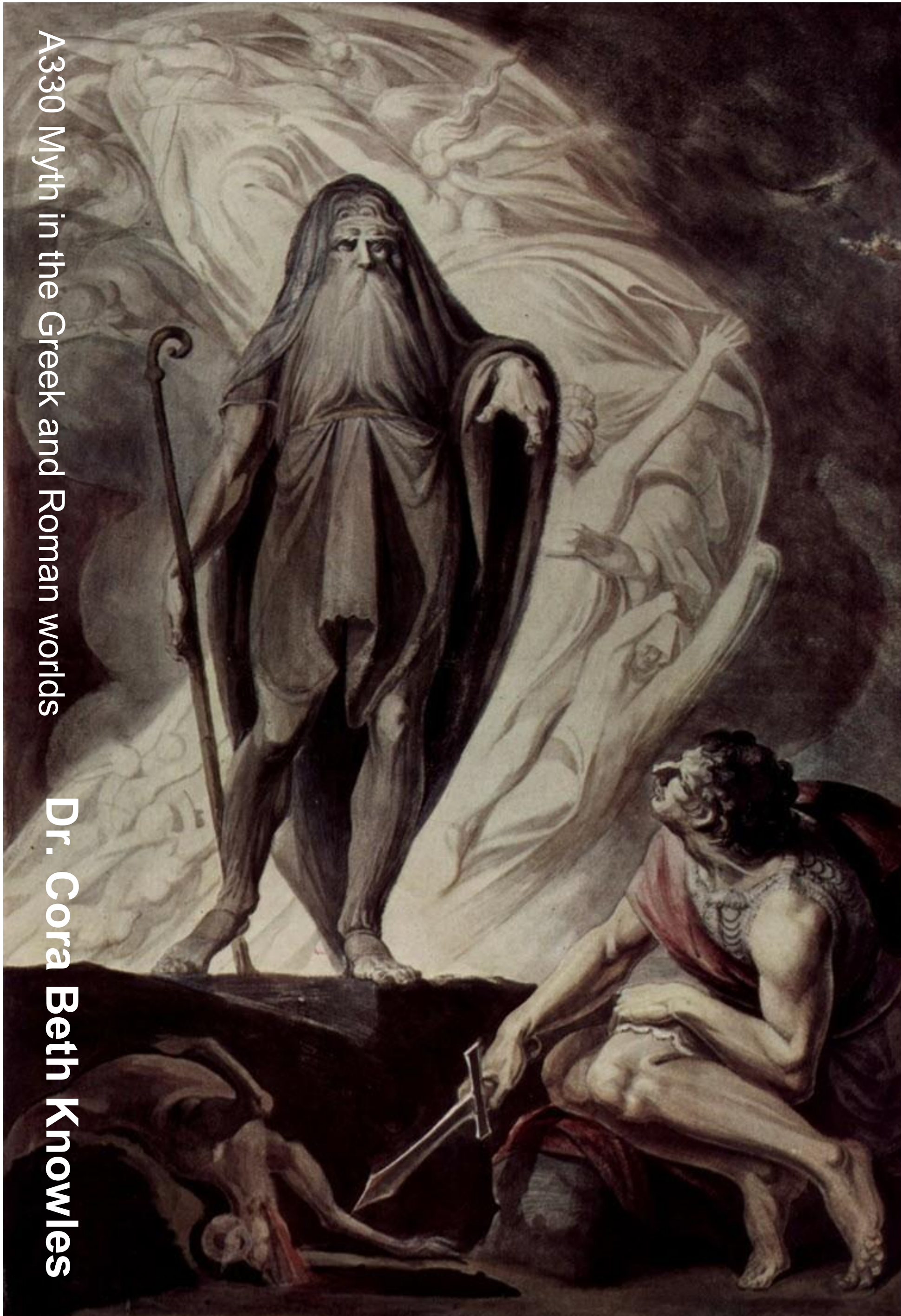
A330 Myth in the Greek and Roman worlds

Module Conclusion



A330: A Retrospective View

This section will review the main themes and approaches of A330. In order to make this review more interesting, it will apply the main themes and approaches to a different (and rather obscure) source. It is hoped that this practical demonstration of applying approaches to a source will also be of use in helping you to determine which approach you ought to take to the sources you choose for your EMA.

The Blocks and their Themes

A330 is a course which touches on a number of approaches to myth, both in the Blocks and in the Secondary Sources. It's not possible to review all of them here: however, we can summarise the main ones.

