Chapter 6: Classics and Decolonising the Curriculum: A Case Study Using the Teaching of Sexuality

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Introduction

The Classics has a reputation.[1] Thanks to the appropriation of the history, language and literature of ancient Greece and Rome by Western colonisers, the Classics have become associated with snobbish, educated, elite, white males who have felt it was their right to rule anyone that was different from them. Considering this, and the popular perception of Classics as entertainment, the question naturally becomes, what possible purpose could it serve to continue to teach the Classics? However, in a free twenty-first century South Africa, the question is even more pointed, especially since the student protests of 2016. How can teaching Classics help the project of decoloniality? Surely, the removal of the teaching of Classics, as one of the symbols of Western oppression, would be one of the best and quickest ways to decolonise the curriculum? My answer, as is the answer of many Classics scholars working in this field, is no.[2] On the contrary, Classics has a great deal to offer towards decolonising the curriculum, while also being decolonised itself. My understanding of the decolonising of the curriculum is to look not only at what we teach, but how we teach it, both in terms of teaching tools and perspective. It is an on-going process that will constantly evolve but will never be completed.[3] As such, looking backwards is vital to be able to keep changing, because it is important to learn from history. But why should South Africans learn from a foreign history and one which has been appropriated by colonisers? I will argue that Classics is 'good to think with'; in other words, it provides a useful means

1 I wish to thank the editors of the volume for their efforts concerning this chapter.
2 For example, Masters et al. 2022a; Van Schoor et al. 2022.
3 See Umachandran and Ward 2024.

of approaching and interrogating sensitive or overlooked modern issues by allowing students to engage with them in different and non-threatening ways. It also allows South Africans to examine and critique the Western world in the context it created for itself and makes it possible to see what influence that colonial context has really had on South Africans. I will use the example of unpacking the concepts surrounding sexuality in the lecture hall not only to prove the usefulness of Classics, but indeed its necessity in a decolonising, South African university curriculum.

The fight against Classics

The reputation of Classics as a tool of cultural imperialism and white nationalism in South Africa is well established. This is perhaps best summed up in Michael Lambert's book *The Classics and South African Identities* (2011) in which the author argues that the predominant experience of the Classics in South Africa has been as a bastion of European whiteness. 'Afrikaners used classical education with Afrikaans as the medium of instruction to forge a national identity that was distinct from other South African groups yet linked to their imagined European homeland' (Dominik 2013: 102). In addition, English-speaking Classicists re-enforced British imperialist attitudes of Western cultural superiority with 'Euro-centric assumptions and a patronising tone' (Atkinson 2012: 181).[4] Lambert acknowledges the positive influence on their struggle rhetoric some black South Africans have claimed from the Classics, such as Chris Hani and Nelson Mandela (Lambert 2011), who appropriated classical texts and turned them into 'resistant discourses' (Lambert 2011: 114). However, he argues that Classics was imposed on Black intellectuals and politicians by "civilising" forces, as they were a requirement for Black students to enter university, in order to have economic and political success (Lambert 2011). Although several reviewers have argued that some of Lambert's views are extreme, his language emotive and his choice of material selective (Atkinson 2012;

4 See Lambert 2011.

Claassen 2012; Dominik 2013),[5] his book nevertheless gives an accurate representation of the colonial and racist connotations of Classics in South Africa. As Lambert (2011: 112) states, the Classics at university are currently frequently perceived as 'the last outpost of white intellectual indulgence and cultural narcissism'.

A new generation of post-apartheid South African Classicists, mostly still white,[6] who feel that their subject has worth and should be kept alive, not only have to fight against this academic reputation and its resultant teaching perspectives and methods, they also have to fight the popular public perception of Classics.[7] In modern South Africa, most students drawn to the Classics at university in the last fifteen years have been white and have previously been exposed to the ancient world through purely very Western and tangential means. This includes ancient myths and history introduced as children's fairy-tales,[8] or appropriated into books and video games, like the *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* book series by Rick Riordan (2005–2009), the *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft Quebec 2018) and *Hades* (Supergiant Games 2020) computer games, and myth-based fan fiction like the webcomic *Lore Olympus* by Rachel Smythe (2018) or

5 Van Schoor et al. (2022) further argue that by dividing his discussion into racial groupings, Lambert (2011) is entrenching the very identities he is trying to deconstruct. However, as the discussion of differing racial identities in relation to Classics is the point of the book, such a criticism seems unwarranted.

