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Greek Mythology in the Works of Thomas Bulfinch and Gustave Schwab

In this paper I discuss two collections of classical myths from the mid-nineteenth century, which are still widely read today: Thomas Bulfinch's "The Age of Fable," first published in 1855 and often reprinted as Part One of *Bulfinch's Mythology*; and Gustav Schwab's *Die schönsten Sagen des klassischen Altertums*, originally published in 1838-40 and translated into English in 1947 as *Gods and Heroes: Myths and Epics of Ancient Greece*, with an introduction by Werner Jaeger. The different aims of these two collections reflect their authors' lives and values. Schwab was a professional educator, (minor) lyric poet, and editor of the first complete collection of Hölderlin's poetry. Bulfinch was an amateur—a graduate of Harvard and unsuccessful teacher—who worked as a bank clerk, wrote at night, and was virtually unknown until the publication of "The Age of Fable." Schwab co-founded and co-edited the polemically conservative *Deutsche Musenalmanach*, which stood for traditional values against such "radicals" as Heine and the young Hegelians. In 1836 he published his *Deutsche Volksbücher*, which retold traditional German legends in their supposedly original, "naïve" forms, in order to make them esthetically pleasing, morally instructive, and culturally acceptable. Bulfinch's program, on the other hand, was to promote the knowledge of classical antiquity as "one of the best allies of virtue and promoters of happiness" for "general readers" and "the young." He offered mythology as an "amusement"—"not a study, but...a relaxation from study," which would enable readers to recognize allusions to classical myths in modern poetry and to enjoy these writings with greater pleasure while accumulating what we would call "cultural capital."

Schwab retells Greek mythology, as he retold German folk-and fairy tales, in a deceptively "naïve" style, with no first-person authorial interventions. He completely ignores contemporary, romanticist explorations of the meaning of myths and scholarly studies of their origins and sources. Jaeger praises Schwab for "convey[ing] the legends in the form they have come down to us from the classical period of antiquity," for naively preserving "the poetic power with which the poets of antiquity told these tales." Yet in almost every myth Schwab sophisticatedly combines details drawn from diverse poets and mythographers, to create an unproblematic, idealizing version of Greek mythology as morally acceptable and pleasing to young readers as the tales in the Grimm brothers' Germanic anthologies.

"The Age of Fable" superficially resembles *Die schönsten Sagen* in that it makes classical mythology accessible to readers with no knowledge of Greek and Latin. It is, however, only one-third the length, entirely based on Ovid and Vergil, and filled with Bulfinch's informative interpretations of the myths and quotations of poetry alluding to them. In democratizing, as it were, classical mythology, and providing readers with a veneer of knowledge and cultural capital, Bulfinch anticipated in spirit the college Great Books courses created in the 1930s to acculturate students in the literature and values of Western civilization.