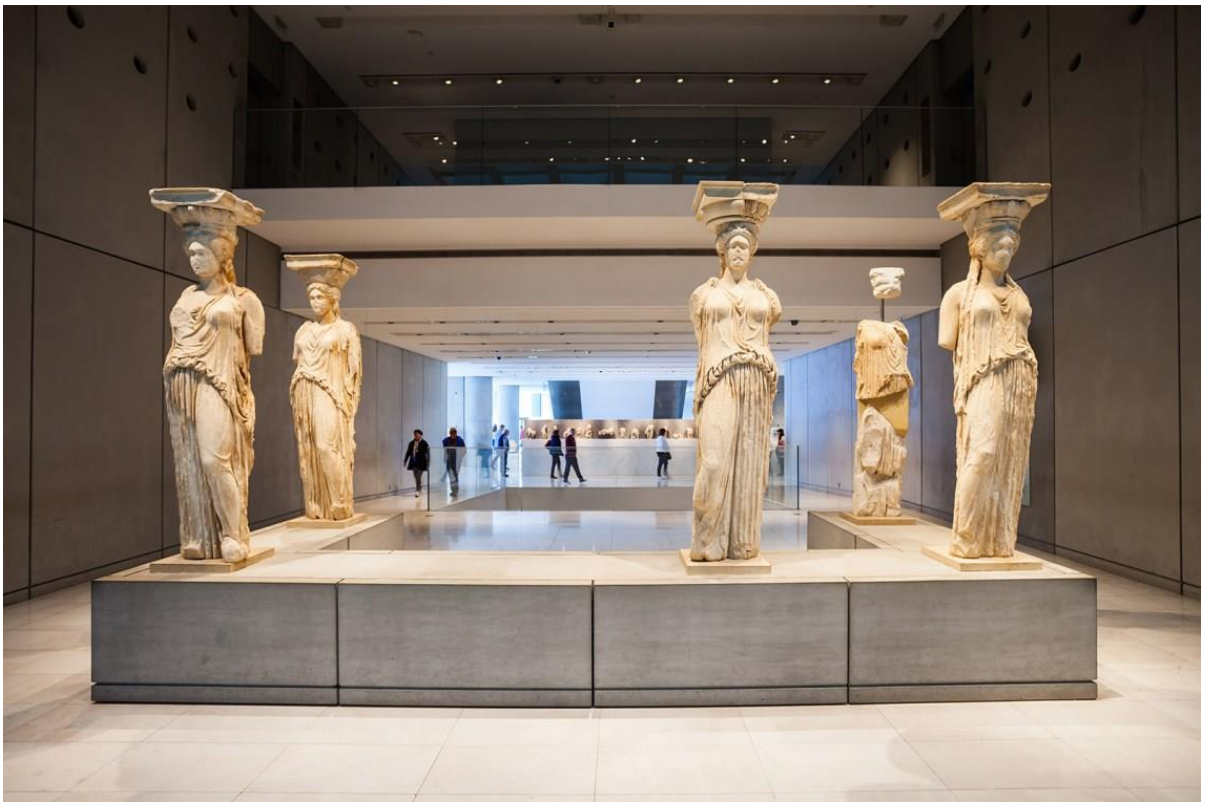
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The Marbles & the Muses by James Romm

A. E. Stallings's reflections on the Elgin Marbles illustrate how beautiful objects have the power to inspire both the noblest effusions and the pettiest efforts at acquisition.

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Five of the six caryatids that once supported the Erechtheion's Porch of the Maidens, on display in the Acropolis Museum, Athens, 2016. The sixth is now in the British Museum in London.

