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Classical Monsters in Children's and Young Adult Literature

This chapter offers a succinct survey of the reception of classical monsters in children's and young adult literature in the aim of indicating the main ways in which this kind of content is adapted to the needs of the young public. The focus is on presenting the monsters' reception as a key for understanding the transformations underway in societal sensitivity, as well as one for enabling intergenerational communication and fostering psychological and intellectual maturation in the transition from childhood to adulthood. The basic theoretical remarks are exemplified by a choice of case studies along with an outline of the major methodological challenges intrinsic to research into this aspect of the reception of Classical Antiquity.

Key words: children's literature, young adult literature, childhood, classical reception, otherness, Argus, centaur, Cyclops, Medusa, Minotaur

Introduction

Monsters originating from classical myth are the perfect tutors. You too grew up under their care, as this chapter will help you recall by taking you back to some of your childhood books, discussed here together with several more recent works in order to offer a broader panorama. If you have any doubts regarding the pedagogical skills of the ancient monsters, simply cast a glance at their Greek and Roman 'biographies', as presented in this volume and in various editions of mythologies, mythological dictionaries, and – last but not least – the ancient sources themselves. The general conclusion is as surprising as it is highly interesting: with a few exceptions, the most famous monsters from Greek myths do not prey on children (below twelve years of age as the conventional borderline goes; Beaumont et al. 2021). Rather, they provide a formidable rite of passage for the heroes-in-becoming who as demigod adolescents stand a chance in their confrontation.

Consider, for example, the terrible Minotaur and the cruel tribute of seven youths and seven maidens to appease its hunger – via a detail that is often overlooked, although it is crucial for a deeper understanding of the myth: they (at least the first tribute) were the Minotaur's peers, with Theseus mature enough to face the beast. We owe this important piece of information to Ovid who mentions the double figure of the beast as part bull, part young boy (*tauri iuvenisque figuram*, *Met*. 8.169, where *iuvenis* denotes a 'youth' of 14–17 years of age; see *OCD* 2015). Similarly, another 'prominent' monster, Medusa – whether considered a primordial creature (Hes. *Theog*. 274) or a beautiful woman turned into a beast (Ov. *Met*. 4.794–804) – encounters Perseus in his salad days, but for him this is also the age suitable for marriage with Andromeda and, with some divine help, he is then fully capable of attacking the Gorgon on an equal footing (in Hermes' winged sandals). Furthermore, were we asked to indicate the perfect ancient tutor and educator *par excellence*, someone who had successfully managed to raise quite an impressive number of rather 'challenging' children to become benefactors of humankind – well, the answer is unequivocal: half man, half horse – the centaur Chiron, teaching his wards to revere the gods, respect their parents, and protect Nature (Hall 2020). His love for human offspring differs sharply from the cruelty of the conquerors of Troy who killed Hector and Andromache's infant son Astyanax, or from King Acrisius of Argos who threw the baby Perseus (his grandson), imprisoned in a chest with his mother Danaë, into the high seas, thus exposing him to a greater danger than the youth's later encounter with the horrific Medusa.

All this invites us to further explore the peculiar link between mythical beasts and the young members of the human species, especially as not only Chiron but also Medusa and the Minotaur and many other of their monstrous kind have always been present in the world of children and adolescents via two main channels. The first is storytelling: fascinating myths told to communities of all ages by the aoidoi ('singers of tales') – Homer's disciples. The second is the phenomenon of reception: by adapting and retelling the ancient myths, new generations of writers and artists have been giving new lives to the mythical monsters in various places of the world, wherever Graeco-Roman tradition has reached over the millennia. And it is this reception that is of the greatest potential for children's and young adult literature. For the ancient creatures are not fossils like so many other victims of time (or of Medusa). Instead, they undergo a metamorphosis and often develop empathy, thus responding to young people's changing needs. The reason for this is that the ancient beasts are part and parcel of a malleable cultural heritage – the classical tradition in constant reinterpretations across the centuries, ever mirroring the transformations underway on both a global scale and in local contexts. Thus, reflection on the receptions of classical monsters for young audiences broadens our

understanding not only of the childhood we ourselves have gone through, but also of the childhood and the adulthood we hope to create for future generations.

