

From Elitism to Democratisation: A Half-Century of Hercules in Children's Literature

Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University

***Abstract:** This paper focuses on retellings of the Hercules myth for children, over a period of fifty years, showing how presentations of the myth for children have changed during this period, under the influence of changing ideas, and against the background of the perception of the classical world as elitist. It demonstrates that although Hercules was originally depicted in a reverent manner, by the end of the twentieth century a change was occurring, as a result of the screen adaptations that had popularized the hero. These led to a resurgence in number of books about the hero, and a change of attitude towards him, with Hercules treated humorously and with far less deference than before. More recently this has developed into a trend whereby amateur writers have appropriated the hero for themselves, adapting the original tale with an enthusiastic abandon, a move that also reflects the recent popularity of classical myth in the digital age of globalisation. Limited as the present study is, the Hercules books for children demonstrate that the so-called democratization of classics is real, ongoing, and reflected even in a very specific group of works targeted at a particular readership.*

Keywords: Children's literature, mythology, popular culture, Hercules, Heracles

Over the past few years there has been a burgeoning of interest and research into the role that elitism plays in our understanding and perceptions of the classical world. Scholars have examined the role that elitism and class have played, and continue to play, in interaction with Greece and Rome.¹ A new openness exists in examining post-colonial receptions of classical material and the cultural hegemony of traditional sources, with a plethora of journals, blogs and conference panels² considering the so-called democratization of classics.

This research has shown that over the last half century, the role of Classical Studies has changed enormously in the Western English-speaking world. In the middle of the twentieth century, knowledge of Classics was still seen as a mark of intellect and good education, left over from the period in which the

¹ There is a large bibliography on the issue of classical studies and its changing role, both in the United States and Britain, the two areas under discussion in this paper. See for example, Culham and Edmunds(1989); Hardwick and Harrison (2013); Adler (2016); Stray (2018).

² There was, for example, a panel at the Celtic Classics Conference in 2017, organized by Jenny Messenger and Rossana Zetti, on this topic.

knowledge of Latin and Greek gave distinct advantages, and ensured one a place in the higher echelons of society.³ With the social revolutions of the 1960s, in particular feminism, the civil-rights movement, and the beginning of gay-rights activism, however, the ancient world came to be regarded as the bastion of conservatism, and thus seen as in opposition to such ideas. In the brave new world of equality, Classical Studies was an elitist profession, which divided the haves from the have-nots, the privileged from the oppressed.⁴ As postmodernism emerged, attitudes towards the ancient world changed again, and the world of Greece and Rome was given new life, in the form of receptions of the ancient world that not only legitimized but even encouraged reinterpreting, recasting, rewriting, and reinventing that world (see Maurice 2013). Such new creations particularly seized on classical myth, which appeared in various genres of popular culture, such as film, drama, television and literature.

Receptions of the ancient world in children's literature have featured in varying quantities, at each stage of this evolution. Research into the field has in recent years begun to attract the attention of scholars, with collections by Lisa Maurice, Katarzyna Marciniak (who also heads the ERC-funded international project, *Our Mythical Childhood*), Helen Lovatt and Owen Hodkinson, and Deborah Roberts and Sheila Murnaghan (Maurice 2015; Marcianiak 2016; <http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/>; Lovatt and Hodkinson 2018 and Roberts and Murnaghan 2018). These works examine the different ways that ancient Greece and Rome have had an impact on children's culture and literature, discussing the popularisation and adaptation of ancient texts and myths for juvenile audiences, and the reasons for such manipulations. Such studies provide the context for theoretical approaches to children's literature and the classical world.

As these works demonstrate, children's literature and culture impose particular conditions on these receptions. By its very nature, any book that is written for or given to children involves by definition an element of ideology.⁵ As Seth Lerer puts it, 'the study of children's literature is cultural studies' (Lerer 2008, 9). Since the classical world has so often been a vehicle for elitism within

³ See Stray (1998) 280-297.

⁴As Edith Hall and Henry Stead have shown (Classics and Class: <http://www.classicsandclass.info/groundwork/> (accessed 21 July 2019), and forthcoming, 2019)), the influence of the classics among the working classes of Britain was actually far greater than has generally been recognized. Nevertheless, the public perception of classics as something for the elite was so pervasive that it has consistently coloured the attitudes of wider society, reinforcing this stereotype listed here.

⁵ In Peter Hunt's words, 'It is arguably impossible for a children's book ...not to be educational or influential in some way; it cannot help but reflect an ideology and, by extension, didacticism....Children's writers are in a position of singular responsibility in transmitting cultural values.' Hunt (1994) 3, also quoted by Maurice (2017) 4.

traditional education, such works on Greco-Roman themes are often even more loaded than other works for young people. There is both a belief that it is in some way ‘good’ for children to learn about the Greeks and Romans, and also a recognition that these ancient tales have high entertainment value, providing a tension between the two aspects of didacticism and amusement. This tension is often highlighted further by the fact that classical myth is frequently at odds with contemporary ideals and educational and moral principles; yet, despite these difficulties, it is often specifically directed towards children, and targeted with a specific message for its intended audience.

