

## Integrating Children's Literature into an Undergraduate Classics Curriculum

When students enter their undergraduate classrooms, many of them bring memories of their prior engagement with the ancient world through children's literature. As students' familiarity with Classical material increases, a gap opens between their earlier reading and what they learn from primary sources, separating their childhood experiences from their academic endeavors. I believe that this gap can be transformed into an opportunity to construct meaningful conversations between children's literature and ancient texts.

I'd like to mention upfront that I am interested in children's literature *as literature*. I think of it as a genre, mode, or discourse with particular parameters, concerns, and moves. Just as students develop an increasing sense of what epic or tragedy is and does as they read and discuss ancient works, students can fine-tune their understanding of children's literature as a specific kind of writing with recurring elements and abiding interests. Framing children's literature *as literature* encourages students to view it as writing with its own identity and standing and to consider the analysis of it a serious intellectual enterprise.

The children's literature which I incorporate in my classes is mythologically themed. This makes sense, given my own interests as well as the general prevalence of mythology in children's literature. Reading children's literature alongside ancient mythological literature is fitting for another reason too: they both use narrative to process issues, articulate and question social values, and explore ideas. In both, storytelling, ideological mapping, and thought-experimentation go hand in hand in hand.

In what follows I'll sketch some of what I've done to incorporate children's literature into my courses at Hendrix College. (Links to the full reading lists for the dedicated courses on Classics and children's literature are available on the home page of [pegasus-reception.com](http://pegasus-reception.com).)

In a course focused on anthologies of Classical myth, we began with selections from reference works for children by Godwin and Goodrich. These information-focused texts provided background against which Hawthorne's imaginative and playful *Wonder Book* could be appreciated for its innovations. As we worked through Hawthorne's stories, we read the related entries in Anthon's *Classical Dictionary*, which Hawthorne himself consulted while writing the *Wonder Book*. We then moved to the anthologies by Bulfinch and Hamilton, which—although not meant exclusively for children—have consistently included young people in their readership. The d'Aulaires' *Book of Greek Myths* gave us the chance to examine a heavily illustrated anthology. I chose Hawthorne, Bulfinch, Hamilton, and the d'Aulaires because of their long-standing influence, but each student also analyzed an additional anthology published between the late 1800s and early 2000s. They selected part of their chosen anthology to assign to the rest of the class, gave a presentation on it, and ran the class discussion about it. The course closed with another project in which each student planned their own hypothetical anthology, wrote a portion of it, and explained the reasoning behind their choices.

In a survey course on Classical myth and children's literature, I focused the readings around particular figures, and we looked at a combination of ancient material, picturebooks, middle-grade books, and young-adult novels so that we could see more than one adaptation of each myth we considered. For instance, in the case of Midas, we read Ovid's account in the *Metamorphoses*, Hawthorne's short story, a Max and Ruby picturebook by Wells, and a novel by Shusterman. A later seminar I taught on myth and children's literature used a different

organizational framework. It started with anthologies or collections of different sorts, then it moved to picturebooks, and it concluded with novels. We also read relevant ancient versions of the stories we encountered. In both renditions of this course, I included books set in the imaginary world of ancient myth as well as works that use myth in some way but are situated in a more modern context and may or may not have fantastical or supernatural elements.

A seminar on myth and picturebooks began with some background on analyzing images and the dynamic environment created by the combination of pictures and words. We then explored a variety of works, mostly traditional picturebooks and illustrated anthologies, but also a board book, a fine art edition of Cupid and Psyche, and two graphic novels. At the end of the semester, students had two projects. For one, they worked in groups, and each group prepared a presentation on a different picturebook retelling of the myth of Persephone. For the other, independent project, they interpreted a myth-related picturebook of their own choice.

In 2019 and again in 2022 I taught a course on myth and Percy Jackson. We read the five novels in Riordan's Percy Jackson and the Olympians series, and after each we spent a couple of days with corresponding ancient sources. Riordan himself has mentioned that he uses the [theoi.com](http://theoi.com) website, so not only did this site provide students with free public domain translations, but it also allowed them to see many of the exact materials which Riordan drew upon. Most of the students had read at least a few of the Percy Jackson novels when they were younger, but none of them expected the extent and variety of Riordan's engagement with ancient sources which they discovered and explored through the course. In 2019, we read three middle-grade novels to compare and contrast with Riordan's series, while in 2022 we read a picturebook, a middle-grade novel, and a young adult novel. These works by other authors gave students a

chance to contextualize Riordan's series and further develop a sense of the different ways in which children's literature can use Classical myth.

