



**Girton Mountford Humanities and Arts
Communication Prize 2023**

JUSTICE
through the
OBJECTS

Monday 13th February 2023

8pm, The Fellows' Rooms

Programme

8.00pm Introduction by Dr Janik

1. Anna Williams Moura Costa
2. Hanwen Cao
3. Shala Alert
4. Alasdair Harrison

Short break

5. Jacob Robinson
6. Hasan Lone
7. Ben Maguire
8. Elena Bashkova

Audience vote

Judges' comments

Presentation of Prizes

Abstract Prize

The Lawrence Room Prize

Audience Prize

Judges' Prize

10.30pm Closing remarks by The Mistress

Abstracts

1. Anna Williams Moura Costa

Hermione: Learned, Obscured, Loved

In a sense it seems strange to even submit this brief, on justice through objects, when discussing the Girton College mummy, Hermione. Can she truly be classified an object in the same way as the pottery sherds? There is a degree of injustice there already. However, I aim to focus on the wider enmeshing of justice and injustice that surround Hermione. As a unique example of cultural melding, with the Greek, Roman and Egyptian features of her burial, is it Just that the College houses her when she could be compared to other examples of burial in a larger location? At the same time, there is a degree of gender justice that she represents: she was presented to a College for women, to allow female scholars to access and study her, in a male dominated time. In a way she acts as a symbol for the college, having been herself a scholar, as the Greek on the portrait suggests. What would be the justice then, if she were reclaimed, in moving her to a space that has been (like most museums) traditionally controlled and dominated entirely by men, to the exclusion of women? Finally: is it Just that we can see and study Hermione, when the College that she exists in is on the site of many more nameless and faceless Anglo-Saxon dead? I hope to explore these concepts further.

Is it JUST that Hermione receives both less and more attention than she deserves?

2. Hanwen Cao

The Mummy of Hermione Grammatike in the Lawrence Room



A malleable justice embodying the tensions between human philosophies arises from the consideration of plural moralities in the embedded philosophical dimensions of an object. An object is not just a neutral medium to contain but also an active interlocutor to reframe social dialects on justice. The objectification of human remains further questions this presupposition of objects as passive philosophical mediators. My presentation will examine a *patchy* justice and its deep entanglements of struggles in the case of Hermione Grammatike to reveal a darker and more ambiguous version of ideological progress.

Hermione Grammatike – Hermione the literary scholar – was another icon in the ecology of knowledges enkindled by historical and modern female enlightenment in education. After her excavation by Flinders Petrie in 1911 at South Cairo, she came to Girton College symbolising a continuity of female contribution to academia and the strive for justice through a gendered lens. Nevertheless, Hermione exists in a framework of social justice without existential justice which neglects the complementary and antagonistic nature of philosophies in favour of romanticising a universally applicable morality. Her questionable history of acquisition and the underlying ethical dilemmas in the public displays of human remains challenge contemporary imaginations of justice which prioritises what she represents but not what she is. Hermione’s legacy encompasses a multitude of contextual landscapes with shifting implications of justice in the processes of becoming. My presentation will engage with this ideological impasse and its paralysing effect on current visions of a situational justice within the objectification of human remains.

3. Shala Alert

Displaying the Woman's Body: A Question of Ethics

There have been many historical moments when the woman's body has been exploited for various reasons, including propping up the ideals of the socio-cultural body that holds power over her. In this study, I will focus on the academy's use of the female body to further its goals and agendas. Sara Baartman, originally displayed by the white male-dominated European institution, exemplifies perhaps one of the most infamous and controversial examples of this phenomenon. Treated as a "human ethnological" specimen, she was dehumanised, and her body violated in life and desecrated in death to satisfy her captors' supposedly scientific curiosity (Qureshi 233). The important point here is that this project was carried out in the name of knowledge/research/science. After her body was dissected, her remains were exhibited in the museum space in France for decades (Qureshi 233). Even after Mandela fought for her return to South Africa, "modern writers and artists appropriat[ed] her as a focal point for discourses upon race, gender, empire, and specifically Western representations of black female sexuality" (Qureshi 233). In a way, this seems like a further exploitation of her body to promote the agendas of new generations of academics.

