

# THE MCA NEWSLETTER



Malta  
Classics  
Association

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## LETTER From the Editor

*Salvete omnes!*

Welcome to the February 2021 edition of the Malta Classics Association Newsletter! It is a true honour and privilege to introduce myself as the incoming Editor of the Newsletter. I would like to thank my predecessor, Elizabeth Kemp, for her great contribution to the MCA.

In this issue, our very own Samuel Azzopardi launches a thought-provoking discussion on queer Classics, while Maria Giuliana Fenech gives us many interesting insights on the history of the Greek tongue - one of the two major classical languages. We also meet Noel Tanti, an MCA Sanskrit student, and get our monthly dose of classical etymology in The Power of the Classical Word, prepared by Maria Giuliana Fenech.

We are always very excited to hear whatever you'd like to tell us about the Classics! If you have an article, poem, story, illustration, project, event or anything else that you would like to contribute, we would love to hear about it. Drop us an e-mail on [info@classicsmalta.org](mailto:info@classicsmalta.org) or contact us on our Facebook page.

Stay safe and ἔρωσο!

*Andrew Debono Cauchi*

# Queer CLASSICS

## A Story of Inheritance, Inspiration, and a Sense of Home

SAMUEL AZZOPARDI

The beauty and profound expression of feelings that characterise Classical literature have made it a source of inspiration for artists throughout the centuries, and authors of various genres and backgrounds have picked at the cultural inheritance left to us by the ancients for powerful ways to react to their circumstances and experiences.

In his work on classical reception, Emilio Capettini has tracked classical culture's influence on queer authors reacting to the decimating HIV/AIDS pandemic which dominated their world for several years. [1] As Capettini notes, the American author, poet and activist Paul Laundry Monette was inspired to write his 1988 memoir *Borrowed Time* after witnessing a number of eroding monuments during his visit to Greece. These "*broken slabs and columns lying in the field, covered with Greek characters erasing in the weather*" (p. 146), some voicing explicit and loving instances of homosexual desire, were the last remaining material evidence for people with whom Monette could identify and whom he thus felt comfortable to call his (queer) ancestors.

In his brief conversation with Diomedes, Glaucus had compared the lives of mortals to leaves for their brevity and unceremonious passing (*Iliad* 6.145). This image would have been particularly resonant for Monette and his peers, who would see their communities and

circles of friends ravaged by the disease. Spurred on by these desolate images, Monette chronicled his experience and those of his peers in his memoir, while references to Greek material and literary culture were peppered throughout his works until his death in 1995; his own partner, Roger Horwitz, had passed away in 1986. Nor was Monette the only gay artist of the time to be inspired by the Classics - Capettini also traces allusions to Catullus 5 in Derek Jarman's final 1993 film *Blue*. Jarman would himself die of complications arising from HIV/AIDS early in the following year.



