



St. John's College, Oxford

## Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition 2019/20

The St. John's College Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition ran for the tenth time during the academic year 2019/20: a decade in which well over 800 students took part in it, and many dozens of participants have successfully applied for Classics and related subjects at Oxford, including this college. The competition was, as in previous years, open to all students currently studying in Year 12 (Lower Sixth) or equivalent anywhere in the UK, whether or not they were currently studying a Classical or Ancient subject.

Unfortunately, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are unable to run our planned Classics Study Afternoon at the moment, and will sadly miss meeting you all this April. We hope to see you at St John's when the danger passes and quarantine measures can be eased, and that many of you will consider applying for Classics here next year. In the meanwhile, we recommend the digital resources available through the St John's Inspire platform <https://sjcinspire.com/>. We shall be adding to it further contributions from St John's Classics tutors in the near future: please stay tuned.

We had 69 entries from all over the UK across the four disciplines of literature, ancient history, art, and philosophy, with literature attracting the largest numbers of takers. This is fewer than in the last few years, when the number of participants was steadily in triple figures, and when the current emergency is over we shall be exploring new ways of spreading the news about the competition and encouraging students to participate. We are keen to hear your ideas for that, too!

Ten awards and commendations were given (5F, 5M, with six coming from the maintained sector, and four from independent schools). The overall winner, Lyra, has offered an essay in the literature category, and attends Gosforth Academy in Newcastle upon Tyne. We were, as always, immensely impressed by the quality of the essays, the range of the students' interests and experiences, and their enthusiasm for the ancient world.

The range of questions reflects the range of subjects on offer in the Oxford Classics course, and the range of expertise of our tutors. This year, the questions were set and the essays marked by Dr Emma Greensmith (Fellow in Classical Literature), Dr Georgy Kantor (Fellow in Ancient History), Dr Alison Pollard (Lecturer in Classical Archaeology), and Dr David Lee (Lecturer in Philosophy). They offer their reflections on essays in their fields below.

### 1. *Do heroes in ancient literature learn through suffering?*

There were 41 entries this year for the Literature question – a huge number (more than 50% of the total submissions), which speaks optimistically to the continued interest in heroism and ancient literature among classically-minded students. The answers were in general of a very high quality: thoughtfully written, sophisticatedly phrased and argued (many were of an undergraduate standard in terms of their prose). Many (though by no means all) used the

Aeschylean quote 'pathei mathos' (in Greek or in translation) as a launchpad for their discussions. Particularly commendable were the essays which sought to challenge the question in some way: to consider for example how it is the audience/ reader who learns through the heroes' suffering, rather than the heroes themselves; or queried the straightforward causal connection that the question implies ( e.g. that learning happens with suffering, but is not dependent on it); or problematised the term 'hero' itself (more than one answer incorporated ideas of the *heroine* too , which was great to see). A few confidently argued *against* the question – suggesting that in some cases heroes do *not* learn from the arduous experiences that they go through.

I would have liked to see a greater diversity in the examples used as illustrations and case-studies: the question gave scope for a wide range of 'heroes' to be considered, however around 75% of the essays focused exclusively on Homer (especially Achilles and/ or Odysseus), Aeneas and tragedy (particularly Oedipus). What about what prose works (e.g. historiography or oratory) tell us about heroic suffering and knowledge? What about non-Greek and Roman material (a couple of answers brought in Gilgamesh, very successfully)? Or Jewish or Christian texts? Entrants should be encouraged to use the competition as a chance to explore some new literature, and apply their ideas from more 'familiar' works and characters to new material. Overall, though, a very impressive set of answers, with great sensitivity shown to a challenging and ever-relevant notion: as many essays noted, the possibility of gaining knowledge in even the most trying of circumstances is an idea which continues to resonate; perhaps now more than ever.

