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Source: *The Classical World*, Vol. 98, No. 2 (Winter, 2005), pp. 187-192

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press on behalf of the Classical Association of the Atlantic States

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4352928>

Accessed: 22-06-2017 16:25 UTC

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PAEDAGOGUS

SPECIAL SECTION ON TEACHING CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY*



THE ROLE OF MYTH COURSES ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

In fact, the most persistent problem that humanism has had to face in the twentieth century is its inability to reconcile its central doctrine with the realities of mass public education.¹

It is a rare college classics program that does not have at least one course in classical mythology, and the myth course is often the largest enrolled class in the program. In fact, at large state institutions, sections of myth are regularly offered which contain five hundred or more students, and while hard data are not easily come by, it is probably safe to say that myth courses routinely enroll far more students than any other "in translation" course normally offered by a classics program, and many students' sole contact with a college classics department comes through a myth course. How things have changed from a generation ago when myth courses were rarely offered, and most students came to college with a full arsenal of classical learning based on their college preparatory work in high school!²

I have been charged with studying the role of mythology courses in the college curriculum, and the task has been enlightening. There is not much secondary literature devoted to the matter, despite the importance of classical mythology to the lifeblood of most classics departments. The current penchant for analyzing and tracing the state of classics and predicting its future almost invariably concentrates on language courses. Likewise, while bibliography abounds on this or that mythological theory or cycle, there is surprisingly little written on what we should be teaching in such courses, how they should be taught, and how all this relates to our role as classicists in the twenty-first century.

A few exceptions stand out. A 1987 pamphlet published by the APA and containing papers presented at a 1986 panel by Mary Lefkowitz, George Harrison, Mark Morford, John Peradotto, Gregory Staley, and Joseph O'Connor

* In May, 1999, the Department of Classics at the University of Maryland, College Park, organized a conference titled "After Twenty Years: Teaching Classical Mythology," which sought to take stock of the course which, since the 1970s, has become the cornerstone of the classical curriculum in American universities. The conference, in which about twenty classicists from around the country participated, focused on how to bring the latest intellectual developments within the field into the classroom in practical ways. To share our discussion with a wider audience, Gregory Staley, who organized the conference, invited several classicists, all but one of them participants in the conference, to share their perspectives on the pedagogy of mythology in the following collection of papers. Each paper seeks to provide a rationale for including a particular emphasis in our myth courses, illustrates that approach through a sample lesson, and then offers resources to which instructors can turn to develop their own knowledge of the subject.

¹ H. M. Kliebard, *Forging the American Curriculum* (New York 1992) 3.

² See B. Knox, "The Enduring Myths of Ancient Greece," *CO* 62 (1985) 118. The article originally appeared in *Humanities* 5 (1984) 1-4.

is still good and useful reading today. The APA might consider updating this out-of-print pamphlet or making it available through its Web site.³ Most recently Nanci DeBloois has made specific suggestions for using a diachronic approach at the college level, S. Douglas Olson has outlined an approach for the first day of class, and James Clauss has reported on structuring a myth course around film.⁴ Teaching myth at the college level thus has an odd dual status—it is a course which we teach routinely to huge numbers of students and upon which many programs depend for survival, and yet it is also one of the most understudied when it comes to the pedagogy of presenting it properly to our students.

How did myth grow to be so important on our campuses? Through necessity and enlightened opportunism. It is commonly quoted that Latin enrollments dropped almost 80 percent between 1962 and 1976,⁵ but it is less commonly pointed out that this severe decline had an enormous impact on the kind of classical studies entering college students were prepared to study.

Edward Phinney has observed that the severe decline in the number of high school Latin teachers during this period was not matched by an equivalent drop in the number of members in the American Philological Association, where membership actually increased during this period.⁶ In retrospect, it is clear that one reason for what Phinney calls this “uneven collapse” was the fact that college classics departments both saw the need for such courses in translation and acted with dispatch. As a result, enrollments have flourished and the “classical studies” model for a minor and a major is to be found in most thriving classics departments today. The students still desire the information (much of which they were not exposed to in high school) but now obtain it in their native tongue.⁷

Some traditionalists, of course, decry the retreat from old-style philology, but most embrace the change. Even Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath, who berate the demise of classical education, have some semi-kind words to say about the ingenuity that kept programs viable: “Anemic and bandaged, but still breathing, Homer limped into the 1980s, leaning heavily upon the goodwill of dedicated teachers, translators, and ‘popularizers,’ who were struggling to save their programs.”⁸

³ J. F. O’Connor and R. J. Rowland Jr., eds., *Teaching Classical Mythology: The 1986 APA Panel*. American Philological Association Committee on Education Papers 5 (Atlanta 1987). I am grateful to Adam Blistein, Executive Director of the APA, for making his sole copy of this useful pamphlet available to me.

