

Article

Antipodean Theseus: The Narrative Influence of Classical Myth on the Historiography of William Larnach

Phillip Louis Zapkin 

Department of English, Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA 16801, USA; phillipzapkin@gmail.com

Abstract

This essay examines six depictions of the 1898 suicide of New Zealand businessman and politician William Larnach: four historical narratives and two dramatic/fictional depictions. Drawing on the insights of postmodern historiographers like Hayden White, I argue that these tellings reflect an increasing influence of the Hippolytus myth, a culturally authorized narrative rooted in traditional British colonial education structures and Antipodean reception of classics. In particular, as New Zealand shifted away from British identification to a distinctly Kiwi identity, classics legitimized New Zealand culture within a global north from which the Antipodean nation is geographically isolated. Analyzing depictions of Larnach's death and the possible incestuous scandal leading up to it reveals important historiographic insights both into how history is conceptualized and emplotted and into how Antipodean cultures navigate their positions on the fringes of a larger global north primarily seated in Europe and North America.

Keywords: adaptation; classics; Euripides; *Hippolytus*; historiography; narrative; New Zealand; postmodern historiography; Seneca; Theseus; William Larnach

1. Introduction

An old man sits alone in a locked room. He raises his hand. Checks the loaded revolver. Slowly, with a low sigh, he places the barrel of the gun to his temple. Pulls the trigger. He dies instantaneously.

The death by suicide of William Larnach shocked his family, his colleagues in business and politics, and the people of New Zealand, especially his home region of Otago on the South Island, where he had been a well-known resident for decades. On a factual level, we know that, on 12 October 1898, after a series of personal/familial setbacks, business failures, and financial decline, William Larnach, then serving as Member of Parliament for Taupeka (in the Otago region), locked himself in committee room J in the Parliament building in Wellington and shot himself in the head with a revolver. What no one knows is why. Larnach left no suicide note explaining his actions. And he died intestate, without a will, the contents of which might have shed light on his decision. This article is interested in the causes of Larnach's suicide.

Or, more accurately, this article is interested in how historians and dramatic/literary authors have discussed Larnach's suicide. I cannot shed any additional light on William Larnach's real motives or experiences. But the ways in which his final days have been narrativized are historiographically and literarily significant, in part because, as I will argue, they reflect a distinctive style of what (meta-)historian Hayden White calls emplotment, or the structuring of historical narratives through literary patterns (White 1985, p. 83). As we



Academic Editor: Greg Melleuish

Received: 3 December 2025

Revised: 27 January 2026

Accepted: 4 February 2026

Published: 10 February 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

shall see in more detail, postmodern historiographers argue that historical narratives are fundamentally shaped by culturally validated stories, which historians—consciously or unconsciously—take as models for understanding and presenting historical events. The narratological focus here on story-telling techniques means that both historical/biographical accounts and literary accounts are relevant primary texts, though obviously they serve different purposes. But, although non-fiction and historical fiction take different stances towards the importance of historical accuracy, both utilize comparable elements of plot, conflict, tension, character development, etc., and so a postmodern approach assessing the techniques of narrativizing highlights historiographic concerns about truth, accuracy, and how stories shape non-fiction.

In the case of Larnach's suicide, one supposed motive was an affair between his third wife Constance "Conny" de Bathe Brandon and his favorite son from his first marriage, Douglas.¹ Though rumors of the tryst have persisted among Larnach's descendants, there is no concrete evidence or documentary proof that it occurred. However, as Section 3 of this essay shows, biographers of Larnach have increasingly acknowledged and even accepted the affair as factual. And, as Section 4 discusses, literary/dramatic authors have made it central to their stories of Larnach's end. What I argue is that the story of this affair aligns in its key elements with the Greco-Roman Hippolytus myth, as presented most famously by Euripides and Seneca. In New Zealand, a former British colony, the classics were deeply entrenched within the British colonial education system and therefore form a recognizable cultural pattern in Kiwi thought. The growing certainty in the historical literature about the affair between Larnach's wife and son represents a historiographic alignment of Larnach's story with a distorted version of Hippolytus's tale, indicating the ongoing role of classics in shaping New Zealand self-identity and self-consciousness.

In broad brushstrokes, the generally agreed upon facts of William Larnach's life are: his heritage was Scottish, and his immediate ancestors had faced scandal and controversy in business and politics in Scotland and Australia. William Larnach was born in New South Wales, Australia, probably in 1833 (or 1838, for which there is some controversial evidence). In his early career, Larnach found success working for banks in the Australian goldfields, where he showed both his honesty and his physical and mental resiliency. Because of his service, he was appointed manager of the Bank of Otago in New Zealand and arrived in that colony in 1867. During the remainder of his life, primarily spent in New Zealand, Larnach held posts in several banks, co-owned businesses of various kinds, speculated in land, was elected as MP for three different constituencies, built his lavish home, married three times, had multiple children, and eventually shot himself. Of his three marriages, Larnach seems to have been contented, if not actively happy with all three. He married Eliza Jane Guise in 1859 and had several children with her before her death in 1880. This seems to have been a largely happy marriage, though William was often absent on business or political ventures. His second marriage to Mary Cockburn Alleyne, Eliza's half-sister, from 1882 to Mary's death in 1887, seemed to be Larnach's least fulfilling relationship, functioning partially as a marriage of convenience but driving a wedge between William and his often-spendthrift children who feared their inheritance would go to Mary. Larnach's final marriage was to Conny, roughly twenty years younger than William. At the very least, Larnach was extremely happy during the early days of this marriage, though there is disagreement about his feelings at the end of his life.

Today, Larnach is probably most famous for his home, generally known as the Castle, though Larnach himself often called it The Camp (a nickname he gave it while living in tents during the construction). The Castle, which remains today as a tourist attraction ("[Larnach Castle & Gardens](#)" 2025), is a massive building styled after the fortresses of Larnach's ancestral Scotland and built with a mix of local and imported materials. Although the

Castle is his claim to fame today, during his own time Larnach was equally known as a pillar of the community, a businessman who strengthened the economic life of Otago and New Zealand as a whole, and as a politician who got things done for his constituents and party. He was very much a standard Victorian success story, and his Otago neighbors seemed generally proud of his accomplishments.

2. Postmodern Historiography and Classical Influence in New Zealand Culture

2.1. Postmodern Historiography

This essay's argument is predicated on the insights of postmodern historiography, in which thinkers interrogate the structures and approaches to history as a discipline—going beyond traditional practice. Prior to the postmodern meta-critical intervention, history as a discipline largely utilized a “mimetic model, whereby history was said to reflect, present, or provide the truth of what happened in the past” (Berlatsky 2011, p. 12). However, with the rise of critical theories like structuralism, post-structuralism, and postmodernism in literary and cultural studies, historians like Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit turned critical lenses towards the practice of history. Drawing inspiration partly from the genealogical work of thinkers like Michel Foucault, postmodern historiographers began questioning the ways in which power dynamics shape the telling of history. Foucault points to the interpretative aspect of history, arguing that it reflects not a revelation of ontological truth as such, but an epistemological attempt to make meaning: “the development of humanity is a series of interpretations” (Foucault 1977, p. 152). In light of this critique, postmodern historiographers fundamentally argue that histories are not neutral or objective representations of the past, but *narratives* constructed and shaped by culturally authorized story-telling structures. How historians make meaning of historical events, evidence, artifacts, etc., is deeply and (perhaps) inescapably influenced by the ways in which cultures tell stories.

White is probably the most famous and influential proponent of postmodern historiography, having built much of his career contesting the mimetic model. Central to White's understanding of historiography is the idea of *emplotment*, or the fitting together of episodes in such a way that an overarching story becomes coherent, seems purposeful, and leads to a logical conclusion. In White's words, “by emplotment I mean simply the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as components of specific *kinds* of plot structures” (White 1985, p. 83, original emphasis). In other words, historians determine what events *mean*. They select information to include within a historical narrative, determine how that information relates to other information, emphasize or de-emphasize certain information, and conceptualize some kind of movement across time. One concern with this—if one presupposes the objective of history as a discipline is to accurately represent the past—is that it inherently involves a selection process reflecting authorial intervention, rather than objective ontology. As White explains, “events are *made* into a story by the suppression or subordination of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation in tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies” (White 1985, p. 84, original emphasis). Essentially, the historian determines what history means.

