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ABSTRACT

A knowledge of the major myths and legends will be an invaluable asset to the student in acquiring a richer and deeper appreciation of his reading, be it in English or a foreign language. The teacher must treat the material systematically, starting with the creation of the primal power out of chaos and the struggles for power which ultimately lead to the victory of Zeus and the Olympians over the Titans. The teacher then proceeds one by one through the gods of the heavens, the Twelve Olympians, and goes from there beneath the earth to explore the topography of the Underworld and the lore of the gods of death. Like the gods, the heroes should be treated genealogically, house-by-house or family-by-family. Back-up texts for the teacher include: H. J. Rose's "A Handbook to Greek Mythology," "Oxford Classical Dictionary," "Crowell's Handbook of Classical Mythology," and "Classical Mythology: An Annotated Bibliographical Survey." (LL)

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CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY FOR TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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I saw a staring virgin stand
Where holy Dionysus died
And tear the heart out of his side,
And lay the heart upon her hand
And bear that beating heart away;
And then did all the Muses sing
Of Magnus Annus at the spring
As though God's death were but a play.

There it is, a fine bit of Yeatsian poetry with its heart's blood warmed in classical mythology. You can speak, if you will, of Jungian archetypes, of Fraserian slain vegetation gods, of the merging of pagan and Christian symbols, but to what end if your student hasn't the vaguest idea about Dionysus other than the association of his name with "orgy" or what he may have seen in Dionysus 69? And how many teachers of English are there who can identify the "staring virgin" and her relationship to Dionysus? And the Orphic element within the poem, how many of you would spot that?

Here I stand as a Professor of Classics and I throw down an exegetical gauntlet before you on one of your most cherished English poems.

What hybris! What chutzpah! However, I would make the same case if you were teachers of Classics. Too few in my own field provide their students with a frame of reference in classical mythology before indulging in their favorite anthropological or psychological interpretation of a mythological allusion in one of the "Greats." Too few, in fact,

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possess a frame of reference themselves. Wrestling with participial constructions and conditional clauses in Latin and Greek does not give a Classics major an overview of the field. And even when the literature is taught in translation, the bulb does not light up over a student's head when he sights a common mythological allusion. You would have to agree that the same would apply to a student's reading of a poem of Yeats, let alone anything of Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Shelley, Keats, and a hundred others. Yet, there is some consolation in the fact that even native speakers of Greek and Latin were themselves unsure of their own heritage; they produced and used handbooks to guide them through the labyrinth of their own myths and legends. And did not Milton, Keats, and other English "greats" resort to classical dictionaries?

In short, then, we no longer have to lament the decline of interest in reading the classics in their original languages and shed a tear or two over the loss to humanistic studies. We no longer have to disparage secondary school educators for not providing the college-bound student with a proper background in classical mythology. We no longer have to apologize for introducing a course in classical mythology into the college curriculum. It belongs in the liberal arts program as much as, if not more so than, courses in disciplines that require reading only in the current issue of The New York Times.

Let me return to the phrase "a frame of reference," to which I will add a few cautionary remarks. In view of the fact that the corpus of mythological material from Greece and Rome is so vast, so varied, so uncannical/^{that}no one, student or teacher, can take it all in a single semester or/ⁱⁿa single lifetime. For the student, an organized approach to the subject -- that is, a knowledge of the major myths and legends -- will be an invaluable asset in acquiring a richer and deeper appreciation of his reading, be it in English or a foreign language. It will also serve as an introduction to those scholarly works which presuppose a background in the classical mythology -- Douglas Bush's Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry, for example. For you, even if you had no formal training in Latin and Greek, an appreciation of a different sort: a sense of humility before, and wonderment at, the inventiveness of the ancient Greek and the Greek-trained Roman. At least that has been my experience in teaching the subject for a good number of years.

How to go about it if you wish to give your student's a working frame of reference? I am afraid there is really one way to go: the material has to be treated systematically: chronologically (if that word can be applied to classical mythology) and genealogically. You should begin with the creation of the primal power out of Chaos, their offspring and the struggles for power which ultimately lead to the victory of Zeus and the Olympians over the Titans. Then proceed one by one through the gods of the heavens, the Twelve Olympians. From heaven, go beneath the earth and explore the topography of the Underworld and the lore of the gods of death, Hades and others. Dionysus and Orpheus should be given a special place of their own

since they bridge the gap between heaven and earth, between life and death. Once you have ranged over the various divine regions and give the biographies of the gods, pick up the tales of the "older" and "younger" heroes, that is, those who preceded the Trojan War, and those who took part in it. Like the gods, the heroes should be treated genealogically, house by house, or family by family. Whatever logic there may or may not be in such a treatment, practice has shown that it is an effective way of gaining an understanding to a much tangled collection of tales. Then on to the Trojan War: the major families involved in that earth-shaking event -- for so it appeared to the ancients -- and the story of the struggle as Homer, the greatest of all poets, related it in the Iliad. With the downfall of Troy there should follow the tales of the returns of the surviving heroes and the account of the consequences of being away from home for a decade or two. This concludes the story of the Greek heroes. From the material of the Trojan cycle, the Romans wrote an epilogue and fabricated a legend of their own origins, a story which culminated in Vergil's epic, The Aeneid.