Block 1: Block 1 introduced you to the character of Hippolytus (focusing mainly on the play by Euripides), and to ideas which would be developed further in other Blocks: reception, manipulation of myth and the afterlife. It also briefly introduced you to comparative mythology, through Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.

Block 2: Block 2 focused on the use of myth for self-promotion and propaganda, as well as its function as a status symbol in Roman culture. It demonstrated that, while the use of myth could at times be purely decorative, it could be used (or even misused!) in a public or domestic setting to send a message to the viewer.

Block 3: This Block developed your awareness of Ovid's influential work *Metamorphoses*, and considered the extent of its influence on later art, literature and even television. It encouraged you to consider the flexibility of myth and whether there were limits to that flexibility, as Ovid recasts tales from an earlier time, then his version is itself recast by later writers and artists as other religions and mythologies require changes to be made.

Block 4: Block 4 took a look at the early development of myth, and the environment of intellectual curiosity in which myth developed in classical Greece. It examined the relationship between myth and reason (*muthos* and *logos*), questioning the feasibility of a clear division between the two concepts.

Activity 1:

We'll be looking at a source which covers the myth of Tiresias. Spend a few moments writing down anything you can remember about Tiresias: and if you can't remember anything about him, look him up in the *Penguin Dictionary*!

Discussion:

You may have remembered that Tiresias was a famous prophet – notably, a blind prophet. He appears in a lot of Greek tragedies relating to the city of Thebes (you might have come across him in Sophocles' *Antigone*, or

Euripides' *Bacchae*, or perhaps Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*), and he also appears in Homer's *Odyssey* (Book 11, during Odysseus' conversation with spirits from the Underworld).

However, even if you don't recall Tiresias from any of these sources, you should remember him from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book 3, where his own transformation from man to woman and back again is recounted, and where he plays an active role in the stories of Narcissus and Pentheus, as well as adjudicating a dispute between Jupiter and Juno, which costs him his sight.

The following version of the Tiresias myth will form the basis for the rest of this review. It comes from a commentary on Homer by the twelfth-century bishop Eustathius. Eustathius summarises a poem on Tiresias by an elegiac poet whom he calls Sostratus. This is a translation of Eustathius' summary:

First change. And Sostratus in the Tiresias, an elegiac poem, says that Tiresias was originally born female, and was raised by Chariclo. At the age of seven she was wandering in the mountains, and Apollo fell in love with her, and taught her music as payment for sexual intercourse. But after being taught the girl no longer gave herself to Apollo, and he changed her into a man, so that she would have experience of Eros.

Second change. Having been changed to a man, he acted as judge for Zeus and Hera, as has been mentioned above. Having been changed back into a woman, she fell in love with Callon the Argive, by whom she had a son, who was called Strabo or "Squinter," because he was born with squinting eyes, due to the anger of Hera.

Third change. After this Tiresias laughed at the statue of Hera at Argos, and was changed into an unsightly man, and so called Pithon or "Monkey."

Fourth change. Zeus pitied her and changed her back to a woman in the bloom of youth and sent her to Troezen.

Fifth change. There a local man named Glyphius fell in love with her and assaulted her as she was bathing. But she was stronger than the young lad, and strangled him. Glyphius was the beloved of Poseidon, who turned the matter over to the Moerae for judgment. The Moerae turned her into Tiresias, and took away the skill at prophecy.

Sixth change. But he learned this again from Chiron, and dined at the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. There a beauty contest was held between Aphrodite and the Graces, whose names were Pasithea, Cale, and Euphrosyne. He acted as judge, and judged Cale most beautiful, and Hephaistus married her. This made Aphrodite angry, and she changed him into a poor old gray-haired woman, but Cale made her extremely attractive [manuscripts: gave her a good head of hair], and led her away to Crete. There Arachnus fell in love with her, and after lying with her he boasted that he had lain with Aphrodite.

Seventh change. At this the goddess became angry and changed Arachnus into a weasel, and Tiresias into a mouse. He says this is why a mouse eats little, from having been an old woman, and has the power of prophecy, because of Tiresias. That the mouse has prophetic powers is made clear both by the way that their squeakings are a timely sign of a storm, and by the way they flee and run away from houses that are in danger of collapse.

We don't know anything more about the poet 'Sostratus'. We don't know who he was or when he lived (although we can make some educated guesses, and will do so later), and we don't know what the tone or style of his poetry was – or whether it was good or bad! We don't even know whether Eustathius got his name right. However, the lack of information about this source doesn't prevent us from applying to Eustathius' summary the approaches presented in each Block of A330.