Specifically, White asserts that historians adopt (often unconsciously) specific literary frameworks reflecting culturally authorized modes of storytelling. For the western historiographic tradition in which White primarily works, he identifies “comedy, tragedy, romance, epic, or satire” as guides for how a historian finds meaning in past events (White 1985, p. 59). Historians looking at events through different literary lenses will produce very different readings of the events. The events themselves are not objectively comic, tragic, romantic, epic, or satirical. Historical evidence merely provides grounding for conceptual-

izing meaningful relationships through emplotment. These variations reflect the process of narrativization. Undercutting the mimetic model, White theorizes: “What one historian may emplot as a tragedy, another may emplot as a comedy or romance. As thus envisaged, the ‘story’ which the historian purports to ‘find’ in the historical record is proleptic to the ‘plot’ by which the events are finally revealed to figure a recognizable structure of relationships of a specifically mythic sort” (White 1985, p. 58). Therefore, past events do not—as the mimetic model assumes—precede the historical explanation; rather, authorized narrative structures precede historical explanation, simultaneously allowing for and constricting the meanings that can be made of past events. Plot structures create comprehensibility by illuminating relationships while delimiting the types of relationships that are and are not imaginable between past incidents, artifacts, and events.

This becomes an ethical issue as far as the accurate representation of historical truth is concerned when historians (or history as a discipline) buy into the mimetic model and attempt to obscure the historian’s role in constructing historical narratives. Whereas the mimetic model assumes the past exists as an object to be discovered, postmodern historiography asserts that this is not how history really works. Instead, “a historian must comb through sources and claim to ‘find’ a pattern or plot that explains past events. In fact, the plot is imposed by the historian, indicating that the narrative form itself is that which removes ‘history’ conceived as discourse from ‘history’ conceived as the past itself” (Berlatsky 2011, p. 15). In this way, the fantasy of history as objective can be maintained only by obscuring historians themselves (and their cultural contexts) as meaning making frameworks. As Foucault puts it, “Historians take unusual pains to erase the elements of their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place, their preferences in a controversy—the unavoidable objects of their passion” (Foucault 1977, pp. 156–57). While in a Derridean sense, historical narratives inherently contain the evidence of their own construction and the conflicting influences that shape them, the historiographic norm of denying the role of the historian and appealing to discursive objectivity significantly limits the possibilities of reaching some kind of historical truth.

When an individual historical narrative is presented as *The Truth*, this framing attempts to rhetorically foreclose other potential explanations or explorations of the past. As Eric Berlatsky argues, historical memory becomes a kind of forgetting when the people, events, etc., excluded from ‘official’ histories are erased by that exclusion (Berlatsky 2011, pp. 20–21). The rhetorical posture of historical objectivity attempts to draw a curtain across the past, implicitly suggesting that there is nothing to see outside the historical narrative because the historical narrative is *true*, and therefore complete, comprehensive, and accurate. To counteract this, historiographers like Frank Ankersmit argue that we must pursue a multitude of historical narratives and look for historical truth through their dialogic interactions—seeking truth by assessing the relative reliability of differing interpretations of historical events. As he puts it:

In history there are no a priori criteria enabling us to establish to what extent one *individual* account of the past matches with the past or not. Such criteria develop simultaneously with the proliferation of the accounts that we have of some part of the past. Hence, the more accounts of the past we have, and the more complex the web is of their agreements and differences, the closer we may come to historical truth. (Ankersmit 2001, p. 15, original emphasis)

He points out that without access to some objective ontological version of past events, we can only assess the relative truth value of claims using comparative metrics. If all historical narratives reflect some degree of truth and some degree of distortion through the historian’s narratological lens, then only examining multiple emplotments of a specific event approaches

historical truth. That is precisely what this paper attempts to do, though with less focus on the historical truth of Larnach's death and more focus on meta-historical analysis.

2.2. Classical Adaptation in Antipodean Culture

Greco-Roman and British literature, philosophy, drama, and art is foundational to New Zealand culture, even if contemporary NZ (like much of the rest of the western world) has shifted away from classical education.² In both New Zealand and Australia, classics simultaneously marked cultural continuity with (and divergences from) white settlers' European heritage while being used to assert the superiority of European culture over that of Indigenous Antipodeans. In this sense, classics has a complex legacy within Antipodean cultures. In comparing education systems in different British colonial spheres, Harish Trivedi claims that white settler colonies like New Zealand were spaces in which "the same pattern of education prevailed as in Britain" (Trivedi 2010, p. 288). Geoffrey Miles is even more explicit about the centrality of classics in nineteenth century New Zealand education, writing, "Colonial New Zealand inherited the English public school emphasis on Latin and Greek as cornerstones of a liberal education; each of the nation's four original universities instituted professorial chairs in Classics at their foundation, and Latin was a compulsory subject for a BA up to 1917" (Miles 2019, p. 105). For a colony and subsequent nation geographically separated from the British motherland, European classics and the British education system signaled appreciable links to a British-oriented Kiwi-ness.

Through cultural links back to Britain, maintained by the British education system and institutions of government and colonial power, New Zealand constructed and maintained an imagined community with the metropolitan center. In Benedict Anderson's famous formulation, nations are constructed as imagined communities in which groups of disparate people conceptualize themselves as part of a unified collective. He explains that these communities are *imagined* because although the majority of any national population do not know one another, "in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 1991, p. 6). And that nations are *communities* "because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is ultimately conveyed as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1991, p. 7). In other words, the effective reality of the 'nation' as such is a shared agreement amongst its members that such a construction both exists and meaningfully delineates communal identity. For much of its history, New Zealanders (at least Pakeha New Zealanders) imagined their community as British. As historian of citizenship Mann (2019) puts it:

In the 1950s Aotearoa New Zealand very much identified itself as a British country and an integral part of a wider British World which had the UK at its heart. However, by the 1970s this British World had come to an end, as had Aotearoa New Zealand's self-identification as a British nation. During this period, citizenship in Aotearoa New Zealand was redefined in a significant way from being an ethnic (British)-based one to a more civic-based one. (Mann 2019, p. 99)

In other words, (Pakeha) New Zealanders saw themselves as British until the mid-twentieth century. This was partly due to the persistence of British-style education, which formed a cultural link with the colonial motherland. But events both in the UK and NZ during the 1950s and 60s weakened those ties, and Kiwis increasingly turned inwards to re-define their national culture and civic identity.

Part of this re-definition included an increasingly complex engagement with classics, classical influence, and classical reception. As the collected essays of *Antipodean Antiquities*, edited by Johnson (2019a), shows, the influence of classics on New Zealand and Australian culture has been pervasive since the early days of Anglo settlement, when classics was deployed as part of a 'civilizing' mission (Johnson 2019b, p. 2). However, Antipodean

reception of classics has never been uncomplicated. As with most other classical receptions in colonial contexts,³ Kiwis and Aussies used classics simultaneously to create links with the metropolitan culture and to forge distinct identities separate from that culture. As Laura Ginters writes of an 1886 University of Sydney production of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, "in this instance, we can identify both external conformity to an imperially transmitted classical tradition, *and*—through its reception—a more equivocal response to this enterprise" (Ginters 2019, p. 47, original emphasis). Antipodean receptions and adaptations of classical literature and myth show complex renegotiations of the function of culturally authoritative texts in a new (for Europeans) part of the world with new challenges and opportunities. Because the cultures of colonial New Zealand and Australia differed radically from those of Europe, the narrative and mythic tools brought from Europe necessarily needed to be reworked to encode Antipodean values like individualism and social equity, or Antipodean contexts like frontier isolation from the mother country.⁴ As I argue in this essay, that re-definition of classics reflects NZ ambivalences about a British/classical culture that is at once foundational to Kiwi-ness and reflective of a colonial project that de-centered the experiences of New Zealanders as such.

