Agora

Issue 11
Autumn 2024

CLASSICS TO SHARE AND ENJOY

As we kick off another exciting year at the LSA CA, *Agora* returns for its 11th issue, with more fantastic content showcasing the talents of our hard-working Classics Ambassadors. Alongside our usual highly informative articles and Artefact of the Issue, this issue also features some immersive creative writing and an interview with two former members who have recently been bringing Greek tragedy to life on stage.

Plus, don't forget to try out our latest Classical Crossword on page 8, for a chance to win a copy of Rosie Hewlett's *Medusa*! The deadline to enter is Friday 29 November.

Our Association feels more alive than ever following the success of our unforgettable 10-year anniversary programme, including our first ever themed Roman Day and Ancient Worlds Day. The latter included not only Professor Michael Scott's Presidential Lecture on the Athenian general Themistocles, but also the Grand Final of our 2024 Classics Competition, which saw four young speakers pitch their ideas for ancient world documentaries to our President. Faced with four outstanding presentations, Professor Scott judged Ffion Shute the victor for her talk on the Herculaneum papyri, with Olivia Strudwick, speaking on Roman coins, as runner-up. These results were matched by the People's Choice Award.

Our book club continues to meet every few months on Zoom, and we have recently been delving into a wide range of captivating reads, from Tom Holland's *Rubicon* to Alice Oswald's *Memorial*. Our next meeting will take place on Thursday 5 December, book title to be announced. All are welcome and it's free to join – just send us a message at lsaclassics@gmail.com!

On behalf of all our contributors and the LSA CA Committee, I hope that you enjoy this latest issue and our 2024-25 lecture season. Be sure to check all the dates at the end of this newsletter, and note that two of our talks this year are taking place at the Lytham St Annes High School, rather than at AKS as usual.

Cura ut valeas!

Declan Boyd, Editor

Contents

After Plataea: a short story

LORNA LEE

In 479 BCE, an allied force of Greek city-states defeated the invading Persians at the Battle of Plataea. This success was commemorated by the erection of a victory monument, the Serpent Column, at Delphi: on it were inscribed the names of the 31 Greek poleis who had fought against the Persians. Classics Ambassador Lorna conjures up a scene at Delphi in the aftermath of the battle, from the perspective of a man whose city backed the wrong side…

I have been dreaming about the sanctuary ever since the war ended. Losing myself in visions of gilded monuments and elaborate friezes, hammered into an epic landscape of wild forests and soaring fells. But after queuing on the oracle's doorstep since the early hours, I can only think about the scent of roasting meat drifting from a nearby banquet table and how it might taste crumbling on my tongue.

Model of the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi (Image credit: Jean-Pierre Dalbéra via Flickr)

The air is heavy with heat, watery sunlight tracing gullies through livid clouds. I gulp down the occasional trickle of wind, trying to ignore the grinding ache in my stomach and the chafe of leather against my swollen feet. I press against a column to adjust the straps, but hastily withdraw after a sharp look from a priest so craggy he might have been hewn from the mountainside itself. I do not know why I am bothering! When did consulting the oracle come to anything good anyway? Oedipus tried to escape what he heard and ran straight into its arms. The king of Lydia marched to destroy his own empire. The medisers who rule my city were so convinced that they had chosen the winning side. Yet, when my nephew was chosen to represent Thebes in the Pythian games, I found myself offering to accompany him, hoping, like the trail of desperate fools who came before me, that Delphi held answers.

The Naxian in front is beckoned forwards. *It won't be long now.*

A knot of Athenians have formed a huddle outside the pronaos, muffled mumblings lost in the febrile hum of the crowd. The old priest clicks his tongue but makes no move to shoo them away, seeming to sag as he takes in the long line of waiting consultants. They still find stories to share after hours of queuing in the pressing heat, voices weaving together in a tapestry of sound. Some slumbering part of me longs to join in. An impulse soon driven away by the ass behind me, who has been riding the backs of my sandals every shuffling step of the sacred way. He is so close I can feel the tickle of his breath against the nape of my neck. I shift position, dirt and grit from thousands of travellers crunching beneath my sandals. In the fringes of my vision, a column of twisting serpents glimmers against the orange-red hues of the cliff face, ruby eyes winking in the muddy light. I am not close enough to make out the names etched into the bronze, but I already know my polis is not among them.

Muffled cheering erupts from below. The athletic events do not begin for another day, but that has not stopped the early arrivals from taking advantage of the empty stadium to practice. Thrasydaeus shoots a wistful glance that way, sinewy muscles straining to keep a grip on the sacrificial goat, his endless volley of requests for battle stories seemingly chased away by the prospect of earning Thebes some much needed glory in the youth running race. Gods help me, I'm glad of it. It is not like his beloved epics of long sieges and

even longer journeys home. The memories gutter and flare like a dying flame finding a last lick of fuel. I remember how the glint of Athenian bronze slurred together in the shimmering heat. The feeling of their thundering feet rattling through my body. The shade of my sister's face when I told her I had not been able to protect her husband. My gaze drifts once more to the serpentine victory monument, a small shudder rippling through me at the thought of how those coils might writhe under a less overcast sky. The world is only interested in one story anyway.

