

OUR MYTHICAL CHILDHOOD...  
CLASSICS AND CHILDREN'S LITERATURE  
BETWEEN EAST & WEST

Final Debates, May 23–26, 2013  
Centre for Studies on the Classical Tradition (OBTA),  
Faculty of “Artes Liberales”  
University of Warsaw

The magic of books permits us to travel across time and space, to feel a welter of emotions, and to live exciting adventures along with the protagonists. These are such marvellous experiences that we wish to repeat them again and again, each time becoming more aware of the power of literature – whether written down on ancient papyri scrolls or digitalized as the most advanced ebooks. And there is one period of human life when the charm of literature has a particularly strong impact – childhood. The young human being, when introduced into the realm of books, is presented with a priceless gift for the future: the knowledge of the magic of words – something which gives him or her the strength to face the challenges of adulthood. Thus does literature shape and support us. Moreover, the act of reading binds generations.

Exceptional bonds beyond time and geographical borders are established by the books for children and young adults inspired by Graeco-Roman Antiquity – ancient myths, culture, and history. The tales of the Greeks and Romans build our common heritage – a unique legacy, and one which is in constant evolution as ever new authors reach for ancient motifs and threads to create ever new, contemporary stories, globally understandable thanks to these timeless components. The adventures of Harry Potter, who happens to chant in Latin: *Expecto patronum!*, or of Percy Jackson, who discovers himself to be a demigod – Poseidon's son to be precise – are but a few of the most recent examples from the rapidly growing library of references to Classical Antiquity.

In the Centre for Studies on the Classical Tradition (OBTA) at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales”, University of Warsaw, we are carrying out research on this library within the framework of the international team project “Our Mythical Childhood... Classics and Children's Literature Between East & West”, supported by the Loeb Classical Library Foundation Grant, the University of Warsaw Funds for Research, and the “Artes Liberales” Institute Foundation.

The reception of Antiquity in literature for young readers is a new, fascinating field of studies, and in our venture, additionally, we have adopted a particular perspective. We analyze books for children and young adults inspired by Classical Antiquity in regional contexts, treating a region not as a periphery to be dismissed, but as an extremely interesting filter for the reception of a given cultural text. Thus, using a comparative approach we study how the image of Antiquity changes in response to the social, cultural, and political transformations underway in various parts of our globe. Ancient culture thereby becomes a mirror which permits us to better understand post-ancient epochs. We look upon ourselves in this mirror also today<sup>1</sup>.

Scholars from all over the world are taking part in this project – from North America to Africa, and from Europe to Australia and New Zealand. They represent sundry disciplines: classics, archaeology, modern philologies, philosophy, psychology, etc. From May 23 to 26, 2013 we met at the University of Warsaw to conclude the first stage of our research work, with joint debates under the Honorary Patronage of the Spouse of the President of the Republic of Poland, Anna Komorowska. At the inauguration of the debates Prof. Wilfried STROH (Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich) delivered a lecture in Latin on the books for children and young adults translated into Latin in various countries, though the potential of the language makes them globally accessible in the milieu of Latin admirers. Next, a total of six panels took place, moderated by Prof. Mark O'CONNOR (Boston College, USA), Prof. Farouk GREWING (University of Vienna), and by the members of our team.

Panel I, “In Search of Our Roots: Classical References as a Shaper of Young Readers' Identity”, was dedicated to the childhood exercises in rhetoric of Poland's King Jan III Sobieski – Prof. Barbara MILEWSKA-WAŻBIŃSKA (University of Warsaw); and to ancient motifs in texts by authors crucial in global or regional, or both, contexts: J.M. Barrie and Astrid Lindgren – Prof. Katarzyna JERZAK (University of Georgia, USA); Rudyard Kipling – Prof. Jerzy AXER (University of Warsaw); Tadeusz Zieliński – Dr. Michał MIZERA (University of Warsaw); Saul Tchernichowsky – Prof. Jörg SCHULTE (University College, London) and Agata GRZYBOWSKA (University of Warsaw); and Laura Orvieto – Dr. Valentina GARULLI (University of Bologna).

