

THE MCA NEWSLETTER



Malta
Classics
Association

THIS ISSUE

LETTER From the Editor

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Marsilio Ficino

Χαίρετε!

It's once again time for our little monthly dose of the Classics! It may be short, but it packs a punch!

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Classical Word

This issue includes a writeup on The Letters of Marsilio Ficino by Maria Zammit, our monthly insight into the Power of the Classical Word, a look at Louise Vella, whose book of poetry was shortlisted for this year's National Book Prize, and an interview with a MCA student from this summer's Sanskrit course.

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And remember, if there is something you would like included in the newsletter, or if you have a project or event that we can share with the Classics community, just send us an email on info@classicsmalta.org or contact us on our Facebook page.

Stay safe, and I hope you enjoy the October issue.

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The Letters of MARSILIO FICINO

Maria Zammit

Marsilio Ficino (1433 – 1499), tutor to Lorenzo de' Medici, author of *Twelve Volumes of Letters*, of *Theologia Platonica*, translator of Plato and Plotinus, leader of the Platonic Academy in Florence, friend of popes, cardinals, scholars, theologians and statesmen, wrote the following letter on 4th January, 1490:

Coetus civium quorundam elegantium, et optantium tranquillitatem, nomine Mammola.

Mammola, a company of discriminating citizens, desiring tranquillity.

Cum rerum omnium vicissitudo quaedam futura sit, meum certe est (nescio quo fato)
Since all things will change, some fate or other has made it my function

vicissitudinem in plerisque reddere. Caeteri sane servitute solent, et quidem longa,
to bring about change in a great many people. Others, of course, through long service, usually end by

brevem sibi tandem asciscere dominatum. Et summa quadam diligentia praefecturam.
gaining for themselves a short period of mastery and, through very earnest endeavour, a prefectship.

Ego vicissim libertate potius, et negligentia, nescio quam heri praefecturam nactus fuero vel censuram.
I, on the other hand, through freedom and carefreeness, yesterday obtained some kind of role as prefect or censor.

Et in hac quoque dignitate vicissitudo patet. Nempe censors alii corrigunt imprudentiam.
In this honour, too, change is evident. Surely other censors correct imprudence.

At ego deinceps sum (nescio quomodo) prudentiam correpturus.

I, however, am going to censure prudence from now on, although I know not how.

Iam vero et hic vicissitudo resurgit. Nam prudentia mammolae imprudentia est apud vulgus.

But already, even here, change once more arises. For the prudence of Mammola is imprudence in the view of most people;

Atque contra prudentia vulgi manifesta quaedam est apud mammolam imprudentia.
and conversely, the apparent prudence of most people is imprudence in the view of Mammola

Summa denique rerum vicissitudo in qua contubernii huius versatur officium,
In short, the greatest difference central to the function of this gathering,

si quod habet officium, haec est profecto, ut quum caeteri securitatem omni cura studiose perquirant,
if it has any function, is surely that, while others assiduously and with all care seek freedom from care,

nos per summam quandam incuriam, non quaeramus quidem sed iam habeamus.
we, for our part, with supreme lack of care, do not in fact seek freedom from care: we already have it.

Nam quaerere certe curiosi est, habere vero securi, nec tam quod optaveris possidere
For it is certainly the nature of the inquisitive to seek, but of the carefree to possess, and not so much for you to possess what you desired

quam quicquid forte possideas, id optare. Et id ipsum velle quod habes.
as to desire whatever it is you happen to possess and to wish for that very thing which you have.

M. Ficino, *Letters* 9.5 (Shepherd-Walwyn 2012)

This delightful little letter has given rise to much speculation. Why did Ficino adopt the name of *Mammola* for his fellowship? Did it have an association with ‘breast’, was he referring to the common violet, a symbol of humility (*Letters* Vol 9, p. 69) or was Ficino denoting something else?

Addressed to Bernardo Rucellai, on whom he bestows the title ‘beloved brother in freedom of life and freedom from care’ (Dilectissimo in libertate Vitae et Secura quadam negligentia Fratri), the redoubtable Marsilio Ficino, philosopher, theologian and priest, in a somewhat light-hearted vein, playfully creates multiple instances both of contrast or antitheses and of similar meaning or synonyms.

Prescribing freedom from care, Ficino indulges in these so-called word games. One can imagine him enjoying the effect his letter will have on the recipient (and on his future readers). This is all very intriguing. What is Ficino doing here? Is he really prescribing carelessness and heedlessness? The translator of the whole of Plato and Plotinus, the author of *Theologia Platonica*, telling us that he will from now on censure prudence?

