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Hyacinth and Humanity: The Modernization of a Myth

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Myths have always been fluid, originally passed down through oral tradition. (Virtue, 2022). Throughout time, differing versions of myths emerged—some, separate myths about separate characters of the same name, converged; others, the same myth with different spins, diverged into alternate versions over time (Atsma, n.d.; Virtue, 2022). As Virtue (2022) stated:

> Every tale told could be changed by the audience and teller alike. Every version existed in tandem, and every telling was a new experience. The same words told in the same order to the same audience took on new meaning in the repetition. Mythology took shape in the hands of the common people. Any story that was had a thousand different versions and variations. Every Greek legend [...] you have ever heard was once a fragment of a living, breathing organism. (p. 4)

The fact that myths are so universally similar in their differences means that there is no such thing as a version that is correct, only more popular. One example of this is the myth of Medusa—the common version is that Medusa, one of Athena's followers, and Poseidon were having sex in Athena's temple, and Athena turned Medusa into a monster as punishment. Other versions, though, assert that Poseidon assaulted Medusa, and her ability to turn people to stone was a gift from Athena, for self-defense.

But what is the purpose of telling myths? Well, historically, myths have been used as a memory device (Barber & Barber, 2012). "Before the invention of writing, everything was oral tradition. History, fiction, everything[…]." (Virtue, 2022, p. 3). As we could not simply

write down lists—important dates, numbers, events—information had to be transmitted orally, stored only in memories (Barber & Barber, 2012). Lists of numbers are incredibly difficult to remember on their own, so humans paired them with vivid, interesting stories so they could be preserved throughout time (Barber & Barber, 2012). A notable example of this is Hawaiian myths that described battles the volcano goddess was involved in during times of named past chiefs, associated with known lava flows (Barber & Barber, 2012). When these lava flows were radiocarbon dated and compared to the genealogic information of those chiefs, they were incredibly accurate both in order and, when assuming 22-year reigns on average, date (Barber & Barber, 2012).

However, their use in enhancing human memory, while obviously important, is not the sole purpose of myths. In *The Storytelling Animal, How Stories Make us Human,* Gottschall states:

> […] When the human mind was young and our numbers were few, we were telling one another stories. And now, tens of thousands of years later, when our species teems across the globe, most of us still hew strongly to the myths about the origins of things, and we still thrill to an astonishing multitude of fictions on pages, on stages, and on screens[…]. We are, as a species, addicted to story. Even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories. (2012, p. xiii–xiv).

So, this begs the question: why *do* we tell stories? We can be certain that it's no longer for memory's sake—we have written language that can record anything for posterity. It's probably not about communicating information, either; the internet is a

fantastic way to do that. Rather, my thoughts are best summed up by Madeline Virtue when she states, “I believe the human need to tell stories […] is a fundamental need of consciousness” (4). Similarly, Storr (2020) states that, “it’s story that makes us human,” before referring to the human brain as “a ‘story processor,’ […] ‘not a logic processor’” (sec. Introduction).

Stories are how humans understand and make sense of the world around us—this is why most religions have their creation myths, or why we’ve all heard *pourquoi tales* like “why the snake has no legs” (“Pourquoi Story,” 2022). Moreover, stories are how we understand ourselves—we weave intricate tales filled with complex characters with conflicting wants and needs and desires, and we are invested in these characters’ lives; we see ourselves in them. We root for them to succeed, we mourn when they fail, just as we would for ourselves. Stories—and, by extension, *myths*—are “the eternal mirror in which we see ourselves” (Bierlein, 2010). This explains why some myths are fantastical beyond belief—they are not *trying* to accurately depict the world; humans have never needed myths for that. What myths are ultimately for is to understand ourselves (Ball, 2021).

My (current) journey to self-discovery began, much like my college experience, with a two-week trip to Greece. I was fortunate to join a group of eleven other WWU Honors students for our very first Western course, exploring the concept of humanity and culture through the lens of ancient civilizations. Within the first couple of days in Greece, the Percy Jackson and Greek mythology fans of the group decided to “assign” everyone a role as one of the major Greek gods. This was the beginning of my exploration of identity through the Greek god Apollo.

One of the notable friends I made during that course was (the previously cited) Madeline Virtue, who fulfilled the role of Artemis to my Apollo. Madeline and I had met before, once, and as queer introverted redheads with a love of performing, we really hit it off. Our connection as "twins" in accordance with the Greek gods we ended up aligning with fostered a close relationship that's endured for five years and counting. By relating with these "icons" of Greek gods and the ideas we associated with them, we explored our own relationships with ourselves and each other.

