



Popular Culture and Classical Mythology

Author(s): David Frauenfelder

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POPULAR CULTURE AND CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY

Once there was an instructor of classical mythology who sat down in front of the television one Sunday afternoon and came upon a B-movie starring Arnold Schwarzenegger. The film's simple plot involved Schwarzenegger, a commando, hunting a dangerous alien, which had been wreaking havoc in the Central American jungle where it had recently landed. The intrigued instructor spent the rest of the afternoon watching how the warrior used brute strength and native ingenuity to defeat the superhuman beast. The next day, in class, the instructor mentioned the film and asked if anyone had ever seen it. Every hand in the class shot up. This was not a B-movie, but *Predator*, a 1987 mega-hit. Sensing an opportunity, the instructor asked if the class found any similarities in this film with any Greek stories they had heard. The name Heracles was on many sets of lips in an instant—they had by coincidence recently been studying the hero—and the rest of the class was spent illuminating the manifold parallels between the modern and ancient stories.

This method of teaching classical mythology, in my case serendipitously discovered, can transform the undergraduate myth classroom: using American popular culture to energize the study of ancient stories. The method does not lead students first to study in a detached way how myth is received or reproduced through the ages, but to recognize that good stories have a profound effect on all cultures and that comparison of similar stories from different cultures can illuminate both sides in ways otherwise impossible.

Often, the most difficult part of teaching mythology involves helping undergraduates to own the material—that is, to believe that what they are studying does matter, is worth their attention, beyond good grades. Greek myth at first puts off the average student by appearing on the surface facile and designed for children, yet at the same time alien and incomprehensible, too much to memorize for a test. Film, on the other hand, is a passionate medium for students; they are natural experts, natural aficionados. They know that movies are important because they spend money on them, are entertained by them, have their life philosophies affected by them. This natural energy is the instructor's gold, a mound of capital which can be invested to create corresponding energy for studying the culture of the ancient world—if the crucial connection is made that the stories of the Greeks and Romans are more like American film than they first appear, and vice versa.¹ Once undergraduates recognize that myths are neither simple children's stories nor mere ammunition for objective tests, the instructor can begin to close the natural distance between student and material, fostering engagement and thus learning.

¹ As indeed they are. Film, like myth, is a vivid, story-oriented genre and our most public form of popular entertainment. Because it must make money to survive, the film industry must monitor closely what pleases its audience. As a result, movies are endlessly reflective of our shared values, aspirations, and beliefs, which make us pay to see stories again and again. In fact, although many have distanced Greek myth from modern entertainment because of myth's religious character, its literary worth, or its explicative value as prescientific inquiry, mythmakers in the ancient and modern worlds have always had the same fundamental task: to help a particular audience validate a particular construction of reality. It is a simplification, therefore, but nonetheless true, to say that the same psychological payoff is offered to spectators of *The Matrix* as was offered to hearers of the *Iliad*.

To begin, choose American films with the power to hold the audience (Academy Award winners are often good choices), and match them with myths with which they have more than a passing resemblance.² Avoid films which students might consider ridiculous (such as comic books/video games made into movies: *Superman*, *Dick Tracy*, *Tomb Raider*, *Pokemon*), or to which they have difficulty relating (especially French films). Although a good class will come to be able to compare most anything once they have developed proper skills, students apprenticed on comic-book films or “art” films will continue to associate the ancient material with the “too hard” or “too easy” obstacles mentioned above.

Nearly as important, the instructor must not select films which in another class are rightfully studied as part of the classical tradition (*O Brother Where Art Thou* [*Odyssey*], *What Dreams May Come* [*Orpheus*], Pasolini’s *Medea*, the adaptations of Cacoyannis, the Hallmark Hall of Fame’s *Odyssey*, *Clash of the Titans*, *Black Orpheus*). The comparison of conscious retellings of tales serves unique and valuable intellectual purposes which are nonetheless different from the kind of comparisons described here.³ The focus should be on serendipity—on the seeming absurdity, for example, of the special-effects-saturated *Predator* having any connection with a tale as old and traditional as that of Heracles. Like archaeologists who have dug something quite unexpected out of the ground, students experience an indescribable shock of pleasure in discovering that a modern film is filled with elements found also in classical myths, and they come to class eager to share their research.

