ACCOUNTING FOR ACHILLES: TEACHING LITERATURE TO NON-MAJORS

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In their book provocatively titled *Who Killed Homer? The Demise of Classical Education and the Recovery of Greek Wisdom* (1998), Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath lament the death of classical learning. “We are sure,” they write, “that at the present rate, Greek wisdom will be almost unknown to the general public within two decades” (249). Fourteen years later, however, Homer is still alive and kicking in many a college classroom. At the same time, fewer and fewer students—at least in my introductory literature surveys—speak any foreign languages, let alone dead ones, and many have trouble following the bard’s ancient yarns without the help of SparkNotes. Even the brightest ones routinely complain “there are too many names.”

The devaluation of classical languages and literatures is part of a larger national trend. More and more students find texts, assignments, and entire courses “boring,” a point Gary Gutting and Anthony Grafton, among others, have connected to the current “crisis” or “failure” of higher education. Students assign value only to material that “provide[s] training relevant to future employment” or is presented by a teacher in “a pleasing (amusing, exciting, ‘relevant’) way” (Gutting).

The purpose of this article is to discuss strategies to get students engaged in learning classical mythology and literature which, I believe, should remain in undergraduate liberal arts curricula, and to do so in a way that would preserve the integrity of the individual texts while, at the same time, making these texts relevant to the millennial generation. By positioning myself between two extremes—higher education centered on the objective study of classical languages, as proposed by Hanson and Heath, and a personalized, subjective approach adopted by instructors like Jane Ellen Glasser—I hope to find an *aurea mediocritas*, a moderate stance that will facilitate an open, nonhierarchical dialogue between the ancients and the moderns.

Hanson and Heath suggest that we begin to resuscitate the blind bard by combining a “traditional multidisciplinary approach (history, literature, philosophy, religion, political science, art)” and “a professional ethics derived from Greek wisdom.” Their proposal for a new general college curriculum includes two mandatory years of Greek or Latin and “at least one year reading the classics in the original” in addition to two years of foreign-language study (a Romance language or German). “[C]ourses in Business and Communications—everything from accounting to radio/TV,” on the other hand, should be excluded from the university curriculum altogether because they are “vocational at best” (Hanson and Heath 212-4). The implementation of this plan demands that teaching, not obscure research, compulsive grant writing or compulsory publishing, be the focus.¹

I am a classicist by conviction more so than by profession, with a background in Latin poetry and classical Greek literature and mythology. From Fall 2005 to Spring 2009, I had an opportunity to apply

¹ In *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* (2011), Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa similarly fault “the vast majority of those involved with the higher-education system” for making “undergraduate education...peripheral to the[ir] concerns” (142-3).
my training while teaching Greek and Roman classics in countless sections of so-called “Great Books” courses at Queens College of the City University of New York. These were surveys of literature from antiquity to the Middle Ages typically described in catalogues as introductions to “major” or “foundational” texts. Because they fulfilled various liberal arts requirements, they always enjoyed high enrollment and were dominated neither by avid readers nor by classics, English, or humanities devotees. In fact, most of my students were aspiring accountants—Accounting being the College’s most popular major.2

Suspecting that my students were spending more time on bookkeeping than on Great Books, in spring 2008 I conducted a mini-survery. The question was open-ended: Should we read myth and ancient literature, and if so, why? The positive replies were generally of two kinds. Eighteen students out of forty-five stated that ancient literature and myth helped us understand how people lived “in those times” and provided insight into the past; some stressed the importance of history stating, for example, that “without the past there is no present.” It is hard to tell who was sincere and who was merely restating the course description. The myth-as-history group prevailed over the smaller group of eight students who thought we should study myths for their moral lessons. Both groups agreed, however, that we should study myth because—in the verbose phrasing of one student—“it makes us understand our own society we live in today.”

