



From the most carefully researched and detailed retelling, to the most lightly sketched or allusive story, every text we discuss in this book is an adaptation of classical myth and culture aimed at bringing the ancient world to young minds. This is inevitable – the processes

of translation and interpretation alone mean that most versions of the myths we read are adapted, filtered through the lenses of their authors' cultures and contexts. But the shaping of material for young readers involves several specific approaches, including paring myths down to their essences for clear retelling; considering the effect of particular stories on young audiences; selecting and in some cases softening them; and modifying them or applying them to modern life. Adaptations can be very close to the original. Or they can travel such a long way that only the reader with a keen eye for story types, or a handy reference tool, can find their classical contexts. The power of classical myth is such that it is useful for storytellers of all sorts of genres, from all around the world.

Since the first artist drew the first image of Athena, or the first playwright dared to write the stories of the great houses of Greece, classical myth has been adapted for listeners, readers, and theatregoers. It is in a state of constant adaptation, of transformation and reformation. The classical myths themselves are not a single monolithic body, but rather pieced together from fragments of urns and inscriptions, images and literary works, quotations and passages of history. Through this piecing together, which has taken place over generations, we have a picture of gods, heroes, and monsters, told through great stories that explain our world to us: both the natural elements we live among, and the human emotions that make us tick. And these stories sometimes contradict one another, providing shape and dimension to the pictures we have, showing that the myths are themselves adaptations, modified for different demands and occasions.

We know, for instance, that Zeus, the king of the gods of Olympus, strikes the earth with thunderbolts, that the eyes in the tail feather of the peacock originally belonged to a monster named Argus, who served as a security guard for the goddess Hera, until he was lulled to sleep by the tricky god, Hermes.¹ We know that the march of the seasons re-enacts the bargain between Hades, the god of the Underworld, Persephone, the goddess of spring, and her mother, Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, whereby Persephone spends half of the

¹ For the myth of Argus, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.583–750.

year in the Underworld, and half above.² Though this does not entirely work for those of us living outside the Northern Hemisphere, the myth is resonant and compelling. The echoes from the Greeks and Romans continue to this day. When we go on an adventure, we call it an odyssey; when we get lost in a complex pattern of streets, or buildings, or trees, we call it a labyrinth. Our emotions are often caught between Eros (love) and Psyche (soul); our fears and worries are eased by prophecy, and so on.

The young adult novels of Francesca Lia Block capture how powerfully and continually the myths relate to how we think about ourselves. Her novel *Psyche in a Dress* (2006) adapts the myths of Psyche, Persephone, and Eurydice, three young women drawn into relationships with deities (Eros, Hades, and Orpheus). Psyche, the daughter of a Hollywood film-maker, tries on different roles, becoming versions of Persephone and Eurydice, growing older, having a child, and becoming Demeter. At the end of the novel, having made her film, Psyche is out dancing with Joy, her daughter, when she meets Eros again:

“Eros,” she said.

When she opened her eyes, he was standing there. Had she conjured him with her dancing? He looked older now; his hair was close-shaven, nearly all gray. There was nothing about him that screamed “ancient power of the cosmos, love god, son of Aphrodite, son of Chaos.” He was a man, getting older, her daughter’s father. He was also her first lover, her secret, her storyteller. And he was a god, yes. But she was a goddess and a storyteller too. A soul in a new dress now.³

For Block, mythical figures appear in California, wearing the clothes of writers, directors, actors, musicians, and poets – acting like teenagers in love, dealing with issues of gender, sexuality, love, and power – wearing new dresses for their different roles. The influence of the myths is everywhere, even thousands of years after the passing of the Greek and Roman empires, and they appear scattered throughout literature in almost all Western languages, in invocations, and allusions, and retellings.

Classical myths are adapted throughout the world, across genres, and age groups. In our book we are concerned with how they appear in children’s literature. Some myths lend themselves well to nursery stories, to simple explanations about how the world came to be. Some are ideal as cautionary tales,

² Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 5.565.

³ Francesca Lia Block, *Psyche in a Dress*, New York, NY: Joanna Cotler Books, 2006, 116.

teaching behaviour and morality. Some are more suitable for older children, explaining aspects of sexuality, or gender, and of dark emotions and events. Some are funny, and some critique the vagaries of human behaviour (greed, egotism, selfishness, boastfulness). Some are tragic, showing how death is inevitable and inexorable, that there are ills in the world. Myths help us to face the world, and also to face ourselves.

