Agora

Issue 12
Spring 2025

CLASSICS TO SHARE AND ENJOY

We have come to the end of another phenomenal season here at the LSA CA, replete with fascinating lectures, insightful Book Club discussions and, of course, copious amounts of homemade cakes! As we prepare to take a break from our events over the next few months, *Agora* is back to provide some more Classics-themed reading until the start of our next lecture programme.

This year's talks have covered an array of subjects from Roman roads to ancient pets to ghosts and goats in Greek tragedy. In January we enjoyed our annual Presidential Lecture from Michael Scott, exploring to what extent the Athenian Panathenaea festival could truly be considered inclusive and democratic. This was followed by a delicious meal at Tiggis and the annual Classics quiz, with the team from Nelson & Colne College emerging victorious.

Another recent highlight was the Grand Final of our 2025 Ancient Worlds Competition, judged by Professor Sharon Marshall. Our four finalists all gave impressive presentations in response to the question: 'Which ancient myth fascinates you the most and why?' Professor Marshall was faced with a difficult choice between these talented young speakers but selected Sebastian Onillon from London, who presented on the reception history of the Icarus myth, as the winner. Amelie Harrison from Bolton, the runner-up in the Competition, won the People's Choice Award for her presentation on modern feminism's reclaiming of the Medusa myth. You can read more about this year's Competition here.

Our online Book Club continues to meet regularly, and our next session will take place on Thursday 29 May at 7pm. We will be discussing Ferdia Lennon's novel *Glorious Exploits* and all are welcome – please email us at lsaclassics@gmail.com if you would like to join.

On behalf of all the contributors and the LSA CA Committee, I hope that you enjoy this latest issue of *Agora*. This time we feature two new writers and delve into ancient worlds beyond Greece and Rome, comparing Persian and Greek slavery (page 2) and examining an artefact from Sutton Hoo (page 5). We also look at examples of the reception of classical studies (page 7) and of the *Odyssey* (page 12). Plus, as always, we have a new Classical Crossword for you to try out on page 11, with a chance to win a copy of Michael Scott's *Ancient Worlds*! The deadline to enter is **Friday 18 July.**

Wishing you all a lovely spring and summer!

Declan Boyd, Editor

Slavery: a comparison between the Achaemenid Empire and Classical Greece

RAFFERTY, aged 13, from the Crypt School, Gloucester

Slavery, although differing in nature between nations depending on the economic, social and political characteristics of each, was an accepted practice in both ancient Greece and the Achaemenid Persian Empire. But what exactly were the differences between each of these civilisation's slavery systems? How were slaves treated, where were they from, and how commonplace was this practice?

An Achaemenid stele in the Vatican Museums

Bandaka, *kurtaš* and *māniya*

Historians remain divided on whether slavery was a major pillar of society and of economic development in Achaemenid Persia. Darius the Great used the term *bandaka*, meaning 'servant' or 'vassal', when referring to a military colleague or general; this alludes to a larger hierarchical structure in the Achaemenid Empire, at whose apex was the King of Kings, followed by his generals, soldiers and finally the common people.

It should be noted, however, that *bandaka* does not refer to an actual enslaved person but to a *servant*, in this case the military comrades who were considered by contemporary historians to all be servants of the King, as were the people. Slavery, on the other hand, was not construed in quite the same way. Other Persian words such as *kurtaš* and *māniya* were used to indicate indentured – and sometimes enslaved – workers, who are seen by both modern and ancient historians to be a separate class to those designated *bandaka*.

How were slaves seen in the Achaemenid Empire?

It is an important historical fact that slavery was previously recorded across Babylonia, Media and Egypt, and so the practice of enslaving and exploiting people was already widespread and unlikely to have been perceived as taboo or unethical.

The private ownership of slaves practised a few millennia later by those involved in the Transatlantic Slave Trade focused on chattel-based enslavement, with enslaved persons usually being owned and used by wealthy individuals. The majority of enslaved persons in the Achaemenid Empire, on the other hand, were government- or state-owned, although private ownership did exist to some extent.

As property of the Persian state, slaves were often utilised as agricultural labourers tied to the land they worked on. Despite this, slavery is considered to have been treated with a low level of importance in the Achaemenid Empire. For example, the Persian capital city Persepolis was constructed using almost entirely paid labour, with is generally

considered to have been sourced and treated with relatively ethical standards (bearing in mind that the labour standards of antiquity were far different to today's).

Slaves were gathered from across the ancient world. Once subjugated to Persian rule, the Babylonians were required to provide a tribute of five hundred boys to Achaemenid aristocrats. Defeated Eretrians and Ionians were also forced into slavery upon being captured during conflict, in a similar fashion to how various Greek states sourced their enslaved populations. These enslaved civilians were seen as symbolic prizes and trophies following the defeat of their homelands.