Many films and myths can make excellent comparison projects, but the combination of *Predator* and Heracles brings to the myth classroom an unusually good potential for discovery. Undergraduates enter the course with a thorough misknowledge of the hero, through images of popular culture (including from a hit television show) and children’s stories. Through *Predator*, the instructor has the opportunity to correct these misperceptions

² The following make excellent pairs for comparison:

Soap operas	Any family story, especially from Greek tragedy
Professional sports	<i>Iliad</i>
<i>Survivor</i>	<i>Philoctetes</i>
<i>Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?</i>	Heracles’ journey
<i>Sixth Sense</i> (1999)	Underworld journeys: Odysseus, Orpheus, Aeneas
<i>The Matrix</i> (1999)	Myth of Er
<i>Titanic</i> (1997)	Ariadne or other broken romance stories
<i>Star Wars</i> (1977)	<i>Aeneid</i> . Pair with <i>Independence Day</i> (1996).
<i>Thelma and Louise</i> (1991)	<i>Odyssey</i> . Good to pair with <i>Rain Man</i> (1988).
<i>Top Gun</i> (1986)	<i>Iliad</i> . Good to pair with <i>Platoon</i> (1986).
<i>Fatal Attraction</i> (1987)	<i>Agamemnon</i> , <i>Medea</i>
<i>Vertigo</i> (1958)	<i>Oedipus</i> . Fate and free will meets modern psychological cinema.

³ P. W. Rose, “Teaching Greek Myth and Confronting Contemporary Myths,” in M. Winkler, ed., *Classics and Cinema* (Lewisburg, Pa., 1991) 17–39, for example, points out the value of comparing films like *Clash of the Titans* to ancient stories in order to bring out biases and prejudices in American society.

while helping students develop a fascinating, sophisticated interpretation of the long-lived character.

The instructor may lay the groundwork with a basic introduction to Heracles, either in lecture or readings or both. Then may come a full screening of *Predator*, individually or (if time allows) as a class. In any case, it is good practice to show representative clips in class. The next step is discussion, in which the students first create parallels in surface details such as plot, character, and setting, and then move on, with the instructor's guidance, to examine thematic and other interpretive similarities. The final step is a written product, in which students demonstrate and expand their understanding, showcasing Heracles' Greekness by framing it with the peculiarly American qualities of *Predator*.

The basic core of knowledge about Heracles imparted in lecture/readings/handouts will vary from instructor to instructor, but I find the concept of the "uncivilized civilizer" most effective. Walter Burkert's iteration of this theory finds that Heracles is not a conventional, Iliadic warrior, but a superhuman phenomenon, fighting monsters, doing impossible tasks, and making the world safe for civilization.⁴ As such, he resembles the Paleolithic figure of the shaman, a kind of superhunter who protects his community and takes spiritual journeys to distant worlds, even to the land of the dead. *Predator*, the class will find, is a retelling of this superhunter story-pattern, in which Heracles emphatically participates.

The film begins with the extraordinary warrior (Schwarzenegger) called in to fight an extraordinary opponent (the alien). Although the hero has companions, these are shed through the course of the film, until he is left alone against his adversary. Schwarzenegger also loses all of his twenty-first-century weaponry and clothing, until he is effectively, like Heracles, naked, in an otherworldly jungle environment of huge trees, waterfalls, and impenetrable mists.

