

“By Gentlemen for Gentlemen”: Classical Culture in the Victorian Age

Victoria Tietze Larson

Charles Martindale, Stefano Evangelista, and Elizabeth Prettejohn, eds. *Pater the Classicist: Classical Scholarship, Reception, and Aestheticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), xiv + 353 pp., \$105.00 cloth.

Stephen Harrison, *Victorian Horace: Classics and Class* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), ix + 196 pp., \$114.00 cloth.

The stated mission of *Pater the Classicist: Classical Scholarship, Reception, and Aestheticism* is to “make the case for taking Walter Pater seriously as a classicist” (1). What, though, do we mean by “a classicist?” The question is a particularly important one, not just for understanding Pater but also for understanding the Victorian readers and interpreters of Horace discussed in the other book under review here, *Victorian Horace: Classics and Class*. It is important because Walter Pater (1839-1894) and the subjects of Harrison’s study lived in an era when, as Christopher Stray (1998) and others have shown, understandings of what classical studies and classicists were all about were undergoing a transformation: “Text-centred solidaristic affirmations of permanent humanist value” were beginning to cede the field to “a more detached investment of the classical world that went beyond the margins of the literary text.” At the same time, an “earlier world of

gentlemanly amateur scholars” was beginning to give way to “professional researchers [...] in university environments” (117) derived from the middle rather than the upper class.

With the exception of Daniel Orrells’ chapter, “Pater and Nettleship: A Platonic Education and the Politics of Disciplinarity,” *Pater the Classicist* discusses this transformational phenomenon only in passing. Yet the book somewhat prejudges its complaint that Pater receives short shrift from modern classicists (3-4) by its provocative insistence (both passim and in the title of Chapter 1) on calling Pater a “professional classicist.” Granted Pater taught Classics for a living at a university and published on the subject, but that, I suggest, was about the extent of his resemblance to the model implied by the term. Stefano Evangelista and Katherine Harloe acknowledge in their chapter on “Pater’s ‘Winckelmann’: Aesthetic Criticism and Classical Reception,” that although Pater was “writing at a time when British classical scholarship was embracing the ‘scientific’ method, Pater goes against this trend, revaluing an eighteenth-century ideal of amateurism based on a sentimental approach to the object” (71). Orrells, on the other hand, argues that Pater followed neither trend, “locat[ing] Plato as the historical cause for that history of modern debates about the politics of disciplinarity” and showing that they are ultimately irresolvable (303). Either way, being an Oxford don was hardly the “job” (another anachronistic term) conjured up for modern readers by the term “professional classicist,” but rather a way of life that, in as far as it involved teaching, was a quasi-spiritual and moral calling. The microcosm of the Oxford college and the intimacy of the one-on-one tutorial that Benjamin Jowett, Pater’s onetime teacher, had promoted at Oxford in emulation of the Socratic system (Orrells, *Classical Culture* 97), encouraged Pater to see himself as teacher in the mode of Platonic pedagogue, where Plato’s Academy was the archetypal “first college, with something of a common life, of communism on that small scale, with its chapel, its gardens, its library” (311). In at least one instance, as the scandal that erupted around his relationship with undergraduate

William Money Hardinge was to prove, Pater seems to have carried this intimacy too far (Orrells, *Classical Culture* 104-6).

With respect to his publications, Pater disseminated what he had to say about the classical world, directly or indirectly, not in the new academic journals that were springing up, such as the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, inaugurated in 1880, but instead with the mainstream publishing house Macmillan, and—before publishing it in book form—in periodicals such as the *Fortnightly Review*, *Westminster Review*, *Guardian*, and *Macmillan's Magazine* (whence they were often reprinted shortly thereafter in American periodicals such as *Littell's Living Age*, the *Eclectic Magazine*, or on occasion *Scribner's Magazine* and *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* [Wright 1975, passim, and 34, 47]). The outlets in which Pater published his scholarship provided leisure-time reading material for affluent, educated (especially, classically literate), upper-middle- and upper-class subscribers—in fact, for exactly the sort of people that Pater might have taught at Oxford. Thus, in letters written in 1872 to Alexander MacMillan about his forthcoming book *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Pater, who wanted his book to be more expensively bound than the publisher proposed to make it, characterized his potential readers as “persons of taste” and “a comparatively small section of readers” (Wright 62). Likewise, five years later, when a second edition was in the works, Pater wrote to MacMillan urging further upgrades to the quality of its binding, and requesting also that its price be raised (Wright 65). In fact, Pater let it be understood that it was the very exclusiveness of MacMillan's list that had led Pater to MacMillan in the first place: “I know not how long ago I formed the ambition that you should publish what I might write as I gleaned over the fascinating list of your publications in the ‘higher’ literature—certainly before I could afford to buy them,” he wrote in 1876 (Wright 63). The price and intellectual content of the periodicals in which Pater published his work ensured an upper-crust readership for these too. In fact, what William Makepeace Thackeray has Captain Shandon say about the fictional *Pall Mall Gazette* in his 1850 novel *The*

