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Awakening the Classics
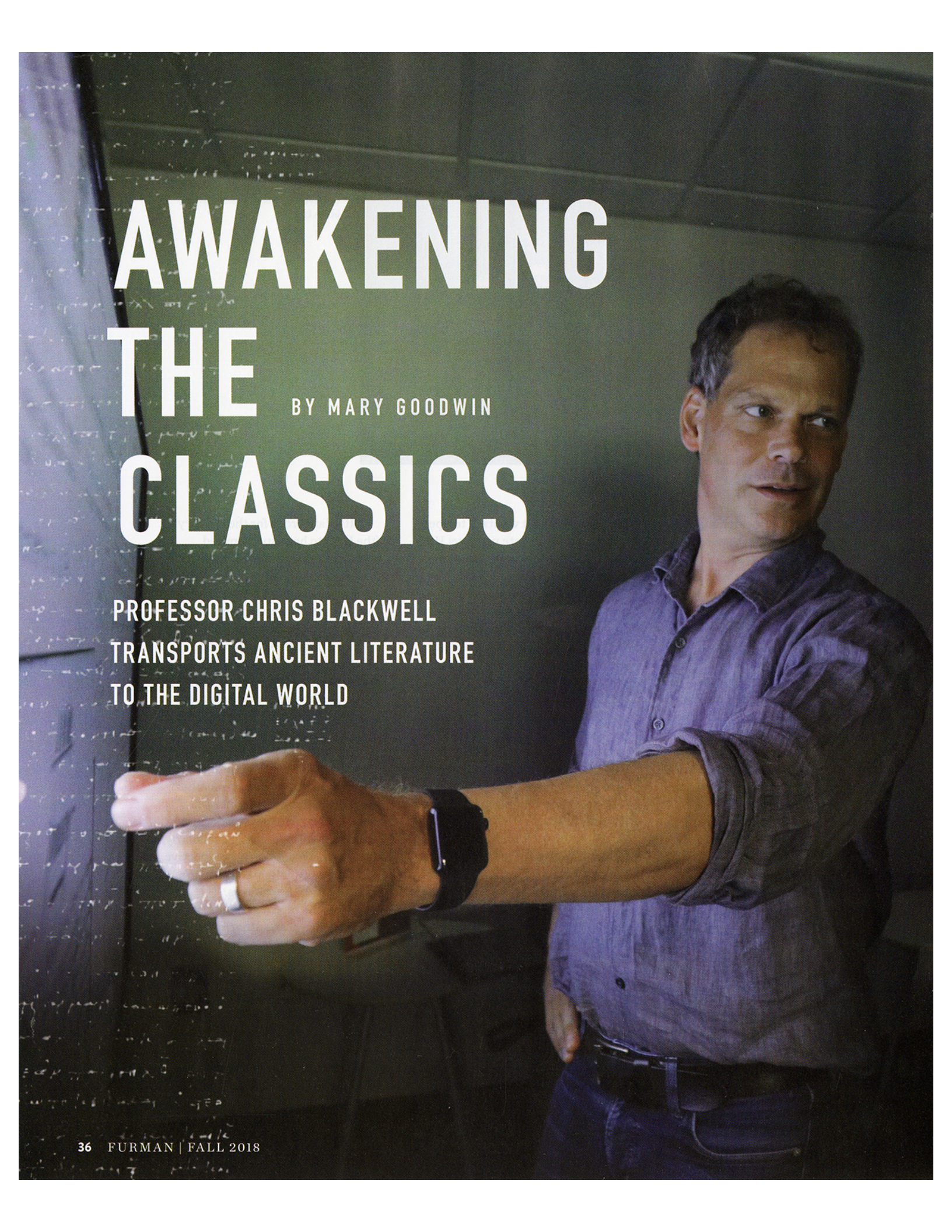
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AWAKENING THE CLASSICS

BY MARY GOODWIN

PROFESSOR CHRIS BLACKWELL TRANSPORTS ANCIENT LITERATURE TO THE DIGITAL WORLD

WHAT DO "RAINBOW MAN" AND CHRISTOPHER W. BLACKWELL, THE LOUIS G. FORGIONE UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR IN THE FURMAN CLASSICS DEPARTMENT, HAVE IN COMMON? ACCORDING TO BLACKWELL, AN APPRECIATION FOR CITATION.

"He understood the true meaning of citation," Blackwell says of Rollen Stewart, the controversial evangelist who traveled to sporting events wearing a rainbow wig and a shirt or sign reading John 3:16. "Often students think the citations they put at the bottom of their papers are there to prove they didn't plagiarize. But really, they're for getting you to where you need to be."

