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Spoiling the Egyptians: An Introduction to Resuscitating Paideia

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Abstract

In this article, Helena Sullivan shares the mission statement and vision for the journal *Resuscitating Paideia*. She also explains how reading literature for wisdom looks as it's applied to a particular text, in this case, Homer's *Odyssey*. More specifically, she examines Book V of that epic, in which Odysseus leaves the goddess Kalypso.

Keywords

Paideia, Wisdom, Literature, Homer, Kalypso, Book V, Book 5, The Odyssey, Odysseus, Ogygia, Classical Education

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Spoiling the Egyptians: An Introduction to *Resuscitating Paideia*

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The Mission Statement

English Departments today evince the long-standing notion that theoretical knowledge legitimizes the field of English. Either teach theory or become obsolete.

Enter *Resuscitating Paideia*. This journal seeks to provide a venue for an alternate way of reading literature. In *Resuscitating Paideia*, a free online journal, Cedarville's English Department seeks to foster close readings of great literature—close readings that describe what it is often *actually like* to read a great work. In other words, we seek to publish narratives that discuss how reading literature enlarges human sympathy and revolutionizes human character.

The ancient Greeks called this sort of education *paideia*. Think of it as a sort of mimetic learning on steroids. Reading Homer bequeathed to the young coherent ideals—ones that would inspire them to heroic action. Those seeking publication in this peer-reviewed journal should write about reading for wisdom. In truth, many readers' ideal lives are calibrated by great literature. Many have learned *how to live* from literature. Another way of putting this: Great literature *is great* precisely because its readers learn to read themselves, to cite Proust.

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Any essay submitted for review should explicate specific life lessons, insights, or orthodox theological truths drawn from specific moments or characters in canonical texts. Much has been said, in a more general sense, on why it matters for Christians to read great literature. This journal seeks to publish a range of essays that discuss how, for example, Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* illustrates to its reader the façade of success, how Woolf illuminates the beauty of human consciousness in *To the Lighthouse*, how studying Porter's character Granny Weatherall equipped someone to volunteer in a skilled nursing center, or how Homer presents readers with inspiring possibilities for father/son relationships in *The Odyssey*.

Serious readers have usually fallen in love with reading precisely because they have fallen in love with self-discovery, and, by extension, understanding. In other words, great readers often have thriving ideal lives that have been formed and reinforced by great stories. *Resuscitating Paideia* will provide a forum for these kinds of scholarly discussions of canonical texts. Moreover, we hope this journal will help teachers of literature to answer students' pressing questions about specific texts, questions like "Why are we reading John Keats anyway?" and "Why does reading _____ literature matter for the Christian?"

The Vision

With that in mind, I'm so glad you've found our journal. Here at Cedarville, we're excited about this peer-reviewed, literary journal—a journal that celebrates reading literature for wisdom. And, I should add, we define *wisdom* within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy. This journal is intended for lovers of great literature, for professors and teachers who want to inspire their students to virtuous action, and for students who want to understand how literature can do precisely that.

I've named the journal *Resuscitating Paideia: Reading Literature for Wisdom* in honor of the Ancient Greek's educational

system. The *paideia* system took for granted the connection between stories and the ideal life we frame and narrate to ourselves. But serious readers of literature can ill afford to take this connection for granted anymore. We must, I believe, explicate that vital connection in the clearest terms possible, else we risk students never understanding how and why reading enriches the soul for eternity.

Readers often approach texts with difficult and legitimate questions: “Why am I reading this?” “Will this even do anything to me?” “What does it matter if Christians read Homer or Herbert or Milton or Auden? Who cares?” Many Christian scholars address these concerns, but, in this journal, we hope to provide a venue for those who answer those questions on behalf of specific texts.

I love it when my students ask, “Why am I reading this?” The problem arises when educators don’t try to answer that question, leading some students to ignore or dismiss texts. This question doesn’t have easy answers. But to me, part of the joy in reading literary texts is asking and answering those kinds of questions. Incidentally, I’ve noted that Christian readers tend to read ersatz pop culture texts on, say, faithfulness, which always seem to me to lack the particularity of incarnation necessary for any text to be truly great. Moreover, what better books to read on faithfulness than *Anna Karenina*, *Madame Bovary*, or *Ruth*?

My hope is for readers of the journal to learn to love literature because of the beautiful ideals it can bequeath to its readers. Moreover, I want to explicate the connection between reading and our ideals in order to demonstrate why one should read Shakespeare and Milton over watching *Modern Family*, a show which seems to foster many American’s ideal lives and their ideal peer group, that great director of human belief systems, according to Peter Berger. More so, I see students reading texts, watching shows, and playing videogame stories that give them ideals that will only ever find fulfillment in a virtual world. Thus, they spend their days fulfilling their ideals through the heroic action of fingers clicking on a keyboard and hands

fiddling buttons on a console. I mean to amend this lack of heroic enterprise, even for just a few.

