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## Classics for Cool Kids: Popular and Unpopular Versions of Antiquity for Children

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## Classics for Cool Kids: Popular and Unpopular Versions of Antiquity for Children

### Abstract

Since Nathaniel Hawthorne's pioneering *A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls* (1851) and *Tanglewood Tales* (1853), retelling Greek and Roman myths for children has been a widespread and influential means of popularizing classical material. While Hawthorne unabashedly appropriated the myths as entertainment for young readers, works by his contemporary counterparts (such as the "Myth-O-Mania" series, *Greece! Rome! Monsters!*, and the Percy Jackson series) display a more anxious and conflicted approach to the same material, caught between the aims of educating their readers about antiquity and appealing to their readers' presumed hostility to school and learning.

### Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Classics

## CLASSICS FOR COOL KIDS: POPULAR AND UNPOPULAR VERSIONS OF ANTIQUITY FOR CHILDREN

**ABSTRACT:** *Since Nathaniel Hawthorne's pioneering A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls (1851) and Tanglewood Tales (1853), retelling Greek and Roman myths for children has been a widespread and influential means of popularizing classical material. While Hawthorne unabashedly appropriated the myths as entertainment for young readers, works by his contemporary counterparts (such as the "Myth-O-Mania" series, Greece! Rome! Monsters!, and the Percy Jackson series) display a more anxious and conflicted approach to the same material, caught between the aims of educating their readers about antiquity and appealing to their readers' presumed hostility to school and learning.*

One area in which the classical tradition is currently most alive and popular is in works of children's literature inspired by mythology.<sup>1</sup> Such works are widely consumed by people who may not encounter the ancient world in their formal education and are often remembered afterwards as high points of childhood reading. Thus they make a good testing ground for general issues about popularization of the classics: what it accomplishes, and for whom? why it is valued, or should be valued, by specialists?

Children's literature as a category has several points of affinity or overlap with popular literature. In a recent book devoted to the surprisingly complicated project of defining children's literature, a leading scholar in that field, Perry Nodelman, points out that children's literature resembles popular literature in being identified through its audience. "The only other literary category I can think of that defines an audience rather than a time or place or a specific type of writing like romance or tragedy is what is called popular literature," texts conceived of as such because "they are, or are at least intended to be, widely and popularly read."<sup>2</sup> Children can be thought of as displaying certain characteristics of popular audiences in general: as having unformed, unsophisticated tastes; as having little sense of history; as instinctively reading for pleasure and for the plot; as delighting in what is playful; and as naturally anti-authoritarian.

As an audience for literature, children have other distinctive features that popular audiences may or may not share. For one thing, children

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was the keynote address at a graduate student conference on "All Roads Lead From Rome: The Classical (non)Tradition in Popular Culture," held at Rutgers on April 9, 2010. I thank the organizers of that conference, Liz Gloyn, Benjamin Hicks, and Lisa Whitlach, for giving me such a congenial occasion for trying out these ideas. My discussion owes much to conversations with Deborah H. Roberts, my collaborator on a forthcoming book on classics and childhood in the twentieth century, and to the work of Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson on Rick Riordan and the Percy Jackson series, especially a forthcoming essay (see below, n.10) on which I draw heavily in my treatment of that series.

<sup>2</sup> P. Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature* (Baltimore 2008) 3.

are not themselves the authors of the literature that is directed to them. Children's literature is written by adults, whose work inevitably answers to adult agendas and addresses not so much real children as adults' constructions of children, imaginary children shaped by adults' assumptions about what children want, or should want, or need. This has been one of the central themes of theoretical and critical writing on children's literature, from Jacqueline Rose's seminal *The Case of Peter Pan: The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, first published in 1984,<sup>3</sup> to the book by Perry Nodelman from which I just quoted, published in 2008 and tellingly entitled *The Hidden Adult*. Furthermore, as an audience, children are a moving target. They are destined not to remain children forever; they are expected to lose the childlike qualities of playfulness and ignorance that make them similar to a popular audience, and the books they read play a role in that process. Children's books not only address children but seek to change them.

Neither of these restrictions necessarily applies to the broader categories of popular literature and popular audience, but both of them often do. We may think of popular literature as being popularly generated, as emanating from authors who resemble their audiences, and giving voice to identifiably popular perspectives, but we may also think of it as the work of more highbrow authors who produce what they think a popular reader wants much as adults produce what they think a child reader wants. We may see works of popular culture as sources of pure pleasure, dedicated only to recreation and entertainment, or we may see them as attempts by specialists to make their audiences a little more like themselves, to make them better informed and more culturally literate, much as authors of children's literature try to make children a little more like adults. So children's versions of the classics can help us to think about popular versions of the classics more generally, about why they exist and what they accomplish, and especially about the stake that professional classicists have in them. Do we value them as equally authentic forms of engagement with the classical past, different from, but on an equal footing with, our own professional activities? Or do we applaud them for their capacity to convert their audiences, to make them more like us, getting them to share our interest in antiquity, making them better informed, the way we are—for their capacity, that is, to perform “outreach.”

