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# Co-Opted, Cults and the Classics: Highlighting the Magna Mater Cult in Rome

Janessa Reeves  
*Seattle Pacific University*

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Co-Opted, Cults and the Classics: Highlighting the Magna Mater Cult in Rome

by

Janessa Reeves

Faculty Advisor, Dr. Owen Ewald

Second Reader, Dr. Rod Stiling

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### Abstract

This paper argues for a more critical approach to classics, pushing for the de-sanctification of classical antiquity and deconstruction of ‘western civilization’ as a tool able to be co-opted by white supremacist agendas. In the latter part of the paper, I demonstrate what I hope this will look like through analysis of Roman reception of the Mother of the Gods cult, known in Rome as the cult of Cybele or Magna Mater, or the Phrygian cult, and how Roman reactions to the cult reveal xenophobic sentiments and toxic masculinity within the social fabric. Throughout this work, I engage with questions of identity, differentiation, and cultural exchange.

*Key words: Roman reception, Eastern cult, Magna Mater cult, Cybele, galli, ‘western civilization’, Orientalism, gender, classical xenophobia, cultural appropriation, white supremacy, classics, Attis*

## Introduction

The social dynamics of Roman imperialism were messy and complex, involving issues of gender, ethnicity, and class as well as many others. Yet, the reign of the Roman empire is often taught in ‘western’ nations as a series of venerable accomplishments that ‘western civilizations’, as heirs of classical civilization, are endowed with. I believe we need to problematize the legacy of classical civilization rather than idealizing it, in order to confront the darker side of ‘western civilization’ today. While it is treacherous to pass judgement on the Romans by our own standards, it is important to interrogate the darker and more complicated moments in classical history in order to undermine the problematic exaltation with which classical civilization has traditionally been approached (in scholarship and general understandings) and to approach classical studies more critically, as the complicated and human subject that it is.

This paper is an attempt to contribute to this deconstructive work. First, I will discuss some examples of the coopting of classical antiquity by radical racist extremists. Then I will explain how the insufficiently critical study of classics contributes to this by sanctifying classical civilization and buying into the myth of continuity between classical antiquity and ‘western civilization’, the latter of which will be debunked as a constructed identity with insidious implications.

In the second part of my paper, I will apply this idea of a more critical classical scholarship to studying the reception of the Phrygian cult in Rome. Here I will argue that the adoption of the Magna Mater, the deity at the center of this cultic worship and otherwise known as Cybele, constitutes an act of cultural appropriation on the part of the Romans because of the opportunistic incorporation of her into their pantheon coupled with their dismissal of the cultic elements that they deemed too alien. I will identify the xenophobia latent within their

disapproval, as well as some of the ways this reflected and reinforced problematic constructs of Roman masculinity. Finally, I will end with some brief comments on past scholarship of the Magna Mater cult in Rome concerning how it has perpetuated the patterns I identified above as well as othering cultures of ‘the East’.

### Red Pill and Other Extremes

Classicist Donna Zuckerberg’s recent book *Not All Dead White Men* calls attention to the coopting of classics by the online alt-right community often called the “Red Pill.” This self-adopted title is a reference to the film *The Matrix*, where the red pill represents awakening from a false reality. A characteristic of this online echo-chamber of conservative, nearly all white, men is the use of classical history and literature which, with the cultural capital it carries, they deploy to justify their white supremacy.

In her book, Zuckerberg explores this problematic coopting of classical texts and culture by the alt-right. She writes that “far-right communities...have been increasingly using artifacts, texts, and historic figures evocative of ancient Greece and Rome to lend cultural weight to their reactionary vision of ideal white masculinity”.<sup>1</sup> They have weaponized “the same texts that are for us sources of beauty and brutality, subjects of commentary and critique”, which are then deployed by members of the Red Pill as “proof of the intellectual and cultural superiority of white maleness.”<sup>2</sup> They reference authors such as Ovid and Marcus Aurelius “to bolster their credibility”<sup>3</sup> because classical authors such as these have been implicitly and explicitly canonized as ‘the best’. From Ovid’s work, rife with stories of sexual assault, the Red Pill

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Donna Zuckerberg, “How to Be a Good Classicist Under a Bad Emperor”, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 3.

derives their manual for ‘picking up chicks’. The men of the Red Pill also adopt an oversimplified, distorted version of Stoicism and congratulate themselves on their believed ability to rationally think and not succumb to the excesses of emotion that they attribute to feminists and people of color.

The Red Pill use their version of Stoicism to argue that women are overly emotional, depicting them as inferior and incapable of rational decisions or intellectualism. In scholarly circles, however, Stoicism is considered one of the more feminist ancient philosophies.<sup>4</sup> For example, Musonius the Stoic philosopher advocated for teaching women as well as men.<sup>5</sup> There are qualifications to this, though. Ancient texts concerning Stoicism still reveal some regressive interpretations of gendered virtue, such as differentiation between the public and private spheres for men and women, respectively.<sup>6</sup>

What is crucial here, though, is the fact that the Red Pill ‘philosophers’ do not critically engage with the full breadth and depth of the Stoic texts. Instead, they “divorce passages from their original context, so as to make them seem universally applicable”.<sup>7</sup> This ignorant selectivity enables them to construct ideas, such as the superiority over women and people of color based on emotional display mentioned above. The Red Pill believes they can perpetuate such distorted, oversimplified beliefs and this behavior because they are vindicated by the unassailability of the classics, to which they perceive themselves the heirs.

As Zuckerberg acknowledges, this recent ultra-conservative movement’s claim to classical civilization is not the first, “it is only the latest development in the millennia-long use of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 63.

classical antiquity to promote reactionary ideologies.”<sup>8</sup> For example, Adolph Hitler’s speeches were rife with references to the imperial greatness of Rome, and his architect Albert Speer extensively emulated classical styles in Nazi architecture. Speer writes in his memoirs that,

“Hitler liked to say that the purpose of his building was to transmit his time and its spirit to posterity. Ultimately, all that remained was to remind men of the great epochs of history was their monumental architecture, he would philosophize. What had remained of the emperors of Rome? What would still bear witness to them today, if their buildings had not survived?”<sup>9</sup>

It is clear here that Hitler fancied himself an heir of Rome, obligated to recover the greatness of the past. Throughout his memoirs, Speer names a plethora of ancient sites as inspiration for his work, not just because of their artistic appeal, but because of the power and domination they connoted. Hitler, Speer, and other Nazis were attempting to link themselves to the legacy of classical antiquity because of the authority and cultural sublimation which has been attributed to Greco-Roman culture. The Red Pill is attempting the same: to align themselves with the classics for the cultural capital that the classics hold.

While the Red Pill is a relatively small, radicalized fringe group, their coopting classics has been enabled by broader trends in the study of history and classics. It is a caricature of what traditional classical scholarship communicates more implicitly, more politely. Scholarship and popular understandings of classical antiquity and modern ‘western civilization’ have constructed and maintained a framework which privileges the study of classics not for the content but for the gleaming reputation it has. Within this framework also, a deceptively direct line of continuity is

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>9</sup> Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs by Albert Speer*, (New York, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1970), 55.

drawn from classical antiquity—through medieval Europe—to ‘western civilization’ today, which is depicted as a monolithic unity of European and North American culture, politics, and otherwise.

### Canonizing the Classics

The field of classics has historically been quite elitist because of the perceived elevation of the material and gate-keeping practices. Even the origin of the term ‘classics’ is elitist in nature. Zuckerberg explains that the etymological origins are from around 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., when the word *classis* was used to delineate the six groups or classes of the Roman population, and from this, the most elite and well-off were the *classici*, or ‘classics’.<sup>10</sup>

The way Greco-Roman culture is traditionally spoken of characterizes it as the paragon of civilization. It is lauded as the foundation of the modern West. Historian Francis Sidney Marvin, a historian and author, illustrates these sentiments explicitly in his book *The Unity of Western Civilization*. He writes, “our debt to the Greeks” is “(a) the very notion of civilization, (b) the idea of its realization through knowledge, (c) the ideal of freedom as the inner spirit of true civilization.”<sup>11</sup> Several pages later, he continues to sanctimoniously laud the Greeks and their contributions, as well as claiming the European right to that legacy:

“It is with the advent of the Greek that the seal is placed upon the claim of the Mediterranean to be the birthplace of the highest type of human civilization, the centre from which a unity of the spirit was to spread, until, by material force as well as by the conquering mind, the European or Western man was recognized in the forefront of the race.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 23.

<sup>11</sup> Francis Sydney Marvin, *The Unity of Western Civilization: Essays*, (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 8.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

Marvin encourages his readers to take on a posture of gratitude when studying the classics.<sup>13</sup> These effusive passages and the reverential way he approaches classics is characteristic of traditional scholarship, which seems to so often include some such assertion of the greatness of the classics.

By positing Greek and Roman civilizations as the apex of what humans are capable of, and the most sublime of human accomplishments, the canon takes on a cultural capital that is more socio-political than we give it credit for. As Zuckerberg says, “the Western Classics are valued more for being Western and classical than they are for their content.”<sup>14</sup> Some classicists might clutch their pearls and primary texts at such a statement, seeing it as an attack on the integrity of the classics. But this argument does not assert that the classics are not worth being studied. I hope the fact that I have dedicated an entire thesis to this subject is evidence enough that I do not think the classics should be utterly demolished in the face of changing standards for social justice. What I am arguing is that when the canon of classics becomes taken for granted and elevated above even its content, it reveals the cultural hierarchy and motivation behind it.

Establishing this canon and privileging the body of classical art, literature, philosophy, and culture as the apex of human intellect leads to classics being studied not for its content, but for its attributed cultural sublimation. This exaggerated elevation of the classics is not benign, it automatically devalues other cultures and civilizations. This difference can be used to fuel, justify, and legitimize white supremacy and other forms of superiority. The field of classics emerged around the time that the ideas of biological racism began to be established, as I will demonstrate soon. We find implicit and explicit racial implications in historical scholarship

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>14</sup> Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 35.

about classical antiquity and ‘western civilization’ which reveals the dangers that I am suggesting.

The writings of Theodore Lothrop Stoddard, an American author, serve as another illustration of the canonization of classical antiquity. His work, however, much more directly asserts the white supremacy which this canonization can engender. Stoddard was a white supremacist with ties both to the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi regime who clamored for eugenics on premises of biological racism. The particular work of his that I will quote in this section, entitled *The Revolt Against Civilization; the Menace of the under Man*, is a racist polemic against inter-racial reproduction, which he believes is impoverishing the genetic integrity of whites. He leans heavily on the exceptionalism of classical antiquity, and therefore ‘western civilization’ as its heir, because he believes also that the level of civility of a culture reflects the very biological value of its people.

Stoddard, like many others, seeks to elevate the classical ‘greats’ above any other human thinker or actor. He asks, “can we show greater philosophers than Plato or Aristotle, greater scientists than Archimedes or Ptolemy, greater generals than Caesar or Alexander, greater poets than Homer or Hesiod...?”<sup>15</sup> He states also that the success of civilization hinges on “individuals capable of sustaining this elaborate complex and of handling it on to a capable posterity”.<sup>16</sup> Between these two points, he asserts quite clearly that it is the inherent superiority of those individuals that enabled them to achieve the level of civilization which they did. There is an insidious component of biological racism assumed here. The “use of almost exclusively white

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<sup>15</sup> Lothrop Stoddard, *The Revolt against Civilization: the Menace of the under Man*, (New York, Scribners Sons, 1924), 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

male exemplars” makes male whiteness the gold standard of civilization and success.<sup>17</sup> Even if ancients such as Ptolemy or Septimius Severus did not think of themselves as white, they have been whitewashed by those like Stoddard who seek to identify with them and claim their inheritance.

