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Can Public Intellectuals Think? Classics and the Public Sphere

Though the pressures of the present are urgent and real, classical studies has more resources for ensuring its survival than classicists tend to think. One of these is the natural affinity of classical scholarship to public intellectual life. From its founding, the field has been every bit as much public and political as it has been a matter of the solitary scholar poring over the relics of the past. Indeed, classics has arguably held the prominent place in society it has historically enjoyed not because of its timeless value but precisely because classics has been a *contested* heritage, one of direct, if changing, value to each successive modernity.

Our panel is both a call to arms and an exhortation to acknowledge and develop the historical and contemporary links between classics and public intellectual life--in our classes and curricula, in our scholarship, in our public appearances, and in our aspirations. We believe that classics can and must rethink its historical and social functions in the light of its history as a peculiarly civic study, and that the profession needs to examine the ways its daily practices of research and teaching enable--or disable--lines of communication with the public sphere. Not all classicists will (or will want to) be contacted by the media for quotation, or write books designed for non-professional readers. Yet in order to guarantee classics a place at the table in the public sphere, we must begin by making our own historical role in building that table better understood by ourselves and by the public.

Contributors will explore pivotal moments in the historical formation of the field, focusing on political context: the Italian Renaissance, 19th century America, the 1960s, and today. Some will speak from their own experience as writers for non-professional audiences. How can classics capitalize on the intrinsic advantages granted to it by its disciplinary history? What are some of the ways in which classicists might learn to reach out and to shape public discourse, appeal to existing public constituencies, enrich the understanding of classical antiquity among the larger public, and indeed to create new publics, without at the same time suffering from anxieties over the "dilution" of professional standards? Can classics departments tenure public intellectuals? What are some of the models available for public intellectuals in our field today? Can classicists imagine themselves as "specific intellectuals" (Foucault), as "organic intellectuals" (Gramsci), as "figures of dissent" (Eagleton), or as "unacknowledged legislators" (Hitchens), or simply as public writers trained in the traditions of classical eloquence and civic virtue? These are some of the questions our panel wants to address.