There is also a charming little anecdote which has reached me just this week, through the aether, associated with the launch in 2012 of Volume Nine of Marsilio Ficino’s *Letters* from which this letter is taken.

The editor of the volume, Mr Arthur Fardell, was asked to speak at the event in Central London. There were several scholars present, as well as members of the School of Philosophy and Economic Science, which was in fact responsible for the translation of the ten volumes of *Letters*.

Mr Fardell, as he relates, decided to focus on this particular letter, or a part of it. He therefore spent a little time rehearsing everybody present to join in with Ficino’s words, so that when he paused after reading “*In short, the greatest difference central to the function of this gathering, if it has any function, is surely that, while others assiduously and with all care seek freedom from care, we, for our part, with supreme lack of care do not, in fact, seek freedom from care*”, the audience all gave a resounding chorus of “*We already have it!!*” He reports that that got everyone relaxed and happy.

At any rate, for those who love words, here are 11 examples of antithesis/synonym in barely 12 lines of Latin:

Longa servitute // brevem dominatum
long service // short period of mastery
(antithesis)

diligentia // negligentia
earnest endeavour // carefreeness (antithesis)

asciscere // nactus
to gain for oneself // to obtain (synonym)

praefectura and censura // dominatum
a prefectship, censor // mastery (synonym)

corrigo // corripio
to correct // to censure (synonym)

prudentia // imprudentia
prudence // imprudence (antithesis)

servitute // libertate
service // freedom (antithesis)

mammola // vulgus
a select group // the mob (antithesis)

cura // incuria
care // absence of care (antithesis)

quaeramus and perquirant // habeamus
we seek, we inquire after // we have (antithesis)

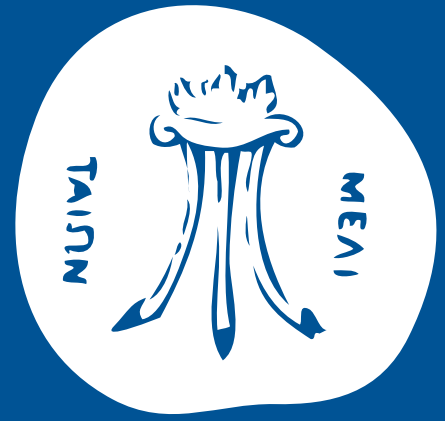
secura // negligentia
carefree // heedlessness (synonym)



Portrait of six Tuscan poets
GIORGIO VASARI (1544) ORIEL COLLEGE, OXFORD

(From left to right: Marsilio Ficino, Cristoforo Landino, Francesco Petrarca, Giovanni Boccaccio, Dante Alighieri and Guido Cavalcanti)

the power of the **CLASSICAL** **WORD**



astronaut

noun //

A person whose profession and role is to travel, explore and/or navigate through outer space.

From the Classical Greek ἄστρον (astron) meaning 'star' and ναύτης (nautēs) meaning 'sailor'.

omniscience

noun //

The power of knowing everything, a quality often attributed to a higher being of existence such as a god.

From the Latin *omnis* meaning 'all' and *scientia* meaning 'knowledge'.

Classics

noun //

The humanistic study of the ancient Greek and Roman languages and cultures, as well as their reception.

From the Latin *classicus* meaning 'belonging to the highest class of citizens'.

metaphor

noun //

A literary and poetic technique used to draw a parallel between two images in a work.

From the Classical Greek μεταφέρω (metaferō) meaning 'carry to another place' or 'transfer'.

sporadic

adjective //

Used to describe an object/s isolated and not part of a group or set of other similar objects.

From the Classical Greek σποραδικός (sporadikos) meaning 'scattered' or 'isolated'.

calendar

noun //

A conventional and socially constructed measure of time, divided into days, weeks and months to form a year.

From the Latin *kalendae* (plural form) meaning 'the first day of the month'.

LETHE

a journey into the poetry of Louise Vella

Maria Giuliana Fenech

This year, an ex-student of Classics and a current student of Classics have both been shortlisted for the National Book Prize in two different categories. In this month's issue we will be meeting Louise Vella, whose book was shortlisted in the *Poetry in English* category.

The very title of Louise Vella's volume of poetry *Lethe: A Rhapsody of Life Remembered* immediately evokes a classical theme which is prevalent in her poetry. The MCA met up with Louise and found out more about her writing process and work.

Lethe, the daughter of Eris is the personification of oblivion and also the name of a river in the Underworld. It was believed that the newly dead who drank from the river would lose all memory of their past existence. Why did you choose *Lethe* as the title, but paradoxically followed it by *Life Remembered*?

