

Are You Smarter than a Sixth-Former? Verse Composition and Linguistic Proficiency in Victorian Classical Exams¹

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ABSTRACT:

If assessing contemporary student achievement is a challenge, assessing the attainment of students from 150 years ago might seem almost impossible. While plenty of old classical examination papers have survived, we do not generally have students' answers; we are thus left with literally nothing but questions. What could such students actually do? Some scholars have suggested that in the nineteenth century only exceptional students managed to achieve high proficiency in Greek and Latin. But this paper, drawing on an unnoticed—and thus far the only known—surviving set of student exam scripts, the responses to the prose and verse composition portions of the 1882 and 1883 entrance examinations for King's College, Cambridge, shows that at least one kind of “average” student was able to reach an astonishing level of linguistic proficiency. These exam scripts allow us to assess past student attainment in a way that has been impossible until now, helping write a chapter in the history of classical education. They also offer a useful perspective on continuing debates about the classical curriculum today.

Scene: An Oxford common room, mid-nineteenth century. Wood paneling, glasses of port, mutton-chop whiskers, &c. A heated discussion.

Don A (*somewhat in his cups*): Come now, the elegiac couplet is endlessly versatile. I should maintain that any moderately intelligible bit of English can be turned into Latin elegiacs.

Don B: Steady on, old boy. How about this? (*Pulls from his pocket a printed circular.*)

REVEREND SIR,

You are requested to attend a Meeting of the Bridge Committee on Saturday the 5th of November, at 12 o'clock, to consider Mr Diffles's proposal for laying down gas-pipes.

We are,
Rev. Sir,
Your obedient Servants,
SMITH AND SON,
Solicitors.

Don A: Hold my port.

We don't know what Don A managed to produce. The story's probably too good to be true. But Benjamin Hall Kennedy, who reports it, does the task requested—and with great style:²

Consilio bonus intersis de ponte rogamus
Saturni sacro, uir reuerende, die.
nonae, ne frustrere, dies erit ille Nouembres,
sextaque delectos conuocat hora uiros.
carbonum luci suadet struxisse canales
Diphilus: ambigitur prosit an obsit opus.
haec tibi deuincti Fabri, natusque paterque,
actores socii, uir reuerende, dabant.

If you don't swoon at least a little bit at the sheer sprezzatura of these verses, well, you are made of sterner stuff than I. Now B. H. Kennedy, he of the *Public School Latin Primer*, was a virtuoso composer.³ He's to be classed with Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb, a versifier so good that he supposedly went for a long walk one day and came back with a version of Robert Browning's "Abt Vogler," 96 lines of English obscurity, done into the meters of Pindar's fourth *Pythian*.⁴ Men like these—and they were almost all men—seem like something out of a time when a single hero could heft a stone that no two classicists could raise from the ground today.⁵



[B. H. Kennedy in 1883.](#)



[Caricature of R. C. Jebb from 1904.](#)

But questions immediately arise. One, the issue of Classics as a badge of elitist privilege, used to exclude the *hoi polloi* with arcane shibboleths like Latin verse writing, might temper our admiration for such feats of compositional bravado. We'll return to this issue by way of conclusion. But first I'd like to consider the

question of how unique a Kennedy or a Jebb was. Scholars like Françoise Waquet and Mary Beard have influentially argued that most students of Greek and Latin—whether in the Renaissance or the nineteenth century—weren’t really all that good.⁶ Young pupils spent very many years in the grammar grind and had very little to show for it. Sure, the argument goes, there was the occasional Kennedy or Jebb, but these were the rare exceptions to the general rule of mediocrity: as Waquet puts it, “it does not seem unreasonable to suppose . . . that overall standards have probably never been very high.”⁷ This is a comforting argument for classicists today; on this understanding, we’re not just belated dwarves standing on the shoulders of past giants. And it’s an argument that has been hard to challenge, because there just isn’t much evidence about what an average student could do. The whole discussion tends to be built on anecdotes, which, while colorful and entertaining, don’t amount to evidence.

One way of assessing the argument of Beard and Waquet for one era of classical instruction would be to look at student responses to the abundant Greek and Latin exams that have survived from nineteenth-century England. While only the best students became scholars and found their way into the printed record, countless droves of average students sat for exams; looking at the performance of such students under exam conditions would be very revealing of their abilities. And yet, although nineteenth-century classical exam papers do survive in abundance—university exams were printed and had a wide circulation⁸—we don’t usually have student answers. But at least one unnoticed cache of Victorian exam scripts has survived, the student answers to the Greek and Latin prose and verse composition

papers of the 1882 and 1883 entrance examinations to King's College, Cambridge. Prose and especially verse composition can serve as very good proxies for assessing students' overall linguistic abilities. We can use these exam responses to move the basis of discussion of past student achievement from anecdote to evidence. The scripts have much to tell us about the abilities of a certain kind of "average" student, which were in fact extraordinarily high, and they may have some lessons to teach us still today.

Exams without answers and unanswerable questions

"Are students now really so much worse than their predecessors were in the late nineteenth century?" In a word, Mary Beard would answer "no." One piece of evidence in her argument consists of nineteenth-century exam papers. For example, [she cites the Harvard College entrance exam of 1869](#), from which here are a couple of specimen questions for translation:⁹

2. ¹Who ²more illustrious in ³Greece ⁴than Themistocles? ⁵who ⁶when he ⁷had been driven into ⁸exile ⁹did not do harm to his ¹⁰thankless ¹¹country, but ¹²did ¹³the same that Coriolanus ¹⁴had done ¹⁵twenty ¹⁶years ¹⁷before.

¹Quis. ²Clarus. ³Graecia. ⁴Write in two ways. ⁵Qui. ⁶Cum. ⁷Expellere. ⁸Exilium.

⁹Do harm to, *Injuriam ferre* with Dative. ¹⁰Ingratus. ¹¹Patria. ¹²Facere. ¹³Idem.

¹⁴Viginti. ¹⁵Annus. ¹⁶Ante.

As ¹Xenophon² was³ sacrifici⁴ng, a messenger⁵ arrived⁶ from Mantinea⁷ announcing⁸ that his son⁹ Gryllus¹⁰ was dead.

1 omit.

2 Ξενοφῶν.

3 θύω.

4 ἄγγελος.

5 ἦκω.

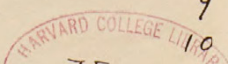
6 Μαντίνεια.

7 λέγω.

8 υἱός.

9 Γρύλλος.

10 to die, θνήσκει.



Beard rightly notes that virtually every English word here is footnoted with its Greek or Latin equivalent or some other prompt: completing such an exam is thus hardly something to marvel at, particularly in the case of students who had doubtless been preparing for just such tests for college admission.

But this exam says more about the American high school curriculum ca. 1869 than anything else. Greek and Latin composition were not emphasized, and we don't generally have stories of American compositional superstars. In fact, even when one exceptionally talented young American, Charles Astor Bristed, made his way to Cambridge in 1840 to read for an undergraduate degree—already equipped with a BA from Yale, mind you—he had no hope of competing with his English fellow-students in the field of composition in the ancient languages ([Bristed 219–37](#) = Stray 161–73). He was advised to “work at composition five or six hours a day for six months” to bring himself up to scratch.¹⁰ He didn't even try.

The expectations in Cambridge, England, were simply quite different from those of Cambridge, Massachusetts.¹¹ In the nineteenth century, candidates for examination in the Classical Tripos—the undergraduate examination for a Cambridge BA—were held to a much higher standard. Composition in Greek and Latin, prose and verse, was *de rigueur*. So, equipped with pen and paper and three hours, a candidate might be faced with something like the following ([Cambridge University Examination Papers 271](#)).

TUESDAY, *May* 20, 1884. 9—12.

I. For GREEK IAMBICS:

'Thou neither dost persuade me to seek wealth
 For empire's sake, nor empire to affect
 For glory's sake, by all thy argument
 For what is glory but the blaze of fame,
 The people's praise, if always praise unmixt?
 And what the people but a herd confused,
 A miscellaneous rabble, who extol
 Things vulgar, and well weigh'd, scarce worth the praise?
 They praise and they admire they know not what,
 And know not whom, but as one leads the other;
 And what delight to be by such extoll'd,
 To live upon their tongues and be their talk,
 Of whom to be dispraised were no small praise?
 His lot who dares be singularly good.

MILTON. *Paradise Regained* III. 44—57.

