Greek Mythology and the Creative Arts

Lecture to a class in Greek mythology, Monmouth College, 1988

Greek mythology did not just fade away when the ancient Greeks ceased to be the dominant political power in the Western world. Their conquerors, the Romans, adopted and adapted the Greek mythology to their own world. This was not just a matter of taking over the Greek religion intact because the Greek and Roman temperaments were completely different. The Greeks were a people of vast imagination and creativeness, who saw everything in concrete symbols. Beauty was the goddess Aphrodite, wisdom the goddess Athena, and the creative impulse was the spirited winged horse Pegasus, which had to be kept under control by the golden bridle of Athena (wisdom), or it could become destructive. A Renaissance painting by Botticelli employs this same symbolism. The painting is called “Pallas and the Centaur,” showing a tame centaur being stroked by Pallas Athena, and illustrating brute force being tamed by wisdom. The artist also used this painting to flatter his patron. By decorating Athena's clothing with the three interlocked rings of the Medici crest, he implied that the Medici had tamed the ignorant mob.

Another instance of this symbolism is the Trojan War. There really was a Trojan War, you know. Myth is always based on fact. But it was not fought over who would end up possessing the most beautiful woman in the world. It was probably fought over control of the Aegean Sea, which lies between Greece and ancient Troy. But that kind of description is so matter-of-fact. It is much more glamorous to describe the struggle as a free-for-all fight over a beautiful woman. And struggles for control of waterways are not just things of the distant past. England defeated the Spanish Armada to assert her sovereignty over the English Channel; and right now a serious struggle is taking place over the control of the Persian Gulf.

But to get back to the differences between the Greeks and the Romans. The Romans were completely lacking in the creative genius of the Greeks. Almost all Roman art work was done by Greek slaves. Instead of dreamers, the Romans were practical, hard-headed business men, who knew how to codify the laws and build aqueducts and roads, some of which (with a few repairs) are still in use today. So the gods of the Greeks took on somewhat different personalities when they moved to Rome. For instance, the awe-inspiring, inexorable dispenser of justice, Zeus with his terrifying thunderbolt, became the more genial god, Jupiter, whose name means Jove (or god), the father. His new character is reflected in the English word "jovial," derived from his name.

It was this Roman version of the Greek gods that most influenced later generations. No such thing as copyright laws existed then, and the writer of the Roman epic, the *Aeneid*, appropriated whole passages from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. (Joe Biden should have lived in those days). But Vergil added to the Greek myths new stories, explaining the origins of Rome because (as we said) myths are based on reality. And just as fact and myth got blended in the Greek story of the Trojan War, the story of the founding of Rome, as told by the Roman historian Livy, contains at least as much myth as fact. Nor has that tendency gone out of date. I found it very informative to sit in Rome and watch an ITALIAN documentary on World War II. This material as seen by "the other side" was not quite the same as what I had seen presented by the American press.

But again to get back to my subject. The first really important literary work to be written after the *Aeneid* did not come for almost thirteen centuries when the Italian Dante wrote his *Divine Comedy*. In this work Dante used Vergil (who wrote the *Aeneid*) as his guide through

Hell, which greatly resembled Vergil's Underworld, which in turn was drawn directly from Homer's Hades.

Not too long after Dante in the course of human history came the Renaissance, and Classical mythology (mostly taken from Ovid) was really given a workout by sculptors and painters. I am not sure that you could find one Renaissance artist who did not produce at least one work based on Classical myth. From Titian, with his reclining Venuses, to Tintoretto to Botticelli, with his famous "Birth of Venus," to Cellini to Rubens to...any artist you name.

My favorite of all statues comes from this period. It is a statue of Apollo just about to catch Daphne, who has prayed to the gods to rescue her. She is just being changed into the laurel tree, with twigs and leaves beginning to sprout from her fingers and tiny roots from her toes. The lines of this statue (which, incidentally, Bernini made at the ripe old age of seventeen) are incredibly graceful. But I think that what really won my heart was the Latin inscription on its base, which says: "The man who tries to grasp fleeting beauty ends with only bitter leaves in his hand."

Other than individuals like Venus and Minerva, the two favorite subjects for painters during this period seem to be the judgment of Paris and Jupiter in the form of a bull kidnapping Europa. I have tried to figure out why this second subject was so popular. I suspect that it is the challenge of portraying in the same painting the virile strength of the bull contrasted with the delicate loveliness of Europa.

