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

In their study of children's literature based on traditional tales, John Stephens and Robyn McCallum suggest that children's literature inspired by classical mythology persistently replicates the conservative tendencies and hegemonic "metanarratives" of western culture (Stephens and McCallum 1998, e.g., 10, 63-64). A look at Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Wonder Book* may indicate otherwise. Written in 1851, the *Wonder Book* occupies a place near the start of classically inspired leisure-reading for children in English. In his contribution to this genre, Hawthorne subverts traditional positions of social or scholarly authority and stakes a claim for the superior authority of imaginative appropriations of myth.

Hawthorne presents the six stories of the *Wonder Book* as the creations of a college student, Eustace Bright, who tells them to his younger relatives while on holidays. Between each of the myths, Hawthorne places descriptive pieces which situate Eustace and his audience in various places: in the forest gathering nuts, for instance, or on a climb up a mountain, or in the children's playroom. By making the "author" of the stories someone closer to the children's own age than Hawthorne himself, and by having that narrator occupy the position of co-conspirator and older cousin rather than father, Hawthorne seems to take pains to avoid a storyteller who could immediately be seen as a patriarchal mouthpiece.

In the myths Hawthorne has Eustace relate, classical authority is subverted in a variety of ways: Hawthorne sometimes disregards the interpretive advice of Charles Anthon, a scholar whose classical dictionary he consulted while composing the *Wonder Book*; he makes up new mythological episodes which become the linchpins of their narratives; and he sometimes enlists a silly didacticism which parodies educational uses of classics. The atmosphere of the frame-story is pervaded by play (Donovan 2002), and most of the time Eustace and his young friends are outside (Laffrado 1992, 73). The mythological stories are colored by these contexts and the whole work conveys a spirit of natural and free exuberance, not conforming to the more structured environments of home and school. The two stories which are narrated inside the house confront traditional authority most squarely. "The Paradise of Children" uses the tale of Pandora to revise the story of Adam and Eve, and in "The Three Golden Apples" a young Hercules gets the better of his elder Atlas and bears away the prize.

The frame-story makes explicit the challenge which these two stories especially pose to traditional authorities. Having heard about Eustace's rendition of Pandora, Mr. Pringle--the father of some of Eustace's auditors--asks to listen to one of Eustace's stories to judge if they are likely to work mischief on young ears. After Eustace's tale of Hercules and Atlas, Mr. Pringle delivers his verdict: he finds Eustace's storytelling the equivalent of applying paint to marble statues. Although Mr. Pringle uses this description to illustrate how far Eustace's stories have strayed from the classical ideal, it is probable that Hawthorne knew about ancient polychromatic practices and ironically orchestrates Mr. Pringle's description to undercut his objection. In injecting imaginative new life into classical myth, Eustace and Hawthorne claim a greater authority than Mr. Pringle's scholastic and frozen view of antiquity.

In the *Wonder Book* Hawthorne provides readers with a model for engaging classics on terms not set by traditional authorities. Through Eustace, Hawthorne empowers a young-adult audience to authorize their own imaginative interactions with classics, and he suggests that such renditions of ancient stories are more likely to be true to the spirit of classical myth than the accounts they may find in their schoolbooks.