



St Hilda's College
UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

June 2024

On behalf of the Classics tutors at St Hilda's, I should like to congratulate you on your offer of a place here from October 2024.

You will already know something about the course; further information can be found at: www.classics.ox.ac.uk. I enclose details of some preparation which you can usefully do before coming up. Don't worry if you can't cover everything, but whatever you can do now will make life that much easier next year and we do strongly urge you to take seriously our suggestions for how to warm up for your forthcoming studies.

We hope you are excited about the prospect of joining us. The Classics degree at Oxford is an absolute treasure-trove of wonderful papers across the full range of disciplines - literary, historical, archaeological, philosophical and linguistic - and all with the added thrill of learning how to interact with ancient material in the original languages. We are sure you will find the subject here as fun to study as we do to teach!

Please don't hesitate to contact me with any queries you may have, big or small, academic or otherwise. Meanwhile I wish you every success in your studies this year, and, all being well, the Classics tutors look forward to seeing you in Oxford in October.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Rebecca Armstrong

Fellow and Tutor in Classical Languages and Literature

rebecca.armstrong@st-hildas.ox.ac.uk

Classics Preparation and Reading List 2024

Mods IIA (Learning Latin)

Background reading:

Much of the focus, especially when you first start at Oxford, will be on the ancient languages (more on which below), but we are aware you may not yet feel quite familiar with the ancient world in general. The historical and intellectual contexts which produced the texts you will go on to read are clearly very important, and you might like to read a few general works to help you get to grips with the basics. If you already have a fair sense of the sweep of Classical history and the vagaries of Classical mythology, feel free to pass over this section. Others, however, may like to try:

S. Price and P. Thonemann, *The Birth of Classical Europe* (Penguin, 2010)

R. Lane Fox, *The Classical World: An Epic History from Homer to Hadrian* (Allen Lane, 2005)

H. Morales, *Classical Mythology: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2007)

Feel free to get in touch with me if you would like further recommendations in this vein.

You might also find it interesting to take some virtual tours of the Classical exhibitions in various museums, especially if you have not had the opportunity to visit any in person. For example:

<https://britishmuseum.withgoogle.com/>

<http://collections.ashmolean.org/>

Reading recommendations for the summer before you start your course:

1. Homer:

Although you will not be reading Homer in the original Greek, we recommend that you familiarise yourself with both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in translation, since these are such fundamental works for an understanding of all ancient literature (not least Virgil's *Aeneid*). For the *Iliad*, try R Lattimore's verse translation (Chicago, 1951) or M Hammond's prose translation (revised Penguin, 1987). For the *Odyssey*, try W Shewring (Oxford World's Classics, 1980).

Short introductions to Homer include: J Griffin, *Homer* (Past Masters, Oxford 1980); M Silk, *Homer, The Iliad* (Landmarks of World Literature, Cambridge, 1987); and W. Allan, *Homer: the Iliad* (Bristol Classical Press, 2012).

2. Virgil:

Read the whole of the *Aeneid* in translation. There are two Penguin translations: West (1991) in prose, and Fitzgerald (1983) in verse; or you may prefer C Day Lewis in the Oxford World's Classics series. F Ahl's more recent Oxford World's Classics version is engaging and interesting, but some might find its colloquial style renders a less 'neutral' kind of translation.

For the examinations in your fifth term, you will need to have read books 1, 2, 4, 6 and 12 in the original Latin. If you already have GCSE Latin (or equivalent), have a go at reading one of these books

in the original Latin. The prescribed text is the Oxford Classical Text, but there is also a useful two-volume edition with text and commentary by R D Williams (Macmillan 1972–3).

3. Texts and Contexts:

In your first term and beyond, you will be having classes on the Texts and Contexts paper, where you study a range of works from both Greece and Rome. The first term's work will include some poems of Catullus and Propertius, and the *Pro Caelio*, a defence speech by Cicero. Have a look at some translations: e.g. G P Goold's Catullus (Duckworth, 1983), bearing in mind that the version of the text he uses differs in places from the set text (which is the Oxford Classical Text, edited by Mynors); for Cicero, D H Berry's translation in the World's Classics series; and for Propertius, Goold's LOEB (again, with some differences from the set text (the Oxford Classical Text, edited by Heyworth) or G Lee in the World's Classics.

Reading texts in the original languages:

As you will know, the Classics courses at Oxford place great emphasis on learning Greek and Latin and on reading Classical texts in those original languages. You will receive intensive training and a great deal of learning support during term times, but you will also be expected to put in a lot of work on your own. If you will be starting Latin from scratch when you arrive in Oxford, please just treat these as notes for future reference; however, if you have some Latin already and are ready to try some Virgil, you may find this section of use. Individuals differ in their approach to any task, and with time you will be sure to develop your own ways of working, but it might be helpful to use this as a rough guide when you embark on your reading.

