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Classica Africana: Black Classicism and the Ownership of Narrative

Eunsu Lee

Abstract: Within the previous decade, the burgeoning re-imagination of the Greco-Roman canon in an African American context, presently referred to as “Black classicism,” has traversed artistic mediums not only as a cultural transliteration but an active subversion, rejection, and reclamation of the sociological underpinnings of a historically eurocentric area of study. Though modern reception studies are fraught with racial prejudice accusing Black authors of passively imitating—or merely deriving influence from—antiquity, I argue that the neoclassical inventions of Phillis Wheatley, W.E.B. Du Bois, Rita Dove, and Robert Hayden have transposed myth’s most defining elements onto two prominent social narratives: the public reception of African American scholarship and the collective female consciousness. Of these elements, imagery invoking the movement across transitory ‘liminal’ states has been enfranchised to actively subvert the traditionally-eurocentric classical canon while transferring intellectual ownership to African American authorship. Visualizations of the cyclicity of the rhapsodic oral tradition have further been harnessed to defend the female canon, translating myth’s cyclicity onto contemporaneous social dilemmas.

Key Words: *Black classicism, classical reception, African American studies, transliteration, Homer*

Introduction: William Sanders Scarborough and Calhoun's Challenge

The summer of 1892: A polished replica of the Roman Pantheon, finished with Corinthian columns and marble pavilions, celebrates its 64th year of installment at the heart of the University of Virginia's campus grounds. An architectural project of Jeffersonian conception, the University's Rotunda had been held analogous to the "dome of heaven, the home of all the gods"—a heavily-embellished descriptor which connotes that the structure's inhabitants would be granted a command comparable to that of the Olympians themselves (Patton 2010, 187). The idyll, though picturesque, neglects the uncompensated labor of 4,000 enslaved persons constructing and maintaining the University's structures between 1817 and 1865. Despite the fact that the building's classicized exterior was forged by the physical duress of these enslaved laborers, they were restricted from accessing the very scholastic opportunities that the Rotunda claimed to epitomize (Patton 2010, 187; McInnis and Nelson 2020).

Perhaps in homage to its distinctly-Roman architectural influence, the Rotunda was appointed as a rendezvous for the American Philological Association that particular summer, during which a prominent Black Classicist and academic, William Sanders Scarborough, was to deliver his research entitled, "The Chronological Order of Plato's Works" (Scarborough 2005, 121). Scarborough's self-titled autobiography narrates his inner monologue in the brief moments preceding his presentation; he recollects his school-age Latin and Greek examinations and John Calhoun's declaration that "no Negro^[1] could learn Greek" (Scarborough 2005, 121):

For a moment I felt embarrassed as I faced my audience aware too that they must experience a peculiar feeling at the situation—a Negro member of that learned body standing in intellectual manhood among equals and where no Negro had ever been allowed even to enter, save as a servant—a Negro to discuss the writings of a

Greek philosopher. (Scarborough 2005, 121).

Scarborough's command of Platonism was met with positive reception; in his autobiographical accounts, his paper presentation was characterized a self-declared "victory for [both Scarborough himself] and the race" (Scarborough 2005, 121). Amidst the Rotunda, a space where "no Negro had ever been allowed even to enter" and whose hostility towards Black scholars—whether architecturally or historically—had been most significant, Scarborough asserts intellectual ownership of academia that had previously been accessible exclusively to a narrow demographic. In active subversion of Calhoun's "famous challenge," Scarborough became the foremost Black scholar to have written an instructional textbook on the Greek Language, entitled "First Lessons in Greek." The agentic access championed in Scarborough's writings promotes the reclamation of a historically-eurocentric field while recontextualizing the discipline of Greco-Roman studies as a tool of equalizing force.

