Painting the Statues:
Subversion and Authority in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Wonder Book*

During the late spring and early summer of 1851, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys.* Anne Eaton, in *A Critical History of Children's Literature*, maintains that by doing so, Hawthorne became "the first to put the Greek myths within the reach of child readers" (Meigs 196). Strictly speaking, this is not true. In the late 17th century Alexander Tooke translated a Latin guide to mythology into English for children, and in the early 19th century William Godwin published a reference work to rival Tooke's. On this side of the Atlantic, we can point to some books in the early 19th century which were designed to acquaint younger readers with ancient mythology—for instance, Samuel Griswold Goodrich's *Book of Mythology for Youth*, published in Boston in 1832. That such books existed should not be surprising: the 18th and 19th centuries see a rise in the number of handbooks for adults about ancient Greece and Rome; why shouldn't there be similar books for children to familiarize themselves with their Classical inheritance?

But in some sense Eaton is right to suggest that Hawthorne's *Wonder Book* occupies a special place in the history of children's literature in English. Prior works dealing with Classical myth have a markedly educational quality. Informational and authoritative in tone and format, they could be used as textbooks or consulted at home as supplements to school-work. The *Wonder Book*, by contrast, stakes a strong claim for Classical myth in the emerging market for what we could call "pleasure reading." While Hawthorne can't help but draw on the cultural cachet of Classics to some extent, he departs from his more authoritative predecessors in both organization and orientation. Here I hope to provide an overview of the *Wonder Book* which points out how Hawthorne both invokes and subverts various sources of cultural authority with the ultimate aim of authorizing children themselves in an imaginative engagement with the Classical tradition.

It is clear even from the table of contents that *A Wonder Book* is not a comprehensive text. It shows that Hawthorne has chosen a small slice of Classical myth to treat, six stories: Perseus and Medusa, Midas' golden touch, Pandora, Hercules and the apples of the Hesperides, Baucis and Philemon, and the conquest of the Chimaera by Bellerophon and Pegasus. The titles which Hawthorne has given to his stories ("The Gorgon's Head," "The Golden Touch," "The Paradise of Children," "The Three Golden Apples," "The Miraculous Pitcher," and "The Chimaera") avoid the proper names of the main characters. *A Wonder Book*, obviously, does not aspire to be consulted as a dictionary or encyclopedia.

The mythical tales of the *Wonder Book* are embedded in a set of frame-stories. Hawthorne presents the myths as imaginative retellings composed extemporaneously by a young college student, Eustace Bright, to entertain an audience of his younger relatives. This scenario tinkers with narrative authority in a number of ways. By emphasizing the stories' status as re-tellings, Hawthorne is not purporting to pass on the "truth" or "facts" of these stories as they appear in ancient texts. Hawthorne does acknowledge the aid of a scholarly resource, Charles Anthon's popular Classical dictionary for adults, but he also makes it clear that Eustace will depart from that source as he sees fit. As a college student, Eustace occupies a different authorial ground than Hawthorne, who (at the time of composition) was in his late 40s and the father of three small children. Eustace may strive to differentiate himself from his juvenile audience, but Hawthorne presents him on a youthful continuum with them rather than on a separate, mature wavelength. Hawthorne also pokes gentle fun at Eustace as he affects a grown-up stance with colored glasses and a hint of a mustache. Hawthorne could have used his own narrative voice in *A Wonder Book* or enlisted a subordinate narrator associated with various kinds of cultural authority and gravitas. Instead, he gives us Eustace, who romps with his cousins.