6 The continuing 'whiteness' of Classics in South Africa and the way in which the inability of Classicists to attract Black students and academics to the discipline will contribute to its demise, has been a persistent concern. See Whitaker 1997; Lambert 2011; Masters et al. 2022a; Van Schoor et al. 2022.

7 Classics is also in a state of decline worldwide. While Classics formed the core of all university teaching at Western universities in the nineteenth century, the subject fields which sprang from it and formed their own disciplines (Schaps 2011), as well the growing disillusionment with the belief that the classical civilisations of Greece and Rome were both the cultural ancestors of the West and superior to all other cultures (Schaps 2011; Voeltz 2011), has led to the slow demise of Classics throughout the world. In 2025-2026, the Department of Classics and Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa has been engaging in a battle to get their Classics programme reinstated. See Beard (2012), the British scholar and TV personality who asks within the Western context, 'Do the Classics have a future?'.

8 The myths of Heracles are a prime example. Among Disney's animated films of traditional Western fairy tales is the 1997 movie, *Hercules* (Clements and Musker). One of my greatest challenges is teaching students to pronounce the name correctly as Heracles.

the stories on Archive of Our Own.[9] Other possible exposures include the swords-and-sandals epics out of Hollywood that have enjoyed a resurgence since the movie *Gladiator* (Scott 2000), myth-based TV series, like *Kaos* (Netflix 2024) and music, like *Epic: The Musical* (Rivera-Herrans 2022–2024), or even the brief background given in certain episodes of the New Testament.[10] Since the shut-downs prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which have driven people online, more and more students are only vaguely aware of Classics through themed memes and TikTok videos. The Classics are not taught at all at public schools and Latin alone is taught at only a few private schools.[11] Students are, therefore, drawn to the Classics because of the fantasy, the romance and the exoticness of the ancient world, which reminds them of the fantasy worlds and cultures of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* book series (1997–2007), HBO's *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) and the books, movies and TV series set in J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth,[12] or simply because they need credits to finish a degree. They do not necessarily think it has something to offer them either academically or for use in the job market.[13] This makes the Classics seem even more diminished and irrelevant. Consequently, university departments teaching Classics are being gradually reduced through redeployment of staff and retirements, where posts are not refilled.[14] How then can an irrelevant, still predominantly white, dying subject experiencing brain-drain possibly

9 Archive of Our Own is a 'fan-created, fan-run, nonprofit, noncommercial archive for transformative fanworks, like fanfiction, fanart, fan videos, and podfic' (Archive of Our Own 2025).

10 This knowledge comes as the result of casual chats with undergraduate students taking Ancient Culture Studies over the past fifteen years.

11 For example, St. Mary's School Waverley, a private Christian primary and secondary school in Johannesburg (St. Mary's School Waverley 2025).

12 This includes the *The Hobbit* (1937) and the *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954–1955) by Tolkien, the Peter Jackson *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–2003) and *The Hobbit* (2012–2014) movies and the Amazon Prime Video series *The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power* (2022, 2024).

13 Modern students are often first-generation university attenders drawn towards professional qualifications (Parker 2017b).

