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The Cradle of Whose Civilisation?: Reading the Theseus Myth in Riordan's *Percy Jackson* and Ottley's *Requiem for a Beast*.

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I would like to open my discussion with a quotation from Rick Riordan's *The Lightning Thief* (2005), the first in a series of five novels about Percy Jackson, a son of Poseidon coming of age in the early twenty-first century:

> What you call 'Western civilization.' Do you think it's just an abstract concept? No, it's a living force. A collective consciousness that has burned bright for thousands of years. The gods are part of it. You might even say they are the source of it, or at least, they are tied so tightly to it that they couldn't possibly fade, not unless all of Western civilization were obliterated. (Riordan, *Lightning* 72)

As an explicit statement both of appropriated cultural heritage and of presumed cultural superiority, this quotation captures a socio-cultural context inflected both by canonical liberal-humanism and by social Darwinism. Not coincidentally, such social forces shaped an understanding of adolescence as a period of "civilisation" for the individual. Thus, retellings and appropriations of Greek myths offer a convenient site for the simultaneous socialisation and acculturation of contemporary Western youth.

This paper considers the functions of the "Theseus and the Minotaur" myth in two contemporary texts of adolescent masculinity: Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series (2005-2009) and Matt Ottley's *Requiem for a Beast: A Work for Image, Word and Music* (2007). Both Riordan and Ottley make use of classical hero plots in order to facilitate

their narrative explorations of contemporary adolescent men 'coming of age'. These intertextual gestures could easily be read as gestures of alignment with narrative traditions and authority which confer "legitimacy" on Riordan and Ottley, on their texts, and by extension, on their readers.

Within contemporary Western, "democratic" nations, Ancient Greece is often constructed as an origin point, even the "cradle" of Western civilisation. I am interested in the telos that is invoked by describing Ancient Greece as a cradle, and which implicates civilisation as synonymous with personal development. As Stephens and McCallum note, "the extreme position sees the telling and teaching of myths, especially classical, as an aspect of cultural conservation central to the production of children as subjects which are both unified and possess social integrity. This is to ascribe to classical myth a function earlier ages ascribed to the classics as a whole" (68).

What we recognise as a Theseus cycle today—even if "only" derived from pseudo-Apollodorus, Ovid, and Plutarch—is long and complicated. Although episodic, the cycle is unwieldy, ranging from the founding of Athens to the kidnap of Helen. Plutarch tells us:

> When he [Theseus] arrived in Crete, as most of the historians and poets tell us, Ariadne fell in love with him; it was she who gave him the famous thread and taught him how to find his way through the mazes of the Labyrinth, and there he killed the Minotaur and sailed away with Ariadne and the young Athenians (24-25)

Walker asserts that the "fight with the Minotaur has remained the most popular episode in the myth of Theseus, and it may also be the oldest one we know of" (16). It may be also the most potent episode in terms of symbolic resonance. The range of thematics and anxieties which converge in the story of Theseus and the Minotaur include:

- Autonomy of the city-state (nation) versus reparations / obligation to others
- Sacrifice of tomorrow (youths) to pay debts of the past
- Patrilineal inheritance; generational tensions; procreative anxiety figured through father-son relationships and filiality – especially via Aegeus, Minos, and Daedalus
- Obviously, the embodiment of narrative tensions is manifest in
  - Theseus—hero, lost son returned, founder-king of Athens, destroyer of the Minotaur
  - the Minotaur—animal/human, embodied reminder and repression of past sins

  - Ariadne—daughter, traitor, helper, lover, (and in some versions) victim

- And, of course, the saturation and slippage of meanings are manifested and emplotted in the labyrinth itself, "the twistings and turns of a dark, inextricable maze" (Ovid 8:158)

Little wonder that the story of Theseus and the Minotaur makes fertile ground for narratives concerned with national/cultural identities; disrupted/non-normative filiality in patriarchal contexts; monstrosity/humanity (approved subjectivities); and, the heroic.

If we understand adolescence as a "threshold" time in human development, and YA literature as reflecting and shaping thresholds, transitions, and developments, it is not so great a stretch to map the classical on to the contemporary. I turn to Joseph Campbell, for an account of motivation:

> we have not even to risk the adventure alone; for the heroes of all time have gone before us; the labyrinth is thoroughly known; we have only to follow the thread of the hero-path. And where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god; where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves; where we had thought to travel outward, we shall come to the center of our own existence; where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world. (24-25)

Such high goals seem at once slightly ridiculous and perfectly apropros to the adolescent subject as imagined by contemporary popular culture. In the negotiation of self and society, hero narratives offer a convenient template for the narrativisation of adolescence, and come with a great weight of cultural authority (even, for some, "legitimacy"). The labyrinth of adolescence can be simultaneously called up in the name of "truth", and be guaranteed as navigable by the heroic subject.

Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series consists of five novels published from 2005-2009 and covers five crucial years of adolescent development for its protagonist, Perseus Jackson, who readers quickly learn is the son of a mortal woman and Poseidon. Although Percy's name might lead readers to expect an appropriation of the Perseus myths, Riordan engages a wide range of Greek myths and figures in order to construct his fantasy world, where demigod youths are brought together at "Camp Half-Blood" to

learn a skill-set anachronistic in the contemporary era unless one can trace one's heritage to a Greek god.

