

Daniel Mendelsohn

WRITING CLASSICS IN THE "OUTSIDE" WORLD: A Working Journalist Weighs In

It seemed both to the organizers of this panel, and to me, that a forum on the role of public intellectuals ought to include at least one contribution that focuses less on the theoretical and historical contexts for the participation by intellectuals in popular discourse than on the practical issues facing those whose writing about Classical texts and cultures takes place largely or (as in my case) primarily outside the walls of the Academy. As a full-time writer and critic who frequently entwines discussions of Classical material with investigations of contemporary culture, and who writes very often about Classical material for a wide variety of magazines and newspapers, I would like to illumine the actual practice of writing about Classics in the "outside" world. I want particularly to raise the key question (about rhetoric and, as it were, ownership) of whether such writing about Classical culture necessarily misrepresents key aspects of that culture; and, to a lesser degree, whether such misrepresentation can be exploited for political ends.

Three articles, each directed at a different audience and each published under wildly different editorial circumstances, will be the vehicles for my discussion: a long review-article about Tom Stoppard's drama about A. E. Housman, *The Invention of Love*; a review of the first several volumes of the Penn Greek Drama Series, which had to explain basic material about Greek tragedy and to present assessments of translation-related issues in a way that had to be accurate as well as palatable and entertaining; and, finally, an essay about the appropriation of the Peloponnesian War and Thucydides' *History* as vehicles, in the popularizing writings of Donald Kagan and Victor Hanson, for advancing conservative political agendas.

In all three cases, questions of authenticity, fidelity to ancient texts and cultural concepts, and the manipulation of classical material (and, in the case of the Stoppard play, classicists as figures symbolic of Philology) for artistic and political purposes arise. I want in my talk to explore the practical questions that arise when treating these complicated issues in popular media: What knowledge can be assumed on the part of the audience—and, indeed, of editors—and how do such assumptions help forge the tone and content of the piece? To what extent does editorial interference and the *soi-disant* "tone" of the publication (to say nothing of questions of space, all-important in popular journalism) dictate the final editorial result—as, for instance, in the Thucydides essay, where much of the more trenchant critique of Kagan and Hanson was sacrificed, partly in order to explain just what the Peloponnesian War was, but mostly because a certain kind of political and critical vehemence is considered antithetical to the style of the magazine where the essay appeared. To what extent can a critic raise issues of fidelity and authenticity (as in the case of the Stoppard review, as well as in a review of John Barton's new Trojan Cycle, *Tantalus*) about creative works that use the Classics to what could be argued are purely artistic ends?

By exploring the genesis of these three pieces, I can offer a look at the constraints facing working writers whose discourse about the Classics—its texts, cultures, and scholars—is necessarily constrained in ways that full-time scholars don't often experience. Since public intellectuals are the conduits through which the insights of pure scholarship ultimately pass to the reading public at large, an examination of such constraints, and the dangers (and pleasures) they present, seems worthwhile in an age in which laying claim to the Classics still carries with it enormous rhetorical prestige.