

Teaching the Classical Reception Revolution

5. *Black Athena* and the Classical Classroom

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Among the issues explored at the *Revolutions and Classics* conference, where I presented the paper that has grown into this piece, was just how far the discipline of Classics has been changed by the development of Classical Reception Studies.¹ Indeed, as Sebastian Robins, one of my fellow speakers, commented, the very notion of ‘Classics’ originates as reception.² In one of the pedagogic papers, also published in this current collection, Luke Richardson advocated a move from what Classics means to what Classics is for. He asked how far the emergence of Classical Reception Studies has impacted on classical research and on how Classics is taught. He asked whether Classical Reception managed to revolutionise Classics – and, if so, where this revolution succeeded or failed. In this article, I shall work through these issues in relation to *Black Athena* and the role it has played in my teaching.

I do this at a time when a discussion of this particular topic is especially germane for several reasons. Martin Bernal claimed in 2001 that ‘*Black Athena* has forced classicists...to make choices on general issues and take “political” positions for or against the status quo.’³ Here I explore Bernal’s claim in light of a session that forms part of a module I teach at the University of Roehampton – at a time when students’ perceptions of Classics as an elitist or inclusive discipline appear to be on the move. Certainly, they are on the move at Roehampton and from the evidence presented by colleagues, including at the *Revolutions and Classics* conference, how Roehampton students are perceiving their degree subject has echoes in other institutions as well. Secondly, Professor Bernal died several years ago, and the death of an influential author will typically generate reflections on their career and impact.⁴ In Bernal’s case, this process of looking back had begun before his death, with the 2008 Conference at Warwick that gave rise to the edited collection *African Athena* which included reflections by Bernal on where

¹ ‘Ancient Greek Texts in the Age of Revolution: John Gillies’ *Orations of Lysias and Isocrates 1778* and Aristotle’s *Ethics and Politics 1797*. Cf. the exploration of ‘democratic turn’ towards a more pluralised and inclusive discipline, especially due thanks to Classical Reception Studies, in L. Harwick and S. Harrison ed. (2013), *Classics in the Modern World: A Democratic Turn? Classical Presences* series, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

² ‘Ancient Greek texts in the Age of Revolution: John Gillies’ *Orations of Lysias and Isocrates 1778* and Aristotle’s *Ethics and Politics 1797*’, *Revolutions and Classics*, UCL, 22.06.16.

³ Bernal, M. (2001), *Black Athena writes back*. Durham and London: Duke University Press: 52.

⁴ E.g. Blue, G. ‘Martin Bernal obituary,’ *Guardian* 21.06.13

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2013/jun/21/martin-bernal> [accessed 24.04.17].

he stood in relation to Classics.⁵ Thirdly, 2017 – the date of this written-up version of my paper from the UCL conference – is the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of the first volume of *Black Athena*.⁶ There is something about anniversaries that prompts a reflection in light of the intervening years. During anniversaries, we are prompted not just to look back, but also to look ahead to the future. So, writing in 2017, I would like to ask not just how far *Black Athena* has changed Classics, but also at whether it might have a place in future Classics teaching.

I have twice taught a session on *Black Athena* as part of a third-year undergraduate module called Athena the Trickster. The module is about Athena, but it also uses Athena as a vehicle for thinking about issues relevant to the study of Classics, including how the reception of Athena has shaped – and constrained – how the ancient deity is understood. For example, one of the sessions takes place in the Ruskin Room at Whitelands College at the University of Roehampton. This room houses a collection of books which Ruskin, a great benefactor of Whitelands, gave to the College, including several of his working copies of *The Queen of the Air*, a study of Athena which he updated regularly from the 1860s onwards. Here, Ruskin presents a vision of the goddess as an exemplar of everything that author regarded as wholesome about British culture, civilisation broadly and women in particular, especially young girls. The book is steeped in Ruskin's own version of Victorian thinking. But it also exemplifies a trend in the perception of Athena that persisted into the twentieth century and then into the twenty-first: that the goddess is an exemplar of cultural and civilised values and of a kind of non-threatening, big-sister femininity.

I am going to focus here in particular on my first experience teaching the session on *Black Athena* in 2014/15, including on how the session on Ruskin's vision Athena complemented it. As the module was timetabled for the autumn term, I was able to respond to my Head of Department's call for sessions tied in with Black History Month, and I opened the session to students and staff from across the Department of Humanities (Humanities at Roehampton encompasses Classical Civilisation, History, Philosophy, Ministerial Theology, and Theology and Religious Studies). This invitation led to the presence of two welcome visitors, one a PhD student working on Greek tragedy, the other a lecturer in Ministerial Theology, Dr R. David Muir, who, I learned during the session, had taught *Black Athena* in the past from a Black Studies perspective.

At the session, I considered first how Bernal received Athena. Secondly, I posed the question of whether he was 'right' or 'wrong' in his reception of the goddess. Then I explored what it means to regard a particular act of reception as either right or wrong. Thirdly, moving beyond the question of the rightness or wrongness of Bernal's vision of Athena, I considered how *Black Athena* is played out in his work. In this section of the class, I considered how far Athena, as received by Bernal, stands for elitism in Western Civilisation in general and in Classics in particular. I examined how, as for Ruskin, there is such a level of personal engagement with the goddess that Athena can also stand for Bernal himself, as is expressed most strikingly in

⁵ Orrells, D., Bhambra, G.K. and Royon, T. ed. (2011), *African Athena: New Agendas*, *Classical Presences* series, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

⁶ Bernal, M. (1987). *Black Athena. Volume 1: The fabrication of ancient Greece*. London: Free Association Books. Subsequent volumes: Bernal, M. (1991) *Black Athena. Volume 2: The Archaeological and Documentary Evidence*. London, Free Association Books; Bernal, M. (2006). *Black Athena: Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization; Volume 3: The Linguistic Evidence*. London, Free Association Books.

