

Klassics for Kids: The Reception of Antiquity in Children's Entertainment

Many, if not most, of today's children will not get their first exposure to the ancient world from an ancient source, or even from a myth compendium like the justly famous *D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths*. Instead, they are more likely to meet people from Zeus to Caesar in their favorite picture book, Saturday morning cartoon, or PG rated movie. These sources are often what draws people to the Classics in the first place, and even more often provide the foundation of their understanding of the ancient world. Indeed, large numbers of students young and old are shocked to find that Ovid's Hercules is not the same as the man they knew from Disney movies. Understanding antiquity's status in the modern world therefore requires us to study the materials that craft the lens through which new generations will see it. This panel hopes to be a first step in that direction.

Taking their cue from CAMWS' recent thought provoking special panels on Classical Reception in Westerns, Sword and Sandal films, and other media, this panel will approach Greece and Rome's role in children's entertainment from both scholarly and pedagogical perspectives. The nature and significance of divergences from ancient sources will be discussed, as will strategies to maximize the benefits children's television, books and films provide to the classroom while minimizing the potential problems they can cause.

While this panel will be focused on children's entertainment generally, the multiform nature of this entertainment provides a vantage point by which to combine multiple genres of reception analysis into a single panel. By using the young intended audience as a thread between papers, this panel hopes to shed light on which aspects of modern reception are genre-specific, and which stretch along the boundary of medium, providing a further benefit to what promises to be an enlightening and entertaining panel.

Appropriate for All Ages: Adapting Greek Myths for Children's Picture Books

Ancient mythology is considered today to be part of the canon of childhood stories, along with fairy tales, and an essential part to every child's education. In the interest of giving young children a head start on the path to higher learning, a number of picture books have been published in the last 20 years, starting with Ingri and Edgar d'Aulaires' foundational *Book of Greek Myths*, continuing through the recent *Treasury of Greek Mythology: Classic Stories of Gods, Goddesses, Heroes & Monsters* by Donna Jo Napoli and *A Child's Introduction to Greek Mythology: The Stories of the Gods, Goddesses, Heroes, Monsters, and Other Mythical Creatures* by Heather Alexander.

However, there is a fear in modern society that children are too young and too innocent to handle the more brutal, sordid side of human existence. Therefore, the authors of these children's books of Greek myths have taken steps to soften the rough edges of ancient mythology. Thus the many women who were the victims of Zeus's lust become his other wives. However, in authors' zeal to present versions of ancient myths suitable for general audiences, they often inadvertently transform the offending elements into situations that, on closer inspection, are even more offensive to modern sensibilities. Rather than an adulterer, Zeus becomes a polygamist.

This paper seeks to explore some of the ways that Greek myths are adapted in children's picture books to be suitable for young children, and the paradox that results from these adaptations. I will focus on the suppression of sexuality and complications that result from the attempt to remove such a central element of Greek mythology.

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Devil in Disguise: Characterizations of Hades in Children's Media

Hades is not often discussed in ancient literature, but his influence on contemporary depictions of the ancient world is noticeable. While the Hades of Greco-Roman literature is best known as the kidnapper of Persephone, today his role has shifted to that of war-maker and master manipulator. Characterizations of Hades in children's media in particular show the influence of Judeo-Christian belief systems tempered by ancient attitudes. In this paper I will examine the presentation of Hades in Disney's "Hercules" and in Rick Riordan's The Lightning Thief (Percy Jackson and the Olympians, Book One), exploring how they reflect ancient and modern ideas about the Lord of the Underworld.

There are not many myths related to Hades in ancient literature and where he does appear he is an ancillary character. Although he perpetrates the capture of Persephone, most versions of the story focus on Demeter's search and grief. There are important points to note in this familiar myth, however; Hades' action is divinely sanctioned and he receives credit for deceiving Persephone with the pomegranate (at least in Apollodorus' account). Hades does not act against the will of Zeus in either kidnapping or returning Persephone, yet he tricks Persephone in order to keep her. Hades knows what eating the pomegranate will mean for her but he neglects to tell her the consequences. This deception and manipulation by Hades becomes more fruitful when compared with modern characterizations.

