

JASPER GRIFFIN 1937-2019

by Eleanor Dickey



Jasper Griffin. Photo: Julia Griffin

In 1980 Jasper Griffin published a slim and unassuming volume that turned out to be one of the most significant twentieth-century works on Homer.¹ With arresting freshness and force, *Homer on Life and Death* presented the *Iliad* as a great literary work, at a time when scholarship had been preoccupied with elaborate ideas on how the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were composed. Griffin's undertaking had German and French precedents and some contemporary anglophone parallels, but the power of his writing gave the book a decisive impetus. It did not greatly involve itself in the vast shape and the continuous development of the poem as it unfolds; rather it drew innumerable brief passages, with consummate knowledge and command, into an imposing image of the poet's vision. Death and deity are the supreme concerns.

Though Classicists rarely excel in both Greek and Latin, Griffin's other major contribution dealt with Latin poetry: Catullus, Virgil, Horace, Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid. His approach in *Latin Poets and Roman Life* (1985) was to compare and contrast a multiplicity of poets and poems, putting the cultural context intensively to work. Where Nisbet and Hubbard's famous commentaries had looked at one poet, Horace, and had used the literary traditions behind him to deflate naive responses, Griffin conjured up, from a range of evidence and perspectives, a

¹ I am grateful to Gregory Hutchinson, another pupil of Jasper's, for substantial contributions to this piece.

contemporary Graeco-Roman world into which a mass of poems fitted and from which they drew new life. His book was far too elegant and nuanced to see the poetry as merely reflecting its context; but in showing the stylization of reality, it particularly emphasized the reality. The book was seen to be important, but it did not sit easily with some critical interests of the time. More recently the value of Griffin's work has been stressed by eminent Latinists, and it still has much to give.



*Homer (modern reproduction of ancient bust).
Photo: Eleanor Dickey*

Griffin also had significant effect in a third field, Greek tragedy, here through articles. In this area he took a line similar to his approach to Homer – except that there is much more contemporary context to consider. Against readings that dwelt on the political meaning of tragedy and its relation to a specific context, he stressed its emotional force and universal concerns. The work, as usual, was energetically controversial, and energetic controversy ensued. It has been vital to developing debate.

Griffin's other writings included shorter, more popular books on Homer, Virgil, and the *Odyssey*, a commentary on *Iliad IX*, several edited volumes, and numerous influential articles. His eloquent style, his range across Greek and Latin, his critical flair and assured mastery of verbal detail made his oeuvre an imposing entity with a distinctive character.

Jasper was born in London on 29 May 1937 to working-class parents, Frederick William Griffin and Constance Irene Griffin (née Cordwell); he was only two years old when Britain entered World War II. His father joined the Navy; the combination of attempts to follow his ship when in port and evacuations to avoid bombings gave Jasper a peripatetic childhood. Nevertheless, his remarkable intelligence was soon visible, and was rewarded by a scholarship to Christ's Hospital. Jasper did not enjoy boarding but thrived academically, winning an exhibition to Balliol College, Oxford, where he matriculated in 1956. Four years later, having won numerous prizes and graduated with first-class honours, he married Miriam Tamara Dressler, an ancient historian from a New York Jewish family. Unusually for that era, their happy marriage and three daughters did not preclude equally brilliant academic careers for both. Miriam became a fellow and tutor at Somerville College Oxford, an authority on Cicero and Nero, and the world expert on Seneca; she transformed the relation of philosophy and Roman history. Jasper's affection for his wife was perhaps most clearly shown in the hours he spent actively parenting their daughters, a responsibility he took seriously in a distinctive fashion; upon becoming a father, he purchased texts of the major English authors because 'the baby would expect it'.

Griffin belonged to a generation of academics for whom doctorates were optional, and he did not opt for one. After the BA, he spent a few years as Jackson Fellow at Harvard (1960–1) and Dyson Research Fellow at Balliol (1961–3), before becoming Fellow and Tutor in Classics at Balliol, a position he held for more than forty years. During that time he shared his superb



knowledge of the ancient languages and literatures with hundreds of students in tutorials, and with thousands in his famously theatrical lectures on Homer, Aeschylus, and other ancient authors. Lecture audiences were sometimes alarmed by the densely-packed handwritten handouts, often consisting entirely of passages in Greek – but once Griffin started speaking, fear was replaced by wonder as the poems’ artistry became clear. Unlike many great scholars, Griffin prized clear communication highly, and some of his most notable scholarship sprang from attempts to help students understand complex subjects. As a teacher he was unfailingly kind and generous, for example giving me extra one-to-one tutorials each week for four terms, on a topic I was not supposed to be studying at all. Many of his students have gone on to become professional Classicists, and we all owe Griffin a tremendous debt.

When Oxford began to allow promotions, Griffin was one of the first to be granted new titles, becoming Reader in 1990 and Professor in 1992. He also served as T.S. Eliot Memorial Lecturer at the University of Kent at Canterbury in 1984; those lectures were later published as *The Mirror of Myth*. He was elected Fellow of the British Academy in 1986.

From 1992 until retirement in 2004 Griffin also served as Public Orator, composing speeches for Oxford’s honorary degrees. These speeches were delivered in Latin and printed in the programme in English; they were packed with jokes and puns that worked (not necessarily the same way) in both languages. Some of the humour was remarkably hard-hitting, a medieval tradition that must have taken courage to continue when facing the likes of President Clinton – but Griffin’s unfailingly courteous manner so charmed honorands that they took no offence at what he said.

When Miriam died in 2018, friends were much concerned for the increasingly frail Jasper. But thanks to his daughters, he was able to spend a dignified and comfortable old age in his own home, until succumbing to pneumonia and dying on 22 November 2019, aged 82. He is survived by daughters Julia, Miranda and Tamara and granddaughter Zuzana.

An obituary for Miriam Griffin is forthcoming in *CUCD Bulletin*.

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