14 For example, when I began studying Classics at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 1998 there were seven full-time academic staff members on the Durban campus and three on the Pietermaritzburg campus. As of 2025, the Pietermaritzburg campus Classics programme has been shut down and there are only three full-time academic staff members on the Durban campus, one of whom is about to retire.

contribute to decolonising the curriculum?[15]

The fight for Classics

I will outline several arguments for the usefulness of Classics for decolonising the curriculum and the subject of Classics itself. It has by now become an adage that '[t]hose who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it' (Santayana [1905] 1920: vol 1, 284). Ancient Greek and Roman history is replete with examples of people, events, decisions and behaviours that we could, but do not, remember and learn from. However, Classics is not just about the important events in the history of two societies; it is the study of cultures, social history, literatures and languages of peoples who lived many centuries before us, whose lives are both foreign and exotic to us as well as having the familiarity of common humanity. Classics, therefore, is good to think with.[16] By examining the ancient parallels of modern controversial subjects, it is possible to gain a more objective understanding of these issues in the "fantasyland" of ancient history. These understandings can then be drawn through to the modern context and applied to a person's own circumstances. Thus, one can gain new insight into modern, controversial issues while avoiding the offensiveness of pre-judgements. It thus becomes possible to decolonise modern ideas through the distance of time.

This idea of appropriating the Classics and using it to think with, especially in terms of decoloniality, is not new. Classics scholars in South Africa have for decades been advocating studies of comparisons between ancient Graeco-Roman and modern African literatures and societies (Lambert and Masoga 1994; Mackay 1999; Lambert 2011; Dominik 2013) to gain insights into both sets of cultures.[17] However, within scholarship,

15 Lecturers also face the challenge of physical university structures, like lecture venues, that encourage the colonial idea of the lecturer as an authority figure and the student as a passive vessel waiting to be filled with knowledge. However, this is a problem faced by all university academics.

16 See Lambert 2019; Masters et al. 2022a.

17 See also Lambert (2011). It should be pointed out that Lambert (2011) is wary of this method of teaching and learning as he believes it runs the risk of instilling a sense of classical cultural superiority. However, he believes it can be overcome by consciously avoiding value judgements. See also Lambert and Masoga (1994).

studies of the reception of the Classics in South Africa, especially reception by the white establishment, have predominated over parallel cultural studies. In this respect, South Africa is starting to learn from West Africa. In 2018, the University of Ghana launched The Classical Association of Ghana at their First International Classics Conference, themed 'Classics and Global Humanities' (Classical Association of Ghana 2018). In addition to international scholars, this conference showcased the resurging and vibrant interest in the Classics in West Africa with papers presented by home-grown academic staff and post-graduate students from both Ghanaian and Nigerian universities.[18] However, their topics were not traditional Western fare. Although some papers looked at the direct reception of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds into Africa, especially the reception of ancient Greek drama into West Africa, they were largely made up of papers tackling modern African issues such as politics and political corruption, gender roles, myth creation, indigenous values and conflict resolution, by studying these in parallel with ancient examples. Speakers were not just from Departments of Classics, but also Philosophy, English, Communication and Language Arts, Religious Studies, Theatre Arts and Arabic and Islamic Studies (Classical Association of Ghana 2018). All these speakers obviously felt that Classics added to the understanding of issues within their disparate research fields. Since then, the Association has hosted two more successful conferences that have continued this trend.[19] Lambert (2014: 11) believes from his experience of Classics at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria that 'they have decolonised the Classics and appropriated what they find meaningful'.[20]

In 2022, not one, but two volumes were published, one on Southern Africa (but mainly South Africa) (Masters et al. 2022b), and another

18 See also Lambert (2014) on the resurgence of the Classics in Nigeria.

19 'Global Classics and Africa' was held in 2022 and 'Classics Beyond Borders' in 2024, the latter of which was organised in collaboration with Nigerian and international institutions and scholars (University of Cambridge 2025).