Eustace's first two stories are told in the early autumn, when Eustace has delayed his return to college on the grounds of "trouble in eyesight," though Hawthorne adds with a wink, "such as many students think it necessary to have, nowadays, in order to prove their diligence at their books." Instead of cracking open his Classics books at Williams, Eustace is readying himself and his relatives for a nut-gathering expedition. He tells the story of "The Gorgon's Head" as he and the children wait on the front porch of Tanglewood House for the fog to lift. Like "The Gorgon's Head," most of the myths of the *Wonder Book* will be told outdoors, a setting that places myth outside the institutional contexts of school and home. Play pervades the atmosphere in which the stories are told, a contrast with the "reverence" for Classical material which Carl Richard has recently documented in so many aspects of antebellum life in the United States. Through the frame story Hawthorne eschews academic and domestic authority. The spirit of myth emanates from nature, not nurture. The seasons, not school, are myth's most fitting backdrop.

In "The Gorgon's Head," Hawthorne has Eustace focus on a discrete episode from the life of Perseus. We are given relatively little background information about our hero, and we are not allowed to linger on other adventures in Perseus' career—Eustace alludes to them, but hurries us on: "I have no time to tell you of several marvellous things that befell Perseus on his way homeward; such as his killing a hideous sea-monster, just as it was on the point of devouring a beautiful maiden...." In providing a bare-bones background for Perseus and in merely gesturing toward his other epic adventures, Hawthorne initiates a pattern of discrete presentation used throughout the *Wonder Book.* Such selectivity continues to differentiate the *Wonder Book* from mythological handbooks, as does Hawthorne's decision to use the proper names of the gods circumspectly. Mercury is the divine figure who appears most often in the *Wonder Book*, but Eustace persistently refers to him by the playful name of Quicksilver. Other gods—like Minerva, who helps Perseus here—may be named or not, but are most often identified as "strangers" rather than "gods." Compare this approach to mythological handbooks, whose first order of business is often to enumerate the gods and their divine attributes.

"The Gorgon's Head" illustrates another way in which Hawthorne flaunts authoritative expectations: he sometimes turns the practice of drawing a moral from the stories into a nonsensical pursuit. For instance, after Perseus sees the Graiai squabbling over their shared eye, Eustace sagely remarks: "As a general rule, I would advise all people, whether sisters or brothers, old or young, who chance to have but one eye amongst them, to cultivate forbearance, and not all insist upon peeping through it at once."

Not that Hawthorne resists all temptations to moralize from his tales. In "The Golden Touch" Hawthorne uses the myth of Midas to articulate a lesson on the higher value of nature, life, and love over money. To do so, Hawthorne substantially innovates the ancient stories about Midas. Anthon sets out three main strands of the Midas legend: 1) he had a fabulous rose garden; 2) he received the golden touch but had it removed when it proved an unwise request; 3) he was given ass-ears after maintaining that the music of rustic Pan surpassed that of Apollo the aesthete. Hawthorne discards this third item (he has Eustace call it an "idle story"), but to the first two he adds a non-Classical element: Midas has a daughter named Marygold. Though Midas gleefully turns even his roses to gold, when his daughter becomes a golden statue at his touch, he asks for his power to be taken away. Sprinkling his daughter with the same water that has washed away his golden touch, he is able to reanimate her, and together they transform Midas' roses back to their original state. Midas realizes that his daughter was right in finding the flowers more precious before their aurification. Hawthorne shows the value system of the adult Midas to be morally bankrupt, and the daughter's valuation of things is validated: the young girl both trumps and teaches the old king.

This rendition of the Midas story works as a moral tale largely because of Hawthorne's truncation and augmentation of the tradition. By excising the music competition and including a daughter in the story, Hawthorne refocuses Midas' predicament: in Ovid, Midas' problems involve his relative valuations of nature and culture and the effects of those valuations on his own self, while Hawthorne shifts the stakes and makes Midas' culturally inclined request have possibly tragic consequences for the innocent Marygold. The story becomes a domestic drama in which the father eventually revises his entire value system. In "The Golden Touch" Hawthorne enlists the general authority ascribed to myth in order to moralize, but he also significantly changes the specific content of the myth so that it says what he wants it to.