My particular focus is on adults retelling classical myths for child audiences and how they negotiate the diverse goals of entertaining their audiences, appealing to their childish appetites, and educating their audiences about the classical tradition, instilling in them some of the adult cultural literacy that children might not seek but ought to acquire. I start with the mid-nineteenth century myth books of Nathaniel Hawthorne, which are founding documents in the extensive tradition of retelling classical myths for children, before moving on to several contemporary examples.

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<sup>3</sup> J. Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan: The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London 1984 [Philadelphia 1993]).

Hawthorne made a far-reaching contribution to the popularization of the classics by converting classical myths into children's literature, producing two widely read myth collections for children, *A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls* in 1851 and *Tanglewood Tales* two years later in 1853.<sup>4</sup> These books can be thought of as popular literature in a number of ways. For one thing, they were written in hopes of wide sales. In 1849, Hawthorne had lost his appointment as surveyor of the Salem, Massachusetts custom house and needed to make money from his writing. Books for children could be written fast and would be highly marketable. In writing them, Hawthorne allowed himself a lot of freedom in adapting his material, for which his principal source was a classical dictionary by Charles Anthon, to his child audience. He made the Greek myths resemble fairy tales, another form of traditional storytelling that was being targeted at children at that period, and in some cases he turned them into stories about children. For example, his version of the Pandora story in *A Wonder Book*, entitled "The Paradise of Children" and also drawing on the biblical story of the fall, makes all of the characters children and turns Pandora's fatal opening of the box into a study in childish curiosity and minor disobedience. Pandora is beset by little whispering sounds, possibly creatures trapped inside, possibly the voice of her own curiosity.

"Let us out, dear Pandora—pray let us out! We will be such nice pretty playfellows for you! Only let us out!"

"What can it be" thought Pandora. "Is there something alive in the box? Well!—yes!—I am resolved to take just one peep! Only one peep; and then the lid will be shut down as safely as ever! There cannot possibly be any harm in just one little peep!" (112)

*A Wonder Book* in particular offers not only an instance of popularizing the classics, but a dramatization of that process and a manifesto for it. The retold myths are tied together through a frame narrative, in which Eustace Bright, a sophomore at Williams College, is entertaining a group of younger cousins and their friends at Tanglewood, a house in the Berkshires belonging to a Mr. and Mrs. Pringle. When he runs out of fairy tales to tell the children,

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<sup>4</sup> Quotations in this paper are taken from N. Hawthorne, *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* (repr. The Iona and Peter Opie Library of Children's Literature, Oxford 1996). Useful general discussions of Hawthorne's two myth collections include N. Baym, "Hawthorne's Myths for Children: The Author Versus His Audience," *Studies in Short Fiction* 10 (1973) 35–46; E. B. Donovan, "'Very capital reading for children': Reading as Play in Hawthorne's *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*," *Children's Literature* 30 (2002) 19–41; L. Laffrado, *Hawthorne's Literature for Children* (Athens and London, 1992); R. D. Richardson, "Myth and Fairy Tale in Hawthorne's Stories for Children," *Journal of American Culture* 2 (1979) 341–46; D. Roberts, "From Fairy Tale to Cartoon: Collections of Greek Myth for Children," *CB* 84 (2009) 58–73; S. A. Wadsworth, "Nathaniel Hawthorne, Samuel Goodrich, and the Transformation of the Juvenile Literature Market," *The Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* 1 (2000) 1–24.

Eustace turns to Greek myths or, as he calls them: "The nursery tales that were made for our great old grandmother, the Earth, when she was a child in frock and pinafore," adding "It is a wonder to me that they have not long ago been put into picture books for little girls and boys. But instead of that, old gray-bearded grandsires pore over them in musty volumes of Greek, and puzzle themselves with trying to find out when, and how, and for what they were made" (19–20). Eustace here reveals himself as to some extent a stand-in for Hawthorne himself, who begins the collection by declaring that "The author has long been of the opinion that many of the classical myths were capable of being rendered into very capital reading for children" (8).