The terror-inducing alien combines several traits of traditional Heracleian opponents, traits which students are delighted to uncover. The predator a) has intelligence (Diomedes, Hippolyta); b) shoots missile weapons (Stymphalian Birds); c) has snaky growths on its head (Hydra); d) has a piglike snout and tusks (Erymanthean Boar); e) cannot be hurt with normal projectiles (Nemean Lion); f) is stealthy and elusive, cannot be chased down easily, but can be tracked and tricked (Cerynean Hind, Boar).

If students, through this use of American popular culture, are able to internalize the concept of Heracles as "uncivilized civilizer," pedagogical victory may be declared. But they are also primed to go further, to expand to more global comparisons, especially in response to essay questions. The students may note the fear of monsters common to both ancient Greeks and Americans, then focus on the mythological differences between an alien and, for example, a lion. Or they may consider the significance of the superhunter story in societies where hunting has become superfluous. Or they may focus on endings, and consider why Heracles is often considered a figure of tragedy, even though his labors (and *Predator*) end happily. Whatever the questions chosen, this kind of comparison—especially frequent, regular comparison—will sharpen students' appreciation of the kinds of stories ancients liked and why.

I have concentrated here on a feature film, but this comparative method need not be restricted to this medium. Students, once familiar with comparison,

⁴ W. Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley 1979) 78–98.

tend spontaneously to adduce television shows, books, and films from other cultures or from the past. My students have compared classical myth with such disparate cultural products as Fellini's "La Strada" and the television show *Battlestar Galactica*. Some of this will fall on its face; this is the nature of learning. Indeed, as scientists know well, negative results can be as illuminating as positive ones. If students conclude that the journey of Gelsomina in *La Strada*, for example, does not parallel that of Odysseus as closely as they had thought, or that finding characters in the *Aeneid* parallel to those in *Battlestar Galactica* does not produce an elegant symmetry, they still rehearse, revise, and reinforce what makes ancient stories what they are. And this is always what we set out to do.⁵

The North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics DAVID FRAUENFELDER
Classical World 98.2 (2005) frauenfelder@ncssm.edu

⁵ Suggestions for further reading include R. Reich, *Tales of a New America* (New York 1987), an astonishingly effective primer on the categories and uses of American myth—a must read—and M. Winkler, ed., *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (Oxford 2001).

**CLASSICAL ASSOCIATION OF THE ATLANTIC STATES
 CALL FOR PAPERS**

Fall Meeting, October 6–8, 2005
 Wyndham Hotel, Wilmington, Delaware

We invite individual and group proposals on all aspects of the classical world and the classical tradition, and on new strategies and resources for improved teaching. Particularly welcome are presentations which aim at maximum audience participation and those that integrate the concerns of K–12 and college faculty; papers jointly authored by K–12 and college faculty on topics and issues of common interest will be given special consideration. Undergraduates are encouraged to submit proposals to high-light outstanding undergraduate research.

Among the special sessions being planned are the new Advanced Placement Catullus syllabus, regional classical associations, teaching with the *Ecce Romani* series, classical studies in "formerly Latin" countries, new directions in teaching and research in classical mythology, and a tribute to Henry Bender. There will be a limited enrollment workshop for both secondary school and college faculty on strategies and resources for teaching the Advanced Placement Ovid syllabus.

Abstracts of no more than 300 words should be submitted electronically, as Word or RTF files. They should have the title of the paper as their file name and—as they will be refereed anonymously—should not indicate the name of the author. This information should be included in a companion electronic submission, a "cover letter," which provides the title of the abstract, and the name, postal address, phone number, and e-mail address of the author. The "cover letter" should contain a brief c.v. of the author as well. Deadline for submission is April 8, 2005.

E-mail submissions of the abstracts and "cover letters" to Dr. Judith P. Hallett jh10@umail.umd.edu and jeph@umd.edu and Dr. Edward Sacks (Edward_Sacks@Agnelrwin.org and edssacks@yahoo.com).

For further information, contact: Judith P. Hallett, CAAS Program Coordinator, Department of Classics, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742; fax: (301) 314-9084; e-mail: jh10@umail.umd.edu.