The opponents offered even more interesting data. Four students replied in the negative and chose to remain anonymous. The student who believed most strongly that “we shouldn’t study myth” listed the following reasons: first, “[t]here’s no way to determine if the myth is fiction or non-fiction”; second, “[myth] has nothing to do with the culture of our country”; and third, “if someone wanted to study [G]reek mythology, it shouldn’t be force[d] on them nor a requirement.” The other three responses echoed the first two reasons: myths are “not true (confirmed),” and “[l]ife in these days requires a lot more knowledge about things we need for the future and not about something that has been said and done.” Notably, both the supporters and the opponents of myth singled out the category of relevance, underscoring the relationship between myth and contemporary culture.

Building on these responses, I take as the principal criteria for evaluating the importance of teaching myth the following: verifiability, relevance, and curricular value. I set out to demonstrate that classical mythology and literature are relevant and should have a place in liberal arts curricula. I turn to the classics due to my personal training and experience, but the approach I delineate is potentially adaptable to other cultures and times, depending on the individual instructor’s expertise and research interests. Since the third criterion—the curricular question—is not, strictly speaking, pedagogical and since my position on the matter is implicit in the argument, I focus primarily on the verifiability and relevance charges, and I suggest some strategies which, I hope, will prove useful to other instructors, as well.

2 Since Fall 2009, Queens College’s Comparative Literature program has transitioned away from “Great Books” and offers introductory surveys in global literatures, which stress “pluralism,” “multiculturalism,” and “globalism” over the passé “essentialism” of the West. But while the curriculum and bureaucratic nomenclature have changed, the student population remains the same: future CPAs are still holding down the fort.
I. VERIFIABILITY

The student’s response regarding the uncertainty between myth’s being “fiction or non-fiction” raises a valid point applicable not only to mythology but also to fiction and literature at large. The term “literature,” however difficult its definition, is neutral in the sense that it comes from the Latin littera, or “letter,” through French to mean in late Middle English the “knowledge of books”; however, that is not the case with “fiction” or “myth.” The word “fiction” entered the late Middle English vocabulary in the sense of “invented statement”; it originates in the Latin fictio, from fingere meaning “to form” or “contrive,” and as such, it is related to “feign” and “figment” (OD). Who would trust “a figment of the imagination” to carry true knowledge? The same goes for “myth.” Urban myths appear in the same category as rumors and scams. As in the title to the Discovery Channel’s MythBusters, in the popular imagination myths have questionable or ambiguous standing and, like old wives’ tales, often turn out to be false. This is parodied in the television series Bones in an episode tellingly titled “The Truth in the Myth.” The forensic anthropologist Dr. Brennan shames her partner Booth for thinking that a myth, such as the Loch Ness Monster or the Chupacabra, could kill someone because “it doesn’t exist,” and concludes that he must not “understand what the word ‘myth’ means.”

The ancients, as it turns out, were not so far afield. The criterion of verifiability can be traced back to classical Greece. That myths are lies, that is, “the meaning that myth often has today: a thing widely believed but false,” was what Plato claimed as he “set his new art of dialectic apart by using more sharply defined concepts, opposing logoi, propositions demonstrable with the aid of dialectic, to mythoi” (Graf 2). In The Republic, Plato’s spokesman Socrates chastises the poets Homer, Aeschylus, and Pindar for being impious, and he excises a number of troublesome lines (such as the gods’ immoral gallivanting), which the Athenian youth might take literally. Similarly, the historians Herodotus and Thucydides were skeptical of myth: the one used the word to mean an “implausible story” while the other associated it with “the fabulous” or “mere storytelling,” distinguishing it from “his history, with its new claim to veracity” (Graf 2). Then again, Plato was also ambivalent about myth; on more than one occasion, Socrates uses it to prove a point: the allegory of the cave, the divided line, and the Myth of Er at the end of The Republic are all imaginative ways of conveying Platonic truths.

