

Summer 2013

Review: African Athena: New Agendas. Daniel Orrells, Gurminder K. Bhambra, and Tessa Roynon, eds.

Mary J. Lefkowitz
mlefkowitz@wellesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.wellesley.edu/scholarship>

Version: Publisher's version

Recommended Citation

Lefkowitz, M. R. Review of D. Orrells; K. Gurminder, T. Roynon. "African Athena." *American Journal of Philology* 134.2 347-350. (2013).

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Research and Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. For more information, please contact ir@wellesley.edu.



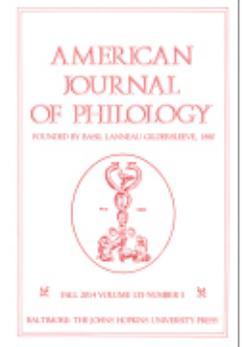
PROJECT MUSE®

**African Athena: New Agendas ed. by Daniel Orrells,
Gurminder K. Bhabra, Tessa Roynon (review)**

Mary R. Lefkowitz

American Journal of Philology, Volume 134, Number 2 (Whole Number 534), Summer 2013, pp. 347-350 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/ajp.2013.0016](https://doi.org/10.1353/ajp.2013.0016)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ajp/summary/v134/134.2.lefkowitz.html>

how these particular dimensions of the *Somnium* connect with ethical and political aspects of *De Republica* beyond the few examples given. The result is that we have a good, broad recapitulation of the idea that Cicero's science and ethics are interrelated, but relatively less light shed on interpretation of the text itself.

The book's final chapters (9–11) reveal how Lehoux has come to his position as an “epistemological coherentist,” attempting to balance the need to relativize and historicize ancient science (i.e., to account for its epistemic context) with a belief in the validity of one's own scientific systems. As a coherentist, Lehoux emphasizes that different aspects of one's worldview must fit together (i.e., cohere) but pragmatically acknowledges that no system can do so perfectly. His stimulating discussion of the nature of coherence and truth-claims (esp. 233–42) may well have purchase for those scholars working in ancient historiography of a more traditional sort, and it is in these chapters that Lehoux fleshes out the theoretical framework of the book most fully, with special (though by no means exclusive) attention to T. S. Kuhn. Those unfamiliar with these aspects of the history of science will gain a great deal from this concluding portion of the book which, like the whole, will undoubtedly repay rereading.

JOHN M. OKSANISH

WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY
e-mail: oksanijm@wfu.edu

DANIEL ORRELLS, GURMINDER K. BHAMBRA, AND TESSA ROYNON, eds., *African Athena: New Agendas*. Classical Presences. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. xiv + 469 pp. 6 black-and-white figs. Cloth, \$160.

The inspiration for this book derives from a 2008 conference at the University of Warwick that was held in recognition of the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the first volume of *Black Athena*. *African Athena* is the title Martin Bernal once said that he “should have used” for his multivolume project, but his publisher “insisted on” using *Black* because it would “sell” (“*Black Athena* and the APA,” *Arethusa* 22 [1989]: 31–32). In his autobiographical afterword to this volume, he admits that the title *Black Athena* “may well have had the effect” of exposing critics of his books to charges of racism, as indeed it did. So the use of the alternate title for the present volume represents a welcome shift in emphasis from issues of race to issues of culture and nationality, and the reception of Greek and Roman ideas by later writers. Some of the essays in the volume are based on papers given at the Warwick conference; other contributors were specially invited. The chapters in the first part of the book are primarily historiographical in nature, while most of the essays in the second part consider the literary and historical productions of particular authors. The editors provide an introductory overview of each contribution, with a helpful survey of some of the other recent work in this emerging field, and offer some brief general remarks. But it is not

clear why certain important topics (e.g., the works of Jean Terrasson or Cheikh Anta Diop) were not treated in more depth. Of course, no collection can have the coherence of a work by an individual author, and the essays in this volume seem largely independent of one another. If there was any discussion among the authors who presented their papers in the conference, or commentary on them by Bernal himself, few traces of such interchange appears in the published book. Readers are left to make such connections as best they can.