This affinity between art and Classical mythology has continued into our own century. One of the recent artists to use Classical myth extensively (his favorite subject is the Minotaur) is Picasso. The Classical myths have also had a strong impact on world opera. The first opera still extant and at least twenty-six other operas are based on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, and at least sixty on the tragic love story of Dido and Aeneas, which you will not study in this class because it is a part of Roman, not Greek, mythology. Cherubini's opera on Medea (as well as a movie on the same theme) had as its vibrant star the longtime girlfriend of Aristotle Onassis, the firey Maria Callas, who committed suicide in the 1970's. And when the University of Indiana Art Center was dedicated in 1972, the first staged performance of John Eaton's *Heracles* was presented for the dedication. Also in the 1970's there were many presentations of Montiverdi's opera on Ulysses' return home.

One of the most spectacular operas of all time was based on the *Aeneid*. It was written by Berlioz [pronounce Ber li oz] and entitled *Les Troyens* (*The Trojans*). It deals mostly with the fall of Troy and the Dido tragedy. The music takes four hours to sing. There are thirteen major scene changes. A cast of hundreds is required, including two choruses, a corps de ballet, and three stage bands. Although Berlioz died in 1869, proper staging of this opera was impossible until the Metropolitan Opera Company, with its four enormous stages on two levels, its 57-foot turntable, and the most intricate theatrical lighting system in the United States presented it in 1973.

When we come to the influence of Classical myth on literature, the material is overwhelming. It is like having hundreds of flavors of ice cream set down in front of you at one time. The only question is -- what can I leave untouched? Today we shall talk mostly about a few of the plays drawn from this source, with only an occasional comment on the novels and poems -- like taking one teaspoonful from one of those luscious ice creams that we are not really going to try to eat.

The Theseus-Phaedra-Hippolytus triangle is the subject of plays not only by the Greek Euripides and the Roman Seneca, but also by such modern writers as Racine and Robinson

Jeffers. And the entire Theseus saga was retold by Mary Renault in two historical novels (*The King Must Die* and *The Bull from the Sea*), in which she interprets the mythical events in a way credible to the modern reader. For instance, the Minotaur's devouring of the best and the strongest of the Athenian youth she considers as the sport of bull-dancing (a favorite sport in that area at that time). Here the athlete danced on the back of a bull. It was a very dangerous sport, more so than bronco-busting. These young bull-dancers did not have a long life expectancy. No life insurance company would ever issue one of them a policy.

The Jason-Medea story has also furnished enough material to fill several bookshelves. In ancient literature both Euripides and Seneca wrote plays on Medea, and Ovid wrote an imaginary letter from Medea to Jason in his *Heroides*. And among the many modern playwrights who have used this story are such names as Corneille, Maxwell Anderson, Anouihl, Robinson Jeffers, and Serban of the La Mama Repertory Company in Minneapolis. In the 1960's an English movie came out based on the Argonaut expedition; and William Morris's *Life and Death of Jason* is the longest single mythological tale in English literature.

Nor did our old friend Heracles fail us in providing material for modern playwrights. Comedy is often based on the fact that Zeus had come to Alcmene, Heracles' mother, in disguise as her husband Amphitrion. Then when the real Amphitrion came home from the wars the same night, Alcmene became pregnant with twins, Heracles the son of Zeus and Iphicles the son of Amphitrion. One play on this episode is entitled *Amphitrion 38,* indicating that this is the thirty-eighth play based on this story. Some plays about Heracles have been transformed into a modern setting. In 1967 Archibald MacLeish published a play in which a modern professor went to Delphi to try to find the answers to some of the contradictions in Heracles' character. In this play Heracles himself wanders on and off the stage as a character. And in 1970, a biting satire on modern American life came out, entitled *Hercules and the Augean Stables*. The chief point of this play is that people don't "want" the corruption around them cleaned up.

Other plays based on a Classical myth but put into a modern setting center on Orpheus and Eurydice. Both Anouilh and Tennessee Williams wrote plays of this nature. Then, of course, there is the movie, "Black Orpheus."

And, of course, one of the longest running musicals to ever hit Broadway was *My Fair Lady*, which is a version of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, a modernized version of the Classical myth of Pygmalion.

The Twentieth Century is filled with literature based on Oedipus and the so-called "Oedipus complex." (This term, by the way, was first used by Freud in 1910). Jean Cocteau wrote *The Infernal Machine*, in which he shows Oedipus struggling against a satanic universe. James Earl Jones played the role of Oedipus in John Lewin's translation of Sophocles, where he emphasized his resentment of the child abuse inflicted on him by his parents. Jean Perrault's *Oedipus, a New Work* was first performed at NYU in 1971 with such stage props as incense sticks and nylon stockings. The stage was kept black except for the use of spotlights; and sound effects include Balinese music, gongs, and whistles. And on November 9, 1980, a "Sophoclon" was held in New York City, where all three of the Sophocles plays on the Theban story were presented in one day. The performance began at 3:00 PM, with an hour between shows, and the cycle ended at 10:00 PM.

