

The Case of the Reluctant Epistemologists

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AT THE END of Spring term 2008, I gave the students in my “Gender and Sexuality in the Ancient World” class their final exam.¹ The format was a take-home essay, in which I asked them to respond to an article by Amy Richlin (on which more below). The article lays out a range of ways to approach the topic of “women in antiquity”—different epistemologies, different attitudes. I asked them to explain what their own approach was, now that they’d studied the topic for a term, and what the implications were of that approach. Richlin helpfully centers her essay around the provocative question “why study the past?” and I asked them to use their self-classification as a way into considering this question.

It turns out that asking students to think about their own epistemology produces some really interesting results—not least making me think more clearly about my own. After I had read through the exams, I had an urge to chase those no-longer-students-of-mine out into the parking lots where they were packing up to leave for the summer, or in some cases for the rest of their lives. I wanted to continue the conversation just a bit longer, let them know what they’d taught me. I pictured us all out there in the early summer afternoon, getting at big issues and solving problems. Maybe Amy Richlin herself would stroll by and join the discussion! Or again, maybe they would lean on the accelerator and tear out of there. They’d had enough of college by that point in the year. So I stayed in my office. This essay is the best I could manage instead.

Before I get into the students' responses, a brief summary of Richlin's article² is necessary. In her essay, Richlin formulates a "taxonomy" of scholars working in the area of ancient women. She distinguishes what she calls optimists and pessimists based on each of two criteria: attitude (for which she uses lower case designations) and epistemology (where she capitalizes). Attitudinal optimists focus on good aspects of the past (women's power or "agency," or different and exciting models of sexuality); pessimists focus rather on the bad stuff (patriarchy, oppression, etc.). Either of these attitudes can be associated with each of the two possible epistemologies. Here "Optimists" are associated with grand theory, and believe that concepts like "patriarchy" or "homosexuality" have validity across time and space, while epistemological "Pessimists" are associated most closely with the ideas of Foucault and some other postmodern thinkers, and instead stress the differences between ancient and modern concepts and structures. The epistemological split maps onto, but is not coterminous with, the familiar essentialist-constructionist debate: Optimists would assume an essential universality of some concepts across time; Pessimists would counter that these concepts are everywhere and always socially constructed, and inextricably tied to their specific socio-historical context. While the helpful chart Richlin gives showing the possibilities assumes that all four theoretical combinations are possible, in fact both her essay and her chart place almost all the emphasis on two options: those who subscribe to an Optimistic epistemology with a pessimistic attitude (she includes herself in this category); and those happy Foucauldians, whose epistemology is Pessimistic, but whose attitude is optimistic.

Richlin goes on to lay out a number of related debates that have occurred in other fields, which she felt (in 1993) had not yet fully worked through the field of classics. In the light of her exploration of these problems in anthropology, history, and the study of "women in antiquity," Richlin makes a plea for moving beyond epistemological debates to a greater focus on a feminist agenda. Her assumption is that our political aspirations are generally similar, and thus we should ground ourselves in the more basic question of "why study the past?": "If feminists—optimists and pessimists alike—are all really hoping for better days ahead, how can we best use our study of the past to make that dream come true?"³

The final exam I gave my students, then, asked them to respond to the article by classifying themselves within Richlin's taxonomy (with some illustrative examples of how they read certain texts), and then by connecting that self-classification to her larger question of the potential value to the present of their study of the past. We had been discussing the essentialist-constructionist debate, particularly in the context of ancient sexuality, throughout the term, and I had made explicit for them the notion of optimistic and pessimistic attitudes as well. So by the time they

read Richlin's piece, they had a degree of familiarity with many of the concepts she discussed.

The first surprise I had was that the students were extremely resistant to defining their own approach to the texts. When pressed (it was, after all, their final exam—in this context, most students will do what you ask them to), marginally more identified themselves as epistemological Optimists than Pessimists, but there were just as many who refused to put themselves squarely into one or another of the camps. Even some of those who avowed one epistemology or the other wanted to problematize the categories. Several were unhappy with Richlin's terminology, and felt that the terms "Optimist" and "Pessimist" unfairly colored the kinds of inquiry they were meant to describe:⁴

I want to note my reluctance to consider an epistemology "pessimistic" only because it holds that we cannot reduce information about cultures in different places and from different eras to a single pattern that will always hold true. To me, this admission could be better termed "optimistic": to allow for fundamental discontinuities between societal structures is to avoid limiting humans to certain inescapable tendencies (Mary Ellen Stitt).

