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***Classica Africana: Directions in the Nascent Study of Black Classicism***

A recent trend in classical scholarship has been the discovery and discussion of black classicism. This paper will survey the scholarship on black classicism, beginning with Michele Valerie Ronnick's 1997 APA panel and its aftermath. I will begin with the 19th century black scholars of the Classics and end with a discussion of the 20th century reception of the Classics in such works as Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. While an emphasis on ability and humanity marked the 19th century careers, 20th century authors were increasingly concerned not primarily with proving their humanity to a white audience, but with addressing their own social concerns in segregation and post-segregation times.

A great deal of work has already been done on black classicists of the 19th century. Ronnick's photographic exhibit, *12 Black Classicists*,<sup>1</sup> gives university audiences an immediately accessible introduction to figures like William Sanders Scarborough (1852-1926), who learned to read Greek after being a slave and went on to write a Greek textbook (*First Lessons in Greek*). Figures such as Scarborough, Edward Wilmot Blyden, and Daniel B. Williams, similar to their predecessor Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784), proved to a skeptical American audience that Negroes could stand alongside the greatest minds. The first stage of scholarship on these 19th century figures has been that of recovery: the recovery not only of the individuals themselves, but also of their somewhat unfortunate mission, namely that of proving their very humanity.

Although the question of Negro humanity should now seem trite and unfortunate, new directions in black classicism could assess the black scholar's unique approach to the Classics. Already in the 19th century, Blyden's Ethiopianism is one example of a black-conscious Classics. His work shows an insistence not on Greek indebtedness to a black Egypt (in the Bernalian vein), but rather a meticulous, philological survey of the texts. Blyden's study, along with the perspective of such figures as W.E.B. DuBois, raises the issue of whether African Americans sometimes ask different questions of the Classics than others. Moving into the twentieth century, we find that authors such as DuBois use classical myth, literature, and the classical perspectives of their black forerunners to address their particular social concerns. DuBois' *Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) uses the myth of Jason and the Argonauts in a manner which Wilson Moses (author of *Afrotopia*, 1998) describes as interpretive rather than descriptive. In a similar vein, Countee Cullen's 1935 *Medea* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* each reinterpret classical mythology from a distinctly African-American perspective. A growing body of scholarship already exists on the relationship blacks and the Classics. As an increasing number of scholars enter the discussion through publications and college courses, it is important to contextualize what has already been done while anticipating new directions.