

MORE OF A COMMENT THAN A QUESTION: INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY AND THE ROLE OF COMMENTARIES IN THE CLASSICS CLASSROOM

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This resource is an exercise that I used as an “ice-breaker” on the first day of an Intermediate Latin class that I taught in Fall 2019. The below handout contains passages from the ancient Roman poet Ovid’s Latin poem *Metamorphoses*, along with a translation and excerpts from Peter Jones’ (2007) editorial commentary of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, which Columbia students are usually required to purchase and peruse. With “commentary,” I am referring to a work of philological interpretation closely oriented about a primary text. This teaching exercise is grounded in the specific status that critical commentaries of ancient texts hold within the field of Classics. In the words of Kraus (2002),

Commentaries are funny things. [...] They can be described as following the rhythms and agenda of the primary text, and as thereby **fundamentally untouched by ideological or interpretative issues of their own**. Especially in classical studies—the field with which this volume is concerned—commentaries have generally been seen as more closely related to philological textual or historical work than to discursive studies; this affinity is signaled in the very format of a commentary volume, which either **includes or presumes possession and close consultation of the text on which it comments**. [...] This close relationship to historical and philological exegesis has attracted to commentaries evaluative adjectives such as 'empirical,' 'objective,' 'common-sense,' 'scientific' (in the sense of wissenschaftlich), 'positivist,' and—above all—'useful.' (p. 1-2; my emphases)

Central to the critical thrust of this teaching resource is an interrogation of commentaries’ alleged objectivity and self-evidence. The largely uncontested truism, in the field of Classics, that commentaries are scientific and thus objectively truthful has turned them into something similar to hagiographic texts (Smith, 1991). I created this teaching artifact with the aim of exposing the ways in which classical commentaries contribute to a gatekeeping of the discipline, under the guise of prioritizing textual deference. In other words, peripheral and radical interpretations of ancient texts have been systematically

invalidated as subjective distortions of the text, which only neutral and scientific commentaries could safeguard.

For context regarding my use of this teaching exercise, I should clarify that we did not read Ovid in full in this class;¹ the idea was to encourage students to reflect on the nature and implications of the commentaries we use in the discipline of Classics. In particular, I hoped to show that commentaries should not be seen as neutral and objective documents that “explain” texts in univocal and authoritative ways, but that they themselves work as powerful, if subtle, interpretive tools. So, even though we were not going to use the commentary I quoted from in the handout, the learning objective was for students to start building a vocabulary and a mindset to approach commentaries critically.

I first encountered this Ovid commentary, edited by Jones (2007), when I served as Teaching Assistant for Professor Carmela Franklin’s section of Intermediate Latin II in Spring 2019. At the time, I was shocked by the blatantly sexist and inappropriate comments that the editor generously sprinkled throughout his analysis of the original texts. While I did not yet feel empowered enough to drastically address the situation (by using a different commentary altogether, for instance), I was struck by the insightful outrage that some of the students expressed. I am especially grateful to Helen Ruger and Isabell Pride (students in the Spring 2019 class), who sharply pointed out some of the more problematic passages of the commentary, and who were always eager to discuss them with me, the professor, and their peers. I am also indebted to Professor Franklin, who never shied away from such discussions and fostered a class environment that encouraged students to ask difficult questions.

¹ However, the choice of using a commentary of Ovid’s production for this teaching resource was neither causal nor solely dictated by my previous teaching experiences. Recent discussions within the Academy have challenged the status of Western literary canons which uncritically include problematic texts such as Ovid’s poems, where instances of sexual violence are often glamourized. Philological commentaries have contributed to this mystification by opting out of taking firm stances on the problematic contents they analyze (or even by endorsing such contents as instances of passionate love, as we will see below). See McCarter and Tolentino (2019) for a discussion about teaching Ovid as part of the Core Curriculum at Columbia University. For an analysis of how translations of Ovid turn rape into a consensual, if passionate, sex encounter, see McCarter (2018).

This experience is what prompted me to create and use this teaching resource when I finally had my first chance to teach a language class on my own. Mainly, I wanted to challenge my students to uncover all the ways in which commentaries are not neutral interpretive tools. In fact, Jones's sexist remarks are part and parcel of, rather than a deviation from, the biased and subjective analysis that is always inevitably involved in the writing of commentaries. This resource aims to address this problem area, which I see as prevalent in the field of Classics: namely, the idea that ancient texts (and the attending commentaries) are neutral documents without pointed political implications and repercussions. In the context of this field, commentaries are often treated as analytical (and thus scientific and objective) tools with which to bridge this distance between ancient texts and contemporary readers. On the contrary, commentaries are highly subjective interpretative tools, and contribute to fostering a certain ideology and a specific reading of ancient texts. The examples I quote in the handout are especially blatant ones, and rife with sexist and inappropriate comments. I believed that providing such an extreme example would show more forcefully that commentaries are far from neutral and apolitical.

