WHY WE HAVE WINTER

MYTHOLOGICAL PLAYS FOR CHILDREN

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On the Value of Myths

Learning the myths and legends of a culture–even though they *are* mythical and legendary–is a fine way to learn part of the ancient world's history. In myths and legends, we meet the gods and heroes, friends and enemies, food and drink, the imaginings, beliefs, entertainments and aspirations of a culture. In some small way, learning a myth enables us to see the world through the eyes of a Sumerian, Greek, Saxon or Viking.

In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, we meet the pagan world of Abraham's day. We note the contrast between the one God who called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans, and the petty, capricious, quarreling godlings worshiped by his neighbors. We see some of the temptations and failures of the backsliding Jews as they offered sacrifices to the "Queen of Heaven," and we marvel at God's grace.

In the classical myths, we open a storehouse of stories which have become part of our cultural heritage. We see the simultaneous joy and madness of the Greeks, their genius for creating gods in their own image, and their understandable dissatisfaction with the idols of their imaginations. Classical myths also furnish some of the background of the New Testament, showing us what the average pagan listening to a sermon by Paul might have believed.

In Beowulf, we see the Anglo-Saxon ideal man. He is a Christian warrior, sort of an early medieval King David. He is brave, generous, loyal to his lord, desirous of fame, and confident both in his own might *and* in the sovereignty of God.

In the Norse myths, we learn about our Scandinavian ancestors. Though tainted by cruelty, they were skilled in the use of words, enjoying lively and clever plots, scheming trickery and bold deeds. The Norse gods were unique: they were doomed to die, and they knew it. Yet their bravery in the shadow of fatalism in the coming Ragnarok showed the Norseman his example of indomitable courage. He had no choice in how he was to die; but he could die in a cowardly fashion, or he could go down fighting, swinging a sword. Thus he could defeat fate.

The myths also furnish us with lessons, good and bad examples, and insights into character qualities. Pentheus fights against heaven and thus earns terrible and unavoidable destruction. Small things are important: as a forbidden fruit brought about the fall of man, so a pomegranate seed caused winter. The death of Balder, the best of the gods, reminds us of the death of Christ. Gilgamesh, like the rest of us, longs for eternal life and finds it is a "gift of the gods." The Mesopotamian "House of Dust" reminds us of Sheol in the Old Testament. We see another, albeit distorted, view of the great flood in the Gilgamesh story. Idun's apples remind us of the Tree of Life. Cursed Grendel is descended from Cain. We see the

bravery and loyalty of Wiglaf contrasted with the cowardice of the other Geats. The unchecked mischievousness of Loki escalates into great spite, malice and finally murder. Nephele and Demeter show us a mother's love, and Gilgamesh and Enkidu picture friendship. God grants success. The pure in heart can see God. Brains over brawn. Love will find a way. False confidence leads to destruction. And Melanion discovers a novel way to get a bride!

Thus a study of the myths will reward a student of history, and the literature will enrich and educate. I trust the plays in *Why We Have Winter* will be a means to that end.

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Suggestions for Use

The twelve plays in this book were written for upper elementary students and would probably be performable for grades three through early junior high. If you want to integrate them with your studies of history, the "Gilgamesh" plays belong with the Old Testament. "Atalanta," "Winter," "Phrixos," and "Dionysos" belong with Greek or Roman studies. The dramas from *Beowulf* and the Norse plays date from the medieval period.

These plays have parts for 14 to 20 actors and actresses. If you have fewer students, some smaller parts can be combined and spoken by the same character; or one actor could play more than one character in a given drama. Homeschooling families can join forces to put on a play. Some parts are for boys and others for girls; many, however, could be performed by a student of either gender. Examples of the latter include Hermod, Skadi, servants, advisor, giantess, sailors, the eagle, etc.

I usually allow about ten days of practice, from the initial read-throughs in the classroom to the last dress rehearsal. Practices usually last about 30 - 50 minutes. The amount of time you need will of course depend upon the age, experience and effort of your students. As you assign parts, note the number of lines and the complexity of the parts particular students may have, which could necessitate allowing more time (or less) to memorize lines and learn the blocking.

Teach your students to use the front of the stage whenever practical, which will result in visibility of the action and better projection. Actors should face the audience, or present a three-quarter view–at worst a side view–but they should not turn their backs on the audience. I have seen productions where all the actors and actresses literally faced the audience and delivered their lines like a poem in a speech meet. Projection is typically excellent then, but the action is stilted and artificial. It kills the drama. Strive for both lively, natural action *and* audible projection.

