

Classics Beyond the Pleasure Principle

Why would classicists read *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, an essay by Sigmund Freud first published in 1920 just over 100 years ago? This paper suggests that re-reading Freud's text is worthwhile for students and scholars of the ancient world. Freud conjured up the possibility of the death drive which seemed to upset the applecart of all of psychoanalysis. But as Jacques Derrida showed in 1980 in *The Post Card*, like Ernst, Freud's grandson and his fort/da game, Freud sought to gain mastery over the "devil's advocate" of the death drive and thereby bring it back under the control of the pleasure principle. As Derrida explored, Freud speculated on the possibility that "death is not opposable to" life. Freud's speculation wanted a return: just as he would go out on a limb, Freud would show that the possibility of the death drive could be incorporated back into the psychoanalytic thesis that desire is the bedrock of the self.

In this paper, I speculate on the provocation which *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* presents. Classical Studies has conjured up its own series of devil's advocates in recent years. But what has been at stake in these intellectual experiments? What is the relationship between really changing the discipline into something else and restoring the status quo? Since the 1980s, classicists have explored various ways in which Classical Studies might problematize its institutionalization, but which end up re-idealizing (the study of) Graeco-Roman antiquity: expanding the textual or material canon, bringing Classical Studies into dialogue with "other" disciplines of the pre-modern world, and the rise of Reception Studies, have all provoked us to ask: what counts as Classics? What does it mean for Classical Studies to change into something else and yet to integrate and incorporate its "Others" into itself? To question its status, only to co-opt those "Others", thereby re-confirming the traditional structures and hierarchies of the

discipline? In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud himself turned to Aristophanes' myth in Plato's *Symposium* about the search for our other halves. Can – and should – looking back at the ancient world disrupt Classical Studies, or are we always to find ourselves – our other halves – in antiquity?

Bibliography

Derrida, Jacques (1987 [1980]) *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)

Freud, Sigmund (1955 [1920]) 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', pages 1-64 in James Strachey et al (eds.) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII (1920-1922): Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works* (London: Hogarth Press)