This paper focuses on a particular group of receptions, namely retellings of the Hercules myth for children, over a period of fifty years. As such it provides an opportunity to study how presentations of the myth for children have changed during this period, under the influence of these changing ideas, and against the background of the perception of the classical world as elitist. I examine a range of books published between 1970 and 2018, in both the UK and the USA, focusing on two central categories; books used in reading schemes, and general children’s books not intended for classroom use.⁶ During this period, a number of retellings of the Hercules myth appeared, with two periods seeing particular waves of popularity; in the early 1970s, only two were published, followed by another two in the early 1980s, but a rash of post-Disney’s *Hercules* (dir. Ron Clements and John Musker, 1997) books were produced in the late 1990s and the first years of the second millennium. This was then followed by a lull, preceding a further flurry of new books centring on the hero that have appeared over the last eight years.⁷

Hercules, 1970-2003

The American Hercules

From the earliest days, Greece and Rome has played a large role in influencing the founders of American society, and had been the cornerstone of traditional American education. Nevertheless, over time, with the development of the humanities curriculum and its stress on ‘Great Books’, the word ‘classics’ was extended, as Eric Adler has explained, ‘to define any time-tested works of high culture, rather than to denote the study of Greco-Roman antiquity. The Great Books — all of them — were “classics”’ (Adler 2016, 40). It is within such an understanding that the American Hercules books from the 1970s and 1980s fall; all were written by highly respected authors, and produced by weighty

⁶ I exclude both textbooks/academic-style books for use in school, and other genres, such as graphic novels and comics, which have their own agendas and conventions.

⁷ I discount republications of books from the early part of the twentieth century, since they clearly cannot be representative of contemporary values; they do, however, reflect the current interest in the hero himself.

publishers, who aimed to educate and improve the minds of the young with worthy texts, and fall within collections of books that are thought of as 'classic'. These are all extensive prose retellings of the Hercules myth, text heavy books designed to have literary merit, and to introduce children to a tale with which they should be familiar if they are to be regarded as well-educated. The four books in question are Ian Serraillier's *Heracles the Strong* (1970); Robert Newman's *The Twelve Labors of Hercules* (1972); Bernard Evslin's *Hercules* (1984) and I. M. Richardson's *The Adventures of Hercules* (1983).

All of these books focus on the figure of Hercules because of his status as a classical hero, and thereby, reflecting the elitist attitude towards the classical past that was prevalent at the time, worthy of attention and presentation to young readers. It is notable that the first two, published at the start of the 1970s, preceded a period of turbulence with regard to this outlook in the United States. As recent scholarship has shown, the decades immediately following this were the ones in which major controversies and soul searching rocked the classics departments of North America (Adler 2016, 40). This period saw disputes between traditionalists and conservatives, and anti-traditionalists and progressives, as questions were raised regarding the perceived dominance of dead white males over education, to the exclusion of women, ethnic minorities and non-heterosexual groups. Despite the fact that classicists themselves were only on the margins of such debates, their research field uniquely managed to unite both sides of the debate in the conclusion that classics, and the study of the ancient languages in particular, was 'stodgy and elitist... a discipline so outmoded that it failed to win even the traditionalists' assent' (Adler 2016, 40). It is surely no coincidence that tales of Greek mythology for children, until then a staple of juvenile publishing, dried up at this point, with no Hercules stories published for more than a decade.

Hercules came to prominence for children in the United States with his arrival on screen in the last years of the twentieth century. *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* hit television screens in 1995, introducing a new generation of youth to the hero, as portrayed by Kevin Sorbo. The series continued until 1999, while its spin-offs, *Young Hercules* and the even more spectacularly successful *Xena: Warrior Princess* ran from 1998-9 and 1995-2001 respectively. Meanwhile, in 1997, Disney released *Hercules*, the 35th animated feature in the Walt Disney Animated Classics series. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker, who had already achieved notable success with *The Little Mermaid* (1989) and *Aladdin* (1992), it was a successful movie, being generally well reviewed and making a total of \$99 million in revenue in the United States during its theatrical release and \$252,712,101 worldwide ([https://movies.fandom.com/wiki/Hercules_\(1997\)](https://movies.fandom.com/wiki/Hercules_(1997))), accessed 13 November 2019). The popularity of the film led to a further direct-to-video prequel *Hercules: Zero to Hero*, and a syndicated Disney TV series, *Hercules: The*

Animated Series. Classical mythology in general, and Hercules in particular, were suddenly exciting and attractive popular heroes.

As a result of this popularity, Hercules suddenly begins to appear in more children's books at this period than before, with four volumes being published in 1997 alone, one more in 2000, and another, a pocket board book to accompany the *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* series, in 1998. These Hercules volumes capitalise blatantly on the new interest in and excitement at Hercules. The *Legendary Journeys* board book is a by-product of the television series, while Kathryn Lasky and Mark Hess' *Hercules, The Man, the Myth, the Hero* (1997), was published by the New York based Hyperion books, a company owned by the Disney corporation. Similarly Bob Blaisdell's *The Story of Hercules* (1997) explicitly exploits these contemporary depictions of Hercules, with the back cover explaining enticingly, 'youngsters already familiar with Hercules from television and film versions will enjoy reading about other feats by the intrepid hero'. While two of the works are Basal readers used in schools, and quite different in content and tone from the screen productions, even these capitalize on the popularity of Hercules, with whom children were now familiar, as a result of the screen depictions.⁸