2.3. Euripides' *Hippolytus* and Seneca's *Phaedra*

As we will see below, the historical narrativization of William Larnach's suicide shifts over time, from the 1950s through to the twentieth century. And this narrative shift brings it increasingly into line with the Greco-Roman myth of Phaedra and Hippolytus. I do not claim this is a conscious choice on the part of any individual historian/author, or that it is a systematic decision. What I argue is that—following the postmodern historiographic work of authors like White and Ankersmit—the plot structure of the Hippolytus myth presents itself as a culturally authorized narrative frame. In the conclusion, I draw on intertextuality and postcolonial theory to discuss at greater length the implications of this cultural authority. This section glosses two of the most familiar and authoritative retellings of the Hippolytus story: Euripides' 429 BCE Greek play *Hippolytus* and Seneca's 54 CE Roman dramatization *Phaedra*. While there are stark differences between them, core similarities inform the myth—and it is these that we will see played out, in distorted form, with later histories of Larnach.

Euripides (c. 480–406 BCE) was the third of the great Athenian playwrights whose work has survived into the present, and in some senses, the most cynical and skeptical. Euripides often critiques values at the core of Athenian society and challenges social and religious ideology. His *Hippolytus* tells the story of Aphrodite's revenge on the titular character who refuses to worship her, instead giving all his reverence to Athena's virginal sister Artemis. As punishment, Aphrodite curses Phaedra to fall in love with Hippolytus. This is a major problem because Phaedra is married to Theseus, Hippolytus' father and the king of Athens. Although Phaedra is not Hippolytus' mother, she nonetheless seeks death to escape the shame of her incestuous desires. But when her nurse forces a confession from Phaedra, the queen demands the nurse say and do nothing to promote an affair. However, the nurse tells Hippolytus, thinking a relationship will cure her mistress' sickness unto death. Rather than accepting an incestuous affair, Hippolytus reviles the nurse and Phaedra, leaving Troezen (where the action is set) until his father's return. Ashamed, Phaedra hangs herself, leaving a note accusing Hippolytus of raping her. Theseus returns, finds the note, and condemns his son—despite the young man's pleas of innocence—calling down a curse from his father Poseidon to destroy the boy. Hippolytus leaves and a messenger arrives with news that a mystical sea bull stampeded Hippolytus' prized chariot horses, horrifically dragging the prince, whose dying body is brought on stage for a reconciliation

at the prompting of Artemis, who appears as a *deus ex machina* to inform Theseus of his error and the truth of his son's innocence.

During the Roman era, where much was borrowed from Greek myth, literature, and drama, the story was picked up by Seneca the Younger (c. 4 BCE–65 CE). In addition to being a dramatist, Seneca was a Stoic philosopher, prizing self-discipline, rationality, and logical rather than emotional decision-making. These philosophical leanings shape his *Phaedra*. Unlike the Euripides, Seneca's play does not open or close with a deity, reflecting Stoicism's preference for the natural world over theological explanations. Rather than Aphrodite introducing the action as her punishment of Hippolytus and Artemis closing the play by revealing Hippolytus' innocence, Seneca opens with Hippolytus directing his hunters and the crisis is resolved with Phaedra's confession before her onstage suicide. While there is a divine component to the play—Neptune still carries out Theseus' wish to murder Hippolytus—the Senecan rendition tells a story driven more by human frailties and failings than by capricious deities.

Beyond this, Seneca fundamentally alters the nature and role of both Phaedra and her nurse, flipping their moral positions within the play to reflect Seneca's ethical commitment to rational self-control. Euripides has Phaedra refuse to express her feelings to Hippolytus, but the nurse betrays her trust. In the Seneca, Phaedra is driven by emotions while the nurse counsels stoic restraint. As the nurse puts it, "It's best to have upright desires in the first place and never to slip from the path, but the next best thing is discretion, knowing where to draw the line when you err. . . Moral failings are worse than monsters. You can ascribe the latter to fate, but the former to character" (Seneca 2011, p. 111). In other words, the nurse argues that Phaedra must repress the feelings leading her away from virtue, and that stoic virtue is both to be prized above all else and is rooted in individual choices. Phaedra, for her part, accepts this argument, but refuses/fails to denounce her love. She responds, "I know what you're saying is right, dear Nurse, but my desire compels me to follow the worse course of action. My mind spirals out of control—and I know it, too. But every time it tries to come back, striving after sensible judgement, it is no use, no use at all. . . What good is logic? Desire has won and now rules me" (Seneca 2011, p. 112). Phaedra, therefore, acknowledges the Senecan ethical framework privileging self-restraint, rationality, and non-emotional decision-making, but does not live up to those values. This is part of her shame within the play: not merely her incestuous lust, but her inability to lead a virtuous life (according to the ethical precepts of the playwright's philosophical tradition).

Across both re-tellings, some core elements centrally define the Hippolytus myth:

- a triangular relationship with a father, son, and stepmother,
- the stepmother's romantic/sexual desire for the stepson,
- the revelation of that desire to the stepson,
- the stepmother's suicide,
- the father is deceived about the nature of the stepmother-stepson relationship,
- the father curses his son and dooms him to death,
- the truth is revealed.

Or, if we simplify even more to the extreme, the central story requires an incestuous stepmother-stepson relationship, revelation, and death. Obviously the more reductive the analysis becomes, the less useful it is in terms of understanding both the myth as such and later receptions of it. However, as postmodern historiographers point out, what becomes authorizing in shaping historical narratives are the broad brushstrokes of narrative types, rather than granular details. And, I argue, the broad structure of the Hippolytus myth increasingly shapes narrativization of Larnach's death. Narratives to which this essay now turns.

3. Historical Accounts of William Larnach

3.1. A.H. Reed's *Larnach and His Castle*

The earliest published history of William Larnach is A.H. Reed's short 1950 book *Larnach and His Castle*, which focuses more attention on The Camp than on its builder.⁵ Of the twenty-nine pages of text (plus sixteen pages of images), nine are devoted to a biography of Larnach, primarily sketching his financial and political career, with reference to his contributions of New Zealand's economy and governance. Reed's biography is relatively lively and thorough, though he cites no specific sources—just references to newspapers (sans specific dates, authors, or article titles) and phrases like, “said the chronicler of the tour” with no identification of who that chronicler was (Reed 1950, p. 11). Despite the lack of citations, Reed assures readers that the book's purpose is “to narrate such of its annals as can be substantiated by reliable evidence” (Reed 1950, p. 5, emphasis added). While this is consistent with 1940s historiographic practice, it does limit subsequent researchers double checking Reed's sources and argument.

As far as the issue with which this essay is concerned, Reed says virtually nothing. The book passes over both Larnach's death and his family life with very little commentary. In reference to the suicide, Reed describes, “His death, in tragic circumstances at Parliament House on the 12 October 1898, was attributed to a nervous breakdown due to worry and ill-health” (Reed 1950, p. 13). Probably in a nod to the cultural sensibilities of a 1950s New Zealand audience, the suicide as such is not addressed, merely presented euphemistically. But more interesting is the complete absence of any indication of a possible relationship between Constance and Douglas—the prime cause later historians and authors would identify for Larnach's self-destruction. Of Larnach's family life, Reed provides only the scant notation: “Larnach, who was thrice married, was survived by his third wife. He left by his first wife two sons and four daughters. He died intestate” (Reed 1950, p. 14). We learn nothing more of any suspicions that might have existed about an incestuous affair.