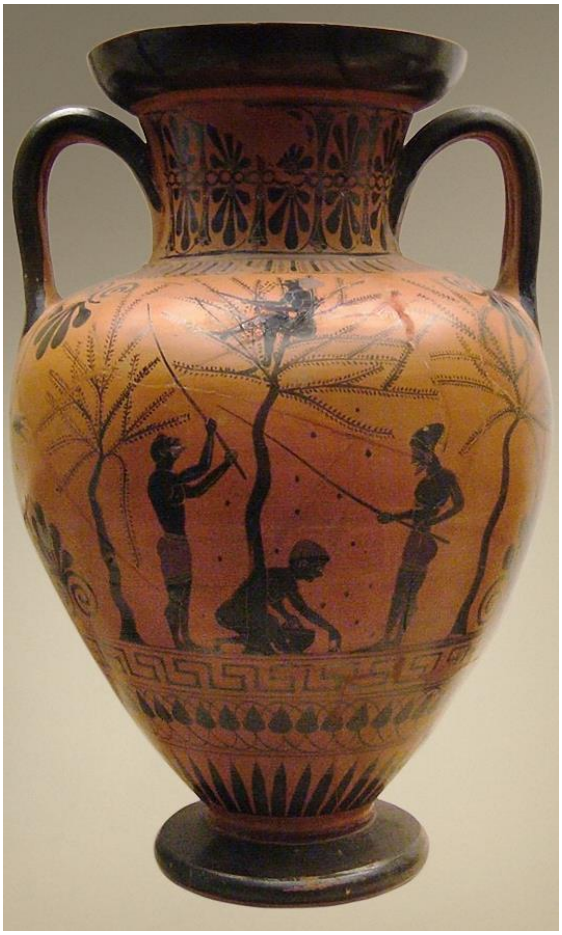
Slavery in Classical Greece

Chattel slavery was widespread and widely accepted throughout Classical Greece. It is estimated that, during the fifth century BCE, the number of enslaved persons in Greece was around eighty thousand. These slaves were often captured and sold following their imprisonment during conflict, or traded from regions such as Lydia, Macedonia and Syria. Around three hundred publicly enslaved Scythian archers were employed as an Athenian police force. During his takeovers of the areas, Alexander the Great subdued the populations of cities such as Thebes and Olynthus into slavery. As in the Achaemenid Empire, the capture of defeated enemies was symbolic to the strength and power of Greek city-states. In these ways, slavery was racially and ethnically motivated.

Modern scholars offer varying interpretations of how widespread slavery was. The claim of the Athenian orator Hypereides that most citizens of the Greek states owned at least one slave, while challenged by some other sources, does perhaps hold some truth considering that the practice of slavery was so widespread across Greece.

How were slaves treated in Classical Greece?

Slaves were treated with varying degrees of abuse depending on their social status and hierarchical class. Aristotle sums up their experience with the phrase 'work, discipline and feeding', implying that their working conditions lacked much comfort or luxury and focusing instead on basic needs; images of slaves being flogged and bound by their masters exist in various artistic forms. An informal hierarchy of sorts was instilled into Greek slavery: on the whole, slaves who were skilled craftsmen, for instance, were treated with a higher level of care and respect than their farming counterparts, who could be subjected to harsh punishment should they fail to meet their masters' demands.



Agricultural slaves at work on a black-figure neck-amphora by the Antimenes Painter (late sixth century BCE)

Ancient Greek education and schooling, particularly formal learning (i.e., the attendance of a public school or classes with a hired tutor), was typically reserved only for males and non-slaves, meaning that many slaves were illiterate and uneducated.

Although Athenian slaves belonged to their masters and were generally seen as property, we know of a small number of rights bestowed upon them. Interestingly, despite their harsh treatment by many commercial hirers, Athenian households often regarded enslaved cleaners and workers to be an (albeit very low-status) part of the family, and some instances of them owning their own private property are documented. Slaves were also allowed to practise religion freely in the households of their owners without fear of physical abuse.

Comparison

While slavery was commonplace in both Achaemenid Persia and Classical Greece, there were major differences between the two civilisations in the societal significance and organisation of slavery and the treatment of individual slaves.

Firstly, the ownership of slaves differed greatly. In Persia, most slaves were owned by the state, which controlled how they were used and treated, often setting them to agricultural work on state-owned land. Privately-owned slaves were much more common in the Greek world.

