
Too Hot to Handle?

Medea for Schools:

Two experimental workshops at Roehampton University (2016-17)

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Greek tragedy with its shocking plots, which famously include murder, rape, incest, and the impact of war on both soldiers and non-combatants, might not strike teachers as the most obvious topic to introduce classics to schoolchildren (in our case, Year 10s from local schools in London). But as Susan Deacy (my co-organizer for the workshops) and Fiona McHardy have argued we should not shy away from the darker aspects of the ancient world in the classroom,¹ including younger audiences, as our Roehampton pedagogical experiment demonstrates.

The idea for the workshops arose out of discussions about the wonderful *Classics for All* project,² and the key question about how best to engage with younger audiences, a task that is essential for the survival of our subject. Unlike my new institutional home in New Zealand, where Classics continues to be widely taught at school,³ our subject is under threat in the UK. In the autumn of 2016, the examination board AQA announced its decision to discontinue

¹ Deacy, S. and McHardy, F. (2011), 'Teaching Uncomfortable Subjects in the Classics Classroom', in *Developments in Higher Education Learning and Teaching, Roehampton University*, 12-13. See also, Rabinowitz, N. Sorkin and McHardy, F. (eds) (2015), *From Abortion to Pederasty: Addressing Difficult Topics in the Classics Classroom*. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press.

² <http://classicsforall.org.uk/> (accessed 18/1/2017).

³ <http://ssol.tki.org.nz/Classical-studies/curriculum> (accessed 21/1/2017).

Classical Civilisation and Archaeology at A-level.⁴ This leaves OCR as the sole examination board offering these subjects. AQA's justification that they are too hard sends out the wrong message to students. Classics teachers both at school and university level have long argued that we should study the classics precisely because of their complexity.

The achievement of the Greeks and Romans have had an enormous influence on nearly every aspect of our own culture and students will find the study of classical texts both provocative and challenging.

Camden School for Girls website⁵

Challenging the Year 10 students visiting the Roehampton campus was precisely our aim. The workshop on *Medea* formed part of a taster day for Year 10 pupils offered by the University of Roehampton. The aim of the students' visit to the campus was to introduce them to university life and what it means to study a subject like classics at this level.

Ancient Greek tragedy was intended for performance. This was the key message that I personally wanted to convey to students. The dramas were specifically designed to be seen, heard and experienced by a large audience, as part of a civic and religious festival in fifth century BCE Athens. Ancient theatres were a safe space to explore difficult questions such as the role of the individual in society, citizenship, identity, leadership, justice, race, humanity's place in the world, and other 'big questions' that are still very much with us. But, the ancient tragedians did not offer any easy solutions to these burning issues. They let their audience make up their own minds.

The choice of which Greek tragedy to focus on was made by our wonderful team of student volunteers (Eliza, Hope, Joël, and Sarah). Susan and I wanted them to feel like an integral part of the team, and the first workshop (29 June 2016) would certainly not have been possible without all their hard work. But, crucially, as students who began their University studies as teenagers, they are also much closer in age to our target audience and have a much better idea of the type of material that is likely to appeal to them. When I asked our volunteers 'why *Medea*?', their answer was that the tragic heroine's decision to kill her two sons made her a well-known and exciting figure from the ancient world. Young adults are not frightened or repelled by horrific subject matter, such as Euripides' portrayal of *Medea* as a woman who kills her children for revenge. This aspect of the ancient world intrigues them. This presents us with an opportunity to reach out and demonstrate that Classics is an exciting subject that can 'speak' to them.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/oct/19/aqa-classics-classical-civilisation-a-level-exam-archaeology> (accessed 20/1/2017).

⁵ As quoted in *The Guardian*: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/mar/11/camden-school-girls-last-non-selective-state-school-ancient-greek-considers-ditching-it> (accessed 21/1/2017). This

is an example of a success story since the school continues to offer classics courses including ancient Greek: <http://www.camdengirls.camden.sch.uk/page/?title=Classics&pid=39> (accessed 21/1/2017).

