

The Classics Are for Everyone, Not Just Old, Dead, White Men

Yes, yes, and yes!

That was what I shouted, in the silence of my heart, when I finished Louis Markos' online [review](#) "How Classical Education Can Liberate Black America."

Earlier that same week, I'd read yet another account of an attack on the classics of Western civilization, the Great Books as they were once called, as racist and misogynistic. Though I can't recollect where I saw this piece, I was once again knocked for a loop, wondering if those who were panning Aristotle and Pascal had ever read any of the writers in this canon.

But then came the unexpected and mighty lift from Markos' praise for [*The Black Intellectual Tradition: Reading Freedom in Classical Literature*](#) (Classical Academic Press, 2022). Here Dr. Anika Prather and Dr. Angel Parham examine black intellectuals, several of them former slaves, who read the classics and became staunch advocates of an education grounded in these works.

Prather and Parham, who are themselves black, make a solid case for what some of us already knew, namely, that these classic works are not just for Europeans, or people with pale skin, or males. They belong to all humanity. Prather and Parham also show how American blacks like Frederick Douglass "devoured the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian classics and became a virtuous person and a strong communicator because of it."

"By telling the stories of a half dozen black writers whose

faith in Christ and study of the great books equipped them with the rational, rhetorical, and religious power to overcome oppression and fight for internal and external freedom,” Markos writes about *The Black Intellectual Tradition*, “Parham and Prather demonstrate that the writings of such dead white men as Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Virgil, Plutarch, Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Locke, and Mill comprise a legacy that transcends race, class, and sex. Such time-tested wisdom unites diverse groups of Americans by providing a common language and vision for human virtue and growth.”

Advocating for the thesis on which *The Black Intellectual Tradition* is based wasn't all rainbows and roses, Markos explains. During her graduate school years, Prather wanted to research the black classical tradition, studying the impact that classical education could have on modern black students. “Why are you researching classical education in the Black community?” came the response. “Don't you realize that those books are not for your people? This research topic is irrelevant to the Black community!”

Nevertheless, Prather persisted, turning up such luminaries as mid-18th century poet Phillis Wheatley, the early 20th century educator and author Anna Julia Cooper, and 18th century writer and abolitionist Olaudah Equiano, all of whom were born into slavery. Each of them explored, by one means or another, many of the classics, and at least one of them, [Anna Cooper](#), earned her doctorate at age 67 from The Sorbonne, University of Paris, later working long years as an educator and activist, believing that one of her missions was to bring a classical education to the underprivileged.

Another example of the black intellectual tradition engaging with classical texts is found in Professor David Blight's “Introduction” to [The Columbian Orator](#). This textbook sold more than 200,000 copies in the 19th century, and one of the copies, Blight tells us, was purchased for 50 cents by a 12-

year-old Frederick Douglass. Purchasing the book with money earned from shining shoes, Douglass came in contact with many classical references between its covers, later calling the book a “gem,” declaring, “Every opportunity I got, I used to read this book.”

As a teacher with 25 years of experience, I know firsthand that our young people—both black and white—are capable of learning more than we give them credit for, of gaining at least a cursory knowledge of the weighty issues at play in *Antigone* or appreciating the beauty of Christina Rossetti’s sonnet “[Remember](#).” Aesop’s *Fables*, the dialogues of Plato, the *Aeneid*, the plays of Sophocles and Shakespeare: these and many other works of great literature, philosophy, and history, if taught well, are within the comprehension of students.

As Prather notes on the [website](#) of Classical Academic Press, the publisher of this book:

When we place a classic text before Black students and then ask them what they feel about the text, we are communicating that we see them, we value them, and we hold high expectations of them to engage in the Great Conversation from which their ancestors had been excluded. We become a living example of God’s universal love for all of humanity. . . . As classical educators we invite all students to share in the feast of the canon and thus communicate to them that all of our students are welcomed to the Promised Land.

I’ve already ordered my copy and will, I’m sure, be returning to this topic soon.

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