The sources of enslaved people were rather similar in both civilisations, as they were gathered from across the ancient world, and many slaves were taken from defeated nations whose inhabitants were forced into servitude. Captured slaves were held as prizes for victory in battle by both the Greeks and the Persians.

Whilst both Greece and Persia were slave-owning societies, Greek slavery was much stricter and more systematic, the presence of slaves being noticeable in all aspects of daily Greek life. Slaves were not just owned by rich elites but were part of most if not all households, and they had only their most basic needs fulfilled by their masters, who focused on the efficiency rather than the wellbeing of slaves.

In Persia, on the other hand, slaves seem to have been treated with somewhat more dignity. The hierarchical structures of Persian society were also different, with a strong focus on societal classes such as *bandaka* and *kurtaš*. Everybody in the Achaemenid Empire was considered a servant to the reigning monarch, whereas many (but not all!) Greek states around the same time were developing more democratic forms of government with an emphasis on individual freedom.

Conclusion

Of course, these civilisations existed millennia in the past, and labour rights and ethical standards have changed dramatically since – particularly as we still grapple today with the long and painful legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, which has forever shaped views about human rights and dignity. When we reflect on the Persian capture of Babylonian youths or the Greek ban on education for enslaved people, we can only hope that, looking forwards, we can better understand the struggle of slaves over time and, through newfound lenses, appreciate the standard of freedom that so many enjoy today. But we are still a long way from securing justice for everybody. Perhaps with the lessons we have learned from the Achaemenid Empire and Classical Greece combined, we can get just a little closer to that goal.

Artefact of the Issue: gold shoulder clasp from Sutton Hoo

LORNA LEE

This shoulder clasp, one of a pair which featured in the recent 'Silk Roads' exhibition at the British Museum, was discovered during the 1939 excavations of the Sutton Hoo ship burial in Suffolk, England. Dating from 560 to 610 CE, it incorporates examples of more than four thousand garnets that were unearthed at Sutton Hoo and represents a fusion of ideas

and materials from a range of locations, making it a brilliant example of how far the transcontinental exchange of ideas and objects in the medieval world could reach.

The clasp has two parts connected by a pin and would have likely secured a garment of thick fabric. The upper section depicts two interlinked boars, heads down, hip-joints inlaid with blue millefiori glass, and curved backs forming the rounded end, while a gold filigree design depicting serpentine creatures fills the spaces between their legs. The lower, rectangular section is made up of a central panel of fifteen cells containing alternating red garnets and more millefiori glass arranged in a mosaic-like pattern. Weaving sinuously around each side are designs of interlacing beasts with bodies of glittering garnets and tiny, blue glass eyes.

This sparkling effect was achieved through an intricate metalworking technique known as garnet cloisonné, which involves the setting of garnets into interlocking cells (or 'cloisons') made from narrow strips of gold. Beneath the surface, each cell is filled with a paste-like mix of calcite, quartz and beeswax, raising the garnet to the surface. Onto this, beneath each gem, is laid a thin gold foil, which caught and reflected any light that passed into it, making the stone glimmer and glow. This technique is thought to have originated in areas surrounding the Black Sea, Caucasus or West Asia around the early AD 200s, spreading west in the centuries that followed and adopted by elite groups who adapted it to their local styles.

It is thought that the gold would have been obtained from coins minted in Francia or the Mediterranean, while the garnets are thought to have originated from as far as Southern Asia, where they formed underground millions of years before. This geological process imbues garnets with a unique chemical composition, which can be detected through a non-destructive technique called PIXE (Particle-Induced X-ray Emission). This involves using a particle accelerator to fire a high-energy iron beam into each garnet, with the fluorescent X-rays emitted indicating the quantity of elements (such as chromium and iron) within, which is then compared to a library of reference samples. Initial results indicate that this clasp is decorated with garnets from Czechia, India and Sri Lanka, complementing ancient sources like Pliny the Elder, who also linked garnets (which he called *carbunculi*, 'little coals') to India.

You can find more details about this artefact and other examples of garnet cloisonné from Sutton Hoo in this article, along with this talk on the British Museum Events YouTube channel. 🏺

Find us on social media:

Website: www.lsaclassics.com

Email: lsaclassics@gmail.com

Instagram: @lsaclassics

Facebook: @lsaclassics

Twitter/X: @lsaclassics
@lsaclassicsoutr

Putting the class in Classics

MAEVE NEAVEN

It is no secret that Classics has long been an inaccessible and exclusive academic discipline to many. The subject unfortunately has a history of carrying an aura of elitism, and although a great deal of fantastic outreach work is being undertaken by organisations such as the Classical Association, Classics for All and Advocating Classics Education, the subject is still associated strongly with private education. How did we get here?

