Forte Academy: Challenge the Canon in the Classroom

Starters

Day 1: Raising Awareness of the Canon

1. Why are we studying [insert author]?

Note down your thoughts:

• Why is this author on the curriculum?

• From what perspective does this author write?

• How do we know this author existed?

• How did we end up with this author's text?

1. Teacher's Notes

This starter is designed to stimulate curiosity about canon formation and the curriculum. There is no one 'right' answer to the questions. The teacher and students could discuss the possibilities together or could follow up with a independent research task to investigate the transmission history of a particular text/author.

Some ideas:

Why is this author on the curriculum?

-Some authors (Homer, Virgil) have enjoyed a place on the curriculum for centuries, which ensured their preservation and popularity.

-Because these are the authors/texts which survive on a given topic.

-Some authors (Sulpicia, Propertius) have a more complicated transmission history than others (Ovid, Virgil).

- Some authors are consistently on the curriculum due to their perceived influence in Western culture (i.e. their place on the Canon) and popularised by teachers, scholars and literary critics in the 19th and 20th century. (PTO)

1. Teacher's Notes

Some ideas (cont.):

Why is this author on the curriculum?

"The 19th century Cambridge syllabus had been shaped by the curricula of the elite public schools which supplied Cambridge with a stream of boys trained predominantly in ancient Greek and Latin. A university syllabus which simply required more of the same at degree level ensured success for these students."

On the creation of the English Tripos course at Cambridge in 1926:

"The ordinances of the new degree course held an explicit aim to situate English literature as an inheritance of the Greco-Roman Classics. And it was underpinned by an assumption of the existence of an inherited transhistorical canon of works and genres."

- Dr Holly Ranger, 'Subverting the Classics? White Feminism and Reception Studies" 17:39.

1. Teacher's Notes

- From what perspective does this author write?

- Consider the author's gender, sexuality, education, status in society, city or country of origin.

- Consider the time, place and audience.

- Consider whether the author had a patron.

- Consider the relationship between the author and those in power.

- How do we know this author existed?

- Sometimes, the only information we have about an ancient author is from what they say about themselves within their texts.

- How did we end up with this author's text?

- This is a good independent research project for students to carry out.

- A 'revival' of interest in classical texts in Renaissance Italy played a crucial role in the discovery and compilation of manuscripts. For example: Read our article on Livy's History of Rome and its reception in Florence.
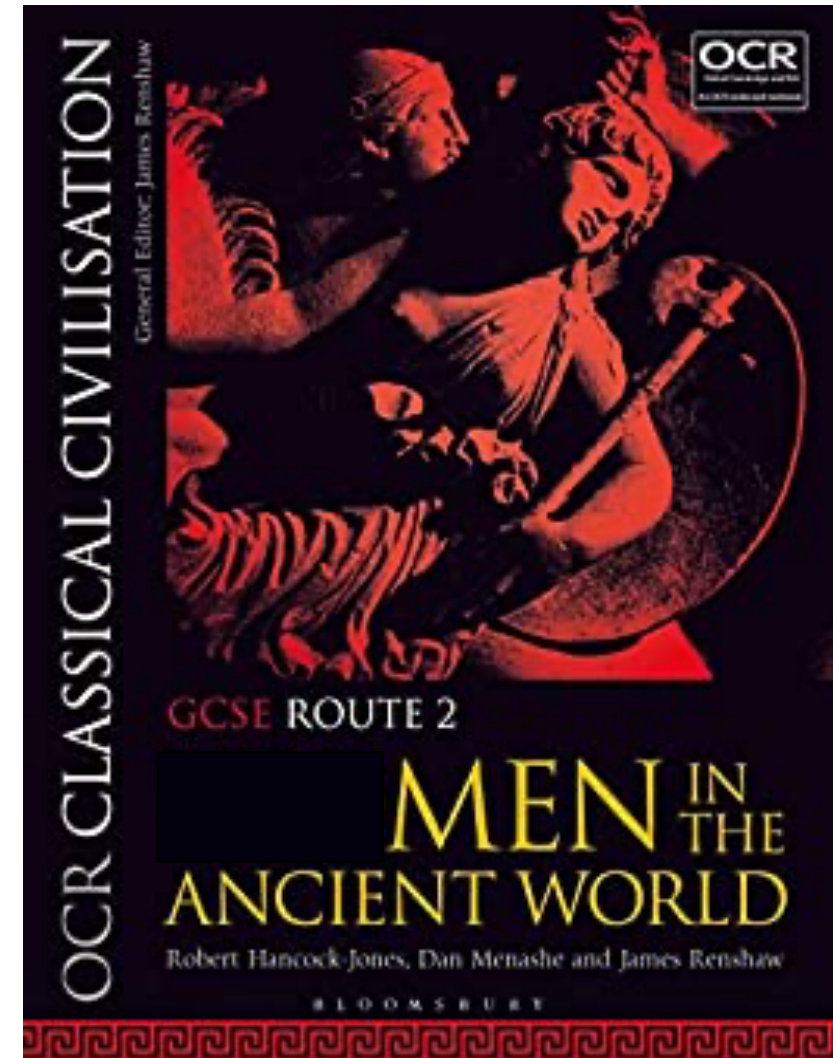
2. Design an exam module