Surviving records of classical civilization have commonly been called upon to defend "slavery, race science, colonialism, Nazism, and other 20th-century fascisms," according to Dominican-born Princeton historian Dan-el Padilla (Poser, 2021). The gradual absorption of Greco-Roman art, literature, and philosophy by the mainstream "Western" canon was accompanied by both the etymological ("classic," derived from the Latin *classicus*, or "of the highest class") and referential (e.g. "Athenian Golden Age") immortalization of antiquity as a coveted *exemplum*. Classical antiquity was subsequently mobilized as pro-slavery rhetoric by 19th century scholars, who derived justification from Aristotle's characterization^[2] of slaves as "animate piece[s] of property." The values upheld by such receptions of Greek philosophy swiftly permeated to higher academic institutions, with antiquity being harnessed as an active agent against social mobility. One such institution, the American Journal of Philology, was created under the direction of Basil Gildersleeve, professor of classical studies at Johns Hopkins University. Gildersleeve established the journal imbued with the sentiment that the discipline should actively support the subjugation of enslaved persons^[3] (Greenwood 2022,

2). The creation of a distinguishable and equivocating classical identity by Black scholars has thus become central to disrupting the homogeneity of antiquity as an “emblem of a European heritage” (Rankine 2006, 22).

Scarborough is among the Black academics who have harnessed antiquity as a mode of subversion and re-imagination, enmeshing classical elements with modern social narratives to render myth a novel vehicle for argumentation. His peers, whose works both precede and succeed his own, construct a linear artistic movement that parallels the long-withstanding rhapsodic tradition and whose interpretations, translations, and adaptations remain fluid despite their roots in antiquity.

This article analyzes the language of four Black scholars as they extract distinct elements of classical myth—whether referential, idiomatic, or literary—to recharacterize two prominent social narratives: the reception of African American academia and the collective female consciousness. While poet Phillis Wheatley and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois situate liminality and motion, recurring motifs in myth, as metaphor for the transference of intellectual ownership to Black scholars, poets Rita Dove and Robert Hayden invoke the annularity of epic to characterize the intersecting planes of mother- and maiden-hood. I situate my analysis through the theoretical framework of critical fabulation, introduced by African American scholar Sahidya Hartman as a vehicle for amending history’s omissions of the Black narrative—or alternatively, to “displace the received or authorized account” which had previously constituted the classical canon (Hartman 2008, 11).

Liminality as a Catalyst within Black Classicism: Wheatley and Du Bois

The liminality woven throughout ancient epic, from the Ovidian conception of Earth (a phenomenon brought by the translation between opposing energies, *Chaos* and *Eros*) to the physical and political boundaries transgressed by mythological frontmen, is simultaneously shaped and deconstructed by myth’s modern reconfigurations and the people for whom they

speak. When reworked into modernity, such reciprocity has rendered the notion of “classical enfranchisement” as one which transcends mere “classical influence,” instead being harnessed by neoclassicists as a method of adaptation, subversion, and rejection. In reclamation of a previously homogenous and eurocentric field, Black Classicists have reimagined antiquity to their own *telos*, or end, to contextualize their sociopolitical commentary and subvert myth’s cyclical tradition. Similar instances of *aequivocare*—or equivocation through doublespeak—are explored in the transitory natures of poet Phillis Wheatley and civil rights activist W.E.B. Du Bois’s “To Maecenas” and “Of the Wings of Atalanta.” These instances of doublespeak are used to capitalize upon the malleability of epic in allusions to societal mobility and self-determinism. Throughout their writings, Wheatley and Du Bois invoke symbolic imagery reminiscent of fluidity into the leitmotif of transitory states, effectively showcasing their classical enfranchisement and simultaneous subversion of a Eurocentric modernity. As depicted by protagonists’ dynamic movements and interactions with bodies of air, earth, and water, such leitmotifs of Ovidian metamorphosis draw upon the likeness of classical liminality to restore intellectual ownership to historically oppressed groups and function as metaphors for determinism and directional agency.

