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**Introduction** There has been study of the ancient world at Oxford for over 900 years, and it's still at the very centre of innovation and discovery in the subject. As the largest faculty of classics in the world, Oxford can offer an unparalleled range of scholarly activity.

In this podcast, Professor Oliver Taplin, an authority on classics and the performance of ancient drama, talks about the subject and his research.

**Interviewer** Shall we begin by asking you what are classics like at Oxford?

**Professor Taplin** Extremely lively. There's a lot of people. People might think of classics as something that's dying on dusty corners. We have a big faculty and a lot of students and a superb new faculty centre that has just opened last year. And a lot goes on in all branches of classics. And we have a lot of visitors and a lot of graduates. And what would surprise anyone walking into that building is just how lively everything is, just how active everything is, and just how much interaction there is going on.

**Interviewer** Why study classics?

**Professor Taplin** In a way, one can say well, why study anything that hasn't got a direct practical application? One might ask, why study classics, in the same way that one might ask, why study any humanities subject?

Classics at Oxford actually has the official title of *Literae Humaniores*, sort of the humane study of letters.

If humans are going to be at all aware of the history of their culture, of their past, then the culture and civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome and of the ancient Mediterranean, of the Mediterranean area between let's say 800 BC and 500 AD is going to be absolutely crucial, because it made such a huge impact.

It's made a huge impact on Western civilisation, after all the Renaissance was the rediscovery of that civilisation in Europe. But it's also made a huge impact worldwide. And the way that it's adapted in the world today is by no means Western dominated, by no means a colonial enterprise to get everyone to study the roots of Europe.

It has remained extraordinarily fertile in producing new initiatives.

**Interviewer** So what does a classicist do on an everyday basis?

**Professor Taplin** Well there's a wide range of choice. And because our faculty is so big, and because we have so many students, I guess we've got more choice than any other classics faculty in the world. But most people who study classics here at Oxford learn one or both of the ancient languages, ancient Greek and ancient Latin, to a high level and study the literature.

But the course isn't necessarily dominated by literature, it's dominated by literature for those to whom poetry, to whom historical writing appeals. But there's a lot of study of history in the broader sense of the world, there's a lot of study of philosophy.

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And Oxford has a bit of a speciality of not drawing a clear line between ancient philosophy and modern philosophy, they interact. There's philology and linguistics, the study of languages as such. And there's archaeology. And archaeology of course, if we're dealing with the whole of the Greek and the Roman world across the span of over 1,000 years, of well over 1,000 years there's a lot of archaeology.

**Interviewer** So in contrast to many modern university degrees which tend to be quite targeted, classics has remained cross-disciplinary?

**Professor Taplin** Yes, I think it has. Of course people do specialise in certain areas, and they can, but perhaps there's more of a post-graduate narrowing than an under-graduate narrowing. We do try to keep an inter-disciplinary course, and nobody can do the undergraduate course in only one branch of the subject, they have to study at least two branches of the subject.

And we do aim for what I might call width, still. I suppose in a way this is partly because we believe that we're dealing with the whole civilisation or a whole set of civilisations. Partly also because, when say, if I'm asked what is the use of classics, one use is that it makes a wonderful area for people to explore their thoughts, ideas and techniques while they have the luxury of being a student.

But it then trains their minds in ways that makes them very employable and very valuable to society in an extraordinary range of activities.

We, as much as any other humanities subject, arguably more than most humanities subjects, send people out into a very wide range of future careers. All the way from IT, which classicists seem to be particularly talented at going into, to journalism, to finance. I've had a recent graduate of mine who has trained in medicine and is glad that he had a classical background.

I've got one who works in a professional theatre in Paris. These are just recent graduates. So I think the reason why we don't target is because we are trying to produce people who will be of value to the world, to the world of letters, to the world of science, rather than specialists in some tiny area.

