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NOTES TO CONTRIBUTORS

Res Difficiles, the Journal (Res Diff) was co-founded in 2024 by Hannah Čulík-Baird (University of California, Los Angeles) and Joseph Romero (East Texas A&M).

Res Diff is currently edited by Hannah Čulík-Baird (culikbaird@humnet.ucla.edu).

From 2020–2026, the *Res Difficiles* conference series was a venue for addressing inequities within the field of Classics, examining issues arising out of intersectional vectors of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability, class, socio-economic status and beyond. An outgrowth of this conference series, *Res Difficiles, The Journal*—an imprint of *Ancient History Bulletin*, a Green Open Access Journal—invites submissions from individuals, pairs, or groups, addressing “difficult things” within the discipline of Classics and related fields. *Res Difficiles, The Journal* seeks to publish the “traditional” argumentative forms of inquiry standard to the discipline, but also reflections upon pedagogical concerns as well as contributions of a creative, personal, or experimental nature, including interviews. In addition to individual submissions, we welcome pitches for guest-edited special issues.

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NOTES TO READERS

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What is a Classic? Experimenting with Engaged Scholarship

Jody Valentine

Abstract: In this essay, I reconsider and revise a talk called “What is a Classic?” that I gave in 2017. By refusing my own previous claims to kinship with T.S. Eliot and J.M. Coetzee, and by shifting my relationship to Sappho from one that embeds us in the classical tradition to one that refuses classicizing discourses, I commit to antiracist, engaged scholarship and model the process of change. Cultivating my perspective as a person who identifies as White, working class, and queer, I suggest that engaged scholarship, as a form of process-oriented, deliberately subjective and self-reflective academic inquiry, supports trenchant object analysis, personal experiences of coherence, and ethical social practices.

Keywords: classical tradition, critical self-reflection, reflexive antiracism, Sappho, subjectivity, White privilege.

ΣΩ. δεινὸν γάρ που, ὦ Φαῖδρε, τοῦτ' ἔχει γραφή, καὶ ὡς ἀληθῶς ὅμοιον ζωγραφίᾳ. καὶ γὰρ τὰ ἐκείνης ἔκγονα ἔστηκε μὲν ὡς ζῶντα, ἐὰν δ' ἀνέρη τι, σεμνῶς πάνυ σιγᾷ. ταῦτόν δὲ καὶ οἱ λόγοι· δόξαις μὲν ἂν ὥς τι φρονοῦντας αὐτοὺς λέγειν, ἐὰν δέ τι ἔρη τῶν λεγομένων βουλόμενος μαθεῖν, ἔν τι σημαίνει μόνον ταῦτόν ἀεί.

Socrates: *Phaedrus*, writing does something strange. It reminds me of painting. The things depicted in a painting stand, just as if they are alive. But, if you ask one something, they keep solemnly silent. Written words, too. You would think that they communicate something because they are cognizant of it. But, if you ask them a question, because you want to understand what they mean, they always indicate that one thing and only that one thing.

—Plato, *Phaedrus* (275d-e)

The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself.

—bell hooks (1994, 11)

Introduction

The question “What is a Classic?” asks for an answer—a painting, a sculpture, a piece of music, a text—that will remain steady and steadfast, unmoving and unchangeable, and, as Socrates laments, unable to listen, respond, or change. For bell hooks, engagement means rejecting the calcification of a classic in favor of dialogic transformation. Is it possible to cultivate an engaged voice, not only in pedagogical spaces but also in written scholarship? What might it look like to develop an engaged voice in the field of “Classics,” where preservation may seem essential to our remit? In this essay, I trace how I have experienced meaningful change, through a critical, self-reflective process of engaged scholarship. I suggest that, and attempt to model how, it is possible to write in a way that elevates process over product and that incorporates and invites growth. Practicing engaged scholarship has enabled me to see the

external objects of my inquiry more clearly while developing a more nuanced understanding of the unique subjective experiences that determine my viewpoint and shape my scholarship. Engaged scholarship offers a coherent way to bring subjectivity into scholarship so that our academic inquiries are strengthened by the conscientious incorporation of our embodied and contextual experiential insights. I share my story as an example and an invitation.¹

Caveat 2026²

In December of 2017, I gave a talk titled “What is a Classic?” at the University of Southern California, where I received my PhD in Classics. In this talk, I placed myself in conversation with T.S. Eliot and J. M. Coetzee, who each delivered a lecture that asked the same question. For Eliot, the answer was Vergil’s *Aeneid*. Coetzee named Bach’s *Well-tempered Clavier*. I recited Sappho 16 and, with a hint of pride, claimed this poem as my own queer classic. I revealed that I had been siloing my identity as a queer feminist away from my scholarly work as a Classicist. I described how, in my pedagogy, I had begun to break down this boundary. I’d learned through my experiences as an educator why it was important for me to reflect honestly and openly about how Sappho empowers me and how the queer and gendered aspects of my identity shape my scholarship. For the first time in my academic life, I celebrated that my queer subjectivity shaped my scholarly voice. I felt excited and more than a bit nervous to be making this claim, particularly because I was doing so at the institution where I had been inducted into an academic culture that claims to value objectivity and detachment. This was a vital step for me to take: owning my queer identity and celebrating how it informed my scholarship felt (and, perhaps, was) radical.

I presented my “What is a Classic?” as an invited speaker at an event titled “What is the Role of Classics Outside the Academy?”. The event centered a performance by Rhodessa Jones’s organization *The Medea Project: Theatre for Incarcerated Women* and featured Rhodessa Jones, Amy Richlin (influential feminist Classics scholar and my own grad school professor),³ and myself as panelists; we were invited to explore connections between the humanities and social justice activism. I was honored to be included on the panel of presenters even though I felt unsure about what I had to offer on the topic.⁴ I was in my sixth post-doctorate year of teaching as a contingent instructor and hurling myself onto the academic job market. More than an expert on the role of the Classics *outside* of the academy, I was hustling to gain access *into* the academy.

My talk was well received, and I was encouraged write it up for publication. I wondered: could I join Eliot and Coetzee in print by writing up my “What is a Classic?” lecture and turning it into a published essay venerating a poem by Sappho that I genuinely loved?

¹ I offer this experiment in engaged scholarship with gratitude to Hannah Čulík-Baird and the *Res Difficiles* team, including the scholars who generously and helpfully offered peer review of this piece.

² This section title nods to Mathura Umachandran’s chapter, “Classics at the Borderlands: Decolonizing with Gloria Anzaldúa,” in Katherine Blouin and Ben Akrigg’s *The Routledge Handbook of Classics, Colonialism, and Postcolonial Theory*, where Umachandran enacts what I am calling engaged scholarship by publishing work that she has come to see as insufficient to its original aim of decolonizing the “so-called field of Classics” with a “caveat” and “an affirmation of a feminist practice of err and error, and serious self-reflexive criticism” (2024, 62).

³ Amy Richlin wrote “Hijacking the Palladion: Feminists in Classics” (1992) in the first person, interweaving personal essay with scholarship. Her encouragement inspired me to try something similar here.

⁴ I want to thank Jessica Wright for organizing this event and inviting me to participate.

Buoyed by the encouragement, I began digging into Eliot, Coetzee, and my initial claims. During the process of interrogating my position, I discovered not only more about Eliot and Coetzee, but also something more personal.

Rather than erase my previous claims to present my subsequent findings here as a *fait accompli*, I will show the palimpsest of my process. In the first part of this essay, I'll describe what I brought to the room in 2017—why I had avoided, and then embraced, Sappho. I'll share what it meant for me to claim Sappho 16 as my own classic, and why I continue to bring some of the work I did in 2017 with Sappho's poetry forward with me today. I'll then show how, through the research, critical analysis, and self-reflection entailed in revising my presentation into this essay, I have come to understand my position in relationship to the question "What is a Classic?" and to the two famous authors who have asked it, differently.⁵

Sappho 16: My Queer Classic

I first encountered Sappho in the early 2000s, in my early twenties, when a selection of her poetry was assigned for a class I took with Stephen Hinds at the University of Washington on representations of sex and gender in ancient Greece and Rome. I read the English translation on xeroxed copies, stapled into my course reader, at a wobbly wooden table in the Pearl Café on University Avenue in Seattle, where I worked early mornings, cooking soup and pulling espresso. Flushed with heat, I wanted more. Rushing to the bookstore, I found Anne Carson's beautiful translations of Sappho's surviving fragments, newly published in *If Not, Winter* (2002). Printed in Greek with page-facing English translations, Carson's edition contains copious brackets and ellipses emphasizing the fragmentary nature of the poems. Many of Sappho's fragments, with their lost phrases, lines, and verses, long for what is lost, I noticed. Transfixed, but also self-conscious and embarrassed by my crush on Sappho, I wondered: Was Sappho's truly a female homoerotic voice, telling us (her) stories of love (lost) and beauty (lost) from ancient Greece? Was I, a queer academic in training, allowed to love Sappho, or was I supposed to study her poetry *objectively*? I was afraid even to ask these questions—when would I ask, and who would I ask? My kind (straight, male) Irish professor? During class? In office hours? I found these awkward, intimate questions impossible to ask (or answer), but I couldn't set Sappho aside. Slowly, through many semesters of encountering Sappho's poetry together with students in liberatory, engaged, collaborative learning communities, I began to understand and embrace why Sappho's poetry, especially number 16, resonates so easily, and so significantly, with me. And then one day, in 2017, my Sappho appeared, right in front of me.

A multi-media installation by artist and scholar Kiki Loveday invited me to declare my love. From November 2017–February 2018, the Huntington Museum and Gardens in Pasadena sponsored and exhibited a collection of works created by seven feminist artists-in-residence titled "WCCW/five." For the second year of a five-year project (/five), the Huntington collaborated with the Women's Center for Creative Work in Los Angeles (since renamed the Feminist Center for Creative Work, or FCCW). The FCCW recruited these scholar-artists to create new work in response to the Huntington's collection and gardens. The resulting projects exemplify the potential for creative, revitalizing engagements within

⁵ For a study of the question "What is a Classic?" with attention to Eliot, Coetzee, post colonialism, and subaltern studies that draws more optimistic conclusions than my own, see Mukherjee 2014.



Fig. 1: A multi-media installation by artist and scholar Kiki Loveday (2017). Photo by author.

elite, conservative institutions, such as the Huntington. Soyoung Shin reweave a tapestry to show the connection between women's work as weavers and their contributions to the coding of early computers; Zya Levy crafted a collection of white cacti, displaying their ubiquity at the Huntington even as they disappear from their native habitats. While I loved every part of this project, one contribution to the exhibit filled me with dizzying joy.⁶

In the center of the lavish Huntington Gardens, on the wall in the back room of a brightly lit building, sat a well-loved wooden writing desk covered in a slightly musty, Sapphic collection of books. Anne Carson's translation of a stanza from the poem known as Sappho 16 inscribed in black on the wall behind the desk reminded the viewer that Sappho says the most beautiful thing is "what you love." On the desk's writing surface, a handwritten invitation from the artist with a box of pencils and a stack of handmade paper beckoned visitors to sit down and write their own queer love stories. My four-year-old accepted the invitation without hesitation and inscribed a thick piece of paper for Loveday's letterbox (Fig. 1).

I walked up to Loveday's installation and felt that she had brought *my own Sappho* into physical, material form. My favorite books inspired by a mythic iconography of Sappho, including Pierre Louÿs's *The Songs of Bilitis* and Sidney Abbott and Barbara Love's *Sappho was*

⁶ The exhibition's website can be viewed at <https://www.huntington.org/exhibition/collections-wccw-five-huntington>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026.

a *Right-on Woman*, were gathered on the desk, as if borrowed from my own bookshelves. The invitation to tell *my* (queer) love story, just as Sappho had told hers, gave me a feeling of ebullient pleasure. I reached out to the artist-scholar and learned that this installation was part of her larger project archiving first-person accounts, love letters, and other memorabilia that document queer love stories, titled “What You Love.”⁷ Loveday’s project invites Sappho 16 to create space for a practice of queer identity formation that rejects the privilege and prestige inherent in the “classic.” Loveday celebrates Sappho 16 as *one of many* queer love stories that need to be told. As Loveday says, “Time will not tell. Only we can tell our stories.”⁸

Inspired by Kiki Loveday, I spoke at USC about how Sappho 16’s self-reflexivity invites us to celebrate subjectivity, to see ourselves in the “you” of the poem. The poem tells us, the readers, that no one else can tell either the “I” of the poem or you (or me) what love is. In Anne Carson’s 2002 translation:

Some men say an army of horse and some men say an army on foot
and some men say an army of ships is the most beautiful thing
on the black earth. But I say it is
what you love.

The poem, attributed to the only queer-presenting, female-identifying poet of Greek antiquity whose work and name have survived the intervening two thousand five hundred (or so) years, offers what could be read as a rejection of universality, objectivity, and tradition—or what we call the classical: *Define love for yourself. Love who you love—that love is real. Decide what you find most beautiful for yourself. I, Sappho, am on your side. And everyone will, or should, understand. I will make them understand, easily.* I handed out postcards that promoted Loveday’s project and invited audience members to submit their own (queer) love stories to be included in her archive.

By claiming Sappho 16 as my classic, I queered and bent (but didn’t refuse or break) the classical tradition. I situated myself in kinship with T.S. Eliot and J.M. Coetzee. In my talk, I suggested that their essays had inspired me and I playfully positioned myself as their heir: Coetzee had improved upon Eliot, and I was taking the next, slightly sideways, step. I now realize that my engagement with Eliot and Coetzee was self-protective. When I gave that talk, I was underemployed and insecure, and because of my class background (which I didn’t acknowledge in my presentation), I leaned on Eliot and Coetzee. I wanted to claim a place for myself in academia. As I subsequently came to see my own implication in the Eurocentrism and White supremacy of Eliot and Coetzee, I felt shame and, at first, planned to push the talk into the past and leave it there. But I sensed that revising my position in this essay might afford me an opportunity for growth. I would have to look critically not only at Eliot and Coetzee, but also at myself: my fears of marginalization and my privilege. As if critiquing two Nobel Prize winners wasn’t intimidating enough, I would also have to interrogate my decision to align myself with them. In the next two parts of this essay, I show what I discovered by asking what’s at stake in the question “What is a Classic?” and what Eliot, Coetzee, and I were obfuscating with our answers.

⁷ As of the publication of this essay, Kiki Loveday’s project is ongoing: If you have a (queer) love story to tell, put it in writing and send it to kikiloveday@gmail.com. See <https://kikimovingpictures.com/portfolio/what-you-love-2/>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026.

⁸ “WCCW/five Meet the Artists,” 5:08; <https://www.huntington.org/exhibition/collections-wccw-five-huntington>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026.

Virgil's *Aeneid* and Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*: The Classic Classics

In October of 1944, five years into World War Two, T. S. Eliot delivered “What is a Classic?” as the inaugural presidential address to London’s newly formed Virgil Society. In his speech, which was later published, Eliot constructs what he claims to be a universal model with identifiable patterns, attainable but rarely achieved, for defining a classic. First, for a classic to emerge, both the individual artist and his society (it seems to always be “his” for Eliot) must have achieved full maturity, but not surpassed it; both artist and society must simultaneously reach the tenuous peak of perfect development that comes only after the rise and, importantly, before even a suggestion of decline and fall (1945, 10–11). This apex of maturity, which, for Eliot, includes both a “maturity of mind” and “maturity of manners” (12), allows for a work of art to attain the sublime quality of “universality” (10): no society, no poet, and no poem better exemplify the achievement of this universality than Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

Eliot claimed that Virgil’s *Aeneid* is a classic on the grounds that the poem emerged at the perfect height of cultural achievement that all societies and individuals could, in the best possible circumstances, reach. Despite his claim to the universality of this classic, however, the particularity of Eliot’s exemplar cannot be missed. Eliot presented Virgil’s *Aeneid* as the definitive classic in a lecture that launched the first meeting of the Virgil Society. In the lecture, even as he claims to demonstrate the universality of the themes of the *Aeneid*, Eliot emphasizes how the poem specifically links ancient Rome to modern Europe and to England: Aeneas “is a man of fate... a symbol of Rome; and as Aeneas is to Rome, so is ancient Rome to Europe” (1945, 28–29). Despite arguing for Virgil (and Latin and Rome) as universal, Eliot shows his Eurocentrism: “The Roman Empire and the Latin language were not any empire and any language, but an empire and a language with a unique destiny in relation to ourselves” (29). Who are Eliot’s “us” and who are the (implied and necessary) “not us”? Eliot’s Eurocentric claim to a delineated “we” that is somehow also, all logic aside, “universal,” stealthily and insidiously produces symbolically inferior others, a “them”: those societies that are not of Europe and those individuals who are not (or, as in Eliot the American’s case, are not descendants of) Europeans.

Eliot’s belief in Europe’s universal significance, and the othering that this ideology entails, is not unique to him, nor is it a thing of the past. The ideology of European universalism is interwoven with European imperialism and colonialism, supported by and supportive of its violent practices. Academia, and the field of Classics, plays a particular role in maintaining a false model of Europe’s universal significance that disguises an insidious Eurocentric bias. Note that the Virgil Society remains active today, with the current website spotlighting Eliot and giving this description of its purpose and membership:

The Virgil Society was founded in 1943, and its first President, the poet T.S. Eliot, delivered *What is a Classic?* as his Presidential Address in the following year. The purpose of the Society was and remains to unite all those who cherish the central educational tradition of Western Europe. Of that tradition Virgil is the symbol. Membership is open to all those who are in sympathy, whether they read Latin or not.⁹

The chauvinism of the “us”—defined as those with an appreciation for the West as central, educational, and traditional—is clear. The implied “them”? Anyone not a part of, or not

⁹ See <https://virgilsociety.org.uk/new/#about-us>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026.

sufficiently appreciative of, the Western European tradition. The Virgil Society members' centering of Western Europe inscribes them into a long and—for those who are decentered by it—punitive and violent tradition of imperialistic, universalizing chauvinism.¹⁰

For Coetzee, Eliot's selection of Virgil's *Aeneid* was forgivably flawed, a charming choice shaped by Eliot's unique personal circumstances. Eliot's Aeneas, Coetzee observes, sounds a lot like the fifty-six-year-old Eliot himself: a tired and bedraggled middle-aged expat Trojan in Italy or American in England (2001, 1–2). Coetzee noticed something important about how Eliot's subjective experience informed his ostensibly objective claim but missed the mark with his evaluation of the consequences of Eliot's lack of critical self-reflection. For Coetzee, Eliot's misstep was revealing his subjectivity; but Coetzee overlooks how, by constructing a connection between Rome and England, and Virgil and himself, Eliot makes two problematically universalizing moves. First, if Eliot's veneration of Virgil's epic was informed by his own education, experience, and history, Eliot does not acknowledge his subjective position. Instead, he claims to perceive the universal significance of the poem as if from a wide, detached view. Second, he articulates a unidirectional, homogeneous theory of human and social development (as the rise from youth through maturity to the decline that comes with aging) that echoes a fundamental set of assumptions that are held, often unspoken or unrecognized, by scholars in multiple academic disciplines, certainly in "Classics," but also in European and American popular culture. In this model of development, both an individual person and a whole society, given the right circumstances, will progress on a linear trajectory upward, from an underdeveloped youth toward a peak of perfect maturity. If this apex is reached, it will be followed by an inevitable decline and fall. Just as an individual will grow old and die, so too will a society decline from the height of civilization into ruin. This paradigm supports the rhetorical subjugation of non-European (non-Anglophone, Indigenous, and recently, with particular ferocity, non-US) societies by describing them as either "underdeveloped" or "in decline" and perpetuates a pessimistic view of human development that misconstrues childhood and fosters antipathy toward aging.¹¹

It seems to have been Eliot's personal ambition to elevate English to the level of Latin so that one of his works might someday be declared a classic. He was protecting, and attempting to improve, his own privileged position. I recognize a hopeful longing from Eliot in his coordinated claims that no one may deliberately compose a classic, as such an attribution can only be made retrospectively (10), and that there was not (quite yet) the possibility of an English classic (17). Eliot's ambition to manifest an English language and an Anglophone culture worthy of producing an English classic, and then to be named the author of the first (and only) English classic is palpable. T.S. Eliot received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948, four years after his lecture. Did he attain his desired status?

¹⁰ Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) have informed my analysis here. For resources to understand the relevance of Orientalism in the field of Classics, see, *inter alia*, Katherine Blouin, Usama Ali Gad, and Rachel Mairs's website "Everyday Orientalism" (n.d.), Marchella Ward 2024, and Phiroze Vasunia 2024. See also Emily Greenwood's discussion of how, "through false genealogies and cultural traditions masked as historical continuities, ancient Greece is often carelessly and erroneously linked with modern Europe, as though they shared a single, continuous history," including, she notes, by Said himself (2010, 2 and fn. 7).

¹¹ Though they do not address the aspect of decline that I notice as part of this paradigm, Umachandran and Ward express alarm at how genealogical, evolutionary, and kinship "metaphors and epistemological frameworks indicate one of the ways that classics as a discipline was structured in service of European cultural hegemony and white supremacy" (2024, 17).

In the late 1990s, as I dedicated my 20s to learning ancient languages, I made an overture to Eliot. In addition to sitting in cafés for innumerable hours studying gerundives and genitive absolutes, I also charged thousands of dollars onto my credit card at the University of Washington bookstore. Would owning every book on the course shelves secure my place in graduate school and insure me against the tragic fate of having dedicated so much time, effort, and money into joining academia, only to be shut out? One of the books I bought with money I didn't have was the newly printed Everyman's Library Pocket Series *Eliot: Poems*. I didn't fully understand my compulsion to buy every Everyman at the time, but I knew that I was hoping to fill my mind with the knowledge I felt I lacked, and I found it impossible to stop. But when I sat down with Eliot's poems, the words blurred. I felt no connection, no exhilaration or emotion. My eyes lost focus behind a fog of exhaustion and regret—compounding credit card interest for a book I couldn't comprehend. I was working full time, studying ancient Greek and Latin, and trying to maintain relationships with my family and friends. I couldn't focus my attention on those poems in that small book with creamy white pages. I couldn't perceive what made these poems important. I believed that I should be able to read and understand Eliot's poems, (they were *classics*, after all, and in English). When that didn't happen, I felt a gut punch of shame before I added the book to an ever-growing pile on the floor of my small Seattle apartment, where I lived with my partner. I didn't admit to her how much debt I was accruing, and I didn't tell anyone that I couldn't understand or appreciate T.S. Eliot's poems. I suppressed my shame by acing a Greek test and buying another book (to celebrate). So, in 2017, when I had made it through grad school and found a way to place myself into Eliot's lineage, I did so with a feeling of triumph.

I was also eager to set myself in the tradition of South African novelist and essayist, J.M. Coetzee, who, in 1991, had delivered his own "What is a Classic?" lecture in Graz, Austria. In his lecture, published as an essay in the collection *Stranger Shores*, Coetzee describes how a Bach fugue became his classic:

One Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1955, when I was fifteen years old, I was mooning around our back garden in the suburbs of Cape Town, wondering what to do, bored being the main problem of existence in those days, when from the house next door I heard music. As long as the music lasted, I was frozen, I dared not breathe. I was being spoken to by the music as music had never spoken to me before. What I was listening to was a recording of Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier* played on the harpsichord. (2001, 9)

Coetzee presents himself as following Eliot's lead, with the important addition of self-reflection. He asks:

Is there some non-vacuous sense in which I can say that the spirit of Bach was speaking to me across the ages?... [O]r was what was really going on at that moment that I was symbolically electing high European culture, and command of the codes of that culture, as a route that would take me out of my class position in white South African society and, ultimately, out of what I must have felt, in terms however obscure or mystified, as an historical dead end? (10)

Coetzee cultivates one degree of critical reflection of his experience. He interrogates the relationship that he (and Eliot) claim to their "classics." Were their responses to Virgil and Bach inspired by a transcendent quality in the works themselves, or were they, both born in colonial countries—the United States (Eliot) and South Africa (Coetzee)—interested in these "classics" because connecting themselves to Virgil and Bach would also link them to high

European culture (2001, 10–11)? Coetzee suggests that he will distinguish himself from Eliot by interrogating his own biases. He asks: “[W]as the experience what I understood it to be—a disinterested and in a sense impersonal aesthetic experience—or was it really the masked expression of a material interest?” (2001, 11).

Coetzee, however, does not introspectively take up his own questions. Instead, he pulls his focus outwards, changing the question from one that demands critical self-reflection to a theoretical expansion of the concept of a classic: for Coetzee, a classic must have aesthetic beauty and must be brought forward through its contributions to our historical, “material,” understandings. A classic of this kind, Coetzee elegantly elaborates, makes our “historical understanding part of our present” and “requires us to understand ourselves not only as objects of historical forces but as subjects of our own historical self-understanding” (2001, 13). Coetzee’s definition of “historical understanding” importantly also contains “historical self-understanding,” as a “context of paradox and impossibility” (15). From the argument that Bach’s survival in various performance and scholarly contexts solidified its status as a classic, Coetzee asks: “What does it mean in living terms to say that the classic is what survives? How does such a conception of the classic manifest itself in people’s lives?” (19). There are ways that this question could be interesting and lead us toward inquiries into the magical, unconventional, and beautiful ways that art can survive even the most violent efforts to destroy it. Or toward the revelatory work of acknowledging how colonialist and racist powers shore up their status through the erasure of traditions, artistic legacies, and human lives. For Coetzee, however, these (rhetorical) questions about survival set up the conclusion of his piece, where he evokes Polish poet Zbigniew Herbert as “the great poet of the classic in our own times” (16). Coetzee brings forward Herbert’s idea that the opposite of the classic is “not the Romantic but the barbarian” (16). Coetzee contextualizes Herbert’s historical position of Poland:

... a country with an embattled Western culture caught between intermittently barbarous neighbors. It is not the possession of some essential quality, that, in Herbert’s eyes, makes it possible for the classic to withstand the assault of barbarism. Rather what survives the worst of barbarism, surviving because generations of people cannot afford to let go of it and therefore hold on to it at all costs—that is the classic. (16)

In presenting Herbert’s Poland as vulnerable to losing what he calls the “confrontation” between the classic and the barbarian (16), Coetzee doesn’t reflect on the etymology or connotations of the term but instead accepts and promotes the idea that anything non-Western is, by definition, the barbarian other.

I had marked this paragraph “Yikes!” in the margins, because I did know the term’s etymology. The English word barbarian derives from the Greek adjective βάρβαρος [*barbaros*], which scholars translate as “a non-Greek speaking foreigner.” This onomatopoetic word ostensibly emulates the sound of a foreign, unintelligible, non-Greek, language. Euripides’s *Medea* was a “barbarian” of this sort. Her character provides a rich example of the penchant among Greeks (especially Athenians of the Classical Period) to distinguish themselves hierarchically from others by figuring those others as less-human foreigners.¹² To robustly apply Coetzee’s own idea of historical perspective here, in the context of European colonialism, race-based slavery, and race-based apartheid, the English word barbarian cannot be interpreted to imply only linguistic or cultural difference. Is it possible

¹² See, *inter alia*, Blondell *et al.* 1999, 22–23 and Greenwood 2022.

to consider Coetzee's Herbertian denouement as anything other than racist? Coetzee's Cape Town suburb lay in the heart of apartheid South Africa, a country that, in Coetzee's youth, produced a particularly brutal form of White supremacy and European cultural elitism. In 1954, when Coetzee was fourteen and mooning around his back garden listening to Bach, apartheid was in its first decade as a legally ratified system built on, and perpetuating, a centuries-long, codified, violent, and oppressive racial stratification wrought by Dutch colonial rule of South Africa. In this context, how might we understand Coetzee's "class position" as a White South African? Coetzee's definition of class here depends on a particularly colonial framework. He claims a low-class position because he is a colonial rather than a European citizen. Coetzee is not referring to the specific socioeconomic status of his family's position *within* apartheid South Africa. He also doesn't account, in any way, for the high status and privilege that his Whiteness affords him.¹³ Instead, he perceives himself as a marginalized colonial subject.

Coetzee obfuscates his White privilege and the deeply racist and oppressive imperialism that supports his position as a White colonial subject. He implies that South African society has no claim to a classic, presumably because it lacks those qualities that Eliot insisted define a classic: maturity and (pure) Europeaness. Coetzee reinforces the hierarchical, imperialistic paradigm that devalues African society and culture. He does not argue that a South African author could create a classic. Instead, Coetzee constructs a model that reinforces Europe's superiority over Africa and places him as a defender of the West, with its unique claim to the classic, in confrontation with the barbarian. In 1991, when South African apartheid was in the earliest stages of dissolution and Nelson Mandela was barely one year out of prison, Coetzee delivered his "What is a Classic?" lecture. In 2002, Coetzee left South Africa for Australia after the African National Congress accused his novel *Disgrace* of racism; in 2003, Coetzee won the Nobel Prize for Literature.¹⁴ Despite Coetzee's initial promise to interrogate if "being spoken to across the ages is a notion that we can entertain today only in bad faith," (16) he ultimately proceeds, suggesting that by simply asking this question he has assured his good faith and therefore overlooks the tenacity of bad-faith racism that shadows the concept of a classical canon.

When I first presented my talk in 2017, I followed Coetzee's lead, forgiving that he failed to practice the critical self-reflection suggested by his own question and arguing that my intervention would improve upon his. In the model of scholarly progress I had assimilated in graduate school, I believed that I was building from Eliot and Coetzee to add my own contribution. In the next section of this essay, I'll describe how I recognized my own complicity in the self-protective racist maneuvering modeled by Eliot and Coetzee.

Self-reflection as Scholarly Work

In my 2017 presentation, I claimed Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *la facultad* for both Sappho and myself; I said:

Gloria Anzaldúa teaches us that those who have experienced oppression gain a specific type of understanding—and self-understanding—through *la facultad*, our view from somewhere, the border, the not-quite-in and not-

¹³ "White privilege can be thought of as intangible advantages that are afforded to white . . . individuals that have not been earned through labour or merit" (Lin, Kennette, and Havermaet 2023, 36).

¹⁴ See Donadio 2007.

quite-out perspective that any form of “queerness” or “otherness” gives us to look upon the center and see it more clearly, and to look upon ourselves and see who we are.