20 However, it should be pointed out that knowledge of the Classics has become a way of marking the intellectual elite in West Africa (see Lambert 2014). Indeed, one of the VIP guests at the inauguration of The Classical Association of Ghana in 2018 was a Ghanaian government minister with a background in Classics. See Okyere Asante (2022) on the history of the study of Classics in post-colonial Ghana. See McKechnie (2024) on Classics and African elitism in Malawi.

on Africa more widely (Van Schoor et al. 2022),[21] whose chapters/articles tackle a wide range of decolonial topics, including challenging and reconceptualising established Classical pedagogies and exploring alternative, decolonial ways of teaching and using the Classics. These include adapting pedagogies to the context and communities in which the Classics are taught, decentring canonical texts (Masters et al. 2022a), and both centring Africa in Classics texts while critically deconstructing the place of Classics in colonial education systems (Van Schoor et al. 2022). Two chapters specifically discuss examples of using the Classics to consider and elucidate real world issues relevant to modern Africa. Moyo (2022) explains how he used the study of Cicero's *On Duties III* to delve into issues of 'politics, social issues, or trade and economics and the area of human rights' (Moyo 2022: 163) in Zimbabwe. Masters (2022) reconsidered the matter of public monuments in South Africa after the RhodesMustFall movement led to the removal of statues of Cecil John Rhodes. She did this with her students using the material remains of the Roman Empire as a lens 'to examine more recent, local and contemporary examples of imperial and political propaganda' (Masters 2022: 168). In another publication, Lambert (2019) describes how he used the study of rapes in several ancient texts to help students understand and cope with campus "rape culture", and the cultural issues surrounding it, at Rhodes University.

Nevertheless, the study of the reception of the Classics can still be useful for decoloniality in terms of how both West and South Africans have already used it to think with. For example, over the past 70 years, playwrights have been adapting and appropriating storylines from ancient Greek drama to express their own pertinent, local, colonial and post-colonial concerns. For example, the Nigerian writers, Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan,[22] as well as South Africans Athol Fugard, Winston Ntshona and John Kani who staged *The Island* in 1973, which depicted the experience of prisoners on Robben Island staging Sophocles' *Antigone* (Hardwick 2003). Several other plays in South Africa have also been adapted from Greek models

21 This is a special issue of the *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, edited by guest editors, David van Schoor, Kofi Ackah and Michael K. Okyere Asante.

22 For example, Soyinka's *The Bacchae of Euripides* (Killam and Rowe 2000), Osofisan's *Tegonni: An African Antigone* from Sophocles' *Antigone* (Olasope 2002) and *Women of Owu* from Euripides' *Trojan Women* (Olasope 2012).

to express anti-apartheid or post-colonial sentiments (Dominik 2013). Hardwick (2003: 110) states that the 'reception of classical texts has been instrumental in the resistance of imposed identities and the construction of new ones' and points out the 'potential of classical texts for decolonizing of the mind (of both colonizers and colonized).' Thus, from such studies students can not only receive the opportunity to understand a part of African history, students, especially those of colour, can also be provided with an example to encourage them to appropriate the Classics for a modern South African context.[23]

Classics is useful in another way that is not only part of decoloniality, but also part of the humanities project of any university, and that is critical examination and problematisation of the world around us.[24] The history of academia in the West has been to study and critique both their own and other people's cultures, values and politics. Centres of African studies are a part of many prominent Western universities, such as Cambridge (Centre of African Studies, University of Cambridge 2025) and Harvard Universities (Harvard University Center for African Studies 2025). The West has, to a certain extent, also designated itself Africa's policeman, giving or withholding aid and support based on Western values and beliefs about Africa.[25] Masters et al. (2022a) point out that this attitude has become even more obvious during the Covid-19 pandemic. As part of the decolonising project, South African universities have made a point of trying to counteract this purely outsider perspective by critically examining Africa from an African perspective. For example, the Universities of Cape Town (Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town 2025) and the Free State (Centre for Gender and African Studies, University of the Free State 2025) also have centres of African studies. They look for African solutions to African problems.

23 See Dominik (2023) who advocates for a new methodology that combines Classical tradition and reception, which he calls 'traception'.

24 The latest iteration of this is the need to critically assess responses from LLM-based GenAI. GenAI, in its current form, poses a threat to the formation of critical thinking skills as 'some features of GenAI appear to lessen individual willingness and ability to engage in meaningful critical thinking about its output' (Larson et al. 2024: 373).