My neighbour has taken to picking his fingernails. A puff of air escapes as my eyes rove for somewhere else to settle, returning to the grouping by the temple. They appear to be wrapping up their conversation. One of them shifts to the right, revealing a flash of silver irises, and I feel as though I have been pitched into the Asopos. It is definitely him. Those eyes, even gleaned through helmet slits, are difficult to forget. They widen now as he meets my gaze. *He remembers then.* A dreadful coolness closes in, numbing my insides as the memories seize me. The clang of metal pressing on my ears, so unnervingly like the clink of goblets back home. The tug of churned earth at my feet, as though the soil from which we sprung was trying to reclaim me. And a face. His face. He is younger than I remember. His boyish nose, eclipsed by a smattering of freckles, has not caught up with the rest of his features. I take in the bone white scars puckering his skin, swallowing thoughts of how many I gave him and countless others at Plataea that day. The sword is buried somewhere on the road to Thebes. I ordered the enslaved lad who buried it never to tell me where.

The living slip by as though set to a different beat. I hold his gaze, skin prickling at the memory of his returning blows. He is within hailing distance, but what do I say to someone I would give almost anything to be a stranger to? No. We are cursed to be acquaintances. Even though I recognise the anguish cradled in his eyes and know that something of him lingers on those fields too. It's the look Thrasydaeus' father had when he threw himself, a trembling boar, on that Athenian's spear. Like his soul had already fled to Hades. The same one I have seen in my reflection every day since. *How do you carry what happened?* I long to ask, to yell across the gulf. In those quiet moments when the hurry of the day has passed, how does he, *how do I*, keep my chin above the tide? But I make no approach and neither does he. We just stand, still and silent as two kouroi, the pain aching between us.

Replica of the Serpent Column at Delphi; the original is now in Istanbul (Image credit: Andy Hay via Wikimedia Commons)

The crackle of a throat being cleared. I blink at the ancient priest beckoning to me, taking several moments to remember that I am here, outside Apollo's temple, and it is my turn. Those silvery eyes are now fixed resolutely on the ground, but as I stare, he gives the paving stones a shadow of a nod. I have been waiting for the day I will wake up and feel normal. A way back to who I was. But as I look at him I begin to understand. There is no going back. A gap opens in the clouds, flooding the precinct with pale, golden light. Perhaps that is enough. To stop holding the shattered fragments together and build something else from the pieces.

I know he catches the returning dip of my head.

The priest looks irritated now, cane clacking as he makes for me with surprising haste. But rather than heading inside, I follow the lingering scent of roasting meat, my nephew's footfalls and the clop of hooves at my heels.

I have my answer.

Artefact of the Issue: a coin from Carlisle

OLIVIA STRUDWICK

Image credit: Frank Giecco via the BBC

This fascinating silver *denarius* was discovered this July on an excavation site near an ancient bathhouse in Carlisle. Minted in 82 BCE, 150 years before the Romans arrived in Carlisle, it is not only one of the oldest coins ever unearthed in Cumbria, but also one of the oldest artefacts found at Roman Carlisle.

The illustrations on the reverse side of the coin depict a familiar episode from the *Odyssey*: the moment when Odysseus returns home and is greeted by his ever-faithful dog Argos, who can see through his disguise. Whilst the coin accurately depicts Odysseus with a staff (the mark of a traveller), Argos is portrayed as happy, excitable and alive, in contrast to Homer's description of the dog being on the brink of death. By displaying an excitable Argos, the image on the coin would have reminded viewers of the happy memories they had with their own lively dogs in the prime of their lives; this would have allowed them to connect more positively with the scene than if it reminded them of frail or ill animals.

The obverse side of the coin depicts the Mercury. The coin demonstrates how the Romans considered their world closely linked with the mythological past, while also aligning the state with powerful deities.

Issued by a certain Gaius Mamilius Limetanus (according to the faded inscriptions on the reverse side) this coin is serrate, meaning that its circumference has been cut in a particular way as an anti-forgery technique. We can see small perforations which indicate that the Romans had tested the coin to ensure its validity (when pressure was applied, a forged coin would reveal a copper, rather than a silver, core). The number of these markings attests to the frequency of this coin's exchange in the ancient world.

Whilst the question of how the coin travelled to Cumbria remains unanswered, its discovery contributes to our understanding of Roman Carlisle (Luguvalium), offering an insight into the thriving economic activities and trade links that must have existed for the coin to end up there. As the northernmost city of the Roman Empire, Luguvalium was a supply base and major military and commerce centre. The wealth of artefacts found there have established Roman Carlisle as one of the predominant archaeological centres in the North-West of England. The most recent excavations have yielded stunning discoveries such as two monumental carved Roman heads, the largest collection of intaglios from any period in the UK, the only sample of the renowned Tyrian purple dye in Northern Europe and over 550 Roman coins.

No mind without madness: mental illness in the ancient world

CAOIMHE ACRES

CW: discussions of mental health issues and sexual violence.

Aristotle is famously reported to have said that "no great mind has ever existed without a touch of madness". This connection between greatness and madness can be clearly seen in the cases of multiple Roman emperors who were described by ancient historians as mad. Discussion around mental illness in the ancient world can, however, be traced back to the Greeks.

Whereas the basics were known about health – for instance, if you overindulge in food or wine, it might be worth eating or drinking less – mental health remained a mystery, and, following their customs, the ancients turned to religion to explain mental health issues which they experienced. They ascribed these issues to the gods inflicting curses in divine retribution for wrongs which individuals had committed. Over time, however, attitudes to mental health evolved, and physicians emerged who began to experiment with treatments and theories to both explain and solve adverse mental health conditions.