There is another approach I hope you will avoid even though it is attractive to us academics. Let's call it "the womb to the tomb approach"; that is, to start with Homer and Hesiod, proceed to the Greek dramatists, and then on to Vergil, Ovid, and perhaps Hyginus. This approach may work for a history of classical literature but it won't do for classical mythology. Take Homer and Hesiod. Although Homer is the first to appear on the western literary scene, he certainly is not a primitive; in many ways he is the most sophisticated of any poet of any time. His audience was equally sophisticated in picking up his mythological allusions and, undoubtedly, hugged themselves with delight at the bard's unorthodox treatment of age-old material. As for Hesiod -- that crusty farmer from Boeotia, the prophet of justice and hard work -- if any of you have read through his Theogony, you will find it as illuminating as the "begets" and "begats" of the Old Testament. No, I do not believe the "womb to the tomb approach" is a viable one for classical mythology.

In the process of issuing these caveats, let me add one more which flows from the complex character of classical mythology. Avoid, no matter how tempting, the single theory or unitarian approach to explain the whole range of Greek and Roman mythology. Theories abound whether put forward by anthropologists or psychoanalysts -- name your persuasion -- or scholars of religion or, yes, even of classicists. It would be a disservice to Homer and his successors to channel Greek inventiveness and imagination into a single stream. This is not to say that these theories -- even when they contradict one another -- have something to offer in the way of explanation. In short, if you feel impelled to theorize, it is best to be careful and to be eclectic.

What is the best way to go? First of all, select a text, a modern text, one that you can be comfortable with. (Eschew Edith Hamilton or Gayley; they are simply too Victorian and Ovidian and do not merit a place on a reading list for college students. Robert Graves on the other hand is too tendentious and is more of a myth-maker than a mythographer.)

As a backup text for yourself, I would recommend H.J. Rose's A Handbook to Greek Mythology. I have a very high regard for Rose's scholarship and commonsense approach to mythology. If only he were not so obstinate in insisting upon transliterating Greek names directly into English rather than by way of Latin! To the reader unfamiliar with the peculiarities of the Greek language such names as Oedipus and Actaeon look strange when given as Oidipous and Aktaion. Not only that, but he has jammed so much into such little space that the Handbook resembles a telephone directory more than a text. Be that as it may, Rose can be the golden thread that will lead you through the labyrinth of mythology. In addition, I would suggest further backstopping by a sound dictionary. The best, of course, is the Oxford Classical Dictionary; Crowell's Handbook of Classical Mythology (1970) is a good second choice and cites the principal sources for myths and legends. And just one more suggestion in the way of backup. If you do not have some idea about changing attitudes among the Greeks from one period to another (important distinctions should be made between the Archaic, Classical, Hellenistic periods) and from one writer to another, an excellent potboiler like H.D.F. Kitto's The Greeks (Penguin) will be helpful. All of us should be careful about making those widesweeping and often erroneous generalizations about the Greeks.

As a guide for the perplexed in matters bibliographical, there is a recent publication of the American Philological Association: Classical Mythology: An Annotated Bibliographical Survey, by John Peradotto, a critical guide to 200 modern reference works, textbooks and other publications useful for teachers and students of Greek and Roman mythology. A tiny coda to these remarks. For those of you who have an abiding and scholarly interest in the afterlife of classical mythology, Patricia Merivale's Pan the Goat-God: His Myth in Modern Times (1969) is a paradigm for the kind of work that can be done in this field.

So far we have been traveling along a common path, and now we reach a fork in the road. Keep in mind, if you will the Cumaean Sibyl's words to Aeneas in the Underworld: This is the place where the road goes into different directions. The path to the right...points the way to Elysium; the other to the left inflicts punishment... and leads to godless Tartarus." I am hardly a Sibyl but let me caution you against taking the road of trying to be an expert in Altertumswissenschaft, if that is not your training. As sure as Calvinist's hell-fire, that road will lead to the abyss of pedagogical uncertainty and chaos. To steal a thought from Plato, to ta hautou prattein, do your thing, use the expertise you possess in your own field.

I know that I need not tell you that there is no profit in taking class time rarely to retell the myths and legends that have been given as assigned reading. Of course, a certain amount of explication and explanation should take place in the classroom to reinforce the material at hand, and in particular to guide your students in the proper pronunciation -- that is, the one in common acceptance -- of names that are strange to them. For the rest, call upon your own frame of reference

to show how the classical material has been adopted, manipulated, altered, enhanced, inverted and perverted. It can run from the medieval to the modern; from Auden, Browning, Chaucer to Tennessee Williams, Wordsworth and Yeats; from Adonais to The Waste Land. Illustrations from English and American literature are more than a cornucopia-full; European writers, especially those of the twentieth century, can also be brought into the classroom since the availability of fine translations has removed the language barrier between Continental and English literature. And if you, as many of you do, have more than a passing interest in music and art, you can enrich your course with illustrations in art from the seventh century B.C. to the twentieth century A.D.; in music much can be done with librettos, which at one time were read as literature and were more important than the music associated with them, and you have and you have a wide range of choices between Monteverdi's Orfeo and Stravinsky's Oedipus Rex or his Persephone.

In short and in sum, the combinations and permutations are virtually infinite; there is considerable material out of which to fashion a course that will suit you. I think it is very important to feel comfortable in your own skin. However, I have never found the course an easy one to teach and the only consolation is docendo discimus -- what we learn through teaching. As a Classicist I cannot refrain from paraphrasing Cicero's statement concerning the Latin Language:

"It is not so much a distinction to know the myths of Greece and Rome as a shame not to know them." And finally from Seneca without paraphrasis: "It is greater virtue to know how to stop than how to speak."