

OPEN EVENING

It's our annual Open Evening. The balloon clusters in the atrium are intended to create a celebratory atmosphere, but as our College colours are black, grey and purple, the effect is more like a Goths' tea party. You somehow feel they should be playing Nick Cave or Marilyn Manson, rather than the bland pap coming out of the speakers. Hired displays of exotic plants strive to create the impression that we've suddenly landed in a Costa Rican jungle, or a Madeiran wine-shipper's garden. But tomorrow all those plants and balloons will be gone, to be replaced by the mundane detritus of College life: discarded crisp packets, empty coffee cups, and lounging students playing games on their smartphones.

The Welcome Desk is stacked with free knick-knacks in our corporate shade of purple (Pantone colour 248), chosen for its connotations of quality and luxury. It's the colour of the murex dye that the ancient residents of Tyre used to make from marine molluscs - or, to put it in more modern terms, it's the colour of a Cadbury's Dairy Milk wrapper. Apart from the inevitable stationery – pens, rulers, highlighters - there are tiny retro gonks, grey stress-balls and bowls containing individually-wrapped pieces of rock, the enduring legacy of a Business Studies teacher appointed to a Marketing role a couple of years ago. As our College is located in a seaside resort, he came up with the brilliant idea of ordering rock with the legend 'St Matthias Rocks!' running through its sugary core. But nobody eats rock any more, in our dentition-conscious age: the cheap purple pens will run out after a few lessons, but those slices of rock will probably survive the next mass extinction. .

Banners and cardboard cut-outs, placed at intervals along the corridors, indicate the location of each subject: Psychology (Sigmund Freud), Biology (Charles Darwin) and English (Charles Dickens). My own contribution to this pantheon of Dead White Bearded Males is a life-size cut-out of Gerard Butler playing Leonidas in Zach Snyder's film *300*. The real Leonidas was sixty when he was killed by the Persians at Thermopylae, but historical truth takes a back seat when confronted with Mr Butler in a saucy red cloak and a tight loincloth. I shudder to think what the ancient Spartans (who were surprisingly fashion-conscious) would have made of this travesty, but I can't complain; the release of *300* trebled the admissions to my Ancient History course.

Tonight is a night of dreams and aspirations. Just for one evening you can fantasise about being anything you want to be: a human rights lawyer, a cosmetic dentist to the stars, a palaeontologist who discovers a new species of Cretaceous dinosaur. You want to go to a Russell Group university? Actually, you've probably already blown that one with the mediocre GCSE grades you're going to get this summer. You want to be a forensic psychologist? There are probably more fictional ones than real ones. You want to be a museum curator? Well, I'll happily tell you the story of how one of our students landed a job at the British Museum, and got to work on a blockbuster exhibition. What I'll omit to tell you is that she had to do a six-month unpaid internship first; when they finally offered her a job, they put her on a zero-hours contract.

The reality is that down the line, after two years here and three years at university, many of these people will end up in jobs they would have dismissed with

contempt at Open Evening. They'll be working in financial services, for personal injury lawyers, or in care homes or hotels. They'll be baristas rather than barristers. They'll start a teacher training course and drop out when the going gets tough.

Tonight's eager faces, in their silken-badged uniforms, will be transformed within weeks into people who are invisible to bus-drivers, whose trains are always cancelled, who must attend strings of appointments with doctors, dentists and orthodontists. How can they get all these appointments at such short notice? No wonder the NHS was already at breaking-point before Covid came on the scene.

Perhaps I'm getting a bit jaundiced, cowed under the weight of feckless students and inexplicable managerial decisions, but then I suppose I'm quite a lot older than most of my colleagues.

Now the Principal's talk has finished, people are beginning to find their way to the Classics Department, located at the far end of the Health and Social Care corridor. As you approach my room, posters of cheerful, under-worked nurses give way to images of the ethnically-diverse population of Roman Alexandria.

People wander into my classroom, eyes sweeping the curious collection of objects. Some of them walk straight out again, but others are drawn to explore. There are slides flickering on the screen: images of Greek gods on statues and vases. One of the slides shows a Roman statue of Pan having sex with a she-goat, a sculpture so shocking that it used to be kept in the Secret Cabinet in the museum in Naples: but now it's just one more image amongst the thousands that wash over us every day.

As a veteran of these events, I know that there are three questions that visitors to the Classics Department can always be relied on to ask:

The First Question: ‘What’s Classics, then?’