Odysseus and the *Odyssey*

Having triumphed at Troy, Odysseus sails home to Ithaca. His journey takes ten years and he has many adventures (and faces many trials) along the way. Finally, he is reunited with his wife and son, and reclaims his kingdom. This is one of the most influential of all the classical myths and stories, and makes its presence felt in literature for all ages.

Retelling – Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Wanderings of Odysseus: The Story of the Odyssey*, ill. Alan Lee (1995)

This illustrated chapter book is a traditional retelling of Homer’s epic that highlights Odysseus’ courage and craftiness as he strives to return to his beloved wife and home.

Revision – Sulari D. Gentill, *Chasing Odysseus* (2011)

In this young adult novel, Odysseus is presented as a vain and flawed figure. As they track him across the Aegean in an effort to clear their name, Hero and her brothers are credited with involvement in the key events of the *Odyssey*.

Adaptation – Francesca Lia Block, *Love in the Time of Global Warming* (2013)

This young adult novel plays out the *Odyssey* in post-apocalyptic Los Angeles. Having lost everything, seventeen-year-old Pen navigates a dangerous world in search of a new home.

Allusion – Cynthia Voigt, *Homecoming* (1981)

First in the “Tillerman Cycle” of young adult novels: after their mother abandons them, Dicey leads her younger siblings across America to their grandmother’s house, facing many challenging encounters along the way.

Retell, Revise, Adapt, Allude

Adaptations of classical myth for children take many forms, from poems to plays, from short stories to novels. They appear in different ways: retellings, revisions, adaptations, and allusions. Retellings, for example, give (relatively) faithful presentations of the original myths. They may vary in style, in depth or length, but for the most part they deliver a recognizable version of the myths with which

we are familiar. In retellings, mythical figures appear as themselves, and behave according to convention. Zeus is mighty, Hera is jealous, Athena is wise, Artemis scornful, Hercules brave.⁴

Many retellings are influenced by two nineteenth-century writers, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Charles Kingsley, whose popular collections of myths for children have been in print since the 1850s. Both collections emphasize myths of adventure and morality, focusing on exciting stories, such as Perseus' quest to slay the Gorgon, Theseus' quest to solve the riddle of the Labyrinth and slay the Minotaur, Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece, and excerpts from the *Odyssey*. Many of the stories involve heroes slaying monsters. Many of them are stories of morality, such as the tales of Pandora's Box and Midas (illustrating the consequences of excessive curiosity, greed, and carelessness) or the stories of Atalanta and of Baucis and Philemon (celebrating positive qualities, such as kindness, wisdom, and hospitality). And all are told with an awareness of the interwoven nature of classical myth, its twists and turns, and ability to be adapted to different purposes. So influential were these collections that many retellings follow their lead. Some even highlight their influence, as in Kathryn Hewitt's lavishly illustrated picture book *King Midas and the Golden Touch* (1987), which has an image of Hawthorne on its dedication page.

Retellings for children usually focus on several core stories: the Theseiad, the Perseiad, the *Argonautica*, and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well on elements from Hesiod's *Theogony*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Aesop's *Fables*. For the most part they focus on simple stories of adventure, love, and transformation. They generally soften or omit sex and violence. Writers and illustrators can also be critical of the actions of the gods and heroes, and have increasing sympathy for ordinary folk, for heroines, for those who fall victim to the demands of a hero's actions, and also for the monsters. Although they soften some elements to be suitable for young audiences, they do not hold back from pointing out the flaws of heroes and gods. Picture book retellings are a particularly interesting case, as they often both retell and critique at the

⁴ In this division of categories, we are influenced by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer's analysis, which notes that children's reading engaging with classical material includes classical fables (commonly associated with reading for children); adaptation of classical myths and epics, including faithful and modernized versions; and, increasingly, intertextual allusion to classical elements. History makes an appearance, in retellings and allusions, time travel, and fantasy texts. Kümmerling-Meibauer notes too the power of the "Pan and the *puer aeternus*" theme, which is strongly felt in works such as *Peter Pan* and *The Secret Garden*. See Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, "Children's and Young Adults' Literature", in Manfred Landfester, ed., *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World. Classical Tradition*, vol. 1: A-Del, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2006, 750-754.

same time, using the tension between image and text to highlight or challenge different aspects of a particular myth or legend.