To encourage and facilitate such reflection, I first address the basic methodological issues, as the intersections among children's literature, classical reception, and monster studies pose challenges for all who wish to explore this portion of the mythical beasts' realm. Then I discuss the distribution of classical monsters in children's and young adult literature, along with their main functions therein. Finally, I present a sample bestiary in children's and young adult literature to supplement analyses of the 'adult' reception cases elsewhere in this volume. On this basis, we observe the transition process from childhood to adulthood under the care of our mythical, monstrous mentors.

Methodological Challenges

There are three main research questions to address upon entering the realm of mythical monsters in children's and young adult literature. None of the three meets with satisfactory answers, yet there is a solution on how to cope with this challenging status quo.

What Is a Myth?

This question must remain open, as there are many, equally justified definitions available, and each of them takes a different approach to the topic.[1] For now, let us agree to understand myths as narratives of gods, humans, and supernatural beings, including monsters. These narratives played a fundamental role in Greek and Roman culture, as attested by the ancient sources – and they also do so today the world over, through the reception process.

What Is a Monster?

There is no consensus on a definition of 'monster' – not even in this handbook (see also Felton 2021). The Greek and Roman bestiary usually includes human-animal hybrids (the Minotaur), creatures with a lack or excess of some bodily parts (Argus Panoptes), and animalesque beings (the Chimaera), but the problem is more complex (Marciniak 2020c: 30). The beginning of the twenty-first century in children's literature brought a discussion on the difference between a 'being' and a 'beast' as offered by Newton Artemis Fido Scamander – the expert in 'magizoology' (the study of magical creatures) in J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter universe. Rowling endowed him with three names: those of the ingenious scientist (Isaac Newton), the

[1] See e.g. Britannica, s.v. 'myth', https://www.britannica.com/topic/myth.

Greek goddess of the hunt (Artemis), and the first-person singular form of the Latin verb meaning 'to trust, to have faith' (*fidere*; Fido being also the most recognizable name for a dog), while his surname is taken from the river god at Troy. This strange nomenclature well reflects how rational thinking and mythical thinking intertwine in the human approach to monsters. Scamander features as the author of the handbook *Fantastic Beasts & Where to Find Them*, used by Harry and his friends during their studies at Hogwarts and actually written by Rowling (2001) for charity. Its humorous form, parodying a scholarly volume, hides a serious content exceeding the fictional world of a children's book: it is meaningful that Rowling-Scamander avoids the term 'monster', instead focusing on two concepts – 'being' in opposition to 'beast' – and showing the impossibility of any clear-cut categorization. In so doing, *Fantastic Beasts* points to the creatures' right to self-identification: for example, the centaurs in the Harry Potter universe rejected the categories proposed by the humans and 'declared that they would manage their own affairs separately' (2001: xiii). Thus, the readers receive an important lesson in empathy: they learn that beings so different from humans demonstrate reason and emotions, and should be entitled to make their own decisions (Maurice 2015a: 148–152; Marciniak 2020c: 30).

These reflections, when transferred to the readers' reality, offer food for thought – and not only for children – in regard to the use of certain words ('beast', 'monster') as tools of stigmatization, and this encourages reflection on one of the greatest challenges of contemporary societies: the issue of Otherness. This issue seems crucial for understanding the reception of the mythical creatures in children's and young adult literature. After all, it encapsulates the need to belong, to be accepted, and to fit in, and at the same time to develop one's own identity, despite all the obstacles and fears. The classical literary monsters guide readers through these conflicting desires, so frequent in the transition process of young people into adulthood. "Monsters are our children", as the iconic statement by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996: 20) goes: this applies particularly well to children's and young adult literature, where beasts, through their writers' talent and imagination, have the chance to express themselves and gain subjectivity, so that they can help the (not only) young readers mature and come to terms with Otherness – their own included.

