

Why Diversify Classics? with Arum Park – Podcast Transcript

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SPEAKERS

Arum Park, Malin Hay, Shivaike Shah

Malin Hay 00:00

Hello and welcome to the Kameleon Classics podcast. I'm Malin Hay, the assistant producer. In this episode, Shivaike Shah is speaking to Professor Arum Park from the University of Arizona. She's the author of the upcoming book *Reciprocity, Truth, and Gender in Pindar and Aeschylus*. But today, she'll be talking about another aspect of her work: the attempt to introduce diversity to classical academia. Shivaike and Arum will talk about what they mean by diversity in classic scholarship; why received ideas about the neutrality of traditional academia can be harmful to its progress; and why diversifying classics offers a corrective not just to historical injustice, but also to historical inaccuracy.

Shivaike Shah 00:40

So we've got a lot to talk about today. But I'm going to start with a very simple question, which is what do we mean when we say the word diversity, especially when related to the Classics?

Arum Park 00:49

Oh, that's a good question. So for me, diversity, in a field like classics, which has been really historically predominated by white men - cis white men, I should say - diversity, for me, really means anything that kind of reduces or mitigates that historical domination. As a Korean American myself, I am particularly interested in racial and ethnic diversity. But I'm also interested in feminist approaches to classical scholarship. And I include that under the umbrella of diversity, as well as LGBTQ issues in scholarship, those I would also consider under the umbrella of diversity.

Shivaike Shah 01:35

I think that anyone who's been listening to any of these podcasts will sort of know that that's obviously a topic we're very interested in, and a very, very pertinent one to the conversation of what's going on. But what touched me so much in your speech, and I think what was so important, and it's luckily what we're seeing really gratefully, actually, what we're seeing a rise of, is realising that it's a necessary part of the field. And what you say in the speech is: 'Because these voices have expressed crucial and transformational insights about the material we study, that we have an intellectual and ethical responsibility to listen to and heed.' I'm interested, when you say intellectual and ethical responsibility about these insights, what do you mean by that?

Arum Park 02:13

There's a couple of things that I think are important about diversity in Classics. Okay, so one of them is just uplifting groups that have been historically marginalised. So part of that ethical category is, I just think we have an ethical duty to increase access to those who haven't historically had access to Classics, okay, or have limited access, or really impeded access to classics, right? So just as, as a person, as a human being, as somebody who considers himself like kind of compassionate or aspiring to be compassionate, right, I just think we should increase access to anybody who wants it. Okay. But the intellectual responsibility, I think, comes from the duty to just actual knowledge of Greek and Roman, or more broadly Mediterranean antiquity. I feel that diversifying the scholarly voices in Classics actually has the effect of introducing or uncovering, illuminating new knowledge and new insights, and even corrective knowledge and insights about this field that, you know, this material that's thousands of years old.

Shivaik Shah 03:30

Something that's so important there. And I think in some ways, I actually feel this is being lost, even in those people who are doing diverse work, which is that a lot of the ethical argument comes through, which is super, super important, as you say, we talk a lot about the ethics of it - about these marginalised communities, we talk about how important it is that different people have access. But one of the things that you mentioned, and the reason I found that speech so powerful, is one of the things you mentioned - and you prove, and we're going to get onto those proofs later, because I was shocked at how practical those proofs actually were - is that it isn't just an ethical responsibility. It's not just something we should be doing because we're good people or something, we should be doing because it's a nice thing to do. It actually enriches the field intellectually - increases our intellectual capacity within the field, but actually improves the actual academic work. And what you're saying here is that academic integrity is also benefited by diversity. Right?

Arum Park 04:19

Exactly. Yeah. So then we'll go on to talk about this, as you said, but yeah, as you said, it's not just a question of being nice, or you know, being generous or something. It's actually that I think Classics needs diversity, right? So yes, um, you know, underrepresented or marginalised groups, or historically marginalised groups, right, what have you, they deserve equity, right? They deserve access if they want to, and it's, you know, our duty as a field to increase access or to try to remove as many structural barriers as possible in the in the name of equity, right, and inclusion. But it's also that classics as a field just won't even generate new knowledge or new insights or corrective knowledge without these new voices coming into the field.