Influenced by Hawthorne I

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* (1851) and *Tanglewood Tales* (1853) are regarded as the first English-language retellings of classical myth to be written specifically for children. Though rarely acknowledged directly, Hawthorne's influence on contemporary retellings is profound and widespread. He can be credited with placing emphasis on children and childish characters, as well as the use of an internal narrator and frame narrative to link the collection of myths. His invention of Marygold, a daughter for King Midas, has become so pervasive in children's retellings that it is difficult to believe that there is no ancient source for her character.

Laura Geringer's picture book *The Pomegranate Seeds: A Classic Greek Myth* (1995), illustrated with dreamy, diaphanous paintings by Leonid Gore, draws closely on the version told in *Tanglewood Tales* in casting Persephone as a playful companion for lonely Hades, rather than as his bride. Sally Grindley and Nilesh Mistry's *Pandora and the Mystery Box* (2000) replicates elements of Hawthorne's version, including referring to Hermes as Quicksilver and the contents of the box as "Troubles". And like Hawthorne in "The Chimaera", in *The Orchard Book of First Greek Myths* (ill. Jan Lewis; 2003) Saviour Pirotta lets children tell Bellerophon where to find Pegasus, while the adults deny his existence.

Unlike these books, which remain close to Hawthorne's retelling but do not refer to his influence explicitly, Kathryn Hewitt's postmodern picture book *King Midas and the Golden Touch* (1987) names him on the cover and credits Hewitt as an adaptor rather than author. In addition, the dedication page features a framed portrait of Hawthorne looking aghast in response to the prospect of Hewitt's irreverent, highly intertextual treatment of his classic work.

Often drawing on standard versions, such as those of Kingsley or Hawthorne, or Roger Lancelyn Green, the British writer whose 1950s stories and novels were very influential in Britain and the Commonwealth, picture books combine short stories with illustrations. The flexibility of the format, and the demand to be entertaining for very young readers as well as their parents, make for interesting interpretations (see "V is for Visual Storytelling"). For instance, John Warren Stewig and Omar Rayyan's picture book *King Midas: A Golden Tale* (1999) offers in the text a straight retelling of the Midas myth.⁵ Although small elements reveal their inspiration by Hawthorne – Midas' daughter, for instance, is named Marygold, after Hawthorne's version – there is room for

⁵ For the myth of Midas, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 11.85–145.

new interpretations. While Stewig’s words retell the myth simply and clearly, Rayyan’s illustrations set the action in a palace suspended in the clouds, supported by mythical beasts, and populated with exotic animals. His King Midas wears round John Lennon glasses, which are among the first of his objects to be turned to gold and eats “Poseidon Puffs” for breakfast.⁶ Words and illustrations work together to humanize King Midas, offering a story that is both a standard version, and one that is characterized as belonging to an unusual mythical and magical place and time.

Indeed, the Midas myth adapts readily to different contexts. Al Perkins’s retelling for early readers, *King Midas and the Golden Touch* (ill. Harold Berson; 1969), has a bouncy rhythm and simple but evocative phrasing:

King Midas jumped up,
And he wished with all his heart.
He put out his hand.
He touched his cold, gold daughter.
His wish came true.
He had turned his daughter back from gold!⁷

Illustrators for different editions of Perkins’s text add their interpretations: Harold Berson (1969) employs a bright, cartoonish style, in which the King, who is dressed in the style of the French court of Louis XIV, prances around turning things to gold. Haig and Regina Shekerjian’s more sober take (1966) transfers the King to a medieval castle, and highlights the parallels with European fairy tales, whereby Dionysus becomes a “strange little man”, not unlike Rumpelstiltskin. Adaptations and retellings can be played for laughs, or for sympathy, foregrounding folly or vice as the author decides.

Golden Girl: King Midas, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the Invention of Marygold

The story of King Midas and his golden touch famously features in Book 11 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, but it is the version told by Nathaniel Hawthorne in *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys* (1851) that has significantly shaped contemporary children’s versions of the myth.

⁶ John W. Stewig, *King Midas: A Golden Tale*, ill. Omar Rayyan, New York, NY: Holiday House, 1999, 17.

⁷ Al Perkins, *King Midas and the Golden Touch*, ill. Harold Berson, New York, NY: Beginner Books, 1969, 27.

Hawthorne gives Midas a daughter, Marygold, “whom nobody but myself ever heard of”,⁸ in the words of the narrator, Eustace Bright. The gift of the touch is revealed to be a curse when Midas discovers that he is unable to eat or drink, and then, when he tries to comfort his beloved daughter, that she has been transformed into a golden statue. In addition to its cautionary message about the dangers of greed, this adaptation of the myth celebrates the innate wisdom of children, who understand things more clearly than their adult counterparts.

