

## BOOK REVIEW

*Classics and Prison Education in the US. Classics in and out of the Academy: Classical Pedagogy in the Twenty-first Century.* By EMILIO CAPETTINI AND NANCY SORKIN RABINOWITZ. Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2021. Pp. x + 135. Hardback, \$64.95. ISBN: 978-0-367-82061-9.

While the work under review here is a slight volume (145 pages, including frontmatter and index), it packs a powerful and timely wallop. Frankly, it may now be required reading for Classicists, as we become more honest and critical in interrogating our discipline's place in the real world and guide it through a rapidly changing 21<sup>st</sup> century. I review this edited volume having taught Classics and Humanities courses voluntarily in a men's maximum-security prison in Nashville, TN since 2018 and as part of a team establishing an Associate's degree program that partners Austin Peay State University with that prison. For those of us who teach "inside" and in other post-carceral settings, this volume is a celebration and, indeed, I enthusiastically recommend it. It also takes its place as part of the recent explosion of social outreach by Classicists, such as the website *Eidolon* and grant programs like Society of Classical Studies' (SCS) *Ancient Worlds, Modern Communities* grant.<sup>1</sup>

This collection's importance is understood best in light of certain truths about education in carceral settings. Recidivism, for example, drops substantially when incarcerated people and re-entering citizens take college-level courses. And, offering great promise, the Second Chance Pell Grant Program will be fully available to incarcerated students starting in the summer of 2023.<sup>2</sup> These facts, in

<sup>1</sup> For *Eidolon*, go to <https://eidolon.pub>. For the Ancient Worlds, Modern Communities grant program, go to <https://classicalstudies.org/outreach/ancient-worlds-modern-communities-formerly-classics-everywhere>.

<sup>2</sup> According to Prisonerresource.com, risk of recidivism drops from 70% to 13.7% when an inside student participates in an associate's level education program, to 5.6% for participation in a Bachelor's program and to 0% for participation in a Master's program. For information on the Second Chance Pell grant, see <https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/us-department-education>.

conjunction with a general awakening in the US about both the devastations caused by mass incarceration and the role of education in combatting its consequent societal disease, set the stage for what could become a robust, carceral educational movement. The essays contained here project considerable pedagogical insight on method, motivation and a provocative educative philosophy such that Classics now may have a theoretical basis for its place in carceral education. I also maintain that the pedagogical ideas found herein are invaluable for teaching in any context — I know, certainly, that teaching in a prison setting has made me a far better educator for my “outside” students. Moreover, one of the more persuasive and profound elements in this volume is the critical perspective displayed in the essays found in the collection’s third part, “Critical Pedagogy and the academy.” For even the least self-reflective of us in the “Classical Studies” family of disciplines, it is no secret that our field smacks of elitism, imperialism and white-supremacy to many of our most vulnerable in society. The essays by Padilla Peralta, Dugan and Umachandran, and Wright rightfully and powerfully interrogate how Classicists can critique our field and our pedagogies, so that we can move beyond those harmful and privileged default mindsets and methods. These three essays lead the way, clearly influenced by the social-pedagogical philosophies of Paolo Freire, bell hooks and Angela Davis, towards setting our discipline on a more justice-oriented and inclusive pathway.

All the essays in this edited volume derive from conference presentations and, as such, they are brief. Yet their brevity is misleading as they all provoke and teach in profound ways. The collection’s eleven essays are set in three sections. “Part I: Old Texts, new classrooms,” contains six essays focusing on in-person teaching in carceral settings. This section demonstrates in high relief the value of using compelling themes (e.g., Bobrick on *timē*, Pappas on ancient transgendering), provocative texts (e.g., Allen-Hornblower on *Philoctetes* and *Trojan Women*, Scully on Freud used with ancient myth, Johnson and Slatkin on *the Iliad*) or inclusive pedagogies (e.g., Felson and Todorovic on dialogue) in carceral settings. Emily Allen-Hornblower’s essay begins with a vivid scene from Riker’s Island — a truly apt way of beginning a volume on prison education — where she and some

[announces-expansion-second-chance-pell-program-and-actions-help-incarcerated-individuals-resume-educational-journeys-and-reduce-recidivism.](#)

actors presented *Trojan Women* to an incarcerated audience. She continues with a discussion of her experiences teaching Greek Tragedy and Epic to incarcerated people and examining how depictions of ancient trauma help this group work through their daily isolations and indignities. Elizabeth Bobrick's essay presents how interrogations of ancient honor (i.e., *timē*), especially as it is "received" in a prison setting, were useful interrogations of the students' own lives, behaviors and traumas. Nancy Felson and Nebojsa Todorovic's dialogue discusses the importance of dialogic pedagogy (as theorized by Freire) as a tool for both breaking down damaging hierarchies and humanizing students in a "ancient Masculinities" course. Amy Johnson and Laura Slatkin, in their essay, center their incarcerated students' reception of the *Iliad*, *Ajax*, and the *Oresteia*, in conjunction with more modern works on similar themes (e.g., *Achilles in Vietnam*, *Ajax in Iraq*, and the *Island*), as a way of teaching methods for studying and writing about the human condition. Alexandra Pappas' essay, which, along with Morgan and Price's essay in Part II, I believe best highlights the transformative potential of Classics in a carceral setting, describes her experiences with the Medea Project, a prison-centered theatre project for women, and with teaching in a gender nonconforming housing unit in a county jail. She explains how, in the jail setting, she teaches a compelling course that foregrounds mythological stories of gender transformation (e.g., Hermaphroditus and Tiresias) as a way to help transgender people find their voice and affirm their basic dignity as human beings. Stephen Scully's essay reflects deeply upon his experiences teaching a course, titled "From Family Violence to Civic Order" in prison. Teaching texts such as the Babylonian creation myth, Hesiod's *Theogony*, *Genesis* 1-5, the *Oresteia*, *Medea*, Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* and others, Scully learned such wisdom as the white-supremacist effect of ancient literature as received by minority students and the value of the liberal arts as a mechanism for "freeing" people.