Wheatley’s Poetics of Manumission

Wheatley’s personal and poetic identities originating from her former enslavement and subsequent manumission are interlaced within her works, elevating her poetic authority by subverting the previously-homogenous tradition of classical reception. Wheatley prefaces her anthology, “Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral,” with an acknowledgement that her poems were “written originally for the Amusement of [Wheatley herself], as they were the Products of her leisure Moments” (Wheatley 1984, 1). Aside from granting an air of nonchalance about her artistic command, Wheatley’s foreword invokes the social hierarchy of Greco-Roman civilization, in which only the free, aristocratic class was afforded the luxury of leisure.

Although her anthology was initially critiqued for assuming an imitative and passive voice, Wheatley sourced her “Poems of Various Subjects” as a mode of financial and intellectual capital, ensuring her manumission by sending her manuscript to publishers in Massachusetts. To arrange for her publication, Wheatley was granted permission to travel to London by her owners, during which she had learned of the Somerset Rulings: a decree which legally forbade Wheatley from remaining enslaved upon her return to America from England. With the assistance of Granville Sharp, a prominent British abolitionist, Wheatley is believed to have mailed copies of her “Poems on Various Subjects” to Massachusetts as intellectual capital to invest towards her emancipation (East End Women’s Museum).

In establishing a distinguishable classical identity separate from that of traditional classical reception, Phillis Wheatley embodies both her physical and intellectual transformations through an invocation of Maecenas, a patron of celebrated Augustan poets. Wheatley’s classical prowess is harnessed to undermine the inequities embedded within social hierarchies, as depicted by her descriptors of movement within scenic elements and usage of dynamic, equivocating language.

In the opening lines of her poem—and correspondingly, her publication, “Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral”—Wheatley extends a direct bid to Maecenas, the patron of classically-acclaimed poets including Horace and Virgil. Given Wheatley’s reliance on the patronage of her then-owners, John and Susanna Wheatley, such an outright invocation of the patron (in place of the Muse, who is normally called upon in epic) might typically have implied that a subservient or reverential tone would be adopted throughout the poem. Despite addressing individuals of seemingly higher social standing than her, Wheatley instills ambiguity within the power dynamic between patron and poet, employing potentially-*iussive*^[4] verbiage as she either commands or narrates the actions of the patron in the closing the lines of her poem:

“Then grant, *Maecenas*, thy paternal rays,
Hear me propitious, and defend my lays”
(Wheatley 1984, 9).

The verbs, “grant,” “hear,” and “defend” can be interpreted as either passive or imperative verbs, effectively transitioning authority from one entity to the other as the reader oscillates between interpretations. In her employment of *aequivocare*, or doublespeak, the classicist Emily Greenwood notes that Wheatley’s verbiage is a vehicle for “equali[zing] speech: a verbal strategy that makes the addressee into the speaker’s equal... even impel[ling] agreement on the part of her addressee” (Greenwood, 169). A fluid transference of authority between the patron, Homer, and herself continually alters the reader’s frame of reference and permits Wheatley to operate within a liminal state of transition in which she subverts long-ingrained social hierarchies through intellectual command. Such poetic agency is mirrored by not only Wheatley’s figurative metamorphoses from enslaved person to poet—or a physical translation “[On Being Brought] from Africa to America”—but also her self-proclaimed induction into the Pantheon of acclaimed rhapsodes from antiquity. In seemingly directing praise towards the Homeric works, Wheatley covertly embeds her poetry’s merit and intellectual prowess through the eloquence of her verse, exclaiming, “While *Homer* paints lo! circumfus’d in air... Heav’n quakes, earth trembles, and the shores resound” (Wheatley 1984, 9). Though initially appearing to laud Homeric epics through likening their lasting impact to movements of grandiose scale, Wheatley’s poetics are executed with verbiage which calls upon disruptive mobility with a literary dexterity comparable to that of the originator. In subsequence, her praise adapts an equalizing undertone. The dynamized notions of fluidity utilized by Wheatley in describing the classical significance of Homer’s works, with words like “quakes,” “trembles,” and “resounds,” reinvent motion as an social and intellectual metaphor for flux; the former harnesses such motion to transfer poetic agency to herself while the latter exercises sole proprietorship of her verbiage (Wheatley 1984, 9).

