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Marketing the Classics to Today's Students

Cover Page Footnote

This article is based on a lecture delivered at the The Greeks Institute, a series of lectures presented to secondary school teachers in the Bridgeport Public Schools during the spring of 1989. Co-sponsored by the Connecticut Humanities Council, Sacred Heart University, and the Bridgeport Public Schools, the purpose of the institute has been to provide teachers with an interdisciplinary exploration of classical Greece for the purposes of professional enrichment and curriculum development.

DALE P. WOODIEL

Marketing the Classics to Today's Students

Jacques Barzun, noted Columbia University historian and author of *Teacher in America*, commented in a recent address on the use of classics today. "Obviously," said Barzun, "the first service that a classic does is to connect the past with the present by stirring up feelings akin to those that once moved human beings — people who were in part very much like ourselves and in part very unlike."¹ He went on to suggest that studying the classics often ends up "mere bookishness," lacking in "imagination," which he defined as "making a successful effort to reconstruct from words on a page what past lives, circumstances, and feelings were like."²

Two recent experiences have reinforced for me the truth of Barzun's observations. The discovery of some old family papers and a trip to the movies have provided evidence of the cherished place the study of the classics once held in the lives of young learners in America and, more important, the power which the classics still maintain even in a world dominated by visual communication media rather than "words on a page."

When we introduce the classics to students in our high schools today we are destined for less success than that attained by television programs and films simply because we are restricted to the use of the written word, a far less impressive medium for communicating with today's youth than the visual image. It is instructive, however, to remember that it was not always so. There was a world before film, a world in which love and respect for the written classics was central to a young person's education. Some nineteenth-century correspondence among my wife's family papers brought this fact home to me.

In a letter dated May 13, 1836, a middle-aged Alfred Hennen writes to his teen-aged daughter Ann Marie regarding the attention she must pay to her studies:-

My dear Child,

I am very happy to learn that you are going on diligently with your studies — getting 100 lines of

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Virgil at a lesson — giving no trouble to anyone. I hope you will continue to press on with all the ardor in your power. Recall your Latin and Greek as fast as possible and advance, steadily and resolutely, in your knowledge of them both. I wish you to receive as good an education as any young lady in the United States. Remember that Miss Skinner told you at New Haven, last fall, that you might soon read Greek with as much facility as she, then, did. Determine to do so, and I know you can. You have such an excellent instructor in Mr. Johnson. His recitations will be very instructive to you.³

Her father goes on to advise that in her “leisure hours” she could read French. Although he recommends first “two sacred tragedies of Racine,” he allows eventually that “in the heat of the day,” when she is fatigued, she might divert herself “with a few pages of *Gil Blas*.” He concludes with the admonishment, of course, to “rise early” and “study your Bible” in order to “become wise unto Salvation.”

Clearly the last 150 years have brought some changes, not only in the conventional relationship between fathers and daughters and the degree of respect held by both for their teachers, but also in the role of the classics and the value placed on learning in the lives of young people.

However, the importance of the classics evident in those days of the last century may not be totally lost to today's teachers and students. Perhaps it is only the approach to the classics, not the classics themselves, which requires attention. This point came to me at a recent viewing of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, in a theater filled with “children of all ages.” It occurred to me how perceptive film artists such as Steven Spielberg and George Lukas are with respect to the power of the archetypal themes evidenced in the classics. The subject of *The Last Crusade* is the search for the Holy Grail, and as was the case following *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, some educating of an interested but ignorant viewing public has been necessary. Just as news articles appeared informing the public about the Ark of the Covenant after *Raiders*, a rash of media bits has recently appeared informing viewers about the Grail legend. A cartoon version of *Le Morte D'Arthur* is no doubt being planned!

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Yet, when one's cynical impulses are overridden, it is clear that an archetypal theme such as the heroic quest — a theme early evident in Greek classical literature in myths such as that of Jason and the Golden Fleece — has tremendous appeal for today's mass audience, if properly marketed.

It is doubtful that it occurred to young Anna Marie Hennen to question the value of her father's recommendations or those of Mr. Johnson, her teacher. In fact, the written word was sacred in the America of 1836 — in New Orleans, where Alfred Hennen wrote from, as well as in the area surrounding Boston and Concord, Massachusetts, where Ralph Waldo Emerson was about 33 at the time and where a literary renaissance was germinating. Certainly Emerson — or even his protege Thoreau — could not have envisioned the decline of the written word 150 years down the road. As the twentieth century wanes, we as teachers continue to be dragged slowly into an expanding arena where the written word is consistently overshadowed, if not obliterated, by television and film.