Pythagoras, although a key figure not only in the mathematics of triangles but also in the realm of Greek philosophical 'shamanism' (interacting with the spirit world through an altered state of consciousness similar to the prophets and oracles found across the ancient world), believed that human consciousness was contained in the brain. His conclusion went on to inspire other philosophers and physicians and eventually led him to be recognised as a founding figure of psychology.

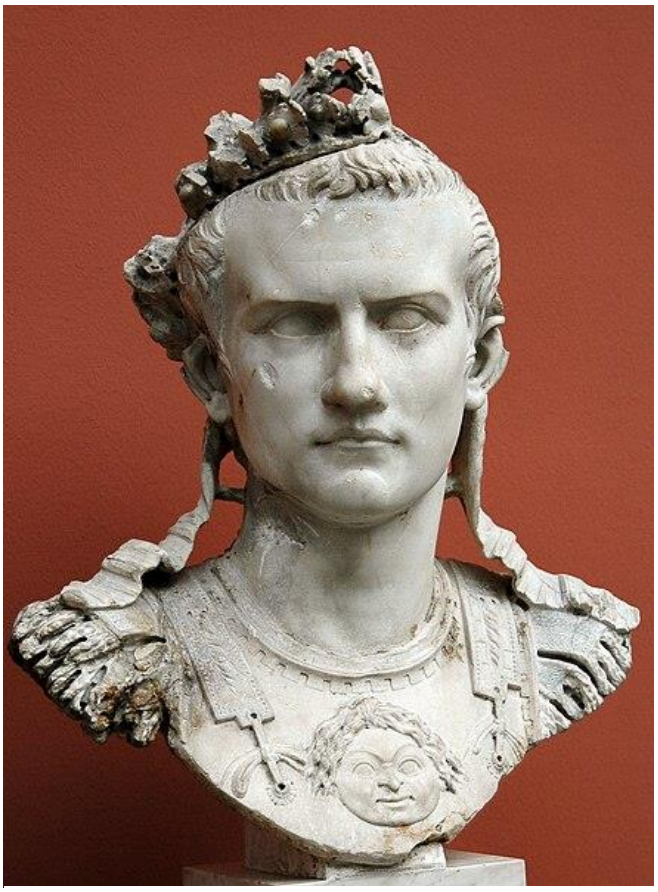
Another significant individual in relation to attitudes towards mental health was Asclepiades of Bithynia, who advocated for humane treatment for the mentally ill, treating them with diets and massages as opposed to confinement. In this, he resisted engaging with the Hippocratic notion of balancing the humours, which had previously been seen as the appropriate way to treat disease, either physical or mental (although this went through phases of popularity).

Dionysus and his maddened female followers, fifth century BCE bell krater (Image credit: Sergey Sosnovskiy via Wikipedia)

Mental illness and disorders were a common theme in mythology, such as in Dionysus' infliction of madness on a range of characters, including – perhaps most famously – the women of Thebes and eventually also their king Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae*. According to a lesser-known myth, Dionysus also drove the daughters of Proitos, a king of Argos, to madness. The prophet Melampus cured these women, who, according to Servius' commentary on Virgil's sixth *Eclogue*, imagined that they had become cows; Melampus let them scream and dance, then cured them with hellebore roots, which can cause one to pass black stools and experience convulsions. These roots were often used in antiquity to treat psychological conditions. Although it is most likely that they were not used as a permanent treatment, their use certainly points to how the ancients thought about episodes of madness such as this: the cause of the conditions must have been thought to be some sort of edible drug, possibly a hallucinogen, if it was expected to disappear after a purging of the stomach like this. Drugs were likely also ingested on religious occasions when prophets and oracles would transcend

into a euphoric state in order to communicate with the gods.

We often hear about mad Roman emperors who suffer repeated bouts of insanity and the results of whose madness are felt by their subjects. Names such as Caligula and Nero are commonplace in studies of this nature and therefore make for excellent case studies.



Marble bust of Caligula, first century CE (Image credit: Sergey Sosnovskiy via Wikipedia)

Although modern scholars tend to suggest that Caligula's madness may largely be a construct of ancient historiography malicious to the emperor, it is important not to rule out the possibility that he did indeed suffer from mental illness. There are a couple of neuropsychiatric theories as to the cause of his madness. The first attributes it to a near-fatal illness he experienced aged 25 due to lead poisoning. The other suggests that he suffered from epilepsy since his childhood and that, after experiencing status epilepticus (when a seizure lasts too long, historically anything over 20 minutes but recently reduced to five minutes, or when seizures occur too close together), he suffered brain damage; this, along with periods of paranoia, then haunted him for the rest of his life, causing him to be perceived as mad. However, this view was challenged as early as 1923 by Thomas Spencer Jerome, based on the rarity of status epilepticus. Jerome instead suggested that the emperor's alcoholic tendencies might be a more appropriate target of blame (although he acknowledges the imperial family's history of epilepsy). If alcoholism is to blame, then Caligula offers a clear example of how one's physical condition can impact one's mental health.