Shivaik Shah 05:15

There's a quote that you, you mention from Dan-el that I'm going to read in full here. And anyone who doesn't know who Dan-el is, he's from Professor at Princeton. Read the NYT article on him, I think that I'll link it as well. It's incredible what he's been doing to the field, he also has an approach that is very similar to Kameleon Productions's approach to diversity. So you can see that, that we sort of get along with him. But he says: 'I should have been hired because I was black: ... because my black being-in-the-world makes it possible for me to ask new and different questions within the field, to inhabit new and different approaches to answering them, and to forge alliances with other scholars past and present whose black being-in-the-world has cleared the way for my leap into the breach.' So I think that

sort of, well, rounds out what we've just said, but something he says there is past and the present, and he talks about other scholars in the past. One of the other big arguments you have and you hear all the time is, well, no one, or very few people, certainly the scholars in antiquity that you study, they weren't black or brown, it's anachronistic, it's sort of putting on these, we're taking these modern standards, and forcing them upon two and a half thousand years ago, where none at all, you know, Aristotle was white. So why should we read him with a black or brown perspective? What's your response to that sort of line of argument that still has a lot of strength today, specifically, within Classics?

Arum Park 06:30

First of all, what is quote unquote "the standard", I think you used the word standard a little while ago? That itself is applying, you know, a post-antique or post-classical lens to Mediterranean antiquity, right. And this is getting sort of more theoretical than is my usual comfort zone. But I think we should - we as a field - should acknowledge that any scholarly approach to the primary sources of Greek and Roman antiquity, any modern scholarly approach, is an application of a modern lens to something that happened thousands of years ago, right, or to texts and materials that were generated thousands of years ago. So there's always going to be that sort of gap or distance between scholarship and the material that scholarship focuses on, right. So from my perspective, there's nothing more correct about more traditional modes of scholarship - and by traditional here, I mean, like, cis white approach, you know, cis white male approaches to classical antiquity - there's nothing more correct about those than what we see now, like, sort of more theoretical approaches, more approaches that are rooted in embodied knowledge, right, or approaches that are more based in like classical reception or something like reception studies. Those are just as illuminating and knowledge-producing as the sort of more traditional, like, sort of, I don't know, physiological approaches, and also they're not - and we will talk about it as we go through some of the examples - but these so-called newer voices or newer approaches, they're not completely divorced to traditional approaches like philology or something. So applying these so-called newfangled or modern or whatever sort of derisive term one might apply to them - applying these approaches to classical antiquity are - they're just, it's just applying another approach. It's kind of like a less valid one.

Shivaik Shah 08:43

I think that's so important to note because I think it's an argument of anachronism. Exactly what you say there is, well, everything is anachronistic. This happened one thousand years ago, we're piecing together fragments and bits of pottery for heaven's sake, you know, the field is not coming with this set, wonderful thing that was always white and has always been white. In fact, as you know, go to look, look at any of the podcasts that we've made that cover the 17th, 18th, 19th century, it was all constructed in that time. So the very best, sort of non-anachronistic - or what they think is non-anachronistic - scholar is basically just using ideas from the 18th and 19th centuries. You look at classical antiquity, it's not something that's marvellously you know, Greek that they found. I think that's another important point that is often, people are sort of remiss to mention, which is that everything is anachronistic, it's not that we're better or worse, it's just they're exactly the same process as, as are the more traditional ones. But we've been sort of teasing people with these examples. So why don't we just jump into them and obviously, you go into them in more detail with the presentation in your script, but we're going to talk about them here because I think they were really important. Because I was completely taken aback, as I said, at how extremely real and practical the implications of having different voices were. So the first