25 For example, withholding aid because of perceived political corruption (Reuters 2011) or human rights violations (Reuters 2018). The United States is now withdrawing aid on the grounds of wasteful spending and national interest, and several European countries have used this as an opportunity to follow suit (Faguy 2025).

So, the West is studying Africa and Africa is studying Africa, however, as the Latin author Juvenal said *quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* (*Satires* 6.347–348), loosely translated as "who will watch over the watchmen themselves?".[26] Who is critically examining the West from a much-needed outsider's perspective? There are only two South African organisations which study the United States, mainly as they impact on and relate to Africa (African Centre for the Study of the United States@UP 2025; African Centre for the Study of the United States, University of the Witwatersrand 2025) and there are currently no centres which study Europe from an African perspective. Between colonisation and globalisation, it is impossible to pretend that either African or Western ideologies can exist in a vacuum. It is also internalising Western attitudes about Africa to think that African knowledge and perspectives have nothing of value to offer academically to Western social dynamics, or indeed those of the world. Classics is the foundation on which the West has chosen to base its ideologies. As part of the project to critically analyse the West, it is necessary to understand their classical heritage. The ways in which Western societies have appropriated the philosophical, political, religious and cultural ideas of the classical era as their unproblematic and direct history, and used it to frame their identities, cultures, forms of government and the very notion of civilisation itself (Funder et al. 2019),[27] explains a great deal about how Western societies operate and have operated in the past.[28] By understanding the basis of Western thought, it is possible to understand how to speak to them in a way that will allow Africa to be heard. At this moment, with the rise of populism in the West, the African continent, whose countries have experienced apartheid, ethnic cleansing, conflict based on religious difference, gender violence and the continuing struggle for gender and LGBTIQ rights, is in a unique position to open a dialogue with Western societies about the dangers inherent in allowing nationalism to become an excuse for fear,

26 Latin text edited by Ramsay [1918] 1950. Translation by the author.

27 The idea and model of empire which spurred colonisation in the first place, can be traced back to the Romans (Funder et al. 2019).

28 See for example, Funder et al. 2019. See also Masters et al. (2022a); Van Schoor et al. (2022); Umachandran and Ward (2024) who also mention examples of how the Classics is currently being misused in the twenty-first century to bulwark exclusionist policies in the West.

hatred and the curtailment of freedoms.

Finally, for good or for ill, through colonisation, Christian missionary education (Lambert 2011) and globalisation, Western ideologies have entered the bedrock of the African paradigm to the point that it has become impossible to tell the difference easily between traditionally Western and African ideologies. This issue is assuming renewed relevance with the rise of large-language-model-based (LLM) generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), like ChatGPT, Claude and Grok. Many of these models have a Western bias, namely that the replies they generate are based on knowledge from, and tailored to users in, the Global North (Carman and Peters 2024; Tao et al. 2024), once again marginalising African knowledge and perspectives. This contributes to a new form of knowledge colonisation called 'digital colonialism' (Ghozali 2025; Nothias 2025).[29] I do not believe that this intertwining of Western and African thought can ever be undone, or that it will ever stop. That does not, however, mean that those who have taken on the responsibility of academia must stop trying to problematise this relationship. The process of decolonising the university curriculum will equally never be complete, because it is academia's responsibility to continually question what is African in an ever-transforming global context. Classics can play a vital role in this endeavour by bringing to light what ideas within the African paradigm truly come from the ancient Greek and Roman worlds.[30] As previously mentioned, many South African Classics scholars have already been undertaking the valuable task of looking at the reception of the Classics in South Africa. Several volumes including such articles have been published in the last fifteen years.[31] One of the more recent is *South Africa, Greece, Rome: Classical Confrontations* edited by Grant

29 "Digital colonialism" also includes the exploitation and domination of data, knowledge and people connected to marginalised and underrepresented groups by big tech companies who act like colonisers (Ghozali, 2025; Nothias 2025).

