Survey on Grantee Publications

The Teagle Foundation's commitment to promoting and strengthening liberal education grounds all of our grantmaking. Our programs seek to generate new knowledge on issues of importance to higher education, and have a specific focus on improving undergraduate student learning in the liberal arts and sciences. We are further committed to widely disseminating this knowledge which we hope will be useful to faculty and institutions beyond those initially funded. Towards this end, we hope that you will take the time to answer the following questions. Please email your responses to Cheryl Ching at cdching@teaglefoundation.org or send them by regular mail to The Teagle Foundation, 10 Rockefeller Plaza, Room 920, New York, NY 10020. Your replies will be very helpful to us.

Publication: _______________________________________________________________________

- What was your principal “take away” from this work?

- Has the work in any way affected your thinking, practice, or planning? If so, how?

- Are the ideas and findings of this work applicable on your campus? If so, which ones? Have you—or do you plan to—use them in any way?

- Do you have any suggestions for the Foundation on how we can further the dissemination effort of publications like this one?

Name (optional): ____________________________ Date: ____________________________

Affiliation (optional): ____________________________
Report on

Teagle Forum in Liberal Education

“Classical Antiquity and American Popular Culture”

Northwestern University

March 3, 2006

Prepared by

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and

Reginald Gibbons

September, 2006
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Executive Summary

Our purpose in convening a Teagle Forum in Liberal Education was to explore the presence of classical antiquity in American popular culture and the possibility that its examination could suggest potential new directions for enlivening student interest in liberal arts modes of inquiry and argumentation. We commissioned two distinguished thinkers, Danielle Allen and Daniel Mendelsohn, to present papers at a public forum, and invited members of the faculties of several liberal arts colleges to travel to Evanston to attend the forum and participate in small discussion sessions. The papers, together with a response by Kirk Ormand, are collected here as an invitation to others to undertake further discussion and experimentation. The Forum is available as a podcast on the Teagle Foundation web site.

Our findings include strong arguments for the usefulness of examining the presence of classical antiquity in popular media to occasion critical thinking about contemporary society. The papers provide examples of approaching the relationship between popular media and classical sources as one of reciprocal, provocative tension, instead of influence, legacy or transmission. Our discussions stressed the potential for such studies to have broad, multidisciplinary impact on curriculum development and student interest in humanistic inquiry, as well as on criticism and scholarly research.

Follow-up at Northwestern includes the development of a new undergraduate course on Classical Antiquity and American Popular Culture that is team-taught by members of the classics faculty, Northwestern faculty affiliates of our interdisciplinary Classical Traditions Initiative and visiting speakers. The course will be taught for the second time in spring, 2007. We are encouraging continued discussion by initiating an annual series of events (faculty and student workshops, public lectures and visiting speakers) sponsored by our Classical Traditions Initiative on a text or image of antiquity that is the subject of current attention in the arts, politics or other areas. In 2006/07 we will examine Aeschylus’ Persians and the remarkable wave of recent interest in this text in performance and criticism.
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Introductory Comments

American popular culture is especially receptive to echoes of classical Greece and Rome, and also, Greece and Rome are especially susceptible to being made into echo chambers for American culture and politics. Our opportunity as teachers within a liberal arts context is to use this mutual susceptibility to encourage in undergraduates an interpretive practice rather than, or at least in addition to, an impulse to consume. While the pleasures and obsessions of consumption appeal to us nearly everywhere in American culture, the pleasures and usefulness of interpretation are hard to learn outside a classroom--hence our responsibility as teachers. And meanwhile, one of the most salient characteristics of ancient Greece--the centrality of the tragic--seems scarcely to exist in American culture, as Daniel Mendelsohn trenchantly notes in his paper; and indeed, the tragic (as opposed to sorrowful) may well be an idea that American popular and political culture very thoroughly exclude. Likewise, the many historical and political dimensions of empire first instanced by Rome seem nearly excluded, except in passing mention or in spectacular simplification, in American public discourse or popular culture.

The prominence of icons and ideas from classical antiquity in American culture, high and low, from the eighteenth century to the present, is well known; our Forum set out to inquire whether such tokens of the classical heritage in American popular culture, especially in film and drama, might presage "another neo-classical cultural moment," as Allen called it.

Traditions of critical thinking, skepticism, well articulated argument, and close reading are available to us in the classroom, as they are not available in popular culture itself, as tools for thinking about ourselves and our popular culture; at the same time,
classical antiquity seems newly available to us as an object of study that provides us with contrasts and ideas of special relevance to American culture. Why not use the liberal arts classroom as the place where such topics, and the difficulties of interpretation, are most rigorously pursued, on the basis of the opportunity given to us by contemporary film and drama based on antiquity? In such a teaching context, as we know, we can study not only how one interprets a "text" from popular culture, but also the problem of understanding ourselves as interpreters in a way that is richly informed by liberal education.

The presence of classical antiquity in American popular culture is at the very least a signal that we who teach have the opportunity to use historical difference and historical error in popular culture to help us show students how to think about what is critically good in a film--in terms of critical categories, we should note, that in fact begin in ancient Greece--and also to inquire with students into why it's worth thinking about something like the movies in terms of the assumptions, attitudes and experience of those who consume it.

As Danielle Allen points out, human and especially intellectual merit cannot be understood without our understanding where we Americans are, historically. Popular movies such as *Gladiator*, *Troy* and *Alexander*, she says, can be seen not only as narratives based on familiar yet exotic locales and characters with historical echoes in our own culture, but also, in a more veiled way, as responses to pressures in our own historical moment on human beings--especially the very students whom we are teaching--as competitors for economic resources and social status, and as consumers of and participants in social fantasies about idealized merit. Drawing on readings of Herodotus and Plato, Allen demonstrates that a critical assessment of utopian and dystopian
elements in both classical antiquity and contemporary American popular culture,
especially film, can help us see the suppressed dimensions of our own culture, such as
race, the idea of meritocracy, and the ambitions and moral dilemmas of citizens of
empires.

We teach students to see how popular culture so often selectively both politicizes
and depoliticizes what it depicts in order to convert suffering to entertainment. And in
fact, in our Teagle Forum, Danielle Allen questioned our wanting to celebrate new
examples of the use of classical antiquity in popular culture if what is happening is that
the tragic is being changed into the pathetic. Daniel Mendelsohn, with refreshing candor
and clarity, also questioned whether such recent use of the classical as cinematic and
theatrical adaptation can be regarded as an uncomplicatedly good thing without
wondering about the cultural and political assumptions underlying such production. With
regard to the recent evidence of a new American fascination with Greece and Rome,
Mendelsohn wondered if, given the cultural usefulness of popular American spectacles of
classical antiquity, in fact there has ever been a particular dearth of film adaptations of
classical themes and materials; he cited movies as old as the 1914 silent film *Spartacus*,
and highlighting a number of films from the 1950s and 1960s. He questioned the
educational value per se of popular film, regarding many of them as costumed pretexts
for the usual fantasies of sex and violence. And for our academic audience, he did not
even need to emphasize that popular movies thrive on providing audiences with the
mistaken impression that attitudes, ideas, experience and behavior in the ancient worlds--
among other exotic locales--were or are the same as ours--but clothed in those togas and
sandals. Mendelsohn's analysis of the recent production, "in its Sondheimian
incarnation," of Frogs at Lincoln Center, in some fundamental ways betrayed the thrust of the original play by seeming to make it as relevant as possible to our own historical and political moment. Mendelsohn commented that this new production of ancient Greek comedy favored "pomp over genuine intellectual engagement... with a call for more heart and less head," thus turning upside down the Greek imperative to deliberate and argue and substituting for it the American imperative not to think but to retreat into feelings of patriotism. In analyzing a recent Broadway production of Medea, Mendelsohn found a similar inversion--American attitudes even in the most well-intentioned actors and directors turning the difficult unresolvable sorts of philosophical and political conflict of Greek tragedy into the acting out of the American assumption that the ultimate reality of conflict is (only) psychological.

In responding to Allen and Mendelsohn, Kirk Ormand judges that the benefit of undergraduate education in classics is in using the widespread presence in American culture of classical materials in order to teach close attention to aesthetics, political assumptions, and the misuse of history. The misuse of classical history would of course be especially galling to a conscientious classicist, so Ormand joins Allen and Mendelsohn in pointing out the flaws of popular films, but adds his own critique of contemporary political opinion that misrepresents the ancient world for reasons of party politics.

Stirred by these presentations, one could argue that the enduring value of the classics may be the very opposite of what cultural conservatives claim for them. The complaints we used to hear, not so long ago, about the opening of the canon of western literature in such a way that texts like Greek tragedy fall out of circulation, to be replaced,
for instance, by contemporary novels, never seemed to take into account that those
tragedies do not always reinforce the vague and politically convenient values of family,
patriotism, and religious orthodoxy, that the complainers want them to reinforce. Above
and beyond the remarkable aesthetic, philosophical and narrative richness of so many
works of classical antiquity, and their irreplaceable historical importance, such texts
belong in a liberal education precisely because they so often profoundly subvert any easy
acceptance of an uncritical allegiance to any social or religious structure or ideal.

Thus the recent American fascination with some of the outward trappings of
antiquity—not only in spectacular cinematic war epics but also in small-scale dramas of
intense conflict between characters—give us ample opportunity to teach courses that
include not only Euripides but also Oliver Stone for the sake of helping students
understand how interpretation can draw from its objects of study the stuff of thought that
is critical in exciting ways.

Our experience as teachers often shows us the value of bringing into question not
the easy target of the historical inaccuracy of a present film but rather our own
assumptions about what we and our students may mistakenly expect the remote past to
have been. Indeed, learning from one's students so often comes from the way our own
attitudes and assumptions are revealed by our work of analysis and critique with them.

It is a great injustice merely to quote a few brief passages and to paraphrase from
Allen's and Mendelsohn's richly thoughtful papers and Ormand’s trenchant response. We
do so here only for the sake of introducing our project. The goal of our Forum has been
to invite us all as teachers to return to our thinking about the confluence of classical
antiquity—its history, its dramatic characters, its poetry and mythology— and American
culture, both high and pop, with renewed energy for helping our students to think. One might well argue that one of the best reasons for the study of classical antiquity is in intellectual self-defense.
Living in the Movies
and Learning in College:
On Competition, Meritocracy, and History

Danielle Allen
I. Neo Neo-Classicism and Politics

Are we in a neo neo-classical cultural moment? We can certainly spot a surge of interest in things Greek and Roman. From the onset of the Iraq war in spring 2003 to summer 2005, I counted 18 op eds in the Chicago Tribune, New York Times, and Los Angeles Times that invoked Thucydides, the Roman empire, or some other fragment of ancient history to talk politics. Not a deluge, but not a normal level either. More dramatic, of course, are the films. 2004 on its own saw the release of Troy, starring mega-star Brad Pitt, and Alexander, starring star-enough Colin Farrell, as well as the postponement of the release of a second Alexander film starring Leonardo di Caprio and Nicole Kidman. The surest sign of all of change? Enrollments in ancient Greek at the University of Chicago surged 164% between September 11, 2001, and June 1, 2006.

Perhaps that does look like a moment, sparked by the September 11th terror attacks and the war in Iraq. We might therefore offer a political explanation of the increased interest. Perhaps for those who have not lived out a war on their own front stoop, the onset of war brings curiosity, a desire to know more about an enterprise that is in all senses foreign to us. Unless we choose to do what some young people do and enlist, become mercenaries, or set off on unsanctioned humanitarian ventures into war zones, we can reach only for the single source of knowledge available to us: history. Once we ask history to tell us what it knows about war, we are lead inexorably to famous books about the history of war. Inexperience and curiosity lead to antiquity. We might try that explanation for a so-called neo neo-classical moment.

Or we might try a different but still political explanation that goes like this. When this country’s revolutionary generation developed the genetic code for their new regime,
they sowed at its heart a vast political ambition, in particular to found a political order that might endure for centuries and that might also secure, beyond its inevitable demise, endless fame. Every dollar bill reminds us that these United States were founded to be a novus ordo seclorum. This original ambition insistently, if only subterraneanly, challenges citizens to try to understand how to make things last for centuries. How can citizens learn how to do this? Only by studying other innovative, political orders that have endured, if not for millennia on the face of the earth, at least for millennia in cultural memory. If the collective American ambition to make a new order for the ages runs for periods below the surface, it has now burst forth hot and unmistakable. The venture in Iraq is certainly meant to be experienced as a reliving of, a renewing of, our own original moment of undertaking to plant on the globe a purely political novus ordo seclorum. Many of George W. Bush’s speeches would serve as an example; I draw only from the 2006 State of the Union: “Abroad, our nation is committed to an historic, long-term goal -- we seek the end of tyranny in our world. . . . Once again, we accept the call of history to deliver the oppressed and move this world toward peace.” For our foray into Iraq, we have taken our own mythical novelty as a guide and our aspiration to longevity as the aim. With such goals directly in front of our eyes, we citizens will surely grow curious about how such country-making as wins eternal fame is done. Where else to look than Rome, or Greece. History tells us how to do it; epic movies tell us it can be done. “What we do in life echoes in eternity,” proclaims Maximus, the protagonist of Gladiator (aka Russell Crowe), on a Roman battlefield represented at the start of the film.