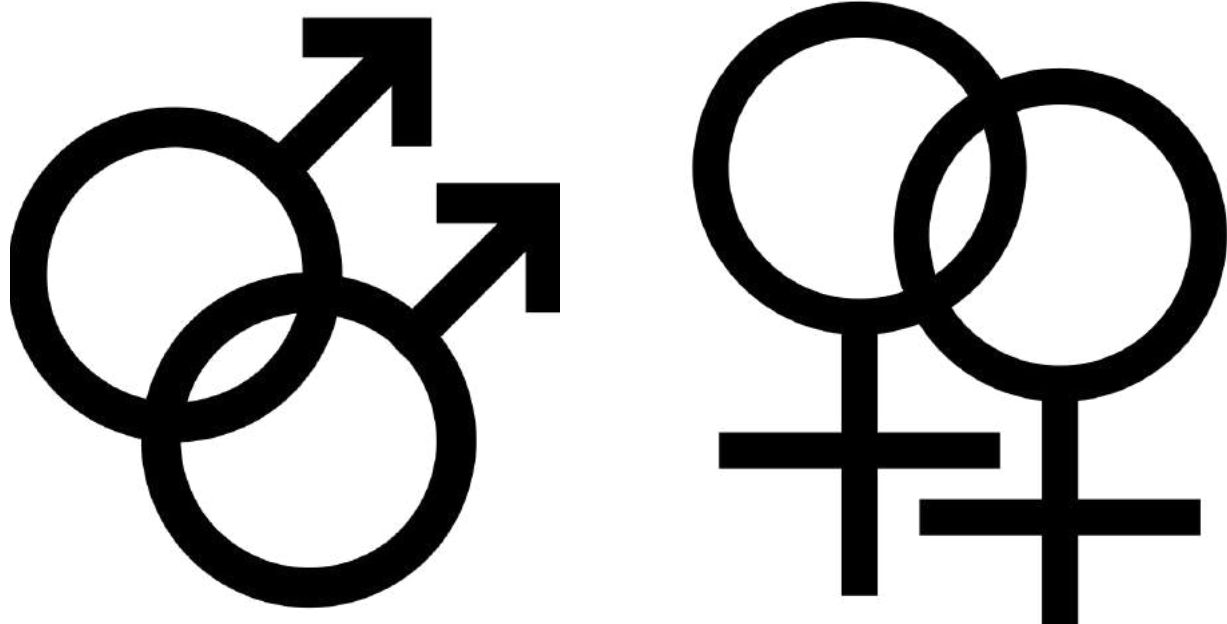
*Catullus*

This connection between the Classics and queer culture was certainly not novel. For many centuries, the sparse references to same-sex infatuation, same-sex sexual relations or same-sex love in Classical sources offered the only glimpses into a strand of the human experience that was either actively persecuted or ignored. Monette's identification of queer people as 'his ancestors' is taken up by Hannah Clarke who admits that her constant searches in JSTOR articles for references to expressions of queerness in antiquity constituted a search for a form of cultural inheritance and a means to satisfy a very strong need in proving that the queer community is not a product of the modern age but that even its reality is timeless. [2] Her personal feelings were well-mirrored in her survey of queer students of the Classics, who also expressed that their lasting interest in the Classics oftentimes stemmed from a desire to see themselves represented and reflected in ways that modern media generally did not. Whereas contemporary films, series and books do occasionally include a queer character, this is generally a token and disappointingly one-dimensional representation; within the Classics, however, queer behaviour and emotion is expressed by warriors, gods, heroes, conquerors, and so a diverse roster of world-changers and inspiring figures whose existence as queer characters was at one and the same time more than just their queer identity as well as being so powerful and well-developed that it

established lasting and recognisable literary terms like 'Sapphic' or 'Achillean'.

To describe these characters of Classical culture and history using purely modern terminology would be incorrect, and to describe the Classical period as a time and culture that was fully open to queer identities would be a gross simplification. Yet the Classical period, and the study of Classics, remains an oasis of relatability in a desert of absence. It is perhaps for this reason that authors like Mary Renault (*Fire from Heaven*, 1969), Paul Waters (*Of Merchants and Heroes*, 2008), and Madeline Miller (*Song of Achilles*, 2011) chose Classical culture and history as the setting for their stories of homosexual love.

This sense of timeless representation and connectivity that has drawn and continues to draw countless queer students and authors to the Classics was picked up and developed by author Mark Merlis in a literary way that can only be described as dangerously bold. In his 1998 novel *An Arrow's Flight*, Merlis expresses the eternal relevance of the Classics to the queer community by meshing the late Mycenaean world and his late 20th century world together. In his novel, the Trojan War is fought using swords and shields but is witnessed throughout the world by families sitting in front of their TVs; Achilles' armour seems looted straight out of an archaeological museum but is transported across the rough seas in Odysseus' metal-clad



warship. While this jarring mosaic of mismatched material elements seems to threaten confusion, it soon slides into the background and the reader is drawn instead to focus on the personal experiences of the novel's characters, whose familiar names help establish a ready context for Merlis' plot.

Indeed, *An Arrow's Flight* largely follows the plot of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. Unlike Sophocles' Neoptolemus, however, Merlis' young homosexual Pyrrhus escapes the smothering confines of his marginal and insular native Scyros for the 'big city' on the mainland where he plunges head first into the city's mesmerising gay lifestyle. Pyrrhus' exceptional good looks lead him to a brief career in the sex industry, and it is in these circumstances that he is found by a bemused Odysseus and informed of his father's recent death. Like the Sophoclean Neoptolemus, this 20th century Pyrrhus is manipulated by the eternally scheming Odysseus so that he might trick Philoctetes into handing over Heracles' bow and arrows. Within Merlis' universe, however, Philoctetes' mysterious wound is identified with HIV/AIDS, and for him there is no sudden Heracleian *deus ex machina* – he perishes defiant till the end in a hospital on the seemingly Mediterranean gay-resort island on which he had once been abandoned.