The inherent superiority of classical authors, thinkers, and culture—already primed by the elitist elevation classics receives as a field—is implied or subconscious more than we like to acknowledge. It is not only apparent in explicitly fascist writings or contexts, but subtly reveals itself in the attribution of value to certain texts and authors, value which transcends appreciation of the content and nearly deifies the human source. And as I suggested near the beginning of this paper, this value and its canon is transmitted to ‘western civilization’ through a constructed myth of commonality. Let us turn now to tracing how that linear continuity from that canon of classical civilization to ‘western civilization’ today has been established and maintained.

#### Debunking the Myth of Linear Continuity from Antiquity to ‘the West’

The earliest references of the term ‘western civilization’ can be found in scholarship from the 1840s.<sup>18</sup> As it took shape through further use, it was tied to ideas of liberty, democracy, and the enlightenment. Classical antiquity was not “yoked” to the idea of ‘western civilization’ until the 1890s and early 1900s.<sup>19</sup> Considering the context in which this term arose—in Europe and North America during this time—particularly as a period of intense global imperialism and just after the rise of theories of biological racism.

Classicist Rebecca Futo Kennedy argues that this construction of ‘western civilization’ was built on settler-colonialism, Christianity, and whiteness. She classifies it as an imagined

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<sup>17</sup> Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 80.

<sup>18</sup> Rebecca Futo Kennedy, “On the History of ‘Western Civilization,’ Part 1”, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

community (a term coined originally by Benedict Anderson), which is held so tightly by those who believe in it because nothing else expansively binds together the people who hark back to this heritage and the disintegration of this identity would remove their ability to relegate others to exteriority, or ‘other-ness’.<sup>20</sup> Part of the function of the concept of ‘western civilization’ is to extend interiority, or ‘us-ness’ to North American countries, especially the United States of America, through this constructed shared identity based on whiteness and a fabricated narrative.

Now that ‘western civilization’ has been debunked as a construct, we must still investigate how the term has been used, as that is the main topic of concern here for me. In the sections above, I explained how classical scholarship has nearly deified antiquity. Given that ‘western civilization’ is a construction and the term was not introduced until the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and was certainly not anticipated by the ancients to the extent it exists today), how do modern people find continuity with such a distant civilization?

Medieval Europe is typically posited as the vessel of this continuity, despite the fact that many articles of classical learning, art, and science were preserved and added to by Islamic cultures. In Marvin’s work *The Unity of Western Civilization*, he writes that “the next stage in unity was the mediaeval [sic] Church, which inherited the framework of the Roman Empire and extended the area of moral and civilized life which Rome had initiated.”<sup>21</sup> An important historical event within that is the Crusades, which are just one iteration of the clash between ‘the West’ and ‘the East’, a dichotomy born in part from the conceptualization of ‘western civilization’. Certainly, we cannot deny that there were many elements of classical civilization—religious, artistic, cultural, and otherwise—which were emulated by medieval Europe. But any assertion

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Marvin, *The Unity of Western Civilization*, 25.

that medieval Europe was somehow united by any means, or that the pieces of classical antiquity that survived there primed Europe to rise again as the second Rome, is a retroactive projection of colonialism and white supremacy.

This connection drawn between Greco-Roman civilization and ‘the West’ leads to an overstated relatability with the ancient world. Marvin writes that, “the history of classical antiquity is the history of the youth of the modern world, of the formation of the now latent but still potent hopes, fear, designs, and thoughts which constitute the substratum of the European mind; how this unites a divided Europe and affords a ground of hope for a restored and deepened union.”<sup>22</sup> He also claims that the Greco-Roman World “was the nucleus from which the Western world of modern civilization has been developed.”<sup>23</sup> Stoddard writes that, “in Europe, a great civilizing tide set in, first displaying itself in the ‘Classic’ civilization of Greece and Rome, and persisting down to the ‘Western Civilization’ of our own days.”<sup>24</sup> The Greeks and Romans

“are largely the stuff of which our present selves and our present world are made. Not merely, I repeat, in the sense that then were the foundations of both laid, not merely in the sense that we are heirs to the labours [sic] of our ancestors. We *are* the Greeks and the Romans, made what we now are by their deeds and thoughts and experiences, our world their world, at a later stage of an evolution never interrupted but always one and single.”<sup>25</sup>

This sentiment that ‘western civilization’ is so deeply tied to classical antiquity means that the relationship between modern ‘westerners’ and the classical past becomes filial and personal.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>24</sup> Stoddard, *The Revolt against Civilization*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Marvin, *The Unity of Western Civilization*, 72.

Because of this presumed relatability, which is rooted in ideologies of superiority revealed by the origin of the term ‘western civilization’, some people who heavily buy into that narrative “are positioning themselves as the defenders of Western Civilization.”<sup>26</sup> An illustrative quote from an article entitled “An Establishment Conservative’s Guide to the Alt-Right” by Allum Bokhari and Milo Yiannopoulos reads,

“attempts to scrub western history of its great figures are particularly galling to the alt-right, who in addition to the preservation of western culture, care deeply about heroes and heroic virtues. This follows decades in which left-wingers on campus sought to remove the study of ‘dead white males’ from the focus of western history and literature curricula... to a natural conservative, such cultural vandalism may just be their highest priority.”<sup>27</sup>

In this quote we see that Bokhari and Yiannopoulos, like many other conservatives across the spectrum, perceive recent social justice movements within academia as “cultural vandalism”.

There is a similar quote from *Thirty Seven*, a book by Quintus Curtius (the pseudonym of a Red Pill writer), which reads,

“one can even imagine a future where classical knowledge will be driven underground, purged from schools, or bowdlerized, as not being in tune with modern feminism and political correctness. The degradation of humanistic learning has come as a direct result of the feminization of American society. We cannot permit this to happen. The commissars of modern culture don’t want you

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<sup>26</sup> Zuckerberg, “How to be a Good Classicist”.

<sup>27</sup> Qtd., Ibid.

to know too much about history, or about how things were like in previous eras.”<sup>28</sup>

The above quotes are in reaction to waves of feminism, social justice movements, and what they pejoratively call ‘political correctness’ that seek to deconstruct the cultural and social hierarchies that are reinforced by the canonization of the classics. Writers like Bokhari and Yiannopoulos feel so vehemently defensive of the classics because they overestimate the proximity of that relationship, so challenges to the academically-sanctioned superiority of the classics becomes a direct attack on their own constructed identity as members of ‘western civilization’.

That is the position of the radical right wingers in the Red Pill, but similar defensive sentiments have been expressed in more mainstream and academic settings. For example, Iowa U.S. Representative Steve King made some concerning comments recently in an interview. He said, “white nationalist, white supremacist, Western civilization — how did that language become offensive?”<sup>29</sup> He also added, “Why did I sit in classes teaching me about the merits of our history and our civilization?”<sup>30</sup> In the words of two scholars of history and medieval studies in an article by the Washington Post, “King’s defense of ‘Western civilization’ does the same work [as violent white supremacists], especially when placed alongside his long history of racist statements. It just does that work more politely.”<sup>31</sup> In his comments, King literally aligned ‘Western civilization’ with white supremacy. That is so telling of what ‘western civilization’ implies, although it is not often addressed as explicitly as it was by King.

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<sup>28</sup> Qtd., Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Qtd., Trip Gabriel, “A Bullhorn of Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric, Long Before Trump Started,” (*New York Times*, 2019), paragraph 14.

<sup>30</sup> Qtd., David Perry and Matthew Gabriele, “Steve King Says He Was Just Defending ‘Western Civilization.’ That’s Racist, Too.”, (*The Washington Post*, 2019) paragraph 1.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., paragraph 7.

Another concerning event occurred at a panel on the Future of Classics during the most recent Society for Classical Studies and Archaeological Institute of America joint conference in San Diego this past January, 2019. During the Q&A portion of the panel, an independent scholar named Mary Frances Williams railed against the devaluing of classical canon and destabilizing impact of social justice movement. Her comments carried racist undertones, coded language, and even an explicitly racist statement about panelist Dr. Dan-el Padilla Peralta, speculating that he was hired because he is African American.<sup>32</sup> Williams voiced concerns about the encroachment of social justice in the classics field, claiming that it has led to reducing the languages taught and devaluing the exceptional works of the ancient authors.

Williams then called classicists to defensive action. She said, “maybe we should start defending our discipline in of itself [sic.] as saying it’s western civilization, it matters because it’s the West.”<sup>33</sup> She followed that with, “we need to stand up for it and say, ‘we are western civ’” and “if we’re not western civ “then we might as well just shut down then”.<sup>34</sup> Her appeals to the “classic classics”<sup>35</sup> referenced liberty, democracy, freedom<sup>36</sup>, and the inherent value of “the greats”<sup>37</sup> as reasons why the field of classics itself is valuable against the perceived attack of social justice-based scholarship. She even went so far as to try to talk over Dr. Peralta’s response, putting words in his mouth and questioning him, was he saying that people of color are “not capable” of classical scholarship for the sake of classical scholarship?<sup>38</sup> I include this

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<sup>32</sup> “SCS Annual Meeting (2019): ‘The Future of Classics’ Unedited Full Panel,” YouTube video, 2:11:59, “Society for Classical Studies,” February 14, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcJZCVemn-4>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., (45:58-46:07).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., (46:20-46:31).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., (47:09-47:12).

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., (46:13-46:19).

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., (47:34-47:36).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., (49:29-49:31).

anecdote and quotes from Williams' diatribe to illustrate that the prejudices tangled up in the perceived superiority of the classics and in the conceptualization of 'western civilization' is not restricted to Klu Klux Klan members and Red Pill writers.

There have been some attempts in traditional classical scholarship to push back on the notion of filial similarity with antiquity. Franz Cumont, one of the most foundational early classical religious studies scholars, acknowledges this inclination slightly critically when he writes,

“we are fond of regarding ourselves as the heirs of Rome, and we like to think that the Latin genius, after having absorbed the genius of Greek, held an intellectual and moral supremacy in the ancient world similar to the one Europe now maintains, and that the culture of the peoples that lived under the authority of the Caesars was stamped forever by their strong touch. It is difficult to forget the present entirely and to renounce aristocratic pretensions.”<sup>39</sup>

This at least acknowledges some awareness of the dynamics at play, of sanctifying the classics and associating ourselves too naively with them, but I believe it does not argue strong enough for the deconstruction of 'western civilization' as an identity.

As Kennedy points out, removing the language of 'western civilization' will not demolish the history and historical entrenchment in racial superiority which our field has been (rightfully) accused of. It will, however, divorce the study of classics further from the white supremacist agenda and remove that lifeline to the ancients which they hold so dear. Dr. Peralta said it boldly and beautifully in his response to the personal attack of Mary Frances Williams when he said that

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<sup>39</sup> Franz Cumont, *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, (New York, Dover Publications, 1956), 1.