**Interviewer** So classics is far more than just the study of Latin and Greek?

**Professor Taplin** Certainly. I mean, in fact there are some courses where history and archaeology can be studied without learning either Latin or Greek. But those who do the central classics courses, which is the great majority, learn at least one of those languages, and most of them learn both.

But they are a means, not an end. And there may have been a time when the learning of Latin and Greek to a high standard was the end rather than the means. But those are time that are long passed. We'd still put a very considerable emphasis on the languages, we believe that if you're going to study in depth particularly the literature and the poetry then you need to study them in the original language.

But as I say, the language is a means to studying in depth rather than an end in itself.

**Interviewer** Has there been a decline in the number of students who arrive at Oxford already with a grasp of Latin?

**Professor Taplin** There's a decline in the number who are already trained, particularly in Greek. Over the last – over the course of the 40 years or so the number of people who come already well trained in ancient Greek has perhaps halved. So now at least half learn Greek from scratch when they arrive.

Also there are many schools which don't have Latin, and you don't want to exclude them. And so there is an increasing number, still in the minority, but an increasing number of people who learn Latin from scratch when they arrive.

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So the teaching of the languages has become something where the University, and the universities, do a great deal of activity. And perhaps less is done than used to be done in schools.

We still do get a fair few who are very well trained in the languages at school but they no longer dominate the undergraduate population.

Undergraduates always say that the Greek is more difficult than the Latin. Greek is more complex, a more subtle language than Latin. But neither of them are desperately difficult. I am amazed at the dozens of students each year who learn these languages up to a really remarkably high standard.

**Interviewer** What works does one read in classics?

**Professor Taplin** Well that depends on what part of classics you're going in for, of course, whether you're going in primarily for literature or philosophy or history. And then, of course, there are all sorts of other areas like ancient geography and grammar and music that can also be studied.

For a main stream undergraduate at Oxford, what they will all read is quite a lot of literature, particularly of epic poetry because the epic poems are some of the foundation of ancient Greek and Roman literature and of drama. Also works like Ovid's 'Metamorphoses', which is a basic work of ancient myth.

And love poetry and lyric poetry. So there's a fair amount of literature, particularly poetry, for those who have a feeling for poetry. But there are others who spend much more time reading the historians, for example, Thucydides who can claim to be the first historian in the modern sense of the word, of somebody who tries, systematically to document events in the light of their explanations and causes.

And others specialise in philosophy, and they're going to obviously read Plato and Aristotle. These are figures who remain major in any history of the whole of philosophy down to the present.

So there is a range. Personally I've always specialised in poetry and drama and Greek poetry and drama. This is the way that things have developed, I've continued to teach Latin, I've tried to keep my Latin from getting rusty. But my professional career has been mainly in Greek poetry.

**Interviewer** So what first interested you in classics and what sustained that interest?

**Professor Taplin** Yes, it's quite interesting to look back and ask how it happened. I did study both Latin and Greek at school so I was at school back in the 60's so in an era that in some ways has now passed.

And was going to study them at university. But I think the absolutely crucial event for me was going to Greece. I went to Greece for four months in-between school and university. And the whole thing became real for me because of the landscape, because of the places, because of the drama. I went and saw ancient Greek plays at the Great Theatre at Epidaurus. And the subject ceased to be something that was done on paper, and became something that could be set in a world, a world which was so different from cold, grey Britain.

And which was, I found totally enthralling. And ever since then I've gone back to Greece.

**Interviewer** And what's kept your interest?

**Professor Taplin** Well it would be quite wrong to think that classics is a subject that is finished, that is finite, and that all we can do is find out more and more about what we already know about.

Like any subject that's alive, it changes, it develops. And part of the challenge of being a university teacher and being a university researcher is, of course, to find ways to develop the subject. And I've found my own areas in which I think I've been something of a leader, taking people towards new ways of approaching things.

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And I suppose I've particularly concentrated on three. The main one has been thinking of ancient poetry as performance, both epic poetry and of course of drama.

Thinking of them, not just playing lip service to the fact that they were originally performed out loud but actually thinking what this means in terms of their interpretation and in terms of what they meant to their audiences.

