

Etymologies of the Liberal Arts

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As a student and faculty member at three liberal arts colleges,¹ I have participated in many special events over the past forty years at which the core purpose of these institutions was at times celebrated, at other times debated. At convocations, orientations, open houses, workshops, seminars, symposia (some of which would have benefited from a greater portion of wine to water), and inaugurations, we sought to determine the meaning and role of the liberal arts in the twentieth and twenty-first century. What are the liberal arts? What benefits do they provide to their students? Are these benefits sufficient for the costs levied on the students and their families? What must the liberal arts become in order to survive in the United States?

I will confess that I am a fan and advocate of the educational model, since it was transformative in my own life as a first-generation college student, and I intend to offer a similarly transformative experience for my own students. Yet, as a philologist of Greek and Latin, I often spent more time pondering the opening of the speeches at those events than the speakers surely intended. They regularly make reference to the etymology of the terms deriving from the Latin *artes liberales*. The elements are easily discernible—*ars*: “skill, art” and *liberalis*: “of or pertaining to that which is free.” I would recommend that the defenders emphasize more that *artes* are to be *skills*, not diversions with no practical benefit, but the real questions in my internal pondering lie in just how to construe the two words together. There are two options commonly presented: Are these (A) the arts that are appropriate to free people or are they (B) the arts that catalyze or effect freedom?

There are innumerable examples of both etymologies in scholarly and semi-scholarly sources. The *Oxford English Dictionary* favors the former: “originally, the distinctive epithet of those ‘arts’ or ‘sciences’ that were considered ‘worthy of a free man’; opposed to *servile* or *mechanical*.”² Yet many defenders of the liberal arts, such as Michael Roth, President of Wesleyan University, incline toward the latter: “In Western traditions going back to the Greeks, a ‘liberal’ education was to be liberating, requiring freedom to study and aiming at freedom through understanding.”³ The former explanation is, of course, troubling because it ties education to political inequality and elitism. The second etymology is obviously

preferable as a strategy for modern education. It offers an objective to the form of education. Thus, at stake here is more than a bit of arcane trivia. The assumed history and understanding of the words, as is often the case, reveal the application and purpose of the users. Is the liberal arts institution a refuge for social and political elitism or does it provide a liberating power through education that promotes equality? In this short study, I intend to deconstruct the choice between those two options by examining the social and cultural context in which the Latin terms emerged. I will argue that the tension between the two interpretations of the phrase *artes liberales* was inherent from its inception, that the first users were aware of the political connotations but recognized an irony or contradiction regarding the application of the two words, and that irony undermined the elitist interpretation. Those most skilled in the *liberales artes* were not necessarily politically *liberi* “free.”

To begin the linguistic investigation, we must acknowledge that the *OED* is right: The terms cannot be separated from an original connection to freeborn political status among the Romans. The educational model may have originated among the Greeks, but the terms are Latin. Aristotle in the *Politics* (1338a32) introduces the idea that there is a form of education that is appropriate to freeborn children, connecting *paideia* with *eleutherios* “free,” but he does not define the elements, whatever they might be, nor describe them as *technai*, the usual Greek equivalent to *artes*.⁴ The Greek phrase *eleutheriai technai*, “arts pertaining to the free,” did exist in later antiquity but under the influence of Latin and the Roman Empire.⁵ The first-century CE author Quintilian claimed that the Greeks used the name *enkuklios paideia*, literally “learning in a circle,” as a name for general education (*Institutes* 1.10.1), but even that term is also only attested under the influence of Rome.⁶ It may have been the case that education did not need the qualifier “free” in classical Greece, because only the free were educated. Only when it became necessary to convince the Romans of the value of the curriculum did the terms gain an honorific and association with freedom. Such proposals concerning the linguistic development are conjectural, but the Roman and Latin origin of the phrase in question is certain.