Eustace Bright tells the next set of stories indoors. It is winter, and the children are in the playroom when Eustace presents "The Paradise of Children." This is Hawthorne's version of the story of Pandora, and in telling it Hawthorne ignores the explicit advice of Anthon's Classical dictionary. Anthon argues against the identification of Pandora with Eve (969-970), but Hawthorne merges the narrative of Pandora and Epimetheus with that of Adam and Eve. When Pandora is introduced into an Eden-like paradise, she is told that she must not open the box that had been entrusted to Epimetheus by Quicksilver. So enticing is the box, however, that Pandora does raise its lid, thereby releasing troubles into the world and bringing an end to the everlasting spring of childhood.

In giving a Biblical wash to the Hesiodic tale, Hawthorne may be seen as recruiting the aura of religious authority. But I think that Hawthorne's conflation of Pandora and Eve serves to revise both the Classical story and the Biblical one. Although Pandora opens the box, Epimetheus' curiosity about the contents is nearly as great as hers, and he looks on—not stopping her—as she lifts the lid. Together Pandora and Epimetheus open the box a second time and release into the world the spirit of Hope, who promises a better life in the hereafter. The childhood of Epimetheus and Pandora has ended, but Hawthorne emphasizes their togetherness as they move into the next phase of their lives. Their aging is presented as eminently natural, in accord with the seasons, as if Eden were the unnatural aberration. By modulating the story of Pandora to rewrite the narrative of Genesis, Hawthorne removes the taint of original sin and lifts the traditional burdens of blame and subordination placed on the shoulders of women.

It makes symbolic sense that Eustace is inside when he tells this story: indoors, he more squarely confronts traditional sources of authority. It may come as no surprise that Mr. Pringle, the father of some of the children, is concerned when he catches wind of Eustace's tale. For his next story, Eustace is summoned into the drawing-room; Mr. Pringle wants to "judge whether [Eustace's stories] are likely to do any mischief." Eustace is nervous: not only is Mr. Pringle the respectable head of the Tanglewood household, but he was also a Classical scholar in his day. Yet Eustace does not de-escalate his subversive story-telling to suit his new audience; instead he tells a tale almost sure to rankle Mr. Pringle.

"The Three Golden Apples" recounts Hercules' search for the apples of the Hesperides. Hercules' other labors are relegated to the sidelines, and Hawthorne has Eustace concentrate on the ways in which the young Hercules overcomes older characters in this episode. Youth bends old age to its will when Hercules wrestles the Old Man of the Sea, and though the aged Atlas scores a temporary victory over Hercules when he nearly leaves Hercules to hold up the sky forever, Hercules tricks Atlas in turn and puts the old giant in his proper place. Although Anthon's dictionary outlines the helpful role which the Titan Prometheus plays in this affair (614), Hawthorne eliminates Prometheus' part to present the story consistently as one in which the young outdo the old. I will return to Mr. Pringle's reaction to Eustace's story-telling later, but I'll say here that, when Eustace has finished, Mr. Pringle advises him "never [to] put any of his travesties on paper."

Having exercised his story-telling abilities with and against various authorities—ancient, academic, religious, social, and familial—Eustace now moves to higher ground, literally. The last two stories of the *Wonder Book* are told while Eustace and the children are hiking up a "high hill" in the spring. Halfway up, they pause because the younger children are tired, and Eustace tells them the story of "The Miraculous Pitcher." In this version of the tale of Baucis and Philemon Hawthorne continues to conflate the Classical and the Biblical. We find echoes of the Beatitudes, the story of the loaves and fishes, the wedding at Cana, the great flood, and the destruction of the cities of the plain. Jupiter is not named, but is called "the elder stranger," and he later identifies himself as a divinity. Hawthorne's depiction of Jupiter allows him to be associated with the Judeo-Christian god. But just as Hawthorne tempered the misogyny of Genesis, here he softens the retributive anger of the deity. The flooding of the impious neighborhood is not described at length, nor is it presented as a punishment per se. Rather, because the people of the village had lost their sense of humanity, they became fish and "the lake, that was of old, [...] spread itself forth again, to reflect the sky." This god does not kill his people, but he does allow nature to reclaim its own.