There are three primary ways to read Reed's silence. The first is that he was simply unaware of any rumors. They may not have received enough notoriety by his 1950 publication date to cross his radar. A second possibility is that, as with opting for a euphemism for suicide, Reed was concerned that mentioning such a scandal would shock the sensibilities of a relatively socially conservative readership. He may have been aware that such suspicions existed and chosen not to print them. But it is the third possibility that is the most interesting from a historiographic perspective: such rumors may not have risen to the level of the “reliable evidence” with which Reed sought to substantiate his history. If he was aware of the story and willing to potentially discuss it in his book, but did not feel that the evidence demonstrating the affair could be trusted, then this positions his book as a noteworthy starting point for a historiographic study of Larnach's death because it suggests that over time historians (to say nothing of the literary authors whom Section 4 will examine) embraced this narrative—either through the discovery of new evidence or through an acceptance of stories originating within the family.

3.2. Hardwicke Knight's *The Ordeal of William Larnach*

Even the title of Knight's (1993) biography *The Ordeal of William Larnach* foregrounds the troubles that would eventually lead to Larnach's suicide.⁶ Indeed, the central narrative Knight constructs for Larnach's life is that of a man of genius who continually stretched himself too thin, and for whom disaster inevitably followed initial mastery of whatever he turned his hand to. As with Reed, Knight focuses a great deal of attention on Larnach's castle, the building process, the materials, etc., and includes a hefty number of photographs (perhaps unsurprisingly because Knight was a medical photographer by profession). Knight's historiography is better sourced than Reed, sometimes providing specific

dates and info about sources. For example, in reprinting a media report of Larnach's death, Knight clarifies that it is "The Press Association report from Wellington, dated 12 October 1898" (Knight 1993, p. 123). This is a level of specificity unknown in Reed. However, whereas Reed asserts that his history is based on reliable evidence (Reed 1950, p. 5), Knight acknowledges that in chapter 7—the chapter focused on Larnach's death, and therefore of most interest for this article—"I have taken the privilege of superimposing on known facts the personal impressions I have acquired in the course of writing the first six chapters" (Knight 1993, p. 3). In other words, Knight's final chapter contains a mix of historical reality and fictive speculation. This blending becomes abundantly clear when reading chapter 7, which devotes substantial time to a novelistic exploration of Larnach's thoughts, motives, and actions while locked alone in the room in which he shot himself.

In contrast to Reed's demurring approach to the method of Larnach's death, Knight addresses it in the second line of the book, writing that Larnach "died by his own hand" (Knight 1993, p. 5). Throughout Knight's narrative, there are periodic references to the suicide (e.g., Knight 1993, pp. 57, 113), which remains central for this biography and its theme of an overreaching man with a compulsive need to control all aspects of his life. Knight places the primary emphasis of Larnach's suicide on a combination of business failures, strain from governmental work, failing health in older age, and difficult relationships with his children (Knight 1993, p. 121). But in pages 121–123, he does narrate what he imagines Larnach's suicide to have involved. Much of this is entirely speculative, since there is no way Knight could know what Larnach was thinking or feeling in his final moments, which concerns played on his mind, what random thoughts occurred to him, and what gestures he might have made before placing the revolver against his forehead for the final time. But Knight devotes much page space to narrativizing these elements. Like a writer of stream-of-consciousness fiction, Knight attempts to represent what he believes were Larnach's thoughts on the last day of his life:

He picked up the revolver and examined it. He had many guns and other arms at the Castle. Most of them were sporting weapons. The revolver was different. He admired beautifully fabricated mechanical things. This was something new, made for a purpose, to kill efficiently. He pointed it at the wall. Then at the empty seats around the table. But he was tired, too tired to play with life. Committees, late evenings, a temporary existence, Wellington was a cold, unfeeling place, even with Conny by him. (Knight 1993, p. 122)

The blend of short, simple sentences with occasional longer, serial lists is reminiscent of stream-of-consciousness authors like Virginia Woolf or James Joyce. There is a fictive element, both in Knight's imagining of Larnach's thought process and in the description of his actions (e.g., pointing the revolver at the wall). None of this could be corroborated in any way, raising concerns about the reliability of Knight's history.

Also, in stark contrast to Reed, who says nothing of a possible affair between Larnach's third wife Constance and his son Douglas, Knight acknowledges—and implicitly dismisses—the possibility. There is continual discussion of Larnach's family life throughout *The Ordeal of William Larnach*, often focusing on William Larnach's tyrannical attitude towards his children and his sadness at their distance, despite having sent them to school in Europe. But until the final chapter there is no mention of any suspicion of an affair. Again, Knight primarily identifies the cause of Larnach's death as professional stresses and separation from his children. But in the stream-of-consciousness section, Knight writes:

There was a rumor going around that she [Constance] was unfaithful. There is often such talk. He did not believe it. . . And Douglas. He had been much alone with her on the Australia trip. Douglas had shown affection. It was right. She was not his mother, of course. And he was no longer a boy. Perhaps sending him to

England had been right; something had made a man of him. . . The family—fallen to pieces. Only Conny. Conny? It was not to be believed. It was best not to know. Never to know. That, at least, he could spare himself. (Knight 1993, p. 122)

This passage certainly suggests an ambivalence about whether Conny and Douglas were having an affair—it also suggests Larnach knew about the rumors if nothing else. Knight's speculative depictions of Larnach's state of mind indicates both a rejection of the possibility (i.e., "He did not believe it") and simultaneously an openness to the possibility (i.e., "It was best not to know").

Larnach may have accepted the possibility of this affair and merely sought to avoid the unpleasant truth, as Knight's narrativization suggests. But Knight himself rejects the idea. In the final paragraph of *The Ordeal of William Larnach*, Knight muses, "was there some scandal he could not face? The rumor of a scandal had persisted, *instigated and perpetuated*, perhaps, by the ill feeling that was revealed during the court case of September 1899, and the friction between the daughters and their stepmother" (Knight 1993, p. 126, emphasis added). Immediately following the suggestion that the rumor was "instigated and perpetuated" out of animosity between Larnach's surviving daughters and Constance with a description of Conny's devotion to and concerns about her husband's health implies Knight's strong skepticism about this affair. Knight seems perfectly happy to dismiss the story as possibly or even likely a vindictive fabrication. However, he opens the door to ambiguity, concluding, "It is perhaps too late now to inquire what were the real causes of his tragic death" (Knight 1993, p. 126). Unable to say for certain, Knight draws his conclusion using the same kind of inferences and speculation that undergird the more overtly fictive portions of chapter 7.

3.3. Fleur Snedden's *King of the Castle*

Fleur Snedden's 1997 biography *King of the Castle* has certain advantages that those of Reed and Knight do not. Firstly, on a stylistic level, Snedden's writing is much more compelling, almost novelistic, than previous biographers, making this book a more engaging read. On the level of historiography, Snedden is the great-great-granddaughter of William Larnach, and therefore the inheritor of a trove of his personal papers and letters (Snedden 1997, p. ix). Access to these papers, which had otherwise "lain stacked in a cupboard" means that Snedden had more resources to put together a comprehensive picture of her ancestor than either of her predecessors (Snedden 1997, p. ix). Throughout *King of the Castle*, Snedden consistently transcribes letters, or portions thereof, between Larnach and his family members, business associates, political colleagues, and others. This direct personal evidence substantially strengthens the credibility of Snedden's historiography. The familial connection also means that Snedden's grandmother, Gretchen Guise (Larnach) Hjorring, had direct memories of William Larnach, particularly in his later years, and that Snedden could draw on that primary testimony (Snedden 1997, p. ix). However, this personal connection via her grandmother also colors Snedden's perceptions of William Larnach, because "Gretchen was to refer in later life to the friction-filled, bitter, joyless atmosphere at The Camp in those years, years when she had been so unhappy she 'could hardly bear to talk about them'" (Snedden 1997, p. 225). As we will see, Snedden's narrative of Larnach's suicide seems shaped by a willingness to give perhaps uncritical credence to rumor—in part, possibly, because those rumors align with Snedden's flair for engaging story-telling.