II. For GREEK ANAPAESTS:

Before our lady came on earth
 Little there was of joy or mirth;
 About the borders of the sea
 The sea-folk wandered heavily;
 About the wintry river side
 The weary fishers would abide.
 Alone within the weaving-room
 The girls would sit before the loom,
 And sing no song, and play no play;
 Alone from dawn to hot mid-day,
 From mid-day unto evening,
 The men afield would work, nor sing,
 'Mid weary thoughts of man and God,
 Before thy feet the wet ways trod.

W. MORRIS. *The Hill of Venus*.

This is but one examination paper for Part I of the 1884 Classical Tripos.¹² Over the previous few days, the test-takers had already sat four other papers; later that Tuesday, they would return for three hours of translation from Greek into English;

and over the rest of the week, they would face seven more grueling papers.

Mary Beard still urges caution. [In a lecture from 2015, commenting on these Tripos exams, she says:](#)

Of course we have to be very careful about leaping to judgments . . . we have absolutely no idea what the students wrote. None of the student answers survived . . . so we have loads of examination questions, but we have no examination answers, and that makes it really difficult to judge.

In the absence of exam scripts, it really would be impossible to judge. Waquet sums up the resulting problem: “We are therefore obliged to resort extensively to narrative sources, the remarks of teachers and the memories of former pupils, to get some sort of answer to a simple but very legitimate question: what did the children learn in the course of this long schooling in Latin or, more exactly, what level did they reach?” (Waquet 130). These sources may at times give us a glimpse into the exam room; occasionally, for example, a specimen of verse supposedly produced under exam conditions will be quoted in a book or in a letter from an exam candidate.¹³ But any such specimen is subject to embroidery, or at least retouching, and the rare extant examples tend to record exceptionally good performances rather than the average. We cannot form any reliable conclusions from them.

An exam with answers

Fortunately, at least one hitherto overlooked cache of exam scripts does survive.¹⁴ For some reason the Greek and Latin composition portions of the

exam scripts for the 1882 and 1883 entrance examinations at King's College, Cambridge, made it into the College archives, where they can still be found today ([KCAC/4/20/4](#)).¹⁵ Until 1862, King's College was open only to students from Eton; by the 1880s, non-Etonians were being admitted too, albeit in proportionally smaller numbers.¹⁶ The candidates for this particular examination were thus sixth-formers, or what Americans would call high school seniors, primarily at Eton College. Some of these young men would go on to Great Things in the academic world. For example, based on the results of the January 1882 examinations, the prestigious Eton Scholarship was awarded to Montague Rhodes (M. R.) James, who matriculated at King's College that fall. He would eventually become a noted medievalist and an author of ghost stories, successively Provost of King's College and Eton College.¹⁷



[*M. R. James ca. 1900.*](#)

But James got his start on a couple of cold mornings in January 1882 by translating into and out of Greek and Latin.¹⁸ Here, for example, is his Latin prose:

II. For LATIN PROSE:

It was not till the Gauls had crossed the Tiber, and were at the rivulet of the Allia, less than twelve miles from the gates, that a Roman military force sought to hinder their passage on the 18th July. And even now they went into battle with arrogance and foolhardiness—not as against an army but as against freebooters—under inexperienced leaders, Camillus having in consequence of the dissensions of the orders withdrawn from taking part in affairs. Those against whom they were to fight were but barbarians; what need was there of a camp, or of securing a retreat? These barbarians, however, were men whose courage despised death, and their mode of fighting was to the Italians as novel as it was terrible; drawing their swords the Celts precipitated themselves with furious onset on the Roman phalanx, and shattered it at the first shock. Not only was the overthrow complete, but the disorderly flight of the Romans, who hastened to place the river between themselves and the pursuing barbarians, carried the greater portion of the defeated army to the right bank of the Tiber, and towards Veii. The capital was thus needlessly left to the mercy of the invaders.

MOMMSEN.

M. R. James

Jan 18, 1882

Quum jam galli, trajecto flumine, ad Alliam
 pervenissent fluvium duodecim fere millia
 passuum a portu disantem, exaceratis Rom-
 anus tum clemem propedientibus obstitit, a. d.
 XV. Kal. Sext: profectus est: qui etiam dñm
 in pugnam superbi ac temerari ibant - quasi
 potius cum praedonibus quam cum militibus eum
 habituri: neque ipsi qui ducebant rei militaris
 satis erant periti, Camillus enim - quippe ducibus
 contraria inter se imperantibus - rebus gerendis
 sese abdicaverat: ceteri sibi cum barbaris
 tantum praelium commissuris, quod ~~opus~~ castris
 praevide, providenda fuga, ^{nullum} ~~quod~~ ^{esse} ~~esse~~ ^{disantem} ~~atrocem~~ +
 hostibus autem quamquam barbaris et mors ob animum
 contempta erat, et pupae incendae nro eo magis
 Latini horrendis quodammodo ^{esse} ~~fuerat~~ striculis
 enim ensibus Celtae furibundo impetu sese in
 Romanam aciem coniecerunt. Nec tantum confusi omnes;
 sed et ~~turbati~~ ita turbati ordinibus confugerunt - quippe
 qui trajectum flumen intersectantibus ~~hostibus~~ ^{hostibus} ~~opacore~~ ^{opacore} ~~aspecerunt~~
 ut maxima pars victae agminis in dextram Tibidis ripam
 deversa, ~~et~~ prope Veios discederet; id quod ipsam
 urbem ~~ne~~ nequaquam hostibus obnoxiam reliquit.

Quum jam Galli, trajecto flumine, ad Alliam pervenissent fluentum duodecim fere millia passuum a portu distantem, exercitus Romanus tum demum progredientibus obstiturus, a. d. XV. Kal: Sext: profectus est: qui tum etiam in pugnam superbe ac temere ibant – quasi potius cum praedonibus quam cum militibus rem habituri: neque ipsi qui ducebant rei militaris satis erant periti, Camillus enim – quippe ducibus contraria inter se imperantibus – rebus gerendis sese abdicaverat: ceteri sibi cum barbaris tantum praelium commissuris, ~~quid-opus~~ castris ponendis, providenda fugâ, ~~quid~~ nullum opus esse dicebant: hostibus autem quamquam barbaris et mors ob ????? atrocem animum contemptu erat, et pugnae ineundae mos eo magis Latinis horrendus quod antea ignotus [-m] ????? fuerat: strictis enim ensibus Celtae furibundo impetu sese in Romanam aciem conjecerunt. Nec tantum confusi omnes; sed ~~turbatis~~ ita turbatis ordinibus confugerunt – quippe qui trajectum flumen insectantibus hostibus opponere cuperent – ut maxuma pars victi agminis in dextram Tiberidis ripam devecta, ~~ad~~ prope Vejos diverteretur; id quod ipsam urbem nequicquam hostibus obnoxiam reliquit.

The correcting marks of two examiners are visible, one writing in blue ink, the other in light black.¹⁹ We can peer over young Monty's shoulder as he makes the occasional slip. For example, he mistakenly writes "distantem" (i.e. *masculine* accusative singular) modifying "fluentum" (a *neuter* noun). Or later on he seems to have misunderstood the English word "orders" in the phrase "in consequence of the dissensions of the orders," thinking that it referred not to the social orders at Rome

but rather to the instructions of individual commanders. Thus he wrote “quippe ducibus contraria inter se imperantibus”—and this did not escape the watchful eye of the examiners. Other mistakes too are dutifully marked out; the English “needlessly,” for example, has been translated “nequicquam” (= “in vain”). But in general I think it’s fair to say that this is an excellent effort by a high school senior left to his own devices. Even little bits and bobs like an ancient date, July 18, are handled with aplomb (“a. d. XV. Kal. Sext.”). In that same three-hour exam block, James also managed to produce 18 Latin hexameters to complete the verse portion of the test:

**EXAMINATION FOR SCHOLARSHIPS, EXHIBITIONS
AND ADMISSION.**

KING’S COLLEGE. *January, 1882.*

I. For LATIN HEXAMETERS:

So since at anchor safe our good ships lay
Within the long horns of a sandy bay,
We thought it good ashore to take our ease,
And pitched our tents a-nigh some maple-trees
Not far from shore, and there with little pain
Enough of venison quickly did we gain
To feast us all, and high feast did we hold
Lighting great fires, for now the nights were cold,
And we were fain a noble roast to eat;
Nor did we lack for drink to better meat,
For from the dark hold of the Rose-Garland
A well-hooped cask our shipmen brought a-land,
That knew some white-walled city of the Rhine.

