

INTRODUCTION

Interdisciplinarity challenges the boundaries of traditional academic thinking, makes connections, seeks patterns, traces influences, draws comparisons and brings new perspectives to old topics. It also questions the established ivory towers of humanities in which scholars shy away from gaining knowledge from other disciplines. It is liberating to be 'allowed' to study across different disciplines and this enables academic thinking in ways that were previously obstructed. TORCH (The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities) and its equivalent in other universities are leading the way in sharing knowledge across disciplinary boundaries. Yet true interdisciplinary degree programmes remain scarce, in the UK at least, and although we will be the fifth cohort to graduate from the MSt. in Literature and Arts, we are still, to an extent, torchbearers.

In contrast to postgraduate programmes that offer study in a highly specialised field, MLA students run the risk of being the proverbial Jacks-of-all-Trades, Masters-of-None, flitting dilettanti-like across topics, time periods and disciplines. Our challenge is to use our greater breadth to bring together disparate areas of study. We have each brought to the course a different set of skills and specialist knowledge, historians working next to lawyers, art historians next to literary scholars, and it has been our privilege to learn from each other as well as from our inspirational course tutors.

This journal bears the fruit of interdisciplinary study. Twenty-two articles analysing a range of paintings, prints, poems, buildings, parks, songs, cartoons, novels, plays, sermons and more, from over five hundred years of British history, have given rise to a surprising number of common themes, enabling a wider perspective. The nature of academic study means that research is often conducted at a micro level, but our combined output is certainly greater than the sum of our parts.

In the end, academia is not just about studying in isolation: it is about exchange, discussion, different perspectives, and about personal connections. Going forward we will continue to benefit from the friendships and links we have forged on an academic level as well, continuing the discussions, still learning from each other. The MLA is about more than study, however. As Hogarth so aptly captured in his iconic print, a happy and fruitful society is one that makes time for wholesome leisure. And so, as the modern-day inhabitants of Beer Street, we leave it to the Reverend James Townley to reflect on the productivity-enhancing properties of that wheaten elixir:

Labour and Art upheld by Thee
 Successfully advance
 We quaff Thy balmy Juice with Glee
 And Water leave to France