The fact that my students dismissed the Greeks using a concept the Greeks themselves had derived does not make our cultures identical, but it can initiate a dialogue. I usually bring up the subject of myth in the first class meeting of an undergraduate literature survey. I ask a series of questions, such as: What is myth? What is fiction? What is the difference between literature and history? The replies are almost always consistent: Myth is something that is not factual. Fiction is made-up. Literature has to do with history and tradition. One or two students tie the notion of myth to cultural values and mention heroes and gods. As in the original mini-survey, the responses fall into two categories: myth as a record of a culture’s stories, ideas, and values, on the one hand, and myth as falsehood, on the other. I tackle the latter by pointing out to my students that they are heirs to a long-standing intellectual tradition and, more concretely, by outlawing the use of the term—in class discussions and written assignments—to mean “untruth.”

More important to the study of classical literature is the former category: the ability to appreciate the imaginative potential and cultural currency of myth. For the German Romantic theorist Friedrich Schlegel, Homer was “less an ideal beauty than a faithful copy of nature” and a “true reflection of his own world and surroundings”; however, Schlegel also knew that Homer, like his cunning Odysseus, “invented many deceptions that seemed like truths” (Behler 88). Rather than immediately turn to the ancients, I like to begin on more familiar turf: I ask my students about George Washington and the cherry tree, a myth cited in a similar discussion in one of my graduate courses. The story is, of course, meant to reinforce Washington’s honesty regardless of whether he had ever chopped down any trees; it
is more likely than not that the individual episode was fabricated by his biographer—in which case the founding father’s inability to tell a lie is, in fact, conveyed through one. By dissociating myth from fact, though not from history, I encourage my students to see it as an imaginative record the truth of which is contingent upon a culture’s construing it as such: myths are true, in other words, because the members of a community believe that they are true; as such, they are windows onto the community’s values, traditions, and customs.

A way to gauge whether this notion has settled in is to turn to Hesiod’s *Theogony* and, specifically, to the prophecy against the firstborn son. From Cronus’ chopping off his father Uranus’ genitalia and swallowing his own children (first, to usurp the throne; second, to remain in power) we can proceed to the two female goddesses, Gaia and Rhea, who are Zeus’ grandmother and mother, respectively, and who combine forces to outwit his tyrannical father by serving him a stone in swaddling clothes. The goal is for the students to understand these not as travesties but as profound articulations of generational rivalry and of the power dynamics between the sexes (aggressive but ultimately reckless men duped by cautious, cunning, and ultimately successful women). The more outrageous and shocking the myth, the more likely will the students pass judgment and call its creators “crazy” or “barbaric” (an ironic epithet given its original use by the Greeks to refer to non-Greeks, a point that may help reinforce the benefits of etymology); at the same time, the more animated will be the discussion which, under the instructor’s guidance, can help the students read more critically as well as creatively, unraveling the allegorical web and decoding its meaning, and thus provide an entryway into various spheres of life from the *oikos*, or the home, to the *polis*.

By equipping students with the kind of thinking Socrates did not find in the Athenian education system based on uncritical memorization, we will teach them to read critically—and, in this case, allegorically, by seeing myths not as lies but as imaginative ways of telling the truth. The ability to distinguish between true and false claims is, after all, one that will benefit students in and outside the classroom. In addition, the cultural awareness and empathy implicit in an understanding of cultural myths will prepare them to navigate the global sphere, where they will have diverse cultural experiences and encounter values far stranger than those of the Greeks, even if closer temporally or geographically to their own.