But many students felt strongly that limiting themselves to a single epistemology unduly constrained their readings of the texts: they found grand theory perfectly appropriate for some texts or topics, while a more Foucauldian approach had the edge in interpreting others. Those who took this tack saw no difficulty in picking and choosing the epistemology that worked best for the text at hand (like "a mercenary wandering from camp to camp" as one student colorfully put it): "In identifying as an Optimist or a Pessimist, one limits oneself from exploring all the possible interpretations of the classical past and forming the best and truest conclusions" (Jon Cossette).

My first reaction to this was surprise, along with the unsettling feeling that I had really failed to do my job. How could they not see the intellectual inconsistency they were espousing? Could they really read Ovid's story of Iphis and Ianthe *both* as confirmation of "female homosexuality" among the Romans *and* as evidence that the Romans could not think about sex without penetration? Was this relativism gone wild? Or was it simply developmentally appropriate, given their level of knowledge and position in the journey from novice to expert?

In fact, some students were disarmingly self-aware of their own tendencies, and keenly perceptive about the implications of their education and development:

When I first came to Carleton, I was firmly in the Grand Theory camp. This comes in part from my distaste for memorization and desire to shock and change the world. I believe that a liberal-arts education encourages this generalist view. My course selections danced through math, history,

English, religion, anthropology, and women's and gender studies, and I still enjoy applying insights gained in one discipline to a seemingly-unrelated subject (Carol Drysdale).

Carol went on to discuss the ways in which she came to understand and appreciate more complex theory as she began taking more advanced courses ("I learned the value of ... discovering what Grand Theory hides. My Transnational Feminism class, in particular, problematized the generalizing theory of International Feminism, which assumes that all women everywhere and every when have the same goals and values"). Beginning her college career as an Optimist, in other words, she had increasingly been won over by the Pessimist critique of that position. In spite of this interesting plotting of the two epistemological positions onto her own intellectual journey, she refused to abandon the earlier and claim the later. Her quite complex position was that one should move back and forth between the two: "In my opinion, historical specifics must be the base of Classics study, constantly reining in theories that would overlook certain groups and exceptions. However, the base alone only gives us disconnected facts instead of perspective or motivation."

Perhaps another reason the students resisted defining themselves as pure Optimists or Pessimists is because they shared Richlin's sense that the debate has indeed largely worked itself out: "The debate over grand theory ... strikes me as having served its purpose and run its course. It has raised the consciousness of scholars, and makes for less naïve analyses."⁵ In the realm of sexuality in particular, the debate continues.⁶ But my students seemed largely comfortable with a position that comprised elements of both essentialist and constructionist approaches. They could at once acknowledge a genetic basis to sexual preference (nearly all of them believe that sexual orientation is "not a choice" in our own society) while still understanding that individual identity is largely a product of cultural forces, and that the terms in which sexuality is understood at all are necessarily constrained by culture. This strikes me as just the sort of sophisticated convergence between pure essentialism and pure constructionism that Richlin seems to be advocating. I would call it constructionism with qualifications, while Richlin might call it "less naïve" grand theory, but it does all seem to be moving in the same general direction.⁷ One of the scientists in the class (a senior chemistry major) compared the combination of the two approaches to work in his own field:

[B]oth approaches, in a constant tension, are necessary for a clear-sighted approach to scholarly research ... To take a perhaps pithy example from my own field of chemistry, when an exact mathematical result is impossible to solve for, a nearly-exact result can be reached by making an initial approximation and augmenting it with a series of correcting, perturbative terms, each with an opposite sign of the term before it. As the answer converges

towards the real value, the effect of the corrections becomes smaller and smaller, until the answer adequately describes the reality of the situation. While it may seem naïve to assume a similar approach would hold in a situation so different, a tension between the grand theories of the essentialists and correcting criticisms, based on the complexities of the societal issues, is probably the only realistic way to reach meaningful conclusions in a cross-cultural analysis (Kit Zall).