The current success of Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth* provides an excellent example of the dynamics in this arena of contemporary communication. Although Campbell had been a renowned teacher and authority on mythology for many years, his numerous works could hardly be said to have been popular successes. However, shortly before Campbell's death the veteran television journalist Bill Moyers conducted a series of interviews with him, on subjects ranging from the nature of myth to conceptions of God, which were eventually broadcast on the public television network. The interviews, illustrated by both films and photographs, were an immediate success, attracting an estimated 2.5 million viewers each week for the six episodes.⁴ At this writing, a book based on the series remains on the *New York Times* best-seller list for its fifty-fifth week (at \$19.95). Through the power of television, mythology is suddenly *in*.

The eventual extent of the impact of the Campbell-Moyers series is difficult to envision, but what is clearly illustrated by its success is the power of film and television to stimulate in its audience an interest in the written word. The influence of Campbell's constant references during the interview to the Bible or to Homer or Dante or *The Upanishads* or *Bhagavad-Gita* is apparent at this moment through the presence of these texts on the shelves of bookstores — even

department stores and supermarkets — all over America.⁵

Now, I am not suggesting that the classics can be effectively taught only through the visual media. No. What I am emphasizing is the need to recognize the power of the visual media vis-a-vis the written word that is evident in the example of *The Power of Myth*. It is clear from this example that serious ideas which have forever connected individuals with their human heritage have not lost their powerful significance. When exposed to these ideas — today more likely through television than through books — even ordinary people respond and are, ironically perhaps, led back to the printed word from which, as Barzun put it, past lives and feelings can be reconstructed.

What do these realizations tell us about marketing the classics in today's classrooms? Of course, video versions of such programs as *The Power of Myth* can serve as stimuli for a variety of instructional ventures.⁶ However, leading students back to the printed page by means of a videotape is not in itself a successful ploy, because most high-school students, like (one suspects) most of today's adults, find the classics only modestly fathomable. Although excellent English translations are available, the form as well as the language of the classics frequently present problems for today's readers.

Herein lies the crux of our marketing dilemma. Because of a consistent decline in reading skills, students need to be *taught* to read the classics just as they need to be taught to read all serious literature. This calls for new reading, or marketing, strategies. Actually, it might be more accurate to call these "creative" or "imaginative" reading strategies, since many of these techniques are hardly new. They do, however, call for a new look at what we are trying to achieve when we ask students to read — when we so virtuously present them with the *Oresteia* or the *Iliad* or the *Crito*.

These new approaches to teaching reading, providing new direction along with a convincing rationale, have been discussed by Dennie Wolf in *Reading Reconsidered*, a stimulating and informative reassessment of the issue published this year by the College Board.⁷ Her extensive interviews with teachers and students reveal a variety of successful techniques for extending the teaching of reading beyond the mere search for facts or the "right answers." Instead, there is a need to "read resonantly," in Wolf's terms, relating and connecting the experiences of the work considered with those of all

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other works and all other experiences of which the student is aware. Further, asserts Wolf, these strategies have been made to work successfully for all students, not just the elite.⁸

The value of marketing the classics was underscored some 30 years ago by the noted classical scholar Edith Hamilton in her introduction to *The Echo of Greece*, which concluded with these words:

Fundamental to everything the Greeks achieved was their conviction that good for humanity was possible only if men were free, body, mind, and spirit, and if each man limited his own freedom. A good state or work of art or piece of thinking was possible only through the self-mastery of the free individual, self-government.⁹

The essence of this statement can be found at the core of any thoughtfully prepared philosophy of instruction. Such a policy statement may be collecting dust on a shelf in our schools somewhere today; yet when have such issues as personal freedom and the need for self-mastery been more relevant?

With the above comments in mind, it is clear that the field is wide open for the classics in our schools today. Their power and their relevance is obvious. And for those teachers with the courage to venture forth, there are aesthetic fortunes to be acquired in the process, for them as well as for their students.

Notes

¹Jacques Barzun, "Of What Uses are the Classics Today?," *Perspective*, 1, No. 2 (1988).

²Barzun, p. 11.

³Carter Family Papers (private collection).

⁴It should be noted that the publication phenomenon resulting from the *Power of Myth* series had its forerunners in the sixties in Kenneth Clark's *Civilization* and in the seventies in Jacob Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man*, both of which were popular in book form but had been released first on film via television. Although the films are rarely programmed today, the printed

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versions remain standard works in America's libraries and schools.

⁵Joseph Campbell died in 1988 at the age of 83 before either the series or the paperback was released. *Newsweek* pointed out in a feature article (November 14, 1988) the mythic appropriateness of Campbell's becoming a legend after his death: "The hero is dead, but his message lives on" (p. 60). How characteristic of the classic hero!

⁶Over 50,000 copies of *The Power of Myth* videocassettes were released with the series and were directed initially at educational institutions.

⁷Dennie Palmer Wolf, *Reading Reconsidered* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 1988). Wolf, a Research Associate for Project Zero at the Harvard School of Education, conducted research that was extensive and significant, and her book is filled with quotations from creative teachers and involved students.

⁸Wolf, p. 3.

⁹Edith Hamilton, *The Echo of Greece* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1957), p. 12.