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Why a Different Excerpt from *Metamorphoses* should be in the Core Text Reader

The Samford Core Text Reader includes key excerpts from many important texts across many different culture groups and time periods. These texts are all related in some way so that during Cultural Perspectives class, each text can be compared and contrasted with another from other time periods and cultures. One excerpt that is currently in the Core Text Reader is from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. However, this excerpt should be changed and replaced with an excerpt that more accurately reflects Ovid's work as a whole.

To begin, the current excerpt must be analyzed in terms of the work as a whole. The current excerpt is "The Deification of Julius Caesar." This is the last section and story told in *Metamorphoses* (Humphries). As a result, the excerpt is extremely random in the Reader because it is the last story; all the other stories have built up to this story. It also cannot easily be compared with other texts because it is so specific. The most comparable aspect of the excerpt is the role the gods play in deifying Caesar. Other texts, like *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Aeneid*, can easily be compared and contrasted with this excerpt, but only in that aspect. Additionally, this excerpt is rather short and it seems as though it was an afterthought. From personal experience, I have met few people who have read the *Metamorphoses* in their Cultural Perspectives classes. I believe this is a result of the poor choice in excerpt.

How is this excerpt different from other excerpts, though? Other excerpts in Reader include passages which when read by themselves, the meaning of the work as a whole is still portrayed. For example, the excerpt from *Meditation: The Path to Enlightenment* includes the actual eight fold path and its many counterparts that help the sojourner accomplish the goal of eliminating suffering in his life. But, imagine if this excerpt only included the subsection "The Practice of Introversion (Fisk et al. 95-96). Not only would Siddhartha Gautama's purpose in writing the work be lost, but also the importance of reading the work. It would show no progression of logic or of the soul, nor would it demonstrate the path which Gautama lays out for the reader because this section is specific to only one aspect of the eight fold path (Fisk et al. 94). Another example of an excerpt that clearly demonstrates the work as a whole is that of *The Holy Qur'an* (Fisk et al. 256). The first verses included in this excerpt are: "God! There is no god but

Him, the Living, the Ever-existent One” (Fisk et al. 256). Because the excerpt includes this verse, a key doctrine of Islam is expressed and gives context to the rest of the work. However, if this verse were excluded, *The Holy Qur’an*’s excerpt would begin with: “He has revealed to you the Book with the Truth, confirming the scriptures which proceeded it; for he has already revealed the Torah and the Gospel for the guidance of men, and the distinction between right and wrong” (Fisk et al. 257). The reader would be thrown into a work which he knows nothing about and would be faced with questions like, “who is ‘He’?” Excerpts must be chosen that accurately represent the entire work’s message, purpose, and meaning.

The excerpt from *Metamorphoses*, however, does not reflect the work as a whole in the least. By choosing the very last section of the book, the reader misses the entire purpose of not only “The Deification of Caesar,” but also of the work as whole. The overall purpose of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is to give an account of the history of the earth and of Rome. The work begins with the story of creation and progresses through many explanations of natural phenomena, like the creation of black people or the peacock, the Trojan War, the Pre-Socratics, and finally the Deification of Caesar. Ovid’s goal is to answer the questions “Who are we? Why are we here? What is our purpose? How did we get here? Where are we going?” according to Roman mythology. The section presented in the Core Text Reader is unable to answer any of these questions in and of itself. It also does not provide insight into the history of Rome or the earth; it simply depicts the beginning of The Roman Empire.

What would a better excerpt include, then? A better excerpt solution would be to include three sections from *Metamorphoses*. It should include the first section “Creation”, the section “The Invasion of Troy,” and “The Deification of Caesar.” This is a better excerpt selection because it shows the progression of earth’s history and of Rome’s history; it answers the questions “who, what, when, why, and how;” and it reflects the overall purpose and meaning of the work. Additionally, this is a good excerpt selection because it can be better compared with other texts from the four units of Cultural Perspectives.