For Stewart, that was a new testament Bible verse. His citation of John 3:16, or the book of John, chapter 3, verse 16, will take a reader to the same message in any of the Bible's 5 billion copies.

This concept is called canonical citation – citing a work beyond a single version, edition or physical expression. And Blackwell has devoted 16 years of work to bringing it alive in the modern digital age.

"People were good at canonical citation before the printing press," Blackwell explains. "But after around 1480, citations became page numbers. If you're reading "Pride and Prejudice" in large print, and a citation references a page in standard print, it's no longer getting you to the same place."

Christopher Blackwell and **Brienna Dipietro '20** analyze and discuss the Venetus A manuscript of the "The Iliad."

IN 2001, BLACKWELL BEGAN A PARTNERSHIP WITH NEEL SMITH, PROFESSOR AND CHAIR OF THE CLASSICS DEPARTMENT AT HOLY CROSS COLLEGE, TO BRING CANONICAL CITATION TO THE 21ST CENTURY — AND MORE SPECIFICALLY, TO TEACHING AND RESEARCH IN THE HUMANITIES.

They began working on the Homer Multitext project (HMT), a digital library that archives texts and images related to Homer's ancient Greek poems "The Iliad" and "The Odyssey," led by humanities professors Casey Due and Mary Ebbot.

Together, Blackwell and Smith developed a digital citation method called Collections, Indices, Texts, Extensions (CITE) architecture to provide a framework for referencing materials that could outlive rapidly changing technologies. Using the tool, scholars can search for something vague or specific, something Blackwell says no other system of identification is able to do.

"With CITE we can identify Book 2 of "The Iliad" in any version or the third letter iota in the Greek text of Book 1, line 1, as it appears in the Venetus A manuscript," he explains. "And this spans to all materials in the HMT project: texts, physical artifacts like manuscripts, and documentary objects like photographs."

To expand this list, Blackwell and Smith are working to make CITE more accessible. They're developing better documentation and creating tutorials for potential users. In the future, Blackwell sees this tool – or even the concept of it – impacting various other databases.

"I could see this as a building block for digitally tagging or sorting complex data like personal medical records," says **Patrick Rankowitz '15**, one of Blackwell's students. "Especially when the data isn't standardized or is always changing."

And beyond referencing items, the system can capture the semantics of work in a format that translates to both humans and computers. For example, you could search for abstract citations, such as "future tense of Attica." According to Blackwell, this helps scholars not only analyze texts, but also declare meanings.
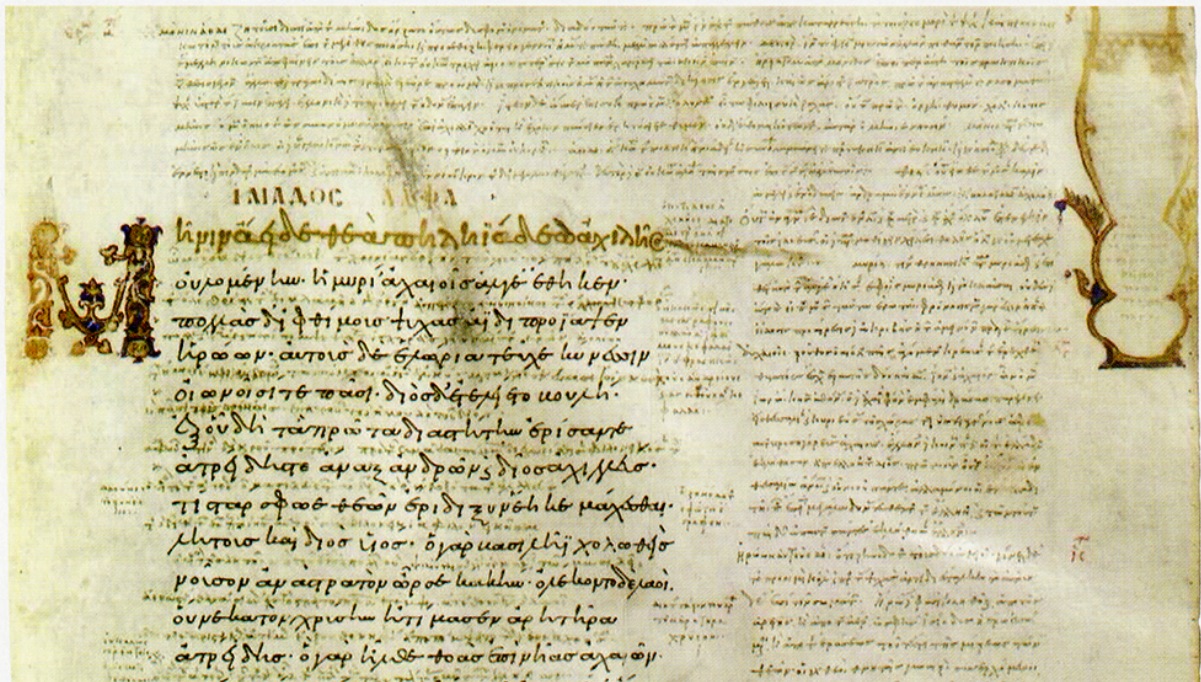
The Venetus A Manuscript is the oldest complete copy of "The Iliad." (Opposite page, top) Blackwell and students studied this illustration, which was added to the manuscript in the 12th or 13th century. (Opposite page, bottom) "The Iliad" is introduced by philosopher Porphyry, with 13th-century illustrations featured in the margins.
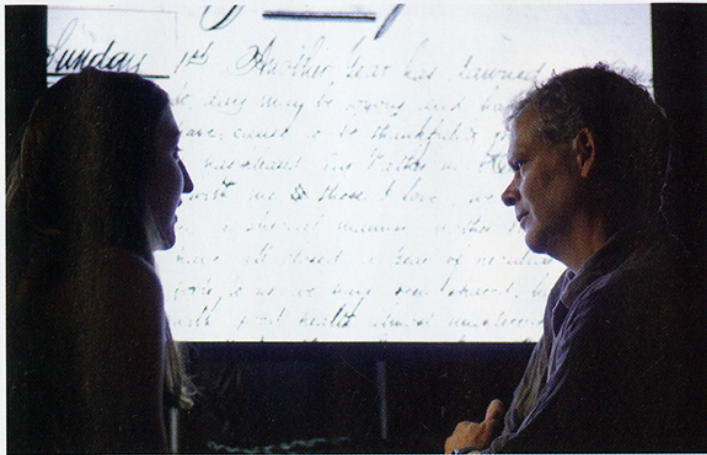
In May 2018, HMT published a complete 21st-century edition of the Venetus A Manuscript of "The Iliad," which was the work of 178 editors, the majority of whom were undergraduate students.