II. RELEVANCE

The second charge against myth is that “it has nothing to do with the culture of our country”—that it is, in a word, irrelevant. Material that is not directly “relevant” is likely to be dismissed as “boring,” thereby precluding any genuine engagement; what is worse, it is likely to induce such a strong feeling of boredom in the students that they might begin to doubt the value of the discipline as a whole in which, as non-majors, they may not be invested anyway. It does not help that, unlike their accounting classes or even those in composition (which my students appreciate because they “want to write better”), poetry has ostensibly no real-life application. In *The Iliad*, Plato’s dialogue on poetry, Socrates questions Homer’s authority on practical matters such as seafaring, medicine, and fishing; like the rhapsode’s, this authority comes by “divine dispensation” (539, 542B). We would not turn to a poet if we were sick or required a captain to steer a ship (or needed help with taxes).

If the critical-reading skills developed through interpreting myths and works based on myths (are these stories true? are they lies? are they truth-bearing lies?) do not, in and of themselves, make myths relevant, then we may add a few more applications. The oral retelling of Homer’s epics in the classroom, as David Reedy and Bob Lister show in their study of children aged nine to eleven in East London schools, is a valuable tool for developing literacy and enhancing the discourse between pupils and teachers. The Socratic method of questioning deep-rooted beliefs is used by law professors to keep
students on their toes. It is, in fact, a great critical-thinking tool for students in any discipline. *The Apology* could provide a fruitful platform for interrogating beliefs and ethical issues from civil disobedience to the death penalty. Homer’s poetry, too, could serve as a launching pad for ethical discussions. Jason M. Bell, for example, has noted the relevance of *The Odyssey* to modern environmental ethics, particularly the impact of dietary ritual on the environment. Perhaps, when presented with the discursive power of Platonic dialogues, students might think twice before writing, as one did in a course evaluation, “Who really [sic] cares about Socrates?”

But it is one thing to persuade fellow academics and sympathetic administrators that the Greeks are still with us. It is quite another to encourage twenty-first century students of our globalized world to read old texts by dead authors who are, perhaps with the exception of Sappho and the Roman Sulpicia, predominantly white and almost exclusively male. This is a hard sell. Then again, the few lines of women’s literature we do have go a long way. Sulpicia’s torment as a lover is inextricably tied to her anxiety about being exposed through writing: “I would not want to trust/anything to tablets, signed and sealed,/so no one reads me before my love—” continues to resonate even if our tablets now come with Internet access.

How can we make classical literature relevant to aspiring accountants and other non-majors who will not grow up to be classicists, whose idea of the wrath of Achilles is that of a half-naked Brad Pitt prancing around the citadel of Troy in search of his girlfriend Briseis, and who repeatedly cite Richmond Lattimore as “the great author” of *The Iliad?* In other words, how can we make “Great Books” the business students’ business?

In my own teaching, I have found that referencing popular culture can get the students’ attention while, at the same time, targeting common misconceptions. When teaching Homer’s *Iliad* or Virgil’s *Aeneid,* for example, I like to show my students clips from the movie *Troy* (2004), which most of them enjoy and have seen on the big screen. What they may not have seen, however, are the ways in which the classical material has been adapted for—or, rather, made “relevant” to—contemporary audiences. The “fair-cheeked Briseis,” I like to point out, has about twenty lines in Lattimore’s 400-page translation of *The Iliad* (I.184, 19.282-300) and is named only once in Robert Fagles’ version (I.218). In the movie, on the other hand, this minor character is in the spotlight almost as much as Achilles whereas Hecuba, the wife of Troy’s celebrated King Priam, is strangely missing from the cast. Even more baffling is the painfully brief cameo allotted to Aeneas—the hero whose flight from Troy to Italy is the basis of *The Aeneid,* the epic which inspired national myths across Europe throughout the Middle Ages and beyond. Besides, whatever happened to the gods?

