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The True Past

Professor Nancy Sultan is among a generation of scholars who are bringing new life to the study of ancient texts.

By Tim Obermiller

For May Term 2001, Professor Nancy Sultan taught a travel course she named “Preserving the Past: Collectors and the Trade in Antiquities.” Her original title, however, was a little more provocative.

“I called it ‘Lord Elgin and Other Thieves,’” she says, adding a laugh in hindsight at her boldness. She changed the name at the request of several of the scholars and curators whom she had lined up to speak to the class, which traveled to universities and museums in New York and Boston that contained some of the country’s best examples of ancient Greek, Roman, and Egyptian art.

For Sultan — who is director of Greek and Roman Studies (GRS) and chair of Modern and Classical Languages and Literature at Illinois Wesleyan — providing students an up-close look at these objects was only part of her goal. She also wanted them to think about the circumstances that led to the acquisition of antiquities that now rest in climate-controlled rooms or under glass cases, far removed from their geographic and cultural origins.



Nancy Sultan holds a mask that was used in an ancient Greek chorus performed by students — complete with costumes, music, and choreography. *(Photo by Mark Romine)*

The course’s original title refers to Lord Elgin, who served in the early 1800s as British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, which at that time controlled Greece. In a questionable legal arrangement with the Turks, Elgin had stripped and sent back to London scores of pedimental figures, friezes, metopes, and parts of columns from the Parthenon. Built in Athens between 447 and 438 B.C., the Parthenon continues to serve as an emblem of ancient Greece’s enduring impact on the development of human civilization.

Elgin later sold the Parthenon Marbles to the British Museum, where they remain on display — despite repeated calls for their return by the Greek government. While Sultan concedes that storage of these objects in the British Museum likely saved them from destruction by war or pollution, she firmly sides with those who would now return them to their rightful home in Athens.

Sultan also sees the removal of Parthenon sculptures as culturally symbolic. For Great Britain to assume a stance as their rightful owner is just one example of how nations and empires have borrowed, or even plundered, from antiquity to establish or justify a set of cultural norms and aesthetics that often strays radically from the true nature of ancient cultures.



Lord Elgin (above) took possession of the Parthenon Marbles in a questionable legal arrangement.

It was no accident, Sultan points out, that the often garish colors in which the Parthenon Marbles had been originally painted were scrubbed away before being put on display in the British Museum. “They wanted them to be white, because white is a symbol of purity.” In much the same way, she believes, previous generations of classical scholars have presented an ideal vision of antiquity, scouring away the less-than-perfect realities of ancient Greek civilization. “Racism, sexism — these were also things that came to us from the Greeks and Romans,” she says. At the height of ancient Greek civilization, slavery was a common practice, while non-Greeks were regarded as barbarians and women were considered to be a vastly inferior species.

Learning about those realities, Sultan believes, does not detract from one’s appreciation of ancient Greek and Roman civilizations and all that they have inspired. “It comes down to whether or not you believe that the more you know, the better,” she says.

Sultan brought her candid approach to the classics to Illinois Wesleyan in 1993. Prior to joining IWU’s faculty, she was an acting assistant professor of classics at Stanford University, and a teaching fellow at Harvard, where she received her Ph.D. in comparative literature in 1991. A respected scholar in her field, especially noted for her expertise in ancient Greek music, oral poetics, and the voices of women in classical literature, Sultan has published several articles and one book, *Exile and the Poetics of Loss in Greek Tradition*. She is now at work on a new book that will examine public expressions of grief, as portrayed in Greek tradition, both ancient and modern, and how those expressions can wield political power.

When Sultan was hired by Illinois Wesleyan, its humanities division did not have a full-time classics professor. She says that the task of assembling a curriculum from the ground up was one of the things that appealed to her most about the job. While at Stanford, Sultan recalls, she interviewed at the University of Texas, Austin, which had 26 full-time faculty in its classics department — the largest in the country. “And I realized that I would have just been another junior faculty member trying to work my way through this political hierarchy, and teaching yet another section of mythology.” At IWU, she was encouraged to design and build courses “based on my own academic strengths and background.”