In a departure from her predecessors, Snedden directly and openly asserts that Larnach's suicide was primarily driven by an affair between Conny and Douglas. As we have seen, Reed makes no reference, however slight, to such rumors, while Knight downplays the possibility that these rumors could be true (Knight 1993, p. 126). By contrast, Snedden not only raises the possibility, but positively treats the scandal as a matter of historical fact.

She writes quite bluntly that while in Australia with William in 1897, Douglas and Conny continued “a love affair which was the barely concealed subject of gossip for many years” (Snedden 1997, p. 228). The statement that the affair *was occurring* in the opening clause of that sentence, as opposed to the more critical *was rumored to be occurring*, is significant in terms of how Snedden narrativizes Larnach’s final days. She consistently assumes it to be true. For instance, in musing over the motives for Larnach’s taking his own life, she claims, “the blow that tipped the balance *must have been* the betrayal by Conny and Douglas” (Snedden 1997, p. 241, emphasis added). This statement is made with absolute certainty. Similarly, in reflecting on the events following Larnach’s death, Snedden refers to “the lack of love from his wife and unfilial behavior of his son Douglas,” and notes that “After the funeral, Alfred de Bathe Brandon [Conny’s brother], long aware of the situation between Conny and Douglas, quickly organized Conny and her sister Anne to take a trip to England, hoping to avoid any further scandal” (Snedden 1997, pp. 235–36). Snedden consistently treats as true this taboo affair, despite a lack of reliable evidence.

This certainty in her narrative is not inherently problematic. However, the evidence presented raises questions about the historiographic objectivity of Snedden’s report. Access to Larnach’s papers and personal letters definitely strengthens the overall detail and authority of *King of the Castle*. And in describing her historiographic methodology, Snedden writes, “My task, as a narrator of historical facts, leaves little room for the imagination, but requires pernickety insistence on authenticity. In delving into the history of Larnach, this constraint was not a hinderance, it only highlighted the fact that his life was as full of drama as any fictional saga written today” (Snedden 1997, p. xi). In this passage from the prologue, she sets herself as a chronicler of details and facts, thereby building her credibility. However, she also mentions “fictional saga[s],” suggesting a kind of literary kinship—however unintentional—between her biography and literary fiction. This connection is, circumstantially, strengthened because Snedden’s exigence for writing the biography was a request from Michelleanne Forster for access to William Larnach’s papers as part of the research for her play (Snedden 1997, p. ix).⁷ These fictive connections inform how Snedden apparently thought about this biography.

A desire for a “saga” or a drama may shape Snedden’s willingness to accept the authenticity of the Douglas-Conny relationship, even as she acknowledges a lack of any physical or documentary evidence and hints at reasons to doubt these rumors. In terms of physical/documentary evidence, Snedden admits:

The crucial letter, the letter that so upset Larnach the afternoon of his death, was never found. Could it have been a letter from Douglas confirming his father’s suspicions that his favored son and his beloved young wife were indeed having an affair? Nor did the letter Larnach so anxiously posted to Dunedin that fateful day ever surface. Was it to Douglas? *Nothing at all came to light that might have given a clue to his torment.* (Snedden 1997, p. 235, emphasis added)

In this passage, Snedden admits that there is nothing concrete upon which to assess the facticity of Conny and Douglas betraying William. A letter exists only at the level of speculation: it *could* have existed, and *if* it did exist then it *could* prove everything. But *could* and *if* are the crucial operators in that equation. Snedden often uses speculative rhetorical questions—like the two in the passage just quoted, or one on page 231 when she supposes Conny’s attendance in the Parliament gallery might have been the result of a guilty conscience (Snedden 1997, p. 231). These rhetorical questions allow Snedden the luxury of suggesting a conclusion without definitely stating it. In other words, the questions suggest an affirmative answer, even though no material evidence supports that affirmation.

The evidence that does exist seems exclusively to consist of rumors and innuendo. As noted in a previously quoted passage, the affair “was the barely concealed subject of

gossip for many years” (Snedden 1997, p. 228, emphasis added). That same paragraph refers to it as “common knowledge among the family” (Snedden 1997, p. 228). On the one hand, if these rumors predate Larnach’s death, then they may be credible. But without any written or physical evidence for their circulation prior to 1898, a significant question mark looms over them. This is particularly true because—as Snedden herself acknowledges (see, for instance, Snedden 1997, pp. 152, 180, 206)—Larnach’s children from his first marriage were generally opposed to both his second and third wife. Snedden even describes how, Larnach’s “elder daughters, regardless of their father’s happiness, were so concerned that Conny might inherit their father’s money, they were incapable of friendly relations with her” (Snedden 1997, p. 206). And given the bitter legal battle that ensued after William’s death intestate, Knight’s speculation that the rumor could have been “instigated and perpetuated, perhaps, by the ill feeling that was revealed during the court case of September 1899, and the friction between the daughters and their stepmother” seems worthy of legitimate consideration (Knight 1993, p. 126). Couple this with the fact that Douglas was the only one of the siblings to stand with Conny and against his brother and sisters in the case (Snedden 1997, p. 236). In a household that, at least for the final years of William’s life seemed filled with recriminations, resentments, and his children constantly seeking money above all else, it is not out of the realm of possibility that such rumors were started by William’s children as a weapon in the legal battle against Conny and Douglas. My claim is not that Snedden is wrong and such an affair could not have happened—it certainly could—but from a historiographic perspective, we should be extremely cautious about accepting as fact negative rumors promoted by people with a personal and financial stake in discrediting the subjects of those rumors.

3.4. *Ghost Hunters International*

In season 1, episode 8 of the SyFy channel show *Ghost Hunters International* (GHI), the team visited Larnach Castle to hunt for ghosts not necessarily identified as any specific person (“*Larnach Castle*” 2008). From a specifically historiographic perspective, there is very little worth saying about the episode, but I mention it because it probably brought more international awareness to Larnach Castle and the story of William Larnach than any other media depiction, with 2.4 million US viewers according to the Wikipedia entry on GHI episodes (“*List of Ghost Hunters International Episodes*” 2025). This is, of course, important as far as popularizing awareness of The Castle and, to a lesser extent, Larnach’s story. That being said, the historical info given about the Larnach family and William’s suicide is extremely minimal. Deborah Price, the Castle Director, explains, “There was a lot of tragedy. [William] lost his first two wives. He married a third time and this time he married a woman half his age and she went on and had a love affair with his son, which got a bit awkward. And William Larnach shot himself in Parliament in Wellington.” Price asserts the historicity of the affair, but there is simply not enough historical information given in the episode to provide much narrative analysis. Among other historiographic issues, the only evidence actually offered for the historicity is Price’s authority as Castle director.

4. Historical Fictional and Dramatic Accounts of William Larnach

4.1. *Michelanne Forster’s Larnach*

In the early 1990s, Michelanne Forster collaborated with Fleur Snedden to research the life and death of William Larnach for a play she was writing for The Court Theatre in Christchurch; the play became *Larnach*. While her conclusions about the broad brushstrokes of Larnach’s final years align with Snedden’s, Forster also demurs about the historicity of her account, noting that “the demands of the stage always outweigh those of biography for the playwright” (Forster 2013, p. 106). Interestingly, however, this remark is made

regarding condensing the size of the Larnach clan, reducing the number of servants, and inventing a couple of additional characters. The contention around the Connie-Douglas affair, Forster entirely brushes aside to treat as a matter of historical fact. As Forster puts it, “Fortuitously, I *uncovered* a love affair between Larnach’s third wife, Constance de Bathe Brandon, and Larnach’s younger son, Douglas, and I was able to use this secret liaison as the impetus for my own storytelling” (Forster 2013, p. 103, emphasis added). The choice of the term *uncovered* here reflects an understanding that the affair simply was, that it definitely occurred, and Forster (and Snedden) merely learned of it. Although the default in Forster’s introduction to the play is to treat the affair as fact, she does acknowledge that while “Two other family sources confirmed” the affair, “no written proof was offered” (Forster 2013, p. 105). In this sense, Forster largely follows Snedden in treating the evidence of familial memory (generally transmitted by family members with a negative view of William, Connie, and Douglas) as authoritative, and underplaying concerns about a lack of hard evidence. Of course, this is less concerning with Forster because the play she sets out to write is overtly a fictionalized version of the events in question, whereas Snedden presents her version as historical fact.