What Is Children's and Young Adult Literature?

Children's and young adult literature is a relatively fresh cultural invention, classified according to the intended age of readers (respectively: 0–11 and 12–18 years), albeit with no consensus

on a clear dividing line.[2] Its beginning is dated to the mid-eighteenth century with the publication of *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book, Intended for the Instruction and Amusement of Little Master Tommy, and Pretty Miss Polly* (1744), which contained, among other texts, a selection of Aesop's *Fables*. The obvious – and hence often overlooked – factor that the writers of children's and young adult books are adults is not without consequences: the 'hidden adult' is present in the works intended for children, both as the author and as a member of the implied readership (Nodelman 2008). The latter includes the phenomenon of dual or double addressee, when the writers direct their message to both a younger and an older audience or build a separate line of communication with adults 'over the heads' of children (Wall 1991). We are thus close to the ancients here, who attended storytelling sessions irrespective of their age. At the same time, the still occurring marginalization of works for youth as 'less serious', and therefore less important, makes it easier for authors to find a place therein for experiments and to lead a 'silent revolution' through innovative messages, ones crucial also for adults, but for the moment too controversial for older audiences to face directly in the mainstream culture (Marciniak 2024).

All this considered, the young age of the targeted readers, as determined by the publishers, should not discourage adults from reaching for a given work. Rather, even children's books that might seem obsolete, judging from the date of their creation, have the potential to surprise contemporary audiences of all ages – older ones perhaps even more. This happens, for example, in the case of Nathaniel Hawthorne's version of the Minotaur's myth in *Tanglewood Tales for Boys and Girls* (1853). For a start, the American writer boldly questions the creature's inability to communicate, thus alluding polemically to Aristotle's famous criterion ("no animal has speech except a human being", *Pol*. 1253a9–10, trans. C.D.C. Reeve). The Minotaur can voice his thoughts – indeed, "his", not "its", as Hawthorne uses the pronoun endowing the monster with an ontological status usually reserved for humans. The sounds made by the Minotaur may not be clear, but Theseus understands them and feels "some sort of pity" for the beast (1853: 61). This mid-nineteenth-century elaboration is also revolutionary in shifting blame from the creature to King Minos, whom the hero calls "a more hideous monster than the Minotaur himself" (53), thus encouraging young readers to look beyond appearances – all the more so as the narrator also links monstrosity with the human species: "And O, my good little people, you will perhaps see, one of these days, as I do now, that every human being who suffers any thing evil to get into his nature, or to remain there, is a kind of Minotaur, an enemy of his fellow-creatures, and separated from all good companionship, as this poor monster was" (61–

[2] That is why in the next sections of this chapter, when the age of the readers is indicated, the classification by the publishers or bookshops is used, though this should by no means be treated as limiting.

62). This message is not without meaning for adults, too (Marciniak 2020c: 34; Murnaghan and Roberts 2020: 56–74, esp. 66; Marciniak 2024). In sum, the universal context of Greek mythology and its creatures, obtaining new lives in children and young adult literature, strengthens its intergenerational (crossover) potential.

A Solution

The above methodological issues should not scare us from approaching monsters in children's and young adult literature, for such issues only prove how rich and fascinating the theme of the mythical creatures' reception is and how it challenges our preconceptions and demands constant openness towards crossing barriers and overcoming stereotypes. In cases like this, team projects work particularly well, along with the individual scholars' readiness for an interdisciplinary approach, including such fields as classical philology, education, the history of ideas, human-animal studies, literature studies, philosophy, and psychology.

