

The κύκλος Klan and the Dark-side of Classics

Famed southern politician and defender of the “peculiar” institution of slavery, John C. Calhoun supposedly once remarked that if an abolitionist could find “a Negro who knew Greek syntax,” then he would believe “that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man” (qtd. Hall 10-11). This peculiar strand of Classicizing racism persisted after the Civil War and crops up again and again in the early documents of the Ku Klux Klan, an organization that was considered by some to have derived its peculiar name from the Greek κύκλος. In the first two prescripts of the “order” (c. 1867), pamphlets delineating the administration and goals of the society, the Klan presents itself as the defenders of the Western tradition against a vaguely defined “other.” In these documents Classical references abound. The Klan is envisioned as a sort of secret Roman Empire with provinces and Governors. Administrators are named after creatures from Greek Myth: Cyclopes, Centaurs, and Titans. Perhaps most interestingly, the top and bottom every page of these short pamphlets contains Latin quotations in the margins.

This use of Latin quotations, which are never translated, brings to the foreground the requisite skills necessary, as a member, to be able to read, recite, and comprehend many of the foundational principles of this secret group. As the above John C. Calhoun quote shows, this valuing of the Classical tradition leans heavily on an education only the most elite white men would have had access to in the southern states. The founding member of the Ku Klux Klan belonged to this white Southern elite. Using their Classical education in the form of these thirty-one Latin marginal quotations to clandestinely narrate their version of the Civil War and its aftermath — a story where they are the saviors of the lost republic. For example, they quote Cicero speaking against Catiline — “*O Tempora! O Mores!*” — or allude to popular notions of

Roman republicanism — “*ne quid detrimenti respublica capiat*” — as a rallying cry for the white educated elitists they aimed to enlist in their new society.

In this paper we will first set the precepts of the Ku Klux Klan against the cultural background of the American South in the late nineteenth century, exploring the links between Classical scholarship and racism. Next, we will analyze the role that Classical allusions and Latin quotations play in the precepts of the Klan and how these aspects of Greco-Roman culture portrayed the twisted mission of the society as the preservation of liberty and civilization. We end the paper by contrasting the use of Classical learning for racist means by the Klan and Southern whites with the pursuit of Classical scholarship by black scholars after the Civil War. In contrasting the ideology that Classical civilization was the white man’s domain they made a profound political statement and undercut the racist ideologies expressed in documents like the precepts of the Ku Klux Klan.

Bibliography

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