“Sappho,” I continued, “is centered as part of the Classical canon, but her poetry also shows her *la facultad*. A female poet, who writes of same-sex desire! Sappho is my Aeneas and my Bach....” I fielded curious follow-up questions from people in the audience who were introduced to Anzaldúa for the first time that day. So, I can’t regret linking Anzaldúa with Sappho as I began to advocate for the value of diverse subjectivities, including my own, in the field of Classics. However, through recursive self-reflection that followed, I came to understand Anzaldúa differently.¹⁵

Rather than empowering me to subtly shift Eliot and Coetzee’s classicizing discourse, Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of *la facultad* requires a rejection of any claim to so-called “Western” culture; Anzaldúa provides a biting critique of those who have weaponized objectivity as the highest form of intelligent work and enacted a violent, oppressive othering of Indigenous people:

White anthropologists claim that Indians have “primitive” and therefore deficient minds, that we cannot think in the higher mode of consciousness—rationality. They are fascinated by what they call the “magical” mind, the “savage mind” In trying to become “objective,” Western culture made “objects” of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing “touch” with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence. (2012, 59)

Anzaldúa theorizes how, in reverse of White anthropologists’ belief in their lesser cognitive capacity, those who are marginalized by a dominant culture develop an extraordinarily sensitive awareness of the world. It is this insight that she calls *la facultad*:

La facultad is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant “sensing,” a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world.... It is a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate. It is latent in all of us. (2012, 60–61)

Anzaldúa’s antidote to the violence of objectification comes through embracing a two-fold subjectivity: positional awareness and embodied self-awareness, which she describes as “Entering into the Serpent” (2012, 47–61). Anzaldúa tells of a childhood rattlesnake encounter, after which she feared and loved these magical, earthly, creatures. Over time, she writes, she came to “know things older than Freud, older than gender.... Like the ancient Olmecs, I know Earth is a coiled Serpent” (2012, 48). She continues: “Forty years it’s taken me to enter into the Serpent, to acknowledge that I have a body, that I am a body, and to assimilate the animal body, the animal soul” (2012, 48). Anzaldúa describes in evocative

¹⁵ As noted above (see fn. 2), I am struck by the similarly recursive Mathura Umachandran, who reassessed her initial claims about what it might mean for scholars in the field of Classics to ethically engage with Anzaldúa, as she moved away from imagining how to decolonize the classics with Anzaldúa (2024) and toward the Critical Ancient World Studies’ view that the field of classics is irredeemably colonial (Umachandran and Ward 2024).

terms why it is valuable for individuals to cultivate an embodied experience of subjectivity coupled with a unique positionality and perspective, a view from somewhere, *la facultad* (2012, 48, 60).¹⁶

Precisely because of a lack of centrality, those who exist in the borderlands can look into the center of the matter and see something true, from a specific perspective. Adapting Donna Haraway's pivotal concept of "situated knowledges," Nancy C. M. Hartsock highlights "the significance of experiences of marginalization and subordination for developing knowledge and subjectivity" (1989, 28).¹⁷ Of Anzaldúa, and similar theorists who have not only experienced marginalization but have self-reflectively incorporated that experience into their scholarship, Hartsock writes:

They do not see everything from nowhere but they do see some things from somewhere. They are the knowledges of specific cultures and peoples. As an aspect of being situated, these knowledges represent a response to and an expression of a specific embodiment. The bodies of the dominated have been made to function as the marks of their oppression: we are not allowed to pretend that they do not exist. (1989, 29)

Subjectivity and embodiment define Anzaldúa's queer, Chicana, feminist, activist scholarship. Her work opposes, and aims to transform, discourses that valorize objectivity (and falsely claim access to it) and perpetuate cycles of oppression that protect White privilege and the heteronormative patriarchy. This sentiment is echoed in the work of bell hooks, who asserts that "dominator culture promotes a calculated objectivism that is dehumanizing" (2003, 131). In my 2017 talk, I tried to decenter false objectivity by acknowledging one area of my identity and celebrating how it informs my work. However, by identifying only one part of my positionality, I was misappropriating Anzaldúa, misconstruing my viewpoint, and misperceiving the object of my analysis.

It took some additional work for me to recognize how fear and shame feel in my body, to recognize that I not only have access to *la facultad* through my position as a queer and working-class person in academia (and in the larger neo-liberal capitalist social context), but that I also have access to privileges that come from participation in dominant social and cultural forms. (I am a White, English-speaking citizen of the United States; by 2017, I had earned a doctorate in Classics; in 2025, I started a tenure-track job). The concept of *la facultad* doesn't allow me to add another rung to the ladder but requires a rejection of Eliot's, Coetzee's, and my own commitments to the classical tradition. To examine the degree to which I occupy an insider position, and to interrogate my own desire to move further in, has been the recursive work of this essay.

¹⁶ I'm honored that my essay is scheduled to be published in the spring 2026 issue of *Res Difficiles*, *The Journal*, following the fall 2025 issue *Rez Diff*, which practices an Anzaldúan approach to integrating indigeneity into the study of antiquity. See especially Casias 2025, 60–61, 67.

¹⁷ Haraway's essay, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective" (1988) is central to the Critical Ancient World Studies Collective's aims, as articulated in their "Manifesto" and in two of the essays in their volume (Umachandran and Ward 2024, 15–16; Haselswerdt 2024, 122, 133; Ward 2024, 176).

The Classics are the Master's Tools

As I reflected on my relationship to the field of Classics, I recalled the historical and ongoing failure of White women (feminists, Classicists) to be antiracist. As Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex* over seventy-five years ago, women have been complicit in our own marginalization (and the marginalization of people of color) because we have opted to hinge ourselves onto the highest rung of the social ladder we can reach:

[Women] live dispersed among men, attached through residence, housework, economic condition, and social status to certain men—fathers or husbands—more firmly than they are to other women. If they belong to the bourgeoisie, they feel solidarity with men of that class, not with proletarian women; if they are white, their allegiance is to white men, not to Black women. (1949/1952, 4–5. Translation is mine, following Parshley.)

The interweaving of academics—and academic conferences—with White supremacy was the context and impetus for Audre Lorde's famously incisive 1979 speech "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." At a by-invitation-only conference honoring the thirty-year anniversary of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in New York City, Lorde directly addressed the organizers, criticizing their exclusionary practices:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support. (2020, 41–42)

The organizers of the 1979 conference on de Beauvoir's work missed a significant facet of de Beauvoir's own analysis, instead replicating the exact behavior that de Beauvoir recognized as the cause of women's failure to emancipate ourselves from our secondary status in the patriarchal social order. Audre Lorde's powerful denunciation of the exclusionary, White-supremacist culture of academia remains relevant in the field of Classics.

When we try to build up the value of the "Classics," we are engaging in a futile effort to shore up the rotten foundations of the master's house, which are crumbling beneath us.¹⁸ We cannot assume that progress toward equity will happen without deliberate efforts by White people to recognize, interrogate, and cede our own privilege. Lorde does not mean that scholarly work inherently belongs to the oppressor's toolkit and must be wholly rejected, but rather that the systems and practices of White supremacy, misogyny, and

¹⁸ As Dan-el Padilla Peralta has repeatedly argued. For example, at the SCS in 2019, he demonstrated how the field of Classics dramatically skews toward publishing, and so supporting, White male scholars. Padilla Peralta stated, "White men will have to surrender the privilege they have of seeing their words printed and disseminated; they will have to take a back seat so that people of color—and women and gender-nonconforming scholars of color—benefit from the privilege of seeing their words on the page." (See Padilla Peralta 2019 for his self-published transcript and data from the presentation.) At that event, a white female audience member attempted to defend the "classic Classics" and to discredit Padilla Peralta's presentation. Watching the video of this event reminded me of the brittle irony of Lorde's intervention at the conference in honor of Simone de Beauvoir.

heteronormativity must be resolutely and radically refused for meaningful antiracist, feminist, pro-queer transformative scholarly (and political) action to unfold. Anzaldúa's concept of *la facultad* provides a framework for understanding the importance of developing our own situated perspectives. I believe that cultivating *la facultad*, or the capacity for self-reflection, is necessary to the survival of our field, and the institutions we inhabit and create. It also affords us opportunities for a less-impooverished, indeed richer, more ethically coherent, and ultimately more pleasurable enterprise. Because paradigmatic transformation within institutions, including—but not limited to—academia, depends on the willingness to analyze and reject the dissonant classicism and racism that underpin our disciplinary and institutional culture, we must each critically self-reflect, interrogating where we benefit from race-based privilege, and actively seek opportunities to cede status and make space.

In 2017, I had yet to secure a tenure-track position. In the face of my own frustration, fear, grief, and the material consequences of my failure to gain stable employment, a decent salary, or a sense of belonging in academia, did I desire to glean status and privilege through a connection with the classical tradition? I did. And when I eventually noticed this insecure, striving part of myself, I resisted the urge to conceal my shame. Instead, I asked myself: if I stay with the discomfort of how, and why, I have sought to uplift myself through the discipline of Classics, what happens next? What can I learn and how might I change?

Classicism, White Privilege, and Me

Sappho exists as a valorized poet in the classical canon who shows a self-reflective subjectivity supportive of queer identity. From my first encounter till now: I find her poetry physically, emotionally, and intellectually pleasurable. Sappho 16 matters to me because I have become a more liberated and empowered scholar and teacher through my experience with it. But when I claimed that poem as my (queer) classic, I was off. The question “What is a Classic?” demands a more radical answer. By following in the footsteps of Eliot and Coetzee, I was working to elevate the value of (my) subjective, queer experience. I was also placing myself into a lineage of Eurocentric classicizing and White supremacy. Developing my presentation into this essay gave me an opportunity to reconsider my aims. To do so, I had to reflect on my White privilege. This process has, at times, been painful: I recall feeling cloudy with shame and genuinely afraid to write (let alone publish) any of what you are reading. A 2018 essay published in *Eidolon* helped me to understand and not get stuck alone in my shame.

In “White People Explain Classics to Us,” Yung In Chae interviewed Dan-el Padilla Peralta; in her analysis of their conversation, she realizes that both of these scholars of color were motivated in their study of the Classics by “a form of epistemic injustice.” Padilla Peralta candidly tells Yung In Chae about his reasons for studying Classics:

It was the erasure or occlusion of many other historical and cultural trajectories that had been folded into my immigrant experience but did not receive repeated validation.... It was when I turned to *Classics* that people started saying, ‘Ah! You do Classics? That’s so hard. That’s so amazing, that you’re interested in the Greeks and Romans.’ Of course there was all this condescension in the attempts to encourage me. A version of ‘look at how articulate he is.’ But because there was such an overwhelming urge to be validated, I turned in the direction of those compliments and smiled. And I basked in their glow because I felt that it was this form of affirmation that

heralded a deliverance from life circumstances that I found reprehensible.
(2018)

Yung In Chae had a realization about herself while in conversation with Dan-el Padilla Peralta:

[T]he real, honest, secret, shameful reason that I majored in Classics is simple and clear: *I wanted to tell people that I was a Classics major.* I wanted to tell people that I was studying something esoteric and important, which required knowledge of two difficult dead languages. (2018)

These scholars' experiences differ from and resonate with my own experience. First, I have had a different experience because I have the privilege of Whiteness. Privilege often works behind the scenes, unnoticed or ignored by those it benefits, and so it did for me, allowing me to pass as someone entitled entry into the field of Classics, and into the wider culture of academia in the United States. I didn't recognize my Whiteness at work. Coming from a working-class family without any connection to academic culture, I felt keenly aware of my outsider status, and I relished the recognition I began to receive when I showed myself capable of mastering the Classicist's toolkit.

I only started studying Greek and Latin after I finished my undergraduate degree at the Evergreen State College, where I was introduced to ancient Greek texts in translation as part of interdisciplinary programs offered by professors who were not Classicists by training. When I started studying in the University of Washington's Department of Classics, I began to have experiences similar to what Dan-el Padilla Peralta and Yung In Chae describe. When I told people that I was studying "the Classics," they were either confused ("What is 'the Classics?'"") or impressed. I began to receive scholarships to support my studies. I felt pride that I was doing something so *difficult* and so *fundamental*. I was studying the same ancient Greek and Latin texts as Freud, Nietzsche, and Arendt. I imagined that mastering the classics would empower me to develop and articulate my own ideas and to knowingly critique the oppressive (patriarchal, pessimistic) ideologies of my own historical context. While there was always a part of me that felt off track, I pushed forward. I often wondered whether studying the Classics was really the best way to work toward my aims. Through the process of asking "What is a Classic?" and engaging in this self-reflective reconsideration of my initial answer, I have come to realize that the dissonance I have felt, and continue to feel, was an emotional coupling of pride and shame. How could I celebrate the pride I felt at my accomplishments as a student and teacher, acknowledge the privilege I was beginning to receive through my identification with an elitist and exclusionary field, and simultaneously uphold my commitment to breaking down the value system that affirmed my status?

Only Medea in name: Rhodessa Jones Supports Women to Tell Their Own Stories

Looking back to the context of my 2017 lecture, I recognize how that event provided me inspiration for doing Classics differently. Vital, antiracist work is possible when we reject the limitations of the "classic(s)," as Rhodessa Jones's work with *The Medea Project* demonstrates. In the late 1980s, Jones founded *The Medea Project* to bring theatrical activism to incarcerated women. Over three decades of operation, the organization has made a real, significant, and positive impact on many people's lives. When Jones first began to produce plays with incarcerated women, their performances were adaptations of Euripides's fifth-century Greek tragedy, *Medea*, a riveting play about a woman who kills her own children. Despite her origin in a decidedly patriarchal and misogynistic time and place, and her characterization in the

play as a barbarian, Euripides's character Medea speaks (and acts) on her own behalf, famously articulating several persuasive points about her untenable position: Medea recognizes that she—as a foreigner and a woman—has no power, no status, and no cultural capital. She states that she would rather stand behind a shield in battle three times than give birth to one child (Diggle 1984, ll. 250–251). Medea is a problematic hero, to say the least, but it is not difficult to see how performing a version of her story could be cathartic and empowering.

According to Jones, although the group retains the name “The Medea Project,” they drew on Euripides's *Medea* for the content of their performances only briefly, when they were first getting started. Jones quickly understood that the women she was supporting—both incarcerated women and, subsequently, women who are HIV positive—did not need Euripides's words in order to tell their stories. The program participants had their own stories to tell, so Jones incorporated a creative writing component into her workshop. Today, participating members of *The Medea Project* create and perform their own original works. While the Greek “classic” provided a meaningful place to begin and, perhaps, some cultural capital, supporting living women to tell their own stories became the ongoing project.¹⁹ Like Sappho 16 and Kiki Loveday's project, Rhodessa Jones invites us to consider what can happen when we hold the Classics lightly, when we generate opportunities for traditionally marginalized people to tell their stories—and when all of us to learn to listen.

Self-reflection continues

It turns out that wrenching my way into academia did not equip me to write honestly in the way that I had hoped. I formed habits that were antithetical to my original aims of self-actualization and transformation through scholarship. My training as a Classicist hindered my capacity to engage in self-reflective scholarship. By claiming my own queer classic, I had begun to weave together subjective self-reflection with scholarly analysis, but by situating myself into Eliot and Coetzee's intellectual genealogy, I stepped into my White privilege. Through learning from the antiracist, intersectional work of many scholars and activists, and co-learning with students, who have generously joined and challenged me, I now believe that queering the Classics was only the start of the work I need to do to properly answer the question, “What is a Classic?”²⁰ I now reject, and am working to dismantle, the “imagined kinship” that I had previously aspired to construct (Umachandran and Ward 2014, 14).²¹

In this essay, I attempt to understand and describe how I have participated in constructing a concept of the classic, and the field of Classics, in ways that obfuscated my own privilege. From the time I gave my “What is a Classic?” talk until now, I've been

¹⁹ For more on *The Medea Project* see their website at <https://themedeproject.weebly.com/>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026. See also Fraden 2001 and Rabinowitz 2008.

²⁰ In the field of Classics, the work of Shelley Haley 1993, 1995, and 2009, Patrice Rankine 2020, the scholarly society *Eos* founded in 2017, and Sasha Mae Eccleston and Dan-el Padilla Peralta's recent essay published in a special issue of *American Journal of Philology* 2022 are vital interventions into this conversation that have inspired and educated me. My perspective and commitments have been, and continue to be, shaped and revitalized through the important work of activists and scholars outside of the field of Classics, including bell hooks (e.g. 1998 and 2014), Alicia Garza, and adrienne marie brown 2019.

²¹ I believe that the CAWS call for the field to “rend the fabric of the kinship narrative” and “[r]efuse to allow the classical to provide justification for European cultural hegemony through an imagined genealogical relationship with white Europeans” elevates what I'm doing personally in this essay to the level of a collective call for our discipline (Umachandran and Ward 2024, 14–19).

contemplating the problem of love. Valorizing something only because I love it, I've come to understand, isn't in and of itself sufficient. Many love the Classics *because* the field affords prestige and shores up oppressive paradigms. Was I doing something substantively different? Or, was I, like Eliot and Coetzee, in love with the feeling of belonging to an elevated class of people who could read Sappho in Greek and fill our shelves with volumes of poetry? It's not that my love for Kiki Loveday or Sappho, or the pleasure of teaching with their work, has diminished. It's that my commitments as a scholar and educator have expanded: I no longer celebrate what I love (Sappho 16, teaching, and the possibility of becoming a professor), without acknowledging what I refuse, including my own unexamined White privilege and acquiescence to the racism implicated in academic institutions and culture.

Because shame and silence prevent personal and social change, I am writing and publishing this essay, which details part of my imperfect process of becoming a more self-aware, honest, and engaged scholar. By working to refuse my complicity in the oppressive, dysfunctional dynamics of the field of Classics, I am experiencing firsthand the transformative potential of self-reflective scholarship. As I acknowledge my own White privilege and examine how that privilege intersects with my queerness and socioeconomic status to shape my experience and identity, I cultivate my own honest voice as a scholar and writer. I feel vulnerable publishing my process in printed words that can't continue to change. But I also feel a growing sense of coherence and self-respect as I recognize that, here and now, I am working toward my aims.

What is a classic? The classic is, I believe, a concept scholars might productively engage with as a site for refusal; it is an opportunity to cultivate a thoughtful, engaged, and historically contextualized, "No." Claiming, protecting, and carrying forward a concept of the classic doesn't serve us. We need movement. Classics can provide a productive field for cultivating the critical, self-reflective practice of engaged scholarship. Engaged scholarship can help us change.

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A Trans Philology of Bion's Lament for Adonis

Sarah Cullinan Herring

Abstract: This article explores the connections between trans theory and the ancient figure of Adonis in order to offer a definition of “trans philology”. The literary and historical ancestors for Bion’s *Lament for Adonis* are considered, offering important evidence that Adonis is already presented as a “gender outlaw” (Bornstein 2016) even in archaic and classical texts. The article then offers a close reading of Bion’s *Lament for Adonis*, resisting earlier editors’ attempts to erase Adonis’ ambiguous embodiment in this poem. The piece then closes by offering a wider context for the frequent connections in Greek literature between gender non-conformity and violent death, tracing an uncomfortable theme which makes it difficult to find in Adonis a wholly positive gender queer or trans ancestor.

Keywords: Adonis, Bion, gender, trans theory, philology.

Introduction¹

Adonis, from his earliest extant appearance in Greek literature, is something of a “gender outlaw”.² In applying Kate Bornstein’s term to the ancient mythical figure, this article argues that Adonis resists easy interpretation within the traditional gender binary of male/female. Adonis’ body, as the discussion below will show, displays markers of both masculinity and femininity from his earliest extant appearance in Greek literature. Adonis’ complex gender presentation is thus a (perhaps surprising) example of Jacob Hale’s concept of “rich and subtly nuanced embodiments of gender that resist and exceed any simple categorization”.³ Adonis and other characters from Greek myth disrupt the supposedly “objective” medical and psychological accounts of transgender pathology, and show that there is a long historical

¹ It is important to state that I am not trans, and that this paper is not intended to speak for or on behalf of family, friends, colleagues or students in the trans community. In working on issues of gender ambiguity and gender fluidity in classical texts I have found “Suggested Rules for Non-Transsexuals Writing about Transsexuals, Transsexuality, Transsexualism, or Trans ____” written by Jacob Hale (1997b) and shared open access online, helpful in framing my scholarship. For a recent and useful reflection on these rules see Zurn (2023).

Versions of this article were delivered as papers at the Oxford-Cambridge Classics Open Day in 2021, for the Lyne Society and FemSoc at St Edward’s School, Oxford in 2022 at the kind invitation of Mr Mark Taylor, at the WGSS & Trans Studies Seminar at the University of Kansas in September 2025 and at *Res Difficiles* 7 in March 2026. Thanks are owed to the audiences at all those talks for their engaged questions and challenges which have improved the piece considerably. I would also like to thank the editors of *Res Diff* and the anonymous reader, Abe Weil, Tom Sapsford and Erika Weiberg for their generous and helpful feedback. Of course, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the author alone.

² The term “gender outlaw” is explored at length by transgender scholar Kate Bornstein in *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us* (2016, first published 1994). The present article is concerned with portrayals of Adonis in Greek literature and culture—there is much fruitful work to be done on how Latin authors, particularly Ovid, receive and transform Adonis in their work, but that is outside the scope of this piece.

³ Hale (1997a): 273.

record of a wider, more inclusive understanding of gender and sex than the dominant and binary view of sex common in the USA and Europe today.

This article reinterprets Adonis through trans theory. Reading the ancient material through this modern theoretical lens allows us to look on the source materials with fresh eyes, to generate new interpretations, and (as *Postclassicisms* state in their essay on how the broader discipline of Classics might be transformed) “to interrupt the past understandings of the past in the name of an unpredictable future”.⁴ This approach allows a bidirectional rather than diachronic analysis of the texts: interpretation and understanding of Adonis’ ancient portrayal is enhanced by the perspectives of trans theory, and, simultaneously, these ancient Greek sources offer a challenge to certain understandings of the contemporary. While it is tempting to look for an affirming queer or trans ancestor in Adonis, the case in fact turns out to be uncomfortably complex. As with many contemporary gender outlaws, Adonis’ non-conformity ultimately causes him harm when he fails to perform in the traditionally masculine field of hunting, subsequently dying a painful death, gored in the groin by a wild boar.⁵ His violent, highly sexualized death is directly connected to his embodied gender expression: as we will see below, his body is read by other characters in those texts as rendering him incapable of functioning successfully within the bounds of Greek masculine society. His death therefore sits uncomfortably against the otherwise positive tone of his portrayal: while the texts uniformly celebrate the beauty and desirability of Adonis’ body, they also consistently present his non-conforming body as incompatible with life, or at least as incompatible with successfully living as a man. This tension complicates Adonis’ reception in modern queer culture and prevents a straightforwardly positive or affirming interpretation of his gendered embodiment.

I am not seeking to identify Adonis as transgender in the sense in which that term is understood in contemporary society, but rather to explore the Greek texts’ depictions of his embodied gender non-conformity and the implications of this for our understanding of ancient attitudes to gender difference(s).⁶ Two modern trans theories offer useful models for understanding the ways in which Adonis’ body is depicted in these texts, and for identifying the power structures which underpin his portrayal. The first is Susan Stryker’s broader concept of transgender phenomena which focuses on “anything that calls our attention to the contingency and unnaturalness of gender normativity” and bodies which “exceed or elude capture within the gender apparatus when they defy the logic of the biopolitical calculus”.⁷ The close readings which follow will argue that Adonis is positioned in the Greek texts as a “transgender phenomenon”, whose body “exceeds or eludes capture” within the gender apparatus of Greek culture. As an extension of this first theoretical model, my methodology in this article has also been shaped and inspired by the work of Cael Keegan who focusses on the theoretical implications of queer and transgender media representation, aesthetic figuration, and cultural production. “‘Bad’ objects,” in Keegan’s schema, are those “that refuse to fit neatly within the purportedly closed system of sexual difference, gesturing at the existence of possibilities beyond deterministic, binary categorizations”. Such “‘bad’ objects”, Keegan continues, “point to a broader vision for trans politics than the provisional

⁴ *Postclassicisms* (2020): 61.

⁵ On the violent punishments suffered by trans and gender non-conforming individuals in contemporary culture see Letcher (2018), DeJong et al. (2021), Brown (2022).

⁶ For a very useful discussion of the development of the term “transgender” see Williams (2014), Keegan (2020) and the guidelines prepared by the American Psychological Association (2024).

⁷ Stryker (2014): 40.

inclusion into gender-normative worlds that ‘good’ media currently provide”.⁸ Adonis, I argue, is a perfect example of what Keegan calls a “‘bad’ object” in that his existence, identity and embodiment all call into question the male/female sex binary, offering a powerful challenge to the gendered power dynamics of not only the ancient, but also the modern worlds.⁹

The second element of trans theory relevant to this article relates to Stryker’s observation that bodies which manifest transgender phenomena “experience microaggressions that cumulatively erode the quality of psychical life, and they also encounter major forms of violence, including deliberate killing”.¹⁰ The ancient texts under examination in this article present Adonis’ body as narratively marked for death precisely because it does not fit neatly into the binary scheme of the Greek gender imaginary. Mark Padilla and Sheilla Rodríguez-Madera’s recent application of Achille Mbembe’s theory of necropolitics to trans studies has identified ways in which the embodied experiences of trans individuals are marked by structural violence and death, arguing that trans bodies are (within the current political and medical systems) “systematically excluded and designed to die”.¹¹ Padilla and Rodríguez-Madera identify “violence and aggression ...as forms of social control and gender regulation and as broader expressions of necropolitics, that is, the ways that transwomen are structurally ‘hastened toward death’”.¹² While the present article does not argue that trans people are *always* or necessarily transhistorically marked for death—which would ultimately affirm the discursive ideological structures which produce such death—it *does* argue that comparable mechanisms of power are operating in the mythical and literary representations of Adonis, who is structurally and discursively “hastened towards death” because of his embodiment. Although Adonis is temporally and culturally removed from the modern systems of power and profit described by Mbembe in his theory of necropolitics (such as colonialism, slavery and mechanized warfare), Mbembe’s exploration of how societies and states decide whose lives are protected, whose lives are exposed to violence, and whose deaths are rendered acceptable or invisible is relevant for exposing the ways in which Adonis’ embodiment is presented by the texts as creating the circumstances for his inevitable death.¹³

The final theoretical premise of this article aims to bridge the gap between modern trans theory and disciplinary discourses more traditional to and familiar within Classical Studies in exploring the idea of trans philology. The term trans philology is here coined in a similar spirit to Ella Haselswerdt’s “deep lez philology” or the “critical philology” discussed by Hannah Silverblank and Marchella Ward.¹⁴ These recent critiques are a call to recognize that the concept of a neutral, scientifically “objective” philology is a myth, and a dangerous myth at that.¹⁵ As Patrice Rankine puts it “the pretense of pure philology, set apart from its

⁸ Both quotations from Keegan (2022): 29.

⁹ Keegan, interviewed by Ward (2022): “These ‘bad’ objects ask us to consider whether a discrete male/female sex binary exists at all, undercutting the modes of power that produce cisness and transness as contrasting opposites”.

¹⁰ Stryker (2014): 40.

¹¹ Padilla & Rodríguez-Madera (2021): S26.

¹² Padilla & Rodríguez-Madera (2021): S26.

¹³ Mbembe (2019): 66-92.

¹⁴ Silverblank & Ward (2020): 507-514.

¹⁵ Recent helpful discussions of philology include Gurd (2010), Güthenke (2020), Hardwick (2021), Greenwood (2022), Rankine (2019).

legacies and associations is pernicious".¹⁶ It is pernicious partly because it leads to the importation of biases (whether misogynistic, racist, homophobic, ableist or otherwise) into the construction of editions of ancient texts, or into translation(s) from Greek and Latin into English and other languages.¹⁷ The discussion below highlights the ways in which some of the Greek texts featuring Adonis have been edited by modern scholars to render his gender non-conformity (which is clearly present in the manuscripts) invisible. Trans philology recognizes the practice not as an "objective empirical scientific method" but rather as a series of decisions which are inevitably political.¹⁸ It therefore aims to bring to textual criticism a sensitivity to the possibilities of existence that trans theory enshrines, as Keegan puts it: "transgender studies' attention to corporeality means that it often treats texts as if they were bodies—applying heuristic methods extracted from transgender phenomenology to textual objects themselves".¹⁹ Trans philology is thus an iteration of what Emily Greenwood has termed "philology, otherhow". For Greenwood, this involves "a practice of intramural counter-philology—of turning the tools of philological criticism onto the discipline to examine its sources of cultural knowledge, ways of knowing, and its lacunae".²⁰

The birth of Adonis

As mentioned above, Adonis is celebrated for his beauty and attractiveness in many surviving sources from the Greek world. However, we find a darker strand to his story in the details of his birth and death, which contain elements of marginalization and othering. Adonis' birth narrative, told as early as Panyassis in the early 5th century BCE, is best preserved in Apollodorus, and includes the taboo subject of father-daughter incest, initiated by the daughter, Smyrna, who tricks her father into having sex with her. Smyrna is eventually metamorphosed into a tree, thus providing an aetiology for the myrrh tree.²¹ The story is set in Assyria, likely in Smyrna (hence the name given to his mother), a city on the Aegean coast of Anatolia located at the site of contemporary Izmir.²² The connection in ancient Greek literature of "barbarian" nations (particularly those from territories east of Greece, including Asia Minor and Persia) with effeminacy and luxury is well documented: Adonis' origins thus prefigure and potentially even explain his effeminate gender non-

¹⁶ Rankine (2019): 349.

¹⁷ Particularly useful in regards to ableist and racist interpretations of ancient texts is the intervention of Silverblank (2023) which offers a lexicographical analysis of the reproduction of antiblack and ableist ideologies in translations and commentaries of texts featuring Hephaestus.

¹⁸ Conybeare & Goldhill (2021): 1-11 (quotation on p.6) discuss the tensions between ideas of philology as supposedly 'objective' discipline in relation to faith-based beliefs. My particular thanks to Hannah Čulík-Baird for her comments on this section of the article which were transformative.

¹⁹ Keegan (2020): 71.

²⁰ Greenwood (2022): 190.

