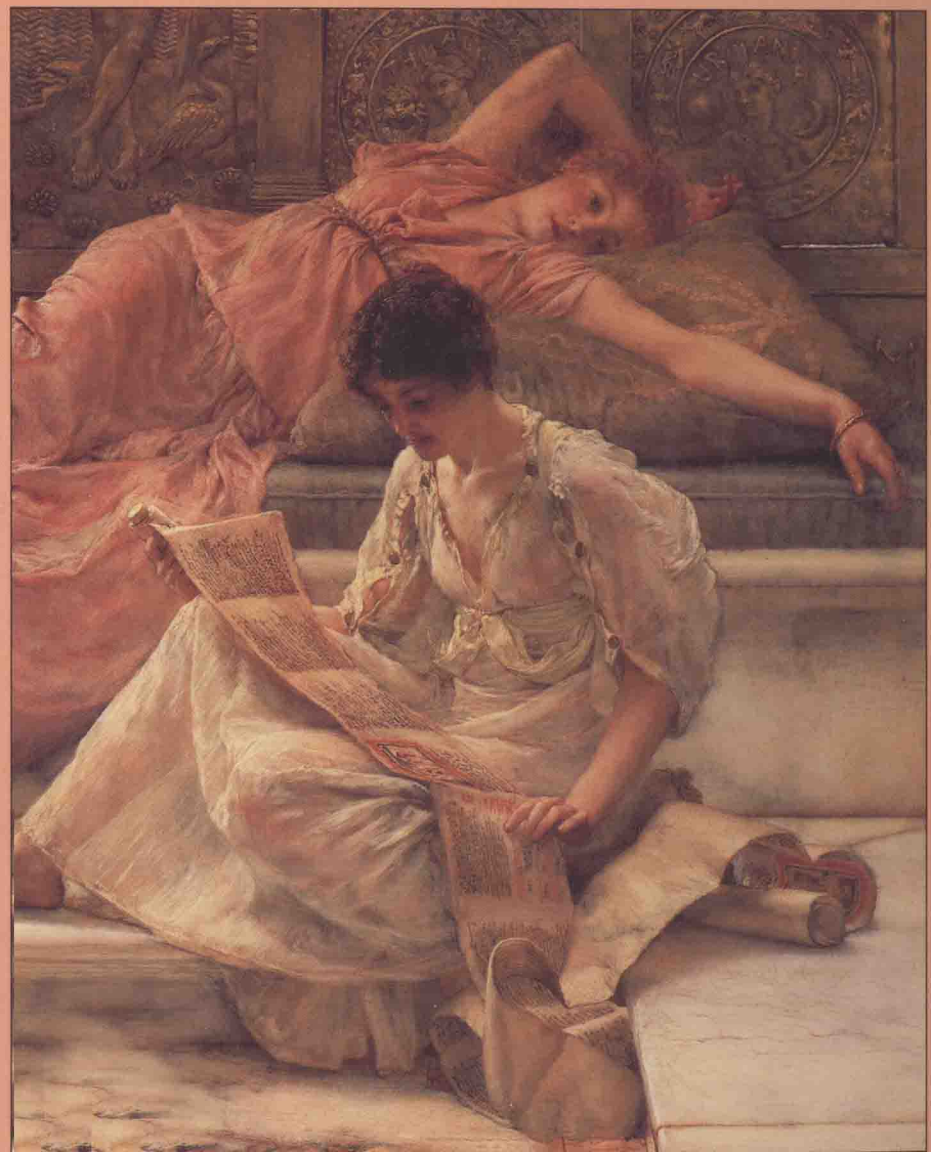
PHILIP GASKELL

Landmarks in Classical Literature



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Preface

Landmarks in Classical Literature is the last in a set of three books about the major authors of European literature and their works, from ancient times until the early twentieth century. Despite their similarities, each of these three volumes of 'landmarks' approaches its subjects in a slightly different way.