Mental illness can also spawn from past trauma, something that Nero is thought to have experienced in his childhood, due to losing his father when only four years old and being banished from Rome at a young age along with his mother and her sisters. From this trauma, psychosis may have manifested, which, as it advanced through the different stages, would have led to delusions about his family and the world around him. This may have been what caused him to have his mother, wife and stepbrother killed. Even if it is the case that Nero did not in fact suffer such a degree of adverse mental health and that the stories about him are exaggerated by hostile historiographers, it remains clear that the tales they are telling about the emperor are based on a real-life process of deteriorating mental health with which they were familiar.

In the picture of Nero we are presented with, behaviour relevant to the first stage of psychosis – anxiety, social withdrawal, suspicion, deterioration in functioning, withdrawal from family and friends, and so on – was particularly prominent around and in the aftermath of Nero's murder of his stepbrother Britannicus by poison. He progressed later to the acute phase: during these stages he presented severe aggression, paranoia and manipulation, then soon after hallucination and delusion. Nero displayed all these different behaviours throughout different periods of his lifetime, through his actions such as wandering the streets and attacking random men and raping many women (including a Vestal Virgin, according to Suetonius). He was also known to have castrated young boys and was instrumental in the deaths of multiple of his wives. There is very little

information on any treatments that Nero may have undergone, but David Woods in a 2009 article argues that bathing and drinking very cold water were among them. Some scholars have also suggested that Nero might have been suffering from Cushing's syndrome, the symptoms of which include a build-up of fat (Nero is often depicted as rather large) and depression and mood swings. This would further go towards explaining the ill health that led to his poor mental health.

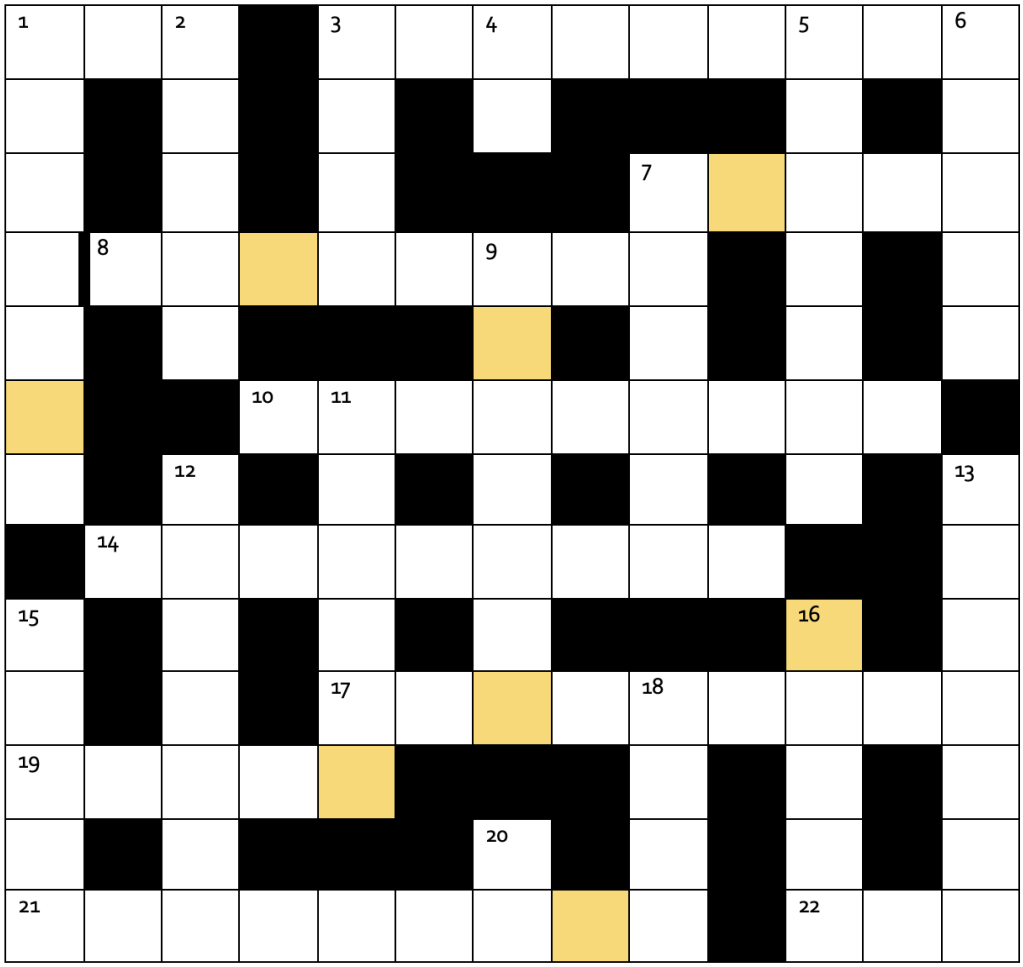
There is a modern-day lesson to be learned from the experiences of all these people: the importance of mental health and its role in physical health, and vice versa. Due to the lack of functioning treatment available in antiquity, these imperial figureheads were unable to access support for their mental health, and the people around them were treated worse because of it. The Theban women and the daughters of Proitos also demonstrate the highly common theme of women seeming to be hysterical and more emotional; these women are not offered a chance at redemption in the way that men who suffer from madness, such as Heracles, are. Taboo, stigma and shame such as that which 'insane' women in antiquity suffered are still faced by lots of people when accessing support today, although figures such as Asclepiades and Pythagoras made efforts to combat this sense of shame in adverse mental health. The issue of mental health and mental illness is ever more prevalent in our modern climate, and we need to make every attempt to help those who are struggling.

