

Flip the Myth, Change the Perspective

A study guide designed for 9th grade students

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My students are in Latin II, but this study guide was designed to be applicable to ELA/English students as well.

Overview

As a participant in the Examined Life study program to Greece, one of the running themes was the paradoxical nature of myth as being both timeless and always changing and fresh for a new generation. As a teacher of Greek myths in a Latin classroom, this rings true with my teaching experience: although I teach the same stories year in and year out, for my students this is their first experience with these stories, and as a result their new readings of the stories keep them fresh and vibrant for themselves and for me as a teacher. This is what Hannah Arendt termed natality, and what Chris Higgins has called the natality of teaching. Teaching ancient myths brings with it the imperative to help students see how they are still relevant for their modern world.

One of the ways to underscore the perennial relevance of ancient Greek myths is to examine their inherent multiplicity. Myth has always been multiform, as Ann O. Koloski-Ostrow reminded us in her lecture, using the Albert Lord's term from *Singer of Tales*. There has never been just one version of the myth. There is no one authentic, original version of the story. The ongoing digital humanities Homer Multitext Project even has as its motto, "As many Homers as you please."

Modern American students often find this unsettling. They are accustomed to having one canonical, original source. They reflexively criticize a movie if it changes some aspect of the book it is inspired by. One of my goals as a teacher of myth is to show them that there are always different ways of telling the story. Moreover, I want them to see how each telling of the story spins the tale for their own ends and with their own reasons. Consequently, students should be able to take ownership of the story and tell their own tales. I want students to think of themselves as creative artists, and give them the chance to re-examine the myths and stories that we read together from a new and different perspective. Sometimes students say that a movie "got the story wrong" or wasn't true to the "original." But each myth has always had many different versions, and there is always another side to the story. We should never think that there is just one "right" version, or that there is only one "original" myth.

The power of myth is its multiplicity. There are always more ways of telling a story. This was true for Ovid, whose versions of the Latin stories we often read. Ovid retold older Greek myths in ways that were often very transgressive in the Roman empire, challenging the regime of the emperor Augustus. This was true for the Greek myths that Ovid drew from, for even in the age of the Homeric epics, there are numerous variants of the same story told differently in different written texts and in different vase paintings and mosaics. This continues to be true today, as each new generation retells old stories with a new angle and a new purpose.

Laura Ruby and Deb Kovacs made this clear in their talk about being modern YA writers and editors. Laura asked, how many different versions of Spiderman are there? The 2018 film *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* explores this very idea, with multiple different Spiderman characters interacting with each other. When we see the story from a different character's point of view, we can see that there is always another layer, always another angle. Madeline Miller did just that with her 2018 novel *Circe*, which reclaims the "witch" of the Homeric *Odyssey* by retelling the story from the perspective of Circe, not Odysseus.

This, then, is my goal for this study guide: to help my students see that although the Greek myths are old, their strength continues to be timeless because each generation, each new reader, makes them new and fresh for themselves.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Read stories about Perseus & Medusa and the labors of Hercules; Daedalus & Icarus; Caesar's *Commentary on the Gallic War*
- Translate the Latin versions of the Perseus and Hercules stories in Francis Ritchie's *Fabulae Faciles* (Easy Stories) into English
- Translate selections from Caesar's *de Bello Gallico* and Ovid's version of Daedalus & Icarus from the original Latin into English
- Analyze the characters of Perseus and Hercules, as told by Ritchie. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.3
- Support their observations with specific textual evidence about key ideas and details. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1
- Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.6
- Use Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to examine visual images
- Analyze the representation of a subject or a key scene in two different artistic mediums, including what is emphasized or absent in each treatment. CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.7
- Re-tell one aspect of the myth, in their own original work

Assignments / Learning Activities

The required Latin II curriculum at Boston Latin Academy has students read and translate the story of Perseus from Ritchie's *Fabulae Faciles* (Easy Stories). Francis Ritchie first published his *Fabulae Faciles: A First Latin Reader* in 1884. Ritchie retells the Greek stories of Perseus, Hercules, and Odysseus in simple Latin. Ritchie's text present the stories in a way that is indicative of his own late 19th century bias. At that time in England and the United States, Latin was required for college-bound boys, and these boys were Ritchie's target audience. Ritchie's stories of male heroes are told in a simplistic, uncritical way. In the Perseus story, for example, the king Polydectes tells Perseus to cut off Medusa's head. So, Perseus goes on his quest and does the king's bidding. Medusa is so ugly that the mere glimpse of her turns men into stone. But the gods favor Perseus, and they help him to slay the beast. Suffice it to say that in the multicultural mixed-gender class of Boston Latin Academy in 2019, students are ready to bring a much more critical eye to these versions of the stories.

After reading and translating the Latin version of Perseus, I wanted students to see different versions of the Perseus story. Specifically, I wanted to flesh out the character of Medusa. In Ritchie's telling, she is a flat character, simply a monster that needs to be killed. But there are many more versions of Medusa by many different artists, especially in visual media. Consequently, I assembled an image set that shows Medusa as portrayed by three different artists.

