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Sculpture as Literature and History: Captive and Captivating Venus Figures from the Greek Revolutionary Era

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Sculpture as Literature and History: Captive and Captivating Venus Figures from the Greek Revolutionary Era

Gonda Van Steen

1. In Search of Homer and Hellenism

- 1 In 1820, the French diplomat Comte de Marcellus (1795-1865) traveled to Chios, an island on the very frontiers of West and East, to go searching for the “school” of Homer. Like many other Romantic travelers, Marcellus wanted to see the island where Homer was presumably born and spent the latter part of his life teaching. Visitors were shown Homer’s seat and those of his disciples, which were hewn out of the rocks. On this and many other occasions, Marcellus carried his *Odyssey* in hand, that “delight and travel guide in Greece” (*Souvenirs* 100).¹ He raved:

I wanted, before all else, to see the school of Homer, and mark the beginning of my journey with an homage to the great poet whose songs had to embellish it, and sometimes even direct it. That passion for Homer, with which my first studies had left me, increased during my stay in the Orient: it grew from my observations on the primitive customs, which I approximated to the customs of our own days, from the living applications of the text, from my numerous commentaries, and from the thousands of delights that I owed to the reading of Homer, my favorite pastime. In the end, that passion—one should perhaps say that frenzy—had become for me some sort of a cult. (*Souvenirs* 99)

- 2 For Marcellus, Homer was metonymic for all things ancient Greek. Homer served as an important roadmap not only through texts but also through places. He was the guide and mentor whom Marcellus, on his tour of the Greek lands, followed closely in search of meaningful encounters with antiquity’s remnants, left behind in the physical landscape of what was soon to become independent modern Hellas. Marcellus was a

classically trained French royalist, who had seen the aftermath of the French Revolution and who himself had benefited from the restoration of the Bourbons to the throne. In 1815, at the age of twenty, he had been dispatched to Constantinople to assume the position of secretary to the French embassy. Marcellus was a huge admirer (and relative) of the French Romantic travel writer Chateaubriand. The latter gained widespread fame, but Marcellus was the better explorer, even though some of the true facts behind his tales remain elusive. Also, Marcellus had sensed correctly that, by the late 1810s, the Greek territories were stirring themselves for a national uprising against their Ottoman overlords. Yves Leboucher, who has brought renewed attention to Marcellus (by issuing the 2006 edition of his *Souvenirs de l'Orient*), characterizes the French diplomat's crucial historical position as follows: "He [was] one of the last travelers to see the Orient in a kind of primordial state, before an entire part of that dream evaporated in the rubble of the combats" (10).

- 3 Marcellus is best known (if not notorious) for "abducting" the famous Aphrodite statue that, in April 1820, a Greek farmer unearthed on the island of Milos: the *Venus de Milo*. Marcellus not only "discovered" but also displayed and dramatized the Venus. He upheld the Venus as a masterpiece of classical sculpture, not of Hellenistic statuary—the category in which she actually belongs. In his lifelong appropriation of "his find," Marcellus transformed the Venus into a collector's prize, an object of desire, and even a rhetorical feminine emblem. In my book, *Liberating Hellenism from the Ottoman Empire*, I have argued that Marcellus engaged in the practice of gendering not just Orientalism but also Hellenism through the vehicle of the Venus.² Marcellus was quick to present the Venus as a desirable female captive rescued from an occupied land, soon to be war-torn, and thus unprepared and even unworthy to keep her. His dramatization of his eastern adventure turns the Venus into an "endangered" statue. The captivating rather than captive Venus fits the "female-in-peril" trope, a catch phrase and self-serving motivation transferred from an Orientalist to a prerevolutionary Greek context. It suited Marcellus well to apply this trope to the Venus and thus to cover up the traces of his own treasure hunting at the expense of a feminized, humiliated, or even violated Greece. For Marcellus/Pygmalion, the statue nearly came to life as a sexually attractive woman: his gendering of the Greek locale surrounding and suffocating the statue took on very detailed, possessive, and at times graphic traits. His act of writing up his conquest was a form of displaying his classical and therefore Western trophy against the contrastive backdrop of the rest of Greece and the East. The Venus was the white female in danger, awaiting rescue, and so was the classical Greek culture she was made to represent and which the West was eager to appropriate wholesale. Prerevolutionary Hellenism was thus subjugated, conquered, and possessed (in the passive-physical as well as in the symbolic sense) by the West as well as by the Ottoman Empire to the east. If post-1815 France would not be making significant military or colonial conquests again soon, at least it had scored a victory in the manly Marcellus' acquisition of the Venus. The *Venus de Milo* had to substitute, too, for the lost Venus de Medici, which France had been obliged to return to Italy after the demise of Napoleon.³ The virulent drive to conquer deflates the perception of opponents, rendering them physically and morally weak. Marcellus guiltlessly feminized and sexualized Greece as well as the Orient. The overall image of a despoiled prerevolutionary Greece rising foreboded the country's vulnerable status through subsequent decades. Conversely, this image helps to deflate the myth of French or even Western European exceptionalism, or the claim

that France displayed more altruistic conduct in the Middle East when compared to the reportedly single-mindedly self-serving and deviant “Orientals.”