In his realization of his own vision, Hawthorne presents children's versions of the classics not as reading but as orally transmitted tales, like the folk tales they resemble, told in this case by Eustace Bright, and has Eustace suggest that, if they were found in books, those would be alluring "picture books," in which the myths would be translated into a universal language of images, in contrast to "musty volumes of Greek." The association of those volumes with "old gray-bearded grandsires" creates an explicit opposition between the young as the proper audience of popular, accessible versions of the classics, and the old as the proper audience of obscure and esoteric versions, in a dead language and weighed down with abstruse scholarly questions.

Eustace confronts the scholarly, elderly version of the classics directly in the scholarly, elderly person of Mr. Pringle, who is a classical scholar, and the two of them have a brief showdown after Eustace tells his version of the story of how Hercules gained the golden apples of the Hesperides by tricking Atlas. One of the children asks how tall Atlas was, and Eustace answers by inserting Atlas into the Massachusetts landscape: "He might be from three to fifteen miles straight upward, and that he might have seated himself on Taconic, and had Monument Mountain for a footstool." And he adds that Atlas' little finger was "as long as from Tanglewood to the lake" (163). Mr. Pringle, however, chimes in to express disapproval of Eustace's versions, admonishing "Pray let me advise you never more to meddle with a classical myth," objecting in the name of classical decorum: "The effect is like bedaubing a marble statue with paint. This giant now! How can you have ventured to thrust his huge, disproportioned mass among the seemly outlines of Grecian fable, the tendency of which is to reduce even the extravagant within limits, by its pervading elegance?" (164).

Eustace's reply is a ringing defense of the classics as popular literature, then and now.

"I described the giant as he appeared to me," replied the student, rather piqued. "And, sir, if you would only bring your mind into such a relation with these fables as is necessary in order to remodel them, you would see at once that an old Greek had no more exclusive

right to them than a modern Yankee has. They are the common property of the world, and of all time. The ancient poets remodeled them at pleasure, and held them plastic in their hands; and why should they not be plastic in my hands as well?" (164–165)

Eustace not only asserts the equal value of all versions of classical myths, but even argues that the classical versions, while beautiful and enduring, were not the truest or best ones.

"And besides," continued Eustace, "the moment you put any warmth of heart, any passion or affection, any human or divine mortality, into a classic mould, you make it quite another thing from what it was before. My own opinion is that the Greeks, by taking possession of these legends (which were the immemorial birthright of mankind), and putting them into shapes of indestructible beauty, indeed, but cold and heartless, have done all subsequent ages an incalculable injury." (165)

Hawthorne's decision to make children the audience of the classics leads him to a redefinition of the classics as a form of popular culture and to a brief for the superior value of the popular over the canonical. His redefinition begins with antiquity, when, he points out, ancient writers had the same freedom to remake myths that he is claiming for himself. This is a key point, to which I will return, that is repeatedly overlooked and reasserted when popularization of the classics is discussed. Many of the canonical classics to which we look back were themselves popular literature in many senses, one of those senses being that they were never exclusive property, that they drew on material that was freely available for appropriation and reworking by anyone who wanted. As Hawthorne declares in the preface to *A Wonder Book*, "No epoch of time can claim a copyright in these immortal fables" (8), and that applies within the classical world as well. No classical author had a copyright on the Troy legend or the Argonaut myth or on Achilles, Heracles, or Helen—quite a different situation from that which obtains for more recently generated heroes of children's entertainment like Mickey Mouse or Harry Potter.

As the natural audience of classical myth, children stand for popular audiences in the sense that they stand for everyone, representing humanity in general, not yet molded by particular historical circumstances. They inherit a universal "immemorial birthright," and in their affiliation with the earliest eras of human experience, like that time when the Earth itself was a child in frock and pinafore, prompt the recovery of versions of myth that precede even the classical period, the warmer, more passionate, more human versions that the Greeks imprisoned in "a classic mould." But children also stand here for a more particular, historically specific version of a popular

audience, that of the contemporary world, the modern as opposed to the ancient. For Hawthorne, the audience that is young as opposed to old and modern as opposed to ancient is also American as opposed to European. All these oppositions are neatly combined in Eustace's insistence that "an old Greek had no more exclusive right to them than a modern Yankee has." Hawthorne's popularization of Greek myths involves their Americanization as well as their liberation from fusty constraints: the giant whom Mr. Pringle finds to be too "huge and disproportioned," is given a comfortable seat in the Berkshires.

