



# A CONVERSATION WITH MARY LEFKOWITZ

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The Postil is most pleased and deeply honored to publish this interview with Mary Lefkowitz, professor emerita of Classical Studies, at Wellesley College. Her husband was the late Classics scholar, Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones. She is the author of such important works as, [\*The Victory Ode: An Introduction\*](#), [\*The Lives of the Greek Poets\*](#), [\*Women's Life in Greece and Rome\*](#), [\*Greek Gods, Human Lives: What We Can Learn From Myths\*](#), among many other works. She has also been a stout-hearted and brilliant opponent of the "[\*Black Athena\*](#)" fantasy-theory, as laid out in her two books, [\*Black Athena Revisited\*](#) and [\*Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth As History\*](#). She further described her ordeal in [\*History Lesson\*](#). Currently, she has co-edited, [\*The Greek Plays\*](#). She is interviewed here by Dr. Zbigniew Janowski.

**Zbigniew Janowski (ZJ):** The first time I came across your name was in the second half of mid 1980s. I found an article you wrote in the English Conservative magazine, *The Salisbury Review*, edited back then by Sir Roger Scruton. It was an anti-feminist article - an article written by a female scholar of antiquity. Yet you wrote several books about women in ancient times, in tragedy. One can't think of Greek tragedy without women. My question is: Where does your interest in ancient women come from? Clearly, given your stance on feminism, it was not just a fashion: A woman writing about women.



**Mary Lefkowitz (ML):** That article was one of several articles which I wrote about revisionist histories. In the seventies and eighties some feminists were using Greek myths to argue that early in human history there had been peaceful matriarchal societies that were eventually usurped by men, and I tried to show why myth couldn't be used as historical evidence. I can't imagine that there ever was a time when women were in continual charge of their societies. Until relatively recently in human history, anatomy was destiny.

**ZJ:** When you look at your antifeminist articles, your book *Not Out of Africa*, and watch today's academic landscape, do you think fighting it, writing against it, changed anything? I can come up with a few names of female scholars in your field (Mary Beard and Edith Hall) who write about the Greeks and the Romans as if feminism and Marxism were an orthodoxy. Beard's popular history of Rome reminds me of the Marxist interpretations of Roman history which I read in Communist Poland: Roman masses are her hero. Now the same message comes from the most prestigious British universities.

**ML:** Feminism, Marxism, and Afrocentrism are like religions; believers are not persuaded by arguments based on known, warranted facts. But (as I think I said) I'm not against feminism per se. Rather, what I object to is the use of mythology as history.

**ZJ:** The position of women in Greece was not the same as in Rome. There is no Greek Livia, Augustus' wife, who—if we follow Robert Graves' account—was the real force who shaped Augustus' politics, and so many others. Given different stature of women in Greece and Rome (Greek women, from what we know, did not yield the same power, even behind the scene), how do you explain the importance of women in Greek tragedy? Did the Greeks see some fundamental difference between men and women which the tragedy explores?

**ML:** In fifth-century Athens women certainly did not have any political power, but women in Sparta had considerable political influence, and Artemisia of Halicarnassus in Asia Minor commanded her own ship fighting against the Greeks in the battle of Salamis. But in the Hellenistic Era, there were powerful women rulers who had even more power than Livia, e.g. the Macedonian Greek Cleopatra VII of Egypt. Such women were all from royal or aristocratic families.

**ZJ:** What is striking about Greek tragedies is the importance of female characters. Neither Ismene nor Chrysothemis in Sophocles' *Antigone* and *Electra* seem to have much to contribute to the plot. They serve as a contrast to *Antigone* and *Electra*. What I mean by contrast is the personae of Ismene and

Chrysosthemis—their femininity. They want to live, have families, children. Antigone and Chrysosthemis, on the other hand, are obsessed with one idea: vengeance. But for it to work, they have to turn off their emotions, forget about their feminine charm, their feminine nature. There must be a reason why both playwrights chose women to be there, why they constructed the pairs of women to act this way. Do you think there is something about women, their psychology, their nature, that Sophocles and Euripides saw and explored? After all, one could use a male character there, but they did not.

**ML:** I suspect that Greek women, then as now, had plenty to say, even though they weren't officially in charge - that's apparent even in Homer. Contrasting strong women with weak women allows the dramatist to show that women can be as heroic as men in life and death situations.