“if that is in fact the vision that affirms you in your white supremacy, I want nothing to do with. I hope the field dies that you’ve outline and that it dies as swiftly as possible.”<sup>40</sup> Although this sentiment might feel extreme to some, I agree that the racist, colonial damage that our field has wrought must be properly accounted for. If we content ourselves with an un-critical classics that takes its texts at face value without reading against the grain for the stories that are being excluded, we are complicit in the use of classical and then ‘western’ civilizations to exclude or even commit violence against people in the present.

Pointing out the flaws in the Roman imperialist system does not make the poetry of Virgil any less evocative or the construction of the Pantheon any less stunning. It does not have to be a demolition of appreciation or a personal attack. I will acknowledge that I understand it can be hard for academics, particularly, not to feel a defensiveness when there is the sense that interest in classics and history at large is shrinking and not to become personally aligned or associated with the content that they spend their lives studying. My hope here is that classical scholarship can be conducted in a more self-aware way.

All of this requires candid reflection on why we study classics. Do we study them simply by virtue of their ‘western civilization’ legacy and ascribed cultural prominence? Do we study them because we find the Greeks and Romans relatable and/or aspire to their greatness? How much are we motivated by perceived sameness or the cultural capital that the classics hold? Zuckerberg issues a direct call to challenge those (and ourselves even) who esteem the classics solely for the fact that they perceive it as the foundation of ‘western civilization’. This deconstructive work requires also that we approach both the critical study of classics and critical

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<sup>40</sup> “SCS Annual Meeting (2019): ‘The Future of Classics’ Unedited Full Panel,” (49:42-49:52).

observance of the modern world as the study of people and their institutions, drawing analytical connections from the content of that study and not from constructed commonality. The approach that Donna Zuckerberg envisions is “neither uncritically admiring or rashly dismissive.”<sup>41</sup> This requires, to an extent, a judgmental position which has been underrepresented in the field because, given the commonality generally assumed between the ancients and ‘the West’ today, implies a criticism of the self.

We must take care not to project modern frameworks for right and wrong, values of inclusivity (which ‘the ancients’ may not have shared) onto the past, but it is productive to prod at established understandings and offer different interpretations. In the rest of my paper, I hope to demonstrate this method of scholarship. I will apply the term ‘appropriation’, with its modern connotation, to the adoption of the Anatolian deity Cybele into the Roman pantheon. The modern connotation I am referring to is the idea of cultural appropriation often applied to African-American popular culture in the United States, where the mainstream, dominant culture co-opts certain aspects of a more marginalized culture while concurrently devaluing the members of that marginalized culture. It is a self-serving dynamic which is enabled by power imbalances between the two cultures.

These are the reasons why I believe the term Orientalism can be applied to the case study of Cybele’s cult in Rome: because, as I will demonstrate, the Romans (especially the elite) naturalized the figure of Cybele and built themselves up through associations with her cultivated prestige, but vehemently disapproved of some aspects of her cultic worship which were

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<sup>41</sup> Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 189.

perceived as foreign and destabilizing. Sentiments of xenophobia and the pervasion of toxic masculinity<sup>42</sup> in Roman society contributed to the suppression of those foreign elements.

Applying more modern terms such as cultural appropriation, xenophobia, and toxic masculinity which are born from our modern understandings may strike a nerve with establishment classicists. But as I will demonstrate in the second part of my paper, these concepts in and of themselves are not strictly limited to their modern context, as they describe cultural dynamics which I argue can be compared to similar trends in antiquity. If those who see ‘western civilization’ as the modern incarnation of Greco-Roman civilization insist on doing so, at the least I hope that identifying ancient appropriation, xenophobia, and toxic masculinity will enable ‘the West’ to better face its own such issues. If one presumes to inherit the wisdom and *virtus* of Marcus Aurelius, the least they can do is acknowledge the problematic social ills which were also present in Rome.

### Highlighting the Cult of Cybele

The questions I will be exploring in this section involve the dynamics of Roman identity and otherness framed by the incorporation of the Anatolian mother goddess Cybele into the Roman pantheon. I am interested in how the manifestation of this Phrygian religion (the cult of Cybele, also known as the Magna Mater cult) in Rome conformed to and challenged the Roman disposition. In investigating these dynamics, what I seek to emphasize most is the narrative constructed from history and myth, a narrative which contributed to Roman self-definition using differentiation from the other. I will argue that the paradoxical Roman reception of the figure of

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<sup>42</sup> The definition of toxic masculinity I am operating under is one quoted by Donna Zuckerberg in *Not All Dead White Men*. It comes from psychiatrist Terry Kupers and reads, “the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence”, qtd. 13.

Cybele, as well as her eunuch priesthood, reveal xenophobic sentiments and evidence of toxic masculinity.

In this section of my paper, I will start by framing a general understanding of Eastern cults in Rome, of which Cybele's cult is one. I will then discuss particularities about Cybele's cult which are pertinent to this discussion, most notably her prominence in the Roman origin myth codified in Virgil's *Aeneid*. I will then discuss the way the *galli*, Cybele's Phrygian eunuch priesthood, served to define *romanitas*, or Romanness. Finally, I will include a brief discussion of problematic ways past scholarship concerning Eastern cults in Rome has reinforced the othering of Eastern cultures. Threaded through all of these specific discussions are multiple overlapping dichotomies—between the Roman and the foreign; the more institutionalized forms of Magna Mater cultic worship and the more fringe manifestations; Cybele herself and the *galli*—which serve to reinforce Roman imperial and patriarchal convention.

### Eastern Cults in Rome

First, let us establish an understanding of the phenomenon of foreign cult practices within Rome itself. There were many other 'oriental' religions, such as the cults of Isis and Serapis, Adonis and Atagartis, as well as others, which were brought to Rome over the course of the expansion of the *imperium*. This exchange occurred through the movement of provincial peoples into Rome, free and enslaved, as well as the movement of military men, from the fringes of the empire where they were stationed, back to the center.<sup>43</sup> The fact that Roman soldiers were one vessel of this transfusion endowed the cults with at least some sense of belonging, given that they were transmitted to Rome through returning Romans along with the expected influx of

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<sup>43</sup> Robert Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, (Malden, Blackwell Publishing, 1996), 6.

people from the provinces. Because of this dynamic—of Romans abroad adopting cultic practices and bringing them back home—the cults arrived in Rome somewhat Hellenized.<sup>44</sup> This is revealed by the Greek language and imagery which characterized the cults in Rome.<sup>45</sup> This is also self-evident upon looking at Roman artistic representations of Cybele which unequivocally conform to Greco-Roman artistic convention. In addition, some features of the processions, the use of Greek language in hymns, and the tympanum as a Greek attribute are evidence of this. The deities also were given Latin names, and the hymns were sung in the dominant language of the day even within the Roman *imperium*: Greek.<sup>46</sup> In these ways, the Romans naturalized the cultic worship to an extent.

The religious transfusion both served to expand the meaning of *romanitas* and demanded that native Romans cope with a diversifying empire. Eric Orlin, professor of Classics at the University of Puget Sound, writes that “the addition of new cults has therefore been viewed in the light of the growing Roman power, an expansion of the divine pantheon to match the expansion of territory and citizens.”<sup>47</sup> Concurrently, however, diversification triggered a Roman “crisis of identity”.<sup>48</sup> Livy’s texts especially, written during the Augustan Age, “frequently betray a concern about what it meant to be a Roman in the age of Augustus”.<sup>49</sup> This anxiety is evidence that the shift from Republic to Empire necessitated a concerted effort to self-define. Livy had a puritanical view of Roman religion. He was wary of, even hostile to, foreign influences and was occupied with determining the proper ‘Roman’ worship.<sup>50</sup> These sentiments

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<sup>44</sup> Lynn Roller, *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999), 295.

<sup>45</sup> Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 6.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>47</sup> Eric M. Orlin, *Foreign Cults in Rome: Creating a Roman Empire*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

contributed to the stark distinctions made between foreign cultic worship and institutionalized Roman religion.

The language differentiating native Roman religion from foreign religions reinforces the dichotomous separation between the familiar and the foreign. The most prominent terms are *religio* and *superstitio*, respectively. The former, *religio*, was the proper, traditional worship of the pantheonic gods. The latter, *superstitio*, was, as historian Robert Turcan writes, “exotic and suspect”<sup>51</sup>. *Religio* was regulated by moderation, reason, and elite religious officials. *Superstitio* was primarily practiced by those on the fringes of society and included ecstatic rituals and sensational spirituality which conflicted with Roman propriety. *Superstitio* was associated with “the fringe practices of prophecy and occultism, the techniques of mental exaltation, of direct contact with the supernatural and the sacred.”<sup>52</sup> The Roman religion was characterized by restraint and hierarchy, and whether or not the actual practice of the fringe cultic religions was actually as ecstatic and unruly as the ancient Roman sources make them out to be, they irrefutably are branded in that way in the majority of contemporary texts. This depiction is more pertinent to my discussion, because while it is an imperfect source of the cults’ actual manifestation, the Roman depictions reveal the Roman attitudes which I am interrogating.

Another reading of religious differentiation that can be applied here is Hugh Bowden’s model of imagistic versus doctrinal modes of religion. Bowden describes the imagistic mode as much more dramatic, ecstatic, episodic rituals rather than the more institutionalized practices of doctrinal religion.<sup>53</sup> While he hesitates to describe Roman religion as thoroughly doctrinal, he does apply the ‘imagistic’ label to the mystery cults, such as Cybele’s. Some core features of

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<sup>51</sup> Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 10.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>53</sup> Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010), 15-7.

doctrinal religions, such as existing in more hierarchical communities and having more structure, are applicable to mainstream Roman religion. What is important in this framework of classification of religions is the connotation of primitiveness which accompanies imagistic religion. The characterization of the Phrygian worshippers in contemporary texts does seem in some places to imply primitiveness, evidenced by lack of reason and self-control. I will explore this in much more detail later, when I discuss the textual references to the *galli* and their practices.

### The Particularity and Tensions of the Magna Mater: Cult and State Sponsorship

The deity whose cult is the subject of this paper goes by many names, but Cybele and Magna Mater are the most prominent in Roman sources so these are the labels I will use most, particularly Cybele for the sake of brevity. Cybele's cult spread into Greece long before it reached Rome. There is evidence of Phrygian cult worship there in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.<sup>54</sup> Roman narratives maintain that after the Second Punic War, directed by a mandate from the Sibylline Oracles, the Senate requested that the king of Pergamum send a sacred black stone which was associated with Cybele because the Oracles had decreed that its presence in Rome would enable them to successfully defend themselves against Hannibal's campaigns.<sup>55</sup> This took place in 204 B.C.E., marking Cybele as the first foreign god to be adopted officially and consecrated in the mainstream Roman religion.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 29.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 35; Jacob Latham, "'Fabulous Clap-Trap': Roman Masculinity, the Cult of Magna Mater, and Literary Constructions of the Galli at Rome from the Late Republic to Late Antiquity," (*The Journal of Religion*, January 2012), 86-7; Mary Beard, "The Roman and the Foreign: The Cult of the 'Great Mother' in Imperial Rome" in *Shamanism, History, and the State* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996), 168.

<sup>56</sup> Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 28.

