

Certamen Beyond Greece, Rome, and Highschool

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This document addresses two problems with Certamen. 1) As a major way many high schoolers learn about the Classics, it suffers from Greco-Roman exceptionalism, which carries with it the many problems of race in the Classics. 2) As a way some high schoolers obtain deep Classical knowledge, it suffers from excessive specificity and could be a more effective introduction to Classics as an academic discipline. A solution to both of these problems is to expand the certamen universe horizontally rather than vertically, to look outside of Greece and Rome for new questions instead of deeper in. A discussion of this solution's consequences and implementation follows.

Problems with Certamen

1. Utility

Like many former certamen players, I took a Latin class my first semester of college. It was overall a very fun class. I engaged with Classical authors not just in grammar, but in themes. I learned about the intricacies of Roman insults and satire and how to connect those lessons to our modern world. While my vocabulary and grammar allowed me to sight read with ease, my certamen knowledge was less useful for the larger lessons than I expected. Beyond adding insight into the use of particular vocabulary words and helping with the translation of a particularly tricky clause here and there, the hundreds of hours I had put into learning Latin intricacies for certamen were not useful to me in the classroom. Not only was my deep knowledge not useful, but this was also not the way I was used to approaching the material. Now I have a better appreciation for literary analysis, reception, etc., but at the time my interest in the Classics was in memorizing facts, in translating first, in knowing more minutiae than others.

Ultimately, the knowledge gained in lower levels may be useful outside of the Classics and in post-secondary Classical education. But for those studying for Advanced, the things they are encouraged to learn are increasingly obscure and not incredibly relevant to the Classics. We are in a situation where kids study the Classics for thousands of hours but may know little about the discipline as it is practiced. They could tell you the city in which any author was born but not how their cultural background affects their work, why that is important or what that *means*. Certamen doesn't reward using the knowledge, just having it. It encourages reading sourcebooks, not ongoing research. Players have little to no familiarity with Classical reception, archeology, art history, and even in many cases, anything Greek. Some students solve this problem by reading beyond certamen sources and even into modern scholarship, but success at certamen does not require this. It often encourages students to learn more, but for the amount of time and energy kids put into learning this stuff, what can they do with it outside of the game? Certamen does not create Classical prodigies. Instead, it creates something of a simulacrum of them - people who know lots of things about the Classics but do not know the Classics itself.

1a. Difficulty Creep

Related to utility is another major issue with certamen: it is getting harder over time. As students and coaches craft study guides and master the existing question types and material, there is pressure on writers to make questions harder to continue to challenge students. This most often manifests as more specific knowledge in earlier levels. That may seem trivial, but it means that in order to win any given level, the amount of obscure knowledge students must learn is increasing. This problem interacts with the utility problem, making it worse.

2. Race

Much, though perhaps not enough, ink has been spilled on the topic of race in the Classics.¹ On how the discipline was artificially limited to Greece and Rome. On how whiteness has been attributed to certain ancients. On how the Classics lends itself to white supremacist beliefs. On how non-white Classicists can exist in the field.

Certamen too suffers from a limited view of the ancient world. But where the Classics as a discipline have arbitrarily limited study to Greece and Rome, certamen, with the exception of Greek mythology, is only concerned with Latin and Rome. The language used by the JCL invokes the “greatness” of Greece and Rome and states that JCLers “carry on the torch” of their civilization. This type of Western-Civilization thinking exists in Certamen as well. Roman Britain is a common source of questions, and though this may be excused as a remnant of American Classics coming from the Brits, it still does not fully stand up to scrutiny. Why should certamen players learn more about Roman Britain than they do about Roman Armenia or Egypt?

Despite the white leaning nature of secondary Classics, many certamen players are non-white. As discussed in Dani Bostick’s *Not for All*,² they may see themselves as the *other* where the Classics are associated with whiteness. The Classics are associated with prestige and greatness. Those positive qualities are attached to an image of Western Civilization non-white students may have trouble seeing themselves as a part of. Additionally, by associating Classics and greatness, the JCL and certamen may contribute to a dangerous pattern of subconscious conditioning.

Personally, I think I reached for the Classics as a way to gain legitimacy in a Western world. If I knew Latin and immersed myself in “Western Civilization” who could doubt that I was American, believing of course the mythology of the United States’ origins. As a brown-skinned kid in Florida, when people heard I was into “Latin stuff,” they not infrequently assumed that meant something along the lines of Latin dance. Remembering my frustration with that assumption is embarrassing, because it reveals my intentions and beliefs at the time. The assumption is the opposite of what I was trying to achieve. I wanted to validate my place in the in-group, not as an other.

