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(Utrecht University, the Netherlands & North-West University, South Africa)

## Review of Samantha Masters, Imkhitha Nzungu & Grant Parker: *(u)Mzantsi Classics. Dialogues in Decolonisation from Southern Africa*

African Minds, Liverpool University Press (Cape Town,  
Liverpool, 2022) ISBN: 9781802077469 (Paperback),  
eISBN: 9781802079135 (PDF), £20.00 (paperback), open  
access (pdf).

Why classics? In 1995, Naoko Yamagata observed from her experiences as a classicist from Japan resident in England: ‘Whether we are born into ‘Western’ culture, or into a ‘non-Western’ culture ... we are now all ‘Westerners’ in one way or another ... [and therefore] it is an urgent task to learn about this Trojan horse called Western civilization.’<sup>1</sup> An understanding of the roots

of western culture is indispensable for western self-knowledge, and for those who grow up outside the traditional sphere of the ‘West’, she recommends: ‘Beware of Greeks bearing gifts!’ Almost 30 years later, in a world where many are ‘Westerners’ in one way or another, it is precisely because of the acuteness of globalization and its challenges to western thinking that Yamagata’s plea is repeated by Jo-Marie Claassen, professor emerita in the department of Ancient Studies at Stellenbosch University and one of the contributors to *(u)Mzantsi Classics*.

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1 N. Yamagata, ‘Why Classics today – and tomorrow?’, *Scholia NS* 4, 108–109.

Classics has been waning for the past decades, and there is plenty of literature available that suggests reasons why.

*(u)Mzantsi Classics* instead charts roads ahead, making apparent throughout that situatedness is all important. The editors, contributors and interviewees are Southern Africans from diverse backgrounds who teach or were educated in classics. The (u)Mzantsi in the title is an adaptation of a Nguni word that translates to 'south' in English, '*emZantsi Afrika*', and which has the connotations of 'below' and 'bottom'. The book, then, not only explores the potential ways of making classics engaged and engaging to a Southern African audience, but it is also an imperative 'bottom up', South-North approach.

The volume in a way continues Michael Lambert's 2011 study *The Classics and South African Identities*. Lambert, then senior lecturer in classics at South Africa's University of KwaZulu-Natal, traced the subject of classics and its legacy back to the beginnings of education and the teaching of Latin in the Dutch settlement at the Cape of Good Hope (1652). Given the colonial heritage, South Africa has increasingly and explicitly come to relate itself to a plurality of epistemes and pedagogies. This has become particularly palpable since the end of apartheid and of white minority rule in 1994. The country has undergone profound educational changes, along with its general remake. Classics in South Africa has exclusively become a university

subject, with rare high school exceptions. What indeed is the situatedness of Classics in a country with more than ten official languages, and how is the country's diverse demographic makeup exemplary for a globalizing Classics?

*(u)Mzantsi Classics*'s introduction is provocatively titled 'Nothing about us? Reflections on classics in southern Africa', and takes its cue from the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall/Fees Must Fall movements in South Africa, which amplified a new generation's call to decolonize. These protests made few headlines in the Global North, thus confirming a North-South asymmetry, while an almost worldwide wake-up call to end racism was sparked by the 2020 murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. With the decolonial moment reaching the Global North, Claassen aptly observes that the ensuing 'identity crises of erstwhile overlords' typically stalled in paradigms of apologies, a 'cultural cringe', and 'a militant and overbearing Afrocentrism'. (86) Several decades after Africa's formal independence, the North suddenly feels apparent discomfort at the thought of an Other returning the gaze from what it dubbed 'Global South'. The ways out of this impasse that the volume outlines, then, are likely to be familiar to a South African audience, but of a more vital interest to the Global North.

Distinctly different from Lambert's study, *(u)Mzantsi Classics* is structured into four dialogues, totaling ten paired

chapters by established academics that alternate with interviews with students or emerging scholars. The first dialogue, 'On baggage', looks at the associations attached to classics in former colonies, through the historical realities of its use in the settler colonial project. The second, 'On intersecting identities', probes questions around an identity for classics in post-apartheid South Africa, and reports on a classics outreach project that the historically privileged (white) university of Stellenbosch has run in the context of previously deprived communities. The third dialogue, 'On classics and the canon', addresses issues of canonicity, for which classics may seem to be the very poster child, as well as classical ideas and ideals. The fourth dialogue, 'From reception to reimagination', along with the final chapter, reframes classics within global history while underlining the need for a situated classics.