I've also been interested in iconography, in the way that literature interacts with painting. You know we have thousands – when I say thousands I mean tens of thousands of ancient vase paintings and I've studied their interaction with drama.

And the other thing I've become interested in, which is very much a growth area, and growth area of the last 15 years, is what we call reception, which is how has ancient Greek literature been transformed and renewed and appropriated into the literature and drama of modern times.

So this isn't just a matter of studying the influence or the heritage. And it's not just a matter of saying, have they got it right or have they got it wrong? In fact, it's almost the opposite of that. It's asking how is it that that it has stimulated creativity? How is it that it's renewed in our modern world?

So those are my three areas, and you can see how all of them, in a sense have this element of performance of literature, not only as something that is read in silent privacy but is a communal activity.

**Interviewer** So what are the finest examples of Greek poetry?

**Professor Taplin** Well if people ask me which is my favourite Greek play, then I tend to answer, well it's a different one each week. The one I happen to be reading, or the one I happen to be studying or translating at that time.

There is a remarkable variety of types of ancient Greek poetry. For me, and for most people who are interested in Greek poetry the 'Iliad', the great epic of Achilles and of the death of Hector and the siege of Troy is fundamental, as it was for the ancient Greeks. It's extraordinary, it's our earliest work of Greek poetry and it remains, indisputably one of the great works of world literature.

So the 'Iliad' is terrifically important and powerful. And so is, in very different ways, 'The Odyssey', the other great early epic poem. So different, as different as Odysseus is from Achilles. As different from the man who's integrity is such that he says he hates anyone who doesn't speak the truth, to Odysseus who survives precisely because he doesn't speak the truth.

So ancient Greek epic is rightly regarded, I think, as something that still has a terrific amount to offer and still has terrific bearing on modern poetry.

Greek drama, well you only have to look at the amount of Greek drama that's being put on by theatres, by no means only theatres from Europe or the European tradition, but theatres from all over the world. South America, Japan, India, wherever, to see that these plays are the works that count as world literature and reward coming back to again and again.

But as well as that I think I'd like to emphasise Greek lyric poetry, Poetry like the poetry of Sappho or the poetry of Anacreon. These perhaps have been relatively overshadowed, partly because they tend not to survive in a very good state, and they tend not to survive in a Greek state.

So an awful lot of trouble has to be put into reconstructing them. But I've an idea that that kind of lyric poetry, whether it's love poetry, whether it's poetry of love or of death or of partying or poetry about ageing, or poetry about the natural world. This kind of poetry may, I think, be going to make a comeback in the near future.

And another kind of poetry I think maybe is going to make a comeback is actually Comedy. Particularly the comedy of Aristotle, which is not at all the kind of comedy that we think of. We

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think of Shakespeare or Moliere or Oscar Wilde. It's much more political satire, it's topical, its grotesque.

And much more like – there was a wonderful puppet show on the television, 'Spitting Image', which unfortunately no longer exists. But Aristotle is like that. And I think that Aristotle has got a lot to offer in the years to come.

**Interviewer** I assume then the comedy and the lyrical poetry can inform us more about ancient Greek culture as well?

**Professor Taplin** Yes, I mean well that in a sense goes a lot more with what I've been saying about the performance and about how poetry belongs to a society, and how thinking about poetry as belonging to a society helps to keep it fresh, and helps to keep it alive and inspiring today.

I guess those two are works that are the product of a certain time, of certain social interaction.

**Interviewer** Presumably your study of the reception over time looks at how it's been performed over time?

**Professor Taplin** Oh very much so, yes. I mean what we roughly call reception, some people say oh, reception's a rather tedious word, it makes you think of receptionists. But we haven't got a better one, because it's certainly much more than the classical heritage or the classical condition, because it's much more active than that and much more interactive than that.

Yes, it looks at the whole of the history of reception, not just at the contemporary reception. I, myself have specialised perhaps in the reception of the last thirty years. But obviously, the Renaissance reception of the ancient world is huge and fascinating.

