



## Children's Literature and the Classics

—Mark Golden

Hodkinson, Owen, and Lovatt, Helen, editors. *Classical Reception and Children's Literature: Greece, Rome and Childhood Transformation*. I. B. Tauris, 2018. 352 pp. \$110.00 hc. ISBN 9781788310208.

Innovative and instructive, this excellent collection includes contributions from an author of more than thirty books for young readers and others (Michael Cadnum), several distinguished classicists (Edith Hall, Owen Hodkinson, Helen Lovatt, Sheila Murnaghan, Deborah H. Roberts, Niall Slater) and a nine-year-old saxophonist (Caroline Lovatt). Ancient authors range chronologically from Aesop to Apuleius, modern ones from William Godwin to J. K. Rowling and beyond. The collection is almost entirely restricted, however, to anglophone receptions of antiquity.<sup>1</sup>

The volume is arranged in five sections. The first opens with a helpful introduction by the editors, justifying the focus on transformation: change is a constant for children; literature for young readers adapts style and content to suit its audience; ideas of what is age appropriate alter as well (1-37). After offering broad

definitions of children's literature—with its distinctive genres, such as alphabet books; its characteristic brevity; its moral or didactic intent—and reception studies, the editors pick out some motifs that recur in the contributors' chapters: gender and class, identification and othering, image and text. Helen Lovatt then presents a case study of classical allusions in the Harry Potter books. Exotic but familiar to English readers, Latin figures as a means to power and privilege, the language of magic. This is followed by full summaries of individual chapters.

The introductory section closes with an imaginative triptych: Michael Cadnum's account of his short novel *Nightsong* (in chapter 1: "Beyond the World: Gossip, Murder and the Legend of Orpheus," 38-49), Owen Hodkinson's interview with him (chapter 2, 50-63), and Hodkinson's critical study of two of Cadnum's versions

of *Ovid, Nightsong* and *Starfall* (“Michael Cadnum’s *Metamorphoses of Ovid*,” 64-86). Cadnum discusses his preference for the voice and point of view of young characters and reveals the impact of his mother’s illness on his reimagining of the story of Orpheus, in which Eurydice’s spirit inspires the singer to take up his lyre once again in order to heal an injured boy. Cadnum insists that he writes with no specific audience in mind; he asserts that if he is thought of as a writer of children’s literature, this is the result of decisions made by publishers, booksellers, and reviewers. The interview returns to this issue, exploring Cadnum’s interest in myths: in his opinion, such tropes as the Turmoil of Adolescence are myths we live through. Cadnum avoids slavery in his fiction because the subject is so important that it must take the centre of any story; sexuality also plays no part because the “mythical world is pre-sexual, speaking to a part of our imagination before we had sexual partners” (61). Another feature of his fiction that seems to suit young readers, its brevity, is ascribed to his respect for silence. Hodkinson’s own presentation expresses some skepticism about all this—reception theory insists that a text’s meaning is not solely or even mainly under the control of its author—and comments perceptively on Ovidian features in Cadnum’s work. Hodkinson concludes that the study of Cadnum’s youthful voices opens up new perspectives on Ovid’s naive and childlike characters (for example, Scylla).

Part I, “Changing Times,” contains two broad brush strokes: Edith Hall’s “Aesop the Morphing Fabulist”

(89-107) explores the reach of Aesop’s fables, imported into Greece from the ancient Near East 2500 years ago and now rivalled only by the Bible in ubiquity. Translated into Tamil in 1969, into Bosnian in 1994, into Kurdish in 2002, Aesop in the native tongue has become a marker of nationhood. The work’s universality is in part the consequence of its similarity to Jesus’s parables and its compatibility with the moral teachings of Christianity—missionaries took it everywhere—and in part a testament to its openness to different political readings. But however much the fables’ brevity and didacticism strike us as appropriate for children, we should remember, as Hall emphasizes, that reading was rare in antiquity and many adults needed beginners’ texts. Andelys Wood’s chapter, “Perspective Matters: Roman Britain in Children’s Novels” (108-118), also reveals diversity and change. Until the late 1960s, novels about Roman Britain aimed at young people took the Romans’ point of view: they were models of order, discipline, and self-control for British youth. From the 1970s, however, archaeological discoveries and shifting attitudes toward empire fostered more favourable attention on Boudicca and the Britons. Reflecting this shift, Wood examines four more nuanced novels from the late 1970s which use a variety of narrative voices to explode simple stereotypes. In *Between the Forest and the Hills*, by Ann Lawrence, it is Roman characters who fear change, the arrival of the Saxons. Here and in Clive King’s *Ninny’s Boat*, it is the land of Britain itself which will endure, enough for all if they can get along.



