

**THE CLAIMS OF CLASSICAL  
CULTURE UPON THE ATTENTION  
OF AMERICAN TEACHERS AND  
AMERICAN SCHOOLS: A  
LECTURE**

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The Claims of Classical Culture Upon the Attention of American Teachers and American Schools: A lecture by Elbridge Smith

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**ELBRIDGE SMITH**

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## THE CLAIMS

OF

## CLASSICAL CULTURE.

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In urging the claims of Classical Culture upon the attention of American teachers and American schools, I do not propose to use the phrase Classical Culture in its common, and perhaps I may say technical, acceptation. Or, in other words, I am not about to attempt a eulogium upon the languages and literatures of ancient Greece and Rome. The Classics, properly so called, are not the exclusive productions of Grecian or Roman genius; they are the natural products of the human mind, whenever and wherever its powers have been stimulated to their highest and happiest development. The classics of Greece and Rome, which have received so large a portion of the attention of the civilized world, were formed upon the models of an earlier age. The spirit which they breathe is essentially

the spirit of enlightened man. But it did not originate with them. Three hundred years before Homer lived, sublimer strains were struck from "the harp the monarch minstrel swept," than were ever heard from the Grecian Rhapsodists. Before Cadmus had set foot on Greece, or Romulus and Remus had been nursed on the banks of the Tiber, the great features of a truly Classical Literature had not only been traced, but invested with the highest elements of beauty and power. Nor has the culture of which I speak been confined to the highest states of civilization.

"In climes beyond the solar road,  
 Where shaggy forms o'er ice-boilt mountains roam,  
 The muse has broke the twilight gloom  
 To cheer the shivering native's dull abode.  
 And oft beneath the od'rous shade  
 Of Chili's boundless forests laid,  
 She deigns to hear the savage youth repeat  
 In loose numbers wildly sweet  
 Their feather-cinctured chiefs and dusky loves;  
 Her track, where'er the goddess roves,  
 Glory pursue, and gen'rous shame,  
 The unconquerable mind, and freedom's holy flame."

The primeval forests of Rhode Island resounded with an eloquence from Philip of Mount Hope, which, under other circumstances, might have proved as classic as that which was thundered against Philip of Macedon. The story and speech of Logan, the celebrated Mingo Chief, present to us all the elements of that heart-stirring eloquence which stayed for a time the declining fortunes of Grecian

and Roman liberty. In the rude war-songs which rung around the council-fires of our American Aborigines, we see the germs of what, beneath more genial skies, and in more prolific soils, have ripened into rhapsodies and pœans which the world has not yet consented to let die.

The purpose of these remarks is to illustrate the universal prevalence of what may be termed the Elements of a truly Classical Culture. The degree of maturity to which these elements have attained has depended, of course, upon all the contingencies of physical, mental, social, and political organization to which the human race in its ever-varying career has been subjected. Whenever the human mind has been awakened to a consciousness of its own strength; whenever it has summoned its highest energies to surmount opposing obstacles, to seek out new channels for action, and to resist oppression; it has furnished the material for the orator, the historian, and the poet, to transform into enduring models of excellence and beauty. Or, to state the case somewhat figuratively, whenever the great depths of man's being have been broken up; whenever the volcanoes of the soul have sent forth their hidden stores of passion, both good and evil, blessing, cheering and invigorating, or, it may be, desolating, consuming and destroying, and seemingly threatening the very existence of the race, then have appeared, sooner or later, like the bow of heaven upon the retiring storm, those immortal works which genius has produced for the instruction of mankind. It is almost superfluous for me to mention as illus-

trations of this remark, the two great epics of antiquity, and the work of the Father of History. The Iliad of Homer, the Æneid of Virgil, and the History of Herodotus, present to us only the different aspects of the first great conflicts between Asiatic and European civilization. The narrative of Thucydides exhibits a subsequent scene in what may perhaps be termed the same great drama, when the west, triumphant over the east, is rent asunder by internal dissensions, and the power which had twice rolled back the invading hosts of Persia, is, in turn, completely broken in the harbor of Syracuse. Our great English epic bears upon it the most indubitable marks of the greatest convulsion that ever shook the English mind. The overthrow of the rebel angels, in the Sixth Book of the Paradise Lost, is but an apotheosis, if I may so say, of one of those dreadful struggles in which the iron squadrons of Cromwell, charging in the name of the Most High God, had swept from the fields of Naseby and Worcester the last hopes of the Stuarts.

