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CLASSICS AND ITALIAN COLONIALISM: AN OUTSIDER’S PERSPECTIVE

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I am a classicist who studied and works in the United Kingdom. What then do I have to say about questions of diversity and decolonisation in Italian studies today?

The history of the study of Greek and Roman antiquity in Italy and the history of Italian colonialism are tightly intertwined. I came to be interested in these intertwined histories through my study of Latin literature. I will give a brief, specific example: The Roman historian Sallust, who was writing in the second half of the first century BCE, gave an account of the Jugurthine War, a war fought between Rome and the Numidian (roughly equivalent to the area of Algeria today) ruler Jugurtha, in 112-106 BCE. In this work, Sallust breaks off from his narrative to tell the legend of the Philaeni brothers, two Carthaginians who sacrificed themselves to expand the territory of Carthage, the ruins of which are in modern-day Tunis. On the site of their self-sacrifice, the Carthaginians built a shrine in honour of the brothers. In 1937, the Fascist authorities of the Italian colony of Libya inaugurated a triumphal arch in honour of this same pair, purportedly on the same site as the Carthaginian shrine. On the arch was a Latin inscription, which paraphrased Sallust’s account, translated from Italian by the prolific classicist Giorgio Pasquali. The arch embodied the aggressive use of

the texts of classical antiquity in support of modern Italian imperialism overseas, and the employment of the institutional discipline of classics in such efforts.

Of course, Italian classics is not unique in deploying Greco-Roman antiquity in service of empire. What is unique about the Italian case is the fact that, of all the modern imperial powers that have posed themselves as the successor of ancient Rome, only the Italian empire had Rome as its capital. Secondly, the easy association of Italian imperialism with Fascism has historically limited interrogation of the legacies of imperialism in Italy and its former colonies. After all, the Italian empire fell with Fascism, end of story. Yet Italy gained its first African colony in 1882, long before the advent of Fascism, and only abdicated from its administration of what is now Somalia in 1960. So, it is clear that the legacies of Italian colonialism extend far beyond the Fascist period.

What business is this of mine then? I am a child of empire, with grandparents originating from Britain’s West African and South Asian colonies, as well as from the imperial metropolis itself. For me, the interrogation of the legacies of empire and colonialism is personal. But why Italy? As a classicist, Italian imperial classicisms represent a limit-case of what Julia Hell (2019) refers to as ‘neo-Roman mimesis’. Italy could most forcefully pose itself as Rome’s imperial successor by dint of the fact that Rome was the capital of Italy from 1871. Perhaps the most explicit manifestation of this mimesis was Fascism’s overtly Romanising rhetoric and practice, and Mussolini’s proclamation of the refounding of the Roman empire in 1936, following the conclusion of the invasion of Ethiopia.

While recent years have seen Italian classicists produce excellent work interrogating the complices of the discipline with colonialism, both pre-Fascist and Fascist, and its legacies, there remains a good degree of resistance to engage with calls for academic ‘decolonisation’ and greater commitment of ‘diversity’. Some of the resistance cites the perception that such calls are an imposition exercised by the hegemonic force of USA academia. Other times, descriptive scholarship, which explains specific elements of disciplinary history, but with no attempts to interrogate the continuing effects of such histories, are cited as examples of ‘auto-decolonisation’. Attempts to push such avenues of research further are met with hostility.

For example, a recent editorial of a prestigious Italian ancient history and history journal pushed against an intervention made by a prominent USA-based classicist. In the intervention of this classicist, the demographic makeup of authors published in the most highly ranked North American classics journals is scrutinised and suggestions, some of them provocative, are made. In the editorial of this Italian journal, the provocations are decried as ‘reverse-racism’ and an example of the monopoly of American cultural discourses. I wrote a short online piece reflecting on this polemic, aiming to contextualise the USA classicist’s intervention, and seeking to suggest that, in fact, what this classicist says is relevant not only to USA contexts, but is also of critical importance to Italian classics, not least because of the links between the discipline, and coloniality and racism in this country.

In response, the editor of this Italian journal – a scholar for whom I previously had profound admiration – sent an email to the editor of the website on which my piece was posted, in which I am unnamed but referred to as ‘Afroamericano inquieto ma disinformato’ – ‘an anxious but ill-informed African American’ (in the subject line of the email, no less), elsewhere referred to simply as ‘the naïve author’. Just to be clear, I am not an ‘Afro-American’. This scholar suggested that I direct my attention to the first ten or fifteen issues of the journal where the issue of the connections between Italian classics, colonialism, and racism are discussed at length. This is all well and good, but perfectly misses the point. When one is met with such defensiveness and racist hostility from a scholar who purports to have edited a journal which has exhaustively treated the theme of classics, colonialism, and racism in Italy, it proves the inadequacy and incompleteness of such approaches to these difficult themes. Unless such scholarship is combined with a genuine commitment to a more diverse academy which promotes the sustained interrogation of the ongoing effects of colonialism, then its purported contribution to ‘auto-decolonisation’ is limited, indeed, counterproductive.

The study of Latin literature continues to be of profound importance to discussions of diversity and decolonisation, not only in Italian contexts. Discourses of imperialism and racism are frequently anchored in readings of Greek and Roman antiquity – from defences of ‘natural slavery’ derived from Aristotle and environmental theories of race, to agile justifications for imperial aggression and empire-building in the

name of bringing peace. Only by really probing how readings of ancient Greece and Rome continue to be deployed in support of oppressive structures – be they aligned to discourses of nation, race, gender, or sexuality – can we begin to imagine a more diverse or ‘decolonised’ study of antiquity. In practice, and very briefly, I believe that this involves drawing on the methodological and theoretical tools of other fields and disciplines in our research, and, in our teaching, engaging with and employing pedagogical practices that are aware of and seek to redress classroom hierarchies. This, at least, seems more constructive an approach than ascribing such suggestions to ‘Afroamericani inquieti ma disinformati’.

References

Hell, J. 2019 *The Conquest of Ruins: The Third Reich and the Fall of Rome*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.