The classical myth of Ulysses versus Palamedes: an early metaphor for the qualitative/quantitative debate?

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Abstract This essay examines the classical myth of the confrontation between Palamedes (pro-quantitative) and Ulysses (pro-qualitative). This para-mythical transposition is used as an interpretative metaphor for the methodological debate regarding the use of qualitative or quantitative paradigms of research in the fields of social sciences and education. Although the debate about paradigms has come to a halt over recent years, it may be appropriate to rekindle it now, with less rancour than before, in order to move towards a fertile dialogue without striving to reach any kind of consensus.

Keywords Greek mythology · Qualitative · Quantitative · Methodology · Epistemology · Debate · Interpretation · Ulysses · Palamedes

1 The para-mythical transposition

All myths are originally used to narrate or talk about a certain episode or relevant person in the form of a metaphor. In this way, myths can be used to represent, analyse and explain certain phenomena and characters. The simple narration of a myth can lead to different interpretations which, when transformed into beliefs about the world and transcendence, can subsequently result in new ideologies and religions. The myth is one of the cultural phenomena which has the most direct influence on the way in which man thinks, his conscience, his history and the exegesis and hermeneutics of his seminal texts. Rose (1970, p. 22) defined myth as “the result of the working of naïve imagination upon the facts of experience”.

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Gadamer (1997, p. 27) believes that myth has its own value and credibility, and it is therefore relevant and justifiable to research it. There is no jump between mythos and logos. The idea of absolute reason is an illusion. Gadamer believes that there is no gap between mythos and logos as an epistemological improvement, in which mythos is weak knowledge and logos is strong knowledge.

There are a large number of classification systems, acceptable typologies for and approaches to studying Greek myths. Falcón et al. (1997, pp. i–xxviii) make a distinction between several different analytical approaches: historicist-diachronic, structural, semantic and psychoanalytical. Here, however, we will focus on myth as abstraction or an epistemological concept, which is the reason why it is now used as an explicative metaphor which is transposed to reinterpret certain parts of reality.

Qualitative methodologies have traditionally used figures from Greek mythology as interpretative metaphors for certain observed phenomena and characters. In fact, metaphorical explanations summarise the findings made through qualitative methodologies and "soft" sciences, while scientific knowledge generated through quantitative methodologies used for "hard" sciences is described in the form of laws and theories expressed quantitatively. If any criticism were to be made of the use of metaphors in qualitative methodologies, it would not be the use of them itself, but the poor, stilted development of those metaphors. Metaphors tend to be thought of as mere anecdotes, brittle concepts and fleeting evidence.

In The Birth of Tragedy (1872), Nietzsche made a distinction between two fundamental principles—the Apollonian and the Dionysian—as a way of interpreting the world and Greek philosophy. These two principles would go on to influence contemporary thinking, especially 20th century aesthetics and literature, a great deal. Apollo represents serenity, clarity, measure and rationalism. Dionysus, on the other hand, represents impulse, excess, the dissolution of all boundaries, the affirmation of life, eroticism and orgiastic passion as the culmination of the thirst for life, saying yes to life despite all of its hardships. This is a metaphysical, existential approach to art as a product of the tension and alternation between, and fusion of, two opposing principles: light and darkness, reason and instinct, sobriety and intoxication, order and chaos.

Psychoanalysis went on to use Greek myths to make sense of certain characters and behaviours (i.e. Oedipus complex, Electra complex, Phobos syndromes or phobias, etc…) in line with the Greek tradition of using moral types/cases found in Theophrastus’ work The Characters.

Later, myth was used not as an explicative metaphor but as a conceptual guideline. This interpretation began to gain meaning in Horkheimer and Adorno’s Dialectic of Enlightenment (1994, p. 30), as the authors consider that, faced with the self-destruction of rationality illustrated by nature’s rebellion, which is self-degrading, and the terrible wars which take place, there will be a return to the myth, and, more specifically, to a revived Odysseus.

More recently, Greek myths have become involved in, given names to and explained a wide spectrum of phenomena, happenings and modern cultural patterns, always as case studies with the logic used in interpretative research (Gutiérrez et al. 2002). For example, researchers have coined the term “Procrustes’ bed” to describe assessments which are biased because they use inappropriate standards. The application of this term in educational research was first discussed by Howe and Eisenhart (1990). In a next future, a general review of Greek myths, which have been used in various different fields and scientific disciplines, would be a useful, informative and welcomed review.