In order to analyze the visual images, I applied a technique called Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), as developed by Housen and Yenawine and expanded by the Thinking Through Art program at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. VTS engages students in focused discussion of one artwork at a time, by asking the students to answer three deceptively simple questions:

1. What's going on in this picture?
2. What do you see that makes you say that?
3. What more can we find?

My students became familiar with the VTS protocol in a number of different discussions of visual art. So they were well prepared to examine different versions of Medusa in pictures. (Please see image set.)

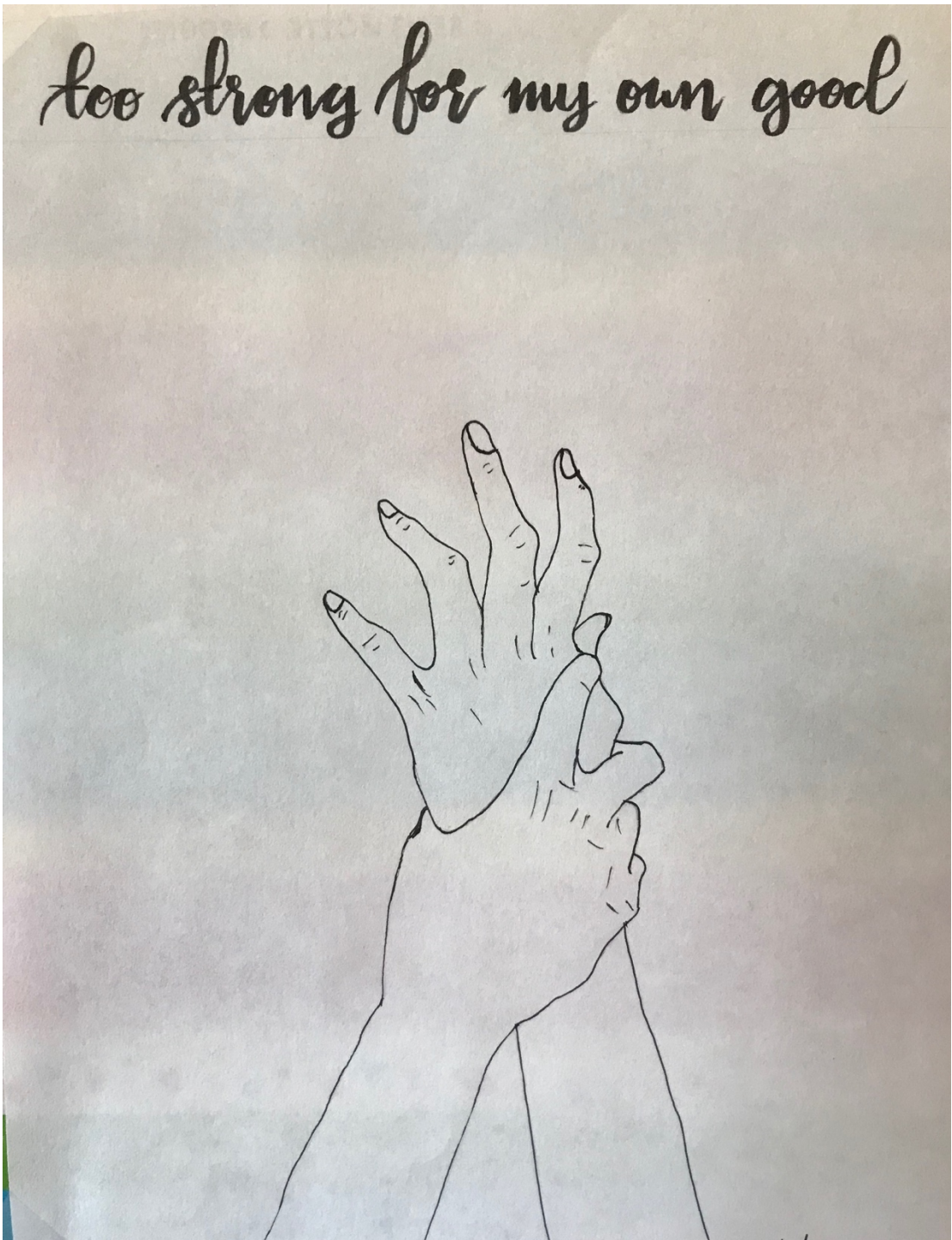
Cellini's sculpture depicts Perseus in triumph over Medusa, holding her severed head. The students noticed details from the Latin text in the image, including the helmet Perseus received from Mercury. The second image (by Caravaggio) shows only the decapitated head of Medusa. After some initial gasps, students explored the ambiguity of her facial expression. Is she in shock? Is she angry? Is she even ugly? Emily noticed that Perseus wasn't shown, but that this must have happened the moment after he decapitated her, since there is blood shown gushing out of her neck. This led to Heschel commenting that the round shape of the painting was like Perseus's round shield. Students were making connections between the written Latin text and the visual text of the painting. They were exploring the idea of artistic choice in focusing on one part of a story, while leaving another part only hinted at—or left out entirely. The third image (Versace logo) was met with recognition. But most students hadn't realized the connection to the Medusa story. A few comments discussed how she is not beautiful, before she was cursed by Athena (not something all students had read, but this student brought in some background knowledge of the myth). This led to one boy asking, "Wait. So Medusa wasn't ugly?" I could have left it there. This comment by itself indicates how we all can accept a story as told without thinking about its implicit bias, without realizing that the same story could have been told in a different way, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie reminds us in her 2009 TED talk, "The danger of a single story." And it was this one boy's comment that led to a project in which students were invited to delve more deeply into the bias in the traditional telling of a Greek myth, and to re-tell that myth from a different perspective.