Reviewed:

Frieze Frame: How Poets, Painters, and Their Friends Framed the Debate Around Elgin and the Marbles of the Parthenon

by A.E. Stallings
Paul Dry, 233 pp., $17.95 (paper)

On September 5, 2006, in an operation conducted not by surgeons but by museum curators, a nameless Athenian man had his severed foot reattached. The foot—a chunk of marble—had been returned to Athens by Germany's Heidelberg University, where it had arrived sometime before 1871, perhaps filched out of the Parthenon's ruins by a German tourist. The restoration marked the first time that a piece of the Parthenon frieze—a bas-relief masterpiece that once wrapped around the 524-foot perimeter of the building's main chamber, inside its colonnade—had been returned to Greece since the early nineteenth century, when about half the frieze, along with a host of other Acropolis sculptures, was taken out of the country. The mastermind and sponsor of that removal was a Scottish nobleman, Thomas Bruce, Earl of Elgin; the collection of sculptures he exported, purchased in 1816 by the British government and exhibited in the British Museum to this day, has come to be known as the Elgin Marbles.

Two months after the reattachment of the foot, Birgit Wiger-Angner, a retired gym teacher in Sweden, returned to Greece a piece of carved marble that a distant ancestor had taken from the Erechtheion, another classical temple on the Acropolis. At a ceremony in the Acropolis Museum to mark the return of the fragment, Wiger-Angner expressed the hope that her gesture would set an example. "I think that all people in the British Museum should also bring back all the originals," she said, evidently referring to the plaster casts that stand in for the slabs of the Parthenon frieze that Elgin took away. Over the two decades since, her sentiment has been echoed with increasing fervor, not only by Greeks but by many in the United Kingdom; the British Committee for the Reunification of the Parthenon Marbles, active since 1983, today includes among its members many prominent UK classical scholars along with actors, writers, and political figures. Despite the strenuous efforts of this group and support for its position among more than half of Britons (as shown by one recent poll), the marbles have stayed where they are.

The stance of the British Museum is hard to discern. Since 2021 the chair of its trustees, George Osborne, has taken part in a series of talks with Greek authorities, with the goal of transferring at least the most prominent marbles—the slabs of the Parthenon frieze—to Athens; the new Acropolis Museum, opened there in 2009, displays the frieze in a continual band interrupted by the off-color plaster casts. Yet a stern trustees' statement, posted on the British Museum's website, seems to rule out such repatriation: "The Trustees firmly believe that there's a positive advantage and public benefit in having the sculptures divided between two great museums, each telling a complementary but different story." The statement explains that although the trustees would consider lending the marbles on a temporary basis, Greece has insisted on ownership, and "this has made any meaningful discussion on the issue virtually impossible." Conservatives in Britain have recently moved to block any further negotiations. Last summer a right-wing group called the Great British PAC, in a letter signed by supporters including former prime minister Liz Truss, threatened in a letter of July 11 to take legal action to stop the museum from even talking to Greece. Nonetheless some left-leaning members of Parliament, led by the Liberal Democrat Andrew George, have continued to press for a long-term loan of the marbles. The documentary

film *The Marbles* (2025), widely screened in British theaters, presented diverse views but generally supported the case for the return of the stones.

The Parthenon's unique importance as a democratic icon has raised the emotional temperature on both sides of the dispute. Built under the revered statesman Pericles and principally designed by his close ally Phidias, the temple of Athena perhaps named for its "back room"—*Parthenôn*, "[the room] of the maidens," where a team of young women, *parthenoi*, wove a robe as a gift for the goddess—has always carried ideological weight. The images on the frieze in particular attest to the democratic spirit of the Periclean era: ordinary Athenians are depicted in a processional line, leading sacrificial animals, riding on horseback, and carrying baskets of offerings, while seated Olympian gods look on appreciatively. For much of the past two centuries the frieze has been interpreted as a representation of the Panathenaia, an annual rite in which Athenians marched up the Acropolis slope and presented Athena with gifts, including the robe woven by the *parthenoi*. Recently other meanings have been proposed, but in any reading the hundreds of human figures portrayed on the frieze represent a broad swath of Athenian citizenry. In contrast to other examples of Greek temple art and even other parts of the Parthenon, where mythic gods and heroes predominate, the frieze shows everyday mortals, perhaps even the contemporaries of those who carved it and viewed it.