What Sultan built, as described on the GRS Web site, is “an interdisciplinary program designed to provide students with linguistic skills through the study of the Greek and Latin languages, as well as an in-depth knowledge of the history and culture of Greece and Rome.” Last year Jason Moralee, a Roman history expert, joined the GRS faculty, which includes Sultan and Associate Professor April DeConick, whose religion courses are also central to the program.

Pointing out that almost all of IWU's peer institutions have classics majors, Sultan believes that the University would benefit from the establishment of a full GRS major. With the addition of Moralee to the department's faculty, Sultan says that Greek and Roman Studies is now close to having the array of courses it needs to offer a full major to interested IWU students.

Most students currently take Greek and Roman Studies as a minor, though some, under Sultan's supervision, have designed their own interdisciplinary "contract" majors. One such contract major was Liz Myers '03, who also majored in chemistry. She combines those two

interests in her current studies as a graduate student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Archaeological Materials Program. Says Myers, "I would not be able to be in the program if not for my training in both chemistry and Greek and Roman Studies at IWU, because my program requires a multidisciplinary background in both science and the humanities."

Even more importantly, says Myers, it was through her studies with Sultan that she "came to truly love the classics."

In all her efforts as a teacher, Sultan says she hopes to provide passage for her students into an ancient world that can seem both strange and oddly familiar — a world that she herself was drawn to by that mysterious combination of fortune, fate, and chance.

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Sultan grew up in Asheville, N.C., which she says "was and still is a thriving, artistic community," nestled in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Both her mother, Phyllis, and father, Norman, were raised in Asheville, so the family "has deep roots there," even though, being Jewish, they couldn't join the country club "and there were certain parts of the town where we weren't allowed to live." Still, she says of growing up there, "I loved it. I really did."

Norman Sultan made a good living expanding the tire company started by his father, who launched the business in Detroit during the Depression, selling tires off the back of a donkey. Sultan says her father wanted each of his four children to be artists, "because he was a secret artist himself; he painted and had a studio in the basement." Her oldest brother, Jeff, trained in the technical side of theatre before becoming an electrical contractor in California, but Sultan's other two siblings did pursue careers in the arts: Terrie Sultan is director of the University of Houston's Blaffer Gallery and Donald Sultan is an internationally renowned painter.

The youngest of the four, Nancy played piano and had childhood dreams of becoming a musician or actor. At the progressive private high school she attended in Asheville, she was introduced to



Sultan and Moralee (above) review lecture slides depicting ancient artifacts and architecture. (Photo by Mark Romine)

ancient Greek history and became fascinated with the subject. She enrolled as a music major at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. But as she took more classes in Greek and Latin, she says, “I realized that a music major wasn’t going to allow me to pursue the range of classics and other liberal arts courses that I wanted to take.”

Still, Sultan stuck with her music courses — a commitment that sometimes put her in conflict with her classics professor, Frances Lane. As Sultan describes him, Lane sounds more like a literary creation than a real person. “He was a double agent in World War II, he spoke six or seven languages, he could recite Homer from memory.” She remembers how Lane would invite his “pet students” over to his log cabin — filled from floor to ceiling with books and musical instruments — to cook them fried chicken and read and discuss Greek and Latin through the night.

Sultan had to stand up to Lane to become one of his favorites. When her music ensemble was going on tour, she called Lane to tell him she was going to miss a test the next day. The professor berated her and vowed that she’d never pass his class. When she next saw him, Lane asked if she had come to drop the class. She retorted, “Not only am I not going to drop, but I’m going to make an A in your class.

“And he loved me after that,” she says, laughing and shaking her head. “That was all it took.”

After graduating from college, magna cum laude, as a classics major and music minor, Sultan



In 1980, Sultan spent a summer on an excavation in Crete and became drawn to archeology. *(Photo provided by Nancy Sultan)*

spent the summer on an excavation in Crete and became drawn to archeology. She was later offered a full scholarship to study classics and Aegean archeology at the University of Minnesota. After earning her master’s degree in 1983, Sultan realized that her academic path was potentially leading her to a job as a college professor. “And so,” she says, “I decided to find out if that was what I really wanted to do. So I went on the job market.”