In the final stanza of “To Maecenas,” Wheatley bids to the patron that he “Hear [her] propitious” for “As long as *Thames* in streams majestic flows,” evoking the cyclical quality of myth to suggest a continuity in movement, and a transference of poetic lineage from the likes of Homer and Virgil to herself. In referencing

a “flow[ing]” current whose steadfast constancy propels forward movement, Wheatley appears to construct a continuum bridging classical antiquity to her own writing—an exercise of subversion towards those who have previously undermined her literary prowess due to her social standing as a formerly-enslaved woman (Wheatley 1984, 9).

Du Bois, Education, and Societal Progress

Wheatley’s fluid conceptions of movement—from physical metamorphoses to transferences of energy between geographical bodies—later manifest in the essays of W.E.B. Du Bois in the following century. Such fluidity is most prominent in Du Bois’s adaptation of the Ovidian myth of Atalanta in “The Souls of Black Folk,” a collection which attributed materialistic fixations to socio-economic stagnancy and instead advocated for the dissemination of the humanities among Black communities. The Atalanta of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is characterized by Du Bois as a tragic heroine; a wing-footed maiden condemned to run in perpetuity, she must continuously resist worldly temptations which attempt to divert her from her contest. As both the daughter of a Boeotian king and a maiden allied with Artemis, Atalanta (of the Ovidian myth) acquiesced to her father’s arranged marriage attempts by agreeing to marry the first suitor who could outrun her in a footrace. In his infatuation for Atalanta, one such suitor named Hippomenes enlisted divine assistance from the goddess Aphrodite in obtaining three golden apples, each of which would assuredly distract Atalanta during the course of their race.

Akin to the mythical Atalanta’s internal strife is the conflicting desire for gradual societal progress and instantaneous monetary gratification of her near-homonym, the Southern city of Atlanta. Amidst rapid industrialization and the growing prominence of technical or “trade” skills, Du Bois recalls the myth of Atalanta to reiterate the necessity for higher academia, issuing a caveat for “African American youths, who [...] must strive to pursue education rather than quick financial gain” (Aigbedion 2018, 28). From the fluidity characterizing the city of Atlanta’s “sullen

waters” to the maiden Atalanta’s swiftness, leitmotifs depicting movement inform Du Bois’s outlook on the liminal state as simultaneously both an impetus for and an outcome of progress.

In describing Atlanta’s mobilization towards education, Du Bois identifies strife-ridden waters as among the initial catalysts for the city’s movement, narrating that, “the iron baptism of war awakened her with its sullen waters, aroused and maddened her, and left her listening to the sea,” neglecting to mention neither Hippomenes nor his golden apples as a root of temptation (Du Bois 1903, 54). In characterizing war—an exchange of power between two peoples—as a baptism, or submergence under and rebirth from water, Du Bois’s subsequent descriptors of the “madden[ing]” and “arous[ing]” divisiveness of the city contextualize his discontent with Atlanta’s vocational and monetary fixations. Despite the portrayal of water’s coursing and divisive nature as the primary originator of strife surrounding higher education, its simultaneous mobilization of Atalanta’s travels renders its fluid nature as a vehicle for progress, rather than an end or a means.

However, Du Bois’s closing remarks on the chapter uncover Atalanta’s perpetual transitory state as being catalyzed by the very movements brought by such fluidity, narrating, “a wind gathers itself from the seas [...] and at its bidding, the smoke of the drowsy factories sweeps down [...] yon gray mist is the tunic of Atalanta pausing over her golden apples” (Du Bois 1903, 62). With sea-borne winds propelling Atalanta forward amidst materialistic distractions such as vocational wealth, the cyclical nature of classicism is placed in greater emphasis. Alongside the cityscape of Atlanta’s “sweep[ing]... smoke” and Atalanta’s abrupt “paus[e] over her golden apples,” Du Bois’s mythological adaptation enlists movement born from fluidity to further instigate directionality. One homonym not only propels the other forward, but eventually they become one and the same, as both the means and the *telos*.

