

# WHY STUDY THE ANCIENT GREEK CLASSICS ?

## **Mary R. Lefkowitz, Ph.D.**

Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities  
Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts

My family does not come from Greece, but whenever I return to Greece, I feel as though I have come home. I became a philhellene because when I was in the tenth grade I decided to study ancient Greek. Once I started to study ancient Greek, I couldn't stop. I have never been able to learn enough about it. It's not easy to explain why I should have become so obsessed with a language and a culture. But perhaps in the course of doing so I can suggest why the ancient Greeks deserve everyone's continuing attention and respect.

Studying Ancient Greek is exciting because it brings you into direct contact with the past. The first Greek text I bought for myself was a copy of the New Testament. The original Greek was more powerful, and made better sense than the translation. But it was not until I began to read Aeschylus and Sophocles in Greek that I found that I could not be happy without studying the language. The poets can say what could not be said or perhaps even thought of in English. There are important grammatical differences. Greek verbs can convey the notion of continuous and discontinuous action, as well as of the timing of an action (past, present, future). They have a middle voice and optative as well as subjunctive. The use of personal endings and grammatical cases allows great flexibility in word order. And there are metaphors that have not survived in English, or in our way of looking at the world.

The ancient Greeks also developed a way of speaking about the world without reference to particular events or entities or divine beings. Unlike the Egyptians, Babylonians or Hebrews, they did not need to refer to particular gods or particular times in imagining how the universe came into being. Heraclitus in the fifth century B.C. says "one entity, the only wise one, wishes and does not wish to be called by the name of Zeus." The Greeks made use of abstract nouns, and neuter adjectives and participles. They talked about being as opposed to things.

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of this revolution in language. While other peoples in the ancient world still used mythological narratives to explain the workings of the universe, Plato and Aristotle devised the abstract definitions and terminology that have been used ever since by philosophers and scientists.

Another significant ancient Greek legacy is their humanism. The Greeks, unlike earlier ancient peoples had sympathy for their enemies and saw that today's victors might become tomorrow's victims. The Iliad tells the story of both Greeks and Trojans. The fifth century B.C. dramatist, Aeschylus, speaks about the suffering of the Persians defeated by the Athenians at the battle of Salamis. The historian, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, records the deeds both of Greeks and "barbarian" peoples like Persians and Egyptians.

The Greeks were able to see both sides because of their religion. Zeus in the Iliad dispenses judgment both to the Greeks and to the Trojans, and does not favor one people. Greek religion, especially compared to ancient Hebrew religion, is open and

tolerant. Zeus does not object to people who worship other gods, so long as they have respect for all gods. He does not try to control all the actions of the other gods, but allows them to have powers and receive honors.

It is a pity that the disdainful attitude of monotheistic religions towards polytheism keeps us from seeing some of the strengths of ancient Greek religion. The presence of many gods helps to explain why the gods' policy towards nations and individuals can seem inconsistent; gods disagree, or for reason not be paying attention. The gods exist for their own pleasure and purposes, and did not create humankind. Humans are doomed not only to grow old and to die, but also to reach too far, and to fail. The great epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey, as well as Greek drama, emphasize how important it is for men and women to understand the limitations of their powers and understanding.

But this positive side of Greek religion is rarely portrayed in most modern versions of the Greek myths. In these accounts the gods appear simply to be powerful human beings motivated primarily by their own lusts and selfishness. But we owe it to the ancients to look at what they themselves have written about their gods. From these texts we learn that mortals can protest the actions of the gods and question the motives of the gods, without any fear of punishment. Asking questions is not sacrilegious! Croesus, when he is about to be executed by the Persian king Cyrus, complains that Apollo is not grateful for the many gifts he had sent to Delphi and Zeus sends a storm to extinguish the pyre on which Croesus was to be burned alive.

Was it this ability to ask questions of the gods, to complain about them and even (at least in comedies) to make fun of them, that explains why it is that the ancient Athenians were able to develop a system of government that allowed rulers to be challenged? The openness of Greek religion certainly allowed philosophers like Heraclitus, Socrates, and Plato, to ask whether true gods could be selfish and immoral. Their questioning led them to the notion of divinities that could be good, and paved the way for the acceptance of Christianity by the pagan world. So the positive qualities of a religion that encouraged the development of democracy, philosophy, and scientific thought ultimately led to the religion's self-destruction.

Perhaps then the greatest legacy of the ancient Greeks to the modern world is not democracy. The Athenian version of democracy had many flaws and excluded women, slaves, and foreigners. Instead we should look to the power of questioning encouraged by the ancient Greek religion, which led to the development of abstract thought and reasoning and encouraged a broader humanism with sympathy for all human experience, and a desire to hear both sides of an argument. The importance of this legacy needs to be emphasized in the United States today, where ancient Greek civilization is widely misunderstood and misrepresented. That is why Greeks and philhellenes alike need to remind themselves and others of what it really was, and do everything they can to support its study.

From **THE AHEPAN** magazine – Winter Edition, 2001