Hawthorne's vivid, modern, child-oriented, American versions of classical myths were as successful—as popular—as he had hoped. They were widely read and appeared in multiple editions on both sides of the Atlantic, given additional life by numerous distinguished illustrators during the decades of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a period often viewed as the golden age of book illustration, fulfilling Eustace Bright's vision of myths as natural subjects for picture books. Among Hawthorne's most prominent illustrators were Walter Crane, William Russell Flint, Maxfield Parrish, Willy Pogany, Howard Pyle, Arthur Rackham, Gustav Tenggren, and Milo Winter. Only gradually in the course of the twentieth century did Hawthorne's works come to be superseded by newer versions, including some that have had long lives of their own and are still read, notably Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* from 1940, and the still current *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*, written and illustrated by the wife-and-husband pair, Ingri and Edwin Parin D'Aulaire, and first published almost fifty years ago in 1962.<sup>5</sup>

In the century and a half since *A Wonder Book* and *Tanglewood Tales* were first published, the positions both of Hawthorne and of myth collections have shifted in the universe of young readers. Both have become more classic and less popular. Hawthorne is now of course a standard "classic" author, known best through *The Scarlet Letter*, a staple of the high school literature curriculum and (on the basis of informal and selective research) not especially popular with that audience. Myth books too have become authoritative classics. Retellings like that of the D'Aulaires now may stand in for the venerable traditions of ancient culture rather than representing a bid for freedom and modernity. This situation is nicely evoked in a recent issue of *The New Yorker*. There Daniel Mendelsohn, reviewing three new novels retelling Greek myths, makes the same point that Eustace Bright does, that the Greeks themselves played freely with their myths. After describing ancient versions in which Oedipus and Jocasta long survive the revelation of their identities and Helen spends the Trojan War in Egypt, Mendelsohn comments, "To us, brought up on the D'Aulaires' 'Book of Greek Myths,' all this may seem odd. It is as if Tolstoy's novel were only one of many possible 'Anna Kareninas' . . ."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> E. Hamilton, *Mythology* (Boston 1940); I. and E. P. D'Aulaire, *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths* (New York 1962).

<sup>6</sup> D. Mendelsohn, "Epic Endeavors," *The New Yorker*, April 5, 2010.

Mendelsohn's passing comment gives a snapshot of the complicated position of the classics in contemporary children's literature. He rightly appeals to the canonical status of the D'Aulaires, who have supplanted the actual ancient Greek sources as the standard against which more playful versions by modern novelists and, in an interesting inversion, the Greeks themselves are to be measured. The large role played by anthologies like those of Hamilton and the D'Aulaires in contemporary classical reception is worth stressing. To a significant extent, these books now represent the classics for modern audiences. Encountered in childhood, they define the understanding of classical myths that students bring with them to college courses and often underlie the works of modern writers, playwrights, and visual artists, whose reworkings of myth are today's most affirmative and vital expressions of the ongoing value of the classical past. And judging from the personal statements of aspiring classics graduate students, the D'Aulaires are responsible for a high proportion of contemporary careers in classical scholarship.

The children's myth book now has a more complicated, conflicted identity than it did when Hawthorne invented the form and placed it squarely in opposition to the traditional, scholarly, adult-oriented, straitjacketed, emotionally tepid, high cultural version of the classics represented by Mr. Pringle. Books like the D'Aulaires' are now associated with tradition, reading, adults (who use the book to "bring up" children), and even the schoolroom. Hawthorne avoided these associations by representing his versions of the myths as pure entertainment, delivered orally by a young storyteller who is close in age and sensibility to his listeners, in largely outdoor settings, and during times of vacation and play. In his construction of Eustace Bright as a surrogate for himself, Hawthorne tries to banish the "hidden adult" who lurks behind all works of children's literature. But the successors to Hawthorne's collections are often seen, at least by adults trying to appeal to child audiences, as representing just that top-down, adult-approved, educational version of the classics that Hawthorne resisted. So they too may need to be resisted if a version of the classics is going to be popular with young audiences.

The new classic status of myth collections, and the impulse to attack them in order to be popular, is well illustrated by the "Myth-O-Mania" books, a series for young readers (the recommended age range is 9–12) by Kate McMullan, published by Hyperion in 2002 and 2003, beginning with the first title, *Have a Hot Time, Hades!*, going through *Phone Home, Persephone!*, *Keep a Lid on it, Pandora!*, *Stop That Bull, Theseus!*, and others, to the final volume, *Go For the Gold, Atalanta!*<sup>7</sup> As these titles show, the tone of the books is jokey, and they derive much of their punch from the juxtaposition of classical figures with aggressively modern idioms and

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<sup>7</sup> My quotations are taken from K. McMullan, *Phone Home, Persephone!* (New York 2002), but much of the framing material is repeated from volume to volume in the series.

