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Teaching Mythology

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TROUBLING THE FAMILIAR INTO NEW LIFE: SOME THOUGHTS ON TEACHING MYTHOLOGY

The stimulating papers on teaching mythology that appeared in *CW* last year represent an invaluable compendium of approaches and ideas for all of us who teach such courses.¹ I offer these comments in the hope that they too may be of use.

Given the deficient background of many students, simply covering the material in a myth course can be daunting, and the *CW* papers suggest a panoply of resources for meeting this challenge. I think, though, that we miss an important opportunity if we do not also build into such courses strategies for eliciting active student response. My experience teaching mythology at Carleton College for many years suggests that such strategies are a natural fit for this subject and that they contribute materially to what students learn in the course—and to what they retain.

One approach we used was to require students during the term to develop their own definitions or descriptions of myth. I began the opening class by asking students to take ten minutes to write in their notebooks, for their eyes only, a brief statement of what, at that moment, they thought myth was. At the end of the third and sixth weeks of the ten-week term all students turned in one-page definitions or descriptions that drew on what we had covered in class to that point and on ways in which their own thinking had evolved. These two statements were ungraded (except for an F, if they were not turned in) but received extensive comments and criticism. The final stage in the saga was an hour-long question that represented either 50 percent or 33 percent of the final exam:² “In a well-organized and cogently argued essay, elaborate your own definition or description of myth. For documentation you may draw on whatever myths you choose, but be sure also to relate your comments closely to two of the following: X, Y, or Z”—with X, Y, and Z being myths announced at the time students took the exam.

Because this ongoing exercise had as its *telos* a question that materially affected their grade in the course, students took it seriously—and in the process often became deeply involved in it. Most students chose to relate their definitions closely to what we were covering at the time in lectures and readings, so that writing their statements inevitably entailed active review and assimilation of class material. Even among those who followed this approach, however, responses varied greatly: different students focused on different aspects of what we had covered, found different handles for dealing with it, different ways for arguing their cases. And a substantial portion—perhaps 25 percent in a typical class—came up with highly original answers, often relating the assignment to the theoretical focus of their majors or to reference points of personal interest. Science students often compared the function of myth to that of a scientific model,

¹ “Special Section on Teaching Classical Mythology,” *CW* 98 (2005) 187–213.

² The approximately eighty students taking the course for four credits attended two lectures a week, did the written assignments, and took a two-hour final, of which the “definition” constituted 50 percent—i.e., one of two essays they wrote. The approximately eighty students taking the course for six credits also chose a discussion section (e.g., myth in modern drama, myth in opera, myth in art, “a modicum of Greek”) and wrote a three-hour final consisting of their definition, a second essay, and a question on their discussion section, with each part counting one-third.

noting that neither is a literal representation of the “real world,” but that both help us comprehend and deal with that world. Students in the arts often related the evocative power of myth to the artistic languages they were developing, while students in the social sciences tended to ground their definitions in the study and observation of human society. Some of the best definitions were those in which students approached myth indirectly, through metaphor or analogy. One student, for instance, began her description by commenting that “from author to author and from age to age, the characters and relationships in myth are viewed from different perspectives. Like a glass prism, the story we call myth has innumerable faces which reflect as many lights/colors/interpretations as there are human experiences.”

There is, of course, no “right answer” to this question, a fact I emphasized from the start. But that the question is so open-ended, can be approached from so many angles, obliges students to confront myth on their own, to forge their own answers. In order to encourage students not only to come up with their own ideas but also to relate them rigorously to what they were studying in class, my comments on the two ungraded essays constantly raised questions about issues we’d been discussing: “Good ideas about the Olympians, but where does a god like Dionysus fit in?” “I like your emphasis on the historical origins of some myths, but don’t you need to pay more attention to cult and religion—e.g., to initiation rites?” We also located these two statements at points where the course abruptly veered in new directions. Students submitted their first definition the day after we finished a section on the gods—and on the day we started on myths associated with the Trojan War. The second statement was due the day after we finished Troy—and on the day when we began studying some psychological approaches to the Theban cycle. A student would accordingly labor to integrate into a definition what we’d been studying the last three weeks only to discover on the day s/he turned it in that it was already outdated! This was a fiendish device, but it kept students on their toes—and reminded them sharply of the complexity (impossibility?) of the assignment.