²¹ Vernant (1988): 155 "the product of a union between a man and a woman who...should never have been united". Reed (1997): 329 "Furthermore, Panyassis' myth is constructed as an unsavory sexual daydream told from the male point of view: an older man has relations with his nubile adolescent daughter without the remotest risk of being blamed for the misdeed...notice especially...the excessive violence of his punitiveness, serving as an emphatic denial of guilt".

²² Apollodorus *Library* 3.14.3-4 (partly based on the earlier account of Panyassis) offers two alternative origins for Adonis as the son of Cinyras, the son of Syrian settlers in Cilicia who settled in Cyprus, and notes Hesiod's assertion that Adonis was the son of Phoenix and Alpheisiboea. By far the most attention is given to his Assyrian origins in the story from Panyassis. Hyginus (*Fab.* 58) also reports the Assyrian origin. See Frazer (1921) 87 n.1 for further discussion.

conformity.²³ The myrrh tree was also a symbol of exotic foreignness, since myrrh was not available in Greece and came as an import from Southern Arabia, Eritrea and Northern Abyssinia.²⁴ Adonis is carried to full term inside the tree, and is born from a slit in its trunk. As a baby, he is so beautiful that two goddesses fight over him: Persephone and Aphrodite, with the latter eventually become his lover. In many ways, Adonis is multiply “othered” in his birth narrative: the child of a taboo and abusive sexual relationship, a non-Greek who would be seen automatically by many Greeks as a barbarian; and born from a tree, so in some ways not even fully human. These elements of stigmatization subtly undermine an entirely affirming interpretation of Adonis, despite his almost supernatural beauty. Keegan identifies a tendency to present transgender phenomena “as *things*—indefinable and monstrous objects that threaten the taxonomies of the western scientific episteme” in literature and culture from the 19th century onwards, but we can see clear echoes of this more modern cultural trope in the Greek representations of Adonis.²⁵

Adult Adonis: a body in flux

The earliest reference to adult (or adolescent, at least) Adonis is in Sappho (630-570 BCE), who mentions him several times in the extant fragments.²⁶ Sappho, a lyric poet from the Greek island of Lesbos, famous in modernity for her love poetry focused on same-sex desire, was equally renowned in antiquity for the excellence of her verse. Relevant to this discussion is fr.140a, a short snippet of call and response between a group of girls (who are directly addressed in the preserved lines) and the speaker, otherwise unidentified. The fragment may allude to women-only cults in honor of Adonis but sadly lacks the necessary context for any certainty:²⁷

καθνάσκει, Κυθήρη', ἄβρος Ἄδωνις· τί κε θεῖμεν;
κατύπτειθε, κόραι, καὶ κατερείκεσθε κίθωνας.²⁸

“Delicate Adonis is dying, Lady Aphrodite. What should we do?”
“Beat your breasts, girls, and tear your dresses.”

(Sappho fr. 140a)

The adjective ἄβρος (“delicate”, “dainty”) used to describe Adonis here is a signal that he is gender non-conforming.²⁹ This descriptor (elsewhere, and in all of the examples below, usually spelled with a rough breathing) is coded as feminine wherever it appears in Greek

²³ On the concept of the “effeminate” barbarian see especially Kurke (1992), Hall (1989): 56-101, 209-210; Harrison (2020), Castriota (2021). On the persistence of this phenomenon into Roman culture see Strassfeld (2023): 35-36.

²⁴ On myrrh in Greco-Roman culture and literature, see Frazer (1921): 87 n.2, Hünemörder (2006). For myrrh in the Adonis myth specifically, see the extensive discussion of Detienne (1994): 5-36.

²⁵ Keegan (2020): 72, emphasis his.

²⁶ Fr. 168 consists only of the phrase “alas for Adonis”, which may connect to the Adonia festival, while the uncertainly attested fr. 17b (=Sappho/Alcaeus fr. 24) consists of the phrase “Oh for the Adonian”.

²⁷ Stehle (1996): 194-195 discusses the fragment and its potential cultic significance; see also Neri (2021): 817-818. On Sappho’s poems for girls, see Ferrari (2021): 107-108.

²⁸ The Greek text of Sappho is that of Campbell (1982). The English translation is my own.

²⁹ See Kurke (1992) for an analysis of the changing cultural value of this word and its cognates, tracing an increase in negativity towards the word after the Persian war and due to the development of *isonomia* as a key civic value in Athens, alongside the earlier survey of Lombardo (1983): 1077-1103.

literature, as a short survey shows: it is used of tragic heroines such as Hecuba, former queen of Troy: "Guide me, who before trod so daintily the streets of Troy..." and Antigone "I do not veil my delicate cheek shaded with curls"³⁰. Of adult men, it indicates both foreign luxury and effeminacy, as we see in Pentheus' threats to the gender non-conforming stranger in *Bacchae* that he will cut his "delicate hair".³¹ Antiphanes, a now-fragmentary comic playwright uses it to describe "a delicate, luxury-loving host of foppish Ionians".³² Its use in reference to Adonis shows that, as early as Sappho, his character already pushes the boundaries of manhood. The examples discussed here also show the intersectionality of gender non-conformity and racial identity in the Greek imaginary.³³

Along with Sappho, the Hellenistic poet Theocritus is a direct literary influence on Bion's Adonis. Although our evidence for his life is scant, it is likely that Theocritus was originally from Syracuse and that he later spent time in Alexandria and on Kos. Internal evidence allows us to date some of his extant poems to the 270s BCE, including *Idyll* 15 (dated to c. 275 BCE) in which Adonis has a starring role. This poem is focalized through two ordinary middle-class women, Gorgo and Praxinoa. The action takes place firstly at Praxinoa's home, subsequently following their walk through the streets of Alexandria and their experience attending a festival of Aphrodite and Adonis at the royal palace. The women are married and have children, and before they attend queen Arsinoe's lavish display, they complain about their husbands who are grumpy, stupid and boring.³⁴ This creates a strong contrast to the images of Aphrodite and Adonis that are described as part of the festival, where the couple are depicted as the paradigm of passion and romance.³⁵

³⁰ Hecuba at Eur. *Trojan Women* 506, Antigone at Eur. *Phoenician Women* 1486; further similar usages occur at Eur. *Medea* 1164 (of Creusa's "dainty" movement), Eur. *Helen* 1528 (of Helen's "dainty" movement), Eur. *Iph. Aul.* 614 (Clytemnestra instructing Iphigenia to move "daintily"). Plato *Symp.* 204c5 uses it to refer to pederastic eros. Bacchylides fr. 15.4 applies the adjective to "a delicate song".

³¹ Kurke (1992): 109 notes that the term connotes "hedonistic luxury" in most lyric poetry apart from Pindar where it retains a more positive tone. Outside tragedy it is used to praise "the delicate Graces" (Sappho fr. 60), to evoke the vulnerability of a new-born baby: "his tender body washed in the golden and purple light of violets" (Pindar *Ol.* 6.55). In some cases ἄβρος is used to connote foreignness in the context of the alleged effeminacy or luxury associated with non-Greeks.

³² Antiphanes fr. 91 K-A (91K).

³³ Olson (2023): 344 notes that the adjective is "used occasionally in the classical period in praise of girls and women (A. fr. 313.1) but not of men, for whom such "delicacy" is unmanly (e. g. E. *Ba.* 968–9, where the maddened Pentheus imagines the ἄβροτης and τρυφή that will in fact be his destruction)".

³⁴ Hunter (1996): 117 "a contrast which runs parallel to that between the sensuality of the Adonis cult and the "lovelessness" of the marriages in which the women find themselves"; Hopkinson (2015): 206 "the two women's husbands are no Adonises".

³⁵ The Greek text of Theocritus is that of Hopkinson (2015).

ΓΟΡΓΩ

Πραξινοά, πόταγ' ὦδε. τὰ ποικίλα πρᾶτον ἄθρησον,
λεπτὰ καὶ ὡς χαρίεντα· θεῶν περονάματα φασεῖς.

...

ΠΡΑΞΙΝΟΑ

αὐτὸς δ' ὡς θαητὸς ἐπ' ἀργυρέας κατάκειται
κλισμῷ, πρᾶτον ἵουλον ἀπὸ κροτάφων καταβάλλων,
ὁ τριφίλητος Ἄδωνις, ὁ κὴν Ἀχέροντι φιληθείς.

GORGO

"Praxinoa, come over here! First look at these tapestries, how detailed and charming they are—you'd say they were the clothes of the gods!"

...

PRAXINOA

[describing Adonis' image on the tapestry] "And he himself—how wonderful he is, lying on the silver couch, with the first beard hair spreading down from his temples, thrice-beloved Adonis, who is desirable even in death."

(Theocritus *Idyll* 15.78-79, 84-86)

In this exchange, we are told what it is about Adonis that the women find so attractive (in contrast to their husbands for whom they have only criticism): he is very young, with the first facial hair only just spreading on his face. As Joan Burton notes, it is precisely Adonis' gender non-conformity to which the women are responding so enthusiastically: "Theocritus's Praxinoa also finds this stage of gender doubt erotic, and her description of Adonis makes evident the eroticism of her gaze".³⁶ This suggests that Adonis is here aligned with the age of pederastic attraction: perhaps Theocritus, in attempting to subjectivize female sexual desire, has superimposed onto them a male-focalized pederastic gaze?³⁷ The reference to Adonis' continued attractiveness after death has double valence, referring to the myths of his sojourn in the underworld and rebirth, but also anticipating the later poetic accounts of his body's literal beauty in death. The women's admiration of Adonis' boyish beauty is echoed in the hymn of the un-named female singer at the festival:

ὦ ἔβενος, ὦ χρυσός, ὦ ἐκ λευκῷ ἐλέφαντος
αἰετοὶ οἰνοχόον Κρονίδα Διὶ παῖδα φέροντες,
πορφύρεοι δὲ τάπητες ἄνω μαλακώτεροι ὕπνω·
ἅ Μίλατος ἐρεῖ χῶ τὰν Σαμίαν καταβόσκων,
"ἔστρωται κλῖνα τῷδ' ὠνιδι τῷ καλῷ ἄμμιν."
τὸν μὲν Κύπρις ἔχει, τὰν δ' ὁ ῥοδόπαχυς Ἄδωνις.
ὀκτωκαιδεκετὴς ἢ ἐννεακαίδεχ' ὁ γαμβρός·
οὐ κεντεῖ τὸ φίλημ'· ἔτι οἱ περὶ χεῖλεα πυρρά.
νῦν μὲν Κύπρις ἔχοισα τὸν αὐτὰς χαιρέτω ἄνδρα·

³⁶ Burton (1995): 58.

³⁷ Burton (1995): 57 and 85-86 notes the pederastic overtones in this passage.

“O ebony, O gold, O eagles of white ivory carrying a boy as wine-server to Zeus son of Cronus, and purple coverings above, softer than sleep! Miletus and the shepherd who pastures the land of Samos will say, ‘The bed for beautiful Adonis has been spread (with blankets) by us!’ Kypris is holding him, and Adonis holds her in his rosy arms. The bridegroom is eighteen or nineteen years old, and his kiss does not scratch; reddish down is still around his lips. Farewell now to Kypris as she holds her man.”

(Theocritus *Idyll* 15.123-131)

The reference to Ganymede as an ornament on the couch links Adonis again to pederasty, indicating immature manhood and mirroring the power imbalance between Aphrodite and her young lover. The Greek term for Adonis’ “rosy arms” (ροδόπαχυς) is strongly female-coded, as noted by Gow in his commentary on Theocritus: “the adjective is not used elsewhere of a male person”.³⁸ Once more, we are told that Adonis does not have rough facial hair, only “down” on his lip and a soft face which “does not scratch” his lover. Of course, this signals immature masculinity, but combined with the rosy arms, and the gender-reversed relationship in which the female partner dominates, it is also a signal of gender non-conformity.³⁹ Hunter notes this non-conformity: “Adonis ‘the beautiful’, who is always both bridegroom and lost lover, is not a martial hero, indeed in some ways is the very antithesis of such a hero, for whom hunting and warfare are two sides of the same coin”, connecting Adonis’ non-traditional masculinity directly with his beauty and his inability to perform in the masculine pursuits of battle and the hunt.⁴⁰

The festival song-performance closes with a list of heroes to whom Adonis is claimed to be superior: the line-up includes Agamemnon, Ajax, Patroclus and Neoptolemus. Adonis’ superiority rests, for this singer, on the fact that he is “the one and only hero, so they say, that visits both the underworld and the world here above”.⁴¹ His ability to traverse between worlds was granted to him because of his extreme beauty and the rivalry between Aphrodite and Persephone, who both wanted to possess him.⁴² Thus, it is his sexual attractiveness, explicitly expressed through embodied gender non-conformity, which has rendered Adonis superior to the rollcall of Greek epic heroes. Although Adonis is manifestly not an example of Greek heroic manhood or hegemonic masculinity, he is nonetheless beloved and admired, by Aphrodite, by Persephone, by Queen Arsinoe who chooses to honor him with this lavish festival, and by the two ordinary women who narrate this poem. There is not scope here to go into a detailed textual comparison, but Adonis’ particular brand of effeminized, boyish masculinity is seen elsewhere in Greek literature: we might think of Paris in the *Iliad*, or Dionysus/the Stranger in Euripides’ *Bacchae*.⁴³ All of these characters exhibit a powerful sex appeal, and this raises the question: why did the Greeks turn, again and again, to exploring

³⁸ Gow (1950): 310 n.128. Hunter (1996): 130 “the epithet ‘rosy-armed’ (v. 128) is normally applied to women and so both points this [gender] reversal”.

³⁹ Hunter (1996): 130 “the sex rôles are reversed... the tableau representing them suggests both illicit lovemaking (‘incest’) and the grandiose style of Ptolemaic funerals”.

⁴⁰ Hunter (1996): 134, see also Lambert (2001): 95-96 “the singer...feminizes the young lover at the hymn’s most erotic moment”. Burton (1995): 57 describes Adonis as “sexually ambiguous”; Griffiths (1981): 119 as “the sweet and passive Adonis”.

⁴¹ Theocritus *Idyll* 15.136-137.

⁴² Vernant (1988): 155 “inspiring an equally passionate love for him in both Persephone of the Underworld and the heavenly Aphrodite”.

⁴³ These figures, and Adonis, are part of a larger study under preparation by this author on gender outlaws in Greek literature.

the idea that gender outlaws (i.e. figures who do not fit into a socially authorized gender binary) are more attractive than those who *do* conform to those societal constructs?

Towards a trans philology of Bion's *Lament for Adonis*

The non-conformity of Adonis' embodied gender expression is intensified in Bion's *Lament for Adonis*. Almost nothing is known of Bion's life or the dates he was active, although a date in the late 2nd century or early 1st century BCE is thought to be most likely.⁴⁴ The Suda θ 166 reports he was born in Phlossa, a town near Smyrna, which is significant given the origins of the Adonis myth. His work shows the influences of both Moschus and Theocritus.⁴⁵ The *Lament for Adonis* focuses on the death of Adonis and Aphrodite's grief for him. Here too, the descriptions of Adonis emphasize his beauty using language more usually used of women, and here, too, there is a language of infantilization reflective of the references to Ganymede (and pederastic love) which we saw in Theocritus *Idyll* 15.

Adonis' violent death occurs due to his failure to kill a wild boar in the hunt, a traditionally masculine pursuit:⁴⁶

κεῖται καλὸς Ἄδωνις ἐν ὄρεσι μὴρὸν ὀδόντι,
λευκῷ λευκὸν ὀδόντι τυπεῖς, καὶ Κύπριν ἀνιῇ
λεπτὸν ἀποψύχων· τὸ δέ οἱ μέλαν εἵβεται αἶμα
χιονέας κατὰ σαρκός, ὑπ' ὀφρύσι δ' ὄμματα ναρκῇ,
καὶ τὸ ρόδον φεύγει τῷ χεῖλεος ἄμφι δὲ τήνῳ
θνάσκει καὶ τὸ φίλημα, τὸ μήποτε Κύπρις ἀποίσει.

Beautiful Adonis lies in the mountains; wounded in the thigh with a tusk, wounded in his white thigh with a white tusk, and he longs for Kypris as he breathes his last faint breath. Dark blood trickles over his snow-white flesh, and under his brows his eyes grow dim; the rose flees from his lips, and around it dies the kiss, too, which Kypris will never carry off again.

(Bion *Lament for Adonis* 7-12)

Bion, like Theocritus, describes Adonis in terms which do not conform to the usual embodied gender expression of masculine heroes: his thigh is “white” (λευκός) and his flesh is described as “snow-white” (χιονέας). Whiteness in Greek literature is a marker of attractive femininity.⁴⁷ The location of his wound and the ecphrastic emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of his body in death sexualizes the attack of the boar. Adonis is penetrated by his tusk and wounded in the thigh even as he is emasculated through his failure in hunting.⁴⁸ Adonis' continued sexual attractiveness in death, hinted at by Praxinoa in Theocritus, is again a feature in Bion's poem: “even when he is no longer living his kiss pleases Kypris, but Adonis does not know that she kissed him after he died” (13-14). The sexual interaction after Adonis' death intensifies the poem's portrayal of Aphrodite as the

⁴⁴ For Bion's date see Hopkinson (2015): x-xi; Reed (1997): 3 prefers a date earlier in this range.

⁴⁵ See Reed (1997): 2-4 for discussion of what is known of Bion's life.

⁴⁶ The Greek text of Bion is that of Hopkinson (2015), with any changes noted in the discussion.

⁴⁷ On cultural ideals of paleness as a female beauty standard in the ancient world, see Davies & Llewellyn-Jones (2017), Eaverly (2013): 83-122.

⁴⁸ Fowler (1987) identified an association between wounded heroes on the battlefield and sexual penetration or defloration in Vergil, tracing this motif back to the *Iliad* (as I discuss further below).

dominant partner in the relationship, further effeminizing Adonis. We will return to the theme of Adonis' sexualization in death below, after a discussion of two passages of the *Lament for Adonis* which have been edited by modern scholars to remove gender ambiguity from the descriptions of Adonis, and/or due to discomfort with the age-gap relationship between the adult Aphrodite and the younger, effeminized Adonis.

Bion's *Lament for Adonis* is preserved in two principal manuscripts (V and R), both dated to the early 14th century, which are generally agreed to derive from a common ancestor (Φ).⁴⁹ We do not have any papyrus evidence for Bion, and his works otherwise survive as fragments deriving mostly from the quotations of 5th century CE anthologist Stobaeus. While acknowledging this relatively precarious textual transmission, this article aims to consider the text as we have it in the extant manuscripts and to evaluate the rationale for making changes to the transmitted text, particularly in cases where the manuscripts show no variance and/or there are no obvious metrical, lexical or grammatical errors to be remedied.

The first case to be considered is the poem's description of Aphrodite searching and calling out for Adonis:

ὄξ' ὃ δὲ κωκύοισα δι' ἄγκεα μακρὰ φορεῖται
Ἀσσύριον βοόωσα πόσιν καὶ παῖδα καλεῦσα.⁵⁰

Lamenting shrilly, she wandered the long, winding ways
screaming and calling for her Assyrian husband, her boy.

(Bion *Lament for Adonis* 23-24)

The first item which has caused problems is the reference in line 24 to Adonis as both πόσιν καὶ παῖδα. Scholars have struggled with this in the context of Aphrodite's sexual relationship with Adonis, and Neil Hopkinson's Loeb edition (after Gallivotti, Fantuzzi and Hermann) prints an emendation to this line as follows: Ἀσσύριον βοόωσα πόσιν, καὶ πολλὰ καλεῦσα, "crying out for her Assyrian husband and calling many times". Hopkinson's note on the line identifies the reason for the textual emendation: "in this context 'boy' seems odd".⁵¹ The "context" meant here is the sexual nature of Adonis' relationship with Aphrodite. The word πολλά does not appear in the manuscript tradition, and there is no reason to change the Greek text here for reasons of metre or grammar. The motivation to change the text here is therefore not a technical problem with the Greek, or a preference for a variant attested MS reading, but rather a discomfort with the content of the text itself. Such a practice, of changing an ancient text based on value judgement (or anachronistic moral grounds) alone, calls into question the supposed objectivity of philology and textual criticism as commonly understood, or rather as commonly assumed, in the discipline of Classical Studies.

In fact, Bion refers to Adonis as a παῖς ("boy") only a few lines before this (line 18: "Around that boy his own dear dogs howl") and it is not at all out of place that he should use

⁴⁹ For a detailed discussion of the textual transmission of Bion's *Lament for Adonis*, see Reed (1997): 64-86. Fantuzzi (2017): 169-171 offers a very useful and accessible overview.

⁵⁰ The Greek text is that of Reed, here following the MS R, and noting the variant reading reported in MS V as an error based on a misreading of παῖδα. For a detailed account of the vexed history of these lines, see Reed (1992): 538-543 and Reed (1997): 209-210.

⁵¹ Hopkinson (2015): 509 n.6. Hopkinson's 2015 edition follows the MS for these lines, but expresses serious misgivings in the footnote to the passage.

this term again here. Rather than changing the Greek text to fit with (negative, or at least wary) modern attitudes to such an age-gap relationship, it is more profitable to raise the question: *why* does Bion use the word “boy” to describe Adonis here? As we have seen from the Sapphic and Theocritean depictions of Adonis, he is frequently depicted as a very young man or older boy on the cusp of manhood, even in the context (as in *Idyll* 15) of a sexual union with Aphrodite. As in Theocritus, Bion’s emphasis on Adonis’ youth suggests that the age-gap relationship between Aphrodite and Adonis is being depicted as quasi-incestuous and that Aphrodite is coded here as a mother figure as well as a lover. This transgressive aspect of their relationship is noted in Hunter’s analysis of Theocritus and furthermore reflects the power imbalance and incest which resulted in Adonis’ own birth.⁵² Another connection with Theocritus (where we saw the desire of the married women for Adonis described in terms reminiscent of pederastic relationships) is that the repeated use of *παῖς* suggests that Aphrodite’s desire for a younger man, and a mortal, is coded as pederastic.

The next problem with this passage is the reference to Adonis’ chest and the blood on his body in lines 25-27. Before looking at the changes made to these lines of the poem by textual critics, let us consider the relevant lines of the poem with the “problematic words” in bold. These words are reported by all the extant manuscripts, and do not cause metrical or grammatical problems. Once more, as we shall see below, the reasons for changing the text are ideological and/or moral.

The text with bold words as reported in the extant manuscripts:

ἀμφὶ δέ νιν μέλαν **αἷμα** παρ’ ὀμφαλὸν ἄωρεῖτο,
στήθεα δ’ ἐκ **μηρῶν** φοινίσσετο, τοῖ δ’ ὑπὸ μαζοῖ
χιόνεοι τὸ πάροιθεν Ἀδώνιδι πορφύροντο.

Around him the black **blood** gathered above his navel,
his chest was bloody from his **thighs**, and Adonis’ breasts which
before were snowy-white grew crimson (with blood).

The text as emended by Reed (1997), followed by Hopkinson (2020):⁵³

ἀμφὶ δέ νιν μέλαν **εἷμα** παρ’ ὀμφαλὸν ἄωρεῖτο,
στήθεα δ’ ἐκ **χειρῶν** φοινίσσετο, τοῖ δ’ ὑπὸ μαζοῖ
χιόνεοι τὸ πάροιθεν Ἀδώνιδι πορφύροντο.

Around her the dark **cloak** floated at her navel,
her chest was bloodied by her **hands**, and her breasts
snow-white before, grew crimson for Adonis

The substance of the changes is that *αἷμα* (“blood”) becomes *εἷμα* (“cloak”) and *μηρῶν* (Adonis’) “thighs” becomes *χειρῶν* (Aphrodite’s) “hands”. The image over all is changed to refer to Aphrodite rather than Adonis. Reed offers justification for this on the grounds that the verb used of the blood pooling around Adonis’ navel in line 25 (“floated”, *ἄωρεῖτο*) is inappropriate of liquid: “Blood cannot do this”.⁵⁴ However, the imagery of blood floating on Adonis’ navel is not out of keeping with Bion’s creative use of language elsewhere

⁵² Hunter (1996): 130. See also Lambert (2001): 98-99 “The discreet flash of incest may glimmer momentarily; certainly the myth of Adonis is fashioned by it”.

⁵³ Reed is ultimately here following the emendations of Ahrens (1854).

⁵⁴ Reed (1997): 209, followed by Hopkinson (2015): 509 n.7 “floating blood is a very strange expression”.

in this poem. Idiosyncratic language usage, when describing Adonis' embodied suffering, occurs throughout the descriptions of the death scene. We might take as an example the phrase ὑπ' ὀφρύσι δ' ὄμματα νάρκη (lit. "under his eyebrows his eyes grew numb", line 10). One might similarly argue that "eyes cannot do that", but editors have not sought in this instance to change the Greek to something more literal.

Another reason for the change from Adonis to Aphrodite is the position of Adonis' body as implied by the description in the MSS of his chest growing bloody from his thighs (i.e. we should picture him lying on his back, with his thighs resting on his prone chest and covering them in blood). This description has been termed "improbable"⁵⁵, "awkward"⁵⁶ and "a perversely sexual image".⁵⁷ The image, I would argue, is probably sexual: Adonis, a beautiful young man, lies naked, wounded in his thigh in a symbolic penetration, his body arranged in a posture which recalls his sexually passive characterization. The sexualization of warriors wounded in battle is a theme already in the *Iliad* (as I discuss below). Here, Bion intensifies the sense that the painful, yet ecphrastic image is meant to be read erotically by the poem's audience. Like Aphrodite, we are meant to take pleasure in Adonis' body after his death. The fetal position also resonates with the previous imagery of Adonis as a child, indicating his vulnerability in death and emphasizing his passivity.

The Greek manuscripts as transmitted use the term μαστοί ("breasts") of Adonis' body, which has also caused consternation. Reed comments on the "strangeness of the MS reading", arguing that this word if used of a man, must mean "nipple", and therefore that the adjective applied to Adonis' chest (χιόνεοι, "snow-white") is incongruous in this context. He finds "internal and external indications that the lines originally described Aphrodite". However, the external indications are to literary depictions of female lament in Adonian and non-Adonian ritual contexts, none of which offers strong justification for emending the lines, while the internal indication is simply a claim that the reference to Aphrodite's ruined beauty at lines 29-31 "is better accounted for" if these changes are accepted.⁵⁸ Ultimately, Reed finds that "Bion did not intend what the MSS report".⁵⁹ This claim to understand the ancient poet's authorial intention is based on very little evidence other than discomfort with the description as it stands in the transmitted text(s). Rather than emending the ancient Greek text to reflect particular 20th century sexual norms and desires I suggest that we consider the text as transmitted and ask what the implications are for the poem and its meaning. While the term μαστοί is most commonly used of female bodies, there is a strong indication through intratextuality that it is Adonis' body which is described here: the adjective "snow-white" (χιόνεοι, which was used already of his skin at line 10 of the poem) is used here of his chest. Here, as there, the whiteness indicates femininity, as does the deliberate use of an anatomical term more usually used of women to describe his body. The language of this description encourages a reading of Adonis as a "transgender phenomenon" or "bad object" whose body confounds and undermines what Keegan terms the "purportedly closed system of sexual difference".⁶⁰

⁵⁵ Hopkinson (2015): 509 n.7.

⁵⁶ Reed (1997): 209

⁵⁷ Reed (2006): 52.

⁵⁸ Reed (1997): 210.

⁵⁹ Reed (1997): 210.

⁶⁰ Keegan (2022): 29.

Deliberate use of language to subvert gender norms continues in Bion's description of the supernatural metamorphosis of Adonis' blood.

δάκρυον ἅ Παφία τόσσον χέει ὅσσον Ἄδωνις
αἶμα χέει, τὰ δὲ πάντα ποτὶ χθονὶ γίνεται ἄνθη·
αἶμα ῥόδον τίκτει, τὰ δὲ δάκρυα τὰν ἀνεμώνων.

The Paphian pours out as many tears as Adonis
pours out blood, and it all turns to flowers on the earth:
the blood gives birth to roses, the tears to the anemone.

(Bion *Lament for Adonis* 64-66)

The choice of the verb τίκτω ("to give birth") to describe the spontaneous growth of roses from the earth where Adonis' blood falls further blurs Adonis' gender presentation within the poem. His non-human birth from the tree trunk of his metamorphosed mother comes full circle as his blood generates botanical life, blurring the boundaries not only of gender but of human and non-human lifeforms. The ῥόδον ("rose") that is born from his blood was previously used in the poem metaphorically of the color loss in his lips as he dies: καὶ τὸ ῥόδον φεύγει τῷ χεῖλεος, "and the rose flees his lip" (line 11). One of the most admired and distinctive features of his beauty in life is transferred through this metamorphosis to perennial existence in the natural world, recurring yearly in the due season and mirroring his own eventual bilocation between the upper and underworlds.

Adonis' gender non-conformity is central to this poem's portrayal of his identity, and a vital component of his extreme beauty and sexual appeal for Aphrodite, thus "gesturing at the existence of possibilities beyond deterministic, binary categorizations".⁶¹ Previous scholarship on Adonis has sought to minimize or even deny his gender non-conformity precisely *because* scholars cannot accept that a gender non-conforming figure could have been positively viewed by the ancient Greeks. On this reading, exemplified in the following quotation from Reed, Adonis' popularity, sexual attractiveness and beauty negates the possibility of his being gender queer:

"it is a commonplace in scholarship on Adonis to regard him as a figurative antithesis of what a Greek man should be: his death by the boar epitomizes failed hunting, his position as the kept boy of Aphrodite deprives him of traditional male virtues...to this theory let it be objected immediately that no extant version of the myth clearly suggests treatment of Adonis as contemptible..."

(Reed 1997: 25)

This article seeks to turn this statement on its head. The praise for Adonis' transgressive gender presentation in these texts suggests that ancient attitudes to gender were more flexible in some ways than contemporary binary ideologies of gender. The beautiful, complicated Adonis could thus be added to a growing cohort of examples, many from non-Western cultures, of more complex and diverse cultural understandings of gender and sexuality than the two-sex binary we are all familiar with.⁶² It is important to consider

⁶¹ Keegan (2022): 29.