situations. As the titles also show, they are highly formulaic, which may explain why the series was relatively short-lived; nonetheless, their underlying premise is quite interesting. Each book is devoted to parodic debunking of a well-known Greek myth. The narrator is Hades, whose mission is to correct the lies of his little brother Zeus, whom he regularly characterizes as a “a total myth-o-manic,” which is “old Greek-speak for ‘big fat liar’” (v). Zeus spreads lies mostly for self-aggrandizement. As Hades complains,

“The stories are all about mighty, monster-slaying Zeus. Powerful, thunderbolt-hurling Zeus. Handsome irresistible-to-goddesses Zeus. Zeus is always the hero. And who is eternally cast in the role of the bad guy? The sulky, bad-tempered brother, banished to the Underworld? Three guesses: Hades, Hades, Hades.” (vi)

Strikingly, Zeus’ big fat lies are propagated in the form of a book: *The Big Fat Book of Greek Myths*. McMullan’s appeal to her readers is based on the assumption that they will have already met the myths in their traditional form at an even younger age, in a compendium like that of the D’Aulaires, and that they view that compendium as somewhat tedious and overlong (as opposed to the Myth-O-Mania books, which come in at between 150 and 165 large-print pages)—or, if they do not view it that way, they will get a charge out of being given permission to do so now. McMullan’s retold myths are in some ways subversive, as we like to think that popular literature is. August classical figures are put on a par with ordinary modern people through mundane details and deflating puns. For example, Persephone uses a cell phone and checks into the Motel Styx. And the conceit that canonical myths are shaped by Zeus’ self-promoting agenda conveys a sophisticated sense of the vagaries of transmission and of the role of the victorious and powerful in determining the success of a given variant.

But the revisions that are offered in place of Zeus’ lies are remarkably anodyne and go much further than Hawthorne and his twentieth-century successors in editing out those violent and sexually explicit elements in classical mythology that might not be seen as suitable for children. In *Stop that Bull, Theseus!*, the series’ narrator, Hades, reveals that Zeus made up the monstrous minotaur defeated by Theseus because he was ashamed of his bull-headed grandson and wanted to write him out of mythology; the minotaur was in fact a gentle vegetarian. In *Phone Home, Persephone!*, Hades explains that Zeus perpetuated the story of Persephone’s abduction in order to make Hades look bad. In reality, Persephone just hitched a ride on Hades’ chariot in order to get away from her overly possessive mother.

McMullan’s designs on her child readers are confused and contradictory. She wants to hook them with a parodic, subversive, anti-authoritarian stance, but she does not really want to stimulate their imaginations through stories with truly challenging elements. And in the end, she reinforces the canonical myths she makes fun of,

since the pleasure to be gained from her books depends on knowing the canonical versions and recognizing how they have been reworked. *The Big Fat Book of Greek Myths* is ultimately indispensable. McMullan's educational aims are lightly worn, but they surface in the back of the book with a glossary. Hades explains:

Let's face it mortals. When you read the Greek myths, you sometimes run into long, unpronounceable names like *Ascalaphus* and *Hephaestus*—names so long that just looking at them can give you a great big headache. Not only that, but sometimes you mortals call us by our Greek names and other times by our Roman names. It can get pretty confusing. But never fear! I'm here to set you straight with my quick-and-easy guide to who's who and what's what in the myths. (142)

A typical entry: "Demeter [duh—MEE—ter]. my sister, goddess of agriculture and total gardening nut. The Romans call her Ceres" (144).

Many writers currently presenting the classics for children share McMullan's somewhat tortured agenda: to present classical material as fun while also using it to educate, constrained by an anxious sense that children do not consider the educational fun, that what is fun, contemporary, and popular stands on the other side of a divide from what is educational, historical, and unpopular. The opposition between the academic and the child-friendly that Hawthorne resolved by disavowing Mr. Pringle is internalized and remains unresolved. The resulting works try to bridge that divide in a variety of confused and conflicted ways.

My next example is a picture book that is more introductory in aim than the Myth-O-Mania books. Although its announced target audience is also nine- to twelve-year olds, it is considerably simpler and does not assume any prior exposure. This is *Greece! Rome! Monsters!* written by John Harris and illustrated by Calef Brown. The book was published in 2002 by the Getty Museum, and its aim is evidently to teach its readers to identify the ancient monsters they will see in works of European art. The Unicorn entry ends with the advice, "If you are ever lucky enough to be in Paris or New York, be sure to see the famous 'Unicorn Tapestries' in the museums there. Woven hundreds of years ago, they tell unicorn stories, and boy, are they beautiful." About the Minotaur we are told, "The major Spanish artist Pablo Picasso would later paint many pictures of the Minotaur stalking around."