Show your students pictures of people from the same historical periods, to give them ideas for costuming, so they can look for usable garments at home. (See the appendix for possible books.) If the character is *not* a person, often suggestion in costuming works well. For example, the holly bush can be successfully evoked by a green or brown clothing, a garland in the hair, and a stick in each hand. Ears, nose and tail can suggest a dog. Similarly, a beak, tail and wingtips can work for a falcon or eagle. A sack or sheet may do fine for the rock in "The Death of Balder."

Many properties are important. Some of these the children will be able to procure from home. (See the appendix for a props list.) Some props, however, either need to be exactly right, or they're not

the kinds of things families tend to have around the house, and these you may need to procure yourself. The Christian community tends to be short on battle axes and spare arms. You can, however, easily make Grendel's arm from a stuffed sleeve with a glove safety-pinned on. I made rocks for throwing at Balder from Styrofoam spray painted brown. The stick which killed him had to be a shape and weight that could be both accurately thrown and not likely to damage my actor, so I found one (with several understudies, just in case we lost or damaged the first stick.) I have a replica of a medieval sword in my own collection, which I occasionally let my students use for a play prop.

We do not use painted backdrops. While if they are skillfully done they can add to the play, they take a terrific amount of time and talent to do right, and they are also costly in materials and necessary help. I do not believe they are important enough at this level of drama to justify them. Nor do we typically use any makeup, though for an animal or inanimate character some face paint may add to the effect.

The plays my students perform are frequently highlights of my school year, and I trust also a zenith of their year in fifth grade. Plays provide valuable practice in rhetoric and often make ancient history and literature come to life. I hope you and your classes find them entertaining and useful in the process of classical and Christian education.

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Summaries of the Plays

Atalanta Loses a Race
Atalanta, a fine athlete and the country's fastest runner, disdains the idea of marriage and dislikes the thought of having a husband. She brushes off suitor after suitor. Finally, pressured by her father, Atalanta agrees to marry the man who can beat her in a race. Melanion, with the help of Aphrodite and three golden apples, beats Atalanta and wins her hand in marriage. (17 students)

Why We Have Winter
Hades abducts Persephone to the nether world for his bride. Her mother Demeter is searching diligently for her. When Demeter discovers that Persephone has been taken to the realm of Hades, she causes all the plants on the earth to perish. Zeus sends Hermes, commanding Hades to release Persephone. Unfortunately, she has eaten a pomegranate seed, which means she must spend part of the year with Hades, but the rest of the year she can spend on the earth above. (18 students)

Phrixos and Helle
Queen Ino, the wicked stepmother of Phrixos and Helle, wants to do away with the children. She therefore parches the seed grain so that it doesn't sprout. Then Ino bribes the messenger sent to the Oracle at Delphi to say that the children must die. They are about to be sacrificed when they are rescued by a ram with golden fleece. (17 students)

Dionysos Comes to Thebes
Dionysos, the new god of wine, is coming to Thebes with his wild followers the Mainads, to establish his worship in Greece. King Pentheus scorns him, believing he is an impostor. Even after hearing from a sailor of the miraculous vengeance of Dionysos upon a crew of kidnapers, Pentheus will not relent. He tries unsuccessfully to imprison both the god and his followers. Finally Dionysos sends temporary madness upon the Thebans, and Pentheus is destroyed by his own people. (17 students)

Thor's "Wedding"
Thor's hammer, by which Asgard is kept safe, has disappeared. Loki discovers it in the possession of Thrym, a giant, who refuses to return it unless Freya becomes his bride. Since Freya will not comply, Thor and Loki disguise themselves as Freya and her handmaiden and recover the hammer. (17 students)

In Which Thor Gets a Hammer and Sif Gets Shorn
Sif, the wife of Thor, is proud of her long, golden hair. Loki, out of spite, cuts it off. Thor forces him to replace it or be killed. Loki goes to the dwarves of Svartalfaheim, makes empty promises, and gets new hair for Sif, and two other treasures as well. Loki then takes the three treasures to other dwarves and bets them they can't make three more treasures superior to the first three, as judged by the gods. If Loki

loses, he is to be decapitated. The dwarves make three new treasures, including Thor's hammer, which the gods prefer. Loki tricks his way out of an execution, though. (14 students)

The Apples of Idun
Idun keeps the gods supplied with the golden apples which keep them eternally young. The giant Thiazi, in the form of an eagle, extorts a promise from Loki, by which Idun is betrayed to the giants' side. Loki is discovered, and the gods force him to rescue Idun and her apples and restore them to Asgard. (16 students)

The Death of Balder
Beautiful Balder, beloved of gods and men, has dreams portending his death. To give him protection, his mother Frigga causes everything to swear allegiance to Balder. However, she neglects the mistletoe, thinking it too insignificant to bother with. Villainous Loki tricks the blind Hoder into accidentally killing Balder with the mistletoe. (19 students)

Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven
Gilgamesh refuses a proposal of marriage from the evil goddess Ishtar. She, in anger at being rejected, compels her father Anu to give her the Bull of Heaven, which will cause drought and destruction upon the land. Gilagamesh and his friend Enkidu kill the bull and deliver the Sumerians. (15 students)

Gilgamesh and the Search for Eternal Life
The gods have fated Enkidu to die by a wasting sickness. Enkidu dreams of the gods' conference and sees himself brought down to the House of Dust. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh is despondent. He leaves on a journey seeking Utnapishtim, who men say knows the secret of eternal life. Gilgamesh meets a lion, a scorpion man, the gods and finally Utnapishtim. No one gives him eternal life, but he returns back to Uruk with Urshanabi, the ferryman of Utnapishtim, no longer in despair. (19 students)

Beowulf and Grendel
Hrothgar and the Danes have been oppressed for twelve yeqars by a man-eating monster called Grendel. Beowulf and some of the Geats come to Heorot, Hrothgar's hall, and spend the night there in an effort to aid the Danes. The monster comes and devours one of the Geats. But then Beowulf grabs Grendel, and wrestles with the monster, tearing off his arm and mortally wounding him. (20 students)

Beowulf and the Dragon
A runaway slave happens upon a dragon's hoard and takes a jeweled cup home to placate his angry master. The dragon discovers its loss and wreaks havoc upon the Geats. Beowulf, now an old man, goes to the dragon's den. Most of his men desert him, but he, with the help of Wiglaf, kill the dragon, although he himself also dies from a poisoned wound. (14 students)

ATALANTA LOSES A RACE
D. N. KOHL c 2006

(Curtain opens on a group of Greek men.)
Suitor 1. Why are you so glum?
Suitor 2. Why are you so cheerful?
Suitor 1. I'm off to court a fair maiden.
Suitor 2. I'm back from trying to court a fair maiden.
Suitor 1. Not Atalanta?
Suitor 2. The same. *(Bitterly.)* Good luck to you.
Suitor 1. Why?
Suitor 2. That "fair maiden" doesn't want to be courted.
Suitor 1. You're just crying "sour grapes" because she doesn't want you.
Suitor 3. She doesn't want anyone.
Suitor 4. Women all play hard to get.
Suitor 2. She's not playing at all. Atalanta won't have anyone.
Suitor 4. Sooner or later King Iasos will lose patience and make her marry someone.
Suitor 3. I don't think anyone, even her father the king, can make Atalanta do anything she doesn't want to do. The last time someone tried to, I hear she threw him out the window.
Suitor 4. *I* hear she's quite the wrestler. My cousin was at the funeral games for Jason's uncle. He said she wrestled Peleus, the father of Achilles. She stood him on his head, pinned him, and then threw him out of the ring.
Man. And you all want to marry her? You want to marry a woman who can beat you in a wrestling match?
Suitor 1. Of course.
Man. Why?
Suitor 1. She's got...talent.
Man. I prefer my wifely prospects with a bit more delicacy, domesticity, decorum.
Melanion. She can also run like the wind, throw, shoot, hunt; you name it.
Suitor 2. I bet she doesn't weave, or sew!
Suitor 3. Or clean house.
Suitor 4. Or cook.
Suitor 2. *(To* suitor 1.) I hope you didn't plan on eating during your married life.
Suitor 3. *(Joking.)* Well you can't have everything!
Suitor 4. *(Joking.)* But they can have a great time wrestling!
Suitor 1. Sour grapes again. I believe I'll be off, and you gentlemen can sit around all day feeling sorry for yourselves. (Suitor 1 *exits.)*

(Curtain closes. Curtain opens. Melanion *and* Suitor 1 *are on one side, women on the other.)*
Melanion. What now, friend?
Suitor 1. That woman is impossible!
Atalanta. Grow up, little boy–come back in ten years or so. Then maybe you'll be a man–and I'll consider marrying you. (Suitor 1 *leaves.)*
Queen. Dear, you're so rude to them.
Atalanta. I'm not rude–just playful. Men like a good joke, a challenge, competition.

Queen. They don't seem to be able to discern the humor in your jokes.
Friend. And what is this "competition," as you call it?
Atalanta. I'm not interested in a husband. I can't respect any man I can beat.
Queen. Dear, you're being so unreasonable.
Atalanta. No, Mother, men are fine for hunting companions or as fellow athletes. But I don't relish the thought of becoming someone's pet on a leash, or a pretty bird in a cage.
Friend. That's not what marriage is.
Atalanta. So you say. That's not what I see.
Friend. Maybe your father can talk some sense into you, but I doubt it.
(Queen, Friend *and* Atalanta *exit.)*
Melanion. "Where brawn will fail, brains must prevail." So say the poets. Either way, my prospects are not sterling. But the poets also say, "Love will find a way." Aphrodite, help me! O goddess of love, look upon my plight. (Aphrodite *peeks around the curtain.)*
Aphrodite. I believe I shall look into this. I've never been able to tolerate her type: scorning love–disrespectful to Aphrodite, she is. Now, what can I do to help that handsome young fool win her?

