

**Katarzyna Marciniak (ed.), *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2016 (Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity 8), XVI + 528 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-31342-2, €181.00 (paperback).**

The treatment of Classical Antiquity in modern literature and film for the young audience has been uneven. In the Hollywood blockbuster *Wonder Woman* (2017), the Amazons are introduced as Zeus' last-resort weapon to defend the world from his own rebellious son Ares. Framed by the contrast between innocent yet militant gynocracy on the island and the corrupt yet worth-saving patriarchy outside of Themyscira, the final defeat of Ares in a Ragnarok-style showdown is presented as a precondition to world peace. The appropriation and distortion of Greek mythology is blatant enough to upset many among the popular audience. Neil Gaiman's *Norse Mythology* (2017), by contrast, offers a refreshing retelling of the Eddas that even an academic reader will appreciate. The book preserves the original concepts, conflicts, and relationships but serves them in crisp, modern language that makes Norse mythology come vibrantly alive. Gaiman's Thor is not a Marvel Comic's character or a dude from Rick Riordan's series, but the unplugged Norse Thor who was never the brightest or handsomest of the gods and does not leap through the air in heroic postures. The two different styles of engaging with classical mythology represented by Jenkins's film and Gaiman's book lie close to the opposite sides of a spectrum, whose diversity boggles the mind. *Our Mythical Childhood* is an attempt to address some of the questions about what accounts for the continuing presence, appeal, and relevance of classical myths in literature and other media for the young reader.

The collection is addressed to an academic audience and includes 26 essays on tropes of antiquity in (mostly) modern works for children. Its range is unavoidably wider, however, due to the amorphous nature of the field mapped by the essays. The Introduction, for example, identifies the Greco-Roman heritage as central to the book's critical reflection, specifies as its research target a community of societies – largely European or Euro-American – whose literatures and cultural codes have incorporated and preserved references to classical antiquity (p. 3), and then depicts the scope of the collection as limited to works that “draw inspiration from Classical Antiquity: Greek and Roman myths and history” (p. 11). Yet, some essays in the collection tackle the use of the Classics in Japanese, Israeli, and African literatures, while others lead expeditions to discuss modern Latin translations of children's classics done for the academic Latin-reading audience, the use of school dictionaries to enhance students' knowledge of the ancient world, and the phenomenon of mythological fan fiction. As a result, while some chapters engage with issues of children's literature in more depth, others do so more marginally. This heterogeneity is not necessarily a disadvantage. In the Introduction, the editor explains it as a consequence of bringing together scholars from several fields – “from classical philology and Neo-Latin studies, through modern philologies, archeology, to ethnography” – and a price for creating a conversation across disciplines (p. 23). Indeed, the field of Classical reception studies in children's and young adult literature is relatively recent. The present volume joins *The Reception of Ancient Greece and Rome in Children's Literature* (Brill 2015) as one the first attempts to grapple with some of the key issues arising at the intersection of the two disciplines.

The essays are grouped in four parts. The opening section, “In Search of Our Roots: Classical References as a Sharper of Young Readers' Identity”, consists of nine essays broadly concerned with the cultural history of the notion that works of Classical Antiquity are indispensable for the ethical and civic education of young people. The essays range across topics, from Wilfried STROH's survey of Latin-language books for children, Barbara MILEWSKA-WAŻBIŃSKA's analysis of school notebooks of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Polish king Jan Sobieski, Ewa RUDNICKA's study of references to Classical Antiquity in modern Polish dictionaries for children, and Agata GRZYBOWSKA's overview