At the same time, *Greece! Rome! Monsters!* shares McMullan's evident commitment to making educational content fun and mythical material unthreatening. The sentences quoted above well illustrate the book's informal prose style, which tries to prove that identifying these figures and liking their depictions is very cool. On the front cover, the monsters of classical myth are offered with an enthusiastic exclamation point, in keeping with the conversion of

monsters into appealing creatures in contemporary children's culture, of which Sesame Street's Cookie Monster is a prime example. Here we might note in general the extensive use of exclamation points in contemporary books of this kind. McMullan's titles all end with exclamation points, corollaries of her tendency to pile on the modifiers "big," "fat," and "great": "big fat liar," "big fat book," "great big headache."

*Greece! Rome! Monsters!*'s conflicted attitude to learning, which it aims to deliver while fearing that it may be off-putting, is well expressed on the back cover. The characters of myth are redefined as Hollywood celebrities: "Starring twenty monsters and a huge supporting cast of gods, goddesses, heroes and heroines!" That's the fun part. Now the educational part: "With a bonus pronunciation guide and a special pop quiz to test your monster smarts." The didactic elements of the book are presented as lucky prizes, even the "special pop quiz." Here the term "pop" takes on associations with fun ("pop goes the weasel") and the popular ("pop culture") when in reality a pop quiz is not fun, but rather an opportunity for a teacher to exercise his or her authority by catching students off guard. This book is, however, eager to disavow a teacher's authority. When we get to the pop quiz, it is introduced with both a cheer and a disclaimer: "OK, now it's time for the MONSTER QUIZ. Can you pass it? I know I couldn't!" This author is so nervous about imparting knowledge that he claims he does not even have it himself.

In my final example, the currently very popular series of novels for young readers, Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (which appeared in 2002–2005, followed by a film version of the first in 2010), the double agenda of gratifying the subversive, pleasure-seeking child and educating the reluctant proto-adult is better concealed. Its two parts are kept separate and expressed in different formats with different audiences. These books, of which I focus on the first, *The Lightning Thief*,<sup>8</sup> aim to attract their readers with the same jokey, parodic, modernizing presentation of Greek gods and heroes that we saw in the Myth-O-Mania books. Their premise is that the Olympian gods actually do live in contemporary America, since they are destined to survive as long as Western civilization does, and they keep moving to where the flame is brightest. Right now "America . . . is the heart of the flame" (73). So Olympus is located on top of the Empire State Building, and mythological figures are modernized and Americanized—in the tradition of Hawthorne, but to a far greater extent. When the child protagonist, Percy (short for Perseus) Jackson, finally meets his father, who is Poseidon (since the gods keep having liaisons with mortal women and producing half-mortal offspring), this is how he describes him: "He reminded me of a beachcomber from Key West. He wore leather sandals, khaki Bermuda shorts, and a Tommy Bahama shirt with coconuts and parrots all over it" (340).

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<sup>8</sup> R. Riordan, *The Lightning Thief* (New York 2005).

This freewheeling approach to mythology goes hand-in-hand with an antipathy to school and academic learning. Percy hates school, and is not good at it. When we first meet him, in a chapter entitled “I Accidentally Vaporized My Pre-Algebra Teacher,” he is an unhappy inmate of “Yancy Academy, a private school for troubled kids in upstate New York” (1). He is a terrible student and has been diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia, which are misdiagnoses because Percy’s real learning difference is that his mind is “hard-wired for ancient Greek” (88). Notable here is the change in status of Greek from Hawthorne’s day, when it was associated with the fusty studiousness of Mr. Pringle. Now that no middle school student is in danger of being taught Greek, it can be associated with a hero who is thoroughly anti-academic. Greek is so out it’s in and carries a cachet that allows it to serve as a positive redescription of a stigmatizing “diagnosis.”

Countering that particular stigma is, in fact, an important part of Riordan’s mission, as can be seen from the Eustace Bright-like story of the series’ genesis. As the Scholastic Books Web site reports:

Already an award-winning author of mysteries for adults, Riordan, a former teacher, was asked by his son Haley to tell him some bedtime stories about the gods and heroes in Greek mythology. “I had taught Greek myths for many years at the middle school level, so I was glad to comply,” says Riordan. “When I ran out of myths, [Haley] was disappointed and asked me if I could make up something new with the same characters.” At the time, Haley had just been diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia. Greek mythology was one of the only subjects that interested the then second-grader in school. Motivated by Haley’s request, Riordan quickly came up with the character of Percy Jackson and told Haley all about “[Percy’s] quest to recover Zeus’ lightning bolt in modern-day America,” says Riordan. “It took about three nights to tell the whole story, and when I was done, Haley told me I should write it out as a book.”<sup>9</sup>

Latin is a different story. It is certainly taught at Yancy Academy, as it is at many contemporary schools, and offers some familiar torments, including a final exam, for which Percy has to study the unrewarding *Cambridge Guide to Greek Mythology* and on which he expects to get “a big fat F” (18). But the course is redeemed by a teacher who spends a lot of class time not actually teaching Latin.