The story of how the frieze was split in two, with roughly half the panels in Greece and half in London, begins in 1798. That was the year Lord Elgin assumed the post of British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, which included most of what is now the nation of Greece. Some of the Parthenon sculptures, including a few slabs of the frieze, at that time lay strewn on the ground or in pieces, the result of a disastrous explosion in 1687, when a Venetian bombardment ignited gunpowder that the Ottomans were storing in the building. Operating through an Italian agent, Giovanni Lusieri, Elgin obtained from Turkish officials in Athens some sort of permission to take away some of the Parthenon stones, though just what kind of permission, and how many stones, are subjects of ongoing dispute. Had Elgin received a *firman*, an official decree signed by the Ottoman sultan, his claim to ownership of the marbles would carry substantial weight, but there are grounds for thinking that he instead had a letter from a lesser official. (The original document has disappeared without a trace.) Even if one assumes that Elgin received full license to take what he took, doubts have been raised about whether the Turks, as an occupying power, had the right to grant it. The British Museum evades the question in its trustees' statement: Elgin's claim to the marbles is said to be derived not from the Ottoman occupiers of Athens but from "the legal authorities of the day."

In discussing this matter in *Frieze Frame,* her kaleidoscopic set of reflections on all things Elgin, the poet A.E. Stallings makes clear that the paper trail leading back to the Turks is disturbingly faint. The *firman* claimed by Elgin had already vanished by 1816, when the UK Parliament held an inquiry into the ownership question; investigators relied on an apparent Italian translation of the *firman*, which sanctioned removal of "some [*qualche*] pieces of stone with inscriptions or figures." The word "some" hardly seems to justify Lusieri's predations. "Like a red wheelbarrow," Stallings writes, referring to a well-known poem by William Carlos Williams, "so much depends on the translation of, potentially, a single word." She raises the possibility that given the tenor of earlier portions of the alleged *firman*, the Turks meant for Elgin to take only

stones already dislodged from the building. (The 1816 English translation of the Italian document is included as an appendix to *Frieze Frame*.) Then, piling doubt upon doubt, she quotes a recently recovered letter sent to Elgin by the British diplomat Robert Adair, dated 1811, claiming that Turkish officials "absolutely denied your having any property in those marbles." Though Stallings concedes that "there are good and persuasive points to be made about the legality of Elgin's actions," the points she makes against it seem more persuasive.

Stallings is in an ideal position to comment on matters that set Greece and England at odds. A MacArthur Fellowship–winning poet and admired translator of Greek and Latin verse, she relocated to Athens in 1999; in 2023 she was appointed professor of poetry at Oxford, the first American-born writer to hold that distinguished four-year post. In the cheekily titled *Frieze Frame*, her first prose volume, she brings to the Elgin Marbles story a deep appreciation of the stones and their very different meanings for Greece and for England, as revealed in the writings of poets and aesthetes in both countries. She approaches her topic primarily through passages taken from poems, beginning with Keats, passing through Byron, A.E. Housman, Constantine Cavafy, and James Merrill, and ending with her own translation of the contemporary Greek poet Anna Griva.

Into this poetic garland Stallings weaves a host of other discoveries: documentary evidence, anecdotes, and ephemera she unearthed as she "wandered down many a labyrinthine rabbit warren of the mind" (a journey begun during the Covid-19 lockdown). She reports on these explorations in a series of short essays, some only a few hundred words long, laid out in a loose arrangement like a set of curios. Until its final chapters the book does not make an argument for the return of the marbles to Greece, though it's clear early on that Stallings favors that outcome. Mostly *Frieze Frame* illustrates the power of beauty to inspire both the noblest effusions and the pettiest efforts at acquisition and ownership.