of Homeric prosody in the poetry of Saul Tchernichovsky. It includes other essays that examine the uses of antiquity in specific 20<sup>th</sup> century works for children. Katarzyna JERZAK offers a compelling reading of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1906) and Astrid Lindgren's *Karlson on the Roof* (1955), suggesting that their protagonists are modern articulations of Hermes, reworked at "the space where myth gives way to a modern fairy tale" (pp. 44 f.). Jerzy AXER argues that the deep structure of Kipling's autobiographical short story *Regulus* (1917) reflects the author's Classical ideas about a boy's initiation into manhood. In what is perhaps the longest essay in the collection, Valentina GARULLI introduces the Italian children's author Laura Orvieto (1876–1953) and her works that evoke Classical Antiquity, especially the widely translated *Stories of Greece and the Barbarians* (1911). Next, Robert SUCHARSKI demonstrates how the discovery of Çatalhöyük inspired the Polish author Jadwiga Żylińska and how her short story collection *Priestesses, Amazons, and Witches* (1972) imaginatively recreates the rise and fall of Neolithic matriarchates. Finally, Przemysław KORDOS offers a glimpse of how modern Greek children's literature engages with "the glory that was Greece" (p. 128) through narrative representations – from the mourning over the end of Hellenism in Anatolia after the Greco-Turkish war in Christos Boulotis's *The Statue that Was Cold* (1998), through contemplating the loss of important Greek antiquities to foreign museums in Alki Zei's *Alice in Marbleland* (1997), and on to reflecting on the need to preserve one's history, including archeological sites in the sea, in Kira Sinou and Eleni Hook-Apostolopoulou's *The Hand in the Deep* (1988).

Section two, "The Aesop Complex: The Transformations of Fables in Response to Regional Challenges", takes up the reception and transformation of Aesop's fables across time and culture. The five essays are closely knit thematically and work well when read together. The section opens with Edith HALL's interrogation of the prevailing assumption about the suitability of Aesop's fables to children. HALL argues that the fables reflect the adults' investment in the delusional idea of children and childhood as primitive and innocent, and that they reinforce adult control over children through the exercise of power, narrative and financial, embodied in the operations of modern children's books' market. Peter T. SIMATEI discusses three types of Classical borrowings and adaptations in modern African literature, focusing mostly on the work of the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe (1930–2013). Adaptations of Aesop's fables are then examined by Beata KUBIAK HO-CHI, who considers three waves of Aesopica in Japan, starting from the early missionary translations, through On Watanabe's groundbreaking translation of 1872–1875, and to their modern versions used in Japanese-language textbooks. Adam ŁUKASZEWICZ continues with the theme of adaptations, focusing on one of the most well-known Polish reinterpretations of Aesop: Jan Brzechwa's much-celebrated poem *Vitalis the Fox* (1948). The section concludes with a look at the legacy of fables in Slovenian children's literature, in which David MORVIN discusses creative redefinition of the fable in the award-winning *Bosnian Fables* (1999) by Slovenian cartoonist Tomaž Lavrič.

As hinted at in the title "Daring the Darkness: Classical Antiquity as a Filter for Critical Experiences", section three deals with how themes borrowed from Classical Antiquity are used today as filters for critical experiences, especially psychological processes and coming-of-age issues. Sheila MURNAGHAN and Deborah ROBERTS discuss a range of responses to WWI in children's literature that engages with the ancient world, focusing especially on two American novels: R.F. Wells's *With Caesar's Legions* (1923), which recasts modern warfare as an adventure that advances civilised progress, and Hilda Doolittle's *The Hedgehog* (1936), which highlights losses on both sides as a shared privation that should inspire pacifism in international relations. The uses of Classical Antiquity in the service of creating *homo sovieticus*, especially of the trope of slaves' rebellion and heroism, are examined by Elene ERMOLEVA on examples of Soviet works published between the 1920s and the 1970s. In the following essay Elizabeth HALE offers an eye-opening argument about how New Zealand fantasy authors Margaret Mahy and Maurice Gee use the trope of katabasis to explore the themes of coming of age and adolescent hero's quest. The coming of age through Classical themes is also subject of Owen HODKINSON's essay, which offers a comprehensive overview of the wealth of Classical references in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*

trilogy (1995–2000). In the last essay of this section, Bettina KÜMMERLING-MEIBAUER expertly leads the reader through five modern retellings of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth that together reveal an astonishing potential of this story for generating multiple meanings.