example you gave is from book 22 of the Odyssey, after Odysseus and Telemachus have slaughtered the suitors and they're now determining the fate of the handmaids who had been loyal to the suitors. If you don't know the story of the Odyssey, don't worry about it, you can still get your head around this example. But it is book 22, if you want to go have a little look as to what that practically means. I'm going to read out two translations, and then you're going to tell us exactly how wildly different these two perspectives are - and in fact, which one is the most sort of anachronistic, if we really want to look from that perspective. So the famous Robert Fagles translation, which is, I would say, one of the most sort of traditionally canonical translations, reads: 'No clean death for the likes of them, by God. Not from me. They showered abuse on my head, my mother's too, you sluts, the suitors' whores.' Sorry, I'm not the best poetry reader, but I'm just going to read that last bit again: 'you sluts, the suitors' whores.' Now, Dr Emily Wilson gave us the first English-language translation of the Odyssey by a woman, much, much more recently than that should have been, but there we go. She's from UPenn. And on this exact same line, she writes: 'I refuse to grant these girls a clean death, since they pulled down shame on me and Mother when they laid beside the suitors.' So just notice the absent words. So why don't you tell us a bit about why there is such a drastic difference between 'you sluts, the suitors' whores' and just the word 'suitors' in Emily Wilson's translation?

Arum Park 11:25

Yes. So in that example, and this is an example that Dr. Wilson herself has spoken about in the sort of press that accompanied the release of her translation several years ago. But she points to the original Greek, right? And the original, or I should say the manuscript Greek, the Greek texts that we as classicists rely on, you know, whether they're Homer, an original, like that is a whole other set of issues and a whole can of worms that we don't want to get into. But the Greek text that we rely on now for our modern translations doesn't have any word for whores or sluts in it. Now, I should say that that passage is still shocking because of what Telemachus does to these handmaids, they're like crying and everything and, and he hangs them, you know, but he does - I mean, there's plenty of misogynistic attitude and action on the part of Telemachus in the, in the text. But his actual words that he says about these handmaids are these, uh, you know, female slaves. They don't include words like slut or whore - I don't, I'm not actually sure what those words would be in ancient - I mean, I can imagine. It does alter the meaning of what Telemachus actually says in the text that we have. And so for Dr Wilson to to translate as she did, not using those words, right, her translation is actually closer, I think, to the so-called original. As I said, in the surrounding context to that passage, there's still plenty that we can see in the actions of Telemachus. So there's no need to import even more. And we don't have Fagles to talk to you about this, you know, right now, I mean, like in this podcast, whatever. For that matter, we're not talking to Dr Wilson either. But the interesting thing that all that press surrounding Dr Wilson's translation generated, is this put a focus on, like, what goes through the mind of a translator and the choices that a translator makes, right? We don't always get that when a new translation is released. And I think we got a lot of this hype and a lot of this focus on like the actual translator's choices and their gender identities, you know, how those gender identities like affect those translations. We got a lot of conversation and illumination around those issues from Dr Wilson, thanks to the press that accompanied her translation.

Shivaik Shah 14:07

I think what's super important to note is exactly what you say, which is that there's no sort of agenda. Well, actually, there was an agenda, perhaps, with the Fagles translation, but with Dr Wilson's translation, she is actually sticking more closely to the original text. She's not importing a bunch of, as you know, completely extra misogyny to the misogyny that's already there. Anyway, she's actually giving us a more honest picture of what the Greek is. And as you say, he still goes on and she doesn't change the version, they're still murdered, they're still murdered very brutally, but what she's given us is a much more honest representation of what the original text was. If the concern is of Classics that you know, this more liberal agenda or whatever is going to be poisoning - It seems, you know, they seem to feel that strongly, these people who are very, very passionate about not diversifying the Classics - well, actually this is a fantastic example of where, if you're looking for purity in the origin, if you're looking for this idolization of what the origin text says... Now look, I'm a theatrical adapter. I'm writing a version of Medea that is not that concerned about necessarily what the original text says. And that's a whole different argument. Maybe you don't worry about that. But if that's what you're worried about, well, Dr Wilson's translation is actually a much better translation of the original Greek than is the Fagles. And this isn't the only example. So we've given an example where perhaps there is a misogynistic agenda. But there's another interesting example from a Augustan era poem called Moretum, by Virgil - though actually, you say it was probably written by someone else. It describes a black female character called Scybale, who's an African woman, who's called to help Symilus. and Shelley Haley - Shelley Haley who was, I think, at Hamilton College, she runs the SCS [Society for Classical Studies], is a very prominent black scholar - writes her translation of this passage. So she writes: 'She was his only companion. African in race, her whole form a testimony to her country, her hair twisted into dreads, her lips full, her colour dark, her chest broad, her breasts flat, her stomach flat and firm, her legs slender, her feet broad and ample.' And what Haley actually points out is that in this passage, there is a huge amount of racism imported. So she notes that this character is often translated as 'old Negress', or 'old Negress servant'. Is there any suggestion in the text that that is actually the case? Or that language is at all relevant to the original?