(Curtain closes. Curtain opens.)
Atalanta. Hello, Father. You wanted to see me?
King. Oh, hello, Atalanta. Yes, I did. On a matter of great importance to the kingdom.
Atalanta. Concerning *me?*
King. Yes.
Atalanta. Since when am I so important to the kingdom?
King. I am passing middle age. You are my only child. I want a grandson to put on the throne.
Atalanta. So?
King. Please don't pretend to be dull, my dear daughter. The gods have cursed you with brains–too many–which no woman needs. But use them anyway. You've played long enough: it's time to marry.
Atalanta. Oh Father! Hippomenes has put you up to this, hasn't he?
King. Yes, this wise old man *(nodding toward* Counselor 1) has informed me that if I want a grandson, I'm going to have to get you a husband.
Atalanta. But I don't want a husband!
Counselor 1. So we've heard.
Atalanta. No! I won't accept one.
King. That would be a foolish thing for my intelligent daughter to do.
Counselor 2. Can we have a word with you, please?
Counselor 1. I pray you–don't defy your father. No good can come of it. He is a powerful man and (dare I say it?) somewhat unscrupulous.
Atalanta. I know. He exposed me on a mountain when I was born. I was first raised by a she-bear, and afterwards by hunters. They all showed me more kindness than my father.
Counselor 1. The whole sorry business has been a grief to me ever since. I know his mind better than all but a few: he too grieves his rash deed, but he is too proud to admit a wrong and seek forgiveness.
Atalanta. He's only sorry because I have achieved the fame and honor that few sons have ever earned.
Counselor 2. No, he *is* sorry. Forgive him. He loves you–in his own way. When you are queen mother, you can do whatever you want.

Counselor 1. Do not cross his will. It is best for you.
Counselor 2. And it is best for Arcadia.
Atalanta. Very well. I will not refuse him directly. But I have no intention of marrying. Father, I will heed your counsel. I will marry....
King. Good. I had hoped you would be reasonable, in spite of your youth and gender.
Atalanta. I will marry...the man who can beat me in the two-stadia race.

(Curtain closes. Forestage.)
Aphrodite. Come here, Melanion. I have a gift for you. Don't stare. You are right. I am not a mortal.
Melanion. You are the foam-born goddess.
Aphrodite. Aphrodite. Yes, you called upon me, and I've decided to help you.
Melanion. I am honored.
Aphrodite. Atalanta has agreed to marry the man who can beat her in a foot race. King Iasos has announced it. I understand you are quite fleet of foot.
Melanion. I am, but Atalanta is faster.
Aphrodite. Which is why I'm giving you three golden apples, to give you a chance to win the race. Atalanta, like any other woman, will find them irresistible.
Melanion. What should I do with them?
Aphrodite. Come now, Melanion, surely you don't expect me to do everything for you, do you? "The gods help those who help themselves." (*Sarcastically.)* Feed them to her at breakfast, so she'll be too heavy to run. Tie them around her ankles. Knock her over the head with them during the race. I'm sure you'll think of a way to put my gift to a good use.
Melanion. Thank you, gracious goddess of Cythera.
Aphrodite. Don't mention it. I like you. I'm sure you're not as stupid as you look. (*She leaves.)*
Melanion. I hope not. *Oimoi!* What now? (Melanion *exits.)*

(Curtain opens. Spectators *are gazing out across the audience at the race about to begin.)*
Spectator 1. Another race?
Spectator 2. Yup. The princess is about to demolish another suitor.
Spectator 3. I wish we could get her in the Olympics.
Spectator 4. You're not kidding.
Spectator 2. No women allowed.
Spectator 3. Of course.
Spectator 4. Maybe we could *disguise* her. *(They laugh.)*
Spectator 1. Who is *he?*
Spectator 2. Milanios, Meletos, something like that.
Spectator 3. I hear he's fast.
Spectator 4. Not fast enough, I'll warrant.
Spectator 1. Drat–I can't see. The people are too tall.
Spectator 2. You're too short.
Spectator 1. Tell me what's happening!
Spectator 2. They're at the line, waiting for the signal.
Spectator 3. The boy has something in his hands.
Spectator 1. A lucky amulet?
Spectator 3. Maybe, but I can't tell at this distance.