

Questions from Prof. Dan Curley's Webinar

Tuesday, June 30, 2020 3pm EDT

If you were to retell the story of Hercules from a "minor/supporting character's" POV, whose perspective do you think would be the most interesting? Also, I miss you, happy you're doing this :)

Submitted by: Sarah D. '17

Thanks, Sarah. I miss you, too — and all of the alums and friends who tuned in and sent questions.

I would choose (as Sophocles did in his tragedy, *Women of Trachis*) Deianira, the second wife of Heracles/Hercules. She struggles with her husband's infidelity and tries to rekindle his desire for her with what she believes to be a love potion, but is actually a deadly poison. Sophocles addresses the monstrous side of the Hercules myth, both the hero himself as monster of appetite, and the notion of doing something helpful that turns out to be monstrous. And he reduces the story to a human scale. That's what would appeal to me, too.

2 questions: 1. Could the change from ancient pottery color palette to full color Olympus an homage to *The Wizard of Oz*? 2. Might you read this opening as a typical musical theater intro or even an operatic *introduzione* setting the scene?

Submitted by: Alison N. P'21

The transition to full color must be an homage to *The Wizard of Oz*. And, yes, this introductory number is completely in line with both contemporary and older musical theater traditions, even as it recalls the prologues of ancient comedy and tragedy.

If you could choose any ancient myth to modernize into an animation, which would you choose and why?

Submitted by: Eddie Z. '04

My favorite poem from antiquity is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a Latin epic that collects and retells transformation stories from the beginning of time down to the assassination of Julius Caesar. I like to say that it's one of the works that invented modernity, due to its influence on artists and writers since its publication in the first century CE. I think the CGI technology for rendering the metamorphoses of people into trees or rocks into people (among many, many other changes told by Ovid) has finally made a live-action version of this masterpiece feasible. One challenge, a steep one, would be to determine which stories to tell and how to connect them. As far as I know, the only major adaptation was produced in Japan in the late 1970s. Later released as *Winds of Change* with English narration by Peter Ustinov, it was, of course, an animated feature.

What are some other "modern" Classics-related films or animations that you really appreciate (either from a Classicist's perspective or your own personal perspective)?

Submitted by: Dana M. '90 and Gillian R. '03

I would recommend two. One is *Iphigenia* (1977), which translates the play by Euripides to the screen. Written and directed by Michael Cacoyannis, it both continues and culminates his career-long project of making cinematic adaptations of ancient tragedies. I also recommend *Agora* (2009), a biopic about the philosopher Hypatia of Alexandria, a powerful meditation on the intersection of religion and politics. I use this film all the time when trying to help students visualize the Roman empire's transition to Christianity.

Neither of these films is your typical, escapist hunky sword-and-sandal spectacular (see *Gladiator* or the Rock's *Hercules*), and I suppose that's why I mention them here. Certainly they're about as far from the Disneyverse as one can get. Both show the violent impact of patriarchy on the bodies of women, which makes them all the more contemporary.

Do you see any connection between the movie's Al Hirschfeld-inspired designs and the notion of classical theater, given Hirschfeld's career caricaturing Broadway stars?

Submitted by: Gene K.

Possibly, as I pore over Hirschfeld's many sketches. That's a huge topic, but an interesting one, given the Broadway stylings of the Disney Renaissance films. I might begin not only with *Hercules* but also with *Aladdin*, whose Genie is Hirschfeldian in the extreme.

Have you compared the functionality of the Disney muses with the function of the chorus in Greek drama and if so, what are the key similarities and differences.

Submitted by: Wendy R. '63

They do play that function. They remain aloof from the drama and yet comment on it, though they also take part in it — just as any chorus does in any ancient play. One key difference is that they are also the primary narrators. A development we see in Athenian tragedy and comedy is the gradual relegation of the chorus to a tangential or adjunct status, with little-to-no impact on the plot. That is not the case here.

Are there any other storytelling techniques from antiquity that pop out to you in modern film? For example, the way in Hercules that the muses function as a chorus from a tragedy throughout the film.

