

## Research Article

# *tristia ex Dorcestria*: reflections on a redundancy process, and a comment on the writing of *Manifesto*

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### Abstract

This reflective essay responds to current redundancies in the sector of Classics teaching. *tristia ex Dorcestria* recounts the author's near-miss experience of redundancy and considers the place of Classical subjects in the twenty-first-century curriculum. Written from the intersectional perspective of a Classics teacher, researcher and poet, the piece discusses the composition of the award-winning poem *Manifesto*, recipient of the Classical Association's 2025 Write-Speak-Design Prize, and explores how creative practice became a means of transforming professional loss into pedagogical insight. Drawing on the metaphor of Ovidian exile, the essay situates one teacher's story within a broader context of national uncertainty about the value and future of Classics. The essay demonstrates that creative practice can function both as personal catharsis and as a mode of critical reflection, enabling educators to reimagine their role and reconnect with the emotional and ethical dimensions of ancient study. The accompanying poem models how teachers might use creative responses to engage students with questions of power, justice, and identity, and to affirm the continuing relevance of the ancient world in addressing modern crises, not least those relating to war and violence, marginalisation, and democracy.

**Keywords:** creative practice; redundancy; poetry

### *alea iacta est*

In January 2024, less than 16 months after taking up my first position as a Teacher of Classics at one of the South West's most prestigious boarding schools – one whose very livelihood had been secured, in large part, by its collection of Ancient Assyrian antiquities – I received an email from the then headmaster, inviting me to a meeting to discuss the future of Classics teaching at the school. Young, naïve, and unaccustomed to institutional legalese, I read this email as a genuine invitation to discuss several new initiatives I had proposed: increased digital outreach; an evening lecture series; and extension opportunities for able Classics students to study for the Intermediate Certificate in Classical Greek (ICCG). The headmaster and I had happened to discuss the latter enthusiastically over lunch the previous week.

At the least, I thought the invitation to be a check-in from the headmaster as I approached the three-quarters point of my probationary 24-month contract, perhaps even to discuss my transition to permanent member of staff. With excitement and gratitude for the invitation, I quickly sent a reply, thanking him for the opportunity, but expressing regret that, due to my pre-authorised absence, I would be unable to make the proposed date. I

suggested that we could rearrange the meeting for my return on the following Monday.

The headmaster's reply to my request revealed that his invitation was not all that it had seemed. It quickly became apparent that this meeting not only had to happen in the same week, but that he would be accompanied by the head of HR, and that my attendance was not desirable, but urgent. I found myself in the meeting the next day, bewildered, unprepared, and with hindsight, incredibly grateful for a colleague's quiet insistence that I should be accompanied by a union representative.

I cannot tell you exactly what happened within that meeting; not because I feel any sense of obligation to discretion, nor because I almost fainted directly afterwards. Instead, I cannot recall clearly, because the entire affair was conducted according to a script, which described the 'at risk' process for redundancy in terms that no one seemed to be able to explain to me in a manner relevant to my individual situation.

What I later pieced together was that, 'as a starting point', the school's entire Greek offering and Latin, from A-level, were to be cut from the curriculum from September 2024 for reasons of 'poor financial viability' and a 'lack of modern relevance'. No evidence was given to account for either of these claims, despite my desperate requests for clarification. There would be no period of staff nor pupil or parent consultation about this decision. Instead, the subjects were to slip out silently, cut by stealth. No regard was paid to my plea to consider the pedagogical cost. I can only imagine that, whilst the imposition of VAT on independent sector school

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fees had not yet taken effect, its shadow was already lurking at the door. Indeed, the headmaster, his own passion for Classical languages voiced just days before, seemed to have been reduced to an effigy enacting a movement controlled by his Governors' fear. Quick targets had been sought for immediate financial gain, and someone had decided that Classical subjects were the most expendable.