The recognition of the Roman context is essential, because it places the terms in the hierarchy of conqueror and conquered, free and enslaved. The Romans generally adopted these arts from captive Greek slaves or conquered Greek subjects. From the earliest attestations of the terms in the first century BCE, the irony was recognized that the arts of the free were taught by the enslaved or subjugated. Cicero in the *De Oratore*, or *On the Orator*, is an early source for the phrase as well as a poignant example of a

Roman thinker struggling with the ethical tension, as we will see below. The central question of this dialogue is what is the best form of education for an orator: Should it be one of the technical skills of speaking or a more general education in the liberal arts?⁷ Cicero openly admits the necessity of the latter of the two curricula: "...no one has ever been able to thrive and excel in eloquence without not only a knowledge of speaking but also every kind of wisdom."⁸

Although the *De Oratore* is thought to have been written in the 50s BCE, its dramatic date is set in the previous generation at 91 BCE, when Cicero would have been a teenager, and the author pretends that the dialogue was conveyed to him twice removed, using a famous literary device of Plato. ("I remember that it was told to me..." [1.24].) What is more, several of the participants in the dialogue are at the end of their life. Lucius Crassus, the most famous orator of that age, is said to have died several days after the events portrayed in the dialogue, and Marcus Antonius, the grandfather of the more famous protégé of Caesar, died four years after the discussion. This date allows the author to confront the Roman state's final conquest of Greece as well as the Romans' attitude to their most recent subjects. The narrator can cite the actions, stories, and ideas of the elders directly involved in those events. Famously, Crassus himself claims that he spoke with many of the great minds of the Academy when he was official in Asia Minor sometime around 110 BCE,⁹ praising the leaders of the school at the time, noting that Metrodorus was the sharpest and most flowery of speakers among humans. It is a back-handed compliment that plays to a favorite stereotype of the Romans that Greeks talk too much, but Crassus does nonetheless believe that the Academy was at its height (*Academia florente*) at the time and was willing to read Plato's *Gorgias*, whose main topic of discussion is rhetoric, under the guidance of another of the Academics (See *De Oratore* 1.45, 2.365, 3.75.).

In his own voice, Cicero sets out the irony of intellectual freedom gained through political subjugation in the preface of the dialogue:

For when our rule of all peoples had been established and a length of peace strengthened leisure, almost every young man eager for honor thought that he must strive with all zeal for speaking...later, however, when they had heard the Greek orators and became acquainted with Greek literature and consulted the learned men of Greece, our people burned with the desire of speaking.¹⁰

In essence, only when the Romans had conquered the Greeks did they stop to learn from them, according to Cicero's scenario. So, when the author used phrases such as *liberalissimis studiis* (1.11), *eruditio libero digna* (1.17), *artibus, quae sunt libero dignae* (1.72), *homine ingenuo liberaliter educatoque* (1.137), *institutus liberaliter* (2.162, 3.125), etc. either as a narrator himself or through his characters, he knew that excellence in these arts was not reserved for the politically free alone. Those who had lost their freedom were now educating those who had taken it away. The phrase at 1.137 demonstrates the inherent semantic tension: "a freeborn (*ingenuo*) person educated like a free person (*liberaliter*)." One can be born politically free without yet having attained the freedom provided by liberal studies.

Perhaps the best example of the orator's awareness of the cultural and political ambiguity can be found in his defense speech *Pro Archia*, in which Cicero defends the Roman citizenship of his former Greek teacher. The speech is famous for its encomium of the humanities, which is deployed as an *ad hominem* defense of Archias. No less than W. E. B. Du Bois claimed to have used simplified versions of Cicero's arguments to convince recently-freed families in rural Tennessee to send their children to summer school.¹¹ The defendant was a famous poet who had been born in Antioch under the Seleucid Greeks and came to Italy where he had earned citizenship from one of Rome's allies. That Italian citizenship became Roman citizenship after the Social Wars (91-87 BCE), but Archias's legal status later came into question in the strife of the late Republic.¹² Cicero sets aside the nasty, internecine struggles for a few moments to praise the value of the artist and his art:

