St. John's College, Oxford
Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition 2016/17

The St. John's College Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition ran for the seventh time during the academic year 2016/17. The competition was 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. The number of entries was the highest in the history of this competition so far – we had 161 participants (up from 127 in 2015/16) from all over the country, including 25 for the classical literature question, 49 for ancient history, 49 for philosophy, and 38 for archaeology; 78 people signed up for the study afternoon on 20 April. As ever, we were very pleased by the overall quality of the essays and by the broad range of approaches taken by the participants.

The questions were as follows:

1. A big book is a big evil' (Callimachus). Does your reading of Greek and/or Latin literature bear this out?
2. 'Like ants or frogs around a pond' (Plato). Was the sea central to Graeco-Roman history?
3. Is Socrates right that it is better to suffer an injustice than to commit one? What if one is never caught?
4. Should it be illegal to purchase ancient artefacts?

1. Classical Literature

There were 25 entries for literature ('"A big book is a big evil" (Callimachus). Does your reading of Greek and/or Latin literature bear this out?'). Most had something to say about Callimachus – indeed, the majority addressed precisely the issue of 'Callimachean poetics' raised by the question, and looked at the places in which Callimachean reception has been most studied: Roman poetry, particularly Catullus, Virgil, and the Elegists (Horace was largely absent). Another approach got away from Callimachus and explored the logic of the thought (does he mean 'a small book is a small evil', or 'a small book is a big good'?); or thought about a different section of ancient literature entirely (might Callimachus' dictum apply to pre-Callimachean literature?). Many challenged Callimachus' ideas on the basis of Homer and Virgil; prose and drama were rather thin on the ground (there is some terrific 'small scale' prose fiction from antiquity that might have been germane to the topic), but some essays, pleasingly, explored inscribed epigram.

Many also had something to say about the 'book' and what this word means. This led some essays to consideration of performance culture. Many also considered the concept of 'evil', and, indeed, 'big' in great detail. For example, many thought that works like the *Aeneid* were 'propaganda' and therefore 'evil' (though at least one drew the opposite conclusion - that using works of art as propaganda was 'good'), while the *Iliad* was 'l'art pour l'art' and therefore good - but is this fair? The *Iliad* has been used as propaganda (e.g. by Alexander the Great, or by Peisistratus); the *Aeneid*, meanwhile, has been 'reclaimed' as a work of art beyond any ideological messages (e.g. by the 'Harvard school'). Some might profitably have reflected on the difference between 'a big book is evil' and 'a big book is *an* evil' in this context: a subtle but important difference (of interest, *inter alia*, to Plato). A fruitful strand of investigation asked about the status of the fragment: are fragmentary works, e.g. the fragments of Sappho, intrinsically better works of art? An intriguing point, and a subject of active discussion in the field!

Much witty, even Callimachean, writing was in evidence; the better one's writing elsewhere, the more humour can be tolerated. Be careful of sweeping assertions: a precise, correct statement is preferable to an easily disproved assertion. Similarly, many essays gave the impression that ancient literature is there to be 'useful' and no more ('use' being the antithesis, it seems, of 'evil' - but see above on 'propaganda'); but these are the expressions of human loves, anxieties, passions, and fears from thousands of years ago, and must be treated as such.

2. Ancient History

There were 49 essays on the Ancient History question ('"Like ants or frogs around a pond" (Plato). Was the sea central to Graeco-Roman history?'). There was a considerable variety of interesting approaches to the question, but certain dominant themes have emerged. Many essays have attempted to engage with the original context and meaning of Plato's quotation, occasionally somewhat over-interpreting it: Plato did not himself meant to distinguish between Spartans as 'ants' and Athenians as 'frogs', even if that's a nice further play on his metaphor, and he was not really aware of the Romans (though he probably heard about them during his time in Sicily). Other essays started from geographical conditions in the Mediterranean, with stronger essays discussing the considerable difference in that regard between Greece and Italy. Most essays addressed the role of the sea in various aspects of Greek and Roman civilisations: military, trade, and cultural transmission, including for instance the adoption of alphabet from the Phoenicians. Greek colonisation and the establishment of the Athenian empire were notable favourites, as were the Punic wars on the Roman side. At the weaker end, there was occasionally a tendency to cherry-pick particular events, especially in military history, which illustrated the significance of the sea, while not considering the other side of the argument and passing over the role of land battles or of overland or riverine trade. Was e.g. the battle of Actium more important in Roman