History of Pendennis could be fairly said of the real-life daily *Pall Mall Gazette*, in which Pater occasionally wrote, as well as of his other journalistic outlets: “We address ourselves to the higher circles of society: we care not to disown it—the *Pall Mall Gazette* is written by gentlemen for gentlemen” (350).

What Stephen Harrison will very successfully show in *Victorian Horace: Classics and Class* is that an interest in Classics could be counted on among gentlemen such as these, and that the demonstration of classical knowledge—especially, a knowledge of Horace—was a *de rigueur* marker of gentlemanly status. As such, Horace was constructed “as an honorary English gentleman who represented the values of the male and homosocial Victorian English élite: moderation, sociability, leisured gentility, patriotism and (even) religion” (20). Harrison’s survey of commentaries on, translations of, and allusions to, Horace in poetry and novels provides ample evidence that during the Victorian period, as before, knowledge of, and interest in, Classics was not, as its professionalization would eventually cause to be the case, confined to a small academic group, but widespread among men of the élite class, whatever their occupation might be. This was the “like-minded readership group” (Harrison 2) that formed the audience for Pater’s publications and that, to quote Harrison who deploys French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital,” constituted a “durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (2): in other words, it was a macrocosmic version of Pater’s Oxford “Academy.”

Such gentlemanly readers were prepared to seek and recognize analogies for themselves and their lives in the ancient world, and they also delighted in what Oscar Wilde (a friend of Pater’s) called the “Oxford temper,” or the “the ability to play gracefully with ideas” (Shuter 261). In articles such as these, meticulous footnoting of one’s sources was not the point, and Elizabeth Prettejohn in “Pater on Sculpture,” admits that Pater engaged in “much unacknowledged paraphrasing” (233). But Prettejohn of all the contributors to *Pater the*

Classicist also comes closest to tackling head-on the question of how Pater's practice as a classicist differed from the model that we now take as the norm. In this respect, she makes the illuminating observation that Pater did not "copy" original research, and "neither was [Pater] less learned nor less original than the new generation of professional archaeologists" (221), but rather that his "relationship [with them] might be better described as one of inspiration where the reading of a text, or the discovery of an artefact, compels Pater to make a work of his own in response" (232). Another way of putting it would be that Pater engaged with the classical world and other scholars' research on it in a way that, by modern criteria, would be regarded as artistic or creative rather than scholarly:

the relationship might be called one of imitation, in the sense that term was used in the literary criticism of antiquity or the Renaissance, without pejorative force. For us that kind of relationship to a predecessor is acceptable for works of art, but not for works of scholarship. (232)

Pater's published output ranged widely over what would nowadays be regarded as the separate specialisms of Greek art, religion, philosophy, as well as the early modern period (Renaissance art, Winckelmann), although always with the ancient world as point of reference. In four parts entitled "Classics and Classicism," "Fictions," "Greek Art and Culture," and "Philosophy," the twenty-one distinguished contributors to *Pater the Classicist*, drawn from the fields of English, Art History, and Classics, show beyond dispute that Pater's classical knowledge was both profound and up-to-the-minute and that modern classicists have much to learn from it. Martindale's contention that Pater is "an instructive precursor, indeed a sophisticated proponent, of what from the 1960s we have learned to call 'reception theory'" (13) is well taken. As such, Pater was concerned with "modernity's engagement with its multiple pasts" (12). Much of Pater's classical scholarship—and what makes it original—lies in his own personal enactment of this engagement.