Portrait of Servius Tullius by Guillaume Rouillé, 1553

Back in the sixth century BCE, Servius Tullius, the legendary sixth king of Rome, held a census to discover the assets of his people and divide them into strata based on their wealth. The citizens were *classes* ('called out', from the Latin verb *clamare*), and thus these economic strata were also called *classes*, with the wealthiest men being *classici*. Through this association with social superiority, *classici* also came to describe the top authors at the time and in turn inspired our term 'classes' to denote socio-economic categories. The study of classical authors and texts became imbued with cultural capital and landed a prominent seat in educational curricula.

For a long time, Latin persisted as a 'universal' language of communication, but this faded away during the eighteenth century. For various reasons, Latin book production declined and access to engagement with the language became limited and exclusive. Accordingly, Latin became the preserve of the educated upper classes, playing a key role in 'a gentleman's education'. This is what we see in Thomas Hardy's 1895 novel *Jude the Obscure*, in which the titular Jude Fawley, a working-class stonemason who dreams of attending university and becoming a scholar, teaches himself Greek and Latin in his spare time but ultimately cannot overcome the fixed class barriers and thus fails to advance in society.

By the late nineteenth century, classical learning was viewed as an essentially useless endeavour. Thorstein Veblen, in his 1899 book *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, writes that classical education gives students knowledge 'of no use', which is proof of 'the pecuniary strength necessary in order to afford this waste'. The lower classes needed a practical industrial or vocational education in preparation for their working lives, but the upper classes did not and were free to 'waste' their education on Classics. The exclusivity of classical education resulted in a closed system: until 1919, entry to Oxford and Cambridge for any subject required competence in Greek and Latin, and until 1960, Latin was still required. This created privileged access for the upper classes, a situation which only worsened

following the educational reforms of the 1980s and the introduction of the National Curriculum. This all but removed classical subjects from the curriculum by prioritising required subjects like Maths, English and Sciences, but it did not apply to the private sector, meaning that classical learning decreased in the state sector alone.

One counterattack against the near monopolisation of Classics by independent schools was the introduction of subdisciplines such as Classical Civilisation and Ancient History. These courses allow students to engage with the ancient world without needing to have the opportunity to learn Greek and Latin, circumventing some of the class barriers in place. Unfortunately, however, there is a view that these subjects are not to be taken as seriously as 'pure Classics'. In the proposed educational reforms of 2012 in which EBaccs were to replace a number of GCSEs, Classical Civilisation was not proposed among them, despite the inclusion of Latin and Ancient Greek, and in 2015, one commentator, Harry Mount, suggested in *The Telegraph* that Classical Civilisation is a 'woefully dumbed down, diluted version of classics'. And yet it is the most popular classical subject in the state sector: according to the Department for Education, sixty-seven per cent of the entries in 2019 for A-Level Classical Civilisation and Ancient History were students from state schools, versus twenty-four per cent of the entries for Latin and only eight per cent for Classical Greek. Again, the private sector holds the supposedly 'superior' Classics, while those who are state educated can often only access what is deemed a 'lesser' subject.

Nowadays, many view Classics as being impressive – a by-product of its esotericism and isolation from the masses. When Rachel Cunliffe questioned whether Boris Johnson had actually achieved something impressive (as he evidently seemed to think) in his impromptu recitation of the *Iliad* at the 2013 Melbourne Writers Festival, she hit the nail on the head: Classics is sometimes deemed to denote superiority and excellence, regardless of the actual intellectual rigour involved, and this therefore transfers these values onto the perception of its students. The knock-on effect is that, in the UK in general, many associate Classics with exclusivity and inaccessibility. The historical monopolisation of classical education by the private sector has forged a perception of the subject as the preserve of this demographic alone.

But this misconception does an enormous disservice to our subject. Despite the barriers in place, there are those who have broken the 'class ceiling' of Classics. More so, there is a long history of working-class autodidacticism regarding the ancient world: miners forming book clubs and study groups to read ancient literature; tailors teaching themselves Latin and Greek by night; shepherds establishing lending libraries of classical texts (simply flip to any page of Hall & Stead's *A People's History of Classics* for more examples!). The enduring success of cheap translated editions of classical texts, such as the Everyman series, is a testament to the demotic interest in Classics that contradicts the traditional narrative of working-class cultural apathy where the ancient world is concerned. Classics can, and should be, more readily available to all.

Of course, it's not all sunshine and roses. Some may find engaging with the ancient world and the discipline of Classics as a member of the working class uncomfortable due to the subject's legacy of elitism. Operating within a sphere that has largely excluded members of your class has the potential to feel like a betrayal of class solidarity and identity. So, how can one grapple with this?