Here is where a twist comes in. Perhaps our political ambition for eternal fame drives us to classical history, but when our travel there is through the movies, the movies
divert us from a quest for eternity to the pursuit of global fame. There is a significant paradox in how the U.S. political ambition has presented itself over time. Despite our lofty collective ambition to secure a *novus ordo seclorum*, Americans are famously rootless, a “hotel civilization,” as Henry James put it. How often do we build anything that’s meant to last for more than 30 years? Built to last are the aristocratic countries of Europe--Britain and France, for instance. A basic experience of the American abroad is wonder at the durability of European cityscapes and even of European villages, so long as they have escaped the bombs. I can’t explain our rootlessness in full, but I suspect that it relates to enterprise and capitalism. Our founders aspired to conquer time; our movie stars aspire to conquer space, and this is because the audience’s pocketbooks matter only in the present, that is, while those who make movies are alive to enjoy their financial profits; what counts is how many fans are attracted to any given film in the here and now. Our star culture, which makes Brad Pitt, not only more of a household name around the entire globe than Achilles, but also a world-wide object of mimesis, should therefore be recognized as a tragicomic redirection into spatial terms of what was originally a temporal goal for the *novus ordo seclorum*. Indeed, *Gladiator’s* stunning use of a simulated arena full of the indistinguishable faces of cheering fans that the camera surveys by circling round and round the arena conveys precisely this spatial and global orientation to fame; the contrasting trope from ancient epic would be the visits to the underworld by Odysseus (*Odyssey* Book 11) and Aeneas (*Aeneid* Book 6) where they recognize heroes of an earlier day and, in so doing, anticipate their own recognizability to the future.
Pursuit of fame across the ages and its pursuit across the continents are not wholly separate types of ambition. Fame’s bright and long burning requires that the memories of many people be activated to recall glorious deeds. As the light of fame fades out, time and space darken simultaneously. The ambition for an eternal reputation will inspire pursuit of a global reputation; the only question is why we seem to have tipped so far toward desiring the latter as we have. Warhol’s famous “15 minutes” has been the durable articulation of the reorientation from an ambition to impact time to an ambition to have an effect across space; we don’t care how long fame lasts—15 minutes is enough—as long as it is global. The epic movies of the last few years might be seen as moments where the post-Warholian individual fantasy of global fame and the original collective fantasy of eternal fame merge fully (the most recent epics would, then, stand in contrast to the epics of the 50s and early 60s which did not achieve the same level of global circulation). In movies like *Troy* Greece’s eternal fame and Brad Pitt’s global fame become the same kind of thing, and since Brad Pitt’s fame is the epitome of the present U.S. ideal of fame, Greece’s fame is our fame, but, represented by Brad Pitt, it has to be understood as influence over space. If I knew more about psychoanalysis, I might be able to say something about the consequences for individual and polity of this flowing together of these twin fantasies. I do know enough about ritual, however, to propose that the repetition in the movies of our new epic themes is at least initiating a generation of young people into a definite understanding of ambition. This, then, would be the second political account of the recent surge of interest in classics: it stems, we might say, from the recent actualization, thanks to the Iraq war, of our sometimes dormant ambition to
make a *novus ordo seclorum*, and converts this ambition into its fraternal but less worthy twin ambition to make a *novus ordo mundi*.

To offer either of these two political explanations for this neo neo-classicizing moment would, however, obscure the fact that I have created a cultural moment through my narration of the facts. Enrollments in Greek at the U of C went up 164% between 2001 and 2006, but the growth started before that. *Troy*, *Alexander 1*, and *Alexander 2*, were all birthed (or not) in the same post-2001, post-Iraq year, but *Gladiator* came out in 2000 and deploys the same rhetoric as the later films. “A cultural moment” is always the product of a historiography that marks off eras. Remember that not everyone agreed with Thucydides that there was one “The Peloponnesian War.” In the *Menexenus*, for instance, Plato has Socrates treat the events narrated by Thucydides as amounting to two wars. The phrase, “cultural moment,” also demands that its user be quite clear about what she thinks that culture is, how it changes, and how best to scrutinize those changes. That would entail a lengthy discussion for which I do not here have space. Moreover, I am not adequately equipped as an American historian to justify the claim that any given period of years constitutes a cultural moment. I will therefore abandon the idea that we are in a definite cultural moment, and focus instead on the more limited claim that for the last few years, including for the years preceding September 11th, 2001, and the Iraq war, the literary and historical materials of antiquity have had increasing resonance for U.S. citizens, sufficient to support their deployment for substantial profit in the arena of pop culture. Importantly, since *Gladiator* came out in 2000, this resonance does not derive, or at least does not entirely derive, from the world-altering political events of the last five years. Another cause must be at work. These movies must tap some collective concern
other than those issuing from international politics. In fact, we must look at these pop
cultural uses of antiquity with extreme care, because the political events of the last five
years may actually have distorted or clouded our view of why antiquity is now appealing.
The easy political answers are too easy. If we wish to know what is really behind the
renewed interest in antiquity, we should pay careful attention to Gladiator in particular,
precisely because it precedes recent political events. I now turn now, and for the rest of
this essay, to that film.

II. Identifying Gladiator’s Genre

First, let’s remind ourselves of the plot of Gladiator. As the DVD box puts it,
quoting the film’s villain Commodus, the movie tells the tale of Maximus: “The general
who became a slave. The slave who became a gladiator. The gladiator who defied an
empire.” A few more details suffice to flesh this out. As a leading Roman general,
Maximus fights for Marcus Aurelius, defeating the “last barbarian tribe” in Germania.
Marcus Aurelius asks Maximus to serve as his true son and succeed him as emperor; the
emperor doesn’t deploy the deviousness he ought to in setting up this kind of plot to rob
his blood son, Commodus, of his inheritance and so Aurelius is easily killed by the
corrupt Commodus, who believes that deviousness and the mere capacity to survive are
virtues. After killing his father, Commodus sentences Maximus and his family to death.
In what is early in the film already “yet another” remarkable bout of fighting, Maximus
escapes Commodus’ murderous lackeys but makes it home too late to save beloved wife
and child, whom he has remembered throughout the years of fighting by paying homage
to small figurines that represent them and that, in the film, occupy the same context and
space as figurines of the various pagan gods to which he periodically prays. Defeated in body and mind, Maximus succumbs to his wounds and wakes to find himself a slave about to be trained as a gladiator. A fellow captive, a black African, heals his war wounds, and soon becomes his gladiatorial yoke-mate. And then, forthwith, the troupe makes to Rome, to participate in the extravagant gladiatorial games that Commodus is now sponsoring in order to win and keep the allegiance of the people against a potentially rebellious Senate. After various plot twists and turns, where first Maximus and then Commodus and then Maximus is up, Maximus does finally succeed in killing the emperor and in restoring Rome to the hands of the Senate, only to die himself moments later. Before that concluding moment, in one of the strangest lines of the film, after Commodus has discovered the true identity of the renowned and consistently victorious gladiator called the “Spaniard,” Maximus’ fighting-mate, the black African, says to the mega-star gladiator: “You have a great name. You must kill your name before [the emperor] kills you.” Maximus kills off not his name, but the emperor instead; I will return to the African’s remark, for I think it reveals the central thematic dynamic of the film. Before we get to the exegesis, however, let’s first ascertain in general terms what sort of imaginative exercise the film is, what its genre is.

The director, Ridley Scott, also directed Alien (1979) and Bladerunner (1982). A maker, then, of futuristic dystopias/utopias turns to a historical dystopia/utopia to engage his millennial audience.¹ I call Gladiator a “dystopia/utopia” and neither a “dystopia” nor a “utopia” because it relentlessly portrays Commodus and Rome as corrupt and in need of

¹ Scott’s list of credits also includes two other historical drama, Kingdom of Heaven (2005) about the Crusades and 1492 (1992) about Christopher Columbus, as well as Black Hawk Down (2001), Matchstick Men (2003), Hannibal (2001), Thelma and Louise (1991), and Black Rain (1989).
overturning, but then also portrays that moment of overturning.² We conclude with a utopian dawning; Maximus’ character, understood in the ancient sense as a source of meaningful action in the world, is the utopian alternative to the dystopic city. To gain full purchase on antiquity’s appeal, we have to open a broader question about how the genres of futuristic utopia and of historical drama differently engage an audience’s imagination. All drama takes us outside ourselves, but futuristic utopias and historical dramas do that in the particular way of telling us insistently that, for so long as we are in the drama, we are outside of ourselves. To some extent, they do so in the same way. In the context of U.S. literary and filmic production, utopias that cast us back to the antique past and also those that project us forward to a distant future transport us to pre- and post-racialized landscapes and also to pre- and post- monotheistic worlds; such contexts provide valuable opportunities to portray stark conflicts without triggering concerns about political correctness.³ They are therefore a deeply necessary part of our creative repertoire.

Curiously enough, the 18 op-ed pieces that have drawn on ancient history to comment on the Iraqi war split roughly 50-50 for and against the war. This in itself is good evidence for the ways in which antiquity manages to escape contemporary politics. Ancient history can’t be for or against anything we’re doing now.

Yet while there are similarities between the fraternal genres of futuristic utopia and historical drama, a few basic points must also be made about their different conceptual potentialities. None of the concrete stuff of the future yet exists; therefore,

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³ J. Sadashige, in “Review of *Gladiator,*” (*The American Historical Review*, Vol. 105, No. 4, Oct. 2000, pp. 1437-1438) offers a different but complementary reading of the issue of race in *Gladiator,* writing, “The image of a multicultural Rome reflects, at one level, our contemporary investment in diversity. . . . Maximus and his diverse band (recalling the crew of *Star Trek*) prove once again that concerted difference is always the best strategy” (p. 1438).
futuristic utopias and dystopias, to the extent that they make a claim (even if only hypothetical) about what might exist in the future, are inevitably wholly conceptual, artifacts of the mind that is developing the vision of the future. Putting to one side the domain of prophecy, I would argue that human beings can make that future only out of what has already existed or already been imagined, and also only out of what they already know, so even the most creative futuristic dystopias and utopias can’t do anything more than invert, negate, or reorganize what is already thought. Even the best futuristic movies and books are composed entirely of recognizable elements of contemporary life. Therefore, in futuristic utopias and dystopias the moral of the story is always very clear, for the story has been organized, in the first place, by the moral, with nothing accidental to get in the way.

In contrast, historical dramas attempt to tell a story through material that has been organized to some degree outside the sphere of agency of the author. The concrete material that makes the world of the historical drama is not the invention of the author, not the product of his mind, regardless of how familiar the objects that fill the world of the historical era have become to the utopian writer or director through education and cultural transmission. There may well be a moral to the story, as told by the writer of a utopian or dystopian historical drama, but that moral will catch and snag here and there on worldly flotsam and jetsam that is beyond the full ken of the maker of the utopian or dystopic scene.

A good example of the distinction I mean to establish between utopian imaginings that cast themselves into the future and those that project themselves into the past can be
found in the difference between Plato and Herodotus. If students, even relatively young ones, have enough time and guidance, they can easily enjoy the capaciousness and seeming bagginess of Herodotus’ tale, and they enjoy it because with every turn of the page they encounter something that never in their wildest imaginings could they have imagined. My favorite such example is perhaps the passage where Herodotus describes the city built by Deioces:

Once power was in his hands, Deioces insisted that the Medes build a single city and maintain this one place, which involved caring less for their other communities. The Medes obeyed him in this too; they built the place which is now known as Ecbatana—a huge, impregnable stronghold consisting of concentric circles of defensive walls. This stronghold is designed so that each successive circle is higher than the one below it just by the height of its bastions. This design is helped, of course, to a certain extent by the fact that the place is on a hill, but it was also deliberately made that way. There are seven circles altogether, and the innermost one contains the royal palace and the treasuries. The largest of the walls is approximately the same size as the wall around Athens. The bastions of the outer five circles have all been painted various colours—first white, then black, red, blue, and orange. But as for the bastions of the last two circles, the first are covered in silver and the second in gold. Why black, blue, red, and orange? Why silver and gold? One encounters concrete details like this and cannot avoid asking, “What did this construction mean to Deioces

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4 This issue, addressed in full, would have to take up the relation of the Republic to the Timaeus, which uses the historical lost Atlantis.
and his countrymen? Why did they do this? What structure of aspirations and fears could explain this sort of concrete making in the world?” History over and over again reminds us that some things are beyond our ken.

Yet Herodotus is no mere assembler of detail. His book is for the most part a collection of dystopias, leavened only by a very subtle account of the development of a new and potentially utopian mode of politics—the Greek mode. Although the balance in the tale between Athens and Sparta is very careful, I think it does tip to Athens in the end; nonetheless each city shares aspects of the utopian developments celebrated by Herodotus. For instance, they are free and so fight for an entirely different rationale and with greater energy than the Persians, and this enables their victory. In some subtle fashion, this Greek freedom is related to an acceptance of the Solonian idea of equality, which points out that no man can be called happy before his death. “Call no man happy before his death.” We don’t often hear Solon’s maxim for the claim about human equality that it is. Once one accepts Solon’s view of the mutability of fortune, one must act with greater hesitation toward and regard for those around one. Solon’s principle, as articulated and explored by Herodotus throughout the Histories, is like Rawls’ veil of ignorance. Both warn, “You never know where you’ll end up . . . . Better tend to the fate of the vulnerable as well as to the fate of the powerful.” Solon’s principle functions like a spine for the history and strung along that spine are one after another example of cities and peoples almost all of whom have failed to achieve a version of politics that might make that Solonian principle of equality real in the world. For this reason, the cities and peoples presented by Herodotus are all dystopic. Thus, in Herodotus’ Histories, one can work out a moral, but if one succeeds in doing so, it is only by concentrating and waving
off all of the distractions presented by historical detail. Because of all the concrete antique realia of the text, there is a very real chance that readers will never get to the moral, and this is, paradoxically, the value of historical dramas, historical writing, and historical utopias.

