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Myth, Performance, Poetics—
the Gaze from Classics

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Almost thirty years ago, Sally Humphreys, then a member of the Departments of Anthropology and History at University College London, wrote that

the relation between Classics and Anthropology must be a relation of active debate. It is difficult, if not impossible, to gain an understanding of the methods and critical standards in argument of another discipline without personal contact and discussion. Up to the First World War both classicists and anthropologists took it for granted that their relationship should be one of exchange of ideas and collaboration in developing theory; we have to try to recreate this situation."

Since then, much water has flowed under various bridges in both disciplines. While each side has been occupied eyeing somewhat erratic ebb and floods of thought by its own embankments, the larger task of making connections between these two disciplines (or disciplinary tribes) has been largely ignored. Humphreys’ notion of bringing together classicists and anthropologists continues to be a desideratum. It is my hope that future meetings of workers on both sides can follow the innovative lead given by the organizers’ inclusion of classics in the wide-ranging Syros conference, “Anthropology, Now!”

My title alludes to the gaze. It will be worthwhile to ponder, first, this steady one-way stare, as it has been directed for more than a century by classicists toward anthropology. Any gaze can be baleful—like Medusa’s head, it can petrify its object—and the object, in this case, has certainly shifted while many on the side of classics have tried to steady it. A list of some magic phrases might characterize the attractions that anthropology has traditionally held over classicists, from Sir James George Frazer until
recent times: to cite a few, “fieldwork”; “living informants”; “a fully synchronous view”; “the truly local”; “ethnographic confirmation.” A critical look at these elements of the gaze soon strips them of their glamour, however. The fetishization of fieldwork, for one, has certainly become suspect among practitioners, whereas the temptation is still strong for those classicists reacting against the field’s text fixation to prize anything not derived from books.4 There is a kind of one-upmanship that can take the form of attempting a “proof” of an argument by citing “real” information from ethnography—in this variation of the gaze, living informants, fieldwork, and the thirst for parallels all combine. Fortunately, this kind of argument has begun to die down, but it can still be found in the footnotes of books and articles, especially on ancient myth and history.

In my own specialization, the study of Homeric poetry—often a lightning rod for broader debates within classics—a variety of “fieldwork” fetishes have brought about a serious and abiding divide between “oralists,” on the one side, who have tried to propound arguments about Homer by using Milman Parry and Albert Lord’s work with singers of oral epics in Bosnia and Montenegro, and on the other side, purist or “scripsist” classicists, who insist that Homer was a genius transcending his tradition, a Virgil or a John Milton avant la lettre.5 Thus, the former Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford can airily dismiss Serbo-Croatian analogues for epic composition while acknowledging that he does not know how to read a word of the language.6 But a foothold for his disdain may have been given by the initial stance of oralists who pressed parallels into service as proofs, by mistaking fieldwork as the last word.7 In recent years, the number and quality of ethnographies of poetry-in-social-use, many of them highly relevant to Homeric epic, have increased; unfortunately, the opposition dwells on the last generation’s faults and ignores the new.8

As for “living informants”—that desire goes back all the way to antiquity. After all, Socrates himself, in Plato’s *Apology*, thought that one of the best things about his being put to death was the opportunity to meet with Homer, Hesiod, and the other great names of the past—in other words, to dispense with books and get his information live, as it were. “Men of the jury, what would a person give to interrogate the man who led the great expedition to Troy or Odysseus or Sisyphus or a myriad other people, men and women? Unbelievable happiness that would be—to converse with, be with, and examine them, wouldn’t it?”9 Neither he nor many classicists since seem to have considered what anthropologists know by experience—live informants in fact can be a real pain. At least the dead, as
represented in our texts, do not correct you, take you offtrack, or exhibit the annoying habit of poking holes in your preconceptions.  