With only a master’s degree, the odds were against her, but Sultan landed an assistant professorship at Northern Illinois University. Teaching Latin, mythology, literature in translation, and an honors course in Homer, she says, “I found I was enjoying it a lot. ... I found out that I was a teacher there.”

But her work as a student was unfinished. In 1985, she enrolled in a summer seminar for college professors sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and hosted by Harvard University. There she met Gregory Nagy, one of the world’s top Homeric scholars, who persuaded Sultan to pursue a doctoral degree at Harvard.

Choosing to focus her studies in Comparative Literature at Harvard, she felt free to take a variety of subjects beyond the classics. Nagy introduced her to Margaret Alexiou, the George Seferis Chair of Modern Greek Studies, who became an important mentor. “I studied modern Greek so that I could work with her on Byzantine folksongs, which had not been seriously studied by American scholars.”

During her time at Harvard, in the late 1980s, such approaches as the New Historicism, cultural studies, and gender theory had firmly established their roots in mainstream academe. While Sultan and her fellow graduate students were eager to apply those new paradigms to their studies of classical texts, many of their professors did not share the same enthusiasm.

Influenced by German classical scholarship from the 19th century, most classicists of that era were trained to approach ancient Greek and Latin more as a science, called philology. By limiting their studies to strict textual analysis, Sultan says, these professors tended to ignore some uncomfortable facts that archeologists, historians, and the texts themselves had revealed about the ancients.

“Racism, sexism, the subjugation and abuse of slaves — those aspects were not taught, but we inherited those notions, along with all the good stuff,” says Sultan. “So if we’re going to be inspired by the ancient Greeks in the ways we think about art, literature, philosophy, and politics, we also need to talk about aspects of those ideas that weren’t as positive but which still have tremendous influence.”

Today, Sultan says, most classics scholars agree on the need for a more balanced, cultural-studies approach to ancient Greek and Roman studies. Yet despite this shift, there remain some people, both in academe and among the general public, who “have this idea that the discipline of classics is narrowly focused on textual criticism and the works of ‘dead white males.’”

“My response is that so many of our Western ideas — our notions of beauty, of good and evil, basic principles by which we live — came to us in large part from the Greeks and Romans. I believe that it’s an important component of anyone’s education to grasp the scope of those contributions. But the key is to do that in an inclusive, rather than exclusive, way; one that embraces a multicultural perspective.”

In studying the ancient Greeks and Romans, students can learn the origins of prejudice against people of different cultural or racial backgrounds. But they may also learn, for example, how Greek mythology applies to the classic contemporary novel, *Beloved*, by African-American writer Toni Morrison.

“*Beloved* is all about the recovery of memory, and how important collective



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memory is to one’s community and to understanding who you are,” says Sultan. “Well, the Greeks and Romans understood the power of memory; their sacred stories were transmitted from

one generation to another via an oral tradition that depended on memory. And Toni Morrison is very aware of that.” In fact, Sultan adds, Morrison was a classics major in college.

While Sultan believes that “cultural studies was the best thing that ever happened to classics,” she does side with more traditional classicists in one respect. Like them, she thinks that it’s important for serious students of Greek or Latin to learn the languages, and that “they should understand how the textual tradition was transmitted and codified in order to truly comprehend the great classical texts.”

Another value to studying the languages, she adds, is that “roughly 60 percent of all English words and 90 percent of technical and scientific terms are derived from ancient Greek and Latin. So, if you are interested in a career in law or medicine, you will benefit enormously” in learning those languages. Mark Rubin ’05, a pre-med biology major who is minoring in GRS, agrees: “Studying Greek vocabulary has actually enhanced my ability to remember and understand biology jargon because most biological terms have Greek stems in them.”

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While promoting ancient Greek and Roman language study at IWU, Sultan is happy to teach translations of classics in her general-education courses because, she says, “I can reach a lot more students that way.” But she also tries to enrich her students’ understanding of the texts by teaching them a few dozen words in the original Greek or Latin.

