



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1984 Volume II: Greek Civilization

Introduction

Nietzsche said, “The Greeks are like genius— *simple* ; for that reason they are the immortal teachers.” We mortal teachers, working in a culture that no longer makes classical antiquity the center of its curriculum, find that Nietzsche’s aphorism is both true and false. It is true that the Greeks made the first formulation of much in our culture, and simply by being early in the tradition had the advantage of being able to say what they wanted without glancing backwards all the time, adding footnotes and bibliography, so to speak. By instinct they strove for clarity, which is always achieved by being simple. Often this simplicity takes the form of generality, notably in their reflections on the human condition. Though the Greeks could be reprehensibly chauvinistic, their literature predominantly addresses what is universal in men’s experience (Roman literature is far more national, and therefore harder to teach to non-specialist audiences.) By virtue of a related instinct, the Greek texts are rhetorical in a most general sense of the word: their words—at least such as have reached us—were selected to impress an audience, not to record a private meditation for private ends. The student of Greek civilization has the persistent sense that his subject is reaching out to him.

And yet the Greeks are elusive. Much about them is simply lost, or if preserved, hard to understand, both in small antiquarian details and issues of broad interpretation. The difficulties became obvious very soon. Aristotle, working in Athens in the fourth century B.C. and therefore enjoying a wealth of sources denied to us, was reduced to speculation based on small bits of evidence when trying to reconstruct the history of Athens in the archaic period and the origin of Athenian dramatic poetry. Soon after Aristotle, classical scholarship became recognizable as the principal occupation of intellectuals, even those who were creative writers on their own account. Further, simplicity of surface often conceals complexity. The gnomic utterances of a tragic chorus, simple packets of wisdom endorsed by the poet, one might suppose, are very far indeed from exhausting the “meaning” of a play: this is very well explained in Maureen Howard’s unit. Similarly, the ambiguity of heroism will be apparent to readers of Phyllis Taylor’s and Linda McGuire’s units. Only the mathematicians had a truly simple subject, and even they had to confront what seemed to them a most disturbing complexity: see Joseph Montegna’s reference to the shock of incommensurables.

The units include both obvious, “liberal arts” choices, say Homer and tragedy, but also texts and topics often slighted in university offerings meant for classics majors, e.g. New Comedy, presented by Norrine Polio, and the so-called Second Sophistic (Lucian in Anthony Franco’s unit). Most unusual is the inclusion of South Slavic poetry, a body of texts which all Hellenists are aware serves as the “living laboratory” of oral poetry that shares techniques with Homer. But hardly any enjoy Henry Brajkovic’s direct access to the material.

Finally, even when the Greeks wrote with the explicit belief that their audience included posterity, they had to use their own language and assume the intelligibility of their culture’s manifold codes and assumptions. An

example from Kathleen O'Neil's unit: the Athenian audience that first saw Euripides' *Alcestis* expected not a tragedy, but a satyr drama, for that was the practice of the dramatic festival; their experience of the play must have been altered by that expectation, but the text itself does not signal the curious thing Euripides has done.

The teachers in our seminar have presented some of what is simple and immediately attractive in Greek civilization, but without shrinking from the challenge of accuracy. They have examined ancient sources for themselves, and also the work of contemporary specialists; they have not tried for a specious textbook simplicity at the cost of half-truths. Consequently, the reader will see throughout the units qualification of general statements and reminders that our knowledge of the Greek world is a view through narrow, and in many places smudged, windows. Some of those windows are fortuitous openings. Henry Rhodes explains that much of what we know of the Athenian courts is based on a happy accident, that the Attic orators were prized in antiquity as models of Attic prose; Norrine Polio owes her principal text to a lucky find in the Egyptian desert. I do not have the competence to predict what will work in middle and high school classrooms, but my amateur's guess is that few of the children will ever entirely forget what they will soon see through the windows to which their teachers will lead them.

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