Tony Harrison performing his poem *V*, broadcast 1987

These sentiments and predicaments are explored by English author, poet, playwright and translator Tony Harrison, many of whose works engage with and reimagine classical material. What makes Harrison's work valuable is that he is a working-class classicist articulating the difficulties of occupying this paradoxical position and advocating for Classics to be accessible for all. Born in Leeds in 1937 to working-class parents, he was awarded a scholarship to attend Leeds Grammar School, a private institution where he first came into contact with Greek and Latin. He read Classics at Leeds University and began a PhD thesis on translations of the *Aeneid* but ultimately abandoned it to focus on his literary career. As a member of the working class who managed to break into Classics, Harrison has a foot in both camps, and this experience with both the upper and lower echelons of society feeds into his work.

Harrison expresses a divide within himself due to this dual identity, an internal conflict stemming from, on the one hand, his desire to remain loyal to his class and maintain his working-class identity, and on the other, his love for Classics and awareness that a meritocratic education facilitates social mobility. In his poem *Wordlists*, Harrison laments that he's got 'L&S dead Latin, L&S dead Greek' but not his 'mam's' tongue anymore. He has lost his accent and working-class identity in pursuit of fitting into the largely elite sphere of Classics; he struggles to strike a happy medium between his academic and his personal life. It is not only his family that he feels separated from: in *Me Tarzan* we learn that as a youngster his homework got in the way of playing out with his friends ('Ah bloody can't ah've gorra Latin prose'). In Harrison's view, Classics is a tool of division wielded by the elite to maintain socioeconomic disparities in the UK. As he writes in *Blocks*, a classical education is impractical for the working-class, and his family don't see the 'point' of it 'for a job' – we might recall Veblen's aforementioned comments about the uselessness of Classics here. In *Classics Society*, Harrison aligns Classics with a 'dreadful schism in the British nation'.

But in these examples we see one way that Harrison comes to terms with this tension: writing working-class identities and perspectives into literature where they have long been erased. His use of Northern accents, regionalisms and vernacular valorises the working-class voice and seeks to normalise its place in such a 'high culture' as Classics. But it is more than that: it is also a defiant act of gatekeeping his work from anyone outside the demographic of his people. A non-Northerner might struggle to read his heavily accented lines: Harrison's work is not immediately accessible to them, and they have to work for it, where others can gain access immediately by virtue of their station. Sound familiar?

It is not only his use of a Northern accent which achieves this effect; Harrison's entire corpus centres around working-class perspectives and culture. The elitist legacy of Classics can

sometimes inspire hostility from those of lower social status because it is at odds with their identity. When one of the satyrs in Harrison's play *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* rejects classical literature as 'poncy Apollonian art' that he wants no part of, equating it to a 'betrayal' of his peers, this reflects the hostile and disillusioned attitude of those who have long been excluded from the subject. This is also the case in the film-poem *Prometheus* when the miners begin uncontrollably speaking in rhyme and express horror at 'spouting bloody poetry like King Lear'. Working-class viewers likely understand this sentiment perfectly. Harrison's satyrs and miners give Classics and any other 'high art' a wide berth because of their negative perception of it as a posh, elitist, exclusive endeavour, which is not an uncommon attitude.

