

Laura Gibbs is an assistant professor of classics who enjoys calculus almost as much as she likes reading Greek, and she contends that algebra and Latin have many things in common.

Her love of math as well as language is not the only dichotomy behind the young teacher who just completed her first year at the University of Oklahoma.

A gifted student who graduated from high school at age 16, Gibbs grew up the daughter of a sociology professor in Austin, Texas, earned her doctorate at the University of California, Berkeley, and moved to Norman last August. This Texan likes the Sooner state and looks forward to settling down with a dog and a piano, a luxury beyond her reach as a graduate student.

Gibbs already has two book contracts in her specialty, but she says research is not her first love. Teaching is.

Probably the most unusual thing about this teacher of ancient culture is her love for the Internet. Gibbs finds balance by reaching outside of the traditional ways of studying the classics. She sees how computers are changing the way students learn about everything from engineering to Greek literature, and she is happy to be riding the current.

At 36 Gibbs was among five new "Ph.D.s to watch" named last year by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. This distinction helps validate what she admits is an unusual approach to classical studies.

While the majority of her colleagues focus their research and teaching on Plato, Aristotle, Homer, the Caesars and other Greco-Roman superstars, Gibbs' attention is on the popular culture. Ancient folklore is at the foundation of her teaching philosophy. She calls it the road less traveled, the lighter side of the classics.

In place of poetry, drama and other elevated Greek and Roman literature, Gibbs enjoys Aesop's fables, which often are associated with the slaves in Greek and Roman society. She uses the levity of Roman insults and ancient magic

spells to dust away boredom and obscurity.

Even though they date back as far as 2,800 years, Aesop's fables are a clear window on life in ancient times, Gibbs says. Aesop was a legendary Greek storyteller, and Aesopic fables were already a part of archaic Greek culture. His fables typically are about animals with human characteristics, who encounter dilemmas common in both ancient and modern times.

"An Aesop's fable is about a mistake, or a mistake someone else has made, or a mistake not made," Gibbs says.

One fable about a wolf with a bone in his throat contains a lesson about trust.

A version posted on Gibbs' Web site goes like this: "A wolf had swallowed a bone and was going around looking for someone to be his doctor. When he met a heron, he begged him to remove the bone for a fee.

"The heron put his head into the wolf's jaws, pulled out the bone and asked for the pay they had agreed on.

"The wolf replied, 'my good fellow, aren't you satisfied with getting your head out of a wolf's mouth without asking for pay besides?'"

The fable's moral is that "the greatest return for good service to bad men is not being wronged in the bargain."

Gibbs says people used Aesop's fables as lessons on how to avoid mistakes. The Aesop tradition has spread over much of the globe and has been unbroken from 800 B.C. to now.

Gibbs is translating a collection of about 600 fables from Latin and Greek to English. She started the project 10 years ago and expects to finish later this summer; the translations will be published by Oxford University Press. Part of her project also will be posted on the Internet.

John Catlin, chair of OU's Classics Department, calls Gibbs a pioneer in developing a new area of interest.

"What she is doing is opening up a whole area of



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Laura Gibbs' mastery of cyberspace sets her apart from most classicists. She is part of an Internet project to create multimedia presentations of all that is known about antiquity.

classical antiquity that has been ignored in the past," Catlin says. "Now, there is a growing interest in how people lived in everyday Roman or Greek society."

Catlin explains that he and most of his colleagues are focused on the great classical authors and thinkers, but he is beginning to see interest in what ordinary people thought, particularly in the first few centuries A.D.

While Gibbs' passion for classical studies is in folklore, she is proving her scholarship in the mainstream as well. Catlin says Gibbs has joined an attempt to place all that is known about antiquity on the Internet. Working with a group of scholars at Tufts University on the "Perseus Project," Gibbs is establishing Web links to images and other supporting materials to accompany Suetonius' biographies on the lives of the Caesars.

Catlin judges the Perseus Project "enormous . . . more sweeping than an antiquity encyclopedia." Gibbs refers to it simply as, "your best classical friend on the Internet."

When complete, the new site will include materials that, up to now, have only been available at the most prestigious universities. Its multimedia presentations will level the playing field, Catlin insists, giving all students access to the same information, regardless of where they are.

He says Gibbs is unique among faculty in his department because of her familiarity with cyberspace. "She is much more aware than any of us of what's out there.

"What she is doing is opening up a whole area of classical antiquity that has been ignored in the past."

Laura is very, very bright."

Between earning her master's degree in European literature and beginning her Ph.D. program, Gibbs took time off to work as a computer programmer. That experience helped make the Internet a mainstay of Gibbs' teaching style.

The teacher supports her high-energy classroom manner with high-tech resources on the Web. She requires each of her students to create their own Web site and update it at least three times during the semester.

Her own Web site contains access to an array of Latin and Greek dictionaries, morphologies and archives. It gives students access to dozens of Internet resources that will speed their work and help them avoid purchasing expensive

reference books.

Gibbs loves ancient culture. She is devoted to exposing as many people as she can to its color, wisdom and passion. Like her colleagues, Gibbs will publish her share of books and papers on the subject, but that is not at the heart of her mission. She points to low circulation numbers for academic publications on the classics, and concludes her biggest impact will be in the classroom.

Her students describe her as a friend and a mentor who holds them to high standards. The professor has a strict attendance policy, but she does not count noses at the beginning of class. Instead, she requires written questions or comments each period and marks her book according to the papers she receives.

Gibbs laughs and jokes with her students while coaxing them through their Greek and Latin readings. They drink soft drinks and coffee, and an occasional box of crackers is passed around, extinguishing formality and inhibition.

Jaime Craig, a junior letters major from Norman, says Gibbs is an enthusiastic teacher. "She showed how much she loved (the course), and it made the class, I think."

Craig, who just completed her second class with Gibbs, believes the teacher cares about her students, which motivates the class to work harder. "I think of her more as a friend than a teacher."

Bob Hutchins, a Latin major from Tishomingo, describes his time with Gibbs differently. "It's like hanging out with Socrates."

—CHIP MINTY



Robert Taylor

There is nothing stuffy about the classics in Laura Gibbs' classes, which could be held in front of a computer or outdoors under a tree. With Gibbs, from left, are Beau Branson, Eric Brown and Steve Wagner.