



Context In OCR Greek And Latin Specifications

by Jerome Moran

Context:

1. The part or parts of a written or spoken passage preceding or following a particular word or group of words and so intimately associated with them as to throw light upon their meaning
2. The interrelated conditions in which something exists or occurs (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Examination questions ('Give the context of the following ...') testing a knowledge of 1. above used to be much more common than they are now. Your answer showed how well you knew the text and how 'significant' the extract from the text was. The problem - if you knew the text well - was where to stop, going backwards, and how far to go, going forwards. It was not quite as easy as it sounds.

Context as in 2. above was all the rage in the days of Structuralism – when you really could say 'context is all' – though its influence is still very much felt in literary and cultural studies. It is context as in 2. above that this article is concerned with. It is an elusive concept: I do not know that anyone has been able to define it, in general or in particular, to the satisfaction of the next person.

The word 'context' occurs in a number of places in the set texts sections of the most recent OCR specifications and related documents for AS and A Level Greek and Latin.

I am assuming, not being an adherent of New Criticism, in what follows that works of literature are produced in a context, and that a knowledge of the latter can help one to a (fuller) understanding and appreciation of the former. So I have no quarrel with the expectation that candidates should equip themselves with a knowledge of the context of the texts they study. I also assume that it already goes on in fact: it may be a new feature in the specifications; it is not a new practice in the classroom or library.¹

First the 'Summary Brochure' issued by OCR for the new specifications for Greek and Latin. This states (for both AS and A Level) that 'Learners are required to have read *a small amount of literature in translation* (my italics) so that they understand *the context* from where (*sic*) the set texts have been taken'. We assume that the literature is Greek. It does not say whether the texts to be read will be specified or not. How small 'small' is we are not told. 'Context' is left vague. But one cannot expect too much detail in a summary description.

Next, the specifications themselves (for 'Greek' read 'Latin' since the requirements for context awareness are the same for both languages). I begin with the specification for AS Greek (for first examination in 2017). There is no mention at all of context in Section 1b 'Aims and learning outcomes' or in Section 1c 'What are the key features of this specification?', though it is fair to say

that it is a new feature and context is mentioned several times in later sections.

In Section 2a 'Content Overview' we are told that 'Learners should have an *awareness of the immediate literary context* from which the set texts have been taken'. This is similar to what is said in the Summary Brochure, except that 'the context' is now 'the immediate literary context', thus restricting the context in both time and type. But no guidance is given about the time span envisaged by 'immediate', and how a literary context differs from other (highly relevant) sorts of context, e.g. historical, cultural, social, or political, is not explained. (A good case can be made for a literary context embracing all of these and more. If it does not, then I do not understand what is meant by a literary context, unless we are talking about intertextuality.)²

In Section 2b and 2c the word 'awareness' used in Section 2a is replaced by '*understand and appreciate*'. Fair enough. We are also now told that this understanding and appreciation is to be achieved 'by reading *an appropriate supporting selection of ancient literature in translation*'. So, putting all of this together, so far it seems that candidates should read a selection of ancient literature in translation that will enable them to gain an understanding and appreciation of the immediate literary context of the set texts. Note that apparently this can be gained solely by reading other works of 'ancient' literature. (I think it is being assumed that we shall take 'ancient' to mean Greek and Latin. One

might take exception to this.) So what ‘appropriate supporting selection’ of ancient literature should I read that will enable me to gain an understanding and appreciation of the ‘immediate literary context’ of Homer? I think one might be able to go somewhere near to gaining this by reading non-literary works written in more recent times, but apparently this will not be necessary. This goes for all the other set texts too.

But at least I know what OCR expects me to be able to do (assuming that I can make an appropriate supporting selection), even though it will not achieve what OCR seems to think it will. Or do I? OCR has more to say about context in Section 2c ‘Content of literature’. Here we read that ‘Learners should be able to . . . understand and appreciate, as appropriate, *the social, cultural and historical contexts* for the *set texts, their authors and audiences*’. What am I supposed to make of this? Am I to address myself to other contexts of the set texts in addition to their literary context? Or is this part of the specification merely unpacking the content of ‘literary’ for me along the lines I suggested above? Whichever it is, I now have to address myself to these contexts (no longer ‘immediate’, note) as they apply not only to the texts but to their authors and audiences. Which ‘audiences’? And can I still do all of this by making a selection of ancient literary texts alone?