My second surprise after the students' resistance to choosing an epistemology was the reasoning given by many who did make the choice. Not all of the students addressed this question. I hadn't asked them to *justify* their choice of epistemology, only to *illustrate* it and then reflect on its wider implications. In retrospect, putting the question this way reflected my own assumptions, which I myself had not reflected upon until I started reading their responses. I identify myself (and I had shared this with the class) as a Pessimist in epistemology, and I have always assumed that I did so because I considered that this approach yielded the best and most convincing possible interpretations of the ancient evidence I was most familiar with. How on earth else would you go about it? In not even considering that there could be other ways to think about which epistemology you might subscribe to, I was of course leaping to that always dangerous conclusion that my students are just like me. You would think that after eighteen years of much evidence to the contrary I would have gotten over this one, but I still find myself slipping into it from time to time, and this was certainly one of those occasions.

What became clear from the student responses was that there were other powerful factors driving this decision, and of course as soon as I started seeing them, I realized that, as a good Pessimist, I should always have expected such forces and indeed was subject to them myself. Rather than my students being just like me, maybe I was just like them!

Richlin's essay nicely opens the door for students to think about these factors, and I am somewhat amazed that after teaching the piece for years, I had failed to follow out its implications for my own views before. For while she does not say it explicitly, much of Richlin's argument implies that her allegiance to grand theory is a product of her political agenda:

If you are interested in a construct like "patriarchy" and want to test how long it has gone on, it is helpful to have as much information as you can get about cultures two thousand years in the past ... If we abandon a model that charts a pattern over long periods of time, if each culture is distinct, then time collapses into space and classics becomes a branch of anthropology ... Our only special claim was that Greece and Rome themselves were somehow important, either because of their intrinsic worth or because of their putative status as the origin of Western culture. When such claims are abandoned or rejected, what does classics have to offer?⁸

This is not a purely rhetorical question, and Richlin goes on to suggest a couple of answers. But it's not hard to see how students might read the paragraph as implying that the feminist agenda (investigating "patriarchy") and the worth of the study of classics itself are both arguably dependent upon an Optimistic epistemology. Restricting the field to investigating the "local/historical differences" of the ancient world throws both into question. Similarly, her account of one critique of grand theory (what she calls the "wrong because depressing" argument) also implies that political implications drive decisions about epistemology on the other side as well: "The strength of the anti-essentialist reaction seems to come partly from a feeling of revulsion against an idea that was for so long used against women ... Thus some feminists have claimed ... that the essentialist concept of gender is a trap for women ..."

I'll return to the question of the worth of classics, which frankly is something that seems to exercise my students far less than it does me. But the idea of determining an epistemology based on the political effectiveness of the data it recovers struck me, at first, as mildly scandalous. I was not alone in that reaction, yet neither was it a majority view; a number of students were quite happy to justify their choice of an epistemology based on the politics of its results. One senior women's studies concentrator, for instance, gave articulate voice to her struggles as she shifted epistemologies in this context:

In the broader debate in feminist scholarship, I am fairly critical of grand theory. I do not accept the universality of concepts like "patriarchy" and am cognizant of the socially and historically constructed nature of gender and sexual identity ... Richlin's article challenged me to examine why it is that I am more willing to accept grand theory when studying the ancient past than when studying other cultures (Maya Dusenbery).

Maya noted (following Richlin) the peculiar status of the "ethnographer's dilemma" within classics: it doesn't seem so dangerous to "speak for" these women when they can no longer speak for themselves. She concluded, "ultimately, I choose an Optimistic epistemology and pessimistic attitude simply because to me it seems like the best way to gain something useful for the present from our study of the past."

Several of those who identified themselves as Pessimists, also, justified their choice on the basis of the political implications of the knowledge they gained from it. Some pointed out the usefulness of calling into question areas perceived by our own culture as "natural:"

If an evolutionary psychologist claims that men are naturally more inclined to have affairs and crave sex and women are naturally more inclined to want a family and abstain from sex and that is why our culture glorifies men who have affairs, I think it is important to have a classicist who can

point to classical Athens and say “here is a society where they believed the opposite ...” Perhaps there is an undercurrent of sexism in evolutionary psychology that needs to be addressed or perhaps we are not so much the slaves of our biological history as we might believe (Emily Edmond).