⁶² Keegan (2022): 28 "From the 17th through the 19th century, what had been a range of available social and legal roles for trans and intersex people was slowly restricted until there were only two sexed categories: 'male' and 'female'". See also Fausto-Sterling (2000): 30-44.

however, the extent to which Adonis' non-normative body is fetishized by the Greek texts in ways familiar from modern cultural treatments of trans bodies. Recent scholarship has exposed the many ways in which gender non-conforming people "face multifaceted fetishization" both in online spaces and in daily life, while there is a long-standing and well documented trope in film and media of "fetishizing trans bodies and stereotyping trans stories". Adonis' hyper-sexualized representation throughout the examples discussed above has echoes of such objectification and fetishization.⁶³

The death of Adonis

Turning to the end of Adonis' story and his death, we should remember at this point the circumstances of his birth. Conceived through incestuous intercourse and born from a tree, his taboo origins imply that Adonis non-conforming gender, his existence as a trans phenomenon, is somehow an embodiment of that sexual transgression. This unease surrounding Adonis culminates in the texts' implication, at his death, that he was somehow "designed for death" because his body does not meet the societally sanctioned standards of traditional, hegemonic masculinity.⁶⁴ So, Aphrodite, distraught, laments over his wounded corpse:

τί γάρ, τολμηρέ, κυνάγεις;
καλὸς ἐὼν τί τοσοῦτον ἐμήναο θηρὶ παλαίειν;
"Why indeed, rash one, are you hunting?
Since you are beautiful, why were you so mad as to fight with a beast?"
(Bion *Lament for Adonis* 60-61)

In Aphrodite's view, Adonis' beauty logically and naturally excludes him from the masculine pursuit of hunting. The choice of verb in line 61 παλαίειν (lit. "to wrestle") cleverly suggests that Adonis is also excluded from that other most masculine of pursuits: athletics. Aphrodite's assertion that Adonis' body both guaranteed his failure in the masculine activities of hunting and athletics and assured his death is, as I stated in the introduction above, resonant with the conclusions of modern trans necropolitical analysis which notes the ways in which trans bodies are structurally failed by systems in such a way that they "must die". It is also not an isolated example: there is not scope in this piece to offer a full series of parallels, but it is the case throughout Greek literature that gender non-conformity is depicted as alluring, thrilling and seductive, but as having disastrous consequences for the non-conforming individual and/or their community. One example will have to suffice here: a moment in Homer's *Iliad* where Hector upbraids Paris for his cowardly exit from the failed duel with Menelaus:

τὸν δ' Ἴκτωρ νείκεσεν ἰδὼν αἰσχροῖς ἐπέεσσιν·
"Δύσπαρι, εἶδος ἄριστε, γυναιμανές, ἡπεροπευτά,
αἶθ' ὄφελες ἄγονός τ' ἔμμεναι ἄγαμός τ' ἀπολέσθαι.
καὶ κε τὸ βουλοίμην, καὶ κεν πολὺ κέρδιον ἦεν
ἢ οὕτω λῶβην τ' ἔμμεναι καὶ ὑπόψιον ἄλλων.

⁶³ Kidd et al. (2026): 5, Samer (2021): 538. For a wide-ranging discussion of this phenomenon see also Anzani et al. (2021).

⁶⁴ Padilla & Rodríguez-Madera (2021): S26, S36, building on the framework of Mbembe (2019): 66-92. Vernant (1988): 156 "He fails the test which normally gives a boy access to full manhood".

ἧ που καγχαλόωσι κάρη κομόωντες Ἀχαιοὶ,
φάντες ἀριστῆα πρόμον ἔμμεναι, οὔνεκα καλὸν
εἶδος ἔπ', ἀλλ' οὐκ ἔστι βίη φρεσὶν οὐδέ τις ἀλκή.”⁶⁵

There Hector saw him and reproached him with shame-arousing words: “Wicked Paris, excellent in looks, woman-mad, deceiver! I wish you had never been born, or had died before you married. I really do wish that, and this would have been far better than your being an outrage, an object of other men’s contempt. The long-haired Greeks must be laughing out loud, saying that this leader was chosen as champion only for beauty, devoid of strength and courage in his heart.”

(Homer *Iliad* 3.38-45)

Hector’s terms of abuse for his brother here show that Paris, like Adonis, is a “gender outlaw”: the phrase εἶδος ἄριστε (“excellent in looks”) is usually only applied to women, and when it is used of men it marks a failure to perform successful masculinity.⁶⁶ Paris’ capacity for deception (ἡπεροπευτά, “deceiver”) and his excessive sexuality (γυναιμανές, “woman-mad”) also render him effeminate. His beauty exists in a correlate inverse to his lack of strength and courage. A few lines later, Hector more directly associates Paris’ beauty (here coded as feminine by association with Aphrodite) with his lack of martial prowess:

οὐκ ἄν τοι χραίσμη κίθαρις τά τε δῶρ' Ἀφροδίτης
ἦ τε κόμη τό τε εἶδος ὅτ' ἐν κονίησι μιγείης.

Your lyre will not help you, nor will those gifts of Aphrodite,
your looks and your locks, when he lays you in the dust.

(Homer *Iliad* 3.54-55)

Achilles (whose embodiment in the *Iliad* is generally characterized as gender conforming, and who is obviously highly successful on the battlefield) is depicted as playing the lyre at *Il.* 9.186-9; hegemonically masculine heroes can also have long hair (as noted by Hector’s own reference to the “long-haired” Achaeans just a few lines above) and be beautiful (so Achilles at *Il.* 2.673-4).⁶⁷ Nonetheless, it is clear from Hector’s critical tone, and the connection to Aphrodite, the female goddess of sex and beauty, that Paris’ particular brand of embodied gender expression does not fit societal norms and that Hector considers it to be incompatible with success on the battlefield. Paris’ gender expression, like that of Adonis, is feminine-coded and yet brings with it considerable sex appeal (he is, after all, married to the most beautiful woman in the world). However, Paris also brings destruction on himself and his whole community as a direct result of his relationship with Helen. As with Adonis, the consequences of an individual’s refusal or inability to meet the gendered expectations of their society are portrayed in literature as dire, although Adonis’ failure to conform rebounds only on himself and arguably Aphrodite, while Paris’ has much wider reach.

Adonis’ sexualized death also has epic roots in the trope of the beautiful corpse in battle, and particularly the erotic connection between battlefield wounds and

⁶⁵ The Greek text of the *Iliad* is that of Bowie (2019). The translation is my own.

⁶⁶ Bowie (2019): 101 n.39 “more usually applied to women; when it is used of men...there is always an implication that their valour does not match their looks”.

⁶⁷ Of course, there are many fruitful queer readings of Achilles’ sexuality, including Mueller (2023): 29-41 on the boundary-defying “wildness” of Achilles’ passion for Patroclus and Warwick (2019): 115-139 on conjugal imagery in the Achilles-Patroclus relationship. There is no evidence in the *Iliad* to indicate that Achilles is depicted as expressing a gender non-conforming embodiment.

penetration/defloration which was identified by Don Fowler in a landmark article "Vergil on Killing Virgins".⁶⁸ Fowler traces this tendency back to the *Iliad*, noting examples such as that of Euphorbus in *Il.* 17.50-60 whose hair is compared to the Graces as he is wounded and dies, which "makes Euphorbus like a girl".⁶⁹ Fowler argues that in the case of these characters (including Euryalus, Pallas, and Camilla) the sexualization of their death invokes pathos for both their wasted beauty and the untimeliness of their death, which has shut off the full development of their sexualities. He notes the gender non-conformity of the masculinized Camilla and ponders a morally negative interpretation of her death:

"In the case of Camilla, it could be said that the perversity of her becoming a wife (defloration) and a mother (suckling) only at the moment of her death constitutes a reproach to her way of life. She should have stayed at home to become a wife and mother in the normal way: her death shows the abnormality of her life."

(Fowler 1987: 196)

There is, however, an important difference between the pathos evoked by the death of a young warrior (who might well have survived if he had been luckier) in these texts and the death of a character who dies because of their physicality, i.e. their embodied gender expression renders them incapable of succeeding. The heroes who are injured or who die on the battlefield in Homer may be emasculated and effeminized in the moment of injury or death, and this may inspire pathos in the audience, but they are not incapable of success in war because of their bodies. An example of the latter is Menelaus at *Il.* 4.141-7, where his wound is sexualized both by its location on his inner thigh and through a simile comparing the blood on his skin to purple dye on a fine ivory artwork.⁷⁰

In the case of Adonis, his beauty marks him, in Aphrodite's view, as designed to fail in the hunt. To take Fowler's example of Camilla, who is also gender non-conforming, I suggest that both his suggested interpretations co-exist: the poem generates pathos at the moment of her death but also implies that her non-conforming gender identity led to her death.⁷¹ The Greek (and Roman) texts therefore reveal underlying anxieties about individuals who do not or cannot conform to the binary gender expectations and roles imposed on them by society.

Conclusion

The ancient depictions of Adonis, then, this paper contends, offer a strong challenge to current binary ideations of sex and gender. Adonis' portrayal in the Greek texts offers evidence of the existence of gender non-conforming people in antiquity, an important

⁶⁸ Fowler (1987): 185-198.

⁶⁹ Fowler (1987): 187.

⁷⁰ Interestingly, commentators prefer to term the wounding as "aesthetic" rather than sexual: so Kirk (1985): 345-6 n.141-7 and Coray, Krieter-Spiro & Visser (2020): 72 n.140-147 "By highlighting Menelaos' beauty, and by conjuring up the image of a little 'treasure' (*ágalma*) made by a woman (141-142n.), his stylized brush with death is lent a strongly aestheticized component". Fowler (1987): 190 notes the sexual tone and the (awkward) acknowledgement of it as early as bT scholia on *Il.* 4.141.

⁷¹ Caravaca-Morera & Padilha (2018): discuss a similar mechanism in modern culture concluding that 'there are significant similarities between the life histories and daily coexistence with stigma, structural violence and trans necropolitical practices'.

counter to claims that transgender identities are a modern leftist phenomenon, a fad or a phase.⁷² Adonis' existence as a person with a complex gender expression is therefore (albeit in a problematic and limited sense) an example which could be added to the work of scholars across disciplines aiming to focus attention on the often-ignored presence of trans identities in many historical world cultures.⁷³ However, reading Adonis' violent death through trans theory, particularly noting the fact that his taboo birth and violent death are directly connected to his embodied gender expression, also allows us to see the long history of "the cultural mechanisms that work to sustain or thwart specific configurations of gendered personhood".⁷⁴ The fetishization of his beauty before death leaves an impression of an objectified and dehumanized rather than a non-stigmatizing, subjective transgender representation. Adonis' painful death in the hunt thus mirrors and long pre-figures the theme identified in post-19th century literature and culture by Keegan whereby "transgender phenomena have generally been represented as things-indefinable and monstrous objects that threaten the taxonomies of the western scientific episteme".⁷⁵ It is important, although also difficult and painful, to recognize that, despite positive portrayals in some aspects, individuals with complex gender expression such as Adonis or Paris do not generally fare well in ancient myth. This tendency of the myths to "punish" gender non-conformity, or to present such individuals as outside society and incapable of participating in the rituals and activities prescribed for their perceived gender group, prevents an easy, joyful connection between modern trans identities and these ancient mythical characters. We also noted how societal assumptions about gender have informed the philologists constructing ancient texts, leading to alterations to the Greek transmitted in the manuscripts which are driven by modern *mores* of sexuality and/or gender rather than problems with the text's metrical, lexical or grammatical stability. Bion's *Lament for Adonis* stands as a miniature test case for the ways in which a 'trans philology' can open up new interpretations of ancient texts and expose the ways in which textual criticism has both been influenced by normative sex and gender systems and played a part in their enforcement and construction.

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⁷² On the history of anti-trans and queer ideologies see, among many, Butler (2024), Gill-Peterson (2024), Wuest (2026).

⁷³ Sienna & Plaskow (2019), Giardina (2025), Edwards et al. (2026).

⁷⁴ Stryker (2006): 9.

⁷⁵ Keegan (2020): 72.

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Terracotta relief roundel with head of Medusa. 2nd century BCE (Hellenistic).

Metropolitan Museum, New York. Public Domain.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/246742>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026.

The above is only one example of many from Hellenistic and Roman periods that show Medusa as a beautiful human woman, seemingly happy and at peace. By contrast, a great deal of our oldest Greek art depicts the Gorgons (not necessarily Medusa) as hideous monsters. A different but similarly illuminating contrast can be found in the later European depictions, which reflect the reception history of victim blaming and dehumanizing Medusa by often showing her face as contorted, ugly, angry, and/or screaming. One must imagine Medusa peaceful.

Reconsidering Medusa's Punishment in Ovid's Metamorphoses

Joy Woolley and Paul Robertson

Abstract: The popular understanding of Medusa today is largely based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which recounts Minerva transforming Medusa from beautiful maiden into snake-haired monster due to Neptune's rape. Both academic translations and popular receptions of this story typically feature the view that Medusa was the one punished, at least in part due to her perceived role in Neptune's sexual assault, understanding Medusa as a key figure in the history of victim blaming. However, attention to Ovid's original description of the episode demonstrates that Minerva was not punishing Medusa but rather the deed itself, perpetuated by Neptune. Furthermore, attention to the wider context of the story as well as Ovid's other accounts of divinities sexually assaulting mortals suggests that Medusa's transformation should be understood as distinctive, and was not intended as a punishment but rather as a deterrent against such attacks in the future.

Keywords: Medusa, rape, victim blaming, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Introduction

Medusa is arguably one of the most well-known Greek mythological figures. Thanks to her presence in mainstream media, ranging from popular films such as *Clash of the Titans* (2010, a remake of the 1981 version) to young adult novels like *Percy Jackson and The Olympians* (2005-2024), anyone with a basic knowledge of Greek myth can tell you about the woman with snakes for hair who turns men to stone. In no small part due to her popularity, her story provides ample room for misinterpretations. Our purpose with this paper is to comment on what we believe to be a widely mistranslated passage regarding Medusa's transformation, in order to correct a history of misinterpretation that leans towards victim blaming. While victim blaming is widespread in both academic and popular accounts of the primary source, we argue that this interpretation is not grounded in the primary source itself.

With this reinterpretation in hand, we also aim to highlight how Medusa's transformation differs from that of other victims in the *Metamorphoses*. This paper thereby contributes to an important and complex debate on the extent to which Ovid depicts his rape victims sympathetically, and if/how readers should understand these stories as optimistic or pessimistic. While some (re-)readings of Ovid have attempted to argue that he is sympathetic to certain or many of the rape victims described (an optimistic reading), others have argued that Ovid's depiction is not sympathetic and perhaps even glorifies the act of rape given the sheer amount of attention and poetic detail he devotes to it. While this duality is an over-simplification of a complex debate, our position tends toward the optimistic side with respect to Ovid's story of Medusa, highlighting how at least this episode grants Medusa greater agency than has been previously recognized.

At the same time, our perspective takes a more pessimistic view of the reception tradition, both scholarly and popular, which we argue has overwhelmingly and uncritically accepted a translation and misinterpretation of the story that assigns blame to Medusa, thereby contributing to a history of victim blaming in both Ovidian studies and otherwise. While we argue that Medusa's rape is unique, it still must be acknowledged that Medusa's

tale takes place within a much larger body of work that includes numerous instances of sexual violence. The difficulty of teaching and interacting with Ovid because of the prevalence of rape within the *Metamorphoses* and the rest of his body of work has been highlighted by numerous scholars, and this paper's central aim of reinterpretation is closely aligned with a corollary aim of engaging with scholarship on this reception tradition.¹ As we will see, retellings of Ovid that reproduce a victim blaming narrative occur nearly universally, from traditional Ovidian scholarship to more explicitly feminist scholarship attempting to critique the previous reception tradition, and from children's literature to adult novels to online popular discourse found in blogs. This results in a harmful sort of circularity in discourses across academic scholarship, news media, literature, and popular discourse: victim blaming is common, which becomes read back into Ovid, whose Medusa episode is seen as a key example of victim blaming, which in turn underpins subsequent views around sexual assault. We argue that ascribing victimhood is often viewed as the only way to engage with a text through a feminist lens, and ask the reader to consider the ways in which ancient stories are being sold to them to fulfil a specific agenda.

Medusa's most popular origin story occurs in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which he tells the story of a beautiful woman who is raped by Neptune in the temple of Minerva, and transformed into a powerfully dangerous creature as a result. The general interpretation and reception of this story from classicists and non-classicists alike paints Medusa as a victim of *both* Neptune and Minerva, in the former case as a victim of sexual assault and in the latter as a punishment for her role as victim in the assault. This view generally understands her transformation into a snake-haired creature as a specific punishment against Medusa.

This paper takes the opposite view. A close read of Ovid's Latin reveals three things: first, that Ovid's language does not specify that Medusa is the one punished but rather, in fact, the punishment is directed against Neptune's misdeed; second, that Medusa's transformation differs from that of other rape victims within the *Metamorphoses* in the maintenance of her agency, as she remains human and does not become a "creature"; and third, that Medusa's transformation can be plausibly understood not as punishment of her as victim but rather as something of a corrective gift, or even protection from subsequent sexual assault.

This reading accords in some ways with other attempts to reread and reclaim Medusa as mythological figure. Beginning most prominently with Hélène Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" in 1975, a line of thought has understood Medusa as a key nexus for feminist (re)understanding.² Some thinkers in this lineage have even narrowed in on Ovid's telling in ways similar to our own, noting that while the original language is itself ambiguous, it is the later reception of the story that attributes the punishment to Medusa's role: "Minerva's actions, particularly her adoption of Medusa's severed head on the very aegis with which she

¹ Relevant scholarship on the Medusa passage in question is engaged more specifically throughout, but a summary of scholarship around this broader hermeneutic can be found in Melissa Marturano's contribution to Melanie Racette-Campbell and Aven McMaster, eds., *Toxic Masculinity in the Ancient World* (2023), 229 n. 28: "A synthesis of arguments for more pessimistic, resisting readings and more optimistic, releasing readings can be found summarised in Salzman-Mitchell 2005, 17–21; McAuley 2016, 26; Rimmel 2018; Sharrock 2020; Marturano 2023; and Ranger 2023a. In addition, Ranger and Richlin (2014, 33) discuss the liberal (as opposed to radical) feminist wave of scholarship after Richlin's first publication of 'Reading Ovid's Rape' in 1992, which in various ways attempted to reclaim Ovid and his representations of women. Rimmel (2018) endeavours to find the space between the liberal and radical feminist critiques. Sharrock, likewise, attempts an optimistic and pessimistic reading of metamorphosis."

² Cixous (1976), 875–893.

covered her face, warn against similar transgressions, but the symbolism is violently displaced, making Medusa the monstrous face of the deed as well as of the goddess's own wrath."³ It is the displacement of Medusa's original role, in other words, that creates this later tradition of victim blaming. A recent volume specifically engages Cixous' essay and this feminist tradition in order to provide a wide set of re-readings that usefully reorient the mythological stories that we think we know, but may have become distorted over their reception history.⁴ Our reading of Medusa sits squarely within this line of scholarship, reminding us that while myths always evolve, sometimes this evolution is not of the positive kind that maintains a story's relevance but rather the negative kind that distorts the original in a harmful, ongoing way. We hope that this paper has contributed to this history of scholarship by not only correcting the record with respect to Ovid's original account but also in showing the importance of this correction in both reclaiming a modern Medusa and undermining an ideological history of victim blaming.

A final note before proceeding with our analysis. This project is a collaboration between an undergraduate major in classical studies (Woolley) and a professor in that department (Robertson). It thus reflects an attempt to link together the current and explicitly social concerns of a recent graduate with the philological and scholarly concerns of an instructor. It is our view that this partnership has resulted in mutual benefits: by grounding critiques of victim blaming in primary sources and specialized academic scholarship, and also by applying philological and narratological analyses to matters of concern well beyond the field of classical studies. What follows is an argument around how to re-read the Medusa episode and its consequences, but at a meta-discursive level it also advocates for more deliberate collaboration between professors and students in any field in order to link wider contemporary issues to academic scholarship. Attempts to disentangle and deconstruct the complex ties of scholarship, reception history, popular media, and capitalistic appropriation of feminist hermeneutics require firm grounding in proper scholarly analysis, but no less important is a perspective that looks outward and apart from academic discourse to how the consequences of these analyses around topics such as victim blaming continue to shape and influence young people today. This project would not have started without a late night deep dive by Woolley following a TikTok fueled epiphany, so we argue the value in looking beyond the widely accepted scholarly canon.

Ovid's Account

There is direct, textual evidence within Ovid's account that suggests that Medusa's transformation was not a punishment for her victimhood, and was a response to the violence enacted by Neptune. Ovid's story is straightforward, both concise in narrative and simple in Latin. His account of the action is rather short (4.798-803):⁵

It is said that the ruler of the sea [Poseidon] raped this woman in the temple of Minerva. The daughter of Jupiter turned away and covered her chaste face with the aegis. And this deed was not unpunished, she [Minerva] turned the

³ Morse (2018), 184.

⁴ Zajko and Leonard (2006).

⁵ The Latin text of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* follows Tarrant (2004); translations are our own unless otherwise noted.

Gorgon's hair into serpents. Now she also, to overwhelm her enemies with terror, displays on her chest the snakes of her own creation.

*hanc pelagi rector templo vitiasse Minervae
dicitur; aversa est et castos aegide vultus
nata Iovis texit, neve hoc impune fuisset
Gorgoneum crinem turpes mutavit in hydros.
nunc quoque, ut attonitos formidine terreat hostes,
pectore in adverso, quos fecit, sustinet angues.*

The verb here, *vitiasse* ("raped"), is in the active voice, thus making Neptune (epithet *pelagi rector*) the acting agent in the rape. This stands in contrast to other instances of this word in the text where *vitio* is used passively. The previous account of Jupiter's rape of Europa sees the verb used in a passive form (2.826): *inlaesas vitiatis addere partes* ("to add the unharmed parts to the corrupted ones"). In the book following the Medusa episode, the verb is used as a passive when the nymph Cyane is transformed into a spring after witnessing and failing to stop Pluto from abducting Persephone (5.436-437): *denique pro vivo vitiatas sanguine uenas / lympa subit, restatque nihil quod prendere possis* ("finally water in place of living blood flows through her violated veins, and there remains nothing that you could take hold of"). And then again just later, referring to the seeds of the earth when Ceres decides to cause winter, again following Pluto's abduction (5.480): *vitiataque semina fecit* ("she made the seeds become corrupted"). Linguistically, then, Ovid thus has no problem using the verb in the context of the victim or object of metamorphosis itself, and when he does so he elsewhere uses the passive form.

What is more, *vitiasse* is a rather rare form. Commenting on line 798, Bömer notes that "Kurzform -asse sonst nicht in der klassischen Dichtung."⁶ In his comparanda literature contextualizing Ovid's choice of word and its form—looking to Terence, Tacitus, and Suetonius—Bömer notes that *vitio* is often paired with violence against virgins, but not in the same form that Ovid uses with Medusa; it tends to be passive elsewhere.⁷ By comparison, the special form of the verb in Ovid (and there are no proposed emendations in the critical editions) thus signals that Ovid is framing Medusa's rape differently.

Terence's *Adelphoe* ("Brothers"), a comic play dating to circa 160 BCE, provides one of the few noteworthy grammatically active examples. It merits mention that Terence's play was widely read during Ovid's time and certainly well-known by Ovid himself. Indeed, Terence was admired by Ovid, who understood Terence's writings as authentic representations of cultural mores. We could well infer, then, that Ovid would have picked up on Terence's language and narrative context in his own writings. Terence's text is a Roman comedy whose genre would have elicited expectations of sex, sexual exploitation, and an interrogation of gender roles. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the verb makes an appearance there. In this example, two characters are discussing how Aeschinus raped Simulus' daughter, and the subsequent consequences. Here, however, the verb *vitio* occurs in a different grammatical form (465-468):

⁶ Bömer (1976), 226.

⁷ Bömer (1976), 266, notes the following: Ovid, *Epistle* 11.37: *tumescebant vitiati pondera ventris*, a passive form. He also points to the following comparanda for active forms of *vitio* in Terence (*Adelphoe* 465-468), discussed here; Suetonius (*Life of Augustus* 71.1), which uses *vitiantas*; and Tacitus (*Dialogue de oratoribus* 35.5), which uses *vitiarum*.

Demea: What has he been up to? Hegio: You knew our friend and classmate Simulus? Demea: Why wouldn't I? Hegio: Aeschinus raped [*vitiavit*] Simulus' daughter. Demea: Wow! Hegio: Hold on, Demea, you haven't yet heard the worst part. Demea: Is there anything worse than that?

Demea: *quid istuc est?* Hegio: *nostrum amicum noras Simulum atque aequalem.* Demea: *quidni?* Hegio: *filiam eius virginem vitiavit.* Demea: *hem!* Hegio: *mane; nondum audisti, Demea, quod est gravissimum.* Demea: *an quid est etiam amplius?*

The passage continues to describe Aeschinus' shame and attempt to come clean and ask for forgiveness. The passage manifestly uses this verb to highlight the shame of the misdeed, the innocence of the girl, and the fault of Aeschinus. Terence's use of the active verb thus occurs in the context of blame and an attack on the aggressor's character, and the consequences that resulted. The closest comparandum for Ovid, in other words, underscores the fault of the aggressor and not the victim, who is otherwise seen as blameless. The other similar uses noted by Bömer (*vitiandas* in Suetonius, *vitiarum* in Tacitus) provide little other additional context. Tacitus' usage is a noun ("violations") and not especially relevant. Suetonius' passage, meanwhile, refers to the charge that Augustus was "eager to violate virgins" (*ad vitiandas virgines promptior*), perhaps a useful parallel in that Suetonius describes the verbal form as a clearly negative polemic.

There are narrative and interpretive consequences of Ovid's word choice, since when the word portraying the act of the rape itself is in the passive voice, some of the responsibility for the rape is placed on the victim. Translations of "ravish" attempt to get at such ambiguities possible in the verb *vitio*. Rather than Jupiter raping Europa, Europa is ravished by Jupiter, which thereby might simply suggest an active male sexual role and a female passive one that is ambiguous regarding consent. Brewer's 1933 translation of Ovid uses exactly this verb: "Neptune ... ravished her [Medusa] in a temple of Athena."⁸ Stephanie McCarter has touched on the importance of translating rape actively, especially noting how audiences are more likely to ascribe blame to the victim when passive language is used.⁹ There is no such ambiguity in the case of Medusa and *vitiasse*. This crucial linguistic differentiation of the active voice is often missing in translations around the violence against Medusa, and this difference in sense is significant: the entire agency and responsibility for the rape is given to Neptune.

With the voice of the verb already establishing the party responsible, Ovid's Latin continues to paint an even clearer portrait of who is to be blamed for this deed. Regarding Minerva's vengeance in the wake of Neptune's rape, Ovid writes (4.800): *neve hoc inpune fuisset*, something like "and in order that this deed might not be unpunished." Crucially, *hoc* here is neuter, and thus can refer to neither Neptune nor Medusa; the former and latter would respectively be *hunc* or *hanc*. Therefore, *hoc* must be referring to *vitiasse*, the (active) act of rape itself. Minerva's subsequent vengeance thus refers solely to Neptune's action, and it cannot be a punishment of Medusa herself, as much of the reception history has claimed. It is not linguistically possible to claim that Minerva was punishing Medusa for some kind of perceived violation of her own chastity, but rather the act (by Neptune) that violated this

⁸ Brewer (1933), 179.

⁹ McCarter (2022).

chastity.¹⁰ The interpretation that Medusa herself is being punished further finds no other support in the text, and apparently arises from mere inference which moves it outside of Ovid's text and into wider cultural frames more liable to victim blaming.

The Commentary Tradition

This is no straw man argument. The reproduction of a victim blaming interpretation of the Medusa episode persists across translations both academic and popular, scholarly commentaries, specialized classical studies research, post-classical and medieval work, modern fiction re-tellings, popular media, and even children's literature. All of these together readily illustrate the breadth and depth of the problem.

In the most obvious place for learned Medusa interpretations—academic translations and commentaries—we found no current, widely circulated *Metamorphoses* commentaries that note the difference between Medusa's transformation and that of other rape victims, much less those with an attention to the difference in the voice of *vitio*. Commentaries typically either breeze past Medusa's story or describe the transformation as a punishment specifically of Medusa. J.D. Reed's commentary asserts that “Medusa was *victim* of two gods: raped by Neptune in a shrine of Minerva, she (rather than her assailant) is punished by the latter for this impiety.”¹¹ Gianpiero Rosati's recent commentary notes “that an offence, real or presumed, should not remain unpunished is a recurrent demonstration of force demanded by a powerful person or divinity.”¹² True as this general claim may be with respect to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, there are no specifics here on Medusa's case and this general statement seems to imply that the framework is simply general punishment—by powerful beings against lesser ones (e.g., Minerva against Medusa). William S. Anderson's commentary is even more direct: “As usual, the *deity punishes the innocent victim of rape*, and the rapist goes unscathed.”¹³ Michael Simpson references Anderson's interpretation that this section is an example of a victim being punished for a rape.¹⁴ Bömer's commentary similarly interprets Medusa's rape and transformation as no different from other such instances where the victim's role merits punishment or atonement.¹⁵ Mostly recently, Miriam Kamil's article on trauma and recovery in Ovid's rape narratives likewise reproduces this same view: “Minerva punishes Medusa for being raped by Neptune.”¹⁶

¹⁰ Anderson (1998), 496, on lines 798-801 notes that Medusa did nothing wrong and the violation was wholly that of Neptune: “we should probably assume that she [Medusa] was acting reverently and modestly. Of Neptune, though, we have to think the worst: his lust has defiled the temple and a worshipper.” Yet Anderson continues that “he [Neptune] has made her vulnerable to the angry goddess,” a subsequent interpretive conclusion we dispute in this paper.

¹¹ Ovid *Metamorphoses* translated by Humphries, annotated by Reed (2018), 431, emphasis added.

¹² Rosati (2024), 470.

¹³ Anderson (1998), 496, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Simpson (2001).

¹⁵ Bömer (1976), 266: “Ovid vertritt auch sonst (VI 541) die Ansicht, daß eine Frau durch das Erleiden einer Vergewaltigung einen Makel auf sich lädt, der der Sühnung bedarf.”