Despite the rise of Hercules as a result of popular culture products aimed specifically at youth, the approach by authors, themselves representatives of earlier generations, was still one of venerability when dealing with the classics, the subject matter treated weightily. Blaisdell's book is a typical output of the Dover *Children's Thrift Classics* series, which primarily reprints works in the public domain and markets them at low cost. These include classic children's books, folk and fairy tales and mythology, all literature deemed by publishers and educators to be suitable reading matter for youngsters. The Hercules volume is a detailed and somewhat idealised narration of the ancient hero and his exploits, culminating in his apotheosis and ultimate marriage to Hebe. Similar in tone is Georges Moroz's version, published in two editions by imprints of the American company, Random House books,⁹ which, like Blaisdell's work, is a comprehensive retelling that employs relatively sophisticated language. It also adopts a scholarly tone, including a quote from Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, and includes a list of the gods, a map of ancient Greece, an introduction, bibliography and an eleven-page afterword, which is academic and intellectual in tone, and seems to be more aimed at parents than young readers. This is indicated by the concluding paragraph, which talks of, 'a link between Greek

⁸ Marc Cerasini's *The Twelve Labors of Hercules* (Random House, 1997), and Della Rowland's *Hercules and the Golden Apples* (McGraw-Hill, 2000). On the characteristics of such readers, see Horning (2010) 121-131, and below part II.

⁹ The book was published as *Hercules - The Complete Myths of a Legendary Hero* by Laurel-Leaf Books in 1997, and then as *Hercules, The Twelve Labors* a year later by Yearling Books.

culture and more ancient cultures from the neighboring Near East', the Indo-European connections, and possible echoes of 'magical and religious practices dating back to the prehistory of mankind' (p. 131).

It is clear that the later works, published in the wake of the popularisation of the character, continue in the same vein of worthy reverence towards the subject matter that the earlier books had demonstrated. Moroz's approach in particular glorifies the classical Greek tradition, which he clearly regards as worthy of admiration, talking of 'what is specifically Greek in these stories, the beautiful complexity of some of the narratives, and the peculiar relationship between men and gods, with their unmistakably Greek way of highlighting the divine in man and the human in the gods' (p. 131). This is actually a contrast to the earliest days of American children's literature, when Nigel Hawthorne produced 'free, child-friendly versions of the myths' that were 'distinctly American reinventions', that aimed to throw off the stuffiness of the Old World, as represented by Ancient Greece, and embrace the excitements of the New (see Murnaghan and Roberts 2018, 43-4). It seems that, despite the rebirth of Hercules as a popular hero, which inspired the publication of books centred around the figure, the elitist approach to the Classical past remained in the style of the works produced at this time.

The American books from the twentieth century not only maintain this attitude of reverence to the subject matter but also present the myth in a didactic manner, teaching moral lessons. Hercules, as a figure, does of course present challenges to such an approach, since the tale in its traditional form is not one often regarded as edifying for youth, with illegitimacy, madness, child-murder and cross dressing all featuring. Thus, as in the Disney productions, the myth has been sanitised and softened in these retellings, in order to make it suitable for young audiences (see Maurice 2019b). Thus Hercules may be described as attacking, rather than murdering, his children (Richardson), and the labours may be a test from Zeus of the hero's worth, rather than atonement for such an act (Blaisdell). Hercules' parentage is sometimes fudged over (Serraillier), and in one case (Evslin), the hero is not even the son of Zeus, but rather of the kindly Amphytrion. Hera's enmity is caused purely by jealousy, since she heard rumours of the child's godliness and therefore immediately decided that he was the child of Zeus, albeit not entirely without cause, 'For, as king of the gods, he had always felt free to take as many wives as he liked' (p.6). Other sanitizing elements include the removal of the Amazons and any element of rape in the story of Nessus, who in this version is no longer even a centaur, but 'a young warrior of Calydon... who was a marvellous horseman. He rode so well that his body seemed to grow out of the horse's body', and therefore earned the nickname of 'the centaur' (p. 131). Any sexuality is removed or softened, with Omphale appearing only in Newman's version.

Efforts to turn Hercules into a paradigm for young readers go beyond plot changes, however. The hero had long been a figure who, despite the darker elements of the tale, has been utilised as an educational or moral role model, and this is a prominent feature of the American books.¹⁰ Such an approach in fact has long roots in the United States. From the time of the Founding Fathers and through the antebellum period, classics had been the mainstay of the educational system:

Americans... continued to use the classics in the same way that the founding generation had used them, as a favored source of symbols, knowledge, and ideas... antebellum Americans used classical symbols to communicate, to impress, and to persuade. They continued to derive from the classics both models and antimodels of personal behavior, social practice, and government form. They persisted in viewing the study of the classics as an indispensable training in virtue (Richard 2009, x).

Even with the fall from supremacy of Classic Studies in education, the idea that they could, and should, be used to teach correct behaviour continued and remains apparent in these books. The message of Richardson's *The Adventures of Hercules* is the universality of Hercules' heroism and his innate nobility; Serrailier's version glorifies the hero's physical strength and the way in which he uses his abilities to overcome obstacles and Evslin's *Hercules* explicitly states the writer's educational agenda of providing an inspirational example for youth, saying,

boys and girls, dreaming into the fire, see pictures in the heart of the flame and pin their own face on Hercules as he fights the Nemean Lion and the Hydra and the three-bodied giant... And these boys and girls, dreaming into the fire, promise themselves that they will be brave when they grow up and always fight those shapes of evil called monsters and always dare to be gentle, too (p. 140).