Arum Park 16:32

Yeah, so this is a text - well, I'll just say, and Dr Haley can speak to this in much more depth than I can - but what she points out is that the term 'Negress' has a very bloated meaning in the context of American race relations, right? And so to somebody unaware of that context, it may seem like a completely just like neutral term or something. And, you know, it might just seem like a fairly neutral term for like a black woman, right? But that term is, it's really dated. And it dates to a time when blatant racism is just like, accepted in America, or in not just America, but like Anglophone countries, right? So to use that term, in a translation of, you know, a centuries-old Latin text that doesn't have that same context, really is importing the term and all those sort of nexus of associations that go with it into a text from a completely different time and place, right? Or we're just talking about - this text is just describing like, a woman from the African continent, right? So I wouldn't say that that text is - that the original Latin has those all those associations that modern translators have injected into it.

Shivaik Shah 17:59

And you talk about how Dr Haley goes even further: there's often the assumption in translations that this character is a slave or a servant, whereas in fact, she could find nothing in the Latin that actually indicates it.

Arum Park 18:12

Right. Yeah, and, and so yeah, it really does just import like just a whole different set of ideologies and histories and context into that text. What I remember is that Dr Haley also makes the point with some of the other translations of, I think it was that text, maybe it was a different one, that a lot of these translations of passages that depict African women also overly like sexualise them.

Shivaik Shah 18:38

She talks about the line here where she specifically translates 'her breasts flat'. But she points to a lot of translators, and in fact, she particularly points out in black male translators, where suddenly this line is very different.

Arum Park 18:50

Yeah, so but that reflects this sort of hyper-sexualization or sexualizing of this female character, this new black character really reflects more about like modern American depictions and stereotypes of black - about black women than what actually appears in the Latin.

Shivaik Shah 19:09

Yeah, so it's - this is a specific, another instance where, you know, we've sort of combined the first and second issue in the examples we've given, where we're seeing not-so-latent sexism and racism that are coming directly into the examples given, but also another example of where we're actually compromising - and again, if the argument is the fear of compromising these original texts, well actually we're compromising them with these other extremely anachronistic terms. And by inviting people who are women and encouraging people of colour to interact with these texts, we're instead receiving and being able to interact with more honest translations of them that are not loaded with with some of this agenda that is so compromising for actually getting to grips with the original text. As you say, it's not like the Odyssey lacks misogyny. It just doesn't necessarily carry as much misogyny in that moment as this particular Fagles translation imports. And same with this particular text, whether it is or not some kind of racial reckoning - I don't think it is, I think she's just as you described the character - but by having a black woman like Shelley Haley translate it, instead of all of these extra and extremely anachronistic interpretations of this character being put onto the text, we receive a more honest translation of the text. On the flip side, though, as I said, certainly as an adapter myself, I'm not super worried about honest translations of text. That's an academic reason why diversity is great, but you actually mentioned a couple of other things, and of course Luis Alfaro; we were lucky enough to have Rosa Andujar as our script editor, who published the scripts and edited the scripts of the Trilogy, Greek Trilogy of Luis Alfaro. And you also talk about a really interesting South Korean adaptation of Agamemnon, which doesn't concern itself at all with necessarily the importance of the original text. But you mentioned how this shows another avenue, let's say, for diversity, where it's super important. And we learn more about the original Agamemnon through the South Korean adaptation.