In Plato’s *Republic*, in contrast, it is impossible to miss the moral (and this is true despite the arguments of Leo Strauss and scholars who have followed his reading of the *Republic* as essentially a joke). The moral goes like this: A futuristic utopia would be a place where you had been able to remove all the kids from their parents and had given them an education that led them to value above all self-control, the submission of passions to reason, and complete devotion of each individual to the single activity for which he or she was fit. Such a world would be utopian because in it conflict would cease, and by virtue of the non-existence or near non-existence of conflict, justice would reign. Justice would reign because each soul had been reined in and justice had been enthroned therein. Whether such a utopia, or a version of it, is possible depends on the question of how radical an impact you think it is possible to have on any given generation through education. I take Plato’s decision to write to be evidence that he believed one could have such a radical impact.

Significantly, Plato’s *Republic* explicitly begins from a place that Herodotus’ *Histories* never seeks to go. Plato begins the discussion about justice with the story of a ruler named Gyges who also appeared at the start of Herodotus’ *Histories*, but Plato inverts Herodotus’ story and uses it to suggest, contra Herodotus, that it is possible to separate questions of morality from the material world of appearances. Before we get too
far into the analysis, we should remind ourselves of the content of the two tales of Gyges that ground Herodotus’ narrative on the one hand, and Plato’s utopia on the other.\(^6\)

Gyges appears, of course, right at the opening of Herodotus’ book. He is a soldier whose king asks him to hide in the king’s bedroom so as to observe and admire, in her nakedness, the king’s beautiful wife. Because his king has asked, Gyges must oblige. He hides, but a mirror in the room shows him to the wife. Upon discovering him in her chamber, the wife challenges Gyges to choose between being denounced and killed as an unlawful intruder and killing her husband and marrying her to avenge her honor. Gyges commits the murder, takes over the throne and, despite his crime, and establishes a stable line of succession. He is presented by Herodotus as a success and, indeed, throughout his Histories Herodotus underscores repeatedly that one can’t fully escape the fact that life soils us. Even the great Themistocles is a liar in Herodotus. Life does not give us easy moral choices in his Histories but typically requires that we decide which of our ideals must be sacrificed at any particular point in time in order that over the long-term we can protect as much of what matters to us as possible.\(^7\)

In Plato’s Republic the tale of Gyges’ ascension to power is essentially the inverse of this. The shepherd Gyges finds on a corpse in a cave a ring that he accidentally realizes has the power to make him invisible. The ring, by hiding him, makes it possible for him to acquire other men’s wives and political power and to do all manner of evil things without anyone ever thinking him anything other than just. With this conceit, Plato takes the idea of a ruler with dirty hands who is a practical success to its farthest logical

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\(^6\) As it happens, the Herodotean version of the Gyges tale is explicitly important to a recent film, The English Patient (1996).

\(^7\) More sophisticated versions of the moral position articulated in Herodotus can be found in B. Williams, Shame and Necessity (University of California Press, 1994) and M. Nussbaum, The Fragility of Goodness (Cambridge University Press, 1986).
extension, and then he asks the question of whether such a ruler will find that his soul is in such a state as for him to be happy. For Plato, this imagined construction, a ring that makes you invisible, is necessary to ask the question of what justice is. Justice, on his view, should have nothing to do with appearance; a ring that makes appearances meaningless is a way of testing the question of whether justice is in itself worth something. Moreover, not even necessity, the need to secure one’s very survival, should trump the pursuit of justice in Socrates’ argument in the Republic. In contrast, Herodotus’ story—with the servile Gyges caught in the mirror—essentially says to the reader, “See, invisibility is impossible! There is no such thing as moral action abstracted from materiality!” And Herodotus’ story also says, “See, necessity is unavoidable! You will be forced to choose whether to harm another or accept harm to yourself.” In Herodotus, the problem of morality is the fact that neither appearances nor necessity can be avoided.

Both Plato’s Republic, the futuristic utopia, and Herodotus’ History, the compendium of historical dramas, claim to lead readers outside of themselves: in Plato, the cave image tells us this; in Herodotus, the final sentence, which describes, a people’s changing their mind about how to live, and choosing a new direction, tells us this. But each text (and the genre it founds⁸) leads readers out, or educates them, very differently. Plato’s introduction of Gyges and his ring at the beginning of the Republic marks the difference between his method of education and that of Herodotus: Herodotus explores the question of justice without shedding concrete, historical materiality and its effect of diversion, distraction, and moral compromise; Plato sheds history, for an exploration of justice in which the moral will be eminently visible by virtue of having been freed from historicity and where moral perfection is also imaginable, represented, even, in the figure.

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of Socrates. Speaking generously, then, we might say that the difference between the
director of the futuristic *Alien* and *Bladerunner*, on the one hand, and the director of the
historical drama, *Gladiator*, on the other hand, should be like the difference between
Plato and Herodotus. Moreover, the popular interest in antiquity, should reflect to some
degree the form of curiosity and intellectual inquiry exemplified by Herodotus. It
expresses a desire to get out of one’s own head and to shake oneself up a bit against
material that, because of its concrete and unyielding independence from our own minds,
might take us places we cannot predict.

III. *Gladiator*’s Argument

How well does *Gladiator* in fact get us outside ourselves? How does *Gladiator*
blend its particular utopian theme with history? Are we, in the film as in Herodotus,
distracted by the realia? To the contrary. Ridley Scott, like Plato, puts Gyges’ ring to
work. Despite the quality of the graphics of the Colisseum, Scott disappears concrete,
historical reality. The most obvious instance of this is the rewriting of the story of
Commodus’ rule and defeat through the introduction of a non-historical character,
Maximus, and a non-historical plot-line, namely the notion that Marcus Aurelius wished
his rule to pass to someone other than his blood son. When Ridley Scott refused to accept
the fact that history provides plots that are beyond our control and that are interesting for
that very reason, he reveals himself to be at heart still the maker of futuristic utopias with

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9 The film won an Oscar for best special effects. See also J. Sadashige (2000) for a more detailed review of
the movie’s historical accuracy.
clear morals, even when working on historical material.\textsuperscript{10} Given this fact of the film’s making, the film should have a very clear moral, and indeed it does.

The utopian moment dawns when our hero, Maximus, has not only achieved a fame that spreads as far and wide as possible, has not only conquered an emperor, has not only for both his fame and for the victory acquired evident superiority to all other figures in the film, but has also done all this justly. He has never lied; he has never cheated; he has honorably thrown down his sword when his opponent has lost his; he does not blame his betrayer, Commodus’ sister, for his death, since she has betrayed him out of love for her child; he has not used his victory to his own advantage; he has not converted his evident natural superiority into any desire for political superiority. In fact, with all his gifts and despite all his gifts, he gives Rome back to the people. Marcus Aurelius, early in the film, tells Commodus that the latter has none of the four virtues: neither wisdom, nor justice, nor temperance, nor courage. Maximus has all of them, and prudence too, for his willingness not only to brave death but even to court it is prudent given the prior death of his wife and child. The utopian fantasy of \textit{Gladiator} is of an honest victory and honestly achieved superiority that’s nonetheless compatible with a democratic spirit. The fantasy is not, as it turns out, the event-related, collective dream of eternal and/or global hegemony that we first expected might explain the interest in the ancient world. The fantasy of the film concerns neither the novelty and probable extension of the fame of republican principles, nor even the extension and fame of republican power. Indeed, the movie leaves wide open the question of whether Rome, once given back to the people,

\textsuperscript{10} The same point might be made about \textit{Troy}. When Agamemnon is killed on the battlefield, making it impossible for his wife to kill him upon homecoming, the movie makers are not simply taking the kind of license that the ancient poets took but seeking to clean up one of the few basic and durable elements of the myth that gives the cycle the moral complexity that makes it constantly worth reconsidering.
will thrive. Although in *Gladiator* the idea of rule by the people is celebrated, that celebration is only a frame element, not the main object of the film’s attention.\(^{11}\) The fantasy articulated by the film instead responds to a presumed desire on the part of the audience to purify the ideal of meritocracy for our democratic context.

Here is where I must return to the film’s only strange and nearly impenetrable remark. When Maximus’ African companion says to him, “You have a great name. You must kill your name before [the emperor] kills you,” Maximus nods knowingly, as if the remark makes lucid good sense. Frankly, I find it baffling. Is Maximus’ companion an advocate of reining in ambition for the sake of not rocking the boat? I can’t see how else to take the remark.\(^{12}\) Upon reflection, one realizes that the maxim offered to Maximus is indeed about competition and survival. In fact, it is a very weird rewriting of the Herodotean tale of the secret message passed between tyrants about chopping off the heads of over-tall stalks of grain. In that story (Herodotus 5.92), a moderate king uncertain of his power dispatches a messenger to a seasoned king asking for advice on rule. The messenger finds the second king, Thrasybulus, in his corn field and relays his master’s questions, but is met with silence as the Thrasybulus continues walking through the corn field slicing off the tallest ears of corn with his sword. The messenger returns home and reports the failure of his mission. His master, Periander, the moderate king, is surprised and asks for full report. When the messenger says that he has gotten no reply to his questions, and that Thrasybulus has only walked through fields chopping down the tallest stalks of corn, Periander understands that a word of advice has been passed along:

\(^{11}\) J. Sadishige (2000, 1438) agrees: “Whereas earlier dramas set in ancient times projected dreams of the idealized nation or technological superiority, *Gladiator’s* dream is of simple ‘natural’ manhood: a noble heart cloaked beneath iron-hard pecs and a gleaming breastplate.”

\(^{12}\) J. Sadishige (2000, 1438) at least considers the film to have a significant investment in “contemporary concerns about race and class.”
“Get rid of all the pre-eminent and rising men who might challenge your authority and power.”

Maximus is such a tall-stalk, and the advice given to him by his gladiatorial yoke-mate is the inverse of the counsel passed in this Herodotean tale: not “Off with their heads,” but “Keep your head down.” Maximus does not, of course, keep his head down, and this is what allows him to overthrow Commodus’ tyranny and prove his full merit. The African’s remark turns out to be the darkest moment of the film (in the film’s own terms, that is), revealing the real threat to utopia. The real dystopia is a world governed by individuals’ self-conscious decision to reduce the scope of their ambition. Through this small exchange in the film tyranny is redefined in the broadest terms as the effort to keep a good man down. This is not merely the method tyranny uses; keeping a good man down is what tyranny is. And worst of all, that tyranny is something that we might be practicing on ourselves, according to the film. The audience loves Maximus for resisting this kind of tyranny in particular.

My central suggestion is that the resurgence of interest in antiquity in the U.S. specifically, and especially among young people, reflects not international politics but rather the intensity of feeling and psychological tension that presently surrounds political, cultural, and academic debates about merit, meritocracies, and competitive environments. College admissions bring us these issues at their most salient, because entrance into elite schools brings elite opportunities, yet entrance is meant to be a possibility for all. Broad opportunities for an elite education are the means by which the citizenry of the U.S. seeks
to keep a socially stratified society egalitarian; we can accept stratification if we believe it rests on merit, understood as talent and hard work, rather than on inherited privilege.\(^{13}\)

The academy has always, starting right with Plato, struggled with exactly how to understand the meaning of meritocracy, and in the U.S. academy we have struggled with this ideal in distinctive ways ever since the 1978 Bakke case at UC Berkeley, which established the structure of affirmative action; in particular, since then we have struggled with understanding the relationships among inherited privilege, racial justice, and assessments of merit. At the same time that the academy has been struggling with these questions, the competitive pressures that young people face have increased mightily. In 1980 40.9% of U.S. 10th graders expected to attain a bachelors degree or higher; in 1990 that figure was just under 60%; and by 2002 it had reached 79.4%. The highest socioeconomic status group has seen an increase in the aspiration to attain a bachelor’s degree over these two decades from 70.3% of 10th graders in 1980 to 92.8% in 2002, and the lowest socio-economic status group has seen an increase in this aspiration from 19.4% in 1980 to 66.2% in 2002.\(^{14}\) While the number of colleges has also increased in that period (between 1995 to 2003 from 3,632 to 4,168)\(^{15}\), the number of top ten, or even top one hundred, schools has not; simultaneously, economic globalization has put wage earners in competition with vastly greater numbers of people for their jobs than at any prior point in human history. In other words, the young people we encounter in the classroom now pass through a coming of age ritual where they are forced to meet neither

\(^{13}\) The terms of this formulation come from “Merit in Motion,” *Economist*, Nov. 24, 2005.


\(^{15}\) *Chronicle of Higher Education* almanac.
bears nor buffalos, neither helots nor scrutiny by demesmen, but the most intense form of intra-generational competition imaginable. Each young person entering our classroom must understand himself to be in competition with such staggeringly vast numbers of his peers as for the experience to be nearly inconceivable to members of earlier generations. In order to find tales of competitive success that resonate with current audiences, movie makers must find the biggest competitions that have ever existed; those the memory of which still endures after thousands of years must be just such. Hence, I would wager, the recent popularity of epic movies.\textsuperscript{16} We need, then, to reflect more specifically on what \textit{Gladiator} has to say about competition and meritocracy.

