

"REACTING TO THE PAST" AND
THE CLASSICS CURRICULUM: ROME IN 44 BCE

Imagine a classics course in which the students all rise without prompting to address the class; discuss the course on their own time with their classmates; are seldom if ever absent; write informed, text-based position papers and essays; and conduct the class-sessions themselves, while the instructor sits in the corner and occasionally answers questions. You have just imagined a session of "Reacting to the Past."

"Reacting to the Past" is an innovative pedagogy pioneered by Mark Carnes, Professor of History at Barnard College. "Reacting" courses are elaborate historical games, informed by major texts in the history of ideas. Students are assigned roles, which include detailed descriptions of their individual intellectual goals and possible strategies, along with personalized victory objectives. The instructor performs the conventional tasks of grading students' oral and written work, and conducting classes to introduce and conclude the game. The instructor also serves as Gamemaster, supervising the sessions, advising students on matters of strategy and ensuring that the game is historically credible. "Reacting" was honored with the 2004 Theodore Hesburgh Award for pedagogical innovation.¹ More than 160 colleges and universities now offer "Reacting" classes. Student reaction has been overwhelmingly positive, with many commenting on the unique nature of the courses, on how historical experience became personal experience in the games, and on how the pedagogy led to a better understanding of historical development and causation and a sense of how history might easily have turned out differently.²

The "Reacting" pedagogy began with a game based on the ancient world, *The Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403 B.C.*, designed by Carnes and Josiah Ober. The game begins immediately after the expulsion of the Thirty Tyrants. Students are divided into four historically based social groups, or "factions" (radical democrats, moderate democrats, oligarchs, Socratics), and assigned roles. The factions then convene to plot their course of action. Some students are assigned roles that are not fixed, but are "indeterminate." Such characters may need to devise their own

¹ "Reacting to the Past" has received developmental support from the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation, the Teagle Foundation and the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education of the U.S. Department of Education.

² See <http://www.barnard.edu/reacting/perspectives.htm> for a sample of comments by students and others. Steven S. Stroessner (Department of Psychology, Barnard College), who conducted a multi-campus study of the "Reacting" pedagogy, reports in a forthcoming article that "students who participated in a ['Reacting'] course ... demonstrate improvement in rhetorical skills and no difference in writing skills compared with controls. They also showed increases in self-esteem, decreased belief that they control events in their lives, and higher levels of emotional empathy for others." Our thanks to Dana Johnson, Program Coordinator for "Reacting to the Past," for this summary of Professor Stroessner's study.

victory objectives, or may have objectives specific to their role. Indeterminate characters are expected to listen to debates; to attend any faction meetings that interest them or to which they are invited; and to decide which position makes more sense and better suits their political and economic interests.³ Students meet as a group in the Athenian Assembly and law courts to debate reconciliation after the expulsion of the Thirty, the organization of Athenian government, the expansion of citizenship, the future of the empire and the fate of Socrates.⁴ In order to speak effectively and to advance their factional or individual interests, they are required to read and grapple with the arguments of Plato's *Republic* and other contemporary critiques of Athenian democracy.

When a call went out from the Reacting Consortium for the development of new games, we decided to propose a Rome game, *Beware the Ides of March: Rome in 44 BCE*, in part to complement the Athens game. Much of what follows in our description of the game will be obvious, but we want to give colleagues who may be interested in playing the game with a class a sense of our working assumptions, of the information provided to students at the beginning of the game and of its mechanisms. Instructors who would like to examine the current preliminary version of the game or use it in a course can download the Game Manual and Instructor's Manual through the "Reacting to the Past" Faculty Forum.⁵

Beware the Ides of March recreates the struggle for power and control of Rome that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar. The game begins immediately after the assassination, and most of the action takes place in the Senate, which is required to deal with various threats to order in the city and in the empire. Decisions taken to deal with immediate crises may also set the future course of Roman government. Resorting to one-man rule may ratify the recent trend toward autocracy; on the other hand, if the tradition of rule by consensus can bring Rome through this crisis, the Senate may be able to "restore the Republic" and resume its predominant role in governing the state.