Midas’ daughter appears in most modern retellings of this myth. “Marygold became part of the Midas legend in many people’s memories”, writes Elizabeth Cook in *The Ordinary and the Fabulous: An Introduction to Myths, Legends and Fairy Tales for Teachers and Storytellers*,⁹ noting that even the eminent scholar Robert Graves includes her in his account of the myth, despite the fact that no ancient text refers to her. Geraldine McCaughrean’s “The Golden Wish” in *The Golden Hoard* (1995), part of the “Myths and Legends of the World” series, follows Hawthorne’s version closely, presenting the transformation of an innocent child into a golden statue as the ultimate horror. Other books play around with her role to parody or extend the mythic tradition. In Francesca Simon’s chapter book *Helping Hercules: The Greek Myths as They’ve Never Been Told Before!* (ill. Ross Asquith; 1999), the time traveller Susan and her younger brother are mistaken for Midas’ children. When he accidentally turns them into golden statues, they suffer Marygold’s fate, an experience that Susan finds extremely dull, as they wait to be brought back to life. Annie Sullivan’s young adult novel *A Touch of Gold* (2018) imagines the life of Kora, Midas’ daughter, after she has been revitalized. Though restored to human form, her skin retains a golden sheen, and her father is a guilt-ridden shadow of his former self. These adaptations highlight how the myth of Midas continues to transform, much like the figure of Marygold herself.

Many adaptations offer a revision of the myth, in order to highlight contemporary ideas of how morality should work. These revisions are often presented as the “real” story, whereby the original, or traditional, version is a false story that needs correcting. New heroes come to the fore, villains are recuperated, original heroes turn out to have feet of clay. In Kate Hovey’s picture book defending Arachne, *Arachne Speaks* (ill. Blair Dawson; 2000), the mortal weaver Arachne conflicts with an equally headstrong creator, the goddess Athena. Hovey highlights the parallels between the two figures, mortal and goddess (both weavers, both creative, both strong-willed), and shows how Arachne’s famous tapestry of the gods justifiably, but rashly, highlights the damage they

⁸ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *A Wonder Book for Girls and Boys*, ill. Walter Crane, Project Gutenberg e-book, 3 May 2010, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/32242/32242-h/32242-h.htm> (accessed 11 March 2022), 28.

⁹ Elizabeth Cook, *The Ordinary and the Fabulous: An Introduction to Myths, Legends and Fairy Tales for Teachers and Storytellers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, 86.

do to mortals (Blair Drawson's illustrations show her weavings featuring Apollo's vanity, Poseidon's violence¹⁰). When Athena is offended, and transforms Arachne into a spider, it would seem the goddess has won, but Hovey points out that the gods of Olympus, being immortal, have lived to see their influence wane. The story ends with Athena sitting idle and lonely in her isolated temple, while Arachne's descendants busily spin their webs to this day. This is a considerable revision from some versions, in which Arachne is doomed to have her handiwork scorned by generations of humans who are frightened by the sight of cobwebs.

Many revisions reflect the changing politics and ideals since the time of the original myths: gender equality being one of the most obvious, but also racial and national politics, as well as increased sympathy for animals and for monsters, who often appeal to writers by virtue of being blameless victims, or who are taken to symbolize types of human or child problems, situations, or identities. For instance, Rick Riordan's "Percy Jackson and the Olympians" (2005–2009) and "The Heroes of Olympus" (2010–2014) two series feature the story of Percy Jackson, a dyslexic American boy who discovers he is a demigod son of Perseus and joins an epic battle between the Olympians and the Titans. Percy's dyslexia is a sign that his brain is wired to understand Ancient Greek rather than Modern English – suggesting a vision in which disabilities can be understood as superpowers, if viewed sympathetically.