\textbf{IV. Competition, Meritocracy, and History}

On one level, I say something very obvious in drawing attention to the idea that competition and the idea of merit are in themselves presently issues of heightened concern for young people in the U.S. and, one presumes, elsewhere also. On another level, however, I believe that I am drawing attention to a fact the force and consequence of which remain almost entirely unassimilated in adult thought about politics and culture: the world in which we debate questions about merit, inherited privilege, and opportunity is very different from the one in which we debated those questions in 1980, for the competitive environment itself has changed. Insofar as the transition from high school to college, and the experience of college, contains for modern Americans the core rituals of

\textsuperscript{16} Competition has always been an important theme in Hollywood movies from the Western to cops-and-robbers movies. The claim I make here is that epic movies present competition on a larger scale than do the other genres. One might assess the scale in a variety of ways: the actual numbers of the enemy, the degree to which bare physical prowess is ultimately what matters, or the number of animals, monsters, or other non-human characters who must be mastered (e.g. the animals in \textit{Gladiator} and the giants in \textit{Troy}). Or one might count, as Daniel Mendelssohn does in his essay for the Teagle Forum, the number of elephants and sandals involved in \textit{Cleopatra}. 
a passage to adulthood, college campuses are extremely important sites for setting the terms for how new generations of adult citizens will deal with extreme competitive pressures and learn how to understand what the role of competition should be in their lives.\textsuperscript{17} Is it possible that epic movies have undertaken to engage a challenging topic that adults are otherwise failing to help young people address?\textsuperscript{18}

If we were to take \textit{Gladiator’s} central cultural and intellectual contribution to be a comment on merit and competition, what would be the substance of that comment? We have to return to the fantasy of a purified meritocracy that we identified as being the thematic heart of the film, for we have not yet fully understood the content of that fantasy. Maximus is indeed presented as an honest victor, but the film goes beyond that in conveying the sense in which he deserves his victory. We have to return to the summary with which the film was marketed. This is the story, again, of “the general who became a slave; the slave who became a gladiator; the gladiator who defied an empire.” We have not yet addressed the importance to the narrative of the fact that Maximus starts the film as a member of the elite, a successful Roman general with a beautiful estate and family, well-respected by the Senate and also by the emperor himself; from that high point, he descends to slavery. The opening of the film thus very efficiently strips him not merely of everything but more particularly of any accidental advantages that he may have had by virtue of his birth and social position and that might cloud our judgment of his

\textsuperscript{17} The recent reforms to higher education in Europe, which have explicitly taken the U.S. system as a model, indicate that this may become truer in Europe also. See the Sep. 8, 2005, edition of \textit{The Economist}.

\textsuperscript{18} Curiously, the College Board claims that its mission is precisely to facilitate such a transition for young people. “At its founding in 1900, the College Board was organized to help high school students make a successful transition to higher education. At that time, the handful of colleges that formed the membership association known as the College Entrance Examination Board sought to simplify the application process for students and for those colleges’ admission offices” (http://www.collegeboard.com/about/association/history.html; accessed August 13, 2006).
natural abilities.\textsuperscript{19} His rise to the top, which is the main story of the film, begins not from the very bottom (this is \textit{not} a rags to riches tale) but from the very top. But only after he has lost any inherited privileges does he rise again to the top. Thus we learn that the position of honor he had held at the start had in fact been justly held. Maximus is not merely an honest but a natural victor, one who triumphs because of innate talents. The film thus defines a deserved victory not generally as one achieved through honest action but more rigidly as one achieved as the outcome of a superior nature.

\textit{Gladiator} elaborates a fantasy in which the winners within a meritocracy not only prove their mettle but also overcome any questions about inherited privilege that might cast a shadow over the question of their intrinsic worth. Despite the centrality of the cardinal virtues to the film’s rhetoric, the movie is in fact less about character or nurture than about nature. Or as reviewer Jacqui Sadashige puts it, “Whereas earlier dramas set in ancient times projected dreams of the idealized nation or technological superiority, \textit{Gladiator}’s dream is of simple ‘natural’ manhood: a noble heart cloaked beneath iron-hard pecs and a gleaming breastplate” (2000, 1438). In other words, the plot itself, so succinctly summarized in the marketing materials, is a conceit outlining what might count as a true test of a person’s real nature and merit. Like Gyges’ ring in Plato’s \textit{Republic}, this plot suggests that there can be a true test of a person, such that we can know what she is “really” worth, apart from anything fortune has brought her.

Our day-to-day world, in contrast, is full of false tests, which we nonetheless wish to take as true measures of each test-taker’s nature. The SAT is the one that most dominates our public discourse and collective consciousness. From 1941 until 1990,

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\textsuperscript{19} I owe this observation to Eugene Holland who offered it in response to an earlier version of this paper given at Ohio State University.
those initials stood for “Scholastic Aptitude Test,” which name was intended to suggest that the test measured intrinsic natural abilities. In 1990, in the face of evidence that students could be taught to improve their performance on the tests, the name was changed to “Scholastic Assessment Test,” but in 1994 that name was dropped and the College Board asserted that the test was simply called the SAT and that the initials didn’t stand for anything.\textsuperscript{20} In our collective debate about merit, we have fetishized and continue to fetishize tests like the SAT as if they measure pure merit; yet, at the very same time that we use these test scores as a sign of merit, every upper middle class family in my own circle including my own (and, I suspect, upper middle class families much more broadly) expects to be able to buy some precise point increase on the tests. The more undeniable it becomes that historicity or accidents of circumstance and experience affect assessments of merit, the more insistently we pretend to ignore what we know.\textsuperscript{21} As a citizenry, we are essentially all committed to the idea of merit as being that which should open doors to opportunities, but almost all of us, when faced with the question of whether to deploy accidental advantages that happen to be available to us, also choose to do so. We act within a Herodotean world but wish to lay claim to Platonic assessments of merit like that presented in \textit{Gladiator}. Those of us in the upper middle class do not take what we know about the SAT seriously enough to reconsider deeply how we think about merit, because it is not in our interest to do so. Thus we preserve for ourselves only an increasingly


\textsuperscript{21} Although 700 colleges now claim to downplay the importance of SATs to their admission policies, I have not noticed any diminishment of concern among test takers about their scores.
cynical commitment to merit. Our cynicism is dangerous for it corrodes our commitment to seeking to equalize the distribution of opportunities within the citizenry.

But there is another equally important reason, I think, why we continue to hold on to our belief that it is somehow possible to measure merit objectively. At some level, we probably hold onto SATs as an accurate measure of merit because of our sympathy with the democratic claim that motivated their development. The College Board describes its own history thus:

With the College Board's revolutionary development of common entrance examinations—later known as the SAT Program or Scholastic Assessment Tests—students could apply to a number of institutions without having to sit for entrance examinations at each one. The new assessments also had another democratizing benefit: individuals could provide evidence of their credentials without regard to their family backgrounds and despite inconsistent grading systems and curriculum standards throughout the nation’s high schools.22

In the effort to undo earlier versions of privilege, the College Board successfully enshrined “natural aptitude” as the determinate standard for the distribution of opportunities. The College Board also secured measurement, in contrast to individualized judgment, as the more democratic method for assessing the criteria by which opportunities will be distributed. And we citizens cannot imagine a world without tests, despite what we know about their problems because they at least seem more open than the old boy’s network.

Neither the commitment to “natural aptitude” nor the commitment to “measurement” can, however, withstand the criticism that those concepts are inherently problematic, perhaps even incoherent. Decades of criticism, as well as the ongoing instrumentalization of the SATs, have made incontrovertibly clear that it is impossible to disentangle innate abilities from the particular material situations and contexts within which an individual is able to develop those abilities. This point about the impact on merit of historicity or accidents of circumstance and experience is often taken, in political debates, to indicate an abdication of a commitment to merit entirely. This is, however, both unnecessary and inaccurate. Rather, by calling our attention to the immediate entanglement of innate abilities in circumstance and experience, I seek, following Jill Frank, who in turn follows Aristotle, to redirect our attention from “natural aptitude” to “excellence.” We are all born with some set of innate capacities but also into particular material situations and context, within which we undertake actions that form the bases of habits, which in turn prepare the way for further actions that will or will not achieve the heights of excellence depending on how an individual has used the accidents of nature and circumstance that particularize her to build habits and prepare for future action.\textsuperscript{23} Just as inherited privilege is unacceptable as a determinate standard for the distribution of opportunities, “natural aptitude” is also problematic, not merely because it is impossible of determination and actual measurement but also because it is misleading to suggest that excellence can come to exist or be understood apart from particular contexts. To suggest replacing the idea of “natural aptitude” with an idea of “excellence,” is to shift attention

from what one has in the womb to what one makes of the self and world into which one is born.

But how can we measure excellence? Once we try to develop an understanding of merit that can reconcile it with an acceptance of historicity, we find ourselves at a loss. The idea of excellence introduces not merely the question of actions achieved but also the issue of habits formed, or character. This is a topic of which we are rightly chary. “Character” itself has frequently been abused as a criterion for the distribution of opportunities, as in its use to sustain quotas on Jewish matriculants to Ivy League universities in the first half of the 20th century (see J. Karabel, *The Chosen: The Hidden History of Admission and Exclusion at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton*, Houghton Mifflin, 2005). Although *Gladiator* invokes justice, temperance, wisdom, and courage, (the four cardinal virtues, which pre-existed Catholicism but were, of course, designated as “cardinal” within Catholicism), we never see Maximus acquiring any of them; they too are made to seem as if natural, but the point of the ancient philosophical discourse of virtue that led to the identification of the cardinal virtues was always that they were not natural but achieved. The movie’s flattening out of the philosophical tradition that treats the virtues as subjects of great difficulty contributes to its presentation of excellence as something that you either have or you don’t. In this the film transcribes, I think, our contemporary *aporia* on the subject of how to discuss earned, as opposed to natural, excellence.

Perhaps our *aporia* arises simply from the degree to which the goal of measurement has displaced judgment? We have accepted measurement as the right way to assess merit because we distrust our own capacity to keep our prejudices at bay; we
suspect that if we are simply asked to judge the relative levels of excellence of young people, we will inevitably prefer those who are like ourselves. We are right to be so distrustful and suspicious of ourselves. But perhaps there might be alternatives to measurement that might also serve as correctives to prejudice without also encouraging the atrophy of our faculty for judgment. In fact, our culture preserves healthy habits of judgment, and a respect for expert judges, in many contexts: in assessments of athletes, movies, and books, for instance. Where healthy habits of judgment exist we can see the concurrence of three phenomena: (1) an expectation that excellence will be shown in action, in some form of being-at-work in the world, where the action undertaken counts in the world and matters to the world; (2) the existence of expert judges whose experience and expertise is respected by the competitors themselves; and (3) the presence of real competition indicated by the fact that competitors themselves develop a culture of judging one another, which brings with it often also a development of mutual respect.

Our world consists of overlapping and multiple competitive arenas in which people have the opportunity to demonstrate the degree to which they have cultivated their own capacity for excellence before judges who, through long practice of observation, can themselves become excellent as judges. What if we turned to the many opportunities for competition, and judgments made therein by expert judges, as a basis for assessments of excellence, understood both as successful performances already undertaken on the basis of strong habits and as a capacity for further successful performance thanks to the foundation laid by past actions converted into habits? Although there are presently many more opportunities to demonstrate physical than intellectual excellence, perhaps we might give some thought to what intellectual excellence looks like in action. It does not
look like taking the SAT. It might look in part like a spelling bee, or poetry recitation
contest, or debate competition; it might look like an essay writing or film-making contest;
it might look like Model UN. It certainly looks in part like doing well in school, and the
gradual evolution from the SAT to a variety of versions of the Advanced Placement exam
seems to be developing a more reasonable measurement proxy for judgment on this
question. Whatever the case, we may need to leave it to college administrators to
determine, within the constraints of anti-discrimination law, the kinds of excellence that
prepare young people to make the most of the particular kinds of education their college
offers.\textsuperscript{24}

\textit{Gladiator} thus ultimately gets some things right and some things wrong in its
reflections on the question of merit and/or excellence. It gets right the idea that in order to
judge excellence we must see it in action. It gets wrong, however, both what it means to
be in action and, therefore, what excellence actually entails. Maximus never faces a
moment where he must choose one of his commitments over another; he never, in other
words, faces the messiness of historical reality that Herodotus so deftly sketches. To be in
action in the world is, however, to face precisely that kind of difficult entanglement.
Maximus’ problems are all strategic, never moral. Without facing the latter kind of
difficulty, Maximus makes his ascent naturally, in accord with an inevitable unfolding of
his innate gifts. We see no evidence that he gives any attention to his habits—his
virtues—to ensure their durability as the basis for excellent action in the world. But
action in the world is always about moral difficulty, and excellence is about working

\textsuperscript{24} There is an extensive policy literature on this subject, and I am only scratching the surface of this issue.
My point is not so much to make significant progress in this essay on the question of how we think about
merit as simply to connect the interest in antiquity among young people to this issue in particular, and to
flesh out the implications of that connection.
one’s way through that, about making careful judgments, so as to be able to act well both
in respect to others and at one’s chosen undertaking. Good historical writing from
Herodotus to Robert Caro should open up the landscape of moral difficulty and moral
compromise to our understanding. *Gladiator* does not do so and so reduces the public
understanding of the value of historical narrative. The problems with this movie and with
our public discourse concerning merit thus turn out to be the same: we lack a sufficiently
subtle understanding of the historicity of action generally and of excellence specifically.

There is, however, a silver lining. Paradoxically enough, our own education in the
classics now gives us, the old fogeys, access to pop culture and to our students’
imaginative formation. Because these appearances of antique materials in the mainstream
have drawn us, the reclusive and blinkered, out to see the names in lights, the moment is
a rare opportunity for generations to meet and consequently valuable. In this moment of
meeting, occasioned as much because we have been drawn out as because anyone has
been drawn in, we do have a responsibility to do right by those young people we meet.
This responsibility is no different than the responsibility that we always have, I would
argue, in talking to strangers. The difference on this occasion is only that, because we
should be good at interpreting the meanings of these classically inspired films and
articles, we start with somewhat more knowledge of the strangers whom we encounter in
our classroom than is often the case. And when we find ourselves discussing epic movies,
we should recognize that we are helping our students come to grips not only with ancient
Rome or Greece but also with politically and ethically difficult questions relating to
competition, merit, and history generally. On this point, I think the best thing we could do
for students would be to help them become good judges, discriminators, and evaluators of
the diverse types of human action that can emerge out of the myriad of specific material situations and moral dilemmas. This would be to teach them to think historically. It would also be to teach them not to settle for a movie like *Gladiator* as an account of human possibilities.

