



St. John's College, Oxford Classics Essay Competition and Study Afternoon 2018/19

The St. John's College Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition ran for the ninth time during the academic year 2018/19. 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; participants in receipt of free school meals received financial help with attending the study afternoon.

We had 101 entries across the four disciplines, with literature and history attracting the largest numbers of takers. Eight prizes and commendations were awarded (with the overall winner, in the archaeology category, coming from a comprehensive school in Bristol), and on 25 April, 58 sixth-form students from around the country all the way from Dorset to Scotland came to St John's to participate in a study afternoon which took as its theme 'Mythology in the Ancient World'. College tutors delivered a range of short talks which gave attendees a taste of what it is like to study Classical subjects at St John's and Oxford, with time allowed for students to ask questions afterwards.

Dr Laura Miguélez-Cavero discussed literary variations of the same myth and their significance, Dr Alison Pollard explored how Romans depicted myths and what messages those might have been intended to send, Dr Amber Gartrell examined how we might decide where mythology ends and history begins, and Prof. Alison Hills used the myth of the cave in Plato's Republic to analyse philosophical knowledge in antiquity.

Attendees were also given tours of the college in the spring sunshine by current undergraduates and had the opportunity to chat to both tutors and undergraduates about Classics at Oxford and college life over tea and cakes.

Literature

There were 44 essays on the question 'Is love a narrative force to be reckoned with in epic?' Discuss with examples from Greek and/or Latin Poetry.' Most essays focused on the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, followed by the *Iliad*, with few references to Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Lucan's *Pharsalia*. Most essays started with a general discussion of the different terms for love in antiquity (*eros*, *philia*, *storge*) and how these were found in the different epics, in most cases displaying a good knowledge of the ancient texts. A few essays also emphasized the effects of love on characters' development, especially in the case of Odysseus and Aeneas. A preliminary reflection on the meaning of 'narrative force' would have been advisable in a number of instances, as well as a treatment of secondary bibliography as a starting point (and not the final point) of the discussion.

Ancient History

30 essays were submitted for the question 'What role did the gods play in the life of the ancient city?' Many essays elected to focus on a single culture's gods, most commonly the Greek pantheon, although some submissions drew comparisons between the gods in different religious systems. A few entries considered both the role of the gods in public life, but also in private or family life. Submissions commonly drew on their knowledge of ancient literature, in particular the epics of Homer and Virgil, although some essays also drew on ancient oracles, calendars, and art to nuance their argument. The best submissions interacted closely with the question set, exploring how beliefs, rituals and festivals might have structured and affected the life of the ancient city.

Philosophy

There were 17 entries in the ancient philosophy section, addressing Aristotle's contention that humans have a function. The essays referenced an impressively wide range of philosophical literature, from recent discussions or developments of Aristotelian ethics (from Philippa Foot and Christine Korsgaard), to very different philosophical traditions, notably the existentialists, who deny that humans have any essence at all. Many made use of a knowledge of Darwinian biology, to question whether Aristotle's own claim depended on his own teleological biology, or even depended on their being a deity 'designing' humans with a particular function. The best essays martialled this material into a compelling overall argument, and were very clear about what Aristotle was claiming, what other claims that depended on, and which objections were most serious. The best essays had a very impressive level of philosophical rigour.

Archaeology

There were 10 entries for the archaeology essay, which posed the question: 'Why are mythological scenes so prevalent in Greek and Roman art and archaeology?' Some entrants set parameters in the introduction and defined what they considered mythology to be, which ultimately lead to clear and focused writing. Several considered standalone representations of the gods to be mythological, which led to an interesting variety of answers. The Parthenon metopes and the Prima Porta Augustus were the most cited artworks, meaning that the use of mythology to promote political messages was the most commonly-addressed theme. Strong essays went beyond the traditional interpretation of these frequently studied artworks, presenting original and nuanced thinking. Other entrants addressed the use of mythology in funerary art, particularly sarcophagi, with one essay focusing on the ambiguity of displaying Medea in this context. Surprisingly few discussed the promotion of education and high culture through domestic display in mosaics and wall-paintings, which is a compelling argument as to why Romans preferred to show Greek mythology in their houses. Weaker essays tended not to properly address the question, and push a point tangential to the topic in hand. The best essays addressed a range of ideas rather than running with a single argument, and gave equal weighting to Greek and Roman archaeology. Some brought in lesser-known objects, suggesting research beyond the normal syllabus and providing a refreshing and welcome range of examples.