It also emerged that, between myself and the one other full-time member of the department at the time, one of us would have to leave. The other would carry the existing Latin and Greek pupils through to the end of their current teaching cycles and then would teach Classics and Latin up to GCSE-level only. I was therefore to be thrust into a sudden and grotesque public reality show: a Classics-department version of *The Apprentice* final, where one teacher would be hired, and one fired, according to an unknown set of criteria, later to emerge as a largely arbitrary 'skills matrix'. From this moment on, I was part of a 'redundancy selection exercise', where I would be watched and assessed as to whether I should be hired for a job that I was already doing. I was also reminded that I should not forget that I was still on probation; I would receive no redundancy pay were I to be made redundant, and no matter the outcome of the redundancy process, my notice could still be served at any time. Before I could ask any more questions, the bell rang, and I was asked to return to teach the Year 11 Latin class. They were not to be told that their option to take Latin further had just vanished.

### tristia

I had two options: walk away right then, applying for new jobs, knowing that on every score I was already doomed – 'last in, first out'; with no formal teaching qualifications; no successful probation; no exam results yet to prove my 'added value' – or begin a Herculean task of staying and fighting not only for my job, but for the value of our subject. I did not know what I would choose until I left for Cambridge the next day, where, through tears, I received a scholarship celebrating the success of my MPhil research. The irony was gut-wrenchingly brutal, but it was, in part, a necessary reminder that all hope was not lost; my voice still had value.

January 2024 thus became a moment not only of immense personal devastation, but also of professional clarity. Naivety ripped away, I saw first-hand how precariously our subject exists on the boundaries of modern education. And I began to write. The poems that emerged were not only forms of personal protest, but a defence of what I believe Classics education can and must be in our present moment. As Ovid, exiled from Rome, wrote from the margins, stripped of his position and identity, I wrote, grieving the loss of my home: not a city, but a classroom; my space where ancient voices were safely reanimated, reinterpreted and reclaimed. Finding myself caught between *furor* and *pietas*, I dared to express hope that our discipline still has value for its ability to offer insight into the experiences of exile, marginalisation, and resistance to tyranny.

However, just like the treasured antiquities of our discipline, my words lay forgotten and buried for some time. Lost in the labyrinthine complex of my OneDrive, they tacitly witnessed my drawn-out redundancy process, several appeal processes, and more

than 6 months of pain and uncertainty, until I unexpectedly found myself back in the classroom in September 2024. Through some favour bestowed on me by an unknown god, or perhaps, as I was told by my colleagues, because I was 'young, unqualified, and cheap', I got the job. But I returned to ruins. I now had to face a new, practically Sisyphean, labour: rebuilding what was left of the department from the ashes. Barely 2 years into my teaching career, I was consigned to a dingy classroom on the edge of the school site with beaten-up walls, a whiteboard with a hole in the middle, no schemes of work, and no resources, and I felt completely alone.

At INSET talks that September, overwhelmed and convinced that I was a Patroclus in Achillean armour, fated to fail, and retained merely as a vehicle to justify the inevitable erasure of the department altogether, I was defensive. My mind saw Latin in every word. I could have even explained how the health and safety talk on avoiding microwave fires might connect to Classics teaching. But one presentation that year really lodged in my brain: a lecture on the rise of Andrew Tate, TikTok, and their part in fuelling a teenage trend towards 'toxic masculinity', as well as contemporary online glorification of aspects of the Roman Empire, including slavery and colonisation. The speaker deigned to describe our young, predominantly white, male students as experiencing a culture of 'regression' towards the imperialist and suppressive autocratic ideals of Ancient Rome. Around me, I could see staff nodding knowingly. My stomach turned. Is this, I thought, all that Rome has become?

Certainly, every day Classicists must reckon with the dangerous allure of imperial narratives. But if our students idolise emperors for their strength without understanding their cruelty, we have failed to teach the nuances of Ancient History. If their algorithms reward narratives of conquest and domination and punish diversity, equality and empathy, our discipline is neither responsible nor irrelevant. Instead, it is more vital than ever. We can model how autocratic power can be interrogated, not emulated.

