



Integrating Research-Based Contents into a Classical Mythology Course

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Abstract

This article is predicated upon the belief that academic research, especially in the field of the humanities, runs the risk of amounting to a sterile and idle exercise unless it finds ways to be effectively propagated. Venues for the dissemination of research knowledge may range from conferences attended by well-versed specialists to public lectures addressing lay audiences. A classroom populated with undergraduate students constitutes yet another scenario conducive to the diffusion of research content that has already been published and/or may serve as an arena to test ideas for future publications. The paper aims to discuss a couple of practical suggestions for implementing a productive process of knowledge transfer from the researcher to the students in a higher education classroom environment. The experience of teaching a large class in Classical Mythology has informed, and perhaps limited, the reflections contained herein. It is the writer's hope, however, that the article will prove useful in general terms to instructors encountering comparable challenges when incorporating their research topics into the classroom setting.

1. Introduction

The present paper relies on my experience of teaching courses in Classical Mythology over the past three years at the University of Kentucky. This class fulfills a general education requirement, thereby attracting for the most part students who do not possess any background knowledge of the ancient world. Consequently, the very makeup of the student population attending this course represents a significant hurdle to the promotion of specialized research. In previous years, lecturing about this topic seemed the most obvious way to deliver the content but yielded mixed success as only an average of 65% of the students correctly answered multiple-choice questions on the topic. This rather low response rate makes some sense in light of the nature of the subject matter explored. My research in fact investigates how an apparently marginal character in Homer's *Odyssey*, the Cretan king and judge Minos, offers a fundamental heuristic model for the main hero Odysseus. In an elaborate lie concocted to conceal his identity from his unsuspecting wife Penelope (*Od.* 19.192-94) [7], Odysseus claims to descend from Minos, the sovereign well known for periodically conversing with Zeus. According to my argument, through that lie Odysseus appropriates the figure of Minos, who serves to foreshadow how Odysseus' relationship with Zeus will become closer in the course of the poem. In addition, earlier in the poem, Odysseus had envisioned Minos as a judge in the Underworld delivering verdicts to the dead (*Od.* 11.596-99) [7]. As arbitrator amongst the spirits, Minos conjures for Odysseus the possibility of resorting to justice over self-help in the hero's own conflict with the suitors who have taken over his household. The topic in and of itself presents a series of unpalatable challenges for presentation to an undergraduate audience: the paradoxical importance of a peripheral character, the fragmentation of the evidence scattered throughout the poem, and the need not to interpret some passages at face value (the fictitious context of the lie). In the latest iteration of the course, however, some changes in the course emphasis and structure have resulted in an improved student comprehension of the topic.

2. Foregrounding the themes

During the lecture portions of the class, insistence was laid on teasing out of the multiple readings assigned for the class the themes of man's rapport with the gods, the preoccupation with the establishment of justice in lieu of bloody redress, and the unsuspected centrality of secondary characters and episodes. This preparatory work was meant to cue in the students to tackle the topic of Minos. What is thought of as myth proper precisely explores the relationship between mankind and the gods [9], so examples to this effect abound in the stories the students read and that largely take the shape of cautionary tales. In-class lectures focused on pointing out the dire consequences men incurred in challenging the authority of the gods, in particular Zeus. The prime case in point was the punishment dealt by Zeus to Lycaon, a king mutated into a wolf along with his whole family for

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attempting to feed Zeus human flesh (*Ov. Met.* 163-252) [10]. Prometheus also paid his dues for stealing Zeus' fire on behalf of humans: the titan ended up chained to a mountain rock with an eagle eating away at his liver and occasioned with his actions Zeus' retribution to mankind (the need to harvest produce from the soil and the creation of the loathed female race: *Hes. Theog.* 509-620; *Op.* 58-128) [6]. In addition, even in cases in which Zeus held a human being in special regard, as he did his son Sarpedon, the god could not spare a fate-decreed death and has to be content with bestowing upon his mortal offspring proper funeral honors (*Il.* 16.419-505) [7]. The literature, then, paints a quite bleak picture of the god's interactions with humans, whereby men pay a hefty price for their own or their representatives' misdemeanors without even reaping much of a benefit from a positive rapport with him.

