

Cultural Capital, the Classics, and the Creation of the Southern Planter Class

On May 1, 1699, five young William and Mary students bravely faced an audience made up of the Royal Governor, the Governor's Council, and the entire House of Burgesses. The young orators were appealing to the Virginia colonial government and its most prominent aristocrats for financial support for the fledgling new college. These future aristocrats emphasized the role of classics in their appeal: "By the help of Learning, wee may Converse with the most Excelent men of all ages, with the Sublime Philosopher Plato. with the Prince of Philosophers Aristotle, with the most Christian Philosopher Seneca, with Tully the Master of Rethorick, & unexhausted Fountaine of Eloquence, with Livy that Notable Historian, & with Tacitus the Polititian in accord with the Muses w^{ch} Can furnish us with all kinds of Learning & Polite Literature" ("Speeches" 1699). Their appeal was a success. The college would move to Williamsburg and receive public support to continue educating the sons of Virginia planters.

Classics had been the heart of education among social elites in Europe and North America at least since the renaissance, but the tradition would have particular importance in the South. From such early planters as William Byrd II to such founding fathers as Jefferson and Madison, to planters at the end of the antebellum period, knowledge of classical languages and the history of classical antiquity was a given and participation in the political discourse of the social and political elite assumed a fairly expansive background in classics.

A planter was expected to be certain kind of person, possess certain kinds of tastes, and be exposed to certain kinds of learning. Those practices and ideas constitute what Pierre Bourdieu called cultural capital. Bourdieu first introduced the concept of cultural capital in a 1973 article entitled "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction." In that article, Bourdieu argued that "the inheritance of cultural wealth which has been accumulated and bequeathed by

previous generations only really belongs (although it is *theoretically* offered to everyone) to those endowed with the means of appropriating it for themselves.” For Southern planters, an important component of that cultural capital was an education in classics.

Looking at several selected members of the planter class and several institutions responsible for the education of the sons of planters, my paper will examine how classics education served to distinguish the Southern ruling class from those over whom they were able to exercise political, economic, and social power.

Bibliography

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