Myth and the Classical Tradition
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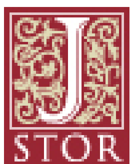

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MYTH AND THE CLASSICAL TRADITION

I.

> [T]he truth of works of art is a contingent one: what they reveal is dependent on the times, circumstances and views of the audience to whom they reveal it.[1]

Truth be told, we teach mythology because it is popular, because it still speaks to students today in a vivid and engaging way. In short, we teach it because of its "receptability," because of the classical tradition. Yet more often than not, we justify the course instead as a general introduction to ancient culture, as Classics 101, or as a survey of Greek and Roman literature under another, more marketable title. But as Barry Powell points out, "the category of 'classical myth' exists more in the minds of contemporary teachers than it did in the ancient world itself."[2] I would argue that a course in myth needs constantly to keep that principle in mind: this course is at least as much about what we make of these stories as it is about what the ancients did.

Undoubtedly the most striking feature of instruction in myth over the last twenty-five years has been the increasing focus on theories of myth. While these theories are all products of the last two centuries and are hence themselves in some ways a feature of the classical tradition, they have ironically produced a focus "more drawn to the pre-history of the literary text than to its subsequent influence," as Joseph O'Connor has noted.[3] Richard Caldwell has criticized such theories for ignoring the "aesthetic function" of myth, "its capability of producing some sort of pleasure or satisfaction." For it is precisely this essentially psychological function which helps to explain the continuing appeal of Greek myths in later eras "during which other functions were no longer operative."[4] While I do not wish to argue against consistent attention to theories of myth in our approach to teaching mythology, we need to be alert to their tendency to overlook the very feature of myth which has attracted our students in the first place: its production of pleasure and satisfaction for us in this time and place.

The textbooks most commonly used in our myth classes recognize this principle to a degree, but respond to it in different ways. Morford and Lenardon's *Classical Mythology* has from the beginning devoted several chapters to "The Survival of Classical Mythology" at the end of the book. I have always found it difficult, however, to treat the classical tradition in this way as a coda to the course. Most students simply do not have the historical and cultural paradigms through which to respond to categories such as medieval, romantic, or Enlightenment in such a compressed format. Moreover, all of Western culture is in some sense a footnote to Greek and Roman mythology; it is therefore difficult to teach the entire

[1] G. Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Cambridge 1987) 66, cited by C. Martindale, *Redeeming the Text* (Cambridge 1993) 7.

[2] B. B. Powell, *Classical Myth*, 3rd ed. (Saddle River, N.J., 2001) xix.

[3] J. F. O'Connor, "Afterword: The College Mythology Course," in O'Connor and R. J. Rowland, ed., *Teaching Classical Mythology: The 1986 APA Panel*, Education Papers (American Philological Association, Committee on Education) 5 (Atlanta 1987) 82.

[4] R. Caldwell, *The Origin of the Gods* (New York 1989) 13.

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liberal arts curriculum in one course, let alone at the very end. I have had greater success in integrating the classical tradition throughout the course, in digestible morsels related to the myth of the moment, much in the way Powell does in his text, *Classical Myth*, which includes sections titled "Perspectives" in almost every chapter. These examine how Prometheus became a hero in the romantic era, for example, or the ways in which artists through the ages portrayed Venus.[5]

II.

Come Muse, migrate from Greece and Ionia,
Cross out please those immensely overpaid accounts,
That matter of Troy and Achilles' wrath, and Aeneas', Odysseus' wanderings,
Placard "Removed" and "To Let" on the rocks of your snowy Parnassus,
. . . .
For know a better, fresher, busier sphere, a wide, untried domain awaits, demands you.

Walt Whitman, "Song of the Exposition" (1871)

A course in classical myth is, to use Whitman's terms, an account of "migrating Muses," of the constant retelling and reinterpretation by each new era of stories handed down from Greece and beyond (even the Greeks created their myths in part from inherited tales). Traditionally, myth courses have focused on the European aspect of this process, but I increasingly have focused in my own teaching on classical myth in America. By addressing the issue of *America's* attitude toward classical mythology, I can help my *American* students think about why they are taking such a course and about why these old stories should still be read, 1,500 years later and 5,000 miles away. The very assertion that America has a classical tradition is both a revealing yet contested claim.[6] For America was a product of the same Enlightenment that had declared myth dead. Unlike much of Europe, moreover, America was never a Greek colony nor part of the Roman empire; Americans therefore had no ruins, decorated with mythological scenes, to tie them to Athens or to Rome. As a democratic nation of the New World, defining itself in contrast to the aristocratic Old, America, Alexis de Tocqueville predicted, would not create poetry "fed with legends or the memorials of old traditions."[7] Although "pagan" myth had long existed in an uneasy relationship with Christianity, America's Puritan

[5] The three most commonly used textbooks for myth have recently issued new editions, not all of which I was able to examine before writing this essay: M. P. O. 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); S. L. Harris and G. Platzner, *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights*, 4th ed. (Boston 2003).

[6] See M. Reinhold, *Classica Americana* (Detroit 1984), esp. 40–41, for a discussion of this issue. The question is not whether Americans knew and used the Greek and Roman classics, but whether these served merely as ornament to American ideals or as part of their intellectual core. W. Haase offers an update to the scholarship on this issue in his introduction to Haase and Reinhold, eds., *The Classical Tradition and the Americas*, vol. 1 (Berlin and New York, 1994).