¹⁶ Kamil (2024), 505-536, 510n. 19. Kamil interprets this as an example of Minerva preserving traditional “power structure”; true as this may be in other mythological contexts, especially at the hands of different male authors, we argue by contrast that Ovid is here exploring something different in the case of Medusa.

Other commentaries avoid explaining the passage entirely. The notes in David Raeburn's translation does not comment on the punishment or the rape itself.¹⁷ Wilmon Brewer's commentary does not offer any insight on Medusa's transformation and merely discusses that her story was retold by later authors.¹⁸ E.J. Kenney does not offer any comment on Medusa's treatment in his notes on A.D Melville's translation.¹⁹ Commentators, in sum, either ignore the particulars of this passage (both linguistically and narratively) or insert their own views that diverge from the text in describing it as Minerva punishing Medusa for being a victim of rape. Victim blaming, in other words, is widespread in academic accounts of the primary source, but not grounded in the primary source itself.

This view also occurs in the post-classical world and the reception tradition, for instance in both post-medieval art and the commentators who explicate it. To pick one example, Jane Davidson Reid's entry on "Medusa" on classical mythology in the art of 1300-1990 writes that "Medusa's transformation was the punishment of Minerva (Athena) for *allowing Neptune (Poseidon) to violate her* in the goddess's temple."²⁰ Here we see that Medusa's only agency was in "allowing" the rape, as if she were doing something or refused to do something that allowed a vastly more powerful deity "to violate her," and thereby Minerva was justified in punishing her as bearing no small part of the blame.

This treatment in academic contexts influences and parallels popular readings and work directed at a wider audience. Robert Graves, for instance, synthesizes various ancient accounts to retell the story,²¹ mostly following Ovidian lines: "one night Medusa lay with Neptune, and Athene, enraged that they had bedded in one of her own temples, changed her into a winged monster."²² While Graves' reputation is not that of a careful scholar, he was popularly influential and his retelling here is paradigmatic in the modern imagination for attributing some of the misdeed to Medusa herself. The punishment was for the coupling itself, not for Neptune's rape, reflecting Minerva's interest and focus on chastity, especially in her temple.

More recently, even the pre-eminent classicist Mary Beard reproduces this general frame in her work for a non-academic audience. In promotion for her book *Women & Power* (2017), Beard appeared in a piece for the *London Review of Books*, where she describes the story straightforwardly along Ovid's lines: "One famous version has her as a beautiful woman raped by Neptune in a temple of Minerva, who promptly transformed her, *as punishment for the sacrilege*, into a monstrous creature with a deadly capacity to turn to stone anyone who looked at her face."²³ Here it is a neutral description at best (similar to Graves'), or an implication that it is the "her" that is receiving the punishment for her part in the sacrilege. In a video piece for *Aeon*, Beard summarizes her *LRB* article's argument that Medusa has remained a proxy to attack women despite efforts by some to reclaim her. Beard's interview

¹⁷ Raeburn (2004).

¹⁸ Brewer (1933), 179-181.

¹⁹ Ovid *Metamorphoses* translated by Melville, annotated by Kenney (2004), 402.

²⁰ Reid (1994), "Medusa," 650, emphasis added.

²¹ Graves (1955), 33n. 2, cites Hesiod's *Theogony* 270f. and 333f., Apollodorus 2.4.3, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* 4.792-802, scholiast on Apollonius' *Argonautica* 4.1399, and Euripides' *Ion* 989 ff.

²² Graves (1955), 33.

²³ Beard (2017), emphasis added.

and video is tellingly summarized thusly: “nearly every leading female politician has been at some point depicted as Medusa—that beautiful woman of Ancient Greek myth who was transformed into a hideous beast *as punishment for her own rape*.”²⁴ Beard herself states that “this unfortunate creature, she’s been turned into this because she was actually raped, and *as punishment for being raped*, she gets turned into this horrible thing.”²⁵ Beard’s perspective is intended to be sympathetic to Medusa, yet despite Beard’s deep knowledge of Ovid and expressly political frame polemicizing against the sexist use of such passages and symbols, Beard still reproduces the view that Medusa is the one being punished. While we recognize that these statements were made in connection to her feminist manifesto, *Women & Power*, and are not necessarily scholarly deep dives of Ovid, we feel that it is significant to note that even modern, critically feminist scholars reproduce this view.

The reproduction of this view even in sympathetic and critical feminist scholars can be found elsewhere. Holly Ranger, for instance, has written forcefully on problematic attempts at re-interpreting ancient figures and authors as sympathetic from a modern perspective, critiquing the underlying structures at play in studying ancient Greek and Roman literature as part of the Critical Ancient World Studies group.²⁶ Yet Ranger herself, in a piece for Bloomsbury Academic, writes that “Ovid teaches the feminist philologist that women who refuse to perpetuate cycles of misogyny are always punished.”²⁷ Even a scholarly perspective that takes a carefully critical perspective on the so-called optimistic view of Ovid, and one that might well sympathize with the current paper’s argument especially around reception history, reproduces the view that Ovid’s stories blame the victims of misogyny with punishment.

A variety of other popular media operates along similar lines, either neutral about Medusa’s role or blaming her explicitly. Around the culmination of the 2016 US Presidential election, Elizabeth Johnston’s *Atlantic* article noted the widespread use of Medusa iconography, with Donald Trump acting as Perseus and Hillary Clinton as the decapitated Medusa. Johnston describes the episode as a punishment of Medusa specifically: “In Ovid’s story, the god Neptune sees Medusa, desires her, and decides that, because he is a god, he is entitled to her body (sound familiar?). He rapes her in Minerva’s temple, and Minerva, incensed that her temple has been defiled, *punishes the victim* rather than the perpetrator (again, sound familiar?).”²⁸

This essay was influential, and a host of other media accounts followed. To pick but two, Christobel Hastings’ piece for *VICE Magazine* seems neutral at best with respect to Medusa, though part of the article’s title (“a Rape Victim Turned Into a Monster”) seems to suggest Medusa was punished as a result of being the victim: “Her beauty caught the eye of the sea god Neptune, who proceeded to rape her in the sacred temple of Minerva. Furious at the desecration of her temple, Minerva transformed Medusa into a monster with the deadly capacity to turn whoever looked upon her face to stone.”²⁹ Even more strongly, Nick

²⁴ Beard (2019).

²⁵ Beard (2019), 2:24-2:38, 2:39-43 emphasis added.

²⁶ Ranger (2024).

²⁷ Ranger (2023), 33-47.

²⁸ Johnston (2016), emphasis added.

²⁹ Hastings (2018).

Iakovidis' piece in *Medium* blames Medusa for the temple's desecration and rape: "This is the myth that explains the origins of Medusa and how she was transformed into a monster after *being blamed by Minerva* for getting raped by Neptune."³⁰ Iakovidis locates this view in his reading of Ovid's description of "punish the outrage as it deserves" (see more below): "This phrase states that Minerva believed *Medusa deserved punishment* for letting Neptune rape her. ... [Minerva] chose to blame Medusa for being too pretty and thus driving Neptune to lust. In some versions [e.g., Apollodorus *Library* 2.4.2-3], Minerva's actions are the result of the goddess being jealous of Medusa for being adored by the people and thus refusing to aid her." Iakovidis concludes: "For women like Minerva, *rape victims are the only ones to blame*."³¹ A great many similar readings can be multiplied in magazines, blogs, social media, and so on, including even trauma centers specifically devoted to aiding the victims of rape and rejecting narratives of victim blaming.³²

The Reception Tradition

Pushing back against this interpretive line is important, because it is so often reproduced in cultural mediums outside of academic or political discourse. A great deal of popular fiction, both adult and children, follows the typical and traditional view that Medusa was the one punished. Because this assumption gets internalized and reproduced in popular fiction, the trope of victim blaming—an erroneously interpreted trope, we contend—becomes further and more deeply embedded in cultural consciousness. We feel that this thus perpetuates a school of thinking in which the only way for a text to be worthy of feminist engagement is if it features victimization.

This embedding occurs early in modern readers' engagement with the story, as Robin Diver demonstrates how it is a prominent feature of children's literature on Medusa.³³ This has downstream effects on popular understandings of the myth, such that "to most modern readers, it is clear Medusa is an innocent victim unfairly punished by Athena."³⁴ There are occasional other accounts, both ancient and modern, that push back against this interpretation and are available to the modern reader: "In ancient accounts such as Apollodorus and Lucian, Medusa's monstrosity did not take away her ability to be beautiful, and perhaps enhanced it";³⁵ while in modernity, a rare few analyses and retellings focus on Medusa's vengeance and at least interpret Minerva's transformation as "deliberately

³⁰ Iakovidis (2021), emphasis added.

³¹ Ibid., emphasis added.

³² E.g., the Avalon Healing Center, which on its website describes the rape of Medusa thus: "Athena, hearing of the incident, punished Medusa by banishing her to an island, turning her hair into snakes, and making her facial features so unattractive that it turned anyone looking at her to stone. She is isolated and banished from all society. She is silenced and punished. She is blamed ... We can take the story of Medusa and apply it to several current cases pertaining to sexual assault." <https://avalonhealing.org/rape-in-art-history>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026.

³³ The discussion here closely follows Diver (2020).

³⁴ Diver (2020), 66.

³⁵ Diver (2020), 74.

ambiguous.”³⁶ Yet the primary vector for children’s literature is Ovid, and specifically the view that Medusa is punished by Minerva, usually called Athena within the stories, as victim:

“As Roberts (2015) showed, Ovid is the ancient literary source who has been the most influential in modern children’s literature. The ancient Medusa narrative being drawn on in many children’s books is therefore the version which centres her status as a rape victim, even when other ancient versions available do not.”³⁷

Diver outlines a series of highly influential retellings in children’s literature, such as “Charles Kingsley’s 1856 anthology” as well as “later children’s authors generally (Murnaghan and Roberts 2018)” who were influenced by Kingsley, which led especially to the children’s anthology of James Reeves (1969) which elaborated on Kingsley’s characterization of Medusa’s “sin” by “linking it directly to Athena.”³⁸ The Reeves reception in particular bridges an older view about Medusa’s “sin,” glossing over the sexual assault for a younger audience, to a more recent view that blames Medusa for a different reason, namely her beauty that she unduly flaunts before Minerva and therefore receives punishment. “There is thus a pattern in which modern children’s literature has transformed the virginal Athena’s disgust at Medusa as a rape victim into a competition of femininity.”³⁹ We can see that the misreading of Ovid as “punish the victim” gets translated even to children, who are offered the view that Medusa’s worth is distillable to her physical beauty and that unduly flaunting one’s beauty leads to punishment; in both, women are punished for not properly conforming to patriarchal frames of proper behavior.

The trope of victim blaming continues in young adult and adult fiction, which has boomed in recent years. Perhaps surprisingly, this reproduction occurs in the most recent retellings with an intentionally feminist hermeneutic. The stories discussed below, in other words, take an expressly feminist perspective and attempt to re-tell the Medusa stories in ways that are attempted to elicit sympathy, further flesh out her character, grant her additional agency beyond Ovid’s version, and/or highlight Medusa’s special qualities and power. Yet nonetheless they generally reproduce a narrative that depicts Medusa as the one punished for the rape, and the transformation as a clearly undesirable punishment. While not exhaustive here for reasons of space, we see examples of this in works such as Haynes’ *Stone Blind* (2022), Gruender’s *Medusa* (2024), and Dexter et al.’s *Medusa: New and Ancient Greek Tales* (2024).⁴⁰

The last of these, *Medusa: New and Ancient Greek Tales* is a collection of short stories on Medusa, some retelling her ancient story through a new lens, others bringing her into the

³⁶ Diver (2020), 66, discussing Enterline (2000): “Enterline...argued Athena transforms Medusa into a Gorgon to punish *mankind* for their rapacious ways. She points out that Medusa’s powers in Ovid are used only against men.” See further Diver (2020), 68, on Ann Stanford’s *Medusa* (1977), which “does focus on Medusa as rape victim, and follows a line of thinking similar to Enterline’s, where Medusa becomes a Gorgon to avenge herself.”

³⁷ Diver (2020), 66, referencing here Roberts (2015).

³⁸ Diver (2020), 67, referencing Kingsley (1889 [1856]); Murnaghan and Roberts (2018); Reeves (1969).

³⁹ Diver (2020), 68.

⁴⁰ Other examples can indeed be multiplied; from just the last half dozen years we could add Nina McLaughlin’s *Wake, Siren* (2019), Heywood’s *The Shadow of Perseus* (2023), Lynn’s *Athena’s Child* (2023), and Patel’s *A Drop of Venom* (2024).

current day. Omitting the stories not relevant to our argument for their different foci (e.g., her mother, Medusa as allegory for race and racism, her ability to find love), many of these stories at least touch on Medusa's transformation and her relationship with Minerva. These stories take obvious inspiration from Ovid, but they all diverge from (our reading of) Ovid by directly proclaiming that Medusa's transformation was punishing her, rather than just implying it. Minerva (most often referred to as "Athena" in the majority of the stories) is frequently the villain in these stories.

The first story, "The Wise Look For All of The Stories," follows a modern Athena as she converses with an archaeologist inside the replica Parthenon in Nashville, Tennessee.⁴¹ In an attempt to reconcile origin stories, Athena notes that she "[knows] the overarching story about Poseidon's act and her own vengeance wrought" and that it "never sat right with her" (119). The understanding here is that Athena punished Medusa, which results in Athena traveling to Medusa's home to apologize for her "destruction" (124), perpetuating the idea that Medusa is a victim of both Athena and Poseidon, even as Athena is self-aware of her role in victim blaming. The second story, "How to Tame a Head of Snakes", follows a humanized version of Medusa as she lives a relatively normal, albeit secluded, life on an island full of loneliness and depression—a reflection of her view of her transformation as punishment. After finding a man she loves and managing to avoid killing him, Poseidon sweeps him away to his death, and Medusa waits for "[her] killer, [her] savior" to arrive (141). Medusa's stance is that of lamenting her condition, explaining that the gods left her isolated and stating that "beauty does not go unpunished in this covetous world" (128). While not directly present in Ovid (see discussion below), this story perpetuates an idea that Athena was jealous or upset by Medusa's beauty and therefore transformed her—again, a punishment.

"The Toll of The Snake" follows Medusa (Mei-Ko, in the story) through the form of a young Hollywood actress who stands up to the overbearing director Minerva and reveals her true "monstrous" form in turning him to stone. Again, the theme is Medusa and Minerva at destructive odds, with the former being transformed as monstrous punishment, and the latter worthy of retribution for her role in doing so. We also see the theme of beauty as a reason for Medusa's punishment: "her beauty made her bold. Too bold. The gods had to put her in her place. They turned her hair into snakes, and she became a monster so ugly that one look at her face turned men to stone" (165). Athena "put [Medusa] in her place" by virtue of monstrous punishment.

We can compare these stories to the account in Natalie Haynes' *Stone Blind* (2022), a longer version of the Medusa story that links together many stories for a complete birth-to-death narrative. Medusa is the primary narrator, thus giving her own perspective on her transformation, and Haynes also gives insight into Athena's mental state and motivation. Athena's reaction receives wider treatment:⁴²

"Poseidon had taken some girl-mortal, nymph, she wasn't sure. But he had done it in her temple. Hers. Where her statue could look down and see it all. She felt an encompassing rage. How dare he? How dare he when his temple was being built next door? He could rape or seduce whoever he liked there, Athene wouldn't interfere. But to profane her temple, and not even to

⁴¹ Here and elsewhere "Athena" is used if that is the authorial choice; thus we use "Minerva" in our discussion of Ovid and more broadly.

⁴² Haynes (2022), 116-117.

consider the insult worth an apology? She would have to find a way to get her revenge on him later. He was—as so often—away in his ocean kingdom: she could not harm him there. There would be an opportunity to humiliate him later, she was quite sure. But in the meantime, her anger was roused and she needed to expend it. The girl. The girl would do.”

This narrative more closely follows Ovid’s account than the short stories above, and indeed both Ovid and Haynes make it clear that Poseidon is deserving of the punishment. Yet Medusa is still the target of her anger, and very much understood dismissively as a pawn within wider Olympian conflict. Haynes also makes it clear that Medusa was a victim of Athena through Medusa’s own reaction to her punishment, when she returns to her cave and describes to her sisters how the snakes appeared. It was “a goddess ... She was angry with me,” to which Euryale replies that they “know who it was ... Vengeful and cruel, always blaming women for what men do to them. She has always been like this” (138). Athena is manifestly anti-woman and victim blaming, and performed the transformation with the specific intent to punish based on her anger directed toward Medusa as proxy for Poseidon.

Finally, Nataly Gruender’s recent *Medusa* (2024) hews most closely to the Ovidian account, while adding some agency and personality to Medusa’s character. Following Medusa’s rape, she and Athena have a confrontation where Athena explains that “Poseidon cannot be punished. For me to call for his atonement for this crime would be to instigate the same war I have been trying to avoid. Many more mortals would suffer in the skirmish” (109). Medusa responds that she does “not give a damn about other mortals. I am the one who was raped at the foot of your altar and you are the one who allowed it to happen. Don’t I deserve justice?” (109). Athena continues to explain to Medusa that she knows Medusa is not to blame, but that the mortals and other gods needed to see that she will not be made a fool (110). Like Haynes, Gruender follows Ovid in noting that Poseidon was ultimately the one to blame, but Athena nonetheless feels as if she has to punish someone, and therefore settles on Medusa. While we therefore see some nuance in this account, Athena is still understood as punishing Medusa. The transformation itself is understood as punishment, and Athena does not care for Medusa in punishing her.

All of these stories, then, understand Minerva and Medusa as opposed. They vary in the extent to which Minerva directly blames Medusa, ranging from full blame for Medusa’s role and/or her beauty to simply seeing Medusa as the only available recipient for punishment. Regardless of the extent to which they unpack the complexities within and between the two characters, the transformation of Medusa is depicted as a manifestly negative punishment, meted to Medusa for her unfortunate role in Neptune’s rape. Though the goal of the feminist authors of these modern retellings seems to be aligned with this paper, in that they are created with the intention of reclaiming Medusa’s story and highlighting voices that have historically been ignored, the stories themselves are manifestations of trends from the ancient world through the modern day, seen in popular media, children’s stories, and even feminist adult fiction. Yet these themes, we argue, stem from a fundamental misreading of Ovid, and this misreading, in turn, leads to the harmful reproduction of views on victim blaming. A wider attention to Ovid’s treatment of Medusa and other rape victims is merited, then, in order to explore more deeply how this particular story functions both in and of itself and within Ovid’s wider work.

It is necessary to note that these modern retellings are being written with the specific intention of being sold to as many people as possible—just take a look at the general fiction section of every Barnes and Noble and you’ll see how many of these feminist retellings are

being pushed out by publishers. It is the job of the author to determine how to essentially “translate” these ancient stories into tales that are digestible and interesting to a modern audience. We argue that the authors of these retellings are caught up in the same vicious cycle as the translators and commentators we previously discussed, in which victim blaming is societally common, therefore relatable to a wide audience, and the view of Medusa as victim is reproduced continually.

Divine Punishment or Gift?

We argue that Medusa's transformation is fundamentally different from that of other transformations within Ovid's work. The Greek and Roman gods certainly have a track record of punishing humans generally and rape victims specifically, which likely explains the aforementioned commentary tradition and their subsequent popular retellings. Within the *Metamorphoses* alone there are numerous instances of rape victims undergoing a transformation by the gods as a punishment for their purported misdeeds, i.e. being sexually assaulted. As Leo Curran writes in his paper about rape victims in the *Metamorphoses*, these punishments have multiple motivations ranging from jealousy to a reaction stemming from a perceived violation of the so-called “cult of virginity.”⁴³

The stark difference between the other punishments in the *Metamorphoses* and Medusa's experience is that the other women were entirely transformed in a way that strips them of their personhood and makes them unable to continue living their normal life. These complete transformations include Daphne turned into a tree after Apollo attempts to rape her, Io turned into a cow after she is raped by Jupiter, and Callisto turned into a bear by Diana, to name but a few. Although Medusa is physically changed, the change occurs only to her hair. Unlike the others, her humanity is maintained and she is able to continue living as Medusa, keeping her identity. While the ancient myths are lamentably spare on her daily life or character (in contrast to, for example, the development of the male Cyclops and his subsequent myth retellings), it seems that her everyday actions were largely unchanged by her transformation: she lives with her fellow Gorgons in a presumably somewhat normal life in a faraway cave.

One commentator has noticed this difference. Stanley Lombardo's “Catalogue of Transformations” describes the stories of Io and Callisto as “transformations from human to animal” and Daphne is listed as a “transformation into flora” due to the complete nature of their transformations.⁴⁴ Lombardo doesn't describe Medusa herself as transforming, but rather notes more limited aspects: drops of her blood to vipers, her hair to snakes, and her blood to Pegasus. Medusa's lack of total transformation in Ovid—and the maintaining of her personhood—thus signals that her story is qualitatively different from Ovid's other victims and transformations in a key way, and the reader is thereby signaled to interpret and perhaps judge her differently than the others too.

It is worth noting that while Minerva can be a vindictive goddess instead of a supporter of women, for instance in her treatment of Arachne, Minerva does not have a history of punishing victims. Minerva is not afraid of lashing out at women, but when she does it is always women that she perceives as a direct threat or that have spoken out against

⁴³ Curran (1978).

⁴⁴ Ovid *Metamorphoses* translated by Lombardo (2010), 450-455.

her. She does, however, have a history of assisting the victims of rape. In cases such as that of Cornix, Minerva even helps them escape (2.576–88). After Ajax’s rape of Cassandra, also in her temple, Minerva went out of her way to hunt down and kill Ajax. Minerva’s exact method varies—either she wrecked his ship via Neptune⁴⁵ or thrust his body against rocks, so named in the *Aeneid* “the rocks of Ajax”⁴⁶—but in both cases she punishes the aggressor and not the victim. A punishment of Medusa for being a victim of rape would be outside of her typical treatment and would be a major deviation of how she is typically portrayed.

It is thus worth looking more carefully at how Ovid describes Minerva’s response to Neptune’s rape. When Neptune rapes Medusa, Ovid writes that Minerva averts her eyes (4.799–800): *aversa est et castos aegide vultus / nata Iovis texit* (“The daughter of Jupiter turned away and covered her chaste face with the aegis”). Rosati’s commentary on *Metamorphoses* Book 4 notes that “Minerva’s gesture of turning and covering her eyes so as not to see Medusa, victim of Neptune’s rape, is an innovation of Ovid and does not seem to have parallels in the other sources for the myth.”⁴⁷ As a novel addition to the poem, it is therefore a window into Ovid’s own view of the myth and character. Rosati further points out that the best parallel is one cited just above and generally “ignored in the commentaries,” namely:⁴⁸

“the violence done by the Lesser Ajax to Cassandra in the very temple of Athena-Minerva at Troy. To avoid seeing the act, which will condemn Ajax to ruin, ‘the goddess raised her eyes from the image to the ceiling.’ A temple as a space of protection from sexual violence is an element that recurs in the familiar circumstances of Perseus himself [around his mother and Polydectes] ... It is evident in any case that Ovid rereads Minerva’s gesture as an anticipation of what will be necessary for anyone who wants to avoid the ‘death in stone’ produced by the sight of Medusa.”

Ovid’s most direct source here is the Ajax/Cassandra episode, where as noted above Ajax is swiftly punished, but not Cassandra. The violation there—and also in the case of Medusa, we would argue—was of Minerva’s temple and her support of chastity, and is inherent in the nature of sexual assault itself. Minerva averted her eyes because of the heinousness of the Lesser Ajax’s crime, not because of Cassandra’s role. The same should be said of Medusa: Minerva averted her eyes because of the terribleness of the crime perpetuated by Neptune; Medusa herself was innocent. Anderson notes how Ovid’s line placement underscores this interpretation, regarding *templo vitiasse Minervae* (“raped in the temple of Minerva,” 4.798–801):

“The verb, carefully set in the middle of the phrase about Minerva’s temple, emphasizes the shocking affront to the goddess and her essential chastity. What Medusa was doing in the shrine, Perseus does not say, but we should probably assume that she was acting reverently and modestly. Of Neptune, though, we have to think the worst: his lust has defiled the temple and a worshipper, and he has made her vulnerable to the angry goddess.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Homer’s *Odyssey* 4.499–511.

⁴⁶ Vergil’s *Aeneid* 1.39–45.

⁴⁷ Rosati (2024), 468.

⁴⁸ Rosati (2024), 468–469, cf. *vultus avertite vestros* and *avertitur* at 5.179 and 214.

⁴⁹ Anderson (1998), 495–496, on lines 798–801.

Furthermore, because Minerva was forced to avert her eyes to avoid seeing the terrible rape of a chaste woman in her sacred temple, Minerva decided that so too would everyone who approached Medusa—undoubtedly men, as Ovid lists both men and beasts in Perseus' account of his approach to the cave but not women (4.779-781)—be forced to do the same. Rosati is right that this parallel is rarely noted in the commentary, a fact that, we suggest, reflects the general pattern of victim blaming in the reception tradition of Ovid.

What is more, the nature of the punishment itself is rarely discussed and similarly overlooked. The pre-Ovidian mythical tradition has Neptune and Medusa procreating (Hesiod, *Theogony* 278-279) while Apollodorus preserves a tradition of a beauty competition and rivalry between Minerva and Athena (*Bibliotheca* 2.4.3) that would better fit the Minerva-Arachne parallel in Ovid.⁵⁰ By contrast, the focus on Medusa's hair is unique to Ovid and therefore can shed particular light on his own distinct understanding and telling of the myth. It is clear that Medusa is beautiful (4.794-795, *clarissima forma*, "most beautiful appearance"), a thread shared with the Hesiod and Apollodorus traditions, but Rosati notes that "the principal thing to admire in Medusa—really the part of her that is 'most seen'—is her hair" (4.796, *conspetior*, "more noticeable").⁵¹ Rosati understands Ovid's novel addition here as focusing on this particular feature as an "excess of gaze," namely a highly beautiful feature that draws the male gaze, "which is obviously the basis for the retribution to which Medusa is condemned."⁵²

While Rosati again falls into the common trap of seeing Medusa herself as the person "condemned"—that is, punished or blamed for the rape—a more careful consideration of Medusa's pre- and post-rape circumstances belie this view. Medusa's beauty is what draws Neptune's attention to her. This is common in Ovid, where the male gaze is what precipitates the act of rape: "Beauty is dangerous. The victim's beauty is an invitation to and a justification for rape."⁵³ Medusa is distinctive in that what is especially beautiful to such a gaze (Rosati's "excess gaze") is her hair, and thus Medusa's beautiful hair is what precipitates Neptune's rape. Minerva's response to this rape is the transformation of Medusa's hair: away from something that attracts an "excess of male gaze" to something that repels and even destroys the male gaze. Perseus himself describes the snakes as *turpes* ("ugly", 801), showing the change in frame from the perspective of the male narrator. Anderson similarly highlights this change, noting that Ovid has us "focus on the once-outstanding beauty of Medusa, which forms such a sharp antithesis with her fearsome ugliness as Gorgon."⁵⁴ The antithesis is the key point here, as the object that attracted the male gaze has now been completely inverted: no such male gaze of unwanted attraction is now possible given the purported "fearsome ugliness" of Medusa. The parallel with the case of Daphne is instructive, as Daphne explicitly begs that her father transform her in order to destroy her beauty, since it was the thing that attracted the unwanted attention to begin with (1.546-547).

For Medusa, however, this theme goes even further. The object that so undesirably attracted attention and Neptune's sexual assault is now a feature of Medusa's power: it can

⁵⁰ See discussion again in Rosati (2024), 468.

⁵¹ Rosati (2024), 468.

⁵² Rosati (2024), 468.

⁵³ Curran (1978), 226.

⁵⁴ Anderson (1998), 495, on line 794.

literally destroy those who gaze upon it, especially any potential suitors or heroes.⁵⁵ Minerva has entirely inverted the traditional structure of the male gaze leading to sexual assault. Whereas before Medusa's hair attracted unwanted attention, now Perseus' entire narration leads with the physical description that "explain[s] the snake hair, so he artfully focuses on it as especially worth attention from the start."⁵⁶

To this we can add that Medusa's power has similarly inverted the role of fear. Ovid's rape victims often fear and flee their assailant. This fear, however, only serves to heighten the sexual attraction of the aggressor, with hunting and flight metaphors abounding in Ovid's stories as the powerful god runs down and then violently takes the innocent human. As Amy Richlin notes, "[Ovid] stresses how visually attractive the disarray of flight, and fear itself, made the victim."⁵⁷ Medusa's transformation, however, has flipped this dynamic completely. With her newly granted deadly powers, she need not fear the aggressive, sexual pursuit of men as she did before. What is more, it is now *she* who strikes fear into *men*: Perseus' approach to the Medusa's cave (4.779-781) is one of terror and fear, with a blasted landscape of death visited on others.⁵⁸ Perseus' narrative is full of dramatic tension, recounting his approach and how he managed to kill Medusa, who was so powerful and terrible that she could only be killed in her sleep. That is the transformation that Minerva has given Medusa: not a hideous existence, but a ferocious power to destroy all those who come uninvited and with ill-intent.

In a similar way, we can reconsider the common view that Medusa's banishment to the cave and isolation from society removes her ability to marry, procreate, and thus participate in traditional female virtues.⁵⁹ First we must recognize that such virtues are male constructions: the virtues of marriage and procreation in the Roman period especially reflect the frame of male elite authors, who use these mythological narratives to reinforce "how a patriarchal society conditions women to punish their own sisters."⁶⁰ This view gives rise to the interpretation that Medusa's banishment to her cave and loss of potential motherhood is a reflection and manifestation of society punishing the woman for flouting its sexual mores.⁶¹ Yet the result of Medusa's transformation is that she both flouts this traditional path of marriage *and* maintains the ability to reproduce. Her hair—so frightening to men that she is no longer desirable as a wife and mother—has removed her from the expectations of marriage and motherhood.⁶² But even in death she shows her fundamental fecundity, giving

⁵⁵ Anderson (1998), 495, on line 795, who describes a "formulaic reference to the many suitors who, in fairy stories, vie for the hand of the beautiful princess."

