

The Education of the Spirit
in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Wonder Book*

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* retells six Greco-Roman myths, and, in many ways, this collection of Classically inspired stories is presented as emphatically un-educational. Even in its original physical form, its size and illustrations proclaim it a leisure book rather than a textbook. If we look at the titles of stories in the *Wonder Book* ("The Gorgon's Head," "The Golden Touch," "The Paradise of Children," "The Three Golden Apples," "The Miraculous Pitcher," and "The Chimaera") we might observe that Hawthorne's selection of tales is sparing and that, first and last stories excepted, he avoids using actual ancient names, thus making it unlikely that children would consider or consult this book as a reference work on ancient myth. The presentation of the myths within the book also seems designed to detract from any authoritative or educational status. Hawthorne does not offer his versions of the ancient stories directly in his own voice; instead, they are introduced as the impromptu creations of a fictional undergraduate, Eustace Bright, who tells them to his younger relatives while he is on holiday breaks from college. Hawthorne frames each of the reinvented myths with vignettes about Eustace, his young audience, and the circumstances of Eustace's story-telling. In all but one instance, the stories are told amid the children's escapades. By putting the myths in the mouth of a student who recounts them while on vacation and by allowing the stories to emerge from the children's recreation, Hawthorne transports Classical mythology from the realm of school to that of play. This move makes the *Wonder Book* decidedly different from earlier or contemporaneous works by other authors which primarily aim to enhance children's cultural

literacy and enable them to claim their own stake in the cachet of Classical learning.¹ Other scholars (notably Peck and Donovan) have—very appropriately—noted the importance of leisure-reading and recreation in the *Wonder Book*, and because of its difference from its textual peers, the *Wonder Book* has a special place in the history of children’s literature.² I would like to suggest that despite, or even in tandem with, its proliferation of play and secession from the classroom, the *Wonder Book* has a serious educational program of another sort. Here I will look at four of the *Wonder Book*’s stories and suggest how they together promote the spiritual education of Hawthorne’s young audience.

Two of the *Wonder Book*’s six stories engage Biblical tradition in a sustained way: the story of Pandora and Epimetheus (entitled “The Paradise of Children”) and the tale of Baucis and Philemon (called by Hawthorne “The Miraculous Pitcher”). Other readers of the *Wonder Book* have remarked that Hawthorne aims in these stories to make Classical culture compatible with Biblical tradition by Christianizing the Greco-Roman myths.³ John Stephens and Robyn McCallum even generalize that this is usually true when Classical stories are retold for children in predominantly Christian cultures. As they see it, the flow of influence is a matter of “one-way traffic” (62). I think, however, that something more complicated and interesting occurs in the *Wonder Book*: Hawthorne revises the lessons of both Christianity and Classical mythology by simultaneously combining them and reimagining them.

Our earliest and fullest source for the myth of Pandora and Epimetheus is Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (lines 42-105). In that text, the creation of Pandora is the climax of a conflict between the ruler of the cosmos, Zeus, and a Titan rival, Prometheus. Zeus punishes humans for

¹ E.g., Godwin’s *Pantheon* (1806) and, on this side of the Atlantic, Goodrich’s *Book of Mythology for Youth* (1832).

² See Pearce, Meigs, and Donovan.

³ For a relatively recent example, see Richard.

Prometheus' theft of fire by ordering the other gods to create Pandora, the beautiful but dangerous first woman, in whom men will embrace their own destruction. Pandora is dangerous because her carefully crafted exterior hides a tricky interior—she is filled with lies and has the mind of a thief. Pandora's hybrid being itself poses a problem for mortals, but she also acts to the detriment of the mortal realm: opening a jar, she unleashes banes and ills upon men. Symbolic readings of the jar episode suggest that it encodes women's problematic control over household stores and even their potentially problematic control over their own bodies and sexuality.⁴ Once Pandora is in the world, men must live with women and the host of ever-unsolved issues associated with them. Hope stays in the jar—in the wings, as it were, but not in action. And all this (says Hesiod) is one of the reasons why life is hard.

When Hawthorne retells this story, it is not embedded in a context of divine struggle; in fact, we aren't told anything about the circumstances of Pandora's creation. The sexual antagonism inherent in the Hesiodic story nearly disappears. Gender distinctions are still marked in Hawthorne's portrayal of Pandora and Epimetheus, but their depiction as children removes the shadow of sexual menace from the myth. In fact, Hawthorne reverses the relationship dynamics of the Hesiodic tale: while Hesiod's Pandora and Epimetheus provide a mythological exemplar for perennial gender conflict, Hawthorne's characters realize that they are better and happier when together, and even though life gets harder in ways after Pandora opens the box, Hawthorne repeatedly emphasizes that they face the changed world in concert. Hesiod keeps Hope waiting in a jar, but Hawthorne allows Pandora and Epimetheus to open the box a second time—

⁴ Control over household stores, McLaughlin; control over their bodies and sexuality, duBois. Also, Zeitlin.

together⁵— and they release the fairy-like Hope who promises them a beautiful and blessed life beyond this one. With such a promise, precarious hope is transformed into a more certain spirit of anticipation, or even faith.