There crowned with flowers, and flushed with noble wine,
Harkening the distant murmur of the main,
And safe upon our promised land again,
What wonder if our vain hopes rose once more
And Heaven seemed dull beside that twice-won shore.

The Earthly Paradise. W. MORRIS.

M. R. James

Jan 1882

Ael, ibi jam puppes tutas statione teneret
 Ancora, ^{tendebant} ~~procurant~~ qua longa per aequor arenam
 Cornua, nos requie per risa paravimus uti
 Littora: parva umbra pelles pandebat aerna
 Haud procul a fluctu, - facili prosternere ceros
 His ~~epulas~~ labor, et cunctis epulas propinare, lactes
 Instaurare dapas avidis; et robora flammis
 Addere, namque altum noctes jam fagus habebat =
 Et totos gaudere epulis: socianda per menses
 Pocula non deerant lautae: nam multa carinis
 Protulit ex ima - protra cui cetera micabant
 Victo flore, cadum strictum fice: patria Phoenus
 Moma cui ego quondam ^{praeter} ~~candentia~~ fluxit.
 Tempora tum te ceteris redimite et corda lyas
 Ferventes - dum bene canit prope marmoris ^{unda} ~~aspar~~
 Nosque item tuti promissa capessimus ara.
 Quid mirum, accitis vanaspe mentibus, ipso
 Si Littora victa iterum si praefereamus Olympo.

Now perhaps you object that M. R. James was not typical: he had entered Eton with the second-best performance on the Eton entrance exam, he was bracketed first on the present exam for entrance to King's, and two months later he won the Newcastle Scholarship at Eton besides.²⁰ He would go on to win the Craven Scholarship at Cambridge, first-class honors in the Classical Tripos (indeed being placed first in Part I of the Tripos), and the first Chancellor's Classical Medal.²¹ There followed a stellar academic career. He's thus another Kennedy or Jebb. That's a fair point, and for now I'll just make two observations: first, everyone whose exam script survives was able to finish.²² Second, everyone showed a competence that almost no one could match today under the same conditions.

But let's leave James aside and look a little more closely at the results of a "normal" candidate. For 1883, the year after M. R. James carried off the Eton Scholarship, the entrance exams of fifteen young men have survived.²³ At least a few would go on to become professional classicists, like J. W. Headlam and E. C. Marchant and the lesser-known Nathaniel Wedd.²⁴ We won't look at the exam scripts of budding academics. We'll consider instead a student not destined for classical scholarship, John James Withers.²⁵ Withers was born 21 December 1863, the son of a prosperous London solicitor, and was educated at Eton from 1877–1883. Popular and athletic—he was a successful rower—he was not at Eton on an academic scholarship and does not seem to have been a "swot" (someone devoted to his studies to the exclusion of other interests). At Cambridge he continued rowing, becoming captain of the King's College crew, and he was something of a rebel, numbering among the "scallywags" at King's rather than the "best set" of stuffy

old Etonians.²⁶ In due course he took a second-class degree in the Classical Tripos. From there he joined the family law firm as a solicitor; he eventually was made a Commander of the British Empire (CBE), was knighted, and became a member of Parliament. Not an “average” career by most standards, but when the nineteen-year-old Withers sat the King’s College entrance exam in 1883, it seems fair to say that he was a typical candidate. So how did he do?

We’ll look just at his Latin verses:

EXAMINATION FOR SCHOLARSHIPS, EXHIBITIONS AND ADMISSION.

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KING'S COLLEGE. *January, 1883.*

(1) FOR LATIN HEXAMETERS:

Now to the ascent of that steep savage hill
 Satan had journey'd on, pensive and slow;
 But further way found none, so thick entwined,
 As one continuous brake, the undergrowth
 Of shrubs and tangling bushes had perplex'd
 All path of man or beast that pass'd that way:
 One gate there only was; which when th' archfelon saw,
 Due entrance he disdain'd, and in contempt,
 At one slight bound high over-leap'd all bound
 Of hill or highest wall, and sheer within
 Lights on his feet. As when a prowling wolf,
 Whom hunger drives to seek new haunt for prey,
 Watching where shepherds pen their flocks at eve
 In hurdled cotes amid the field secure,
 Leaps o'er the fence with ease into the field.
 Thence up he flew, and on the tree of life,
 The middle tree and highest tree that grew,
 Sat like a cormorant.

MILTON, *Paradise Lost*, IV. 172.

J. J. Withers.

(1) Latin Hexameters.

^{Tardus}
 Lepus ad ascensum dirum jam venerat alti
 Plur^{is} consilium volvens in mente, sed illi
 Non patet ulterius hanes: tam densa ruborum
 + Brachia dumeti, veluti conjuncta, tenentur
 Inter se, cunctos hominesque ferasque morata
 Quos veniunt illuc: una illi porta videtur:
 Quam videt inferum nimen spernitque patentem,
 Aut uno saltu leviter trans membra elsa
 Transiit et collum: pedibus ferit intima rectis.
 Ut lupus + ^{inscr}pers, pisius famē querere praeda
 Innotas ^{lab}bras, quo vespere pastor ovili
^{constat} ^{collectum}
 Defensasque gregem septis circumdat in agris,
 Septis praeteritis leviter jam pervenit agrum.
 Ince petit aelum } ^{ori}
 Ardens inde volat: } ^{pro} instar in arbore Vitae
 Listit, quae mediis altissima floret in hortis.

+ I thought brachia would infer "dangling," as brachia gives notion of "retaining."
 I am not sure whether septa should not be spelt septa.

~~Segnis~~ Tardus ad ascensum dirum jam venerat alti
 Pluto consilium volvens in mente, sed illi
 Non patet alterior trames: tam densa ruborum
 + Brachia dumeti, veluti conjuncta, tenentur
 Inter se, cunctos hominesque ferasque morata 5
 Quot veniunt illuc: una illi porta videtur:
 Quam videt inferum numen spernitque patentem,
 Ast uno saltu leviter trans moenia celsa
 Transilit et collem: pedibus ferit intima rectis:
 Ut lupus inserpens, jussus fame quaerere praedae 10
 Ignotas latebras, quo vespere pastor ovili
~~Defensisque Inventam~~ Collectamque gregem septis circumdat in agris,
 Septis praeteritis leviter jam pervenit agrum.
 Inde petit caelum
 Arduus inde volat: ~~gruis~~ corvi instar in arbore Vitae
 Sistit, quae mediis altissima floret in hortis. 15

+ I thought brachia would infer “tangling,” as brachia gives notion of “retaining.”

I am not sure whether septa should not be spelt saepta.

So the verses of an “average” candidate. They’re not perfect, and even in the first line they show some strain (neut. *altum* for “hill”), but by modern standards they are a literally incredible performance by a nineteen-year-old in an exam room equipped with only pen, paper, and his native wit. Withers shows the typical insecurities of the exam-sitter, rewriting certain phrases and adding a couple of explanatory

footnotes.²⁷ Most of us have probably done the same. But he finishes a copy of generally accurate and occasionally elegant verses; “in arbore Vitae | . . . quae mediis altissima floret in hortis” for “on the tree of life, the middle tree and the highest tree that grew” is a particularly nice finish (ll. 14–15).

It is interesting to see what moves the examiners to note a word or phrase. Awkwardness that scans is generally allowable (cf. e.g. ll. 11–13). False quantities, however, instantly earn a mark of censure (l. 10 “famě” for *famē*); as do grammatical errors (l. 12 “collectamque gregem”—*grex* is masculine) and inaccurate word choice (l. 10 “insepens” and “jussus”). Small slips do not escape notice (l. 7 “inferum” for *infernum*). Some of the marks seem a bit harsh: “Pluto” translating Engl. “Satan” (l. 2) might not seem so bad, but the examiners have clear preferences here, as can be seen from the other exams. On other students’ papers, “Charon” and “Titan” are likewise marked, whereas “Satanas” and “Lucifer” are evidently acceptable renderings (though one student’s dubious orthography of “Sathanas” is at least queried), as are periphrases (e.g. “auctor scelerum”) or simply omitting the word altogether.

But even “mistakes” can show the remarkably high level of these students’ knowledge. So Withers is tasked with rendering “like a cormorant” into Latin. A student might be forgiven for not knowing the Latin word for this type of bird, or indeed for not knowing that a cormorant is a type of bird at all.