Where Theseus had multiple "fathers" (including in some accounts, Poseidon), Percy Jackson is a multiple "son" or at least combines the exploits and genealogies of several heroes. In the first novel, for example, Percy defeats the Minotaur (Theseus), Medusa (Perseus), and Procrustes (Theseus).

Over the course of the series, tropes from 'Theseus and the Minotaur' are mobilised as signifiers of the heroic national identity which underpins *Percy Jackson*. In *Battle of the Labryinth* (2008), the labyrinth is endowed with autonomous consciousness, and Daedalus explains that it "is tied to my life force" (Riordan, *Battle* 267). Of more interest, however, is the novel's account of the labyrinth in the context of its status as a metaphor for adolescence. Daedalus is unable to provide Percy with a clue, as he explains:

> Yes . . . the string. I told Luke that the eyes of a clear-sighted mortal are the best guide, but he did not trust me. He was so focused on the idea of a magic item. And the string works. It's not as accurate as your mortal friend here, perhaps. But good enough. (*Battle* 268)

The attempt to endow the implied reader with both mortal vision and heroic agency reveals some of the tensions which the Percy Jackson series both invokes and effaces at individual and national levels.

The socio-political conservatism of the series is made clear in the closures of *The Last Olympian* (2009). The reader is told that, "The connection between Olympus and America is dissolving. If it fails—' / 'The gods won't move on to another country this time,' Thalia said. 'This will be the end of Olympus. The *final* end" (Riordan, *Last* 302). The victory over Kronos thus ensures the survival of Olympus and America. Percy turns down immortality in order to secure acknowledgement by gods of their children (patrilineal legitimacy), and heteronormative romance.

The *Percy Jackson* series' privileging of "Western Civilisation" makes sense in the context of canonicity as ideology: post-Enlightenment projects of canonicity have worked to instantiate liberal-humanism and "civilisation" as synonymous, and to naturalise the project of self-improvement achieved by reading the "right" books. Riordan's series thus takes up not only the classical mythology of Greece but an accompanying project of

socialisation and acculturation into (hetero)normative masculinity that is coded as hegemonic less because of heroism than because of being nationed as "American". As such, the *Percy Jackson* series fits with Lawrence and Jewett's account of a particularly *American* monomyth, which

> pictures a world in which no humans really live. It gives Americans a fantasy land without ambiguities to cloud the moral vision, where the evil empire of enemies is readily discernible, and where they can vicariously (through identification with the superhero) smite evil before it overtakes them. (48)

Ottley's *Requiem for a Beast*, by contrast, suggests that such normative linking of gender, race, and national identity within a hegemonic matrix of 'heroism' are untenable in the postcolonial context of contemporary Australia. Faced with the facts of social and individual histories, Ottley's protagonist self-reflexively uses the Theseus myth in an attempt to reconcile his own location as anti-hero, as representative of the enemy empire, as inheritor and beneficiary of ongoing violence against Indigenous Australia, and as agent.

In his picture book for adolescent readers, Ottley juxtaposes a number of stories about "becoming a man"—primarily, the book juxtaposes a third-person present-tense account of a young man working with cattle in the outback, with a first-person, past-tense account of a young man remembering his childhood, or at least those childhood experiences which may have contributed to him attempting suicide. These childhood experiences include another first-person, past-tense story—told this time by the man's father—of his complicity in the murder of a young Aboriginal child. The narrator is unable to reconcile his father as sanctioned storyteller with the private history his father shares, just as he is unable to reconcile the violence which links privileged masculine and Australian identity, and which both contributes to and is effaced by contemporary national discourses of "Australia".

Formally, *Requiem* juxtaposes words and images, but also juxtaposes the order of five parts or divisions with the disorder of attempts to "civilise" humans, animals, and landscapes. Further, Ottley deploys a register of audible music, including a CD of recordings which themselves juxtapose Western religious cultural traditions with contemporary Bundjalung voices.

The unifying narrative element is the myth of the Minotaur. Ottley exploits the visual and symbolic connections between childhood, nation, livestock, and environment, and represents the "introduced" beast of the bull/man to Australia. The intersections of the myth's elements of hybridity, physicality vs. intellect, imprisonment, the labyrinth, nation, father-son relationships, heroism, individualism vs. community, and gender, is resonant both within Australian culture and history generally, and Ottley's text specifically. That said, the extent to which it resonates with meanings of "Australia" was brought to my attention by Ottley's book!

The centrality of the Minotaur becomes clear early in the text, when a boy dreams of seeing a child in a schoolhouse; in the dream, a man rides a horse and wears a mask with horns; the "beast-man" (Ottley 13) apparently hunts the child; the narrator (the dreamer) reaches for the child, and in that moment, is visually aligned with the reader (a first-person visual focalisation, the outreached hands could be ours) and possibly with the beast-man—the racialised depictions resonate with Australia's history of the "Stolen Generations". In attempting to save the child, the speaker tells us "I heave him [the child] through the window" (13). Readers may wonder how evicting a child from school, from education, is "saving" him.