Identifying Mythical Monsters in Children's and Young Adult Literature

Children's and young adult literature is not a consistent body but a collection of genres, some of which, such as novels, follow the taxonomy typical of works also targeted at an adult audience, while others, such as picture books, are indeed more frequent among the young public (Mickenberg and Vallone 2011; Kümmerling-Meibauer 2012). Classical monsters populate them all. There is no risk in venturing the hypothesis that each genre identified by the Library of Congress has been touched by creatures from Greek myths. These creatures dwell in literature from around the world, in a vast number of human languages and in line with the chief categories of reception – including adaptation, transplant, and translation – as defined by Lorna Hardwick (2003). We can meet mythical monsters in mythologies, bestiaries, school novels (i.e. set in a school and focused on students, teachers, and administration staff), comics, poetry, and even cookbooks. Each genre offers different opportunities and requires a different research approach. For instance, illustrations are often as important as the text, especially in picture books but also in other genres, and they deserve their own in-depth analysis, as has been done for the Minotaur in Hawthorne's *Tanglewood Tales* (Roberts and Murnaghan 2020). Furthermore, mythical creatures broaden their distribution area outside literature through the phenomenon of the supersystem of entertainment (Kinder 1991: 1), that is, the set of works originating from a given hypotext. The Harry Potter universe provides a good example, since the original book series gave rise to movies, merchandise, and even amusement parks. As a result, the first medium of contact with classical monsters often cannot be identified, especially

since such contacts may occur long before the child's reading experience – via television, the Internet, and the ongoing practice of storytelling within families, as well as at schools, public libraries, and other such venues. One does not exclude the other, however, as all these encounters are complementary and thereby strengthen the importance of mythical beasts in young people's lives.

Functions of Mythical Monsters in Children's and Young Adult Literature

Classical monsters fulfil a variety of functions in children's and young adult literature, starting from the fundamental narrative role – that is, as elements in a story's development according to Joseph Campbell's scheme of the hero's journey or Vladimir Propp's morphology of the folk tale (e.g. monsters as antagonists, helpers, tricksters). Monsters are, however, more than that, provided they originate from the pen of truly ingenious writers. Of crucial importance is the educational function of mythical creatures, for they transmit to children and young adults knowledge of the ancient myths and other related subjects, like mythological phraseology in contemporary languages. All this enables intergenerational communication based on the cultural code that draws upon Classical Antiquity and is present in both everyday life and masterpieces of world civilization. Furthermore, as the mythological beasts of ancient Greece and Rome appear not only in obligatory school texts, but also in literary works read 'after hours', this 'Monster University' (Marciniak 2020c: 33) operates through entertainment and in an attractive way, with excitement and humour working together and dispelling tedious didacticism. However, it is worth emphasizing that the educational function of the ancient creatures is not limited to intellectual growth, but extends also to the emotional development of young readers. Indeed, psychologists consider the confrontation with fears impersonated by the monsters to be a natural stage in the process of maturation – hence the children's early fascination with them (Sayfan and Lagattuta 2009; Marciniak 2020c: 25). In this context, the etymology of the Latin term 'monster' is symbolic, as one posited origin is the verb monere ('to warn'): dwelling within ontological liminality, the mythical creatures throw us off balance. They lead us out from our comfort zone and make us look at the world from a different perspective, beyond appearances (Marciniak 2020c: 31–32 and 37). It is impossible to offer such versatility, essential especially for the identity-building process, to children by human tutors. In this context the ethical function also becomes activated: as befits wise mentors, the ancient creatures teach children and young adults to respect the Other and they show that there is nothing wrong in being different. Last but not least, the function of the reception mirror should be mentioned as one of the most important contributions of classical monsters: authors

employ them to talk about issues vital for society in given periods – for example, women's rights, ecology, disability, and (altogether frequently) Otherness. Thus, the reception of the ancient creatures as such becomes a litmus test for transformations in societal sensitivity (Marciniak 2020a). In what follows, we see some of these functions at work.