Landmarks in English Literature (1998) is a survey of the major British and Irish authors from Chaucer to the 1920s, together with explanations of how the three main genres of literature – fiction, poetry, drama – actually work. Then *Landmarks in European Literature* (1999) discusses thirty-two key works of European literature from Dante to Brecht, translated from six languages other than English, putting them into the contexts of their times and places. Now *Landmarks in Classical Literature* surveys the most influential authors of ancient Greece and Rome, and says something about their environment, and about translations of their work.

All three books are aimed at 'general readers' and students of all ages, people who want to discover the delights offered by literature, old as well as new. All three base their discussions on the texts of English literature, and of foreign and ancient literature in translation, that are available nowadays in well-edited paperback editions. And the prime purpose of all three is, not to be a substitute for reading these wonderful books, but to help and encourage readers to explore and enjoy the great literary heritage of the west for themselves.

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The bad effects which, generally, result from the present system of [classical] education are the following; a blind and bigotted attachment to authorities, names, and antiquity: disputes merely verbal: and, consequently, the continuance of error and prejudice.
(William Stevenson [father of Elizabeth Gaskell], *Remarks on the Very Inferior Utility of Classical Learning*, 1796)

The special benefit which these [classical] studies are supposed, and in some cases justly supposed, to confer, is to quicken our appreciation of what is excellent and to refine our discrimination between what is excellent and what is not.
(A. E. Housman, 'Introductory Lecture' as Professor of Latin at University College, London, 1892)

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Introduction

Reading the classics today

The civilisation and literature of ancient Greece and Rome, along with the Judaeo-Christian religion, have been the bedrock of the thought and culture of the western world since the high Middle Ages, and they still underlie the way Europeans and Americans think and write. Until quite recently the classics have also underpinned western education, first-hand experience of at least a few Roman authors in the original Latin being the basic requirement of anything more advanced than elementary schooling.

But, although western culture is based on the classics, not many schoolchildren now learn Latin, and very few indeed learn Greek; while the ancient languages are long gone as a requirement for university entrance. And because the Greek and Latin languages are taught to so few pupils at school, the history and culture of the ancient civilisations tend also to be disregarded, both in school and afterwards. It is true that the classics are still taught on a small scale in British secondary schools,[1] and that there are some twenty-five university departments of classics in Britain (few of them large on the scale of the major humanities and science departments); but it is also true that the classics are no longer taught to anything like the extent that they once were. An important part of our heritage – the basis of much of our thought and art – is in danger of being forgotten.

The purpose of this book is to make available the work of some of the most important Greek and Roman writers, chosen both for their intrinsic quality and for the influence they have had on the

[1] In 1998 there were 10,945 UK candidates for GCSE Latin, 3,529 for Classical Civilisation, and 980 for Greek; compared with (to the nearest thousand) 1,006,000 for Combined Science, 638,000 for English, 491,000 for English Literature, 385,000 for Design and Technology, 336,000 for French, and 134,000 for German (*The Times*, 27 August 1998).

development of our own cultural history; and to present it against a background of the history – political, social, and cultural – of the ancient world.

A novel or a poem or a play, while it is being experienced, is an event in time like a piece of music, not a thing. (Of course the text of a work of literature can be written down, as can a musical score, and it may appear to be a thing in that state; but it remains a thing only so long as it is unread or unheard, when it becomes an event once more.) Now these events will have certain effects, depending on the skill and understanding of the readers or listeners, who will experience intellectual, imaginative, emotional, and even physical responses to them. It is obviously important that readers and listeners should hold themselves open to these responses during such events, and should welcome the interest, wonder, pleasure, amusement, anger, or whatever that may result from reading or hearing works of art. This is what I hope readers of this book will do when I suggest that a work is good, and worth their attention.

What cannot be explained is why a particular work of art is beautiful. Beautiful works can induce a transcendental state of happiness in experienced and receptive listeners or readers that goes beyond the describable pleasures of the intellect, imagination, and emotion. There are no words that can usefully say why Bach's B-minor Mass is beautiful – though there are plenty that can say why it is interesting or satisfying or well made or well performed – and the problem of explaining the beauty of works of literature is essentially the same.

