

## “To learn *from*”: An Approach to In-Translation Classics Courses

Speaking of the teaching of literature of past eras, Wendell Berry wrote, “The poetry is to be learned *about*; to learn *from* it would be an embarrassing betrayal of objectivity” (Berry 91). One might say the same thing about our current approach to teaching ancient literature: we teach students *about* the content and literary qualities of the works of Homer or Sappho or Euripides or Plato or Vergil, but we do not tend to invite them, having discerned what each of the authors are trying to impart to their audiences, either to *learn from* it—that is, accept the teaching or implicit advice as true—or to reject it as false and not worthy of integration into their lives. At the same time, student engagement in these general education in-translation Classics courses is increasingly low. It is a commonplace now to talk of students not seeing the value in learning about the ancient world or, indeed, about anything that does not directly pertain to their future career.

This paper describes a tested approach to in-translation Classics literature courses that addresses this challenge by re-focusing the course on themes immediately relevant to the students’ personal lives, such as happiness, relationships, success, and meaning. The basic premise in the re-framing of the course was this: if students would read a self-help book or watch a YouTube video about the topic, why would they not check and see what people have been saying about the topic for the last few millennia? By eliminating the impression that the time gap makes the observations about the nature of humanity and reality merely objects of curiosity in a museum rather than claims that can be either rejected or accepted like any other, students engage more authentically and deeply with the texts, and, ultimately, gain more utility out of the course, even if it does not directly relate to the way they will make money after college. For example, in

a recent iteration of the course which focussed on the theme of happiness, I had a student discuss in a reflection paper how he had come to value friendship more highly and begun to make changes in his life to foster healthy friendships because he was persuaded by the high value placed on good friendships in the works we read, particularly Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. Another example is the way in which—to my surprise—nearly all my students personally related to the way *eros* is connected with madness in Sappho and Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Vergil's *Aeneid* and in their papers sought to find in these works and others (e.g. Plato's *Symposium*) sympathy and, perhaps, solutions to the problem that would make their lives better. They also felt free to reject the views that they found insupportable: our readings ranged over two thousand years, several schools of philosophy, and at least two religions, so not all ideas on the subject of happiness were even compatible. In addition to an articulation of the teaching philosophy, this paper will include examples of readings, assignments, class discussions, and assessments, as well as student feedback and suggestions for ways to integrate this approach into different kinds of in-translation courses, including classical mythology and Greek or Roman civilization courses.

#### Work Cited

Berry, Wendell. 1987. *Home Economics: Fourteen Essays*. New York.