

Learning Greek

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Twice a week after the school day ends, seven students (and one history teacher) convene in my classroom for an honors-level independent study in beginning ancient Greek. This is the third consecutive year I have offered the course, and enrollment has increased dramatically. It is an accelerated, language-intensive class that focuses exclusively on learning to read Attic Greek, the language of Plato, Sophocles, Thucydides, and many other great authors.

It started two years ago with Bernadette Bepler, who approached me with her own proposal for an independent study in Greek. Bernadette's phenomenal talent in Latin was already legendary; her decision to take up Greek was the logical next step. Both she and her classmate, Jess Frisch, excelled in the subject, as did Kevin Sparks, who took the course last year. All of them proved their mastery of the subject by earning honors on the National Greek Examination, a challenging test of the language. Preparing for the exam, which is offered in February, is a major course goal.

On our first day of class this year, I asked the students to record their reasons for learning Greek. Several cited an interest in language and communication, along with a desire to complement their knowledge of Latin. (All except one are also enrolled in Latin.) One observed

that the idea of ancient Greece as the "crucible of Western civilization" was "thoroughly ingrained" in him and his classmates in his freshman Humanities course last year. Another is excited that Greek is new and different and will instill in him a sense of discipline. Another noted that learning Greek "removes boundaries" and will enable her to read original Greek texts. My personal favorite? "I want to learn Greek simply because it is Greek."

A little more than a century ago, Greek was mandatory. It was simple: no Greek, no college. A classics professor of mine at Vanderbilt had in his office a framed copy of the university's Greek entrance examination, circa 1900. A beautifully printed booklet, it contained original excerpts from Xenophon's *Anabasis* and the *Odyssey* of Homer, with detailed questions on the content and grammatical points of each passage. It was a demanding exam, one that presupposed a rigorous training and proficiency in both the Attic and Homeric dialects. Not long after it was printed, Vanderbilt dropped its Greek entrance requirement.

Even as Greek ruled in the American academy for nearly three centuries, it was not without its detractors. Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and the founder of Dickinson College, publicly asserted that classical learning had no value whatsoever. In a letter to his friend John Adams, he wrote: "Were every Greek and Latin book (the New Testament excepted) consumed in a bonfire, the world would be the wiser and better for it." Others, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, the French aristocrat who toured America in 1831, held a more balanced view. A strong supporter of

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the classics, he wrote in *Democracy in America*, that Greek and Latin should not take precedence over commercial, industrial, and scientific branches of learning, since these subjects offered the majority a better means to enjoy the benefits of a democratic society. De Tocqueville's view turned out to be prophetic. Decades later, the Greek requirement began to disappear, and not only in America. In 1910, Oxford University removed Greek as a degree requirement. One professor who voted in favor of this decision was, at the time, Oxford's most distinguished Greek scholar.

Why learn Greek today? Classics teachers often point pragmatically to higher SAT scores, vocabulary building, and the claim that translating dead languages improves "critical thinking" skills. These reasons, while legitimate, are subordinate to one that is more compelling. We learn Greek to read Greek authors who tower above other writers, silently awaiting the approach of those who wish to make their acquaintance. In the lofty poetry of Homer or in Plato's elegant prose, one often encounters an alluring charm that is beyond analysis and translation. On every page, their powerful ideas are expressed with clarity and precision. Even single Greek words – *mythos*, *logos*, *theos* – often enchant us into higher realms of the intellect and imagination.

Discerning students will always be attracted to Greek because they long for something stimulating and intellectually nourishing. It is far from easy, and that is exactly what makes it worthwhile. As Thoreau observed in *Walden*, reading the classics "requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object."

Such training brings a precious reward, for once the language has been learned, a straightforward and delightfully entertaining storyteller such as Homer can be read with pleasure for the rest of one's life.

This past summer, I read a play by Euripides entitled *Cyclops*. In it, Odysseus is blown off course on his voyage home from Troy. He comes to Sicily, where the satyr Silenus has already arrived. When Silenus tells him that the Cyclopes dwell there, Odysseus asks what sort of political system they have. Silenus answers: "Nobody pays no attention to no one." A triple negative in Greek is perfectly grammatical, but Euripides takes it a step further, joining together all the words of negation – *ouden oudeis oudenos* – to highlight how lawless and uncivilized the Cyclopes are. Euripides' breathtaking wordplay in this half line of verse could never be adequately translated. This simple fact, I trust my students will understand, is an excellent reason to read it in the original Greek.

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