First of all, many of my poems are inspired by Classical mythology, which for me encapsulates everything. Poetry helps me remember but also forget. Once I chose the name for my volume, I actually got inspired further and wrote poems inspired by this theme.

How have the Classics influenced your poetry?

My poetry was definitely influenced by the Classics. This volume of poetry was written over ten years and, in fact, I started writing them while still a student of Classics. While my style is more modern and therefore my verses do not follow the strict metrical rules of Classical poetry, the Classical theme is one of the unifying factors. Nonetheless, the musicality of classical poetry influenced my own writing.

The personal poetry of Sappho and Catullus influenced my writing. I relate with Sappho's uniquely feminine voice and I could relate to the emotions expressed in her poetry, emotions which were sometimes lacking in the other male poets. While Sappho's poetry only survives in fragments, those fragments pack a punch.

Apart from my Classical influences, the writings of Sylvia Plath, Dorothy Parker, Maya Angelou and Anne Sexton have all had an indirect but profound influence on my own writing. The political writings of Orwell have also influenced my work.

Poetry is often viewed as 'unsellable' and subsequently 'unpublishable'. What are your views about such a statement?

I have been writing poetry since I was 9 or 10 years old. Despite poetry being a hard sell, I cannot conceive writing in any other medium. Even as a student, poetry was my favourite genre to study. Ultimately, although I want my poetry to be read, I published for myself. However, I do like the way different people relate to different things that I have written. The words I express become one with the thoughts of the person who is reading them.

Finally, how do you write your poems? Do you call upon the Muse?

I think the Muse calls upon me! When that happens, I immediately jot down the first two verses but then I am uncertain about how the poem will end. I am very in touch with my emotions and the news affects me. Current events and especially the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia have definitely inspired my poetry.

ODYSSEY

by Louise Vella

Odysseus sailed for nine long years,
Abandoning his sweetheart
Cold-hearted Penelope
Whose chest beat just for him.
He wound around the Mediterranean
Island-hopping with the best of them,
Sporting the sea as his medal
(You could see it in his face where he'd been)
And she dreamed on, perpetually praying
Unravelling weaves and lives at the seams
Scrounging the gods for another night,
Another day of dignity,
When the men left her solely
To work on her weave.
Pleading Athena for wisdom not might,
For every night her hopes got tattered
Like her web. Another day of watching,
Another patient day of watching the ebb
And flow of water, without him on it.

Q&A

with Lara Bugeja

DEGREE PLUS/MCA STUDENT, SANSKRIT, 2020

What is your profession and what are your interests?

As a museum professional, I curate the collection at the Malta Postal Museum in Valletta. I truly enjoy the role I play. Top of my list would be the creativity that one brings to the table - I have free reign in much of what is required in terms of exhibitions, lectures, and curatorial content and am well supported by talented colleagues who help translate these ideas into reality. It's a people job and I enjoy that - random visits from random people with unusual and interesting projects. What more could one ask for?

My interests are varied - I've always had a great love of dance, especially flamenco (and I love dancing too), being with people is a close second, ceramics (specifically maiolica) is another; painting and drawing (when time permits are incredible), food, travel, teaching and reading are all things I enjoy.

Why did you take up the MCA invitation to study Sanskrit language and culture this summer?

For quite some time now, I've had a genuine yearning to take up Sanskrit. It's very niche (which it shouldn't be, of course) and so courses were few and far between. However, as with most things, one needs to be prepared for the commitment it entails and that summer I resolved to be as committed as I could! Also, as a student of the School of Practical Philosophy, it's become a valuable tool but it is so very much more than 'just' a language.

Can you say anything significant about the effect of coming in touch with the Sanskrit language?

Well, I'd say that Sanskrit resonates on many levels. First, there's the wonderful sound of it being chanted and the shlokas which, when fully understood and absorbed, are just perfection itself - so simple, so beautiful, and so pregnant with practical understanding. The script is a feast for the eyes - I had studied Arabic for five years and thought that was particularly beautiful - Devanagari is, I would say, right 'up there' when it comes to beauty and constancy! There's a feeling of grounding, timelessness and measure in all things that I experience when I get stuck in to Sanskrit.

Do you think Sanskrit is for everyone?

'Yes' is the short answer but I think this requires qualification. Sanskrit can be learnt simply as a language, which is one approach - it is clearly structured and with proper application, fairly straightforward. It can also be learnt in conjunction with Advaita philosophy, which is where its true value is apprehended. Steeped in the wisdom of many generations of sages, it is in its vibration, in its metre, in its meaning and in itself quite unique. I can't explain further, one just needs to experience it.