I stumbled on a second approach by accident—and in desperation. The first time I taught the myth course I focused on covering the material in grisly detail and on making sure students mastered it. Most of the students demonstrated on exams that they were managing to do so, but as the term progressed, it became obvious that enthusiasm was waning, and by the end I found myself wondering what of all this material students would remember once the course ended. Feedback on the class confirmed my suspicions, as did the fact that enrollment plummeted from sixty the first year to twenty-four the second. One day that second year when we’d been discussing different versions of the Orestes story—Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Eliot, Sartre—I mentioned that if any students wanted to try their hand at creating their own versions of this or another myth, I’d be delighted to read them—and to share them with the class. To my surprise, about half the class took me up on the offer, in several cases with impressive results.

Clearly I’d struck a responsive chord, so the following year I built the assignment into the course. Each student was required to submit an original “something”—story, poem, musical composition, drawing, dance, etc.—based on one or more myths. Like the two one-page definitions of myth, this assignment was ungraded—(except for an F for not doing it). By no

means were all submissions memorable, but virtually every student took the assignment seriously, and many of the resulting pieces were quite wonderful. Perhaps most exciting was that in almost every instance the student had clearly gone through something like the process Cesare Pavese describes vis-à-vis his myth-based *Dialogues with Leucò*: "What is more acutely disturbing than to see familiar stories troubled into new life? . . . The surest, and the quickest, way for us to arouse the sense of wonder is to stare, unafraid, at a single object. Suddenly—miraculously—it will look like something we have never seen before."³ In confronting their chosen myths, students became obsessed with them, got inside them, and eventually saw them in ways that were new, their own. Moreover, the process clearly worked in the other direction as well—the myths got inside the students, made them see themselves anew, sometimes in profound ways. Always gratifying and even moving were those quite frequent occasions when students who had classed themselves as "uncreative"—indeed, had sometimes begged to write a graded term paper in place of this "creative" project!—found that they were talented in ways they had never suspected.

Education is sometimes defined as what remains after one has forgotten the facts. Though somewhat pat, the definition is worth pondering, for there is no question that students *will* forget most of the information we so carefully present to them. What will remain? Is it what we'd want to remain? What I can report is that former students from the Carleton myth course remember these two assignments—and that from their experience of them they have retained a sense of just how alive myth was—and still is.

A second point, also about retention: because students were constantly and actively trying to relate what they were studying to their evolving definitions, they tended to master the course material much better than they did that first year when I bludgeoned them with it so mercilessly (they also enjoyed it more).

Over the years this class became large, and the reading of papers made it feel at times like a yearly harrowing of hell. But the assignments I've described yielded such intriguing responses that I always looked forward to reading them (well, almost always). The greatest joy was that often the definitions and creative projects made me, in Pavese's words, look at a familiar myth, or at myth itself, as something I had never seen before.

Three poems suggest what I mean, one evoked by *Antigone*, the other two by *Orpheus* and *Eurydice*. They were written by first- and second-year students at Williams College, where I now include a "creative" assignment in an ancient drama course.⁴

Antigone on the Beach

Holidays, we'd vacation at the seaside,
 the six of us, in an old rambling cottage, with
 airy porches, where we'd sit, in the
 twilight hours, playing games on the floor,
 as mom and dad watched over us.

³ C. Pavese, foreword to *Dialogues with Leucò*, trs. W. Arrowsmith and D. S. Carne-Ross (Ann Arbor 1965).

⁴ The poems are printed here with the permission of their authors. For comments written soon after I instituted this assignment at Carleton, and a number of poems elicited by it, see my "Classics in Translation: Some Comments and Some Suggestions," *CW* 63 (1969–70) 292–93.