From the first section, *Metamorphoses* can most easily be compared with *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. These two works demonstrate similar worldviews. Both come from polytheistic cultures and describe the work of multiple gods. These gods are capricious and manipulative, often pushing their own agendas before the well-being of humans or even the other gods. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, this is shown in the creation of Enkidu. The purpose of creating Enkidu is unclear, whether it is to destroy Gilgamesh or simply to make him question himself and his

purpose. However, it is still clear that whatever the purpose, the gods were in absolute control. Another example of the gods' capriciousness is when Ishtar asks for the Bull of Heaven from her father after Gilgamesh refuses her hand in marriage (48-51). In *Metamorphoses*, two good examples of the control and capriciousness of the gods are the two accounts of Jove's rape of two human women. In the first account, Jove rapes a woman and when Juno finds out, he turns his victim into a cow and gives her to Juno. Juno proceeds to put the cow under constant surveillance (Humphries 21-27). In the second account, Jove rapes a woman in the woods and gets her pregnant. This woman is a handmaiden of Diana, the goddess of purity, who banishes the woman from her presence upon finding her pregnancy. After the child is born, Juno decides the time is right for her to exact her revenge and turns the maiden into a wolf (Humphries 40-45). These two texts are very similar in some aspects and if included in the Core Text Reader, this would be an excellent conversation to find its way into the classroom.

From the second Cultural Perspectives unit, *Metamorphosis* can be contrasted with *The Jewish Bible*. These texts come out of two vastly different cultures, Roman and Jewish. Roman culture is polytheistic, pleasure obsessed, mythos based, while Jewish culture is monotheistic God-centered, and faith based. As a result, *The Jewish Bible* portrays one God who, though omnipotent, does not use his power in a capricious manner. When God punishes people, he has a good reason (Genesis 3), unlike the gods from Roman culture. Another contrasting point between these texts that is worth discussing is the difference in explanations for natural phenomena. In *The Jewish Bible*, every single object in existence is formed by intelligent design; a preconceived idea fashioned by the hands of God himself: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb" (Psalm 139:13). In *Metamorphoses*, in contrast, much of the natural world is made through lapses of judgement by the gods. An example of this is when Phaethon asks his father, the Sun god, if he can drive the chariot (i.e. the sun) across the sky. His father agrees to his request against his initial hesitancy. Phaethon loses control of the horses on his trek across the sky and flies too close to the sun, coloring the people of Africa black (Humphries et al. 35). These are two insightful conversations for the classroom that could result from better excerpt selections in the Core Text Reason.

From the third unit, the purpose of humanity can be compared and contrasted between Catherine of Sienna's *Dialogue of Divine Providence* and *Metamorphoses*. Catherine of Sienna's dialogue between her and God largely expounds on The Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), explaining that it is humanity's purpose to love God "without measure" and to love its neighbors "with

measure” (Fisk et al. 349). She is concerned with properly reflecting Christ through desire and affection, making her another of Christ (Fisk et al. 349). Contrastingly, Ovid portrays a very different purpose for humans. In the polytheistic world of the Romans, the purpose of humanity is to survive, including reproducing and expanding, by honoring the gods. An excellent example of this is in the section “Invasion of Troy.” The goddess Diana grows angry with the Trojans and, “virgin blood must satisfy the virgin goddess’ anger” (Humphries 286). Agamemnon, more concerned with the welfare of the whole than of his affection for his daughter, brings Iphigenia to the altar to be sacrificed. Fortunately for her, Diana takes pity upon her and leaves a deer to be sacrificed instead. This sacrifice stays her anger and calms the ocean’s storm (Humphries 286). This conversation is thought provoking and one that can spark other branching conversations in the classroom about the purpose of humanity according to different texts and cultures.

From the fourth and final section of this class, *Metamorphoses* can be compared with Pico Della Mirandola’s *The Oration on the Dignity of Man*. Mirandola strongly espouses free will and its place in society. He emphasizes the individual’s actions and consequences to answer the questions “What are we?” and “How much will do we have?” This is not just an idea of Mirandola’s, but also of the Renaissance as a whole (Fisk et al. 394-400). *Metamorphoses* also wrestles with this themes. Whether or not free will exists and if it does, what is its place, is discussed in many places, but especially in “The Deification of Caesar.” When Venus learns that there is a plot to kill Caesar, she beats “her breast with both hands, and tried to hide him, her Caesar, in a cloud” (Humphries 390). But Jove reminds her that even she cannot change the fates and that Caesar has “finished the time allotted him...but he will enter the gates of heaven as a god” (Humphries 390). If even the gods and goddesses cannot change fate, how much will exists for humans?

All of these conversations would be possible by including three stories from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in the Core Text Reader: “The Creation,” “Invasion of Troy,” and “The Deification of Caesar.” Students and teachers would both benefit from these conversations and from more attention brought to this essential text.

Works Cited

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