⁴ N. DeBloois, “Girl of Your Dreams or Bride of Frankenstein? Teaching Classical Mythology,” *Interdisciplinary Humanities* 15 (1998) 39–47. S. D. Olson, “Classical Mythology, Day 1: The Pilgrims, George Washington, and Santa Claus,” *CW* 84 (1991) 295–301. J. Clauss, “A Course on Classical Mythology in Film,” *CJ* 91 (1996) 287–95.

⁵ R. A. LaFleur, ed., *Teaching of Latin in American Schools* (Atlanta 1987) 15.

⁶ E. Phinney, “The Classics in American Education,” in P. Culham and L. Edmunds, eds., *Classics: A Discipline and Profession in Crisis?* (Lanham, Md., 1989) 77–78.

⁷ Kliebard (above, n.1) 3–24 offers a fine survey of the erosion of the humanities in public education. See also K. Herbert, “The Classics in America at 2000,” *CB* 75 (1999) 123–46.

⁸ V. D. Hanson and J. Heath, *Who Killed Homer? The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom* (New York 1998) 86. In a follow-up article (“On Stinging a Dying Horse,” *CB* 75 [1999] 169), they decry the spectacle of a full professor lecturing to a packed house of undergraduates on mythology and not having significant contact with the students as “an ugly truth” and “a scam, really.”

But is the overall picture really that bleak? We are offering a valuable service in teaching mythology on today's college campuses, for the information is equally engaging, important, and useful. But it is now time to ask if we are teaching this valuable course in the most effective manner possible. Such questions have been but little asked, and the limited scope of this article provides no forum to conduct a proper study of the question. Yet it may be just adequate to pose certain questions that need to be studied and to offer some possible avenues for that study to take.

Even though he wrote in 1977 for a British audience of precollegiate teachers, J. E. Sharwood Smith summed up our present condition rather well. He notes first that an entire subindustry had evolved to defend the study of Latin in the schools, but that little had been written on why classical civilization should be taught there. He then cites, with obvious disdain, the reasons many people proffered for doing this. We have heard versions of the same arguments on our own campuses from those who seek to justify huge myth courses:

The teaching of Latin . . . has inherited an excessive burden of justificatory theory; Classical Studies is still dangerously (if refreshingly) innocent in respect of its theory. There are currently a number of rather crude and dismal theories, which could lead to crude and dismal practice, such as: that the function of Classical Studies is to keep the Classics teacher in employment so that he can continue his proper task, which is the teaching of Latin and Greek to a select few; that its function is to be a bait to catch bright pupils for next year's Latin beginners' class; that in a proper selective school everyone should be capable of learning Latin, but now the Goths are at the gate, if not actually inside it, thought must be given to civilizing them. Too barbarous for Latin, they might nevertheless make something of Classical Studies, which thus becomes an inferior substitute for Latin.⁹

We have heard this before: "If our department wants to teach upper-division Greek, we'd better have the numbers in myth"; "Myth class is a great recruiting ground for majors and minors"; and "They come to us knowing less each year. How can they read Shakespeare, Milton, or even political science without a sense of the Graeco-Roman heritage?" The only common complaint missed by Sharwood Smith is, "My dean makes me do it." Each of these statements has a certain validity. Necessity is a harsh mistress, and unless classics programs and departments have excellent student-to-teacher ratios and keep their major count up, they can soon find themselves in the sights of budgetary or, worse, zealous educational reformers.

Why do today's students need myth so badly? The year 1987 saw the publication of E. D. Hirsch Jr.'s *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*.¹⁰ In this book, Hirsch makes the claim that America's youth has been ill-served in recent times by not being taught the basic knowledge most students once took with them into the world from high school. For example, classical mythology was long a staple of the junior

⁹ J. E. Sharwood Smith, *On Teaching Classics* (London 1977) 8.