- 4 Like many other French travel authors, Marcellus cared to oversee both the publication and the distribution process of his own writings. He was no less concerned with presenting and writing up the Venus in his own way. Marcellus created a culture of display as well as a literary culture around the Venus, through his dramatic travel writings and through his strong opinions on how the Louvre ought to display “his” Venus. On repeated occasions throughout his life, Marcellus wrote and published about the Venus, and he burnished the tale, to instruct and impress the reader and to direct the gaze of the viewer—as a museum guide would do. The results show how central “authoritative” narratives could become to the interpretation of works of art. The same holds true of the second “Venus” statue that this paper will be discussing shortly. Marcellus was driven by an overwhelming desire to own the Venus, to take the sculpture with him, and to arrange for its transport to Paris, where it would be protected from “certain demise.” His stubborn possessiveness, thinly disguised as a concern for the classical Greek legacy, ruined a valuable friendship and jeopardized a network of diplomatic relations. After “purchasing” the sculpture,⁴ Marcellus took the Venus on a “tour” of the eastern Mediterranean, which overlapped with his diplomatic mission. The immediate effect of his five-month-long sea voyage was that it loosened the ties between the statue and the soil from which it came. It destabilized the sculpture’s topography and decentered Milos, resituating it as a remote, off-the-beaten-track location that “civilization” (again defined in Western terms) had passed by. The far-from-stationary Venus acquired her own virtual travelogue within Marcellus’ travelogue, and she gained her own European audience of “connoisseurs.”
- 5 Marcellus’ act of writing was a form of displaying the Venus against the contrastive backdrop of the East. If we think of the Frenchman’s travelogue as a mere specimen of the kind of travel writing that was popular at the time, we fail to see his travelogue’s function as a dramatic and Orientalizing mode of display. Marcellus’ travel record realized itself as a narrative and as a plot: he turned his display acts of the Venus, often conducted discreetly or secretly, into a series of staged set-pieces. The passing of time, the traveled distance, and the furtive viewings became part of the Frenchman’s mapping of the eastern Mediterranean, with the beacon of the Venus steering him to set West and East apart. Marcellus paraded the Venus as his own and as his culture’s firm connection to the West and, against this backdrop, he paraded the Otherness of the Oriental regions that he visited. In this symbolic, as well as literal, circumnavigation, the Classics and the imperialist “owners” of the Classics helped to mark the territory of the West and to demarcate its contours. The triumphant “tour” of the Venus gives new meaning to what Said has defined as the vast area of the “imaginative geography” of the Orient, in which a diplomatic mission, a triumphal procession, and a real geography merged (Said 55). Marcellus collected ports, admirers, and exotic blurbs for the “imaginative geography” of the Venus’ display tour, and he was thereby imaging “his find” for the public back home, whose appetite for the classical as well as the Oriental kept growing. Thus, both the statue and Marcellus’ story shared in elaborate, circuitous acts of displacement, typical of the Orientalist mode of representation, or of display in its own right.
- 6 The Frenchman’s sense of proprietorship continued to define his relationship to the Venus long after she had been donated to the Louvre, where she was first displayed in a

small and somber vault. Boasting that he himself had unearthed the Venus (an act in which he had no share at all), Marcellus then dictated that she needed exhuming from a second entombment—the entombment in the nineteenth-century French museum. It hurt the “savior” to see the “mistreatment” of the sculpture that marked his own royalist loyalties but, more significantly, France’s cultural capital. The ownership of works of art for everyone to see stands, of course, for so much more than economic or financial capital. The Venus embodied the cultural, and largely symbolic, capital of a France that had grown newly confident after the first few years of the Restoration. The restoration of eye-catching ancient art to the Louvre gave material expression to the restoration of the Bourbon throne and to the new conservatism that had ensued since 1815. Precisely because the Louvre displayed France’s royalist capital, it had to give visitors the best possible chance to witness an icon of such power. Marcellus’ story, therefore, presents a subjective investment in the Venus’ earliest modern appearance and display, and it lays bare the sociopolitical forces affecting this transformation. The visual icon has since been engaged in other intense processes of becoming as well as of being.