Two new competitions!

The Classical Association Mythology Competition is now open for students around the world in Key Stages 2 and 3 (or equivalent), i.e. aged 7-14. Students are invited to submit a piece of Creative Writing, Art or an animation in response to all or a part of the stories of the Wooden Horse (Key Stage 2) or Romulus and Remus (Key Stage 3). For further information and general guidelines, see https://classicalassociation.org/mythology-competition. Submissions should be made to tildesley20@gmail.com by Friday 9 May 2025. There are book token prizes to be won!

The Warwick Classics Network has announced a UK-wide competition for students from KS3 to A-level, i.e. ages 11-18. Students are invited to submit a written (up to 500 words) or creative (drawing, poster, photo of a diorama or scene) response to an ongoing mystery from the Roman world: Why did the Romans carry numbers? See https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/classics/warwickclassicsnetwork/events/tokens for more information and general guidelines, or hear about it on The Classics Podcast! The closing date is Saturday 1 February 2025. The prize is a fully funded trip to Warwick University for the student, a guardian and their teacher for a coin handling session, where you will be able to touch and learn about genuine coins from the ancient world!

Classical Crossword



Across

1. 1,600 in Roman numerals (3)
3. Title given to the daily elected leader of the Athenian *prytaneis* (presidents of the Council) (9)
7. Egyptian sun-god, worshipped by the Hellenistic Greeks as the child Harpocrates (5)
8. Alternative name for Oedipus' mother Jocasta, used in the *Odyssey* (8)
10. A hero's descent into the underworld
14. Platonic dialogue on the nature of temperance (*sophrosyne*) (9)
17. Spartan king throughout most of the Spartan Hegemony after the Peloponnesian War; friend of Xenophon (9)
19. Major Phoenician city, often synonymous with Phoenicia in Greco-Roman literature (5)
21. Deliberative speeches used in Roman oratorical training; Seneca the Elder wrote a book of these (9)
22. Latin word for justice and law; the rights that Roman citizens were entitled to (3)

Down

1. Crane which allowed gods to fly in Greek theatre (7)
2. Horace's most famous motto: _____ *diem!* (5)
3. Loftiest genre of Greco-Roman poetry (4)
4. Beloved of Zeus, transformed into a cow (2)
5. Vestal Virgin who betrayed Rome to a Sabine invasion; namesake of the southern cliff of the Capitoline Hill (7)
6. Slave in Plautus' comedy *Amphitryon* (5)
7. Kindly lady who offers Theseus hospitality in a poem of the same name by Callimachus (6)
9. City buried by Vesuvius (not Pompeii or Herculaneum!), home to the Villa Arianna and Villa San Marco (7)
11. Greek historian of Alexander the Great (6)
12. Wife of Theseus who fell in love with her stepson Hippolytus (7)
13. Satyr flayed alive by Apollo (7)
15. In Roman coinage, a denarius was originally worth 10 (later 16) of these (5)
16. City in Latium captured by the Roman king Tarquin the Proud through deceit (5)
18. Daughter of King Eurytus of Oechalia and beloved of Heracles; cause of the jealousy of Heracles' wife which led to his death (4)
20. Fourteenth letter of the Greek alphabet, equivalent of English *x* (Ξ, ξ) (2)

Use the letters in the boxes highlighted in yellow to find the hidden word. Then email this word to lsaclassics@gmail.com by Friday 29 November and one entry will be picked at random to win a copy of Rosie Hewlett's *Medusa*!

Staging Greek theatre in the 21st century

DECLAN BOYD, ELLA JORALEMON AND JONATHAN WILSON

Agora editor Declan spoke to former LSA CA members Ella and Jonathan, who directed an amateur production of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* at the ADC Theatre in Cambridge this May. Ella and Jonathan have recently completed their Master's degrees at Cambridge, in Film Studies and Classics respectively.

How did you settle on *Oedipus* as the play you wanted to stage?

Ella: I wasn't super involved in the choice of *Oedipus* so much as I wanted to do a Greek tragedy. I remember seeing *Medea* on the ADC's list of suggested plays, but in the last few years *Medea* has been done a lot – not in Cambridge, but in other theatres.

Jonathan: *Oedipus* was one of my set texts in my third year at university, so I had it in my head. It's quite a fun play; I think it's one of the most watchable plays. So what's what we settled on.

What did you learn from the experience bringing an ancient play to life, as opposed to reading it?

Ella: It's helpful to do it, and so many people involved studied either English or Classics, so we had a lot of our actors bringing their own ideas in. But it's weird – especially seeing how things jump out at you which normally wouldn't, like the comedic elements. At first you think bits of the script are funny, but you want to play it as a tragedy; we eventually learnt that you just have to lean into the comedy.

Jonathan: A big part of what we wanted to do was to have it feel alive. I always think about a *Horrible Histories* sketch which talked about the origins of theatre. They said it was just two people on a stage talking to each other for three hours, which isn't what ancient Greek theatre ever was. They forgot that the chorus existed! We wanted to try and make it dynamic, and music was a big part of what we wanted to do.

Yes, I thought the musical aspect was really well done. What was the main inspiration behind the music?

Ella: The tune of the entrance and exit songs for the chorus was the Seikilos epitaph.