Throughout the novel, Merlis reflects on the terrible consequences of the HIV/AIDS pandemic on the queer community, as well as the broader society's reaction and approach to the disease. Besides this overarching theme, however, Merlis also discusses other issues pertinent to his community such as self-rejection and self-acceptance, the difficulties of gay youths who find themselves alone in hostile or indifferent environments, as well as the difficulties faced by the community in professional contexts with particular reference to the now discontinued US army's *Don't Ask, Don't Tell* policy.

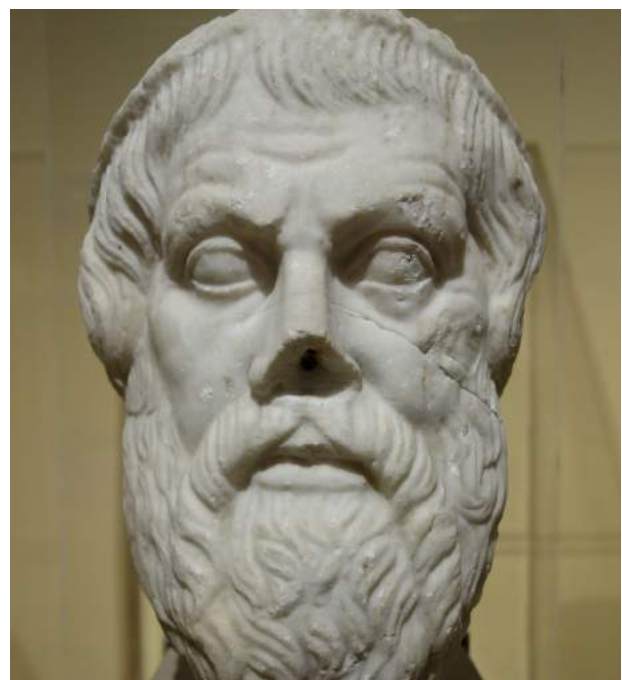
In *An Arrow's Flight*, Mark Merlis adopts the familiar backdrop of the Trojan War to a story that is fundamentally contemporary to its time of authorship. Yet the depth with which Merlis adorns these familiar but modified characters, and the continued relatability of their stories to modern queer audiences ensure an enduring podium to *An Arrow's Flight* among the works of modern queer literature, further cementing the indelible relationship between the Classics and the queer community through the ages.

## References

[1] E. Capettini, "Greek Characters Erasing in the Weather": *The Politics of Memory during the AIDS Crisis*, last accessed on 9 Dec. 2020 at <https://classicalstudies.org/annual-meeting/149/abstract/%E2%80%9Cgreek-characters-erasing-weather%E2%80%9D-politics-memory-during-aids-crisis>

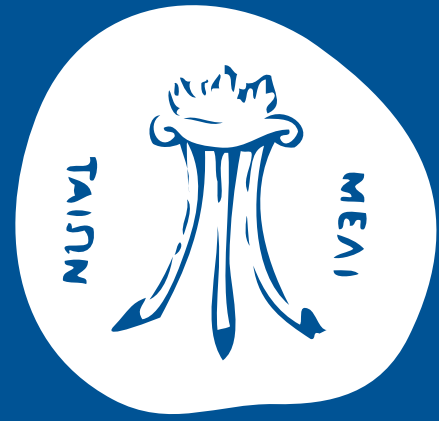
[2] H. Clarke (2019) *Queer Classics – Survey of LGBTQ+ Classicists Reveals Community and Continuity* – last accessed on 9 Dec. 2020 at <https://eidolon.pub/queer-classics-b84819356f74>

Image of *Catullus* by Schorle (Username)  
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*Sophocles*

# the power of the **CLASSICAL WORD**



## **lalochezia**

*noun //*

Emotional relief gained by using indecent or vulgar language.

From the Classical Greek λαλώ (lalo) meaning 'to chat' and χέζω (chezo) meaning 'to ease one's self'.

## **Victor / Victoria**

*noun //*

Winner, a name commonly given to persons.