The classical canon

The acknowledgement of the most important writers of any period – of canonical writers, as they are called – both forms and safeguards its cultural tradition. Some of the canonical authors of the ancient world were identified as being canonical even in their own time, a position which the writers and critics of later periods have confirmed by acknowledging them to be their greatest and most influential predecessors. The epic poets Homer and Virgil are the most classical – in that their works have always been considered valuable and exemplary as well as traditional – of the primary writers discussed here, but the eight others follow closely behind them: the lyric poets Pindar and Horace, Ovid the poet of love and myth, the dramatist Sophocles, the philosophers Plato and Cicero, and the

historians Herodotus and Tacitus. These ten are given the most space here, but a further twenty-five Greek and Latin writers are also discussed in connection with them: the didactic poet Hesiod; the Hellenistic poets Callimachus, Apollonius Rhodius, and Theocritus; the lyricists Sappho, Anacreon, and Catullus, and the satirist Juvenal; the dramatists Aeschylus, Euripides, Aristophanes, Plautus, Terence, and Seneca (as playwright); the historians Thucydides, Xenophon, Caesar, Sallust, Livy, Plutarch, and Suetonius; the novelists Petronius, Apuleius, and Longus; and the philosophers Aristotle and Seneca (as philosopher).

Technicalities

The rest of this Introduction considers a number of technical matters. They are dealt with here rather than in appendices because they are the sort of things which can puzzle or put off new readers of the classics, and which are best explained at once for those who would like to know more about them. These matters are: (1) reading classical authors in translation rather than in the original; (2) the form and pronunciation of Greek and Latin names; (3) metre in classical verse; (4) dates; (5) Roman numerals; and (6) maps.

(1) The classics in translation

Because few people can read Greek and Latin, our authors are necessarily approached through translation; and their distance from us means that their work has to be introduced by explanations that are longer than would be required for the discussion of more recent literatures.

We have to accept that translation is an imperfect medium for the transmission of even the simplest literature written in prose, and that it is especially inadequate for expressing the poetry of one language in terms of another. Hardly any but simple words for concrete things translate directly between languages without some distortion of meaning, and even simple words tend to have subsidiary senses that differ from language to language. Furthermore, as C.D.N. Costa remarked in connection with translating Seneca's Latin prose:

> The more brilliant and distinctive an author the harder it is to translate him adequately, and Seneca is no exception. There is in any case the general problem of translating from an inflected into a virtually uninflected language. For example, inflection allows variations in word order for special effects of emphasis or surprise that are difficult to achieve in the far more

> fixed word order of a language like English.[2] When to this general difficulty are added Seneca's numerous and highly sophisticated mannerisms – word play, pungent aphorism, elaborate sentence structure combined with elliptical phraseology – we are faced with sometimes daunting problems. (Seneca, *Dialogues and Letters*, ed. and trs. by C.D.N. Costa, 1997, Penguin Classics p. xxv)

For poetry the situation is even worse: the rhythms, sounds, puns, nuances, and emotional charges of poetry simply cannot be translated from one language to another, and cannot easily be mimicked in the inevitably different modes of another language.[3] G.H. Lewes summed the problem up in connection with translating the poetry of Goethe:

> A translation [of a poem] may be good *as* a translation, but it cannot be an adequate reproduction of the original. It may be a good poem; it may be a good imitation of another poem; it may be better than the original; but it cannot be an adequate reproduc tion; it cannot be the same thing in another language, producing the same effect on the mind.[4]

The difficulties and imperfections of literary translations are bad enough between modern languages, but between ancient and modern languages they are compounded because the cultural environments are further removed from each other by time as well as place.

Translations are what we have to deal with, however, and we are fortunate in having plenty of good ones easily available. There is also a real advantage in being able to approach the riches of classical literature through the medium of these translations. This is that everyone – including those who have been taught some Greek and Latin – can read so much more of it, and read it so much more easily, than they could if they had to pick their way through the varieties of the ancient languages in which the classics were originally written.