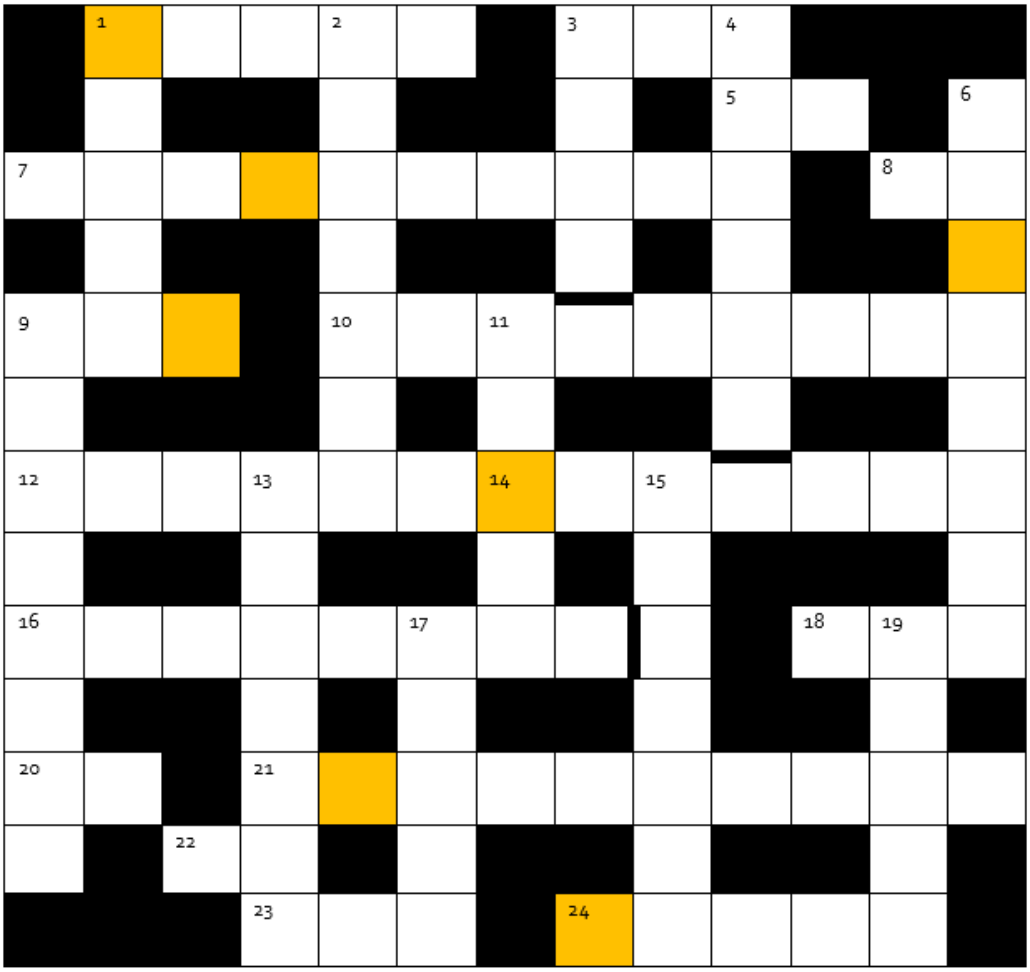
Harrison's standpoint here carries with it the resentment and anger of a hundred years of exclusion. This is perhaps best expressed in his poem *Them & [uz]*, which is often quoted for its foregrounding of accent bias: having been admonished for his 'barbarian' recitation of Keats' poetry, Harrison avows, 'We'll occupy your lousy leasehold Poetry'. Harrison's version of Classics is *by* the people, *for* the people, *about* the people. It is accessible to those who have historically been excluded from Classics, but rather less so for those who may have used the discipline as a shibboleth between the classes. A Classics that embraces his working-class identity, that might have opened it up to his family and friends rather than pushing them away. Perhaps it is the Classics his younger self needed.

Agora 11 Crossword Answers

M	D	C		E	P	I	S	T	A	T	E	S
E		A		P		O				A		O
C		R		I				H	O	R	U	S
H	E	P	I	C	A	S	T	E		P		I
A		E				T		C		E		A
N			K	A	T	A	B	A	S	I	S	
E		P		R		B		L		A		M
	C	H	A	R	M	I	D	E	S			A
A		A		I		A				G		R
S		E		A	G	E	S	I	L	A	U	S
S	I	D	O	N				O		B		Y
E		R				X		L		I		A
S	U	A	S	O	R	I	A	E		I	U	S

And the hidden word was... ANTIGONE!!!

Classical Crossword



Across

1. Alternative name for the Crommyonian Sow killed by Theseus, or the name of the woman who owned the Sow (5)
3. Like Catullus, ___ *et amo* (3)
5. Thirteenth letter of the Greek alphabet, equivalent to Latin *n* (2)
7. Tiberius and Gaius _____ Gracchus (10)
8. Man who is given a tour of the afterlife and then resurrected at the end of Plato's *Republic* (2)
9. Daughter of Cadmus who became the goddess Leucothea (3)
10. New Cambridge School Classics Project featuring a novelisation by Caroline Lawrence: _____ *and his Neighbourhood* (9)
12. Aristophanes comedy about the 'Assemblywomen' taking over Athens (13)
16. Acanthus leaves were often used as an _____ in Greek and Roman art (8)
18. Seventh letter of the Greek alphabet, making a long-*e* sound (3)
20. Latin word for 'that'; forms a trinity with Freud's *ego* and *superego* (2)
21. Discus-thrower statue sculpted by Myron (non-Latinised spelling) (10)
22. Egyptian sun-god and mythical first pharaoh (2)
23. Latin word for king (3)
24. Month taking its name from the Roman war god (5)

Down

1. Song of triumph or thanksgiving; also an alternative name for Apollo (5)
2. Gorgon, sister to Medusa and Sthenno (7)
3. Augustan poet who composed a work on women's cosmetics (alongside more well-known poems…) (4)
4. In Euripides' *Heracles*, the titular character is driven _____ by the goddess Hera (6)
6. Only complete surviving Greek tragic trilogy (8)
9. Ancient Athenian term for 'equality in the freedom of speech' (8)
11. Legendary poet who rode a dolphin to Corinth after being thrown off a ship (5)
13. Lover of Hero (7)
15. Third-century queen of the Palmyrene Empire who annexed Egypt and much of Asia Minor (7)
17. Modern British county once home to the Trinovantes tribe (5)
19. Egyptian god of wisdom, writing and magic (5)

Use the letters in the boxes highlighted in orange to find the hidden word. Then email this word to lsaclassics@gmail.com by **18 July** and one entry will be picked at random to win a copy of Michael Scott's *Ancient Worlds*!