**ZJ:** Unlike in a number of other disciplines, there are and were many outstanding female scholars of antiquity: you; [Jacqueline de Romilly](#) in France; in my native Poland there were several; [Lidia Winniczuk](#), H. Kronska, [Maria Dzielska](#). There is [Grace Harriet Macurdy](#), professor at Vassar College, whose book [Hellenistic Queens](#) was published in 1932! One can also invoke the name of the 18th century translator of [Epictetus'](#) Enchiridion, [Mrs. Carter](#). And, of course, [Edith Hamilton](#), the author of very popular books on Greece and Rome. You can probably come up with many more names. What attracts women to Greece and Rome? You said, "Contrasting strong women with weak women allows the dramatist to show that women can be as heroic as men in life and death situations" Is it just a question of weak versus strong women? Why should we assume that the strength of women lies in their being "as heroic as men"? Why should we measure strength of women by analogy of what is valuable in men? Why not assume, as we did even in the Enlightenment period, that the virtues of women - of which [Rousseau](#) in his [Emile](#) or [La Nouvelle Heloise](#) and [Laclos](#) in his [Education of Women](#) wrote - are different and they should be measured as such? Would you not agree that to judge women against men - whether they can be like men - is to capitulate to the democratic idea of equality.

**ML:** How do we measure qualities like courage? How can we measure courage? Or constancy, or determination, or whatever other qualities we can think of? More men have been greater mathematicians and physicists than have women, but is that because men have more testosterone in their systems than women, or because women have not had the same encouragement or opportunity?

I suspect that what attracted women to the study of antiquity is what has attracted men to the study of antiquity: the challenge of learning difficult languages, the excitement of reading great literature. In my own case, learning Latin helped me understand the structure of English grammar. Greek seemed to me

to be particularly interesting because the words seemed to be more literal, closer to what the parent language must have been like. I tried to make myself study something more practical, like Chemistry, but couldn't stop wanting to read Sophocles. So that's what I did.

**ZJ:** T. S. Eliot once said, tragedy is impossible in the Christian world, or Biblical world - I cannot remember. But the Old Testament story of Job seems to indicate that he had both in mind. I made it my habit to teach the [Book of Job](#) to students to draw a contrast between the Greeks and the Hebrews, and, more precisely, between Job's attitude and [Epictetus](#) or the [Stoics](#). My standard questions after reading the two texts is: "Was Job a Stoic?" If you were to look at Job from Mars, you would not know whether he reconciled himself to his fate because he had faith in God or whether he reconciled himself because he was a Greek Stoic philosopher, a man who accepted life "as it happens." "Don't seek to have events happen as you wish, but wish them to happen as they do happen," says Epictetus. Perfect one-line expression of the Greek mind. Was Eliot right? Tragedy in the Biblical tradition—whether the Jewish or Christian versions—seems impossible. No savior, no messiah. The universe is blind and deaf, and thus, human life is tragic!

**ML:** Eliot was right. You can't have tragedy in a universe where divinities are supposed to promote human welfare and cooperate with one another. Ancient Greek deities disagree with one another. Hence the Trojan War, the death of [Hippolytus](#), Juno's wrath against the Trojans in the [Aeneid](#).

ZJ: If you think of what happened to [Oedipus](#), he does what he was bound to, but then when he discovers what he did—killed his father, slept with his mother—he blinds himself. Another proof: [Fatum](#) is blind, we must account for our "sins" even if we did not know, which makes me think of [Agamemnon](#) and the origin of a fundamental issue in European culture: Justice.

The [Trojan war](#). It starts with the abduction of Helen. The Greeks gather at Aulis. Agamemnon goes hunting; crosses the sanctuary of the Goddess of Nature, Artemis, who demands sacrifice of his daughter, Iphigenia; reluctantly, he does it because the winds will not blow; he goes to Troy, comes back, he gets killed by his wife, Clytemnestra, who, to avenge the death of their daughter, kills him. The filial duty falls on Orestes and Electra, the two children, who kill their mother, and who must be killed. It is a domino effect. Those involved in the killing must suffer too. Why? Because Agamemnon unknowingly crossed the boundaries of the Goddess sanctuary. Ignorance, like in Oedipus's case, is no excuse in the eyes of the gods. Finally, Apollo intervenes because Orestes and Electra would have to be executed for killing their mother, which they had to do.