Students are divided into two principal factions, "Caesarians"—the larger group, since Caesar had packed the Senate—and "Republicans." Some students will have indeterminate roles as non-partisan (or at least uncommitted) members of the Senate, depending on the size of the class and the interests of the instruc-

³ There are nine Indeterminate roles for the Athens game: Fishmonger, Retired sailor, Impoverished farmer, Merchant son, Rich athlete, Metic, Bearded artisan, Carpenter, Middling farmer.

⁴ The third edition of the Athens game recommends three introductory classes, six classes devoted to the game and one "post-mortem" session. We have found that the "Reacting" pedagogy is very flexible and that the number of sessions can be reduced or increased depending on local conditions without reducing the general effectiveness of the game.

⁵ <http://www.barnard.edu/reacting/resources.htm>.

tor.⁶ One point of the game is to force students to grapple with complex issues of Roman power politics at a moment of crisis, allowing them to gain perspective on the dynamics of late Republican history and increasing their ability to evaluate and understand Rome's subsequent evolution.

Probable debates in the Senate fall under four headings: public order, Caesar's powers, foreign policy and government. Public order involves both practical and symbolic matters: whether to reward the assassins for their murder of the "tyrant" or to allow their prosecution; whether to confirm in office those, like Brutus, who currently hold public magistracies, or to remove them from their posts; whether to allow a public funeral for Caesar; and whether to give emergency powers to Marcus Antonius, now invested with sole executive power as the surviving consul. Some senators may call for the confirmation of Caesar's decrees, including his nominations for public offices for several years into the future; but the Senate must confront the possibility that interested parties will continue to produce previously unknown "decrees" of Caesar for some time after his death. The Senate must also decide whether to conduct elections for successors to the various offices held by Caesar—most importantly, consul, dictator and pontifex maximus. In foreign policy, the Senate must decide whether to proceed with the expedition against the Parthians in order to secure the empire's eastern border and avenge the defeat of Crassus and the loss of Roman legionary standards in 53. In addition, it must consider the fate of Egypt and of Cleopatra, who was Caesar's lover and is living in Rome at the time of his assassination.

In addition to public order and public office, issues of governance include providing food for the city of Rome, taxation, administration of the provinces and land settlements for Caesar's veterans. Complicating the resolution of these and other issues is the fact that Caesar increased the number of senators from 600 to 900 and that at least three men are seeking his dominant position and the support of his veterans and senators: Marcus Antonius, Aemilius Lepidus (Caesar's *magister equitum*) and Gaius Octavius (Caesar's 19-year-old great-nephew and protégé). Any one of those three may manage to make himself sole heir to Caesar's power; or two or three of them may unite to further their cause and to impose their will on the Senate, as Caesar did earlier in his coalition with Pompey and Crassus.

Central texts, which students are expected to read and be familiar with, are Cicero's *de re publica*, *de officiis* and *Philippicae*. In *de re publica*, Cicero constructs a dialogue between Scipio

⁶ We recommend a minimum of 12 and a maximum of 24 players for the Rome game. That said, the game could be effective with as few as 9 players (2 Republicans, 4 Caesarians, and 3 indeterminates). With more than 24 players, issues would arise of time-management and sufficient opportunity for all students to speak frequently enough in the course of the game. On class size and other management issues, see Carnes, *Pedagogy Manual* (Longman, 2005).

Aemilianus and others on the best form of government, surveying the practice of the Roman state and Greek political philosophy, and arguing for a combination of monarchy, oligarchy and democracy, following the description in Polybius of the Roman system in the 2nd century BCE. *De re publica* illustrates a distinctly Roman approach to political and social issues, combining an appeal to an idealized Roman past with the application of Greek philosophy.

In *de officiis*, written after the Ides of March to his son as a manual on ethical and moral issues in public life, Cicero calls Caesar a tyrant and a king and declares the assassination morally justified. *De officiis* confronts directly the issue of the integrity and responsibility of the Republican faction for the present situation. Cicero himself benefited from Caesar's *clementia* after the defeat of Pompey, while other Republicans, like Brutus, were Caesar's protégés; yet Republicans found it necessary to break their personal oath of loyalty to him. *De officiis* presents the current dilemma at Rome as a moral crisis, not just a political one.