When I saw Hermione Grammatike for the first time, I was extremely excited. It felt like such a unique opportunity to see a real-life mummy. But the reality of seeing her left me feeling like a voyeur. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill describes the museum's role as "educational", promoting "teaching, communication... and... research" (x). In one sense, it could be argued that Hermione served her overt purpose as a museum object: as a result of my encounter with her, she facilitated my learning something new about Egypt. However, the discomfort that lingered with me pointed towards a subtext beneath the ideal of education upheld within the university/museum context. Could it be said that Hermione's body is being displayed to bring legitimacy and prestige to the museum that exhibits her? Can the gaze of the museum visitor be seen as a violation? Is it right for her to have been removed from her home and denied traditional burial according to her beliefs and the traditions of her socio-cultural context? My presentation will explore these questions.

4. Alasdair Harrison

The Tell Brak Eye Idols. Is it just that we don't know?

Object: LR1060

Excavations at Tell Brak, in north-eastern Syria, led initially by Max Mallowan and continued by David and Joan Oates (who sadly passed away last Friday), have uncovered a series of small alabaster figurines. These so-called 'eye-idols' are found from the Uruk period onwards – although late 'Ubaid pottery shows some similar iconography (Oates, 1987, p. 176) – and the Lawrence Room, at Girton College, holds around 17. Interpretations of these 'idols' link to the study of religion in Assyriology. LR1060, for example, in the Girton College collection, showing three figures huddled together, asks questions about the justice in assigning meaning to ancient belief. Archaeological knowledge improves with time, and data-sets grow and improve, and it is unsurprising that some older examinations of religion – such as François Lenormant's 'Chaldean Magic' (1877) – are so 'dated' as to be incomprehensible. However, 'modern' interpretations, often at odds with each other, still influence perceptions of the past, and the study of religion, whether private or public, captivates modern audiences. What is still unknown? Is it just to assert and impose modern, reconstructed ideas of ancient religion on ancient practitioners? Does it matter if these 'eye-figurines' represent Tell Brak's later tutelary goddess Bēlet Nagar, or, as Augusta McMahon argues (pers. comm.), votive depictions of the human form? Or if they are representative of larger metaphysical conceptions? Overall, the Tell Brak 'eye-figurines' ask us all whether careless speculation over ancient religion is unjust.

5. Jacob Robinson

Fair Play: What an Egyptian Board Game Teaches us About Justice

The Senet Pieces in Girton's own museum, the Lawrence Room, give us deep insight into the natures of justice and injustice, as well as the sorts of relationships we can have to them. Senet was a game popular throughout much of ancient Egypt's history, and it is central to a myth which gives us this insight about justice. In the myth, the goddess Nut gambles with Khonsu, the god of time, over a game of senet to escape her unjust punishment. Nut wins 5 days' worth of time outside the calendar year, enough to deliver her children and escape the eternal pregnancy imposed on her by Ra (Pharaoh of the gods). This myth shows us a trio of characters whose relations resemble those in the systemic oppression present in our own society – Nut embodies the oppressed, Ra the authority, and Khonsu the privileged. Additionally, Nut's use of senet shows us our obligations towards the oppressed, where we are in a position of privilege. Nut uses the game to place herself in equal standing with Khonsu, thus accessing the resource she needs to liberate herself, which he holds in monopoly. This game, and the myth it symbolises, shows us that, when we have the resources to combat injustice, to be inactive is to support and maintain that injustice, and we ought instead to act as allies, and not saviours, to those perfectly capable of saving themselves once given access to the resources that were kept from them.

Divine Justice: on Earth, as it is in Heaven?

When we think of the word justice, our minds often conjure up images of stuffy courtrooms, wig wearing barristers, and an old unamused judge. However, something that often misses our attention (especially in our ever-growing secular society) is justice as understood in religion.

The depth to which religion penetrated society in the past goes unappreciated. We are often ignorant of the importance it played in forming key values and ideals which are imprinted on the ordinary governance of that society and how they are still present in the modern world.

Through the duality present in coins, objects often decorated to represent the divinely appointed ideals of a society yet used for the earthly means of buying and selling, we can observe whole societies at once. We can view their principles, understand their ambitions as decreed by the dominance of religion at the time, and understand how they were implemented in reality.