This anecdote requires an important disclaimer. Lynn Roller casts doubt on the historicity of this story in *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele*. She asserts that Hannibal had already been fairly unsuccessful in his campaigns to conquer Italy and was already planning to withdraw, which undermines the veracity of this narrative.<sup>57</sup> Roller points out that the literary sources that codify this story appear later, such as Cicero and Livy. Cicero was writing in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C.E. and Livy straddled the shift from B.C.E. to C.E. By this time, it was already tacitly agreed mythological canon that Cybele's presence had saved Rome from Hannibal.<sup>58</sup> There was also not consensus in ancient sources about her geographic origin. The dominant contender was Pessinous, but some asserted that she came from Pergamon or Mount Ida.<sup>59</sup> This dubious connection between historically factual events and the socio-political narrative positing Cybele as the protector of Rome makes it even more apparent that the motives and functions of that narrative must be studied critically rather than accepted as factual. The questionable historicity here does not derail my discussion, because I am more concerned with cultural identities and narratives, but it is a necessary caveat to include.

In honor of the events discussed above, verifiable or not, Rome held the Megalesian games each year from April 4<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup>, celebrating her arrival to the Palatine.<sup>60</sup> While Cybele was the first foreign deity to be recognized by the mainstream Roman religion and gain honors such as state-sponsored festivities, there are many precedents of other deities, such as Asclepius and Pythian Apollo, who were brought to Rome to serve Rome's needs.<sup>61</sup> Roller asserts that

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<sup>57</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 266.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

<sup>60</sup> Turcan, *The Cults of The Roman Empire*, 37.

<sup>61</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 280-281.

these appropriations were orchestral, contrived, and performative.<sup>62</sup> The Romans appropriated these deities for socio-political reasons, to make statements, and to cultivate associations.

In terms of Cybele's reception in Rome (keeping in mind the earlier discussion of Roman reception of Eastern cults), there are two prominent theories regarding the dynamics at play in the case study of Cybele's cult specifically. Mary Beard identifies both theories in her essay "The Roman and the Foreign: The Cult of the 'Great Mother' in Imperial Rome". There is the idea that Roman reception of the Magna Mater cult went through periods of acceptance and discrimination correlated to the dispositions of the emperors. There is also a school of thought arguing that the cult was Romanized, rendering it more palatable to the Roman consciousness after it was appropriated from modern-day Turkey. However, Beard offers a third framework. She emphasizes the tension between the Eastern cult in Rome and the native Romans, presenting it as a nuanced reflection of shifting definitions of what it meant to be Roman.<sup>63</sup> This relationship was plagued, Beard says, by a deep uncertainty about the Roman identity.<sup>64</sup>

The relationship between Roman self-definition and the cult of Cybele is particular because the figure of Cybele maintains a prominent role in the Roman origin myth. Cybele acts as one of Aeneas' divine protectors, in both Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Fasti*, on his epic journey to settle in Italy and begin the trajectory of Rome's foundation. For example, Aeneas' ships are constructed from the Mother's pine trees, making her the provider of some of his initial needs and a protector for the journey.<sup>65</sup> The imagery of her pine trees forming the hull of his boats, something of a cradle and protective casing, is profound. In a later scene of the *Aeneid*, Cybele

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 282-283.

<sup>63</sup> Beard, "The Roman and the Foreign," 166, 185.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>65</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 279.

“averts the fire of his Rutulian enemies in Italy from his ships.”<sup>66</sup> There are many other references made in passing about Cybele’s continued presence watching over Aeneas, establishing her as a steadfast safeguard over one of Rome’s mythical, ancestral icons and by extension, Rome itself.

Due to this legendary connection, Cybele maintained a more institutionalized position in Roman religion than many of the other Eastern cultic deities brought to Rome. As Lynn Roller writes, Cybele was “emphatically a state deity”.<sup>67</sup> Romans “advanced her rites as one of the strong religious cults concerned with the safety of the state.”<sup>68</sup> One of the reasons she was so closely tied to Roman security was the context of her official arrival in Rome, when her stone was symbolically brought from Anatolia as a relic to protect them from Hannibal’s campaigns.

The links between Cybele and Aeneas were also central in identifying her as Rome’s protector. Roller maintains that the Roman connection with Aeneas and Troy—and therefore Cybele by extension—existed “in the political consciousness well before” the time it was codified by Virgil and Ovid in the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C.E.<sup>69</sup> The goddess’s continuing prominence, therefore, can be directly tied to her role as protector of Rome which was deeply entrenched in popular thought and canonized by Virgil.<sup>70</sup> The idea of Cybele as protector and patron of Rome was established by the narrative of her role in ensuring Rome’s victory over Carthage, her protection of Aeneas, and also reinforced through associations cultivated with prominent elite families.

Many of the written records discussing Cybele’s arrival in Rome in 204 B.C.E. include an anecdote about a Vestal Virgin from a prominent family whose disputed virtue was

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 316.

exonerated by a miracle which she performed, empowered by Cybele's divine intervention, during the procession. There is also evidence of Cybele being associated with Livia in artistic and literary depictions, a most notable example being a bust held currently in the J. Paul Getty Museum, which imagines Cybele with the head of Livia.<sup>71</sup> Both of these examples serve as further evidence that Cybele was a figure with whom the aristocratic echelons allied themselves. The close, purposeful, seemingly enthusiastic identification of the Roman elite with the figure of Cybele fails to account for the prevalence of derogatory rhetoric against the cult.

While it is more complicated than a linear trajectory of acceptance or discrimination, there were chronological shifts in the Roman position towards the cult that stemmed in part from increased visibility of the cult. Beginning in the late Republic, they became an "increasingly conspicuous presence", especially into Imperial Rome.<sup>72</sup> During the Augustan period, some of their rituals and theatrical performances were made more public. During these festivals and only during these festivals, *galli* were allowed to emerge from Cybele's temple and could move freely through the streets of Rome in the celebratory parades, exhibiting their novel music and feminine-coded clothing for the Roman citizens. Their music, that of tympanums and castanets, "will have been loud and raucous—not the quieter music associated with the lyre".<sup>73</sup> It would not have been only their visual presence then, but their sonic presence as well, which was disruptive and impossible to ignore.

Lynn Roller suggests that this trend towards higher visibility contributed to ambivalent Roman reception. She points out that the state did not engage so heavily with the cult in Greece, leaving it smaller, more independent, and less visible. Roller argues that because the ecstatic

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 316-317.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>73</sup> Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, 87.

rituals were brought into the open the way they were, as novelties and performances during public festivals, the *galli* were exposed to more public scrutiny and, therefore, criticism, from the Roman elites and even the public who were not allowed to participate and therefore did not have a deeper understanding of the intended spirituality behind the practices.<sup>74</sup>

What increased visibility and imperial involvement then served to do was to further differentiate between the arcane, exotic elements and the public, Roman parts. A number of the intrasanctuary rites previously reserved for Phrygian participation and viewership were performed outside the temple, one example being the *lavatio*, or sacred washing of ritualistic materials.<sup>75</sup> Ironically, as the cult became more public and incorporated into the social landscape of Rome through festivals made more accessible to common people, the nature of the *galli* became more threatening to Roman masculinity because it was no longer as clearly ‘foreign’.<sup>76</sup> There was reactionary backlash to this increased visibility and integration, as depictions of the *galli* went from charming curiosities to threateningly foreign and effeminate, and they were pitted against the classical philosophy of Stoic self-control.<sup>77</sup> Consider this also in reference to the austere, gendered Stoicism of the Red Pill, which reflects this inclination to an extreme degree.

The increasing official Roman recognition of and engagement with the cult intersected with current socio-political events, impacting the nature of Roman reception. For example, a period of discrimination followed the disintegration of the triumvirate and the beginning of the civil wars from which Octavian emerged victorious.<sup>78</sup> This is notable because Octavian

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<sup>74</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 317-318.

<sup>75</sup> Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap,” 103.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>78</sup> Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 14.

contended with Marc Antony, whose power and resources were centered in the eastern reaches of the *imperium*, aligning him in many popular representations as more foreign than native Roman. In ancient sources recounting this conflict, such as Horace's *Odes and Epodes* and Cassius Dio's account of Octavian's speeches to his soldiers in *Roman History*<sup>79</sup>, xenophobic sentiments are revealed in the denigration of Antony and 'the East'.

The problems that many Romans had with Cleopatra was that she represented lack of self-control (conflated with the perceived hedonism of 'the East') and they cultivated an image of her as a woman who maligned and emasculated men into submission. That necessarily degraded Antony, who they perceived as weak and effeminate because he had succumbed to her. Horace writes in Ode 37 that "the queen, along with her troop of disgustingly perverted men, was devising mad ruin for the capitol and death for the empire—a woman so out of control that she could hope for anything at all".<sup>80</sup> Cleopatra is associated with inebriated frenzy.<sup>81</sup> In Epode 9, called by modern editors "After Actium", Horace disgraces Antony as an emasculated "Roman enslaved to a woman", doomed to "serve a lot of shriveled eunuchs".<sup>82</sup> This image, of Antony enslaved to Cleopatra's wit and lumped in with her eunuchs, is replicated in Dio's text approximately 250 years later.<sup>83</sup>

In Dio's records of Octavian's speech to his men at Actium, the dishonor of female leadership (implicitly, control over men) is emphasized heavily<sup>84</sup>, as well as the vices of

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<sup>79</sup> In a stroke of irony, one should note that Dio was originally from Bithynia, an Anatolian region just north of Phrygia. His *Roman History* was written in the first half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E.

<sup>80</sup> Horace, *Odes and Epodes*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2004), 1.37.6-12.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.37.12; 1.37.14.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.11-13.

<sup>83</sup> Cassius Dio, *The Roman History: The Reign of Augustus*, (London, Penguin Books, 1987), 50.5.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.24-27.

indulgence<sup>85</sup> and effeminacy<sup>86</sup>. Dio claims that the Egyptians greatest affront to nature, beyond their ignobility and cowardice, is the fact that “they are not ruled by a man, but are the slaves of a woman”.<sup>87</sup> In an effort to mollify his soldiers, Dio has Octavian says placatingly, “it is impossible for anyone who indulges in a life of royal luxury and pampers himself as a woman to conceive a manly thought or do a manly deed”.<sup>88</sup> Here we see that the perceived weakness of their opponents is rooted in these stereotypes of over-indulgence and effeminacy.

What evocations of hierarchical gender deviance, weakness, and effeminacy were meant to evoke in Horace’s Roman audience was disgust at the unsettling reversal of conventional Roman hierarchy. The formula of these hierarchies dictated the domination of masculine Roman men over women, effeminate men, and foreigners. The image Horace paints in these descriptions of Cleopatra, Antony, and the eunuchs are startlingly similar to Roman literary depictions of Cybele and her emasculated eunuch horde, which I will explore further later in the paper. With such similarity between the Roman view of Cleopatra and some accounts of the relationship between Cybele and her priesthood, it is no wonder that the Eastern cults in Rome such as Cybele’s experienced a period of intolerance. With such prominent existing xenophobic sentiments and the destabilizing civil wars as a polarizing threat to Roman security, foreign elements became as suspect as the defector Antony and his prodigal, lascivious pharaohess Cleopatra VII.

### Axes of Dichotomy

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 50. 25, 27.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 50. 27.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 50.24.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 50. 27.

