GCE
Classical Civilisation
CIV1D Women in Athens and Rome
Report on the Examination

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CIV1D Women in Athens and Rome

Section 1

Option A
Knowledge of the details required for Questions 01, 02 and 03 was generally sound, although in Question 02 some students thought Tiberius was killed in battle or confused him with the son, and in Question 03 some were convinced Cornelia actually did go mad in her old age.

The best answers to Question 04 made a sharply focused comparison between the woman who allegedly wrote the words quoted and the ideal matrona portrayed in Plutarch’s biographies, sometimes with awareness that the letter may well be spurious and occasionally with an impressive understanding of the political context that would have given rise to such a forgery. More superficial answers focused just on expressions of her caring and patriotic characteristics, without any balancing evaluation of possibly negative traits.

Apart from a tendency to narrate rather than argue in response to Question 05, the quality of work was also sometimes impaired by irrelevance. This was caused either by a failure to observe that the question was about Roman women of the Republican period (that is, those listed in the bullet points and not the Sabine women, Lucretia, Eppia and Messalina) or by the confusion of Clodia with Cloelia, Turia with Arria and Murdia with Fannia. Although the first bullet point referred to ‘the debate about the Oppian Law’, a surprising number of students mentioned the speech of only one of the speakers with no appreciation of the extent to which Cato’s and Valerius’ views differed. The best answers showed awareness of change over time during the long period of the Roman Republic and understood that by the 1st century BC upper-class women could enjoy considerable independence, the exercise of which was constrained mainly by the possibility of humiliating vilification as, for example, by Cicero abusing Clodia for his own political ends.

Option B
Nearly twice as many students chose this set of questions as chose Option A; the overall standard was, however, very similar. Answers to Question 06 generally showed knowledge of the difference between Lucretia’s and the other wives’ behaviour. However, some students exaggerated the contrast: Livy merely states that the other wives were ‘banqueting’ and ‘at dinner’, not that they were engaged in drunken debauchery, so that the other wives were not necessarily revealed to be lacking in virtue, but Lucretia was shown to be exceptionally virtuous. Questions 07 and 08 were also generally well answered, but an error that occurred in both Question 08 and Question 09 was the belief that Arria killed herself out of grief at her son’s death.

In response to Question 09 many students attempted a balanced and informed argument focused on the key issues. However, apart from the error about Arria mentioned above, there was a tendency for the circumstances of Arria’s death to be less well known than the reasons for Lucretia’s, and for a disproportionate amount of time to be spent on recounting the whole of Livy’s account of Lucretia rather than concentrating on the issues surrounding her actual suicide. Discussion of Arria’s adherence to the tenets of Stoicism was entirely appropriate and very welcome; what many students did not realise was that the legend of Lucretia supposedly took place many centuries before the development of these philosophical beliefs and that, although Livy’s account may be tinged with his awareness of Stoicism, Lucretia herself should not be described as a Stoic in the same way as Arria.
Question 10 elicited many quite cogent arguments about the moral qualities displayed by the women about whom Livy and Pliny wrote. Students often seemed better informed about the extracts by Livy than those by Pliny, though sometimes this was perhaps because excessively long narration of the early legends limited the time available for discussion of Pliny’s women. There were similar confusions over some women’s identities to those in Question 05, and consideration of the Oppian Law debate was often similarly truncated. However, the approach described above was not precisely what the question was asking for. Rather, the main focus was on these authors’ purposes in writing about women. Sometimes there was brief mention that Livy was writing history, whereas Pliny was writing personal letters which he nevertheless intended at some point to publish. What distinguished the most perceptive answers was an understanding that these authors did not necessarily have a single motive that applied in every case. They appreciated that Livy was shaping foundation legends and a significant moment in Roman history both for dramatic effect and to create a view of the past consistent with Augustan ideology. Similarly, they realised that Pliny was not simply expressing his feelings towards his wife and other women dear to him, but in making these feelings a matter of public record was, for example, attempting to create a favourable image of himself and foster his relationship with other distinguished families, particularly a notably dissident one.

Section 2

Option C

More than three times as many students chose Question 11 as did Question 12, perhaps because it dealt only with Athens, although some students wrongly saw here another opportunity to bring in the Oppian Law debate. More students seemed to have difficulty understanding ‘morally and physically weak’ in this question than ‘moral points’ in Question 10; some in their answers changed ‘morally’ to ‘mentally’, apparently to suit an essay they had previously written. The examiners were surprised to read so often that the wife in the poisoning trial was morally strong because she stood up to her husband by killing him, as too was Euphiletus’ wife by having an affair behind his back. On the whole, however, students were better able to use Euphiletus’ defence speech, and the laws to which he refers, in a discussion of male opinions of women than many of the other sources. In relation to the speech attacking Neaera, too much attention was often given to narrative and very little to discussion of Apollodorus’ categorisation of women and his references to the jurors’ wives, although some students did take into account the fact that his main target was his political rival Stephanus, the alleged arranger of Neaera’s honey-traps and Phano’s marriages. Interpretation of Aristophanes’ Women at the Thesmophoria was often undermined by a failure to realise that his portrayal of women as drunks, liars, cheats and blasphemers was for the purposes of comedy and not necessarily his personal view. In the best answers detailed knowledge of what Ischomachus tells Socrates enabled students to arrive at more balanced judgements, but here too there tended to be omissions and misunderstanding, particularly with regard to the nature of the source.

Option D

The nature of the sources was also a critical issue in Question 12, and there was a sharp distinction between the more successful answers which demonstrated at the outset a clear understanding of the circumstances and purposes of each text and those which simply concentrated on recalling narrative, often from just the earlier scenes of Women at the Thesmophoria and the descriptions of Eppia and Messalina in Satire 6. However, students who focused on analysis and evaluation, and who supported their judgements with well-chosen details from across the prescribed works, were able to draw some perceptive and balanced conclusions, for example effectively contrasting Aristophanes’ dissipation of fears about women (by means, for example, of the parodies of Euripides’ tragic victims) with Juvenal’s incessant crescendo of paranoia, with safety from threat to be found only in ‘a girl from Venusia’.
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