In Evslin's *Hercules*, a Christianizing spin is also placed on the story, with the hero a selfless character who undergoes apotheosis in order to teach the gods humanity:

Behold the man,' said Athena. 'He, lying there, was the best and strongest, the bravest and most gentle of humankind. Let him join us here on Olympus and teach us to be human, too, before man, learning cruelty from us, destroys himself.' 'So be it,' said Zeus... So Hercules was taken among the gods and lived among them, teaching them humanity. And Hera pretended it was all her idea (p. 138).

¹⁰ See Stafford (2012), esp. 201-244 on the hero's post-Classical reception. For a recent analysis of the element of conflict so prevalent in the reception of the Hercules myth, see Rowland (2016). For Hercules as an allegorical role model, see Lerer (2008) 22. On the Prodicus myth, see Grayling (2011) 11-22,

Lasky and Hess' volume also invokes Christianity, presenting a Jesus-like Hercules, whose ultimate death brings a cleansing from shame through his acceptance and the fire of the pyre. The invoking of Christianity, overtly or implicitly, is a long established tradition (see Stafford 2012, 202-218). Lasky herself writes in an author's note on the final page of the (unpaginated) book:

The message of the superhero is a compelling one for children as well as adults, that through toiling and suffering, people can overcome evil. Or, as one classicist¹¹ wrote of Hercules, 'Born a man – risen to god; suffered toils – conquered heaven'.

Hercules for children, then, in late twentieth century America, is a more than just a muscleman; he is also a moral paradigm exemplifying American virtues, and subliminally presenting the idea that the classical world, that bastion of elitism, is the place in which these virtues are rooted, though it should be stressed that he is only a paradigm for male readers, and the nature of Hercules makes him an uncomfortable option from the point of view of gender considerations so important in the second millennium. In the twentieth century, however, Hercules became an ideal figure who could be popularly employed by authors keen to educate the young.

Hercules in Britain

Very few Hercules books were published in Britain in the period that saw nine separate works appear in the United States. By contrast, the British output up to 2003 consists of only two books, both of them published in the later years of the period. The absence of the hero from British children's literature may be partly a result of the traditional division in British reception of the classical world for children along the lines of Roman history/Greek mythology, with the ancient world most commonly met in the form of historical fiction.¹² This particularly focuses on Roman history, which is familiar ground for British children due to its inclusion in the national curriculum (Hodkinson and Lovatt 2018, 11). In contrast to the USA, where the ancient world is covered in the social studies sections of the educational curriculum, and includes both mythology and a wider perspective on ancient history, the Rome-focussed British educational system places less emphasis on Greek mythology (see Provenzo, Jr. 2009, 2.732-34). This division along national lines probably also plays a part in the difference between the two outputs, although the comparative size of the United States in

¹¹ That classicist was Wilamowitz (1895) 38, 'Mensch gewesen, Gott geworden; Mühen edordet, Himmel erworben'.

¹² For the Greek mythology and Roman history as the two main receptions of the ancient world in children's literature, see Maurice (2015) 1-3. Hodkinson and Lovatt (2018) 32 n.7. point out that this division 'is complicated by the fact that much of the 'Greek' myth is derived from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*', but since the most commonly retold element of the Hercules myth, the twelve labours, does not feature in Ovid, this is less problematic when dealing with the Hercules books.

relation to the United Kingdom must be a contributory factor towards the smaller number produced in Britain.

Hercules' absence is still somewhat notable even within this wider context however, for other heroes do feature in juvenile British popular culture at this period; in the mid-1980s, Odysseus featured in two popular television series, while Theseus was adapted for children's television anthology series *Jackanory* by Tony Robinson (Miles 2018, 158-60). Yet Hercules seems not to have the attraction at this stage that he had in the United States. Even the impact of television and film seems not have made an impact on British publishing, with none of the rise in the popularity of Hercules that occurred in the States reflected in the literary output of the United Kingdom. While the Kevin Sorbo Hercules series did not receive wide release in Britain, being shown only on the cable Sky One channel, and thereby with limited viewing potential, the same cannot be said of Disney's *Hercules*. Yet unlike in the United States, these popular culture versions did not seem to give a boost to the Greek hero's popularity in children's books.

In both of the two cases in which Hercules does feature centrally, a Christian spin is placed upon the story. James Riordan's *The Twelve Labours Of Hercules* (1997), illustrated by Christina Balit, has Hercules being described as a saviour: 'With Hercules' death, Earth had suffered a heavy loss, and Atlas' weight felt lighter. But Zeus gained an immortal son of whom he could be justly proud – the glory of Hera and the saviour of the gods!' (p. 61). In Geraldine McCaughrean's *Hercules* (2003), an extended novel in which the story was told in depth, the message is even clearer. The book, published by Oxford University Press, was part of their *Heroes* series, which also includes *Perseus* and *Theseus*. Republished in paperback two years later, this is a novel running to 121 pages, with developed characters, relationships and settings, and even including details such as the story of Prometheus, Chiron, the choice between virtue and vice, and the death of Linus. McCaughrean faced difficulties in adapting this story for children, stressing that with Hercules:

The contents make him 'unsuitable' for educational use. Also, I cannot say I like him. He just goes around killing things and stealing people's sweethearts/daughters/sons etc. He is a stranger to chastity or fidelity or unselfishness... The Greek myths are often amoral but, as heroes go, Herakles in particular makes a terrible role model for 21st century boys!¹³

In order to solve this problem, McCaughrean therefore reinterpreted the tale rather strangely, in order to warn against the dangers of alcohol, under the influence of which the hero kills his own children. In fact, the only positive feature McCaughrean found in Heracles was in his redeeming of Prometheus, whose story she unfortunately confused with that of Chiron:

¹³ From an email correspondence with the author in June 2017.