However, classifying the cult as a whole—by which I mean including both the deity Cybele herself and her cultic worshippers—as a foreign element is tricky given the way the Roman elite adopted her as their own. I argue that this is explainable using two dichotomies. The first is a softer distinction between state-sponsored institutional worship, or *religio*, of Cybele and the popular *superstitio* embraced by those lower in the Roman social strata. The second is a starker differentiation between the maternal figure of Cybele herself and the *galli*, a differentiation which I have foreshadowed earlier and will explain in more detail later in this paper.

First, I will address the different levels to which the Magna Mater cult was institutionalized by the Roman state. It is almost as if there were two versions of the worship of Cybele, the first being a *religio* belonging to the elite Romans identified with Cybele's protective role in Rome's origin myths, and the second a *superstitio* that did not sanitize the cult and was more comfortable with the elements which were perceived as less Roman. The Roman version of the cult centered Cybele and merely tolerated her consort Attis and related elements, such as the priesthood. 'Begrudging toleration', however, even is a generous allowance for their disdainful treatment of the *galli*. By incorporating Cybele into Roman origin myth as provider and protector, institutionalizing the cult through "symbolic forms of state power"<sup>89</sup>—such as the temple on the Palatine and state-sponsored Megalesian festivities—and cultivating aristocratic associations, elite Romans appropriated the deity of Cybele for their own, without embracing it as *superstitio*, or the people who practiced it.

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<sup>89</sup> Beard, "The Roman and the Foreign", 4.

Marks of Cybele's state-sponsorship included her presence on coinage as well as reforms of her priesthood conducted by Augustus and later Claudius. Her appearance on coinage is significant especially during the imperial era because there was an imperial monopoly on coinage, so it was a form of propaganda exclusive to the Roman state. Cybele was imagined on coins with her cultic worshippers, as well as with her characteristic attributes of lions and other wild animals.<sup>90</sup>

Another illustration of the institutionalization of the cult were the reforms made first by Augustus and others later by Claudius during his reign in the early 1<sup>st</sup> century. Augustus "brought the cult more closely under imperial control by putting priests chosen from his *liberti*, his freedmen, in charge of it, a departure from earlier practice, when attendance at the Magna Mater's festivities was limited to freeborn Roman citizens".<sup>91</sup> Claudius also reformed the priesthood to make it more conducive to Roman society. He instituted the new position of *archigallus*, an office which could only be filled by a Roman citizen. Complicating Roman participation was the law prohibiting citizens from being castrated.

There are records even of non-Phrygians in Rome who voluntarily castrated themselves in service to the Mother who were then exiled or denied inheritances<sup>92</sup>. One such instance was when the slave of a certain Servilius Caepio castrated himself out of devotion to Cybele in 101 B.C.E., he was exiled and forbidden to return.<sup>93</sup> It is certainly interesting that not only a Roman slave, at least one who was not predetermined by their master to be castrated, could commit the act for cultic religious reasons without facing punishment. Another instance concerns a slave

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<sup>90</sup> Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 39.

<sup>91</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 315.

<sup>92</sup> Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, 101; Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 292.

<sup>93</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 292.

named Genucius who was denied an inheritance rightfully given to him by a freedman “on the grounds that he was neither a man nor woman”.<sup>94</sup> He was not even allowed to defend his case in person “lest the court be polluted with his obscene presence and corrupt voice”.<sup>95</sup> This comment on his voice quite possibly is referencing its high pitch, a negatively-coded characteristic of effeminacy and associated with eunuchism. From these anecdotes, it is clear that not only was it looked down on for a Roman to commit self-castration, but it was penalized.

The answer was a ritualistic bull sacrifice called a *taurobolium*, in which the bull is castrated and sacrificed in substitution for the archigallus himself. The *taurobolium* was often accompanied by a *criobolium*, or ram sacrifice, which specifically honored Attis in the way the *taurobolium* did for Cybele.<sup>96</sup> In doing so, Claudius made the ritualistic sacrifice within the cult more normative to Roman practices, allowing Roman citizens to participate more freely, and exerted more direct Roman authority over the Phrygian practitioners. Part of these reforms was also that formal administration of the cult was assumed by the *quindecemviri*, a Roman priestly body.<sup>97</sup> With these reforms, the cult of Cybele was brought even more under the regulation of Rome, as the priesthood became stratified and controlled by Roman citizens rather than the native Phrygian worshippers. There is also evidence of the *taurobolium* being appropriated by the Roman elite, performed as a sacrifice for the safety of the emperor<sup>98</sup> and other performative uses by the aristocrats<sup>99</sup> rather than as a substitution. This institutionalization is evidence of the

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>96</sup> Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 50-52.

<sup>97</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 316.

<sup>98</sup> Beard, “The Roman and the Foreign,” 181.

<sup>99</sup> Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap,” 117.

cult becoming, increasingly, the prerogative of the elite, who clearly valued the figure of Cybele much more highly than her foreign priesthood.

The other, more imagistic version, of the cult was one which Roman sources conflated with the discomfiting features that the Romans rejected and was allegedly embraced by the marginalized, underprivileged, and disenfranchised of Roman society. As Robert Turcan discusses in *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, the foreign cults often offered homes for those on the fringes of society, especially those from the far reaches of the *imperium* who sought to maintain some of their heritage and identity by practicing the religion of their homeland. Phrygianism in its less regulated, less ‘Roman’ forms were especially popular among slaves of eastern origin, in port cities (where there was presumably more ethnic diversity), provincial cities, and wilderness regions.<sup>100</sup> Lynn Roller corroborates this, claiming that the goddess was widely popular among the “common people”.<sup>101</sup>

A revealing illustration of this dichotomy is found in the dynamics of festival occasions surrounding the Magna Mater cult. Festivals were one of the most important venues of religious expression in Roman public life, so the *galli*’s presence warrants some examination. The Megalesian processions and performances were characteristic of Roman practices, following “a typical Roman pattern”<sup>102</sup>, and the official Roman priesthood was even involved in the *lavatio*, a very important ritual in the cult of Cybele.<sup>103</sup> These festivities were hosted by the elite Romans, and became opportunities for public displays “for extravagant display, so much so that in 161

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<sup>100</sup> Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 57.

<sup>101</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 6.

<sup>102</sup> Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, 11, 95 (quote); T. P. Wiseman, “Cybele, Virgil, and Augustus” in *Poetry and Politics in the Age of Augustus*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984), 118.

<sup>103</sup> Beard, “The Roman and the Foreign,” 180.

B.C., sumptuary legislation had to be introduced to control them”.<sup>104</sup> Slaves were barred from the Megalesian games and the seating for senatorial classes was segregated from that of the common folk.<sup>105</sup> This is corroborated by an account in Cicero’s *De haruspicum responsis* indicating that only free men were allowed to attend the games. Cicero includes an anecdote where a man Publius Clodius Pulcher paid slave gangs to disturb Cybele’s rites and gangs “polluted the games...introduced the lowest class elements, slaves, into the goddess’s rites”.<sup>106</sup> From this event and the domination of the elites at these festivities, we can interpret that the state-run, public, prestigious elements of the cult were elitist.

Under imperial rule, the political power of the lower classes became more limited: voting was disallowed, and therefore *civitas* became less tangibly meaningful, causing many to lose interest in affairs of the state.<sup>107</sup> This undermined the in-group motivation to adhere to Roman religion rather than other, perhaps more personally compelling, options such as the cult of Cybele and its experiential, sensuous spirituality. Perhaps this disengagement or disaffection with Roman institutions sheds light on why the cult experienced growth following the end of the Antonines, a period described by Robert Turcan as one of “military anarchy” and of the growing presence of foreign gods in “social and urban fabric of the *Orbis Romanus*”.<sup>108</sup> The different manifestations of Magna Mater cult worship, from the aristocratic state religion to the more grassroots cult embraced by the lower classes, were correlated to elite Roman and foreign or otherwise marginalized identities, respectively. Intersections between these identities, as well as their perceptions of each other, reveal tensions across ethnic and class boundaries.

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<sup>104</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 289.

<sup>105</sup> Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap,” 94.

<sup>106</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 296.

<sup>107</sup> Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 17.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

There was another axis of dichotomy that intersects with the differentiation between the Roman and the foreign, the elite and the lower classes. This distinction, the most clear-cut, was between the figure of Cybele herself and her eunuch priesthood. As Roller writes, Cybele “was lauded as the savior of the state, yet held at arm’s length, largely because of the general disgust at the eunuch priests who attended her”.<sup>109</sup> Dionysios of Halikarnassos drew strong distinctions between the more positively connoted ‘Roman’ features of the cult, and those branded as foreign and Phrygian, which were viewed with suspicion.<sup>110</sup> Specifically, he distinguished Romans from the spectacle and mystery of the cults, embodied in the practices and identity of her priesthood.<sup>111</sup>

#### The Galli: ‘Transgression and Subversion’

The *galli* found their inspiration in Attis’ origin story, of which there are multiple versions which have been disseminated. Disregarding the variation between these accounts, there are a few widely accepted details that are essential to this discussion. First is his self-inflicted castration. In the most prominent accounts of the myth, he performed this on himself to appease his lover Cybele, who was jealous of an affair that he had with a nymph. In some versions, he dies from his wounds. In their accounts of the myth, Eumolpid Timotheus and Arnobius suggest that the castration served to suppress immoderate and sexual urges.<sup>112</sup> In Ovid’s version of Attis’ origin myth, Attis castrates himself as a form of self-inflicted punishment for his infidelity to her, making the castration punitive and an act of “unmanning” himself.<sup>113</sup> In Ovid’s retelling, Attis cries out, “I have deserved it! With my blood I pay the penalty that is my due. Ah, perish the parts

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<sup>109</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother* 4.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>111</sup> Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, 98.

<sup>112</sup> Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 34.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

that were my ruin!”<sup>114</sup> Lucretius also depicts it as a punitive act; the eunuchs were “ungrateful” (*ingratis* in the Latin) to their parents and therefore are rendered unable to reproduce.<sup>115</sup> The whole myth is fraught with violent drama and lack of control over emotions. This excess is the second quality of note about this myth. It offends the moderation and control essential to Roman sensibility.

An intriguing complication here is that Greek tradition underrepresented, sometimes even erased, the castration or figure of Attis in their practice of the cult. In literary texts, cultic worshippers were described as priestesses, not eunuchs, and the myth of Attis’ castration was not acknowledged.<sup>116</sup> There was a reinvention of that facet of Phrygian cult worship in the Roman tradition,<sup>117</sup> where it even highlighted the gory drama during Cybele’s festivals when the *galli* would go into ecstatic trances, engaging in public self-harm as a part of their ecstatic display.

Due to the *galli*’s close association with these characteristics of Attis in the myths, the Roman reception of the *galli* much more tenuous than for the figure of Cybele herself. The *galli* were a clandestine group sequestered in her temple on the Palatine Hill, which was the social and political center of Rome.<sup>118</sup> There is a fascinating paradox here. Amid the bustle of institutional religious and political happenings was an outpost of foreign religion, being practiced, but locked away from public view except on select festival occasions. The temple was a prominent, permanent feature in the landscape of the Forum.

The prominence and permanence of the temple itself is a symbolic anchoring of Cybele in the Roman identity. This is additional evidence of conforming some aspects of the Magna

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<sup>114</sup> Ovid, *Fasti*, (London, W. Heinemann, 1967), 4.239-340.

