

Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 5 (2013)

Hellenism Unbound



Introduction: The difficulty of unbinding Hellenism

Efterpi Mitsi, Amy Muse

doi: [10.12681/syn.16654](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.16654)

Copyright © 2013, Efterpi Mitsi, Amy Muse



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Introduction: The Difficulty of Unbinding Hellenism

Efterpi Mitsi and Amy Muse

Hellenism, once a solid, relatively uncontroversial academic subject concerned with ancient Greek culture, found itself a battleground for culture warriors upon the publication of the first volume of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena* in 1987. The subsequent decades of backlash and counter-backlash have revitalised and raised the stakes for the fields of Classics and of Romanticism, particularly Romantic philhellenism—discovered to be intricately bound up with colonialism, Orientalism, nationalism, and racism—and of Modern Greek Studies, which rushed in to explore the roots of Hellenism, expose its use by the West and complicate its connections to Greece. While in Anglo-American Universities the war was fought primarily over the humanistic and classical ideals and pursuits associated with Greek civilisation, intellectuals in Greece dissected the significance of Hellenism as the national character and culture of the Greeks in relation to the formation of the Modern Greek state and identity. A deconstruction of Hellenism was roundly called for, involving a critique of its binaries, which had trapped the nation of Greece in irreconcilable tensions. Studies such as Vassilis Lambropoulos's *The Rise of Eurocentrism: Anatomy of Interpretation* (1993) and Stathis Gourgouris's *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece* (1996), along with Dimitris Tziiovas's and Gregory Jusdanis's discipline-diagnosing articles in the *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* expanded the interrogation of

Hellenism in both the Anglophone and Greek research communities and sparked new waves of scholarship.

This vigorous cross-examination may have left Hellenism more unstable as a concept—James Porter has recently characterised it as “a baggy, questionable idea that eludes definition,” a concept “burdened with more meaning than it can coherently hold”—but the questioning has also opened up its possibilities, as evidenced by a Hellenic revival in literary and cultural studies in the new millennium. We have been seeing indigenous Hellenism, transnational Hellenism, connections between literary and archaeological excavations, women writers and Victorian Hellenism, Hellenism and postcolonialism, black classicism, and the history of race studies from the invention of white, European Greeks in the eighteenth century to the creation of American white ethnics.

In other words, Hellenism is flourishing, with a spate of studies marked by meta-analysis, a self-conscious examination of scholars’ and disciplines’ methodologies and blind spots in investigating the modern reception of Classical Greece in terms of cultural history, gender, class and sexuality. For example, reconsiderations of Romantic Hellenism and its impact on European literature and culture have emphasised the interdependence of rather than competition between classical and modern Greece (see Wallace and Guthenke). At the same time both Romantic and Victorian scholars have focused on the admission of women (particularly of women writers) into the discourse of Hellenism revealing both the complex cultural history of Hellenism and impact on the construction of a modern female subjectivity

(see Comet, Prins, Hurst, Fiske and Olverson). In fact, the study of Hellenism in the Victorian era has fully demonstrated that even in the nineteenth century Hellenism was not a monolithic but a contested discourse, fraught with tension and conflict, involving issues of power, class and sexuality (see Goldhill and Evangelista). Moving from western Europe to Greece, scholars have been engaged with the relation of Hellenism to Neohellenism, postcolonial theory and postmodernity, exploring modern Hellenism in the context of diaspora and transnational cultural studies (Koundoura) as well as the complexity and variety of diachronic Hellenism from an interdisciplinary perspective, connecting the notion of Hellenism to Greek identity, history and politics (Zacharia).

Our view of Hellenism unbound from its traditional disciplinary and national contexts has been particularly influenced by Gonda Van Steen's *Liberating Hellenism from the Ottoman Empire*, which is at its core a book of unlearning: an attempt to rethink and re-see what has been assumed known and settled. Its title appears to be an announcement of the nineteenth-century mission of the central tale she tells, that of the French traveller and diplomat Comte de Marcellus, 'discoverer' of the Venus de Milo, but the titular undertaking is soon complicated as she sets out on her own mission to examine philhellenism and Orientalism in broader cultural, ideological, and geopolitical contexts. *Liberating Hellenism* is as much a pulse-taking of the culture wars in a post-9/11 world as it is a work of cultural history; Van Steen's own geopolitical and disciplinary position gives her a keen vantage point among Anglo-American and Greek scholars and between Classics and cultural studies. We found this text a crowning example of 'Hellenism unbound,' a transdisciplinary and transhistorical project that ambitiously aims, as she told us in her interview, to "reexamine the age-old East-West conflict" and "redraw the outlines of mutually dependent Orientalism and Hellenism, imperialism and nationalism." Moving beyond the deconstructive critique of Hellenism, she sets out to "re-create some of the Orient's multiple colorations, to acknowledge anew that all Eastern societies are fundamentally different from one another, and to illustrate, by way of the case study of Marcellus, how much Western Europe and classical scholarship have done to diminish this plurality," emphasising that she personally advocates for a "healthy corrective dose of 'unbinding Hellenism'" that will allow modern Greece to be understood and interpreted independent from classical antiquity and the lenses of Classics. Because of her success in quarrying and sifting through this many-layered and occasionally ossified subject we commissioned an interview with her that would serve as a sort of keynote address to the issue as a whole.