## 2. *In what ways did the power of oratory shape ancient politics?*

There were nine entries this year for the History question. The answers were thoughtful across the board, and participants offered interesting observations on some key figures of Greek and Roman political oratory, from Pericles to Cicero and even the emperor Claudius (as an example of a politician failing as an orator). Most essays focussed on the key periods of prominence of political oratory in classical Athens and in the late Roman Republic, but some essays extended the chronological range to mention the precursors of Greek and Roman oratory in the ancient Near East, or to look at the role of public speaking in the spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Perhaps more could be done in thinking about other factors which shaped ancient politics, and the area of life that public politics affected in the ancient world: the thoughts on this front tended to focus just on the military aspect. Many essays, however, took a look at the political systems and social conditions underpinning the role of oratory, and also at the practicalities, such as the size of the crowd or weather conditions.

It might be interesting for those who have been tackling this question to think in a slightly different way about the difference between Athens and Rome in this respect. One may consider not just the contrast between the Roman Senate and the Athenian assembly (quite a large proportion of political oratory at Rome was delivered in the assembly too), but also between the assembly gathering up to nearly 20% of adult male citizens, and one which could only get together 1-2% of them at best. It is also worth noting that at Roman assemblies only the presiding officials and people specially invited by them could speak, so unlike an Athenian *agora* (or Roman Senate), the Roman Forum was not a place for direct debate. This, of course, reflected the more hierarchical structure of Roman society. Another avenue that could be explored is the influence of formal training in public speaking. There is a difference between an orator like Pericles or Cato the Elder, who was relying on his natural talents, and an orator like Cicero, for whom composing a speech was a sophisticated art with complex rules, and that difference has political and social consequences.

### 3. *Who was Greek and Roman state-commissioned art for?*

There were nine entries for this year's Classical Archaeology question. The essays included an impressive range of examples, ranging from Archaic Greece to Constantinian Rome, from Achaemenid Persia to Roman Britain. Lots of different archaeological types were examined, with particularly interesting discussion around coinage, architectural reliefs and freestanding statuary. Quite unexpectedly, some considered *state-commissioned art* to include literature, and the *Aeneid* was even mentioned in a few submissions (but is generally best left to the text-focused question). The most interesting essays delved beyond the more well-known examples of the Parthenon, Ara Pacis and Prima Porta Augustus, and showed an admirable amount of book and web-based research and investigation. Surprisingly few argued that state-commissioned art might be for the gods, preferring instead - even for temple decoration - to see purely political or state-aggrandizing motives behind it.

It's important, however, when looking at ancient artworks, to consider the object or monument in its original context, and consider all of its first-hand viewers. It's very likely that most people *wouldn't* have had politics at the forefront of their minds, and would have seen temples and sanctuaries as the actual dwelling places of the gods. Might some of the decoration have attempted to influence how the gods saw or (hopefully) favoured a particular state? Another important factor concerns how *visible* some of the objects or artworks originally were. How easy or difficult was it to 'read' the Parthenon frieze? Where was the Prima Porta Augustus statue found? Does this influence who they were for or the impact they might have had? A few final tips for archaeology essays... Detailed object/scene/monument analysis will elevate your work, which means having a really good look at pictures of what you're discussing. It's always better to be simple, clear and organized in your writing than wordy and overly-complicated. Use existing scholarship and articles to guide you, but feel free to be entertaining, original and show some of your own unique flair.

### 4. *"Ancient philosophers who proposed radical theories had unrealistic expectations of what they might achieve." Do you agree?*

The philosophy question attracted eight entries in total. The question itself was quite challenging, in that it called for some reflection both on which standards are to be applied in classing a theory from the ancient world as 'radical', and a careful observation of the distinction between what the thinkers actually did achieve and what they expected to achieve. Entrants generally - and quite reasonably - pursued a strategy of identifying one particular area for discussion rather than attempting a comprehensive survey. The more successful essays hit on a coherent theme and paid attention to clarity of writing, punctuation, and grammar. Plato's *Republic* proved to be a popular point of reference, although the questionable assumption was often made that Plato's intention was to get his ideal state implemented by the Athenian citizens of his time. As well as politics and ethics, ancient science - and in particular the atomists - also proved to be a rewarding area to focus on. Credit was given to essays which discussed less well-known theories, particularly when these included concise and accurate expositions while making their case. While all the essays offered a verdict on the question and provided observations and evidence, some clearly stood out. The features these essays included were an eye for unusual or interesting details, a conversational element that drew out both sides to the story, and an attractive writing style that drew the reader in.