The moral is: Vengeance is not mine; to do justice we have to transfer it to the impersonal entity, the State; family members cannot exact justice. Is this so? Is this the point where and when European civilization begins - with the recognition of creating a system where emotions must be turned off? Would you agree with such a characterization?

**ML:** I wouldn't put it quite that way. Fate isn't blind; we are. *Hamartia* doesn't mean "sin," but rather "missing the mark," "making an error in judgment," which is what Oedipus did when he thought he could avoid fulfilling the oracle that he would kill his father and marry his mother by leaving Corinth, and the people he thought were his father and mother, which enabled him to fulfill the oracle by heading for Thebes. Tragedy reminds us of this fundamental human weakness. We always know less than we think we know. Tragedy allows us to turn our emotions on, and to reflect on the limitations of our own knowledge.

**ZJ:** Let me continue by moving to a special topic: Western Civilization. In [Aeschylus' Persians](#), the playwright makes the Persian king listen to his advisor, to understand that the Greeks govern themselves in an incomprehensible way: they are governed by the many, not one king. The explanation comes when the Persian defeat is just about to happen. Let me point out, if the Greeks were to lose, there would be no democracy, no republic if the Persians were to invade and conquer Italy, no system of government that we take for granted today.

Western civilization is a complex entity, built over two thousand years but the question is what are its foundations, the ingredients without which it would not exist. When I teach I use an image of what we call in America: a melting pot, but it is a Western Civ. pot: here are my ingredients: The Jewish/Biblical One God, love your neighbor, in the Christian form, love of all others, other nations; Greek ingredient is philosophy, mathematics, architecture, tragedy, and democracy; my Roman ingredient: Roman law, administration, architecture (arches; aqueducts, dome), republican form of government (two chambers). You mix it, you get the basic dish: European civilization from which the Middle Ages and Renaissance sprang. In it you have the foundations of Modern Europe.

Yet, all of this is today under attack: colonialism, racism, misogyny, patriarchy. Why are we so ungrateful to the Greeks and Romans? You spent your life in Ivory Tower. Life of the mind is the most precious thing, and yet, it is the academics who are destroying it.

**ML:** Academe hasn't been an ivory tower since the student revolutions of the late 1960s, as the result of

which curricula became increasingly politicized. Academics and students wanted to study society's problems so they could do something about them. They wanted action and had no time for reflection. What they didn't and still don't understand is that knowing something about the past and human nature could help them better to understand the present.

**ZJ:** Several years ago, I came across the name of a Saudi Arab intellectual [Ibrahim al-Buleihi](#), former Saudi Shura Council Member, who in an interview titled "Western Civilization Has Liberated Mankind" said many things that few professors in America would have the courage to say. Here it is:

Buleihi: "My attitude towards Western civilization is an attitude based on obvious facts and great accomplishments; here is a reality full of wonderful and amazing things. [Recognizing] this doesn't mean that I am blindly fascinated. This is the very opposite of the attitude of those who deny and ignore the bright lights of Western civilization. Just look around... and you will notice that everything beautiful in our life has been produced by Western civilization: even the pen that you are holding in your hand, the recording instrument in front of you, the light in this room, and the journal in which you work, and many innumerable amenities, which are like miracles for the ancient civilizations. If it were not for the accomplishments of the West, our lives would have been barren. I only look objectively and value justly what I see and express it honestly. Whoever does not admire great beauty is a person who lacks sensitivity, taste, and observation. Western civilization has reached the summit of science and technology. It has achieved knowledge, skills, and new discoveries, as no previous civilization before it. The accomplishments of Western civilization cover all areas of life: methods of organization, politics, ethics, economics, and human rights. It is our obligation to acknowledge its amazing excellence. Indeed, this is a civilization that deserves admiration... The horrible backwardness in which some nations live is the inevitable result of their refusal to accept this [abundance of Western ideas and visions] while taking refuge in denial and arrogance."

'Okaz: "Sir, you can admire this civilization as much as you want, but not at the expense of others, especially our own civilization."