And then taking it down through the centuries you'll find each century interacting in different ways. Some more performatively, some of them more as the printed word. Time and place are enormous variables, and all of them have things of interest to offer. And all of them, in a sense, are part of what it means to them.

**Interviewer** So given the lack of stage directions in the text, I assume that each performance has to improvise somewhat?

**Professor Taplin** Yes. You have to allow people in the theatre the freedom to do with an ancient Greek text what they would do with any other text, whether it was Shakespeare or Chekov or Brecht or whatever. And as we know, stage directions are not regarded as a sacred part of the text.

Indeed, the words are no longer regarded as a sacred part of a work.

And it's not my role, it's not the role of the specialists to tell theatre people what they can and can't do. But I suppose I have more to say and more to offer to people who do regard the works as important and who do regard the stage action as important.

And if they regard the stage actions as an important part of the meaning then they're going to be interested in the built in stage actions, they're not necessarily going to obey it, but they're going to be interested in it. It's going to be part of what goes into their mixing bowl.

**Interviewer** Have you met with opposition from colleagues over your fairly modern stance?

**Professor Taplin** Not a great deal. I mean maybe I'm lucky in my university because it's a big university, a pluralist place and we are a very pluralist faculty, we have a lot of different approaches. There's no Oxford approach, there's no standard party line and that's been very valuable for me, because I haven't felt that I've got to do what the boss tells more or follow a particular tradition.

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Obviously one comes across in debate the whole time, the subject, in fact, would be dead if there were no debate. So all the time there's disagreement, and quite a lot of publications take issues with things that I've said.

And I have no objection to that because at least it means that people take some notice of it. I'd rather people disagreed with me than didn't take any notice at all. So disagreement, debate, dialectic is very much part of a subject that's alive.

**Interviewer** And you established the archive of performance of Greek and Roman drama?

**Professor Taplin** I did this with my colleague, Edith Hall. It's over 12 years now since we started. It connects very much with what we were saying about conceptual performance. Nobody had ever tried to document, in any kind of systematic way the performances of ancient drama in modern times since the Renaissance.

Whether it be theatre, or opera, or film or dance. And we not only set out to document – so we have a database now of around 10,000 or so performances which is on the web, but it's very much part of our aim right from the start to interpret as well as to document.

So this is proving quite a world leader, and indeed one can now see studies related to the kind of thing we do in the archive of performances of Greek and Roman drama going on in countries all over the world.

And it's been great for us to feel that we've been leading a growth area.

**Interviewer** Have people been using the library?

**Professor Taplin** Oh yes, very much so. Both on the web and as visitors, because of course we have a very considerable collection of press cuttings, programmes, texts, videos and so forth. So there's constant evidence, we get a steady stream of enquiries and visitors. And we're always grateful if people send new material, because it's very, very difficult these days to keep up with everything that's going on.

**Interviewer** It must be easy to get the archive details as of modern performances. But how do you find information about how it was performed when it was first written?

**Professor Taplin** Back in ancient times? Well interestingly even that is a subject in which there's a remarkable amount of new development. My own speciality has been finding out about it from the internal evidence of the text. Because there is external evidence, archaeologically there's still excavations going on of theatres and the discovery of new vase paintings that relate to the theatre.

But also there's a remarkable number of ancient inscriptions. The Greeks, and indeed the Romans went in for recording things on stone and other durable materials. And there's still a lot of research going on, both on inscriptions and monuments that have been known for a while, and for those who've been recently discovered.

And more and more, for example, has been done on the economics of the ancient theatre, something which I think people would say, well oh that's something we just don't know about. And actually if we really buckle down to it there's a lot more of that that can be known.

I'm not a specialist in that myself, but I'm glad to say that I've had some influence on people who are.