⁵⁶ Anderson (1998), 495, on line 796.

⁵⁷ Richlin (1992), 158-179, 162.

⁵⁸ Keith (2018), 145-167, esp. 147 where Keith argues that Perseus' story of his approach to the cave is meant to evoke fear because of the "images of men and beasts transformed, at the sight of Medusa."

⁵⁹ Cf. Freas (2018), 60-84, esp. 61 regarding the case of Caenis/Caeneus, discussed further below, whom Freas discusses within the framework of the traditional male view of a woman's worth stemming from "her reproductive capacity as a mother in the service of genealogy."

⁶⁰ Curran (1978), 226.

⁶¹ So Curran (1978), 226, 229.

⁶² Cf. Curran (1978), 224.

birth to Pegasus and Chrysaor (4.785), both understood in Ovid as manifestly positive.⁶³ And while she has been banished from society, she finds new community and family in the other Gorgons. This prospect is one that Perseus as narrator clearly finds repulsive, but only through his male frame privileging traditional female roles within male society—roles that Medusa's transformation has rendered completely moot. Medusa has thus lost her femininity from the perspective of the elite male frame (marriage; human motherhood) but has maintained her agency and perhaps femininity from another frame (sisterhood with the Gorgons; birthing of powerful mythological children).

Finally, we can take a step back to note intriguing parallels to another atypical story in Ovid, that of Caenis/Caeneus, one that similarly explores “the implications of the physical vulnerability of women.”⁶⁴ The beautiful Thessalian maiden Caenis was walking along the ocean when she was seen and raped by Neptune. Afterward, however, the god offered her a boon. Caenis accepts the boon, to transform from a woman (Caenis) into a man (Caeneus) (12.202). “The crime just committed against her determines her greatest desire, that she lose her womanhood,” that is to say, Ovid uses the case of Caenis/Caeneus to show how their agency actively turned away from womanhood in order to preserve their dignity.⁶⁵ As Curran well describes the episode, the transformation renders Caeneus “immune from any kind of penetration ... So far from womanhood is Caeneus now that he is impregnable to even that one kind of rape that makes a man like a woman.”⁶⁶ Because of the terrible violence—physical and social—caused by rape, Ovid understands that his victims can and must change, as they no longer recognize who they are. But unlike most such transformations in the *Metamorphoses* that involve the complete loss of humanity,⁶⁷ the case of Caenis and Medusa shows that Ovid also entertained situations where personhood was not lost, but rather transformed. In the case of Caeneus, this change crucially occurred in order that Caenis/Caeneus “never be able to suffer such injury again” (*tale pati iam posse nihil*, 12.202). Caeneus was not punished, in other words, but granted a boon by the god that prevented further such sexual assault. There is precedent in Ovid, in other words, for both distinct pieces of Medusa's story: transforming someone after a rape not into an animal (as with Io, Callisto, et al.) and also doing so in a way that gave them additional power in order to prevent further such assault.

Of course, both figures meet their ends via metaphors of sexual assault. As Debra Freas has noted: “Neptune's gifts fail to protect Caeneus' impenetrable body from masculine violence as the Centaurs defeat him with tree trunks, which in this context serve as phallic symbols.”⁶⁸ Similarly, Medusa's beheading by Perseus serves as a metaphor for further sexual assault and exploitation. This is no unequivocal story of female empowerment. Yet in

⁶³ See discussion in Rosati, 466. Pace Keith (2018), 153, who reads the production of “monstrous offspring and thus, again, the very incarnation of abjected flesh and blood at her death”; yet Pegasus and Chrysaor are no terrible monsters like the other Gorgons but highly esteemed mythological creatures.

⁶⁴ Curran (1978), 228.

⁶⁵ Curran (1978), 228.

⁶⁶ Curran (1978), 229.

⁶⁷ Curran (1978), 229: “Change from human to non-human is a constant occurrence in the *Metamorphoses* ... uniquely appropriate in the case of rape, for the process of dehumanization begins long before any subsequent metamorphosis of the woman's body.”

⁶⁸ Freas (2018), 60-84, 61.

an intriguing parallel, Ovid depicts both characters' transformations as explicitly leaving behind traditional womanhood, with all its expectations of marriage and procreation.⁶⁹ Caenis' gift was not manliness per se, but rather the inability to be penetrated or killed; so too with Medusa, where the gift was not loss of womanhood per se, but rather the ability to destroy anyone who would again approach her.⁷⁰ The case of Caenis/Caeneus thus provides an important comparative example of how Ovid explores a rape victim gaining power to avoid subsequent sexual assault and specifically departing from traditional notions of femininity.

The Head and the Aegis

Indeed, there is a modern interpretation, albeit a minority one outside of the academy, that Medusa's transformation was actually a gift in that it allowed Medusa to protect herself. One blog post, for instance, writes that "Minerva did not *punish* Medusa; she *protected* her."⁷¹ Such a view is symbiotic with our above re-reading, and its possibility is strengthened when one considers how Medusa's power is used by other figures following her death. Indeed, it shows how non-academic voices can be productive conversation partners in pushing analyses in novel and insightful directions.

After describing the transformation, Ovid writes of Minerva's use of Medusa's head (4.802-803): *nunc quoque, ut attonitos formidine terreat hostes / pectore in adverso, quos fecit, sustinet angues* ("now, in order that she might frighten her enemies numbed with fear, upon her breast she wears the snakes which she made"). Key here is the purpose clause, *ut attonitos formidine terreat hostes*, which describes both the function of the snakes she created as well as how Minerva herself views them. The function is clear, namely to frighten enemies, which is certainly how they functioned in the case of Medusa. The area outside of Medusa's cave was littered with men and beasts turned to stone by her gaze (4.779-781), and Medusa was as a result largely left alone in what had become a "ghostly landscape" unpopulated by man, beast, or god.⁷² The effect of the transformation, in the most practical sense, was to remove and protect her from her enemies, which included both sexual assault and violence generally.

Minerva, for her part, did not view the snakes terribly. We can recall that Perseus is the narrator at this juncture in the story, and it is his (masculine) frame that depicts the snakes as terrible (4.801): *Gorgoneum crinem turpes mutavit in hydros* ("she changed the Gorgon's hair into ugly snakes"). Minerva herself, by contrast, freely uses the symbol after Medusa's death, placing it upon her aegis in a position of power. Instead of an object of revulsion as described by Perseus (*turpes ... hydros*, "ugly ... snakes"), for Minerva it becomes "the symbol of the

⁶⁹ Freas (2018), 70, notes that "Ovid's Caenis does not ask to become a man; she demands not to be a woman (*Met.* 12.198-203)."

⁷⁰ Freas (2018), 70.

⁷¹ See the discussion on a Reddit wiki titled: "Did Athena transform Medusa to protect her from being raped again?": https://www.reddit.com/r/GreekMythology/wiki/bestanswers/monster/medusa/#wiki_did_Minerva_transform_medusa_to_protect_her_from_being_raped_again.3F; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026. This Reddit wiki cites the blog post "Medusa Was Defending Herself," on *Black Dog Diary*; emphasis original: <https://diaryoftheblackdog.blogspot.com/2017/10/medusa-was-defending-herself.html>; link accessed Sept. 24, 2026.

⁷² Rosati (2024), 465, on lines 779-781.

goddess' terrifying power that paralyses everyone who looks upon it," as a form of protection.⁷³ Medusa was not harmed by her own snakes, we can recall, but rather those who approached her. Minerva herself does not shun Medusa and the snakes as an object of punishment and revulsion, but rather Minerva continues, after Medusa's death, to use her transformed power to petrify, terrify, and defeat her enemies.⁷⁴ Given Minerva's status as virginal goddess and protector of chastity (*parthenos*), reclaiming Medusa's power to ward off sexual assault is fully within Minerva's character. Such a view stands against some recent interpretations, such as Anderson's view that Minerva "conceals her irate embarrassment, before that part of her armor became decorated with Medusa's head."⁷⁵ It makes little sense to claim that Minerva is so deeply embarrassed by the symbol of something—that she herself created—that she places this symbol on her own armor/aegis and features it as a key feature of her own identity. In our reading, by contrast, Minerva places Medusa's head there, at least in part, as a warning against those in the future who might oppose her desire for chastity, the sacrality of her temple, and her stance against sexual assault.

For Perseus, meanwhile, the head and snakes become a deadly weapon, as his underhanded execution and beheading of Medusa reproduce undertones of sexual assault and rape. Yet Perseus' action was "not, properly speaking, a heroic action," as Perseus kills Medusa in her sleep, and then wields her head against others in his quest for power.⁷⁶ That Perseus was seen as unheroic was picked up by other ancient authors. Nonnus, for example, "also emphasises this non-heroic aspect in order to devalue the figure of Perseus," as Nonnus interprets Ovid's telling as unsupportive of Perseus—and, we could thus infer, more in support of Medusa and Minerva.⁷⁷ Perseus' subsequent use of Medusa's head and snakes in Book 5 is also relevant here, as he primarily uses them against men forcing themselves on women—just as Minerva originally intended—defeating first Phineus who tried to seize Andromeda by force and then later Polydectes who had been forcing himself upon Perseus' own mother Danaë.⁷⁸ Eventually, having vanquished all the threats—sexual and violent both—to members of his family, along with killing many members of the aggressors' respective courts, Perseus offers the head back to Minerva, bringing the episode full circle (5.177-267).

It might be a stretch to consider Medusa's transformation as something so strong as a gift, as some readers have taken it. This is no proto-feminist story of empowering women, given Medusa's victimhood and Neptune's avoidance of punishment. But there is a real difference in Ovid's account of Medusa's story from others in the *Metamorphoses*, and therefore we can find useful nuance in how we understand Medusa's transformation as something decidedly other than the traditional "punishment for being raped" reading.⁷⁹

⁷³ Rosati (2024), 470, on lines 802-803.

⁷⁴ Anderson (1998), 496, on line 803: "the aegis 'now' becomes a frightening decoration. The head of Medusa, prominently placed on it, looks at the foe and petrifies him." The head of Medusa is innately powerful and destroys enemies; it is not a symbol of shame as discussed below.

⁷⁵ Anderson (1998), 496, on lines 802-803.

⁷⁶ Rosati (2024), 465, on line 776.

⁷⁷ Rosati (2024, 467). Nonnus (*Dionysiaca* 25.64) describes it as "a womanish attack against an unarmed Medusa."

⁷⁸ See discussion in Barchiesi (2024), 468-469 on lines 799-800, including Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca* 2.4.3 [45].

⁷⁹ Curran (1978), 213f.

Ovid clearly describes Minerva's transformation of Medusa as pertaining to the rape itself, and the transformation, if not quite as a gift, then certainly as offering future protection against many forms of subsequent violence. Even after Medusa's beheading, her power continues to be used against men in similar contexts until it is returned and displayed with honor upon Athena's own breast.

Conclusion

While Minerva did grant Medusa some protection, this story is by no means a perfect feminist tale by modern standards. Medusa was still transformed without her consent, in a way that no real person might want; maybe, though, a survivor in Medusa's position would be hungry for such a change and power. However, it is important to note that Minerva, as a goddess lower in the Olympian pecking order than Neptune, would have had no way to exact vengeance directly upon him as she did Ajax. Instead, she grants terribly deadly power to Medusa to ward off subsequent assaults, while leaving Medusa's personhood intact.

We are by not arguing that Minerva, much less Ovid, are particularly concerned with women's rights. However, Medusa's transformation is undoubtedly different from other transformations of women within the *Metamorphoses*, both narratively and linguistically. The result of her transformation is that she receives *more* power and agency over her own life rather than losing her identity and human nature. Because of Minerva's forced transformation, Medusa now has the power to protect herself from anyone, man or god. What happened to her in Minerva's temple can never happen to her again, at the hands of anyone.

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‘Whitewashing’ the Samnites:
Roman Imperialism and the Modern Legacy of Empire
Sally Mubarak

Abstract: The rise of Rome serves as the driving paradigm behind most scholarly works on central and southern Italy in the first millennium BCE. The peoples of these regions, often ‘othered’ in contrast to Roman civilisation, are portrayed as an inconvenient disruption to Rome’s inevitable domination. This paper traces the pervasiveness of romanocentric constructions of the Samnites, connecting them to wider systemic issues of underrepresentation within the fields of classics and ancient history. In doing so, this paper offers new readings of the Samnites as an independent community with its own cultural traditions, infrastructure, and agency, thus drawing attention to an unrelenting legacy of whiteness and academic imperialism.

Keywords: Samnites, Roman imperialism, decolonising classics, romanisation, archaeology of Samnium.

Introduction

The rise of Rome serves as the driving paradigm behind most scholarly works on central and southern Italy in the first millennium BCE. The peoples of these regions are often seen as little more than an inconvenient disruption to Rome’s inevitable domination. The story of Rome’s conquest of Italy in this period can be traced back to the ancient source material, where Roman exceptionalism is typically defined in relation to the demise of Rome’s enemies. Within this paradigm, groups and peoples are defined by reductive labels in dichotomised relationships.¹ For many reasons long recognised in modern scholarship, the authors of our ancient sources often characterised groups outside of their dominant axes of power as the ‘Other’.² This is especially true for ‘the Samnites’, the label given to peoples who fought against Rome in a series of conflicts between 343 and 290 BCE, and whose defeat and incorporation marked a key turning point in the creation of Rome’s Italian empire.

More recently, other imperial biases have also been at work. Research on these regions of Italy has largely been driven by German and anglophone scholars, and, thus, guided by modern colonial frameworks present in these academic schools. A key feature of this trend is the (re-)entrenchment of ancient tropes that diminish non-Roman groups and centre Rome’s imperial domination of the region. This is true of scholarship concerned with many areas and periods of Roman expansion, but has yet to be fully confronted with regard to Rome’s early empire in Italy. This poses an issue, for historians discuss the fifth to third centuries with the predeterminant view that the Roman expansion throughout Italy was an inevitable, almost teleological outcome.³

¹ Livy books 7–10; see also Strabo book 5; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Antiquitates Romanae* 15.5.17–18.1–3; Orosius 3.8.1; Florus 1.11.1–7, 1.12.1.

² Dench 1995; Bradley 1997; 2001; Isayev 2010; 2017; Gruen 2011; 2020.

³ La Regina 1980; De Felice 1994; Barker 1995a, 197–199, 201; Calì *et al.* 2011, 87, 91, 107–108; Robinson 2021.

Such discourse has often been underscored by the othering and centring of Italian groups relative to the Romans: one such group are the Samnites. The Samnites were inhabitants of central and southern Italy who resided along the central Apennine mountains. Most surviving textual sources on the Samnites were written long after the key events (such as the Samnite Wars, Punic Wars and Social War), and Samnite existence in these texts has largely been reduced to their military interaction with Rome—a foil against which Roman character could be built.⁴ This group has been characterised by ancient sources as a barbarian Other or stubborn, rustic mountain tribe: *montani atque agrestes* (Livy 9.13.7). Consequently, all Samnite activity is ascribed to an unavoidable fate; Samnite cities consolidated in preparation for conflict with Rome, trade networks were established to connect to Rome’s wider network, and so on.⁵ Confirmation bias has therefore dictated how scholarship has typically interpreted ancient evidence, which has resulted in an unnuanced and romanocentric approach to Italy in the first millennium BCE—one that clearly favours the imperial power.⁶

Historical and contemporary systemic issues validate and perpetuate this culture of exclusion and the scholarly bias that comes with it. Thus, intentionally or not, historians have both preserved the inherent bias and discrimination present in those ancient sources, and indeed arguably exacerbated it in modern works. The modern academic conversation has become cyclical, limited by the dominance of the romanocentric narrative. This homogeneity in academic thought, although perhaps more evident in this area than others, is nevertheless symptomatic of wider issues within the discipline.⁷ While dominant narratives are often challenged first by people who fall outside of the traditional power structures that uphold them, such voices (naturally in opposition to and critical of the *status quo*) have long been absent in this area. This paper examines this relationship between the systemic underrepresentation within Roman republican studies and the dominance of romanocentric narratives on the historiography of Samnium. It investigates the propagation of these issues, and how they have become part of an essentialist system that retains its colonialist frameworks despite its purported attempts to be free of it.

Although there have been some attempts to challenge these pervasive colonial narratives through an increase in engagement with decolonial approaches in Roman history, their application to early Roman studies and military history has generally been limited.⁸ For my approach, I take my cue from the work of García Peña (2022) 84–89:

what we consider to be standard curriculum, what generations of humans who received Western education have learned, is grounded in white supremacy but masked as objectivity. Ethnic studies is charged with filling in the immense gaps left by our Eurocentric education system, contradicting its violence, changing the narrative. [...] Ethnic studies brings forth silenced

⁴ Livy 7.29, 7.31.7–12, 8.22.7–10, 8.23.1–10, 8.25.5–26.6, 8.36.11–37.2, 8.37.3–6, 9.14.8–16, 9.21.1–6, 10.11.11–12.3, 10.31.1–7, 10.39.11–17, 22.61, 31.7; see also Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Antiquitates Romanae* 15.5, 17–18.1–3; Orosius 3.8.1; Florus 1.11.1–7, 1.12.1.

⁵ Terrenato 2019, 140–142.

⁶ Laurence 2012, 2–12.

⁷ Kelly *et al.* 2019; Kamash 2019; Thonemann 2019; Leonard & Lovatt 2020.

⁸ For issues around the term ‘decolonisation’, see Tuck & Yang 2012.

knowledge, all stories and histories that have not been the norm or as objective truth.⁹

It is not enough to be decolonial—we must be anti-colonial to break down the constructions that dictate which voices are neutral or objective, and therefore which interpretations of evidence are accepted as the default. Confronting the history of Whiteness in early Roman studies allows for these prejudiced frameworks to be unmasked.¹⁰ It opens the dialogue to consider alternate worldviews from scholars traditionally marginalised by the academy, welcoming their experiences, worldviews, and histories as valuable. With these new perspectives come new understandings of ancient communities once relegated to the fringes, and ultimately a re-evaluation of our understanding of Italy in the first millennium BCE. Changing the narrative in this respect involves shifting the focus beyond the violence and inevitability of Roman empire, and instead studying communities, relationships to land and place, and networks of connection. If we take up this mantle for central and southern Italy, the purported ‘barbarian’ Samnite communities are a good place to start.

Modern scholarship by southern Italians has, in contrast to scholarship from elsewhere, recognised Samnite autonomy and explored the Samnites beyond their role as an antithetic enemy of Rome, with considerable weight given to Samnium as a region by local archaeologists, who have identified advanced economic, religious, and domestic infrastructure.¹¹ This archaeology, however, still requires a historical framework to give context to the material evidence, and it is this historical context that is currently under investigation.

This paper explores the cultural features imposed on the Samnites by both ancient sources and modern scholars. Exploring and recognising these cultural features clears the way for challenging the prevailing obstacles in the discipline and artificial paradigms imposed by coloniality. By investigating this narrative, this paper recentres the Samnites and highlights the prominence of a paradigm that privileges invasion and imperialism as agents of change, and explores how scholarship has been shaped by such frameworks. Part i. addresses the racialising paradigms that underlie western research frameworks, and highlights how these foundations have consequently led euro-american scholarship to centre triumphalist narratives of Roman ascendancy. Part ii. posits that ancient Roman imperialism set the terms for the surviving textual constructions of the Samnites as an Other to Rome. Part iii. argues that the uncritical overreliance of euro-american scholarship on romanocentric literary constructions is rooted in colonialist western research frameworks, which set Roman imperialism as an inevitable conquest over the ‘lesser’ Other. Part iv. presents the brief case studies of archaeological evidence from Monte Pallano,

⁹ García Peña (2022: 89) continues by identifying the importance of bringing in indigenous perspectives on processes of colonisation and others who understand capitalism as a racial system of oppression.

¹⁰ I have capitalised the terms ‘White’ and ‘Whiteness’ throughout this article, following the lead of Sirleaf (2023) to render Whiteness visible. In capitalising ‘White’ and ‘Whiteness’, we are removing the neutrality and therefore the power that grants Whiteness its invisibility; ‘White’ is as much a historically created racial identity as ‘Black’ and therefore should be named as such. The label ‘Other’ is thus treated similarly. On the other hand, I have chosen to use lowercase for the terms ‘western’ and ‘eurocentric’ as an act of resistance, to decentre and disrupt notions of western superiority in colonialist linguistic discourse, in line with Lenette (2022, 3) and Bhattacharya (2022, 205 n. 3). See Tuhiwai Smith 2012, who urges ‘researching back’ and disrupting colonial methods of practice in the academy.

¹¹ Capini 1991a; 1991b; Capini & Di Niro 1991a; Cianfarani *et al.* 1978; D’Agostino 1980; De Benedittis 1974; 1987; 1988; 1991a; 1991b; 2008; 2010; De Benedittis & Di Niro 1995; De Felice 1994; 1997; La Regina 1970; 1980; 1981; 1984; 1989; 1991; Tagliamonte 1994; 1996; 2007; Di Niro 1991a; 1991b; 1993; Stelluti 1997; 2009.

Fontecampana, and Larinum as archaeological evidence for the Samnites. I highlight where ancient literary representations of the Samnites have been distorted by Roman sources, and venture to challenge where modern scholarship has uncritically accepted these romanocentric representations. Ultimately, throughout this paper and explicitly in part v., I demonstrate that approaches to ancient Samnium would benefit from a re-evaluation of both the extant sources *and* scholarship, the latter having been limited thus far by its uncritical adoption of ancient narrative and limited problematising of the western frameworks within which it operates.

i. 'Whiteness' and its Academic Implications

'Romanisation', 'Roman colonialism', 'expansion', 'occupation', 'imperialism', and 'conquest' all centre Rome and place Roman hegemony in an oppositional binary to 'native' populations, in line with western epistemologies.¹² This western approach is, according to Hall (1992) and others, grounded in functions based on discourses of 'the west and the Rest',¹³ which characterises and categorises societies based on their perceived proximity to the west. In this framework, communities are stereotyped, dichotomised, and evaluated as either desirable (i.e. 'western' = good) or undesirable (i.e. 'non-western' = bad).¹⁴ This idealisation of the west has underpinned the selection and interpretation of source material in scholarship, dictating *how* one reads it. 'Western research' of this ilk brings with it specific lenses regarding cultural orientation, values, conceptualisations of intangible factors like time, space, subjectivity, and different traditions of knowledge, language, and power structures.¹⁵ This has consequently impacted how many societies are characterised and treated by western historians. For instance, notions of race are often propagated and utilised to buttress colonial systems of empire, and colonialism and essentialism are ingrained in modern conversations regarding Roman republican studies,¹⁶ with both of these things compounding and contributing to romanocentric narratives.¹⁷

The history of Rome's expansion has predominantly been written by 'men of privilege'—individuals who benefit from a system built to maintain power and keep the control of resources in the hands of the White male.¹⁸ Consequently, these scholars have often projected their contemporary understanding of imperialism, and, naturally, their world views and lived experiences onto the ancient Roman past. They assumed Rome fought wars and urbanised Italy, just as Prussia, the United Kingdom, and other colonial powers conquered, colonised, and 'civilised' their own neighbours, before moving on to states further afield in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries CE. This is also a

¹² See Versluys 2014, 9 for a discussion of these terms.

¹³ Hall 1992; Hulme 1986; Tuhiwai Smith 2012.

¹⁴ Those considered developed or urban and therefore western are placed in opposition to societies that are rural or agricultural, and therefore deemed under-developed or 'non-western'. See Hall 1992, 215; Tembo (2022).

¹⁵ Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 44–49.

¹⁶ Both terms are used across a range of disciplines, and it is generally recognised that colonialism is one of many expressions of imperialism. See Tuhiwai Smith 2012, 22.

¹⁷ Mac Sweeney *et al.* 2019, 2.

¹⁸ Kendall 2006, 63.

dominant thread that underlies American scholarship on the subject, mirroring modern American imperialist rhetoric and activity.

For instance, scholarly interest in the ancient Roman past was driven by a desire to find ancient solutions to the issues of empire.¹⁹ Enlightenment thinkers, particularly in Germany, regularly turned to ancient Rome for historical parallels to legal, expansionist, and agrarian issues of their time. Academic explorations into ancient structures of landholding found consonance in Rome's rise to power, growth of empire, and systems for the control of land by elites, providing—in their view—an ancient mirror to contemporary Prussian society. Amongst these writers was Barthold Georg Niebuhr (1776–1831) whose work was instrumental for Theodor Mommsen (1817–1903), both of whom have produced some of the most influential works for western scholarship on Roman expansion. Thus, the foundations of modern contemporary scholarship on ancient Roman expansion, and Roman republican history more generally, are rooted in these eighteenth-century contexts of western imperialism.²⁰

Modern and ancient concepts of race are intimately connected; interwoven such that one will typically precede the other. By the mid-nineteenth century, far-right groups began to claim and weaponise their perceived classical heritage, and the discourse around the classical 'foundation of western civilisation' became a symbolic point of reference for its traditional associations with elites, imperialism, and an established social order.²¹ This vision has also been associated with various far-right and fascist ideologies of the early and mid-twentieth century.²² Scholars and works framed by this classical ideology, such as Mommsen, continue to be cited today, forming the foundation of modern scholarly discourse. The Graeco-Roman world continues to be strongly affiliated with European colonialism as the classical world was intrinsically connected with the values that drove this imperialism.²³

In the nineteenth century, this construction of 'western civilisation' actively produced an academic climate that privileges the voices of empire, and this continues to pervade current academic discourses, where colonial research and western frameworks have dictated whose voices are privileged within the discipline. How this influences the way classicists approached race—both in the ancient world and within the modern discipline—is apparent in reactions that followed the release of Bernal's *Black Athena* (1987).²⁴ In an edited collection of responses to *Black Athena* published in 1996, Lefkowitz asserted the premise that Afrocentrism was founded in bias, emotion, and the need of African academics to 'buy into' ancient Greece's cultural legacy. Afrocentrism was also contrasted with the 'objectivity' of classics, and 'European methods of distinguishing fact from fiction'.²⁵ Lefkowitz and other

¹⁹ The turn towards industrialisation in the 1830s heightened tensions across Europe between the peasant class, the emergent educated middle-class, and the traditional landed nobility (the *Junker* class).

²⁰ Bozzone and Negro 2025, 40–42.

²¹ Mac Sweeney *et al.* 2019, 16.

²² As explored recently by Curtis Dozier in *The White Pedestal* (2026).

²³ Cf. Goff 2013, especially 21–64; Eccleston and Padilla Peralta 2022; McCoskey 2022; Umachandran 2022; Umachandran and Ward 2023; Machado 2024.

²⁴ Bernal was himself problematic, defending his provocative title by quoting his publisher, 'Blacks no longer sell. Women no longer sell. But black women still sell!' (1989: 31–32). *Black Athena*, and the surrounding discourse, was criticised by classicists like Gress (1989), who asserted that the university was 'under attack' by 'anti-European cultural arrogance... from black racist attempts to impose indoctrination in the place of teaching and scholarship'.

²⁵ Lefkowitz 1996, 7 in Lefkowitz & Rogers (eds.), 1996.

euro-american classicists therefore set up an 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy in order to attack those who sought to decentre the west from studies of the ancient Mediterranean and thus challenge the supposed European or monocultural foundations of western civilisation.²⁶ Dichotomies such as the 'emotional and irrational People of Colour and their politicisation of history', and 'the reasonable and objective White person' were adopted as a tool for the defence of the exclusionary practices in the discipline.

In response, certain disciplinary factions have avoided engaging with 'race', ignoring or glossing over the racist foundations of the discipline under the ruse that these sentiments are no longer part of 'the canon we read or implicated in the theories and models we use to think with'.²⁷ These claims have been challenged by meaningful discussions of race in academia and call for reform of the discipline—conversations primarily driven by scholars from racialised backgrounds.²⁸ Although often expressed more subtly today, 'the classical' perseveres as a trope used to bolster and reinforce notions of authority, order, and status. Such inequities continue to undermine efforts to improve accessibility and inclusion within the discipline.²⁹ Classical studies, ancient history, Greek, and Latin have been used to justify and vindicate iniquitous systems of imperialism,³⁰ extremist regimes, and Whiteness.³¹ Furthermore, inherited prejudices, both ancient and modern, continue to influence how scholars interpret the ancient evidence.³² Literary sources are particularly susceptible to misrepresentation, where inaccurate connotations and prejudices can be written into racialised translations.³³ The limited view of the Samnites is but one symptom of the wider ethical problems of elitism and the lack of diversity in the discipline of classics and ancient history.

Such limited views are resultant from modern interpretations, which are shaped by contemporary sociopolitical climates, and frame our understanding of ancient material. This paper identifies some instances where the kinds of systemic exclusion described here have limited the scholarly voices, and demonstrates that western research frameworks have shaped studies on central and south Italian groups during this period. The Samnites provide an ideal case study of the implications of this pervasive modern colonial framework. The textual construction of Samnium and the Samnites will now be examined to demonstrate

²⁶ Rogers 1996, 428–429.

²⁷ McCoskey 2018.

²⁸ Such as Haley 2009; Vasunia 2013; Chae 2018; Pandey 2018; Padilla Peralta 2019a, 2019b; Nguyen 2020, 2021; Agbamu 2023; Johnston 2023; Machado 2024; Padilla Peralta 2025.

²⁹ Publication rates of scholarship in the discipline reflect the dominance of White voices in academic discourses, see Kamash 2019.

³⁰ e.g. those that hierarchise gender, class, and race, and contribute to notions of superiority.

³¹ Conversely, the classics has also been weaponised for progressive change by activists and subaltern groups, including those calling for independence from the British Empire, Vasunia (2013: ch. 1).

³² Emily Wilson's 2023 translation of the *Iliad*, for instance, seeks to address this in relation to characterisation of women in the poem.