Among Stalling's instances of the latter impulse are letters sent in 1801 from Elgin, who was then in Constantinople, to Lusieri in Athens. At that time Elgin was planning to use Acropolis sculptures as adornments to Broomhall, a Scottish manse he was renovating with funds from his wife, the heiress Mary Nisbet, whom he had recently married. "Elgin is giving Lusieri shopping lists," Stallings observes, as she quotes a letter in which the Scotsman requested "the metopes, the bas-reliefs, and the remains of the statues…. Would it be permissible to speak of a Caryatid?" That last, concupiscent inquiry refers to the six columnar female statues supporting the roof of the so-called Porch of the Maidens, the most celebrated feature of the Erechtheion. Lusieri did in the end remove one of the six on Elgin's behalf, replacing it with a grotesque pile of bricks to prevent the collapse of the roof.

Through other letters and documents, Stallings offers a chilling picture of the bribes and manipulations through which Elgin acquired his treasures, as well as the horror and anger of locals who witnessed the plunder. Lusieri, we learn from an 1834 memoir by the writer Richard Monckton Milnes, "thought it necessary to barricade his house at night" since "the feeling of the people ran so high against him." Greeks in Athens claimed to hear sighs and moans as the five remaining caryatids mourned their lost "sister" (which stands today in the British Museum). An

educated wag scratched a rhyming Latin ditty onto the Parthenon at some unknown date, comparing Elgin and his wife to Germanic invaders who had set fire to the Parthenon in 267 AD: "Quod non fecerunt Goti,/hoc fecerunt Scoti" (best paraphrased as "The Scots did worse than the Goths ever did").

Elgin and his agents soothed their consciences by asserting that they were preserving the exported marbles from harm. An unsigned document titled *Memorandum*, likely either written by Elgin or composed at his direction, insisted that the Turks in Athens were vandalizing the Parthenon ruins, but Stallings quotes other testimony to refute this charge. In fact it was sometimes Elgin's workmen who damaged the building in their efforts to get at its treasures. Stallings recounts, quoting the remarkable reports of three eyewitnesses, a harrowing scene when one of the sculpted marble triglyphs, adjacent to a metope that was being removed, became dislodged and crashed to the ground. The British traveler Edward Daniel Clarke, who was on the scene, recorded in a letter to Byron that the Turkish official in charge of the Acropolis, "who beheld the mischief done to the building, took his pipe from his mouth, dropped a tear, and, in a supplicating tone of voice, said to Lusieri, Telos!"—a Greek word that might be translated as "stop." According to a second account, that of the Irish painter Edward Dodwell, the fall was no accident; workers needed to throw down the "magnificent cornice" in order to get at the metope.

Even while quoting such expressions of shock, Stallings notes that both Dodwell and Clarke committed similar thefts from other Greek sites. Clarke explained in a letter that he carried off a statue of Demeter from Eleusis, where locals revered it as a talisman of agricultural fertility, after bribing a Turkish official "by letting an English telescope glide between his fingers." (British telescopes were evidently much sought after by the Ottoman elite; Elgin reports that he also used them as bribes.) Stallings understands well the mentality of such spoliators: "Clarke coveted [the statue] principally because others had failed to get it."

Frieze Frame does not, however, aim merely to castigate men like Elgin and Clarke or to lay bare the ugliness of imperial depredation. Stallings's main concern is the way that Greece has dealt with the loss of the stones and the impact their presence has had in England, starting in 1807. In that year Lord Elgin, deep in debt amid divorce proceedings, began to display the marbles in London, hoping to build public support for their purchase by the British government. (The sale took place nine years later.) Early showings of the marbles prompted rapturous sonnets from Keats and a fierce verse diatribe from Byron, "The Curse of Minerva" (1811), in which Elgin was maligned as a syphilitic and a cuckold. (The poem by Byron was never published and makes a rare appearance in print in one of *Frieze Frame*'s appendices.) The painter Benjamin Robert Haydon, who accompanied Keats on a visit to view the marbles and to whom he addressed the resulting sonnets, thought that the anatomical details seen on the frieze would inspire a revolution in art: "I foretold that…they would overturn the false beau-ideal, where nature was nothing…. I felt as if a divine truth had blazed inwardly upon my mind." Unfortunately this "divine truth," as Stallings illustrates, was infected by racism: Haydon wrote that he saw in the physiognomy of the reliefs the "characteristics…of an intellectual European," in contrast to African features he linked to "brutality."