Mr. Brunner was this middle-aged guy in a motorized wheelchair. He had thinning hair and a scruffy beard and a frayed tweed jacket, which always smelled like coffee. You wouldn’t think he’d be cool, but he told

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/contributor.jsp?id=10315>, accessed July 6, 2010.

stories and jokes and let us play games in class. He also had this awesome collection of Roman armor and weapons, so he was the only teacher whose class didn't put me to sleep. (2)

Mr. Brunner's coolness is also evident in his approach to pop quizzes. "The Latin teacher turned and smiled at me. His eyes had that mischievous glint they sometimes got in class when he pulled a pop quiz and made all the multiple choice answers B" (63).

Mr. Brunner is actually not a Latin teacher at all. He is the centaur Chiron, who has adopted that role so he can keep a watchful eye on Percy. The motorized wheelchair is designed to conceal his horse's lower body, and when Chiron is released from that device, we get a sample of the kind of humor with which Riordan seeks to win his child audience: "Once I got over the fact that my Latin teacher was a horse, we had a nice tour, though I was careful not to walk behind him. I'd done pooper-scooper patrol in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade a few times, and I'm sorry, I did not trust Chiron's back end the way I trusted his front" (75).

Even when Percy is liberated from Yancy Academy and, at the end of the first book, is headed for a much better school in New York where he will be able to live with his mother, school itself is still a place of ordeals comparable to those faced by mythical heroes. Looking ahead to next summer's return to Camp Half-Blood, the special camp for demigods like himself, he wonders how many monsters will attack him in the meantime (Percy is caught up in the perpetual war of the Olympians and the Titans) and whether he and his mother will even survive the year, then adds, "That was assuming the never-ending spelling tests and five paragraph essays didn't kill me" (361).

It is clear from this and many other such moments that Riordan aims to draw in and satisfy his child readers by catering to the distaste for school that he assumes they feel. But that is only part of his agenda. In a forthcoming essay on the series,<sup>10</sup> Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson draw attention to the way the stance implicit in the books, that the lowbrow and anti-adult tastes ascribed to ten-year-olds are paramount, is undercut by the Web site that Riordan, himself a former middle school teacher, maintains for a separate audience of adults<sup>11</sup>—"a parallel discourse addressing parents and teachers, whose tastes are implicitly recognized as earnest, improvement-oriented, and more deserving than children's." Here Nodelman's "hidden adult" comes out of hiding, for a select, like-minded audience of contemporaries.

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<sup>10</sup> A. Morey and C. Nelson, "'A God Buys Us Cheeseburgers': Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson Series and Education's Culture Wars," forthcoming in the publication of the conference "Asterix and Obelisks: Classical Receptions in Children's Literature," University of Wales, Lampeter, July 6–10, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.rickriordan.com/index.php/books-for-children/a-teachers-guide-to-percy/>, accessed March 20, 2009, now replaced by <http://www.rickriordan.com/my-books/percy-jackson/resources/teachers-guide.aspx>, accessed May 9, 2011.

Morey and Nelson detail the ways in which “this parallel discourse treats the Greek myths not as the forerunners of comic-book superhero texts but as cultural capital essential to contemporary education’s efforts to be traditional.” There is a lengthy “Teacher’s Guide”; “project ideas” for classroom activities connected with the series; and a “curriculum rationale, based on NCTE [National Council of Teachers of English] models, for those teachers considering Percy Jackson for classroom use.” Teachers are advised “to compare and contrast the Greek myths with the way those myths are referenced, modernized, and reinterpreted in the novel[s],” and “to examine both positive and negative elements of ‘Western Civilization’ as depicted in the novel and personified by the Greek gods”; “[to encourage] students to explore the classical heritage of Greece as it applies to modern civilization; to analyze the elements of the hero’s quest rendered in a modern-day story with a first-person narrator to whom students can easily relate; and to discuss such relevant issues as learning disabilities, the nature of family, and themes of loyalty, friendship, and faith.”

Morey and Nelson further point out that:

“on the adult-oriented portion of his website, Riordan goes so far as to deny the reality of the basic premises of his fictional world: whereas the series invites its child audience to see classical monsters as real, Riordan insists to his adult audience in his ‘Teacher’s Guide to *The Lightning Thief*’ that the monsters are symbolic, ‘external manifestations of the internal conflicts Percy must win to achieve his coming of age. . . .’”

