



St. John's College, Oxford

Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition 2020/21

The St. John's College Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition ran for the tenth time during the academic year 2020/21. We are delighted to report that it starts its second decade with its highest level of participation ever, with 203 submissions to the competition, including 70 for the classical literature question; 54 for the ancient history question; 11 for the archaeology question; and 68 for the philosophy question. Of these, 137 participants, another record, have signed up for the virtual study afternoon on 22 April. It is very pleasing to note that last year's slump in numbers has now been completely reversed. We hope that this year's success can be repeated in future years.

The competition was, as previously, 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 geographical range remains pleasingly broad, as does the range of different school types, with winning and commended entries coming from Greater London, Liverpool, Belfast, Derbyshire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Surrey, and even Oxfordshire itself, and a variety of educational backgrounds.

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 Prof. Alison Hills (Fellow in Philosophy). They offer their reflections on essays in their fields below.

1. *'Nice guys finish last.' Is this statement true for characters (of any gender) in ancient literature?*

It is common to comment on the range of answers for a given question, but for this year's literature topic, this cliché rings strikingly true. The huge number of entries revealed a huge variety of different stances on the question (strongly agreeing, strongly disagreeing, and middle positions), definitions of the terms ('nice guy' and 'finishing last'), and above all, texts used as examples. Characters discussed ranged from heroes (male and female) in Homer, Vergil and tragedy (Medea, Oedipus and Prometheus were favourites here), through Roman love elegy, comedy and historiography, to Near Eastern, Indian and Biblical works— which were rightly considered as central components of 'ancient literature', and not as side comparisons. Many pieces incisively challenged the complicated notions involved in the question's statement: what is meant by being 'nice', and indeed by winning or losing, is deeply dependent on the different value systems and assumptions held across space and time.

The best essays treated the characters not just as human beings but as products of literary texts, taking into account the different historical contexts, authorial biases, genres and narrative strategies involved. It is also important to give thought to *why* examples are selected: what links, contrasts and justifies the characters chosen for discussion from this vast panorama of ancient literature? And whatever texts are chosen, the most successful entries always *analysed* rather than just described them.

Finally, it was pleasing to see the sensitive approach to modernity used to frame this question: many essays spoke about the origins of the phrase 'nice guys finish last' in 1940s US baseball, but some also thought about its impact in discussions of romantic relationships, contemporary politics, gender dynamics and modern literature. This approach struck at the core of the idea of 'virtue politics', which was just as relevant, but very differently relevant, in antiquity as it is today. What it means to be 'nice', how it's expressed, championed or condemned in ancient texts, does *matter*, as we continue to think through how we can (to quote one of the essays) 'afford to be kind... for the sake of a nicer world.'

2. Did Greek and/or Roman elections express the will of the people?

Essays addressing the ancient history question (Did Greek and/or Roman elections express the will of the people) mostly discussed the classic cases of the fifth and fourth century Athens and the late Republican Rome, but more adventurous participants ranged in their essays from the Spartan ephors to the episcopal elections in late antiquity.

Most essays confronted some of the main questions head-on: the restrictive character of the ancient electorate, consisting as it did only of free males (or some sub-group of those); the practical inaccessibility of elections even for many of those; inequalities within the citizen body, particularly at Rome; undue influence, including patronage, electoral bribery, and gang violence. The strongest essays questioned the ancient (and indeed modern) understanding of 'the will of the people', and drew attention to such elements of complexity, as, for example, the wide use of appointment by lot, rather than election, in ancient Athens, often seen by ancient political theorists as a sign of true democracy.

It could have been fruitful to ask further what the elections were trying to achieve in less democratic city-states, for instance at Sparta, and why did elections (or, for some higher up positions, a fiction of elections) survive in the Roman Empire, under the autocratic regime of the Caesars. Some essays successfully delved into the paradox of improper influence in elections as a sign of the elite recognition of the political role of the people, even if in a narrow ancient definition of who constituted 'the people'.

3. In the ancient world, did the art of democracies express the same concerns as the art of the autocratic regimes?

The submissions were of a good standard and showed an impressive breadth of artistic and archaeological knowledge, with examples ranging from Egypt to Mesopotamia to Roman France. Along with old favourites like the Parthenon and the Prima Porta Augustus, particularly interesting analysis was applied to a Temple of Gaius and Lucius, the statue group of Eirene and Ploutos and the Persian Behistun Inscription (among many others). The best essays had a strong line of argument which stuck closely to the question and used the archaeology as evidence to back up points and proposals. These also tended to drill into the details of the historical context and were specific with regard to time and place.

Although it's tempting to see ancient Greece through a democratic lens, in fact, Athens was unusual in this respect, and then only for a fairly narrow period of time. Some of the most famous Greek artworks like Kleobis and Biton at Delphi, the Temple of Zeus at Olympia and the Sicilian Motya Charioteer were produced by autocratic or oligarchic regimes elsewhere in the Greek world. And don't forget that they would have been brightly painted at the time – the application of polychromy to sculpture and architecture would have created a completely different viewing

experience to what survives today. It's always worth asking practical questions of public artworks. We often read, for example, that 'Trajan built a column to celebrate his victories in Dacia', but *did he?* Who was actually responsible for such monuments? Is there a surviving inscription? What does it say? How much input did artists and craftsmen have into their designs, or even the messages they conveyed? Did Trajan get out his stylus and wax tablet and sketch some ideas or did he just have final approval? (Nb – we may never know, but it's always good practice to ask the question.)

4. Plato thought that democracy was the rule of the ignorant. Was he right?

These essays showed an impressive array of knowledge, from details of the elections in Athens and its restricted electorate, to times at which the democratic decision-making in Athens seemed to go wrong (from the death of Socrates to the Mytilenean debate); to a comparison with modern democracies and situations where their decision-making may be flawed (with many references to Donald Trump!). Many of the essays demonstrated a good understanding of Plato's own views in the Republic, notably his ideas that the "ship of state" needs an expert to steer, to the theory of Forms and the role of philosophers. There was some discussion of whether modern electorates are really ignorant, and whether knowledge as Plato conceives of it is desirable. The best essays considered what might be the advantages of democratic rule, for instance, whether democracies might be expected to make better decisions thanks to the wisdom of the crowds, or whether there are other benefits – in freedom or in representation – in democratic government.