### ubi dolor, ibi amor

Needless to say, the embers of my rage became fierce flames. My words, once unformed clay tossed aside, started to become firm and incisive, and I chipped away at them until they took shape into the form they are today. By day, I wrote never-ending lesson plans and resources. By night, I turned my refusal to surrender Rome to its tyrants into passionate poetry. The rhythm of these words became the music which gave me the strength to walk from my accommodation into the classroom. When I felt fraudulent, I recited the lines in my head. And when, in January 2025, I decided to enter some of my pupils' work into the Classical Association's 2025 Write-Speak-Design competition, which asked entrants to discuss the relevance of Classics today, I recklessly entered my own *Manifesto* into the Over-25s category. It was my 25th birthday.

I never expected it to win, but I'm glad it did. It is my justification for the value of our subjects within the curriculum in this difficult time for Classics teaching nationally. Since performing it back in March at the Classical Association's annual awards ceremony, I have been greatly comforted, and pained, by the

number of teachers who have resonated with its contents. It has become clear to me that, whilst my poem emerged in an effort to process my own experiences, it speaks to the wider systemic crisis and misunderstanding around the 'value' of Classics teaching.

There is no doubt that, in the independent sector, this crisis has been catalysed by the extension of VAT to private school fees, which had chilling effects even before its implementation. Anticipating financial shortfalls that still may not come, many schools reassessed their subject offerings through starkly simplistic and reductionist utilitarian lenses. Classical Languages and Classical Civilisation and Ancient History courses have now become especially vulnerable, perceived as expendable, expensive, and elitist. It is my understanding that, in the last year, more than 10 independent schools have ceased to teach Latin or made cuts to their Classics department(s). As in my own experience, many of these cuts happened silently, suddenly, and left both students and teachers adrift. I have no doubt that there will be more to come. Following the cessation of the Latin Excellence Programme earlier this year, the fight to keep Latin in the state sector is also straining, although I am an avid supporter of the work of Classics for All, the Classical Association, and programmes such as Vocabulous, all trying their best to remedy this.

To me, the irony, once again, is stark. Just when the world seems to need Classics most – to interrogate political propaganda, issues of democracy, tyranny, gender, and victimisation and discuss resistance in action, philosophy, art, and literature – it is being discarded. As you read this today, I hope my words may also resonate with you, and that they might offer some sympathy, expressing something of the pain of the many Classics teachers in both the state and private sectors who have faced redundancy in recent years, or who go on fighting for our subjects in increasingly hostile and financially pressured systems, which find little place to understand the gifts that a Classical education can bestow.

I can offer no further answers as to what it means to teach Classics in this peculiar age; exhausted from teaching in an environment where I felt betrayed, cheap, and in which I was not seen as a pedagogical asset but merely a pawn in someone else's financial game, in June 2025 I chose to sacrifice what I had built and stepped away from teaching, back into research. It pains me greatly to know that this decision may have extinguished even more opportunities for pupils to learn Classics and Latin, and I continue to wrestle with the deep hypocrisy of admitting that I was chosen to stay, and yet that I chose to go.

But it took Patroclus' death for Achilles to fight. So, I implore you to fight. I still believe wholeheartedly in the power, relevance, and diverse gifts of Classics education. Despite the immense pain of my experiences, my love of our discipline has only grown stronger. That which I hope for more than anything is open and honest communication between Classics teachers, policymakers and school leaders about the true value of our discipline today. I hope that, by working together, we can continue to bring alive both the warnings and wonder of Ancient Civilisations and in so doing build our pupils into emotionally mature, discerning, and resilient citizens. By continuing to share the stories that they have tried to silence, I – foolishly – dare to hope that our leaders may start to listen too.

