

A Great Political Institution in a Religious Festival: reception of Greece in Gilbert West's (1749) Olympick Games

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ABSTRACT

Recent commentary has established the significance of Gilbert West (1703-56), the eighteenth-century religious writer, translator, and poet: he has found a place in Olympic history, the history of Pindaric translations, and contemporary politics. West's most enduring contribution to scholarship was the *Dissertation on the Olympick Games* (1749) and its attached translations of Pindar and other scattered Greek and Roman authors. This paper will argue that the *Dissertation* is not only interesting for its contemporary political arguments but also as a unique, valuable, and impactful reception of the Classics. It will consider the nature and impact of West's reception of Pindar and the ancient world as a work designed for both scholarly engagement and a broad general readership. To do this will involve exploring West's distinctive contributions to Classical scholarship, not least his appreciation for the primary of Athenian democracy in late Archaic and Classical period Greece, a century before George Grote advocated the same thing. It will be argued that the most distinctive aspect of West's reception is in his complicated hybridisation of Hellenic and Christian religion. This is clear not only through reviews of West's work and the commentary at the time, but also through a key single moment of direct reception of West's work in the painting *Crowning the Victors at Olympia* by James Barry. This painting was based on West's *Dissertation* and accurately represents the key aspects of West's discourse on the utility of the Olympic Games, and ultimately the utility of the Classics, as they were received by his contemporaries.