Forster’s play focuses on the last several years of William Larnach’s life, opening with William and Connie’s marriage and the death of his daughter Katie (which Forster temporally condenses to occur on the same night, rather than just in the same year). From there, William’s relations with his remaining children suffer as they want more money from him and he refuses to supply it—with his financial position made more tenuous by the collapse of the Colonial Bank in which William invested heavily. The only child with whom he remains on good terms is Douglas, who essentially works as a kind of personal secretary for his father. Douglas initially seems like a type of Hippolytus, shunning the romantic advances of Margaret Culling, despite his sister Colleen trying to arrange a match (Forster 2013, pp. 126–27). So celibate does Douglas seem that his wastrel brother Donald asks, “have you given up wine as well as women?” before accusing Douglas of being gay (Forster 2013, pp. 135–36). However, Douglas is not gay. He has fallen in love with Connie, and she with him. The incestuous dimension of the stepmother-stepson relationship aligns the play with the Hippolytus myth, but the obvious deviations are the mutual desire and that they in fact act on their mutual attraction.

In further echoes of the Euripidean version and aligning with Snedden’s version of events, Forster invents two letters. In the Euripides, Phaedra accuses Hippolytus of rape with her suicide note. In Forster, a letter is similarly the means of informing the patriarch about the incestuous activity in his home. Donald’s lover Mrs. Bates (who is also William’s former lover) has bribed a servant to steal one of Connie’s letters to Douglas, which Mrs. Bates then turns over to Donald to use against his father, brother, and stepmother (Forster 2013, pp. 171–73). Donald shares the letter with his sisters Colleen and Alice. Alice and Donald want to reveal the letter to William, but Colleen opposes the plan, remarking, “You can’t show the letter to father! It will destroy him!” (Forster 2013, p. 176). In the great tragic tradition, her words prove prophetic. Alice gives the letter to William, who becomes increasingly erratic and ill-tempered, even, at one point, aiming his revolver at Connie and Douglas during one of their rendezvous (Forster 2013, p. 192). Although he is unable to pull the trigger, William’s gesture reflects Theseus’ wrath directed against his son and subsequently against his wife in the Greco-Roman versions. However, unlike Theseus, who directs his violence outwards, William directs his violence inwards. The stage directions describing Larnach’s death are stunningly brief for such a crucial episode in the play’s structure:

LARNACH enters Committee Room J in Parliament House. His preparation is rational and meticulous. He is in control again. He sits, takes the gun from his coat pocket, holds it to his left temple and shoots himself. Death is instantaneous. (Forster 2013, p. 196)

Although this might be drawn out in performance depending on the actor's "rational and meticulous" preparations, the description is concise. However, this is not the entirety of Larnach's violence, and it is not entirely accurate to say that all of his anger is directed inwards. Before his death, William sent his son Douglas a letter containing only his signature (Forster 2013, p. 205). While this is mysterious to Douglas and unsettling to Connie, Forster (2013) explains that the letter and William's final actions are punishment inflicted on his son and wife: "His suicide, and the blank letter he leaves his son Douglas (something I invented), says more loudly than words, 'I am punishing you, all of you, for failing to love me'" (Forster 2013, p. 106). And ultimately William does get his revenge against Connie and Douglas, who lose the court case against the other Larnach children, both ending up without any substantive share of the estate—though the shares for Donald, Annie, and Colleen turn out to be meager as well (Forster 2013, pp. 201–4).

Obviously the Hippolytean parallels in Forster's play undergo significant distortion from the original Greco-Roman myth. And if the only reason to identify the parallels were the stepmother-stepson incest, letter, suicide, and destruction of a family, then there might be reason to doubt a classical influence. However, Forster alludes to New Zealand's classical heritage and the tragic structure of her drama in ways that suggest the chain of influence. In a reference to the Victorian era's penchant for classical allusion, when William goes to have his picture taken in act II scene two, his servant Hill informs him that the two backdrops available are "Corinthian column or a wooded glen" (Forster 2013, p. 174) and we later learn that he chose the Corinthian column (Forster 2013, p. 182). While the wooded glen may evoke a pastoralism with classical roots, the Corinthian column is an overt link back to ancient Greece through the iconography of classical architecture. This link is further strengthened when Connie says that he looks "Just like Caesar" (Forster 2013, p. 182). Even William's suicide is discussed in terms linking it to Greek dramatic conventions. Mrs. Bates says, "Of course it's a *tragedy* et cetera, et cetera" (Forster 2013, p. 198, emphasis added). Both Euripides and Seneca present the myth in tragic form, so the choice to overtly identify the plot of Forster's own play as a tragedy works metatheatrically—even if Mrs. Bates uses the word *tragedy* in the colloquial sense to mean an unfortunate event. But that same conversation between Mrs. Bates and Donald contains an even more direct Euripidean allusion. Donald bemoans the place and method of his father's death, asking, "why didn't he go to a nice quiet bedroom and hang himself" (Forster 2013, p. 198). While Seneca's Phaedra stabs herself on stage (Seneca 2011, p. 145), in the Euripides Phaedra takes the much more traditionally Greek path to suicide by hanging herself in her bedroom (Euripides 1998, p. 76). So, when Donald laments that his father did not hang himself in a bedroom, he is envisioning precisely Phaedra's death in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. These classical allusions reflect Forster's awareness of the Greco-Roman influences at work in her play.

4.2. Owen Marshall's *The Larnachs*

Of the narrativizations examined in this article, Owen Marshall's 2011 novel *The Larnachs* is probably the most unique in that it refuses to focus on William Larnach himself. Instead, the novel foregrounds the voices and experiences of Conny and Dougie, alternating who narrates the chapters. This fictional style is what Jeremy Rosen terms "minor character elaboration," which is a genre that builds "narratives around the perspectives of socially marginal figures in canonical works, often seeking to critique the ideologies underlying the manner in which those works represent minor characters—or their failure

to represent socially marginal figures at all" (Rosen 2013, p. 139). Although Rosen analyzes adaptations of canonical literary works rather than historical narratives, the same structures of marginalization, selection, and repression of information function in historical narratives, as pointed out by White. The experiences of characters like Connie and Douglas fit this pattern. In virtually all other narrativizations of the Larnach story, William is the focal point. This reflects both a tendency towards "great man" approaches to history and a practical reality regarding who documentary information exists about. As Forster points out, "Finding something dramatically useful about [William's] three wives proved even harder [than learning about his interior life], and I quickly learnt my first lesson—not a very original one—that the nineteenth-century wives of New Zealand's public men are mostly footnotes" (Forster 2013, p. 104). Because no evidence really exists for how Connie or Douglas conceptualized themselves, their relationship with one another, or their relationship with William, Marshall can fictively imagine their interiority and present them as he likes—within the logical bounds of his story-world.

Despite this freedom, Marshall's framing of the novel ambivalently aligns it with the historical record. On the one hand, his Acknowledgements page identifies his historical source as primarily Snedden, whom he notes credits Knight as a further source, though Marshall's wording does not establish explicitly that he relied on Knight (Marshall 2011, p. 7). He further acknowledges his debt to Forster for sharing her research materials, and indeed the broad brushstrokes of Marshall's novel follow Forster's play (Marshall 2011, p. 7). However, even with these acknowledgments of historical sources and research (including research for a fictionalized theatrical re-telling of the story), Marshall definitely makes clear that he is *not* telling history. As his disclaimer notes, "This is not a biography and not a history. It is a novel: the imaginative interpretation of a situation experienced by real people" (Marshall 2011, p. 6). In other words, Marshall's medium allows him the freedom to build from the basic framework of historical details while not being constrained by them. He can elaborate on Conny and Dougie's interior lives, views, perspectives, aspirations, and feelings, without being limited by a question like whether there is any evidence for these elaborations.