**Interviewer** And the iconography, I assume that means that there are vases which have depictions of the scenes?

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**Professor Taplin** Yes, well the interesting thing there, and this is something that's been occupying me a lot in recent years is for comedy, yes there are vase paintings that show scenes of theatre. You look at the scene, and you say, ah yes that's a performance of comedy on a stage, and they're in costume. And if you know the comedy then the painting reminds you of some particular moment, no doubt a particularly entertaining moment.

It's kind of dinner party entertainment. With tragedy the situation's very different, there are very few pictures of tragedies in performance, they didn't want to see pictures of actors performing tragedies. What they wanted to see was pictures of the stories, of the myths as they were told in tragedy.

So instead of looking at the picture and saying, oh yes, that's a certain tragedy in the theatre, they say, oh yes, that's a certain story, and it's a story as told in a particularly powerful, memorable way in a tragedy.

So there's a very interesting contrast there between the iconography of comedy and the iconography of tragedy.

**Interviewer** So how can we learn about how tragedies were important?

**Professor Taplin** Well, you're quite right to imply that, on the whole, vase paintings were not a huge amount of help there. But they do actually give us quite a lot of indication about costume and about stage properties such as thrones and altars, rocky cave mouths and things like that.

But on the whole when it comes to the performance of a particular tragedy as opposed to tragedy in general one has to turn to the text and ask the text what it reveals about its performance. And there's some external evidence, for example from the comedies of Aristophanes who sometimes says, oh you know I've thought particularly ridiculous the bit where they did something or other, and tells you something about the way the play was performed.

But it's an area in which we don't know nearly as much as we'd like. But the evidence from more than 2,000 years ago is inevitably bitty.

**Interviewer** The ancient performances, did they use a lot of props?

**Professor Taplin** I think the answer to that is that tragedy did not use a lot of props, and comedy did. Tragedy on the whole, to judge from the evidence we've got and I've spent a lot of time with this, seems to be rather economical props. They're either symbols of status or symbols of gender. Like a King will always carry a sceptre, or a priestess will always carry the key of the temple.

Things of that kind. They're either what I might call status objects, or they have a particular significance, a particular meaning in the play.

One of the most famous scenes in ancient drama is in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, where Clytemnestra persuades her husband to walk on purple cloths. And it's quite an eerie moment by the way she persuades him and, in effect, defeats him by getting him to do this rather dodgy- is it blasphemy, is it barbarian to trample on valuable cloths like this?

There the cloth is the creation of the playwright and gains its meaning from the way it's handled within the play.

In comedy there's a lot of clutter, a lot of things to fall over. So it's a very different world there, and there's masses of baggage, there's masses of utensils, there's masses of equipment, quite often the props are given this comic exaggeration.

So I think it's interesting about props that they're handled in these very different ways.

**Interviewer** Is it terribly difficult to look at the texts and find these internal directions?

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**Professor Taplin** Well I think it's the methodology that's difficult. I mean you can look at the texts and the indications, this is what my very first book was about and it's now a while ago. The indications of when people come and go for example. The indications of when people go down on their knees or when they veil their heads and things like that are fairly clear in the words.

But there's all these methodological questions about the relationships between what people are saying and what they're doing. But my basic case was that when something is important in the play then people will talk about it.

And it's a method that has been questioned and refined, but basically I think it's as simple as that.

**Interviewer** So if someone's approaching classics with no prior knowledge, what would you recommend they read?

**Professor Taplin** Well that's a good one. Firstly I think they've got to get hold of a good translation, so you've got to try and find out what people recommend. And my advice would be if you're going to read a translation of poetry then you want a translation that's in verse and not a translation that is into prose.

But then whether people take on the great epics, which are long, of course, and in the case of the Iliad, great though it is, there's an awful lot of battle and an awful lot of blood. Whether they take on the epics or whether they take on the dramas. I suppose if somebody said "We'll just give you one work to read," I think I'd put them onto Aeschylus' play, 'Agamemnon' or onto Euripides' play 'Medea' or onto Sophocles' play, 'Oedipus', I'd put them onto one tragedy and try that. See whether it speaks to you.

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