Figure 1. Odysseus (left) consults the shade of Tiresias (centre) in the Underworld. 4th century BC.

Block 1

If we were to follow the approach which Block 1 takes to Hippolytus, we might choose to look at how and why the character of Tiresias develops over time, in art and literature. In order to do this, we might look first at Greek tragedy, and at the key narrative role played by the blind prophet in (particularly) the Theban tragedies of Sophocles.

In these plays Tiresias is a wise man and a speaker of often unwelcome truth: but his function is to drive the action by predicting the future, both for the characters and for the audience, and his own metamorphoses are not the central concern. In contrast to the strange and even comedic transformations covered by Sostratus, Tiresias in the plays of Sophocles is a dignified authority figure.

Similarly in the *Odyssey* Tiresias drives the action by providing Odysseus with the information he needs. In the Underworld Tiresias is a privileged shade: he retains his memory and his ability to prophesy. Here too, however, the focus is on what the prophet can predict, rather than on his own history.

However, there is a shift in characterisation when we turn to Euripides' *Bacchae*. Here Tiresias is introduced in an almost comic way (170-214): he is presented in the outfit of a worshipper of Dionysus. Thalia Papadopoulou comments, 'Euripides employs the wellknown association of Teiresias with truth and authority but combines it with comic hints to guide the audience to a certain reception of Teiresias' (2001, p.26). In other words, Euripides borrows Sophocles' Tiresias and turns him into almost a parody of himself, perhaps to satirise his role in so many of Sophocles' plays. As we saw in the *Hippolytus*, one of the characteristics of Euripides' writing is its innovative twists on traditional characters, and Tiresias does not escape this treatment.

From Sophocles and Euripides, we could go on to look at other ancient sources, from artwork to later writers (Ovid and Callimachus being two of the most significant, although he is also used by Lucian in some interesting ways). It's interesting to observe how rarely Tiresias' own life is the focus for these sources: in the majority of cases, Tiresias merely appears in another character's story, to comment on and assist events.

We could also take a look at comparative mythology, by examining the popularity of the 'blind seer' figure in other cultures - and indeed in modern culture:

> **Delmar O'Donnell:** But how'd he know about the treasure?
> **Ulysses Everett McGill:** The blind are reputed to possess sensitivities compensating for their lack of sight, even to the point of developing paranormal psychic powers. Now, clearly seeing into the future would fall neatly into that category; it's not so surprising then that an organism deprived of its earthly vision...
> **Pete:** He said we wouldn't get it. He said we wouldn't get the treasure we seek on account of our obstacles...
> **Ulysses Everett McGill:** Well what the hell does he know? He's just an ignorant old man.
>
> — *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*

There's a great deal we could say about Tiresias in art, literature and comparative mythology – far too much to cover here. A whole chapter could be devoted to the relationship between the myth of Tiresias (his sex-changes and the other metamorphoses covered by Sostratus) and its relationship to the prophet who pops up in so many other myths. However, we've covered enough to illustrate how to take a Block 1-style approach to this source by tracing the role and characterisation of Tiresias.

Block 2

This Block focused (at least initially) on the political uses of myth in the Roman Empire, and we could apply this to what we know of Sostratus' *Tiresias*.

The name 'Strabo', supposedly the son of Tiresias and Callon the Argive, stands out in this summary, because it's a good old Roman family name. Sarah Pothecary (1999 p.691) comments, 'One suspects that the detail that Tiresias' son was called 'Strabo' may have originated with the… poem in which it is first attested': in other words, Sostratus may well have made this up. This encourages us to speculate about what a distinguished Roman name is doing in this mythical context.

It seems possible that Sostratus inserted this name because a member of the Strabo family was (or might become) his patron, and he was trying to gain favour by using his poem to create a mythical aetiology for the family.

We can pursue this idea, but there are several directions in which we could take it. One of these is a purely historical direction: we could use the poem (to be more precise, Eustathius' summary of the poem) as evidence for a connection between Sostratus and a Strabo. This connection could help us to determine when Sostratus was writing: by looking at famous Strabos who were in a position to support a writer, we could narrow down when Sostratus might have lived. Some scholars have taken this approach, and the result is a general (although hardly universal) consensus that Sostratus was probably writing towards the end of the Roman Republic, or in the early days of imperial rule. (The son and the father of the famous Sejanus were both named Strabo – but a connection with either of these Strabos seems unlikely!) This could be helpful to use in our study of the myth and its literary context, because it suggests that Sostratus' *Tiresias* is likely to pre-date Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, so Sostratus could have been an influence on Ovid.

