

# A Brief Genealogy of ‘Classics’ as the Name of an Academic Discipline

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## 1. Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 6.13

*Quem "classicum" dicat M. Cato, quem "infra classem".* 1 "Classici" dicebantur non omnes, qui in quinque classibus erant, sed primae tantum classis homines qui centum et viginti quinque milia aeris ampliusve censi erant. 2 "Infra classem" autem appellabantur secundae classis ceterarumque omnium classium, qui minore summa aeris, quod supra dixi, censebantur. 3 Hoc eo strictim notavi, quoniam in M. Catonis oratione, qua Voconiam legem suasit, quaeri solet, quid sit "classicus", quid "infra classem".

Whom Marcus Cato calls *classici* or “belonging to a class,” and whom *infra classem* or “below class.”

Not all those men who were enrolled in the five classes were called *classici*, but only the men of the first class, who were rated at a hundred and twenty-five thousand asses or more. But those of the second class and of all the other classes, who were rated at a smaller sum than that which I just mentioned, were called *infra classem*. I have briefly noted this, because in connection with the speech of Marcus Cato *In Support of the Voconian Law* the question is often raised, what is meant by *classicus* and what by *infra classem*. (tr. J. C. Rolfe, Loeb)

## 2. Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 19.8.15

Ite ergo nunc et, quando forte erit otium, quaerite an ‘quadrigam’ et ‘harenas’ dixerit e cohorte illa dumtaxat antiquiore vel oratorum aliquis vel poetarum, id est classicus adsiduusque aliquis scriptor, non proletarius.

So go now and inquire, when you chance to have leisure, whether any orator or poet, provided he be of that earlier band—that is to say, any classical or authoritative writer, not one of the common herd—has used *quadriga* or *harenae*” (tr. J. C. Rolfe, Loeb).

## 3. *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*

*Classicus* 1: ‘belonging to the highest class, preeminent, ‘classical’.’ Citation: “[Augustinus] doctorum classicorum aquila est habitus,” Hector Boece (*alias* Boethius) [*ob.* 1536], *Scotorum historiae a prima gentis origine libri XIX* (Paris, 1526) f. 119.

#### 4. *Oxford English Dictionary*, classical s.v. A.1.a

Of or relating to the ancient Greek or Latin writers whose works form a canon of acknowledged excellence; of or relating to the works themselves. Hence: of or relating to ancient Greek or Latin literature in general.

1546 W. Peryn *Thre Serm.* (new ed.) iii. sig. K.viii<sup>v</sup> The whych myracles, are not fayned of late yeares, but were wrytten, many hundred yeares agone, & that by classicall and auncient wryters.

1597 A. Hartwell in tr. D. Lopes *Rep. Kingdome of Congo* To Rdr. sig. \*2<sup>v</sup> When they publish any of the foresayd Triumviri [*sc.* Cicero, Caesar or Sallust], or any other Classicall Author, they will..foyst into the Text many words and many conceytes.

1611 T. Coryate *Crambe* 34 Carthaginians..haue bene branded by many classicall historiographers with the infamous marke of eternall dishonour.

#### 5. *OED*, classic s.v. A.I.1

= classical adj. 1a; of or relating to Greek and Roman antiquity in general. Now *rare*.

a1602 W. Perkins *Comm. Epist. Gal.* (1604) vi. 657 Neither Plinie (who writ after Paul) nor any other ancient classique author, doth make mention of *Phrigia Pacaciana*.

1646 Sir T. Browne *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* v. xiii. 253 Nor is there any genuine or classick word in Latine to expresse them; for *staphia* or *stapes* is not to be found in Authors of Antiquity.

1694 M. M. in W. Sancroft *Occas. Serm.* p. xiii He had a peculiar Talent, being an admirable Critic in all the Antient and Classic Knowledge, both among the Greeks and Romans.

1712 R. Steele *Spectator* No. 330. ¶4 All the Boys in the School, but I, have the Classick Authors *in usum Delphini*, gilt and letter'd on the Back.

#### 6. *OED*, classic s.v. B.2.a.

‘An ancient Greek or Latin writer or literary work, of the first rank and of acknowledged excellence; any one of a body of ancient Greek or Latin writers or texts traditionally considered as the model for all literary endeavour. In later use usually in *plural*. With *the*. The canon of ancient Greek and Latin literature.’

1698 J. Strype *Life Sir T. Smith* (Dedication) He means Citations out of the Latin Poets and other Classics.

1734 J. Swift *On reading Dr. Young's Satires* in *Epist. to Lady* 18 If Clergymen, to shew their Wit, Prize Classicks more than Sacred Writ.

1748 Ld. Chesterfield *Let.* 22 Feb. (1932) (modernized text) III. 1106 Others, to shew their learning..are always talking of the Ancients, as something more than men... They are never without a Classic or two in their pockets.

## 7. *OED*, classics

With *singular* or *plural* agreement. Also with *the*. The branch of knowledge concerned with the languages and literatures of Greek and Roman antiquity. Also *attributive*.

1775 Joseph Priestley *Autobiography*. 84 'I had proposed to teach the classics, mathematics, &c. for half-a-guinea per quarter, and to board the pupils in the house with myself for twelve guineas per annum.'

1788 R. Polwhele *Eng. Orator* (ed. 3) I. Argum. A Knowledge of the Classics, the Mathematics, and his own Language requisite.

1815 *Times* 27 Jan. (*adv.*) 1/4 Foreign Gentlemen and natives, who wish to..revive their former attainments in the Classics, Mathematics, or other branches of science, 70 guineas.

1840 *Encycl. Brit.* XXI. 498/2 The candidate for mathematical honours must, in the first instance, 'pass' in classics.

1851 C. B. Wheeler *Mem. John Lang Bickersteth* v. 76 He was first in Classics, first in Mathematics, first in Divinity, and second in Modern Languages.