"People thought Neel and I were crazy having undergraduate students edit Greek manuscripts. They said it was too hard," Blackwell recalls. "But the work of those students is the only reason we've been able to spend this much time on the nature of scholarly information."

Patrick Rankowitz was one of those students. Even though he was a political science major taking introduction to ancient Greek, he says Blackwell encouraged and allowed all students to take part in the project by reading, transcribing and analyzing text.
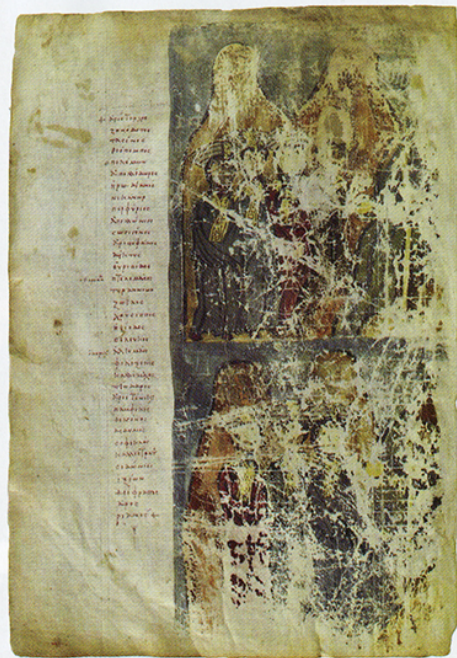
The majority of Rankowitz's work consisted of digitizing Greek manuscripts and labeling them as he put them in the system. This helped ensure that future users could apply a syntax tool to construct diagrams of how the sentences were structured, and even compare the work of authors like Aristotle and Grotius.

"Before, all of these things were strictly in books and could only be looked at one way," Rankowitz says. "And now that it's all digital and in a logical catalog, you can really look at it any way you want. It's incredibly cool that this movement of digitizing and interacting digitally with classic Greek text is happening at Furman."

In addition to the Venetus A Manuscript, HMT has digitized two other manuscripts of "The Iliad," held by the Biblioteca Marciana in Venice; two manuscripts from the Real Biblioteca de El Escorial; and the "Bankes Papyrus" of "The Iliad" Book 24 from the British Library.

Blackwell and Smith also hope to create a CITE extension that would allow digital audio files to be identified, retrieved and played through canonical citation.

"As humanists, we must record each unique phenomenon that we study," Blackwell says. "It's not enough to know that all apples fall the same way; we're interested in this fall of this apple." ⬤

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