- 7 The *Venus de Milo* made a rapid upmarch to celebrity status starting with her display at the Louvre, and she has proved to be malleable to the designs of modern art-historians and viewing audiences. The post-1820 display history of the Venus shows that the statue was quite capable of shaking off its Orientalist accretions. The Venus became a modernist visual symbol, which has always been tied to modes of display. The statue has held more interest as an object of display than as an antiquity. It brimmed with meanings for mid- through late-nineteenth-century viewers, and it gained widespread acclaim for its fragmentary condition: the armless torso heightened the admiration of the idealizing Romantic period for nostalgic fragments and time-worn ruins. This explains why there was a distinct advantage to leaving the sculpture unrestored. Furthermore, the display history of the Venus proceeded in tandem with the reproductive techniques of modernity (casts, emerging photography, mechanical reproduction in bronze), which made the statue accessible to more socially diverse audiences. Thus, the *Venus de Milo* is an ideal specimen on which to focus an exclusively modern history of reception and display (which contrasts sharply with the sheer absence of documentary evidence on the Venus from antiquity).⁵
- 8 Marcellus covered up important parts of the truth surrounding the Venus. The truth might just get in the way of a good story. Thus, the Frenchman’s proclaimed Hellenism unmasked itself as an Orientalism eager to lump nascent Greece back into the inert, dangerous, and corrupt mass of the Ottoman Empire. Marcellus’ rationale appears to have also persuaded Constantin Mourousy, a descendant of the Mourouzis family, with which the Frenchman contended for the Venus. Rather than asserting a “local” viewpoint, Mourousy joins the French conviction about having “saved” the Venus. He records a telling exchange about the Venus, in which he foregoes an important opportunity to “talk back”:
 - Merci de nous l’avoir prêtée, m’a dit un jour Henri Loyrette, ancien président du Louvre.
 - Merci de l’avoir sauvée, lui ai-je répondu. (196)
- 9 In the West’s predatory view, Greece was a treasure trove betokened by the Venus’ sexualized matter-reality. Marcellus’ memoirs vividly illustrate the international chase for antiquities, which still fuels hostile standoffs between West and East. The “double vision” of the French diplomat, the vision of admiration and of hard-nosed denigration,

of both desire and contempt, was indeed prevalent for many decades. This vision marked a pattern that persisted in narratives and representations of post-independence Greece and of the Greeks in general. In its own patronizing ways, the West has always expected the Greeks to draw on their classical past as a deep cultural resource for stabilizing their country—or has regarded the classical past as the country's only stable foundation. Thus, many outsiders have reduced the Greeks to the role of actors on a stage to be watched and have barely let them be agents or authors in their own right.⁶

2. «Étranger, n'oublie pas les filles de Scio» (“Stranger, don't forget the girls of Chios”)

10 When Marcellus visited “Scio” (Chios) to see Homer's school, he was no longer a novice to the Orient of (would-be) Greece. By 1820, Chios housed an important modern school as well: the prestigious Academy of Chios was funded by rich merchants and counted more than five hundred students. Neophytos Vamvas (1770-1855), the Academy's director, was a close disciple of Koraes, a native son of Chios. The Turkish massacre ravaged the school and the entire island in April of 1822. But back when Marcellus visited the still-thriving community of Chios, he was most infatuated by the welcoming and free-spirited young Greek women there. He described the traditional late afternoon walk, the public *volta*, but, by the end of his *tableau*, he could not but ponder the imminent enslavement of the girls he met. The following quotation captures Marcellus' gaze as if it were that of a modern Paris pronouncing judgment in a beauty contest. It becomes one of his most nostalgic musings on behalf of Venuses in the joyous moments before distress:

J' y étais entouré aussitôt des jeunes filles de la ville; elles se promènent par troupes bruyantes, au milieu des jeunes gens qui souvent les accompagnent seuls: elles sont rarement suivies de leurs parents; elles chantent, dansent, ou causent en riant.... La promenade est le rendez-vous des amants. Ce n'est point par des soupirs, des yeux languissants, des mots entrecoupés, que l'amour s'explique à Scio; c'est au milieu des rires, à la promenade publique, et sans détours, que la passion se déclare....

[L]eurs longs cheveux tombent sur leurs épaules, d'où elles les relèvent pour les rattacher sur leurs têtes avec des épingles d'or. Elles peignent leur sourcils, mais jamais leur joues....

Ces jeunes filles s'arrêtaient souvent autour de moi: elles poussèrent des cris de joie quand elles virent que je comprenais leur langage....

- Étranger, dis-nous quelle est la plus jolie de nous toutes: tu balances... allons, prononce.

Et de grands éclats de rire.

- Oh ! qu'il est long à se décider!... c'est comme nos vieillards quand ils choisissent un archonte... Parle donc..., parle donc...

- Mais vous êtes toutes si jolies!

- Oh ! entendez-vous ce qu'il dit!.... Tiens, voilà une fleur, donne-la à celle que tu préfères.

Je ne sais pourquoi je distinguai une blonde aux longs cheveux, et je lui présentai la fleur: elle s'avança, s'en saisit avec empressement; puis ses compagnes en riant la placèrent auprès de moi.

