



Wikis and Prezi at Work: Poetry Composition and Textual Analysis in a Classical Mythology Class

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Abstract

With the steady burgeoning of new technologies, teaching requires, beside expertise in the subject matter and in communicating it effectively, the ability and willingness to keep abreast of the latest developments in educational tools. This sort of challenge confronts instructors in any field, including those among us who teach disciplines relating to the ancient world. Large classes, such as Classical Mythology at my institution, often supplement the more traditional face-to-face class time with online components. The question then arises as to which technological devices work best for which types of uses. This paper explores how Wikis and Prezi can be successfully incorporated into a Classical Mythology class in order for the students to experience first-hand the process of poetry composition and for the teacher to conduct lectures on textual analysis, respectively.

As students of classical mythology are introduced to the epic poems of Iliad and Odyssey, a wiki format lends itself particularly well to digitally recreating the circumstances of oral poetry composition. In their oral form, ancient poems were the result of a tension between tradition and innovation. Ancient bards orally created their poems by relying on a set of fixed verses passed down by tradition that they would have redeployed, but also by composing their own innovative verses. In the class, students have the opportunity to somewhat relive online the ancient poet's experience when they are requested to contribute their verses to a wiki entitled an "Unsung Greek Poem." The wiki consists of the instructor's first verse and of the verses their classmates have added up to that point. In this way, much like the ancient poet, students build on what has already been written (tradition) while also providing their own contributions (innovation).

Both Iliad and Odyssey feature proems which encapsulate all the major themes that will be developed in the remainder of the poem and thus demand a close textual analysis as well as attention to the ways in which the proems respond to each other. Traditional PowerPoint slides prove to be a quite inadequate vehicle for this type of analysis mainly due to the space constraint they impose. The proems must be unnaturally split between different slides if one wishes to accommodate a running commentary in the same slide. Little space is then necessarily left to include anything other than the bare text. On the contrary, Prezi offers a virtually limitless canvas that can be populated with visually compelling and meaningful imagery, and also a countless number of frames filled with a modicum of text without ever feeling crowded. In short, the Prezi canvas provides an invaluable means for commenting and comparing texts. The poem's text can easily be accommodated within a single frame at the center of the canvas encircled by satellite frames that house commentary and images. The teacher's presentation and student comprehension benefit from such structure.

1. Introduction

The present paper draws on my experience teaching courses in Classical Mythology multiple times over the past six years, most recently in the 2014 Spring semester at the University of Kentucky. Unlike its previous versions, the latest iteration of this class presented the challenge of integrating lecture mode (two thirds of the course) with online components (one third). The article reports on an example of such integration, namely the use of a wiki designed for the students to gain a first-hand grasp of select aspects of oral poetry composition. Furthermore, the essay proposes the deployment of Prezi in lieu of Microsoft PowerPoint as a presentation software more suitable for lectures in textual analysis. The discussion herein articulated has much benefited from my participation in the eLearning Innovation Initiative (eLII) and Design Lab Program offered at my home institution. I should also like to acknowledge the support I received from the University of Kentucky eLearning Innovation Initiative Fund.



2. Wikis and Oral Poetry Composition

Iliad and *Odyssey*, the epic poems conventionally attributed to Homer, prominently feature in any classical mythology course. The seminal studies spearheaded by Milman Parry have convincingly demonstrated that, while they have come down to us in written form, these works bear traces of their original genesis in an oral environment [1]-[2]. In particular, epithets, phrases, even entire sets of sentences that are repeated throughout the poems may be construed as relics of an oral performance [3]-[4]. In fact, each verse in the poems follows a pattern, called meter, whereby words are arranged according to a more or less fixed alternation of long and short syllables. Since words cannot be haphazardly placed, the repetition of stock phrases would then have been a convenient strategy in the hands of an oral poet. In the process of delivering his poem orally, the bard would expediently fall back on combinations of words that he had memorized and were proven to work within the scheme of the meter, while at the same time he would be composing new verses. These formulaic expressions derived from either the poet's experience in performing his poetry throughout his career or from an oral tradition that developed earlier and was handed down to him. The poet's performance would thus be the result of a tension between tradition, the trusted verses our bard had learned and could use as a sort of safety net, and innovation, the new verses he produced for a specific context.