A little pied cormorant.

Withers first tries the phrase “gruis instar,” but then seems to decide that a cormorant must not really be a *grus* (“crane”). He tries again with “corvi instar,” which I would have judged excellent: *corvus* means “raven,” and its Greek equivalent, κόραξ, is in fact used of the cormorant (LSJ s.v. A.2; hence the modern scientific name for the genus, *phalacrocorax* (“bald raven”)). Another student tried the same thing, and his word choice was similarly marked. So what were the examiners looking for? Evidently *mergus* or some kind of paraphrase (even “avi similis” and “volucris similis” pass muster), as becomes clear from the other students’ scripts. It has to be said that *mergus* is a really good translation; it’s the *mot juste* for a diving water bird (which a cormorant is).²⁸ And, believe it or not, *mergus* is the most common translation of the word found in these exams (in one case “margus,” with

the *a* duly underlined by the examiners). Ask yourself: in what world can students possibly know all these Latin words for different types of birds? Certainly not in ours, but at King's College in 1883, this knowledge was not only assumed, but, it seems, actually possessed. And this is to say nothing of the extraordinarily precise knowledge that such students had of Latin syntax and accidence and prosody and metrics and so forth. Put simply, such an "average" student was very good at Latin.

The Victorian classical curriculum

These young men had reached an amazing level of proficiency in turning English into Greek and Latin and vice versa; they really could do things that most of us can no longer do today. You might reasonably ask how in the world they were able to do this. The short answer is: practice. Lots and lots of practice, and from a very early age. A boy on this educational track might have started the ancient languages even before entering a "prep school" around the age of eight. At his prep school he would have been thoroughly grounded in Greek and Latin in order to compete for admission at one of the major "public" (independent) schools, like Eton, where he would've gone at the age of thirteen. Indeed, to gain admission to such a school he would've had to re-translate some translated verses from Ovid back into Latin elegiacs, among other classical tests ([RHMC III 127](#)); this is a practice that was still being followed nearly 100 years later, if in diminished form (in the nineteenth century no vocabulary aids seem to have been supplied):²⁹

148 LATIN VERSE

November, 1954.—(60 minutes.)

1. Mark the quantities of syllables, feet, and caesura in the following :—
 Quid, si legitimum flueres, si nobile flumen,
 Si tibi per terras maxima fama foret ?
 Nomen habes nullum, rivis collecte caducis ;
 Nec tibi sunt fontes, nec tibi certa domus.
2. Arrange in correct order for the metre :—
 Habes fontis instār solūtas pluviamque nivesque,
 Divitias quas pīgra hiems ministrat tibi.
 Aut cursū agis lūtulentus brūmali tempore,
 Aut pulverulentus premis ārentem hūmum.
3. Put into Elegiacs :—
 In-these verses the poet is-angry with-a-small stream,
 Which suddenly has prevented (him), swollen by-rapid waters.
 He-was-wont before to cross this scarcely with-wet feet ;
 Then he used-to-take a swift and easy journey.
 “ Why do you prevent ? ” he complains. “ Why do you thus separate lovers ?
 There is to you neither a name, nor any fame to you ”.

WORDS TO BE USED.

Line 1. Versus (4.m.), vātes, irascor (+ dative), amnis (3.m.).
 „ 2. Subito, obstare (obstiti), auctus, rapidus.
 „ 3. Sōleo (use imperfect), prius, transire, vix, mādīdus.
 „ 4. Carpere, celer, -que, via.
 „ 5. Cur, prohibeo or obsto, quēror, sic, disjungere, amans.
 „ 6. See 1. above. Any=ullus.

November 1954 public schools entrance examination.

There followed some six years of constant instruction in Greek and Latin. Between the ages of eight and eighteen then, such a schoolboy might have literally written more than 10,000 lines of Latin verse—and for comparison, the *Aeneid* is 9,896 verses.³⁰ In contemporary English public schools, “Latin verse-composition was still almost universally regarded as an essential part of education.”³¹

And what exactly did instruction at an Eton look like at this time? Thanks to the report of the Clarendon Commission, we are exceptionally well informed about the details of the contemporary public school curriculum. The Clarendon Commission

had been appointed in 1861 to investigate the finances and administration of nine of the leading English public schools (Eton, Winchester, Westminster, Charterhouse, St. Paul's, Merchant Taylors', Harrow, Rugby, and Shrewsbury); they issued their report in four massive volumes in 1864.³² Their inquiry resulted in the Public Schools Act of 1868 and various reforms, and so the curriculum that a John J. Withers experienced at Eton in the late 1870s was not exactly the curriculum that the Clarendon Report describes. But it was in fact quite close—these schools, and Eton above all, were conservative—and the Clarendon Report serves as a useful baseline from which to describe the changes that affected the curriculum of James and Withers. We can reconstruct in minute detail what Eton students were learning at this time.

To restrict ourselves just to a summary of the sixth-form curriculum, here is one of the Commission's tables ([RHMC II 388](#)):

TABLE C.—ETON.

ETON

1. Authors or Books used, (not being mere Books of Reference), with the Editions.	2. Authors or Books used, being merely Books of Reference, including Maps and Illustrations.	3. Authors construed or translated <i>viâd voce</i> , and the Quantity of each in the Year ending with the Summer Holidays 1861.	4. Method of Hearing the Form in such construing or translating Lessons.	5. Authors whose Language has been committed to Memory, and the Quantity of each in the same Year.	6. Authors whose Substance and Matter have been committed to Memory and the Quantity of each in the same Year.
<p><i>Division I, Sixth Form and Part of Upper Fifth, 32 Boys.</i> Number of Boys from the Division who have left the School during the same Year, 21.</p> <p>Greek Testament, <i>Wordsworth, Benton, Alford, Oxford</i>; Homer, <i>Oxford, Rothe</i>; Cicero, <i>Matthia Selection, Leipzig, 1849</i>; Tacitus, <i>The Leipzig Classics</i>; Euripides, <i>Badham</i>; Æschylus, <i>Paley, Blomfield, Klausen, Peile</i>; Lucretius, <i>Bernays</i>; Virgil, <i>Conington, Heyne</i>; Thucydides, <i>Arnold's</i>; Demosthenes, <i>Penrose's</i>; Horace, <i>Orellius</i>; Theocritus, <i>Eton Poeta Græci</i>.</p>	<p><i>Merivale's</i> Roman Empire, Decline and Fall of Roman Republic; Grote's and Thirlwall's Greece; Arnold's Rome; Hallam's Constitutional History (portions set for examination at the close of each school time); Smith's Dictionaries of Antiquities, Biography, or Geography.</p> <p>whole play; Lucretius, selections, p. Lib. I., III., V.; Virgil. Georg., I., II.; Thucydides, Lib. III. c. xviii. to end; Demosthenes adversus Zenothrium et adv. Apaterium; Horace, Sat., II., ii., 126, to Ep. II., ii., 204; Ode, Lib. IV., Epodes 1-7; Theocritus, Idyll VIII., v. 54 to end; Idylls X., XI., XIII., XV., XVIII., XIX.</p>	<p>Greek Testament, St. Paul's Epistles to Philippians; I. and II. Timothy, Hebrews, St. James' Epistles, St. Peter's I. and II.; Homer, <i>Odyssey</i>, Lib. XVII., v. 461, to XXIII., v. 168; Cicero's Epistles, <i>Matthia Selection</i>, Ep. 77 to Ep. 148; Tacitus, <i>Annals</i>, Lib. IV., c. xl. to end; Euripides, <i>Ion</i>, from v. 911 to end; Æschylus, <i>Agamemnon</i>, the</p>	<p>Each boy as he is called up reads over in the original language the passage which he is about to translate, he then construes it word for word. Remarks are made upon the passage, questions asked upon the history, geography, and antiquities, in illustration of the passage. The construction, where required, illustrated and explained. The boy then reads the passage off in English.</p>	<p>All the poetry which is construed excepting the Greek play is said by heart; only about 50 lines per week of the Greek play, and about 40 lines of Latin elegiacs, which have not been construed in school.</p>	<p>None.</p>
<p><i>Division II, Part of Upper Fifth Form, 32 Boys.</i> Number of Boys from the Division who have left the School during the same Year (no account kept).</p> <p>Homer's <i>Odyssey</i>, <i>Oxford edition</i>; Thucydides, <i>Arnold</i>; Æschylus, <i>Agamemnon</i>, <i>Paley</i>; Demosthenes, <i>Penrose</i>; Lucretius, Lib. III. and Lib. V.; Cicero's Letters, <i>Matthia</i>; Horace (generally <i>Orellius</i>); Virgil, mostly <i>Conington</i>; Theocritus (<i>Poeta Græci</i>); Ovid's <i>Fasti</i>, <i>Paley</i>; Greek Testament, principally <i>Wordsworth's edition</i>; Hallam, <i>Merivale</i>.</p>	<p>Eton Greek Grammar; Jelf's Appendix; Smith's Classical Dictionary; Ainsworth's maps or Keith Johnstone's; <i>Poeta Scenci Græci</i>; Grote's History of Greece; <i>Merivale's</i> Roman Republic.</p>	<p><i>Odyssey</i>, 325th line of I to 355th line of II; Thucydides, 3rd Book, 56th ch. to end; Æsch., whole of <i>Agamemnon</i>; Demosth., Speeches against <i>Zenothrium</i> Apaturius <i>Phormis</i> <i>Lacritus</i>; 280 lines of 3rd Book of <i>Lucretius</i>, 55 lines of 5th Book; Cicero, 124 Letter to end of 158; Horace, 2nd Book of Sat. VIII. to <i>Arx Poetica</i>; 4th Book of <i>Odes</i>; Virgil, <i>Eclogues</i>; Theocritus, two Idylls, Lib. I. to 400th line of Lib. II.; Greek Test., Epistle to Hebrews; Epistle to St. James.</p>	<p>About four or six boys called up each school time, the whole lesson is construed through and often reconstrued or translated <i>viâd voce</i>; questions put in history, geography, grammar, mythology, &c.; places not changed. There are three construing school times, on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, therefore the number of boys called up each whole school day amounts either to 12 or 18, sometimes more, sometimes less.</p>	<p>100 lines of Homer weekly; 70 lines of Horace weekly; 86 lines of Theocritus occasionally; 40 lines of Ovid's <i>Fasti</i> weekly; 70 lines of Virgil or Lucretius weekly; 60 lines of Greek play weekly; 40 lines of Demosthenes occasionally.</p>	<p>It is impossible to state with accuracy the amount of matter committed to memory in the course of a year. In my division the boys repeat 80 lines of Homer per week; 70 lines of Horace; 40 lines of Ovid; 50 lines of Greek play; 40 lines of Greek or Latin prose.</p>