- Il aime les blondes, dirent-elles. En effet, elle est jolie. Eh bien, que penses-tu des filles de Scio? (*Souvenirs* 106-108)

Et maintenant, en relisant ces lignes tracées quelques heures après nos adieux, je ne puis taire les profondes émotions qui m'agitent. Pauvres jeunes filles de la plus belle

île de la mer, qu'êtes-vous devenues?... Je suis un de ces derniers voyageurs qui virent vos prospérités et les délices de votre île; d'autres qui m'ont suivi n'ont vu que ses désastres et vos ruines. (*Souvenirs* 108-109)

- 11 Despite its unfathomable horrors, the 1822 massacre of Chios became another trope in literature and art (as in the famous Romantic painting of 1824 by Eugène Delacroix).⁷ Marcellus' account strikes us as original and heartfelt. It remains hard to deduce, however, what is and what is not construed about his record of his visit to prerevolutionary Chios. Christopher Thompson has placed the reader of Romantic travel writing on the alert. His warning pertains to Chateaubriand, Marcellus' model, but it may extend to our Frenchman as well: "his [Chateaubriand's] taste for presenting himself... as the last to see some disappearing spectacle or world was a psychologically satisfying shift in circumstances where he could not claim to be the first on the spot" (Thompson 23). Like Chateaubriand, Marcellus was an active participant in the Western rush to possess the ancient Greek past, its material culture, its topography, and its modern incarnations. On the eve of the Greek War of Independence, the struggle for ownership of the Venus but also for claims on exclusive experiences sheds light on French and Greek encounters and on rivalries between their representatives. Even after the rapid decline of the Napoleonic empire, the French kept mapping an imperialist geography that revolved around expansion and exploitation. This attitude was easily projected onto the Venus and also onto native young women: they were discovered on Greek soil that resorted under French diplomatic supervision, and they were perceived to be in danger of vanishing into a destructive Oriental space (such as the corrupting harem). France's showcase, the Louvre, mapped the "superpower's" imperialist territories and affirmed its Western cultural genealogies. Marcellus' descriptions of meeting local girls, like the ones depicted above, further instilled France's supremacy, for positing superior knowledge, even foresight into impending disasters and shifting power relations. Thus the "Venuses" of Chios became part of the master narrative enveloping the Venus de Milo. Marcellus is complicit in objectifying local populations, all the more so for creating dense relationships, whether literary, historical, or aesthetic, between the girls of Chios and the Venus. The Venus statue has become Marcellus' prism, through which he perceives local feminine beauty and grace, but also vulnerability and imminent subjugation (unless the West once more "rushes to the rescue").

3. Ancient-Style Statue "Champions" Modern Greece

- 12 What Marcellus did to spread knowledge of the massacre of Chios in literature, or what Delacroix accomplished through painting, the American Hiram Powers managed to do in sculpture. The most famous statue by Powers urges us to explore a post-revolutionary instance of the display of Greek art and of the charged narrative underpinning that display. In 1844, Powers revealed the *Greek Slave*, a marble statue that became one of the most viewed and critically acclaimed artworks of the nineteenth century. The *Greek Slave* was the first widely exhibited American sculpture depicting a fully nude female figure. Several life-size and numerous smaller-scale versions were made of the statue, whose nudity, however, required proper justification. It was only when Powers linked his work to the Greek War of Independence and to Turkish atrocities, such as the massacre of Chios, that he secured the statue's acceptance: the girl depicted was a Greek and Christian victim of the Turks, who had

taken her to the slave markets of the East, where she would be sold to the highest bidder. The girl's statue may be modern, but it was profoundly classicizing and resembled ancient statues of Aphrodite. The relationship of "intervisuality" with the *Venus de Milo*, if I may use a term that borrows from the better-known concept of intertextuality, is not lost on anyone studying the statue's twist of the head and the hairdo, the structure of the breasts and the heavy hips, as well as the contrapposto stance enhanced by drapery. But unlike the titillating nakedness of a Venus, the Greek slave's public nakedness did not inflict shame on its victim but became an indictment of the cruel and lecherous Turkish captor. The statue "provided a sculptural counterpart to the ubiquitous wartime and postwar reports of Turkish servitude," according to author Vivien Green (36). Not only was a narrative justification needed, it also had to draw on pre-existing sensibilities. Crafted narrative had to create a "safe space for viewing," especially since mid-nineteenth-century art was still often consumed in public places.⁹ Powers both sublimated and dramatized the statue's nudity, for the sake of his-story and of the exigencies of modern history. The Ottoman "tyranny" was defined by all that was perceived as lacking in the East by the educated West, which proclaimed itself liberal and philhellene: freedom, progress, rationality, humane conduct, the very values seen as germane to Western morality and civilization. Powers' philhellenism, too, was configured at the nexus of imperialist politics, Orientalist fantasies, and the Western "civilizing mission" to salvage Greece from the "emptiness of Asia."⁹