A Sample Bestiary of Mythical Monsters in Children's and Young Adult Literature

A complete bestiary of classical monsters prowling through children's and young adult literature would fill a whole volume at least. It is no small consolation that many of the monsters excluded from this discussion because of space limitations, already enjoy excellent scholarly analyses (see Suggested Reading). Here I have chosen five mythical creatures with three examples of their reception per case. The selection criterion was diversity. Thus, both the most and less famous monsters are showcased. They represent various functions in books targeted at diverse age groups within differing genres and language circles. Moreover, the texts discussed have the status of children's and young adult classics or represent the most recent literary phenomena, for which the parameter of time to test their lasting value is not applicable. All this permits us to signal the similarities and differences in the reception of the mythical bestiary across the world. Finally, as many talented authors of children's and young adult literature prove (see Hawthorne above), even the well-known ancient monsters can still take readers by surprise. Thus, the examples chosen also offer the experience of the unexpected, so important in the transition process from childhood to adulthood and beyond.

Argus

Argus Panoptes ('all-seeing') features in Ingri and Edgar Parin d'Aulaires' *Book of Greek Myths* (1962), which belongs to the genre of mythologies and is one of the basic sources of knowledge about this part of ancient Greece's heritage for English-speaking children in the 8- to 12-year-old range, especially in the United States. Argus appears as a secondary character in the chapter on Hera, in the context of Zeus' love affair with Io. The monster is described as a giant with "a hundred bright eyes placed all over his body" (1962: 24). He serves Hera as her best watchman, always vigilant in guarding Io (whom Zeus has transformed into a cow), as only half of his eyes sleep at the same time. This description is complemented by an elaborate illustration showing Argous with a club. His whole body is covered with eyes, just as on the red-figure Attic stamnos by the Argos Painter (Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, 3729/BA 202608). A peacock nearby foreshadows the metamorphosis to take place after Argus' death at Hermes' hand: Hera will honour her watchman by placing his eyes into the tail feathers of this

bird. The educational function of introducing the myth to children predominates, yet it expands beyond basic knowledge of the myth, as the authors prepare the readers for communing with visual arts by creating a reference to Greek pottery painting.

A similar approach has been applied in the Italian picture book recommended from the age of five, *Mostri e creature mitologiche* (2016) by Marisa Vestita (illustrations) and Giorgio Ferrero (text). Its genre is a bestiary, but the content remains the same as in d'Aulaires' mythology – the renarration of the Argus myth from his characteristics to his death, including the transfer of his eyes on the peacock's tail. Also here a dialogue with visual arts can be traced, this time, however – as suggested by the eyes placed prominently on the monster's head – rather with *Mercury and Argus* (1635–1638) by Peter Paul Rubens and in correspondence with the monster's description in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1.624).

Argus manifests more aspects of his educational role in the collection of short stories *Nić Ariadny, czyli po nitce do kłębka* (*The Thread of Ariadne, or Finding Your Way*, 1989) by Anna M. Komornicka, who explains to elementary school children the meaning of mythological phraseology used in Polish. To this end, her book revolves around three siblings placed in contemporary settings (Marciniak 2015: 75–80). Argus means in Polish a 'careful watchman'. The children use this expression to describe their severe teacher who notices any attempt at cheating. Such a transplant-reception permits the readers not only to gain knowledge of mythology, but also to develop their Polish language skills. All this contributes to learning the cultural code that enables communication between the present and the past (Marciniak 2023: 129–130), while the theme of condemning cheating activates the ethical function of Argus' tutorship.

Centaurs

Children's and young adult literature builds on the ancient imagery of two kinds of centaurs: the wise Chiron and the lustful creatures born from Ixion and Nephele ('Cloud'). In C.S. Lewis's novels from *The Chronicles of Narnia* series (1950–1956), the centaurs bear elements of both traditions and represent the duality of human nature (Maurice 2015a: 146–148; Marciniak 2021b: 231). They fulfil an ethical function as they display a high moral code and side with Aslan. The centaurs contribute to the protagonists' intellectual and emotional development by explaining the world to them and encouraging them to overcome fears. They teach respect as they take two children on a daring ride – an exceptional honour for a human being. The adaptation of the centaurs' myth in the Narnia universe also familiarizes readers with classical heritage: Lewis presents the centaurs as prophets – in that they read the future in

the stars – and they practise the art of herbal medicine, just as in the ancient sources. The centaurs' carnal side manifests itself via their predilection for wine (though they are excused somehow, as they drink in Aslan's honour) and their two stomachs (the reason for their long feasts). This anatomical detail, sometimes overlooked as 'indecorous', paved the way for including the descriptions of physiological processes in children's literature – its popular component today.