30 This bias is insidious as large language models can express themselves so well that it can be difficult for the untrained student, and even the trained lecturer, to notice it (this is just one of several problems that users of GenAI need to be aware of, including "hallucinations", logic errors and meaningless overgeneralisations [Bouchard 2025].) In collaboration with teaching students other ways to identify issues surrounding GenAI, a Classics pedagogy based in a consistently critical eye on the West, can also help to teach students to critically assess any GenAI responses and recognise these biases, especially those based on Classical ideologies.

31 For example, Hilton and Gosling (2007); Hardwick and Harrison (2013).

Parker (2017a), which includes discussions about the problematic influence of ancient Greece and Rome on South African law, education, architecture, museum studies and imperial attitudes in colonial history. However, there are also many more subtle instances in terms of how Western influences have been internalised by modern South Africans that the study of the Classics can help to illuminate.

Teaching ancient sexuality as a strategy for decolonising the curriculum

These important arguments for the value of the Classics to decolonising the South African university curriculum inform my teaching strategies in terms of my perspectives and techniques. I will now use the example of teaching sexuality, my particular research interest, to prove my point, although this is true for many other modern South African issues, including gender roles, racial and national identities and religious differences.[32]

I share my teaching of ancient cultures with another lecturer who concentrates on Ancient West Asia and Egypt. Consequently, the students get a one semester introduction to ancient Greece and Rome at first year level. During this semester I touch on political history, myth and religion and in the last few weeks, I teach social history, concentrating on social hierarchies and interpersonal relationships. Students are given a reader, written by different members of the academic staff of my Department[33] over the years, as their basic research resource. However, I do not teach from it directly. Instead, I use an inquiry-based learning approach in which I hand out a preparatory worksheet for each lecture period. On this, I list

32 For example, in third year, even though my students are studying ancient Graeco-Roman social history through an ancient novel, my perspective for studying this novel is informed by Section 9 (3)–(4) of the South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996), in which discrimination of any form is expressly prohibited. Recently, after a discussion on the "othering" of women which took place in the ancient world, which cast women as naturally lacking in self-control, duplicitous, deceitful and greedy, we were able to use this knowledge to shed light on a discussion of the anti-abortion movement in the United States.

33 When this course began in its current form, the department was named the Department of Ancient Languages, University of Pretoria. It was subsequently renamed the Department of Ancient Languages and Cultures in 2015 and since 2018, is known as the Department of Ancient and Modern Languages and Cultures.

questions to be discussed in class. Some are based upon sections of the reader, however, others relate to the modern context which arises from this content.[34]

Below, I give a few excerpts from the Greek and Roman sexualities sections of the chapter from the reader, written by myself, entitled *Love and Life in the Ancient Greek and Roman Worlds.* These sections focus on male same-sex sexuality. Through this, I will illustrate what knowledge the students first encounter on the subject and then how I use this to encourage them to interrogate their own ideas about sexuality, especially homosexuality.

> It was an accepted part of all sexual relations that there would be a penetrator and a penetrated. The Greeks did not have any idealised concept of an equal sexual relationship in which both parties gave and received pleasure. Pleasure was purely for the penetrator. He gained his pleasure by penetrating those in subordinate positions to him, women, slaves, both male and female, and boys. As none of these types of people were sexually active men who participated in the ruling of the city-state, they were not considered to have the virility of true men. Therefore, a man who enjoyed being penetrated was automatically cast as subordinate to such men and was not considered capable of participating in the ruling body of the city. Any man who was even perceived as passive could lose his social position. To be accused of passivity was a popular but extremely harsh insult.