One particularly striking passage that lends itself to a close reading in class is that describing the death of Priam in Book II of Virgil’s *Aeneid.* In Robert Fitzgerald’s translation, the King is described as “the old man [who] uselessly/put on his shoulders, shaking with old age,/Armor unused for years,” a brave yet ultimately futile effort to defend his honor and his citadel (II.662-4). Moments after he witnesses the death of his son, Priam slips in the latter’s “pooled blood” and is stabbed by his enemy Achilles’ son “at the altar step,” a sacred locus one is not permitted to pollute with murderous gore (II.716-21). When examined immediately prior to or following the viewing of the corresponding scene in Wolfgang Petersen’s *Troy,* this can inspire a serious discussion of the two texts as well as the larger themes they raise. Peter O’Toole’s Priam is similarly weak and pitiable; yet, the movie’s spectacular portrayal of military exploits and Pitt’s shapely calves notwithstanding, at times its texture is too thin: Petersen’s Priam never dons his rusty armor, and so the story is stripped of the retired warrior’s moving effort to protect his homeland, the tragic generational reversal (fathers burying sons), and the perversion of filial piety. By juxtaposing Virgil’s treatment of this scene with Petersen’s, we can appreciate the pathos which, along with other formal and narrative elements, has enabled the epic to stand the test of time;
by examining the two texts side by side, we can also encourage our students to reflect on the unspeakable realities of war in general, not just of the Trojan War, and these are nothing if not relevant to contemporary society.

Although some might dismiss this as gratuitous fidelity criticism (finding fault with “unfaithful” adaptations), it has worked in my classroom. Through class discussion and a writing assignment asking them to compare the way a specific scene in The Aeneid is realized on screen, as well as to consider if, as directors, they might do anything differently, my students have gained a better understanding of the original and the adaptation, which says as much about Hollywood and America as it does about the Trojan War and Hellas.

_Troy_ is only one example of adaptations than can be analyzed more thoughtfully and appreciated more fully with a firmer grasp of the original text. The same principle applies to _The New York Times_ editorials in which Homeric heroes are compared to contemporary politicians, and the epics are meant to remind us—and our leaders—to learn from our mistakes as do Achilles and Odysseus. “Indeed, the subtitle for ‘The Iliad,’” Nicholas D. Kristof wrote in 2003 ironically referencing President Bush’s actions in Afghanistan and North Korea, “could be ‘Achilles Grows Up’.” Joseph Campbell recommends teaching Eric Shanower’s graphic novel series _Age of Bronze_ as a way to provide adolescents with the necessary mythological background; this would also work the other way around: namely, enhancing students’ reading of Shanower’s comics by teaching them how to read Homer. This argument is by no means new, but there is a reason we keep making it.

In addition, as teachers we can demonstrate the relevance of classical texts and, at the same time, help our students become critical thinkers and persuasive writers by focusing on rhetoric. A great instance of the misuse of such power by eloquent bullies appears in Thucydides’ “Melian Dialogue,” in Book 5 of the _History of the Peloponnesian War_. It is Thucydides’ version of what must have happened when the Athenian emissaries arrived on the island of Melos, an ally of Sparta, and told the Melians that they would not boast of their achievements while simultaneously doing just that:

_Athenians:_ Then we on our side will use no fine phrases saying, for example, that we have a right to our empire because we defeated the Persians, or that we have come against you now because of the injuries you have done us—a great mass of words that nobody would believe. And we ask that you on your side not to imagine that you will influence us by saying that you, though a colony of Sparta, have not joined Sparta in the war, or that you have never done us any harm. (Thucydides 401)

When asked to read this paragraph closely, students can usually spot and critique the ironic move.

Another famous instance of paralipsis and a good counterpart to Thucydides’ “Dialogue” appears in Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal.” Similarly aiming to expose the excesses of a power-hungry empire, Swift states: “let no man talk to me of other expedients” thereby drawing the reader’s attention to the very expedients he pretends to leave to the side (“paralipsis” comes from the Greek _para_ meaning “side” and _leipin_, “to leave”). While it can certainly be served on its own, as well as “stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled,” Swift’s “Proposal” can also speak to students in the language of Stephen Colbert, who quoted “a guy named Jon Swift” in the December 13, 2010 installment of _The Colbert Report_ (in reference to Ted Turner’s proposal that the poor sell their reproductive rights to the rich). In this case, contemporary culture both brings up to date and reinforces the ideas of an older text, providing an opportunity for nuanced rhetorical analysis and a broader discussion of imperialism in Athens, England, and America.