In his *de doctrina Christiana*, Augustine compares the mining of literature for truth to the Israelite despoiling of the Egyptians before their exodus from Egypt:

...if those, however, who are called philosophers happen to have said anything that is true and agreeable to our faith, the Platonists above all, not only should we not be afraid of them, but *we should even claim back for our own use* what they have said, as from its unjust possessors. It is like the Egyptians, who not only had idols and heavy burdens, which the people of Israel abominated and fled from, but also vessels and ornaments of gold and silver [...]. In the same way, while the heathens certainly have counterfeit and superstitious fictions in all their teachings [...] their teachings also contain *liberal disciplines which are more suited to the service of the truth*, as well as a number of most *useful ethical principles*, and some true things are to be found among them about *worshipping only the one God*. (159-160, emphasis mine)

It is with these sorts of truths in mind, along with the doctrine of common grace, that I readily read texts of all sorts for their truth and beauty.

Leaving Kalypso: How Resuscitating Paideia Looks in Practice

In my own life, one of my favorite books, Homer's *Odyssey*, has proven an invaluable source of wisdom for me. In particular, I find myself returning again and again to Book V of that great epic, in which we encounter the immortal Kalypso.

As Book V unfolds, we meet Odysseus for the first time. On Kalypso's island, Odysseus reposes as an ill-at-ease man of pleasure, a sensual utopia's denizen. On Ogygia, this island, Odysseus is a kept man. Here, the goddess Kalypso detains him

as her none-too-willing consort although, admittedly, we do learn that Odysseus did enjoy his life with her at first. As Homer depicts it, Kalypso chains Odysseus to the realm of the senses; she *stimulates him*, gives him a kind of pleasure. In contrast, his wife, Penélopê, whom Odysseus longs for, calls forth his higher emotions—for one, his longing for home, a desire rooted in, yet transcendent of, the senses. In considering this passage, I ask my students to differentiate between feeling and emotion. Sometimes our desires tend toward a feeling that is registered in the senses. Other times our desires tend toward an emotion that *can be* registered in the senses but also transcends them. I explain to my students that I love my daughter with my emotions more than with my feelings. In other words, my emotions do not depend on my visceral experience of her.

For many, their entire lives consist of the pursuit of sensation. This is why Odysseus presents such a worthy ideal, for he leaves Kalypso, abandoning the enslaved life of relaxation and pleasurable attachments, for the free, mortal life of responsibility and emotional devotion. Christians must maintain a high view of this life choice.

In one of the many brilliant moments in Book V, Homer foils Odysseus-on-Ogýgia with the suitors-in-Ithaka. As readers compare these, they will find that both the suitors and Odysseus spend years living off someone else, engrossed in a life of ease, sensual delights, and feasting. But the suitors are lazy, and Odysseus is not. The suitors *choose* this life; Odysseus does not. And to Homer, the hard-working life at home is the best life of all. No Greek Platonism yet. Notice Homer's electric language as he describes Odysseus beginning to build the raft that will help him leave Kalypso's island:

Now the man fell to chopping; when he paused
Twenty tall trees were down. He lopped the branches,
Split the trunks, and trimmed his puncheons true.
Meanwhile Kalypso brought him an augur tool
With which he drilled through all his planks, then drove
Stout pins to bolt them, fitted side by side. (5.252-257)

Despite all that Odysseus turns down here—immortal life with a desirable goddess, immortal life with endless pleasures, no work, no pain—Homer *wants us* to admire Odysseus, *wants us* to think he's made the right decision. How many of us could say that, given the same presumed outcomes (dreary afterlife, which Odysseus has already visited), that we would choose the same way?

Throughout the *Odyssey*, Homer privileges home over utopia. And as a savvy writer would, Homer sets us up to love Odysseus for leaving Kalypso by showing us how much his fatherless son and despondent wife need him to return to Ithaka. Before we ever meet Odysseus at all, we meet his family, ergo the *telemachia* (a term scholars apply to the first five books) that jump-starts the epic. Even without the archetypal character of the faithful wife, the archetypal theme of the son with the absent father, the achingly human archetype of the son who wonders how to become a man, is enough to align our sympathies with Odysseus' struggle to return home, no matter the temptations, no matter the cost.

The more I read Book V of the *Odyssey*, the more I'm convinced that Odysseus's leaving Kalypso functions as a useful ideal for many who are similarly trapped by monstrous pleasures:

1. drug addictions
2. pornography
3. various media addictions

Those teaching Homer could ignite interesting discussions along these lines. In my own classes, I've found students quite willing to discuss the ways in which this passage can serve as a useful metaphor for the present.