Through mobilizing liminal states and harnessing the movement of elemental forces within their works, Wheatley and Du Bois exercise their control and agency over the cyclical nature of classical myth, in acts of reclamation and subversion of

a historically-ostracizing field.

Centrifugality and Centripetality as Metaphor for Modernity: The Canon of Woman

Though seemingly a disjointed anthology of heroic deeds and mystical transformations, the cyclicity inscribed about classical myth—a medium which simultaneously reconciles homogenous continuity and disembodied strife—emerges in both the visuospatial and thematic reworkings of antiquity. Deriving influence from the classicized notion of a homogeneous *epic totality*, modern receptions of antiquity mirror the rhapsodic oral traditions that ‘wove’ together hymns and epics by extending the working narrative both backwards and forwards.

Myth’s dual engagement with annularity of physical and archetypal nature therefore renders it a vehicle for the bidirectionality underlying the epic cycle: simultaneous progress and regression lie within recurrent literary textures (e.g. *ekphrasis* in the Ovidian myth of Arachne and Homeric descriptions of the Shield of Achilles); the mother and daughter occupy inverse poles of a dichotomy which is sustained through the cyclicity of death and conception. In harnessing the directionality of motion, the cyclical and linear planes of movement have been utilized to aid the malleability of epic as semiotic representations of convergence and divergence. These representations have gained prominence in the mythical traditions explored by the former poet laureate Rita Dove’s *Mother Love* and poet Robert Hayden’s “Richard Hunt’s *Arachne*.” In reconciling the competing notions of centripetality (inward torsion) and centrifugality (outward torsion) within the classicized works of Dove and Hayden, I argue that the contradictory axes of movement are paired with the opposing motions of ascent and descent to characterize a protagonist’s dissonance. Propelled by the simultaneous resistance to—and acquiescence towards—cyclicity, Dove and Hayden enfranchise numerous dimensions of movement to cohere classical antiquity to the feminine archetypes prominent in modernity.

Rita Dove's Reworking: The Homeric Hymn to Demeter

Antiquity attributes the annual turn of seasons to a mother's mourning, her grief in flux with her daughter's earthly whereabouts. The abduction of Persephone by Hades, immortalized by Homer in his *Hymn to Demeter*, is modernized by the poet laureate Rita Dove in an anthology which reconfigures the mother-daughter dyad within the prominent European landmarks of the late 20th century. The circularity explored by Dove's *Mother Love*—most prominently her final *crown of sonnets*⁵¹—functions as an amalgamation of the continuities facilitated throughout her collection: the mother-daughter dyad is perpetuated by the latter assuming the identity of the former; the annual turn of seasons oscillates alongside maternal bereavement. In further pairing with the directionalities of ascent and descent, the planar and vertical axes of motion detail the subject's convergence towards—or divergence from—their origin.

The disjunction between mother and daughter—which acts contrary to the notion of continued cyclicity—is represented through a simile in a poem from Dove's anthology entitled, "The Bistro Styx," wherein Demeter likens an ascendant spiral of smoke to the recently-emancipated Persephone. The contemporary Demeter, who grows increasingly estranged from her daughter due to the emergence of her daughter's new lover, recalls the smokestacks of Paris in describing Persephone's countenance: "each sooty issue / wobbling skyward in an ecstatic oracular spiral" (Dove 1995, 42). In attributing an upward "spiral[ing]" motion to her daughter's disposition, Demeter seems to indicate Persephone's increasingly ungovernable nature, and further distances herself from her mother's earthly domain to travel "skyward," in vertical motion along an opposing axis. Interpolated amidst the upward "spiral[ing]" lies movement inscribing a circular plane—a shape that returns those who travel along its edges to their origin by virtue of its continuity. The reconciliation between Persephone's divergence from her mother's earth-bound realm and circular convergence towards her origin suggests a dual resistance against—and fulfillment of—the previously-established continuity between mother and daughter.