Section 2c says in the column headed ‘Learners will be required to’ (so far the desiderata have been in the column ‘Learners should be able to’) ‘demonstrate knowledge and understanding of *the wider context* of the set text’. What wider context? Wider than what? Wider than all the other contexts specified so far? How wide can context get? Or is this just repeating in a catch-all phrase what has already been mentioned?

Unless I have missed something, the specification does not say in which part of the set text exam paper I am to display my knowledge of context. (Nor does it say how many of the marks I will get for it.) Presumably it is in the ‘extended response’ question. Here again there is the risk of confusion and misunderstanding. The specification states that as part of the extended response question learners will be required to ‘draw upon relevant additional material read in translation; as a minimum, this should include the material immediately before and after the passage

read in Greek’. Until one gets to the semi-colon it reads as though the material in question is the same material as I studied to help me with the context(s). But the rest of the sentence suggests otherwise. I would not get much insight into the context(s) of the text by confining myself to additional bits of the set text. This must be additional additional (dittography deliberate) reading in translation.

So much for the AS Level specification. The parts of the A Level specification (for first examination in 2018) that deal with context are more or less the same (identical wording, mainly) as for AS Level.

Section 2a ‘Content Overview’ has ‘Learners also study *additional material* in translation in order to understand *the context* from which the set texts have been taken’. Section 2c has ‘*the literary context*’ rather than ‘the immediate literary context’. Whether this denotes a substantive difference is not clear. In the A Level equivalent of the AS Level extended response question (a longer essay, in effect) the specification says that learners will be required to ‘write at length, drawing upon . . . material studied in translation’. Presumably it is in their answer to this question that candidates will display their knowledge of context. As with the AS Level specification, there is uncertainty about this material in translation. For some reason OCR has *specified* the texts to be read in translation to supplement the set texts in Groups 2 and 4 but not in Groups 1 and 3. (Groups 2 and 4 are for A Level candidates only. Groups 1 and 3 are for AS and A Level candidates.) It is not clear, however, whether these specified texts are deemed sufficient in themselves for a knowledge of context(s). Are they the same as the ‘additional material in translation’ of Section 2a? I cannot tell. If they are, then, as with AS Level, they will not in themselves alone (or along with the set texts) provide the knowledge of context(s) required. If OCR has in mind two different sets of texts to be read in translation then it should make this clear(er).

The only other OCR document I can find that says anything about context is the ‘Co-teachability guide’, a skimpy document to be sure. On page 3 it says that for AS Level ‘Learners should have an awareness of *the immediate literary context* from which the set texts have been taken. It is expected that they will develop this through *wider reading in English*’.

For A Level it says ‘Learners also study *additional literature in translation* in order to understand *the context* from which the set texts have been taken’. Not much guidance here. On page 7 of the same document what is said there suggests that the additional reading in English is intended to be used in a general way for the essay-type questions on the papers, not in order to satisfy specifically the context requirements of the specification.

A Level candidates must, at the same session, answer questions on four set texts, two prose, two verse. One of each (those in Groups 1 and 3) is also prescribed for AS Level candidates. These two texts may be taught to a single group consisting of AS Level and year-one A Level students (thus satisfying the requirement of ‘co-teachability’); and A Level students answer questions on them if they choose to take the AS Level exam, perhaps as a ‘staging post’ on the road to A Level. The Group 1 and Group 3 texts examined at the same time as the two other texts in Group 2 and Group 4 for A Level candidates only are exactly the same as those prescribed in the preceding year, and there is nothing to prevent an A Level candidate from answering questions on the *same* prescriptions *twice*, once for the AS Level exam and again for the A Level. However, they cannot carry forward marks gained in the AS Level exam on the set texts: AS Level and A Level have now been decoupled and they must answer questions on all four texts at the same session. Two of the three texts available in Group 2 and Group 4 are different selections from the *same* texts in Group 1 and Group 3.