In the second half of the school year, the Latin II curriculum continues into reading the “authentic” Latin of Caesar and Ovid. By “authentic Latin,” we mean Latin that was written by native speakers of Latin for native speakers of Latin, as opposed to the textbook Latin of a graded reader like Ritchie’s. Yet Caesar and Ovid write for a 1st century BC audience that is quite different from the modern 21st century American culture of my students. When we read Caesar today, we often find problematic his justification for conquering Gaul. We question how much of Caesar’s report is accurate history, and how much is self-aggrandizing propaganda. In a way, we can use the same critical eye that we bring to ancient myth to examine political rhetoric, both ancient and modern.

For their culminating project called “Flip the Myth,” students were asked to tell the same story in two different ways. First, they were to tell a Greek myth in a traditional way, citing a Classical source. Second, they were asked to re-examine that same story from a different point of view. Class activities leading up to this project included discussions of whose perspective the traditional story is told from. We had some short explorations on retelling the story from the perspective of one of the minor characters, or from the perspective of re-claiming the villain. What if Medusa were telling her own story? What if Hercules were alive today? What if Vercingetorix had defeated Julius Caesar at the siege of Alesia? We returned to the textbook myths of Hercules, Perseus, and Medusa. We re-examined Ovid’s version of Daedalus & Icarus. We even looked at Caesar’s description of the war in Gaul as his own myth-making, considering how one person’s news story could be another person’s propaganda.

Our students are so creative, and when provided with the chance to dip into the deep well of mythology from a new and fresh perspective, they produce work which is astonishing. I wanted to include one exemplar. Lisa re-examined Hercules as being a little bit like all of us, with our strengths sometimes becoming our weakness.

Too strong for my own good



Lisa's Hercules project, page 1

Hercules, a demigod, half human, half god, the STRONGEST of them all, is looked up to by many to this day but maybe he is too strong for his own good. He may have slain the Nemean Lion and the Hydra. He captured the Golden Hind of Artemi, and the Erymanthian Boar, cleaned the Augean stables in a single day, slain the Stympthalian Birds, captured the Cretan Bull, stole the Mares of Diomede, obtained the girdle of Hippolyta (Queen Of The Amazon) and obtained the cattle of the monster Geryon, stole the apples of the Hesperides Capture and to top it all off, he brought back Cerberus. But besides all of this, he has killed innocent people, people who were important to him. He killed his own two children with his own, bare hands. He also killed his own wife too, all because of Hera, goddess of birth.

She hated Hercules with a passion because her husband, Zeus, impregnated a mortal woman who later gave birth to Hercules. But if he did not have that strength he would never have killed his teacher and his own family. Was Hercules's strength a gift or a curse?

Materials

- Latin text from Ritchie's *Fabulae Faciles*. Available online at: <https://geoffreysteadman.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/ritchie-10mar17.pdf>
- Freed ExL image set - "Medusa in Art" image set of different depictions of Medusa in visual art
- Freed ExL project assignment - term 4 - "flip the myth"
- BLA school-wide rubrics

Assessments

Students were assessed using BLA's school-wide rubrics. This project was graded using both the Critical Thinking Rubric and the Written Communication Rubric.

References

Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (2018)

The Homer Multitext Project “As many Homers as you please”

<http://www.homermultitext.org/>

Arendt, Hannah (1958). *The Human Condition*.

Arendt calls the human capacity for beginnings *natality*. “It is in the nature of a beginning,”

Arendt (1958) writes in *The Human Condition*, “that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before” (pp. 177-178).

Higgins, Chris (2010) “Working with Youth: In Search of the Natalty of the Teacher,” *Journal of Educational Controversy*: Vol. 5 : No. 1 , Article 15.

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Miller, Madeline (2018). *Circe*.

Ritchie’s *Fabulae Faciles: A First Latin Reader*

This Latin text was first published by Ritchie in 1884 in a volume called *Fabulae Faciles: A First Latin Reader*. In 1903, John Kirtland published a revised edition entitled *Ritchie’s Fabulae Faciles: A First Latin Reader*.

Available online at:

<https://geoffreysteadman.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/ritchie-10mar17.pdf>

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)

<https://vtshome.org/about/>

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum <https://www.gardnermuseum.org/>

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