Panel II, “The Aesop Complex: The Transformation of Fables in Response to Regional Challenges”, was opened with a discussion on the psychological and

---

<sup>1</sup> The presentation of the project can be found in K. MARCINIAK, *In the Mirror of Antiquity*, Academia. The Magazine of the Polish Academy of Sciences XXXVI/4 2012, pp. 36–39, Polish version available at: [http://www.portalwiedzy.pan.pl/images/stories/academia\\_2012/42012/36-39\\_marciniak.pdf](http://www.portalwiedzy.pan.pl/images/stories/academia_2012/42012/36-39_marciniak.pdf). For more details please contact: Katarzyna Marciniak, Elżbieta Olechowska, or the research secretaries for the project: Joanna Kłos and Michał Kucharski. See also the volume *Antiquity and We*, ed. K. MARCINIAK, Faculty of „Artes Liberales” UW, Warsaw 2013, available at <http://al.uw.edu.pl/pl-426>.

philosophical approach to the phenomenon of fables – Prof. Szymon WRÓBEL (University of Warsaw); next, the panel dealt with the reception of Aesop’s fables in various parts of the world: in Africa – Prof. Peter SIMATEI (Moi University, Eldoret, Kenya); Japan – Prof. Beata KUBIAK HO-CHI (University of Warsaw); Great Britain – Prof. Edith HALL (King’s College, London); Slovenia – Dr. David MOVRIN (University of Ljubljana); and Poland – Prof. Adam ŁUKASZEWICZ (University of Warsaw).

Panel III, “Children Dealing with Change: The Reception of Classics in Ideological Contexts”, comprised the reception of Antiquity in American fictions of Ancient Rome – Prof. Deborah H. ROBERTS (Haverford College, USA) in collaboration with Prof. Sheila MURNAGHAN (University of Pennsylvania, USA); in children’s literature in the Soviet Union – Dr. Elena ERMOLAEVA (Saint-Petersburg State University); in post-WW2 Hungary – Prof. György KARSAI (University of Pécs; Academy of Drama and Film in Budapest); in socialist Romania – Dr. Cristian-Nicolae GAȘPAR (Central European University, Budapest); in 1970s Polish literature of a feminist cast – Prof. Robert A. SUCHARSKI (University of Warsaw); and in Modern Greek literature – Dr. Przemysław KORDOS (University of Warsaw).

Panel IV, “Daring the Darkness: Classical Antiquity as a Filter for Critical Experiences”, included the motif of *katabasis* in New Zealand fictions – Prof. Elizabeth HALE (University of New England, New South Wales); in Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials* trilogy – Dr. Owen HODKINSON (University of Leeds); and the motif of Orpheus and Eurydice in German, French, and English literature – Prof. Bettina KÜMMERLING-MEIBAUER (Eberhard Karl University of Tübingen).

Panel V, “New Hope: Classical References in the Mission of Preparing Children to Strive for a Better Future”, focused on the role of Antiquity in supporting the youngest in their liminal life experiences on the basis of literary examples from the United States – Prof. Sheila MURNAGHAN (University of Pennsylvania, USA) in collaboration with Prof. Deborah H. ROBERTS (Haverford College, USA); from the People’s Republic of Poland – Joanna KŁOS (University of Warsaw); and from Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union – Dr. Hanna PAULOUSKA (University of Warsaw).

Panel VI, “Rediscovering the Magic of Words: From the 21st c. Onwards”, was dedicated to the most recent phenomena – Caroline Lawrence’s series *Roman Mysteries* – Prof. Helen LOVATT (University of Nottingham); J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* novels – Dr. Elżbieta OLECHOWSKA (University of Warsaw); the reception of Classical Antiquity in lexicography for young readers – Dr. Ewa RUDNICKA (University of Warsaw); and the phenomenon of mythological fan fiction – Prof. Katarzyna MARCINIAK (University of Warsaw).