Along with its rhetorical power, literature may seem more relevant to non-majors when examined within a larger context and in relation to other domains. According to the departmental website for
Queens’ Accounting and Information Systems, “The functions of accountants encompass ever-broadening spheres of activity.” Reading and writing about literature can become one such “sphere” once the aspiring CPAs realize that the skills for analyzing the “the raw materials of accounting,” as well as the “processes of classification and analysis” by means of which data are “interpreted” and “communicated,” are not categorically different from the skills necessary to read, interpret, and write compellingly about texts. If both literature and accounting provide means to comprehend the “raw materials” of human life, then why shouldn’t we engage them in a meaningful dialogue?

Numbers and letters come together in yet another way. Whether or not we label it “globalization,” the global exchange of goods and services is akin to that of ideas and texts. Fritz Strich describes world literature as “a traffic in ideas between peoples, a literary market to which the nations bring their intellectual treasures for exchange” (Damrosch 13). Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels saw the growth of world literature in conjunction with that of the market: just as “the world-market” acquires “a cosmopolitan character,” so “[t]he intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures there arises a world literature” (22). Besides, if not all economically-minded students know who Marx is anymore, then alluding to The Communist Manifesto, albeit in a literature class, will ensure that modern thinkers do not follow the ancients on the road to oblivion.

The connection between literary and economic forces is one I highlight for my students when we discuss David Damrosch’s Introduction to What Is World Literature?, a text I assign to familiarize them with the discipline. In an in-class essay assignment, I ask them to write about one of four topics: canon formation, tradition vs. presentism, translation, or globalization. More than half of the class typically selects the last option, and understandably so. The prompt asks students to reflect on whether and why literature has to follow the current trend of globalization, which originated in the domain of economics; and also to consider how patronizing attitudes such as “neo-colonialism” (cultural hegemonies in the West controlling the global exchange of ideas) and “orientalism” (the depiction of “the East” in western literature and its study by academics in the West) fit into this discussion. Even if they fail to explain why, most argue that globalization influences literary production, translation, and dissemination. Once rendered less foreign and shown to participate in power dynamics the students know and hear about in the news, the literary market can also become more familiar and “relevant.”

Appealing to contemporary American culture may be tricky, however; certain popular references to Greek myths trivialize rather than promote their significance. Websites such as Mythology.com offer as examples the Bangles’ tune “Venus,” the Aegis insurance group, and the detergent “Ajax.” While drawing on contemporary culture, rhetoric, and the dynamics of the global literary market so as to make classical mythology and literature less “boring,” we should try not to put the reader above the text thereby making it just another outlet for the self.

This is, I believe, the problem with the “personalized” approach Glasser proposed. She decided to break with “impersonal literary analysis” and, seeing Odysseus’ journey as human life in general, asked her students to present personal narratives of their own “odysseys” to the class (Glasser 66). Glasser’s approach can obliterate historical differences by stressing similarity; in 2012 more so than in 1994, it also risks adding fuel to our blazing social-networking narcissism. There is much value in studying ancient cultural history for its own sake and because it is foreign, rather than solely for our sake and to learn something about ourselves. The two are not mutually exclusive, however: we can study how the past informs the present, but both the past and the present must be given equal attention and validation.
III. CURRICULAR VALUE

The third objection to studying myth documented in the student mini-survey (that “if someone wanted to study [G]reek mythology, it shouldn’t be force[d] on them nor a requirement”) raises the curricular question. It suggests that subject matter should be supplied according to the students’ specific demands, not some arbitrarily imposed criteria of a liberal arts curriculum. Must we “sell” literature to a student population because it treats education as a client (buyer/seller) transaction? Ideally, we should not have to do this, but the economic question should not be dismissed either as it leads to the more difficult one: What is the purpose of a college education?