Dove further analogizes the maiden's departure along a vertical axis of motion to antiquity's long-standing "Homeric Hymn to Demeter," in which the mother-daughter relationship is described by the psychiatrist Carl Jung—an advocate for the archetypal theory and the collective unconscious—to "extend the feminine consciousness both upwards and downwards" (Foley, 119). Jung argues that opposing dualisms, such as the assignment of an 'older and younger,' 'stronger and weaker' identity to either mother or daughter, construct a linear dimension which typifies the psyche. In parallel to Dove's dedication "FOR / my mother / TO / my daughter" preceding her novel, Jung also argues with regard to the Homeric Hymn that, "every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter," invoking a notion of circular perpetuity which spans across generations (7; Foley, 119). The figurative 'immortality' granted to the female psyche constructs the Jungian "archetype of woman's fate," with the circularity of the female narrative removing the woman "from her isolation and restor[ing] her to wholeness" as part of a collective (Foley, 119). The female canon thus extends to modernity, enabling women to occupy the dimension created by intersecting mythical planes (cyclicity and linearity), and likewise retaining its constancy throughout Dove's collection.

Through further invocations of centripetality and descent in her later poems—"Political" and "Her Island"—Dove establishes a dually physical and semiotic continuity whose expanse permeates into modernity. In the former, a depiction of "hell's circles" accompanies Demeter as she "keeps digging / towards that darkest miracle, / the hope of finding her child unmolested," narrating the mother's descent within the confines of annularity (55). Utility of the present imperfect verb "keeps" suggests a continuity which extends along the vertical axis of downward motion, whereas "hell's circles" impose a constricting visual representation which renders the mother's search for her daughter a cyclical futility comparable to that of "hell."

Contrary to the downward motion executed by Demeter, Dove's *crown of sonnets* in "Her Island" exhibits a centripetal force converging inwards in search of Persephone—the object of centermost import to Demeter. As the narrator circles the site of

Persephone's disappearance, they describe Lake Pergusa to be "one perfect oval / hemmed all around by reeds / at the center of the physical world. We turn inland..." (Dove, 74). In connoting an "inland" convergence towards the island's center, Dove suggests that Lake Pergusa—and by extension, Persephone—are situated at not only the center of "the physical world," but also that of her mother. As Demeter repeatedly circles the lake ("twice, first one way, then back"), her inability to traverse its edges leaves her in centripetal perpetuity, circling the lake in asymptotic fashion yet unable to harness the "inland" motion that may lead her to the daughter (Dove, 75).

Robert Hayden and the Ovidian Metamorphosis

In parallel to the circular fluidity characterizing Dove's mother-daughter dyad, Robert Hayden's "Richard Hunt's 'Arachne'" utilizes the homogeneity of enjambment^[6] and centrifugal depictions of transformation to illuminate the recurrent lack of autonomy faced by women:

[...] Dazed crazed
 by godly vivisection husking her [...]
 In goggling terror fleeing powerless to flee
 Arachne not yet arachnid and no longer woman
 in the moment's centrifuge of dying
 becoming (Hayden 1975)

In voicing Arachne's "godly vivisection," Hayden describes her "goggling terror fleeing powerless to flee / Arachne not yet arachnid and no longer woman"—a purposeful lack of punctuation embodying the maiden's palpable loss of identity as discordant juxtapositions contest the linearity of Arachne's narrative (Hayden, n.d., lines 9-10). A simultaneous resistance and acquiescence to a jarred cyclicity are explored by language occupying opposite ends of a dualism—"fleeing" and "powerless to flee;" "Arachne" and "not yet arachnid"—constructing a circularity through repetition and annular language. The conflict accompanying Arachne's transitory state is further compounded by her terror, as recounted by the literary scholar Wilburn Williams in his reflections on Hayden's anthology, *Angle of Ascent*.

