

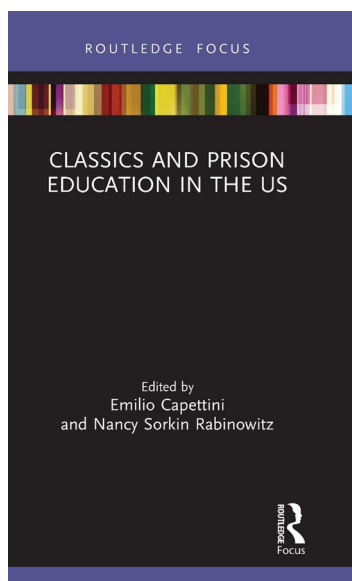
Book Review

Classics and Prison Education in the US

Capettini (E.), Sorkin Rabinowitz (N.) (eds.)
Pp. x + 135. Abingdon: Routledge, 2021. Cased,
£48.99. ISBN: 978-0-367-82061-9.

Gary Fisher and Lois Fisher

University of Derby, Derby, UK
G.Fisher@derby.ac.uk



Emilio Capettini and Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz's *Classics and Prison Education in the US* is the first entry in Routledge's 'Classics In and Out of the Academy' series. As suggested by the title, this edited volume presents a range of case studies and reflections on its contributors' experiences of teaching Classics within the prison system of the United States of America. It is thus an apt and well-handled entry to Routledge's series that aims to explore the ways in which classicists can engage alternative audiences, particularly those amongst historically marginalised sections of society.

The introduction and eleven chapters that comprise this book come from a variety of US-based academic contributors. The organisation of these entries is tripartite: first, the volume considers how classics courses designed for instruction on college campuses have adapted to their rehabilitative context; then, the diverse ways incarcerated persons engage with and approach classics is explored; and finally, there is a more broad reflection on the phenomenon of classics within a rehabilitative education. The chapters take a variety of approaches in exploring their material. Some, such as Elizabeth Bobrick's reflections on teaching Greek epic and tragedy within a maximum-security prison in Connecticut, adopt a highly narrative and conversational tone. This reflection is delivered in the first person and explores the thoughts and feelings of the author as they experience teaching Classics within what, to many readers, would be a highly alien environment. Others, such as Nancy Felson and Nebojša Todorović's evaluation of a course on Ancient Greek masculinity taught within a rehabilitative context, take a more theoretically grounded approach, rigorously examining the pedagogical

strategies that they deployed in their programme and assessing their effectiveness and outcomes.

As editors, Capettini and Rabinowitz do an effective job of embracing this heterogeneity of voice, while also using their introduction to amplify the common threads that emerge across the volume. They identify two key themes that connect the various chapters. The first concerns how the interactions generated through contact between a Classical curriculum and a marginalised, disempowered group (incarcerated persons) highlights the need for the discipline to reflect on how it may have historically been wielded as a tool of exclusion. The second concerns the practice of education in carceral or other similarly dehumanising contexts and the need to foster a space within those settings in which participants feel safe and empowered to voice their opinions. These two themes are present across all eleven chapters in some form or another and form the core thesis of the volume: that classics has the potential to be deeply meaningful to the education of incarcerated persons, despite its lack of presence in the typical prison curriculum.

The latter theme (education within a carceral context) may be of somewhat limited relevance to the bulk of classics educators, many of whom are likely to have little experience of operating within carceral or other such rehabilitative settings. Yet, to those classics practitioners who are active within such context, this will offer a valuable – and rare – treatment of this topic. It is the former theme (the incitement for the discipline to reflect on its implication in the hindering of the social advancement of marginalised groups) that is likely to be of greater interest to educators and therefore it is this which I shall spend the most time on. *Classics and Prison Education in the US* captures and presents numerous instances in which an incarcerated person interacts with the Classical canon in a fashion that invites reflection on how that canon has historically been deployed and the impact that may have on how it is received by diverse parties. For example, Alexandra Pappas' reflections on teaching a course on classical myth to a group of gender nonconforming students in the San Francisco County Jail captures how her class used the story of the rape of Philomena as a supportive tool to investigate and reflect on how they communicate their own trauma. In other cases, the classical materials being taught in these contexts receives provoking criticism from an incarcerated student, highlighting the unique perspective these individuals bring to the subject. For example, Elena Dugan and Mathura Umachandran's reflections on teaching a course on classical mythology in a maximum-security prison in New Jersey captures how the materials being taught elicited questions and challenges about the racialised exclusions that some members felt about the classical canon, with one member questioning 'Isn't this all white man's mythology?'. These diverse cases highlight the power of classics to elicit differing, and in some cases contradictory, reactions amongst different audiences.

This heterogeneity of response is of value to classics educators in of itself, as it invites reflection on how an individual's reception of the classics is influenced by their own context and experiences. Moreso, the conversational and narrative approach taken by many of the chapters ensures that they are accessible to a broad range of non-academic audiences. One could feasibly imagine case studies such of those presented in this volume being shared in the

classroom with more advanced, reflective classics students as a tool to invite them to critically interrogate how diverse voices might interact with the classics.

If there is any limitation to the utility of this volume, it is the US-centric lens through which the volume views the phenomenon of classics in prison settings. Every chapter examines a prison-based classics programme from the US. The introduction by Capettini and Rabinowitz leans into this fact, explicitly linking the findings of the following chapters to the specific history of slavery,

'New Jim Crow' war on drugs, and mass incarceration of the United States. This is no great limitation though. Factors such as these are not strictly particular to the United States and their discussion does not impede the accessibility or applicability of the text. Rather, it places the onus on classics professionals outside of the US to further investigate how incarcerated persons in their own context might interact differently with the classics.

doi: 10.1017/S2058631023000600