- 13 The themes of danger, rescue, and escape may again be brought to bear on our analysis: Marcellus presented the Venus' abduction as necessary and urgent: she needed to be whisked off to the safety and civilization of Paris. His memoirs, however, pointed out the distinction between classical traces that were still physically rooted in Greek soil and those that were not (Aeschylus' tragedy), or the dialogue/rivalry between archaeology and philology.¹⁰ With willful blindness, the Frenchman claimed to have recovered "his" Venus not from a remote Aegean island but from an East embalmed in "backward" and "intolerant" traditions. Similarly, the *Greek Slave* had to be pulled away from the "destructive" and "preying" Turks—a "rescue" that proved impracticable for most of the girls of Chios. Marcellus, who had been responsible for the successful migration of the Venus statue, reflected on his adventure on Chios as that of a failed migration. Failed migration equaled failed escape and near-certain death or destruction. Like Marcellus, Powers placed a local Greek predicament before the eyes of the Western classically trained elite. He put local matters on the world stage of the West's perception of Greece. The microcosm of the statue and its story reflected what was happening on the grand geopolitical and ideological scale of the early through mid-nineteenth century.
- 14 Both Marcellus and Powers deliberately Orientalized the geographical domain that was the "theater" of operations during the years of Greece's transition from occupied Ottoman territory to modern nation-state. The philhellenes' words and deeds revealed blatant inconsistencies in the face of real power and opportunity. Ancient and modern, Hellenism and Orientalism clashed in these two agents' aesthetic and other rationalizations, urging us to rethink the old binaries and especially the prejudices attached to them. Through his statue's classicizing artistic codes, Powers opened up another perspective on West and East but also on classical reception and modern history. He invoked classical ideals to boost hegemonic but imperiled superiority,

upholding the *Greek Slave* and her ethos of strength and purity as standards of Western civilization. His focus might well have been on the livable present of contemporary Greece, but it still invoked the useable past. The concern with classical antiquity prompted Western Europe to lend its cooperation to the Greek cause, which was redefined as the cause of Western civilization, Christian religion, and Enlightenment rationalism. Because Greece's struggle for independence became the cause of the West, it spurred renewed interest in the cultural and also the racial purity of the Greeks. Powers' work reinforced another potent culture of display and inspired reflection on slavery in the United States in addition to championing the Greek cause. Contemporary critics have noted the manifest hypocrisy: many of those Westerners who claimed to be shocked by the sight of Ottoman bondage, incarnated in the *Greek Slave*, were never in the same way scandalized by the ugly reality of the American failure to abolish slavery. Before the 1850s, however, Powers himself had "sublimated" the *Greek Slave's* connection to US slavery and racism, and he had abstracted the otherwise logical link to the oppression of black female slaves. Only after the prolonging of American slavery into the 1850s did the sculptor become more accepting of the type of vocal abolitionism that he had previously disavowed for being too radical.¹¹

- 15 International and personal politics aside, poetry and prose picked up where Powers' narration left off. Once rescued from peril, the *Greek Slave* was given an identity, even a specific name and origins. She got a new lease on life under the name of Garafilia (Garifalia) Mohalb(e)y, stemming from the island of Ipsara/Psara, situated a short distance to the west of Chios. In an 1830s poetry collection (2nd ed. 1837), the American anti-slavery advocate Lydia H. Sigourney published a poem inspired by the statue of the *Greek Slave* and the narration associated with it. The poem, entitled "Garafilia Mohalby," reflects on the girl's fate beyond the day of her liberation: Garafilia's benefactor by the name of Mohalby set her free from the Turks, adopted her, and, in 1827, took her to Boston. In 1830, she succumbed there to tuberculosis at the age of 13. Garafilia inspired art and poetry, and also further support for Greece, especially after her untimely death. Her name became synonymous with that of the grateful and gracious adoptee and "modest," even "tractable" young woman, as in the *Sketches of All Distinguished Women from the Creation to A.D. 1854*, designed by its author, Sarah Josepha Hale, to provide female role models to American girls: "We give her history as an example for young girls" (432). The opening stanza of Sigourney's 3-stanza-long poem, source of inspiration to the idealized biography, reads:

Sweet bird of Ipsara! who fled
From tyrants o'er the tossing sea,
And on the winds of freedom shed
Thy wildly classic melody,
Love at thy tender warbling woke,
A foreign land was home to thee,
And stranger accents fondly spoke
The welcome of paternity.

- 16 The contours of Hellenism and Orientalism are broad, but this paper's point of departure has been quite specific. The paper features two statues, each with a story: first, Marcellus' discovery and "purchase" of the *Venus de Milo* and, secondly, the story of the Greek slave girl from Chios or Psara, embodied in the statue by Powers as well as in the poetic lines inspired by it. These narratives, both situated in Greece's long revolutionary age, thematize two Greek subjects of relevance to the nineteenth-century West: ancient(-style) art and contemporary literature. These prominent themes mark

the larger cultural, ideological, and geopolitical processes involved, focusing on the Western philhellenic “call” and on the Orientalist “il(l)-logic” cause. Thus, these stories, which open up into adventure tales, operate like conduits through which a range of nineteenth-century issues and phenomena related to the Greek Revolt may be examined. Both of the statues and the stories become vectors of knowledge about Greece-in-danger, threatened by the “hostile” Ottoman Empire, but also about the West, its Romantic Hellenism, its burgeoning philhellenism, its expansionist designs on the East, and its tradition of classical scholarship, which fed into the above but, most of all, fueled the underlying quest for Greek continuity that morphs into Western expediency. In the eyes of the professed philhellenes Marcellus and Powers, the “barbaric” and “despotic” Ottoman Empire held captive both the Venus statue and the young Greek girl, worthy descendants of the ancient Greeks but ultimately belonging to the civilized West.