EPIC: The Musical – a classicist's perspective

DECLAN BOYD

'When does a comet become a meteor? When does a candle become a blaze? When does a man become a monster?'

This is the central question (and recurring refrain) that runs throughout *EPIC*, a sung-through musical adaptation of the *Odyssey* developed over the past five years by songwriter Jorge Rivera-Herrans. The musical's concept album was released on streaming platforms in nine 'sagas' at intervals between Christmas Day 2022 and Christmas Day 2024; it features Rivera-Herrans himself in the role of Odysseus alongside a supporting cast of over twenty other highly talented artists. Besides the *Odyssey* itself, *EPIC* takes heavy inspiration from anime, video games and a range of musical genres, making it an artistic creation like no other. As a classicist and an enormous fan of musical theatre, I have been an avid listener and believe this new take on the Homeric poem to be a true masterpiece. I cannot recommend it enough!

EPIC draws most of its plot from the Apologoi, Odysseus' inset narrative of his own adventures in books 9-12 of the *Odyssey*, but – as the best and most rewarding retellings often do – finds a new lens through which to explore the hero's protracted homecoming. Its central theme is ruthlessness: Odysseus must grapple with how far he is willing to go in order to reunite with his loved ones as obstacles from the *Odyssey* are transformed into a series of moral dilemmas he must face. Seeing the Homeric hero plagued by an internal conflict between the paths of kindness and brutality, between the man and the monster within him, casts a fresh and thought-provoking light on the Homeric poem, in which Odysseus does not experience the same inner turmoil regarding the morality of his actions. For me, the musical's angle on the ethics of heroics has a less Homeric and more Virgilian resonance, and there are many moments which recall Aeneas' difficulty in choosing between rage and mercy, between *furor* and *clementia*, in his conflict with Turnus. In this parallel with the *Aeneid*, *EPIC*'s rethinking of how to approach the ethics of Homeric heroism sits very comfortably within the classical tradition.

Another of the musical's great strengths is its characterisation of the individuals who inhabit Odysseus' world. Rivera-Herrans takes Homeric characters and transforms them into representatives of varying life philosophies which they try to impose on Odysseus. From the start we find the hero's best friend Polites urging him to forget the cautious and distrustful attitude he has developed in war, and instead to 'greet the world with open arms' and 'lead from the heart'. Athena, on the other hand, wants Odysseus to be the ultimate

'warrior of the mind', to embrace intelligence and logic with all his being; she berates him when he becomes 'reckless, sentimental at best', which she sees as a prime weakness. In his quest to avenge the death of his son, Poseidon mocks Odysseus for the mercy he exercises, preaching instead that 'ruthlessness is mercy upon ourselves' – a philosophy that will pose the greatest threat to Odysseus' moral compass. Exploring how the hero responds to these influences in each scenario he faces gives a depth to his character that extends far beyond the cunning for which he is renowned and provides an excellently crafted developmental arc which perhaps accords more with modern sensibilities than the tastes of the archaic Greeks.

John Singleton Copley, *The Return of Neptune*, c. 1754
Poseidon's arrival is heralded by a Triton's conch-shell trumpet, just as trumpets mark his appearances in *EPIC*

The strongest character dynamic in my opinion, however, is that between Odysseus and his second-in-command Eurylochus, who despite their closeness provides a foil to the protagonist and repeatedly questions his decisions. The moments I found most impressive and intense where those where I was unsure whether Odysseus or Eurylochus had the better point, who was more in the right. The increasingly tension-fraught trajectory of their friendship is a joy to follow, and the pay-off is a gloriously shocking departure from the *Odyssey* which made me gasp out loud in the street when I first listened to it during a morning walk.

In fact, it is the great triumph of *EPIC* that it retells such a familiar story while simultaneously keeping its audience guessing by altering character motivations or changing how certain events unfold. Particularly during Act 2, I was utterly gripped and could not wait for the next saga to be released, to find out what new twist Rivera-Herrans would overlay onto Odysseus' next adventure. Its departures often make *EPIC* much darker in tone than its source material; the first-century CE literary treatise *On the Sublime* sees the *Odyssey* as a precursor to the comedy of manners, but the Odysseus of *EPIC* is always at risk of becoming a tragic hero. His journey is a wonderfully cathartic one, and the musical's emotionally climactic ending is fully earned.

