

CLASSICS SYMPOSIUM, SASKIA TEEGER

The final event of Classics Week at Francis Holland was the Classics Symposium on Friday 28th January. In Ancient Greece, symposia were lively occasions with discussions and debates taking place after much food and drink. While our conference was almost certainly a rather more composed affair, it was an impressive event. Sixth Formers from eight state and independent schools attended, from as far afield as Brighton, and our two guest speakers captivated the audience for the whole afternoon.

Robin Osborne, Professor of Ancient History and Fellow at King's College, Cambridge, opened up the trove of ancient comedies for us, where he spoke about the socio-political significance of Greek Theatre in the democracy of fifth century Classical Athens. He explained that often the plots of the competing dramatic entries in the annual Dionysia festival, the comedies in particular, contained direct political criticism of Athenian society and generated debate about Athenian law and morality. Dionysus (later known as Bacchus by the Romans) was the god of revelry and freedom. The ancient Athenian playwrights had free reign to question authority. Aristophanes mocked a prominent Athenian politician, Cleon, in his satire, *'Knights'*. In his comedy, *'Frogs'* Aristophanes caused the audience, citizens of the democracy, to evaluate the merits of their society which denied a voice to the slaves who could not vote. In *'The Assembly Women'* he portrayed the unthinkable - the city of Athens run solely by women!



A Bacchanalian Revel, W Etty

I was struck by how intrinsic theatre was to Athenian Democracy. Professor Osborne also explained that Greek Theatre mirrored the political institution of

the Athens Assembly. The 500 Assembly members were allocated theatre seats in accordance with the established council hierarchy. In addition, one drama festival judge was selected from each of the ten tribes of Athens. A further demonstration of the democratic nature of the Dionysia was the effort to ensure that the competition could not be won by bribery: initially 5 judges' selections were taken at random with the winning drama gaining the majority vote; a further judge was added to the panel until a majority verdict was reached.

Professor Osborne concluded that there is still much debate about the extent to which Greek Theatre affected social and political change. Aristophanes' satirical portrayal of Socrates in '*Clouds*' may well have contributed to the accusations that resulted in the trial and execution of Socrates. However, the parody of Cleon in '*Knights*' did not prevent his re-election!



Caroline Vout, Professor of Classics and Fellow at Christ's College, Cambridge, spoke so animatedly about how the classical portrayal of the ancient gods conveyed the essence of divine immortality in the guise of human form.

Professor Vout explained that we often assume that the Greeks were the first people to believe that humans were made in the image of their gods. However, as she explained, the Greeks and Romans would have considered such audacity to have been

blasphemous, and she encouraged us to seek out the 'beyond humanness' that is revealed in these images.

Women were not prominent in Greek and Roman society. Outside the patriarchal house, they remained veiled to maintain their modesty, and they would never reveal themselves publicly. Professor Vout argued that nude depictions of the female deities, such as the goddess of desire and love, Aphrodite, exude the confidence and power of the immortals and instil humility in their mortal onlookers.

Professor Vout explained that the omnipotent immortals were unknowable to mortals. They could morph and assume different guises, and their Olympian ancestors were celestial beings - the Earth, the Moon, and the Sun. She urged

us to view the surviving sculptures and paintings as artistic impressions of the gods: their materials, method of creation, poses and settings denoting divinity.

Professor Vout cited the example of the sculptures of the goddess of war and wisdom and the protector of Athens - Athena, at the Parthenon in Athens. There are numerous depictions of Athena on the triangular roof pediments, the square metopes and friezes. On climbing the Acropolis, the first powerful image that confronts you is Athena fighting with Poseidon. At the opposite end of the Parthenon is the representation of the birth of the goddess. Professor Vout argued persuasively that in defying chronological order, the arrangement of the depictions of Athena is symbolic of her divinity. The enormous statue of Athena in the centre of the Parthenon is so overwhelming that her immortality is reflected in the reality that you cannot 'take her in' all at once. It is as if one cannot grasp her form while being acutely aware that this is but a representation of a deity. In ancient times, the statue would have been surrounded by a big libation pool of water or oil. Professor Vout beautifully conjured up the image of the gold leaf on the statue reflecting and bouncing off the water and temple walls to emulate the radiant aura of Athena's immortality.