David Roessel's *In Byron's Shadow: Modern Greece in the English and American Imagination* has also shaped our own area—English studies—and our specific research interests on texts representing Modern Greece: philhellenic plays on the London stage and Greek tourist sights about the War of Independence that work as acts of theatre (Muse) and travel writing about Greece, from seventeenth-century English travellers exploring a still unknown province of the Ottoman Empire to nineteenth-century women visiting the newly-independent Greek state

(Mitsi). Roessel has also contributed an essay to this special issue, “Exploding Magazines: Byron’s *The Siege of Corinth*, Francesco Morosini and the Destruction of the Parthenon,” in which he re-examines Byron’s ‘Turkish Tale’ in the context of the Elgin Marbles debate in Parliament. Roessel posits that Byron, who sets the poem during the Venetian invasion of Greece and blowing-up of the Parthenon, contrasts it with Elgin’s later destruction of the Parthenon Marbles and implies “[b]etter an explosion for a good cause, for freedom’s battle, than safety in a British Museum. Better wanton devastation for a good cause, than wanton devastation for articles of commerce.”

Byron’s politically-engaged and passionate Hellenism is still resonant to us and, as the title of this special issue of *Synthesis* suggests, we invited a reflection on the role and significance of Hellenism today. We wondered if it is truly possible to unbind Hellenism from its mooring place in Greece, from its binary counterpart of barbarism, its tug-of-war partner in the clash of civilisations, the East-West division of the world. Contributors responded to our call to explore the current possibilities of Hellenism, unbound, and the essays included in this issue attest to the renewed potential of Hellenism to address the concerns of scholars in literary and postcolonial studies, history and philosophy as well as its recharged importance as a tool of political and aesthetic analysis. Ranging from reappraisals of Romantic Hellenism to discussions of contemporary novels and from the Greek War of Independence to Hispanic philosophy and African drama, they also show its hold on the imagination of both writers and scholars across disciplinary and national boundaries. By revisiting Hellenism, whether by re-examining familiar texts or by excavating in unexpected sites, contributors open it to new interpretations, connecting it to issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality and revealing its ability to relate to the political exigencies of our time.

The essays by Evgenia Sifaki and Eleni Andriakaina illustrate how tight the bindings of Hellenism can be. Constantine Cavafy’s narrators in the dramatic monologues “Philhellene” and “Going Back Home from Greece,” Sifaki argues, are concerned with situating the identity of themselves and others within a Hellenism-barbarism binary; she focuses on the “labour involved in the two speakers’ efforts to assert or establish a significant link with some aspect of the Hellenic legacy, as they themselves understand it, and its outcome.” As Andriakaina shows, the internal battle over Greekness and national identity has, since the Greek War of

Independence, been caught in its own binary between a native folk heroic image and a Westernised, diasporic Hellenist image, between anti-intellectual autochthons and “Frenchified heterochthons,” drawing a sharp “distinction between the doer and the thinker, the man of action and the man of thought.” After the revolution, a conflict emerged between the intellectuals and the “common people,” she adds, explaining in this way the origin of the distrust of intellectuals, which still exists in Modern Greek culture. By exploring constructions of identity and subjectivity from different disciplinary perspectives, both essays show the early entrenchment of definitions of Hellenism and the difficulty of breaking out of them.

The remaining four essays in this issue are concerned with explorations and appropriations of Hellenism in the twentieth century. Modernist artists are of course well known for their admiration of Hellenism (as Chrysa Marinou, the reviewer of Theodore Koulouris’s *Hellenism and Loss in the Work of Virginia Woolf* puts it, “the impact of classical Greek literature has by and large pollinated the work of modernist authors”). Sarah Barnsley’s “Making it New: Sappho, Mary Barnard, and American Modernism” tells the story of how Mary Barnard, the American poet best known as a translator of Sappho—the translator who made Sappho seem like a Modernist poet—made Sappho ‘new’ and transformed both Barnard’s own poetic sensibility and American modernist poetry. In Barnsley’s words, Barnard’s “unique brand of late Imagism had extensively engaged with Sappho’s poetry both as part of her apprenticeship in prosody and as part of her American modernist project to ‘make it new’ for the nation.”

Just as Barnard’s Sappho enriched American poetry, defining the poet’s distinctly modernist and American voice, so did Hellenism, in the form of figures, myths and philosophers—the Kouroi, Oedipus, Orpheus and Plato—define María Zambrano’s quest for the “Enigma of knowledge.” Karen Peña Benavente’s essay “Art Echo: María Zambrano and the Kouroi Relief” opens up new horizons in Hellenic Studies by exploring the Spanish philosopher’s turn “to early Greek thought as a means to displace [desviar] prescriptive knowledge with another pathway, that is, with a radical interpretation of sophrosyne, arcanelly defined as ‘supreme temperance’ or ‘ultimate self-knowledge.’” For Zambrano the ancient statues of the Kouroi with their mysterious smile embody the Enigma, and function

as mediums to the archaic interpretation of *sophrosyne*, which resists fixity and resolution.