The Classics have a problem with race. And as the entry point for many people, the JCL and certamen are implicated.³

¹ See Eidolon’s collection of Articles About Reshaping the Field. eidolon.pub/articles-about-reshaping-the-field-825557614c75.

² Bostick, Dani. "Not For All: Nostalgic Distortions as a Weapon of Segregation in Secondary Classics." *American Journal of Philology* 141, no. 2 (2020): 283-306. doi:10.1353/ajp.2020.0012.

³ Note that the JCL and certamen have recently made statements acknowledging this implication. See www.njcl.org/Press-Releases/ACL-and-JCL-DEI-Statements.

Intervention

I believe that there is a solution that addresses both problems described above. While not a panacea for all the issues facing certamen, it certainly accomplishes something. **The solution is simple: expand the canon horizontally rather than vertically. Instead of making questions harder by being more specific about narrow topics, expand the universe of possible topics.**

Increasing the canon horizontally rather than vertically simultaneously solves several of the problems above. First, it **decreases the amount of specific and trivial knowledge** that students are learning. Currently, as players are getting better, questions are getting harder and more specific, but this is an **issue for accessibility and real life utility**. Including more subjects would address players getting too good at the existing metagame, while being more accessible and opening students up to useful knowledge about the ancient Mediterranean.

Second, it exposes students to the **broader ancient world**. A Classicist would be better served with a basic understanding of Egyptian myth than with the minutiae of memorizing every single death in the *Iliad*. In addition to addressing utility, this approach also **directly challenges the exceptionalism of Greece and Rome. Exposing students to the wider ancient Mediterranean is a start at addressing the racial consequences of certamen**. This type of expansion and inclusion could counter narratives of Western Civilization and subconscious conditioning of white supremacy.

But what specifically am I talking about? Well, though I may have plenty of certamen experience, I am not an expert in the Classics or in the Ancient Mediterranean and do not feel qualified to make full recommendations. What follows is simply a start which I hope will be iterated and improved upon by others.

Topics may include the following

- Egyptian mythology, history, literature, culture
- Persian mythology, history, literature culture
- Near-East ancient history
- Wider selection of ancient literature for mythology and literature
- Geography of the ancient Mediterranean and Near-East not only in relation to Roman imperial provinces
- Simple linguistic concepts

The trickiest category to expand horizontally is language. As it is, asking students to learn Greek is a big ask. I couldn't reasonably ask them to learn ancient Egyptian. To address this problem and some of the utility problems I described above, a more didactic approach to question writing may be useful. Questions may start by presenting information students are not expected to know and ask them to synthesize with things they do know. Questions might utilize the connections or correlations in languages and civilizations to accomplish this. This type of question writing and studying would mitigate learning facts for facts' sake and instead encourage mastery of a topic. Highlighting the connections between peoples would also counter the artificial silo Classics has traditionally put around Greece and Rome.

Once topics have been decided upon, the following products must be produced in order to facilitate adoption.

- Topics by level
- Official Sourcebooks
- Syllabi
- Study Guides
- Examples of Questions (Practice Rounds)

Because of its relative accessibility and widespread familiarity, Egyptian myth would be the easiest subject to add, especially in the novice level. Egyptology provides numerous potential sourcebooks. For example, Geraldine Pinch's *Egyptian Mythology: A Guide to the Gods, Goddesses, and Traditions of Ancient Egypt*, combines a Morford-esque background on the cultural and historical context of Egyptian myths with a more Tripp-like, encyclopedic approach. More work should be done to find the most suitable sourcebooks, but *Egyptian Mythology* shows that these types of books exist

I also propose supplementing traditional certamen studying with a **yearly topic or book** which students can expect to be tested on. This topic/book could be a horizontal expansion of the cannon, i.e. a book on Persian kings, or, my preferred approach, it could be a recent publication in a classical field like art, reception, or literary interpretation. This would encourage students to engage with the field more broadly.

Considerations

The primary issue with my intervention is a perennial problem of certamen: accessibility. Latin and Rome are the focus of certamen because that is what most kids learn in school. Greek is not commonly offered, which is the main argument for why certamen does not currently include Greek content. But there are limitations to keeping to the secondary curriculum. Novice and Intermediate are fairly well rooted in Latin 1 and 2. However, in the Advanced level, the questions and topics are quite removed from the high school curriculum already. Syllabi often indicate an expectation of omniscience of the topics. Anything is fair game. One way to address the accessibility issue is to only add new topics to the Advanced level, or in an Advanced Plus level. In the latter case, Latin 3 could become correlated with Advanced, and Advanced Plus would be reserved for older or higher level students. This solution would obviously not be ideal, because it wouldn't include all students. But the accessibility of certamen, especially at lower levels, is of great importance. Expanding the Advanced cannon to the Ancient Mediterranean is a start, and it is possible that through difficulty creep and familiarity, new topics could be incorporated into lower levels over time.