Arum Park 21:21

So yeah - I should say, but I have not had the good luck of actually seeing any of these adaptations that I talked about in that one talk at College of Charleston, I could only read about them later, right? But what struck me about these is that by staging Agamemnon in South Korea, or in Los Angeles, or

something, right, staging Medea in Los Angeles or whatever, right? The setting, the voices, a lot of this is because of the choices that the adapter or translators made, right, but all of these like bring sort of new understanding, and elicit new insights, from these old texts. So for example, I never considered Medea - I mean, she is, you know, she says so very clearly in Euripides's Medea - but it never occurred to me to focus on Medea as an immigrant. And that's one thing that, that Alfaro does with his adaptation of Medea, is to focus on Medea as an immigrant story. Obviously, that is sort of importing 21st-century - 20th- and 21st- century - modern American concerns into this ancient text. But it's also, it's just really just for grounding some of the issues in this ancient text that might have - for someone like me, you know, who was more familiar with traditional scholarship - it just highlights or foregrounds certain issues that didn't, that weren't necessarily jumping out at me before. Last month, you're probably aware of this group Theatre of War that does these live readings of, of ancient texts, mostly Greek tragedy, right. Last month, I watched their live reading of sections of Aeschylus's Suppliants, which is a story about these women from Africa, basically, who actually have some original Greek ancestry and they're coming back to Greece, seeking asylum from their Egyptian cousins, right. And they too are Egyptian but also Greek. And so that Theatre of War production that I watched last week on like Zoom, had an all-people of colour cast reading the parts of the Danaids, the suppliants who are the title characters of Aeschylus's play. And so suddenly, you know, I've read Suppliants many times, and I know cerebrally, right, I just, I know intellectually and cerebrally that the suppliants are this set of like foreign women who arrive in Greek land and are trying to like, establish Greek roots, right, I know that cerebrally. But to see this production, to hear these lines, and see them read by, you know, women of colour, suddenly these lines have just so much - they were just so much more illuminated, right, they just had the issues at the heart of Aeschylus's Suppliants - which I have, you know, I am familiar with already as an academic, as somebody who writes about Aeschylus and Pindar, right - suddenly though, they just seemed a lot more meaningful. They were just more poignant and the issues of being a group of like refugees or something seeking asylum had a lot more significance, or, you know. As somebody who sort of tries to stay abreast of current events. And this is just, I suppose you could say it's importing anachronistic elements to the text, although from what I could tell, the translation that the director of Theatre of War Productions wrote for this reading, it seemed original or pure, accurate or whatever. But to have them read by women of colour, who would not have been reading this in the fifth-century BCE Athenian production of Suppliants, right, all those parts would have been played by men, right? So to produce this reading, with this sort of modern twist on it, really just brought out a lot more of the ideas of the text than just my sitting at my desk reading it, you know, without envisioning or imagining black and brown woman's voices saying those words.

Shivaik Shah 25:54

And just to clarify, in the text, they are talking - whether it would have been read by black or brown women at the time, obviously, it wouldn't have been - but they are actually talking about black or brown women and their immigration. It's not that the - it's not anachronistic to have black or brown women reading those lines. Those are actually the lines of the characters that have been written, right?

Arum Park 26:14

Right. Yeah. And the characters themselves are, you know, foreign women, right, in a way.

Shivaik Shah 26:19

And again, we keep coming back to this because I think it debunks one of the biggest misconceptions about diversifying classics. It doesn't divorce it from the original meaning. It is actually bringing us closer and closer in many ways, if that is the aim, and as I said, as an adapter myself it's not even my aim, but if that is the aim, and certainly in an academic context, as you say, it's actually bringing the voices of the people who were actually in this for this particular play, but also, as we described for the adaptation of Oedipus, or Haley's translation, it actually is bringing us closer to the original text. So I suppose to round up, we've sort of answered the question I asked, in a way, is what is to be gained from diversity, but - and you write in a couple of blogs and answer this question, which is going to be sort of - how is this to be gained? So you talk about the new predoctoral fellowship at Princeton, by Michael Flower and of course, Dan-el, which is going to bring up, or sort of bring through, some people at a sort of predoctoral level, namely, people of colour, mostly people of colour, to inhabit the academic space a bit more particularly, and also the bridge MA at the University of Michigan, which is one of a couple of initiatives like that that's also helped bridge the gap not just for people of colour but just for people who aren't that integrated or linked to the classics, right, it gives them the opportunity to move up. So we have some schemes coming into place as a step forward. So that, or what other things need to be done? How can we implement this to bring that importance into the field? Very big question.