Buleihi: "My admiration for the West is not at the expense of others; rather, it is an invitation to those others to acknowledge their illusions and go beyond their inferiority and liberate themselves from backwardness. [Those others] should admit their shortcomings, and make an effort to overcome them; they should stop denying the truth and closing their eyes to the multitude of wonderful achievements. They should be fair towards those nations that achieved prosperity for themselves but did not monopolize it for themselves and instead allowed the whole world to share the results of this progress,



so that other nations of the whole world now enjoy these achievements. Furthermore, Western civilization has given to the world knowledge and skills which made it possible for them, the non-Western nations, to compete with it in production and share markets with it. Criticizing one's own deficiencies is a precondition to inducing oneself to change for the better. Conversely, to glorify one's backward apathetic self is to establish and fortify backwardness, to strengthen the shackles of apathy, and to eradicate the capabilities of excellence. Backwardness is a shameful reality, which we should resent and from which we must liberate ourselves."

What is your reaction to al-Buleihi's statement?

**ML:** I agree with what he says. The students who chanted "Western Civ has got to go" were only considering the downside of Western Civ, which is pretty much the downside of human nature generally, anger, violence, self-aggrandizement, etc. Plato and Aristotle showed us ways in which all people could lead more constructive lives, but their visions did little to address social issues, like oppression of certain people, such as slaves.

**ZJ:** There is a tendency today to just go over religious traditions (plural) as if religion was never part of any culture. Why do we operate in this religious vacuum and how does it obfuscate our understanding of both Antiquity and Modernity? You probably know the movie [Troy](#) with Brad Pitt. It is, in my opinion, a very well-done movie. However, same thing: no gods! Last year in November, [Joseph Epstein](#) wrote a nice piece for the *Wall Street Journal* about Thucydides. I always enjoy finding something like that. The title of it is "[History Made by Men, not Gods.](#)" To ignore gods is to miss the point of the *Iliad*. Gods are as important as humans. I remember Sir Moses Finley's several articles about Socrates, whose trial, according to him was motivated to a large extent by the suspicion that he really did not believe in the gods, and the Athenians, remembering well the plagues that visited Athens and devastated population during the war, thought disbelief was a serious problem. What is your view here when it comes to taking religious views seriously? Can one understand culture, Greece and Rome, in particular, by simply saying - myths, gods...

**ML:** I believe that you cannot understand ancient Greek literature, history or philosophy unless you take account of ancient Greek religion. Although it's hard for us to understand, Greek theology (I prefer that term to mythology) assumes that the gods exist for their own benefit and for the benefit of human beings, and that they often work at cross purposes from one another. It provides a means of understanding why bad things happen to good people, and the forces of evil are so often successful.



**ZJ:** Is what I implied in my previous question a matter of changing world-view (un-religious, a-religious, atheist, skeptical, scientific, or whatever else you want to call it or; ignorance, or a-historicity), which makes us create worlds of the past that do not correspond to historical reality and from which we can't learn.

**ML:** We could learn from ancient Greek religion that there is only so much we can do to shape the courses of our own lives, much less the lives of our communities or nations.

**ZJ:** When did the awareness of the Ancient world start dying in the US, in the West? Complaints go back to the 19th century. I have in front of me two wonderful little books by [Henry Nettleship](#), a great scholar of antiquity: *The True Aim of Classical Education and The Moral Influence of Literature*, and *The Moral Influence of Literature: Classical Education in the Past and at Present. Two Popular Addresses*. Both books aim at explaining the importance of the classics. The decline of interest can be traced, I think, to the late 1970s. The map of heavens is Greco-Roman, so were all space programs: Geminin Apollo, etc. Then, things changed. No Greeks, no Romans. Columbia, Challenger, etc. and the nail in the coffin was... Jessie Jackson in 1988: "Hey, Hey, Ho, Ho, Western culture's got to go." So, the Greeks, the Romans, the West are gone. You as a teacher of the Greeks in a prestigious college are well qualified to explain: Should we feel more sorry for the Greeks, or for ourselves?

**ML:** For ourselves, of course. Western Civilization has many shortcomings. Greek philosophy has not solved all the world's problems, because it is essentially elitist and relies on the existence of a working underclass. But the critical thinking that it encourages offers the best means of finding equitable solutions for the disparities in our society.