The thing I like best about him is that his death redeems Prometheus from everlasting torture, but he only seems to sacrifice himself because he wants to be dead... The Christ-like Prometheus is the true hero of the story.¹⁴

This glorification of Prometheus leads to a harsh condemnation of the pitiless Olympian gods by Hercules in the Prometheus episode at the end of the book. Since McCaughrean makes the Prometheus-Christ link explicit, the book can therefore be seen as a Christianizing take on the ancient myth, whereby Christian values, and mercy in particular, are promoted.

Hercules in the Second Millennium

Hercules as a Model for Literacy

If British publishers showed little interest in producing narrations of Hercules' life for leisure reading at the cusp of the second millennium, the same cannot be said of the reading schemes used in British schools in the following years. In the UK, as in the USA, despite the differences between the two education systems with regard to schooling ages, division of educational stages, philosophy and ideology among other issues, basal readers (graded textbooks used to impart and improve literacy) have been a staple of the teaching of reading since the nineteenth century. They continue to be used in the form of reading schemes, with most of the major educational publishers producing their own programmes used in primary schools. Usually written for the six to eight year old reader, these books aim to improve reading fluency and increase enthusiasm for reading. This is reflected in the much greater emphasis placed upon fiction, as opposed to non-fiction, in these readers (see Moss and Newton 2002, 1–13). Hercules is a recurrent subject of these books, all of which focus almost exclusively on the twelve labours in their retellings.

Almost every major British reading scheme includes at least one volume on Hercules. The Usborne reading scheme features two such books, both in series two of the Usborne Young Reading books, and aimed at the six and seven year old age group: *The Amazing Adventures of Hercules* by Claudia Zeff (2004) and *Hercules The World's Strongest Man* (2011) by Alex Frith, illustrated by Linda Cavallini and Stephen Cartwright respectively. Collins, meanwhile, included *Hercules: Superhero* (2005) by Diana Redmond and Chris Mould as part of their Big Cat reading programme, aimed at ages 7-11, or key stage 2 of the British National curriculum. Tony Bradman's *Hercules the Hero* from 2013, illustrated by Steve May, is part of the White Wolves Fiction guided reading scheme, published by A & C Black, a British book publishing company that has been owned since 2002 by Bloomsbury Publishing. Finally, in 2014 the Oxford reading tree programme also published a volume, *Hercules the Hero: a Myth*

¹⁴ From an email correspondence with the author in June 2017.

from *Ancient Greece*, written by Michaela Morgan, and illustrated by Glen McBeth, intended for seven to eight year olds. There are also two such books from the United States; one in the McGraw-Hill reading programme, written by Betsy Hebert and illustrated by Yevgenia Nayberg which, like the 2001 book from the same scheme, is entitled *Hercules and the Golden Apples* (2014). The second, *Hercules* (2008), by Shannon Eric Denton and illustrated by Andy Kuhn, was published by ABDO publishing, in their *Short Tales* series. It is striking that almost all of the reading scheme books are British, and that, while Hercules is thought to be a figure of interest, at least by those creating reading schemes, this is far more the case in the UK than in the USA. In the United States, basal readers were often traditionally adapted versions of classics books – *Black Beauty*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Treasure Island* and so on; the lack of a core text for the Hercules myth thus does not lend itself readily to this tradition, and may explain the lack of a comparable number of books from the United States.

It is more likely, however, that the prevalence of Hercules also reflects the stronger classical tradition within British education (see Shen 2016); there is perhaps, in Tony Bradman's words, a feeling that 'everyone should know something about' the ancient world, of which Hercules is an outstanding representative (p. 48). In Britain, the emphasis on creating an enjoyment and appreciation of reading also adds to the attraction of Hercules' colourful life as subject matter.¹⁵ As a hero, Hercules does much to ease the constant tension in children's literature between appearing educational and appearing fun. He is a classical hero, and therefore a suitably worthy figure to be introduced; but he is also an exciting character whose exploits are enjoyable to read.

In addition, Hercules' story fits the requirements of reading schemes well on a practical level since the iconic twelve labours fit nicely into the short chapter structure and repetitive language required at the typical level at which the hero features. All of these books share the common features typically found in works of this genre: large font, short sentences, distinct spaces between words and lines, leaving plenty of white space on the page and clear demarcation of episodes into manageable chapters; and ample illustrations on each page (see Horning 2010, 121-131).