This is Jupiter's only appearance in the *Wonder Book*, and from a Biblical perspective, it is fitting that Eustace reveals the god to his audience while they are on a hill. But for the older children, who ascend with Eustace to the summit, Hawthorne has a greater revelation in store. The last myth in the *Wonder Book* retells the story of Bellerophon's vanquishing of the Chimaera with the invaluable help of Pegasus. In Hawthorne's hands Pegasus becomes a transcendent symbol of the imagination, the high-flying soul, the beautiful, and the good. The fight with the Chimaera is thus a veritable battle between cosmic forces of good and evil. When Bellerophon and Pegasus triumph, Bellerophon attributes the real victory to a small boy whose faith in the flying horse sustained the hero as he waited for Pegasus' appearance. While Eustace relates the battle between Bellerophon, Pegasus, and the Chimaera with relish, he acknowledges that an even higher heroic fate awaited the boy: "...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!" In the last myth of the *Wonder Book* we get not the epiphany of a patriarchal god but the apotheosis of imagination and the exaltation of those who believe in its truth.

But let us come down from the mountain-top and return to Mr. Pringle's drawing-room. When Mr. Pringle delivers his verdict on Eustace's story-telling, he likens the effect of Eustace's myth-making to "bedaubing a marble statue with paint." With this description, Hawthorne taps into 19th-century debates about polychromy in sculpture and about the merits of sculpture versus painting. Mr. Pringle, who has a reproduction of Greenough's "Angel and Child" statue in his drawing room, is aligned with those who considered forms of white marble to be the epitome of art. Though by the mid-19th century it would have been hard for informed artists and scholars to deny that the ancients painted their statues, there was a strong contingent who believed that ancient polychromy was an unfortunate misstep and that contemporary artists who practiced it brought to sculpture the illusory and morally suspect pleasures of color usually associated with painting. Mr. Pringle's description of Eustace's technique puts Eustace in the camp of artists whose interests in the earthly distract them from the pursuit of beauty in the abstract.[1] Eustace, however, does not yield ground. While he admits that the ancient forms of myth are "shapes of indestructible beauty," he also finds them "cold and heartless." He suggests that myth is the "common property of the world" and maintains that he has as much right as the ancients to "remodel" the stories in his own hands. Eustace as story-teller has the Midas touch in reverse: he takes the frozen cultural currency of Classics and reanimates it. Hawthorne allows history to support Eustace's side of the debate: since the ancients did paint their statues, in returning myth to a polychromatic vitality, Eustace is being truer to the originals than those who venerate a monochromatic Classical world stripped of its color (and life) over centuries. Hawthorne invites a pointed contrast between Mr. Pringle's statue of a dead boy escorted by an angel and Eustace's lively myth-making amid a group of rambunctious children.

In their study of children's literature based on traditional tales, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum suggest that stories inspired by Classical mythology may not be able to avoid replicating the conservative tendencies and hegemonic "metanarratives" of western culture. Although there may be ways in which we see 19th century cultural imperatives in the *Wonder Book*, Hawthorne makes a bid for myth to be more and other than the repetition of authoritative cultural givens. The *Wonder Book* models for its readers a vivifying engagement with Classical myth. Hawthorne shows Eustace reshaping the myths as a form of play and an exercise of imagination which supersedes other claims of authority. Hawthorne knows his audience will encounter Classical myth in other ways and venues. We might thus consider the *Wonder Book* a pre-emptive, subversive strike of sorts in which Hawthorne authorizes young readers to claim these stories as a living legacy and to work their own imaginative wonders upon them, no matter what the Mr. Pringles of the world might say.

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[1] See Nelson and Malgrave for discussions of 19th century views of ancient polychromy. Relevant to a depiction of Mr. Pringle as a representative of an outmoded view is Malgrave's statement, "Thus by 1825 the 'white view' of Greek antiquity was largely a thing of the past" (77).

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