³³ For instance, Richlin's (2015) translates Plautus' *Poenulus* as 'Towelheads'. Haley (2021) has identified the tendency of North American translators to select modern racial slurs for their translations of ethnic labels in ancient texts—for example, translating Latin and Greek terms such as *Afros*, *Aethiopsis*, and ὁ γναφεὺς ἀνθρώπων as slurs rather than simple demonyms, as the ancient sources seem to have used them (Juvenal 8.120). Vasunia (2021) has also identified a similar theme in translations of the *Song of Solomon*, where the original Hebrew translates to 'I am black and beautiful', whereas Latin and Greek translations of the Bible often say, 'I am black but beautiful'. Ethiopian translations of the Bible retain the 'and'.

how Roman imperialism, and its later receptions, have set the terms for Samnite identity to be constructed as an Other.

ii. *Montani atque agrestes?* Samnite Identity and Roman Imperialism

As already noted, the ancient sources for ‘the Samnites’ are problematic at best. References to ‘the Samnites’ are sporadic, the earliest literary depictions coming from early-fourth-century BCE Greek sources.³⁴ These sources focus primarily on ethno-geographic descriptions of a Samnite *ethnos* and refer to peoples of the region of Samnium³⁵ as *Saunitai* (Σαυνῖται) (Philostratus, *FGrH* 556, fr. 41, 42 & Pseudo-Scylax, *Periplus*, 11, 12).³⁶ The majority of extant literary evidence comes from Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus in the late first century BCE.³⁷ However, there does not seem to be much Roman interest in the Samnites before the Social War (91–88 BCE), at which time the Samnites and Samnite identity played an important role in shaping the opposition to Rome. The ancient evidence is, therefore, limited in what it can reflect of the actual lived experiences of the Samnites and other marginalised communities. However, it certainly reveals that the labels of ‘Samnite’ and ‘Samnium’ were ascribed to a group or region by authors of the late Republic. Indeed, ‘Samnite’ served as an important early imperial trope used by Livy and others to explore and promote Roman excellence and unity. This is, in part, why the ancient sources *cannot* express exactly who was a ‘Samnite’ during this period, nor whether these labels reflect practices of self-identification.³⁸ Moreover, the geographic region of ‘Samnium’ is similarly unclear, existing as an amorphous intellectual construct, inexactly and variously imposed on the land—not even bounded by a river or a sea—and open to manipulation by ancient authors.

The Samnites exist within the narrative space as Rome’s opposition. The Latin sources (Livy 7–10, 22; Polybius 2.24; Florus 1.11.8) are mostly centred on Samnite interactions and conflicts with Rome, whereas the Greek sources (Strabo 5.4; Polybius 2.24; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Antiquitates Romanae* 17–18.4.4) apparently took an ethnographic approach and emphasised the great resources of the Roman state.³⁹ Consequently, these annalists created

³⁴ Tagliamonte 2017, 421.

³⁵ The term also included people of Samnite descent resident in Campania, namely the *Lucanii* and *Brettii*, identified as distinct from the original Samnite settlers (Theopompus Historicus *FGrH* 115, fr. 204; Timaeus of Tauromenium transmitted via Strabo 5.4.12, 6.1.3, 6.1.6, 6.1.15). See Musti 1992; Dench 1995, 76–77; Tagliamonte 2017, 419.

³⁶ If later sources have accurately preserved this text. See also: Μυστία πόλις Σαυνιτῶν. Φίλιστος ἑνδεκάτω. οἱ οἰκῆτορες Μυστιανοί (Stephanus Byzantius, *Ethnica*, Τύρηστα and Μυστία in *BNJ* 556, fr. 41, 42). See further Strabo 5.4.1–3, 5.4.8, 5.4.11–13, 6.1.2–3; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Antiquitates Romanae* 15.5, 17–18.4.4; Polybius 1.7.3. Strabo also describes a Lucanian origin myth in which he places the Samnites as their *archegetai* (leaders or ‘co-founders’, Strabo 6.1.2–3). Mamertines are included under the Samnite umbrella by ancient sources, along with Lucanians and Campanians (Polybius 1.7.3; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Antiquitates Romanae* 15.5).

³⁷ Livy 7–10, 22; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Antiquitates Romanae* 15.5, 17–18.4.4; Strabo 5.4, 6.1.2–3; Polybius 1.7.3; 2.24; Florus 1.11.8.

³⁸ Ancient identity is a complex and layered concept; modern western notions of identity fail to acknowledge the nuance and diversity of the ancient Mediterranean, and cannot be accurately mapped onto the ancient world. See Bradley 1997; 2001; Isayev 2010; 2017; Gruen 2010; 2020; Roselaar 2012.

³⁹ Polybius lists the Samnites among the Italian allies at Rome’s disposal in 225. Florus describes the Romans celebrating twenty-four triumphs over the Samnites. Dionysius lists the Samnites among the Italian allies.

a historical framework based on the contemporary socio-political experiences of their class.⁴⁰ It is difficult to avoid these biases of identity and geography; for example, Livy’s (9.1.3–10) speeches by Samnite leaders provide only generalised criticisms of Rome, revealing little about the Samnites themselves.⁴¹ Thus, the question remains: who were the Samnites?

It is evident that the romanocentricity of the ancient evidence has conditioned academic reconstructions of central and southern Italy in the second half of the first millennium.⁴² Rome’s growing presence in the Italian peninsula and its victories over Pyrrhus and Hannibal throughout the third century BCE had ideological consequences for the peoples of Italy who became *rustici*.⁴³ Indeed, although a vital part of Rome’s emerging imperial system, the Italians were also constructed as barbarians in the literary sources (Plautus *Truculentus* 687ff.; Aristophanes *Thesmophoriazusae* 1001ff.),⁴⁴ with foreign languages depicted as unintelligible and indicative of intellectual deficiency.⁴⁵ Just as the Greeks reasserted their centrality and primacy within groups of surrounding barbarians, the Romans asserted their superiority to the Italian peoples through the polarity of ‘urbanitas–rusticitas’ (Cicero *De oratore* 3.42–46; Plautus *Captivi* 879ff.). That is, ‘citified’ or urban wit or sophistication, in contrast to the boorishness or dullness of the country (Cicero *De oratore* 2.231; Plautus *Persa* 169; *Vidularia* 31–35; Terence *Adelphoe* 42–46).⁴⁶ This theme of primitivism persisted in Roman literary portrayals of the Italians and had both positive and negative connotations through Livy’s *montani atque agrestes*. Literary appearances of the Samnites therefore constituted careful literary constructions. These barbaric tropes were commonly deployed from the late Republic; comparisons were drawn between the superiority of the Romans and othered groups,⁴⁷ such as Roman *virtus*;⁴⁸ Roman piety (Tacitus *Annales* 3.55.8ff.); divine support for Roman causes (Livy 9.1.1–16; 10.37.13–16); and the use of historical figures as moral exemplars. Samnite identity is established by Roman constructions of a rural and barbarian Other juxtaposed against Roman urbanity, sophistication, excellence, and morality.

Central Italians were not only depicted negatively; positive Samnite attributes, for instance, were emphasised in later sources to lament the immorality of Rome, revealing an important aspect emphasised in the surviving literature. Ancient Roman authors possessed the opportunity and power to construct opponent identities and representations in such a way as to give the Romans greater moral standing—either by comparison with the barbaric

⁴⁰ McDonald 2026, 47.

⁴¹ Bradley & Hall 2017, 192; Oakley (1995: 9 n. 105) asserted that ‘no one has ever doubted’ that Caiatia was Samnite despite there being no evidence to prove it. For an exception see Horky (2011: 119–147) who argues that the speeches of Herennius Pontius are representative of cross-cultural transmission of practical philosophy about friendship, and thus provide an insight into Samnite ideals.

⁴² Bradley & Hall 2017, 192; cf. McDonald (2026) for a discussion of ‘linguistic racism’.

⁴³ Perhaps most aptly captured as ‘rustic’, on the grounds of their *rusticitates*: their rusticity or boorishness, see Dench (1995: 74–76) for a comprehensive explanation. This has been conflated with a ruralism prescribed to Italian communities in modern scholarship.

⁴⁴ Dench 1995, 73–75.

⁴⁵ Hall 1989, 19, 122.

⁴⁶ Ramage 1960; Dench 1995, 75.

⁴⁷ Bradley & Hall 2017, 192; Tagliamonte 1996, 137; McDonald 2026.

⁴⁸ Sallust *BJ* 85 for Marius on the ‘elites’ (*nobiles*); Wiseman 1971, 113 on *novi homines* (new elites elected to office) and the virtues of the ‘central-Italian hill-people’.

Other, or through their ability to prevail over opponents with perceived ‘worthy’ traits.⁴⁹ In Virgil’s *Georgics* (2.458–542), his Latins lived in desirable simplicity, free from the corruption of the modern city.⁵⁰ His simple agricultural society of the past contrasts the discord of his contemporary Rome, and is bookended by descriptions of the rural lives of Sabines and Etruscans. Positive depictions also pervade the annalistic sources of the late Republic and early Empire. These included depictions of the central Italians as brave, rustic, and masculine,⁵¹ characterised according to Herodotus’ ethnographic system as austere and rugged soldiers from rough lands (Livy 9.13.7; Herodotus 9.122.3).⁵² Livy (9.13.7–10) includes a passage that has generally been taken at face value to suggest that either Samnite society was organised around raiding by the ‘rugged mountain-people’,⁵³ or that this was the Roman understanding of Samnite society.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, these interpretations still emphasise dichotomies of ‘affluent, non-rural’, versus ‘poor, pastoral, rural’;⁵⁵ disparities between the Samnites and their neighbours that support the narrative of Roman imperialism. Dench, however, has identified that this passage is also about the varieties of economy that existed in the region, highlighting the terms *culti* and *agrestes*: pastoralists and agriculturalists. The agriculturalists are the ‘softer characters’ of the plains, whereas the Samnites are ‘rough mountain-dwellers’. Particularly explicit here is Livy’s employment of geographical determinism to explain the behaviours of the Arpi and Samnites during their conflict.⁵⁶ The phrase *montani atque agrestes* is just one description of the Samnite peoples, and should not be privileged in historical discussions of Samnite society above other descriptions.

Livy’s contradictory presentation of Samnite primitivism and *luxuria* (extravagance or excess) echoes Greek patterns of othering through the emphasis of excess.⁵⁷ Livy (9.40; 10.39.11–14) emphasises the resplendence of Samnite arms by describing their adornment with gold and juxtaposing it with Roman (or Greek) masculinity.⁵⁸ These descriptions are more than just a trope; they seem to fit late-fourth-century BCE iconographic representations of south Italian battledress.⁵⁹ The Augustan context for Livy’s work is clear: Livy selected elements of Samnite dress and practice for manipulation within pre-existing patterns of characterisation.⁶⁰ Livy’s Samnites straddle the distance between foreignness and familiarity, continuing to fulfil their narrative role as a barbarian Other while also becoming

⁴⁹ Dench 1995, 67–68.

⁵⁰ Hall 1989, 149.

⁵¹ Dench 1995, 67. See Strabo 5.4.2 for bravery of Vestini, Marsi, Paeligni, Marrucini, and Frentani. See also Virgil *Georgics* 2.167ff.; Pliny (the Elder) *Naturalis historia* 3.106; Appian *Bella civilia* 1.46.

⁵² Dench 1995, 68.

⁵³ Livy 9.13.7–9: ‘for the Samnites, who in those days dwelt in villages among the mountains, used to ravage the regions of the plain and coast, despising their cultivators, who were of a softer character, and one that—as often happens—resembled their country, while they themselves were rude highlanders’. Trans. Foster.

⁵⁴ Salmon 1967, 77; Lloyd 1991, 180; Barker, Lloyd and Webley 1978, 43; Dench 1995, 114.

⁵⁵ Dench 1995, 114.

⁵⁶ Dench 1995, 114–115.

⁵⁷ Stek 2009, 37.

⁵⁸ Dench 1995, 45.

⁵⁹ For full discussion see Rouveret 1986, 103ff.; conversely, Wiseman (1979: 73–76) argues that Livy and his contemporaries had fabricated most of the events in Rome’s history up to the second century.

⁶⁰ Dench 1995, 100.

recognisable—and therefore acceptable—allies, as adjudged by the first-century CE Augustan audience.⁶¹

Livy's description of the topography and architecture of Samnite settlements is similarly nuanced. Walled settlements are described as either *urbes* (cities) or *oppida* (towns).⁶² *Oppida* has also been translated to denote 'defensible hilltop fortifications'.⁶³ This term is used by Livy to refer to several cities and towns across the Mediterranean, and usually appears within the context of war. Despite Livy's wider use of the term, polygonal walling in central and southern Italy has generally been seen as an indication of these *oppida*.⁶⁴ These walls are difficult to date, and the proliferation of *oppida* in southern Italy is largely regarded as a fourth-century BCE phenomenon.⁶⁵ It is therefore puzzling when scholars use the term to distinguish Samnite fortifications as *oppida* and, by extension, use polygonal walling as a feature of Samnite settlement more generally. Empirical generalisations, such as the idea that polygonal walling is indicative of Samnite settlement or fortifications, betray the uncritical application of ancient literary tropes, and a modern western model of urbanism.⁶⁶

In sum, the Samnites have been defined as a 'disorganised and brutish mountain people', with 'luxurious tendencies', contrasted with the elegance and sophistication of the Romans. We will now see that these textual constructions have been propagated and reinforced by modern scholarship on this period.

iii. Ancient Tropes in Modern Scholarship

Modern scholars have all too often posed questions about the ethnic identity of the peoples of the central Apennines in terms of nineteenth-century theories of race. In their identification and discussion of primitive unities, they have assumed that the actions of peoples who lived hundreds of years after the periods covered by these supposed primitive unities were more or less determined by this pre-existing cultural unity. They have been frequently misled by the ancients themselves, who regularly expressed present relationships in terms of blood ties. I have argued that notions of identity are far from fixed and 'objective', and that questions of identity must be posed in such a way as to allow for the possibility of frequent regroupings according to individual circumstances.

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Central Italy has long been virtually synonymous with the community of Rome since the early modern period (1550–1796 CE). With the tremendous influence of the Catholic Church

⁶¹ The Social War in the first century BCE played a huge role in how the Samnites were conceptualised and discussed by the Romans. Stek 2009, 44–45; Dench 2005, 129.

⁶² Lee 2016, 9.

⁶³ La Regina 1970, 191–192.

⁶⁴ See Oakley 1995, 129; Lloyd *et al.* 1997, 32.

⁶⁵ Bispham 2007, 200. Livy uses *oppidum* when referring to Bovianum at 9.31.4–5; Aquilonia at 10.42.4, 10.43.13, 10.44.1–2; and Allifae, Callifae, and Rufrium at 8.25.4.

⁶⁶ Lee 2016, 2; Gualtieri (1987: 32–33) has argued that 'Samnite' fortified centres could not be classified as cities, nor as urban, because the Greeks and Romans would not have understood these decentralised settlement patterns as urban spaces. Samnite settlements therefore do not fit within the definitions of 'city' or 'urban' that Livy applied to other cultures across the Mediterranean.

in Rome and the city's reemergence as the political heart of Italy following unification in the nineteenth century, the region has never been able to escape the shadow of the ancient city. Southern Italy represents a counterpoint, yet one that also suffers from a modern Roman bias. The south has been less wealthy than its northern neighbours since the early modern period and has been economically exploited by Rome and the north of Italy for generations. The region saw limited professional archaeological activity until the 1970s, and has attracted little attention from Roman historians outside of being used as a touchstone for comparisons with Roman greatness. These regions, especially southern Italy, thus provide ideal case studies for illustrating how systemic exclusionary practices in the discipline have impacted academic output in studies on the Roman Republic.

The academic discussion of fourth-century BCE Italy focusses heavily on Rome's development and (largely military) interactions with Italian groups. This approach is relatively unilateral; it centres the impact of 'Rome' on local societies and presupposes dichotomies such as 'Roman' and 'Other', 'Roman' and 'native', 'Roman' and 'barbarian', 'rural' and 'urban', 'civilised' and 'uncivilised', and, as noted earlier, is scaffolded upon established ancient patterns and tropes, and a teleological trajectory towards a unified Italy under Roman control. This ancient influence on contemporary modern scholarship is further exacerbated by western and colonialist frameworks that have guided and shaped the work that has come before.

Mommsen, for example, divided, categorised, and organised Italian groups in accordance with their perceived relationship to the Roman empire, beginning *Römische Geschichte* (1887) by outlining ethnic categories for Italian 'tribes', 'races', or 'stocks' as a foundation for his historical discussion,⁶⁷ normalising an essentialist assumption that early Roman society was organised through innate ethnographic drivers.⁶⁸ Mommsen established Italian inferiority in contrast to the inescapable Roman conquest of Italy and Rome's inevitable global hegemony,⁶⁹ with his 'Samnites' representing the antithesis to Roman organisation and excellence through the use of the terms '*samnitischen Scharen*' or '*samnitischer Schwarm*': Samnite hordes or Samnite multitudes.⁷⁰ In contrast, Roman troops were discussed in terms of Roman armies and Roman settlers: '*Aussendung roemischer Kolonisten*'. Rome's early expansion was thus apparently born of an attempt to combat the perceived aggression of its neighbours;⁷¹ the Romans are portrayed as an organised and intrinsically structured society defending itself against the Samnite 'hill-people' who threatened what Mommsen called '*Roms Hegemonie*'.⁷² While Samnium's political organisation granted them the ability to challenge Roman hegemony, their ultimate defeat was—in Mommsen's view—caused by their

⁶⁷ Mommsen (1862: 7, 9–10) used philological evidence as the basis for his categorisations of ethnic groups. See Mommsen's bk I, ch. 2 for a full discussion.

⁶⁸ Niebuhr 1803–1806; Momigliano 1994, 232–233; Reill 1980, 19.

⁶⁹ 'Accordingly, the whole history of the two nations is prefigured in their diametrically opposite systems of colonization. Whatever the Romans gained was a gain to the state: the conquests of the Samnites were achieved by bands of volunteers who went forth in search of plunder, and, whether they prospered or were unfortunate, were left to their own resources by their native home'. Mommsen 1862, bk 2. Trans. Dickson.

⁷⁰ Mommsen 1862, bk II, ch. V. Likewise Mommsen's discussion of Gauls, Celts, Etrurians, and Sabines.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 7.

⁷² *ibid.*, 361.

lack of organisation around a central governing body.⁷³ For Mommsen, Samnite success was measured against Roman forms of organisation and governance.

A century later, ancient characterisations of a poor and disorganised Samnium were adopted in Salmon’s *Samnium and the Samnites* (1967) to contextualise his archaeological survey. Depopulation of the area in the 1960s and 1970s only compounded the biases further, with studies on the Samnites from this period mirroring the contemporary region’s poverty and marginality.⁷⁴ However, the rise of archaeology in the 1960s afforded the Samnites increasing agency in historical reconstructions, recognising them as a living community who existed beyond their role in Roman imperial narratives. That said, Salmon’s work opens by dichotomising the Samnites and Romans: ‘of all the tribes and nations with whom the Romans found themselves obliged to dispute the supremacy of Italy, none were more formidable than the Samnites of Samnium’.⁷⁵ This juxtaposition is carried throughout Salmon’s work, perpetuating ancient preconceptions of the Samnites such as *opikoi*,⁷⁶ or Livy’s stubborn mountain-tribe, the *montani atque agrestes*. Salmon’s work, although sympathetic to the Samnites in some ways, sets up the Roman conquest of the Samnites as inevitable, and their ‘unification’ into Rome’s empire as ‘pre-destined’.⁷⁷

Coinciding with south Italy’s recovery and increased archaeological activity following World War II, there was an upsurge in research on the Samnites. This archaeological reappraisal, as well as the independent *regione* status granted to Molise in 1970, instigated a desire to construct a local identity. Southern Italian academics saw merit in connecting with their own regional identity in a meaningful way that was separate from and distinct to Roman heritage.⁷⁸ Adriano La Regina, for instance, has highlighted alternatives to urban models of settlement organisation in the region, and shed light on cultural interactions between groups in Italy through examinations of art and architecture.⁷⁹ La Regina emphasised Samnite idiosyncrasy and regional variation throughout central and southern Italy, contending that the Pentrians partook in elaborate displays of wealth at sanctuary sites in contrast to more muted displays observed in spaces with civic or military functions,⁸⁰ and countering dominant narratives of a homogenous and unsophisticated Samnite people. Gianluca Tagliamonte similarly has argued for distinctive community traits in relation to culture and socio-political organisation.⁸¹ This interest in regional Samnite identities has been driven by Italian voices, further demonstrating the value of diversifying the scholarly discourse. Despite this growing appreciation of central Italian regional differences, scholars have generally continued to emphasise Samnite otherness.⁸²

In 1995 three pivotal books were published, *The Hill-forts of the Samnites* by Stephen P. Oakley, *A Mediterranean Valley: Landscape Archaeology and Annales History in the Biferno Valley* by Graeme Barker, and *From Barbarians to New Men* by Emma Dench. Livy’s propensity to

⁷³ *ibid.*, 123–124.

⁷⁴ Dench 1995, 8 n. 26; Scopacasa 2015, 3–4.

⁷⁵ Salmon 1967, i.

⁷⁶ *Opikoi* referred to peoples who could not properly speak Greek. Dubuisson 2001, 1–16.

⁷⁷ Dench 2004b, 45.

⁷⁸ Dench 1995, 8.

⁷⁹ La Regina 1970; 1976.

⁸⁰ La Regina 1976, 229.

⁸¹ Tagliamonte 1997; 2000.

⁸² Dench 1995, 8–11; Lloyd 1991, 184; Patterson 1991, 146ff.; Morel 1991, 187ff.

emphasise and invent Roman successes (and therefore augment Roman exceptionalism) while omitting Samnite achievements is generally accepted by Oakley,⁸³ who used ethnographic and historical records (primarily Livy) to identify potential Samnite hillforts. The residual polygonal walling is then recorded as the primary indicator of Samnite hillfort constructions (*oppida*). Oakley's conflation of polygonal walling with rural fortifications and thus 'primitive' or 'uncivilised' societies exemplifies the impact of empirical generalisation and colonial binaries.⁸⁴ This circular form of reasoning, however, does not stack up with the archaeological evidence, as demonstrated by the case studies of Monte Pallano and Larinum, discussed in part iv below.

Barker's survey of the Biferno valley also reflects the tendency to fall back on the Roman literary construction of the Samnites to contextualise the archaeology;⁸⁵ the work relies heavily on modern understandings of societal organisation. For instance, Barker acknowledges that the forum at Saepinum was built by a Samnite, C. Papiu[s] but concludes that this is indicative of local Samnite families participating in the urbanisation and Romanisation of the region.⁸⁶ Although Barker's conclusions involve an acknowledgement of Samnium's substantial sphere of interaction throughout the Mediterranean through trade and mercenary involvement, this socioeconomic complexity is ultimately connected to urbanisation that Barker implies took place in anticipation of the Roman conquest.⁸⁷ The Samnites, Barker argues, became connected on account of Rome's world system.

Dench's work, on the other hand, represents something rather different, pushing for a re-evaluation of the central Apennines, challenging biases of modern historians and giving a voice to central Italian groups traditionally sidelined in the scholarship. Dench scrutinised ancient literary evidence and identified the literary tropes that have been consistently applied to the Samnites, demonstrating that the representation of the Samnites as a barbarian Other by the classical authors aligned with a wider pattern of othering 'foreign' groups. Furthermore, Dench's survey of modern English scholarship reveals the tendency to characterise Samnium as 'anti-classical' and the Samnites as the disorganised, rural antithesis to the Romans.⁸⁸ They are thus an early republican example of the barbarian Other. Indeed, when the Samnites are compared with the likes of the Celts, Gauls, or Britons—other so-called 'fringe groups'—it becomes apparent that the description of the 'barbaric tribes' has also been extended to the Samnites by Livy, Polybius, and other sources in antiquity. Unlike the Celts, Gauls, and Britons, however, this notion of the 'barbaric Samnite hill-tribes' has rarely been challenged by scholars, and notions of Samnium's autonomy and

⁸³ Tagliamonte 1996, 137.

⁸⁴ Oakley (1995: 11) 'rough fortifications made out of dry-stone walls, often the construction of *primitive* societies', emphasis added.

⁸⁵ Barker (1995a: 208) 'with only a few recent exceptions, ancient and modern assessments have presented the Samnites as a primitive pastoral and agrarian society'.

⁸⁶ Barker 1995a, 221. The concept of 'romanisation' can be augmented to acknowledge the roles of local societies and change over time; however, these interpretations remain confined by the frameworks that underpin them. See Mihajlović (2019: 1) for further discussion on romanisation and Fulminante (2014: ch. 7) on the limitations of urbanisation as a concept.

⁸⁷ Barker 1995a, 311–312.

⁸⁸ Dench 2005, 18–19.

independent identity have been sidelined in favour of a more traditional narrative of Roman imperialism. More recent publications on the Samnites have fallen into similar patterns.⁸⁹

Frustratingly, out of the three works that emerged in 1995, only those by Oakley and Barker seem to have made a substantial impact on wider anglophone discussions.⁹⁰ Dench's work, although influential in its own way, has been sidelined as a literary exploration of identity, despite the obvious challenge she has posed to the traditional historical narrative.⁹¹ The reasons for this are almost certainly varied, although it is worth again noting that the tropes that have hitherto confined current understandings of Samnium and the Samnites are also part of a wider set of colonialist ideals that have been shared and perpetuated by modern historians and archaeologists (see part i). The overreliance on these romanocentric ideals is a result of systemic factors that are pervasive not just within Roman republican studies, but also the wider disciplines of classics and ancient history. Scholarly contributions on early Roman expansion have been limited to a small group of voices, and consequently, arguments of the resulting scholarship have often become circular. It is noteworthy that Dench, the scholar who did challenge the 'automatic acceptance' of the ancient textual constructions of the Samnites, is a woman.

This critique of western research is not intended to dismiss or delegitimise the scholarly discourse on Roman imperialism and the Samnites to date, but rather to identify an issue that has heretofore largely been neglected in the subfields of ancient history and archaeology in particular: that the voices and contributions of individuals from underrepresented or historically marginalised groups have been missing from the conversation.⁹² Such systemic factors have had an impact on academic output and consequently restricted the discussion of Samnium and the early Roman Republic. The Samnites have been regarded through a simplified set of literary tropes that were crafted as part of the construction of an Other, a group that was juxtaposed with the Romans to serve

⁸⁹ Scopacasa's (2015) *Ancient Samnium* aims to bridge the discourse between the archaeology and ancient history. Although the book is comprehensive, some interpretations fall into confirmation bias in the search for Livy's mountain-warriors in the archaeological record. For example, Scopacasa references Musti (1984: 26) who discusses the 'colonisation' vocabulary used by the Greeks, a loaded and modern concept projected retrospectively onto the ancient past. Robinson (2021) argues for romanisation to be reframed as a multi-century long process rather than a sudden shift during the fourth century. Despite Robinson's focus on the autonomy and actions of local groups in Larinum, and consideration for gradual processes of interaction and transformation, the position presented ultimately relies on Rome's predetermined and inevitable hegemony.

⁹⁰ See the following from Barker & Suano *et al.* (1995: 160) 'the homeland of the Samnites, the renowned opponents of Rome (Salmon 1967). Although traditionally regarded as a backward and rustic people, archaeology shows that Samnite culture in the later centuries of the 1st millennium BC was far more complex than envisaged even a few years ago, with more or less urban structures developing before Romanization'. Also note from the passage the use of Salmon as an academic touchstone for the argument on Samnium's opposition to Rome.

⁹¹ A pattern identified and discussed in Skinner (1987: 187) whose articulation summarily encompasses the issue, 'the historic use of classical studies as a self-enhancing cultural emblem and a gatekeeping mechanism designed to control access to education and power explains its present appeal to reactionary elitists... knowledge that does not fit male disciplinary paradigms can be dismissed'.

⁹² Kamash (2019) examined the presenter programmes of twenty-two Roman Archaeology conferences from 1995 to 2019. Of the 2068 papers and posters presented over this period, only 2.4% were by individuals from BAME communities and Development Assistance Committee countries. Furthermore, 46% of papers presented over this period focussed on the regions of Britain and Italy, despite the Roman empire covering far wider geographical regions and groups.

a broader literary narrative. The use of categorisation (*barbaroi* or Other), stereotypes (feminine Persians or war-like Samnites), and stereotypical dualism (Roman versus foreign) can certainly be identified in the ancient sources. Modern understandings of the Samnites have been conditioned by these early imperial attitudes and consequently have framed the Samnites as the barbarian counterpart to Roman civilisation. The Samnites therefore reveal the degree to which (primarily German and anglophone) scholarship, entrenched in Whiteness, has fixated on Rome's ascendancy over Italy, a position grounded in an overreliance on romanocentric constructions of Italian groups and Samnite alterity. Yet, the surviving archaeological evidence pertaining to Samnium offers an alternate picture.

iv. The Archaeology of Samnium

Modern academic literature often assumes that cultural features are connected to wider ethnic distinctions, and that changes in cultural features are linked to invasion and decreases in local authority. In this reconstructed historical context, Samnium is predominantly viewed as either an opponent or vassal of Rome. Roman hegemony is established as the catalyst for any Samnite development. The geography and archaeology of Samnium paint an image contrary to that presented by the ancient historians, who often presented Samnium as isolated and fortified by its hilly terrain, mobility of a few elites notwithstanding.⁹³ The archaeology does not serve as a universal corrective to the literary evidence, and should not be considered as such. It does, however, offer an alternative, underrepresented view of Samnite spaces.

The Topography of Samnium

The Apennine mountains are a key defining feature of the central Italian region. The mountainous terrain encircles grassy plains, and plateaux and river valleys made ideal areas for grazing animals or land for agriculture.⁹⁴ The river valleys appear to have the densest areas of surviving archaeological material in the region, and therefore likely constituted the main axis of settlement during the first millennium. The most active lines of communication, however, did not only lie through the paths at the bottom of the valley, but also the transhumance trails situated along the mountain ridges that were used for seasonal relocations between mountain pastures in warmer months and lower altitudes in colder months. This geographical landscape therefore encourages transhumance, where flocks are moved in seasonal cycles between the lowland river valleys in the winter and the green pastures in the highlands in the summer. Transhumance trails acted as nexus points of cultural and economic activity in antiquity, and evidence socioeconomic systems of organisation;⁹⁵ and yet the existence of long-distance transhumance systems in antiquity

⁹³ Salmon 1967; Oakley 1995; Terrenato 2019, 270.

⁹⁴ Barker 1995a, 17–21.