**Figure One**

Percentage of U. S. 10th graders who expect to attain a bachelors degree or higher 1980, 1990, 2002

Classical Antiquity and American Popular Culture

Daniel Mendelsohn
To all appearances, this gathering ought to be a happy, even celebratory occasion. Our hosts today, after all, remind us that encouraging signs of widespread popular interest in the classical Greek and Roman cultures—gauged, inevitably, by a marked increase in the number of mass entertainments with classical themes—seem to be everywhere just now: the promotional materials for today’s event mention movies such as *Gladiator*, *Troy* and *Alexander*; theatre such as *The Frogs* at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre in NYC, and trade books such as Thomas Cahill’s *Sailing the Wine Dark Sea*. To this impressive and, indeed, fabulously costly list one could add: a much-ballyhooed new production of Euripides’ *Medea* that appeared on Broadway a few years ago, starring Fiona Shaw; a number of recent novels about Alexander the Great and the Persian Wars, unusually popular new histories of the Peloponnesian War—the bedside reading, we are told, of no less considerable personages than the President and his trusted advisors—and, on television, classically-themed adventure series like the irresistibly schlocky *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Hercules*, a seemingly endless stream of made-for-TV takes on classical myths, like the recent *Jason and the Argonauts*, and of course the budget-breaking new HBO series *Rome*.

All this is bound to gladden the hearts of classics scholars everywhere, who ever since the cultural and academic upheavals of forty years ago have never quite stopped having to justify what it is that they do for a living (to what, significantly enough, continues to be referred to in the Academy as the “outside” world). How much more gladdening, therefore, that today, when we are inundated by a flood of new technologies, of new and distracting many forms of entertainment; when we are encouraged more
than ever to abandon narrow allegiances to rigid canons and instead to sample the treats offered by a dazzling multicultural smorgasbord—how much more gladdening it is, therefore, to the heart of a classicist to be faced with what appears to be a renewed connection between the culture of the present and the culture of the classical past. History itself, indeed, seems to be underscoring this connection: in the past decade and a half we have seen global political upheavals that further encourage comparisons between America today and her classical predecessors, Periclean Athens and Rome at her height. Imperial powers, that is to say, reigning supreme in their respective worlds. *Plus*, it would seem, *ça change.*

These ostensibly encouraging signs of a popular renaissance of interest in things classical—not among the elite but among the people; not, as it were, on PBS but on HBO—have, rightly it seems to me, led to the questions that we are asked to pursue here today, questions that go beyond merely taking note of this or that classically-themed movie, TV show or book: “Are these signs ephemera or part of a discernable pattern? How widespread is this phenomenon in the United States? Are any comparisons between ancient and modern ideas and practices particularly absorbing today? How might teachers in the humanities make use of the popular interest in antiquity to deepen undergraduates’ understanding of and interest in the range of materials in literature, philosophy and history?” And so on.

Such questions naturally have particular interest to someone like me, much of whose work occupies the intersection where the Classics and popular culture meet—since, after all, I am a journalist who often writes about classical subjects for a broad mainstream audience in newspapers and journals with audiences in the thousands and
even millions. And yet, while as a classicist I rejoice in what appears to be evidence of a huge resurgence of interest in Greek and Roman culture, my job as a professional critic is to avoid being swept up in the currents and trends of the hour. For that reason I would beg your indulgence if, as so often, I attempt to throw a bucket of cold water on the proceedings. For if we do what good critics must do, which is to step back and assess the phenomenon before us in as cool a light as possible, trying to see the thing as it is rather than—and this is always the difficult part—as we hope it might be, the conclusions we reach may not, after all, be so happy for “the Classics,” and, as I hope to argue, are downright scary for pop culture. Since the rubric under which today’s proceedings have been organized is, as I note with interest, “fragments,” I hope that you will take the remarks that follow as a series of fragments toward a critique of a celebration of the contemporary take on the classics.

Wearing my critic’s hat, I would like, first, to examine the evidence for the classical renaissance we’re ostensibly celebrating, and then to explore in a little bit of detail a few random examples of the new “classicism” in popular entertainment, with the aim of assessing whether those movies and theater productions do, in fact, express any serious understanding of or appreciation for the values of their classical models. (If not, then what, exactly, are we celebrating?) Then, briefly donning my scholarly mortarboard, I’d like to suggest what I think are, in fact, the true parallels between the classics and popular culture just now—parallels that have everything to do with mass popular entertainments, although not quite in the way our Teagle hosts may have expected.
I fear that I must begin my grumpy undertaking by warning against over-enthusiastic interpretations of what looks to be a resurgence of classical-themed books, television shows, and in particular films. For even a cursory glance at the past hundred years of popular Western culture suggest that, if anything, the output of such entertainments has remained more or less constant for the past hundred years or so.

To take movies alone—as perhaps we ought, given the implications for mass tastes: Should we really be more impressed and excited by the appearance of *Gladiator* in 2000, as a sign of cultural interest in classical civilization, than we ought to have been during, say, the period between 1950 and 1965, during which over 150 popular movies about gladiators and the Roman games were made? Was that film somehow more culturally significant than was, say—I mention these examples only for the nostalgic pleasure of some of you and for the novel amusement of others—*Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), with Victor Mature, Michael Rennie, Debra Paget and Anne Bancroft; the abysmal *Duel of Champions* (1961), notable for a scene in which Alan Ladd is thrown to wolves played by German shepherds who were, alas, as decrepit as Ladd himself was by that point; *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), whose climax, like that of *Gladiator*, pits another heroic fighter, played by Stephen Boyd, yet again against the hapless Commodus, played here by Christopher Plummer (succeeding the Marcus Aurelius of Alec Guinness); and, my personal favorite, *Arena* (1973), in which, for those of you who are Quentin Tarantino fans, Pam Grier plays someone called Mamawi of Nubia, imported to the Italian peninsula in order to impale her fellow women with a trident in a circus in Brundisium? Is the current public taste for the spectacle of virtuous and hunky young
Mediterraneans standing up, at the cost of their own lives, against tyranny more culturally fraught now than it was in the case of the 1914 silent *Spartacus*, the 1952 *Sins of Rome: The Story of Spartacus*, or the 1960 *Spartacus*, with Kirk Douglas?

Are we, similarly, to see the current mania for HBO’s *Rome*—no small testimony to which, I might add, comes in the form of incessant IM’s from my four siblings asking if Cleopatra was really schlepped around the world in a large, upholstered box—as a greater sign of revived classical interest in the Julio-Claudians and their bedmates, a more telling expression of a cultural similarity between the present day and 1st-century Rome, than was, say, *I, Claudius* in 1976 (a markedly different cultural and political moment, as you will agree, from today’s) or *Caligula* in 1979—or, for that matter, *Ben Hur* in 1925, with Ramon Novarro, or *Ben Hur* in 1957, with Charlton Heston; than the *Cleopatra* films of 1934, 1946, 1963 or—my favorite—of 1999, in which Timothy Dalton squared off against Billy Zane over an unfortunate young thespian called Leonor Varela?; a greater sign than (for those who like their Roman decadence straight up) the 1913 silent *The Last Days of Pompeii*, the 1927 De Mille epic *King of Kings* (pruriently described as an indictment of Rome “in all its sinful splendor”) or the 1933 *Roman Scandals*, a comical send up of the excesses of, of all people, Valerius, a film notable above all for the fact that it marked the screen debut of Lucille Ball; than, for those of you who specialize solely in Neronian decadence, the 1909 silent *Nero, or the Fall of Rome*, De Mille’s 1932 *The Sign of the Cross*, Mervyn LeRoy’s 1951 *Quo Vadis*, Fellini’s 1969 *Satyricon*?

So, too, one wonders if the apparent appeal of *Troy* owed more to the particular allure, at this juncture in cultural history, of Homer or the tales of the Trojan War, than
did the appeal in their own time of such films and television movies as the 1955 *Ulysses*, again with the hapless Mr. Douglas; Robert Wise’s 1956 *Helen of Troy*; the deliciously abysmal 1997 TV miniseries *The Odyssey*, featuring Isabelle Rossellini as Athena and Bernadette Peters as Calypso; or the brilliantly schlocky 2003 made-for-TV *Helen of Troy*, whose keen-eyed appreciation for the *Realpolitik* underlying ancient mythologizing, anticipating that which animated the grimly anti-heroic *Troy*, can be gauged from gritty, no-holds-barred exchanges such as this:

Hector: Now he's talking war against Troy.
Paris: Why?
Hector: Because we control access to the silks and spices of Byzantine.
Paris: Psh!
Hector: What?
Paris: I can't believe people go to war over nutmeg.
Hector: Well, they do, Paris, and you'd better get used to it.

And if we were to abandon the foregoing thematic listing of films for a chronological one, we would be forced to ask ourselves whether the fact that three major Hollywood epics about the Greek and Roman past have been made since 2000 is all that impressive when we consider the following list: the 1955 *Ulysses* with Kirk Douglas; the 1956 *Helen of Troy*, directed by Robert Wise and, that same year, *Alexander the Great* with Richard Burton; the 1959 *Hercules* with Steve Reeves; the 1960, *Hannibal* with Victor Mature; the 1962 *The 300 Spartans* with Richard Egan and Ralph Richardson; the 1963 *Jason and the Argonauts*; and, again in 1963—of course—*Cleopatra*, with Elizabeth Taylor and so many others, the only film I was allowed to miss dinner in order to watch, when I was growing up, and of which the *Times* capsule review, in the TV listings,
memorably commented that Rex Harrison, as Julius Caesar, had the air of someone looking for the men’s room.

And I think it is not unfair to say that what is true about films and TV is true of popular books as well; many of the films I have just noted were, in fact, based on popular books, from Lew Wallace’s *Ben Hur* and Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* to Oliver Stone’s *Alexander* (in its cut and uncut versions), which owes a large if unacknowledged debt to Mary Renault’s Alexander trilogy, *Fire From Heaven, The Persian Boy,* and *Funeral Games*—to say nothing of Stone’s own autobiographical novel, to which I shall return shortly. Indeed, it’s hard to imagine that the popularity of *Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea* lately, or of Steven Pressfield’s *Gates of Fire,* about Thermopylae, has greater significance than the best-selling popularity of Miss Renault’s fictional reconstructions of the archaic and classical worlds, from *The Last of the Wine,* her 1956 novel of Socrates and the Peloponnesian War, to *Funeral Games,* her novel of Alexander’s Successors, published a quarter-century later. If I don’t dilate on the subject of books, it’s more out of a concern for time than a dearth of material. In any event you will, I hope, forgive me this long list; but I think it’s necessary, at the outset of our exploration of the significance of this particular classical revival, to question whether it constitutes a revival at all.

Still, one could say that our time today might be better spent examining those works that do clearly signal at least some kind of serious interest in the classical past. Let us, then,
take a brief look at some of the more noteworthy examples, in the hope that they, at least, will provide some comfort.

To begin with what everyone agrees is the *arkhê* (whether *kalôn* or *kakôn* remains to be seen): *Gladiator*. Yes, there is no question that it’s about Rome, and yes, the battle scenes seem authentic, and yes, the computer-generated Flavian amphitheater is thrilling to behold—and yes, there’s even an incestuously decadent emperor thrown in for good measure; but the evidence suggests that what made this film so successful was not, in fact, that it somehow connected to a neoclassicizing *Zeitgeist*…although now that I think of it, that cinematic tale of a bumblingly incompetent ruler of a vast militaristic empire who would have done the world a favor if he’d chosen to pursue his interest in professional sports may indeed have had a particular resonance in the year 2000. Seriously: it seems clear that what *Gladiator* had going for it was the fact that it was, simply and efficiently, that most appealing of narratives, the well-told tale of revenge, dressed up in Antonine drag. Indeed, it seemed to me that the century that inspired this film wasn’t so much the second after Christ as the nineteenth: the young man betrayed by his seeming friend, the destruction of his family, his humiliating imprisonment and exile, the years spent in exotic places acquiring the arcane skills that will enable him, in time, to take his revenge, the disguised return, after years abroad, to his home, where he finds his lady love from years before imprisoned in a chilly relationship with the man who had betrayed him; and then, to cap it off, the climactic revelation of his true identity and the ensuing satisfactions of the duel: whatever its classical trappings, the plot of *Gladiator* owes more to *The Count of Monte Cristo* than it does to Rome.
Hollywood being what it is, it seems never to have occurred to anyone in positions of power at the studios that the success of Ridley Scott’s film had to do with the satisfying structure of its narrative rather than its designer outfits; and so it was inevitable that the great success of *Gladiator* would spawn a flotilla of hugely expensive epigones which bore the most superficial resemblance to it—which, that is to say, like *Gladiator* dressed its characters in togas and sandals rather than army fatigues, and thrust swords rather than AK-47s (or nuclear warheads) into the meaty hands of its stars: *Troy*, then *Alexander*. I think it’s absolutely crucial that, before we get our knickers in a twist about the few recent toga-and-sandal epics somehow representing a “trend,” we understand the economics of Hollywood, and that the trend being represented here is not about classics but, inevitably, about money-making franchises.

But even if we were to take it on its own terms, rather than simply a rather hopefully spin-off, can we really say that Wolfgang Petersen’s *Troy* (2004)—whose structure, inasmuch as it had one, consisting of little more than a flaccid container for just about every incident in the Trojan War epics from the *Cypria* to the *Ilioupersis*, shows little understanding of what epic is and how it works—can we really say that *Troy* reflects a serious engagement with Homeric epic—its style, content, or values? Indeed in its eagerness to make the *Iliad* “relevant”—not least, by substituting crassly “modern” *Realpolitik* as the motivations for the Trojan War and the heroes’ behavior in it (the “real” reason for the war, we are meant to understand, is a dastardly Agamemnon’s lust for Mycenaean *Lebensraum*) in substituting those for the motivations we find in the cyclic and Homeric epic (the gods, desire, yearning for everlasting heroic renown) the film abandons what is most stirring in Homer behind: its highness, its richness, the
wonder, the glitter that makes the grime worthwhile. Which is to say, the poetry. What about Homer, or the Homeric world, might we expect the intelligent high school student to take away from seeing Petersen’s epic? Little different, I suspect, than what they take away from any trip to the megaplex: quantities of testosterone, a lot of violent spectacle, a feeble love story thrown in to draw in the occasional cheerleader, and great quantities of loud music.