My examination of the coins, which include some Islamic coins from the Fitzwilliam Museum, as well as Roman coins in the Lawrence Room, will observe the religious imagery and significance displayed on them, as well as the economic practices of the society. From this we can contemplate the importance of religion at a state level, as well as understand the ongoing societal evils. Contrasting religious idealism, with earthly realism.

We can explore divine justice, and whether it truly is implemented on Earth, as Heaven desires, in modern times.

7. Ben Maguire

A Rehearsal both Strange and True – A Media both Strange and True?

This presentation will use the witchcraft pamphlet *A Rehearsal both Strange and True*¹ to discuss the popular justice enacted by witchcraft pamphleteers through the late 16th and 17th centuries. Throughout this period the English public existed in a state of near-constant peril, surviving isolated in an incomprehensible world filled with misunderstood and, therefore, esoteric danger. These people lived in an environment wherein the existence of the Devil's agents and magicks was a certainty, which made witchcraft an 'everyday drama'. Witchcraft pamphlets functioned as the primary method by which the public learned about local witch trials while they existed as a contemporary threat

Therefore, their presentation of both the witch and the victim defined the popular understanding of both of those individuals' motives and shortcomings. Prior to 1590 these pamphlets record encounters with witches who are provoked, stories of insult which lead to retribution. However, this perception of the witch, as a victim of at least a perceived slight lashing out, dissipated in the few years following 1590. Those skilled pamphleteers who had been recording the legal events left local villages en masse, with their positions being occupied by local amateurs or mercenary writers hired by rich families.

This created a standard of pamphlet which demonised the witch. The focus on legal precision vanished with the witch's victim often emerging blameless as, either, local writers dramatized events or paid individuals sought to protect reputations. Through this change, the justice fell out of these objects.

¹ Found in the British Library

8. Elena Bashkova

Fountain by Marcel Duchamp

Fountain by Marcel Duchamp, a replica of which is displayed in the Tate, London, stood out to me as an object embodying justice. The original *Fountain* was an ordinary, manufactured urinal which was submitted to be displayed at an inaugural exhibition by the Society of Independent Artists. This new Society was founded for aspirational artists in New York to trespass the rigidity, traditions, and conventions of the influential Parisian Académie des Beaux-Arts. *Fountain* was an unconventional piece of art – the most ordinary object, stripped of its primary function and re-contextualised in its significance as an art piece. Although, the artwork submitted by Duchamp under pseudonym R. Mutt, was accepted by board members, given the only requirement for this exhibition was paying a fee, nonetheless, it was never displayed due to its alleged vulgarity. I think that *Fountain* is an epitome of 'justice through object' theme. *Fountain* defied the established contemporary norms of art, highlighted the prejudice within the art world and within the Society, and became one of the most intellectually captivating art pieces of past century. It questioned what makes an art Art, who can be an Artist, and who gets to establish what is Art and who is an Artist. To me, the upside-down urinal that became *Fountain* is about seeking justice and exposing the superficial nature of establishments. *Fountain* in itself became the artistic, naked symbol of justice in the 20th century.

Thank you to our judges

Dr Stuart Davis (Modern Languages)
Dr Claudia Domenici (Modern Languages)
Dr Sandra Fulton (Natural Sciences)
Dr Liliana Janik (Archaeology)
Dr Margaret Mountford (Egyptology)

Margaret Mountford (née Gamble) read French and German in her first year and Law for subsequent years at Girton 1970-1973, before embarking on a legal career which culminated in her being a Partner in Corporate Law at Herbert Smith (1983-1999). Dr Mountford has held a number of non-executive directorships, notably at Amstrad, where her associations with Alan Sugar led to her appearing as one of Lord Sugar's advisors in the first five series of the UK version of *The Apprentice*. Since leaving *The Apprentice* in 2009, Dr Mountford has pursued research in Papyrology and was awarded a PhD degree from UCL. Writing in the *Girton Review* in 2007 she says: 'If asked to recommend a career in law or TV to an aspiring graduate, I know which one I'd choose'...

We are very pleased to acknowledge sponsorship from
Dr Margaret Mountford