Like Forster's play, Marshall's novel begins with the marriage between William and Conny. But it also begins with tragic foreshadowing. The prologue closes with the words, "Conny, William and Dougie. There they are: alive, guiltless and smiling in the sunlight and the sea wind, with no shadows of the future cast over them, and choices still to be made" (Marshall 2011, p. 17). This set up introduces a fundamentally tragic tension between fate—the shadow of the future—and free will—choices still to be made. This dichotomy is fundamental to tragedy because the genre puts into continual tension whether a tragic hero could escape their downfall or whether it was fated. In the Euripides, Aphrodite tells viewers from the opening that she will punish Hippolytus and there is nothing that can prevent it (Euripides 1998, pp. 48–50), a fatalism that Artemis echoes at the end (Euripides 1998, p. 95). In the Seneca, by contrast, there is no divine intervention that drives the characters' actions, and therefore no certainty of any kind of fate. Marshall's book sets up this tragic tension right from the beginning, though it never overtly evokes any supernatural fate determining what will happen to the characters.

Over the course of the novel, there are several echoes of the Hippolytus myth. In particular, the characterization of the William-Dougie relationship echoes that of Theseus and Hippolytus. In the myth, Theseus is an accomplished hero who has done great feats, much like William Larnach's rise from relative poverty to wealth, success, and fame through grit, honesty, and hard work. Hippolytus, by contrast, was a young man who delighted in hunting and pastoral pursuits—things that have some echo of the adventurous quests of his father, but do not produce the same glory. Douglas seems to have disappointed his father

by leaving off education in England and returning to Dunedin to become a farmer, a choice that aligned with William's goal to have a stately manor, but disappointed political and business aspirations for his younger son. Marshall plays into this father-son relationship and how it echoes that of Theseus and Hippolytus. Conny reflects that Dougie is "still searching for his right place in a world dominated by his father" (Marshall 2011, p. 94) in much the same way that Hippolytus exists in a world marked by his father's heroism, fame, and monarchy. In Marshall's telling, the affair between Conny and Dougie blooms almost because of a mutual alienation from William, in much the same way that Theseus' absence in the Greco-Roman myth opens the door for Phaedra's desire/Aphrodite's revenge. This occurs over several chapters, as wife and husband become more distant and son and father increasingly at odds. The novel parallels Theseus' physical (and probably emotional) distance with William's emotional distance. And finally, in another echo of the Euripides, there is a letter that drives the ultimate tragic ending (Marshall 2011, pp. 264, 271–72, 274). In this case, the letter was sent not by Phaedra (i.e., Conny), but by Dougie (i.e., Hippolytus), informing William (i.e., Theseus) of the affair and essentially requesting that he divorce Conny so that she and Dougie could wed. But the tragic effect, leading to death and devastation of the family is the same.

5. Conclusions

Surveying the six historical, dramatic, and literary sources that give accounts of William Larnach's death reveals important insights into New Zealand's negotiations with its own history and with classical culture, as well as into the process of historical narrativization. Section 5 explores some of those insights.

To begin, if we take the texts examined here as a kind of timeline reflecting the changing narratives surrounding William Larnach's suicide, then the change over time is quite focused in a singular direction. That is, the conviction that William killed himself because of an affair between Douglas and Conny shifts from entirely absent in Reed's 1950 narrative to treated as most likely in Snedden's 1997, and this is accepted without question—even if for literary rather than historiographic purposes—in Forster's and Marshall's fictional representations. Without the authors likely intending it, either individually or collectively, the influence of the Hippolytus myth as an authorized narrative structure increases over time, though in a distorted way. The central driving force of the conflict in Euripides and Seneca is Phaedra's love for Hippolytus—the love between a stepmother and her stepson. In the myth, Hippolytus rejects this love, but Theseus does not know that until it is too late. With the Larnachs, the narrative increasingly figures the affair between stepmother and stepson as occurring, and it is this that drives William's tragic fate. Throughout the historical narratives, there has always been a suicide, as there is in the Hippolytus myth, but it increasingly moves from being inexplicable to a direct result of the incestuous affair. The rage of the betrayed father is even turned against the mother and son, though less directly than in the Greco-Roman versions, as William dies intestate and the courts decide against Conny and Douglas inheriting. In a particularly on the nose association, Snedden even insists on the existence of a hypothetical letter confirming the affair (Snedden 1997, p. 235), as do Forster and Marshall, in direct parallels to Phaedra's Euripidean suicide note in which she falsely accuses Hippolytus of raping her (Euripides 1998, pp. 78–79). The literary influence of Euripides and Seneca are probably most readily accepted when looking at the literary presentations because literary influence is a widely accepted principle, but as historiographers like White and Ankersmit show, this kind of influence also shapes the narrativizing of histories.

Looking at the multiple narrativizations of Larnach's death through the lenses of both postmodern historiography and reception studies reveals important insights into the

story-telling norms within which historians function. The core events described in each narrative are the same, even if additional evidence is incorporated/discovered as time goes on, but the nature of the narrativization changes dramatically across the different tellings. This reflects simultaneously a move towards a more classical/literary influence with the emplotment—as I have just argued—and the broader fundamental principles of postmodern historiography. To further illuminate these principles, it is worth analyzing the emplotment of the various narratives considered here according to White's schema. As discussed earlier in this article, White divides the broad narrative structures into epic, comedy, tragedy, romance, or satire (White 1985, p. 59). The differences in the storytelling techniques across these texts reflect the different authorizing structures that their authors have 'discovered' in the historical materials. For Reed, Larnach's story is basically an epic. Larnach is a heroic protagonist struggling against the odds in a frontier society to achieve great successes, albeit ultimately facing downfall at the end of his life. For Knight, Larnach's story is unambiguously a tragedy, specifically on the model of the over-reaching hero. As Knight tells it, Larnach's ambitions surpassed the possibilities for achievement within his society, and it was that gap between goals and outcomes that led to his suicide. Snedden's narrative is slightly harder to categorize. On the one hand, it has elements of the epic, in that Larnach as a kind of anti-hero challenges the limits of his society and attempts to overcome them. On the other hand, it has elements of the satiric, as Larnach's cruelty and dismissiveness towards his own family is often highlighted, reflecting a condemnation of the socio-cultural structures of Victorian-era patriarchy. Moving to the fictional accounts, both Forster and Marshall take overtly tragic approaches, reflecting the strong literary inflection of Euripides and Seneca.

This diversity of narrativizing approaches reflects the fundamental insight proposed by thinkers like White and Ankersmit about the ways in which emplotment shapes and delimits the possibilities of telling history. But it also tells us about the role of classics in a postcolonial society like New Zealand. As Mann argues, New Zealand transitioned in the mid-twentieth century away from imagining itself as part of the British community to imagining a newly Kiwi-oriented community. However, that newly imagined community was not founded through a complete break with New Zealand's British roots, but rather through a re-negotiation with them. On a practical level, a severing of the close identification between NZ and Britain required a reworking of the cultural foundations of the country, with conflicting impulses to simultaneously identify as independent of the metropolitan center and to re-enforce New Zealand's place as part of the global north with implicit European/classical heritage as a source of legitimacy. As Johnson says in the introduction to *Antipodean Antiquities*, Australia and New Zealand's historical links with Britain have involved a complex process of reflecting back the imperial gaze while also contesting the assumptions of cultural authority and centrality implicit in that gaze (Johnson 2019b, pp. 2–3).