Those with some knowledge of Greek and Latin may choose to use the admirable series of Loeb Classics (with the original texts on the left-hand pages and prose translations – in some cases rather dated – on the right, in dozens of handy volumes, bound in green for

[2] On inflections and word order, see pp. 20–1, 124–6 below.

[3] The practical difficulties of translating poetry from one language to another are discussed at greater length in my *Landmarks in European Literature*, Edinburgh University Press 1999, pp. 2–6.

[4] G.H. Lewes, *The Life and Works of Goethe*, Everyman's Library, 1908 and reprints, p. 483. The philosophy of translation is considered at length in George Steiner's erudite *After Babel*, rev. ed., Oxford University Press 1991.

Greek and red for Latin). But for most people it will be more practical to read the fine paperback translations, mostly annotated and without the original texts, that are available in Penguin Classics and Oxford World's Classics; and in fact all but one of our ten principal authors are included in both series (the exception being Pindar, translations of whose poems appear in Penguin Classics but not so far in Oxford World's Classics); and most of the additional twenty-five writers appear in one or other of these series, or in both. Both series are keeping up to date with recent translations and revisions, the Penguin series covering a larger number of works than the Oxford World's Classics. Sections on these translations are added to the discussions of the main and additional authors.

(2) The form and pronunciation of Greek and Latin names

Many of the Greek and Latin names appearing here are generally familiar in anglicised spellings and pronunciations which have little to do with their original forms. Our ten main writers, for instance are commonly known as Homer (HOHMə), Pindar (PINdah), Sophocles (SOFəkleez), Herodotus (heRODətəs), Plato (PLAYtoh), Cicero (SISəroh), Virgil (VURjil), Horace (HORis), Ovid (OVid), and Tacitus (TASitəs).[5]

There are two main reasons for the confused state in which Greek and Latin names have reached us: alterations made to the forms of the names, and changes of pronunciation. With regard to form, some Greek names have been Latinised, the *-os* termination for instance being changed to *-us* (Kronos, Cronus), or in a more extreme case Polydeukes becoming Pollux. Where the name has not been anglicised, the Latin form is sometimes used (Hercules rather than Herakles or Heracles). But some of the most familiar Greek names have been anglicised – Homer (Homeros in Greek), Pindar (Pindaros), and Plato (Platon) in the list given above – and then it is the anglicised forms that are usually preferred. Similarly, many of the most familiar names of Roman writers are normally used in their anglicised rather than in their original Latin forms, including Virgil (Vergilius), Horace (Horatius), and Ovid (Ovidius) in our list.[6] On

[5] See the beginning of the Index on pp. 213–14 for the phonetic equivalents for these simplified phonetic spellings. Phonetic spellings using the same system are given for all the Greek and Latin names that are used in the book following their entries in the Index. The symbol 'ə' stands for the neutral vowel in English.

[6] See pp. 127–8 for more about Roman names.

the other hand the names of some ancient places have to be distinguished from those of their modern successors, so that we say Ithaca rather than Itháki; Massalia (or Massilia) rather than Marseilles; Eburacum rather than York; and so on (though we have anglicised Gallia as Gaul).

The pronunciation of Latin by English speakers has undergone changes that have left their mark on the way we pronounce common Latin words and phrases – especially legal and medical terms – and the Greek and Latin names discussed in the last paragraph. Until the late nineteenth century Latin was pronounced in Britain with English vowel sounds: 'PAYtə' for *pater*, 'reJEYEnə' for *regina*, 'BOHnə' for *bona*, 'veyediLEYEset' for *videlicet*, and so on. Then a 'reformed' Latin pronunciation was introduced in schools with Continental vowel sounds, hard 'c' and 'g', and 'w' for 'v'; which gave 'PAHtə', 'reGEEnə' (hard 'g'), 'BONə', 'weedayLEEket', and so on.