**ZJ:** This leads me to the question that made you to be probably the most known classicist in America. The controversy in which you were involved. It concerned the book by [Martin Bernal](#), *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. Can you briefly say what the book claims before I ask you about your role in this controversy? You responded to Bernal's book with your own book: *Not Out of Africa: How "Afrocentrism" Became An Excuse To Teach Myth As History*. Something must have deeply gotten to you that made you write an entire book to debunk a myth. Was it just scholarly integrity or something else? After all, not all scholars of Antiquity bothered to write a sentence. Why did you pick the fight? What do you think motivates people like Bernal to write such books?

**ML:** I believe that Bernal (an Englishman) resented the prestige associated with studying Greek and

Latin in British public schools (=of course, elite British private schools) and may have had an unimaginative Classics teacher at his school, because he believed that learning conjugations and declensions numbed the minds of anyone who studied Classics. My experience with learning Latin was just the opposite: it helped me understand the structure of the English language and encouraged me to think about the etymology of words. Greek was even more exciting because it was even more foreign and harder to put into English. The first Greek text that I bought was the New Testament, which I was able to read on my own because the syntax was easier than that of earlier Greek prose writers. Reading the first sentences Gospel according to John in Greek helped me understand how much had been lost in translation.

**ZJ:** We've come to the point in our conversation when I have to ask you about PC in America, at American universities. It is a destructive force. No one, perhaps with the exception of [Allan Bloom](#) in the 1980s, understood how influential and destructive certain trends can be. Serious academic life is close to being gone, and it is not only because of myths about African origins of classical civilization, or relativism, that Bloom was concerned with. No one even uses this term today. Today we look at everything through the lenses of sexism, racism, misogyny, feminism, colonialism (the last term is a bit passé).

**ML:** Political correctness is an orthodoxy, like that of a monotheistic religion. (Ancient polytheism was much more open: new gods could be added ad lib.). Monotheists look down on polytheism as superstition. Any questioning of orthodoxy is heresy, punishable by exclusion, exile, etc.

**ZJ:** Do you think we can survive this level of intellectual barbarism which we see around? It is a total disregard for truth, scholarly procedures, life of the mind, and it is not an ordinary American on the street who is supportive of it, but the academics.

**ML:** We survived the orthodoxy that existed when I was a schoolgirl and an undergraduate (1940s and 1950s) and for a few decades afterward. White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism was the norm, so Catholics and Jews were treated with caution and some suspicion, African Americans were segregated even in the North; all of these were subject to quotas as students and faculty members at many schools and universities are in this country.

**ZJ:** I started my university education there, in Poland, not in Stalinist times, to be sure, but never experienced what my students are experiencing in America today. Some of them see that something is

not right, but are too afraid to say anything. Only last week, a female student came up to me and said, "Dr. Janowski, do you realize you are the minority of one here; in other classes students who disagree with professors are berated; other students attacked me." My student's feelings are now common. Many of them are afraid. Do you see a way out of it?

**ML:** The way around it is to do what you are doing, to encourage students to think independently and to question orthodoxies.

**ZJ:** What role can and should Classical education play in rebuilding sanity? Is there a way of explaining the importance of classical education to the general public, to give support to what appears obvious to me and you.

**ML:** Learning about foreign and ancient cultures requires us to think, to use our imaginations, and to get out of ourselves into very different worlds. Ancient Greece and Rome are particularly worth studying because their writing and thinking and art have had such a profound influence on Western culture. But I am not suggesting that we should regard those cultures uncritically; quite the contrary. And we should acknowledge their debts to other ancient cultures, such as those of Egypt, India, and the different civilizations in Asia Minor.

**ZJ:** Let me finish this conversation with something I tell students. I make them take a map of British Empire—the massive Empire. I say, look at it and ask yourself how one little country could colonize such vast areas. They must have had skilled people to do it. What do you think they studied? There was no department of Administration, Foreign Affairs, Public Relations, etc. They, as the Brits say, "read" Classics and History. Both give you intellectual skills to understand many things that no specialized, narrow discipline will never give you. Even today, plenty of people in the City of London, graduate from Oxbridge and make big money without a degree in business. What do you think?

**ML:** I agree with you. Studying ancient Greek and Roman literature is a great way to prepare for any number of careers, first because the process makes you get away from yourself and the times you live in, and reimagine other, different societies and ways of thinking, and then because the subject matter allows you to understand something about the beginnings of European civilization, and its good and bad characteristics.

**ZJ:** Thank you, Professor Lefkovitz.

The image shows, "Ulysses and the Sirens," by John William Waterhouse, painted in 1891.