This final key to interpretation is consistent with the view implicit in that list of possible topics for discussion, which moves in an ascending scale away from topics that promote learning about the ancient world to topics that promote personal growth and ethical behavior in contemporary conditions, which are too often the principal or even the only goals of literature study in school. Literature’s capacity to foster self-knowledge and moral reflection is undoubtedly one of its glories, but literature also has other rewards that students are not so often shown, stemming from such qualities as form, style, linguistic play, and historical specificity.

Morey and Nelson relate Riordan’s attempt to use an education-averse reworking of the classical tradition for educational purposes to long-standing uses of popular culture in American education, noting that “Since at least the 1930s, American public education has sought to harness the charisma of popular culture to further the formation of tastes that would move beyond the popular, as in the ‘film appreciation’ classes that sought to ‘develop[p] taste and capacity for value judgments’ in the young moviegoer.”

Another expression of this tangled agenda surfaces in a comment from an interview with Riordan in 2008 that appears on a Web site entitled “readkiddoread.com,” devoted to ways of getting children

to read. Asked whether part of the problem is that Americans are reluctant to view reading that does not have an explicit message as worthwhile, Riordan replies:

I think there's nothing wrong with having a message. But I think more importantly we have to remember that at its core, reading is about storytelling and it goes all the way back to Homer and telling the Greek myths aloud as an enjoyable activity. And so if it is not a good story then I think we're missing the point. So why does that not happen in the books that we give kids? I think we do get caught up too much in the notion that reading has to be analyzed, and it has to be dissected for metaphor and dissected for theme.<sup>12</sup>

Here we see Riordan invoking the inherently popular nature of Greek mythology in a way that is reminiscent of Hawthorne. Like Hawthorne, he presents the myths as having an age-old capacity to bring pleasure when told aloud. Hawthorne sought to capture this capacity in books, which he assumed were a medium of entertainment for a sizable audience of children; this assumption comes through in his confidence that classical myths can provide "capital reading for children." Riordan obviously does not share that assumption. He is writing books that he hopes will appeal to reluctant readers, and even to especially challenged readers like his own dyslexic son, in a world in which books compete for children's attention with many other, and more popular, forms of entertainment. In a sense he is hoping to create, or recreate, the audience that Hawthorne simply wanted to reach.

In invoking the classical myths' popular qualities, Hawthorne also disavows their more highbrow associations—with a dead language, with the disciplining of the imagination, and with the investigation of difficult problems—associations that he embodies in the figure of Mr. Pringle. Riordan goes even further in that disavowal. He assumes a distaste for learning in his child audience and caters to that distaste by making it a prominent feature of his child protagonist. In Hawthorne, the child audience stands outside this debate; Eustace Bright's auditors sleep through his exchange with Mr. Pringle. Riordan, on the other hand, is hoping that he can put classical mythology's popular qualities to work in service of its unpopular qualities. He is calculating that if he enters robustly into an anti-elitist, low-cultural view of the classics, he can somehow promote the more elitist, high cultural values with which they are also identified; that by agreeing that school is boring, he can make kids want to learn; that by denying that myths are metaphors requiring interpretation, he can get kids to benefit from the fact that they are.

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<sup>12</sup> <http://readkiddoread.ning.com/page/page/show?id=2244625%3APage%3A1101>, accessed July 6, 2010.

Riordan is clearly caught in a contradiction that cannot be resolved and that may strike us as unsavory, since he is pretending to his readers that he shares values that he hopes to cure them of—or that may strike us as inspired, since he has succeeded in getting many children to engage with his version of Greek mythology, including those who have not been well served by school. Most professional classicists are also invested in inconsistent attitudes to the relationship between classics and popular culture. We know that classical material is fun; we recognize that much of it coincided with popular culture even in antiquity and that no one has exclusive rights to it; and we want to see it reach a broad audience now. But we also value its non-popular associations: with language learning, with a sense of historical difference, with intellectual challenges, and with reflection and analysis. And we hope that currently popular versions of this material will lead some people to share those values. As we hold onto that hope, I think we should be wary of strategies that depend on denying those values, such as Latin-less Latin classes and anxious overuse of exclamation points. We need to affirm the ongoing appeal of an unapologetic, compendious, antiquity-oriented work like *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths*, to bear in mind the role that book has played in setting some young readers on the path to graduate school.

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**CLASSICAL ASSOCIATION OF THE ATLANTIC STATES  
2011 ANNUAL MEETING**

October 13–15, 2011  
Hunt Valley, M.D.  
Baltimore Marriott

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