- 17 The Hellenism that Marcellus boasted of saving had to be strictly classical to be compelling. Marcellus and Powers were enamored with an ideal of Greece that was unrealistic and outdated by the start of the nineteenth century. Their peregrinations, in time, space, narrative and even drama, exemplify the West’s search for Greece and the Greeks in their classical image—and the (“disappointing”) discovery of a Greece that they profile as sub-Western. Their revolutionary sympathies did not extend to accepting and protecting—let alone setting free—a viable Hellenism for the modern Greeks. The Greeks populated the narratives of literati and artists, but they always still had to prove themselves: they had to be sufficiently classical to counterbalance the Orientalist image associated with them and also to be deserving of Western support through their armed insurgency of 1821 and its aftermath. Modern Greeks had to demonstrate that, within a few decades and through contact with Western intellectuals, they could become as classical as the “civilized” Western Europeans had supposedly been for centuries.¹² In the fervor of the revolutionary age, however, an antagonistic thinking about the “sullen,” “violent,” and “tyrannical” Eastern enemy came to serve all parties: the Greek revolutionaries of 1821 and also Russia, France, and Britain, which could only reluctantly be convinced to join the struggle “for the cause of the Christian Greeks.” The Great Powers, however, were more motivated by Greece’s antiquity than by the fate of the “earliest Christians.” Greece’s very existence as a modern nation was thus “owed” to its classical past. Revolution entailed a revolving back to past history, a tenacious investment in cultural, linguistic, and ethnic continuity, and a fierce denial of racial mixing. Consequently, modern Greece came about as a restorative act and as an act on display. Because ancient Greece had never been a country, this restorative act focused on Athens as the ideal space for this culture of display, which made Athens metonymic for all of Greece. The decades-long process of fervent Athenocentrism hampered the development of the rest of the modern country. Thus, modern Greece came about as a purification process as well, of occupants, time, space, and even of racial threat, a process that could not viably claim to be entirely pure, let alone disinterested.

4. Conclusion

Some of these alterations [to ancient statues] are sublime. To that beauty imposed by the human brain, by an epoch, or by a particular form of

society, they add an involuntary beauty,
associated with the hazards of history, which is
the result of natural causes and of time.

- Marguerite Yourcenar, "That Mighty Sculptor,
Time"

- 18 This paper has focused on the *Venus de Milo*, the statue of the *Greek Slave*, or "females-in-peril" and their transformation from "discoveries" to collector's prizes to narrated objects of display. Marcellus' writings reveal that complex dynamics of appropriation and display underpinned one man's reporting on how he acquired and handed over—but never let go of—the Venus. The French diplomat, but also obsessed collector, turned the Venus from object into subjective story, into dramatic action. His material find and his rhetoric of rationalization captured an intricate nexus of local and broader power relations. Significantly, they also urge us, as twenty-first-century readers, to recalibrate the myth of Western exceptionalism. When we use the "mirror" of Marcellus' acts and writings, we soon realize they reveal more about French and Western European attitudes than they do about Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures and societies. Marcellus allows us to gauge how contemporary Greece, classical antiquity, and also the Ottoman Empire were configured in the French imagination (and shaken identity) of the nineteenth century. French anxiety over the course that the country's history was taking expressed itself through competitive and even hostile encounters in remote corners of the Eastern Mediterranean.
- 19 The display of Powers' *Greek Slave*, too, was affected by a nexus of geopolitical relations and, in turn, influenced public opinion about them. Both the statues' accompanying narrations offered up pointed cues of where subjectivity lay and of the forces that propelled dramatization. They let us examine the cultural and political motivations behind such writings, the statues' modern histories, and their histories of reception. The guiding themes of subjectivity, observation, and dramatization in the readings and receptions of these statues reflect back on the axes Greek-Oriental-philhellene. The two case studies complicate the history of Hellenism and Orientalism, and help us to broaden definitions based on documented interactions and receptions: the definition of Hellenism as an idea, a destination of literal travel, a sense of metaphorical homecoming or cultural belonging, and the competing figurations of Greekness that Hellenism engendered; the definition of Orientalism as a versatile instrument in the toolkit of the philhellene, to be administered when suiting Western interests. Marcellus utilized all the available tools to codify the new Venus myth, but also the myth of France's renewal. Powers, in turn, codified the myth of Greece's renewal and of the West's protective guardianship over it. As a "remnant" or "ruin," the Venus de Milo was not allowed to become a local agent: she was immediately forced to become an international agent—perhaps best symbolized by the statue's loss of its hands, instruments of agency.
- 20 The subordinate condition in which Marcellus left the Venus statue and all locals or Easterners involved reveals strong imperialist and colonialist motives. The Frenchman's acts mirrored what was happening on the grand representational and geopolitical scale of the first decades of the nineteenth century. The call for imperialist "protection" was sounded by Powers in turn. The West and the Orient were far from closed or autonomous entities, and our study can help us comprehend better how they interrelated by examining processes of exchange, narrative, diplomacy, commerce, and

even complicity. Against this broader backdrop, the statues' stories matter because they qualify today's critical concern with the West's representational and practical dominion over various eastern Others, from Turks to Greeks to pieces of marble.