<sup>115</sup> Tito Lucretio Caro, *De Rerum Natura*, (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2006), 2.614-7.

<sup>116</sup> Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 35.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>118</sup> Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap,” 93.

Mater cult to Roman religious conventions, as the priesthood of Cybele are usually characterized in non-Roman contexts (i.e. Greek and Anatolian) as mendicants.<sup>119</sup> Apuleius characterizes them in such a way in his *Metamorphoses*, disapprovingly describing them as “charlatans” who had turned the “Syrian Goddess into a beggar-wench”.<sup>120</sup> Therefore, the construction choices made for the temple, namely its grandiosity and location, had a colonizing effect on the Magna Mater cult. By this I mean it was an imposition of Roman control over the cult, by situating it in such a prominent location and containing the *galli* internally. The temple was devotedly maintained as well. When it burned down in 111 B.C.E., it was not only quickly rebuilt, but improved and expanded.<sup>121</sup> In the event of another fire in 5 C.E., it was rebuilt once again at Augustus’ behest.<sup>122</sup>

In addition to rebuilding the temple, Augustus chose to construct his palace nearby to associate himself with that Virgilian heritage myth.<sup>123</sup> The façade of the temple, a highly visible monument to Cybele, concealed the *galli* and their exotic practices. As Jacob Latham writes in his article entitled “Fabulous Clap-Trap: Roman Masculinity, the Cult of Magna Mater”, “the foreign elements of the cult were seemingly subjected to careful control, while the Roman aristocracy celebrated the goddess according to Roman mores.”<sup>124</sup> Cybele was venerated as a guardian of the Roman people, but her priests were hidden and tightly controlled. They were brought out during festivals, but only briefly to be shown off like a sideshow and foil for traditional Roman propriety.

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<sup>119</sup> Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, 101.

<sup>120</sup> Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1962), 179.

<sup>121</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 288.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 312-313; Wiseman, “Cybele, Virgil, and Augustus,” 127.

<sup>124</sup> Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap,” 87.

In contemporary written sources, the *galli* were consistently disparaged as a corrupting, disturbing presence. This perception and representation of the *galli* seems to be an elite view. Jacob Latham writes that, “aristocratic Roman attitudes to the *galli*...seem to have been both stable and straightforward: *galli* were neither men, nor Roman...”.<sup>125</sup> In Latham’s conceptualization of Roman reception of the cult, he sets two different periods and modes of discrimination against the *galli*. During the Republic, he argues, the Romans denied the *galli romanitas*, and during the Empire the *galli* were denied manhood.<sup>126</sup> In this paper, I will take a less chronologically-situated approach, and instead investigate the themes that arise in deprecating, contemporary Roman texts concerning the *galli*.

These themes, I argue, reveal quite potently why elite Romans responded so viscerally to the *galli*. Most of the contemporary Roman sources that mention the *galli* are from the late Republic and early Empire, after Cybele was brought to Rome and during the periods of the highest visibility for the cult.<sup>127</sup> In these sources we can identify three major bones of contention that the elite Romans held against the *galli*. These were their unruliness, feminization, and desexualization, which I will explain in turn below. There was variation among the levels of disagreement, from discomfort to disgust.

The irrational, passionate, uninhibited way in which the *galli* conducted themselves during the public rituals disconcerted the Romans, who valued composure and control over oneself. Their behavior during the festivals involved dancing, singing, and playing raucous music in the processions, as well as wearing wildly colorful clothing and conducting dramatic

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>127</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 4.

spectacles of self-harm.<sup>128</sup> The Romans perceived a “foreignness, turbulence, and lack of control in the eunuchs”.<sup>129</sup> According to Lucretius, this behavior was meant to evoke fear in honor of the “goddess’ majesty”.<sup>130</sup> The most jarring of these behaviors was the self-harm, which consisted of the priesthood working up to a bit of a frenzy and cutting themselves in various places with sharp stones, some even performing their ritualistic castration in these moments.

Certainly readers today will sympathize with the adverse reaction of the Romans to such a practice, but it is important to note that the Romans were not shy of violence—evidenced by the gladiatorial games, the ubiquity of war imagery, and slavery—so we should ask further why the Romans abhorred this particular practice. From accounts both of the *galli* processional violence itself and retellings of the myth of Attis that inspired it, we find that the act of self-castration described as an act of ‘madness’. This would deeply offend the sensible, rational Roman and is perhaps why they found it so repugnant.

Madness, insanity, and other such evocative descriptors saturate Roman sources regarding this phenomenon. Ovid deploys the word “madness”<sup>131</sup> often in reference to this, and his account of the term “*galli*” refers back to a river in Phrygia called the Gallus, writing, “who drinks of it goes mad”, or “*qui bibit inde, furit*” in the Latin.<sup>132</sup> In Catullus’ words, Attis “was attacked by insanity’s goad. Blinded by passion, he lightened the weight of his loins with a sharp fragment of flint”.<sup>133</sup> Catullus goes on to describe the *galli* who join Attis in this venture, “their

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<sup>128</sup> Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap,” 100.

<sup>129</sup> Beard, “The Roman and the Foreign,” 175.

<sup>130</sup> Caro, *De Rerum Natura*, 2.621-3.

<sup>131</sup> Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.243.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.365.

<sup>133</sup> Catullus, *The Complete Poetry of Catullus*, (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 63.2-5.

souls' rabid derangement".<sup>134</sup> After they awaken from the frenzy, he describes how Attis regains "her" (as Attis' grammatical gender changes in the text) lucidity.<sup>135</sup>

The *galli* represented a lack of control which disturbed Roman virtues of self-control rooted in the Stoic values. Since Stoicism maintains that "emotional control is a sign of moral superiority", strong expressions of emotion and excess are perceived as "moral failings".<sup>136</sup> Since, within Stoicism, the highest echelons of human intellect are characterized by reason and restraint in Stoic framework, by denying the *galli* rationality, the Roman sources who censure them for their irrationality are implicitly undermining their humanity.<sup>137</sup> In a similar vein, Red Pill 'Stoics' today utilize that same rational to cast doubt on the equality of those they deem to possess less restraint, usually women and people of color.

The *galli*'s manhood and masculinity, as well as their humanity, were drawn into question by the displays of excess. The cults of Dionysius and Cybele draw many parallels and are often associated with each other, so accounts of ecstatic Dionysiac cult activities can help inform this discussion. In Euripides *Bacchae*, from which we derive some understanding of the Dionysiac cult, Dionysius' female worshippers (maenads) also come from Phrygia and engage in ecstatic madness.<sup>138</sup> Given the similarities between the Bacchic and Phrygian cults, we must wonder if the precedent of women being driven into these frenzies in the Dionysiac cult contributed to the feminization of the *galli*. Since an aspect of Roman masculinity was reservation and self-control, the "reputed excess of the *galli* could have thrown off kilter the

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 63.38.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 63.44-6.

<sup>136</sup> Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 82, 93.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>138</sup> Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, 108.

delicate balancing act of Roman manhood.”<sup>139</sup> Therefore, the wildness and feminization of the *galli* are closely tied.

Highly emotional expression was certainly correlated to femininity in Roman gender stereotypes, but there was also a sexual layer to this which is more foreign to the gendering in our society today. There were “ancient beliefs that women craved or even needed sex more than men; sex-crazed men were acting like women”.<sup>140</sup> Therefore, Attis’ lack of sexual control in his infidelity, and the interpretation that the castration is performed as a punitive or preventative measure against excessive sexual desire, takes on another dimension of feminization. As Jacob Latham unflinchingly acknowledges, “for Vergil and Ovid, the *galli* were unsympathetic and perjoratively women or howling, half-male effeminates who unmanned themselves.”<sup>141</sup> In this quotation, and in the feminizing descriptions discussed above, we can determine that the *galli*’s attributed effeminacy was derived in large part from their excessive displays of emotion and lack of control.

The *galli* were generally criticized for their effeminacy in contexts other than the dramatic spectacles as well. We wonder, then, what specific traits and activities were considered effeminate. Classicist Craig A. Williams identifies “walking delicately, talking in a womanish way, wearing loose, colorful, feminine clothing (including the *mitra* or Eastern-style turban), overindulging in perfume, curling one’s hair, and above all depilation, particularly of the chest and legs” as signifiers of effeminacy.<sup>142</sup> In his work *Art of Love*, Ovid too discourages men from effeminate primping. He writes, “don’t torture your hair, though, with curling-irons: don’t

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<sup>139</sup> Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap,” 89.

<sup>140</sup> Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), 169.

<sup>141</sup> Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap,” 106-7.

<sup>142</sup> Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 141.

pumice your legs into smoothness...Real men shouldn't primp their good looks."<sup>143</sup> Williams adds also that "one feature of Roman culture, theatre, also seems to have drawn especially vigorous accusations of effeminacy".<sup>144</sup> Markedly, references to the *galli*, their behavior, their dress, even the theatrical performances conducted on the steps of Cybele's temple, check many of these boxes.

We find that descriptions of the *galli*, such as the section "The Tale of the Bailiff" in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, reference the qualities identified above such as primping, ways of speaking, and feminine-coded clothing (even colors) to convey the *galli*'s effeminacy and therefore their inferiority. The *galli*'s "splintering harsh womanish voices" and faces "ruddied with cosmetics" would necessarily illicit disdain from Apuleius' audience.<sup>145</sup> Apuleius writes that the *galli* were "gowned in all the colours [sic.] under the sun and hideously bedizened".<sup>146</sup> Although to our modern context that might not trigger such disapproval, we know that in the ancient context the indulgence in brightly colorful clothing would have evoked disgust their outrageousness. Another revealing feature of the *galli*'s regalia is silk, a fabric with intemperately decadent and exotic, Eastern connotations.<sup>147</sup> Apuleius' description of the *galli*'s physical presence and appearance implicates them as highly feminized and foreign, qualities which overlap especially in the symbol of silk, a feminine-coded luxury good.

Even the tympanum or tambourine, an attribute of Cybele and prominent instrument of the *galli*, has etymologically feminine connotations.<sup>148</sup> There is a heavy gendering of good

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<sup>143</sup> Latham, "Fabulous Clap-Trap," 84.

<sup>144</sup> Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 153.

<sup>145</sup> Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 181.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>148</sup> Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 141.

versus bad qualities in ancient texts. Words like *muliebris* and *effeminatus* are used to describe negative qualities, while *virilis* or other words associated with masculinity are largely positive.<sup>149</sup> The connotations behind etymology and vocabulary conveys social messages beyond the words themselves. In this study, I use these examples to illustrate that feminizing descriptions of the *galli* were not neutral, they were degrading.

There are multiple feminizing jabs at the *galli* by various characters in Virgil's *Aeneid*, which serves as a prime example of the paradoxical embrace of Cybele herself but denigration of her priesthood. As discussed above, the *Aeneid*, through both indirect references to the goddess and the very plotline tracing Rome's heritage back to the foot of Mount Ida, constitutes in part an homage to the Magna Mater and her legacy of protecting Rome. Contrasting that, it also includes several references to the *galli*, always cast in a negative light and often deployed by Aeneas' enemies to degrade him and his troupe.