Since the same, if not indeed worse, may be said for Oliver Stone’s absurd Alexander—a film whose director, as we know from his fictionalized memoir, was the product of a stormy marriage between a rich corporate executive and a temperamental, “exotic” wife, spouses between whom the hapless young Oliver was forced unhappily to shuttle even as compensatory dreams of cinematic conquest fevered his imagination, a bit of biography that suggests, on reflection, that the film is less a biopic about its ostensible eponymous subject than about its director—I think we may profitably move on to more serious matters; although in bidding it farewell I think it’s important at least to note that here again, despite the enormous expenses of money spent on an ostentatious “historical accuracy,” the crucial thing, the essence of the ancient donnée—in this case, whatever it was that made Alexander seem so great to so many—gets utterly lost amid the squealing of accurately festooned elephants and the come-hither smirks of historically verified eunuchs: dazzlingly authentic-seeming “details” that ultimately add as much to the story as those scenes in the Star Trek films in which the Klingons speak “real” Klingon courteously subtitled into English for us earthlings. Which is to say, nothing. But then, why not?, since Star Trek and Alexander amount to the same thing in the lives of their respective audiences—or rather, the audience, since I suspect they are one and the same:
people who like a colorful, violence-filled ten-dollar-and-fifty-cent visit to a final frontier.

One naturally had higher hopes for the examples of today’s classical revival to be found in venues that, on the face of it, demand greater seriousness, and are directed at more discerning audiences, than those associated with the neighborhood Cineplex. Much has been made of the various theatrical revivals of the Greek plays (comedies and tragedies both) that we’ve witnessed around the country in the past couple of years. Many of these, unsurprisingly, are revivals of Aristophanes’ anti-war plays; although for that very reason I think we need not attach too much importance to them as symbols of a broader cultural interest in “the classics,” since the evidence of the past century, at least, suggests that whenever there’s an unpopular war on, someone somewhere is bound to be putting on *Lysistrata*. For that very reason I prefer instead to focus here on a less typical vehicle for a dramatic revival, one singled out by our hosts today as an instance of the classicizing moment we are meant to be celebrating today: the hugely popular *Frogs* at the Lincoln Center Theater last year, in its Sondheimian incarnation starring Nathan Lane. I want to linger on this production a little, if I may, because more than most recent expressions of contemporary interest in the classics, that *Frogs* was self-conscious about the issue of *relevance*: the relevance, that is, of an ancient original to the present-day world. It would seem to be an ideal vehicle, then, for our discussion today of the relationship between pop culture and the classics.

On the face of it, the Nathan Lane rewriting of Stephen Sondheim’s 1973 musical version of *Frogs* was admirable in its attempt to use an adaptation of a classical work to
comment scathingly on the state of the union at the time of great popular unrest—in this case, the outbreak of the Iraq war. A great deal of ink was spilled at the time of the production’s premiere, not least by the Times, on congratulating Lane and his partners for their politicizing agenda. “Mr. Lane,” the Times cooed, “also talked with Ms. Stroman about the political resonance of the source material, which concerned a great democracy fighting an unwise war, leaders too puny to inspire a complacent populace, a longing to reclaim the greater voices of the past… Ms. Stroman found the idea moving; “Remember, this was not yet a year after Sept. 11,” she said.”

And yet what was so striking about that Frogs was, if anything, how Nathan Lane (who extensively re-wrote Burt Shevelove’s 1974 rewriting of Aristophanes) got Aristophanes not just wrong, but backwards. Aristophanes’ play, let us recall, tracks the transformation of a personal, aesthetic quest—Dionysus’s madcap mission to rescue his favorite and recently-deceased tragedian, Euripides, from the Underworld—into a political mission: once in Hades, he realizes that he must bring back the poet whose work is most salubrious to the democratic polis. This is why what begins as an adventure turns into that most favorite of Athenian events, a contest—in this case, a contest between Aeschylus, here representing what Kenneth Dover, in his commentary on the play, has called “the valour, virtue, and security of the past, sustained by…traditional usage and belief”; and Euripides, representing “the insecurity of the present, beset by doubt, ‘unhealthy’ curiosity and ‘irresponsible’ artistic innovations.” And as we know, it was Aeschylus who, in the comedy, triumphed.

It is surely interesting that the movement from the private to the public realm charted in the Greek original is, in Lane’s rewriting, blithely reversed. In this Frogs, the
emphasis, inevitably, was on making Dionysus—Lane’s character—more adorable: to the

*New York Times* Lane spoke of his desire to transform the character from a “witty but mostly disengaged demigod into a human being,” to “imbu[e] the character...with a a strain of melancholy and longing.” He wanted, he said, his play to be about feelings, about Art with a capital A. It was for this reason, presumably, that in the updated version, the contest is no longer about politics but about the theater itself: Aeschylus became Shakespeare who, is made to be the symbol for poetic drama and, by an extension I cannot think the Bard himself would have approved, love and sentiment rather than intellect; whereas Euripides was metamorphosed into George Bernard Shaw, here a symbol for austere, intellectual “prose.”

Even if Lane had not, despite these ostensible updatings, faithfully retained the outcome of the Aristophanic contest—by making Aeschylus/Shakespeare triumph at the end—it wouldn’t have been hard, in our era of Oprah, to guess who the winner would be; and so this new, effortfully relevant *Frogs* ended with a celebration of the triumph of what the author of the play’s book called “romantic rhapsody”—“something to get people out of their seats, to get them *going*”—over “dry intellectual interest.” It is not clear, at least to me, how this theatrical outcome fits with Lane’s professed desire to have his *Frogs* be an indictment of the Bush Administration’s handling of the Gulf War.

But then, so much that was well-intentioned here was so disastrously wrong, really. Lane’s much-heralded interest in relevance of the classics to contemporary politics does not seem to have led him so far as to learn that in fifth-century Athens, it was the conservatives who were the peaceniks, and that it was the extreme democrats who again and again disdained peace offers during the thirty bitter years of the
Peloponnesian War; and that for that reason he might have chosen the wrong Greek anti-war comedy to advance his East Coast liberal agenda, since Frogs was essentially advancing a conservative agenda. But then, Mr. Lane doesn’t seem to have bothered to explore the fact that, as Sir Kenneth reminds us, to the average Athenian the poetic debate between Aeschylus and Euripides, even if we pretend that the debate is about nothing more than Art with a capital A, the thing that Lane professes to be interested in—that this contest was a coded debate between appeals to the “security of the past” and “traditional…belief” on the one hand, and a so-called “‘unhealthy’ curiosity and ‘irresponsible’ artistic innovation,” on the other; between a playwright who in the original Frogs smugly boasts that drama ought to provide clean moral models for exemplary civic behavior, and “set…a standard of purity,” and one who desperately counters that tragedy must be subversive, that it should show “what really has happened” in order that audiences “come away from seeing a play / in a questioning mood, with ‘where are we at?,’” / and “who’s got my this?,” and “who took my that?.”

But such exchanges about purity and subversiveness in art do not seem to have rung any political bells in Mr. Lane’s head, and so despite his interest in art and politics and war an “relevance,” he made nothing of it. And so the production that he ended up presenting, a production that everywhere valued distracting spectacle over genuine intellectual engagement, one that ended, however naively, with a call for more heart and less head, with a dismissal of the hectoring intellectual and a triumphant embrace of the rhapsodic and Retro romantic, actually ended up serving the political project of those real-life politicians who keep calling on us to be satisfied with the safe, grandiose nostrums of the past, rather than trying to see for ourselves “what really happened” and
“where are we at”—to say nothing of “who’s got my this” and “who took my that.” This was the bold new adaptation of a Greek play that was so popular in New York City, soon after the outbreak of the Gulf War. How relevant. How encouraging.

The ostensible embrace of a classical work by a contemporary star, done with all due lip-service to the relevance of the ancient theater, put me in mind of the rapturously received Medea of several seasons ago on Broadway, another adaptation of a classic to which much significance was given, and whose showy updating had the effect of diminishing, rather than underscoring, the political relevance of the original in favor of a populist sentimentality.

What, after all, are we to make of a Medea reduced to little more than yet another desperate housewife, as Fiona Shaw’s was—a thin, tense suburban mother dressed in a sweater-set, popping pills and twitching with anguished rage at her philandering husband—the fodder of innumerable TV movies and segments of your favorite true crime show? I am the last person to deny that Euripides’ Medea is a wife, and tense, and full of anguished rage; but she is much more, too, much more that the big Broadway production left out in its unseemly race to be “relevant” to 21st century concerns. Deobrah Warner’s and Fiona Shaw’s showily feminine reduction of the Greek dramatist’s titanic heroine to—these are the lead actress’s words—an exemplar of “weakness,” seems to me not only to get the character wrong, but to imperil the tragic stature of the play itself, which like so many tragedies uses irresolvable conflicts between a man and a woman to comment suggestively on what fifth-century drama is always preoccupied with, which is
politics: the nature and meaning of the life of the state itself, the competing claims of the
domestic and political spheres, of religious and civic values, and so on.

Indeed, beneath the quotidian husband-wife sparring in Medea there lurks a far more significant—and, intellectually and politically, a far more riveting—battle over the nature of language, a subject which in the fifth century, as in contemporary society, was front and center in the culture wars. Let us pause to think about the play itself, rather than what we want it to be about (which, almost inevitably, is ourselves): on the one side there is Medea, whose obsession with oaths in the play betrays an almost poignantly naïve desire to believe that words and actions, logoi and erga, ought to be one and the same thing; on the other there is the smooth Jason, with his glibly disingenuous abuse of language, his facilely self-serving separation of what he says and what he does when it suits him. Although you’d never guess it from the Broadway production, this is the great conflict of Euripides’ play—a play at whose very center, structurally speaking, is a long scene in which we see not a hysterical woman finally driven to the verge of a nervous breakdown by a man, but a woman coolly administering an oath to a man; a scene that suggests that the play, rather than being a domestic drama—which is what the Broadway production reduced it to—was, like Frogs, fully part of the roiling political discourse of fifth-century Athens: a state whose increasing inability to fuse meaningful words with actions and whose taste for disingenuously self-serving rhetoric in order to pursue its militaristic goals—surely concerns in the current century as well as in the fifth B. C.—were the object of Thucydides’ scorn in his history of the Peloponnesian War, a conflict, we should not forget, that began in the year that Euripides presented Medea to the Athenian public for the first time.
Given that chronological coincidence—if coincidence it be—it becomes all the more strange to think that, as a ready-made vehicle for a critique of imperial abuses of power and manipulations of language and public opinion, Medea on Broadway so scrupulously eschewed the vivifying political drama for the clichéd domestic drama. This is particularly bizarre given the director’s and star’s much-publicized comments about the relevance of Greek drama for contemporary political discourse, as for instance the following comments by Fiona Shaw, which remind us vividly of Nathan Lane’s remarks about Frogs:

We desperately need Greek plays. We need them when democracies are wobbly. I am living in a very wobbly democracy right now, whose Parliament has only just been recalled, and Commons may or may not have a vote about whether we go to war. Greece was a very new democratic nation, and a barbaric world was not very far behind them. They offered these plays as places of real debate. We can’t really say that theater is a true place of debate anymore, but these plays remind us of what it could be.

It does not seem to have occurred to Miss Shaw that the reason that theater isn’t a true place of debate anymore is that productions like her own have so consistently made the safe and unanswerable choices—the choice, say, of making the Greek play you’re putting on for your American audience be about spousal abuse and headline-grabbing infanticide by women pushed to the edge by nasty husbands,
which is to say about what you can watch on any afternoon talk show—rather than about what it was meant to be about, and what you claim you’re interested in: a truly relevant theater of the polity itself. But then, what do you expect from a director and a star who think that what the tragedians were up to was to “entice the audience into an emotional debate about failure and dealing with being a failed person.” Enticing an audience into an emotional debate about dealing with being a failed person: that’s someone’s agenda, all right, but it’s Oprah’s, not Euripides’.

So if we’re not, in fact, in the midst of a revival of interest in the classics; and if, when we do show interest in classical texts, we tend either to be interested in the wrong things or to pervert their meanings to fit our own preoccupations, what, exactly, should we be talking about today? Since I don’t want to leave nothing but rhetorical rubble in my wake today, not least because I have been the grateful guest of generous hosts here in Evanston, I want to turn now to see if there is in fact anything of substance that might be said about the relationship, right now, between classical antiquity and the contemporary pop culture—one that is not fooled, that is, by surface resemblances, but which rather uses what we know about the classical past to explore the meaning of the real substance of the American present.

I’d like to begin by returning to the subject of Oprah—a natural enough thing to do, you will think, in the greater Chicago area, but one I think that has relevance to today’s proceedings. Indeed I want to begin my argument about the “real” connections
between the classics and pop culture by noting certain consistent themes that emerge from my criticisms of the works I’ve discussed above. Particularly in the case of popular appropriations of classical drama, what one notices is an aversion everywhere to the truly political and the authentically tragic—by which I mean not “very sad,” which is how people understand the word today, but instead the destructive but illuminating clash of two world-views between which there can be no happy resolution—and, instead, a preference for the personal, the private, the sentimental; for comforting, pat emotional explanations (or confirmations) of why things are the way they are; a preference, to use very broad strokes, for cliché sentiment over difficult and unsettling thought. Medea as a play about women’s issues, about a bad marriage; Frogs as a comedy about how much more important it is to have rousing feelings and distracting spectacle than to entertain dangerous and sobering notions.