Jonathan: It's the oldest complete melody that we have musical notation for, from the second century BCE. A guy wrote it on his wife's grave. Dilan

Oedipus, Tiresias, Creon and the chorus at the end of the play (Image credit: Paul Ashley)

[composer and musical director] based almost all the music on that.

How did you find working with a chorus, since it's an element that we don't tend to have in modern theatre? One of the reviewers didn't like how the chorus alternated between being a collective mass and being individuals – but of course that's how it would have been in ancient Greece!

Jonathan: Well, Rosanna Omitowoju [Fellow in Classics at King's College, Cambridge] said that her favourite part of the production was the chorus and how it was a mix between individuals and a unit, which is exactly what the review targeted!

Ella: We watched a lot of productions that have been put on YouTube, and the worst of those are the ones where the chorus just speaks in unison for the whole thing. It's so boring! I don't know what they wanted from us if not some individuality. That was something we said from the get-go: "It's not just going to be spoken and it's not going to be in unison all the time."

Until opening night, it was a concern that, because the words in the choral odes are so strange that people often didn't know what they were supposed to be portraying at any moment in time, the chorus segments might be boring. But on the very first night I was backstage, and someone said the first choral line, and something about them being on stage brought it all together.

One of the main objectives in your production design was to give the show a timeless feel. Why do you feel that was important?

Ella: I have a pet peeve for most modern adaptations, especially when they're set in the 1920s, because it's either there for the sake of it and not really explained, or it's overly explained and it pigeonholes it into a niche of being about Fascism or something. But when they lean really hard into the ancient style with togas and pillars, it's very hard to make that look good. So I just thought, since the themes are timeless, why not make it about the actors and what's going on, and have it very stripped back? Because it's all set in one place, so you don't need a big set and things like that.

Oedipus, with a half-broken mask, and Jocasta (Image credit: Paul Ashley)

In keeping with that timelessness, how did you find the experience of mapping ancient Greek staging onto a modern theatre space?

Jonathan: There was a bit near the end where Tiresias said, "Here comes Creon", and Oedipus just stood there for about 30 seconds, basically saying, "Hi Creon, where are you?" Then suddenly the masking flew up and revealed Creon on a platform with a beam of light behind him.

Ella: The idea of that platform was to mimic aspects of the original structure of a Greek tragic stage, as gods would appear on the roof of the *skene*, a little building on the stage. But then we thought, "We don't have a god to put up there." So we chose to put Creon there instead.

Well Creon kind of becomes the saving god, the *deus ex machina* who restores order at the end of the play.

Jonathan: Exactly!

I think you did an excellent job of playing with elements of an ancient Greek stage. You also chose to follow the Greek tradition of using masks in the show,

and you had Oedipus' mask gradually break into pieces. Who came up with that?

Ella: That was me. We both wanted to do masks from the start. I was designing a mask for Oedipus and then thought: "What if it just broke throughout the play?" On the last night, I was very excited to be able to tell Daphne [who played the role of Fate/the Messenger] to snap the mask. I really wanted to have as many masks as possible that she could break, but we didn't have time. Obviously it's all about exposing one's identity and the breaking down of false identities.

All of your programme profits went to the outreach charity Classics for All, and you also ran some workshops with them for school pupils. Do you think theatre is a good way to engage people in Classics?

Ella: Yes! We had a lot of school groups come to watch it. I'm biased, because now that I've done it, I think theatre's probably my favourite part of Classics. But I think that if you haven't got into Classics yet, a lot of the stuff that *is* fun doesn't seem as fun. But theatre is so easily made accessible.

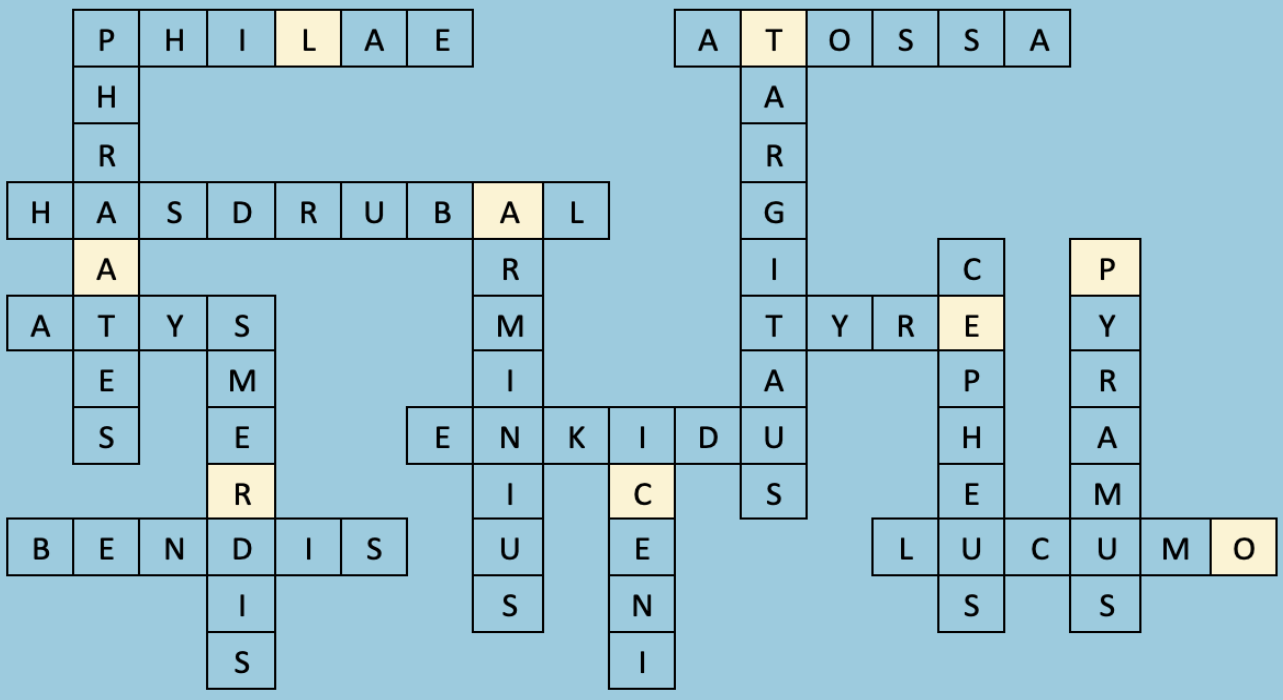
Jonathan: Literature is obviously more difficult because things let lost in translation. But on stage, even though the words are translated, you're seeing the play in front of you, and the physical movements can be the same no matter what language it's in.

