

It is an honour to speak here today. I am going to talk about the ancient Romans, about creative freedom (and its absence), and about storytelling.

But we start with **SLIDE** this. This is a small ancient Roman glass bottle that was made about 2000 years ago. What would have gone through a Roman's head when he or she looked at a glass vessel such as this one?

I wonder what's in there?

What a beautiful colour!

That's an interesting shape?

All of these are possible.

But there is something else, something that is at the core of the research I do. How we respond to material objects – like this little perfume bottle- also depends on our sense of *how they were made*.

In my ERC project FACERE, we study ancient Roman ideas about 'how things were made' – and the values and priorities that lie behind these ideas. [And when I say 'we', I mean that I do this together with these fantastic young colleagues]

How can we get at the experience and the thought worlds of people who lived 2000 years ago, in a society radically different from our own? I'm not saying it's easy – but I'll use the example of glass, and specifically *glass blowing*, to give you a sense of how we do this.

How to reconstruct: poem and lamp

We do this by collecting and studying Roman depictions of making – and in this case glassblowing - in progress. We are not trying to reconstruct how glassblowing was actually, technically done (this kind of thing is what our colleagues over in the archaeology department can do). What we as literary scholars want to know is how Romans talk and think about glassblowing. For that, we use texts and images from ancient Rome that depict glassblowing.

What you can see here is a papyrus fragment (papyrus is a kind of writing material made from the stem of the papyrus plant). For about 1700 years, this papyrus scrap was preserved in a rubbish heap in the Egyptian desert until it was discovered in the 19th century. On it is a fragment of a Greek poem (ancient Greek and Latin were the two main languages of the Roman empire). And this fragment is about glassblowing.

This poem **SLIDE** gives us a sense of how glass was blown, and it also tries to convey something of the excitement and spectacle of seeing a glassblower at work. (where you see "... " in the translation, there are holes in the original scrap of papyrus, or the text is illegible).

The poem provides a blow-by-blow account of how the metal blowpipe is heated. **SLIDE for each step**). glass is attached to it, is softened, blown into repeatedly, and how the glassblower rhythmically swings his pipe to shape the vessel. This poem really gives us a sense of how raw glass becomes vessel, or, if you already know, it reminds you of it.

But this is not a dry factual account. Let's look at three interesting features of this poetic fragment.

SLIDE First: the poet emphasizes that the force of fire collaborates willingly with the glassblower: fire, personified as the god Hephaistos, helps by melting the glass lump, so that it becomes workable for the glassblower.

SLIDE Second: the glassblower himself (it's a bit complicated, you'll have to trust me on this) is compared to a divine, cosmic creator – the glassblower can literally 'breathe life' into the glass, and by breathing into it, it becomes a sphere – like the cosmos.

SLIDE Third: the poet compares the glassblower to someone 'trying out the art of flute-playing'. This metaphor refers to the fact that a pipe is being blown into, of course – but it also associates glassblowing with something that is both creative and aesthetically pleasing.

But this is just one poem, or one piece of a puzzle.

SLIDE Here is another, very different piece of the puzzle: a little oil lamp, made from terracotta. Tens of thousands of such oil lamps have survived from the Roman period. Everyone had them – no lamp, no light. This one carries an illustration which shows a glassblower at work, on the right, **SLIDE** (you can see his blowpipe, and the bottle-like shape emerging from it).

We can see that the lamp, like the text, is putting fire centre stage: **SLIDE** in the middle is the furnace: it is the central item of the composition, and it takes up more space than either of the two figures. So this confirms our impression that the collaboration between man and fire is central to our ancient Romans' ideas about how glass was made and shaped. If many more pieces of the puzzle also place this same emphasis - and they do – then we can probably conclude that many Romans, looking at a glass vessel, might associate it with the creative power of fire.

But there is also something that this lamp shows, and that is completely absent from the poem. There are *two* people here, working *together*. One is blowing, the other **SLIDE**, on the left, is probably working the bellows, to keep the fire at the right temperature. The fact is – glass blowers in ancient Rome never worked alone. They couldn't. Someone had to keep the fire at the right temperature (experimental archaeology has shown that this is pretty challenging) and hand them tools at the right moment.

