

History Lesson: A Race Odyssey, by Mary Lefkowitz. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008, 202 pp., \$25.00 hardbound.

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Truth exists and can be known. This once unremarkable conviction is at the core of Mary Lefkowitz's compelling first-person narrative of her decade-long struggle, beginning at Wellesley College in the early nineties but extending well beyond the bucolic shores of Lake Waban, against a cadre of Afrocentrists, postmodernists, devotees of "compensatory politics," and litigious race racketeers. It is a conviction that gives her a distinct advantage over her opponents because it prompts the obvious rhetorical question: which of two combatants in a dispute is more likely to be telling the truth, the one who believes that truth

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exists, or the one who doesn't and claims there are only "competing narratives"?

Lefkowitz is a distinguished classical scholar whose research has been mostly on "the ways in which myth and empirical reasoning intersect in ancient Greek historical writing, and this is probably why...it seemed only natural to want to find out why some people firmly believed that Greek philosophy was stolen from Egypt, even when it so obviously was not." Among the believers in and propagators of the "Stolen Legacy" myth was an Africana [*sic*] studies professor at Wellesley named Anthony Martin, who was telling his students that Aristotle was a thief who pilfered books out of the great library of Alexandria and then presented their ideas as his own. The slight difficulty with this myth is that the Alexandria library was not built until after Aristotle's death. But when Lefkowitz took it upon herself to point this out, she was accused (by Martin and other Afrocentrists) of being a racist, a conservative, a Jew, among other crimes.

Martin is the protagonist of *History Lesson's* foundational incident, which took place in a dormitory in October 1991 and provides a nearly perfect existential realization of his belief

that any dispute involving a black person must be viewed as a racial incident. Martin, one of a group of faculty and students gathered to read *Twelfth Night*, left the reading to go to the men's room. As he left, Martin was asked by a student dorm officer whose job it was to pose the question to unescorted males: "Excuse me, sir, who [*sic*] are you with?" Martin would not stoop to explain, but instead berated the student for being "a fucking bitch, a racist, and a bigot." The student, Michelle Plantec, later recalled: "Martin's reaction was very violent. I don't know how to express how violent his reaction was. Plus, he is a very tall man and he was towering over me, pointing down into my face, and he wasn't saying very nice things. I was very scared and shaking."

Martin, for his part, claimed that her question was typical of the "bigotry" that pervaded the Wellesley campus. To combat this "racist" assault, he marshaled his acolytes among the play readers, "the black community," and the head of the black student organization "Ethos" to retaliate against Plantec. Plantec had a nervous breakdown and, after receiving psychiatric treatment (a fact widely advertised by Martin when he learned of it), dropped out of school. Particulars of the incident did not appear until May 1993, by which time Lefkowitz had become

aware of the lurid myths about the origins of Greek philosophy and the responsibility of Jews for the African slave trade that Martin was teaching in his classes, with the help of a text published by the Nation of Islam. In December 1993 Martin initiated a frivolous lawsuit against Lefkowitz (which dragged on for five years before being tossed out) for her article about the "racist" incident and for damaging his reputation—by showing him ignorant of history.

How, Lefkowitz asks, with startling innocence, could such things have happened at Wellesley, "where we pride ourselves on being a multicultural community, with all the values of tolerance and understanding that the term implies"? But she has already answered this question in describing the political movement, which she had supported, to give black students privileges granted to no other ethnic group through "affirmative action and equal opportunity programs." At Wellesley, these include the right to appoint one black person to serve on any college committee, and to exclude from Ethos and the Africana studies department anyone not of African descent. But inequality is not the best school in which to inculcate equality. It should not have come as a surprise to Lefkowitz that institutionalized affirmative action bred, as she herself admits, "an affirmative action program

for the rewriting of history.” One Wellesley history professor actually came under attack for “hindering diversity” by saying the Holocaust was unique.

One question about Martin that Lefkowitz does not answer: how did the author of, among other masterpieces, *The Jewish Onslaught: Despatches [sic] from the Wellesley Battlefield* (Majority Press, 1993), come to be hired by Wellesley in the first place? Martin was appointed in the sixties, when do-gooders at schools across the country were intent on hiring black faculty without looking closely at credentials. One wonders—if not for long—whether, at Wellesley at least, these individuals have come to recognize that they confused doing good with feeling good about what they were doing.

In 1991 the *New Republic* suggested that Lefkowitz review a slew of books, including the second volume of Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* (Rutgers University Press, 1991), which argued not merely that Greek culture was heavily dependent on earlier cultures in Egypt and the Near East, but had been stolen from Egypt, and that the inhabitants of ancient Egypt were Africans. In her 1992 review essay, the forerunner of *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (Basic Books, 1996), she

demonstrated conclusively that there was no historical evidence that the Greeks ever stole anything from Egypt, including their philosophy. Bernal had gained undeserved authority for his espousal of “the Stolen Legacy” because he flew the flag of the academic Left, depicted European civilization as a pod of muck, and claimed to be attacking racial and religious prejudice—as if this were the only possible explanation for the classicists’ “pro-Greek” position.