The range of reading might seem broad today, especially by comparison to [the contemporary American AP Latin syllabus](#), whose required Latin readings consist of:

Vergil, *Aeneid*

Book 1: Lines 1–209, 418–440, 494–578

Book 2: Lines 40–56, 201–249, 268–297, 559–620

Book 4: Lines 160–218, 259–361, 659–705

Book 6: Lines 295–332, 384–425, 450–476, 847–899

Caesar, *Gallic War*

Book 1: Chapters 1–7

Book 4: Chapters 24–35 and the first sentence of Chapter 36

(*Eodem die legati . . . venerunt.*)

Book 5: Chapters 24–48

Book 6: Chapters 13–20

By the standards of the English public schools of the 1860s, however, “the sameness and narrow range of reading of the Form” were “among the chief peculiarities of Eton school-work” ([RHMC I 75](#)). It was regarded by the Clarendon Commissioners as “narrow and incomplete” ([RHMC I 77](#)).

The method of reading itself was, well, laborious.³³ And the description in the table undersells just how much labor was involved. Every pupil at Eton was assigned a tutor, and “every lesson construed in school before the Division Master [i.e., what is referred to in the table] is, as a general rule, construed beforehand with the Tutor.”³⁴ Most of this work was thus done twice. Unsurprisingly, this method seems to have left few pupils very satisfied.³⁵ It certainly flies in the face of much of what modern Second Language Acquisition research tells us we should be doing. What might seem most remarkable is the enormous quantity of Greek and Latin

verse that the students committed to memory. “Speaking generally, every . . . lesson, which is construed, is also learnt by heart. A boy has to say 80 lines of Homer and 60 lines of some other author, alternately, five days in the week” ([RHMC I 88](#)). The reality is that many students did not commit so much to memory, relying instead on the fact that teachers tended to call on the boys to recite their verses in a fixed order (and so the requisite five or ten verses could be crammed while waiting to be called),³⁶ and most boys probably could not repeat what they’d memorized a week later—by which time they were of course memorizing, or “memorizing,” new verses. But by comparison to modern Latin students, these young men’s memories were being worked very hard indeed.

And what of Greek and Latin composition, and how exactly was a week’s work divided? Another table helpfully lays out some particulars ([RHMC II 456](#)):

**FIRST DIVISION, SIXTH FORM, AND PART OF UPPER FIFTH,
32 BOYS. THE HEAD MASTER.**

Lessons and Compositions during two School Terms, from January 16 to August 2.	
Lessons.	Compositions.
Sunday { No school lessons. All done with the tutor. Monday { 7 to 7½; or 7½ to 8½. According to time of year, Greek Testament. 11 to 12. Mathematical school. 3 to 3½. Homer Odys., 45 lines. 5½ to 6. Cicero Epistles. Tuesday { 7½ Repeat Theocritus, 45 lines. 8½ to 9. Eurip. Ion., Æsch. Agamemnon. 11 to 12. Lucret. Lib. I. Virgil, Georg. I, II. 60 lines. Half Holiday. Wednesday { 7½ Repeat Virgil or Lucretius. 11 to 11½. Homer Odys. 3 to 3½. Cicero, Epistles. 5 to 6. Mathematical school. Thursday { 7½ Repeat Ovid's Fasti, 40. 8½ Repeat Greek Play, 50 lines. 11 to 11½. Thucyd. Lib. III. Demosth. 3. Repeat Demosth. adv. Zenothorium et Apaturium. Friday { 7½ Repeat Homer, 90 lines. 11 to 12. Mathematical school. 3 to 4. Horace, Satires or Epistles 70 lines. 5½ to 6. Demosth. or Thucyd. Saturday { 7½ Repeat Horace, 90 lines. 8½ to 9. Eurip. Ion. Æsch. Agamemnon. 11 to 11½. Theocritus, 45 lines.	A Latin theme set on Saturday, not less than 30 lines, shown up to the tutor, at such time as he fixes to the Head Master, on Wednesday morning. A translation from an English author into Latin, and one into Greek, not less than once in each school time. A copy of Latin verse, if Hexameters not less than 40; if elegiacs, not less than 30, set on Monday, shown up to the tutor the time fixed by him to the Head Master on Friday morning. A copy of Greek iambics once in four weeks, about 30 lines. A copy of lyrics about three times in each school term.* A set of questions in divinity, set on Saturday, shown up to Head Master Monday morning. A translation from a Greek or Latin author into English every week in which a saint's day occurs.
SUMMARY OF LESSONS.	
Greek construing - - - 8	
Greek repetition - - - 4	
Latin construing - - - 4	
Latin repetition - - - 3	
Mathematical - - - 3	
22	

A grueling grind: of 22 weekly "contact hours," fully 19 were devoted to Classics.

The Clarendon Commission would ultimately recommend limiting Classics to

“only” about three-fifths of the instructional time; the schools resisted,³⁷ but at Eton some changes were introduced after 1868 by John James Hornby, the new headmaster.³⁸ “Repetition” lessons—i.e., when the boys recited memorized Greek and Latin verses—were reduced to twice a week. Four hours of work in “extra studies” were added, to be divided over two subjects (like French or German), although these too could be classical.³⁹ But of course even after these changes, the number of hours devoted to Classics was enormous. Remember again that each boy had a tutor, and every reading would be construed with the tutor before the formal lesson in school. Tutors also would correct a boy’s compositions and assign further compositions—especially in Greek, both prose and verse⁴⁰—as well as other readings, so-called “private business.” And it goes without saying that when students were not with their teachers or tutors, they had to spend much time working on classical material on their own; the Clarendon Commission estimated at least 15 hours of independent preparation—10 hours of reading, 5 hours of composition—even on their proposed reformed timetable ([RHMC I 114](#)).

