

## The Conscientious Classics Club: Implementing Inclusivity, Pedagogy, and Fun in a Student-Led Organization

If the goal of an undergraduate recreational club celebrating cultures of the ancient Mediterranean is to create a space that is safe, inviting, and fun, how can we overcome the inevitable engagement with material that contradicts our values? Moreover, how do we showcase and celebrate media from the ancient world without sacrificing our own values as a club? Finally, how do we responsibly hold film viewings, ancient play readings, game nights, and ancient holiday celebrations for students from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines? These are questions that weigh heavily on the executive board members of the University of Illinois Classics Club which has a diverse membership base containing students from a broad spectrum of identities represented including female-identifying, BI-POC, neurodivergent, and LGBTQ+ members. Additionally, the Classics Club includes members from various areas of study, not limited to the humanities. This means that students who do not have much preexisting knowledge of the Greco-Roman world or experience discussing Greco-Roman culture critically participate in the club.

Unfortunately, the majority of Greco-Roman media and Greco-Roman reception in contemporary media rarely celebrate the identities shared by members of our club. From Homer to HBO's *Rome*, media created or based on the ancient Greco-Roman world erase or make jokes about marginalized identities at best and commit violence against those identities at worst. Examples of the former include the portrayal of Achilles and Patroclus as cousins in *Troy* (2004) and the portrayal of Andromeda as a blonde-haired, blue-eyed white woman, despite her Ethiopian heritage and *fusca* skin described by Ovid in *Heroides XV* in *Clash of the Titans* (1981). Examples of the latter include inflammatory epithets for men who are passive in

homosexual relationships including Agathon's identification as a *καταπύγων* in Aristophanes' play *Thesmophoriazusaie* and Furius' identification as a *cinaedus* in Catullus' *Carmen XVI*. Furthermore, Greco-Roman drama and mythology is rife with depictions of women and enslaved people being the victims of physical violence, including sexual assault. All of the above films, plays, and pieces of literature have been shared in Classics Club, sparking conversation about the prejudices they display and how we, as contemporary readers, experience them. It becomes the task of the Classics Club executive board, made up of elected undergraduate student leaders, to guide those discussions.

One such challenge occurred when the Classics Club hosted a viewing of *Clash of the Titans* (1981). Prior to the screening, we led a discussion about representations of mythological monsters in contemporary media in which depictions of the gorgon, Medusa, once a priestess to Athena, who was assaulted by Poseidon in Athena's temple then punished by the goddess for her own assault by being turned into a snake-headed monster with eyes that turn anyone to look into them to stone. In both the Greco-Roman mythology canon and the film adaptation, the hero Perseus slays Medusa, using her head to later defeat Poseidon's aquatic beast sent to kill the princess Andromeda. Unfortunately, during the film, multiple attendees made inappropriate, objectifying comments about the depiction of Medusa in the film in addition to joking about her sexual assault. This unfortunate event necessitated the authoring of the Classics Club's first ever mission statement outlining the uncomfortable themes encountered when engaging with Greco-Roman culture along with clearly defined standards for how to discuss such themes. The creation of the mission statement likewise introduced questions on how to enforce our newly established expectations for respectful conduct as a recreational club. On one hand, it is important as leaders of the Classics Club who organize the weekly events to actively work to make it a safe,

enjoyable space. On the other hand, the club, being a volunteer-run, student-led organization does not have clearly defined guidelines as an official university class would. The question then arises, how do we balance cultivating a fun environment where people are encouraged to enjoy themselves while simultaneously acknowledging the nuances of engaging with Greco-Roman culture and regulating behavior accordingly?

This talk explores the challenges faced by the University of Illinois Classics Club as this fall semester we welcomed a record number of new attendees representing a wide variety of identities, class years including freshmen, transfer students, and graduate students, as well as students in the humanities, the business college, and engineering college. This talk will employ real-life examples of problems the Classics Club has faced in regards to maintaining a respectful space while engaging with the ancient world, describe solutions we created to solve those problems, and, finally, propose answers to the questions posed above.