What has been your favourite part of the process?

Jonathan: All of it! Working with everyone has been so fun. Working with the musical director, especially. We didn't really know what we wanted for music or where our limitations would be, and he helped us find those limitations.

Ella: If I have to be completely honest, I think my favourite part was the warm-ups. I despise theatre warm-ups, but when you have a chorus, you need to warm them up and you want them to be in unison. We had a choreographed warm-up to Depeche Mode's 'Just Can't Get Enough', but all the chorus had to chant that title line together whenever it came up in the song!

Agora 10 Crossword Answers



Alkibiades: a lion in the city

FFION SHUTE

In his Presidential Lecture in April, Professor Michael Scott told the story of Themistokles, the controversial and larger-than-life Athenian general who helped his city to survive the war against Persia, only to be condemned by his people and end his life on the run in Asia Minor. This led me to think about the cult of personality in Athenian politics and some of the other controversial statesmen around whom that cult was centred. The great personalities tended to be popular and charismatic, but their arrogance made them enemies. Perikles is one famous example of such a politician, but the life of the colourful and multi-faceted Alkibiades is particularly extraordinary for its parallels with the story of Themistokles.

Alkibiades, living about two generations after Themistokles, was a man of many qualities – charm, intelligence, flamboyance – but above all he was known for his divisiveness. He was both admired and condemned, sometimes simultaneously, by those who knew him and by those who told his story. But who was he really?

Ideal male portrait, perhaps of Alkibiades (Roman copy of late classical Greek original)

Which Alkibiades?

Alkibiades fills the pages of the ancient literary canon. He appears in works of philosophy, comedy and history and has an entire biography dedicated to him by Plutarch (written much later, in the early second century CE). However, presentations of his character vary from author to author, and in some cases we find differing versions of Alkibiades within the works of a single writer.

At one extreme there is the flattering portrayal. Born into the illustrious Alkmeonid dynasty in Athens around 450 BCE, he spent his youth enjoying a luxurious lifestyle. He became a protégé of Perikles in the 430s and was elected *strategos* (general) for the first time in 420/19. He distinguished himself at once with his careful negotiation of Athens' entry into the Argive Alliance, which gave Athens several powerful allies in the Peloponnesian War against Sparta.

He argued passionately in favour of the Sicilian Expedition in 415, advocating the dispatch of an Athenian fleet to Sicily to assist the allied city of Segesta in its time of need. His political opponents framed him for the sacrilegious defacing of the herms (statues of the god Hermes which were believed to ward off evil) in an attempt to stop him from commanding the expedition. He sought refuge at the royal court of Sparta but eventually fell out of favour and fled to the Persian Empire, where he gained the trust of the satrap (governor) of Lydia. From then on, he used his newfound knowledge of Sparta and Persia to help his mother city in any way he could, negotiating with difficult city-states in Ionia to maintain their support for Athens in the final years of the Peloponnesian War.

He finally returned, triumphant, in 411, after winning over the remaining generals with his usual charm. He

then proceeded to rescue Athens from the aftermath of a failed coup and went on to win naval battles against Sparta. Xenophon claims that the Athenians would not have lost the final battle that cost them the war had they listened to Alkibiades' sage tactical advice. Soon afterwards, Alkibiades himself met his demise when his house besieged by Persian forces at the instigation of Sparta. He had lived an eventful life, ultimately proving his loyalty to his city even after being betrayed and forced into exile by his opponents.

The same story, however, can be presented very differently. Alkibiades used his family's wealth to gain traction on the political stage, squandering his money on a lifestyle of opulent banquets and horseracing (in 416, he entered seven chariots into the horse race at the Olympic Games, taking the first-, second- and fourth-place prizes); this he continued even when the ordinary people of Athens were struggling due to the effects of the Peloponnesian War. He was arrogant, interfering in political and military matters, leading Athens to defeat at Mantinea in 418. He panicked when he was accused of sacrilege and deserted to enemy Sparta. While his fellow Athenian generals were fighting for their lives in Sicily, he sold information to the Spartans until he fell out of favour there, apparently for having an affair with the king's wife. He then absconded to Persia, betraying anyone he met to pursue his own interests.

