

Lauren Essary

UGS 302 - Dr. Rabinowitz

12 December 2014

Homer in Eighteenth Century America

In the late eighteenth century, American colonists still followed many of the same practices as their European ancestors, including the tradition of a classical education. The reading of Greek and Roman works, usually in their original language, began in grammar school and was required for entrance into any institution of higher learning at the time. Unsurprisingly, the ideologies present in these classical works were central to the ideologies and values held by Americans in the eighteenth century. One can easily see how the Founding Fathers drew from antiquity for the structure of the government, but the relevance of the classical world to this time period in America runs deeper than structural similarities. Classical images were used to convey republican ideals through the perception and use of epics in the late eighteenth century. The view of the perfect republican citizen in early America drew from these epics, specifically the visual depictions of Greek war heroes in popular translations of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* from the decades leading up to the Revolutionary War.

Thomas Jefferson once boasted that American farmers were among the only ones who read Homer (Boyd 1950, 44), and for the most part, this rang true, considering the relatively high literacy rates at the time due to a compulsory public school system (Reinhold 1984, 24). Young boys enrolled in grammar school were to become proficient in both Latin and Greek, and familiar with the great classical authors, like Virgil, Cicero, Ovid, Terrence, Horace, and Homer (Meckler 2006, 21). One of the most recognized grammar schools of the time was the Boston Latin School. Predating even Harvard, the Boston Latin School's curriculum relied heavily on

learning Latin and Greek and being able to successfully understand and translate “Aesop’s Fables... Caesar’s commentaries... Tully’s orations... [the] Aeneid... Xenophon and Homer” (*Catalogue of the Boston Public Latin School, Established in 1635 :with an Historical Sketch /* 1886) from the original language. This knowledge was necessary to gain admittance into most institutions of higher learning, such as Harvard College, whose admittance requirements stated that one must be able “to read, construe, and parse Tully, Virgil, or such like classical Latin authors... and to read, construe and parse ordinary Greek” (Brigham and Tufts 1745). When recommending the state curriculum for grammar schools, Jefferson noted how the classical languages were going into disuse in Europe, and that “it would be very ill-judged in us to follow their examples in this instance” (Meckler 2006, 14). While at one point Americans might have been disinclined to hold onto traditions of Britain, a classical education was something that they prided themselves on until the Jacksonian era, when the focus on the common man led to the decline of the importance of a formal classical education. Until that time, though, knowing Greek and Latin, as well as having a familiarity with most of the classics written in these languages, was a requirement for any well-educated gentleman.

While almost all of the Founding Fathers had a classical education, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams continuously looked back at ancient texts for guidance and warning when forming the new government. Those critical of a classical education, like Benjamin Franklin, complained “at the Constitutional Convention that prayer would be more useful than the delegates’ repeated references to ancient history” (Burstein 1996, 31). Even Thomas Paine was “[opposed] to the study of classical languages and [held] that ancient civilization was inferior to that of the enlightenment” (Aldridge 1968, 370). However, despite their disdain for the classical education system in the colonies, both Paine and Franklin used allusions and ideas from antiquity in their

work (Burstein 1996, 31; Aldridge 1968, 371). Neither of them though, referenced classical Greece and Rome in their writing as much as Jefferson and Adams did.

By looking at the histories of the rise and fall of ancient Greece and Rome, Adams was able to see how moral failings were already at work in creating a new cycle of rise and fall in the modern world. It was through “reading Thucydides and Tacitus... [that] the lesson that... societies thrive on virtue and the willingness of citizens ‘to subordinate personal considerations to the good of their communities’” (Burstein 1996, 35) was imprinted on figures like John Adams. In the development of the new nation, the great political minds turned towards “ancient republics and ancient heroes as ideal models” (Reinhold 1984, 39). Reinhold says that “There was little taste for belles lettres... except in so far as such reading afforded moral instruction, as in Homer,” (Reinhold 1984, 25) and that classical learning provided “a repository of timeless models for guidance in republicanism and private and civic virtue” (Reinhold 1984, 24). Jefferson and Adams perpetuated these models in their letters to each other, as they used Greek examples to illustrate larger political concepts and ideals (John Adams 1812). Although historically misguided, Jefferson uses Homer’s quote, “Jove fix’d it certain, that whatever day/ Makes man a slave, takes half his worth away,” from the *Odyssey* in an attempt to justify his conclusion, “that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind” (Jefferson 1977, 164–165). Similarly, classical examples were used in important political papers, like the *Federalist Papers*, which used classical examples to illustrate their points about politics almost as many times as they used Enlightenment principles (Lutz 1984, 192). Many of these classical examples likely drew from Roman sources, as Virgil and Cicero were among the favorites of the Founding Fathers. However, Homer is repeatedly referred to as the greatest of the epic poets by

many of the men responsible for writing these documents, like Thomas Jefferson (Jefferson 1977, 83). By looking at the content of the papers and the frequency of classical references, it is clear that in creating the new republic, the leaders of the time drew from works that they had examined since their youth, such as Homer, Virgil, and Horace.

