



Plugging Classical Gaps

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David Bennett on Myths and Legends in the Secondary classroom.

A former colleague of mine used to despair when teaching Marlowe, Milton, The Bard, etc., because, as she put it, her students' classical gaps were always showing. What she meant was that with the disappearance of Latin or Classics from the timetable her exam students simply didn't have the ability to comprehend literary allusion to myth and legend. She was so fearsome that I never let on where my sympathies lay; my own classical knowledge was pretty much the size of a black hole rather than a mere gap. When I chanced upon **Larousse Encyclopaedia of Mythology** my ability to impart erudite comment on the doings of gods, goddesses and ancient heroes apparently knew no bounds, providing I'd prepared thoroughly enough beforehand. I found the Bible very useful, too, because I rapidly realised there's also a vast chasm when it comes to biblical allusion; but I'll spare you my thoughts on that until another time.

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As far as doing something positive about plugging the classical gap early with my pupils I must admit I've been a bit dilatory; brief forays into Rex Warner's **Men and Gods** have never quite seemed to strike the mark and it's been a bit of a hit and miss affair, including my own rendition of the appropriate story as the occasion demands. I used to be quite moving as Demeter when she discovers the abduction of Persephone, but transmission was discontinued when D H Lawrence's **Bavarian Gentians** went off the syllabus.

Fortunately for all concerned **The Kingfisher Book of Myths and Legends** retold by Anthony Horowitz came to me for review. Here were thirty-five myths and legends from seventeen different cultures that were very entertainingly told, well-presented and, importantly, affordable for a class reader. As another plus point, they are so written that they savour of the oral tradition and read aloud incredibly well.

'Hypaepae was such a wretched place that only the people who visited invariably turned out to have lost their way and those who lived in it would really have preferred not to. Hypaepae didn't have a village green. It had a village mouldy brown. Although it seldom rained, the high street was always full of puddles and the whole smelt of fish.'

(from 'The Spinning Contest')

'You would certainly have been ill-advised to kick sand in the face of Hercules had you see him on the beach. Not unless you wanted to find yourself several feet under the sand with your legs tied in a knot behind your head.'

(from 'The Mares of Diomedes')

My colleagues unanimously endorsed my enthusiasm and it's a fact that our set has barely been in the stock-cupboard

since. I've noticed boys have been especially receptive and there's been an unusual amount of overnight/ over weekend lending to accommodate enthusiastic demand. The fantasy-gamers seem to come out of the closet and presumably pick up tips about dealing death blows to Gorgons and dragons. At the same time sexual innuendo merchants get their share of cheap thrills on the basis of 'you can find double-meaning in anything, if you know how'; whilst Anthony Horowitz has been discreet, the characters he's telling us about generally weren't!

Other than the appeal to these two sub-culture groups, reading the tales has generally created class excitement and interest. Leaving aside the writer's skills and droll delivery, I wonder if this is because they deal with very basic, real and identifiable human emotions and traits, and their original function was to explain what often seems inexplicable, possibly as much so now as when they were being created and refined. Maybe it's this to which pupils are responding so willingly; the magic of these tales, when told well, is that they strike resonant chords in that part of us which is about what it is to be human.

Love, hatred/kindness, revenge/hope, despair/courage, cowardice, etc., they're all there in action-packed, often gruesome, bite-sized blocks that cement together to form valuable life references. Something deep within our being responds to them, even when we are children. This is especially noticeable with the myths and legends of the Inuits, American Indians, Incas, Polynesians and Africans, which have such a striking wise primitiveness and a knowing simplicity.

We are still learning how to use this text and its wide range of myths in our classrooms but we know that for succeeding years there are cross-curricular links possible because some stories tie in with several Humanities units, e.g. Native Americans. However, most importantly for us, we can be covering literature from other cultures and at the same time comfortably and confidently plugging some of the classical gap with important tales like 'Pandora's Box', 'The Minotaur' and 'Orpheus in the Underworld'. Part of the attraction of Horowitz's delivery is his cross-referencing between the tales and his sly inclusion of bits of other stories and brief pen portraits to augment the main themes. 'The Judgement of Paris' is a case in point; besides the basic ingredients, we are treated to the full low-down on Peleus and Thetis, Hera, Athene, Aphrodite and so on.