The songs themselves are all masterfully written, the lyrics and score expertly crafted, and each contributes something new to the story's themes. The score helps to conjure up the vivid and vibrant world of *EPIC*, particularly through each character's association with a different instrument: Odysseus with the guitar (nylon in calmer moments, electric when the intensity increases), Penelope with the viola, Athena with the piano, Poseidon with trumpets, and so on. Magic and divine power are associated with electronic music, creating a more powerful and often forceful sound for the gods. Different musical styles and genres are evoked throughout: Circe's introduction is very *Hamilton*-esque, Odysseus' encounter with Charybdis resembles the soundtrack to a video game boss-battle, and Hermes singing two 1980s-style synth-pop songs was not something I was ever expecting to hear but works fantastically! But there are also much softer and gentler moments, and Rivera-Herrans has a talent for seamlessly integrating a range of tones. All this combines to form

immersive soundscapes and build on the lyrical storytelling, to brilliant effect.

My favourite element of the music, however, is the frequent and meticulous use of leitmotifs and recurring melodies for different characters and story elements, which are deployed in highly creative ways throughout and invite careful listening and relistening. While motifs often have clear connotations and symbolism, such as the frequently-used 'Danger is Near' motif (whose name speaks for itself), others – my personal favourites – are less transparent in their connections and encourage us to think in new ways about the connections between events. In the opening number, for instance, Zeus instructs Odysseus to kill Hector's infant son Astyanax; five songs later, Odysseus sings his orders to attack the Cyclops in the same melody that Zeus sang, encouraging us to consider the parallels between harming a child and harming an apparent monster who also turns out to be a significant player's son. This is far from an isolated instance, and the amount of thought that has gone into crafting the score to tease out the story's major themes and questions is impressive to say the least.

I have only one criticism of this fantastic musical – namely, the relatively little time devoted to Penelope. Odysseus constantly mentions his wife throughout, but aside from a five-line cameo in a dream sequence in Act 1, we do not hear directly from Penelope until the thirty-sixth song in this forty-song musical! By contrast, in the *Odyssey* we meet Penelope before Odysseus and spend more time with her overall. Her famous shroud-unravelling trick, introduced in Book 2, is just one illustration of the cunning she shares with Odysseus, exemplifying the couple's *homophrosyne* or like-mindedness and showing us from the start that they are made for each other. I find that reserving Penelope

Penelope at her loom

and her deceit for the final 20 minutes of *EPIC* leaves the listener with less reason to care about this relationship, since for most of the musical we know little about Odysseus' beloved beside her name. More frustratingly, Rivera-Herrans did initially write a flashback song depicting how Odysseus met and fell in love with Penelope – and asked Athena to be his wingwoman, much to her chagrin! This song sadly ended up on the cutting-room floor (although an extract can be heard on Rivera-Herrans' Instagram Reels), and I cannot help but think that it would have added a layer of depth to this central relationship.

All in all, *EPIC* is a truly marvellous creation. With every new listen (and I have listened to it probably *too* many times…) I feel that I take away something new, some subtle feature of the score or a clever way in which it plays with the source material that I have not previously noticed. And this is what makes great art. Like the classical literature we know and love, this musical invites constant contemplation, opens up questions worth asking and engages in meaningful ways with previous versions of the story it tells. It may not be written in Greek or Latin dactylic hexameters, but *EPIC* is without a doubt more than worthy of its title.

Join us for our next online Book Club!

Let's chat about Ferdia Lennon's gloriously entertaining *Glorious Exploits*, winner of the Waterstones Debut Fiction Prize 2024.

19:00 BST on Zoom, Thursday 29 May.

Everyone welcome, bring a glass of your favourite drink and let's get lost in an ancient world!

Know your Frontinus from your Fronto

Be sure to check out Classics Ambassador Ffion Shute's blog series on our website, covering the lives and works of obscure Roman authors. Follow the links below to discover some new ancient texts you may wish to dig into over summer (and at least one that you might be advised to avoid…).

Frontinus, author of a treatise on aqueducts and the ancient 'Warfare for Dummies'.

Aulus Gellius, author of 20 books on anecdotes, grammar, philosophy, gastronomy, history and a range of other subjects.

Vitruvius, author of a treatise on architecture.

Ausonius, author of a range of works including a poem on the river Moselle.

Florus, author of a condensed version of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*.