[Boris Johnson’s love of classics is about just one thing: himself | Charlotte Higgins | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/oct/06/boris-johnson-classics-prime-minister-latin-greek)

Boris Johnson’s love of classics is about just one thing: himself

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Like the prime minister, I studied Latin and Greek. His references are pure show-offery in the service of brand Boris

Sun 6 Oct 2019 12.41 BST

Ihad the same education as Boris Johnson. Not the Eton part, self-evidently – it is in that period, I assume, that he learned to recite, from memory and in Greek, the first 100 lines of the Iliad – but the [Balliol classics](https://metro.co.uk/2019/09/11/oxford-students-want-boris-johnson-banned-returning-former-college-10724179/) part. I did that. We were taught by the same men (and men they were). “Effortless superiority”, a ghastly phrase [once used](https://www.oxfordtimes.co.uk/news/opinions/history_man/10392929.a-pioneer-college-not-elitist/) by another Balliol prime minister, Herbert Asquith, was the college’s unofficial motto, though there was nothing tranquil or effortless, still less superior, about my own panicky grapplings with Homer. (Women, I should note in passing, were admitted in 1979, 716 years after the first men.)

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Some of the Balliol classics dons clearly adored Johnson’s blustering undergraduate charm. “Definitely a good egg” is how the philosopher Jonathan Barnes, then famed for his wardrobe of 18th-century-style breeches and cravats, described him in [Sonia Purnell’s biography](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/mar/27/just-boris-sonia-purnell-review). Jasper Griffin, who taught us Homer, wrote a Greek ode for Johnson’s 50th birthday.

Some were less impressed. “What had we done for Boris? Had we taught him truthfulness? No. Had we taught him wisdom? No. What had we taught? Was it only how to make witty and brilliant speeches?” So the philosopher Anthony Kenny, master of Balliol in Johnson’s day, reflected in a [2018 memoir](https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2018/30-november/books-arts/book-reviews/brief-encounters-notes-from-a-philosopher-s-diary-anthony-kenny). “Probably the worst scholar Eton ever sent us – a buffoon and an idler,” the ancient historian Oswyn Murray told me. (The wording chills me slightly, with its suggestion of a regular consignment of Eton scholars as if by a law of nature.) Last year Murray sent Johnson a formal *renuntiatio amicitiae*, a renunciation of friendship. It is what emperors sent to those they wanted to get rid of – “an invitation to exile or suicide”, Murray explained.

Johnson has drawn on the classics throughout his career. In his [speech to the UN](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/sep/25/pink-eyed-terminators-and-limbless-chickens-boris-johnsons-un-speech-in-quotes) this September, he briefly dropped into ancient Greek: he was talking, somewhat bafflingly under the circumstances, about the suspicion often directed towards the *protos heuretes* (first inventor) of new technology. Who is Johnson’s favourite politician? Pericles, of course, or so he told the radio station LBC this summer. Which historical figure did he reportedly reference after he removed the whip from 21 Tory MPs last month? The Roman emperor Augustus, who famously purged, bloodily, his former allies to establish his autocratic rule. That same Augustus whom, debating “[Greece v Rome](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2k448JqQyj8)” with Mary Beard in 2016, Johnson called “a chill and subtle tyrant”, who gouged out an opponent’s eye with his thumb. “What did the Romans do to democracy? They abolished it in favour of a dictatorship,” he said. But on Radio 4 in 2010, he gushed: “Augustus was the greatest politician the world has ever seen.” Go figure.

What is it about Johnson and this relentless classicism? On one level, he is a genuine enthusiast, or at least was. In 2006 he presented [The Dream of Rome](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/feb/05/historybooks.features), a TV programme with an accompanying book that ends in a passionate plea for Turkey to enter the EU. In the relatively innocent era of 2007 he [dressed up in a toga](https://www.theguardian.com/education/2007/may/14/schools.alevels) to protest against the threatened abolition of A-level ancient history. Later, as mayor of London, he bewildered aides by calling meetings to discuss how to revive classical studies in state schools (I attended one).

Johnson’s youthful, playful enthusiasm for classics has long petrified into cliche. It’s not that classical references cannot add depth or strength or interest to an idea or an argument – but that Johnson’s are flicks of show-offery, projections of superiority, mere flourishes that remind us that geeky Greekery is part of brand Boris. His cleaving to traditional learning serves to distract from his real cultural and political vandalism, as he slashes and burns his way through the conventions of parliament and the constitution, and coarsens and toughens his language in other ways. His references aim to exclude the uninitiated and mark him out as “clever”. But the truth is that “the classics” carry disproportionate cultural capital. The merest suggestion of classical knowledge can disarm people into thinking you are far smarter than you really are.

But “the classics” are so much more than this careless and aggressive chucking around of Latin and Greek tags, as if they were bread rolls at a Bullingdon club dinner. Classics has a long tradition of questioning authority, and has had a fundamental role to play in the study of sexuality and feminism, among other areas. It has always been as much of an intellectual resource for the left as the right. (Karl Marx was a classicist, for heaven’s sake; his doctorate on ancient Greek atomic theory was fundamental in developing his ideas on historical materialism.) There is also, in Britain, a long and much-overlooked history of [working-class study of classics](NULL), which the scholars Edith Hall and Henry Stead are bringing to light.

The real energy in the discipline is far removed from this ridiculous classical bluster, this game of trait-projection. The most interesting and challenging work about the Greco-Roman world – for instance by the members of a new group called the [Postclassicisms Collective](https://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/P/bo45713211.html" \o ") – is questioning and self-reflective about the subject’s value and its boundaries, both geographical and temporal. It bumps up productively, sometimes crankily, against disciplines such as gender studies, art history, philosophy, archaeology, political theory and economics. It interrogates its own relationship to the power structures of the past and present, and increasingly understands that “classics” cannot be seen in gleaming-white, superior isolation as a model for “western civilisation”, but alongside the classicism of Persian, Arabic and Chinese. Johnson’s version of classics, like so much in his repertoire, is lazy and tired and utterly irrelevant.

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Extra - [Forget Boris Johnson—the classics are for the working classes too - Prospect Magazine](https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/forget-boris-johnson-the-classics-are-for-the-working-classes-too-latin-greek)