Ruby Blondell's translation of *Medea* was my choice.⁶ I wanted a script whose words we could easily perform in the form of a dramatic reading, but which also retained some foreignising elements that hinted at the theatrical roots of the drama in its ancient context (which I reinforced with a short introduction at the beginning of the workshop). We started at the beginning, the opening of the play that sets the scene, and ended with Medea's triumph over Jason. Our reasoning was that by bookending the play we could offer the students a flavour of the drama that would leave them wanting more, or at the very least with a vivid memory of what Greek tragedy is all about.

A practical consideration to take into account is that our pedagogical experiment can only work in a small group setting. It requires a high teacher/volunteer to student ratio. We divided our participants into two smaller groups, so that we could work more closely with them. Susan and I each took a group, supported by our volunteers and the teachers who accompanied the students. To set them at ease, Eliza, Sarah, and I talked about our love for the tragedy and performed a dramatic reading of the sections we wanted them to work with. This was something we had rehearsed during our preparations. We abridged Blondell's text due to time constraints and to give the students some meaty lines to speak. That was the crux of our pedagogical experiment, to offer students the opportunity to perform lines from a Greek tragedy. We further divided our group into even smaller units so that each 3-4-student team could choose what scene they wanted to perform for the larger group.

The students entered into the spirit of the game and with our enthusiastic support started to work with the scenes they had selected.⁷ Circulating around the group allowed Eliza, Sarah and me to answer questions and to offer encouragement wherever needed. Interestingly, as a whole, our group bucked the current trend in the performance reception of the tragedy of automatically sympathizing with Medea's point of view. But, the fact that Medea is an outsider was definitely a point in her favour in the eyes of our young audience. They sympathized with her position:

... I'm alone and citiless, the victim of
my husband's outrage, seized from a barbarian land.
I have no mother, no brother, no relative
to offer me safe anchorage from this disaster.

Euripides, *Medea*, 255-58

The emphasis placed on the things that divide us in contemporary public debates, and the marginalization of certain groups of people that this leads to, make Medea's complaint eerily relevant. In a London school's multi-cultural environment it was perhaps not surprising that

⁶ Blondell, R. (trans.) (1999), *Medea*, in *Women on the Edge: Four Plays by Euripides*, ed. and trans. R. Blondell, M-K. Gamel, N. Sorkin Rabinowitz and B. Zweig. New York, London: Routledge.

⁷ We received very positive feedback from the teachers accompanying the students who stressed the interactivity of our workshop: e.g. 'Excellent opportunity for pupils to engage'.

this was one of the aspects of Medea's portrayal that students found the most intriguing. But this awareness of the tragic heroine's predicament did not automatically translate into an approval of her decision to kill her sons, which was hotly debated among the group.

If the students took anything away from the day we hope it was precisely this, the importance of debate, of seeing more than one point of view and of making up your own mind about what you think about a problem. We should remember that the ancient Greeks valorized debate, especially in the public sphere. Rather than lecturing at the students about the benefits of studying the Classics we wanted them to experience what our subject has to offer in a fun, interactive environment where they became part of the process of classical reception itself. The feedback from the students justified our decision to opt for a highly interactive pedagogical model for our workshop. When asked to evaluate the day the students mentioned the classics workshop as one of the activities they really enjoyed:

'Discussing... the play *Medea* and things learning things that I've never heard of before'

'the knowledge I gained in classics'

'I enjoyed studying the classics from Greek plays.'

And if there is a lesson in there for us as teachers, it is that we must redouble our efforts to engage with the new generations of school students. Classicists in the UK, New Zealand, in my own native Greece, as well as those working in the many other countries where our subject is taught, have a long and proud record of public engagement activities. But in today's tough global educational climate, where funding for the Humanities is under constant threat,⁸ we must continue to put ourselves forward. We also urgently need to seek new ways to interact with younger audiences so that we can demonstrate to them why the study of the Classics still matters.

11 July 2017: Take Two

This article will be updated following the second Greek tragedy workshop, which will take place at the University of Roehampton on 11 July 2017. To be continued...

⁸ As I was finishing work on this piece, I received an email about President Trump's plans to cut federal funding to the Humanities. http://www.nhalliance.org/help_us_nip_efforts_to_defund_neh_in_the_bud (accessed 21/1/2017). This is but the most recent symptom of a global phenomenon as many government bodies seek to paint the Humanities as somehow less 'valuable', because the benefits they confer are viewed as less 'quantifiable' in a world that prioritizes business, science, and technology.