*The following poem grew directly out of the redundancy process described above and was the winning entry in the Classical Association's 2025 Write-Speak-Design Competition in the Over 25s category. It was written to articulate my beliefs about the importance of including Classical subjects in school curricula today. I invite all to read it, either as a vehicle for personal reflection or as a resource that could stimulate further conversations in the classroom.*

### **Manifesto, by Catherine Perkins**

Tate. Trump. Putin.

Tate. Trump. Putin.

Do you hear the noise of the men that our boys watch on their screens with eyes that gleam?

Men who march on through marble halls,

Whose fists clench as the senate falls into submission.

It's the fall of democracy and the rise of autocracy,  
And the girls, with derision, look to me to allay their fear.

But all I can find, all I see in my mind

Are all the men that came before.

Statues in stone, wreaths and thrones.

Emperors who took more and more.

Here Caligula, no wrong in his eyes,  
Took all that he could with unceasing pride.

And Nero, wine pumping his veins,

Left Rome to crumble as he played his refrains.

Crassus, the golden, with wealth more than measure,

Tarquin the Proud: rape was his pleasure.

Sulla, who carved out his name with blood,

Caesar, who took what the Senate withstood.

And Augustus, who fashioned himself as divine,

then locked out the lovers who stepped out of line.

So how can I blame them,

When these men that we show them

And the power that they had then

Form the foundations of who we've become?

The die has been cast, the Rubicon crossed,

But what is their power? And what is its cost?

Oh it pulls like a vortex, it spins like a curse:

For nothing is worse than men lost in echoes, their own voices loud:

Narcissism reflected in every crowd.

And I burn with such fury, such fire

That this is their "Roman Empire."

All is built on conquest and chains,

Glory is hollow and cruelty reigns.

So, I wonder: do I stand and surrender?

Is this the Rome we must remember?

Do I hand over my standards and give in to anger?

No! I must hold on;

I must be strong

And look to the books  
That tell what they took:  
And show that the fall of democracy and the  
Rise of autocracy is the birth of philosophy.

So, let's hear the cries of Catullus, the real truth  
That love is love is love is love,  
And has always burned bright through history's youth.  
The voice of Sappho, whose verses still whisper  
A song for the lost, the lover, the sister.  
Of Cornelia, teacher of Rome's rebel sons,  
Of Hypatia, killed when her wisdom won.  
Of these women whose words they tried to erase,  
But whose echoes still thunder in time and in space.

For when the swords of men gleam,  
It's the poets who dream.  
It's the thinkers who stand and defy.  
It's the women who live, who bear, who survive.

So though you say I don't matter, and that my language is  
dust,  
That it's buried in ash, corroded with rust;  
That I teach boys men rise by crushing the weak  
And that I am responsible for the hate that they speak;  
When you say that it's time for me to go  
For all that I've done to be laid low;  
That Tik Tok, Tik Tok,  
It's the fate of the clock;  
I say: let's turn back time,  
Look beyond purple and wine.  
We can seek out the voices and learn from the choices of the  
people in pain  
Who cried time and again

For an end to the wars,  
And a stop to the scores  
Of victory, of dominion, of gain.

And I'll echo the sage  
Who sang of a golden age  
Of freedom, of safety, of peace.  
It's not just conquest, not just war,  
But the unlocking of minds who yearn for more.

For what empire really stands when it silences song?  
When women are shamed for just being strong? When  
it severs the hands that painted its past,  
When it censors the poets, the dreamers, and casts  
Out the innocent, lives never begun,  
Love is pushed into shadows, afraid to be won.  
Afraid of the free, the tyrants rewrote what our past ought to  
be.

Now in a world where truth's twisted and stories sold, we  
must stand tall, our voices bold.  
So though you say I don't matter,

And my life has been shattered,  
I will stand and fight for the right to reclaim the voices,  
rediscover the past,  
And make sure that the echoes of women will last.  
To learn not from tyrants, but those who defied,  
Who stood against emperors, refused to comply.

For in the rise of autocracy and the fall of democracy,  
What's Classics is power; the power to see that in the cycles  
of history, we still have hope to break free.