As to compositions, the quantity here too was hefty, although some other schools—Rugby, for example—reported even more time spent writing Greek and Latin.⁴¹ At Eton after 1868, Greek composition, including in iambics, also became a more regular feature of the school curriculum (as opposed to being left to the tutors), while the Latin “theme”—i.e., original Latin composition—was dropped in favor of English-Latin translation, and pupils with no aptitude for verse composition were allowed to replace it with further prose composition.

Boys like M. R. James or John J. Withers thus completed a classical

curriculum that is almost unimaginable today, devoting themselves to Greek and Latin at Eton some 40 hours a week for six of their teenage years.

Conclusion

The King's College entrance examination shows clearly the results of this system: students who had been stuffed with Classics for a decade had an extraordinary facility with the ancient languages. When Mary Beard says that she has ["no doubt that . . . late-nineteenth-century Classics was much less linguistically competent than we imagine."](#) I think I'd beg to differ. The average "Classics major" of Victorian England knew much more Greek and Latin than his—gender chosen advisedly—counterparts today. Victorian schoolboys and university men could translate into and out of Latin at a frenetic pace,⁴² and behind all this translation lay the real ability to read and understand a passage. Such students had awe-inspiring vocabularies at the ready: "cormorant," anyone? If knowledge of vocabulary is the key to reading with ease and understanding—the consensus view of modern SLA research⁴³—these students had it, and had it in spades. They also had a knowledge of Latin grammar and meter that only a few professionals would lay claim to today. Measured by those standards, on average we just aren't as good now as they were then.

But at what price was this linguistic proficiency bought? The Victorian system was exclusionary and inefficient both, and in fact its elitism was intimately bound up with its inefficiency. Consider first the inefficiency: students starting out at a public school like Eton began by simply memorizing a Latin grammar.⁴⁴ They

then spent long years doing nothing but grammar and translation. There was no “extensive reading” in sight; every text was parsed and deconstructed in mind-numbing detail before being put back together into an English rendering. No one spoke Latin as a means of communication, and the Latin that was read out loud was pronounced in a peculiarly English style that severed all connection between the vowel quantity and pronunciation.⁴⁵ In sum, to these students Latin was a code to be broken: it might be a code worth breaking, whether because it led to great literature or considerable emoluments or the avoidance of pain and suffering, but it was a code nonetheless.⁴⁶ You almost couldn’t design a worse system for learning Greek and Latin, and it could produce effective results only because of the massive amount of time it was allotted. If you’ve got a decade’s worth of 40-hour weeks of Greek and Latin to work with, you’ll eventually get enough comprehensible input to start constructing an accurate mental representation of the target language.⁴⁷

There is nothing about knowledge of Greek or Latin, or even the ability to write stylish elegiacs and iambics, that is inherently elitist. What is elitist, however, is a system that relies exclusively on a massive investment of time and money to achieve its results. In Victorian England, you had to have relatively wealthy parents if you were to spend your childhood years doing almost nothing but Classics—you couldn’t be needed on the farm or in the scullery, and even if you didn’t have to work as a teenager, you still had to have a future secure enough that you could dispense with practical training for your entire educational career. And you probably had to be a man, *de facto* if not *de jure* a white man. Knowledge of Classics thus served as a proxy for social class, because only a certain kind of people could afford the time

and money for such an education.⁴⁸ For all the problems our society faces today, let's stipulate that no one wants to go back to the nineteenth century.

And yet much of our teaching is stuck in the Victorian age. That tedious Eton reading method, involving reading out loud in Latin, construing and parsing, and producing a passable English translation? It probably sounds pretty familiar to most American Classics teachers today, no matter their own teaching methods. But we don't have ten years to make an almost impossibly inefficient system "work" for most of our students, and so it's no wonder that most of our students can't replicate Victorian linguistic achievement. Much of our classical curriculum remains elitist, not because there is something elitist about formal knowledge of grammar and the like, but because we still demand that students spend so much of their lives on our subject if they want to be able to do something with it. Such a system excludes all but the privileged few who can devote the requisite vast quantities of unhindered time to an impractical field, preferably from an early age, just as it once excluded [Jude the Obscure](#) and co.

One solution to this problem, and an idea that is heard more and more often today, is to "de-center Greek and Latin" from the curriculum. At the undergraduate level, this has long since been done in many American programs, with degrees offered in "Classics" (emphasizing Greek and Latin) and "Classical Studies" (emphasizing primarily or exclusively courses taught in English translation). In American high schools, on the other hand, Latin classes are still almost always foreign languages courses, and at the graduate level, at least in most programs in the United States as I write these words, the languages are still central. Will they

remain so? As Joy Connolly has recently pointed out, “very, very few students these days apply to graduate school with multiple years of Greek and Latin language study, and those that have those years of experience typically belong to a talented but simply too small a group.” She suggests that “if we restrict doctoral education even to students with 1–2 years of Latin and Greek, we are already guarding too narrow a gateway. We should make the field accessible at the doctoral level to smart students from a range of undergraduate majors and from schools that have no Classics major and no Greek or Latin language courses” ([Connolly](#)).

Further de-centering the languages in today’s classical curriculum is certainly a way forward, but it has real risks. On the one hand, we might become one of the only academic fields where the average knowledge of the average practitioner has actually declined since the nineteenth century. But of course one might argue that our gains have far outweighed our losses, that what we don’t know about Greek and Latin we’ve made up for in other areas, that we’ve moved beyond the need for deep philological skills to focus on more interesting questions.⁴⁹ I’m less sure that we’ve outgrown philology, but regardless, I think that de-centering the languages carries another risk: it threatens to cement existing structural inequalities. The same students who didn’t have the opportunity to learn Greek and Latin at a young age may continue to be denied the chance to learn them all the way through graduate school; they will find themselves stuck in a vicious cycle from which escape becomes ever more difficult.⁵⁰

If we want to rethink our curricula to be more open and inclusive while still valuing Greek and Latin skills, maybe we should first try changing not our “elitist

standards,” but our elitist pedagogy, jettisoning Victorian teaching methodologies. Maybe we should try embracing communicative classrooms and comprehensible input and active Latin and all that Second Language Acquisition research has been preaching for years.⁵¹ And maybe we really can have it all: W. H. D. Rouse, one of the pioneer teachers of “active Latin” in Edwardian England, was himself an accomplished versifier, and his pupils, trained in classrooms where they heard “the living word” of Greek and Latin on a daily basis, did just as well as public schoolboys on Greek and Latin verse composition exams.⁵² Rouse decided to use new methods to help all of his pupils meet the established standards, rather than lowering the standards for his students on the grounds that they didn’t have the advantages of young men at Eton or Harrow. Such a change won’t be easy, and it won’t solve all our problems today,⁵³ but we might at least try it before going gently into the good night.

Victorian classical exams are interesting in their own right, and this treasure trove of exam scripts from King’s College Cambridge helps us reconstruct an otherwise vanished (but hugely influential) era in the history of classical education. The scripts give us a glimpse of what a certain kind of “average” student could really do under exam conditions, and the results are impressive; they help counter the revisionist narrative that nineteenth-century classical students weren’t as good as we might imagine. But the exams may also still have things to teach us today, and as we continue as a discipline to think through how best to improve access to Classics at every level, these old tests remain useful to think with.

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Endnotes

1 For comments on an earlier draft of this article as well as much other generous help, I thank David Butterfield, Christopher Stray, Richard Talbert, and *TCL*'s anonymous reviewer. Patricia McGuire, archivist at King's College, Cambridge, has been the *sine qua non* for much of this work, and she has my particular gratitude. For permission to reproduce material I thank also the estate of Montague James Rhodes; the Harvard University Archives; the Independent Schools Examination Board; the King's College, Cambridge, Archives; and the St. Catharine's College, Cambridge, Archives.