Submitted by: Mark O. '15

Or a chorus from comedy! I do love the choral effect in modern film, everything from the singing mice in *Babe* (1995) or the stentorian Samuel L. Jackson — a host unto himself — in *Chi-Raq* (2015). Apart from that, I've been thinking about prequels and sequels in myth of late. We know that movie franchises invest much storytelling energy in keeping their brand alive (the Marvel Cinematic Universe, for example). The choices of ancient storytellers in beginning and ending their myths, and in placing their versions with respect to other versions, can help us understand modern entertainment industry practices, and vice versa.

***Hercules v. The Moon Men &c via MST3K* ♥**

Submitted by: Clifton I.'06

OH, YES. With a tub of popcorn, refreshing beverages, and friends to howl at the screen with!

Why do we use the Roman version of his name as Hercules and not the Greek version Heracles?

Submitted by: Matthew W. '99

Name recognition. The Roman Hercules simply has more cultural currency than his Greek counterpart, despite being derived from him. For similar reasons, planets are named after Roman gods: We don't talk about Hermes, Aphrodite, and Ares, but we do talk about Mercury, Venus, and Mars.

Hi Dan! Do you have any thoughts about the sharply negative responses the film elicited in Greece in 1997 vs. more positive responses in the US at the same time (and maybe the more positive feelings about the film in Greece today)?

Submitted by: Christopher P.

On the one hand, the Greek hue and cry over the film, centered around heritage and tradition, resonates with cries from other cultures over Disney's appropriation of the material. On the other hand, in this case, such a reaction would have been more legitimate (1) had 20th-century Greece had a sterling record of promulgating the touchstones of ancient own culture; and (2) had the culture in question continued uninterrupted from antiquity to modernity. But, even in antiquity, changes to myths were expected with each new adaptation. So the bold

creative choices made by the filmmakers are in many ways just as classical as the character of Hercules himself. Perhaps the quantifiable interest in ancient Greece that the film inspired has mitigated its reputation overseas somewhat.

Disney is known for recreating fairy tales into big movies. Do you think there is a big difference between adapting fairy tales and myth onto the big screen?

Submitted by: Emilio Z. '18

I wouldn't say there's a huge difference, especially where the stories are old, and therefore ripe for adaptation or updating. But to some, adaptation can mean appropriation, particularly when bright cultural or ethnic lines are crossed. In the case of *Hercules*, Disney was working with the oldest source material ever adapted by the company, material that had already been freely adapted for thousands of years. But movies like *Pocahontas* or *Moana*, whose plots involve characters from non-European cultures, have been taken to task for being "Disneyfied."

You briefly mentioned the Muses being portrayed as Black women and tied that to black-figured vases -- do you have thoughts on how portraying them as these outsider "helper" figures connects with them being virtually the only characters coded as other than white in the movie?

Submitted by: Naomi G. '06

There's a lot to unpack here. I'm not sure I would characterize them as helper figures in the traditional sense — as, say, standing alongside the hero and offering guidance or some sort of boon. Although they do take part in their own story (as in Meg's big "I Won't Say I'm in Love" number), I see them as controlling the narrative, offering a version of the story for a new era, which places them near the top of the divine hierarchy. And we should also observe that the gods in *Hercules* are of many colors; Poseidon, for example, is an ultramarine blue. But that's another topic — how Disney films use color to signal the divine or supernatural.

But I do take from your question the point that the Muses are the only Black women of note in the film (as far as I remember), and that makes them more an exception than the rule. Perhaps the choice of Gospel-inspired music led to the choice of portraying the Muses as Black, or vice versa. (And let's recall a famous precedent in the gospel version of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, appropriately titled *The Gospel at Colonus*.) As progressive or as refreshing as this choice might be or might have been, it does feel similar to how Black people are cast in adaptations of Eurocentric myths and legends: as supporting characters or villains, but rarely if ever as the main heroes. The Netflix series *Troy: Fall of a City* (2018) works against this trend, with a Black Zeus and a Black Achilles. But this comes a full twenty years after *Hercules*, and nearly a decade after *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), in which the first Black Disney Princess was introduced.