Hawthorne locates the story of Pandora and Epimetheus in a specific mythological setting: the Golden Age. This First Age—in which the world is new and gives freely of its goods—encourages an analogy between the Paradise of Children and the Garden of Eden. Echoes of Genesis persist when Pandora is tempted by the well-wrought box in Epimetheus’ house and when her opening of the box ushers in an era of toil for humans. Similarities are obvious, but they may distract us from important differences. Hawthorne gives us no God: Epimetheus has been told by the mysterious stranger Quicksilver (Greek Hermes or Roman Mercury) not to open the box, but Hawthorne’s Hermes falls short of an authoritative divine presence, and his prohibition does not have the force of a command from above. When the young Pandora opens the box, it is not so much a sin or a transgressive desire for knowledge; it is rather presented as a “natural” result of childish curiosity. Nor does Pandora get all the blame for her action. Epimetheus’ own curiosity keeps him from stopping Pandora, and Hawthorne has Eustace emphasize that some of the responsibility for the outcome thus falls to Epimetheus, as well. The Golden Age ends once the mosquito-like Troubles fly out of the box, but Hawthorne’s children are not exiled from Eden. There is no banishment, but the perpetual spring-time of Paradise gives way to the progression of the seasons. The natural order of things begins, and Eden becomes the aberration. We can see Hawthorne as working here within the concept of “the

⁵ Hawthorne emphasizes their togetherness: “with one consent the two children again lifted the lid.”

fortunate Fall,”⁶ but if we do, we run the risk of overlooking the degree to which Hawthorne suggests that the fate of the paradise of children was not a Fall at all.

Though Hawthorne absented God from “The Paradise of Children,” the patriarchal divinity becomes a main character in “The Miraculous Pitcher.” Hawthorne draws this story from Ovid’s tale of Baucis and Philemon in the *Metamorphoses* (8.618-724). Ovid presents an old couple who unwittingly host Jupiter and Mercury in their humble home. When their modest fare runs short, it is replenished by divine powers, and ultimately Baucis and Philemon are rewarded, while their inhospitable neighbors are punished. Jupiter transforms the offending area into a lake; Baucis and Philemon’s cottage, however, becomes a gleaming temple in which the couple serves until, at the end of their lives, they are changed into a pair of intertwining trees. On its own, this Ovidian story might seem a comforting, cozy guarantee of cosmic justice, but within the *Metamorphoses* it is almost unique in its allotment of rewards and punishments. Ovid’s poetic world is generally unsettling, and his gods are more often agents of disorder and misdirected emotion rather than beings who use their power to uphold the stability of things. Ovid’s tale of Baucis and Philemon prompts readers to wonder what justice is if it is realized only rarely and unpredictably. By contrast, Hawthorne’s story of Baucis and Philemon does not intimate the arbitrariness of divine action.

Lifted out of its Ovidian context, the story of Baucis and Philemon lends itself to Biblical overlays. In Hawthorne’s rendition we can find echoes of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, the wedding at Cana, the Beatitudes, and the punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah. Despite the steady stream of Biblical resonance, Hawthorne does not merely make the story’s Classical Jupiter a stand-in for the Biblical God. For Hawthorne’s version revises the very idea of reward

⁶ Hathaway.

and punishment meted out by a ruling divinity. Hawthorne's Baucis and Philemon are rewarded indeed, but their ungracious neighbors are not exactly "punished." Rather, because their actions reflected a less-than-human spirit, their physical forms change to manifest their moral stature. They become fish, and water is allowed to refill their valley so that it becomes the lake it once was. Hawthorne's Jupiter does not take credit for this outcome; as he explains to Baucis and Philemon, the villagers "retained no image of the better life in their bosoms; therefore, the lake, that was of old, has spread itself forth again, to reflect the sky." Hawthorne's Father-God is neither vengeful nor exacting, but he does allow Nature to reclaim its own.

Hawthorne's revisioning of Classical and Biblical sources yields a benign universe with less blame accruing to humans and a more beneficent divinity at work in the world. In combining Classical and Biblical narratives, Hawthorne teaches his young readers that truth is not the exclusive property of either tradition and that a more complete understanding may emerge from their combination. By interweaving Biblical and Classical stories, Hawthorne enlists the authority of these traditions but not without also questioning them, recreating them, and harnessing them to his own spiritual vision.