The iconic figure of Chiron the educator and ethical guide was transplanted by Rick Riordan into his Percy Jackson novels (2005–) for early teenagers. Riordan places Chiron in an enchanted wheelchair that conceals his horse part in the ordinary world of humans, thereby offering an opportunity to discuss the theme of disability and to raise the readers' empathy towards this issue in line with inclusivity movements in contemporary societies. The Percy Jackson universe is also inhabited by wild centaurs known as the 'Party Ponies' who drink root beer and use paintball guns as a kind of extension of their archery skills (Maurice 2015a: 152–155). These centaurs pose no danger to the protagonist; rather, they support him and his case in the hour of need.

J.K. Rowling, in her Harry Potter cycle (1997–2007), a crossover read by both children and adults, keeps closer to the ancient sources in presenting the centaurs as a wild, forest-dwelling population. In *The Order of the Phoenix* (2003), she even alludes to the myths of their abuse of women – a sensitive topic, still rarely employed in children's literature. In fact, Rowling does not reference it directly, but rather suggests it to the adult audience, via the double-address technique, beyond the perception of the young readers. The detested teacher Dolores Umbridge, after she was abducted by the centaurs whom she had gravely insulted, displays behaviours typical of victims of sexual harassment (Maurice 2015a: 151–152). From this wild herd, a wise and human-friendly centaur stands out – namely, Firenze, who is a counterpart for Chiron. Harry first meets him in *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997; published in the USA as *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, 1998). Inquisitive readers have a chance to enjoy the intertextual game proposed by Rowling, who intertwines elements of Classical Antiquity with its medieval reception. Firenze is the Italian name for Florence, the city of Dante Alighieri; this builds a link to his most famous work, *The Divine Comedy* (Hofmann 2015: 168–175; Maurice 2015a: 152). Just as Dante was guided by Vergil, symbolizing the wisdom of the ancients, so Harry, having lost his way in the dark Forbidden Forest, is guided by the wise, mythical centaur. Firenze, who will also become Harry's teacher in the future, then saves the boy's life. He is also the first character ready to tell Harry the truth

of the imminent fight against the forces of evil in defence of all that is good in the world (Maurice 2015a: 149; Marciniak 2021b: 231).

Cyclopes

The Cyclopes belong to the mythical figures whose adaptations best show the creativity of children's writers in overcoming various societal stereotypes through the reception of classical monsters. For instance, the Polish story for toddlers *Ancyklopek na placu zabaw* (*Ancyklopek on the Playground*, 2016) by Piotr Dobry with illustrations by Łukasz Majewski, encourages readers – including adults, if only for the sole fact that 2- and 3-year-olds require their help in accessing the story – to reflect on the issues of tolerance and Otherness. The toddler Ancyklopek – whose name is a wordplay in Polish, a fusion of the mythological Cyclops and *ancymonek* (a rascal) – inherits many features after the ancient creature, thus teaching young readers about mythology: he is huge, has one eye, and displays a talent for building sandcastles that represent the famous 'Cyclopean' masonry of Mycenaean times. The atypical appearance of Ancyklopek causes the toddlers in the playground to avoid him, so he plays alone until he meets a Four-Eyes who turns out to be a boy in glasses – another feature resulting in stigmatization. The two outsiders become friends and have fun together (and soon they are joined by other children), while their adventures contribute to the emotional development of readers by helping them learn to look beyond appearances.