Haydon died some decades later in a messy suicide, Stallings informs us, after his paintings had failed to find an audience:

> Only 133 people visited his exhibit during Easter Week, compared to 12,000 people who paid to view "General Tom Thumb," the three-foot-four-inch-tall American circus performer, during the same period at the same venue.

Frieze Frame is filled with evocative details like this, which Stallings has gleefully plucked from her lockdown-era research, and with thumbnail portraits of curious or eccentric people whose paths have crossed that of the marbles at one time or other. She notes, for example, that a friend of Byron's, John Galt, the author of a long-forgotten poem, "Atheniad," despite having referred to Elgin's predations as "rape," tried to pounce on the marbles himself when it seemed that Elgin and Lusieri lacked the funds to pay customs duties at Malta. In a footnote Stallings reproduces a telling passage from Galt's *Autobiography*, including a sentence that might have been the epigraph of *Frieze Frame*: "The temptation [to seize the stones] was too great." At the last minute Lusieri came up with the money, and the stones continued their journey as the Elgin rather than the Galt Marbles.

In another context Stallings notes that Galt makes a coded allusion to Lusieri in the "Atheniad," under the pseudonym Dontitos. Her book is filled with astute glosses like this one and nuanced readings of poems that touch in some way on the marbles. In discussing Thomas Hardy's "Christmas in the Elgin Room," for example, she quotes a line, spoken by the personified marbles, referring to the "woven sails" that "winged us to exile here [in London]." The tenor of "exile" is clear enough, but it takes a discerning eye to connect the "woven sails" of the ship that transported the stones with the robe once woven for Athena by the Athenian *parthenoi*—a garment that was mounted, in expanded quadrennial versions of the Panathenaic procession, on a mock warship to form a carnivalesque sail. One can't be sure the echo was intended, but the line Stallings draws between a sail of religious celebration and sails of imperial plunder is deeply affecting. Entire chapters of *Frieze Frame* are devoted to explications of this kind, including a long and rich discussion of James Merrill's poem "Losing the Marbles" (1986).

As she nears the end of *Frieze Frame* Stallings becomes more vocal in refuting British justifications for keeping the marbles, pointing out, for example, the fatuousness of the British Museum trustees' statement about them. Rejecting the idea of a "public benefit in having the sculptures divided between two great museums," she asks, "How is it the best thing is to keep the two groups of Marbles from the monument forever asunder, even Athena's torso and her right breast?" Then, in one of the pointed ironies in which this book abounds, she quotes from the report of the 1816 parliamentary inquiry: "[This collection] should therefore be considered as forming a Whole, and should unquestionably be kept entire as a School of Art." That sentence, referring to the marbles that Elgin had exported, clearly could be applied more broadly to the Parthenon frieze or for that matter to the sextet of the caryatids, five of which are now on display in the Acropolis Museum in Athens. (Replicas have stood in their places in the Erechtheion since 1979.)

A photograph of those five, with one huge gap in the foreground like a child's missing incisor, closes this lively, ingenious, humane set of essays. "Their missing sister is not represented by a plaster cast, she is not represented at all," remarks Stallings. "There is just an empty pedestal, waiting for her." The image, together with Stallings's plangent prose, evokes the earlier story of the cries of mourning reportedly issuing from the Porch of the Maidens. In *Frieze Frame* those cries continue to echo, mingling, in a strange harmony, with the raptures of poetry's Muses over the course of two and a quarter centuries.