

ROBERT KASTER



When Robert (Bob) Kaster retires after 20 years as the Kennedy Foundation Professor of Latin Language and Literature and professor of classics, he leaves an unusually lasting legacy. The first reason for this claim involves the efforts he has devoted to textual criticism. Classicists of course lament the countless works that failed to survive to the age of print, but far too many even of those that did have been effectively marginalized by the lack of a usable and widely available edition. Bob is one of the most productive and admired editors of Latin texts anywhere in the world. His two contributions to the series of *Oxford Classical Texts*, Macrobius's uproarious *Saturnalia*, a fictionalized account of the holiday table-talk of fourth-century Latin scholars, and Suetonius's much better-known *Lives of the Caesars*, will make these works accessible and teachable as they were not before. Literary scholarship can be a transient and metamorphic art, but a good edition lasts. And while it was previously common for editors to make the explanations for their readings as laconic as possible (if someone had to ask what made an emendation ungrammatical, unmetrical, or just generally deplorable, it wasn't worth the trouble to teach them), among the most valuable aspects of Bob's work as a textual critic have been the companion volumes to his editions, which give accessible, indeed riveting, accounts of the editorial choices he makes. These works, incidentally, reveal the range of learning that the perfect editor has at his command, encompassing not just grammatical usage and the arcana of manuscript relations but any aspect of the text's subject matter. Beyond their role as the gentle foothills to the sublime and timeless Alps of Bob's editions, they make explicit to students increasingly less comfortable when confronted by the business end of philology how and why to think about the texts they use.

Bob's work as an editor, for all its intrinsic value, forms part of a much more comprehensive intellectual project. As Bob tells it, when he began his first job at the University of Chicago, he had received an excellent philological training but had no real sense of what to do with it, a 50-megaton payload of Latinity hurtling without a

target through the academic stratosphere. He credits the decisive turn in his development as a scholar to the influence of the legendary historian Arnaldo Momigliano. From being a set of techniques, Latin scholarship became in its own right Bob's subject. His first book, *Guardians of Language*, examined the grammarians of Late Antiquity, whose books of instruction on the Latin language are treasure houses of information about lost works of classical literature. Bob's aim, however, was to look at, not through, the authors of these works, of whom, as he says, "many students of antiquity are only peripherally aware." And he reveals them as the practitioners of a particular kind of literary education, responsive to the social and intellectual pressures of their times but which yet provided a direct if distant ancestor for modern philological scholarship. Classical critics sometimes like to put their authority beyond the reach of time, using the power of reason to battle time's effects by recovering the past. One of the great contributions of Bob's book was to suggest the contingency and connectedness of this scholarly tradition, that, as the subtle polemics of his first section-title implies, letters are indeed "in the world."

Throughout his career as a philologist, Bob gave Latinists the tools to recognize the origins of their own investigations of Latin literary culture in antiquity itself, at once making the ancient world look surprisingly familiar to its students, and their own profession deeply strange. One of his outstanding contributions is an edition with translation and commentary of Suetonius's *Lives of the Ancient Grammarians and Rhetoricians*, of which (an especially formidable) reviewer wrote: "From a modern perspective, [Suetonius's collection] seems to concern a group of people far removed from either the public life or the great literature of Rome; but as Kaster abundantly demonstrates, that is far from the case. In this edition, he brilliantly accomplishes several goals: to elucidate the text, to identify and explain Suetonius's argument about the position of grammarians and rhetoricians at Rome, and to advance his own argument about the complex social and intellectual function of Roman teachers. Suetonius is not a great writer, nor is *Lives of the Ancient Grammarians* a great work of literature; Kaster's edition, on the other hand, should be recognized as a masterpiece of the commentator's art, to my mind one of the truly important editions of our time."

Bob has also broken new ground as a historian of the emotions. His 2005 book, *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient*

Rome, focuses on a nexus of emotions sure to strike a chord with any academic readership: shame, disgust, envy, and regret. Indeed, Bob begins his preface by noting how many colleagues welcomed his subject as “the story of my life.” But as a reviewer noted, the history of shame, disgust, etc., in ancient Rome is precisely what Bob did not write. For one of the insights that shaped his work is the incommensurability of emotional terms in modern and ancient languages. If we start looking for a Roman notion of disgust, we will inevitably recover our own. Instead, Bob investigates the Roman experiences of emotions as “scripts”: chains of stimuli, responses, and judgments that collectively a Roman terms *invidia* or *fastidium*. The result is a strikingly consistent and comprehensive picture of the Roman elite’s responses to their world—one with the potential to transform our understanding of every work in the Latin canon—which is also striking for its distinctness from modern emotional experience even when we describe it with the Romans’ own language. Penitence is as far from *paenitentia* as integrity is from *integritas*.

Bob’s scholarly accomplishments have won him practically every honor available to a classicist. In 1991, *Guardians of Language* was honored with a Goodwin Award of Merit from the American Philological Society, which then elected Bob as its president in 1996. He was also selected as a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2013, and in 2007, he received Princeton’s Behrman Award for Distinguished Achievement in the Humanities. But doubtless the recognition that has meant most to him was receiving the President’s Award for Distinguished Teaching in 2017, and this points to the second basis for the prediction that Bob’s contributions will prove unusually enduring.

For the Romans, a great deed lived on in two distinct but interrelated ways: the doing of it won glory for its author, but it also provided an *exemplum*, a model for the actions of others aspiring to that same glory. Throughout his career Bob has been an extraordinary teacher at every level from beginner’s Latin, which he teaches regularly, to graduate seminars and dissertations. And what has made him so extraordinary across such different settings and subjects is his always being himself. In Bob’s case that means both modeling a clarity of thinking that is equally at home in explaining the Latin verb system and in unraveling the manuscripts of Suetonius, and above all treating all his students with unaffected humanity and consideration.

It is no accident that so many of those students have gone on to major careers in their own right. But Bob's exemplarity extends beyond the classroom: in his many years as department chair and director of graduate studies, he has given a generation of colleagues at Princeton a model of professionalism, judgment, and dedication. Appropriately, however, for such an aficionado of jazz, much as those colleagues will find themselves asking "what would BK do?", one thing about Bob no one will ever copy is his style.