Related to the above, is that Latin teachers are default certamen coaches. It might be unfair to expect Latin teachers to teach material they are not themselves familiar with. However, this problem already exists with the current cannon and has been mitigated with the use of formal study guides and sourcebooks. Because adding topics increases the burden on students and teachers, it must be done carefully by level so as to not overwhelm students and teachers. A breakdown of topics by level is included above as a product that must be produced for adoption.

Another consideration is the existence of Agon. At one point in certamen history, Greek derivatives, literature, and history were a part of regular certamen. It has since been removed and in response, Agon, basically a Greek-centric version of certamen, was developed. However, Agon is offered very sporadically at official competitions and has suffered from a lack of legitimacy. This may indicate that these suggestions aren't likely to be adopted well. However, the persistence of Agon and students' interest in it indicates that these proposals may in fact succeed.

Examples of Questions

Example of a basic Egyptian mythology question in the model of current certamen questions.

1. Who am I? I am the firstborn of Geb and Nut. I taught humans how to farm. My wife tried to bring me back to life but did not fully succeed. I am most famous for ruling over the underworld where I judge the souls of the dead.

OSIRIS

B1: Give the name of Osiris' wife, who tried to bring him back to life, the goddess of magic.

ISIS

B2: Which jackal-headed god helped Isis make Osiris into the first mummy?

ANUBIS

Example of a didactic question (Duke Certamen 2021, Novice Finals)⁴

1. The Latin suffix **-men** is added to some verbs to create an abstract noun. With this in mind, what is the meaning of the Latin verb from which we derive “**certāmen**”?

TO COMPETE

B1: What is the meaning of the verb from which we derive the noun **agmen**?

TO DO, DRIVE, CONDUCT

B2: What is the meaning of the verb from which we derive the noun **flūmen**?

TO FLOW

Example of a question that incorporates modern scholarship (K-Agon 2021, Round 1)

1. Who was the basis of a debate between the “Unitarians” and “Analysts,” the focus of Milman Parry’s research, and the center of scholarship by Aristarchus of Samothrace, who split his two major poems into 24 books each?

HOMER(OS)

B1: What modern-day country was the primary home of the “Unitarians” and “Analysts,” as well as most of the classical scholarship published in the 19th century?

GERMANY

B2: In what general region did Milman Parry conduct the research on the oral tradition that allowed him to form his ideas on Homer’s poetry?

BALKANS / YUGOSLAVIA

⁴ When writing didactic questions, avoid punishing students for knowing more than you expect. If this question were read in an Advanced or Intermediate room, someone might buzz at “-men” and give an answer indicating the suffix creates a noun from a verb, or similar. One way to avoid this trap might be to expand the “note to player” format used for “description acceptable” questions to indicate at the beginning that a question probably won’t be answerable from just the first sentence.

Final Thoughts

Unlike changing Classics as whole, changing certamen would require relatively low buy-in. For the first three years of Princeton Certamen, I controlled what questions made it into the tournament. If any independent tournaments want to include additional information on their syllabi and in their questions, they simply *can*. The only limitation would be finding people to write those questions and publicizing study materials. Additionally, as we have seen with recent changes to the language used in certamen for slavery, gender, and sexual assault, the NJCL Certamen Chair has a significant influence over question design. I imagine if my proposed changes were made at the college tournament and NJCL level, they would trickle into states and schools. Unfortunately, it may be difficult for states and schools to teach new material, especially if teachers are unfamiliar with information outside of the classical canon. However, the solution to this problem is widely available study guides and source books. Latin Phrases, Mottos, Abbreviations and Quotations are relatively obscure without *Amo, Amas, Amat and More* and the countless study guides listing ones to know. The same could be done for other subjects. If sourcebooks and study materials are gathered for new topics, most of the accessibility problem is solved.

There may be more to be done to address knowledge utility. Certamen should encourage students to learn about classics beyond memorizing facts. Incorporating interpretation, reception, and other things in the field may be useful. I very much doubt the best certamen players in the country are aware of *Black Athena* and its effect on the discipline, I certainly wasn't. Perhaps supplementing traditional certamen studying with a yearly topic or book with which students can expect to be tested on could accomplish some of this.

One point I have yet to address is a major goal of certamen and the JCL: keeping Classics around in high schools. Expanding the secondary cannon to the Ancient Mediterranean or Ancient Studies may actually make Classics more likely to stay in schools. Latin programs are marred by critiques of utility and stuffiness. Expanding what students learn in the classroom might address these issues and provide a more welcoming environment to students who don't feel like they fit the traditional mold of a Latin student.

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