Translations of these works had become popular in the eighteenth century, making the works of classical authors accessible to those who were not as proficient in the ancient languages. Despite the prevalence of the new translations, there were still prominent Americans who felt it was a point of pride to read the epics in their original. Thomas Jefferson, a self-proclaimed lover of the classics, commented that, “[he] enjoy[s] Homer in his own language infinitely beyond Pope's translation of him, and both beyond the dull narrative of the same events by Dares Phrygius” (Mott 1947, 55). William Byrd, a prominent American in the early seventeenth hundreds, insisted that he read all of his Homer in Greek, writing incessantly in his journals that “[he] read... some Greek in Homer” (Byrd 1941, 107) everyday. He was a lover of the Greek language, much like Jefferson was, and even proposed to his wife in Greek, saying that he fell even more in love with her when he found out that she spoke Greek, too. Even though most well-educated men could read Homer in the Greek, translations of the popular story were becoming more common in the colonies. This phenomenon could be explained by the implementation of English printing presses that made books more accessible in the eighteenth century, or simply because more Americans could read and enjoy Homer in its translated form. Either way, when looking at inventories of private libraries in the colonies, it is more common to find “all of Pope’s works” (*The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 1909, 407), which included translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, than to find Homer in the original Greek. Jefferson acknowledged this, saying “they are read with enthusiasm in their originals by those who can

read the originals, and in translations by those who cannot” (Jefferson 1977, 479). He stood by his conviction that the farmer was well acquainted with Homer, whether through “threading the mazes of free will, foreordination, and fate around the kitchen fire” (Miller 1954, 86), or through their own reading. When an Englishman got a patent on a new way of making a wheel, Jefferson insisted that “it is more likely the Jersey farmer got his idea from [Homer], because ours are the only farmers who can read Homer” (Boyd 1950, 153). He continued by quoting a passage from Homer that likened the act of Ajax falling a Trojan soldier to the young sapling used to make the wheel. His famous insistence that even farmers read Homer lends itself to the prevalence of Alexander Pope’s translations in the colonies.

Although Alexander Pope’s translations were highly criticized for venturing away from Homer stylistically, they were by far the most popular translations of the bard’s work, selling almost twenty thousand copies in 1774 in the colonies alone (Mott 1947, 55). Beyond that, Pope was the 21st most cited thinker from 1760-1805 in a study that looked at the political writings of the time and their major influences (Lutz 1984, 193). Pope did have other works beside his translations of Homer, but they did not enjoy the widespread popularity of his *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, nor did they cater to the cultural background knowledge that most colonists already had of these epics. It stands to reason that despite the teachings of the grammar schools in the colonies, the majority of the colonists were also gleaning their classical knowledge of Homer from Pope’s translations, which were usually illustrated. With the onset of printing presses and public libraries, books were more accessible to late eighteenth century Americans than ever before. These editions of the ancient stories allowed for a common thread to form between the elites and the average colonist, and “in consequence a fair number of colonial and revolutionary Americans were nurtured and molded by the humanistic tradition” (Reinhold 1984, 23). During this time,

the epics were read for their political and moral value, so it is understandable that they make an appearance in the political writings and ideals of late eighteenth century Americans.

In the early seventeenth century when Pope published his translations, it was popular to include large, ornate illustrations in one's books. Pope's illustrated translation of the *Iliad* focused heavily on the "soldier-gentleman poised in timeless arcadia" (Winterer 2005, 1279). This theme was predated by the illustrations in a late sixteenth century translation of the *Iliad* by John Ogilby. Images of stately heroes circulated with similar illustrated translations, reinforcing the archetype of the gentleman. While Pope's images were more in line with actual Greek soldiers than Ogilby's, which depicted men with elaborate hats riding horses in front of buildings with seventeenth century architecture (Homer 1669), they still had a modern flare. Few images showed any of the gory fighting that is evident in the *Iliad*, and even these scenes are dominated by a prominent, dignified figure riding in a chariot above the fray of battle (Figure 3; Pope 1720). The majority of the images seemed to depict civilized, diplomatic missions, like in Pope's edition that showed some of the Greek soldiers trying to persuade Achilles to fight (Figure 4), or in Ogilby's translation, which illustrated four men gathered together with huge hat plumes, discussing in a dignified manner the proceedings of the impending battle (Pope 1720; Homer 1669). These circulations catered to the American ideal of the dignified and educated gentleman, civilized and well-spoken even on the cusp of battle.