The Hades of Disney's "Hercules" is a fast-talking and flaming deal-maker who plots to dethrone Zeus. Hades appears with a crown of flames on his head and can summon fire with a snap of his fingers. He makes deals with two characters in the movie, promising them something they want and then delivering only in the most literal sense possible. These deceptive deals enable him to forward his own agenda of releasing the Titans and attacking Olympus so that he may rule in the upper world. The key points here are that Hades makes bargains and assaults Olympus in a takeover attempt. These points recall the devil of Judeo-Christian lore, but also recall the civil wars of the ancient world. Brother fighting brother was not an unfamiliar idea in ancient mythology; while typically in the classical world Hades is obedient to Zeus, in a modern setting writers have more freedom in his characterization. Disney

blends aspects of the ancient and modern worlds in its characterization to make Hades both familiar and foreign.

In Riordan's The Lightning Thief Hades is initially cast as a manipulator trying to start a war among the Olympians. Percy has been framed for the theft of Zeus' master bolt, but rumor has it that Hades is behind the theft. Hades' supposed goal is to start a war between Zeus and Poseidon in order to increase his own power. In chapter 19 Percy and his companions make it to the Underworld and confront Hades only to discover that Hades never sought war and does not have the bolt. Percy realizes that Hades too has been framed; while the goal of starting a war remains the same the perpetrator is Kronos, not Hades. Nevertheless, for the majority of the book Hades is portrayed as a puppet master creating deceptions and engineering a take over of Olympus. Riordan credits Hades with traits associated with the devil, although ultimately this Hades recalls the gloomy god of Homer or Ovid. He also reminds us of civil war, as the impending war between Zeus and Poseidon is attributed to his machinations. Indeed familial war does break out in the series, but it is the familiar generational war between the Titans and Olympians.

Examining contemporary characterizations of Hades indicates a clear, and not unexpected, influence from the Judeo-Christian tradition. What is unexpected is that these depictions of Hades exaggerate a trait that exists yet is underplayed in ancient literature. Another interesting element is that both depictions emphasize war, what in fact would be civil, brotherly war. Fights between brothers are common in classical mythology so adding this aspect drives home the links to the ancient world. Gods fighting is unthinkable in most modern contexts, but the idea sits well in archaic presentations and broaches a difficult subject. Disney and Riordan mix familiar villain elements with ancient ideas to create a Hades who rings true as a malefactor and a god.

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Black Odysseus: The character of Odie in *Class of the Titans*

In the Canadian animated series *Class of the Titans* (2005-12), teenagers descended from various heroes and gods of myth attempt to save the world from an escaped Cronus. The cartoon grafts modern interpretations of mythology onto tropes of children's action adventure series. One trope that could have been somewhat challenging for producers of the show to deal with is tokenism: virtually every show of this type has an African American male character in a nod towards "diversity," and includes one character marked more by his or her intellectual gifts than physical ability. *Class of the Titans* combines these tropes into Odie, a short, black, technologically gifted 16 year old descended from Odysseus. An investigation into his character helps to understand how both the famously slippery hero of the *Odyssey* and the mythic tradition generally have been appropriated by mass media.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the restrictions of the child's fantasy genre, Odie is a unique reflection of his supposed ancestor. Instead of generic heroic traits, *Class of the Titans* uses a single distinctive feature, Odysseus' diminutive stature, to link him to the cartoon's character. Once this link is established, the show is free to modify other aspects of Odysseus' character in Odie, notably removing his fighting prowess and adapting his morally questionable craftiness into pure intellectual giftedness. While this does remove him somewhat from Odysseus, the character that remains is still arguably closer to the mythic tradition than direct appropriations of the hero of the *Odyssey* in other media such as the movie *Troy*.

Odie's character in *Class of the Titans* also provides some insight into the nature of our appropriation of classical myth generally. The African American teenager's lack of resemblance to his ancestor is repeatedly noted, and even he must explain that Odysseus' bloodline is "rather diluted" in him. The Caucasian heroes, on the other hand, are frequently described as essentially

the spitting image of their predecessors, even though only one, the leader Jason, has a drop of Greek blood in his or her immediate family. While admittedly somewhat problematic, this decision does reflect a key component of Classical reception, particularly as it pertains to children's entertainment. While the myths may be Greek, they are often treated in pop culture as if they are the common cultural property of anyone of European descent, but the same favor is not bestowed upon other ethnicities.

It is doubtful that the creators of *Class of the Titans* had any intentions of making comments about the nature of modern Classical Reception, but that may well be why it succeeds in doing so. Odie's ability to comment on the reception of Odysseus comes not from how he connects to his supposed ancestor, but from how the demands of society and the genre of children's adventure television forces him to distinguish himself from the his supposed heroic ancestor.