[7] De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2 (1840; repr. New York 1945) 76.

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roots made it particularly hostile to myth, especially as a subject to be taught in the schools: "[T]he less we know of this subject, the better; for what is the history of the ancient fables but an agreeable description of frauds—rapes—and murders, which, while they please the imagination, shock the moral faculty?"[8] It is not surprising, then, that when Whitman invited the Muses to migrate to America, he asked them to leave their myths behind.

So strong, however, was myth's "aesthetic function" that from the very beginning Americans found ways to give it a home here. Rip Van Winkle, for example, embodied America's ambivalence about its cultural status and heroic ambitions when he followed in Odysseus' footsteps, leaving home for twenty years (spent, however, *sleeping*) and returning to a dog which did *not* recognize him. Ads to transport New Englanders to California for the Gold Rush used the appeal of Jason and the Argonauts, leading Charles Bulfinch to write a myth book for the masses so that they would understand such references. Athena, as a virgin the most acceptable pagan goddess in a largely Christian America, became the model for Freedom atop the Capitol dome in Washington, in part because as a warrior goddess she was prepared to defend the land. I highlight points of connection such as these as I teach various myths, spending in each case but a few minutes on the topic, but aiming thereby to show my students how their own traditions are in part classical.

As a case study in how this can be done, let me turn now to Greek myths about the paradise to be found in the West, whether it be the Hesperides, Elysium, or Atlantis, for it was through the lens of stories such as these that Americans first conceptualized America. When Europeans set sail to the West, they had to cross the Atlantic Ocean, two names with a mythological past. As Edward Everett, the first professor of Greek at Harvard, pointed out, the Atlantic Ocean had been the venue of various ancient and mythical paradises which could find their embodiment and fulfillment in America:

> In that high romance, if romance it be, in which the great minds of antiquity sketched the fortunes of ages to come, they pictured to themselves a favored region beyond the ocean, a land of equal laws and happy men. . . . We look back upon these uninspired predictions and almost recoil from the obligations they imply. By us must these fair visions be realized. . . .[9]

The American Dream, it turns out, was originally a classical myth.

The Dream did not easily survive, however, the rigors of life in the New World and the painful reality that America was not "a land of equal laws." In the wake of the Civil War, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote the poem "Ultima Thule" (1880), which lamented how far since America's founding "the ocean streams / Have swept us from the land of dreams, / That land of fiction and of truth, / The lost Atlantis of our youth!" America's connection with Atlantis is particularly fascinating. Plato had spoken of

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[8] B. Rush, "Observations upon the Study of the Latin and Greek Languages," in M. Meranze, ed., *Essays: Literary, Moral, and Philosophical* (Schenectady, N.Y., 1988) 20.

[9] "Oration on the Peculiar Motives to Intellectual Exertion in America," in R. E. Spiller, ed., *The American Literary Revolution 1783–1837* (Garden City, N.Y., 1967) 316.

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an unknown continent beyond Atlantis (*Ti.* 25a3–5), and in the sixteenth century, America was identified either with this unnamed continent or with Atlantis itself.[10] In ancient fantasy, if not in ancient history, America was part of the classical world, and this connection later helped to shape the American sense of self.[11]

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[10] For a more detailed discussion of America and myths of paradise, see Haase and Reinhold (above, n.6), especially the entries by J.-P. Sánchez (193–96) and J. Romm (81–90). See also M. D. Snyder, "The Hero in the Garden: Classical Contributions to the Early Image of America," in J. W. Eadie, ed., *Classical Traditions in Early America* (Ann Arbor 1976) 139–69.

[11] There is as yet no comprehensive treatment of the American reaction to classical myths. I have therefore listed below suggested readings for several specific topics which would allow teachers to give an American perspective to their teaching of classical myths:

- George Jupiter Washington: Horatio Greenough's statue of GW modeled ultimately on Pheidias' statue of Zeus at Olympia: S. Crane, *White Silence: Greenough, Powers and Crawford, American Sculptors in Nineteenth-Century Italy* (Coral Gables, Fla., 1972).
- The Choice of Heracles and America's "Fraternities": J. McLachlan, "The Choice of Heracles. American Student Societies in the Early 19th Century," in L. Stone, ed., *The University in Society*, vol. 2 (Princeton 1974) 449–50, 488–92.
- James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* and the *Iliad* (imagine that its title was *The Last of the Trojans*): J. P. McWilliams Jr., *The American Epic 1770–1860: Transforming a Genre* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).
- *Star Wars* and classical myths: M. Henderson, *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth* (New York 1997).
- Rip Van Winkle and Odysseus: G. Staley, "Washington Irving's *Sketch Book*: American *Odyssey*," forthcoming in W. Haase, ed., *America's Classical Greece*.
- Demeter and Persephone: S. Gubar, "Mother, maiden and the marriage of death: Women writers and an ancient myth," *Women's Studies* 6 (1979) 301–15; American women writers Hilda Doolittle, Tony Morrison, and Adrienne Rich are included in her discussion.

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Award(s) will be announced in the spring. Applications (due January 31) should be directed to:

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