

ROUTLEDGE FOCUS

CLASSICS AND PRISON EDUCATION IN THE US

Edited by
Emilio Capettini
and Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz

ROUTLEDGE
Focus

The logo features a stylized white silhouette of a person's head and shoulders, facing right, positioned to the right of the text 'ROUTLEDGE' and above the text 'Focus'.

Classics and Prison Education in the US

This volume focuses on teaching Classics in carceral contexts in the US and offers an overview of the range of incarcerated adults, their circumstances, and the ways in which they are approaching and reinterpreting Greek and Roman texts.

Classics and Prison Education in the US examines how different incarcerated adults – male, female, or gender non-conforming; young or old; serving long sentences or about to be released – are reading and discussing Classical texts, and what this may entail. Moreover, it provides a sophisticated examination of the best pedagogical practices for teaching in a prison setting and for preparing returning citizens, as well as a considered discussion of the possible dangers of engaging in such teaching – whether because of the potential complicity with the carceral state, or because of the historical position of Classics in elitist education.

This edited volume will be a resource for those interested in Classics pedagogy, as well as the role that Classics can play in different areas of society and education, and the impact it can have.

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Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	vii
Introduction	1
EMILIO CAPETTINI AND NANCY SORKIN RABINOWITZ	
PART I	
Old texts, new classrooms	9
1 Reading the emotions inside and outside: classical Greek texts in prison and beyond	11
EMILY ALLEN-HORNBLOWER	
2 “Because we’ve done bad things”: understanding <i>timē</i> in prison	22
ELIZABETH BOBRICK	
3 Dialogic pedagogy as a model for teaching classics in prison	32
NANCY FELSON AND NEBOJŠA TODOROVIĆ	
4 Surmises and surprises: notes on teaching ancient Greek literature in a correctional facility	43
AMY E. JOHNSON AND LAURA M. SLATKIN	
5 Inside out: classical myth in a county jail	52
ALEXANDRA PAPPAS	

6	From family violence to civic order: ancient myths and modern theory in a medium-security prison	63
	STEPHEN SCULLY	
	PART II	
	Beyond the classroom	75
7	Teaching Ovid to incarcerated students: an experiential analysis	77
	NICOLE DIB AND OLGA FACCANI	
8	A poetics of performance liberation: a conversation about <i>The Odyssey Project</i>	87
	MICHAEL MORGAN AND ZACHARY PRICE	
	PART III	
	Critical pedagogy and the academy	97
9	Returning citizens and the responsibilities of the academy: teaching for Columbia university's justice-in-education initiative	99
	DAN-EL PADILLA PERALTA	
10	Racing and gendering classical mythology in the incarcerated classroom	111
	ELENA DUGAN AND MATHURA UMACHANDRAN	
11	Critical perspectives on prison pedagogy and classics	122
	JESSICA WRIGHT	
	<i>Index</i>	133

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Introduction

*Emilio Capettini and
Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz*

This volume on teaching Classics in prison settings comes for the most part from presentations delivered at several conferences – at the Society for Classical Studies, the Classical Association of the Atlantic States, and the University of California, Santa Barbara Interdisciplinary Humanities Center Symposium on Humanities in Prison. The editors and contributors are grateful to those organizations and the audiences for their generous responses, which inspired this project.

Those presentations, and the lively discussions that followed them, are a testament to the current interest in the topic, an interest galvanized by an increasing awareness of the US prison problem. The exponential rise of rates of incarceration in the US since the 1970s has given new meaning to the idea of American exceptionalism: with 4% of the global population, the US has nearly 25% of the world's prison population. As is by now well known, this situation is starkly racialized: Black men are six times more likely to be arrested than white men, and Black and Latinx boys are more likely to go to jail than to college (much less to graduate from one). What might not be as widely recognized is that this pressing issue cuts across gender distinctions: according to a recent report by the ACLU, women are the fastest-growing segment of the incarcerated population in the US.¹ Although far from painting a complete picture, these statistics and data allow one to gauge the toll that mass incarceration exerts – both emotionally and economically – on communities across this country. Ironically, this system is extremely expensive to maintain: its cost for taxpayers is around \$80 billion annually, in spite of the fact that incarcerated individuals work for almost nothing, eat substandard food, and survive in dehumanizing, crowded surroundings – a situation that has been exacerbated even further by the COVID-19 pandemic.²

What is to be done about this enormous problem? A proposal that has been gaining more and more support in recent years is that of

2 *Capettini and Rabinowitz*

abolishing prisons entirely. The choice of the term abolition is not casual: Angela Davis, who is a major voice in favor of this position, has been using this word to highlight, as explicitly as possible, the connection of the prison system to slavery, and scholars and activists have increasingly traced the racism of the modern carceral system back to the period immediately after the formal abolition of slavery. As their work has made clear, slavery did not end with the 13th amendment – and not simply because its text contained a provision for “involuntary servitude” as punishment for a crime. The Black codes and vagrancy laws which were passed to police the formerly enslaved established a new system of peonage (Davis 1998, 75–6; Alexander 2010, 28–32; Blackamon 2008, 53–7); imprisoned for vagrancy, which in most cases simply meant that they were unemployed, Black men would become a new penal work force in what was, in all but name, a legal continuation of slavery. In this way, incarceration provided the labor for the convict lease system that was essential for the continued profitability of the plantations and the success of later industry in the post-bellum South (Smith and Hattery 2008, 85; Blackamon 2008, 45–53).