Finally, there is that double image (itself probably an illusion) that classicists have tended to gaze at with desire, namely, the anthropologist’s ability to work with local knowledge at a fine-grained scale and to tease out a “thick description.” In the case of the Greeks, especially, this desire must always remain a mirage. For since the eighth century B.C.E., the local, “epichoric” traditions of Greek lands seem to have been regularly re-shaped and even repressed by competing versions of “Greekness” in the form of Panhellenic ideology, and later, Athenocentric culture. And since we cannot have the fieldwork experience and must rely on texts, classicists are stuck with a cleaned-up, thin veneer of what may have been going on in any one of the many far-flung Greek-speaking places, from Marseille to the Black Sea.

Here the text-based classicists (philologists and historians) traditionally have yielded to the archaeologists to get an idea, however vague, of what life was like in, say, the Dark Ages, in places outside Athens. The last generation of work, however, in such places as Euboea, Cyprus, Sicily, and the Argolid has revealed more than ever that higher-level affairs, such as the construction of identity, is never confined simply to verbal records. Such institutions as hero-cult or innovations like monumental temple construction represent complicated, ideologically generated responses to various sociopolitical situations. The classical archaeologist deals with these and has as much to learn as the classical text reader does, from good anthropological work about mentalities, ethnos-constructions, and the interplay of center with periphery.

It might be argued that a new postprocessual strain of classical archaeology, emerging from the work of Anthony Snodgrass and his Cambridge students, has taken up this challenge and now in fact offers the lead to other workers within the discipline called classics. This is all the more gladdening since, from its start in the 1870s until recently, classical archaeology had been a problematic stepchild for the prevailing textual interpreters, tightly reined in and focused on high-art objects, lest it give the lie to the usefully idealized Hellenism constructed by the heirs of Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Twenty years ago, Humphreys could write that archaeology in Greece “has still scarcely been touched by the new ideas developing in other fields” and consisted mostly of excavating sites and examining artifacts, rather than studying communities and local culture. That has changed.
So much, then, for the self-deceptions and desires involved in the way classics has gazed at anthropology in the past few generations. As is well known, a gaze can also mirror, so that the desired object sees its own image in return. With this in mind, I offer some reflections on what classics—apart from archaeology—has been doing over the past few years with the results and methods of anthropological work. I exclude from this discussion several rising tides of thought that have floated both our boats but that are not confined to anthropology—for instance, gender studies, new historicism, Bakhtinian dialogics, and varieties of structuralism, poststructuralism, and semiotics. This very personal view will, I trust, make clear several things: first, that there is a real thirst in the field for methodologies that can help us study ancient culture with sophistication and depth; second, that classics, as usual, is about a decade behind the cutting edge in awareness and use of the current work (a gap such conferences as that on Syros can shrink); and third, that classics, in turn, can and should provide both comparative material and methodological help, especially since it has long been involved with philology. This “art of reading slowly” (Nietzsche’s phrase for his original field of work) is, after all, a transferable skill that can be applied to any cultural “text.”

Before speaking of three special cases, let me sketch the broader changes within the study of classics that we might justly credit to an anthropological outlook. Classicists deal with, or purport to, the entire range of cultural forms and productions stemming from Greece and Rome. Of course, the temporal and spatial boundaries of such study have always been hard to determine. Over the twentieth century, such study fluctuated between an all-embracing Altertumswissenschaft (scientific and positivist study of everything from pots to poems) to a more narrowly defined “humanist” core—the study of texts above all, with certain serious poetry and philosophy given privileged position and the “classic” eras of fifth-century Athens and Augustan Rome elevated to special prominence. One welcome sign of progress during the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century is the increasing awareness (though not canonization) of areas that had been considered (sometimes literally) peripheral: late antiquity; Neoplatonism; the transmission of Greek literature in Arabic; the phenomenon of Greek colonization; the local history of Roman provinces, borders, and the role of extra-polis sanctuaries; and the status and roles of women, slaves, children, and the elderly, to name a few. Examining these areas naturally involves looking at encounters with the Other (barbaroi to the Greeks), questions of ethnicity, and cross-cultural negotiations. Borrowing from Annales school history to some extent provided the intellectual
underpinning for such investigations, and more straightforward appeals to social anthropology strengthened the effort. Of course, there has been no master figure organizing or inspiring this new acceptance of unfamiliar methodology, no Frazer to lead the way. Instead, scholars have come to the comparative and theoretical materials on their own bypaths, or through word-of-mouth recommendations on what’s “out there” worth reading—perhaps a healthier situation, all told.

