

Examining Thomas Jefferson's Use of the Classics in Query XIV to Support White Supremacy

Historians of late eighteenth-century America have argued for the past century about whether the classics – i.e., Greek and Roman authors from antiquity – were significant causes of change in the period. When considering all the “founding fathers” during revolutionary and antebellum America, some scholars have argued that the classics were prescriptive, others have argued that they were only illustrative. Recent scholarship has narrowed its focus to specific “founding fathers” and, while not an explicit intention, has made it easier to determine how each individual eighteenth-century figure was “in dialogue” with classical authors. Thomas Jefferson, considered one of the United States’ greatest founders, was a true classicist who read ancient texts in their original language. Despite this, Jefferson utilized the classics differently in his public life than in private, and scholarship has been trying to understand how Jefferson gathered “influence” from the classics.

This paper will examine how Thomas Jefferson utilizes ancient Greco-Roman texts and culture in Query XIV of his *Notes on the State of Virginia* in order to support views of white supremacy and anti-“racial mixing.” The only book published by Jefferson was his *Notes*, and thus can be used to elucidate his self-crafted public persona. Query XIV in Jefferson’s *Notes* mainly deals with “Laws,” but Jefferson compares ancient and modern slavery in a section of this query. As Caroline Winterer says, “what was new about Jefferson’s analysis of ancient slavery in the *Notes* was his attention to race: his ancient slaves were ‘whites.’” (Winterer 2011, 387). The reason why Jefferson had his ancient slaves be white has not been elaborated upon in detail. I argue that he molded the ancient slaves of Greece and Rome into “whites” in order to persuade an audience that was particularly receptive to classical examples. This paper will bring

a classicist's perspective into a discussion which has previously lacked it. In a time when modern Americans are reevaluating these men whom we call the "founding fathers," then it is all the more important for classics to participate in that discussion.

Bibliography

- Egerton, R. Douglas. 2009. "Race and slavery in the era of Jefferson." In *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Jefferson*, edited by Frank Shuffelton, 73-82. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jefferson, Thomas. 1982. *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Edited by Peden William. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Onuf, Peter S., and Nicholas P. Cole, eds. 2011. *Thomas Jefferson, the Classical World, and Early America*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Winterer, Caroline. 2002. *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910*. Baltimore: John's Hopkins University Press.
- . 2011. "Thomas Jefferson and the Ancient World." In *A Companion to Thomas Jefferson*, edited by Francis D. Cogliano, 380–396. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.