Other students based their choice not explicitly on politics, but some other productive outcome: “I put myself in this group [the Pessimists] not due to my opinion on how much knowledge is able to be gained, but rather because I believe that the knowledge gained through this perspective is more crucial to my understanding of the culture” (Jack Frechette). A young woman from Malaysia situated her Pessimism in her experience of being “essentialized” by the American students who had never met anyone from a Muslim culture. Yet for her, an optimistic attitude was a necessary corrective to a broad-based modern flaw:

I study the texts with an intent to recover what can be emulated or perhaps to recoup what can be recouped from the past. This is not simply because I am “romantic,” “cheerful,” or “upbeat” as some of my critics may say (Richlin, 274). It is because we are a narcissistic society and we seem to find it difficult to believe that we may have anything to learn from societies of the past (Dashini Jeyathurai).

Alongside these various practical motivations was another set of justifications based on emotional response. While this was explicitly articulated by only a couple of students, many of the essays implied a curious split between the pleasures offered by adopting the two perspectives: Pessimistic epistemology appealed to the intellect, while Optimistic appealed to the emotions.

I began to get a sense of this split between intellect and emotion from what looked like an assumption underlying many responses that the Pessimistic epistemology was somehow more intellectually sophisticated than the Optimistic. Spotting similarities to their own culture seemed easier, and therefore somewhat suspect, to the students. One wondered if she might characterize her rejection of Optimism as “wrong because obvious:”

If I dig deep, I realize that I reject some essentialist readings because they are too clear and too well-known. Of course, there was patriarchal control of language and the female body in classical cultures, and much of that patriarchy continues (in different forms) today. Does it help to keep re-enunciating that oppression, or would we be better served looking for nuances and variations on the same old themes? (Rachel Carroll)¹⁰

With that suspicion came the sense that it might be fine for an expert like Amy Richlin to point to large historical patterns, but since the students lacked her extensive knowledge of particulars they might well be led into misconceptions if they were to try the same thing. In the class discussion that preceded their writing of the final essay, some students admitted to

feeling that an Optimistic epistemology could actually be dangerous for novices.

But the corresponding sense that Optimistic epistemology had more to do with the emotions came from two students in particular, who independently voiced a striking sense of schizophrenia over the issue. One was Rachel, quoted above, who put it this way: “It would also be more accurate to place myself twice on her (O)ptimistic/(P)essimistic chart. The first placement represents how I, as a responsible literary scholar, theoretically want to read, while the other placement represents how I actually read. *The latter reading may include more emotion than analysis*, but it is also a more honest representation of how I understand gender and sexuality in classical texts” [emphasis mine]. Heather Stevick, a sophomore Classics major, made a similar distinction: “after days of failing to write this essay, I understood; I am a public Pessimist and a private Optimist. What I mean by this is that when I am feeling rational and academic, I read things Pessimistically and I write essays. When I am feeling emotional and self-reflective, I read things Optimistically and write poetry.”

Particularly resonant for me in Heather’s essay was the section she wrote on drama. Here, I recognized my own struggles with the split between the project of excavating the original sense of the plays, with the deepest understanding possible of their complete context, and the texts as living literature, still worth performing:

We can discuss [plays] in class and give a Pessimistic analysis, but although I think this is the best way to understand the play as a classical artifact, it fails to do justice to the play as a play, which ought to be continually re-interpreted by new actors and audience members. If you come away unmoved, if you are able to observe the Other as Other, then the play has failed. It is meant to affect you if you open up and let it ... (Heather Stevick)

I had always thought of this as an “outreach” issue rather than an epistemological one, but of course part of Richlin’s point is exactly about “outreach:” “The one thing of which I am sure is that we cannot contribute to a revolution if we speak only to each other and in very difficult language.”¹¹

While Heather characterized her emotional response as intensely personal (she was in fact outraged at the proposition that education or scholarship should have anything to do with the political), other students found that their emotional connection to the ancient material did in fact have wider implications. For Maya, as for Richlin, the anger inspired by an Optimistic reading of the material was a great part of the political value of looking at the texts at all, and drove her final answer to the question of “why study the past?”

My interest in the past stems mainly from a desire to illuminate problems with our own society—to fan the flame of anger and indignation by noting

similarities between our own “advanced” society and “backward” societies long ago in order to spur societal change ... My purpose is not so much to point out how misogynistic *they were* but rather to highlight how misogynistic *we still are* (Maya Dusenbery, emphasis in original).