A hands-on online activity using our Learning Management System was devised to illustrate the concept. Students were given the assignment to create and enter their own verses into a wiki named an "Unsung Greek Poem" and containing the first verse composed by the instructor. The aim of this poem in the making was to offer the students an analogic tool to experience in a digital environment a process similar to that of oral poetry composition. Students added their personal contribution to a text that had already been written, whether the instructor's initial prompt or their classmates' verses. Similarly to the ancient poet, they were thus confronted with the task of having to innovate on the basis of pre-existing material. It must be added that whenever a user was editing the wiki page, it remained locked for 120 seconds to prevent others from editing the page simultaneously. The first verse of the "Unsung Greek Poem" read as follows:

"Of Hybris, sing to me, o Muse, guilty of which so many immortals and mortals alike have been since the dark era of Gaia and her sons and daughters, the Titans, down to the grim bronze and the iron ages of mankind."

In the spirit of continuity with previous class material, the prompt elicited reflections on hybris, that is the pursuit of a behavior inappropriate to one's standing, a key-theme extensively explored in class, but otherwise gave students leeway in terms of storyline and mythochronology as stories could have ranged from the origins of the Greek universe to the age of heroes. Here follow the first two student compositions, which are aptly representative of the whole work:

"It was you who guided my lust for more, an unquenchable thirst that beacons me and begs me to become what I know I should disdain. And though the thought of you is new, I feel as though we have always been together."

"Keeping me hungry and humble, hybris; you are my passion. However, let me be aware of my *gnothi seauton*, so I do not perish like the unfortunate Icarus and Arachne. My life can have no *meden agan* so I live content with the gods."

Both students felt that they needed to explicate the concept of hybris in Greek culture with more or less poetic wording ("lust for more, an unquenchable thirst"). The second composition explicitly referred to the myths of Icarus and Arachne, two good examples of the portrayal of hybristic behavior, as well as to two ancient Greek maxims (*gnothi seauton* "know your limits" and *meden agan* "no excesses") that warned against hybris by inviting moderation. To the instructor's surprise, however, there was no attempt at the development of a cohesive storyline –and that happened to be true of most subsequent contributions. Rather, students took the opportunity to display their knowledge of Greek myths without trying to connect their compositions to the preceding entry or create their own original stories.

While the online activity did not yield the expected outcomes, it still proved to be a useful exercise as the assignment was discussed during face-to-face time. With the flaw of their approach to the exercise disclosed, students quickly came to the realization that, unlike an ancient poet, they were more rooted in tradition (the reference to established Greek myths) than in innovation (the possibility to invent new stories). This awareness led to a newly found appreciation of the poet's masterful work in merging the two aspects seamlessly. Furthermore, the class reflected on sections of the poems wherein the text appeared to digress from the main storyline in order to detail genealogies of heroes or secondary tales. We were able to observe how these digressions, often perceived as unnecessary by the



readers, may owe to the poet's desire to flaunt his mythological erudition, which was the same principle driving the students' choice to include references to various myth in their compositions. By means of a synergy between the online and face-to-face components of the course, the class successfully internalized the concept as gauged in the context of a later exam.

3. Prezi as an Effective Software for Textual Analysis

A second learning outcome in the section dedicated to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* entailed an understanding of the proems, the short introductions to the poems, as capsules that underscore major themes to be developed in the course of the work [5]-[8]. As such, the proems required careful reading both in connection to the rest of the poems and in correlation with one another. Traditional PowerPoint slides were deployed during lecture in order to achieve the learning objective. Below is a replica of the two slides covering the first seven lines of the proem to the *Odyssey*.



Fig. 1. PowerPoint Slides: verses 1-3 and 4-7 from the proem to the *Odyssey*.

A quick glance at the images reveals the limitations inherent in the PowerPoint slides as a medium to conduct textual analysis, specifically the space constraint and the linear sequence they dictate. The proem (in blue) had to be fractured between slides, which may have hampered the perception of the piece as a unit. Moreover, the need to insert a commentary (in red) took up all the available space within the slide. Although the commentary progressively materialized upon clicking, the final product still appeared overwhelmingly text-heavy, especially considering that students are nowadays attuned to gleaning meaning from images rather than texts. Finally, the instructor was bound to abide by the order of slides and commentary with little liberty for out-of-sequence improvisation.