- 21 A key issue for further investigation would be to ask how the related accounts shaped the intricate mental habits that governed the post-1821 reception of ancient Greek art and of modern art inspired by contemporary Greece. To what extent did new relationships develop between the reader, the viewer, and the actual work of art? Did the gaze of the infatuated Western audiences who, in subsequent decades, filed past the Venus statue or the slave sculpture act as that of a meta-Pygmalion? Was the West-as-Pygmalion observing (if not autopsying) Greece as a country in its marble state, as an intellectual *topos*? Could it look beyond the mass or reservoir of gendered and other *topoi*, captured by the discourse on Venuses, and see a lively modern country and its inhabitants? Or did even the spontaneous Venuses of Chios, the welcoming girls there, need to be imagined as on the brink of doom? The main challenge for today's critical readers, then, remains to address and deconstruct the kind of myth that fed the formation of the modern Greek state, based on its claims to the ancient Greek legacy, while also accepting that some of the very same myths served as sources of inspiration for many opinion-makers and culture-builders in Greece itself. By subjecting these accounts to intensified scrutiny (albeit again on foreign terms), I hope to have shed more and different light on the modern reception of the statues and also on the practice of collecting ancient art, visual and classical references, and exotic travel adventures. Our analysis of the discovery and display of the Venus and the slave statue may become kaleidoscopic for the challenges that beset (attempts at) a cultural understanding of West-East relations through the mid-nineteenth century.
- 22 Studying the agency of Marcellus and Powers may further deepen the questions posed of modern Greek culture and Classical Studies. Both kept up the pretense of contributing to knowledge while, in fact, they contributed to the politics of knowledge—and power (to tap into Said's Foucauldian perspective on the Orientalist discourse). Significantly, the Western European intelligentsia saw their acts as contributions to the fields of Hellenism and Classics, whereas, in essence, they contributed to the growth and strength of Orientalism. Both the Venus and the *Greek Slave* pose a rich challenge to classicists: the statues' reception highlights the imperialist context of antiquarianism and classical scholarship; they undermine the epistemic standing of Classics and reveal its Hellenism to be none other than a set of Pygmalion-style projections. Thus, our study may advance our understanding of a formative part of the history of our discipline may unmask some of the contemporary politics of Classical Studies.
- 23 My hope is, too, that more detailed analyses of West-East physical and mental travels, such as those of Marcellus and Powers, will discourage the binary thinking that has served political and military causes for far too long, and that they will bring the focus back to the intricacies of co-existence in what has been one of the world's most culturally diverse regions through the ages. The study of the complexities of these agents' acts, thoughts, writings, and fictions may help us move beyond our renewed, twenty-first-century tendency to engage in binary posturing. We must, rather, commit to the dialogism, the hybridity, and the syncretism (to use Tziouvas' terms) that have been catalyst impulses within historical Hellenism—and make the effort to first notice them. Here is then where Classics can show its strengths and where the reception of Classics in Modern Greek Studies and Modern Greek Studies *per se* have important roles

to fulfill: attempting to respond to persistent questions and ideological limitations and reductions with creative interpretations fortified by both diachronic and lateral reflections. Together, these fields can keep the axis of Hellenism and Orientalism in a more productive tension.

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NOTES

1. The translations from the French are my own.
2. Edward Said's seminal work, *Orientalism* (1978), still stands as a provocative beginning in this hermeneutic context: it is not a tried and true endpoint but spurs further research and cultural critique. Marcellus' records complement, nuance, and differentiate what Said has laid out. They do so by focusing on ideas in discourse, images, imaginings, and representations in literature, travel writing, and diplomatic reporting, but also on archaeological and collecting practices and on the historicization of such practices against a backdrop of local tensions. Marcellus' treasure hunt (a practice which his elite French contemporaries encouraged) must make us question the depth of his philhellenism and the extent to which philhellenism associated with French imperialism. Therefore, the notion of Hellenism, in forms still practiced by some classicists, needs to be scrutinized for its role in supporting the imperialist and colonialist discourse. See further Van Steen, with extensive bibliographical references. Among the more recent and insightful additions is Exertzoglou.
3. The Venus de Medici and the Apollo Belvedere were among the pieces of booty that were subject to forced restitution. The repatriation to Italy of the two celebrated works of art was the kind of national loss that Marcellus, too, could barely tolerate. Therefore, the Venus de Milo could not have arrived at a better time in the cold political reality of international humiliation for the Louvre, which had become a site of French national and cultural anxiety. Van Steen 25-26.
4. Jockey, too, highlights the extent of Marcellus' myth-making on the subject of the "purchase" of the Venus.
5. See further the important studies by Prettejohn.
6. Ironically, too, in today's Western perception of the ongoing Greek economic and financial crisis, the Orientalist outlook holds currency once more. Greece is often discussed in terms of the Western (re)solution. Some pundits have blamed "Eastern-style" attitudes among the Greeks in their search for the causes underlying the crisis.
7. See further the recent study by Chatziioannou.
8. Nelson speaks of the need for the sculptor to establish a "safe narrative framework" (79).
9. Said: "To Asia are given the feelings of emptiness, loss, and disaster" (56).