The *Philippicae* are important as a record of Cicero's opposition to Marcus Antonius. But they are more interesting and instructive as an example of the personal invective that was part and parcel of Roman political discourse; these speeches illustrate how Romans spoke to and about one another in matters of life and death. Roman political culture was performative; anyone who aspired to power and position was expected to persuade through oratory in the Senate, public assemblies and the law courts. It was also combative, verbally, intellectually and physically.

As in other "Reacting" games, the development of speaking and writing skills is central to *Beware the Ides of March* and is crucial to students' success in the game and in the course. This explains our emphasis on texts of Cicero. In a period when rhetoric dominated public life and education, and rhetorical skill offered a pathway into politics, persuasion was power; and Cicero was the acknowledged master of the craft and remained so for centuries. Reading Cicero's works enables students to flesh out their individual roles and to incorporate in the game the complex interplay of principle, ambition, personal and family ties, domestic and foreign crises, and calculation and miscalculation that shaped the historical events. We want students to gain a mature appreciation of Cicero's remarks on the sanctimonious attitude of the younger Cato towards politics: "He acts like he's living in Plato's *Republic*, not in Romulus' cesspool" (*Att.* 2.1.8).

We have incorporated two mechanisms into the game to enable individual instructors to adapt it to their particular curricular goals: a long list of indeterminate characters, and a number of game "surprises." Our indeterminates include Cleopatra and Herod the Great (for those who want to emphasize foreign policy); Catullus,⁷ Sallust and Varro (to incorporate literary and

⁷ Although we have no evidence of Catullus' career after service on the staff of Memmius in Bithynia, we follow T.P. Wiseman, *Catullus & His World* (Cambridge, 1985) 190–5, who posits that he survived to write mimes.

cultural questions); the Spanish senator Titius (for provincial interests); a Greek philosopher named Panaetius Minor; Gaius Rabirius Postumus (for the economic interests of the *equites*); and the centurion Lucius Vorenus (for those eager to capitalize on the popularity of HBO's *Rome*). The history of the late Republic offers dozens of other possibilities for instructors interested in creating additional indeterminates of their own.

We leave surprises completely to the discretion of the Game-master, who can use them to shake up a deadlocked game or to introduce historical situations and factors which, in the Game-master's opinion, have not otherwise received sufficient attention from the players. We have included several surprises in the preliminary game manual, including the announcement of Caesar's will, designating Gaius Octavius as his heir and successor and leaving his gardens to the people; we have also included instructions to the students for assassinations and marching on Rome, which Gamemasters may incorporate in their game or not. Other surprises might include an announcement from the Gamemaster that Gaius Octavius is marching on Italy with the Parthian army; a rumor that Sextus Pompeius is threatening to cut off the city's grain supply; an announcement of the appearance of a comet leading to a call on the augurs for an interpretation of the omen; the posting of scurrilous attacks; the announcement that the poet Helvius Cinna has been killed in the Forum by a mob who mistook him for the conspirator Cornelius Cinna; the announcement of invasions from border territories, revolts in the provinces, or the seizure of power by provincial governors; the death or divorce of the wives of characters; and assassinations. Again, history provides many more possibilities.

As in all "Reacting" games, grading is based on written and oral work. The instructor might assign the composition of speeches on the probable debate topics in the Senate. This exercise encourages the students to prepare in advance the positions they may be called upon to advocate or refute in meetings of the Senate. Even speeches not delivered in Senate sessions could be made available in the game in the form of a class blog. This is true to historical reality in Rome, where "undelivered" speeches (like the Second Philippic) circulated as pamphlets. Grading criteria for the speeches include fidelity to the models of Roman rhetoric, historical plausibility and suitability to the student's assigned role in the game. Instructors should consider both incentives to active participation in Senate meetings, such as the award of additional votes, and penalties for failure to participate, such as the loss of votes.