⁹⁵ Tagliamonte 1996, 37–9; Salmon 1967, 17–18, 52, 55, 65–70; Barker (1976: 303) emphasised the prevalence of transhumance throughout central and southern Italy during this period; see also De Felice 1994, 34. While other scholars (Salmon 1967, 68–9; Tagliamonte 1996, 36–40; Roselaar 2017, 181) have pointed to Varro and other ancient literary references for flocks being moved between Samnium and Apulia to the east. Conversely, Scopacasa (2015: 14) has been more sceptical of the prevalence of long-distance transhumance trails in Samnium, as well as of their overall importance in the maintenance of socioeconomic networks in Samnium before the 'Samnite Wars', although this may partly be a result of his focus on built sites (an emerging feature of the archaeology that runs counter to the traditional narrative).

continues to be widely debated in the modern scholarship despite numerous attestations in the ancient sources (Cicero *Pro Cluentio* 59, 161; Varro, *De re rustica* 2.2.10, 3.17.9; Livy 22.14; Silius Italicus 7.365).⁹⁶ The interlocking valleys and network of rivers, mountain ridges, and upland passes facilitated mobility; Campania to the west and Umbria to the north would have been relatively accessible.

Monte Pallano and Fontecampana

On the right bank of the Sangro river lies the site of Monte Pallano (*Pallanum*), which rises above the Sangro river valley on a plateau overlooking the Adriatic coast.⁹⁷ The naturally fortified site presents several archaeological features that challenge the traditional image of the rustic and isolated Samnites and their underdeveloped warrior society. There is also evidence of pastoralism and remains of production sites in the region. Material finds indicate human occupation of the Monte Pallano site and its immediate surroundings from as early as the Bronze Age and continued use of the site until the fourth century CE. Bronze Age material was recovered from seven sites in the Monte Pallano area.⁹⁸ To the south-east of Monte Pallano sits a settlement on another plateau, known as Fontecampana.⁹⁹

Work on Monte Pallano has revealed a fortified centre as well as farmsteads—sites traditionally attributed to early Roman occupation—in the surrounding landscape and at Fontecampana in particular.¹⁰⁰ The Sangro river valley and Monte Pallano regions disappear from the ancient literary record after 80 BCE, when Sulla attacked the region. The megalithic walls on Monte Pallano have not been studied in detail, but they are interpreted as evidence of a Samnite fortified centre during this period.¹⁰¹ Driven by Livy's descriptions of Samnite settlements as *oppida*, the presence of Iron Age material near to polygonal walling is taken as an indication of a Samnite hillfort on the site.

Several smaller habitation sites were uncovered at Fontecampana and thought to be farmsteads that utilised the area's arable land.¹⁰² *Impasto* ceramic derived from earlier Iron Age burials has been recovered from the plateau here at the break of the slope between the wooded land and the farmable terrain.¹⁰³ This site sat at the junction of several heavily frequented routes and transhumance paths. Scholars have suggested that this location and large presence of 'Roman material' indicate that the site 'peaked' under the 'Roman period' as a hub for elite interaction.¹⁰⁴ It is unlikely that the site would have been suddenly abandoned by 'Samnites' and occupied by 'Romans' in their place given its history of

⁹⁶ Tagliamonte 1996, 36–40; Barker 1989; Corbier 1991, *passim*; De Felice 1994, 34; Sparacello *et al.* 2011.

⁹⁷ Monte Pallano has been confidently identified as the site of the ancient settlement *Pallanum*: see Miller 1916, 216; Colonna 1955, 169–70.

⁹⁸ Scatters 61, 62, 67, 65, 58, 18, and 91 in Lloyd *et al.* 1997, 179.

⁹⁹ Extensive archaeological material has been recovered from this site dating to the classical period. This included pottery of low-fired handmade ceramics, and late and crude-struck flints. Lloyd *et al.* 1997, 22–23; Bell *et al.* 2002, 179.

¹⁰⁰ Lloyd *et al.* 1997, 5–6; Bell *et al.* 2002, 178–180.

¹⁰¹ Bell *et al.* 2002, 180; Bispham 2001.

¹⁰² Bell *et al.* 2002, 183.

¹⁰³ Scatter 18. Bell *et al.* 2002, 180; Lloyd 1997.

¹⁰⁴ Supporting recent hypotheses concerning the importance of farmsteads as nuclei for elite communication and power in central and southern Italy over the fourth century. Terrenato 2019, 88; Lomas 2025, 240.

continuous occupation and well-established connections with the hilltop at Monte Pallano—a ‘Samnite’ regional site. Furthermore, the influx of ‘Roman material’ at the site could be attributed to movement, trade, or even local production; after all, as is now axiomatic, pots are pots, not people. While these may be inextricable from processes of imperialism, it is an oversimplification to condense Samnite culture, industry, and autonomy to Roman expansionism, and thereby reduce complex and multilayered communities to a trope: the uncivilised enemy of Rome.

The processing of wool was also likely as attested by literary sources which record wool production throughout Apulia, Samnium, and Campania,¹⁰⁵ and the archaeology of the region seems to support this idea that transhumance was an important aspect of the economy. Large material finds have been found at Pietrabbondante (south of Monte Pallano), where there is thought to have been a large Samnite sanctuary site and evidence of transhumant pasturing, and which may well have partially financed the second-century BCE sanctuary site.¹⁰⁶ Tagliamonte’s assertion, that the quantity of military dedications found here demonstrate a connection between the site and the Samnite army, have led academics to claim that the form and dimension of this space are similar to the space described by Livy (10.38), where the Samnites took oaths prior to the battle of Aquilonia.¹⁰⁷ A fragmented Oscan inscription dated to 125 BCE (*Imagines Italicae Terventum* 8) from the site bears the words *safinim sak[arakulud* (‘Samnium with a sanctuary he adorned’) and *keenzstur* (‘censor’).¹⁰⁸ It is thus likely that this structure served as a meeting place for Samnite communities.¹⁰⁹ These dedications also illustrate the use of the endonym *safin-*, indicating a sense of connection between community spaces, ritual or religion, patronage and therefore some degree of shared identity.¹¹⁰ A theatre-temple complex at Pietrabbondante has also been studied as evidence of communal investment;¹¹¹ with these buildings implying that the Samnites had developed socio-political organisation beyond their hillfort sites. Evidently, sophisticated infrastructure and a significant degree of movement existed in central Italy independent of Roman networks.

Larinum

The ancient site of Larinum has been upheld as an exception to the rest of central Italy in its development from the end of the fourth century BCE onwards, used as an example of a nexus of interaction and mobility that resisted Roman domination until the first century BCE, when it was given *municipium* status. Larinum has been labelled a city of ‘cultural ambiguity’ due

¹⁰⁵ Plautus *Truculentus* 3.1.5, *Pseudolus* 145; Varro *De lingua Latina* 9.39; Strabo *Geography* 5.1.12; Pliny (the Elder) *Naturalis historia* 8.7.191; Polybius 2.15.2.

¹⁰⁶ Dench 1995, 118–125; Evidence in the form of statuettes, inscriptions, and associations with salt provisions for herding animals and the preservation of meat on transhumance journeys. See Bradley 2005, 138–140.

¹⁰⁷ Tagliamonte 1994, 148–150; 2012, 101. Breastplate types, weapons, and bronze belts located at the site are thought to have belonged to Samnite mercenaries; Di Fazio 2017, 160–161.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. *Imagines Italicae Terventum* 1157; Herrera Rando 2019, 377.

¹⁰⁹ Tagliamonte 2012, 101; Scopacasa 2015, 206–207; Herrera Rando 2019, 377; Stek 2009, 40–41; Di Fazio 2017, 160–161.

¹¹⁰ Scopacasa 2015, 206–207 uses this as an example of the construction of *safin-* identity as an ‘Other’ in response or relation to pressures from surrounding ethnic groups.

¹¹¹ La Regina 1976; 1980.

to its liminal position between Daunia, Apulia, and Samnium, in an apparent refusal to acknowledge Samnite autonomy and achievement.¹¹² Larinum is located in the lower Biferno valley on a hill that intersects two catchment basins. The Biferno River (Latin *Tifernus*), lies to the north-west, where it is thought to have flowed on the eastern edge of Samnite land and at the intersection of Samnite and Apulian space, between the territories of the Frentani to the north and the Daunians to the south in Apulia.¹¹³ Larinum is mentioned in multiple ancient literary sources, which mostly discuss its integration into the Augustan *Regio II*.¹¹⁴ This literary narrative has clouded considerations of Larinum by modern scholars who, following their ancient predecessors, rarely look at the site beyond its Roman hegemonic context. Yet Larinum provides an ideal example of how the archaeological evidence challenges the textual.

Archaeological data on Larinum are readily available. Tomb assemblages can be dated to as early as the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE.¹¹⁵ Across the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, Larinum demonstrates ‘openness’ to northern Apulia, as demonstrated by the typology of imported Apulian products and funerary customs. At nearby Monte Arcano, for instance, burials contain grave goods that can be linked to Daunian and Peucetian centres during this time.¹¹⁶ Burial practices also reflect ‘Apulian practices’ of inhumation, such as positioning the deceased in a flexed position.¹¹⁷ These findings may indicate a process of self-identification by the Samnites during this period, demonstrated by the inhumation positions, typology of grave goods, and clustered burials. The continuous occupation of Larinum by local family groups is further supported by epigraphic material recording the names and offices of prominent individuals,¹¹⁸ and gentilicial names over several centuries and into the third century CE.¹¹⁹ The above data depict Larinum as a growing centre with established connections and relationships with surrounding groups, similar to Monte Pallano. This illustrates not only aspects of connectivity between Larinum and surrounding groups, but also homogenous cultural traits in the area, contradicting assertions of the isolation and hostility of Iron Age Samnite groups.

Archaeologists have argued that processes of romanisation began in the fourth century BCE in areas surrounding Larinum,¹²⁰ supposedly also marking a level of self-awareness and autonomy in Larinum linked to external pressures (Livy 9.45.1–4; Diodorus Siculus 20.101.5).¹²¹ Livy’s discussion of the territory of Larinum, the *ager Larinas* (27.43.10), rather

¹¹² *ibid.*, 80–82.

¹¹³ Calìo *et al.* 2011, 79; De Felice 1994, 26–28; 40–41; Salmon 1967, 41; Stelluti 1997, 41–42; Isayev 2017, *passim*.

¹¹⁴ Polybius 3.101; Cicero *Pro Cluentio passim*; Nepos *Atticus* 4.12; 7.12.2, 7.13; Caesar *Bellum Civile* 1.23; Livy 22.18, 22.24; 22.43, 27.40, 27.43, 45.2; Silius Italicus 8.399–403, 12.170–175, 15.565–571; Pliny (the Elder) *Naturalis historia* 3.11, 3.105; Silius Italicus 8.399–403, 12.170–175, 15.565–571; Stephanus Byzantius 413, l. 16–17; Appian *Bella Civilia* 1.52; Ptolemaeus *Geography* 3.1.65.

¹¹⁵ Calìo *et al.* 2011, 80–84.

¹¹⁶ Calìo *et al.* 2011, 80–84.

¹¹⁷ Calìo *et al.* 2011, 83.

¹¹⁸ Over 270 inscriptions from Larinum were published in Stelluti 1997.

¹¹⁹ Robinson 2021, 134–201.

¹²⁰ Robinson 2021; Di Niro 1984, 37–38; De Felice 1994, 27–28.

¹²¹ Calìo *et al.* (2011: 84) asserted that pressures on Samnite territory, such as the construction of the *Via Appia* in 312, the ‘colonisation’ of Luceria (c. 315–314), and the treaty (*foedus*) between Rome and the Marsi, Paeligni, Marrucini, and Frentani in 304 ‘provided models for the organisation of the territory and for complex

than the groups of Frentani, Marrucini, and Pretutiani is used as evidence of the region's consolidation.¹²² Biferno Valley Survey and *Forma Italiae* researchers have identified rural sites in the landscape around Larinum containing farmsteads or villas in order to demonstrate changes in population density following the 'Roman occupation'.¹²³ This view has since been adjusted as further 'isolated farms' have been uncovered in the area that fit within the settlement pattern.¹²⁴ Barker's reliance on the city's earlier development patterns and anecdotal evidence from Cicero encourage further scrutiny of the hypothesis for sudden Roman annexation, which is not supported by the material evidence.¹²⁵ Hillside settlements make up the bulk of domestic sites in the Biferno valley, where there is arable upland soil.¹²⁶ Analysis of animal bones and vegetation suggest both agricultural and pastoral activity in the area beginning in the third and second centuries.¹²⁷ This evidence further counters the stereotype of the undeveloped, isolated Samnites, incapable of possessing their own means of production, and therefore only descending from their hill-forts to raid and pillage.

Larinum has been described as 'semi-Samnite' due to its size and evidence for extensive production in the town.¹²⁸ It has been deemed 'too sophisticated' for an 'authentic' rural Samnite settlement, as it does not fit the trope perpetuated by the ancient sources. Scholars have therefore dismissed Samnite-driven development of Larinum in favour of Roman interference in the region. The archaeology of Larinum offers an interconnected and fluid model of the Samnite community, a far cry from the isolated hillfort barbarians portrayed by the scholarship. Indeed, Larinum shows substantial production and manufacturing infrastructure. The lower valley provides ideal conditions for pastoralism and there is evidence of prevalent wool production in nearby Apulia. It is likely that the farm areas surrounding Larinum participated in similar production and trade; discoveries of *fullonicae* (fulling workshops) indicate a market for textile manufacturing.¹²⁹ The artisan quarter at Larinum revealed local stone sculpture from multiple working sites, evidence for ironworking, and ceramics workshops.¹³⁰ Furthermore, Larinum began to issue coins in the third century and there is evidence of an established mint at Larinum by c. 100 BCE.¹³¹ Thus,

urban structures that responded to strong economic and socio-political forces. Henceforth, Larinum saw a new phase of growth and became more heavily involved in the central and southern regions as they were being newly organised by Rome'.

¹²² Di Niro 1984, 37–38; Calì et al. 2011, 84.

¹²³ Barker 1995a; 1995b; Barker, Lloyd and Webley 1978; De Felice 1994. Both the Biferno Valley Survey and the *Forma Italiae* studies concluded that there were sudden changes in the first centuries BCE and CE as the Romans gained increasing power and influence in the region. Cf. Robinson (2021: 21) who has argued for a more gradual development in the region over several centuries; Robinson's work presumes that Roman imperialism was a key factor for change and development in the region.

¹²⁴ Di Niro 1991b; 1993; Lloyd 1991; Patterson 1985; 1987; Barker 1995a, 192–194.

¹²⁵ Barker 1995a, 197–199. This is heavily refuted by Robinson (2021: 49–52).

¹²⁶ Barker 1995a, 29.

¹²⁷ Barker, Lloyd and Webley 1978, 44–45; Dench 1995, 123–125. Grain was the main crop in the Biferno valley, and Larinum exhibits high production of crops from an earlier period. Ceramic goods discovered at the necropolis point to evidence of trade with Magna Graecia, Di Niro 1984, 37–38; Calì et al. 2011, 84.

¹²⁸ Barker 1995a, 209.

¹²⁹ Coarelli 1996; Roselaar 2017, 181; Isayev 2007, 73–76. Loom weights are a common find in the lower Biferno valley, Bispham 2007, 207; Stelluti 1988, fig. 234; De Benedittis 1988; Barker 1995b.

¹³⁰ Barker 1995a, 206; D'Agostino 1980; Di Niro 1991a, 69. Workshops for painted wares and imitation Gnathian vessels suggest that Larinum's inhabitants were utilising relative economies of identity.

¹³¹ Barker 1995a, 197; Robinson 2021, 288–293

the material evidence reflects vibrant systems of production and trade in the region independent of Roman imperial activity. The presence of this infrastructure for production and trade—clustered rural sites surrounding Larinum—as well as the mint at the site indicate that Larinum was connected to substantial trade networks and later participated in a monetised system.

Several observations can be made from this. First, the agency of Samnites at Larinum has been overshadowed by predeterminant assumptions regarding the inevitability of Roman colonisation, evidenced by the consolidation of the city in response to an inevitable (presumed) Roman threat. Second, the archaeological evidence has been—until recently—dismissed in favour of the uncritical adoption of literary narratives produced at least three centuries *post factum* (Livy 9.45.1–4; Diodorus Siculus 20.101.5; Cicero *Pro Cluentio*). Third, notions of Roman-driven advancement presuppose clear divisions and differentiations between the Samnites, Apulians, and Daunians, and the Romans, who later allegedly became the dominant authority in the area and ‘newly organised’ and ‘urbanised’ the region. Fourth, modern understandings of urbanism here imply that Larinum and the Samnites became more sophisticated only after Roman intervention. Finally, as has been discussed at length above, scholars have defined Samnite presence and identity in Larinum *in relation* to other societies. The developments of the fifth century BCE are attributed to responses to Daunian and Apulian influences, and the later consolidation of Larinum is connected to Carthaginian invasion and Roman pressures. The material evidence therefore raises several questions regarding the treatment of Samnites in the secondary literature. Samnite agency has been erased from the historical narrative in favour of a romanocentric representation based on hierarchical systems and external influence. A more mindful reassessment of the evidence reveals Larinum to be an independent hub of production and activity. Furthermore, the degree of interaction between the Frentani, Apulians, and Daunians suggests that Larinum was at the intersection of layered identities and relationships. If the predeterminant assumption of inevitable Roman domination is removed, we can recognise Larinum as an active and connected hub that thrived from the Iron Age through the fourth century BCE, and well into the period of the Social War.

v. Samnium: Connectivity, Identity, and Autonomy

The investigation into the Samnites has thus far demonstrated that the historical construction of Samnite identity is largely dependent on reductive colonial paradigms. While the archaeology of Samnium tells a different story, the conclusions drawn in the scholarship often fall into these same frameworks that privilege proximity to modern Whiteness and the west. In the case of Larinum, we can see that the site is commonly upheld as an exception to typical patterns of Samnite settlement due to the sophisticated industry and exchange visible from the archaeology of the area. However, this level of connectivity (which is antithetical to the isolationist Samnite trope) was likely common throughout wider Samnium during the fifth to third centuries. Transhumance from Monte Pallano and the presence of Samnite mercenaries throughout Italy and Greece suggest that there was more movement in and out of Samnium than scholars have traditionally acknowledged.¹³²

¹³² Discussion of Samnite mercenaries falls outwith the scope of this paper. For more on the presence of Samnites mercenaries in the sources see Thucydides 6.2; Diodorus Siculus 11.1.5, 13.80, 13.80.2, 13.95, 14.8–9; Herodotus 7.165; Arrian *Anabasis* 7.15.4; Polybius 1.7–8; and Griffith (1935) 195 and Tagliamonte 1994. On

We have further clues to Samnite networks, movement, and societal organisation in inscriptions that record civil involvement, magistracies, construction of roads and monuments, and legal texts. The Tablet of Agnone, found close to Pietrabbondante and dated to the third or second century BCE, contains Oscan inscriptions that detail the regulations of a sanctuary. The bronze tablet records the cults of various deities and details of worship, control of the grove site (*Imagines Italicae Terventum* 34),¹³³ and financial information indicating that the site was administered and access to the precinct formally regulated. The sanctuary was dedicated to the pan-Italic agricultural goddess Kerres (*Ceres*) and several other cult deities, including Jupiter and Herakles (but not Mars),¹³⁴ reinforcing the intersectional identity of the Samnites as agriculturalists and pastoralists (Livy 9.13.7; Horace *Odes* 3.6) beyond the modern and artificially imposed limited warrior ethos.¹³⁵ The worship of pan-Italic deities counters the narrative of Samnite isolation; the epithet, *kerrío-* (belonging to Ceres) is used as a qualifier for the named deities which Bradley and Glinister (2014) suggest reinforces the deference of these deities to the goddess.¹³⁶ I would venture further in positing that, in using this qualifier, the Samnites focalised their local, chthonic deity that was intimately connected to their land and therefore defined the terms of ‘outside’ engagement with their cult space. The preference of some Samnite communities to elaborately decorate sanctuaries over sites with other functions reflects a targeted investment into these community spaces that served as meeting points and required socio-political navigation. The tablet also catalogues fifteen ceremonies that occurred within a single year, giving us insight into the Samnite liturgical calendar and the frequency of cult practice. It is reasonable to infer that sharing the use of the grove amongst Samnite groups would have required leadership, negotiation between communities, and commonalities in religious practice, thereby suggesting the existence of complex Samnite civic structures that facilitated this intentional curation of community space.

Artificial binaries and labels applied to Italy in this period obscure the considerable interconnection and movement amongst ancient peoples. For example, La Regina’s *pagus-vicus* paradigm argued that Samnite society (from the fifth century BCE) was organised by dispersed settlement patterns of tribal territories (*pagi*) and small scattered villages (*vici*).¹³⁷ This dispersal of settlement resulted in multiple, intersecting functions at Samnite sites resulting in a lack of urban concentration.¹³⁸ Pietrabbondante was suggested to be one such site for this, where the sanctuary site was therefore also used for civic functions. Contrary to the dominant depiction of the Samnites as a disorganised group,¹³⁹ close reading of the

Italian mercenaries, see contributions by Armstrong and Tagliamonte in Armstrong, Naco del Hoyo, and Rawlings (2027).

¹³³ Oscan: *húrtín kerríín* (in the grove of [the personified] Kerres), *az húrtúm* (at the grove), and *aasas ekask eestínt húrtúí* (these altars stand in the grove), *Imagines Italicae Terventum* 34. See Buck 1904; Crawford *et al.* 2011, 1200–1205; Scopacasa 2014, 78; Meiser 2017, 748; Vine 2017, 755; Baldi 2017, 805 & 808.

¹³⁴ Maras 2017, 68–69; Di Fazio 2017, 151–157; Bradley & Glinister 2014, 181; Scopacasa 2014, 78–80.

¹³⁵ Reinforced by the discovery of votive statuettes of sheep and cattle at nearby Petacciato, Scopacasa 2014, 80.

¹³⁶ Bradley and Glinister 2014, 181.

¹³⁷ Set in opposition to the Greek *polis*, and lacking centralisation in comparison.

¹³⁸ And therefore habitation, administration, cult, trade, and defence were spread throughout the *pagus*. La Regina 1970; 1980, 36–42; Tagliamonte 1996, 156–202; Scopacasa 2015, 160–161. It is important to also consider the interplay between Samnite settlement patterns and the mountainous geography of the region that necessitated this, see Dench 1995, ch. 3.

¹³⁹ Mommsen, 1862, 123–124; Salmon 1967; Dench 1995, 8.

literary sources suggests strong military organisation and leadership from Samnite leaders (i.e. Livy 8.2–8.5 & 9.1.3). For example, architectural and inscriptional evidence, such as that at the theatre-temple complex at Pietrabbondante, indicates the existence of meeting-places where different (plausibly ‘Samnite’) groups came together and discussed military issues.¹⁴⁰

There is general acceptance that the Samnites and other central and southern Italian groups, like the Romans, had some form of elites. Specifically, Samnite identity has been intimately connected to the presence of military elites within their community, in line with their characterisation as *montani atque agrestes*.¹⁴¹ Livy (9.1.3; 10.20.13; *Epitomae* 75; *Periochae* 11) mentions several Samnite groups, each with numerous leaders or generals, and that this lack of centralised leadership contributed to Roman difficulties in negotiating with the Samnites. However, an inscription at Pietrabbondante complicates this picture, indicating that public magistrates held responsibilities outside of the military sphere. This is evidenced by a public monument at Pietrabbondante (mid-second century), which sheds light on patronage and the funding of community infrastructure: ‘Stenis [---] public magistrate gave [this monument] to be built and approved (it)’.¹⁴² The *pagus-vicus* paradigm has since been refuted by scholars arguing against the use of static dichotomies to classify ancient communities.¹⁴³ ‘Urban’ or ‘city-state’ and ‘non-urban’ classifications reduce complex societies and identities to simplified polarities,¹⁴⁴ reflecting the tendency to categorise and define within the ‘western frameworks’ defined in part i.

While archaeology has long been presented, particularly within positivist and classical traditions, as an objective, empirical discipline capable of producing stable, factual knowledge in contrast to the interpretive nature of historical narrative, most contemporary archaeological scholarship recognises the field as inherently interpretive and theory-laden.¹⁴⁵ Archaeology alone is not therefore capable of resolving the methodological and epistemological problems posed by the literary record. Indeed, it does not solve methodological problems of scholarship such as the indiscriminate application of identity labels and the arbitrary definition of geographical boundaries. Cemeteries are not wholesale indicators of continuous occupation or settlement; not all burial practices leave a permanent record, and the quality or concentration of buried goods may not accurately demonstrate the material wealth of deceased individuals or their families.¹⁴⁶ The assumption that rich burials reflect the presence of an elite presupposes that ancient Italians had the resources available to deposit the grave goods and that the burial of material goods was a

¹⁴⁰ La Regina 1976; 1980; Scopacasa 2015, 163.

¹⁴¹ The textual evidence is further supported by rich deposits of grave goods uncovered in burials throughout central Italian sites. Bell *et al.* 2002, 180; Calì *et al.* 2011, 80–82; Fulminante 2014; Scopacasa 2015, 270–275; 2016; Stoddart *et al.* 2020, 7–8, 15; Terrenato 2019, 134. Terrenato’s discussion of elite networks includes little mention of the Samnites, despite the Livian evidence and their important role in Rome’s emerging empire. There is general consensus among scholars that ‘elite’ represents a fluid category rather than a closed, rigid, or unchangeable class. Hölkeskamp 2004; Bradley 2015.

¹⁴² Maras 2017, 70.

¹⁴³ Bradley 2000, 58–62; Isayev 2017, 55–8.

¹⁴⁴ Scopacasa 2015, 163.

¹⁴⁵ e.g. Cipolla, Crellin, and Harris 2023.

¹⁴⁶ Isayev (2007: 8) points out that status may not always be represented by material objects: for example, access to cremation may distinguish an elite individual in the material record. Additionally, it is important to consider cremation or the choice not to deposit material objects in the burial.

performance of wealth.¹⁴⁷ This theory assumes that the ‘non-elite’ had no resources outside of use for subsistence. This model is rooted in understandings of modern capitalist systems where ‘elites’ accumulate wealth through the control of resources and extraction of labour.¹⁴⁸ It is therefore often presumed, implicitly, that central and southern Italian economies operated through similar systems of production, profit, and centralisation of power. Archaeology requires a historical framework to contextualise sites and artefacts into an accessible regional context; without intentional correction, this framework is oftentimes self-fulfilling, built on the bias of the ancient sources as well as colonialist interpretations of them.

The political complexity and organisation of the Samnites discussed in the ancient sources, together with the material evidence of production, trade, and evident community spaces, all suggest a society that had resilient and extensive connections with other groups throughout the Mediterranean.¹⁴⁹ This is also one of the ways that connectivity counters hegemony—that it allows communities and peoples outside the hegemonic powers agency through increased networks of relationships and access to resources, and therefore avails alternative recourses during times of change.¹⁵⁰ The Samnites, therefore, operated within many overlapping spheres of identity and thus, the arbitrary labels that have been applied to them by ancient annalists and modern scholars alike must be re-evaluated—especially since these labels seem to be deployed in the scholarship ethnographically, culturally, linguistically, and geographically.

Conclusion

The systemic issues ingrained in the discipline of classics and ancient history have consequences that reach beyond issues of diversity and access. The issues of colonialism, elitism, exclusion, and race have a cyclical impact on the interpretations of the ancient evidence, impacting how it is read, perceived, and how subsequent histories are written by scholars. Although it is difficult to mitigate natural biases, it is important to actively challenge dichotomies that are reflective of ‘western foundations’. This paper has therefore proposed a reconsideration of how we characterise the Samnites, a central and south Italian community who have been stripped of its agency, reduced to existing in juxtaposition with Roman excellence. Roman imperialist expansion is not only a theory presented by modern scholars, but it also appears as a driving force in the ancient literature; Samnite identity has therefore been lost to historians outside of the Samnite relationship with Rome, and particularly in a post-Social War context. Colonial frameworks and research scaffolds therefore continue to prejudice how modern scholars fit Samnites into the historical

¹⁴⁷ Isayev 2007, 11. This also means that resources were either used to obtain grave goods, or that these goods were removed from circulation (use or exchange).

¹⁴⁸ Hodos 2006, 5–9.

¹⁴⁹ Livy bks 7–10; Bispham (2007: 192) suggests that the diffusion of cuirasses throughout Abruzzo and Molise reflects a growing awareness of a ‘Samnite ethnic-cultural’ identity and a hierarchical society of young warriors in the Oscan populations as early as the sixth century.

¹⁵⁰ Roman expansion severed local alliances and networks, pressuring parties into unilateral treaties directly with Rome and forcing diplomatic ties through Rome’s mediation, it also increased centralisation of a dispersed or decentralised network. I gratefully credit Jack Barlow for his insight on this point, which aligns well with anti-colonial positions, see García Peña 2022; Tuhiwai Smith 2012. Angela Davis’ (2016) *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* is useful reading on the innate connectivity of anti-imperial movements.

narrative.¹⁵¹ In encouraging a re-evaluation of the modern scholarship, I have demonstrated that modern historians have often used the ancient sources to justify a preoccupation with Roman hegemony at the expense of Othered groups.

The discussion of ancient literary and material evidence above has shown the precarity of current constructions of Samnite identity. Simplistic presentations of the Other can be adjusted with new considerations of the evidence. Shifting the centre away from empire—by inviting new approaches outside of colonial paradigms—presents alternative avenues for considering Samnite communities. In doing so, we find that Samnium is not isolated but interconnected, and had comprehensive infrastructure related to trade, industry, religion and civic activity. This autonomy and resilience through connectivity refutes a theory of unilateral dependency on Roman apparatuses. Samnite life was also entrenched in the relationship to the land through chthonic cult, pastoral and agricultural activity, and seasonal migration. When considered in this light, we can see a new beginning for Samnite identity. A key step in dismantling these structures of 'the west and the Rest', and rectifying the impact they have had on research output, is to allow space for more diverse voices and perspectives to join the scholarly conversation and help expand our models.

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¹⁵¹ Indeed, Lomas and Herring's book, *The Emergence of State Identities in Italy in the First Millennium BC* (2000), begins and ends with 'romanisation'.

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