The American picture book *Cyclops of Central Park* (2020), with the text by Madelyn Rosenberg and illustrations by Victoria Tentler-Krylov, aims at a slightly older audience (3–7 years old), but this work also, full of absurd humour, supports children's emotional maturation, here in regard to overcoming timidity. The eponymous Cyclops is a caring and gentle creature. He lives in a cave in New York's Central Park. His extravagant appearance (the ancient monster in modern clothes) does not cause a sensation among the inhabitants of New York, who symbolize an open-minded society that embraces all kind of diversity. Rather, an inner psychological problem poses a social barrier for the Cyclops: his paralysing shyness. Forced to leave the cave to find a missing sheep from his flock, he discovers (and the readers along with him) both the value of teamwork – the other sheep help in the search – and the advantages of going outside one's comfort zone. The story ends happily as they all enjoy a ride on the Coney Island Cyclone roller coaster (Peer 2021).

An approach to the Cyclops myth as a component of the heritage of the Western world is applied in the young adult detective novel *The Subway Cyclops* (1996) by Marivi Soliven Blanco with illustrations by Remus San Diego. The protagonists Jenny and Jay, two teenagers

from a family of Filipino immigrants in the United States, unveil the identity of a one-eyed creature in Boston's subway system. The stranger turns out to be not a terrible monster, as suggested by their housekeeper, but a benign assembly-line worker, wounded in a gas explosion many years earlier (Hale 2018; Hale and Riverlea 2023: 376–377). The genre of detective novel makes the educational content natural and deprived of burdensome didacticism as the kids learn modern history and the Mediterranean roots of their new motherland, while the myth of the Cyclops, used metaphorically, serves both as a narrative tool for creating a mysterious atmosphere and as an element of the code enabling intergenerational and intercultural communication.

Medusa

While collections of myths usually draw upon the Hesiodic tale of Medusa as a primordial monster and place her within the Campbellian heroic quest narrative, other genres ever more often refer to Ovid (*Met*. 4.604–5.263) and embed Medusa's story in the context of women's struggle for developing agency – a process that can start in early childhood, as with the picture book *Brush Your Hair, Medusa!* (2015) by Joan Holub with illustrations by Leslie Patricelli. Aimed at preschool children (ages 1 to 3), the book belongs to the series "Mini Myths", offering "mythology-inspired modern-day parable" intended to teach children both mythology and contemporary social norms. Medusa is a toddler who refuses to brush her hair. This act symbolizes her fight for identity (hair is a cultural topos standing for freedom and rebellion). A visit to the hairdresser results in the difficult compromise Medusa has to make in her socialization process. Accepting a new and short haircut, she loses a part of herself, but starts resembling her Grandma, which protects her from becoming an Other for her family. However, as the little Medusa immediately thereafter is about to refuse to brush her teeth, we can rest assured that she will grow up to be a strong woman (Marciniak 2020b).

The themes of maturation and being true to oneself stand out in the novel *Being Medusa: And Other Things that Suck* (2014) by A. Lynn Powers. It represents the genre of a school novel with the protagonist 15-year-old Medusa, already with her snaky hair which is part of her 'monstrous charm'. The snakes also express Medusa's emotions before she is aware of them. The novel discusses sensitive topics and encourages respect for diversity, since Medusa undergoes a transition from being a lonely girl and victim of bullying to becoming a young woman who accepts herself and displays her agency (Hodkinson 2020).

Developing one's agency, yet in a grave context, provides the theme for the novel *Medusa: The Girl Behind the Myth* (2021) by Jessie Burton with illustrations by Olivia

Lomenech Gill. The novel is recommended for older teens (ages 14–17) and contains trigger warnings due to its focus on sexual abuse, rape, the unjust punishment of an innocent victim, and the process of overcoming trauma. At the story's opening, the first-person narration from Medusa herself establishes a close relation between the implied audience and the monster, thus causing us to question the very notion of monstrosity. In the novel Medusa stands for emotional development and the empowerment of victims, her fate mirroring the cases of abuse known also from contemporary times.

