

Another Addition to the Canon: *The Latinist*, by Mark Prins

The more the discipline of Classics is forced into retreat in academia, the greater the interest in it seems to be in popular novels. Joining novels such as Phoebe Wynn's *Madam* (2021) Alex Michaelides' *The Maidens* (2021) and Clare Pollard's *Delphi* (2022) comes the latest addition to the canon: Mark Prins' *The Latinist* (2022), which shares many common tropes about Classics with these recent novels. It is set in Oxford, imagined as the epicentre of Classics and elitism ever since Thomas Hardy's day. Its anti-hero, Christopher Eccles, an eminent and entitled don with an appetite for cigarettes and alcohol, is the mentor of Tessa, a graduate student, and his obsessive, twisted love for her threatens to destroy her. The story of Apollo and Daphne shapes the novel's narrative, and the interventions of Chris in Tessa's life recall the ways in which the gods of mythology continually interfere in human lives with deleterious results. Perhaps because it is such a rare discipline these days, Classics has acquired a certain glamour for modern readers in recent decades, and many recent novels, at least since Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*, colour their narratives with the technical vocabulary of the discipline to amplify its air of mystique. This can be done very jarringly (at least for professional insiders), but Prins' knowledge of some technical aspects of the discipline is deployed cleverly and effectively. His readers are also given a captivating account of the difficulty and satisfaction attendant on translation and on archaeological excavation: the unironic, old fashioned romantic elitism about the discipline as 'speaking the ineffable,' and 'merging with what is unchanging and unchangeable in life' will appeal not appeal to everyone, especially professionals trying to move their discipline away from its elitist past, but it is very much in tune with the image of the discipline in many recent popular novels ever since *The Secret History*. Prins is also especially convincing about the precarious lives of graduate students trying to forge a path to permanent employment and the vanity of established scholars. A central paradox in modern novels about Classics is that though the subject is often regarded as glamorous and even a little wicked, it is simultaneously associated with decay and death. The tendency is especially notable in Joanne

Harris' novels about St Oswald's Grammar, but even in *The Latinist*, the highly assured figure of Eccles is wrapped in gentle images of decay: his blazer smells of tobacco, his shoulders are covered with dandruff, he is beginning to age and he is essentially alone in the world: Tessa too will ultimately be on her own, again reflecting the trope of the solitary classicist which also permeates many modern narratives.

Bibliography

Harris, Joanne (2009) *Gentlemen and Players*. New York: Harper Collins.

Michaelides, Alex (2021) *The Maidens*. New York: Celadon.

Pollard, Clare (2022) *Delphi*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Prins, Mark (2022) *The Latinist*. New York: W.W.Norton

Tartt, Donna, *The Secret History*. New York: Knopf.

Wynne, Phoebe (2021) *Madam*. New York: St Martin's Press.