I am grateful for Cat Lambert, Diana Newby, and everyone who took part in the Columbia CTL Learning Community "Citational Practice as Critical Feminist Pedagogy" for guiding me in the process of learning a vocabulary that could adequately express the principles of critical feminist pedagogy that this resource attempts to foster. In particular, it was my hope that students would learn to acknowledge and fight implicit biases hidden in what are often considered neutral texts or readings. The privileged and canonical role that commentaries often have within the field of Classics contributes to enforcing and maintaining hierarchical systems of oppression that ultimately hinder one's free and empowered engagement with the ancient texts. A resource that requires students to be critical towards commentaries, and to expose the biases of those who write them, has the effect of both freeing the primary text and of allowing for a broader range of interpretive viewpoints (and thus, of scholarly practitioners) to be part of a recognized intellectual community. Moreover, doing away with the idea that there exists such a thing as a neutral reading, or that even the seemingly technical aspects of any language do not entail certain ideological implications, can open up new ways of engaging with old materials, and can validate those voices that have too often remained unheard in academia.

Whereas when I first presented students with this resource I did not clearly and effectively articulate the relationship between hegemonic practices of knowledge-making and citational practices, in the future I would choose to spell them out more explicitly. I would want to put particular emphasis on how scholars in the discipline might develop “better strategies for responsibly identifying deeply problematic work without adding to its value” (Jordan-Young & Karkazis, 2019, p. 158). In order to sketch out some preliminary strategies, I rely on the praxis of “conscientious engagement” with the politics of citation advocated by Carrie Mott and Daniel Cockayne (2017, pp. 954-973). Mott and Cockayne reject a mode of citational engagement based on neoliberal parameters of quantity (e.g. how many of the cited sources are authored by women versus how many by men), but advocate for an approach to citation that accounts for its potential both reactionary and radical. In other words, they acknowledge citation as a tool that has contributed to establish patriarchal and hegemonic academic practices; at the same time, they “argue for a conscientious engagement with the politics of citation that is mindful of how citational practices can be a tool for either the reification of, or resistance to, unethical hierarchies of knowledge production” (Mott & Cockayne, 2017, p. 956). By foregrounding how commentaries play a crucial role in both how texts are interpreted and how academic competence is measured, I hope to encourage students to think of conscientious strategies by which they might engage with problematic texts without endowing them with hegemonic authority.

If I were to implement this activity again, I would change three things. First, I would not highlight the more problematic parts of the selected passages before distributing the handout to students, in order to let students identify what they deem more problematic or unexpected. I might also expand the resource to include excerpts from less blatantly biased commentaries, in order to encourage a more keenly critical eye, and to uncover biases and structures of power even when they are comparatively well hidden. At the same time, I would provide a bit more scaffolding, perhaps by suggesting some more specific prompts to encourage discussion. Examples of prompts may include:

- Might you suggest a different reading or interpretation of the passage? If so, please elaborate on possible alternative readings.
- Does the commentator provide a univocal interpretation or are multiple interpretive possibilities provided?
- Do you notice any passage or statement that might alienate certain readers? If so, which ones and how?

- What kind of sources (if any) does the commentator cite or use, and how? And how might these sources shape the interpretation offered in this commentary?

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, I would ask students to write their own commentaries on the same passages, and to read and workshop each other's commentaries through a collaborative peer-review process. Reading their peers' work, *vis-à-vis* the published one, would shed light on the profoundly subjective and situated nature of commentaries. Moreover, re-writing their own commentary would give students a chance to inscribe themselves and their own uniquely situated experience within the scholarly discourse. They would become makers, rather than only users, of knowledge. This re-writing exercise would also prompt students to further reflect on the politics of citation, insofar as they would engage with issues of indebtedness, collaboration, and subjectivity within scholarship. In this way, students would be empowered not only to participate in an already existing intellectual community, but also to create a new, more inclusive one. In acknowledging her debt to Audre Lorde, Sara Ahmed (2017) writes that Lorde encouraged her "to build theory from description of where I was in the world, to build theory from description of not being accommodated by a world" (p. 12). It is my hope that, if it was to be modified to include students writing and peer-reviewing their own commentaries, this resource could be an example of how certain ways of being in the world have been left out of scholarly conversations, and that it could provide a way to recreate analytical and interpretive tools that can accommodate where each one is in the world.