...first at Antioch—for there (Archias) was born to a noble family—a city once celebrated as rich with the most learned of individuals and the most liberal of studies—there the glory of his talent began to surpass all others.¹³

The hyperbole ignores the reasons, easily attributed to Roman empire, why that city was no longer rich with the most liberal of studies, why its citizens were no longer free, and why Archias had to pursue his poetic career elsewhere. The greatest of Roman orators has no qualms, nonetheless, in proclaiming that the conquered Greek poet refreshes him "...so that his soul may be restored from the shouting of the lawcourts and his ears, weary from abuse, may be at peace."¹⁴ He, moreover, believes the art of the poet to be "the most humane and liberal diversion for the soul."¹⁵ And finally, as Horace after him,¹⁶ Cicero is forced to confess, although the political

accomplishments of the Romans span the known world, it is Greek literature that is read by nearly every people (23).

These are well-known tropes in the fractured psyche of the Roman elite, but the cultural, if not moral, dilemma must also be recognized in the application of the terms in question, *liberales artes*. Cicero and his peers had to have seen the contradiction in the use of the phrase; he, in fact, directs his audience to it by juxtaposing his opinions on the best forms of education with its sources from the subjugated. *Liberalissima studia* came from *magistri liberti vel servi* (teachers freed or slave), and, in Cicero's particular case, he had deep affection for those teachers and their arts. The entirety of the *De Oratore*, addressed to the orator's brother Quintus, is imbued with nostalgia, but especially the preface to the second book. There Marcus reminds Quintus of their boyhood and the education overseen at home by their father and uncles, in which Greek literature at the hands of Greek teachers was a major element, even if the Roman learners and subsequent practitioners surpassed their teachers. He and his brother were accustomed to refute easily, even as boys, the critics of this new-fangled, seemingly impractical, form of education (2.2). We might read the two as little Roman disciples of Socrates, testing their new skills in dialectic.

The slave and freed humanist teachers did, on occasion, claim the honor of the arts for themselves as well, to the extent that we can recover their opinions. We can, at least, find a few examples among Roman inscriptions, which can reveal a rank of society below Cicero's. A well-known Republican epitaph begins, "Eucharis, freed slave of Licinia, learned, trained in all the arts... (*Eucharis Liciniae L[iberta] docta, erodita omnes artes...*)." The juxtaposition of *liberta* (*freed*, not free) and *artes* is obvious in the first line. The deceased was only fourteen when she died, and, as with all epitaphs, any exaggerations are likely to have come more from her survivors, in their grief, than from her. Nonetheless, the extraordinary accomplishment of a young girl, who at some point in her short life, gained her freedom, while receiving an education in the arts (at the hands of the Muses, no less, according to the epitaph) was as obvious at the time of her death as it is today. It is why the accomplishment is featured on her tomb.¹⁷ We might also consider the case of Euphrosyne Pia, buried in Rome at the age of twenty. Her bilingual Greek-Latin name implies a descent from slaves, if she herself was not born in slavery. Yet she also claims for herself the title of *philosophia*, or 'woman philosopher,' trained by the nine Muses. The word is rare in Latin, as was the opportunity for women in Roman society. A few more epitaphs that document slaves, freed slaves, or their descendants asserting their accomplishments in the liberal arts are listed in the notes.¹⁸