Greece was also the first place where I truly felt like I was in tune with the world—I could sense the interconnectedness of humanity, and I felt as if I was building relationships with the ancient Greek individuals who had walked the same paths as I, transcending time and reaching into the past to form a connection. It is *that* feeling of connection to times past, the sense of timeless humanity, that really inspired my foray into modernizing the myth of Hyacinth.

Currently, I am working on a script for what I intend to be a two-act play (its working title *the flowers still bloom*), centered around this myth. *the flowers still bloom* explores humanity, morality, love, loss, friendship, strength, resilience, and growth.

The myth of Hyacinth, in its short form, is as thus: Hyacinth was a young, athletic prince, who was very handsome. Apollo, the god, fell in love with him. While teaching him to play quoit with a discus, Apollo accidentally killed him (usually, though not exclusively due to interference from the West Wind, Zephyrus). Apollo, mourning the loss of his lover, turned him into a flower (Atsma, 2010).

Selecting this myth began with selecting my central character—not Hyacinth, but Apollo. My previous exploration through my identity of Apollo was central here, as was his status as a particularly effeminate god. Then came my selection of the Hyacinth myth—as one of Apollo's most famous male lovers, it seemed an easy choice, especially as it allowed me Zephyrus as a conduit to explore unhealthy romantic relationships (Atsma, 2017)

Greek religion in particular emphasizes not loving, nurturing gods, but gods who simply inherited humanity, and were forced to interact with them (Lefkowitz, 2005). Greek religion emphasizes that life isn't fair; the gods cannot always intervene, and when they do, it is not always for the better (Lefkowitz, 2005). The myth of Hyacinth is a prime example of this: Zephyrus intervened, only to cause harm, while Apollo couldn't save him, despite his—according to at least one myth, quite extensive—efforts (Atsma, 2010). In modernizing this myth, I wanted to lean into that aspect—the inherent unfairness of life that we all know well.

As a queer individual, however, that is not all I wanted to lean into—it was absolutely crucial for me to highlight the happiness, the love, and the good things. In *The Queer Theatre We Need Now,* Valdez (2022) discusses the importance of two things that queer people need to feel adequate representation; queer characters doing more than just being queer, and having queer joy that matches (if not exceeds) queer pain. To address the first is easy: in *the flowers still bloom*, I'm telling a story about friendship, about loss, and about growth—not *about* queerness, although the queerness is important. This solves the second issue as well: while the loss and the sorrow and the *pain* of Hyacinth's death is

profound, that is not where the story ends. It continues, allowing Apollo to strengthen his relationships with his friends, and to grow.

the flowers still bloom quite intentionally combines ancient Greek myth and imagery contrasted with a modern-day setting: modern language, modern technology. I do this in part as an homage to the monuments in Greece that helped shape me, while truly embracing the modernization of the myth in a way that is accessible and familiar to a current audience. In another part, this decision reflects one of the key points I am making in modernizing this myth—that people always have been, and always will be people; fundamentally similar to one another on a deep, internal level. But there's a deeper part to me, too, that is trying to reflect my own understanding of how I fit into the world.

In *What Is a Non-Binary Play?,* Jonathan Alexandratos (2022) describes an "oscillation of tone and time [which] creates the friction that tears apart the binaries of the play, exposing its very heart," when discussing the play *Pageant and Pyres*, a work by a nonbinary playwright that, similarly to *the flowers still bloom*, combines modern themes and historical characters. This unique meshing of differing points in time, Alexandratos argues, is representative of many nonbinary people's experiences; it dismantles a binary between 'then and now,' much like how we have built our lives around dismantling the gender binary in our lives (Alexandratos, 2022). It is reflective of, at least, *my* nonbinary experience in another way, too—nonbinary people "often search through past, present, and future for places where we exist" (Alexandratos, 2022). I, too, have searched for the footprints of nonbinary people as far back as written language and oral tradition can allow. I, too, seek nonbinary voices in the present, in media, online, in my life. And, in writing *the*

flowers still bloom, I reach forward to nonbinary readers of the future. "*I* existed," I yell, "and I hope I carved out enough space for you, too."

the flowers still bloom will be posted on New Play Exchange once it is complete.

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