In the late eighteenth century, "resurrected in its classical and early modern republican forms, [virtue] refers... to male public spirit, that is, to the willingness of citizens to engage actively in civil life and to sacrifice individual interests for the common good" (Bloch 1987, 38). At a time dependent on both the civic virtue of leadership and of subordinating one's own concerns for the greater good, men were supposed to embody the masculinity necessary to be a

daring soldier, as well as the dignified and gentle spirit to engage actively in civil life. To be a good citizen, a man must hold close to his Christian values of gentleness, while possessing the strength to stand up for his own liberties. These “masculine attributes embedded in the concept of public virtue... can be traced back as far as the Homeric idea of aretê or human excellence, which stressed the physical strength and bravery displayed in athletic contests and in battle” (Bloch 1987, 42). The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* present this ideal of human excellence through the many warriors who step up to fight valiantly for their own country. In Revolutionary America, these Homeric ideas are seen in a new light, as the colonist sees the embodiment of civic virtue in the illustrations of their translations. The heroes, while strong and daring fighters, also embody the elements of the virtuous citizen that the new political climate is demanding.

While the images associated with the virtuous life of a farmer and classical pastoralism were mainly drawn from Roman works, these ideas were also echoed in the images of ancient Greek heroes in Ogilby’s and Pope’s translations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. These “republican-era icons stand out more clearly as signs of a new emphasis within the republican tradition: A focus on virtue achieved through militarism gave way in eighteenth century America to a focus on virtue achieved through possibly more peaceful means, especially small scale farming” (Winterer 2005, 1267–1268). This was in line with the Founding Fathers’ idea that the key to a successful democracy would be a large, landed class that would subordinate their needs to the needs of the community (Reinhold 1984). It is obvious that the imagery in Homer’s *Iliad* did not fit the ideal of the gentleman farmer, but in colonial times, “the imagery was reinvented to suit the ends of a new political program” (Winterer 2005, 1268). This new political ideology was more interested in presenting the ideal citizen as peaceful and virtuous rather than violent and arrogant, like many of the Greek heroes are presented in the original epics. In the illustrations that accompany

Ogilby's translation, the leaders are shown in diplomatic situations: a civilized gathering to eat, a peace-making meeting between leaders before a battle, and a diplomatic venture in a courthouse-like room (Homer 1669). They are characterized as "the models of gentlemanly politeness, decorous on the cusp of battle" (Winterer 2005, 1277). The images of relaxed, country-loving Greek heroes include the importance of the agricultural lifestyle in the "pastoral landscape of gently rolling hills and leafing trees [receding] to the gates of Troy" (Winterer 2005, 1278). In Alexander Pope's illustrated edition, the illustrations depict a man lying serenely under a tree, hills in the background, or in a civil discussion with someone, even at the beginning of chapters that are mainly consumed with battle (Figure 1). The entire disposition of the Greek hero as related by Ogilby and Pope's translations, is a calm, noble, gentleman soldier that is the very picture of virtue, compassion, and gentleness. These images overlay nicely with the burgeoning ideals of civic virtue and participation in civil life. Both of the translations, although separated by one hundred years, are focused on the gentleman soldier rather than the specifics of the time when the Trojan War supposedly took place.

It is this image in the mind of the average colonist that is perpetuated by the needs of the republican society that is being put into place at the turn of the eighteenth century. At odds with their own tyrannical force, colonists were attracted to the republican tradition of resistance of tyranny, hints of which can be found in the disagreement between Achilles and Agamemnon (Burstein 1996, 32–34). It is important to remember that the copies of Homer's works that were being read at this time had strayed away from violent and monarchial themes and had been replaced by themes of gentleness and dignity in fighting for one's country. No longer is Achilles viewed as the rage-filled fighter, but as the "poised and balanced" (Winterer 2005, 1282) soldier that stepped aside under the pressure from an unmerciful king. This event is now shaped around

the colonists' own "contradictory commitments to both individual political freedom and the greater public good" (Bloch 1987, 41). While Achilles has a commitment to his country to fight, he now must consider the events that passed with Agamemnon and his own mortality. These images were already a part of the educational background of most colonists, and because of their own cultural ideals, the colonists could now find a model in swift-footed Achilles. In schools, the original texts were already used to communicate moral and political lessons, so it was only right that the tamer views of the translations be used to further the political culture surrounding the Revolutionary War.