Most strikingly, these books are in almost every case light-hearted, and often comic, the illustrations hand drawn and with the emphasis on humour. Bradman and May's *Hercules the Hero*, for example, features cartoon style illustrations, and chapter titles such as 'Some interesting little jobs' (in which Hercules tackles the Nemean Lion and the Hydra) and 'A few busy weeks' (covering six further labours). The language is contemporary, adding a bathetic air to the

¹⁵ On this aspect as an aim of British education, in contrast with that of the United States, see Wood (2015).

ancient tale, so that in Bradman's text, 'Eurystheus nearly choked on his supper when Hercules returned' (p. 22), and Cerberus is described as Eurystheus' 'new pet' (p. 41). In place of Hera's bitter enmity towards Hercules, the relationship is presented as minor intra-family bickering, which Hercules takes on in a good-natured manner, with no anguish or distress: 'Everybody liked him and thought he was terrific. Everybody, that is, except one of the Immortal Gods... Hercules was still feeling confused. But then he sighed. Hera was an Immortal Goddess, so it was his duty to obey her' (Bradman 2013, 8-9, 16).

As a larger-than-life hero, with a history of being depicted as a comic buffoon as long as that of being depicted as a tragic hero, Hercules is suited to a humorous approach which typifies such books. Yet he seems to have been only rarely presented in this manner for children before the present renderings, and in the late twentieth century American books, often seems a rather tormented figure. In an overturning of this approach, Hercules is now treated with humour in the reading schemes, in order to appeal to the young readers. This is a feature that is most probably influenced by Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson series, which approaches Greek mythology with a strong dose of juvenile humour, mixing the classical elements with the modern world and attitudes for maximum comic effect (see Morey and Nelson 2015). Yet such an irreverent approach to ancient myth is not entirely the result of the influence of Riordan's works, which in fact are themselves typical of receptions in the second millennium, and a far cry from the attitude of the previous century. Such an attitude also extends to other recent works, as we shall now see.

The Postmodern Hercules: The Appropriated Hero

Recent years have seen a change in the world of publishing, with access to digital books and technology leading to a rise in self-publishing (see Ziv 2002). Self-publishing does not have the stigma previously attached to vanity publishing, providing an inexpensive, quick, efficient, and indeed sometimes lucrative, way for an author to produce and sell books, either in digital or print form. Self-publishing is becoming more and more popular; according to one recent report, 'in 2012 fifteen of the top one hundred bestselling Kindle titles in the UK were self-published, twelve self-published authors sold more than 100,000 copies, and fifty authors earned at least £50,000 from their self-published books' (*Forbes*, 14 January 2013, quoted in Clark and Phillips 2014, 132).

The popularity of self-publishing is reflected in the fact that seven such volumes for youngsters on Hercules may be found on amazon.com, six appearing since 2016, presumably in the wake of renewed interest in the figure as a result of the two Hercules movies of 2014 (*Hercules*, dir. Brett Ratner, and *The Legend of Hercules*, dir. Renny Harlin, both 2014). Equally striking is the nature of all these books, only one of which, Simon Spence's, *Herakles, Book 5 - Early*

Myths, Kids Books on Greek Myth (2016), is a conventional retelling of the Hercules myth. Spence is a trained classicist, and he has an agenda and mission, which led him to publish his own series on Greek mythology, of which the Hercules volume is the fifth. This series aims ‘to bring Greek myths to young kids in a fun and exciting way, but to keep the earliest versions of the stories’. His intention was to introduce young characters to mythological figures, and ‘to excite and inspire young minds with the oldest Greek tales’ (<https://readersfavorite.com/book-review/perseus>, accessed 21 June 2018) through the inclusion of images, influenced by great art, such as classical Greek vase painting and sculpture (https://www.goodreads.com/author_blog_posts/14808006-early-myths--bringing-the-earliest-tales-to-life, accessed 21 June 2018).

Other recent retellings of the Hercules myth are much freer adaptations, and are decidedly modern in outlook and language. In Ryan Madison’s *Hercules, The First 6 Tasks* (2013), written by an enthusiastic amateur author, he explains that the entertainment value of the story is of greatest importance to him, and therefore he does not, ‘allow the truth to intrude too much and mess up the tale’ (Kindle loc. 22). This attitude towards ‘the truth’ explains some rather strange additions and alterations in the book. These include the fact that Hercules is here the king of Sparta, although in the confused retelling there is also a love story element with Alexander the Great and Helen of Sparta. The latter is rescued by and falls in love with Hercules, despite being betrothed to her (and Hercules’) cousin, Alexander. Later he also saves Oedipus, falls in love with Antigone (the plot of Sophocles’ *Antigone* is also inserted somewhat clumsily into the tale), goes to the Delphic oracle of Hermes, and uses ‘the magic candle of Time’ to view his earlier life. Presumably for its entertainment value, this work includes a very bizarre description of the Omphale episode, in which the cross-dressing is detailed, but then followed by a typically contemporary, amateur psychology-based statement that, ‘It was a relationship of total dependence and at the same time totally fulfilling, in which the mother is ever-present and satisfies all needs’ (Kindle loc. 770).