From the Latin *victoria* meaning 'victory', also personified as a Roman goddess.

## **osculate**

*verb //*

To come into contact.

From the Latin *osculari* meaning 'to kiss'.

## **ostrich**

*noun //*

A large, two-toed, swift-footed flightless bird.

From the Classical Greek στρουθός (strouthos) meaning 'sparrow'.

## **Philip / Philippa**

*noun //*

Fond of horses, a name commonly given to individuals.

From the Classical Greek φιλό (filo) meaning 'to love' and ἵππος (hippos) meaning 'horse'.

## **muscle**

*noun //*

A tissue composed of cells or fibres, the contraction of which produces movement in the body.

From the Latin *musculus* meaning 'little mouse', transf. 'muscle' or 'vigour'.

# Q&A

with Noel Tanti

MCA STUDENT, SANSKRIT

## **What is your profession and what are your interests?**

I'm a school librarian by profession and therefore I spend most of the day engaged in book-related activities; whether it's cataloguing and shelving or giving presentations about writers and different genres of books. I'm also a published author of children's books in Maltese. Besides reading and writing, I love watching films, especially horror movies.

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

A few years ago I attended a course on Carmelite Spirituality and one of the lectures was about Sanskrit, delivered by Prof. Michael Zammit. I was immediately drawn to this culture and I wanted to follow it up. However, other commitments prevented me from doing so. A silver lining of the current pandemic is that many things were transferred online, including the MCA lectures, and therefore I could finally manage to attend a course on Sanskrit.

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

You cannot really separate the Sanskrit language from the culture. I tend to think of it as a mindset more than anything else, where everything is connected to everything else. I truly believe that even studying grammar, which can be a clinical and impersonal experience, has a spiritual and

philosophical side to it. This is something which is sorely missed in today's world where the secular is privileged above everything else.

## **Do you think Sanskrit is for everyone?**

For the reasons I mentioned above, yes. There are so many things that we take for granted, and Sanskrit makes us reflect on the smallest, most mundane of things. However, one must invest time in order to reap the benefits. For me, the Sanskrit language was completely new: the alphabet, the sounds, the vocabulary, the sentence structure; and I had to devote some time every day to study. But every small step brought with it gratifying rewards.



# A Short History of GREEK

MARIA GIULIANA FENECH

Ὕμνος εἰς τὴν Ἐλευθερίαν

Hymn to Liberty

Σε γνωρίζω ἀπὸ τὴν κόψη  
Του σπαθιοῦ τὴν τρομερή,  
Σε γνωρίζω ἀπὸ τὴν ὄψη,  
Που με βιά μετράει τὴ γῆ.  
Ἀπ' τα κόκκαλα βγαλμένη  
Των Ἑλλήνων τα ἱερά  
Και σαν πρώτα ἀνδρειωμένη,  
Χαίρε, ὦ χαίρε, ελευθεριά!

I recognize you by your fearsome  
sharpness of the sword,  
I recognize you by your face,  
that hastefully defines the land.  
From the sacred bones,  
of the Hellenes arisen,  
and valiant again as you once were,  
Hail, o hail, Liberty!

In 2017, the 9th February was declared International Greek Language Day. This date was selected because it is also the official commemoration day of Dionysios Solomos, a Greek poet from Zakynthos best known for writing the Hymn to Liberty, the national anthem of both Greece and Cyprus.

The question is: Would a student of Ancient Greek understand the anthem? In written form, the title Ὕμνος πρὸς τὴν Ἐλευθερίαν is immediately understandable, as 'Hymn to Liberty' (even the most green of students recognizes the πρὸς + accusative so cemented in our minds). The student would also recognize quite a few of the words in the actual text and perhaps even make out a very general meaning, but it is highly unlikely that a student of Ancient Greek would understand the sung anthem.