To turn to some specifics: the first area of concentration worth remarking is the wealth of new work that deals with the study of spectacle and display. The invention of Western drama in Athens in the late sixth century has been subject to reexamination in terms of political acting out, group identity formation, and self-presentation. The origins of this state-theater within the artistic program of the Athenian tyrant dynasty, the Peisistratids (or perhaps Cleisthenes, the succeeding “democrat”) is no longer swept aside as an embarrassment—it means something, and a number of scholars have tried to say what. A glance at the recent Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy will show that a good third of the volume is devoted to locating Greek theater within this and other social structures. Two generations ago, critics like Bernard Knox could read Oedipus Tyrannus as a universal tragedy about failure of human intelligence; one generation ago, the play became a tissue of structurally opposed forces. These days, it is about fifth-century Athenian self-image as constructed through the representation of thirteenth-century B.C.E. political disasters in another city-state, Thebes. Oliver Taplin at Oxford, Simon Goldhill at Cambridge, and their students are most concerned with these issues today. In the case of this particular mythic complex, it is a pleasure to see nonclassicists taking a new lead, as in the current work of Neni Pournourgia on Oedipus as archetypal figure of the anthropologist. I expect such work will in turn generate a new wave of interest in rereading, anthropologically, other ancient dramas.

A variation on this brand of research focuses on festivals, processions, athletic games, and public rituals as interconnected means of political and social expression. The names Clifford Geertz and Victor Turner are prominent here, as you might expect. The phrase “theater culture” recurs often. A compendium that might stand to summarize this approach is the volume of papers from a conference at Wellesley in 1990, Cultural Poetics in Archaic Greece. Such approaches as those represented in the volume open up questions earlier classicists had not thought to ask: Why are statues of Olympic victors thought to possess magical powers when displayed in the city-state? Why did Athenians choose to play along with the notion
that a local girl dressed as Athena was really the goddess, physically accompanying the tyrant Peisistratus back to power? Why was it crucial that eighteen-year-old Athenian warriors got the best seats at the Theater of Dionysus? Answers to such questions center on the intertwining of “reality” and “display”—or to put it another way, in sixth- through fourth-century Athens, “theater” was not the delimited, deracinated phenomenon we watch now but a crystallization of processes one could find throughout culture, from political “acting” to philosophical self-presentation. A populace expected scene setting and drama, whatever the venue. It is not surprising that we find in such sources as pseudo-Plutarch’s Lives of the Ten Orators the mention of professional actors working as advisers for political speakers like Demosthenes. The material for this sort of study is as old as the texts transmitted from antiquity; what makes the analysis fresh is the newfound appreciation of general cohesive notions, of a set of shared symbols articulating a social “poetics” that generates meaning through gesture and event.

Classicists have also been emboldened of late to move beyond the hot “histrionic” culture of classical Athens. A second key area of research now ongoing has to do with the overarching institutions, beyond the local city-state, that defined what it was to be Greek, starting around 800 B.C.E. Here the role of Delphi has become clearer thanks to comparative data and viewpoints taken from work on state formation, colonialism, and elites. Carol Dougherty has written on the poetics of colonization—how linguistic strategies, dictated by Delphi, “naturalized” Greek expansion into new lands. Lisa Maurizio, through an exhaustive comparative study of oracles, has delineated the complex representations and possible realities behind the Pythia at Delphi. In my work on the Seven Sages—a kind of dream team of poets and politicians sponsored by an elite at Delphi in the sixth century—and on the depiction of Solon, the Athenian poet-politician, comparative work on ancient India and modern Panama helped define the typology and dynamics of such groups. In this area, there seems to be real promise for the collaboration of anthropologists, political scientists, archaeologists, and philologists.