This aligns with what adaptation theorists argue about adaptation and with what postcolonialists argue about classical reception in postcolonial societies. As Linda Hutcheon points out in her incredibly influential book *A Theory of Adaptation*, "there are manifestly many different possible intentions behind the act of adaptation: the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or to call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying" (Hutcheon 2013, p. 7). In other words, the driving force behind adaptations—or the reception of classics—is multifaceted. Obviously, the classics carry tremendous cultural weight and are therefore a foundation for establishing the legitimacy of an adapter's culture. This is what Astrid Van Weyenberg points out in her analysis of postcolonial African adaptations of Greek drama. She notes that Anglophone Africans—like settler colonists in New Zealand—were raised in education systems privileging classical

literature, and therefore they experience it as their culture, rather than something foreign (Van Weyenberg 2013, p. xxxi).⁸ She also asserts that adaptations of classics from outside Europe—particularly by (formerly) colonized people or people of color—contest notions of European cultural ownership of the classics, and therefore of the cultural superiority ideologically invested in that ownership (Van Weyenberg 2013, p. xii). The same ambivalences are present in New Zealand receptions of classics. The cultural capital of classical literature continues to give these texts weight, and classical storylines therefore function as authorizing cultural narratives, offering themselves implicitly as a lens for understanding or interpreting historical events.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Different texts use different spellings of Constance's nickname—Conny or Connie. In discussing each text, I follow their usage. Similarly, when discussing Marshall's novel, I tend to follow his usage of Dougie, rather than Douglas, as almost every other source refers to him.
- ² While it is commonly believed that classics were the exclusive preserve of elites, Hall and Stead (2016, 2020) make the case that knowledge of classics was much more widespread among working class Britons than has been commonly acknowledged—though classics were usually encountered in translation, adaptation, or abbreviated form. Both books focus on Britain (or Britain and Ireland for Hall and Stead 2020), rather than New Zealand, but nineteenth and early twentieth century Antipodean cultures were heavily identified with British culture.
- ³ For more on colonial and post-colonial receptions of classics, see, for instance Chau and Ho (2023), Hardwick and Gillespie (2010), Wetmore (2002), or Van Weyenberg (2013).
- ⁴ Multiple articles in Johnson (2019a) address how New Zealand authors specifically reconceptualized classics for the cultural and pragmatic environments of NZ. See, for instance, Davidson (2019), Hale (2019), Miles (2019), Parry (2019), or Pütz (2019).
- ⁵ This focus should be unsurprising, considering that on the title page underneath the publisher's name is printed "For Larnach Castle, Ltd., Dunedin" (Reed 1950, p. 3).
- ⁶ My copy lists 1993 as the publication date, though elsewhere the publication date is given as 1981. See, for instance, "Hardwicke Knight" (2025) and Knight (2014). I am inclined to believe that 1981 was the original publication and the 1993 version is a subsequent edition that simply does not list the original date.
- ⁷ Forster's play is discussed in the following section of this essay.
- ⁸ This perspective is, of course, not unanimous among postcolonial thinkers. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (2006), for instance, argues strenuously against the imposition of European/British literature, culture, and languages on colonized subjects, claiming that it destroys indigenous cultures and alienates colonized subjects from their culture and society.

References

- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Ankersmit, Frank R. 2001. *Historical Representation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Berlatsky, Eric L. 2011. *The Real, the True, and the Told: Postmodern Historical Narrative and the Ethics of Representation*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Chau, Brandon, and Elizabeth Ho, eds. 2023. *The Routledge Companion to Global Literary Adaptation in the Twenty-First Century*. London: Routledge.
- Davidson, John. 2019. Salamis and Gallipoli: The Campaigns of Phillip Mann. In *Antipodean Antiquities: Classical Reception Down Under*. Edited by Marguerite Johnson. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 61–71.
- Euripides. 1998. *Hippolytus*. In *Euripides: Ten Plays*. Edited and Translated by Paul Roche. New York: Signet Classics, pp. 47–99.
- Forster, Michelanne. 2013. *Larnach*. In *Downfall: Three New Zealand History Plays*. Wellington: Playmarket New Zealand.

- Foucault, Michel. 1977. Nietzsche, Genealogy, History. In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Edited by Donald F. Bouchard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Ginters, Laura. 2019. Agamemnon Comes to the Antipodes: The Origin of Student Drama at the University of Sydney. In *Antipodean Antiquities: Classical Reception Down Under*. Edited by Marguerite Johnson. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 43–59.
- Hale, Elizabeth. 2019. Imaginative Displacement: Classical Reception in the Young Adult Fiction of Margaret Mahy. In *Antipodean Antiquities: Classical Reception Down Under*. Edited by Marguerite Johnson. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 143–54.
- Hall, Edith, and Henry Stead. 2016. *Greek and Roman Classics in the British Struggle for Social Reform*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Hall, Edith, and Henry Stead. 2020. *A People's History of Classics: Class and Greco-Roman Antiquity in Britain and Ireland 1689 to 1939*. London: Routledge.
- Hardwick, Lorna, and Carol Gillespie, eds. 2010. *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- "Hardwicke Knight". 2025. Wikipedia. Available online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hardwicke_Knight#Publications (accessed on 10 August 2025).
- Hutcheon, Linda. 2013. *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. London: Routledge.
- Johnson, Marguerite, ed. 2019a. *Antipodean Antiquities: Classical Reception Down Under*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Johnson, Marguerite, ed. 2019b. Introduction. In *Antipodean Antiquities: Classical Reception Down Under*. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 1–10.
- Knight, Hardwicke. 1993. *The Ordeal of William Larnach*. Dunedin: University of Otago Printing Department.
- Knight, Hardwicke. 2014. *The Ordeal of William Larnach*. Internet Archive. Available online: https://archive.org/details/ordealofwilliaml0000knig_e4n5/mode/2up (accessed on 10 August 2025).
- "Larnach Castle". 2008. *Ghost Hunters International*. Season 1, Episode 8. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9N6N0ZCTbM> (accessed on 22 November 2025).
- "Larnach Castle & Gardens". 2025. Available online: <https://www.larnachcastle.co.nz/> (accessed on 25 August 2025).
- "List of Ghost Hunters International Episodes". 2025. Available online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Ghost_Hunters_International_episodes (accessed on 25 November 2025).
- Mann, Jatinder. 2019. *Redefining Citizenship in Australia, Canada, and Aotearoa New Zealand*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Marshall, Owen. 2011. *The Larnachs*. Auckland: Vintage.
- Miles, Geoffrey. 2019. James K. Baxter and the Gorgon Moon. In *Antipodean Antiquities: Classical Reception Down Under*. Edited by Marguerite Johnson. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 105–15.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 2006. *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Nairobi: James Currey.
- Parry, Hannah. 2019. Classical Epic in Peter Jackson's Middle Earth Trilogies. In *Antipodean Antiquities: Classical Reception Down Under*. Edited by Marguerite Johnson. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 223–32.
- Pütz, Babette. 2019. Classical Influences in Bernard Beckett's *Genesis*, *August*, and *Lullaby*. In *Antipodean Antiquities: Classical Reception Down Under*. Edited by Marguerite Johnson. London: Bloomsbury, pp. 155–65.
- Reed, Alfred Hamish. 1950. *Larnach and His Castle*. Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed.
- Rosen, Jeremy M. 2013. Minor Characters Have Their Day: The Imaginary and Actual Politics of a Contemporary Genre. *Contemporary Literature* 54: 139–74. [CrossRef]
- Seneca. 2011. *Phaedra*. In *Seneca: Phaedra and Other Plays*. Edited and Translated by R. Scott Smith. London: Penguin Classics, pp. 103–48.
- Snedden, Fleur. 1997. *King of the Castle: A Biography of William Larnach*. Auckland: David Bateman.
- Trivedi, Harish. 2010. Western Classics, Indian Classics: Postcolonial Contestations. In *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds*. Edited by Lorna Hardwick and Carol Gillespie. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 286–304.
- Van Weyenberg, Astrid. 2013. *The Politics of Adaptation: Contemporary African Drama and Greek Tragedy*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Wetmore, Kevin J., Jr. 2002. *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky: Modern African Adaptations of Classical Greek Tragedy*. Jefferson: McFarland & Co.
- White, Hayden. 1985. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.