So, **SLIDE** by comparing lamp and poem, we also learn that telling a story about creation always involves making *choices*, highlighting certain things, leaving out others.

The poem compares the glassblower to a divine creator, and his work is creative and beautiful like flute-playing. We are led to admire his skill and are drawn into the magic of making a hard lump of glass transform into a see-through vessel.

But looking at our lamp (and at what we know about the Roman glass industry from historical and archaeological research) also helps us to see what this poet is not talking about. Glassblowers were not lone geniuses – they worked in a small team, which the poem leaves out to focus on the glassblower alone. And most Roman glassblowers' work was a lot less free and creative than our poem might lead us to think. Glass workers were mass producing at large volumes, breathing in poisonous fumes as they worked, and were exposed to considerable danger in working with hot glass.

The poem, written for educated and most likely affluent readers, creates admiration for the art of glass blowing. In doing so, it makes a lot of the *labour* of glassblowing disappear (and some the *people* who performed this labour). There was also almost certainly a significant amount of slave labour involved in the glass industry of the Roman empire. The poem makes *invisible* the constraints on the creative freedom and the personal and legal freedom of glass workers in ancient Rome.

Stories change the world, then and now

Why does this matter? It matters because stories, and images, are not just pretty things, that have nothing to do with real life. Representations like these reflect social reality, but they also influence and shape it. Especially if we're not talking about a single poem or lamp, but about a much larger conversation that they are part of. If you make certain elements of the creative process, or the people who perform it, invisible in your words and images, then you influence the way people actually see and value them – with real impact on the lives of real people.

Studying an ancient culture and trying to get into the heads of people who have been dead for 2000 years, is, in my opinion, worthwhile in itself. It also has the potential to change your perspective on the present, because often, looking at things that happened a long time ago can provide you with a new awareness for looking at your own world.

SLIDE Researchers at this university also create 'things' (from nanocars to databases, from sugar molecules to books). And of course, many of us also spend at least some of our time talking about the creative processes that lead to our research outcomes. (This includes researchers, but also colleagues in communication, public engagement, and many others). We tell stories of creation every day, to each other, to our students, and to the world outside. I am even doing it now, in this talk!

But what are the choices that **we** make in telling those stories of creation, and what does that say about **our** underlying priorities and values?

I think that, quite often, the stories we tell are a bit like the poem about the glassblower. We like to stress the joy, the wonder, the creative freedom of research, and we emphasise the skill and knowledge of those who perform it. (although hopefully we don't usually suggest that researchers are godlike). And I am not saying that we shouldn't do that – all of these things are real, they are the fuel for our engine, and we *should* be talking about them!

But it is also important to look at what we tend *not* to say or include, and to keep an eye out for what, or who, can become invisible in the stories we tell about creative processes in universities. I am sure that everyone here can come up with their own examples. Here are some that came to my mind.

For example, external pressures (financial and institutional) on academic researchers are so high that we rarely feel able to talk about how something did not work out, an experiment that failed, a paper or a book that didn't get written. (So maybe I should point out that I meant to write two papers for this ERC project this summer, and neither is even near finished).

And we, too, can sometimes, without noticing, make certain people invisible whose work is nonetheless absolutely essential. For example, to free me up to carry out my ERC grant, some of my teaching is taken over by colleagues, usually on temporary teaching-only contracts – and the fact that temporary teaching personnel is not often mentioned when we talk about how we do our work here also means that they are not always at the top of the list when policy decisions are made.

And finally – we can choose to tell a story in which, like the glassblower, we are free to follow our creative impetus – but we shouldn't hide the many ways in which external pressures to produce tangible, marketable or applicable results can sometimes stifle creative freedom.

So I want to close by encouraging you to do two things in this coming academic year. One: to celebrate and appreciate the joy and the freedom that comes with the kinds of creation that we have the privilege to be involved in at this university. But also: to look for what, or who, is perhaps made invisible in the stories we tell and the pictures we paint, and to add them back in where we can, because the stories we tell really do matter for the actions we take.