Activity: Design a GCSE exam module called "Men in the Ancient World" and divide it into 8 sub-categories. What will the titles of your categories be?

Extension: Add a list of (imaginary) prescribed sources all written by women.

Review your module/your peer's module: How useful do you think this module will be for learning about men in the ancient world? Note down your feedback.

2. Design an exam module

The OCR GCSE Classical Civilisation module "Women in the Ancient World" does not contain prescribed sources by women and is divided into the following sub-categories:

- **Women of Legend**
- **Young Women**
- **Women in the home**
- **'Improper' Women**
- **Women and religion**
- **Women and power**
- **Warrior Women**
- **Women to be Feared**

How useful do you think this module will be for learning about women in the ancient world?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of using categories to study people or aspects of the past?
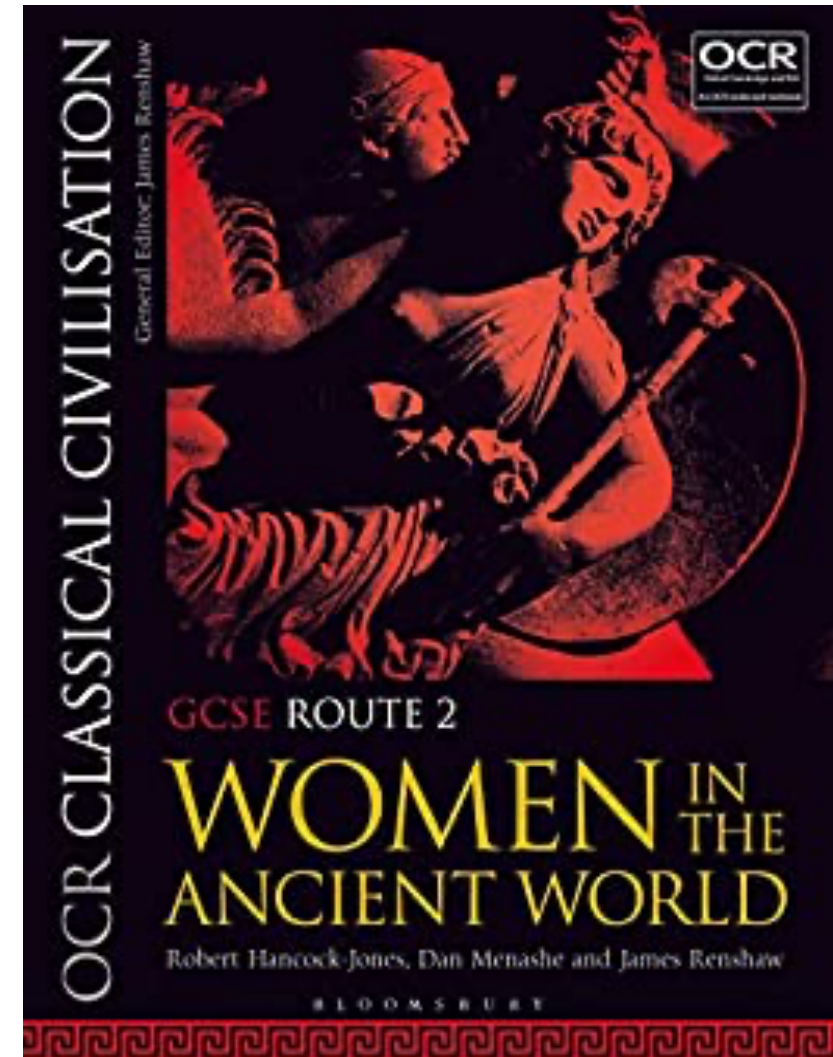
2. Teacher's Notes

This starter is designed to get students thinking about textbook design and its impact on students and our understanding of the past.

Some ideas:

- **How useful are categories for learning about the past?**

- Students could compare the benefits of categories (e.g. making the past more manageable and drawing links) with the disadvantages (e.g. perpetuating stereotypes or miscataloging people).