"Part II: Beyond the Classroom" contains two essays offering pictures of alternative educative modalities: prison correspondence courses and a theatre intervention program for young people of color in a juvenile facility. Nicole Dib and Olga Faccani, teaching a Humanities correspondence course for carceral institutions, present how they constructed writing prompts for texts such as Ovid's *Baucis and Philemon* story, emphasizing the incarcerated student's analysis of the

story via the prism of their own lives and experiences. In their essay's dialogue, Michael Morgan and Zachary Price reflect upon their work with *The Odyssey Project*, as theater educators and men of color. This essay is particularly powerful and shows the importance of inclusive educative programming as a way for young men of color to learn their voice, gain confidence in themselves and "practice freedom."

The three essays in the last section, "Part III: Critical pedagogy and the academy," mentioned briefly above, scrutinize and carefully critique teaching Classics in carceral and post-carceral settings and question whether Classics has a place at all. This inquiry is crucial if we mean for Classics to shed its elitist and white-supremacist past, become more inclusive to minority populations and reduce its complicity in harms done to the most vulnerable. Dan-el Padilla Peralta's contribution examines the academic community's responsibility to the formerly incarcerated via his experiences teaching re-entering citizens. These people have "done their time" and deserve clear and just avenues for living successfully and that offer them the power that many vulnerable populations lack. In their essay, Elena Dugan and Mathura Umachandran consider the Humanities course they have taught in a men's prison and reflect upon the choices they made in building their course. Further, they question whether they had done enough to avoid complicity in oppressive structures. Finally, Jessica Wright's essay stands as a critique of both Prison Education and Classics in carceral settings altogether. She offers reflections on ways that prison education can extend and continue the oppression of the prison-industrial complex and, more positively, offers ways that prison educators and Classicists in general can understand their own motivations and methods and avoid negative effects. This essay may seem, at first glance, a bit crushing and negative. But it meaningfully leads its readers, especially those of us who enjoy unparalleled social privilege, along the path of reorienting ourselves as educators for a more dignified and liberating educative process for our students of all varieties.

The strengths of this volume are manifold, but here I will highlight a few important threads. For one, the eleven essays vividly depict the great diversity of carceral settings and populations. The incarcerated are not a great undifferentiated mass and here we see a broad vision of the variety. We read here about experiences in different security levels (maximum, medium, county jail and juvenile

camps), volunteer prison education and established degree programs, “inside” education v. post-incarceration education and the differences in men’s, women’s and gender non-conforming settings. Further, all the anecdotes about educative interactions and depictions of carceral classrooms and projects ring true. Some cynical folks might think the stories seem “rhetorically embellished” for publication. But every story rings true to my own experiences of the pitfalls, challenges and potentials of prison education, from dealing with corrections staff, interacting with individual students and the pride felt from seeing our incarcerated students succeed.

All the essays, moreover, center human dignity in their discussions of prison education and their critiques of the value of Classics for vulnerable populations. As Humanities educators, our job is to help students interrogate their own humanity, the humanity of those around them, and develop pedagogies that can ensure a dignified place for all humans — regardless of demographics. This, of course, requires careful critique of our motives, methods, and our inherent privilege and prejudices therein. This collection serves as a full-throated and honest assessment and prescription for re-orienting our pedagogies for a more dignified prison education — and education more generally. Further, there is real and compelling pedagogical insight in these pages. Teaching in a carceral setting demands different approaches; those we lean on most in our “outside” classes (i.e., “sage on a stage” and even basic discussion group strategies) often flop in a carceral context. The prison classroom presents differing educational backgrounds and skill levels, levels of trauma and distrust of authority figures, lack of educational resources and assets within the prisons and the distractions of the incarcerated life (e.g., noise, correctional staff, job obligations, family issues or sudden transfers to other facilities). The essays contained in this volume offer real ideas for classroom activities and approaches, as well as the important recognition of issues like trauma and oppression as we put together our instructor’s mindset and method.

As far as weaknesses go, I have only one very minor quibble with this volume and by no means does this complaint detract from the excellence of the collection. A “further reading and resources” section offering readers both bibliography and “directions” on how to get involved in this work seems necessary. Prison

teaching is not a beginner's endeavor and, further, "getting in" to a prison to teach is difficult, especially if one does not have access to any of the outstanding programs in which Classicists are teaching inside. Readings and advice would be quite welcome here for the person inspired to teach in a carceral setting.

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