I move into my well-rehearsed spiel: ‘Classics is the study of the culture of ancient Greece and ancient Rome, including religion, art and literature.’

At this point someone usually asks a subsidiary question: ‘Do you do Ancient Egypt, then?’ I reply that our course only covers the point when Egypt ceases to be an independent state, absorbed into the Roman Empire after Cleopatra’s defeat and suicide.

‘Oh,’ they’ll say, ‘I didn’t know Cleopatra was real.’

The Second Question: ‘Is it real?’

When visitors see the objects laid out on the central table, they always point to one and say ‘Is it real?’ I feel like asking them what they mean: do they want to know whether it’s a tangible object, with molecular integrity, or just a figment of the imagination? But of course, that’s not what they mean. What they really want to know is whether this is something which was made and handled in ancient Greece or Rome, as opposed to being a modern replica.

I pick up a small bottle, made of cloudy glass, the colour of an untreated swimming-pool. ‘This is real. This is a Roman glass bottle from Alexandria – it might have been used for keeping cosmetics in, or perfume, or for taking some oil to the baths, like you would take a bottle of shower-gel with you today.’ My visitors handle the bottle with wonder, and indeed, it is a minor miracle that such a fragile glass bottle has survived intact for two thousand years.

I pick up another item, a small terracotta lamp. ‘This is an oil lamp from Palestine, from around the time Jesus was born.’ At this point somebody usually says,

‘But Jesus wasn’t real, was he? Wasn’t he just a made-up person, like Robin Hood?’

I pick up a third item. ‘This is a Greek arrow-head, from the siege of Agrigentum in Sicily.’ My visitors stroke the arrow-head; it’s still sharp.

‘So’, I say, ‘these three items are originals, but everything else on this table is a replica, including the Greek and Roman coins.’

They home in on the shiny silver Greek coins, picking them up and weighing them in their hands, examining the different designs: owls for Athens, Pegasus for Corinth, a turtle for Aegina. I tell them that the real coins would have been solid silver, equivalent to four days’ pay for a skilled worker

Actually, *everything* on the table is real, including the Greek coins, but I’m not going to tell them that. You wouldn’t believe what people try to steal at Open Evenings; I’ve come across kids who tried to take something from every room, as a kind of game.

On the wall there’s a section of the Parthenon frieze, showing horsemen riding in the Panathenaic Procession. It’s one of the sections that Lord Elgin didn’t manage to get his hands on, as it had already been removed from the building before his team of workmen arrived. I tell people that it’s a modern resin copy, but it isn’t, it’s real.

I invite my visitors to try on the gold jewellery from Troy, suggesting that it’s just cheap replica jewellery bought from a museum shop. You can take a selfie with the strands of the head-dress dangling on your forehead like a golden fringe. I like the

thought that my visitors, posting on Facebook and Instagram, have no idea that they're trying on genuine Bronze Age jewellery worn by Helen herself.

The Third Question: 'Why are you dressed like that?'

Now *this* potential applicant seems quite game; she's still wearing Helen's headdress, and she's been raiding the dressing-up box, draping herself in Grecian folds.

'But I still don't really see the point of studying all this – I mean, it doesn't have any application in the modern world, right? Not like Law or Business Studies.'

Then she looks at me with disdain, like I should be old enough to know better, and points at the Gorgon mask on my chest:

'Like, what's that? Is it supposed to be scary?'

My rising anger transmits itself to the goat-skin *aegis* across my chest, like switching on a neon sign. The hydra's heads that form the fringe of the *aegis* are no longer limp and compliant, pretending to be macramé tassels; they begin to hiss and writhe in sinuous coils, tongues darting. The eyes in Medusa's head begin to glow a vivid green.

The hapless teenager in front of me begins to calcify cell by cell from the feet up, as the blood solidifies in her veins. The colour is bleaching from her, even from her clothes. Even her drapery is turning to stone, although Helen's golden jewellery remains untarnished. She can only stand and stare helplessly into Medusa's eyes, rooted to the spot, too fascinated even to scream. She's turning into perfect Parian marble, but it's always a bit of a lottery – some become sandstone, or basalt, or even poor-quality limestone, complete with fossils.

Next year someone will ask me if she's real.

So why *am* I dressed like this? OK, since you asked, I'll tell you. I'm dressed like this because I'm Athene, goddess of war and wisdom, trying to keep alive the memory of a time when men feared me, women prayed to me and the flight of a heron over the marshes was a sign of my presence.

So does that answer your question, or is there anything else you'd like to know about Classics?