Unlike Latin, Greek did not split into separate languages. However, Ancient and Modern Greek are not identical, and, as we are going to see, the

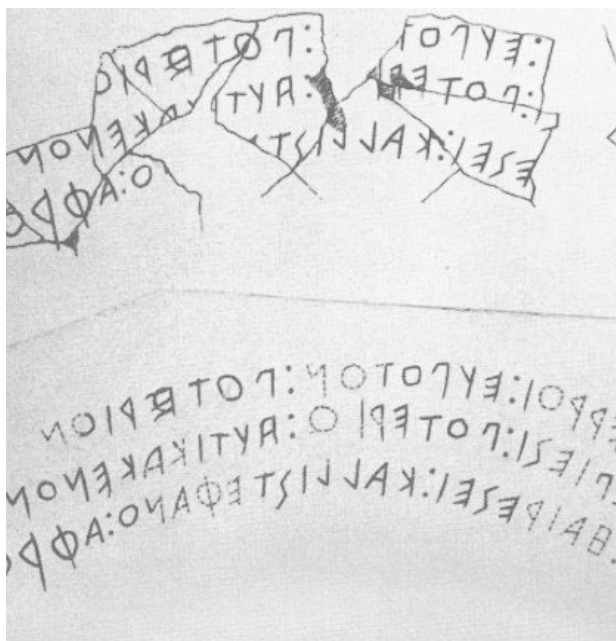


*Dionysios Solomos (1798-1857)*

road from Ancient to Modern was by no means smooth. The two languages use the same script, both have three genders (masculine, feminine and neuter), cases (Ancient Greek has five cases while Modern Greek has four) and a verb system which is simpler in Modern Greek but still similar to that of Ancient Greek. Indeed, knowledge of

either language facilitates the learning of the other, but the learning process is still required.

Greek is an Indo-European language which, like Italic, Germanic and Indo-Iranian languages (among many others) descends from an unattested but partially reconstructed language conventionally known as Proto Indo-European. Greek has an extremely long history. Defining the oldest example of something is always controversial; however, two very old examples of Ancient Greek are the Dipylon Inscription and in the inscription on Nestor's Cup which both date to around the 8th century BC. However, prior to the Greek alphabet, two syllabic scripts were also in use: Linear B in the second half of the second millennium rendering the Greek spoken by the Mycenaean civilization, and a related script, syllabic Cyprian, was used for the local dialect of Cyprus from the end of the second millennium to the 3rd century BC. It should also be noted that when we speak of Ancient Greek, we are usually referring to Attic Greek, i.e. the dialect of Athens. All the cities or regions had different dialects, but presumably most of them were mutually intelligible. Herodotus refers to Greeks as ὁμόγλωσσοι - speakers of the same tongue. In fact, an Athenian dramatist composed his dialogue passages in Attic, but his choral odes would have had a Doric flair, as choral poetry is a Dorian genre. The audience would still have been able to understand the tragedy.



*A Detail from the Inscription on Nestor's Cup (8th century BC)*

By the early 3rd century BC, local dialects started being replaced by an Ionic-Attic koine dialektos (common language). This eventually provided Greece with a standard language from which the later dialects developed. The four canonical gospels were originally written in this form - Koine Greek - Common Greek (koine from κοινός, common).

Nonetheless, after the end of the Classical period, writers of Greek continued using a variety of the language which was rather different to the spoken Greek of their time. For example, during the Byzantine period (395AD–1453AD), the chief models for Greek writing remained literary Attic or Koine. Therefore, the spoken language of the uneducated developed naturally, but the written language tended to remain more archaic and ignored these changes.

By the 12th century, some verse writers started using a literary language based on the spoken tongue. This was further developed in 16th and 17th century Venetian Crete. While this version of the language still contained some archaic features, it included local vocabulary. These texts were the models for the poets who emerged after the Greek war of Independence in the 1820s. Around this time it was noticed that a definite form of the language had to be used in educational works and, ultimately, by the Greek state. Three versions were proposed: the archaists pushed for Classical Greek, and the vernacularists argued for the spoken language. In between the two there was the scholar Adamantios Korais and his followers. He argued that modern Greek should be used, but a modern Greek which has been 'corrected' through the replacement of loanwords by words of Ancient Greek origin. This came to be known as Katharevousa, purifying. (Students of Ancient Greek are familiar with καθαρεύω - 'I am clean or pure' and κάθαρσις - 'catharsis').

By the late 19th century, the language controversy had split into two groups: those who supported the use of the spoken language, known as 'demotic', and those who supported the use of the corrected language, known as 'Katharevousa'. Katharevousa remained the official language until 1976 when it was formally abolished, but the Church of Greece still uses Katharevousa in official communications.