I love it when Odysseus leaves Kalypso. I love how he, with honesty, acknowledges her great beauty compared to Penélopê's fading beauty. I love how he builds that boat straight after she tells him that he is free to go. In short, I hope that all readers will aspire to the same ideals Homer, through his descriptions, produces in us. Finally, I hope that all would choose as Odysseus

does, *will choose* as Odysseus does. I pray as much on behalf of my own students.

When I was a teenager, Leaving Kalypso meant choosing to read literature over choosing to read lite-lit. Now, looking back on that decision years later, to my surprise, I find myself possessed of an ideal life under constant calibration. For to read is ever to jar oneself out of equilibrium with oneself. Now, I can echo the sentiments of Randall Jarrell, who wrote in his essay, “The Obscurity of the Poet”:

Art matters not merely because it is the most magnificent ornament and the most nearly unfailing occupation of our lives, but because it is life itself. From Christ to Freud we have believed that, if we know the truth, the truth will set us free: art is indispensable because so much of this truth can be learned through works of art alone—for which of us could have learned for himself what Proust and Chekhov, Hardy and Yeats and Rilke, Shakespeare and Homer learned for us? (21)

Our having waked and walked and talked and eaten can only have taught us so much. A great work of literature affords a vast supply of wisdom, truth, and beauty. And for the young, still setting precedents for life, to read literature can mean a full course in how to grow up.

As I’ve envisioned this journal, I often imagined an adolescent inspired by Homer to leave the Kalypsian world of mind-numbing TV binges and internet-streaming comas for the rich worlds of Robert Bresson’s movies, for the rich worlds of Shakespeare, Milton, Tolstoy, T.S. Eliot, Flannery O’Connor, and, yes, for the rich worlds of The Bible. One’s ideal life of fame, granite countertops, sensory inebriation, shopping and gossip, and casual encounters could morph into an ideal life characterized by self-sacrifice.

Literature and the Ideal Life

But, really? Is this true? Do stories give readers/watchers/hearers ideals that lead to action? I contend that we can best account for a rapid change in social beliefs by a change in a society's ideal peer groups. On this point, I agree with sociologist Peter Berger. But where do our ideal peer groups come from? I say, *stories*. Our ideal lives come from the stories that are most powerful, most attractive to us. From stories, we build our ideal peer group, and from our ideal peer group, we construct our belief systems—or as Peter Berger writes in *A Rumor of Angels*:

For better or for worse, men are social beings. Their “sociality” includes what they think, or believe they “know” about the world. Most of what we “know” we have taken on the authority of others, and it is only as others continue to confirm this “knowledge” that it continues to be plausible to us. It is such socially shared, socially taken-for-granted “knowledge” that allows us to move with a measure of confidence through everyday life. Conversely, the plausibility of “knowledge” that is not socially shared, that is challenged by our fellow men, is imperiled, not just in our dealings with others, but much more importantly in our own minds. (7)

To build on his point, a dramatic change in society's values can best be accounted for by a dramatic change in its ideal peer groups. In the face of our society's ongoing moral revolution, I often ask, “what brought about this change?” In answer to this, I would not guess, “An increased study of orthodoxy, of ethics.” Rather, I would answer, “Everyone started taking their cues from a new storyline. And from that storyline, they internalized a new ideal peer group. And from assimilating that new ideal peer group, they found themselves possessed by a new set of values.” What we believe will make us happiest often motivates us. And happiness has quite a bit to do with the nature of our ideals, the nature of our friendships. A strange fact to consider, we measure our happiness thusly: ideal life subtracted by circumstance.

Now, for the Christian, Christ must be reckoned the protagonist of the world, and the self should become Unnamed Bystander #3, dead in the second scene of the first act. And strange as it seems, such a view of the self provides one with a happier life as a byproduct of self-sacrifice. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Holocaust-survivor Victor Frankl writes, "To the European, it is a characteristic of the American culture that, again and again, one is commanded and ordered to 'be happy.' But happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue" (162). Earlier in the book he writes, "[S]elf-actualization is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence" (Frankl 133).

In the end, the greatest literature always provides its keenest readers with such a trail to happiness, to a new ideal peer group, new ideal life. This has been my own odyssey—from the island of stories with trite, sensational worlds to my home-island of stories with demanding emotional worlds—from Kalypso's Ogygia to Penélopê's Ithaka.

Through this journal, I hope to reach out to—and connect—Christian humanist professors and teachers who also long to draw students into close and meaningful relationships with texts that demand our attention and rereading as literate persons. I think, also, this journal could help revitalize that most ancient of traditions: reading for an informed ideal life, reading for incarnated wisdom.

I hope you enjoy our first issue.

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