For those that had not been educated in the classics, almanacs, like the ones published by the Ames family in Boston, included classically inspired political propaganda (Gummere 1963, 7). In the edition published in 1766, "warnings about disguised 'Caligulas' and other exhortations" (Gummere 1963, 8) were included. On the March page, it was written, "The Ram that bore fair Hellaen once away/ Hath made dark night equal to lightsome day," and on the April page, "Smooth-faced Thetis bids you hoist your sails" (Gummere 1963, 8). These allusions portend a tyrant on the rise, and have intonations that change must rise up to stop it. These classical allusions were mixed in with pastoral passages, the weather, and the news that the colonists read on a regular basis to stay informed. While Jefferson's assertions about farmers and Homer might be hyperbolic, farmers used almanacs as a calendar and way to know when to do what with their crops. The inclusion of classical quotes and allusions in this medium speaks volumes about the actual knowledge of the classics throughout the colonies. The fact that allusions to Homer's work and other Greek entities are made in the almanacs provides credence to the influence of these classical works over the outlooks of the colonists. In less veiled terms, the Ames almanac included a little commentary on the July 1770 page that says, "But by the size

of those gigantic few/ Whom Greece and Rome still offer to our view /Or Britain once deserving equal Praise/ Parent of heroes too in better Days” (Ames 1769, 7). This quote tells of the unrest that the colonies are feeling towards Britain, and how they have fallen from grace recently. It also talks of the “gigantic few” and “heroes” from antiquity, intimating that these should be held up as examples and praised. The combination of the political unrest with Britain with the use of Greek heroes as models shows that Americans leading up to the Revolutionary War had a thoughtful connection between the epics that they read and the discontent and change that was rampant throughout the colonies.

Use of classical texts in political speeches and yearly almanacs provide a basis that the works that children studied in school were not merely elements to be examined and pushed off, but fluid pieces of the society that influenced the way people lived their lives. Although classical knowledge had its opponents, the influence of classical teachings was so pervasive in society that it was compulsory cultural knowledge, much like it is today. The depictions of the war heroes in the translations of Homer’s stories allowed for relatable examples as the American ideal shifted towards civic virtue and military prowess. At the onset of the Revolutionary War, colonists could find models of masculinity and decorum in the illustrations of Pope’s work. The use of almanacs to communicate some of the political unrest and change that was occurring in the colonies through the use of classical allusions provides a strong example of the connections that Americans were making between their political lives and the works of ancient authors. The changes in the depiction of the Greeks and Trojans in Homer’s stories from violent war heroes to compassionate gentleman, as well as the changes in the minds of the colonist on how they view the material based on their own historical context, have an influence over what is believed to be a good, republican gentleman at this time.