The last section, “New Hope: Classical References in the Mission of Preparing Children to Strive for a Better Future”, packs the final punch through six essays on the future-oriented applications of Classical Antiquity in modern’s children’s fiction. The changing relationship between the Greco-Roman and Jewish traditions is mapped out by Lisa MAURICE in reference to the Israeli educational system and its ambivalence toward literary fantasy. Joanna KŁOS discusses the Telemachus duology by the Polish novelist Adam Bahdaj (1918–1985), suggesting that they engage with the social and economic transformations in the 1970s Poland by rejecting materialism in favour of non-materialist human relations. The reimagining of another Greek hero, Theseus, is taken up by Hanna PAULOUSKAYA to suggest that Soviet science fiction of Kir Bulychev offered spaces most difficult to control ideologically by the Communist regime. The essays by Christine WALDE and Elżbieta OLECHOWSKA focus on the productive appropriation of Classical Antiquity in the Harry Potter series. WALDE posits that the literature and culture of classical Rome have served as a “laboratory of ideas, motifs, stories, and narrative structures” (pp. 366 f.) that have continued to be re-used up to the present and largely account for the appeal of Rowling’s series as a classical epic in a “new” guise. OLECHOWSKA, in turn, locates the success of the series in the fact that it has reminded modern readers how versatile the toolbox of Antiquity can be for navigating the modern world. Rowling transforms classical mythology into desired knowledge, she claims, “as real and powerful as magic but, like magic, [...] accessible only to the initiated” (p. 385). Helen LOVATT’s essay on Caroline Lawrence’s Roman mysteries series (2001–2009) looks at how the ancient Roman setting across the seventeen books allows the author to construct the dichotomy of East–West, center and periphery as a metaphorical map for each character’s search for identity, besides enabling a complex representation of Roman society as multilayered and multicultural. The search for identity through the use of Classical sources is also explored by Katarzyna MARCINIAK, who examines how online-based mythological fan fiction empowers young people to take charge of the narratives of their own lives by learning to question, rework, and hybridise Classical material.

As often happens with such diverse, uneven collections, its strengths are also its weaknesses. A broad range of disciplinary expertise contributes to varied foci of the chapters – including a glimpse of how Classical Antiquity has functioned in non-English language literatures – but at the cost of sometimes highly selective awareness of children’s literature criticism or inattention to the larger frameworks within which Classical Antiquity has functioned in different genres and formats of children’s literature. The chapters by KORDOS and KÜMMERLING-MEIBAUER, for example, are the only two that discuss picturebooks: the format of children’s literature often considered its unique contribution to world literature writ large. One would also welcome, for example, an examination of chapter books – early and middle grade novels, often illustrated – that feature themes from Classical Antiquity, say Terry Deary’s *Ruthless Romans* (2008) or Gary Northfield’s best-selling *Julius Zebra: Rumble with the Romans!* (2016). There are likewise rich traditions of Homeric adaptations for the young audience, mostly in the fantasy, historical novel, and nonfiction genres, few of which are referenced in this collection. The mention of fantasy brings to mind a vibrant tradition of mythopoeic fiction based on Classical Antiquity such as C.S. Lewis’s *Till We Have Faces* (1956), Richard Putrill’s *The Golden Gryphon’s Feather* (1979), Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Lavinia* (2009), or Robert Holdstock’s *The Merlin Codex* trilogy (2001–2007) as well as literary criticism on the history of fantasy as a history of mythopoesis that often starts from Classical Antiquity and then hybridises with other mythological traditions. These and other omissions can be explained by the fact that all but three contributors are classical scholars rather than experts in children’s literature or speculative fiction, a small price to pay for such a rich fare.

The discussion between Classical Studies and children’s literature may have just begun but it definitely has a future. It should go on to enrich both fields and help us appreciate how and why today’s young people engage with tropes, narrative structures, and texts that originated in Classical

Antiquity. MARCINIAK's collection is far from exhaustive but it delivers what it signals in the title: a range of studies on the continuing presence of the Classics in texts for children and young adults. It has more than a few critically astute chapters and a number of hidden gems any humanist will appreciate, such as ŁUKASZEWICZ's speculation on Vitalis the Fox as possibly representing Stalin, MAURICE's discussion of the evolving Israeli attitudes toward fantasy, or HALL's reflections on our deep ambivalence about the nature of the child. Although the collection does not make any grand claims, it invites us to seek the connections we might have overlooked. If you have ever had the pleasure to talk about classical mythology with a young reader, you will appreciate the value of this book and the discussion it fosters.

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