Literary works centered on the Oedipus complex have been numerous and sometimes bizarre. George C. Scott's 1974 movie, *The Savage is Loose*, concerns a man, his wife, and their two-year-old son who are shipwrecked on a deserted island. When the boy reaches twenty, he needs sex. Since the mother is the only woman available, a struggle ensues between the father

and the son for the mother. And a 1977 TV serial, “Flesh and Blood”, was based on a novel by Pete Haml, and tells the story of an ex-convict who becomes involved with his mother after he thinks that his father is dead.

But there are also some powerful works presenting the Oedipus complex in its more usual form -- the almost unbreakable tie between a mother and son. Sidney Howard's play, *Silver Cord* (referring, of course, to the umbilical cord) deals with a mother and her two sons, and how she manages to wreck their relationships with their fiancées in her possessiveness of her sons' attentions. And D. H. Lawrence's novel, *Sons and Lovers*, is perhaps the most penetrating analysis of this close, unique relationship between mother and son. Lawrence was writing from personal experience.

Other modernized plays have come out on the Antigone theme, among them one by Anouilh, showing the youthful idealist rebelling against the "establishment," as young people called the existing order in the 1960's; and one by Bertold Brecht, with an anti-Nazi theme.

Another group of myths that has had enormous influence on the creative arts consists of those centering around the Trojan War and its aftermath. We have already talked about the judgment of Paris in art and the spectacular opera, *Les Troyens*, but there is much more.

The first printed book in the English language in 1474 was a version of the Trojan story. And within the last century at least three works have presented the Trojan situation from the point of view of the women involved. Tennyson wrote two poems which are monologues spoken by Oenone, the "legal" wife of Paris; John Erskine wrote *The Private Life of Helen of Troy*, which discusses the events as she saw them; and in 1979 a fictional autobiography of Cassandra was published.

Two modern plays use this war to underscore the futility of war. One is entitled *The Trojan Women* (not to be confused with the ancient Greek play by the same name); the other one, by Giraudoux, is entitled *Tiger at the Gates*. It was written shortly before the outbreak of World War II and originally entitled *The Trojan War Will not Take Place*.

Those who survived the fighting have also been important sources of material. All three of the Greek writers of tragedy from whom we have surviving plays wrote on the tragedy around Agamemnon and Clytemnestra and their children Electra and Orestes. The best known of these ancient plays is the Aeschylus' trilogy called the *Oresteia*, with the first play dealing with the death of Agamemnon, the second with the death of Clytemnestra, and the third with the purging of Orestes from guilt. Many modern adaptations of this trilogy have been written: David Rabe's version relates to the Vietnam War; Gerhart Hauptmann's and Jean Paul Sartre's versions were written during World War II. Two modernized versions are “very” close to the original. Some of the dialogue in T.S. Eliot's *The Family Reunion* is a verbatim translation of Aeschylus; the other one (and in my estimation the best of all the modern adaptations) is Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, with a Civil War setting. Even the names in O'Neill's trilogy are near the original names -- Orestes becomes Orin; Clytemnestra is Christine, etc.

Another returning hero who has furnished much material to modern writers is Ulysses. Tennyson wrote a poem on him, and James Joyce's novel called *Ulysses* is set in modern Dublin. A really delightful little play based on Ulysses' return home is *Home is the Hunter*, by Helen MacInnis. In this, Homer keeps wandering aimlessly on and off the stage, quoting the *Odyssey* and muttering, "That's a good line; I must remember it and use it sometime." And getting annoyed by the action on stage, he keeps mumbling, "That's not the way I wrote it."

One of the most recent contacts that you have had outside the classroom with Classical mythology in recent times has been Dr. Ryder's talk on one of Willa Cather's novels. Incidentally, Dr. Ryder picked up much of her background in Classical mythology, sitting in a classroom right here in Wallace Hall.

It seems pretty obvious, don't you think, that a person has big gaps in his understanding of ANY of the creative arts without having a basic knowledge of Classical mythology, whether his interest is music, art, drama, or literature. This This mythology is found also everywhere in business, psychology, cartoons, and the sciences. But that is another subject. I have poured enough on you for one day.