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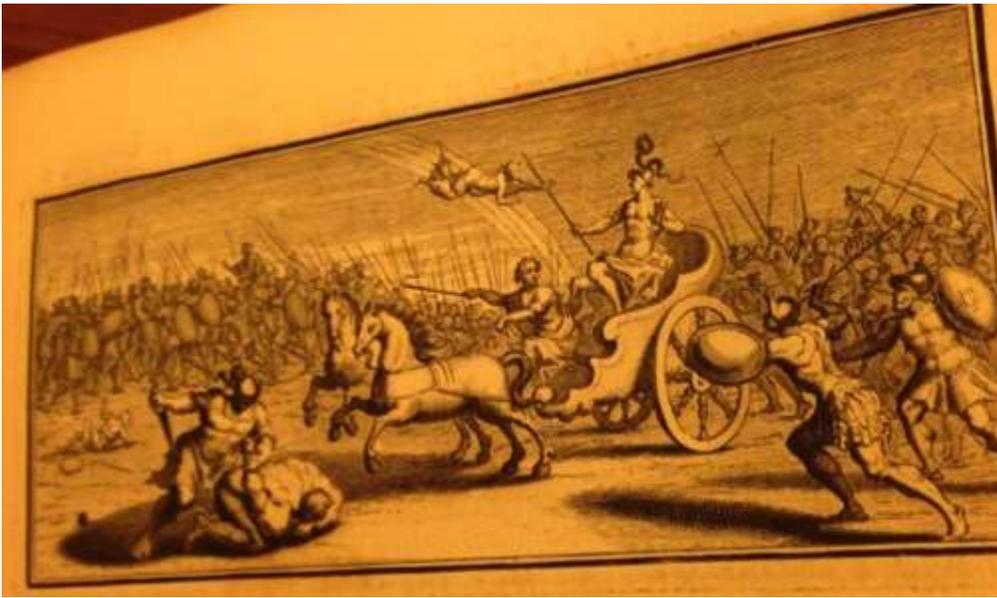
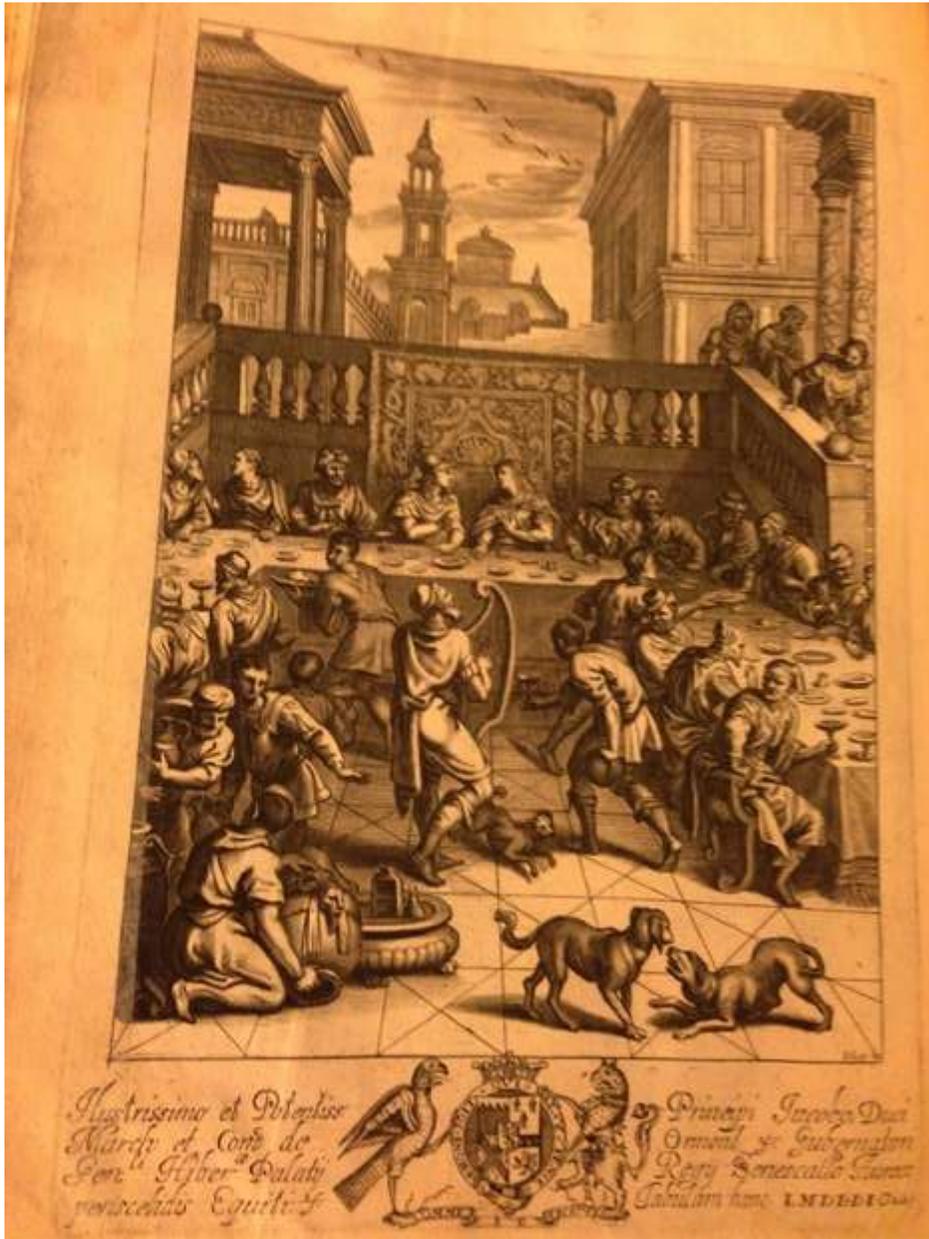


Figure 3 (Iliad 11.0)



Figure 4 (Iliad 9.0)



*Austrisimo et Potentiss.
Marchi et Comiti de
Gen. Hiber. Palati
venetico Equiti &*



*Principi Jacobo Duci
Ornati & Suboratorum
Regi Generalis Senatus
Cassidum anno 1700*

Figure 5 (Odyssey 8.0)