- For example, what difference does it make if a textbook calls Aspasia a 'philosopher' or a 'brothel-owner'. In this OCR module, Aspasia is placed in the category **'improper' women.** Students could discuss whether they agree/disagree with this placement.
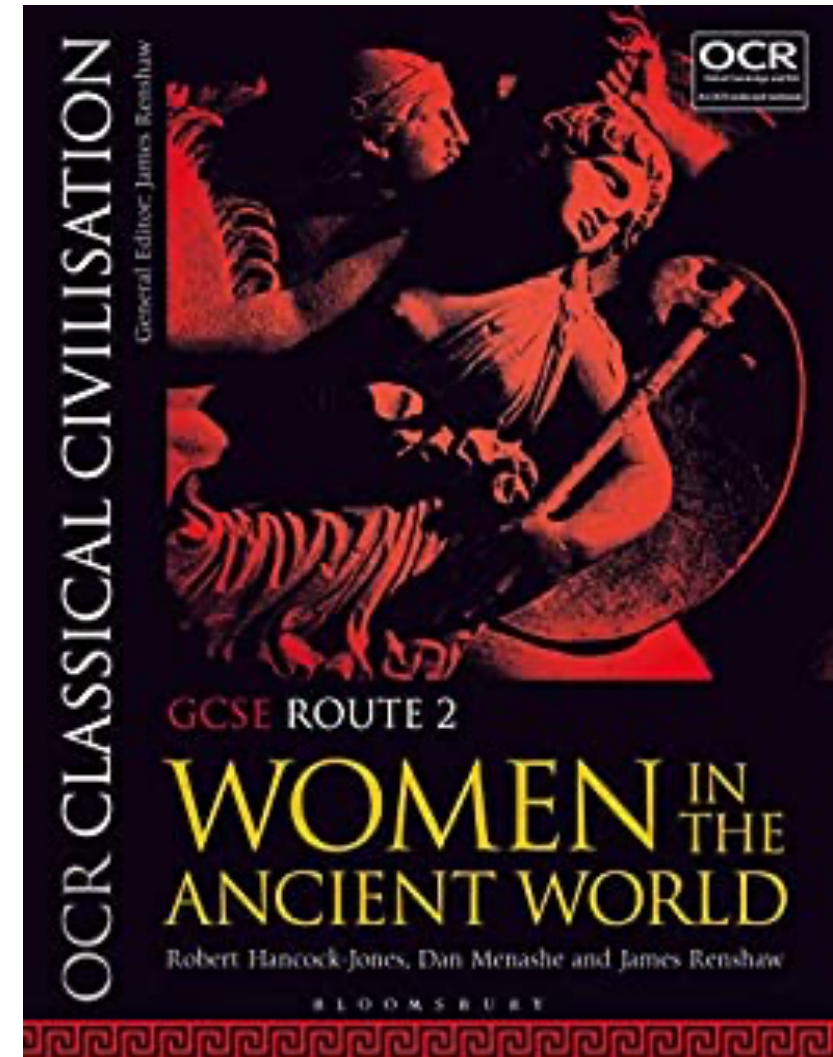
3. Watch this Ted talk on [The Danger of a Single Story](#) by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

3. Activity

Reflect on these quotes from the video:

"Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become."

"How they [stories] are told, who tells them, when they're told, how many stories are told, are really depending on power."

"Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person."

Note down your thoughts:

- Do you agree/disagree with each quote?
- How could we apply Adichie's concept of a Single Story to surviving written accounts by:
    - Ancient Romans writing about the Carthaginians and/or Britons?
    - Ancient men writing about ancient women?
- Do we learn a 'single story' of classical mythology?
- How can we avoid learning about the past as a 'single story'?

3. Teacher's Notes

Canon formation is bound up with concepts of power. Those without power are less likely to have access to the skills, education or contacts to publish their stories. Also, religious or secular governments have sometimes banned or destroyed published works that do not correspond to their ideology e.g. the Index of Prohibited Books (1559). Students could discuss ways in which *only* studying canonical authors might contribute to a 'single story' of ancient Greece/Rome, whilst also making links with what is going on in the world today.

Some ideas:

On Ancient Roman men writing about the Carthaginians, Greeks writing about 'barbarians' or ancient men writing about ancient women.

-Consider the impact of studying history only from the perspective of the conquerors; or one gender writing about another. A helpful background to these kinds of discussion is 'Unconscious Bias' and its relevance today: See 7 Steps (2015).

Do we learn a 'single story' of classical mythology?

- Natalie Haynes' *Pandora's Jar* (2020) deals with this question. See third part of: Challenge the Canon: 3 Books...

How can we avoid learning about the past as a 'single story'?

- Challenging the Canon! Include classical reception as part the study of Classics; reflect on the process of transmission e.g. in the Renaissance; diversify and expand the canon; use visual and material sources etc.