It was not long before the Afrocentrists trained their guns on Lefkowitz, and only a woman of remarkable courage—she was receiving chemotherapy for breast cancer at the time—could have withstood and thrown back the assault. The level of discourse among her attackers is epitomized in the sputtering of historian Wilson Jeremiah Moses, who called her “an obscure drudge in the academic backwaters of a classics department.” In the world of faculty time-servers and timid administrators (“the most sensitive region of an academic administration’s anatomy,” she remarks, “is the institutional pocketbook”) bravery is a rare commodity. Lefkowitz’s attackers espoused the (fascist) idea that physiology determines culture, so that knowledge of Africa is something you have to be born into, by African descent. It was a curious

revival of the once-dominant WASP resistance to hiring Jews in English departments: how could a Jew understand or interpret the literature of Christendom? In the course of endless disputes with her adversaries, Lefkowitz challenged the multiculturalist dogma that members of minority groups cannot be racists, pointing out that race professionals like Martin and Wilson had turned themselves into professional racists.

Why, Lefkowitz often asks, did she feel compelled to get at the truth about the relations between the Greeks and the Egyptians? Who would be harmed by being taught what is not true? Her question reminds me of an exchange that once took place over my dinner table between a physician friend and the eminent literary scholar Robert Heilman. The physician had a Ph.D. in English and had published a highly regarded book about Shakespeare when he gave up a desirable tenure-line position to start medical school (at an advanced age). “Why did you do it?” asked Heilman. “Because I wanted to go into a field where mistakes have consequences and can be fatal,” was the response. “Well,” replied Heilman, “they can be fatal in the humanities too, only it takes a longer time for the harm to make itself felt.” That is essentially Lefkowitz’s answer, and it is a good

one. A glance at another book about race-thinking among university professors will explain why: it is called *Hitler’s Professors: The Part of Scholarship in Germany’s Crimes Against the Jewish People* (Yiddish Scientific Institute, 1946), by Max Weinreich.

History Lesson at its best reminds one of Matthew Arnold. Arnold too defended the Greek classics, not against racist yahoos but against positivism and science. On visiting America he was delighted to find that “in colleges like Smith College in Massachusetts, and Vassar College in the state of New York,” young women (“the fair host of the Amazons”) were studying Greek. Arnold also defined himself as “a Liberal, yet...a Liberal tempered by experience, reflection, and renouncement.” That is almost true of Lefkowitz, except, perhaps, for the renouncement. She shows very powerfully the horrendous effects of liberal shibboleths and nostrums—affirmative action, compensatory politics, “diversity,” academic freedom to indoctrinate, multiculturalism, hate speech codes, condescension towards blacks—and yet she can never quite renounce them.

Take, for example, the last of these. From Henry James’ *The Princess Casamassima* (1886) to Lionel Trilling’s “The Other Margaret” (1945), American literature has given

us scathing exposés of the liberal condescension that imputes all bad behavior by the poor and by members of minority groups to their inability to escape the influence of their environment and circumstances. These show that if you really believe in the equality of all members of the human family, you should accord them the same degree of responsibility for their actions that you give to people who read Greek and Latin. Trilling commented acidly on how “liberal and progressive people know that the poor are our equals in every sense except that of being equal to us.”

At one point in her book, Lefkowitz derives satisfaction from the decision of Wellesley’s history department not to count courses in “Africana studies” towards a history major. But what about the mostly black students who are being taught nonsense? Does Wellesley have no obligation to them?

Late in the book, Lefkowitz expresses some misgiving about her evisceration of the ideology of Afrocentrism because she had not realized that “the myth of the Stolen

Legacy had great symbolic value for those who believed in it.” But what about “Creationism”—the (conjectural) teaching of which she often likens to the teaching of Afrocentrism? Doesn’t it have, has it not long had, symbolic value for people who found Milton’s (biblical) account of Adam and Eve as (unlike their Edenic neighbors) “two of far nobler shape erect and tall” a far more livable truth than Darwin’s proposition that our original ancestor was “a hairy quadruped with a tail and pointed ears, probably arboreal in his habits”?

Liberal dogmatism has dominated American campuses for so many decades and with such dictatorialness that even a courageous truth-teller like Mary Lefkowitz at times shows herself eager to placate it. Many readers of *Academic Questions* will likely challenge her with Elijah’s question: “How long halt ye between two opinions?” But since I am not myself a liberal, I don’t insist that people agree with me about everything before I sing their praises and express my admiration, as I certainly do to Mary Lefkowitz.