Williams reconstructs Arachne's final fate by arguing that a singular narrative is insufficient in adequately capturing Arachne's totality, which encompasses the "violent juxtaposition of concepts of motion and stasis, the human and the animal, birth and death" (Hayden, lines 12-13; Williams, 745). Enjambment accompanying present participles—"dying" and "becoming"—suggest a transitory



homogeneity between the two states given that the suffix "-ing" implies an ongoing process extending both backward and forward in time. In the perpetuity implied by the actions of "dying" and "becoming," Hayden's final stanza mirrors the cyclicity exhibited in Dove's dedication: "FOR / my mother / TO / my daughter." Analogous to the way in which a daughter later assumes the identity of the mother, Arachne is entrenched in a liminality in which she undergoes transformation from woman to arachnid. In ascribing a "centrifug[al]" force to her transformation, the inevitability of cyclicity is paired with the notion of outward-facing resistance, as a centrifuge's vectors of motion diverge from its center. Such strife—represented by an ironically circular, homogeneous motion—associates Arachne's autonomy to counteraction, granting an individualistic quality to the canon of woman.

Notions of circularity in classical reworkings—as they relate to the simultaneous resistance and acquiescence of the cycles undertaken by women—are mobilized by Rita Dove and Robert Hayden to conceive multiple dimensions of mobility within a work. In employing a multitude of linearities, planes, and axes of movement, the retellings of antiquity allude to the collective consciousness of women and their subsequent ownership of narrative.

Conclusion

Often eliciting the image of marble friezes and pale sculptures, the tendency for classical “Greekness” to be white-washed by many is counteracted by Black authors and artists’ reclamation of the African American accompaniments—and receptions—of antiquity.

In one such example, the artist Romare Bearden embellishes a portrait of the sea god, Poseidon, with an eclectic collage of African art style, paying homage to the deity’s north-bound traversal from his Ethiopian origins in Homer’s *Odyssey*.



Such burgeoning re-imaginings of antiquity within the previous decade by African American authors has reworked, subverted, and fundamentally shifted the classical landscape and its future receptions. The continuously shifting classical landscape raises inquiry about the medium’s future direction: To what artistic mediums—whether visual, literary, or sonic—might Black Classicism extend to? How might globalization and the modern interaction between cultures affect interpretations of previous neoclassical mediums? What social dilemmas might antiquity be harnessed to defend for—or against (an example being W.E.B. Du Bois’s employment of classicism to defend his claims on education)?

The re-enfranchisement of classical antiquity by Black artists, writers, and activists soon transcended the limitations of racially-homogeneous representation, instead proceeding to reinvent long-standing myths which have subjected its women to limitations of artistic expression (myth of Arachne), exploitation, rape, and abduction (Homeric Hymn to Demeter). The classicized works of Black authors thus granted mobility to the historically underrepresented perspectives in the canon of literature through metaphorical reworkings and mythical allusions, conceiving a genre rooted in directional mobility and change.

Black Classicism, a culturally-collaged reclamation of a historically eurocentric and highly exclusivist discipline, operates

as a re-negotiation of identity for an authorship who has called upon myth to reconcile modernity. Elements of Ovidian fluidity and the circularity of myth have converged to transpose the myths of antiquity unto contemporaneous times, constructing an ever-expansive *epic totality* whose influence spans both backwards and forwards in time.

Endnotes

1. This term will only be employed in quotations throughout this article in efforts to accurately depict the historicized language of the quoted author or poet. Emily Greenwood, a Professor of the Classics and Comparative Literature at Harvard University, explains: “although the term ‘Negro’ is now widely regarded as pejorative, it was the signifier of black identity used by Scarborough and his contemporaries” (Greenwood 2009, 92).
2. Aristotle in fact addresses slavery in writing as “*ti empsychon*,” a hedging word which suggests that an unnatural or abnormal phenomenon had since been naturalized or normalized. This syntactical decision has frequently been overlooked in modern translation (Greenwood 2022, 2).
3. Gildersleeve’s name has since been removed from the publication in 2019.
4. Grammatically-commanding verbiage. Prominently employed in languages such as Latin or German.
5. The crown of sonnets refers to a structure in which the first and final lines of the sonnet are identical, completing a cycle.
6. Enjambment refers to a poetic structure in which a sentence is continued without punctuation or pauses beyond a line, couplet, or stanza.

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