The pernicious legacy of slavery has also been linked with the expansion of the US prison system in recent decades: in her well-known 2010 book, Michelle Alexander has described the mass incarceration fueled by the war on drugs as “the New Jim Crow,” an institution designed to continue segregation and the oppression of people of color.³ Given this context, it is hardly surprising that Davis has repeatedly called into question the supposed usefulness of prisons and argued that their very existence “relieves us of the responsibility of seriously engaging with the problems of our society, especially those produced by racism and, increasingly, global capitalism” (Davis 2003, 16). Incarceration is, in her view, “the punitive solution to a whole range of social problems that are not being addressed” (Davis 2005, 40). The abolition of prisons would, then, force us to reckon with the systemic and pressing problems of our society and to enact real change.

This radical position is not for everyone, however, and, even if the public debate were to shift in favor of abolition, the process could not take place overnight. What could and should be done in the meantime? Prison education has emerged as one of the most common ways in which people who recognize the problems of mass incarceration attempt to have an impact. After the Congress’ 1994 decision to make incarcerated students ineligible for Pell Grants, many college-in-prison programs that had been created in the 1970s and the 1980s closed; since then, volunteer efforts and initiatives by private institutions have

tried to ensure that incarcerated individuals continue to have access not just to vocational training but also to college-level instruction.

This volume sets out the various ways in which Classicists have joined these endeavors whether by co-teaching Humanities courses with colleagues from related disciplines or by offering classes entirely focused on ancient cultures, literatures, and languages. What has been done thus far? What have been the pitfalls? What do we need to be mindful of going forward? In the essays gathered here, teachers at various stages of their academic careers – from graduate students to full professors – reflect on their experiences teaching Classics or Classics-related courses in carceral settings. Some of them take a more narrative tone, as they guide the reader through the process of devising and designing their course and explain which of their expectations were confirmed, which upended once instruction began. Others adopt more theoretical approaches using the knowledge they acquired in their interactions with incarcerated or formerly incarcerated students to examine the challenges of prison education. Collectively, the essays in this volume offer an overview of the range of incarcerated individuals – male, female, or gender non-conforming; young or old; serving long sentences or about to be released – who are reading and discussing Greek and Roman texts, and of the different ways in which they are approaching and reinterpreting them. No less importantly, they provide a sophisticated examination of the best pedagogical practices for teaching in a prison setting and for preparing returning citizens, as well as a considered discussion of the possible dangers of engaging in such teaching.

We have organized the essays into three sections: the first focuses primarily on the ways in which Classics courses that are offered on college campuses have been reconfigured for in-person instruction in carceral settings; the second examines interactions with students and approaches to the texts that might be less familiar to some instructors, such as those that use correspondence or theatrical production as the primary mode of interaction; the third and last takes a critical approach to prison education and the role of Classics within it. As might be expected, however, there are some questions and concerns that connect all the essays in the volume, regardless of the sections in which they appear. In what follows, we will foreground two among these shared concerns – one specific to the discipline of Classics, the other connected with prison education projects more broadly.

The first important element upon which all the essays reflect is the value of teaching Greco-Roman literature and culture to students entangled within the carceral system – be they in prison or recently

released. Pondering (and questioning) the role that Greek and Roman antiquity can still play in our world has always been important for Classicists, who are frequently asked to make a case for the continued relevance of their discipline.⁴ In recent years, with the rise of social justice movements, Classics' implication in systems of oppression and its historical function as a gatekeeping tool, hindering the social advancement of marginalized groups, have been increasingly explored and scrutinized.⁵ In this context, the risk of "instrumentalizing our [incarcerated] students toward the renewal of our discipline," as Wright aptly puts it in her essay, becomes apparent, and examining whether, and to what extent, they found meaning and value in the study of ancient Greek and Roman materials emerges as all the more urgent.

Many of the essays in this volume detail how deeply ancient texts can resonate with students who are or have been incarcerated, enabling them to reflect on their experiences at a distance, as it were. For instance, cis and trans women in the San Francisco County Jail, incarcerated youth in the Santa Barbara Department of Youth Probation's Los Prietos Boys Camp, and men in a medium-security NY State Correctional Facility – as Pappas, Morgan and Price, and Johnson and Slatkin explain in their essays – all felt a deep affinity with Odysseus and found in his adventures a useful model for thinking about the trajectory of their lives and their own homecoming. The *Odyssey* also prompted students to ponder the meaning of heroism and reflect on different ideals of masculinity; as Felson reports in her conversation with Todorović, the men enrolled in one of the courses she taught as part of the Bard Prison Initiative engaged in passionate discussions while contrasting Telemachus' maturation in the *Odyssey* with that of Achilles in the *Iliad*. Moreover, the concepts of honor and glory that are central to many archaic Greek texts allowed several students to establish connections between the content of their classes and their lived experiences both inside and outside carceral spaces. Bobrick points out that the "inseparable combination of status, material goods, and control of territory" conveyed by the Greek term *timē* (which is roughly equivalent to "honor" and "respect") appeared familiar to some of her students as they discussed the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Similarly, Padilla Peralta explains that the deep ambivalence of Hector's speech to Andromache in Book 6 of the *Iliad* – a speech in which Hector pits his wife's requests against his fear of being shamed in front of the Trojans and his desire to win glory – reminded one of the returning citizens who participated in Columbia University's Justice-in-Education Initiative of "the mentality of street gangs."

As one might expect, texts by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides