

Examiners' report

A LEVEL

CLASSICAL CIVILISATION

**OCR Level 3 Advanced GCE in
Classical Civilisation**

H408

For first teaching in 2017

H408/21 Summer 2025 series

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate responses is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

A full copy of the question paper and the mark scheme can be downloaded from [Teach Cambridge](#).

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Paper 21 series overview

The topic maintained its popularity this year, and as in previous years, it was clear that the candidates enjoyed studying the plays. It was pleasing to see references to performances of the plays which the candidates had seen, such as the productions of Oedipus the King in London. It is not necessary for candidates to see plays in performance or to discuss these in order to achieve full marks, but where candidates were able to do this thoughtfully and with relevance to the questions asked, it often enriched their responses. Candidates generally showed good knowledge of the content of the plays. They were able to express their personal reaction to the plays and the issues they raised and use evidence to back up their opinions.

Legibility and quality of written communication is once again an issue. Candidates should read through what they have written to make sure that their answers communicate their ideas clearly and effectively. A lack of paragraphing in many responses makes it harder for examiners to follow the train of thought of the candidates.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
• read the questions carefully and addressed the question directly • came to a conclusion where required • made close reference to the sources, both visual and literary, when answering the 10 mark questions • made their points clear through using paragraphs • supported their answers in the extended writing questions through using both material culture and literary references • showed knowledge of the plays through use of direct quotations or close references • were aware of the social, historical and political context of the plays • treated the plays as drama, rather than literature • cited several scholars and showed good engagement with their views.	• made little reference to the plays in their answers to the extended writing questions • used information and arguments which were not relevant to the question being answered • wrote lengthy answers to the short answer questions, when a single word/sentence is enough • used technical terms such as anagnorisis and peripeteia without understanding what they mean • made little or no reference to scholars in the answer to the essay question.

Assessment for learning



Remind candidates to:

- follow the instructions carefully
- number questions clearly and, especially when identifying which essay is being answered
- write clearly and legibly
- use paragraphs to make separate points
- start the response to each 10, 20 and 30 mark question on a new page of the answer booklet; very few candidates did this, sometimes not even leaving a gap between answers, making it difficult to work out where one answer ended and the next one began.

Section A overview

In general, candidates dealt adequately with content of the pot, but there was evidence that not all were familiar with the background details of where and when the pot was made. Candidates generally had good knowledge of the plot and details of Aristophanes' *Frogs*.

Question 1

Source A

Bell krater by McDaniel Painter



Figure 1

1 State the name of **Figure 1**.

[1]

Most candidates correctly identified Figure 1 as Cheiron, although he was also identified as Charon, Dionysus or Xanthias.

Question 2

2 What is the technical name given to the building shown in **Source A**?

[1]

Most of the answers correctly stated that the technical name for the building is *skene*. Some candidates confused it with the *proskene*, while others mis-interpreted the question and said that it represented the Temple of Apollo.

Question 3

3 Analyse how useful **Source A** is in telling us how a comedy by Aristophanes might originally have been staged. [10]

Candidates generally had a good knowledge of the source and could describe it well. They were less successful at linking this to the plays of Aristophanes, or to how his comedies may have been staged. Many focused on the myth of Cheiron and less relevant elements like the nymphs or Achilles. Some thought that the nymphs were members of the audience or the judges. Many candidates commented on the number of actors portrayed.

Most candidates were able to comment well on how the pot is useful, but less so on why it may not be useful.

Few commented on the provenance of the pot but those that did generally used this to reduce the usefulness of the pot, as seen in extract below (Exemplar 1), which effectively uses the date of production to show how the pot is not useful.

Misconception



Many candidates were under the misconception as to the number of actors allowed on the stage. The limitation (three actors in Tragedy, four in Comedy) only applies to speaking actors, not to people on the stage in general. Extras were allowed (e.g. Oedipus' daughters in the last scene in *Oedipus the King*).

Exemplar 1

comedy effect. One limitation of this depiction is that the vase is dated to ~~370~~ 380-370 BC - this would therefore be representative of the later period of comedy, but may not accurately reflect the earlier staging of comedies, particularly Aristophanes' ~~work~~ original performances which took place in ~~the early~~ the early fifth century BC. Also, the source is limited

Question 4

Source B

Aristophanes' *Frogs* 33–56

XANTHIAS	Ah woe is me, poor wretch! Why didn't I fight in that <u>sea-battle</u> ! Then I could tell you to bugger off.	
DIONYSUS	Get down, you idiot. My journey's taken me right up to this door here, my first destination.	
	Slave, I say, slave, slave!	5
HERACLES	Who's that battering the door, flinging himself at it like a centaur? Who the...say, what is all this?	
DIONYSUS	Slave.	
XANTHIAS	What is it?	
DIONYSUS	Did you notice that?	10
XANTHIAS	Notice what exactly?	
DIONYSUS	How scared he was of me.	
XANTHIAS	Oh, yes, by Zeus – scared that you're a maniac.	
HERACLES	By Demeter, I just can't stop laughing. I'm biting my lip, but I just can't help myself.	15
DIONYSUS	My good chap, step forward. I have a favour to ask of you.	
HERACLES	I can't stop laughing – look at that lionskin on top of your little yellow number. What's the idea? Why these boots and club? Where on earth were you heading?	
DIONYSUS	I was sailing with <u>Cleisthenes</u> .	20
HERACLES	You fought at sea?	
XANTHIAS	Yes, and sank – oh, must have been twelve or thirteen enemy ships.	
HERACLES	The two of you?	
DIONYSUS	Yes, by Apollo.	
XANTHIAS	In your dreams...	25
DIONYSUS	And while I was on board, reading <i>Andromeda</i> to myself, a <u>sudden desire</u> filled my heart – you wouldn't believe how strong it was.	
HERACLES	Desire? What kind of desire?	
DIONYSUS	Just a little one – the size of Molon.	

4 What was the sea-battle referred to in line 1?

[1]

Most candidates correctly identified the battle as Arginusae, although some said it was Salamis or even Actium.

Question 5

5 Who was Cleisthenes (line 20)?

[1]

Most candidates said Cleisthenes was a politician or a homosexual or both.

Question 6

6 What was the sudden desire (lines 26 and 27) felt by Dionysus?

[1]

Most candidates said it was Euripides, although some only mentioned a tragic poet, which was insufficient to gain the mark. A few confused the analogy of soup with Dionysus' actual desire.

Question 7

7 How successfully does Aristophanes make the scene in **Source B** an effective piece of comic drama?

[10]

This question was generally answered very successfully. There were some very detailed answers with specific focus on the dynamic between Xanthias and Dionysus, and Heracles and the costume. There were also a number of good answers referring to contemporary events and people. Where candidates were less successful was where there was lack of understanding in the context of the extract, i.e. not understanding the irony of the comment about Molon or believing the urge of Dionysus was sexual. Some candidates also discussed Dionysus' appearance without specifically saying what he was wearing. The quality of the answers also varied according to the amount of reference to the passage.

In line 22, Xanthias should have been attributed to Dionysus. This did not cause any issues for candidates. To make sure candidates were not disadvantaged, credit was given for both Xanthias or Dionysus in the mark scheme.

Misconception



There was a lot of confusion about the types of humour. Many candidates regarded any form of physical humour (e.g. Dionysus throwing himself at the door) as being slapstick.

Question 8*

8* 'When it was first produced, Aristophanes' *Frogs* was a success because of what the audience heard, rather than what the audience saw.'

Evaluate how far you agree with this statement.

[20]

This question was generally answered successfully. Much depended on how success was defined. Better answers typically argued that both were important, or that verbal humour was more important; although some good arguments were made for physical humour, these tended to lack detail from the play and rely more on contextual knowledge.

The best responses used examples that exemplified both verbal and physical humour such as the costume swapping or bottom whacking scenes. Better answers also discussed the political and social comments found in the play, including the attitudes of Aeschylus and Euripides. Many candidates were able to recognise the *parabasis* as a reason for the play's success, although fewer noted that the *parabasis* was the reason for the second showing of *Frogs*. Some candidates used modern scholars in their answer to this question with varying degrees of success. It is not required to include modern scholarship in 20 mark essay responses, but relevant use can be credited. As ever, candidates should aim to engage with the scholarship and clearly relate it to their argument, rather than just 'name dropping'. Most candidates discussed the two elements separately and brought them together in the conclusion. This was an effective way of dealing with this question. The quality of the conclusion varied, depending on its length and depth.

In line 22, Xanthias should have been attributed to Dionysus. This did not cause any issues for candidates. To make sure candidates were not disadvantaged, credit was given for both Xanthias or Dionysus in the mark scheme.

Exemplar 2

To conclude, both visual humour (the slapstick jokes and the costumes) as well as what the audience heard (the words Aristophanes invented, his dirty humour and language, and the ~~to~~ political and cultural context he added) makes *Frogs* the most effective, as it is the scenes where there is a mix, like the literary agon, when it is most ~~successful~~ ~~more~~ successful. Therefore both the visual and audible humour is needed.

Exemplar 2 is a good example of how this approach was used well, bringing both elements together with a valid conclusion.

Assessment for learning

Candidates should be aware of the correct definition of different types of humour. Many considered scatological humour to be any crude humour, including sexual, rather than limited to bodily functions.

Section B overview

Candidates generally showed good knowledge and understanding of both tragic plays. They were able to use quotations and close references as evidence for the points they were making. Use of modern scholarship varied, with most answers containing some mention of scholars. There were, however, some candidates who cited only one scholar, or no scholars at all, which limited the AO2 mark. More successful responses integrated the scholars into the discussion and engaged with their views, but sometimes use of scholars was just a 'name dropping' exercise. There were also occasions when candidates used scholars to an excessive degree, which at times hindered or even drove the narrative. Candidates should be reminded that, while it is important to engage with scholarship in their responses to 30 mark essay questions, the bulk of their answer should focus on discussing how the evidence informs their view of the question. In both questions, there was a tendency for conclusions to be quite short and underdeveloped. Some candidates used a plan for their essay, which tended to help with the organisation of the response.

There were more answers to Question 10 than to Question 9.

Assessment for learning



If there is time, a short plan can be very useful in channelling the content and the ideas of the essay. Adding scholars to be used is also helpful.

Question 9*

9* 'Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* is Greek tragedy at its finest.'

Using close reference to the text, assess how far you agree with this statement.

[30]

Candidates who answered this question knew the main details of the play. The best responses commented on Aristotle and the *Poetics*, linking this to the figure of Oedipus as a tragic hero and *Oedipus the King's* plot. They were also able to note the motif of sight and blindness in the tragedy and how this permeated the whole play from the beginning to the end. Theatrical conventions were also discussed thoughtfully showing how all these elements contributed to make the play the 'finest'. Candidates often approached the question from both a contemporary and a modern perspective. However, not many responses presented a counterargument, such as revealing the plot holes that the story of Oedipus may have presented. Thoughtful evaluation, for example a counterargument, is a key element of AO2, so candidates should be encouraged to aim to include 'both sides' in their essay responses.

A few candidates did compare *Oedipus the King* to *Bacchae* to decide if *Oedipus the King* is the finest tragedy. This approach was acceptable, as long as *Oedipus the King* was the main focus of the answer. Some candidates treated the story of Oedipus' life as being part of the plot of the play, rather than being reported in the play. Candidates need to make it clear that they are aware of the content of the play and not just the myth of Oedipus. The content of the play needs to form the basis of the answer.

Misconception



Many candidates were under the misconception that the prophecy given to Laius and Jocasta was the same as the one given to Oedipus. They were simply told that Laius' son would kill him.

Question 10*

10* Assess whether you feel more pity for Oedipus in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, or for Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae*. You should refer to both plays in your answer. **[30]**

Candidates were generally able to tackle this question successfully: most were clear in how to approach the question and able to make a range of points for both Oedipus and Pentheus. Some candidates adopted a side by side approach, tackling the two figures in parallel, while others divided the essay into two halves, each dealing with one character, and brought their ideas together in a conclusion. Both approaches were equally successful in providing a good response depending on the quality of the analysis.

The main arguments seemed to revolve around how much control Oedipus and Pentheus had over what happened to them, and their personalities. Oedipus' predestined fate was contrasted with Dionysus' manipulation of Pentheus. Pentheus' tyrannical behaviour was compared to Oedipus' care for his people, although some answers mentioned Pentheus trying to restore order, and Oedipus' temper. Pentheus' age was also seen as a factor, as were the respective fates of Oedipus and Pentheus. On the whole, more candidates felt pity for Oedipus than for Pentheus.

Exemplar 3

Taplin states that the chorus guide the audience to the emotions they should be feeling. This is particularly evident in Oedipus when the Chorus switch from calling him "my king" and saying they will never charge him with anything to calling him a man of outrage. Contrastingly the Bacchic Chorus state that they sympathise with Oedipus Agave and Pentheus, stating that the gods act in unexplainable ways. Here it doesn't seem like they ~~are~~ ^{anymore} fully support Dionysus ~~anymore~~ and this switch makes me feel more pity for him because Dionysus' cruel actions have even seemed to confuse and shock his own supporters. Thus the chorus pitying Pentheus when they previously did not makes the audience pity him in turn.

The use of scholars varied. Exemplar 3 is a good example of engagement with a scholar, not just citing Taplin, but also showing understanding of how his comment reflects and supports the argument being put forward.

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