civil wars than the battle of Pharsalus? Some of the best submissions perceptively addressed the differences between Greece and Rome or between different Greek cities, notably Athens and Sparta, in this respect, or considered the contrast between classical Greece and the Hellenistic kingdoms, expanding after Alexander's conquests deep inland in Asia. Some other very successful essays addressed the question in a rather different way, through the analysis of the range of emotions elicited by the sea in Greek and Roman authors; it was pleasing to realise that so many participants are aware of the newly discovered poems of Sappho.

3. Philosophy

There were 49 philosophy submissions on the question "Is Socrates right that it is better to suffer an injustice than to commit one (even if one is never caught)?" Most essays either discussed the claim itself or focused specifically on Plato's treatment of it. Regardless of the approach taken, the best essays were those that not only stated the various views on the question, but discussed and engaged with the arguments for and against them. Thus, although many candidates identified Socrates' position well, more time could have been spent outlining, analysing and engaging with his argument. When it came to discussing the reasons why committing an injustice might be bad, many candidates focused on the role of guilt and shame rather than on the notion that doing something unjust makes you a bad person. The best essays, however, discussed the latter claim and noticed the importance Plato places on having a good, virtuous soul. A few essays explicitly discussed the analogy between having a damaged body and having an unjust soul. A virtue of many essays discussing guilt and shame was that they noticed how the fact that *many* people feel guilt and shame is insufficient warrant for the strong claim that it is *always* better to suffer wrong than to do wrong: some people might not feel guilt or be subjected to shame. Many essays also compared the evil of feeling guilt with that of suffering injustice, arguing that even if Socrates is right in some cases, it might be better to commit a minor injustice than to suffer a great one. It was great to see independent arguments being developed here. Some strong essays argued that being punished in an afterlife should count as 'being caught', but many candidates assumed without discussion that Socrates' argument depended on taking the soul to be punished after death. In these essays, more reflection on what 'never being caught' might involve would be desirable. Some candidates drew on an impressive knowledge of different moral theories, notably utilitarianism, deontology and virtue ethics. Even more candidates found similarities between Socrates' position and passages from the New Testament. The best essays sought to identify and compare the arguments and reasons behind the positions taken in the different texts discussed.

4. Archaeology

There were 38 essays on the archaeology question ('Should it be illegal to purchase ancient artefacts?'). Most essays discussed issues of definition (what can be classified as an 'artefact'; what defines something as 'ancient') with the best managing not to get too waylaid by these questions. Almost all the essays explored pertinent concerns around the ownership of ancient artefacts: examining who should have the right to possess antiquities, and who should be able to sell them. Most agreed that it should not be legal to sell looted objects stolen from conflict zones, but there was less consensus around questions like whether museums should be permitted to sell pieces from their collections or whether museums should be permitted to purchase pieces that had been taken from areas of conflict in order to protect this cultural heritage for future generations and make it available to a wider public. The best essays engaged with these issues in a nuanced way, exploring a range of considerations and perspectives. Many essays showed an impressive awareness of current legislation and some essays proposed quite novel legal reforms centring on these questions of cultural property. Overall, the essays contained an extremely wide range of different examples, from Guatemala to China, though the majority featured the case studies of the Parthenon and the more recent trade in antiquities from conflict zones, particularly from Syria. There was some excellent discussion focusing on what is lost when pieces are removed from their ancient contexts, with a number of essays including well-chosen illustrations. There was also some persuasive commentary around the contemporary social importance of material cultural heritage. The most successful essays were clearly structured and examined a number of perspectives before reaching a clear conclusion.