If A Level students elect for the AS Level exam they will answer the same questions as the AS Level students. As for the A Level exam, Section A of the two literature papers will contain questions on the Group 1 and Group 3 texts. Section B will contain questions on the Group 2 and Group 4 texts. Section C will contain essay questions on the Group 2 and Group 4 texts only, including the portions specified for reading in translation. The questions in Sections A and B will be of the same type and level of difficulty. They will be broadly similar in style to the questions on the Group 1 and Group 3 texts set for the AS Level exam. The main differences are in the passages for analysis and the essay questions in the A Level exam, both of which will be more

demanding than their AS Level exam equivalents. However, according to the specifications, there seems to be almost no difference between what AS Level and A Level candidates should be 'able to' do and be 'required to' demonstrate as far as the set texts are concerned.

Getting back to context now, the instructions for the 'extended response'/'write at length' questions both say candidates should make use of material in English they have studied; but they tell them to confine this material to *other parts of the same work that the Greek prescription has been taken from*, not to use material from different works, either by the same or different authors. Again, the specified reading in translation for Groups 2 and 4 (there is no specified reading in translation for Groups 1 and 3 texts) consists of *further selections from the same work*, not from different works. This, as I said earlier, is hardly likely to give candidates much insight into the 'wider context' of the prescription. Furthermore, the specifications themselves suggest that wider reading in translation than this, e.g. 'ancient literature') is expected. The whole relationship between awareness of context and reading in English needs to be clarified, and, if not for awareness of context (and what kind of context), just what this reading in English is for and what it should consist of.

'Text' and 'set text' can cause difficulties. Neither in themselves denotes unambiguously a whole work. In fact at this level of examination the term 'set text' has never designated a whole work in the original language. Sometimes 'context' in the specifications seems to mean the context of the

selection in Greek within the work from which it is taken (context as in sense 1 above), not the wider context of the whole work itself (context as in sense 2 above).

I suggest that OCR needs to provide more help and guidance with this whole issue of context, answering the questions posed in this article and resolving the present uncertainties and ambiguities in the specification. Perhaps a case study would be in order, of how exactly to integrate the teaching (and learning) of the context(s) of a set text into the teaching of the text, using only the material in translation indicated in the specification. At least this might reveal the problems involved in doing it using the specifications in their present form. I must confess that if I had to teach these specifications I would not feel confident that I had prepared my candidates in such a way that they complied fully with the requirements concerning context.

As I said at the beginning of this article, I expect that most of the OCR requirements are already being met by competent and conscientious teachers and students. If so, why has OCR felt it necessary to (attempt to) specify context explicitly? Have candidates' answers shown a conspicuous lack of awareness of the context(s) of set texts? Or have the sort of questions set to date not tested their knowledge of context? Perhaps it has become a pedagogic shibboleth, having for some time now been a shibboleth of contemporary literary and cultural studies. If teachers and students have not been teaching and learning context properly, they need to know how to vary their way of teaching and learning in order to comply with these new

requirements. Nothing that OCR has produced so far will enable them to do so.

Personally, I would scrap all reference to context in the specifications and trust to our teachers and students. If this is not on the cards, then I suggest that the present references to context be removed from the specifications and be replaced by something like the following:

'Candidates should be able to show, where required, some general awareness of the context in which the text was composed. (Candidates will not be expected to demonstrate any detailed knowledge of the context.) By 'context' is meant the circumstances (literary, historical, social, cultural, political, geographical, as appropriate) that influenced the composition and character of the text, and their bearing on the candidate's understanding and appreciation of the text. Such awareness may be gained from any relevant sources, including other Greek and/or Latin texts read in translation, in whole or in part.'

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¹Part of the problem of course is that the importance of context should not really need to be spelled out, as it is in the OCR specifications. It is the attempt to do so that causes difficulties.

²Actually 'literary' is ambiguous here. Does it mean context that is literary in nature or context of the literature that is non-literary? Or both?