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Part II, “Myths of Change,” opens with the first of three studies of individual figures from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. In “The Paradox of Pan as a Figure of Regeneration in Children’s Literature” (121-40), Gillian Bazovsky studies figures linked to the part-goat god Pan in four Edwardian works: *Peter Pan*, *The Wind in the Willows*, *The Crock of Gold*, and especially *The Secret Garden*. An interest in the regeneration of old mythic forms at a time when some sought to replace elements of conventional Christianity with an alternative Arcadian vision made Pan, once connected with the Devil, acceptable in literature for young people. Indeed, childhood itself could be regarded as an Arcadia, a natural contrast to civilized adulthood. Bazovsky argues that in *The Secret Garden*, Dickon, like Pan in his personal appearance and in his ability to bestride the wild and cultured worlds, shares Pan’s aptitude for regeneration: he plays a prominent role in the emotional healing of Mary, the novel’s protagonist, and in the recovery of her cousin Colin, who uses a wheelchair. But in the end, he serves as catalyst rather than hero, and withdraws from the story in favour of Colin, a self-styled discoverer of Science.

Ovid moves to the fore in “Arachne’s Web: The Reception of an Ovidian Myth in Works for Children,” by Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts (141-61). The story of the female weaver who challenges the goddess Minerva and is punished for her temerity is a popular one for both its moral and etiological aspects—any child will know spiders and their webs. But Ovid’s original affords challenges: divine jealousy and vindictiveness, the erotic contents of Arachne’s art, the spider itself. (Trigger warning for arachnophobes: this chapter is illustrated.) Treatments for children have deployed a number of strategies in response, often refiguring

Arachne as boastful and proud, and so softening the presentation of Minerva, and making Arachne younger and her failings less blameworthy and more relevant to child readers. Recent renderings, however, may take a more comic turn, exaggerating Arachne's pride and/or Minerva's anger for effect. And while the divine transgressions featured in Arachne's work are ignored or bowdlerized, illustrations sometimes suggest the sexual violence that the text covers up.

Further in this section, historians of childhood may be especially interested in Aileen Hawkins and Alison Poe's "Narcissus in Children's Contexts: Didacticism and Scopophilia?" (162-78). They begin by pointing out differences between Ovid's story and modern adaptations. In Ovid, Narcissus's crime is cruelty—his indifference to the nymph Echo—and his punishment is never to love another; as a consequence, he falls in love with his own reflection. Modern retellings, perhaps influenced by the Freudian concept of narcissism, often convict Narcissus of self-love from the start. But Ovid's is not the only ancient way of telling Narcissus's tale, and one visual version in particular, directed (the authors argue) at a young audience, illuminates an attitude toward childhood we may find disturbing: a house destroyed at Pompeii in 79 C.E. includes a room with a nude fresco portrayal of Narcissus on one wall. There is evidence that children lived in the house and the authors make a plausible argument that the room with the fresco was where two children portrayed in other images

there (a boy of seven to ten, a girl of three to six) usually slept. If so, Narcissus's sensuality—his nude body, his prominent genitalia—is striking, all the more so in that his image is balanced with another fresco, showing a Roman girl nursing her starving father, an extraordinary instance of filial devotion. The suggestion is that the family's children were meant to identify with these images and their strongly gendered attitudes toward the body. Roman homes were full of everyday objects shaped to refer to genitalia, and their fluid sleeping arrangements likely brought children into contact with sexual activity. But even so we may be surprised by the use of Narcissus as an ideal, let alone "as a potential object of lust for a juvenile viewer" (177).

Lisa Maurice's chapter, "'I'd Break the Slate and Scream for Joy If I Did Latin like a Boy!': Studying and Teaching Classics in Girls' and Boys' Fiction" (181-202), opens the third part of this anthology, "Didactic Classics." Maurice re-examines how changes in the place of classics in schools and in the education of girls affected the portrayal of the subject and its instructors. For much of the twentieth century, Latin was a symbol of childhood suffering in stories for boys, and its teachers were regularly old-fashioned and cruel, their enthusiasm for their daunting and irrelevant material an object of derision. For girls, however, it had much coveted cachet as a boys' prerogative, and Latin teachers were generally portrayed favourably in stories meant for them. But as Latin became more marginal, and as girls and boys came

to be on more equal footing as students, this gender gap disappeared. Latin could now be transformed into the magical language we see in the Harry Potter books.