For example, in discussing Sophocles’ most famous play, *Oedipus the King*, she asks her “Greek Tragedy and Comedy” students to define the word “hero.”

“Like a fireman who rescues someone from a burning building?” suggests one.

“Someone who is a role model for society,” offers another.

“Good,” Sultan responds. “Now, would you be surprised if I told you that Oedipus is a hero?”

Murmurs of surprise do, in fact, follow as the students contemplate how a troubled king who murdered his father and married his mother might be considered heroic.

Sultan explains that the Greek word for “hero” comes from another Greek word, *hora*, that means “time, seasonality.” Greek heroes like Oedipus are typically linked by heredity to both gods and humans, and so those heroes “are out of season — they are caught between two worlds, neither mortal nor divine,” Sultan tells her students.



The Greek hero Oedipus ponders the riddle of the Sphinx.

“And that’s why they have to suffer their whole lives. They’re out of sync with the universe and so they’re very extreme, and model extreme behaviors — extreme good and extreme evil.”

The Greeks also believed that their heroes’ deaths put them back in sync with the universe, and that they reach a divine state where they can bestow healing powers upon the living who worship them. Drawing parallels to a slightly more modern hero, Jesus Christ, Sultan reminds her students that he, too, was regarded as a healer, and was portrayed as being out of sync between the corporeal and the divine. “He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him,” Sultan quotes from the Gospel of John. Only through his death does he ascend to pure godhood, “and the same is true for Greek heroes,” Sultan offers in conclusion.

Matt Brown ’03, a former classics minor who is now a graduate student in classics at the University of Illinois, says that Sultan’s eagerness to discuss ancient texts in a modern context has left a lasting impression on him. “The classics, when they are presented the wrong way, can be stuffy, to put it kindly,” says Brown. “Professor Sultan did it the right way. She had this style of making the material relevant to contemporary media and culture in general.”

Now, as a teaching assistant in a general-education class on Greek mythology, Brown says he makes the same connections. “I try my best to make the material relevant to modern-day culture, in hopes that years from now, when my students have forgotten big chunks of their college education, they will remember some of what my course had to offer. This I owe to my classroom experience with Professor Sultan.”

Connecting the ancient past to today’s headlines is something that Sultan does often in her “Greek Tragedy and Comedy” class. In a discussion of *Oedipus*, which is set in ancient Thebes during a time of disease and famine, Sultan asks her students to consider why Sophocles chose this setting. She reminds them that at the time the play was written, in 429 B.C., Athens had just launched a war that would lead to its eventual demise as the region’s foremost political and military power. And its great leader, Pericles, had died two years earlier in a plague that devastated the city.

“Right now,” Sultan says, “things look really bleak in Athens. And I think that Sophocles is speaking to those fears. He’s speaking to his contemporaries in Athens at this time,” an audience who awarded the play first prize in the dramatic festival of Dionysus, held each spring in his theater at the foot of the Acropolis.

After providing this background, Sultan asks, “When reading the play, did you think of a modern

place that could also be such a setting, as Sophocles describes?” Met with silence, she elaborates. “I mean, what are some specific names of some cities that have recently been devastated by hunger, disease, or war?”

“Places in Africa?” a student tentatively proposes. “Or like in the Middle East,” adds another.

“Good, but more specifically, *where* in the Middle East? What about Iraq? What about Fallujah? What does that city look like right now? What about September 11th in New York City? See what I mean?”

“You should be able to pull out amazing numbers of contemporary images when you read this play,” she continues. “It won first prize precisely because it describes the state of human affairs in Athens. And one of the reasons it remains popular is because it *continues* to represent the state of human affairs.”

Later, Sultan acknowledges that whatever meaning her students derive in such exchanges is ultimately up to them. From her standpoint as a teacher, it’s important to continue to make the effort. And behind each of those efforts is an unwavering conviction that, while the ancient texts may offer roads to many strange and wonderful places, their most important role is the profound way in which they lead us back to ourselves.