Lee Smyth’s *Hercules, Gods Versus Titans* (2018), the third book in the *WARRIORS* series, similarly makes various changes and additions to the story. This version retells the story of Hercules in the first person, the narrative alternating between a fictional character, ‘Ty’ (Tydeus), supposedly the grandson of Homer, and the bard himself. The king for whom Hercules performs his labours is Naxos, King of Mycenae, rather than Eurystheus, and he performs only six such labours, while the story itself is set after the Trojan War. After the sixth labour is recounted, the story then deviates widely from the Hercules myth and narrates a version of the Gigantomachy. In addition to the Hercules myth, the employment of the figure of Homer allows for the inclusion of various other myths (Prometheus, Pandora and Orion), which he retells over the course of the book. Strikingly, and clearly influenced by recent screen deicides of pagan gods

(Maurice (2109) 193-99; Tomasso (2015) 147-57), at the end of this story Hercules sacrifices himself and becomes apotheosised, while Zeus and the Olympians are killed, in a very postmodern retelling of the ancient myth.

Despite these variations, these works are still relatively straight narrations of the Hercules myth, but other recent publications deviate widely from the ancient myth, demonstrating contemporary attitudes towards the classical past with a range of most-modern interpretations. Some are barely connected to the ancient myth at all, such as the rather curious twenty-eight-page digital picture book for young children, *Heroic Hercules and the Baby Dragon* (2017), by Michael and David Sorrow, which features Hercules as a very young child. He is recognisable as an ancient character only by his Greek style clothing (sandals, a laurel wreath, beige shorts and white vest top with clasps at the shoulders) and a lone classical pillar. Despite his declaration of heroism, here defined as saving people from danger ('I'm heroic Hercules. I save people. Whenever there is danger in town I'm called upon to help' (Kindle loc. 2-3)), he has no connection with the Hercules of ancient tradition. The danger in this case turns out to be a baby dragon who is eating the mayor of the town's garden, and who needs to be returned to Patagonia. In order to accomplish this, Hercules goes to his friend, Delightful Da Vinci, who lends him his 'Flying Wonder Machine' with which to take the dragon home. This fanciful short tale thus presents a somewhat incoherent and bewildering mix of diverse traditions; Da Vinci, dragons, ancient Greece and South America (Patagonia) are randomly incorporated, in a tale that has some mild elements of humour, and features a Hercules heroic in an entirely modern sense.

Some books follow the Percy Jackson trend by mingling the past and present and bringing the ancient world into twenty-first century society. Clearly influenced by Rick Riordan's books, and aimed at the same age range, is Connor Hoover's *Camp Hercules* series (2018), for example, of which three have so far been published (Connor Hoover is a pseudonym for P.J Hoover, who has written a number of other standalone book and series for children – see <http://www.pjhoover.com>, accessed 25 June 2018). These stories centre around a boy named Logan, who is unwillingly sent by his mother to a mythology themed summer camp, at which each bunk has to re-enact one of the twelve labours of Hercules. Logan is dismissive of the camp, until it emerges that this is not fantasy after all, and that he is battling against real monsters, in the company of Hercules and other mythological creatures. Peppered with comedy that results from the incongruity of a modern teen interacting with ancient mythological characters and ideas, it also contains adventures and quests in a more traditional mode, involving encounters through which the young protagonists – and by extension the readers – become heroes themselves. Equally concerned with issues facing young people today is another book in this genre, *The Golden Gloves of Heracles & Hercules's Gauntlet* by a young writer, Jermaine Nnamdi Carew, who published the book in 2017 at the age of nineteen. Although the

book is full of grammatical infelicities, the work is of interest in that it is also an ‘issue’ book (on these, see Leland and Harste 2000, 4); the ancient mythological figures meet the modern world in order to treat topics of importance and anxiety to contemporary teens, including bullying, self-image, popularity, celebrity, courage, heroism and happiness. Another example of this mixing of the modern and ancient worlds is Gerald Vinestock’s *Crib and the Labours of Hercules* (2017), where the monsters that Hercules once destroyed have returned and are threatening present-day Greece. Athens Airport is under attack by man-eating birds, a huge boar and a deer are destroying crops, Amazons are rampaging, Crete is plagued by a terrifying bull, and the hydra is in danger of paralysing the entire country. In need of a new Hercules, the hero – or more accurately, heroine, since this is a contemporary example in which a female lead is found in the Hercules books – who steps up to save Greece is a ten-year old girl named Crib, ineffectively assisted by her rather useless uncle.

This free approach to myth is not confined to self-publishing, although the unregulated nature of such works does permit more freedom than in traditional publications. Nevertheless, similar trends may be seen in the recent Hercules books that have been published in this manner. One of the most interesting is a picture book for younger children, *Hercules on the Bayou* (2016), which is a fascinating mix of the tales of Ancient Greece and Cajun Louisiana, described as ‘two of the greatest storytelling cultures’ (flyleaf of book). Produced by the Pelican Publishing Company, a New Orleans based publisher that specialises in books on Louisiana and Southern culture, this is an amusingly illustrated colour picture book, the tale of Hercules, the adopted son of Claude and Claudette, a kindly Cajun couple. It tells ‘the story of mighty Hercules and his many labors, rerouting a river, defeating flying, man-eating pests; and slaying the monstrous, regenerating... crawfish?’, and includes mini aetiological tales (known as *pour-quoi* in the Cajun tradition), explaining things such as why mosquitoes buzz in people’s ears and how cottonmouth snakes got their name. The author of the book, Connie Collins Morgan, grew up in a Cajun family in Lafayette, Louisiana, but studied children’s literature at university; both elements are the inspiration for this original twist on the Herculean myth, in which the uber-muscled hero is barefoot and dressed in overalls, facing his difficulties with a cheery, but goofy, grin.