Pater's historical novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) is an example of such creative, but scholarly, engagement with antiquity. In this story about the spiritual and aesthetic education of a young man named Marius in the context of Antonine Rome, Pater shows his skill at interweaving "fact" and fancy to make a story appealing to readers with varying degrees of classical literacy. *Pater the Classicist* devotes four chapters to explicating the ways in which Pater created in *Marius the Epicurean* a "complex mosaic" (130) that required an advanced knowledge of Roman history, literature, religion, and art and archaeology to fully appreciate. Duncan Kennedy in his chapter "Tibullus in *Marius the Epicurean*, or How to Read Pater's Fiction" shows, for example, that Pater used his own close reading of Tibullus and Horace to create his portrait of Marius. Tibullus was dismissed as a lightweight by the Victorians (104), but Pater departed from that assessment, as well as from that of Tibullus's contemporaries who, for the most part, memorialized him as a merely erotic poet, to emphasize, instead, a more complex and interesting Tibullus—handsome and wealthy, but also contemplative and ethical. Such a Tibullus is sketched in by Horace in *Epistles* 1.4 and glimpsed in Tibullus's own references to Roman religious custom, "below," as Pater put it, "the merely artificial attitudes of Latin pastoral poetry" (qtd 105). Pater's idiosyncratic picture of Tibullus, woven into the portrait of Marius, is an example of how Pater's own scholarly readings of the evidence allowed him to engage, creatively, with antiquity. A modern "professional classicist" would write an article drawing attention to his new reading of Tibullus and publish it in a scholarly journal for the admiration of other academics. Pater, instead, chose to incorporate it, without comment, into his art, for the appreciation of those readers who possessed as deep a knowledge of Latin literature as he did himself.

In choosing to write historical fiction, Pater adopted the most popular literary medium of his time: historical novels, including those about ancient Rome (Baker 324-29), were consumed in enormous quantities in the Victorian era, even at the lowest social level (Simmons

9; Bowen 245). *Marius the Epicurean* sold well relative to Pater's other publications, but the 6,000 copies (Wright 72) he sold in six years (1885-91) was a drop in the ocean compared with, say, the half-million copies sold of a reprint edition of Charles Kingsley's 1855 historical novel, *Westward Ho!* (Bowen 245). Despite, or perhaps because of, readers' established expectations, Pater handled the conventions of the genre with an irony not to be found in other potboilers. Like many other historical novelists, Pater excelled in visual scene-description, lauded as the literary counterpart to the classical settings of contemporary painter Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912). However, compared with the straight-forward photographic realism of Alma-Tadema's Rome (which Ivo Blom says made it easy to translate to the new medium of cinema), Pater's pictorial description, Shelley Hales argues, could not be taken at similar face value. In her chapter, "A Search for Home: The Representation of the Domestic in *Marius the Epicurean*," Hales shows that Pater played with the "standard trope of ancient ecphrasis in which the potential of illusionistic painting to fool its spectators is a constant theme" (139). Pater drew attention "to the made-upness of the objects described even as they seem to promise readers a vivid 'realistic' setting for Marius and a 'real' archaeological knowledge on Pater's part" (140). Of course, the (private) joke is that Pater *did*, in fact, have the "real" archaeological knowledge (visiting Rome as a preparation for writing this book [Wright 72]), but chose when and how to display it. Pater's sophisticated referencing of the conventions of ancient ecphrasis is thus another example of the way in which, throughout *Marius the Epicurean*, Pater engaged in a tacit dialogue with the "like-minded readership group" described by Harrison (*Victorian Horace* 140), whose classical education was such that they could appreciate Pater's multiple layers and modes of allusion to classical literature and culture.

As denoted by the title of his book, *Victorian Horace: Classics and Class*, Harrison's examples of such a *rapprochement* between author and classically literate readers occur specifically in the context of allusions to Horace in Victorian literature. Three types of Horatian allusion

examined by Harrison could be seen to represent the same kind of artistic—and yet also scholarly—engagement with antiquity exemplified in so many ways by *Marius the Epicurean*. These are: 1) translations of Horatian poetry (Chapter 2); 2) more covert allusions (especially in poetry) to Horatian content or style (Chapter 3); 3) parodic or serious “updates” of Horatian poetry (Chapter 4).

In keeping with the “gentlemanly amateur” model that Pater espoused in preference to that of “professional classicist,” what is striking about Harrison’s selected practitioners of these three types of Horatian allusion is that they were men who did not teach Classics for a living. Thus, of the four complete translations of Horace’s *Odes* (at least twenty others were published in England between 1840 and 1900 [49]) examined by Harrison, only one of these was executed by an academic: John Conington, Corpus Professor of Latin at Oxford from 1854. The others were labors of love, the work of eminent men in public life: Sir Theodore Martin (1816-1906), chiefly remembered as the biographer of Prince Albert; Lord Lytton (1803-73), politician and author of *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834); and William Ewart Gladstone (1809-98), four-time Prime Minister. As such, they served as “demonstrations of gentlemanly status and cultural capital by those who had attended élite educational institutions” (49) based on the premise that Horace was “an honorary Victorian elite male” (33). Casting Horace in this role meant that the erotic, especially the homoerotic, aspects of Horatian poetry—openly acknowledged by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century translators as Harrison shows in his first chapter—were routinely downplayed or weeded out by various methods: by outright omission, by explaining them away in commentaries as youthful indiscretions, or by translating male objects of desire into female ones (30, 37). Shielding schoolboys from unsavory material was not the primary or only motive. Harrison points out that poetic (rather than prose) translations of Horace were not, in fact, intended as translation-aides, but rather as bravura performances for the consumption of “elite readers who knew their Horace already and who could compare