On the one hand, there is no denying that the economic dimension matters a great deal. If students are pursuing a bachelor’s degree primarily because they hope for a better job and a higher salary, then we may have a hard time convincing them that Homer’s “beautiful mirror of human life,” as Schlegel put it (Behler 88), will yield an equally beautiful paycheck. On the other hand, literature can be vindicated if we define the raison d’être of higher education not as a means to an end (a job), but as that “to nourish a world of intellectual culture; that is, a world of ideas dedicated to what we can know scientifically, understand humanistically, or express artistically,” as Gutting argues in an opinion piece in The New York Times. He insists that universities are “not simply for the education of students,” that they are also places where research is conducted by highly trained experts and that once “practical skills,” such as those involved in business or teacher training, “far outweigh theoretical understanding, we are moving beyond intellectual culture that defines higher education.” This requires that students, faculty, and administration see value and relevance in learning for the sake of learning.

One of my colleagues says that education is the one commodity we can pay for and not receive. I would add that it is, moreover, an investment that yields interest one may not expect at the time of deposit. This semester, I asked both my community college students and those at a private research university the same question Gutting did: “What Is College For?” Their responses were not strictly financial as one might expect: besides preparing individuals for a career, they mentioned “exploring options,” becoming “independent,” “responsible,” and “well-rounded,” as well as “finding yourself.” These are promising responses, indeed, and goals we can foster through the study of classical literature broadly conceived.

By way of conclusion, I would like to propose a more moderate approach to preserving classical literature than either Hanson and Heath’s or Glasser’s. The former outlines ambitious goals which could be attempted at a small liberal arts college but seem less appropriate for a general education curriculum where the Greeks and the Romans are read in translation, if at all. Going that far would alienate rather than inspire students who do not intend to become Homerists. It might also alienate instructors most of whom do not regularly converse in ancient Greek around the water cooler. But we should not jump ship simply because classical education, in the traditional sense of the term, no longer seems feasible or because our students no longer find mythology “relevant.”

Homer can, in fact, be kept alive and taught successfully, albeit less rigorously, in translation, provided instructors have some access to the original and can complement it with a broader understanding of the text’s historical, social, and cultural contexts. To do so, they can ask students to reflect on what myths mean and what they mean to them; examine the history of the term and the situational differences in its usage; introduce and problematize the notion of cultural myths and constructs; discuss contemporary media which interpret and comment on ancient texts; analyze effective rhetorical strategies which the students can adopt, as well as tricky ones they can spot, critique, and/or eschew; and, finally, place literature in a larger context to examine its interaction with other spheres.

It should be understood that the strategies I describe are not meant for those students who want to pursue the study of classical languages and literature at a higher level; for them, an approach
resembling Hanson and Heath’s may, in fact, be a better fit. They are meant, rather, to target “non-majors,” that is, students who major in disciplines other than Classics, English, Comparative Literature, or Philosophy and for whom the undergraduate literature survey may very well be the first and the last encounter with antiquity. To reiterate, I am not denying the value of teaching Greek and Roman classics for their own sake; however, given the small number of literature courses typical non-majors will take in the course of their academic careers, this may indeed be an *aurea mediocritas*, the golden mean that will allow the past to remain alive while also saving the millennials from drowning in the self-absorbed presentism of tweets and profile updates. Let us, therefore, not bury Homer just yet.

I hope that through efforts such as these, however modest, teachers of literature would revisit and revise their syllabi, join forces, and help preserve the memory of Achilles’ *kallos thanatos*, his beautiful death at roughly the same age as that of an average undergraduate. I also hope that the account of the hero’s *kleos*, the glory sustained through centuries of reading myth and literature, will some day make Achilles relevant to accountants.

**WORKS CITED**