2 [Kennedy 1887: 164–5](#). A second version, purporting to be the original and supposedly produced after thirty minutes' thought, is ascribed to Edward Massie (ca. 1806–1893) in [a letter to the *Oxford and Cambridge Undergraduate's Journal* of 23 November 1877](#) and later in [a letter of June 1899 to the journal *Literature*](#). In the alternative version there are slight differences in the wording of the circular. A link between Massie and Kennedy is made explicitly in [The *Oxford Magazine* of 29 May 1889](#). But the details are implausible (Massie is said to have been Kennedy's pupil [sc. at Shrewsbury], but the chronology won't work: Kennedy began teaching at Shrewsbury in 1827, [while Massie had already matriculated at Oxford in 1825](#); the same claim is made by [Mayor 1889: 278](#)). There are similar anecdotes about Greek iambics (see Clarke 1959: 204 n. 2); cf. e.g. [Evans 1893: vii](#) ("no saying in any language or dialect which could not be readily and accurately reproduced in the Greek Iambic Trimeter"), where the challenge of "Well old stick-in-the-mud, how's your conk?" is met by ἐν βορβόρωι στηρικτέ, πῶς ἔχεις κάρα; (Arthur Sidgwick furnishes a case of similar facility with Greek verse—cf. e.g. the letter from J. M. Wilson printed in the *Times Literary Supplement* on Sept. 30, 1920, and reprinted in [The *Pelican Record*](#) later that year—and in his diary he often recorded even intimate details of his life in snatches of iambics; see [Rutherford 2017](#).)

3 On Kennedy, his *Public School Latin Primer* (1866), and "his" *Revised Latin Primer* (1888, scare quotes because it was in fact written not by Kennedy but by his daughters), see Stray 2018: 307–25.

4 [Jebb 1873: 2–16](#). On its composition, see Dawe 1990: 241 ("apparently worked out in his mind during a single walk"). In reviewing the book in which this poem is printed, [Wilamowitz was lavish in his praise](#): "Da ist etwas geleistet, was noch keiner gekonnt hat und keiner kann" (quoted in Brink 1985: 224 n. 131). Jebb's prowess in verse composition was already in evidence as a schoolboy at

Charterhouse; “in that day . . . there was generally to be found, outside his study door, a queue of vicarious poets waiting to get some verses done for them. It was good for Jebb perhaps if for no one else. And at least it ensured a consistent style in the Latin verse of the school” ([Davies 1921: 285](#); quoted in Stray 2013: 10).

5 Both Kennedy and Jebb are often instanced as Victorian culture heroes: see e.g. Brink 1985: 124–5, Stray 1998: 139–40.

6 Waquet 2001: 119–71; Beard 2015 and Beard 2019.

7 Waquet 2001: 138; sim. Clarke 1959: 86.

8 At both Oxford and Cambridge, printed examination papers were in use from 1828 onwards: [Stray 2001: 46](#), Stray 2005: 103.

9 [Harvard University Archives, HUC 7000.2 Box 1](#) (courtesy of the Harvard University Archives; reproduced in full online [here](#)). This particular exam had a bit of a viral moment on the internet in 2019; see e.g. articles in [Mental Floss](#) and [BuzzFeed](#) and [Business Insider](#). It had been mentioned in a [New York Times blog post](#) as early as March 2011.

10 [Bristed 1873: 219–37](#) (= Stray 2008: 158). Bristed’s experience can be usefully compared with that of Alexander Chisholm Gooden, an exceptionally talented English classicist who hadn’t done verse composition in school and bitterly resented how much this limited his achievements at Cambridge. So, e.g., in describing the results of the University Scholarship examinations in a letter of 1838 to his father, he writes: “The preference in favour of King’s men and the great quantity of poetical composition had led me to expect that a King’s man would be the successful competitor but I did not imagine that the mere knack of writing Latin verse would enable men so much my inferiors to pass me in such a manner” (Smith and Stray 2003: 112; this is a persistent theme in Gooden’s letters: cf. 12, 109, 112, 115, 123, 135, 137, 140, 167, 169, 170). For the unique prowess of King’s College in this field, deriving from the emphasis on Latin verse composition at Eton, see below.

11 Contra Mary Beard, [who claims “it was much the same in Cambridge, England.”](#)

12 In 1881 the Classical Tripos had been divided into two parts, the first focused on Greek and Latin language and literature, the second on a selection of five possible topics (literature and criticism, philology, history, philosophy, and archaeology); on these reforms and their context, see Stray 1998: 141–66, Stray 2018: 108–24. The exams for Part I and II of the Tripos were themselves divided into a number of individual papers.

13 For some examples, see e.g. [Donaldson 1856: 246–8](#), [Bristed 1873: 220](#) (omitted in Stray 2008: 161), [Rouse and Appleton 1915: 173–4](#) (prose). These examples can be multiplied; for the curious case of A. E. Housman doing exam verses himself as an examiner in 1912, see Burnett 1997: 291–2 (not necessarily under exam conditions, but cf. Burnett 1997: 567, remarking that “the MS paper was of the type used for examinations for University Scholarships”).

14 The only known comparable case of surviving exam scripts comes from the Cambridge Mathematical Tripos in the 1870s: two of the exam setters, James Clerk Maxwell (of electromagnetic fame) and John William Strutt (aka Lord Rayleigh, winner of the 1904 Nobel Prize in Physics), were frugal enough to use the backs of student exam scripts as paper for drafting their own articles and books, and their papers were archived (Warwick 2003: 163 n. 110). For the immense value of these mathematical exam scripts, see Warwick 2003: 18–26. Other such scripts probably await discovery in various archives; at Eton, for example, there are a handful of responses preserved from the 1859 exam for the Newcastle Scholarship ([COLL BEN 15 05](#); on the Newcastle see n. 23 below).

15 The entrance examination also included translation from Greek and Latin into English, as well as grammatical, linguistic, and historical questions. The student responses to these parts of the exam do not appear to survive.

16 The proportion of Etonians shrank gradually: for the period 1865–79, there were 69 Etonians compared to 75 entrants from all other public schools; for 1880–89, there were 44 Etonians vs. 175 from other public schools (Wilkinson 1980a: 158). The 1880s were a time of great change at King’s (the college’s statutes were significantly amended in 1882); see discussion in Wilkinson 1980a: 23–37 and, for a contemporary student’s perspective, Dickinson 1973: 59–72.

17 On M. R. James see the full biography of Pfaff 1980 (pp. 17–47 a detailed account of his schoolboy years at Eton); on James’ time at Eton, with less emphasis on academics (and more emphasis on ghost stories), see also Cox 1983: 28–49. James’ own memoirs are considerably less enlightening (James 1926).

18 Interestingly, he was not known for his compositional abilities: see the remarks by his tutors quoted at Pfaff 1980: 41–2 (including: “his style is slovenly”!).

19 One of the examiners was J. E. C. Welldon (Pfaff 1980: 43), [himself an Eton and King’s man with a distinguished academic record and the future headmaster of Harrow and Bishop of Calcutta](#) (see also [Withers 1903: 39–40](#), Welldon 1935); the other is not identified. James’ own hand is described as “notoriously unreadable” and “vile” (Pfaff 1980: ix, 25, the latter quoting James’ Eton tutor, H. E. Luxmoore); he must have been writing carefully on this exam, as his script seems largely legible to me.

20 The Newcastle Scholarship was Eton’s most prestigious prize, given to the best performance on a week-long examination testing knowledge of Classics and Biblical scripture: for a thorough discussion of the exam’s format, its winners, and its significance, see Butterfield 2013.

21 On James’ academic accomplishments, see Pfaff 1980: 43–4, 49, 68 n. 1; [Tanner 1917: 649](#). In his own memoirs James is matter of fact: “in January I got my Scholarship at King’s, in March the Newcastle” (James 1926: 96; on his preparations for the Newcastle see further pp. 60–1).

22 Though mistakes may increase toward the end; James, for example, manages the false quantity “*praefēremus*” in the last line of his verses, which is hard to credit him allowing otherwise. (But see below on the effects of the traditional English pronunciation of Latin on students’ verse composition efforts.)

23 It is unclear why these fifteen have been preserved, and why only the Greek and Latin composition portions of the exams were archived. For a list with prosopographical notes of all those who entered King’s College in 1883, i.e. subsequent to this entrance examination, see [Withers 1903: 88–95](#).