Iarbas of Carthage, Numanus Remulus, and Turnus all disparage Aeneas and his group by analogizing them to Paris and a group of eunuchs. Iarbas, scorned by Dido, vengefully launches a diatribe against Aeneas and his men, railing, "And now this second Paris...leading his troupe of eunuchs, his hair oozing oil, a Phrygian bonnet tucked up under his chin, he revels in all that he has filched".<sup>150</sup> Later, Numanus Remulus taunts Aeneas and his men:

"But you, with your saffron braided dress, your flashy purple, you live for lazing, lost in your dancing, your delight, blowzy sleeves on your war-shirts, ribbons on bonnets. Phrygian women—that's what you are—not Phrygian men! Go traipsing over the ridge of Dindyma, catch the songs | on the double pipe you dote

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<sup>149</sup> Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men*, 74.

<sup>150</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, (New York, Penguin Books, 2006), 4.269-72.

on so! The tambourines, they're calling for you now, and the boxwood flutes of your Berecynthian Mother perched on Ida! Leave the fighting to men. Lay down your swords!"<sup>151</sup>

Turnus, in turn, is quoted saying, "that Phrygian eunuch—defile his hair in the dust, his tresses crimped with a white-hot curling-iron dripping myrrh!"<sup>152</sup> These three attacks draw on those general qualities of effeminacy—clothing and primping—as well as attributes of *galli* specifically—tambourines, eunuchism, and their characteristic music—to differentiate them as other both for their foreignness and, as part of that, their failure to live up to the masculinity required for *romanitas*.

At the end of Virgil's poem, there is a subtler jab at the Phrygians. Juno decrees that, although she concedes that Aeneas will win, she establishes that "good sturdy Italian speech and manners will prevail."<sup>153</sup> The implication here is that while they venerate their Trojan heritage, the indigenous Roman sensibilities which are antithetical to the Phrygian will characterize their social expectations. Also relevant is the divine imperial mandate given by Jupiter, which promises and foreshadows Roman imperial dominion.<sup>154</sup>

The *Aeneid* shares with many other ancient sources this common theme, that "true Roman men, who possess *virtus* by birthright, rightfully exercise their dominion not only over women but also over foreigners, themselves implicitly likened to women."<sup>155</sup> This is tied to idea of *imperium*, or control, domination. Masculinity, and therefore domination over women,

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 9.698-706.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 12.121-123.

<sup>153</sup> Qtd., Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 303.

<sup>154</sup> Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 148.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 148.

foreigners, and effeminate men, was a part of *romanitas*.<sup>156</sup> The criticism of the *galli* “served to define a limit of normative male identity” by using them as a foil from which to distinguish true Roman masculinity.<sup>157</sup> The *galli* are defined against Roman masculinity, a characterization both reinforcing and reinforced by their foreignness which subjugates them to a lower echelon of the social hierarchy.

The act of castration was both one of emasculation and desexualization. As Ovid writes, after his castration Attis was “of a sudden was bereft of every sign of his manhood”.<sup>158</sup> Over the course of reception of the Magna Mater cult, contemporary authors exhibited “increasing emphasis on castration and its implications for gender and sexuality.”<sup>159</sup> Lynn Roller points out the interesting contradiction that Cybele herself was “widely regarded as a symbol of power and fertility”, but her consort and priesthood were men who gave up their ability to procreate and in doing so reduced themselves in power.<sup>160</sup> When Cybele was juxtaposed with her effeminate *galli*, she gained more destabilizing, emasculating power than she had when she was divorced from them and ‘tamed’ to Roman ideals, which is what happened in the elite version of her cult.

The presence of the *galli* then generated anxieties among Roman men, not only for the *galli*’s own behavior and identity, but because the relationship between Cybele and the eunuchs “came to represent the male’s uncertainty and ambivalence about, even fear of, his own sexuality.”<sup>161</sup> Martial, writing in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. maligns their sexuality, quite explicitly draws on their subservience to Cybele.<sup>162</sup> This is the same hierarchical destabilization I discussed

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<sup>156</sup> Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap,” 90.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-9.

<sup>158</sup> Ovid, *Fasti*, 4.241-242.

<sup>159</sup> Latham, “Fabulous Clap-Trap,” 100.

<sup>160</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 6.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>162</sup> Qtd. Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, 98.

earlier in terms of Cassius Dio and Horace's descriptions of the subversive relationship between Antony and Cleopatra.

In Catullus' poem 63, Cybele assumes an authoritarian character which is unique and startlingly disparate from most other portrayals of her as maternal and protective. To her lions she commands,

“‘come, my ferocious!’ she says. ‘See that insanity shakes him [Attis]. See that he panics and runs back to my groves in confusion. One wishing to flee my domain carries his freedom too far. Come now and bloody your back with your tail! Feel your own flogging!’”<sup>163</sup>

This poem is one of the only sources in which we see Cybele as a domineering character rather than a maternal figure, and yet the *galli* are still portrayed in a more negative light than she is. While it was Cybele's domination over the *galli* that challenged the Roman hierarchies discussed above, more disdain was generated towards the eunuch *galli* submitting to female dominion than the female figure herself.

It was not only the *galli*'s hierarchical position in relation to Cybele which disturbed the Romans, but their relative position in Roman society at large. Eunuchism was not unique to the Phrygian priesthood, but the elevated position of the *galli* in Roman hierarchies due to their proximity with the venerated Cybele likely contributed to the anxiety with which they were viewed. Lynn Roller writes that “this particular group of eunuchs enjoyed a sacred status in an important state cult, affording the Galli a position of inviolability and social standing denied to slaves”, which is the role eunuchs typically played.<sup>164</sup> Their elevation challenged Roman

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<sup>163</sup> Catullus, *The Complete Poetry of Catullus*, 63.78-81.

<sup>164</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 319.

hierarchies of masculine dominating feminine, and Roman over foreign which were ensured by *virtus*. The act of their castration when juxtaposed with their elevated position in conjunction with Cybele destabilized Roman social expectations and was, therefore, disconcerting especially to the elites.

As another deviant characteristic, the *galli* were also associated with illicit behavior and sexual practices. Castration itself was perceived as “deviant or marginal behaviour”.<sup>165</sup> And although they were unable to reproduce, Roller writes that “this did not appear to inhibit their sexual appetites or keep them from erotic liaisons with both men and women.”<sup>166</sup> In fact, because they were unable to reproduce, they were known to engage in affairs with married women because there was no risk of illicit pregnancy. Therefore, they became associated with illicit sexuality, aberrational because it was not reproductive.

Another note to make is that the castration of the *galli* also was not conducive to Roman expectations for religious officials, a position which required ‘wholeness’ of body, similar to the Vestal Virgins’ requirement of having no bodily defect.<sup>167</sup> This is just one more way that the act of castration transgressed Roman social norms, in more meaningful and symbolic ways than the fact of its bloodshed.

The Roman rejection of the *galli* was premised on their wildness, effeminacy, and desexualization, which were correlated with foreignness, weakness, and deviance, respectively, although some of those qualities were conflated or overlapped. Similar injurious fears of excess and licentiousness characterize both the Romans’ aversion to the *galli*, and to Eastern cultures at large. Classical texts reveal widespread preconceptions of eastern cultures as hedonistic, wanton,

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<sup>165</sup> Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World*, 104.

<sup>166</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 301.

<sup>167</sup> Beard, “The Roman and the Foreign,” 165.

and feminized. Williams writes that, “the cities of Asia Minor seem to have represented to Romans the ultimate in decadence and luxury and consequently softness and effeminacy.”<sup>168</sup>

This phenomenon of ‘western civilization’ perceiving eastern cultures as threats both to security and their way of life is not isolated.

### Orientalization

American literary theorist Edward Said, in his 1978 book entitled *Orientalism*, redirected the term Orientalism from its early meanings—as simply referring to Eastern cultures and their study—to refer to the way ‘western civilization’ stereotypes and pits itself against ‘the East’. It is a form of self-definition based on differentiation, in which the monolithic ‘East’ is antithetical to the monolithic ‘West’, a framework “premised upon exteriority”.<sup>169</sup> Orientalism is used as a tool of “*positional* superiority” which privileges ‘the West’ and the ‘Westerner’.<sup>170</sup> While he cites the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as the rough starting date of this phenomenon<sup>171</sup> and the British and French as its main perpetrators<sup>172</sup>, I argue that this is the phenomenon at play here. The Romans, through prejudicial bias against the Eastern cultures even within their empire, sought to elevate their own values through denigration of others.

This played out in the paradox of adopting Cybele while silencing Attis and the *galli*. The Romans assumed ownership of Cybele’s patronage because it was conducive to their collective, curated identity; but they fiercely resented the aspects of the cult which they perceived as foreign. This is also why I think the application of the word appropriation here is fitting. Like Asclepius and others, Cybele was brought to Rome to serve their needs. Lynn Roller writes that

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<sup>168</sup> Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 149.

<sup>169</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London, Penguin Books, 2003), 20.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

“the Romans used only those parts of the Pergamene cult that were expedient for their own purposes”.<sup>173</sup> The Romans selectively excluded the parts of the religion which offended their sensibilities but appropriated the figure of Cybele so wholeheartedly that she became somewhat of a patron goddess of the city of Rome. While the term Orientalism was not coined by Said until modernity, it helps to be able to apply a term to the dynamics at work in antiquity.

The core of my argument is that the interactions between the native elite Romans and the Phrygian transplants reveal an unequal power dynamic characterized by cultural exploitation. Rome appropriated the Phrygian goddess but separated her from her consort and priesthood because they offended Roman sensibilities. This practice was not without consequence. The derogatory rhetoric deployed by Roman authors against the Phrygian priests alienated them and fomented sentiments of xenophobia. It also reinforced restrictive ideas of Roman masculinity which in themselves are damaging because of their social ramifications.

The relationship between the Romans and the Phrygian cult (or any foreign cult, for that matter) is a nexus of socio-political tensions, not just a question of ritual or religion. Volkhard Krech, a scholar of religion and theorist of religious studies, writes that religious ideas “always correlate with the specific social forms that carry them.”<sup>174</sup> The Romans characterized the content of the cult as foreign, but also the negative reaction to the cult can be interpreted also as a rejection of the vessel in which it manifested: the Phrygian foreigners. The power dynamics, especially those of inclusion and exclusion here, must inform the study of cross-cultural interactions such as this. “the processes of transmission, however, do not simply ‘happen’, but

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<sup>173</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 284.

<sup>174</sup> Volkhard Krech, "From Religious Contact to Scientific Comparison and Back: Some Methodological Considerations on Comparative Perspectives in the Science of Religion" in *The Dynamics of Transculturality: Concepts and Institutions in Motion*, (Cham, Springer, 2015), 52.

crucially involve actors. As a result it is essential to include a theory of agency that brings awareness of power relations and the driving force of interests in to the picture.”<sup>175</sup> The complex Roman relationship with the cult of Cybele should not be taken for granted as simply a fact of history, it should be interrogated for its function and motives as an instrument of self-definition.