The other two stories I plan to treat today operate according to a different strategy: they articulate Hawthorne's spiritual values by introducing new characters into old narratives. For his rendition of the myth of Midas, Hawthorne creates the character of Marygold, Midas' daughter who is turned to gold by her father's magic touch. Hawthorne's innovation has taken hold, and Midas' daughter has now become such a crucial part of the myth that it is worth reviewing the shape of the story before a daughter was added to it. Again, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (11.85-193) is our fullest source from antiquity. As a reward for restoring Silenus to Bacchus, King Midas is granted a wish, and he asks for the golden touch. His pleasure at the gift soon turns to dismay as

his food and drink become unconsumable. His appetite for food trumps his appetite for wealth, and he prays for release from the ill-wished gift. Bacchus removes the golden touch lest Midas “remain encased in gold” (11.136).

Hawthorne allows Midas to learn from this experience, and Midas’ daughter functions as both a teacher and an object lesson. Despite her father’s delight at his golden gift, Marygold is not amused: she laments the metamorphosis of her beloved roses into gilded flowers, and tells her father—pointedly—that aurification has blighted them and spoiled their beauty. Midas dismisses his daughter’s valuation of the golden roses, but he accepts her embrace when his metallic breakfast has vexed him and she runs to offer him comfort. Midas unwittingly transforms his daughter into a statue, and it is this, not his unappeasable appetite, which prompts him to ask for release from his wish. The mysterious stranger who granted Midas his wish reappears and leads him through a catechism lesson, questioning him about his newly revised sense of value. Whereas Ovid’s Midas learns that the needs of the body have a stronger claim on the self than the desire for gold, Hawthorne’s Midas learns a less self-focused lesson. Marygold and her metamorphosis have taught him that nature and living beings are valuable and beautiful in ways that gold cannot quantify and can even destroy. Hawthorne’s Midas is allowed to retain his new-found wisdom, and the gold which he values most highly is a living legacy: the golden sheen in the hair of his resuscitated daughter and, later, her children.

Hawthorne has Eustace Bright tell the story of Midas while Eustace and the children are in a sun-dappled dell amid trees decked in autumn gold. The setting reinforces the story, allowing the children to see and appreciate the riches which surround them in a new way. The setting of the last story in the *Wonder Book* is likewise significant: Eustace has climbed a nearby

mountain with the older children, and on the mountain-top he provides them with a revelation of sorts through the story of Bellerophon, Chimaera, and Pegasus.

In Hawthorne's hands the battle between the hero Bellerophon and the monstrous Chimaera becomes a cosmic conflict between good and evil, and Bellerophon's victory is enabled by the winged horse Pegasus, an animate instantiation of the Good. But Pegasus' aid is not easy to come by. Bellerophon needs to wait by a spring, day after day after day, until Pegasus arrives. During this time assorted other visitors to the spring respond variously to the idea of the winged horse. A country farmer thinks a winged horse would be impractical; an old man has allowed Pegasus to slip into uncertain memories; and a young woman was once so startled at the sound of Pegasus' approach that she fled without seeing him. Only a young boy, a creation of Hawthorne's, has faith that Pegasus certainly exists and will eventually come. The boy sustains Bellerophon as he waits, and once Bellerophon has conquered the Chimaera with Pegasus' help, Bellerophon returns to credit the boy with the victory: "...if thy faith had not helped me, I should never have waited for Pegasus, and never have gone up above the clouds, and never have conquered the terrible Chimaera. Thou, my beloved little friend, hast done it all." Bellerophon then leaves to announce at court that the Chimaera has been slain, but the boy goes on to live a more exalted life: "...in after years, that child took higher flights upon the aerial steed than ever did Bellerophon, and achieved more honorable deeds than his friend's victory over the Chimaera. For, gentle and tender as he was, he grew to be a mighty poet!" Hawthorne closes the story with this image which, by combining active, transcendent Goodness and creative power, makes poetry a high spiritual heroism: an exercise of faith and its reward in revelation.

In both "The Golden Touch" and "The Chimaera," Hawthorne intertwines spiritual values and aesthetic ones. Marygold and her roses are not just of greater moral worth than

Midas' gold; they are also more beautiful in their liveliness. Pegasus is not only an equine angel of Goodness but also a purveyor of poetic inspiration—and art becomes the ultimate expression of faith. By the end of the *Wonder Book*, Hawthorne's spiritual program has become inseparable from an aesthetic orientation. Both spirituality and art are informed by the same concept of value, are nourished by the natural world, and are inspired by a belief in benevolent higher powers.

As part of the spiritual education of his young audience, Hawthorne encourages pleasure in the beautiful things of this world and beyond. Although he does not repudiate established traditions, he tempers their tendency toward judgement and blame, and he suggests that faith and imagination are partnered paths to enlightenment. It is telling that Hawthorne locates Eustace Bright's revision of Genesis in the Tanglewood playroom, for throughout the *Wonder Book* play is presented as an appropriate spiritual orientation. Play—more than the schoolroom or Sunday school—provides scope for the animation, creativity, and delight essential to Hawthorne's spiritual vision. The *Wonder Book* not only expresses this spirituality but also, through the playful, inventive story-telling of Eustace Bright, enacts it, providing the audience with a theory embedded in practice, and a text that educates through both word and example.

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