

**James Romm**

**Organizer's Statement -- Committee-sponsored panel on "The Classics as Counter-culture: Subversion, Challenge and Rebellion in the Classical Tradition"**

As its title indicates, this panel looks at how Classical myth and literature have been used to challenge established social and aesthetic traditions, in widely divergent eras of cultural history. Indeed its participants have been chosen so as to address this theme of challenge in as broad a historical context as possible: they concern themselves with time periods ranging from the 12th Century A.D. to 1986, and with genres as diverse as historical narrative, comic romance, novel, philosophic treatise and Brechtian drama. Each reveals, in his or her own cultural milieu, how particular classical texts or broader conceptions of antiquity have served as instruments of subversion or rebellion for the post-classical authors who have drawn on them. As a group they illustrate how the Greek and Roman classics, often too easily regarded as instruments of official or mainstream culture, have in the past stood on the side of the counter-culture, and continue to do so in some quarters today.

To underscore the unity of theme in such a diverse array of topics, I intend, in my role as organizer and chair, to preface the entire panel with some remarks concerning these affinities between classics and counter-culture, and to raise some questions as to how an exploration of these might influence scholars, students, and participants in the so-called culture wars. I shall also offer a brief response to each paper, indicating how it helps to answer these questions or raises others. It is hoped that the discussion which will follow will address general issues regarding the role of the classics in post-classical cultural history and their place in our educational curriculum today.

The papers have been arranged in chronological order according to the period they address, as follows:

Panelist #1 reveals how a subversive trend in medieval Norman historiography, in which the character of the Norman race was demonized rather than celebrated, takes ancient myth as its springboard and relies on specific episodes from Roman epic for its elaboration.

Panelist #2 similarly considers a case where a Roman epic, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, has served as a vehicle for undercutting heroic ideals, in this case in the Renaissance comic romance *Orlando Furioso* of Ariosto. Episodes drawn from Ovid's text serve to expose the weaknesses of Ariosto's knights, in particular a susceptibility to sexual desire that associates them with female models of behavior. The paper concludes by showing how one of Ovid's key explorations of the anti-heroic aesthetic, the weaving contest between Arachne and Athena, helps Ariosto define his own authorial stance.

The third panelist addresses the important topic of how Nietzsche constructed his unique version of the pre-Euripidean Greek world and then used this construction as a polemic against late-nineteenth century versions of selfhood and consciousness.

The two panelists jointly presenting the fourth paper focus on two female novelists of the early twentieth century -- one a progressive political activist, the other a former resident of a utopian commune -- both of whom created, as Nietzsche did, idyllic visions of the ancient Greek landscape as implicit critiques of their own societies, in this case with particular focus on gender roles.

The author of the fifth paper discusses *A Mouthful of Birds*, a post-modern version of the *Bacchae* by the feminist/socialist British playwright Caryl Churchill and the anthropologist David Lan. Their play seizes on the idea of divine possession, as depicted by Euripides, and transforms it into an act of willed political and social rebellion. The Dionysiac movement which in the *Bacchae* poses a grave threat to established order here becomes a path toward personal liberation and recovery of meaning.