(It’s important to note, before going on, that this same widespread elevation of spectacle and sentiment, of the affecting or merely “sad” over the truly tragic, is widespread in the way that nearly all popular entertainments are marketed and received by the audience. To anyone who knows it, the true story of the sinking of the Titanic has the bones of a real Greek tragedy: the hubristic challenge to Nature itself by self-satisfied mortals, the irresistible, clockwork series of errors that leads to the final, annihilating catastrophe; elements beautifully limned in the austere 1958 British film A Night To Remember, which has the good sense to let the tragedy unfold, to devastating effect. I’ve always been struck by the way that, handed a great tragedy on a silver platter, the makers of the 1997 mega-hit Titanic felt obliged to give the story “human interest” by grafting a love story onto the proceedings—a choice that reveals the filmmakers’ essential distrust,
or perhaps lack of understanding, of the deeply tragic motor of their own story. More recently, as some of you may know, I’ve been struck that a film like *Brokeback Mountain*, which again is a true tragedy—a story of irreconcilable personalities and world-views whose clash leads to terrible choices, the destruction of whole families, and even death—has been promoted as a feel-good love story that—inevitably—“everyone” can identify with. But then, in a culture in which pain is seen as aberrant, in which we yearn endlessly for “closure” without actually having experienced that which is to be closed, this is hardly surprising.

I find this popular aversion to the public and political, to tragedy and the tragic, very interesting just now. Tragedy, after all, was an artistic phenomenon exactly contemporaneous with democracy: it began to flourish in the form we more or less are familiar with in the late sixth century, and reached its apogee during the middle of the fifth-century, at the zenith of the boisterous Periclean state, only to decline, along with the state, toward the end of that century. It is not difficult to see the causes of the interrelationship between the art form and the state that both inspired it and sponsored it so fervently: in tragedy, as in the healthy democracy, vigorous and sometimes vicious debate between opposing parties is the life-blood of the medium. Tragedy, as we know, like political assembly, was witnessed by the entire citizen body assembled in an open place; the dramas enacted in tragedy, like those enacted in politics, focused as often as not on the nature and meaning of right behavior in a world in which the significance of events is often not clear at the time we confront them—and yet confront them we must, as actors (I use the word advisedly) in the dramas of our own lives as citizens.
The animating force of dialogue and debate, common to democracy and tragedy both, is, therefore, of high value only in a free state and a free theater, the vigorous exchanges on display in the former being artistically reproduced, loaded with even greater meaning, in the latter. The spectacle of “weakness” to which so many tragedies bring their protagonists (and of course us, the audience) in the end—the sight of the actor brought low by the crushing outcome of personality and circumstance—is not, pace Fiona Shaw, interesting and moving because we can all “identify” with failure, but because it makes us think, by implication, of what the nature of a successful existence might be. It make us cautious, in other words, about the hidden yet always ultimately revealed motivations for our actions, about the unknowability of the cosmos in which we must yet somehow make our way, the smallness of man’s view of things when compared to the largeness—only occasionally glimpsed by us—of things themselves. Tragedy makes you think up, of the right way to be—cautious in the world, ready, as democratic citizens must always be, to see the validity of the other person’s views, even when we take issue with them, willing to compromise or to adapt to necessity whether of our own or others’ making. Sentimentality and its artistic expression, melodrama—the Oprah mode, I’ll call it—makes you, by contrast, think down, down to the lowest common denominator, not least because everyone is likelier to have the same feelings than the same intellectual capacity. The relentless emphasis on the drama of feelings has made of us, I would say, a nation of people satisfied to attain to nothing better than dysfunction, not least because dysfunction, today, is so richly rewarded with television appearances and widespread if anonymous sympathy of audiences in the millions.
Let us pause to think a bit harder about the Oprah side of things, the way in which
dysfunction has become a coveted prize. I want to think now not about the victim (so to
speak), so richly rewarded on daytime TV for his public suffering, but about the
audience. As anyone must acknowledge who watches, as I do, quantities of daytime TV
while toiling on the cross-trainer, there is a prize, too, for the viewer, the audience. For
the flip side of Oprah and its spectacles of pathos, meant to generate tears of sympathy
and a facile “identification” with weakness and failure, is the other spectacle common to
contemporary pop culture, the “I’m sleeping with my girlfriend’s brother” episodes of
Sally Jesse or Montel Williams, exhibitions clearly meant to arouse disdainful laughter
on the part of viewers who are invited, thereby, to feel superior to the bizarre examples of
humanity so strenuously collected, like so many specimens of rare and poisonous insects,
by the producers and assembled on stage. In either case, the shallow tears or the shallow
derision, the relationship of the viewer to the “actors” seems to me to be an unhealthy
one—unhealthy because it always demands a kind of condescension. And what kind of
polity do we create when we encourage, instead of a profound engagement between
citizens, and the reflectiveness that arises from such engagement, either an unreflectively
pitying or cruelly superior condescension?

One answer to that question, I’ll venture to say, is a polity in which the citizen has
little real value, doesn’t actually count: an empire, say, rather than a democracy. With
this in mind I want to end by suggesting that there is indeed one form of popular
entertainment that, it seems to me, is the genuine heir to ancient entertainments, truly
expressing parallel values and, indeed, parallel political motives and circumstances. Here
I refer to the rise of reality TV (the natural if hypertrophied heir to the Oprah and Salle
Jesse phase of American cultural devolution)—reality TV, with its emphasis on physical humiliation and emotional degradation, its endless appetite for displays of badly dressed or untalented or overweight people, its implied emphasis on cruelties overt or covert (one thinks of the subtly sadistic host on “The Weakest Link”), the carefully contrived narratives of expulsion and a barely-achieved survival by one “survivor,” its assumption that the audience’s viewing pleasure is most likely derived from the spectacle of other people’s manufactured suffering—seem perfectly to mirror both the methods and the aims of the Roman games, those giant, expensive entertainments, with their elaborate spectacles of suffering and violence contrived to fit fanciful narratives, whose aim, as we know, was increasingly to distract a depoliticized citizenry from awareness of its own impotence in the imperial age.

It seems worth pausing to consider the political implications in particular of the parallels between the Roman munera and the elaborate stagings that are today’s most popular televised pastime, both of them forms of mass entertainment in which (unlike in tragedy) the suffering is always gratuitous, never the end result of a coherent action—and, hence, without meaning, except as the vehicle for the audience’s sadistic pleasure—and in which a taste for showy and expensive spectacle and for elaborately staged physical challenges culminating in the sight of an exhausted or degraded human body has eclipsed significant verbal or intellectual content. In this context, it worth wondering briefly about some implications of the word “reality” in the label “reality TV.” As is obvious from all of reality TV, nothing about the circumstances is “real”: everything, from the 15 gay guys auditioning for the role of boyfriend, all dormitoried in the mid-century modern splendor of an air-conditioned villa in Palm Springs, to the marriages
between total strangers to the immersion of nubile, safety-harnessed young women into tanks of worms, or scorpions, or snakes—I have seen all three—bears any resemblance to what we think of as real situations. The thrill, instead, derives today, as it did in the 1st century A. D., when real men were chained to real rocks to have their real livers torn out by real wild animals, as if they really were Prometheus in the myth, from placing real people in highly artificial, highly unreal settings that conform to preexisting narratives, and then watching those real people have real emotions, real reactions, to those phony environments: we presumably take pleasure in watching the real tears of jealousy, the real awkwardness (and God knows what else) on the wedding night, the real screams of terror.

Why, one wonders, this great thirst on the part of the electorate at this juncture in American history for “reality” shows—by which of course we mean entertainments designed, ultimately, to produce also in the spectators real if artificially stimulated emotions? One explanation suggested itself when I recently came across a passage in a popular book about the ancient Roman games, in which the word “real” kept cropping up:

Indeed, it is interesting to note that the most dramatic increase in the games’ popularity occurred during the first two centuries AD, when peace throughout the Empire provided little opportunity for real warfare. In the absence of real battles in other parts of the Empire, the people made do with artificial battles (although real enough for the participants), the transformation of war into a spectator sport. [emphases mine]
The great republic become a bloated, endlessly self-justifying empire; the stagnating sense of stasis, the anomie that results from an excess of material comfort and a dearth of meaningful civic activity; the vampiric yearning for stimulation that is yet always necessarily prurient and second-hand, once the chance for real involvement in the operations of the polity has been lost, or abandoned; the substitution of overblown spectacle for true drama, the addictive need for stimulation at any cost, even, and eventually, the cost of the dignity of other human beings. And endless, endless games, games, games. Are there parallels between the classical world and contemporary pop culture? Oh yes, I think so. I hope to have demonstrated that they are worth talking about today; whether they are worth celebrating is another matter entirely.
COMMENT

On Aesthetics, Current Movies, and Popular Politics

Kirk Ormand
First, let me thank Daniel Mendelsohn and Danielle Allen for their invigorating papers, on which I offer the briefest of comments. I should say that my remarks will be less a critique of what has gone before than, I hope, a bridge to what comes after.

I want to talk today about three related events. First, there is the interesting but contested appearance of renewed interest in things Classical in American popular culture; second is the phenomenon, alluded to by Professor Allen, that enrollments in Classics courses and especially the languages is, undeniably, improved in the past few years; and third, the changing function of Classics within the Liberal Arts curriculum over the last 40 years. With regard to this last topic, I will dwell at some length on the fact that the last great change to the curriculum of undergraduate classics departments dates to the early 1970's; it is time to think about what the next change should be, and why.

As Mr. Mendelsohn points out, on some level the resurgence of interest in the Classical world is more alleged than real. The current output is not all that great, compared to the number of, say, movies about Hercules in the 50's and 60's. It does come after a certain dearth, however, and that is why it is noticeable. Even this dearth has been far from absolute; by it, I refer to the lack of large-scale epic extravaganzas (on the large screen of cinema, not the small screen of television) that followed the monumental commercial disaster of the 1963 Cleopatra.25 That movie effectively put an end to the sword-and-sandal epic for some thirty years. Even so, the alert fanatic can point out that in 1977 George Lucas began the interminable Star Wars triple-trilogy, and that the plot of the first three movies is, slavishly indebted to the "monomyth" described by Joseph Campbell's Hero with a Thousand Faces, itself largely dependent on his readings Greek

25 For discussion of the budget, scandal, and commercial failure, see Solomon 2001, 67-75.
I won't bore you with the details, I simply agree with Mr. Mendelsohn that, in one form or another, the Classics, like the Rich, have always been with us.

If our excitement about movies like *Troy* and *Alexander* is somewhat unwarranted, however, Professor Allen is right to note that in undergraduate colleges Classics are on the rise. I teach at a small, elite liberal arts school. Our department consists of three professors, as it has since the 1940's. This year we are graduating a record 18 majors in Classics, 2/3 of them in the more rigorous language tracks. I also teach the Classical Myth class -- I am, in fact, in the middle of it now -- and this year I had to raise the enrollment to 70, and I still turned away students. For some of you, I realize, 70 students is a small class, but at Oberlin it is huge. And as much as I would like to attribute these enrollment figures to my overwhelming personal magnetism, the fact is that we could hire a St. Bernard to teach Myth and it would still fill to capacity. There is something going on in the national zeitgeist.

I doubt that we will be able to determine the origin, or the cause, of this rising interest. Myths of origin are always, in any case, invented after the fact in order to explain the way things are now. I am concerned, however, that we recognize this moment and capitalize on it. I say that in politically blunt terms, because we face a blunt political battle.

In order to begin looking about this moment, then, let me talk a bit about the way that colleges in general, and Classics as a discipline, have changed over the last forty years. Professor Allen has already gone into changing college demographics in some detail. The set of statistics that I will refer to all come from the National Center for Education Statistics, a division of the US government. Between 1972 and 1998, then, the
percentage of high-school students who have attended college rose from 49% to 64%, where it has held steady ever since. That is a big jump. [Most of the breakdowns of this one statistic are fairly predictable: the rate of change has been higher for women than for men, and indeed, a higher percentage of women now attend college than do men. Low income families have made a large jump, from 26% in 1972 to the high 40s and low 50's in the last 5 years, while middle income families have gone from the low- to mid-40s to the high 50's-low 60's; high income families started near 64% and are now near 80%. Blacks have made greater gains than Hispanics, though both groups continue to lag behind whites.]

In other words, college education has, in my lifetime, become significantly more democratic. More people are attending college, and while the political elites -- white, upper class -- still have the highest rate of college attendance, they are attending with an increasing number of classmates who are, one way or another, not elite. Perhaps the most interesting statistic from the last 15 years has to do with the educational level of students' parents. From 1992 on, students whose parents had a high school diploma have attended at a rate in the mid 50 percents. Parents with some college, in the 60 to 70 percents. Bachelor's degree, in the low to mid 80 percents. These numbers are all consistent. In the category of students whose parents had less than a high school education, however, we see wild fluctuation from year to year, from a low in 1995 (27.3%) to a high in 1997 (51.4%), leveling off in the most recent years at around 44%. People who would not have gone to college 20 years ago are going today.