The most obvious yokemate for the Rome game is the Athens game, creating a "Reacting" sequence on the Greco-Roman world. The two games raise similar issues and the pairing illustrates the transmission of Greek learning and political thought to the Romans; the games also show how different Athenian and Roman society were. Another possible pairing is with *Constantine and the*

Council of Nicaea: Defining Orthodoxy and Heresy in Christianity, 325 CE for a Western civilization or ancient world sequence.⁸ The Rome game could easily find a comfortable home in a general education program; it emphasizes crucial skill-sets (reading, writing and speaking), introduces scholarly disciplines (classics, philosophy, rhetoric, political science, history) that form the basis of Western liberal education (even if some of those are now pushed to the margins), and has as one of its central issues the relationship between republican governance, imperialism and autocracy. The founders of the American polity certainly had the late Roman Republic in mind as they debated the Constitution. By itself, the Rome game could also serve as the discussion section or precept in a large lecture course in Roman culture or history, or as a component of an upper-level classics, ancient history or Latin language course, especially one centered on the transition from the Republic to the early Empire.⁹ We want to emphasize that the instructor/Gamemaster need not be an expert in Roman history in order to lead the class. The burden of historical knowledge falls instead on the students in the course of the game. When a student asks a vexing question or proposes a new scenario, the Gamemaster should refer the student to appropriate historical resources.

We have had three opportunities to test a preliminary version of the Rome game. Professor Anise Strong of Northwestern University invited us to use the game in a session of her freshman seminar on the Roman Republic; students at Michigan State University played a condensed two-day version; and invited faculty from across the country played the game at the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, D.C. The acute and reflective observations and comments of participants in all three trials helped us to improve the game's conception and design.¹⁰

⁸ This game, designed by D.E. Henderson and F. Kirkpatrick, is in development and may be downloaded at the "Reacting to the Past" Faculty Forum, <http://www.barnard.edu/reacting/resources.htm>.

⁹ Classicists can establish bridges to colleagues in other disciplines by teaching "Reacting" courses in which an ancient game is combined with games from other historical periods. At the University of Georgia, for example, one "Reacting to the Past" course pairs the Athens game with *Confucianism and the Succession Crisis of the Wanli Emperor*, while another pairs the Athens game with *Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France, 1791*. The other published "Reacting" games are *Defining a Nation: India on the Eve of Independence, 1945*; *Henry VIII and the Reformation Parliament*; *The Trial of Anne Hutchinson: Liberty, Law, and Intolerance in Puritan New England*; *The Trial of Galileo: Aristotelianism, the "New Cosmology," and the Catholic Church, 1616–33*. For a list of games currently in development, see <http://www.barnard.edu/reacting/curriculum.htm>.

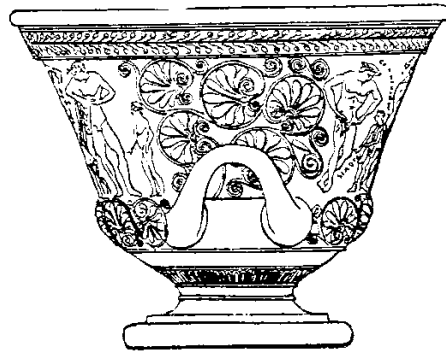
The *Threshold of Democracy* has been adapted for high-school students as part of HEAF@Barnard, an academic program for college-bound students from the Harlem Education Activities Fund (see <http://www.barnard.edu/reacting/special%20projects.htm>). Mark Carnes himself has expressed reservations about the pedagogical value of role-playing activities for students at this level.

¹⁰ Our thanks to Mark Carnes, Dana Johnson and the Reacting Advisory Board for a development grant for the Rome game; John Rauk, Chair of the Department of French, Classics and Italian at Michigan State University; Anise Strong, Kenny Morrell and the Center for Hellenic Studies; Nancy Felson of the

For firsthand experience of the "Reacting" pedagogy, readers should go to a "Reacting" conference. These are held across the country and throughout the year. Participants at the conferences play shortened versions of one or two games and also engage in discussions of liberal education, student motivation and the problems and possibilities of the "Reacting" pedagogy.¹¹

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University of Georgia; and University of Georgia graduate students Eric Verhine, Deana Zeigler and Jessica Fisher. Thanks also to S. Douglas Olson, editor of *CJ*, and Emily West, Forum Editor, for their interest and support.

¹¹ <http://www.barnard.edu/reacting/conference.htm>.