

Putting the ‘T’, the ‘Q’ and the ‘I’ into LGBTQI Classics:

An example of museum-based learning

by Alan M. Greaves

As allies of the LGBTQI community, many Classics teachers are supportive of creating inclusive learning cultures within their classes, but find it difficult to embed LGBTQI topics in their teaching in a way that allows them to be congruent with their personal values as teachers. After all, there are very few texts or artefacts to work with, those that do exist can often be highly sexualised (see Frost 2010 on the Warren Cup), and their ambiguity means that definitive interpretation is tricky if you lack the vocabulary of modern identity politics,¹ let alone the necessary level of Latin or ancient Greek!

In this short article, I want to share an example from my own teaching to demonstrate that (a) you don’t have to identify with the subject in order to teach about it, and (b) you really don’t need to do anything too complex or involved to demonstrate to your students that they are in an LGBTQI-inclusive learning space.

I am a cis-gendered male who identifies as gay, yet this particular learning activity is about sculptures and texts that can be interpreted as representing individuals who identify as Transgendered and/or Intersex (i.e. the ‘I’ in LGBTQI, or part of the ‘+’ in LGBT+). It is not, therefore, informed by my own life experiences but simply by my awareness that it is important for LGBTQI students of any orientation to see the life experiences of their community being recognised within formally constituted learning activities for all their peers.

On the second point, my long experience in advocating for LGBTQI inclusion in Higher Education has shown me that it is often small, but regular, interventions that communicate positive messages about LGBTQI inclusion and bring about cultural development within a department or institution. For example, although a conference, publication or lecture by a high profile speaker might raise the cultural awareness of academic staff for a short time, the natural ‘churn’ within the student

¹ [This educational resource](#), produced by the LGBT charity Stonewall, can be useful in classroom discussions, online learning or just as a teacher’s crib sheet for the terminology of gender identity. All urls correct as at 14.8.18.

body means it will have been forgotten within three years. However, embedding LGBTQI subject matter in core modules means that every new student cohort will have the opportunity to reflect on how their newly-chosen discipline of Classics can inform a deeper understanding of LGBTQI history and the richness of human history in general.

Empires and Citizen: The Classical Mediterranean and the Near East (ALGY 131) is a core first year module for several undergraduate programmes at The University of Liverpool. The module attracts 50+ students annually, with the largest cohort being from the single honours Ancient History degree. The module follows a standard format for Liverpool, with 22 lectures and four hours of artefact handling sessions in the University's [Garstang Museum of Archaeology](#). The module also includes an optional fieldtrip and various online learning activities (a glossary of key terminology, formative online MCQ tests, lecture capture, etc.).

Early in the module programme, a lecture on Greek households somewhat crudely (and deliberately so!) uses the example of domestic space to set up the male/female binary in ancient lifestyles, focussing in particular on the principle of female exclusion and the designation of the *andron* as a male space as a corollary of that principle. This is followed by a self-directed learning activity that is designed to explore and deconstruct this simplistic male/female binary through classical sculpture.

In 2015, I developed a self-guided tour of the city's [World Museum Liverpool](#). This took the form of a .pdf that gave students greater insight into the physical details and contexts of the objects on display. When viewed on-gallery using mobile devices the live links in the .pdf directed readers toward further learning resources and online articles. For example, the genitals of one particular sculpture of Theseus are obscured by a fig leaf, of which the gallery label made no mention. In the discussion of this statute in the .pdf, there a link to an online article about a [fig leaf](#) made for the plaster cast of Michelangelo's *David* in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which gives students a fascinating insight into Victorian curatorial practices.

One of the statues that the students were asked to consider in more detail during their tour of the WML was the so-called 'Sleeping Venus': highly eroticised and languidly laid with her robes in disarray and revealing her voluptuous torso and breasts. The WML sculpture is a very fine Roman copy of a type that was popular in the Hellenistic period. The composition and history of the statue is discussed at some length in the [WML blog](#). The statue had been originally purchased by local collector Sir Henry Blundell after he saw it whilst making the Grand Tour in Italy. A sketch of the statue by Blundell's friend and fellow collector Charles Townley, now in the British Museum archives, shows that the statue had originally been of an image of Hermaphrodite,² complete with male genitalia and two suckling infants at their

² Please note that here I am referring to the god Hermaphrodite (capitalised), as when applied to an individual the term 'hermaphrodite' (in lower case) has stigmatizing connotations (Dreger et al. 2005).

breasts. Soon after Blundell acquired the statue, its male attributes and babies were removed during heavy ‘restoration’.

In my commentary on the statue in the students’ guide, I asked them to reflect on two issues that can be considered to be key ‘Threshold Concepts’ for any Classics learner.³ A Threshold Concept is an idea that is central to a discipline and which, once understood, irreversibly changes the learner’s understanding of that discipline (Meyer and Land 2003, 2005). A good example of such a Threshold Concept comes from the discipline of Archaeology and it is that “excavation is destruction” (Wheeler 1954). When students take this concept on board it changes forever how they view the purpose and necessity of excavation and gives them cause to reflect on their own recording methods, publications and research ethics. Threshold Concepts are also inherently troublesome. For example, knowing that excavation is destruction may give students cause to question what the purpose of Archaeology actually is and when, if ever, excavation is justifiable.