In addition to teaching courses focused squarely on Classics and children's literature, I've also brought children's literature into Latin, Greek, and other Classics courses:

- One year in my regular Myth course we read Barrett's *King of Ithaka* after Homer's *Odyssey* and examined how Barrett both weaves and twists Homeric episodes in her tale of Telemachus' coming of age.
- More recently in my Myth class I've used the Argos episode from Hinds' graphic novel of the *Odyssey*. The encounter between Odysseus and his dog is 3 pages long in Hinds' treatment, repays close attention, and clearly demonstrates how modern adaptations can reflect contemporary, rather than ancient, values.
- In a course on the Trojan War in ancient and modern literature, I wanted students to see how authors had presented the Trojan War to a variety of audiences, so alongside works like Oswald's *Memorial* and Baricco's *An Iliad* we considered Cross and Packer's illustrated *Iliad* and McLaren's *Inside the Walls of Troy*, which focuses on Helen and Cassandra. We also read Miller's *Song of Achilles*. Although it is not a young adult novel, when interpreting it, students drew heavily on their knowledge of coming-of-age and coming-out narratives found in YA literature.
- In a 3rd-semester Latin course, students translated the Vulgate's opening chapters of Genesis and Erasmus' summary of Pandora's story; we then read Hawthorne's "Paradise of Children," in which Hawthorne intertwines and revises Biblical and Classical traditions simultaneously.

- In an advanced Latin course on Orpheus in Vergil and Ovid we read Voigt's *Orfe* and Gaiman's "Song of Orpheus" and "Thermidor" as part of our end-of-semester synthesis.
- In an upper-level Greek course which included portions of Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, Genesis, and Plato's *Protagoras*, we considered how Graves includes elements of all these texts in his narrative about Prometheus and Pandora in *Greek Gods and Heroes*.
- I've also suggested children's literature as possibilities for end-of-semester projects in upper-level language courses, and a couple of students have followed up on those suggestions. In a course focusing on Proserpine and Pluto in Ovid and Claudian, a student worked on Shelley's *Proserpine*, and for a course on Apuleius' *Cupid and Psyche*, a student wrote a paper on Lester's *Cupid*.

If you look at the reading lists for my courses, you'll see that there are some books that I return to again and again. But the various courses have been spread out over several student generations—so although I've used some children's literature texts multiple times, individual students aren't repeating material. Rather, I try to distribute children's literature across my teaching responsibilities so that Classics majors will encounter it at least once during their careers.

In general, students tend to be good observers; they're quick to notice something and call it "interesting." When pressed to comment further on a difference between a Classical text and a piece of children's literature, they may first turn to judgements about fidelity or age-appropriateness. I ask them to move beyond these kinds of remarks because they tend to close interpretation down rather than open it up. Instead, we consider the effects of the differences

they've noticed: how alterations, omissions, and additions contribute to a text's overall program and shape the experience of an audience. We toggle between micro and macro views. We trace details, patterns and breaks from patterns, the use of generic elements, and other things that give us a sense of how a particular text ticks. We also think about how those things participate in a text's project and what it conveys, complicates, or questions, explicitly or implicitly, about how the world works. By reading a related piece of children's literature alongside an ancient text, comparing and contrasting the works' different approaches and investments, students can gain a clearer view of each and how they function.

The academic analysis of children's literature isn't necessarily easier than other kinds of interpretive work, but children's literature provides a smoother, quicker on-ramp to interpretation than many other kinds of literature. In that regard, Classics students may find it a welcome (and welcoming) balance to reading and translating ancient texts. Because children's literature poses fewer initial hurdles, students are more confident and feel more empowered to share their thoughts, and we can move to higher-order critical thinking and in-depth conversation faster. The accessibility of children's literature—its speedier on-ramp—can also give students more time to develop their articulation skills through writing, formal presentations, and seminar discussions.

Mythologically themed children's literature demonstrates how stories from Greco-Roman antiquity are still steadily and vigorously undergoing metamorphosis: we see the malleability of myth at work in real-time, myth doing its discursive job in its most active current arena. As students encounter vivid examples of the ongoing process of reception, they also continue, in a new register, their own conversations with children literature, conversations which may have helped bring them to a Classics course in the first place. When I talk about teaching Classics and children's literature, I tend to focus on the pedagogical benefits and the intellectual and personal

rewards for students, but here's a final consideration. Given that children's literature is how *so many* people—not just among undergraduate students, but also in the wider population—first or even primarily encounter Greco-Roman antiquity, it seems a curious oversight (at best) *not* to integrate some analysis of Classically engaged children's literature into a Classics curriculum.

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