Figure 2: Tiresias appears to Odysseus during the nekyia of Odyssey xi, in this watercolour with tempera by the Anglo-Swiss Johann Heinrich Füssli, c. 1780-85.

Another direction in which we could take the Sostratus-Strabo connection is the analysis of family associations with myth. The most famous example, of course, is the connection of Augustus and the Julian family with Aeneas and his son Iulus – but Augustus was not the only individual who tried to publicise a connection with a mythological character. This was a 'form of family pride shared by many aristocrats in the late Republic' (Wiseman 1974 p.153). In the case of Sostratus and Strabo, it is interesting to note that the original

Strabo is not shown as a famous hero: on the contrary, he's notable for having a mother who changed into a man, and for squinting. This doesn't seem like a glorious myth of family origins! However, Sostratus goes to some trouble to fit Strabo into a story in which (it seems) he had not featured before. Perhaps this indicates that any connection to myth was better than none.

Block 3

This Block opens up a host of possible interpretations of our Sostratus summary.

One of the most interesting areas to explore, following the same lines as our study of Block 3, is the area of mythological knowledge. We can't say anything about Sostratus the writer for certain, but we can speculate, based on this summary, that he may have had a sophisticated knowledge of myth.

Activity 2

Looking back at the summary of Sostratus' *Tiresias*, make a note of whether any of the storylines seem familiar to you from other myths that you've read, particularly in the *Metamorphoses*.

Discussion

You may have noted similarities between Apollo's pursuit of the young girl Tiresias and Apollo's pursuit of Daphne in the *Metamorphoses*, or between Apollo's gift of music and the gift of prophecy he bestows on Cassandra. Perhaps the attempted rape by Glyphius reminds you of the rape narratives of the *Metamorphoses* – although this time the story has a twist, when the would-be rapist is strangled by the victim. The beauty contest has a lot in common with the well-known story of the Judgment of Paris, and perhaps the boasting of Arachnus anticipates the boasting of Arachne in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, although the similarities exist more in the names than the myths themselves. Finally we have the aetiological explanation of the mouse's attributes, which recalls the many aetiological transformations in the *Metamorphoses*.

There are a number of other connections you could make between the *Tiresias* and other myths. It seems that Sostratus has inserted the character of Tiresias into a selection of familiar tales – which suggests either that Sostratus' work was clumsy and derivative, or that he was a skilled and playful manipulator of myth!

We could also choose to compare Sostratus' technique of placing Tiresias at the centre of a number of well-known myths to Ovid's use of Tiresias as a linking device between the episodes of the Theban cycle in Book 3 of the *Metamorphoses*. Ovid does tell Tiresias' story (see below), but he presents it in a much simpler form, missing out (ironically, for a work on the theme of transformations) most of the transformations mentioned by Sostratus.

> [316] While these events according to the laws of destiny occurred, and while the child, the twice-born Bacchus, in his cradle lay, 'Tis told that Jupiter, in a careless hour, indulged too freely in the nectar cup; and having laid aside all weighty cares, jested with Juno as she idled by. Freely the god began; "Who doubts the truth? The female's pleasure is a great delight, much greater than the pleasure of a male." Juno denied it; wherefore 'twas agreed to ask Tiresias to declare the truth, than whom none knew both male and female joys: for wandering in a green wood he had seen two serpents coupling; and he took his staff and sharply struck them, till they broke and fled. 'Tis marvelous, that instant he became a woman from a man, and so remained while seven autumns passed. When eight were told, again he saw them in their former plight, and thus he spoke; "Since such a power was wrought, by one stroke of a staff my sex was changed—again I strike!" And even as he struck the same two snakes, his former sex returned; his manhood was restored.— as both agreed to choose him umpire of the sportive strife, he gave decision in support of Jove; from this the disappointment Juno felt surpassed all reason, and enraged, decreed eternal night should seal Tiresias' eyes.—immortal Deities may never turn decrees and deeds of other Gods to naught, but Jove, to recompense his loss of sight, endowed him with the gift of prophecy.
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> *Ovid, Metamorphoses Book 3, translated by Brookes More, 1922*

It's also interesting that, out of the two most common versions of how Tiresias was blinded, Ovid has selected the one that doesn't invite a direct comparison with the myth of Diana and Actaeon (also in Book 3), a comparison which, for instance, Tennyson later invites in his *Tiresias*:

> There in a secret olive-glade I saw
> Pallas Athene climbing from the bath
> In anger; yet one glittering foot disturb'd
> The lucid well; one snowy knee was prest
> Against the margin flowers; a dreadful light
> Came from her golden hair, her golden helm

And all her golden armor on the grass,
And from her virgin breast, and virgin eyes
Remaining fixt on mine, till mine grew dark
For ever, and I heard a voice that said
"Henceforth be blind, for thou hast seen too much, And
speak the truth that no man may believe."