The implementation of legal procedures to prevent acts of violence represents another major concern of the course readings emphasized in the lectures. Aeschylus' *Furies* stages the drama of matricidal Orestes, whose crime cast the Olympian god Apollo against the divinities named Furies [8]. In the play, Apollo, the instigator of Orestes' matricide, seeks to release his protégée from the grip of the Furies, the older deities in charge of exacting blood revenge for family-related crimes. The clash between the two generations of gods finds its resolution through a civic institution and process, for the dispute is brought before a council of elders well known in historical Athens. Helped by the vote that the goddess Athena casts, the council arrives at the final verdict that Orestes is to be acquitted. A crime that would have previously necessitated bloodshed in a vicious cycle of retribution gets instead peacefully settled once and for all by virtue of Athenian laws. The humorous *Hymn* to the god Hermes also delves into the question of legal proceedings as Apollo, enraged by Hermes' theft of his cattle, first resorts to death threats verbalizing his intentions to hurl the infant god into the dark and gloomy Underworld. On second thoughts, however, Apollo jettisons his recourse to violence for the settlement of his dispute with Hermes in a trial before Zeus (*Hymn. Hom. Merc.* 322-396) [11]. Finally, Homer's *Iliad* also tackles the topic of justice as the poet describes real-life scenes carved on the gold shield newly wrought for Achilles. On the shield, two litigants bring forth a case of murder to a committee of senior citizens gathered in the city's market place, laying on the ground two talents of gold for the elder who will deliver the fairest judgment (*Il.* 18.535-547) [7].

The last example from the *Iliad* illustrates how the minute description of a work of art, while ostensibly a tangential section in a poem centered on murderous warfare and bloody reprisals, drives home a point of paramount importance about legal procedure as a possible substitute for acts of violence. Deceptively insignificant episodes, and minor characters, too, may thus serve to convey major points in Greek mythology, a concept insisted upon in my lectures. Hesiod's *Theogony* provided a couple of appropriate examples. In the work, after he manages to establish his dominion over the gods, Zeus engages in a series of marriages. Metis is the first deity to wed Zeus, who eventually tricks and swallows her. The story is allegorically construed as Zeus' appropriation of "cunning intelligence," which is the meaning of the Greek noun *metis* that Metis personifies. Since trickery caused the downfall of rulers in previous generations, by ingurgitating Metis Zeus makes the powers of *metis* accessible to himself alone and effectively hampers the opportunity for any future shakeup of his rule. His second marriage to the Titan Themis also bears allegorical significance because the noun *themis* in Greek signifies "divine law, justice." The goddess' union with Zeus, therefore, epitomizes the birth of a new era in which the god will strive to ensure good order for mortals and immortals alike.

3. Investigating the topic

After the students were acquainted with the themes in question and the overall plot of the *Odyssey*, I devised an exercise that entailed in-class work in small groups (five to six students) for a total of two sessions, each thirty-five minutes long. The assignment presented the students with a set of quotations from the *Odyssey* accompanied by questions to steer their inquiry. Students were to produce a group blog that addressed those questions. Here follows a selection of the quotes and questions.

First session: Odysseus, Zeus and Minos

Quote 2 (*Od.* 19.192-95) [7]: An excerpt from the so-called Cretan Lie where Odysseus claims Minos as his grandfather and describes his recurring conversations with Zeus.

Questions: Why would Odysseus fabricate a rather elaborate lie to deceive his wife? Think about the plot at this point in the poem and about the general characterization of the hero. In addition to these considerations and although his tale is admittedly an invention, do you think Odysseus might have a special reason to want to connect to Minos? What kind of relationship does Minos entertain with Zeus? Would that kind of interaction be appealing to Odysseus?



Wrap-up Questions: Are you able to trace an evolution in the rapport of Zeus with Odysseus between the beginning and the conclusion of the poem? What role may Odysseus' fictitious claim to descend from Minos play in this process?

Second Session: Odysseus, Minos and Justice

Quote 1 (*Od.* 11.596-99) [7]: Odysseus envisions Minos settling cases in the Underworld for the dead who willingly request his expertise.

Questions: Describe Minos' activities in the Underworld. Why would there be need for adjudication among the spirits? The theme of recourse to justice as a viable option for conflict resolution has informed many of our readings. Refer to other myths that concern themselves with this theme.

Wrap-up Questions: Think about the *Odyssey* as a whole. Is there a dispute in the poem that could potentially be resolved without bloodshed (but is not)? What model does Minos offer to Odysseus? Does Odysseus conform to that model? Why so, or why not so?

The intended learning outcome of the two-session exercise was a deeper student engagement with class materials and the instructor's research. The assignment did not merely aim for a passive regurgitation of concepts already studied, but set out to make the students understand their significance in different contexts. The expectation was not that students would be capable of arriving at the same conclusions as the instructor's, but that they attempt to make their previous knowledge relevant to the new evidence. Questions to quotes were specifically formulated to keep the students focused on the task at hand, whereas wrap-up questions were intentionally left open-ended so as to lend some degree of interpretive freedom.

Conclusions

The multiple-choice questions pertaining to the topic of Minos on the final exam for the class yielded a remarkable increase in the average number of students identifying the correct answers, now hovering around 87%. A concerted effort to link themes throughout the course as well as the exploratory aspect of the exercise on Minos and its teamwork configuration seem to have aided students in internalizing the concepts at a deeper level. While the time commitment required to implement the two-part exercise led to sacrificing some content covered in previous versions of the course, the experiment has indicated that research-based content can be effectively conveyed in a classroom, thus providing a concrete application of the symbiosis between research and teaching that scholars have been advocating in recent years [2], [3], [4], [5], [12].

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