Some other recent Hercules books are equally original in their interpretations. One, Kate McMullan and Denis Zilber’s *Get to Work, Hercules!* (2010), is revisionist in nature, starring Hades, the premise being that the god of the underworld is a heroic figure, and Zeus a liar, who made up the original myths in order to promote himself.¹⁶ This is the seventh in a series entitled *Myth-O-Mania*, aimed at pre-teens and published by Hyperion. In this version, Hercules

¹⁶ This is the seventh in a series entitled *Myth-O-Mania*, published by Hyperion. The series is aimed at preteens.

is portrayed as a fool who needs the help of Hades in order to complete his quest, in a humorous, modern twist on the ancient tale. Others feature time-travel, with comedy resulting from the incongruence between the two periods as the ancient characters meet and interact with modern children. Into this category fall Francesca Simon's *Helping Hercules* (2012, illustrated amusingly as ever by Tony Ross), in which an obstreperous girl named Susan is taught to be helpful through being forced to assist heroes with their tasks. In the case of Hercules, to whom the first chapter is devoted, Susan, to her disgust, has to help clean the Augean stables. A similar approach also features in *Here Comes Hercules!* (2017), written by Stella Tarakson and illustrated by Nick Roberts, the first in the *Hopeless Heroes* series, aimed at six to ten year olds. In this version, Hercules is released from imprisonment in an ancient jar where he had been trapped by Hera when it is broken by Tim, the young protagonist of the story. Hercules' disastrous attempts to help Tim occupy the majority of the book, which is packed with comic scenes centring around Hercules' bumbling clumsiness and inability to understand situations, in an interpretation reminiscent of many of the ancient tales of the hero's buffoonery, but set firmly in the modern world.

It should also be noted that in the latest batch of Hercules books, unlike in earlier periods, no geographic pattern can be seen. Of the eleven works published since 2010, five (Sorrow, Morgan, Smyth, Hoover and McMullen) are by American writers, four (Spence, Vinestock, Nnamdi, and Simon) by British writers, and two (Madison and Tarakson) are the products of Australian authors. This change reflects the new global economy and society of the twenty-first century, in which books are uploaded and downloaded worldwide at the click of a button.

More importantly, however, all of these books demonstrate an interest in the ancient world, and reflect the interaction between different media of pop-culture, with blockbuster movies leading to a surge of interest in other fields, including fanfiction and other creative writing. They also constitute a rewriting of the myths that demonstrate much about contemporary attitudes to sources. There is clear influence not only of works such as Riordan's series, but of fanfiction, which commonly features a mixing of genres, characters, periods and fictional and non-fictional series. Such receptions are typical of postmodern receptions (see Maurice 2013). Similarly, many of these works reflect modern concerns, with female characters taking a much more central role than in previous works, and an abundance of issues of current importance to young people, such as depression, popularity, and empowerment. The mixing of contemporary and ancient also allows for irony and metatextual references caused by the resulting incongruence, while the manipulation of content and contexts is typical of current receptions, which commonly feature a 'remix culture' approach to their sources. This phenomenon has been summarised by Ika Willis as follows: 'Contemporary pop culture... tends to treat classical myth in a decontextualized

and ahistorical fashion. In so doing, however, it sets up myth as popular, counter-hegemonic storytelling over and against history as master-narrative' (2017, 115).

Conclusion: The Democratisation of a Classical Hero

Re-tellings of the Hercules story for children can be seen as part of a wider picture that reflects the changing role and status of Classical Studies in the modern Western world. In the late twentieth century, at a period when Classics was regarded as elitist and isolating, Hercules was only rarely presented to young readers. When he did feature, it was in a traditional, reverent and lofty manner, the product of writers and publishers who grew up in an era in which knowledge of the ancient world was considered a mark of education and presented to youngsters as something they 'ought' to be taught. This is particularly the case in the United States, where Hercules was still treated as an educational and moral paradigm in the early 1970s, but is also clear from the Christianised Hercules of the two British works published at the turn of the millennium.

By the end of the twentieth century, however, a change was occurring, as a result of the screen adaptations of Hercules that had popularized the hero, leading, in the United States, to a resurgence in books about him. Although the phenomenon did not feature in exactly the same way in the United Kingdom, where Hercules became a suitable subject for early readers in the form of reading scheme books, nevertheless a change of attitude can be seen within these books, with Hercules treated humorously and with far less deference than before. Writers began to exploit the figure for comic potential, as the hero descended from the ivory tower in which he had been placed, and captured the imagination of authors and readers alike.

This attitude has expanded still further in recent years as amateur writers appropriated the hero for themselves, adapting the original tale with enthusiastic abandon. This enthusiasm for classical myth in general, and Hercules in particular, continues to grow, as evidenced by the popular movies of recent years, and also by other receptions found in popular culture, including fanfiction and self-published works. This popularity, centred on a global culture facilitated by digital technology and the internet, breaks geographical boundaries, and brings the classical world into the realm of the wider population. Limited as the present study is, the Hercules books for children demonstrate that the so-called democratization of classics is real, ongoing, and reflected even in a very specific group of works targeted at a particular readership. This surely is a reason for hope and elation; despite fears regarding the marginalization of Classical Studies, Hercules is still very much alive and well in the second millennium.

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