¹⁰ E. D. Hirsch Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston 1987).

high school curriculum, and the study of Latin in the high schools insured that basic gods and goddesses and basic sagas and legends were known long before college.¹¹ Also in 1987, Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn Jr. published the results of extensive tests given across America to see what level of competency our high school graduates were attaining in literature and history. They tested 7,812 eleventh graders carefully chosen to represent the entire population. The results were depressing. Only 56.2 percent could identify the god Mars, and two in five could not name Midas as the king whose touch turned objects to gold. Fewer than 50 percent knew who Odysseus was (85 percent knew Cinderella), and 64 percent knew that Pandora's box contained evils rather than, say, a bird. Just about half could deal effectively with Oedipus or an Achilles heel. Such knowledge as there is runs fairly shallow. Just over half knew that Jason pursued a quest, but almost two out of five guessed that he was pursuing Troy.

The authors sum it up well: "[T]he most disturbing finding of the literature assessment was . . . the cumulative impression that students do not know many of the common allusions, especially those drawn from the Bible and mythology, that regularly appear in serious literature."¹² It is therefore arguable that classics has evolved properly, that it is offering courses not just to fill seats, but to meet needs which are demonstrable and serious.¹³

The reality, then, is there. A properly taught myth course may in fact be a form of remediation, but it is crucial remediation. The fact remains that literature, music, and higher art all presuppose a certain amount of mythological knowledge. If a student leaves college without the rudiments of classical mythology, that student leaves unable to appreciate (or in some cases even to understand) Western art, music, drama, and many other artistic forms of expression. Moreover, myth is a universal human activity. To think about myth and myth theory is excellent training for today's multicultural students. It is clear, then, that there is a valid seat at the liberal arts table for today's college students. We are not just coming in the back door.

The remaining question, to paraphrase Sharwood Smith, is whether crude and dismal realities have led to crude and dismal practices. Much needed to be done, and much is being done. But how thoughtful have we been about its implementation? The answers center around standards, content, and teaching prowess.

Mark Morford has written tellingly about the necessity of keeping academic standards high in courses such as this and has outlined some specific ways in which the large, lecture-format class can be brought more readily into the liberal arts formula.¹⁴ The very size of the class is often a hindrance to discussion or writing. Moreover, many of the readers of

¹¹ It is surprising that the excellent pamphlet by M. A. Burns and J. E. O'Connor (*The Classics in American Schools: Teaching the Ancient World* [Atlanta 1987]) makes so little mention of mythology in the schools.

¹² D. Ravitch and C. E. Finn Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* (New York 1987) 44, 93-95, 215.

¹³ Bullfinch saw the same problem when he published his *Age of Fable*. See the comments of M. Cleary, *The Bullfinch Solution: Teaching the Ancient Classics in American Schools* (Salem, N.H., 1990) 7-8. Nathaniel Hawthorne, in his own way, brought myth to the general population in his *A Wonder-Book for Girls and Boys* and *Tanglewood Tales*.

¹⁴ M. Morford, "Teaching Courses in Greek and Roman Civilizations and Classical Mythology," in D. M. Astolfi, ed., *Teaching the Ancient World* (Atlanta 1983) 151.

this piece will be all too familiar with a large, intensely popular myth course which, if truth be told, devolved into more of a story hour than a serious college course. While such a format may be temporarily attractive in the large number of students it can attract, one can not help but worry that it is ultimately bad for the future of classics. The demands of deans and number crunchers have always pushed against the standards of idealistic professors, and the answer lies, of course, somewhere in the middle. It is perhaps enough here to suggest that finding this middle ground is vital, for the future of classics on our campuses in the next generation will in no small part be determined by how we negotiate this compromise. Will we still be seen as an important intellectual part of the liberal arts tradition, or will we have come to the level of teaching mostly service courses? The service courses are unlikely to go away. It behooves us to be sure that they have solid content, and that comes down to what we have students read and what we have them think about—texts and theory, if you will.