The debates also offered an opportunity for graduate and post-graduate students to show their research themes as poster presentations: the *Odyssey*

in Charles Lamb's work – Francesca M. RICHARDS (Durham University); the reception of Hercules in computer games – Sylwia CHMIELEWSKA (University of Warsaw); and the role of mythology in the Polish railway – Adam CIOLEK (University of Warsaw).

The debates were complemented by a cultural programme. As children's literature is usually accompanied by illustrations which enhance the power of words, we initiated cooperation with the Illustration Studio under the direction of Prof. Zygmunt Januszewski from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. The students' works of art, prepared during a year long course thematically linked to the project, were presented at a special exhibition during the conclusion of the debates. Furthermore, Jan Czarnecki – a graduate of the Frédéric Chopin State Music School in Warsaw and student on the programme of the Inter-Faculty Individual Studies in Humanities – and his ensemble gave a concert *Modulamina puerilia*, arranged for harpsichord, which included works by Jan Novák (1921–1984), a composer writing music to ancient Latin poems. The cultural patronage of the project was assumed by the Foundation ABCXXI – “All of Poland Reads to Kids”, Polish Radio Channel 2, and the web portal Qlturka.pl.

At the culmination of the debates we scheduled a discussion panel on the role of books inspired by Classical Antiquity for children and young adults. Our aim was to reach out beyond the academic milieu. Thus, we invited to the discussion not only scholars and students, but also teachers (a group coordinated by Barbara Strycharczyk presented the results of a very promising school curriculum which could be applied at various levels), editors, translators, illustrators, and last but not least – authors. Thus, we were happy to welcome as participants to the panel Jacek Bocheński, Grzegorz Kasdepke, Prof. Franciszek Kobryńczuk, Anna M. Komornicka, Barbara Ludwiczak, Eliza Piotrowska, and Monika Rekowska. Bound by the common experience of reading, a Community came into being at the University understood as a place where people striving for knowledge could meet to talk and learn from each other.

At the end of the debates there was also a panel entitled *Tadeusz Zieliński Between East & West* with Prof. Jerzy Axer, Adam Pomorski (President of the Polish PEN Club), and Prof. Piotr Mitzner (Member of the Board of the Polish PEN Club), who together presented a trilingual editorial project dedicated to Zieliński's texts, recently completed by Professors Jerzy Axer, Michael von Albrecht, and Alexander Gavrilov.

The “Our Mythical Childhood...” project has already resulted in some publications. To recall Zieliński's activity as a popularizer of ancient culture, one of his *Attic Tales (Klechdy attyckie)* was specially published for the debates (*The Queen of the Wind Maidens*, with an introduction by Michał Mizera, Polish translation from the Russian original by Katarzyna Tomaszuk, English translation and textual notes by Elżbieta Olechowska). Furthermore, one of the most vital aspects of the project was to involve students in the research work. To

this end we established a special experimental seminar within the framework of the Mediterranean Civilization curriculum at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales”. The participants – BA, MA, and PhD students – were collecting and elaborating texts from Polish literature for young readers with references to ancient culture. As a result, *Polish Literature for Children & Young Adults Inspired by Classical Antiquity. A Catalogue* was published, with the stated mission (and our hope) of stimulating research into the subject and at the same time popularizing Polish literature abroad. The *Catalogue* is freely available to download from the project’s website, along with Zieliński’s tale and the students’ poster presentations ([www.omc.al.uw.edu.pl](http://www.omc.al.uw.edu.pl), in the bookmark *Publication of Research Results*). A volume with the research cases, the results of which were presented during the debates, is being prepared for publication. The volume will also include a text on the reception of Greek mythology in Israeli children’s literature – Prof. Lisa MAURICE (Bar-Ilan University); and another one on classical references in the *Harry Potter* series – Prof. Christine WALDE (Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz).

On behalf of the organizers and participants I wish to express the deepest gratitude to all people and institutions supporting our research, which has opened so many new and fascinating perspectives that it is possible for us to immediately develop the next stages of the project, and to do so with child-like joy and curiosity.

*Katarzyna Marciniak*  
*Faculty of “Artes Liberales”, University of Warsaw*