- Firstly, find a quiet place and set aside a good chunk of time (say, one and a half to two hours) for each of your reading sessions. Turn off your phone and block out any other possible distractions as much as you can.
- If you are unfamiliar with the text, start by reading an English translation. This will give you a good sense of what you're dealing with, both in terms of the plot / subject matter and in terms of tone and vocabulary range. Do not, however, assume that by reading the English and then glancing at the Latin or Greek you will automatically understand exactly how the texts work in detail. This is only the first step in the process.
- Next, put aside the published translation and look carefully at a small chunk of the text in the original language to see if you can work out what is going on, what the grammatical forms are, how the whole fits together. Once you've got to grips with that sentence, or those few lines of verse, move on to the next small chunk, and so on.
- If there are words you don't know, consult a dictionary. Online aids such as the Perseus Greek and Latin Word Study tools can be helpful in offering both possible meanings and possible cases / moods / tenses etc. However, you should be **very careful** in your use of this kind of thing: firstly, the suggestions emerge from a statistically based algorithm and thus may not offer you the correct meaning in *this* particular instance; secondly, over-reliance on such tools will in the long term hamper rather than assist your learning of the languages. Your brain needs to get used to trying to puzzle things out and running through the possible options: memorising vocabulary, principal parts and so on may feel a slog, but in the end it will offer you a far quicker way to read texts than endlessly clicking on hyperlinks.

- You may want to create a text-specific vocabulary list. Looking back through and learning this will help you to speed up your reading as you go on: you will soon get to recognise words which crop up multiple times, and be able to make educated guesses about related words, compound verbs and so on. Again, though, remember that simply knowing what a word means in isolation is not the whole job done: you need to understand how in *this* context the word works, both in terms of grammar and syntax and – ideally, ultimately – in terms of tone and idiom. If you use an online vocabulary assistant like Quizlet, again make sure that this is only *part* of your approach to translating your texts, not the entirety.
- If, having read a published translation, looked up unfamiliar vocabulary, and having wrestled with a particular sentence or clause for some time you are still unsure how it fits together, don't worry. Simply make a note of it and, in due course, ask someone with more experience in the languages if they can help. Often you will find that if you've struggled to make sense of something you are not the first, and many published commentaries will also contain brief explanations of how certain phrases or constructions are working. If you have access to a relevant commentary before you come to Oxford (see the accompanying notes on the suggested reading) you should make use of it; if not (again) just make a note of the troublesome part and return to it in due course.
- You may wish to write out by hand your own translation of your set texts as you go along. The act of writing things down is a great aid to memory and learning, and handwriting is probably better for these purposes than typing (and certainly better than cutting and pasting on a screen). At the very least, though, we recommend that you make notes which go further than simply recording the English meaning of individual words: include information you have gleaned on the constructions used, the reason for this being in the genitive, and so on. These will be of use to you when you return to re-read your texts.
- Finally, some reassurance: you will almost certainly find this way of reading your texts extremely slow when you start. This is completely normal. As you become more familiar with the languages in general and with individual authors' styles, your reading speed will increase exponentially. If you cut corners and let yourself off with a vague approximation rather than as precise an understanding as possible, you will only be postponing that inevitable need to look the text squarely in the face and get to grips with grammar!

A note on sourcing texts and translations:

If you are in a position to be able to buy some of your set texts, that can make life simpler. We are only too well aware, though, how expensive such books tend to be and recognise that most students will own only a few, if any. A sensible first investment if you have the funds available would be the single volume containing Virgil's *Ecloques*, *Georgics* and *Aeneid* (Oxford Classical Text, edited by Mynors).

Cheap second-hand copies of translations are often easy to find, whether in actual second hand bookshops or via online middlemen like Abebooks. Unfortunately, even used editions of texts in the original languages tend to be quite expensive – and if you do buy second hand, you need to ensure that you're getting the right version (and preferably not a copy already covered in someone else's notes). In some cases, it may be possible for you to borrow texts from a library, and once you have started your course at Oxford you will often be able to take out set editions on loan. At St Hilda's we have made a point of building up our store of set texts within the college library.

Texts and translations of classical works are available online, but if you decide to use these you should be aware that the texts are not always reliable, and the translations often offputtingly old-fashioned.

Once you are on course, there are multiple copies of almost all the set texts in the college library available to borrow. In their first term, all students can apply for a book grant to cover the costs of a few essentials. We also have other funds to which students in particular financial need will be able to apply at any stage of their course for support with buying books necessary for their studies.

Dr Rebecca Armstrong
Tutor in Classics

rebecca.armstrong@st-hildas.ox.ac.uk