Disney is casting a live-action version of their animated *Hercules*...how do you think the shift in medium will change the storytelling?

Submitted by: Juliette T. '20

I think the new film will require about as much animation as the original; maybe not cel animation, but certainly a whopping amount of CGI (of which the original also has its fair share) — such that I'm not sure the term "live-action" will still apply. (Though to what big-budget movie it could apply these days, I'm not sure.) For me, the recent remakes illustrate how nimble and economical and artful the animated films were in their original medium, and how hard the remakes have to work to provide added value.

An interesting point of casting the live-action *Hercules* involves the Muses themselves. The fact that there have been many online calls for the Muses to remain Black is a testament to how traditional they have become. What was once a bold innovation has now become authenticity, so much so that audiences will feel its loss keenly if it fails to materialize.

Thoughts on *Black Orpheus*?

Submitted by: Jovany A. '13

It's difficult to recommend. It will always have a place in cinematic history, because of its Oscar-winning reworking of classical myth — and the Orpheus myth at that, which is one of the most venerable stories there is. But Marcel Camus' colonialist takes on Afro-Brazilian people in Rio de Janeiro are painful to watch. It's not his appropriation of the Orpheus myth that's the problem, but rather his appropriative grafting of Brazilian customs and culture onto the myth — starting with the title, *Black Orpheus*, which immediately Others and exoticizes the story. To screen the movie responsibly for students would entail hard work in the form of content warnings beforehand and dialogue afterwards. That's not to say the work shouldn't be done, only to suggest how much the work has changed in the six decades since the film's release.

Can you talk about the shift you have made as a professor to the "storytelling" format you said you have been using more recently? Do you often create these video / monologue presentations and what benefits have you and your students found in using it? (I am asking as a high school art teacher trying to integrate art history into my courses.)

Submitted by: Hannah L. C. '02

I hope you don't mind a long-winded answer here.

In my teaching I've become more and more invested in visual storytelling, whether I'm trying to unpack a densely-layered site in Rome or trying to explain how the Latin subjunctive works. About ten years ago I began to lean heavily into the animation features of PowerPoint, both to liven up lectures and to lay out ideas in a (hopefully) clear and easy-to-follow fashion. Then, when the Classics Department "flipped" its gateway course, Classical World, and moved lectures into a video format in order to spend class time on discussions and case studies, I carried over those same techniques into my videos. The process has been one of continuous learning for me, as I keep developing my overall sense of style and my strategies for pairing images with narration.

The advantages to using videos are many. I can condense a 20- or 30-minute live lecture into a video of 10 minutes or less. Students can access the videos from any device, and they can take notes while watching (and pause or rewind as needed). Classroom time can be spent on other things besides my professing (though, of course, I'm always happy to do that). The videos themselves can be reused from year to year, and even across classes; students in my ancient drama courses, for example, have been asked to watch many a Classical World video. And the videos are a kind of legacy. I don't expect them to have much of a shelf-life beyond my retirement, but collectively they amount to a body of work I can point to, and I can gauge their usefulness. Finally, the technology has never been more affordable or easier to use. With one program on my little laptop, I can put together an entire series of videos with reasonably high production values. I am grateful to Skidmore for all of the technological support I have received.

The only real drawback is the time it takes to produce a video. For about 5 minutes of video, I can expect to put in at least 10 hours of work, from planning the overall flow of the narrative, to writing a script (which for me is essential, unless I know the topic very, very well), to recording the narration and editing the audio, to assembling the visuals and synching them with the narrative track, to compiling and uploading the finished product. The video for this *Hercules* presentation took about three weeks of on-and-off work, with the lion's share to editing my audio (good audio is indispensable to any video, even if that sounds paradoxical). If I'm doing a series, then a methodical workflow with good organization of all my media is essential. I confess also to being a perfectionist — not that my videos are perfect — so your mileage might vary.

There's plenty more where this came from, so please email me if you have other questions!

Thanks again to everyone for tuning in and asking questions. I hope the presentation gave you a pleasant distraction as well as something to think about. All of these questions were certainly helpful to me!