…

> Nevertheless, an important part of upper class life in classical Athens was pederasty, a relationship built on intellect, sexual attraction and

34 For example, during a period in which we discuss the end of the Roman Republic, I ask 'Urbanisation, overpopulation and unemployment were as much a problem in the late Roman Republic as they are in South Africa. Do you think we could ever have a situation in modern South Africa where the "dissatisfied and idle mob could easily be incited to riots" (Martin et al. 2025: 49)?'. This not only helps to debunk the myth of Graeco-Roman cultural superiority, it also encourages students to think about how and why social and economic conditions can lead to protests in South Africa.

> even romance, between an older man and a youth. As a woman was not considered capable of learning to be a reasoning, functioning adult the way a young boy was, males preferred to find their romantic love with youths.
>
> The sexual hierarchy placed these youths in a very precarious position. Although they were still young enough not be able to participate within the ruling of the city-state and could therefore be objects of male affection without yet losing their own manhood, they were also the future participating citizens of the *polis* and could not afford to be seen as passive. Therefore, a careful balancing act between activity and passivity was maintained, by the ideal that a youth allowed himself to be seduced only out of respect and gratitude to the older man and that he did not himself enjoy the act in any way. Ideally, the moment the first hairs appeared on his chin, he had reached manhood and the relationship ended.
>
> (Martin et al. 2025: 127–128)
>
> In Roman society it was still considered acceptable for a man to sexually penetrate his wife, a male or female prostitute and slaves, but the ideal of boy-love had been replaced by severe penalties against any man who corrupted a youth of good birth.

…

> At no time during this history were male same-sex relations ever considered to be wrong. The crime lay in being passive.
>
> (Martin et al. 2025: 137–138)

Firstly, the very teaching of this sexuality helps to decolonise the subject. In the past, Classics lecturers avoided teaching ancient sexuality, as it might not only contaminate young minds, it would also cast the Greeks and Romans in a negative light, breaking the illusion that the ancients were 'just like us'

(Voeltz 2011: 370).[35] This is despite the fact that understanding the ancient sexual hierarchy is vital to understanding the ancient social hierarchy, as they were interrelated systems (Skinner 2014).

Secondly, this is an entirely different picture of male same-sex sexuality than the contradictory image which students are bombarded with via media and society, of condemnation and conversion therapy on the one hand, and gay marriage and self-affirming coming-out stories on the other. Even by first year, many students have already formed strong opinions on the subject. By introducing students to a conceptualisation of sexuality completely alien to their own, their minds are opened to such alternatives. However, the stigma which might be attached to that which is substantially different from their own beliefs, and which in this case would be classed as paedophilia in the modern world, is smoothed away by the distance of time, and students are able to assess a different idea of sexuality more objectively.

Then, in the last class on the subject, I bring students back to the modern world by asking, what is homosexuality? I open this question to the class as a general discussion. I put no proscriptions on the answers. I only ask that students respect the opinions of others, while I take the role of facilitator, sometimes attempting to clarify disjointed student remarks. Finally, I always check with the students if I have accurately represented their views. Over the past fifteen years, answers have tended to fall into one of two categories. Homosexuality is when someone can only be in love with or attracted sexually to someone of the same sex. Or, homosexuality is when someone has sexual relations with someone of the same sex. At first, these answers sound very similar, but when deconstructed, students are actually voicing two contradictory conceptualisations of sexuality. The first is that sexuality is an inborn orientation and the second is that sexuality is a series of chosen acts. The idea that sexuality is an orientation tends to be held by Westernised liberals,[36] who further believe that what cannot be changed

35 For example, the supposedly "dirty bits" of ancient texts were often omitted or translated into another dead language, instead of the medium of instruction. As recently as 2010, when I started teaching at the University of Pretoria, a colleague suggested that perhaps sexuality was too contentious an issue to be teaching to first years.

36 The idea of homosexuality as an inborn, life-long orientation is very much a product of the West (Long et al. 2003), and it has been transported to Africa mainly through Western media and aid organisations (Gevisser 2010).

should be accepted, while sexuality as acts tends to be held by conservatives, including conservative Christians[37] and traditionalist Africans, who further believe that if sexual acts can be chosen, only heterosexual acts should be chosen (Haskins 2023). This ideological conflict is perhaps not a big surprise, not even to the students. It is, however, in tracing the history of the conceptualisation of sexuality in Africa as acts, and the resulting homophobia, that decolonising takes place.