Minotaur

Next to Ovid's somehow unexpected description of the Minotaur as *iuvenis,* a similarly unusual image of this creature may be mentioned: the baby Minotaur caressed by Pasiphaë on a red-figure kylix from Vulci (see Fig. 16.1). The scene surprises us with its original perspective, quasi-surreal, given the fierce, fully grown monster we usually see in other sources. Yet children's and young adult literature, as already demonstrated in Hawthorne's case, takes up the challenge of showing the unknown face of the Minotaur. For instance, surrealism is the trademark of Maurice Sendak, who refers to this myth indirectly in his picture book *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963). Sendak's gift for storytelling and the mastery of his illustrations result in an inspirational tale of searching for identity and maturation via the example of Max, a boy who magically travels to the realm of the Minotaur-like monsters. They stand for lack of (self-)control, while Max accomplishes the impossible: he becomes their king, he tames what cannot be tamed, and thus proves himself ready for the challenges of adulthood.

The transition from childhood to adulthood, albeit in the context of a heavy personal and national trauma, provides the theme for a highly original reference to the Minotaur myth in the Australian young adult 'multimodal work' (a graphic novel with a musical score) *Requiem for a Beast* (2007) by Matt Ottley. It belongs to the 'hybrid' reception category (Hardwick 2003: 9), by combining classical and Aboriginal heritage. The Minotaur symbolizes the inner fight of the young protagonist who works as a stockman with bulls and must face the terrible truth of his father's involvement in a crime on an Aboriginal man. The boy feels the need to atone somehow for this sin and rebuild his identity challenged by the burden of the truth (Hale 2020; Hale and Riverlea 2023: 81, 160, 221).

Maturation is also the focus of Anthony McGowan's short novel *I Am the Minotaur* (2021) from a series aimed at less experienced readers from the age of eleven. It discusses the issues of fitting in, bullying, loneliness, and mental health (Hale 2022). The protagonist, a teenage boy, feels entrapped as in a labyrinth, like the Minotaur. The references to the mythical

creature show the boy (and readers) the way to put conflicting emotions in order, as well as to accept the things that cannot be changed, which is the true sign of maturity.

Conclusion

Monsters from classical myth are the perfect tutors. If you have any doubts, check with yourself. You, too, have grown up under their care. For we need monster mentors in order not to become human monsters. As the above examples show, our monstrous tutors enable us to go out into the adult world equipped with a reservoir of compassion, love, and empathy towards the Other. It is worth remembering that, in case we lose any of this reservoir on our troubled journey, we can always replenish it by coming back to the monsters dwelling in the works for kids of all ages.

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Suggested Reading

The crucial scholarly guides through the reception of Classical Antiquity in children's and young adult literature are offered by Murnaghan and Roberts (2018), Hodkinson and Lovatt (2018), and Hale and Riverlea (2023). The following collected volumes include chapters dedicated to the reception of classical monsters in the culture for young people: Maurice (2015b), Marciniak (2016), Janka and Stierstorfer (2017), Zajko and Hoyle (2017), Marciniak (2021a). A fundamental study on how post-classical societies use the mythical creatures in popular culture has been published by Gloyn (2019). Analyses of selected monsters have been accomplished within the international team projects *Chasing Mythical Beasts…. The Reception of Creatures from Graeco-Roman Mythology in Children's and Young Adults' Culture as a Transformation Marker* (Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Alumni Award for Innovative Networking Initiatives, 2014–2017) and *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges* (European Research Council Consolidator Grant, 2016–2022) with the results

published in Marciniak (2020a). The latter project has resulted also in a database (*Our Mythical Childhood Survey*, http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey) containing short summaries and analyses of ca. 1,500 works of children's and young adult culture in the context of the reception of Classical Antiquity, the ancient monsters included.

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