Alfred Lord Tennyson, from the dramatic monologue 'Tiresias', 1885

One further point to raise in relation to Block 3 is the importance of reception. The summary of Sostratus' *Tiresias* comes from the work of a twelfth-century Byzantine bishop, Eustathius of Thessalonica, who was writing a commentary on Homer. So it's important to consider how a poet of (perhaps) the first century BCE might have been received by a bishop writing over a thousand years later. It is also worth noting that in the same passage, Eustathius wrongly states that in Callimachus' *Hymn V* it was Artemis, not Athene, who was seen bathing by Tiresias – and where there is one error, there may be others. Further research into the life, works and views of Eustathius might give us a basis on which to evaluate this summary, as would awareness of the medieval reception of Greek and Roman myths.

Figure 3: Tiresias and the snakes, by Johann Ulrich Krauss, from a 1690 edition of Ovid's Metamorphoses.

Block 4

This Block encourages us to look at the intellectual, philosophical and religious context of myths. In accordance with this, we could look at two things: the definition of wisdom and the role of prophecy in the ancient world, and how the character of Tiresias fits into both of these.

In considering the definition of wisdom, we could consider the oracle at Delphi, and the relationship between the famous Delphic inscription 'Know Thyself' and the prophecy which Tiresias gives Narcissus' mother in the *Metamorphoses*, that the child would live a long life 'if he never knows himself' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 3.350). Tiresias' wisdom is therefore established through its relationship to one of the key maxims of Greek civilization. Using this as a starting point (since Plato frequently shows Socrates using the Delphic maxim as a foundation for his arguments, and since Socrates in the *Apology* is also shown to put great faith in the wisdom of oracles), we could show how Tiresias is frequently presented as a Socrates-like character: an old man who speaks the uncomfortable truth. While there are distinct similarities, this interpretation is not without its problems: one is that the lines from the *Odyssey* relating to Tiresias' appearance as a shade are specifically mentioned by Socrates in Plato's *Republic* Book 3 as an example of the dangerous deceptiveness of poetry in its descriptions of life after death – so Tiresias' role in literature does not seem to meet with Socrates' approval! Another problem is raised by Sostratus himself, in demonstrating that Tiresias is not always presented as the wise and objective seer: when Tiresias' own story is told, the effect can be rather more comedic than dignified. Perhaps we could compare the comic portrayals of Tiresias to the character of Socrates in Aristophanes' *Clouds*… But while this is an interesting area of investigation, it is too complicated to investigate here!

The role of prophecy in Greek and Roman society is also a complex one, too complex to explore in this brief study. However, it is worth observing that in Greek and Roman literature Tiresias comes to be used as the all-purpose prophet, popping up in anachronistic situations whenever a prophet with good credentials is called for. Perhaps the transferability of Tiresias is what gives Sostratus license to insert him into a variety of different myths.

It might also be interesting to investigate Tiresias' role after death, as judge and advisor to Persephone.

Figure 4. Ulysses consults Tiresias: 1st century CE from the villa Albani, Italy

Conclusion

If you were to pursue every one of these avenues of investigation, as well as other possible avenues which have not been covered here (like the role of Tiresias in modern culture as a transsexual icon, or the use of the name 'Tiresias' in relation to blindness, for instance in the family of typefaces designed for people with impaired vision, or the origin of the caduceus symbol), you could write a whole book based on Sostratus' *Tiresias* – even though the text itself doesn't exist!

Thinking about the different approaches showcased in the module will prepare you for taking on the EMA. Do you want to look at changes over time, as in Block 1? Will you be considering 'spin' and the uses of myth, both public and personal, as we've done in Block 2? Do you intend to consider Reception, like Block 3? Or will you be unpicking the purpose and social function of myth, as in Block 4? Whatever you choose to do, make sure that you state your choices clearly and openly: your decisions are a big part of what makes your work unique. Good luck!

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