The question as to why such an irony would thrive in the culture of Rome of the first century BCE is worthy of a book-length study, but, for now, we can note that the contrast did allow for new understandings and meanings for the *artes liberales*, such as those employed by the Stoics in their notion of freedom. The classic Stoic view is expressed in many sources: political or legal freedom is not true freedom; true freedom comes only from the training of the mind to be free of wants and desires. By recognizing what we as humans can control, we gain a certain autonomy, or freedom. In this sense training in the arts elicits freedom.¹⁹ The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, who himself was enslaved and freed in the historical context of the Roman Empire, argues strongly for the view in his essay on freedom (4.1), although written in Greek, thus lacking the exact vocabulary of our topic. With regard to education, the same freed philosopher offers a favorite saying of the Stoics in another essay: “We must not trust the many, ...who say, ‘Only the free should be educated,’ but instead trust the philosophers, who say, ‘Only the educated are free.’”²⁰ Release from bondage does not necessarily ensure peace of mind; only knowledge can cultivate that state of being, the ex-slave goes on to argue. The educated should know what is to be chosen and what is to be avoided. I summarize the Stoic argument here without critique. It is a formidable example of a revised interpretation of our core terms, while acknowledging that the conservative interpretation related to political freedom was prevalent outside philosophical circles.

Perhaps similar statements of the moral philosopher and political adviser to emperors Seneca are better known. Since he writes in Latin, he does play with the famous terms:

Do you see why these studies are called free (*liberalia studia*)? Because they are worthy of a free person. But there is only one study that is truly free, which makes one free, that is of wisdom—a study sublime, brave, great in soul; the rest are puny and puerile.²¹

I think these are qualities that any faculty member at a liberal arts college would want for their students or the students themselves would want to achieve. We want a skill that frees the mind and thus the individual, whatever their origins and whatever the life they may face. Another quotation regarding liberal studies from the same letter of Seneca has appeared on the graduation program of my present institution, Rhodes College, for my entire twenty-seven year tenure.²² According to the College Archivist, it has decorated the program since 1967 when it replaced a more pithy statement from Vergil’s *Aeneid* (2.385): *Aspirat primo Fortuna labori*

(Fortuna inspires the first work.).²³ The aphorism from Vergil is imbued with fate, like the actions of Aeneas and so much of that amazing poem. Perhaps the President and Board of Trustees thought a new purpose for the liberal arts was fitting after the college desegregated in 1964.²⁴ Liberal studies are not only for those who happen to be politically free, by fate or any other force, but instead may prepare any student, whatever their race, whatever their origin, for their future after graduation. The curriculum of the college should afford its alumni a freedom that comes from an accurate understanding of the world around them, in all the diverse fields of the liberal arts, deploying all the skills attained.

Each year, I check the program to see if Seneca's thoughts on the object of liberal studies have yet to be replaced, and, in truth, I am somewhat reluctant to mention the quotation here. Drawing attention to it in the midst of the present contests over the methods, purposes, and value of higher education might prompt the administration to remove it. No one necessarily disagrees with Seneca, but because of the Latin origins of the phrase, if not the concept itself, it might be viewed as exclusive of other traditions. I will regret the loss, knowing the struggles associated with the inception and meaning of the phrase *artes liberales*, so that those who were not *liberi* might participate in and benefit from them.

¹ I graduated from the College of Wooster in 1988, taught at Macalester College from 1996 to 1997, and have served on the faculty of Rhodes College from 1997 to the present.

² See also Richard A. Detweiler, *The Evidence Liberal Arts Needs: Lives of Consequence, Inquiry, and Accomplishment* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021), 38; Fareed Zakaria, *In Defense of a Liberal Education* (New York: Norton, 2015), 42.

³ Michael Roth, *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 3. See also The President and Fellows of Harvard College, *Report of the Task Force on General Education* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2007), 1: "A Harvard education is a liberal education – that is, an education conducted in a spirit of free inquiry..."

⁴ Carnes Lord, "Aristotle and Liberal Education," in *Demokratia: A Conversation on Democracies, Ancient and Modern*, ed. J. Ober and C. Hedrick (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 273–83.

⁵ See, for example, Plutarch 2.122e.

⁶ See Teresa Morgan, *Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 33–39; also Bruce A. Kimball, *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Idea of Liberal Education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986), 13–42. His is the most thorough discussion of the origins of the terms *artes liberales* that I have discovered.