Coincidentally, this relative democratizing of college education corresponds with what I think of as the great identity crisis of Classics as a discipline. We can mark this
event in any number of ways, but one convenient date is 1960, in which the colleges of Cambridge and Oxford ceased to require knowledge of Latin for admission. This shift marks, of course, the end of a long series of changes in the status of Classics as a discipline.\textsuperscript{26} Though the arguments marshaled to support such a position varied widely, it is safe to say that the function of Classics previous to 1960 was, largely, to reproduce the elite class. If this was not done through the content of the material itself -- a mark a gentleman being the ability to answer the question "Who chased whom around the walls of what?" -- then through the salutary personal discipline necessary to learn the languages. As the introduction to Balbus, a 1934 elementary Latin text put it, "Nothing worth having is bought without some pain...the grammar must be mastered; there must be some lack of firmness and determination in the character of the boy who cannot -- or will not -- master it. This is probably the chief reason why it is, and no doubt will continue to be, a key subject for matriculation, and an essential one for entry into the professions."\textsuperscript{27}

When Latin was no longer required, however, and with an increasing and more diverse population attending college, Classics departments in the 60's and 70's felt themselves to be under siege. The question began to be asked: "What exactly is this degree good for? What can I do with it?" We have tried a number of different answers to this question, some based on content, and others on pure form. Unfortunately, we have not come up with arguments that are significantly different from those used previously, when studying classics was an explicitly elitist project. We have argued, for example, that a familiarity with the literature, philosophy, and history of Greece and Rome is inherently good because of the self-evident greatness of these subjects. Such arguments have faced

\textsuperscript{27} Cited in Stray, 281.
significant challenges in the increasingly multicultural academy, however. It turns out that other people, at other times, also produced some pretty good stuff. In the late 80's the right wing simply reappropriated an earlier class logic as an answer to such multiculturalism, and we got Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, and E.D. Hirsh's book promoting its narrow and normative concept of "cultural literacy." Other arguments have depended on the usefulness of learning Latin and Greek as a form of mental gymnastics, a keen knowledge of the rules of the Greek verb apparently leading to nimbleness of thought and superior reasoning capabilities when faced with the uneven parallel bars of life. And while I have used all of these arguments myself in various contexts, it remains true that we no longer have the clear sense of what our purpose is in the world that we once did. It is hard to see how, exactly, a knowledge of Thucydides is a fast track to high-paying and rewarding career, even if we do believe that it leads to a meaningful mode of life.

Classics departments in the 60's faced with an increasingly competitive marketplace realized they needed to do something. They responded with a curious answer to the pressures of increasing numbers of students who had no Latin and less Greek, and to the greedy and imperious stares of their deans. They invented, sometime in the late 60's or early '70's, the Classical Myth class. The Myth class appears first in the Oberlin college catalogue in the 1974-75 college year; it was taught, I am surprised to say, by the venerable Charles Murphy. In the next year it was taken over by my predecessor, James Helm; in 1975-6 year Tom Van Nortwick, currently my senior

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colleague, but then the young buck in the department also offered "The Ulysses Theme in European Literature," and in 1976-7 "The House of Atreus: the Transmigration of a Myth."

Let me be blunt. The Myth class saved Classics. It kept the wolves at bay. It still does so. Whenever deans look at my enrollments for 300-level Greek Lyric Poetry, I point to the 70 students in my Myth class; another year survived without going under the knife. Moreover, the Myth class was, I contend, the last significant change to the undergraduate Classics curriculum. There have been, to be sure, minor changes since. Most colleges offer some version of Women in Antiquity, and many now offer Ancient Sexuality, faced with the dazzling intellectual developments of feminism, queer theory, and social history in the last 30 years. But these courses are not offered with nearly the frequency of Myth, and have nothing like the enrollments of Myth. Myth is a Leviathan.

How well did it answer the questions of the 60's and 70's? Not so well. Nobody who takes my myth class has any better idea than they did before of what to do with a degree in Classics. We have not answered the "relevance" question. What we have answered is interest. We saw a demand and we filled it.

Now, hardly anybody I know who teaches Myth loves teaching it. And nobody feels qualified to teach it. It is a class that could hardly have existed before the advent of structuralism gave us a method by which to analyze stories in the abstract, to chart their narrative elements in tables divorced of all the cultural trappings of the texts that contain those elements. And every year I meet an eager first-year who tells me that she wants to major in Mythology, and I am forced to explain, as gently as I can, that Mythology is not a discipline, and that there is not anyone at Oberlin who specializes in it, and there are no
graduate programs in it. But if Myth failed to make us relevant, it has made us popular.

Myth was our answer to the economic pressures of the last generation, if not the ideological ones.

Now, here we are today. I suggest that the moment of Myth has, if not run its course, at least opened the door to another kind of moment. We do have these students, bright-eyed with interest. And we do have movies and TV shows and this zeitgeist. The question is, what are we going to do with it?

Now, Mr. Mendelsohn has suggested, not only here today, but in a series of learned and engaging critical reviews that part of the problem with our recent films like *Troy* and *Alexander* is that they fail, not wholly in terms of content -- which they sometimes get sort of right -- but in terms of aesthetics. In each review is a moment which Mr. Mendelsohn himself has referred to (quite charmingly) as "the Mendelsohn takedown."

Allow me to quote from Professor Mendelsohn's review of *Troy*: "In Homer, war can be hell, but just as often it's sheer heaven. If you don't get this, you don't get Homer—and you don't, really, get epic either, a genre whose amplitude and grandeur are reflections not of the number of events that take place in it, but rather the splendor of its subject, which is as beautiful as it is terrible." In short, Petersen is a lousy reader of the *Iliad*, and that's the problem with his long, overblown, weirdly detailed movie. So no, I also do not see much of virtue in most of these movies themselves. But I do see virtue in producing people who can read them. More on that in a minute.

Today Mr. Mendelsohn has gone on to spin out a more explicitly political argument, one with which I largely agree, though I could quibble with the details. By the time that we get to reality TV, Mr. Mendelsohn has set up a familiar dichotomy. One the
one hand Homer, Tragedy, the Greeks, and the Democracy that was Athens. On the other, gladiators, the Roman Empire in all its decadence, bread and circuses and, unfortunately, us. [Of course, one could point out that the era of Greek Democracy barely lasted 150 years, with a significant interruption 2/3 of the way through, and ended with events like the death of Socrates; that Rome produced, in addition to gladitorial combat, some of the sharpest social criticism the world has ever seen. Though I agree with Mr. Mendelsohn's criticisms of *Troy, Alexander, The Frogs,* and even *Medeia,* I could also argue that our culture is not solely represented by the trivial, the overblown, and the sentimental. But I don't want to enter into these quibbles. ] I do want to pick up the political engagement that Mr. Mendelsohn gestures towards (and which, I must point out, he has been actively engaged in elsewhere himself).

I want to move into politics, because it seems to me that the realm of politics that our discipline has particularly entered the American popular consciousness of late. For Classics, that darling subject of Leo-Straussian Allan Bloom a generation ago, is also the darling of the neocons who currently control the Executive branch of the United States. Indeed, I think that here we really do see a surge of interest; I doubt if at any time in the last fifty years have the readers of the *LA Times,* the *Times Review of Books,* and the *New Yorker* been so aware of the Thucydides and 5th century Athenian history as they are now. It is, indeed, partly as a response to such ideological maneuvers that Peterson -- ineptly, I agree -- tried to depict Agamemnon as tyrant bent on World Domination.

Let us talk, briefly, about Victor Davis Hanson. Hanson, as you probably know, is a great favorite of our Vice President. And Hanson has been an unapologetic apologist for the current administration's policy of a pre-emptive strike and for our continued
"liberation" of the Iraqi people. My own views on the war in Iraq may not be yours. I don't insist that they be so. But I do want to point out that Hanson has traded mightily on his authority as a Classical Historian to support our current political action, and he has done so through a series of readings of Greek History that can only be called distortions. Mr. Mendelsohn has already pointed out several of these, in his *New Yorker* review of Donald Kagan's new book on the Peloponnesian war. In his paper today, Mr. Mendelsohn makes a slightly different move: he suggests that the neocons who want us all to be the Greeks have it wrong -- that if anything, we are the Roman Empire. And this is an argument worth taking up, for you will notice that the Classicists who are lending their authority to the neocon argument are primarily Hellenists, and they never seem to want to claim that we are Rome. Rome is not us; as recent scholarly work on Roman movies from the 40's and 50's has shown, the Romans have British accents and the Christians have American accents.29 Similarly, today, Rome usually equals decadence. It is necessary, therefore, that in the necon imagination, we are Athens, often the Athens of Pericles (as in Hanson's most recent book, *A War Like No Other*).

One example. In April of 2003 (ancient history), Hanson published a piece in the *LA Times* in which he argued that America's invasion of Iraq was simply the latest in a series of difficult but important historical moments in which democracies have fought against evil empires, and in so doing made the world better. He credits the current administration for reminding us of "these ancient, tragic truths." Note the gravitas and hint of regret that, alas, the world is not a better place. Hanson then turns to historical examples, and suggests, somewhat counter-intuitively, that the American invasion of Iraq

29 See, e.g., M. Winkler 2001. Perhaps it is also worth pointing out that in Tim Burton's disastrously funny *Planet of the Apes*, the Apes are clearly based on the Romans of an earlier era of sword-and-sandal movie.
was parallel to Athens' defense against the Persian invasion at Marathon in 490BCE. (In case you find this analogy confusing, I assure you that Hanson sees us as Athens and Iraq as Persia). The real clincher comes when Hanson argues that another such example is the battle of Thermopylae where, as he says "we got there late." We? Who is this "we?" Representatives, if I read correctly, of democracy. But of course, the 300 heroes who died at Thermopylae were Spartans, as Hanson, a Professor of Ancient History knows. And Sparta was not a democracy.

Well, the problems are legion. The difficulty, as Prof. Allen has pointed out, is that ancient history is something of a blank map. It lends itself to sloppy analogy because it exists in our imaginations as both a series of originary myths and as a golden age, in which Empires were Democratic and you know who the good guys are. This, though I find Mr. Mendelsohn's dichotomy a bit too easy, is the value of suggesting that we are more like Nero's Rome than Pericles' Athens; it provides an answer in kind.

At the risk of calling for just another false utopia, I want to hold on to the kind of careful aesthetic reading that Mr. Mendelsohn and Professor Allen have done of so much film, literature, and indeed history, and I want us to make it a model for our students. Our students are a bright lot, and right now, for whatever reason, they are interested in our subject. Our goal, I think, is to teach them to read so that, faced with the kind of messy mishmash that Hanson has been putting out, they would feel confident in simply standing up and saying "wait a minute -- that's not right."

That sounds easy enough. But it won't be. Changing an ethos is nearly impossible; all I want to do is push it in a useful direction, which will be hard enough. It means, in part, that we need to decide that this is the purpose -- or one purpose, anyway --
of a Classical education: to develop sufficient aesthetic sense to be able to function as alert citizens. If we are going to use the past to think through the present, we ought to actually try to understand that past. That's an old-fashioned view, I suppose, but one that I think current popular and political culture leaves open to us. The greater challenge, however, is to decide what this means for our curriculum. If myth, imperfectly, answered some of the challenge of the 70's, what should we do now to answer this pressing political challenge? If, in the terms of the fashion world, Orange is the new Pink, and Brown is the new Black, what undergraduate course do we invent to be the new Mythology?

Thank you.
Table 20-1. Percentage of high school completers who were enrolled in college the October after completing high school, by family income and race/ethnicity: 1972–2003

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— Not available. Data on family income were not available in 1974.
† Not applicable because data for one of the three consecutive years are missing or one of the years is not applicable.

1 Low income is the bottom 20 percent of all family incomes, high income is the top 20 percent of all family incomes, and middle income is the 60 percent in between. See supplemental note 2 for further discussion.
2 Included in the total but not shown separately are high school completers from other racial/ethnic groups. Black includes African American and Hispanic includes Latino. Race categories exclude Hispanic origin unless specified.
3 Due to small sample sizes for the low-income, Black, and Hispanic categories, 3-year averages also were calculated for each category. For example, the 3-year average for Blacks in 1977 is the average percentage of Black high school completers ages 16–24 who were enrolled in college the October after completing high school in 1976, 1977, and 1978.

NOTE: Includes those ages 16–24 completing high school in a given year. The Current Population Survey (CPS) questions used to obtain educational attainment were changed in 1992. In 1994, the survey methodology for the CPS was changed and weights were adjusted. See supplemental note 2 for further discussion. Some estimates are revised slightly from those published previously.

Table 20-2. Percentage of high school completers who were enrolled in college the October after completing high school, by sex and type of institution: 1972–2003

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—Not available. Data on type of institution were not collected until 1973.

1 For the years 1973 through 1986, among high school completers ages 16–24 who enrolled immediately in college, about 3–9 percent were not asked the question about the type of institution attended due to a skip pattern in the Current Population Survey (CPS). Such respondents were assumed to have the same probability of enrolling at a 2- or 4-year institution as those who were asked the question.

NOTE: Includes those ages 16-24 completing high school in a given year. The CPS questions used to obtain educational attainment were changed in 1992. In 1994, the survey methodology for the CPS was changed and weights were adjusted. See supplemental note 2 for further discussion. Detail may not sum to totals because of rounding. Some estimates are revised from those published previously.

### Table 20-3. Percentage of high school completers who were enrolled in college the October after completing high school, by parents’ education: 1992–2003

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¹ Parents’ education is defined as either the highest educational attainment of the two parents who reside with the student or, if only one parent is in the residence, the highest educational attainment of that parent; when neither parent resides with the student, it is defined as the highest educational attainment of the head of the household.

² Parents’ education is not available for those who do not live with their parents and who are classified as the head of the household (not including those who live in college dormitories) and for those whose parents’ educational attainment was not reported. About 9–14 percent of high school completers ages 16–24 were in this category for the period covered.

**NOTE:** Includes those ages 16–24 completing high school in a given year. The Current Population Survey (CPS) questions used to obtain educational attainment were changed in 1992. In 1994, the survey methodology for the CPS was changed and weights were adjusted. See supplemental note 2 for further discussion. Some estimates are revised slightly from those published previously.
Works Cited


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