It follows from the book's set-up that strict conceptualization or definitions are not at its core, and that its merits exist in the cross-section of Southern African classics. The first chapter, by Ian Glenn, is a particularly successful historical example. It traces classical and exotic imagery in colonial writings of Kolb (German), Grevenbroek (Dutch), and Levaillant (French), to find 'vestiges of an earlier humane tradition onto which [in later times] a crude social Darwinism has been literally superimposed.' (46) Classical frames from the colony and their influence in 17<sup>th</sup> and

18<sup>th</sup> century Europe deserve greater attention, if only as a reminder of the multifocality of colonial discourse.

Madhlozi Moyo, in chapter six, reports on the University of Zimbabwe's Classical Studies first year assignment on the relevance of Cicero's *On Duties III* to contemporary Zimbabwe. Building on notions of *ubuntu* and *humanitas* in providing laws for a just society, Moyo, who relocated from Zimbabwe to the University of the Free State in South Africa, finds that it is exactly because of the gap in space and time between ancient Rome and contemporary Zimbabwe that '[their] unifying aspect is universal humanism' (153).

Cross-cultural or transnational comparison is where Southern African classics shows the way forward and where the chapters tie into each other. There seems very little exaggeration in Claassen's claim in chapter four that 'African classicists are ahead of their European, Asian and North-American colleagues [...] in access to living cultures from a different tradition, but similar to those of ancient Greece and early Rome'. (104) Claassen contemplates that 'Only in a society that after centuries of Christian missionary activity still has close touch with its animistic roots can a student seriously and without irony comment on Aeneas' sacrificial preparations to meet his father's spirit, 'We offer snuff' – that is, in this context snuff is used as votive offering to the spirits of the ancestors.' (89)



Richard Whitaker, professor emeritus of the University of Cape Town, makes apparent that we should not imagine Bronze-age Greek ‘kings’ as the equivalent of modern-day European Royalty but rather as tribal chiefs such as the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century king, Shaka Zulu. Multiple contributors rightly point at the value of Whitaker’s contextualized translations of the *Iliad* (2012) and the *Odyssey* (2017).

In a pressing envoi, Grant Parker stages contemporary Southern African art that reinvents classics as a tradition of contextualized self-knowledge, rather than a series of subordinations by passive recipients. To a somewhat similar effect, David van Schoor in chapter nine traces the figures of Polyphemus and the anthropophagous Cyclopes of Homer in depictions of Africans in *The Lusíads*, the epic poem by Luis Camões, the Portuguese Vergil.

Appreciating classics as a shared, situated heritage points out the harrowing contrast between the Zimbabwe post-independence state requirement that ‘all subjects display an African aspect’ (89), and a ‘fanciful restructuring of peripherally academic ‘feel-good’ Afrocentrism’ (103) that followed the murder of George Floyd. This calls to mind the controversial view of the African cradle to Western thought as promulgated by Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* (1987), in turn sparking such responses as Mary Lefkowitz’s *Not out of Africa* (1996), except that this time, the South are bring-

ing their own perspectives to the table themselves – if only the north would care to listen rather than preach its own decolonial narrative.

The editors understand the act of decolonizing after the influential *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, who loosely articulated it as ‘not an event that happens once and for all at a given time and place, but an ongoing process of “seeing ourselves clearly”; emerging out of a state of either blindness or dizziness’. (9) When the editors point out that ‘there is significance in the historical recurrence of decolonization discourse: it is at once a theory and a continuous practice’, we are reminded of the diverging tracks in the decolonization that the North and the South have followed over the past decades. Readers that want to familiarize themselves with the background to classics in colonial and postcolonial South(ern) Africa, might start with chapter four, by Claassen.

Implicit in almost all contributions and interviews is a hard-won awareness from experience that asymmetries between hemispheres or groups of people rarely reach their resolve through oppositional discourse or entrenchment. By bringing themselves to the conversation, the editors, contributors and interviewees – as classicists in southern Africa, and as Africans in classics – reach out to bastions in the Global North that until recently had comfortably little incentive to consider their

(u)Mzantsi Classics

relevance and engagement from Other perspectives. It is a helping hand exactly to countries in western Europe, where many syllabuses of Classics in high school and higher education struggle to bring about a conversation between changing student demographics, the ideal of ‘liberal education’, and trusted paradigms in the study of classics from decades ago.

The potential of *(u)Mzantsi Classics* is not limited to the field of classics, and the epistemic injustice that it addresses is also not exclusive to academia. It is an invitation to *listen* as a way to wider and more fundamental change. It is most fortunate that the book is available open access, given the north-south asymmetries of global publishing infrastructure. It is also promising that the universities of Stellenbosch, Oxford, and Stanford have further tied their ‘SOS’ partnership after a first workshop and this volume, with a second book from the 2023 conference ‘Vergil and the Land’ forthcoming.

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