Black Athena Writes Back, the title of Bernal's volume responding to those who critiqued his work in the volume *Black Athena Revisited*.⁷ The 'Black Athena' that is doing the writing back is Bernal, who has appropriated the goddess as his own image. The title *Black Athena* had a 'high voltage charge' as Molly Levine noted in 1989.⁸ I now asked what kind of charge is created by a title that positions the author himself as *Black Athena*.

I concluded the session with some questions for discussion prompted by our exploration of *Black Athena*, namely: 'what is the purpose of Classics?', 'who owns the classical world?', and 'who owns Athena?'. In the discussion that followed, the students began to reflect on their own relationship with Classics, including as an elitist subject. This same group of students had been surveyed in their first year on their experiences studying Classics. What came out there was a sense of Classics as elitist. For example, one student defined the Classics as 'A subject that was designed for rich, white, men'. But what also came out was a sense that nothing can really be done about this, and some students reported feeling contented to be part of a select group of those who had managed to gain the opportunity to study the subject. However, the response of some of the students to studying Athena – set out in the reflective reports that formed part of the assessment for the module – suggested a new level of reflectiveness about Classics and what it means to study it. One student commented about the module as a whole: 'Week by week this module broke all the boundaries on the way, we as students, saw Athena and this module questioned issues I had never thought to question before.' Another, also thinking back on the module as a whole, wrote: 'Every week I have thoroughly enjoyed being able to talk about our experiences throughout our lives and the many questions we have been asked about our reasoning behind wanting to study Classical Civilisation.' Another reflected on a turn the discussion took in class concerning how students respond to the commonly asked question of why they are studying Classics:

It was interesting to hear how many of my classmates had been questioned about their choice of study and I believe this helped us to bond as a class, we were able to share different stories and the colourful answers we have stored away for the next person to ask us on our choice of subject.

On our discussion of *Black Athena* in particular, one student wrote that the discussion of Bernal had 'revolutionised this aspect of [their] perception of Athena.' Another student was prompted to reflect about Bernal, their own identity and background as follows:

A further intriguing analysis was that Bernal felt the criticism directed at him was simply elitist...Classics has also built up a stereotype in the minds of many. That only the white, privately-educated students study it etc. To a certain extent I could be accused of fitting into those preconceived ideas...However Classics is not an elite subject, due to its large wide-ranging appeal.

I shall end this sample of student reflections with this one, on the potential for Classics as an inclusive subject:

From books to films to television series and so on, Classics subsequently has been able to reach a more diverse audience than ever before. Perhaps this has enabled people who might necessarily not have considered studying Classics to step out of their comfort zone and study it. Overall in

⁷ Bernal, M. (2001), *Black Athena Writes Back: Martin Bernal Responds to His Critics*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

⁸ Levine, M. M. (1989), 'The challenge of *Black Athena* to Classics today,' *Arethusa* Special Issue: 7-16.

conclusion it is perhaps the built-up pseudo stereotype itself which has enabled Classics to be regarded as an elite subject of study when in reality it is not.

My colleague Dr Muir commented as follows in an evaluation of the session:

An inspirational and radically informed lecture on the birth of Athena, how Athena is received and represented in the ancient and modern world. In discussing controversial themes like these it is often easy to hear the (political) rhetoric above the (intellectual) content. In this regard, SD was keen to remind students what Bernal actually said: that he wanted to open new areas of research to those “far better qualified” than himself and to “lessen European cultural arrogance”.

Dr Muir commented as follows on the discussion of Classics and elitism:

I thought this was very rich and informative, challenging some of the old assumptions about the “classics” and offering it up as a subject area for all – regardless of class and race. Overall, the lecture was an excellent interdisciplinary exercise in how to introduce students to a controversial issue in studying the “classics”; the content and style of teaching were inspirational. I left the lecture a little disappointed that such an intellectual feast was not made available to a much wider audience.

My experiences, along with these evaluations, suggest to me that *Black Athena* can occupy a useful place in the classical classroom as a means to explore the foundations and prevalence of Classics as an elitist discipline. *Black Athena* can also prompt students to reflect on what they bring to their studies whether consciously or unconsciously. In 2016, my colleague Fiona McHardy and I ran the same survey for incoming students that the students who took the *Black Athena* class had themselves taken in their first year. The results were very similar in one regard – again students commented on the elitism that they connected with their degree subject. But there was also a striking difference, with students also stating that it is the role of classicists to seek to combat such elitism.

Bernal played a part in revolutionising Classics, but not because his theories were accepted but because of how this work helped stimulate an increased awareness on the part of classicists concerning their discipline. Teaching *Black Athena* has a part to play in helping to build a more inclusive curriculum. To give a *Black Athena*-informed response to the issues raised by Luke Richardson summarised above, the Classical Reception revolution hasn't succeeded or failed – it is ongoing.

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