10. The text of Aeschylus' *Persians*, also discovered by Marcellus in a clandestine staged reading of 1820 (and described by him), had long made its safe escape to the West and could, in the prerevolutionary reading, be subjected to a non-material (but still unequal) exchange of knowledge and ideology. See Marcellus (1859) and Van Steen. Stathis Gourgouris discusses the "anti-Hellenic" solution of the Western philhellene in more general terms (139, 151). He distinguishes between the "explicit" philhellenism that was enthralled with ancient "ruins and legends" and the philhellenism that sought a "contemporary resurrection of ancient traces" (139). It is this line of thought that allows Gourgouris to equate philhellenism with Orientalism and, therefore, with antihellenic tendencies. In my view, his distinction can productively be expanded by the more clear-cut difference between the ancient vestiges that were, in the early nineteenth century, still rooted in Greek earth and those that had come to be of a "metaphorical" nature (in the double meaning of the word). Both artifacts ("archaeology") and texts (philology) excited the traveling philhellene, but sculpture could still be unearthed and exported from emerging Greece (urgently and forcibly, if necessary), whereas most texts, long uncovered, exerted not a present and material but a symbolic impact. In other words, Marcellus saw the Venus as an artifact but not Aeschylus' tragedy. His praxis of collecting material fragments, however, does intersect with his collecting of thoughts and experiences based on texts. The "discovery" of the classical texts was known to be a shining achievement of the Western Renaissance. The bulk of the texts was already in "safe" Western possession in their physical form as Byzantine manuscripts. The classical literary corpus was no longer contested (material) property, unlike the many artifacts that were shipped off under politically contentious circumstances. By the 1820s, texts were perceived to be portable to and from any location and were thus disassociated from the Greek lands. Printed editions had made them into reproducible repositories of Western knowledge (be it knowledge inevitably reduced or distorted by its compression). In the best-case scenario, texts could be restored or, ironically, "imported" to the Greek lands, not as manuscripts, but as book manuals for sharing knowledge. The discrepancy between Marcellus' treatment of treasure versus text also touches on the transdisciplinary question of the objectivity of "scientific" archaeology versus the (stated) subjectivity of philology. The Frenchman's account lets the reader gauge how and where the prestige-driven Orientalist mode of archaeology (or, rather, counter-archaeology) met the record of the text-based interpretation, which made the representational *tour de force* of the Venus story serve as a rationale agreeable to the West.

11. Nelson 111. In her very insightful chapter, Nelson refers to Powers' "sublimating" the sculpture for locating slavery in the Greek War of Independence but "eclipsing" the slavery of the contemporary American South. Nelson 86. See also Malamud 80-88 and Santelli 152-193.

12. Unfortunately, the Greeks internalized these normative standards: they incorporated them in their definition of Neohellenic patriotism, which drove the nation-building project for another full century (1821-1922). It was precisely this demanding ethos, infused with Orientalist hostility against the Turks, that the clandestine reading of Aeschylus' *Persians* in 1820 captured. Resurrecting grand, moral tragedy was the act of resurrecting the classical fatherland and of having tragedy serve the Enlightenment ideals of liberty, virtue, education, and (nationalistic) patriotism.

ABSTRACTS

This paper focuses on the sculpture of the Venus de Milo, a chance find of 1820, but a token discovery in the fermentation brought on by the growing tensions between the Ottoman administrative hierarchies, the foreign diplomats, the Greek intellectuals and yet aspiring revolutionaries, and the local populations of the Aegean islands. For lack of an ancient history of the Venus, antiquarianism, treasure-hunting, archival evidence, and Greek revolutionary history blend in the statue's new lease on life, which is a Western afterlife in literature and legend as well as in history, from which the islanders of Milos have all but been erased. The Venus de Milo has become an iconic figure, heavily overwritten by aesthetic judgments, adventure stories of movement and migration, and the accounts of personal and political trajectories, all playing out in the upper and Western echelons of imperialist Europe and its classist (and racist) underpinnings.

INDEX

Keywords: Comte de Marcellus, Venus, Venus de Milo, Homer, Hellenism, Chios, Greek Revolution, Hiram Powers, The Greek Slave

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