the English with the Latin, in both form and content" (38). But it was by means such as these that Horace was tacitly reconfigured to moral standards embraced by Victorian gentlemen who could thereby find in him an image of themselves—sometimes in deliberately comic form. Just as Walter Pater saw Plato's Academy as an Oxford college, so Horace's references to his own élite education (*Satires* 1.6.71-80, *Epistles* 2.1.70, 2.2.41-5) allowed him to be recruited as an Oxbridge undergraduate, as in George Otto Trevelyan's 1861 one-act verse play *Horace at the University of Athens* or Owen Seaman's 1895 poem *Horace at Cambridge* (102-4).

Harrison's book is an invaluable contribution to the ever-enlarging field of Victorian classical reception. It adds a great deal to existing editions and studies of the poetry of Tennyson, Arnold, Clough, and Fitzgerald (Chapter 3), but also has much to say about texts forgotten today—such as the comic updates of, and "loftier allusions" to, Horace examined in Chapter 4. One of the most interesting of the latter of these, for the light it sheds on an author remembered nowadays chiefly for his importance as a novelist, is Thackeray's fine "May-Day Ode," published in the *Times* on 1 May 1851 to celebrate the official inauguration of the Great Exhibition. Harrison shows that this poem was a clever "reprocessing" (108) in terms of content, meter, and political message of Horace's *Carmen Saeculare*—with glances, too, to Book 8 of Virgil's *Aeneid*: Thackeray's description of the "quiet green [...] / With cattle grazing in the shade" cleared as the site for the building of Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace evoked the pastoral site of the future city of Rome visited by Aeneas. Thackeray's description of the Exhibition's international visitors, "the envoys of her [i.e., Queen Victoria's] empire pil[ing] / Gifts at her feet" (107) recalled Aeneas's shield on which were depicted conquered peoples assembled in Rome presenting gifts to Augustus. Tacit allusion to politically loaded Horatian and Virgilian texts enabled Thackeray to turn the celebration of the opening of an exhibition into a paean to British imperialism endorsed by Roman precedent.

Victorian Horace concludes with the claim—one that Harrison has elaborated more fully elsewhere (*Living Classics*)—that “Horatian reception may be said to have been to some degree ‘democratized’ in more recent literary contexts” (144). Examples of contemporary poets from Northern England and Ireland who make reference to Horace in one way or another in their poetry demonstrate, Harrison writes, that “access to Horace no longer requires an elite male education or close knowledge of Latin, and can belong to the periphery as well as the metropole” (153). Yet the term “democratization” presupposes a degree of cultural permeation that, ironically, was much truer of hierarchically stratified Victorian Britain than it is of Britain today. Edith Hall, researcher of the classical burlesque, makes the point that, even if formal classical education was not available to lower-class Victorians—that is, so to say, they did not own the means of production—they could, nevertheless, claim some acquaintance with, and therefore investment in, classical culture (364-66): its presence was ubiquitous at all levels and in all arenas of Victorian life, including at the fairground, circus (366), panorama, and magic-lantern show (Blom 188). Nineteenth-century Britain was, in fact, “flooded” with a “plethora of referents from Greece and Rome” (Monrós-Gaspar 2)—and, we might add, that this was true of the contemporary United States too: witness, as just one example, the proliferation of classical iconography at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair (Stone), viewed by over 27 million visitors. Moreover, it is now impossible to imagine a professor directing his classical scholarship primarily toward an audience outside university walls, or to imagine a sophisticated adaptation of Horatian poetry being offered as staple fare in a national daily newspaper. All of this points to a less felicitous consequence of the transformation of Classics that was in its initial stages in the day of Walter Pater and Harrison’s Victorians, but which is now, it seems, complete. Classics as a discipline may have teleologically “progressed,” as Harrison and his editors, Susanna Morton Braund and Paul Cartledge, imply in their *Envoi*, from “reinforc[ing] traditional and conservative social values” to a more

"liberal" position. But sadly, in the process, it has also become much more "marginal" (166).

Montclair State University

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