The first Threshold Concept that students encounter from the ‘Sleeping Venus’ can be summarised as: “museum collections are a palimpsest of Victorian and Edwardian collecting habits”. That is to say that what we see in museums, no matter how we interpret it, curate it, or ‘queer’ it up, will always be the result of that period of British history when it was possible, socially desirable and legal for individuals, such as Blundell and Townley, to bring classical materials to the UK and what we see is what they chose to purchase, for reasons of their own. This is a fundamental moment in student learning, when they realise the multiple layers of historical baggage (much of it colonialist) and active pre-selections that are layered into every museum exhibition mean that they can never view them again as simple displays of neutral data devoid of their historical and contemporary British context. This extends not just to what we do, and do not, have at our disposal for museum study but also, as in this case, the ‘restoration’ of those pieces - an example of very intrusive curation. Restoration is in itself an act of interpretation and whereas it might be possible (if laborious) to unglue a mended pot and stick it back together into a more accurate restored state, no amount of glue is ever going to restore this particular Hermaphrodite’s missing genitals and babies.

The second Threshold Concept this learning exercise raises is that “biological sex is not a binary”. The social construction of gender is now widely recognised in much academic writing about Classics and this is unlikely to be the first learning activity to introduce students to this seminal concept in our field. However, what ancient images of Hermaphrodite show us is not just that the socially constructed practice of gender is non-binary but that even physiological sex itself can also be non-binary. This poses a challenge to students’ thinking because even the most recent and well-informed studies of gender in the Classics (e.g. Foxhall 2012) have avoided questioning the fundamental premise that biological gender is both binary and

³ This is a useful resource for learning more about Threshold Concepts: <https://www.ee.ucl.ac.uk/~mflanaga/thresholds.html>

unchanging. Knowing about the existence of the suckling infants at Hermaphrodite's breasts also jars with our contemporary constructs not just of binary gender but also of 'queerness' (the 'Q' in LGBTQI') itself, the popular image of which can be stereotyped as: "Queerness ultimately leads to a body free of any reproductive responsibility: an uninhibited male body. Its archetype is gay males having sex for pleasure, lots of it..." (Gabriel 2010: 67).

There are a number of hormonal, developmental or pathological reasons why an individual might be born with, or develop, disorders of sexual development that might today lead them to identify themselves as 'Intersex'. Some individuals are born with genital ambiguity, but in others it is associated with hormonal changes brought on by puberty or certain tumours, genetics or hormonal conditions. My own research into Partial Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (PAIS, formerly known as Reifenstein's Syndrome) in ancient Rome suggests that this genetic condition, which causes outwardly male children to develop female secondary sexual characteristics (i.e. breasts, no deepening of the voice or facial hair) at puberty, may have existed within a small percentage of the ancient population then as it does in today's population (Greaves 2012). The Roman philosopher Favorinus is thought to have been affected by PAIS, as he is said to have lived in two sexes (Mason 1978). Conversely, 5-Alpha Reductase Deficiency Syndrome leads to virilisation of the female body (i.e. making it outwardly male) and may possibly be attested in the ancient world, although today it is geographically restricted to discrete populations in the New World (Beagon 2005, esp. 173-5). In PAIS and 5-ARD affected individuals' fertility is very often affected. Presumed historic incidences of PAIS and 5-ARD highlight the fact that biological sex can potentially change during an individual's lifetime, albeit rarely, which can lead to discussions around what the implications of changing biological sex might have been for individuals' construction of their social gender in differentiated ancient societies that placed high value on producing male heirs and how such gender 'transitions' might have been managed by those societies.

Another interesting facet of this subject that can be usefully explored with Classical Studies students is that the ancient Greco-Roman world was neither mono-cultural nor achronological - as social values regarding the acceptability of intersex images and individuals in the public sphere evidently varied both from region-to-region and over time. Whilst Hellenistic Greece, which inspired the Liverpool 'Sleeping Venus', celebrated the intersex status of the deity Hermaphrodite in its art (Smith 1991: 133-4), intersex children were simultaneously being destroyed in contemporary Roman societies. The values of Roman society also changed over time to the point that in the second century AD Favorinus was able to speak openly about having lived in different genders (as a male and as a eunuch, which was considered as a third gender).

Classical sculptures and casts of Hermaphrodite can be found in several museum collections in the UK.⁴ Using the example of classical sculptures of Hermaphrodite and/or the historical character of Favorinus allows teachers of Classical Studies to open up discussions with students about the historical experiences of Intersex people and the possibility of individuals, such as Favorinus, ‘transitioning’ between genders and thereby addressing the ‘T’, the ‘Q’ and the ‘I’ in LGBTQI identities.

Sadly, the Liverpool ‘Sleeping Venus’ has recently been removed from display in the World Museum Liverpool and I have had to develop a new self-guided learning tour for students to follow in a different museum. On a happier note, it was fascinating to watch the cohort I had taught respond positively as one of their number came out as non-binary. As was frequently commented upon during the [WCC’s recent LGBTQI Classics workshop in Reading](#), the students are often far ahead of where we are in terms of inclusion and it behoves us to educate ourselves, and *keep on* educating ourselves, about the experiences of LGBTQI people and the fascinating and challenging perspectives that this can bring to our teaching and research in the endlessly fascinating field of Classics.

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⁴ There are several statues of Hermaphrodite in the [National Museums Liverpool collection](#) in addition to the ‘Sleeping Venus’ (see also <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/collections/lgbt/gender-identity/item-226931.aspx>), as well casts in [Oxford](#).

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