⁷ Cicero uses the phrase and considers the best form of education in several other dialogues as well. See *Tusc.* 2.27, *Rep.* 1.28, *Inv.* 1.25, *Arch.* 4. See Ethyl R. Wolfe, “Cicero’s *De Oratore* and the Liberal Arts Tradition in America,” *Classical World* 88 (1995): 459–71, for a discussion of the importance of the dialogue in the Western ideals of education.

⁸ ...*neminem eloquentia non modo sine dicendi doctrina, sed ne sine omni quidem sapientia florere umquam et praestare potuisse.* (2.5). All translations of Greek and Latin are the author’s unless otherwise stated.

⁹ See Elaine Fantham, *The Roman World of Cicero’s De Oratore* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) for a thorough discussion of the historical context.

¹⁰ *Nam postea quam imperio omnium gentium constituto diuturnitas pacis otium confirmavit, nemo fere laudis cupidus adulescens non sibi ad dicendum studio omni enitendum putavit; ac primo quidem totius rationis ignari...post autem auditis oratoribus Graecis cognitisque eorum litteris adhibitisque doctoribus incredibili quodam nostri homines discendi studio flagraverunt* (1.14).

¹¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. H. L. Gates Jr. and T. H. Oliver (New York: Norton, 1999), 49.

¹² Steven M. Cerutti, *Cicero Pro Archia Poeta Oratio* (Wauconda, IL.: Bolchazy–Carducci, 1998), xiii–xviii.

¹³ ...*primum Antiochiae—nam ibi natus est loco nobili—celebri quondam urbe et copiosa, atque eruditissimis hominibus liberalissimisque studiis adfluenti, celeriter antecellere omnibus ingeni gloria contigit* (4).

¹⁴ ... *animus ex hoc forensi strepitu reficiatur, et aures convicio defessae conquiescant*” (12).

¹⁵ *hanc animi adversionem humanissimam ac liberalissimam* (16).

¹⁶ See famously Horace, *Ep.* 2.1.156–7: *Graecia capta ferum uictorem cepit et artes/ intulit agresti Latio.* (Captured Greece captured the wild victor and brought arts to primitive Latium.)

¹⁷ *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* 6.10096. See T. P. Wiseman, *Catullus and His World: A Reappraisal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 31; E. Courtney, *Musa Lapidaria: A Selection of Latin Verse Inscriptions* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 238–40.

¹⁸ For Euphrosyne, see *CIL* 6.33898. Other examples include *CIL* 6.8981, 6.9649, 6.9650, 6.100097, 6.33930, 11.6435. All examples require some speculation to devise a biography of the deceased.

¹⁹ This interpretation of the meaning and etymology of liberal arts is the one favored by Martha Nussbaum. See *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 8.

²⁰ 2.1.22: οὐ γὰρ τοῖς πολλοῖς...πιστευτέον, οἱ λέγουσιν μόνοις ἐξεῖναι παιδεύεσθαι τοῖς ἐλευθέροις, ἀλλὰ τοῖς φιλοσόφοις μᾶλλον, οἱ λέγουσι μόνοις τοὺς παιδευθέντας ἐλευθέρους εἶναι.

²¹ *Ep.* 88.2: *Quare liberalia studia dicta sint vides: quia homine libero digna sunt. Ceterum unum studium vere liberale est quod liberum facit, hoc est sapientiae, sublime, forte, magnanimum: cetera pusilla et puerilia sunt.*

²² *Ep. 88.20: Quare ergo liberalibus studiis filios erudimus? Non quia virtutem dare possunt, sed quia animum ad accipiendam virtutem praeparant.* “And so why do we educate our children with liberal studies? Not because they are able to bestow virtue, but because they prepare the soul to receive it.”

²³ I wish to extend my thanks to William Short, Archivist of Rhodes College, for finding these dates.

²⁴ It is probable that the President of the College at the time, John David Alexander, had a role in the selection. He had majored in classical studies as an undergraduate at Rhodes (then Southwestern at Memphis) and had earned a graduate degree at Oxford in Greek and theology.