TEACHING RESOURCE

Student-facing Instructions

Below are some excerpts from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as well as their translations and passages from Peter Jones' commentary (this is the commentary usually required in Intermediate Latin II). Discuss in groups what you find striking or problematic about the commentary in relation to the texts they claim to illuminate, paying particular attention to the bolded parts. Reflect on the biases, implications, and effects that such language can have, especially as it purports to interpret complex (and sometimes controversial) texts.

a. Ovid Met. 1-490-503

Phoebus amat visaeque cupit conubia Daphnes, 490
quodque cupit, sperat, suaque illum oracula fallunt,
utque leves stipulae demptis adolentur aristas,
ut facibus saepes ardent, quas forte viator
vel nimis admovit vel iam sub luce reliquit,
sic deus in flammis abiit, sic pectore toto 495
uritur et sterilem sperando nutrit amorem.
spectat inornatos collo pendere capillos
et 'quid, si comantur?' ait. videt igne micantes
sideribus similes oculos, videt oscula, quae non
est vidisse satis; laudat digitosque manusque 500
bracchiaque et nudos media plus parte lacertos;
si qua latent, meliora putat.

Translation

Phoebus is in love and, once he sees her, he desires to lie with Daphne;/ what he desires, he hopes to achieve, and his oracles are of no help to him./ Just as light stalks are burned after the harvest,/ just as hedges catch on fire because of the torches which a traveler accidentally/ put too close or left behind at dawn,/ in the same way the god is taken by flames, in the same way he is burning in his whole heart/ and, by hoping, feeds an hopeless love./ He admires the loose hair covering her neck/ and wonders “what if it was done up?”/ He sees her eyes, shimmering with fire/ and similar to stars, he sees her lips, which/ it was not enough to merely look at; he praises her fingers and her hands/ and her arms and her shoulders, mostly bare;/ the parts of her that he can’t see, he deems even better.

Commentary

“[...] We now picture Daphne through Apollo’s eyes. **Inevitably, it is her physical appearance that so excites him**—the face to start with (hair, eyes, ‘little lips’); then the arms (progression up the arm from fingers, hands, forearm, upper arm); the nakedness of her arms suggests that what he cannot see (which presumably he now scans) is even more exciting to him (501-2). **This is a psychology all males will understand.** But what Apollo sees means nothing to Daphne: **she’s off.** So he must attempt to communicate his feelings, and Ovid tells us it will be pointless before he even begins, making his speech all the more **deliciously amusing for the reader** (502-3). But there is no pretense or hypocrisy in Apollo’s words. He has been struck by Cupid’s arrow; he is head

over heels in *amor*.” (Peter Jones, *Reading Ovid: Stories from the Metamorphoses*, 52).

b. Ovid, *Met.* 3.273-86

Surgit ab his solio fulvaque recondita nube
limen adit Semeles nec nubes ante removit
quam simulavit anum posuitque ad tempora canos 275
sulcavitque cutem rugis et curva trementi
membra tulit passu; vocem quoque fecit anilem,
ipsaque erat Beroe, Semeles Epidauria nutrix.
ergo ubi captato sermone diuque loquendo
ad nomen venere Iovis, suspirat et 'opto, 280
Iuppiter ut sit' ait; 'metuo tamen omnia: multi
nomine divorum thalamos iniere pudicos.
nec tamen esse Iovem satis est: det pignus amoris,
si modo verus is est; quantusque et qualis ab alta
Iunone excipitur, tantus talisque, rogato, 285
det tibi complexus suaque ante insignia sumat!'

Translation

Thus she rose from her seat and, surrounded by a dark cloud,/ she approached Semele's threshold, and she did not remove the clouds/ before she took on the appearance of an old lady and placed white hair around her head,/ lined her skin with wrinkles and walked with her limbs/ bowed and with unsteady steps; she also made her voice sound like that of an old woman,/ and she made herself into Beroe, Semele's nurse from Epidaurus./ So, when in the midst of a long conversation/ they came to mention Jupiter, she sighs and says "I hope/ it really is Jupiter, but I am suspicious of everything: many men/ violate innocent beds by using the name of the gods./ And even if he is Jupiter, that is not enough: he must give a proof of his love,/ if it really is him; ask him that he be as majestic as he is when he is/ received by mighty Juno, (ask him) that he be as great and powerful,/ and ask him that he lie with you after having taken on his real appearance!"

Commentary

As Jupiter conducted his liaison with Io in a cloud to keep it secret from Juno (1.599-600), so Juno enclouds herself to keep her approach to Semele secret from Jupiter (273-4). Since he needs to win Semele's confidence if her plan is to work, she transforms herself into Semele's old and trusted maid Beroe, Ovid picking out the physical features that signal 'old' (274-8). Juno subtly steers the

lengthy conversation (the deceiver must not hurry things) toward the subject of Jupiter and Semele's pregnancy (279-80), and plants the seeds of doubt in her mind: what if her lover were not Jupiter (280-2)? A trusted friend carries conviction with a vulnerable young woman in this situation, and Juno acts up to the part brilliantly [...]. **Note too the voice of experience at *multi... pudicos* (281-2): so easy for an innocent young thing to be caught unawares by exploitative males, Beroe/Juno implies. One can almost hear Juno thinking: the little whore.** (Jones, 104-5).

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