On the following page, the speaker states, "With my hands frozen on the windowsill, I look back to see the far wall buckle, crack, and give way. The man-beast has smashed his way into the room. And he has changed" (Ottley 14). The change is visual—these images are fragmentary AND appear within fragmented (non)frames—as opposed to the rectilinear frames of the previous page, these are violently-performed images of and about violence. The beast-man has become a man-beast, and he is transformed into the Minotaur.

Attempts at heroism have served to align the speaker with the nemesis/monster. The politics of recognising the Stolen Generations as monstrosity is itself significant, as is the wider politics of collapsing victim and victor identities.

As this is a dream, readers may not be disturbed by the shifting nature of the images, even as the images themselves are disturbing. Because it *is* a dream, however, readers are invited to read this sequence both literally and allegorically or symbolically—"dreams" are understood in contemporary Australian culture as significant in a variety of ways. Is the speaker "processing" Australian history here? His own history? The

reader's history? Is this a manifestation of a personal, individual trauma? It also poses the question of whether or how one might distinguish the personal from the national traumatic.

Remembering his boyhood, the narrator tells of a journey to a museum (a culturally-sanctioned site which often simultaneously displays and masks colonial histories of oppression, appropriation, and exploitation). After technological and natural histories, the boy learns of "mythology", and is told the story of the Centaur and of the Minotaur—the reader, of course, is told along with him (Ottley 60-61). Readers are invited to make intertextual connections, to reflect on childhood experiences of learning, development, and familial relationships, to reflect on power and culture. The boy remembers that, "when we got to the mythology room / and he read me that story, something extraordinary—something profound—lodged itself inside me" (Ottley 60).

The artificial, soothing blue of the museum space, and of the past, gives way to the present, and to pain. The reader knows that the same father who takes his son to a museum has also been directly involved in the cover-up of an Indigenous child's murder. We are no longer distanced from this son, rather we are confronted with the man he has become and the ongoing resonance of past crimes.

The narrator hides his face; he sits at a table much as the boy in the dream earlier did; another beast-man peers through the window and into/through a mirror—on this page, mirror and window are simultaneous. Again, some readers may reflect on Freudian logics of dreaming and repression; may think again about the Minotaur myth as itself a symbolic narrative of the repressed and the "return of the repressed". Nonetheless, the text on the computer screen (Ottley 62) invites readers to consider the connections between the individual cheating of academia and the very real social cheating of the Stolen Generations.

When the speaker asks the following, readers are invited once more and even further, into a self-reflexive reading experience:

> What was it that happened that day? Why did that strange beast follow me—out of the museum and into the rest of my life? It hunted me, tracked me through the years, and slowly drew my spirit—who I was—from me until there was nothing left. And then four years ago almost took me.

> But often through the years, as the beast pursued me, it seemed like something else; something that chased me to the edge of fear, but was beautiful, powerful, desirable but unreachable. (Ottley 63)

The boy who is also the man who is also the beast is trapped in a labyrinth—he is both Minotaur and Theseus, monster and hero.

Kathryn Hume's description of "transpersonal significance for fantastic monsters" (67) in Greek mythology resonates deeply with Ottley's *Requiem*, wherein the personal, the transpersonal, and the political align. An Aboriginal elder's voice frames a narrative that attempts to engage the Stolen Generations, the murder of one boy, the kidnap of another boy, and the "beast" of history. Thus, the book reminds readers that the voice which frames and shapes this narrative should also be understood to frame the nation it both interrogates and celebrates.

Riordan is concerned with the restoration, recognition, and idealisation of a social order where national-cultural stability and filial stability reflect and shape each other. Greek myth is used to structure and authorise that social order. Ottley uses Greek myth as a point of destabilisation, asserting a postcolonial critique of a national-cultural imaginary which attempts to hide plurality and violence beneath outmoded constructs of filiality and nation. Percy becomes a hero through sanctioned violence and simulation of the father; Ottley's boy is heroic because he names violence as unacceptable, in critique of the father.

Perhaps even more than the Theseus myth itself, the Riordan series is obsessed with conflating nation-state with civilisation. Indeed, the level of intensity with which the novels seek to identify the United States with Western Civilisation borders on fetishisation (which, of course, actually suggests a profound sense of lack). Nonetheless, the emphasis on heroic subjectivity as synonymous with American subjectivity extends the political agenda of Greek hero worship: "to legitimize the authority of the city-states and to create a sense of solidarity among their citizens" (Walker 9).

Early in *The Lightning Thief*, a teacher has Percy explain the myth of Kronos disgorging his god-children, and then asks him why "does this matter in real life" (*Lightning* 6). When Percy can't answer this question, he is told that knowledge of Greek mythology "is vitally important" (7). It may be a matter of life-and-death for Percy, but the necessity or even utility of such knowledge for the reader seems less obvious. *Requiem* models an

active reading of mythic narratives as a lens for, rather than the object of, truth. *Requiem* seeks to disrupt rather than naturalise narratives of cultural and physical imperialism, and thus may offer a new vision of the heroic for the twenty-first century.

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