The connection between emotion and (feminist) politics is not, perhaps, so surprising.¹² But more generally, the sense that an Optimistic epistemological stance allows for a more immediate, emotionally powerful experience of the ancient world brought me back forcibly to my own college days, and reminded me why I had fallen in love with classics to begin with. Those monumental, ancient, and alien texts had, astonishingly, kept offering glimpses of familiar human passions. It was addicting. I studied the past because I couldn’t stop myself. But that pleasurable addiction was, it turned out, something of a gateway drug to the “headier” (as it were) pleasure I discovered in graduate school and beyond of tracing the bizarre differences between the ancient and the modern.

So when, inspired by the thoughtfulness of my students, I take a step back and try to reflect upon my own attitudes and practice, a number of things come together. I have to acknowledge the emotional charge that underlies and energizes my relationship to the ancient world. The intellectual pleasure of reading for clues to the particular structures of gender and sexuality in classical Athens or late Republican Rome co-exists, for me, with a (naïve and romantic, admittedly) attachment to those texts. When I read a particularly beautiful line of Virgil, I seem to recognize (like one who sees, or thinks she sees, the new moon rising through cloud) the same pleasure his first audience felt hearing those words; and the pleasure felt by Petrarch, and Milton, and generations of readers since. Yes, my brain tells me, these were mostly elite men, and yes, the educational system that allowed some individuals to feel the same thrill I feel was certainly problematic and contributed to structures of power and oppression. But isn’t the poetry, nonetheless, beautiful?

Perhaps this alternating current, that shifts continually back and forth between seeing difference and seeing patterns of similarity, or between seeing the admirable and the appalling aspects of the world we study, is simply part of the educational project in general. Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* made the distinction between wit and judgment along just these lines: “for *wit* lying most in the assemblage of *ideas*, and putting those together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity ... judgment, on the contrary, lies quite on the other side, in separating carefully one from another, *ideas* wherein can be found the least difference, thereby to avoid being misled by similitude, and by affinity to take one thing for another.”¹³ For Locke, wit is associated with art, and judgment with philosophy. Plato, on the other hand,

claimed both *diairesis* and *sunagōgē*, division and collection, for dialectic.¹⁴ It seems to me that both are the province of the liberal arts, and both are qualities I would like to nurture in my students and strive for in myself. For helping me to that understanding, I thank both Amy Richlin and my remarkable students.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Amy Richlin, who cheerfully read and commented on a draft of this essay, as well as Rachel Carroll, Jon Cosette, Maya Dusenbery, Carol Drysdale, Emily Edmond, Jack Frechette, Dashini Jeyathurai, Dan Schillinger, Heather Stevick, Mary Ellen Stitt, and Kit Zall, who allowed me to use their names and quotations from their final exams. This essay could not have been written without them and all of the students in Classics 114 Spring 2008.

2. Amy Richlin, "The Ethnographer's Dilemma and the Dream of a Lost Golden Age," in *Feminist Theory and the Classics*, ed. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz and Amy Richlin (New York: Routledge, 1993): 272-304.

3. *Ibid.*, 294.

4. One particularly sophisticated critique claimed that Richlin's very use of attitudinal terms to describe epistemologies implied (what she would have called) a Pessimistic epistemological outlook: that moral beliefs or values determined truth. Thus, while she claimed to be an epistemological Optimist, her very language betrayed her as an epistemological Pessimist!

5. Richlin, 280.

6. For example, Marilyn B. Skinner, *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 2005) is self-consciously constructionist; Thomas K. Hubbard, *Homosexuality in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook of Basic Documents* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2003) has an essentialist perspective.

7. Marilyn B. Skinner, "The Sexuality Wars in Contemporary Classical Scholarship," *Thamyris* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 103-123 and Ruth Mazo Karras, "Active/Passive, Acts/Passions: Greek and Roman Sexualities," *American Historical Review* 105, no. 4 (October 2000): 1250-1265 both imply the value of the thoughtful combination of approaches.

8. Richlin, 277.

9. *Ibid.*, 276.

10. I can't help noting here that during the whole of the term, the Democratic primary election battle between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama was ongoing. I hear in a comment like Rachel's the yearning for a post-partisan end to old battles that seemed so much a part of that campaign.

11. Richlin, 294.

12. See, for example, Caroline Ramazanođlu with J. Holland, *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices* (London, U.K.: Sage Publications, 2002), 99.

13. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II (London, U.K., 1690).

14. Plato *Phaedrus* 266b.