

Classical Literature And Civilisation (Q820): Selected Module Descriptions (years 2 and 3)

Year 2

Core: The Age of Cicero

Cicero is our most important witness to the last days of the Roman republic: his letters, speeches, and philosophical writings take us from the Catilinarian conspiracy to the assassination of Julius Caesar and beyond – until Cicero's own violent death. Taking Cicero's work as our guiding thread, we will discover the significance, for the Romans of the late republic, of friendship, love and sex, morality and immorality, leisure and business, the role of rhetoric and politics, ambition and competition. Cicero's contemporaries, Catullus, Lucretius, and Sallust will be part of the core reading for the module, enabling students to form a complete picture of the literature and culture of the final years of the Roman republic.

Core: Athenian Drama

This module focuses on 5th-century Athenian drama: tragedy, comedy and satyr-plays. Plays are investigated not as closed texts but as what they are: scripts for performance. Lectures situate plays in the context of the development of their genres; explore evidence for Athenian theatrical practice and introduce key critical approaches, as well as some modern performances of Greek plays. Workshops allow in-depth discussion of the verbal and visual meanings of individual plays or scenes; some will include discussion of performances seen on video. Students will usually make a trip to see at least one new performance of a Greek play, and will travel to the Oxford Archive for the Performance of Greek and Roman Drama. The core of the module consists of practical design and enactment of scenes by groups of students, with the aim of understanding the processes whereby the significance of the verbal text is realised, augmented or varied in performance.

Option: Matrons and Monsters: Roman Women

This module will examine the portrayal of Roman women, in contexts such as marriage, family, public life, religion, etc, in texts ranging from late republican to late imperial Rome. Sources will include Roman letters, historiography, epic, satire and elegy, as well as epigraphic material. Representation of historical characters such as Clodia Metelli, or Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi, will be studied alongside fictional creations such as the Italian queen Amata in the *Aeneid*, or Propertius' mistress "Cynthia".

Option: Greek and Roman Epic.

This module examines the history of the epic poem in the classical world. This module aims to give a deeper understanding of the more familiar epic poems from antiquity, in particular the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, and *Aeneid*, addressing topics such as the relationship between Homer's poetry and wider traditions of Indo-European and ancient Near Eastern mythology, the reception of epic themes in Greek tragedy, the reception of tragedy in the *Aeneid*, the ways in which the *Aeneid* addresses the bloody history of the first century BC. We will also be looking at some less familiar epics; these may include Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, Catullus' *Peleus and Thetis*, and Lucan's *Civil War*. In addition to this, we shall consider some of the ways in which ancient epic has been influential in English literature.

Option: Imperial Rome

This module will examine Roman society in the first to third centuries AD – the time when the empire was at its height, when huge building projects expressed the wealth and confidence and when one could travel from northern Britain to Iraq without leaving Roman control. There are three main strands to the module. One will examine the power structures of the empire: the state under Augustus; imperial rule – Caligula, Nero, and Hadrian; imperial women; imperialism and conquest; and imperial cult. The second will look at our writers – Pliny the Younger, Tacitus and Suetonius and will consider how far our 'Rome' is a product of their agendas. The third will look at wider society: 'muted' groups such as the poor, women and slaves; Rome's relationship with its eastern territories including the Greeks and the Jews; religion under Rome; Rome, the non-Roman and resistance; death and disease.

Option: Thinking Athenian

Classical Athenians saw themselves as special. Descended from kings born from the earth itself, championed by the goddess Athena (who had to fight Poseidon for the honour!), inventors of democracy, victors at Marathon and Salamis, inventors of the dramatic arts, home to the best minds in the world, the list goes on and on. This module will look at Athenian attitudes to a variety of issues including: bravery, leisure, sexuality, politics, religion, warfare, money, and imperialism. It will also focus closely on the Athenian tendency towards the "othering" of non-elite male groups such as women, slaves, and foreigners, and even the poor. Ultimately we will be aiming to answer the question of whether the Athenians were peculiar in how they thought about the world.

Year 3

Option: Greek and Roman Comedy

In this option you will study selected plays by the four greatest and most influential ancient comic playwrights of antiquity: the Athenians Aristophanes (c. 450-c. 380) and Menander (342/1-291/0), and the Romans Plautus (c. 250-c. 180) and Terence (c. 190-c. 160). We begin with Aristophanes, whose crazy, scurrilous, obscene and extravagant fantasy dramas shed colourful and scintillating light on Athenian politics, society and intellectual culture during and immediately after the Peloponnesian War. We move on to the very different world of Athens in the late 4th century, still an intellectual and cultural powerhouse but now politically dominated by the Alexander the Great and his successors. This was the cosmopolitan, louche and sentimentally-inclined milieu that produced New Comedy: the ancestor of the European comic tradition, from Italian Commedia dell'Arte via Shakespeare, Molière, French farce and Ealing comedy to the modern Hollywood rom-com and TV sitcom. Greek New Comedy was exported to the Greek cities of southern Italy and there gave birth to the first comedies in Latin. The star playwrights were Plautus, from Sarsina in Umbria (N. Italy), and Terence, probably from North Africa. Their comic world could veer between a Greek/ Athenian fantasyland and the Roman here-and-now, creating a fusion of escapism and social satire not a million miles from *The Simpsons*, *South Park* or *Family Guy*.