The poem of Milton, appearing as it did just after the decline of the Puritan power in England, and coming, too, from the great champion of the party whose spirit it breathes, is a most remarkable symbol of the spirit of the age,—the most impressive lesson of all time perhaps, of what the human mind can do when it dares to burst the shackles of prescriptive bondage, and obey the laws which the Creator has given it.

But the classical literature of mankind is not composed exclusively of Iliads and Æneids, nor has



it been written entirely by Shakspeares and Miltons. In our vernacular tongue, for example, we have some of the happiest, if not the highest, efforts of genius, in forms suited to every age and capacity. For, I think, we must denominate those works as truly classical, which, for successive generations, have had a controlling and elevating influence, both as respects style and sentiment, upon a nation's character. The range of classical reading in our own vernacular is sufficiently extended to meet the demands of all grades of our public schools. No child can be found in an American school-room so young as to be beneath the influence which may be derived from some of the great masters of language and thought. The child who is taught, and *taught rightly*, a hymn of Mrs. Barbauld or Dr. Watts, becomes as really a classical scholar as he who has studied all the literature which was produced in the city of Minerva. Yes, gentlemen, the child of seven or ten years that can repeat understandingly the first of Watts's Moral Songs:—

" I sing the almighty power of God  
Which made the mountains rise ;  
That spread the flowing seas abroad,  
And built the lofty skies,"

has already lisp'd in loftier strains than if he were able to declare all the terrible consequences of the wrath of Achilles, or the various fortunes of the hero who, as the victim of fate, first came to Italy and the Lavinian shores.

I am quite conscious that in these remarks I am

indulging in what, perhaps, many will consider an unauthorized license, in speaking of Classical Studies as suited to the capacities of our lowest grades of schools. But, as I believe, I have Plato on my side, and as I suppose the culture of which I speak to be the peculiar property of no one dialect or language, but to be manifested in a greater or less degree in all "languages which Babel cleft the world into," I will venture to proceed to a more systematic discussion of my subject, premising only what all must, on a little reflection, regard as but a very simple postulate, and what I have already stated less concisely, that a Classical Literature is, to say the least, the heritage of the Englishman, the Frenchman, and the German, no less than it was of the Athenian, and the Roman; and that the refinement and elevation of mind which result from classical study and classical training, may be shared by those to whom the letters of Cadmus and the arrow-headed characters of the Birs Nemroud, are alike barbarian and unintelligible.

And, first of all, let me say that I by no means intend to speak lightly of the study of the Greek and Roman Classics. As a means of human culture, taken in their due proportion, they must "stand acknowledged while the world shall stand," as among the most effectual instruments of human improvement. We see in them, without doubt, the master-pieces of unaided human genius. But we honor them most when we give them their true position, and never do we so abuse them, as when we claim for them a position which they never

would have claimed for themselves, by holding them up as the ends, and not as the means, of our improvement. The Classics were made for man, and not man for the Classics.

I doubt if the history of the world presents to us a more melancholy waste of talent, than is found in the exclusive devotion to classical studies which has prevailed in some nations and at some periods. Take, for example, the course which has been quite extensively pursued in the great public schools of England. The only parallel that occurs to me, is that of which we read in sacred history, of the Jews, and some of their barbarian neighbors, causing their children to pass through fire to Moloch. The consequences of this classical idolatry, it will readily occur to you, have been most disastrous to the very pursuits which it was intended to promote. The world is comparatively little indebted, for its present classical knowledge, to the universities and schools which have sprung up upon the princely foundations of Englishmen. In England, it is true, in the absence of anything better, they have furnished the means of education to the higher classes of society. And it must be confessed that they have not succeeded in spoiling all the minds which they have undertaken to cultivate,—that, in spite of a course of training, both obsolete and absurd, there have been found a stubborn strength and hardihood in the national character, which have not only withstood the legitimate tendencies of the system, but have risen above it, in some instances, to a truly high and generous culture.