The possibilities for classwork that have come out of the stories seems infinite. There is a myriad of opportunities for oral work and digressions into all kinds of language activities including Greek and Latin word derivations. My special success was a three-week project with Year 8 (mixed ability) that sprang out of 'The Mares of Diomedes':

1. After reading the story in class and discussing the general content, our thoughts turned to the ingredients of 'Heroic Language' and 'Action-packed Storytelling'.
2. The findings were then applied in a small group assignment which was to devise a new labour for Hercules. This would be told to the rest of the class with an emphasis on vivid language and exciting action. In the oral sessions that followed, each group told its tale firstly to one other group and then to the whole class, each time receiving the criticisms and suggestions for adaptation from the listeners.
3. Finally each group set about producing both the book and the story tape of 'The New Labours of Hercules' series. This multi-media enterprise ended up in the Resources Centre appropriately packaged for other pupils.

My tutor group had someone's granny in for the day towards the end of the project. (We'd been looking at old age in Pastoral and she'd agreed to spend the day with us and talk about the differences between her school days and now.) She was impressed at how the pupils had imprinted their own modernday concerns onto their stories. We had Hercules sorting out the ozone layer, watering the Sahara to reduce famine, involved in rescuing a cure for aids which had got lost under the polar ice-cap and plugging the erupting volcanoes in the world. In one story he ended up mixing it with the fire dragon from Rosemary Sutcliff's **Dragon Slayer** which we'd read in Year 7.

The multi-media angle meant that everyone had a contribution to make and impressive efforts were made by some of the children with special learning difficulties, who seem to be much better dab-hands with IT software than the rest of us and wield microphones better than pens. The artists/designers came into their own with matching book jackets and

cassette box covers, whilst the bossy ones supervised noisily and I, with Herculean effort, plugged the gaps in my National Curriculum checklists like an English teacher possessed.

The Kingfisher Book of Myths and Legends, retold by Anthony Horowitz, is published by Kingfisher, 0 86272 156 3, £8.95; 0 86272 786 3, £3.99 pbk

A back-up book box is recommended. Some suggested inclusions are:

Mythical Creatures, Bert Kitchen, Walker, 0 7445 2046 0, £4.99 pbk

Griffin, Hydra, Minotaur, Pegasus, Cerberus and eight others graphically drawn and fully described, plus a useful index to creatures, people, gods and places.

Greek Myths for Young People, Marcia Williams, Walker, 0 7445 21017, £9.99

An amusing, busy gem with eight myths told in technicolour cartoon style. There's a wry humour both in the speech bubbles and in the visuals that shouldn't fail to provoke a response.

The Greeks and Their Myths, Michael Johnson and John Sharwood Smith, ill. Peter Dennis, Peter Lowe, 0 85654 656 9, £9.95

Quite self-consciously informative, this is excellent value and material for the bright, interested child who demands to know more than the stories. It's brimming with all kinds of scholarly, but accessible background detail about the original makers of the tales and their beliefs, not written specifically, I feel, with a young audience in mind. The contents; index and list of further reading are impressive and should facilitate quick referencing. The dramatic black-and-white line drawings are fiercely evocative and heroically striking in themselves.

Look, too, at this publisher's 'World Mythology' series which is very comprehensive.

The Orchard Book of Greek Myths, retold by Geraldine McCaughrean, ill. Emma Chichester Clark, Orchard, 185213 373 2, £10.99

Sixteen myths are told here with one or two that aren't often included - like 'Atlanta's Race' and 'Echo and Narcissus'. In her brief foreword the author gives a short background to the stories and ends with a good reason for perpetuating them:

'Because they are full of the things that fascinate anyone in any country, at any time. There are adventures and jokes, fables and fairy stories, thrills and happy endings. In short, the Greek myths are just too good to forget.'

She artfully translates these precepts into a batch of stories where the style is straightforward and homely with understated humour. The full-colour illustrations ably augment the text.

Men and Gods, Rex Warner, New Windmill, 0 435 12012 3, £3.99

The presentation of this book does it few favours and in truth the style is a bit dated in the light of the titles mentioned above. However, on revisiting it, I found some of the less popular, but nonetheless interesting stories, like 'Phaethon' and 'Oedipus'. This is another choice for the able or inquisitive child who wishes to delve further than the 'picture book myths' and get the closest he can to the original Ovid, or who wishes to follow up a reference from elsewhere. As Rex Warner says in his short introduction,

.. they [the myths] have deeply affected our own literature. Those who are ignorant of them will not enjoy English poets as much as they might do.'

There is an accompanying volume - **Greeks and Trojans**, 0 435 12013 1, £3.99.

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