Early mornings, we'd rise with the sun, and
run out onto the cool sand.
Sister and I, with our big bag of beach toys, would
build palaces, while our brothers would
dive into the waves and wrestle on the beach.

Mid-day, with the burning sun over our heads,
the exhausted brothers collapsed, one in the
shade of our parents' umbrella, the other in the bright sun.
And I'd take his little, orange shovel, which he had
long ago forgotten, and cover him with the cool wet sand.

No, the sun's scorching rays never touched him.
Protecting him was my duty, and I felt like such a
good sister, my little hands keeping this big man from harm.
And as darkness descended over the sea, I sat at my window,
Looking at the moon and stars, and remembering his peaceful
smile.

—Samuel Clapp

Your look says it all
Shatters that delicate wall of ecstasy
It cracks like ice and melts away
And the world pushes in hard and cold
The warmth of your touch
Draws icicles across my hand

I shy away from your piercing eyes
Sink deeper where the cold can't touch me
For a while I thought I could breathe
Deep without ice on my lungs
I breathed you in, felt your heat
Shield me from harsh reality

But your eyes are empty and numb
To fall into them would be to feel
That pain of living, of knowing
Warmth for a moment and having it
Fall away and splinter with the
Ice of your gaze.

—Laura Effinger

Composition

The harmony he tuned, it locked in place.
Intent on love he loosed a spinning glance
Dissolving every shadow of her face.

Hell balked and gave him leisure for a space
Expecting acquisition on the chance
The harmony he tuned, it locked in place.

He mused upon her countenance at pace
But blackened to a scowl at dissonance
Dissolving every shadow of her face.

Discordant cancers echoing they trace
Metastasis of song in sirens, dance.
The harmony he tuned, it locked in place.

Her fervent steps, they quickened to a chase
 In meeting subtle beams, the daylight's lance,
 Dissolving every shadow of her face.

His welcome song complete, he lost the grace
 To vie within the vain magnetic trance.
 The harmony he tuned, it locked in place
 Dissolving every shadow of her face.

—Richard Rodriguez

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CLASSICAL ASSOCIATION OF THE ATLANTIC STATES CALL FOR CENTENNIAL LATIN *OVATIONES*

To celebrate its one hundredth anniversary in 2007, CAAS seeks to recognize the accomplishments and influence of memorable and inspirational classics teachers in its region, both past and present, living and dead.

One of the ways in which CAAS plans to do so will be in the form of brief *ovationes*, Latin speeches. Several will be featured in the special souvenir program of the Centennial meeting in Washington, D.C., October 4–7, 2007.

Contributions from those in the following three categories are welcome: (1) secondary school Latin students, as individuals or in groups; (2) college and university Latin students, as individuals or in groups; and (3) secondary, college, and university Latin faculty members, as individuals or in groups. Prizes will be awarded to the most outstanding submissions in all three categories and to the teachers of the students in the first two categories.

Ovationes should be written in Ciceronian-style classical Latin and be no more than 150 words long. Each *ovatio* should be prefaced by a brief biography of the individual honored, and followed by a lively English translation that captures the spirit of the Latin text, along the lines of the Latin *ovationes* published in the final issue of *Classical World* each year.

To qualify for an *ovatio*, a teacher should have taught classics—ancient Latin and Greek languages and literature, and ancient Roman and Greek history and culture—at the secondary or college/university level in the CAAS region (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Delaware, Maryland, and the District of Columbia) at some point during the years 1907 to 2007.

Special consideration, however, will be given to *ovationes* honoring the seven distinguished classicists to be celebrated as “professional ancestors” at the 2007 meeting: Anna Julia Cooper, Basil Lanneau Gildersleeve, Moses Hadas, Gilbert Highet, Edith Hamilton, Gonzales Lodge, and Grace Macurdy. For specific information about these individuals and for further details about the *ovationes* in general, contact Judith P. Hallett at jeph@umd.edu and Barbara McManus at bmcman@optonline.net.

The deadline for submissions is June 30, 2007.