24 For Marchant (Christ’s Hospital and Peterhouse), see the obituary printed in *The Times* 20 June 1960 ([reproduced here](#)). For Headlam (Eton and King’s), cousin of Walter Headlam and [later styled Sir James Wycliffe Headlam-Morley](#), see Stray 1998: 244–5. Wedd (City of London School and King’s), while publishing little, [was an important figure at King’s College for years](#) (see further Wilkinson 1980a: 23–6, Wilkinson 1980b: 190–1 with glowing testimonials (“a teacher of genius” etc.)). The other examinees were: Alan England Brooke (Eton and King’s), Ernest Walter Brooks (Eton and King’s), Bertram Hill (Christ’s Hospital and King’s),

John Curzon Ingle (The Leys School and King's), Cecil Marcus Knatchbull-Hugessen (Eton and King's), J. H. G. Marshall (untraced), A. E. Moore (untraced), Dighton Nicolas Pollock (Wellington and King's), John Read Le Brockton Tomlin (Winchester and Pembroke), Leonard Jauncey White-Thomson (Eton and King's), John James Withers (Eton and King's), Metcalfe Henry Wood (Bromsgrove School and Clare College). For academic and basic biographical details of these men's lives (often quite interesting), see the [Cambridge University Alumni Database](#) and, for those who matriculated at King's, [Withers 1903: 88–95](#). Wilkinson 1980a (esp. 36–7), and Wilkinson 1980b. In the case of the more famous figures, these skeleton accounts are fleshed out by the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

25 On Withers' life, esp. his later career a solicitor, see [Cretney 2007](#) and [Cretney 2008](#).

26 "Sallywags" and "best set" are almost technical terms for the King's College of this period; see Wilkinson 1980a: 24–7.

27 We are assuredly looking at his final "fair copy"; he would have used other paper for drafting.

28 It is in fact the very word suggested in the verse dictionary of Ainger and Wintle 1891 s.v. "cormorant" ([p. 73](#)). A. C. Ainger and H. G. Wintle happen both to have been classical masters at Eton in Withers' day.

29 Image kindly provided by Richard Talbert and reproduced here by permission of the Independent Schools Examination Board.

30 Cf. the scathing comment of Sydney Smith ([Holland 1854: 7](#)): "I believe, whilst a boy at school, I made above ten thousand Latin verses, and no man in his senses would dream in after-life of ever making another. So much for life and time wasted!"

31 Clarke 1959: 93. Cf. the infamous and oft-quoted remark of the Eton headmaster Thomas Balston, made to a pupil ca. 1843: "If you do not write good longs and shorts, how can you ever be a man of taste? If you are not a man of taste, how can you ever hope to be of use in the world?" (Quoted in Stray 1998: 83 with brief discussion.)

32 Today the report is most easily accessible online: [vols. 1–2](#) and [vols. 3–4](#). It is also available in a modern reprint with an introduction by Christopher Stray: Stray 2004. For discussion of the Clarendon Commission and its report, see Shrosbree 1988. The Commission’s real focus was Eton.

33 Admitted even (especially?) by the teachers; see e.g. [RHMC II 120–1](#). For a vividly irreverent description of a reading lesson from a contemporary student’s perspective, see [Nugent-Bankes 1880: 56–66](#).

34 [RHMC I 76](#). This practice would not be abolished until 1885: [Maxwell Lyte 1911: 532](#).

35 See e.g. [“O. E.” 1910: 66–9](#).

36 [RHMC I 88](#); cf. [Cust 1899: 206](#). But teachers did sometimes vary the order, with predictable results: [“O. E.” 1910: 17–18](#).

37 A contemporary Eton master could hardly imagine finding time for other subjects, “for the time given to classics is scarcely too much.” He had earlier stated that “it is desirable that classics should form the basis of all public school education”: [RHMC II 121](#).

38 For the changes to the Eton curriculum, see [Maxwell Lyte 1911: 528–32](#). The reforms of Eton’s finances and statutes were far more drastic: briefly [Maxwell Lyte 1911: 525–8](#) (NB [p. 527](#): “the result . . . was that, in 1871, the whole code of statutes issued by Henry the Sixth for the government of the College was formally repealed”). For a savage critique of Eton’s curriculum under Hornby from a contemporary pupil’s perspective, see [“O. E.” 1910: 64–81](#).

39 Some extra time was gained in the timetable by the elimination of numerous holidays and “half-holidays” ([Maxwell Lyte 1911: 529](#)).

40 See e.g. [RHMC II 141](#). For contemporary pupils’ perspectives on how tutors taught and corrected composition assignments, see [Nugent-Bankes 1880: 97–100](#) and [“O. E.” 1910: 70–3](#).

41 See [RHMC II 441](#), Clark 1959: 91–2. Note that different schools had reputations for different kinds of composition: Eton for elegiacs (see e.g. [Bristed 1877: 224](#) (= Stray 2008: 164), Clarke 1959: 89), Shrewsbury for Greek iambs

(see e.g. Clarke 1959: 91: “the well-known excellence of Salopian iambics”; of the first 79 Porson Prizes awarded at Cambridge for Greek iambics, fully 40 went to Shrewsbury alumni: [Mayor 1889: 278](#)).

42 See e.g. Mary Beard on the “[breakneck pace](#)” of these exams; she allows that “[even I have to confess a sneaking admiration for some twenty-one-year-old bloke who could plausibly toss off a halfway decent translation of these hefty chunks of Latin.](#)” Five or six substantial passages of Greek or Latin would be set for a three-hour translation exam, say 1,100–1,200 words from a variety of authors, with short marginal commentary also requested. [Here is a typical example from Part I of the 1884 Tripos exam](#); the translation portion of the 1883 King’s College entrance exam is similar, except verse and prose are combined into one paper with six total passages.

43 SLA research usually estimates that a reader must know 95–98% of the words in a passage in order to read and understand it (see e.g. [Schmitt, Jiang, and Grabe 2011](#)); for a dramatic demonstration of this principle in action, see [this video lecture by Justin Slocum Bailey](#).

44 Clarke 1959: 51: “to learn this [sc. the grammar book] by heart was the first task of the young.” This was the avowed aim of the *Public School Latin Primer*: “a concise manual of facts and code of rules in Latin, to be memorially learnt,” although “it was not supposed that all sections and parts of sections in the first ninety pages would be learnt in a first memorial course; nor was it doubted that some passages in accidence would be sufficiently taught by means of questions and answers” ([Kennedy 1882: unpaginated preface](#)).

45 For the historical evolution of the pronunciation of Latin in England, see Allen 1978: 102–10, [Collins 2012](#). For the headmaster John Hornby’s defense of the traditional Eton pronunciation, see his letter of 8 February 1879, quoted in [Fisher 1879: 105–7](#). At Eton the “English” pronunciation held out into at least the 1930s: [Alington 1932](#) (written by the then headmaster). Cf. too [Bristed 1877: 22–3](#) (= Stray 2008: 162). In writing Greek and Latin verse English students thus had to rely solely on their eyes, not on their ears (perhaps helping to explain a mistake like James’ “*praeferemus*” above).

46 The material incentives could be substantial. So, for example, M. R. James could finance his entire university education on the proceeds from the classical

prizes he'd won: to name just two, the Newcastle Scholarship was worth £50/year for three years and the Craven £80/year for seven years ([and £130 in the 1880s would amount to over £16,000 today](#), or some \$22,000); see Pfaff 1980: 49 (but note that his figure for the Craven, £75, is incorrect; from 1860 it was worth £80/year: [Tanner 1917: 259](#)). Cf. the infamous but probably apocryphal (Stray 2018: 52) conclusion of one of Thomas Gaisford's sermons: "Nor can I do better, in conclusion, than impress upon you the study of Greek literature, which not only elevates above the vulgar herd, but leads not infrequently to positions of considerable emolument" [Tuckwell 1907: 124](#).

47 It is worth observing that repeated re-reading of difficult passages, as was done at Eton, does eventually turn those passages into comprehensible input.

48 On this phenomenon, see e.g. Stray 1998: 26–34; for Classics and British society in the Victorian period and beyond, see Stray 1998 *passim*. For a different perspective on British Classics and class, see Hall and Stead 2015, Hall and Stead 2020.

49 Mary Beard rightly points out that Victorian exam papers don't seem to involve as much critical thinking as ours do today. Referring specifically to the historical paper of the nineteenth-century Classical Tripos, she remarks on the "[superficial simplicity](#)" of some of the questions and comments that there were "rather too many facts and not much sign of thinking."

50 To advise such students to take a summer intensive grammar-translation course, [as Joy Connolly does](#), is pretty much the same as telling young Brasted to do verse composition for five or six hours a day for six months after his arrival at Cambridge: it's not easily done, and even if you do it, you still probably won't achieve very good results.

51 On SLA research and classical language teaching, see e.g. [Carlon 2013](#).

52 For Rouse's methods and their results, see esp. [Rouse and Appleton 1915](#) and [Rouse 1935](#); full discussion of the man and his cultural context in Stray 1992.

53 Cf. e.g. [Keeline 2019a](#), [Keeline 2019b: 60–1](#).