In “Latin, Greek and Other Classical ‘Nonsense’ in the Work of Edward Lear” (203-25), Marian W. Makins presents an interesting approach to the famous English artist and writer, stressing his interest in antiquity (he studied Greek with a private tutor, read widely on his own, and made notable bilingual puns) and his skepticism about transforming children into adults through formal schooling. She suggests that his classical references, far from being intended to either inculcate or ridicule learning, encouraged an independent, creative response.

The section is rounded off by Helen Lovatt’s account of two series of mystery novels set in ancient Rome, one for adults (Lindsey Davis’s Falco series) and one for young readers (the Roman mysteries of Caroline Lawrence) in her chapter “Changing Alexandria: Didactic Plots and Roman Detectives in Caroline Lawrence and Lindsey Davis” (226-44). Both set under the Flavian emperors, they make an excellent comparison in the way writers for these different audiences structure their narratives and present the Roman world. Davis’s books for adults feature an adult protagonist, the hard-boiled detective Falco; Lovatt notes their leisurely development of the plot and plentiful social observation and interaction between characters. In contrast, Lawrence’s four main characters are all children; her plots move

quickly and include frequent puzzles and cliffhangers, quickly resolved, what Lovatt terms a “gamification” of the narrative. Davis’s *Alexandria* and Lawrence’s *The Scribes from Alexandria* both revolve around the famous Egyptian library and invite the authors to incorporate and adapt traditions about it. In each case, the author introduces uncertainty about the historical record and gives female characters an important role in presenting knowledge; Lawrence in particular spurs her younger readers toward learning.

Part IV, “Narnia and Metamorphoses,” focuses on two studies of C. S. Lewis’s Chronicles. In “Ovid Misunderstood: The *Metamorphoses* in Narnia” (247-61), Geoffrey Miles draws attention to the fact that Lewis knew Ovid well and employed many of the same elements, such as fauns, satyrs, nymphs, river gods, in his work. However, Lewis sanitizes *The Metamorphoses*’ eroticism, violence, horror—and humour—offering instead a domesticated and toned-down Ovid more acceptable to children (or their parents). Where Ovid’s metamorphoses are often arbitrary, inflicted (as in the case of Arachne) by vengeful gods, in the Narnia books they suit their subjects and may be only temporary too. For example, this is the case for Rabadash at the end of *The Horse and His Boy*: an absurd and contemptible prince is turned into a donkey but may later regain his form. So Lewis uses “Ovidian stories and Ovidian techniques to serious Christian moral purpose” (258), a deliberate misunderstanding familiar to Lewis from his engagement with medieval and Renaissance readings of the poet.

Rabadash returns in Niall W. Slater's "The Horse, the Ass and their Boys: C. S. Lewis and the Ending of Apuleius's *Golden Ass*" (262-71). Here his metamorphosis is said to reflect that of Lucius, turned into an ass and then restored to human form by the grace of the goddess Isis in Apuleius's Latin novel—another work Lewis knew well. Rabadash faces ridicule; Lewis, Slater thinks, read Apuleius similarly, and was inclined to think that Lucius's conversion to the worship of Isis was not intended as a happy ending after all.

In an "Afterword," ("Inheriting the Past: Children's Voices and Parenting Experiences," 272-87), Helen Lovatt reports on conversations about their reading with her children, Jonathan (then twelve) and Caroline (nine). Both children, different as they were in age and gender, felt in control of their reading; books allow for more pacing, more moving back and forth, more interpretation and imagination than board or computer games. They experience the ancient world as distant enough to be exotic yet reassuringly familiar too. Two bibliographies (children's literature, scholarship) and an index round off the volume.

This book is imaginatively conceived and edited with skill. Contributors occasionally betray their unfamiliarity with details of Greek and Roman life. For example, the *bullā*, the locket worn around a boy's neck, advertises freeborn status, not necessarily membership among the elite (168). In addition, some paths are gestured at rather than broken, such as research into the responses of young readers themselves. But there is a great deal to learn here. Certainly this is so for readers like me who can claim neither expertise in children's literature nor exposure to scholarship on it. While I read the Harry Potter books to my son



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until they got too heavy to hold, my knowledge is such that even the inevitable typos and inconsistencies here could add to my education—for example, it was only through reconciling the two variants of Noel Streatfeild’s

family name on offer that I discovered that the author is female. However, even specialists in the reception of classical antiquity or in children’s literature will find the collection worthwhile.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> Discussions of other traditions, originating in the same Lampeter conference, are available in Katarzyna Marciniak’s *Our Mythical Childhood . . . The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*.

### Works Cited

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