Arum Park 27:45

Well, yeah, that is a big question. And, and I'm thinking that there are more brilliant minds than mine that could come up with an answer. But part of the reason why I wanted to write about those diversity initiatives at Princeton and at Michigan are because I found them to be really practical ways of reducing inequity, right? I mean, the easy answer is money, right? I mean, money is what gives people of privilege access, right? to like, the impoverished scholarly life, right? Or the the, the period of impoverishment that is necessary before you enter academia, you know, and I'm talking about grad school. But, you know, people without means - the only people who can go to grad school are people who have the adequate monetary resources to do it, and those initiatives just seem to me, really practical and concrete ways of trying to address the structural problems, many of which are caused by money, like who has it and who doesn't? Right? So I think money or funding is the kind of the biggest answer, right? The biggest answer, not the most important one, but it is what people need. And I do think that there is money to be found. It's just a question of priorities. So it's a question of whether we want to - and by we, I just mean like anybody of relative privilege - like, wants to devote our resources, want to prioritise diversity and diversifying classics. So money is a key thing - that is, or the allocation of money, like, you know, prioritising when we make our funding decisions, prioritising diversity, you know, at the top of the list is a key way towards greater diversity. But also, you know, these different scholarly approaches, these non-traditional scholarly approaches that I've talked about - and you know, when I say non-traditional I don't mean to say that traditional is better, right - I'm just saying non-traditional for lack of some better term for it - So these non-traditional approaches that I've been talking about, I think, Well, those bring new knowledge to the field, right? And they uncover and they illuminate things that were hidden to us before. But I also think they have the power to, I guess, it's a sort of trickle-down effect, you know, what happens in scholarship will eventually infuse the way we teach the classical world, or whatever you want to call it, the world of Greek and Roman antiquity or greater Mediterranean antiquity. The stories we tell about antiquity, the the way we present antiquity, is informed by scholarship, and it affects the way we present it to our students, right. And I think to speak of Mediterranean antiquity as like a vibrant, multicultural - well, I don't know if it was multicultural, per se,

because multicultural in my mind, multicultural implies, like harmony, and harmonious relations - but we'll say, diversity, right, and the existence of many cultures that interacted with each other. If we present it that way to our students, and also draw the links between, you know, between Mediterranean antiquity and the modern reality in which we live, then that will also help, you know, bring different perspectives into the field.

Shivaik Shah 31:29

You've given a brilliant answer. I think that what you say about money is, and we talked about practicality through this podcast, but anyone who knows me knows I'm very passionate about just doing things that are practical. And you know, these podcasts are free, the film is free for the same reason, to tackle that boundary of money. And it's as simple, in a way, as - people like to make it very over-complicated. But it's not that over-complicated. If you fund something like a bridge MA, if you fund a predoctoral scholarship, you can immediately, immediately - it's not a delay, literally immediately infuses modern scholarship and feeds into Classics and with any subject. But also it can be extended to jobs, and it can be extended to who's working in your company, who's at your theatre, what artists you're hiring, what consultant you're hiring for a job. As soon as those positions are there, these people come with those lived experiences absolutely ready to make those changes, changes that aren't that hard to make, as we've learned from the Haley translation, as we've learned from the Wilson translation, changes that come simply from that perspective. Their very existence, their lived experience, their perspective - that goes straight into making those changes. And it's a simple answer. It's not as complicated as people want to make it out to be. And I think that's what's so important. But it's been absolutely lovely talking to you today. I've really enjoyed how we have constantly stuck with the practical and debunked all of these sort of myths that this all has to be up in the air, or this is destroying integrity in some way, or this is a completely untacklable problem. Because actually what we've talked about and what we've proven, is it helps the understanding of antiquity. It is intellectually valuable, it is full of academic integrity. And if you throw a bit of money at the problem, it is also solvable. We can say that Professor Park and I have completely solved diversity in Classics. Sadly, I don't think we quite got there, but at least we've laid a pretty decent framework. Thank you so much for talking with us today and for sharing these wonderful insights. Please do go check out this speech where all of this is described in more detail. Do check out the outreach publications on Professor Park's faculty page, which will be linked below. And thank you again for joining us today.

Arum Park 31:30

Thank you, Shivaik, this has been really fun.

Malin Hay 33:42

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