Used strictly, the reformed Latin pronunciation (which was an attempt to reconstruct the pronunciation of the Romans) does not use the neutral vowel 'ə' to the extent that I have done here, but suggests 'PAHtair' rather than 'PAHtə' for *pater*, and 'reGEEnah' rather than 'reGEEnə' for *regina*, and so on. This can sound pedantic, and I have opted for a more relaxed form of the reformed pronunciation in this book, with a liberal use of the neutral vowel, because this is what most people actually say.

The introduction of the reformed pronunciation has resulted in many inconsistencies in the way that we pronounce Latin words and phrases today. For instance, *prima facie* retains its old English pronunciation 'PREYEmə FAYsi', not the reformed 'PREEmah FAKee-ay; and for *faeces* we say 'FEEseez', not 'FEYEkayz'. On the other hand for *fecit* (as part of the signature on an engraving) we are more likely to say 'FAYkit' than 'FEEsit'. In some cases both pronunciations are current: *nisi* is pronounced both 'NEYEseye' and 'NEEsee'; *opus* is both 'OHpəs' and 'OPoos'; and Newton's book is sometimes the 'prinSIPi-ə', sometimes the 'prinKIPi-ah'. And, as a further complication, there is Church Latin, which uses Continental vowels (with a few alterations), and 'tsh' for 'c': thus for *pace* we have 'PAYsi' ('English'), 'PAHkay' (reformed), and 'PAHtshay' (Church).[7]

[7] Another oddity is the common pronunciation 'rashonAHL' for the Latin word *rationale*, presumably in the belief that it comes from French; the English pronunciation was 'rashoNAYli', the reformed would be 'ratioNAHlay'.

The outcome is that the pre-reform pronunciation of Latin names, and of the Latin forms of Greek names, also survives in the common forms of many Greek and Roman names today; which is the reason why the names listed at the beginning of this section are pronounced as they are, and why we say 'meyeSEEnee' not 'miKEEneye', and 'SEEzə' not 'KEYEzah', for *Mycenae* and *Caesar*; and so on.[8]

A point, finally, about the spelling of names in this book: there is a convention that spells the possessive case of ancient Greek and Latin names ending in *-s* as *-s'*; but it is, it seems to me, a bad and outdated convention. We do not say *Sophocles' plays* or *Athens' temples* any more than we say *Polonius' speech* or *John Jones' house*. We say *Sophocles's plays*, *Athens's temples*, *Polonius's speech*, *John Jones's house*, and so on, as we do for the possessive case of almost all singular proper names and other nouns ending in *-s*. For this reason I have spelled the possessive case of Greek and Latin names ending in *-s* as *-s's*.

(3) Metre in classical verse

The metre of Greek and Latin verse is based on patterns of 'long' and 'short' syllables in a line, not (as in English verse) on patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables, or (as in French verse) on the number of syllables in a line.[9] This arrangement was appropriate for ancient Greek, which was not a stressed language; but it was also adopted for classical Latin verse, in imitation of the Greek model, even though classical Latin was normally spoken with stress. A resulting complication is that 'there are good reasons for believing that the Romans read their [Latin] poetry with the stress accent of their normal speech, the quantitative metre (originally Greek) being heard as a counterpoint or undercurrent.'[10] However that may be, what follows here is a much simplified account of the basics of classical quantitative metre, which applies to both Greek and Latin verse, and which explains the origin of certain features of the Homeric verse that we shall be considering in Chapter 3.

In classical 'quantitative' verse (as it is called), patterns of syllables containing long and short vowels were arranged in groups called

[8] For the application of these principles to some of the 900 names in Homer's *Iliad*, see p. 28 below. For an explanation of the forms of Roman names, see pp. 127–8.

[9] For an explanation of how the metre of English verse works, see my *Landmarks in English Literature*, Edinburgh University Press 1998, pp. 70–5; and for French verse, see *Landmarks in European Literature*, Edinburgh University Press 1999, pp. 20–1.

[10] L.P. Wilkinson in his edition of Virgil's *Georgics* (1982), Penguin Classics p. 55.