In an effort to improve the presentation for future iterations of the course and as a project for the eLII Design Lab, the slides have now been redesigned in a Prezi environment. The results follow below:



Fig. 2. Prezi canvas for lecture on the *Odyssey*.

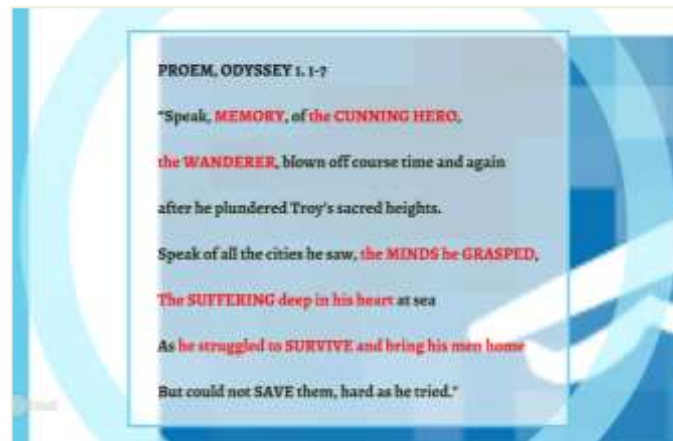


Fig. 3. Prezi circle frame with text of the Odyssey's proem.

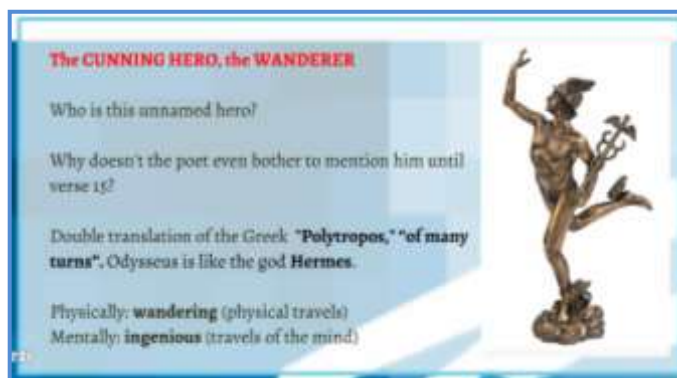


Fig. 4. Prezi square frames with a short commentary to the Odyssey's proem.

There are considerable advantages to adopting Prezi in lieu of PowerPoint. The Prezi canvas offers a practically unbounded platform where text and images can be ideally integrated. The canvas in Fig. 2 presents the sketch of an ancient ship that graphically reinforces the focus of the *Odyssey's* proem, the travels of Odysseus. Students also get a sense of the lecture's content by identifying the circle frame on the top-left corner of the screen and the surrounding comments encased in square frames. Prezi then allows the lecturer to zoom in onto the proem itself, which is now displayed as an unbroken whole (Fig. 3). Satellite square frames contain the commentary; their number can be increased without limits according to one's desire. Such lack of bounds makes for an even spreading of the content among frames, keeping the text to a modicum while enabling the embedding of images (Fig. 4). The balanced redistribution of contents between frames even gives the opportunity to cite directly relevant portions from the proem of the *Iliad* for comparative purposes. Finally, the instructor is no longer tied to the linear sequencing of frames since in the canvas (Fig. 2) one can click on any of the square frames and tackle the commentary in any order that best seems to suit the circumstances.

4. Conclusions

The instructor writing this paper plans to redeploy the wiki exercise in future mythology courses, this time stipulating more emphatically that the digital poem must develop a storyline as much as possible. It will probably be appropriate to impose some form of constraint, such as number of words or even syllables that are allowed for each student entry, in order to reproduce on some level the limitations to which the ancient poet was subjected. As far as the lecture on textual analysis is concerned, the hope of this paper's writer is that the Prezi presentation format will prove instrumental in strengthening the students' grasp of, and appreciation for, a close reading of the text.



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