There are, however, some commonalities among the papers. Most concentrate on reception, and do not consider the historical issues that have made *Black Athena* the subject of such heated debate. That does not mean that the editors or most of the authors believe that the debate has been in any way resolved; rather, it appears that they have sought to avoid discussion of the historical issues involved in Bernal's reconstruction of the ancient past, seeking instead to concentrate on the "ongoing relevance of the issues Bernal raises." Although works by Bernal's most outspoken critics are mentioned, there is only occasional reference to what they actually said and no specific discussions of the particular reasons why most scholars of the ancient world believe that Bernal has vastly overstated the degree of Egyptian influence on Greece and misinterpreted such evidence as there is, especially in the case of his proposed new etymologies. Some of the contributors seem sincerely puzzled by the relative lack of attention accorded to *Black Athena. Volume III: The Linguistic Evidence* (New Brunswick, N.J. 2006). For example, Patrice Rankine in his chapter "Black Apollo?" is impressed by the "patience and meticulous attention to sources" displayed in Bernal's claim (based on the epithet *λυκηγενής*) "that European scholars dislodged Apollo from his Egyptian connection" to Sun worship. Rankine believes that it is mainly because of "the context of North American intellectual life" that such proposals failed to persuade classicists and Indo-Europeanists. He does not appear to have supposed that there might be other, far more compelling reasons why linguists have thought that Apollo's origins might more credibly be traced to Lycia or Anatolia.

Rankine and other contributors to the volume call attention to the nationalism and other types of *Zeitgeist* that have caused European scholars to ignore or downplay the contributions of Egypt and other African cultures. Toby Green observes, "In the long run, the most deep-rooted impact of *Black Athena* may be its excoriating vision of historiography's connection to ideologies rather than in its contribution to debates in Classical Studies" (141). Green might also have pointed out that connection to a particular ideology or theory does not necessarily imply that all the evidence particular authors may marshal in support of their arguments makes the evidence invalid. Kenneth Goings and Eugene O'Connor assert that the "crux of the argument between Lefkowitz and Bernal largely lies in how to interpret the ancient texts" (96), but I would suggest instead that it lies in the question of whether we suppose that we can know some facts about the past, or whether all that we now have (in Bernal's term) are "competitive plausibilities."

An informative discussion on the effects of nationalism is provided by Tim Whitmarsh in his chapter about Erwin Rohde's 1876 book *Der griechische*

Roman und seine Vorläufer. Rohde argued that the emergence of the Greek novel could be explained entirely on the basis of Greek culture. Although some contributors to the volume seem to assume that today's classicists are equally reluctant to entertain the notion of foreign influences, classicists now see the novel form as hybrid, particularly open to foreign influence; it is (as Whitmarsh puts it) "promiscuous, fluid, contagious, boundary-transgressive" (218). Whether or not the contributors to this book are prepared to acknowledge it, Toby Green's observation to some extent applies to them as well as to everyone else who writes about the ancient world. We are all susceptible to the current *Zeitgeist*, in this case the justifiable desire somehow to compensate for the past (and present) systematic prejudice against and mistreatment of peoples of African descent. *Black Athena* itself is an excellent example of such ideological historiography, which presents (as Whitmarsh says) a "misleading, ideologically homogeneous picture of Classics as a discipline, downplaying the possibilities for resistance and contestation" (223–24).