When Athens was in a politically weak position after the coup, he manipulated the generals into letting him back into the city and promptly seized control. He continued fighting on Athens' side until the final defeat in 404, when he tried to escape from the many enemies he had made throughout the Aegean. He was ultimately cornered in Phrygia and died in a house fire lit by one or other of those enemies.

So which version of Alkibiades' story are we to believe?

A complex character

Alkibiades' activity was not limited to the spheres of politics and war; he was also connected with classical Athens' most renowned philosophical circle. He is the eponymous debating partner and lover of Sokrates in a dialogue usually attributed to Plato, entitled *Alkibiades 1*. The dialogue begins with Sokrates expounding upon Alkibiades' virtues, describing him as particularly fair and tall and as belonging to an illustrious family. However, in the same speech Sokrates remarks that Alkibiades' many lovers have all fled because they were 'overpowered by [his] spirit'. He is characterised as charming and noble, yet at the same time unable to retain relationships – both personal and, by extension, political – due to his overpowering personality. The dialogue continues, with Alkibiades arguing that expediency is more important than justice, a position which is subsequently refuted by Sokrates. Alkibiades graciously concedes the argument, but this outward acceptance of the opposing view is juxtaposed with his initial ideas and underlying nature as a politician, and it is difficult to believe that he would actually have taken Sokrates' words to heart.

Alcibiades Being Taught by Socrates, Franćois-André Vincent, 1776

The view of Alkibiades as a man of many qualities who could still not maintain stable relationships is also suggested by the events found in his biography. He took for granted that he could easily win over the people of Athens, the Spartan court, Persian satraps and others. Plutarch reports that, when he returned to Athens after his travels, Alkibiades' curried such great favour with the people that they longed for him to rule them as tyrant. Yet he constantly needed to flee when he inevitably fell out with those whom he had most recently charmed.

Aristophanes, in his comedy *Frogs*, echoes this portrayal of Alkibiades' character: 'It is best not to raise a lion in the city, but if you do, you should cater to its ways.' This comment appears in a conversation between the ghosts of the tragic playwrights Aeschylus and Euripides on the subject of untrustworthy politicians. Alkibiades becomes a metaphorical lion, a creature which stands for strength and nobility and to which the heroes of Homeric epic are often compared; but the lion's inherent unsuitability for urban life also implies that it is a danger to Athens. However strong or noble Alkibiades was, the citizens feared that they could no longer 'cater to his ways' and that he could not be trusted to work in the interests of the people.

The historian Thucydides introduces Alkibiades somewhat disapprovingly, saying that he came to prominence 'while still at an age which would have been thought young in any other city' and that he rejected an established family tradition in his fervent opposition to peace with Sparta. Thucydides also criticises Alkibiades' expensive lifestyle, stating explicitly (and unconvincingly) that it played a key role in Athens' ultimate defeat. All these criticisms echo opinions likely held by at least some of Aristophanes' audience members: Alkibiades was too radical, too belligerent and too egotistical. The Athenian democracy had known strong personalities before (and sometimes ostracised them), but what set Alkibiades apart was his divergence from the traditional expectations of political leaders.

Most of Athens' *strategoi*, despite their differences with each other, worked for the same ends of preserving the democracy and expanding the city's influence. Some of them ended their careers in exile because they had spent too long campaigning dogmatically for their own particular method of achieving this doctrine. Alkibiades, by contrast, with his own alien doctrine of expediency, was detached from the Athenian collective consciousness of civic preservation and did not hesitate to desert to the other side of the war when it was in his own interests. The Athenians could barely tolerate politicians who fought over *how* to protect the interests of the *polis*, let alone one who raised questions in their minds as to whether he would protect it at all.

Plutarch brings to life the atmosphere of controversy surrounding Alkibiades, quoting many sources from fifth-century Athens, including Thucydides, comic poets satirising politicians, pamphleteers and, of course, Aristophanes' lines about the lion. He does not shy away from recording different accounts of each event in Alkibiades' life, notably giving us two contrasting stories about his death. In the first of these, the Spartan general Lysander, fearing that Alkibiades might return to overthrow the pro-Spartan government installed in Athens after the Peloponnesian War, sends Persian soldiers to assassinate him by burning down his house. Plutarch lionises Alkibiades in an almost Homeric scene, having him run heroically through flames with his robes on fire. The barbarians scatter at the sight of him, eventually killing him through the cowardly (from a Greek perspective) medium of arrows because they were too afraid to come close to him.

Plutarch's other version of the story is the same apart from the identity of the assassins. In this version, Alkibiades brings about his own demise by having relations with and thus dishonouring a noblewoman whose brothers sought revenge on Alkibiades for his *hubris* (insolent behaviour). Though Plutarch admits that the details of the fire and Alkibiades' bravery are the same in both accounts, the second portrays him as responsible for his own ignominious death. Plutarch's biography therefore ends not with an answer to the question of what Alkibiades was really like but rather reiterates the question, offering no indication of which story is the more believable.

All we can say is that Alkibiades was a man of many contradictions, who easily won people over yet could never be trusted for long. Anyone who wrote about him respected his nobility, charm and oratorical skill but acknowledged that he outgrew his lovers, his political opponents and eventually his city. Aristophanes would have been closer to the mark if he had written that it is impossible to raise a lion in the city.

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