The last two essays are also representative of new directions in Hellenic studies. Examining the most recent unbindings of Hellenism, Omolara Kikelomo Owoeye's "Classical Temper and Creative Ingenuity in Osofisan's *Tegonni: An African Antigone*" takes us to Nigeria, where playwright Femi Osofisan adapts *Antigone* in a postcolonial context to argue that "had the Africans raised some intelligent resistance instead of a couple of unplanned upheavals that were easily quenched by the colonialists, the story might have been a little different, at least in some quarters." Despite differences between Sophocles's original play and Osofisan's adaptation, the essay stresses the political power of the myth of *Antigone* both then and now. Voicing current ideological concerns through Hellenism is also apparent in Konstantina Georganta's "Home and Displacement: The Dynamic Dialectics of 1922 Smyrna," an essay whose focus on Smyrna raises the timely issues of cultural memory and the consequences of homogenising a city and culture. Georganta examines three novels (written in English) between 1937 and 2004—Eric Ambler's *The Mask of Dimitrios* (1939), Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* (2002) and Panos Karnezis's *The Maze* (2004)—all of which present the city of Smyrna, once the eastern frontier of Greece until the catastrophe of 1922, as a city of haunted memories. The Treaty of Lausanne, which instigated homogeneity and forced migration—which, in other words, reinforced a sense of Hellenism and non-Greek barbarism—continues to haunt Smyrna/Izmir and to spawn a literary narrative that returns to the scene of the crime.

As all of the scholars in this issue illuminate, examining Hellenism takes us deep into the debates over aesthetics and politics that essentially formed and continue to animate the disciplines of Classics, English, Comparative Literature, and Cultural Studies. At the same time, this issue of *Synthesis* is being conceptualised at a specific cultural moment when the modern nation of Greece has been constantly in the news, reaching far outside the bounds of academia. Will this change Hellenism? Is there a new Philhellenism arising or are old prejudices rekindled? As a site of conflict, change and cultural syncretism, Hellenism not only joins the Greek past to the present but also becomes a legacy for the future. As Van Steen observes in her interview:

possessing some knowledge of the history of Hellenism has simply become essential for anyone who keeps hearing about Greece in the day's news bulletin. This daily focus on Greece has pushed the country in a (reluctant) paradigmatic role once again: currently, the West is watching Greece as if it were an on-going laboratory experiment, whose economic and political outcomes will help the West—again—to determine how to proceed when similar crises occur in other European Union countries or in the global economy. Greece and Hellenism are no longer exclusively scholarly pursuits but are as current as today's news headlines. Greece not only invites us but forces us to think of Hellenism as constitutive of a global, transnational world.

Works Cited

- Comet, Noah. *Romantic Hellenism and Women Writers*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Dowling, Linda C. *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*. London: Cornell UP, 1994.
- Evangelista, Stefano. *British Aestheticism and Ancient Greece: Hellenism, Reception, Gods in Exile*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Fiske, Shanyyn. *Heretical Hellenism: Women Writers, Ancient Greece, and the Victorian Popular Imagination*. Athens, OH; London: Ohio UP, 2008.
- Goldhill, Simon. *Who Needs Greek? Contests in the Cultural History of Hellenism*. Cambridge: CUP, 2002.
- Gourgouris, Stathis. *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996.
- Guthenke, Constanze. *Placing Modern Greece: The Dynamics of Romantic Hellenism 1770-1840*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.
- Hurst, Isobel. *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer*. Oxford: OUP, 2006.
- Jusdanis, Gregory. "Introduction: Modern Greek! Why?" *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 15.2 (October 1997): 167-174.
- Koundoura, Maria. *The Greek Idea: The Formation of National and Transnational Identities*. London and New York: Tauris, 2007.
- Lambropoulos, Vassilis. *The Rise of Eurocentrism: Anatomy of Interpretation*. Princeton UP, 1993.
- Olverson, T. D. *Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late Victorian Hellenism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Prins, Yopie. *Victorian Sappho*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999.

- Porter, James. "Hellenism and Modernity." *The Oxford Handbook of Hellenic Studies*. Oxford Handbooks Online, 2012.
DOI:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199286140.013.0002
- Roessel, David. *In Byron's Shadow: Modern Greece in the English and American Imagination*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2002.
- Tziovas, Dimitris. "Beyond the Acropolis: Rethinking Neohellenism." *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 19.2 (October 2001): 189-220.
- Van Steen, Gonda. *Liberating Hellenism from the Ottoman Empire: Comte de Marcellus and the Last of the Classics*. London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Wallace, Jennifer. *Shelley and Greece: Revisiting Romantic Hellenism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997.
- Zacharia, Katerina, ed. *Hellenisms: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity from Antiquity to Modernity*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008.