A critique of classical scholarship and scholars persists throughout the book. It starts in the opening chapter with the assessment by Maghan Keita of Frank Snowden, Jr., the classical scholar who (in Keita's words, 37) provided "a litany of Africans in Greek space—as co-creators of a Hellenic mythistory." As in his more detailed discussion of Snowden's work in his 2000 book *Race and the Writing of History: Riddling the Sphinx* (Oxford, 123–51), Keita notes (36) that Snowden referred to the Egyptians as "among the first of several predominantly white peoples who had extended contacts with blacks" ("Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman World," in M. L. Kilson and R. I. Rotberg, eds., *The African Diaspora* [Cambridge, Mass. 1973]: 12). Snowden did not include ancient Egyptians in his book *Blacks in Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass. 1970), but he later revised his description of the color of the Egyptians' skin, as Keita might have remarked, in favor of ancient terminologies such as *subfuscus* ("somewhat dark," in M. R. Lefkowitz and G. M. Rogers, eds., *Black Athena Revisited* [Chapel Hill, N.C. 1996]: 113). According to Egyptologist Donald Redford (*From Slave to Pharaoh* [Baltimore, Md. 2004]: 5–6), the ancient Egyptians perceived themselves "as a russet hue," Asiatics "of a paler yellowish color," and Southerners as "chocolate brown or black." Nubians were *Nhsi*, "bronzed/burnt," a term analogous to Greek αἰθίοψ. It is because of our modern preoccupations with skin color that the subject of the interactions between Egyptians and other African peoples keeps coming back to race, rather than culture, or an exploration of the customs and ideas that they may have shared.

Nonetheless, despite such preoccupations, there are many chapters in this book that will be of interest to classicists. Margaret Malamud provides a well-documented survey of how African-Americans and abolitionists made use of ancient history, both to point out that the Ancient Egyptians were Africans and to emphasize the influence Egypt had on Greek and Roman culture. Following Whitmarsh's informative chapter about the ancient novel, Paolo Asso discusses Lucan's portrayal of Africans, which shows that although the poet perceives

Africans as “others,” he also makes his audience aware of the similarity in their behavior to that of the Romans during their civil war. John Starks’ chapter provides many examples of negative portraits of African peoples in Roman literature, providing a valuable corrective to Snowden’s claim that “the onus of intense color prejudice cannot be placed upon the shoulders of the ancients” (*Before Color Prejudice* [Cambridge, Mass. 1983]: 108). Color prejudice was the force that motivated the nineteenth-century amateur historian Gerald Massey to claim that Greek civilization was derived from Egypt. As Brian Murray shows, Massey’s work is often cited by radical Afrocentrists, in support of the “Stolen Legacy” theory, yet, Massey believed that although Egyptian culture was taken up by Greece and Semitic civilizations, it degenerated and virtually disappeared among non-whites (308).

Metaphorically at least, Athena can be African in her role as a representative of ancient Greek literature and mythology. John Thieme discusses how the Afro-Caribbean writers Derek Walcott and Denis Williams have found the presence of African elements in the *Odyssey*; Astrid Van Weyenberg describes how Wole Soyinka in his *Bacchae* has redefined the notion of tragedy. Edith Hall and Justine McConnell survey how mythology was used both to justify and to attack the institution of slavery; abolitionists saw themselves as Heracles freeing Prometheus and Atlas. Modern writers of African descent have responded to myths in increasingly complex ways, endowing them with new meanings that never occurred to any ancient author, using myths analogically rather than historically, as Walcott does in *Omeros*. As Emily Greenwood and Tessa Roynon both demonstrate in their chapters, the term “African classicism” is inappropriate, because it does not indicate that these works are not only reinventions but also expressions of ideas that are generally absent in European literature.

This book also provides an opportunity for classicists to see for themselves some of the ways in which our work can be misrepresented and/or misunderstood. Bernal’s portrayal of the field of classical philology is part of the problem; but we can also blame ourselves for not being prepared to explain why we require such a relentless focus on texts and the collection of data. Classicists also have been guilty of concentrating too much on the European reception of classical texts and art; we need to keep expanding our knowledge of the rest of the ancient world and of all the non-European civilizations and cultures that interacted with the Greeks and Romans. Athena is not just African or European, but more specifically, Egyptian, Lycian, Etruscan, and Roman. Ancient Greek culture is unusual in that in the course of time it has been voluntarily adopted by different peoples, and not just imposed by military conquest or government dictum; the appeal of ancient Greek and Roman culture is not necessarily connected to political or social domination.

MARY R. LEFKOWITZ

WELLESLEY COLLEGE
e-mail: mlfkowitz@wellesley.edu