In response to these student remarks over the years, I have begun contextualising student answers at the end of the discussion by introducing them to a brief history of the conceptualisation of male same-sex sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa. In the pre-colonial period, several African communities had avenues for accepting male same-sex desire (Long et al. 2003), such as through alternative identities for men who did not conform to the Western hetero-normative model (Epprecht 2004; Msibi 2011).[38] However, with the Europeans colonisers came the concept of "unnatural" acts. This concept can be traced back to the Bible[39] and the laws of the Roman Emperor Justinian. Justinian's laws on sexuality formed the basis of Church law, which in turn, formed the basis of European sexual law for centuries. The conceptualisation of sexuality as acts which informed Justinian's laws came directly from ancient Roman notions of how sexuality operated (Haskins 2023). Therefore, both the colonial law and conservative Christianity have concepts of sexuality based on ancient pagan, Graeco-Roman notions of sexuality as acts performed by active males on passive subordinates, to

37 These views are held by more than one Christian denomination in parts of Africa and are further solidified by the influence of Evangelical Churches from the United States (Haskins 2023).

38 Msibi (2011) points out that traditional sexual identities in Africa were predominately based on reproduction and gender roles, with men who played the passive part in same-sex acts sometimes identified as women. He highlights studies that show the gender and sexual identities of some traditional cultures from Nigeria, Uganda, Malawi, Senegal and the Zande people of South-Western Sudan, the Central African Republic, and the North-Eastern Congo which included, or accepted, same-sex desire (Msibi 2011). Epprecht (2004) notes acceptance of same-sex practices among the Shona, Shangaan, Zulu and Ndebele of Southern Africa.

39 The condemnation of same-sex acts in the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 13–19 is one of the main Biblical texts used to justify the church's position, as well as Leviticus 18:22, Romans 1:24–6 and 1 Corinthians 9–11 (Goodich 1976).

which strictly heterosexual, Christian ideology was then applied. This conceptualisation gradually became internalised in traditionalist African thinking (Epprecht 2004). It was then further reinforced by modern, Western, conservative non-governmental aid organisations (Hoad 2007), to the point that some Africans now feel able to say that male same-sex desire is unAfrican (Epprecht 2004; Msibi 2011), as it is against African culture, religion and laws (Gevisser 2010).[40]

By being introduced to this history, students are firstly given the opportunity to turn their eyes critically towards the West and its contradictory values, as well as the influence of these values on individuals, both past and present. Secondly, they are confronted with the notion that a supposedly African understanding of sexuality is actually almost entirely Western and even then, not exactly what they thought it was. While this will not tear Western values out of African ideologies, it does allow students to become aware of the basis for their thinking, and can open their minds to the possibility of trying to uncover concepts of sexuality that are wholly African. When they are fully informed, they can then decide what is best for them. This kind of awareness is only possible by tracing ideas from history. As Classics is the basis of Western ideologies, to perceive the West in Africa, it is necessary to know and understand the Classics in Africa.

Conclusion

So, are the Classics a colonial holdover with nothing to say that is worth hearing by twenty-first century South African students? Are the Classics cultural imperialism from the West? There is certainly a danger of that. However, I believe the usefulness of Classics, to think about modern, controversial issues, to turn a critical lens on the West and to become aware of colonial, Western ideas embedded within the African paradigm, is relevant to many other issues besides sexuality. If taught from a local perspective and with progressive teaching techniques, which consider South African issues and history, Classics can not only decolonise itself, but

40 This was said by President Bingu wa Mutharika of Malawi as he pardoned two men who had been arrested for taking part in a marriage ceremony in 2010 (Gevisser 2010). See Haskins (2023) for background on this issue.

also play a vital role in decolonising the university curriculum and indeed in social transformation in the country.

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