

## **Teaching the Liberal Arts: Department of Classics**

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One of the greatest challenges of studying the ancient Greeks and Romans (which is what Classicists do) is resisting the superficially attractive, but ultimately unsatisfying, conclusion that at root they were “just like us.” A closely interrelated challenge arises from the fact that most of our literary sources, which speak to us with familiar voices and exercise a profound influence over our own civilization, were produced by a tiny minority of people who, thanks to their wealth and position, possessed the education and the leisure that enabled them to write at all.

The liberal arts in general, and the Humanities in particular, require us to acknowledge and to embrace, as fellow human beings, people from different times and places who live in unfamiliar ways, whose aspirations and expectations are not our own, and whose beliefs and values are frequently strange (and sometimes repugnant) to us. Getting into the skin of such people requires an extraordinary leap of the imagination and great reserves of empathy. It is vital if we hope to get along with one another on an increasingly crowded and interconnected planet.

I routinely ask students in my Greek civilization courses to complete a project (one, I should acknowledge, not devised by myself but adapted from the work of my own teachers) that assigns to each of them an individualized historical persona, or avatar, and requires them to compose a work in that individual’s voice or from that individual’s point of view—to get inside that person’s skin, as it were.

The possible personae range widely, from the kind of elite adult male citizen who might have associated with—or been bitterly opposed to—the great Athenian statesman Pericles to a woman or girl who might have been exposed as an infant and raised as a slave, and later trained to be a craft worker or a midwife or a prostitute. Or, again, from the priestess of Apollo at Delphi, whose utterances were believed to be divinely inspired, to the rowers who crewed the ships that fought on either side at the battle of Salamis, the outcome of which decisively shaped the world we inhabit today.

There have been many creative responses to the project over the years, including diaries and letters, fragments of previously “undiscovered” epic and lyric poems, philosophical or dramatic dialogues, and in one instance a graphic novel. At the same time, I’m at pains to insist that the project is not primarily intended as creative writing, but rather as an exercise in integrating what evidence survives from antiquity into a plausible reconstruction of the lived experiences of a distinct human person. It is the kind of undertaking that requires not only knowledge, but imagination and empathy—and ultimately leads, I’m convinced, to an understanding both of our differences and of our common humanity.

The ancients do not need us to tolerate them, and they do not insist that we admire them. One of the first questions I ask when I teach Greek civilization is, “Who were the ancient Greeks and why should we care?” I don’t think that the answer is, or should be, self-evident. Different people at different times have answered such questions in ways that responded to their own preconceptions and priorities. They remain worth asking, and pursuing, because the past is always available to be used (and, potentially, to be abused) in the process of determining who we are and where we are going, and because the ancients have always offered dim, distorting, but also compelling mirrors in which to contemplate our own reflections.