



**General Certificate of Education
June 2011**

Classical Civilisation 2020

CIV2B: Homer *Odyssey*

Report on the Examination

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CIV2B Homer *Odyssey*

General Comments

As last year, it was pleasing to see that the vast majority of the 2000 or so candidates who studied the *Odyssey* clearly enjoyed the poem and empathised with the main characters. It was perhaps not too surprising that 80% chose to answer Option A on the wanderings of Odysseus rather than the alternative questions on Telemachus in Option B. In general, Option A was better done, certainly as far as the 10 and 20-mark questions were concerned. Even with the shorter questions the average marks scored for Option A were significantly higher than those for Option B. Well over three quarters of candidates achieved at least Level 3 for Question 03 on Odysseus and his men, making good use of a passage rich in material to quote and analyse extensively. If Question 07 on the scene in the palace was not quite as well done overall, it did produce the very best answers on mood and atmosphere seen anywhere on the paper. The best responses to both Questions 03 and 07 quoted from or referred very closely to the text, pausing regularly to tie the selected material directly to the title; however, it remains frustrating to read otherwise well-argued answers which do not refer at all to the material in the passage. The two 20-mark alternatives on the actions of Odysseus and his men (04) and the role of Telemachus (08) both produced some excellent answers with a similar small minority reaching Level 5 on each. Below this, however, many answers to Question 08 revealed a lack of detailed knowledge; this resulted in a significantly lower mean mark here than for 04. 38% of candidates chose Option D on the suitors over Option C on the immortals. This time, however, the minority choice scored the higher marks. Sometimes too much information can be a hindrance rather than a help, and many answers to Question 09 suffered a lack of focus from trying to include every incident involving an immortal; the material on the suitors was more restricted but often led to a clearer argument and higher mark.

Section One

Option A

The vast majority of candidates got off to a good start with Question 01 on Odysseus' overcoming of Circe's magic, mentioning Hermes' help, the magic herb 'moly' and Odysseus' subsequent actions. Likewise, there were few problems with Question 02, although a small minority brought in Circe's advice on Scylla and Charybdis, which was not given until Book 12. In Question 03 there were again many pleasing answers which quoted extensively from the passage. Few failed to discuss the 'calves' simile and there was some deep discussion on the significance of the maternal, rather than paternal, image presented. The less obvious second simile concerned with reaching home brought out some good answers, its importance being stressed by noting the immediate repetition of the theme by the crew. Odysseus' 'soothing reply' was often seen as significant, then contrasted with the business-like tone of his speech that follows. All in all there was a good range of material well used by many candidates. As every year, it was disappointing to see a number of clearly able candidates scoring low marks because of a failure to make any direct reference to the passage. The essay on the wanderings (Question 04) proved predictably popular and produced a few excellent answers. These often contrasted the actions and fate of Odysseus with those of his crew, while bringing out the importance of *xenia* (good and bad) to the question. There was a significant minority of candidates, however, who retold in excessive detail the tales of the Cyclops and Circe, referring to the title, if at all, in a short sentence at the end of each paragraph. There was some confusion between the Cicones and the Laestrygonians; most candidates however clearly knew all these stories in great detail.

Option B

Few candidates failed to score for Question 05 dealing with the serving women, but many gave rather vague answers gaining only one or two of the marks available. Similarly, knowledge of Penelope's test of Odysseus in 06 frequently omitted the key point that the bed could not be moved; some misplaced the scar recognition scene of Book 19 here. There were some excellent answers to Question 07, where perceptive candidates pointed out that the rattling of the door in the second half of the passage breaks the spell of the 'quiet after the storm'. The two similes were generally recognised, although the subtleties of the fish imagery escaped many candidates who simply paraphrased; better described was the 'fearsome' image of Odysseus as a lion. The harsh tone of Telemachus' words to Eurycleia and her silent obedience drew some interesting analysis from stronger candidates, while the repetition of the suitors lying 'in heaps' was often seen as a grim contrast to their individual characteristics in life. Performance on Question 08 was often disappointing. The meeting in Eumaeus' hut tended to be dismissed in a single sentence. Points which could have been developed here include Eumaeus as substitute father to Telemachus, the young man's consideration towards and offer of hospitality to 'the beggar', Athene's arranging of the recognition scene, the dramatic description of that scene, Odysseus' immediate trust and drawing of Telemachus into his scheme and their discussion as 'equals'. Similarly, details were often lacking of what Telemachus actually did after their return to the palace and before the slaughter of the suitors (hiding the weapons in Book 19, sending Penelope out of danger, pretending he couldn't string the bow in Book 21 etc.). Those who did look at both sides of the question often used Telemachus' failure to secure the weapons in Book 22 as part of a considered judgement that his importance can be overrated, an argument supported by his deference to Odysseus when asked for advice regarding how to placate the families of the suitors and his disappearance then from the climax of Book 23.

Section Two**Option C**

This was the more popular 30-mark essay: divine intervention is a key theme within the poem and there was much material to work with. Most candidates gained marks in Level 3 or above, the better answers looking beyond the gods' involvement in the plot to discuss such matters as variety of theme, dramatic opportunities and how far human responsibility can exist in a world ruled by Zeus / fate. Athene and Poseidon are clearly important figures, but too many essays consisted of a book-by-book look at how these two helped or hindered Odysseus, with the other issues cursorily mentioned in a final paragraph. The best essays were, as always, evaluative throughout, using incidents involving the gods to illustrate an argument, rather than relating the story then 'evaluating' in a concluding sentence to each paragraph. It was all too clear that many candidates had written a practice question on the gods with a different focus: some failed to reshape their material to answer the question on the paper, which is necessary to reach Level 4 or 5. There were some good answers which examined the apparent contradictions posed by a 'hero' whose every move is predetermined by fate and / or watched over by a guardian angel to ensure he succeeds. A number of the best answers argued convincingly that heroism can be strengthened as well as weakened by such a situation.

Option D

Although this question was by some way the minority choice, it produced many of the very best Section Two responses; in fact the statistics for Level 3 and 5 answers were very similar for the two essays, but there were many more Level 4 answers here for the reasons alluded to in the general comments above. Weaker answers often overlooked the word 'all' in the title and dealt with the suitors as a single entity. A reassuring number of candidates recounted the

characteristics of a number of individual suitors, allowing for a more sophisticated line of analysis than the catch-all 'they were a nasty bunch and deserved to die'. Many used the concept of *xenia* well, stressing Zeus' overview of this and seeing the suitors' abuse of his daughter Athene in Book 1 as a particularly important indicator as to their eventual fates. Some of the best work displayed genuine empathy and avoided over-reliance on modern clichés of 'justice', preferring to see such concepts in terms of the Homeric world; so Penelope's views of her suitors were seen as less important than her symbolic position as the wife of a great king. The threat to Telemachus (and thus Odysseus' blood-line) was also brought out well in these terms. There were very few really poor answers. The weaker ones tended to simply provide a book-by-book account of what the suitors did and what happened to them with no real evaluation; middling efforts were similar, but summarised the argument in a short concluding paragraph. Most, however, were a pleasure to read.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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