The two areas I have already mentioned deal, inevitably, with the phenomenon of Greek myth. I suspect that this is a term that has slipped out of usage among ethnographers in recent years. Whether or not Greek myth, or “myth” taken categorically, is of any interest anymore to anthropologists, it remains a staple of the teaching that classicists do daily. (Indeed, for many undergraduate audiences “the ancient world” appears to be coextensive with “myth.”) The structuralist wave that hit classics in the
1970s and only subsided about 1990 took myth for granted, as a transparent concept and tool, while it explored the way traditional tales interacted with Greek social life. There remained a suspicion among a few, however, that “myth” was an etic rather than emic category.35

The evolution of this term, myth, which was to become a central category for classics and anthropology, had oddly enough been passed over in discussions of the larger concepts.36 It had always been recognized that muthos, its etymon, appears to function as one of several synonyms for word in Homeric Greek. On investigation, the word muthos is found to haul much more semantic weight. Taking account of context, it means something like “authoritative utterance, performed at length, before an audience, with full attention to detail and with focus on illocutionary force.”37 Men are almost exclusively the speakers of muthoi in Homer. There are three genres of speaking covered by the term: displays of memory, directives, and insults. Women, like Helen of Troy, perform one powerful subcategory (an elaborate and highly stylized one that can intertwine the various genres)—lament.38

Homeric poetry no doubt stylizes the muthoi, but what it stylizes is something that probably existed as a social reality in the eighth through sixth centuries B.C.E. Here, we can call on the ethnography of speaking, and rich work on social performance—the former represented by Joel Sherzer, Keith Basso, Charles Briggs, Richard Bauman, and others; the latter, for my purposes, by Michael Herzfeld and Nadia Seremetakis.39 We might consider that muthos in archaic Greece was essentially a performance of the self, in an agonistic setting not unlike those described in modern Crete and in Mani. How does this help us understand the category of “myth”? I suggest that myth—in the sense of a story about gods and heroes of the past—evolved easily from muthos, as “authoritative utterance.” When, in the Iliad, Diomedes of Argos and Glaukos of Lycia meet,40 we have the first intercultural exchange represented in European literature (which is also, at least in the narrator’s view, the first bad bargain). These men proceed to define themselves by nothing less than an agonistic exchange of stories about their own ancestors, people who from the point of view of later Greeks are indexed as “heroes” both in ritual cult and in poetry.41 Muthos becomes myth—in performance. Or put another way, every myth is a performance of identity. You can extrapolate to arrive at just how such an understanding might change the way we look at political, dramatic, and philosophical mythmaking throughout later Greek history, not to mention how we scrutinize the category when using it with a comparative slant.
Whether or not “myth” in any usable sense exists must remain a culture-specific judgment. Most likely, one will want to file it hereafter under “rhetoric.”

It is hard to sum up either a growth spurt or an explosion. They happen, and no amount of hindsight can explain exactly the course of either. What happened when classics opened itself to anthropologically inspired social analysis is somewhere between the two. As my last example, I hope, shows, richly nuanced and accessible anthropological work can help the classicist toward unpacking a concept that itself has played a formative role in anthropological discussion. A similar genealogy of concepts could be—in fact, demands to be—written for other terms and concepts inherited by modern social science from ancient Greek sources. The very notion of a *logos* (a reasoned oral account)—as in anthropology—assumes, after all, a particular worldview and social setting. The ethnography of Herodotus in the fifth century was a *logos*—but we also know that it was a performance meant to please and advise particular audiences of Athenians at certain historical moments. What are the hidden assumptions behind our own contemporary *logoi*? It is gladdening to see that anthropology today is intent on precisely such interrogations, and I welcome the opportunity for classicists to join the dialogue.