Option: The Age of Nero

'What an artist dies with me!' Written out of history by the Roman Senate after his death, Nero – the last of the Julio-Claudian line – has gone down in history as the archetypal mad, bad Emperor who fiddled while Rome burned. This option explores the many facets of Nero's legend – artist, builder, matricide, liberator, Antichrist. As well as finding out what we can about Nero's actual contribution to history, we will sample the important literature of his reign – Lucan's anti-epic of civil war, Seneca's gory tragedies, Petronius' scandalous *Satyricon* – and follow his story down to the modern age, in fiction and film (*The Sign of the Cross* and *Quo Vadis*).

Option: Greek mythology

On completion of this module you will understand the complexity of myth and its position relative to intertextuality and the encapsulation of ideas and values, both in ancient times and in modern. You will gain an expert knowledge of classical media, in particular the varieties of literature – surviving and lost; you will also master a sequence of modern ideas based on the quests for knowledge of scholars and thinkers from around 1850 to the present day.

Option: Sparta

Spartan society is an enigma in the ancient Greek world; it excited the imagination of contemporaries from other Greek states and has continued to serve as both a positive and a negative social and political model up until the present day. This module will get behind the 'Spartan mirage' through detailed study of the ancient evidence for the military ethos, the Spartan education system (*agoge*), the roles of women in Spartan society, and the image of Sparta in modern culture. This module also discusses the varied ways in which Sparta has been appropriated by ancient and modern writers, and the impact this has had upon academic study of Sparta.

Years 2 and 3

Seminar – Catullus and his World

In this seminar, students have the opportunity to study Catullus' entire oeuvre in depth. We will read the short poems (elegies and epigrams) in the first semester, and devote the second semester to the long poems (including the wedding hymns, the Attis poem, and the mini-epic 64). The poetry will be read in its late republican context, and we will explore, for instance, how the attitudes and vocabulary presented by Catullus relate to the wider context of works such as Cicero's *de Oratore* and *de Officiis*. We will also explore the evidence for the practices involved in reading, writing, performance and publication in the late republic. We will, of course, also look into the representation of the relationship with Lesbia and explore the implications of this for our understanding of the role of women in the late republic.

Seminar – Herodotus

The Histories of Herodotus is considered one of the seminal works of history in Western literature. *The Histories* serves as a record of the ancient traditions, politics, geography, and clashes of various cultures that were known around the Mediterranean and Western Asia at that time. It is not an impartial record but it remains one of the West's most important sources regarding these affairs. Moreover, the author Herodotus thereby invented 'history' as a field of study.

Seminar – The *Iliad* and the *Mahābhārata*

The *Mahābhārata* is the nearest thing in Indian literature to Homer. Composed in Sanskrit (the Indian equivalent of Latin), its kernel dates back to a century or two before Homer, but it has been colossally expanded since then. It tells of five brothers, the Pandavas, who win a wife, spend time in exile, learn religious and moral truths, interact with good, evil and often inscrutable characters – gods and heroes (in Greek terms), and win the great final battle that brings this heroic age to an end (just as the Trojan War does). Yudhishthira, the leading Pandava, then rules for 36 years, till – bearing a dog – he enters heaven. If Homer is the bible of the Greeks, then the *Mahābhārata* enshrines an infinity of learning – it even includes the celebrated *Bhagavad Gītā*.

Seminar – Sex, Lies, and Violence: Rome and Athens

This module will investigate the representation of sexual, moral and political corruption in Athens and Rome. It will proceed through a range of case studies on the darker side of the Roman and Athenian elites as portrayed by a range of authors from the Graeco-Roman world. It will examine the rhetoric of moral corruption, the ways that it was used by authors to make political and social points and the 'othering' of social groups. In semester 1 we will examine classic Republican and Imperial exemplars of corruption including Mark Antony, Caligula and Elagabalus. In semester 2 we will focus on a range of characters and characterisations including: Theseus, Harmodius and Aristogeiton (the tyrannicides), Pericles and his concubine Aspasia, and Demetrius Poliorcetes filling the Parthenon with his prostitutes.

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