First, texts. The ultimate goal of classics programs has been, over many centuries, to bring students into closer contact with the material and literary achievements of Greece and Rome. We no longer do this in the original languages for the majority of our students. Should we then teach myth courses at the college level without the medium of original texts? This problem formed the basis for many lively discussions at the conference at the University of Maryland which generated these papers and, truth be told, there was little resolution. Some favored discrete ancient texts such as the Homeric Hymns, Homer's works, and various tragedies. Others favored texts which merely retold the stories, and still others preferred texts which choose to tell the tales and also offer portions of ancient texts in translation.¹⁵

We move now to the problem of myth theory. Most college myth courses are, after all, taught by nonspecialists. By this I mean that they are generally taught by classicists whose primary training is in some branch of philology or archaeology. Faced with this situation, many, as I did, read up on the subject with an eye to taking the course beyond mere storytelling. Still, much of this is done in the dark.

In summary, then, we face a disparity. Classical mythology forms a large part of what we do at the college level, and it is a body of knowledge that today's students need if they are to be considered well educated. Yet there has been little time devoted to studying how we should best be doing this important work. The profession could serve itself well by conducting a survey to uncover various kinds of information relevant to these issues.¹⁶ It would be useful to know the percentage of classics departments that offer a myth class. What is the average size for such classes? Are there discussion sections? Is there a writing component? What percentage of first-hires are asked to teach myth? What percentage of myth classes is taught by adjunct faculty? What type of text do most people use? What percentage of the class is given over to theory? Where might a new myth teacher (so often a newly minted Ph.D.) go to read up

¹⁵ To name but three, Morford and R. J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 7th ed. (New York 2003); B. B. Powell, *Classical Myth*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2004); and S. L. Harris and G. Platzner, *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights*, 4th ed. (Boston 2003).

¹⁶ A limited, but enlightening, attempt at such a survey was conducted by O'Connor, "The College Mythology Course," in O'Connor and Rowland (above, n.3) 79–89.

on the subject? How many programs offer an upper-division classical myth course, and is the introductory course a prerequisite? My informal request for such data from classicists on an Internet discussion group brought to light the fact that many programs have upper-division, in-depth myth courses.

A final word about training our teachers. Mythology is firmly ensconced in most of our curricula and, if anything, will probably grow in importance over the upcoming years. The profession should take a close look at how these courses are taught and should facilitate improvements in this area. How? Jeffrey Henderson has written persuasively that we tend to divide our Ph.D. graduate students into the "serious (likely to publish) and unserious (everyone else)."¹⁷ Research and survival through publication have come to be instilled in our graduate students from their earliest seminars. Very few Ph.D.-granting classics departments offer formal teacher-training for their graduate students. Likewise, few offer special training in myth or myth theory. Text-based philology courses and seminars still predominate. The profession could benefit from considering that as more and more of our college audience is taught by us in English and in mythology courses, we could help the employment prospects of our Ph.D. students immensely by giving them some formal training in those very areas they will have to teach. The vast majority of our Ph.D.s will never teach at an institution which resembles the elite institution where they studied.¹⁸ They will, for the most part, work in a program where the B.A. is the terminal classics degree and where "service" courses form a great portion of their teaching load.¹⁹

The results need not form an overly formal study. They could, perhaps, most profitably be circulated via the World Wide Web. A bibliography on the subject should also be amassed to help new teachers, and sample syllabi could be shared easily in the same way.²⁰ The natural point for dissemination is the APA's Web Page, and the gathering of the information seems to be an interesting project for the APA's Division of Education.

Karl Galinsky has stated that curricula are successful to the extent that they evolve with the evolution of the students.²¹ Courses such as mythology have helped to keep classical studies central to the liberal arts curricula of many institutions. It is time to stop and evaluate, to be sure we are teaching this important course as best we can, for, as always with the classics, the next challenge to its relevancy is surely just around the corner.

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Classical World 98.2 (2005)

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¹⁷ J. Henderson, "The Training of Classicists," in Culham and Edmunds (above, n.6) 93. Again, one longs for an update.

¹⁸ Kitchell, "Quis Docebit Doctores? Proposed Models for Change," *TAPA* 132 (2002) 199-207.

¹⁹ R. Hornsby writes well about this need in "Classics in the Next Millenium," *CB* 75 (1999) 185-86.

²⁰ J. Peradotto's *Classical Mythology: An Annotated Bibliographical Survey* (Urbana, Ill., 1973) was invaluable to me when I began teaching my myth class to four hundred students.

²¹ K. Galinsky, "The Challenge of Teaching the Ancient World," in Astolfi (above, n.14) 3. Compare his thoughts in "Classics Before and After 2000," *CB* 75 (1999) 161-65.