### Scholarship, Past and Modern

From the point of view of our modern sensibilities, it might be simpler to view self-castration as a self-evidently disturbing form of violence, and to not begrudge the Romans their aversion to the *galli*. Was this not self-harm, blood-spilled, and violent? And does it therefore not make sense that the Romans were horrified? The ancient Roman world, however, was rife with innumerable forms of violence that were commonplace. Therefore, it was their fear of the foreign nature of Cybele’s cult which fueled their antipathy, not an aversion to the blood spilled. As Lynn Roller soberly writes,

“It is sad commentary on modern Classical scholarship that myths of rape and incest, the myths of violence to women that populate the Greek and Roman landscape so abundantly, are considered a natural part of the Greek and Roman experience, while a myth of castration, of violence to men, must be explained away as a foreign import, the mark of an inferior Oriental people.”<sup>176</sup>

As Roller acknowledges, scholarship has contributed towards a perpetuation of those prejudices. I believe that this is born in part from the overfamiliarity that ‘western’ scholars have fostered with antiquity, which I discussed in the first section of my paper. That overfamiliarity and the

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<sup>175</sup> Antje Fluchter and Jivanta Schottli, *The Dynamics of Transculturality: Concepts and Institutions in Motion*, (Cham, Springer, 2015), 14.

<sup>176</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 22.

tendency not to self-interrogate one's own implicit biases has historically left those Orientalist assumptions as a blind spot in mainstream classical scholarship.

Traditional classical scholarship has undeniably perpetuated the Roman versus foreign dichotomies and prejudices, as modern Orientalism obviously pervades early religious studies and classical scholarship. Franz Cumont for example, pits Roman rationality against “the mysteries of the barbarians”.<sup>177</sup> He describes the presence of Eastern cults in Rome as an “invasion of the barbarian religions” that “was so open, so noisy and so triumphant that it could not remain unnoticed. It attracted the anxious or sympathetic attention of the ancient authors”.<sup>178</sup> Cumont uses the word repeats the term “invasion” and describes how it “destroyed the ancient religions and national ideals of the Romans”.<sup>179</sup> It is incredibly how closely the language and sentiments in these few quotes, and throughout his book *The Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, imitate the comments of those early Roman writers as well as echo some of the narratives we hear in current religio-xenophobic media outlets in the United States.

Cumont was not the only early scholar to reinforce the Roman characterizations of Eastern religions as less-than, whether by virtue of their foreignness or their intersections with gender. Others, such as Henri Gaillot and Roberto Gusmani endorsed early implications that the matriarchal nature of Phrygian religion was a more primitive form, implying that the worship of masculine-coded gods, such as the monotheistic Christian god, were more developed.<sup>180</sup> Henri Gaillot called the Phrygian religion “a cult characterized by orgasm, ecstasism, and sexual aberration”.<sup>181</sup> This constitutes a perpetuation of the prejudices against the cult derived from

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<sup>177</sup> Cumont, *The Oriental Religions*, 6.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>180</sup> Roller, *In Search of God the Mother*, 13.

<sup>181</sup> *Qtd.*, *Ibid.*, 20.

Roman texts, which were taken for granted without adequate critical consideration of their context, purposes, and biases.

### Conclusion

Roman imperialism is taken for granted as an accomplishment of humanity. It is lauded and celebrated as conquest and dissemination of civilization to the uncivilized. Marvin writes, “to us Boadicea is a barbarian, and we trace with gratitude and pleasure the signs of civilization left by the Roman occupation.”<sup>182</sup> He adds later,

“here we must remember that it is the history of *Imperial* Rome that is most relevant to our purpose and most informative. Under the Empire Rome worked as a master, no longer as an apprentice or journeyman. The theatre of her civilizing activities was here little less than the whole world then known, and the boast was not unjustified that she made into a city what had formerly been but a world, as we might say, merely a geographical expression.”<sup>183</sup>

The Roman Empire is so often characterized in the way demonstrated above: as civilizing yet benevolent in its provincial administration, acting as a veritable ‘melting pot’ of trans-Mediterranean cultures. Robert Turcan writes, poetically, that, “the town that Romulus was said to have populated by way of a handful of stateless people...still had the vocation to assimilate heterogeneous elements.”<sup>184</sup> And yet, the Romans exhibited xenophobia despite the multiplicity within their borders. I have demonstrated that in the case of the cult of Cybele.

The United States of America has often professed to the same idyllic melting pot idea in the Turcan quote above. But, like the Romans, xenophobia and marginalization are still

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<sup>182</sup> Marvin, *The Unity of Western Civilization*, 24.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>184</sup> Turcan, *The Cults of the Roman Empire*, 12.

unequivocally active, in insidiously subtle forms, but also increasingly explicit. If we can allow that the Romans did not attain the magnanimous tolerance and multicultural coexistence often attributed to them, perhaps it will be easier to acknowledge the voices today clamoring that the United States is not living up to that mandate either.

The conclusion here should not be to dismiss classical civilization or past scholarship, but to move towards a more critical approach, one that draws relevant conclusions not just about ‘what it means to be human’ or such generalizing ideas typically drawn from classical literature and culture. The triumphalist version of history, particularly the story of classical civilization to ‘the West’, does not serve us well. We must make the practice of classical scholarship less unassailably commemorative and more anthropological. That means readily facing up to attitudes and practices that perhaps were characteristic of antiquity but we recognize now as problematic, such as the forms xenophobia and toxic masculinity that I have discussed in this paper. It is not wrong to point this out. The Romans’ othering of the *galli* may seem like a small fact in the grand scheme of things, but this is simply a small piece of scholarship within a larger movement. I hope that what this paper has done is to contribute to a more complicated, less oversimplified, less idealized, view of the classical world, its people, and its institutions.

Faith Context: The *Galli*, Galatians, and Other Comments

- Given that Christianity as a religion was born during and under Roman imperial rule, studying the religious landscape of late antiquity has great import on understanding the Christian faith. It is beyond the scope of my project to address fully why and how, but there are some comments I can make on the intersection of the Phrygian cult with Paul's letter to the Galatians. Given that Galatia was a region of Anatolia, the presence or at the least knowledge of Cybele's cult was ubiquitous. The ritualistic castration, then, was also widely practiced among the members.

Susan Elliott argues that Paul's exhortation to the Galatians not to practice circumcision was in aversion to the Phrygian cultic castration. She writes that "Paul's concern about circumcision does not originate from an antipathy towards the Law but from an antipathy toward the cult of the Mother of the Gods and an abhorrence of self-castration."<sup>185</sup> Paul considers the act of castration regressive, and is therefore dissuading the Galatians from even circumcision because of their proximity to this practice which he considers more abhorrent.<sup>186</sup> For a much deeper discussion of this concept, please see her work *Cutting Too Close for Comfort: Paul's Letter to the Galatians in its Anatolian Cultic Context*. It is extraneous to the purpose of this paper to include a full discussion here, as it is more of an illustrative example of the Christian potential within classical studies.

In a more general sense, the study of Rome informs so much of what we understand about early Christianity. Jesus was born into a world governed by Roman imperialism. This means that a greater understanding of the dynamics of Roman imperialism has much to say about

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<sup>185</sup> Susan Elliott, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort: Paul's Letter to the Galatians in its Anatolian Cultic Context*, (London, T & T Clark International, 2003), 13.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

Christian theology and practice. And early Christianity itself offers anti-imperialist material that, for those coming from a Christian perspective, can be particularly useful in discourse with ‘defenders of western civilization’ who invoke Christianity in their arguments.

Additionally, since much of classical scholarship has been rooted in the idea of ‘western civilization’, of which Christianity is a pillar, Christianity in turn has historically influenced the field of classics in resounding ways, such as the perpetuation of orientalist biases and misogynistic understandings of religions of antiquity. Susan Elliott suggests also in *Cutting Too Close* that scholarship has tended to underrepresent Eastern cultic religions in the study of early Christianity’s context because they felt the need to distance Christianity from pagan religions. Elliot calls this a compulsion to “insulate” Christianity as part of “an orientalist bias that portrays the cult as an orgiastic and inferior eastern ‘infection’ of the refined and superior west”.<sup>187</sup> This differentiation is ominously reminiscent of the Romans’ own aversion to the imagistic cults, which they perceived as in opposition to their own doctrinal, institutionalized religion. Granted, early Christianity could hardly be considered institutionalized, but here I am referring to Christianity as it is now and as it has been since the 19<sup>th</sup> century when study of Mediterranean cultic religions became more prominent.

Christianity’s role in the orientalism within historical scholarship on the religions of late antiquity reveals itself also in a widely held assumption that until recently guided such study—that of a progression from early, primitive forms of religion with female deities (fueled by the plethora of ‘fertility goddess figurines’ dated to the conception of human civilization) to more advanced, male-centric, monotheistic religions. Elliott acknowledges this tendency, pointing out

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 9.

that scholarship has traditionally understood cults such as the Magna Mater cult “to represent a more primitive religion associated with a Great Mother Goddess and ancient matriarchy”.<sup>188</sup>

Lynn Roller discusses this as well in *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele*, citing the work of Henri Gaillot and Roberto Gusmani as two prominent voices endorsing this claim.<sup>189</sup>

Asserting that Christianity has played a role in this process is not intended to demonize Christianity as a whole, but to come to terms with the fact that Christianity is a complex feature of the idea of ‘the West’ and therefore has been elevated along with it as the apex of civilization. Certainly, one may wholeheartedly hold Christian doctrine as salvific truth, but this must not be done through ignorant dismissal of other religions, in this case, matriarchal cults. Even among Christian scholars there must remain respect for other cultures, even academic objectivity to an extent, in order to study those cultures anthropologically and not as a mode of differentiation from the self.

Another way Christianity has a place in these discussions is in the fact that scholarly understandings of matriarchal religions have in the past been beholden to Christian preconceptions about divine female figures. According to Roller, modern Judaeo-Christian imagery of maternal figures, “loving, nurturing”, “subservient to her husband and closely bonded to her children” has influenced modern understandings of ancient goddesses, projecting this image onto them whether or not it fits.<sup>190</sup> As Elliott argues, such biased portrayals underrepresent some elements of her character which may be more challenging to our ‘Mother Mary’

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>189</sup> Lynn Roller, *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999), 13.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 9.

presuppositions, as well as “the central identity of the goddess as an omnipotent ruler deity”.<sup>191</sup> This is a facile understanding perhaps in line with the over-similarity assumed between modern ‘western civilization’ and classical antiquity. These projections of ourselves onto the past, whether for malicious ideological purposes or the more benign assumptions of the universality of divine female figures, still obstruct the truth.

Beyond the above discussion of religious studies technicalities, Christian values of compassion and justice can enrich the studies of Christian scholars in the classics. One of the roots of Christian doctrine is love of neighbor, which is grievously violated by gross orientalism and allowing classics to become ammunition for white supremacists in the ways I discussed in the body of my paper. The label ‘neighbor’ cannot only be extended to white Christians or those who are considered members of ‘western civilization’. ‘Neighbor’ has to mean what it did to Jesus: every person one encounters, because each holds the spark of God within them. If the ‘neighbor’ is imagined only as those within one’s own community (particularly that of Christian ‘western civilization’), egregious ad-hominem attacks such as that at the SCS Panel against Dr. Padilla Peralta become normalized because the whiteness implied by ‘western civilization’ determines that those like Dr. Peralta are not ‘neighbors’. What is necessary, then is to invest in the stories of the marginalized of antiquity and build empathy, so that it is extendable to the marginalized of today and classics can become more inclusive of their stories as well.

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<sup>191</sup> Elliott, *Cutting Too Close for Comfort*, 96.

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