Michele Valerie RONNICK

"Give 'Em Your Greek, but Study Cotton:" *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* by W.E. B. Du Bois (1911)

Post-Civil War America faced an unprecedented challenge. What should or could be done for the newly freed slaves ? Should it be a curriculum in manual and technical skills or in the classically based liberal arts? Should these people remain 'human tools' laboring as sharecroppers or in factories in a new form of slavery? Or should the best of them, the "Talented Tenth" as Du Bois conceived it, hope for an education that they thought would make them fully enfranchised citizens?

To tackle this question, the classically educated Du Bois turned to the story of Jason and Medea. His Americanized version is set on the "Black Sea" of humanity in Toomsville, Alabama. The town's plantocracy is unsettled when Miss Smith, a high minded educator arrives from the North to operate a school for blacks. When her assistant, Miss Taylor, from Wellesley College who is a less humane person, tells an eager young black student about Jason and Medea, the theme is set. Where Taylor sees only the romance of the quest, the young man immediately sees it as an allegory for the town's economic and social structure. Taylor's brother, an aggressive Northern businessman, tells her that she should teach her students to study Greek, but that she should teach him all about the cotton industry.

This schism based on different conceptions of "useful learning" as well as social and political control ran through arguments over the purpose of black education for decades. Booker T. Washington wanted black people to become self sufficient and achieve economic independence by learning practical skills. To this end he dedicated his life, opening the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee Alabama in 1881. In the same year, William Sanders Scarborough, liberal arts advocate and professional classicist, published *First Lessons in Greek* in New York City. Both men had been born in slavery and had wrestled with the idea of freedom all their lives. By 1911 it was clear to Du Bois, a generation younger and never enslaved, that both types of education were necessary. The sheepskin black people wanted and needed to find was both gold and silver.