Such revisions are increasingly conscious of diversity, including characters of different races, sexualities, backgrounds, and abilities. Nancy Loewen's picture books retell myths, legends, and fairy tales from the perspective of the loser or the villain. *Cyclops Tells All: The Way Eye See It* (ill. Ryan Pentney; 2014) presents the Cyclops Polyphemus as misunderstanding the phrase "You are what you eat", and eating Odysseus' men in a vain attempt to become human. In *Pandora Tells All: Not the Curious Kind* (ill. Ryan Pentney; 2014), it is Pandora's cat who is unable to resist temptation to open the famous vase. These revisions aim to see the famous stories from fresh perspectives and are influenced by modern assumptions. Kate McMullan's "Myth-O-Mania" series (2002–2014) rewrites the Greek myths from the point of view of a brooding and shy Hades, who is frustrated by his irresponsible and brash brothers, Zeus and Poseidon:

My bro Po [Poseidon] and I have the same mom and dad. We grew up in the same dark, damp, overcrowded cave of our dad's belly. But right from the

¹⁰ For Arachne's work, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 6.115–124.

get-go, we were different. I like peace and quiet. Po's the original party god, always arranging picnics at some temple.¹¹

"Myth-O-Mania", aimed at middle-grade readers, uses Hades as a device to narrate an alternative version of the Greek myths (see also "H is for How to Be Heroic", "U is for Underworld Adventures"). This self-professed introvert, withdrawn from the main action, offers a more cynical take on the gods' and heroes' behaviour, and softens the original tale of Hades' abduction of Persephone: as further proof that he's a nice guy, Hades is devotedly in love with Persephone. In works for older readers, such as Rachel Smythe's web comic, *Lore Olympus* (2018–present), Hades becomes a Byronic hero – brooding, lonely, soulful – perfectly matched with a dreamy Persephone who is eager to escape the confines of life with her bossy mother, Demeter. As Holly Blackford notes in *The Myth of Persephone in Girls' Fantasy Literature* (2014), the Persephone myth is useful for storytellers exploring girls' maturation stories – the relationship between daughters and mothers at this time, and also the attraction (and perils) of sexuality for young women.¹² Retellings and adaptations of myths connect not only with the original stories, but also with their impact on contemporary readers and writers.

Such revisions reflect changes in attitudes – to the gods, to the myths, to gender and family relations, to authority, and to individual behaviour. They often reveal authors' sympathy for the underdog – a tendency to explore the lives and minds of figures that are overlooked, or brushed aside, or considered monstrous. (After all, in these revisions are possible new stories!) Sulari D. Gentill, for instance, retells the *Odyssey* from the point of view of Hero, a teenage girl, in her "Hero Trilogy" (2011–2013). Hero is the daughter of Agelaus, chief of a tribe of herdsmen who have been secretly supplying food to the besieged Trojans. When he is falsely accused of betraying the Trojans and executed, Hero and her brothers set out to find Odysseus to clear her father's name. The novels are focalized through Hero's eyes: in the first novel of the trilogy, *Chasing Odysseus* (2011), Hero witnesses key aspects of the *Odyssey*, and offers her own interpretation of the events. For instance, as Odysseus' boat passes between the monsters Scylla and Charybdis, Hero meets the eyes of the monstrous Scylla, and feels immediate sympathy for her:

¹¹ Kate McMullan, *Get Lost, Odysseus!*, "Myth-O-Mania" 10, North Mankato, MN: Stone Arch Books, 2015, 16–17.

¹² Holly Blackford, *The Myth of Persephone in Girls' Fantasy Literature*, "Children's Literature and Culture" 80, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2014.

For some reason that she could not understand, the ferocious eyes of the monster touched Hero deeply, and she wept.

"What happened to you?" she asked tearfully.

The grotesque heads spoke in unison. "I was beautiful once... and I loved the God of the Sea. He desired me, and took me to his bed... but when his wife wreaked her vengeance he left me to answer alone for what we did."

The multiple jaws smiled wistfully. "Ahh pious Hero, heed my words. Do not lie with a god... die before you lie with a god."

And then Scylla was gone and the little ship continued close to the edge of the rocks, until they were clear of the strait.

The sons of Agelaus emerged and comforted their sobbing sister, rebuking themselves for exposing her to such distress.

"She was not always a monster," Hero told them.

"How do you know?" asked Cadmus, surprised that this was the cause of her tears.

"She spoke to me," Hero replied. "She is being punished because she loved Poseidon." Hero's voice trembled and she whispered, "Have the gods no pity?"¹³

By presenting Scylla's tragic backstory,¹⁴ Gentill encourages readers to think critically about the casual violence of the gods towards humans, and to have sympathy for monstrous figures. Like her, many authors find ways to present moments that overturn or challenge ideas about what is monstrous, and who deserves to be considered, or turned into, a monster. What is monstrous to one person, or culture, can be heroic to others, and vice versa.

Revisions have a purpose, and offer new ways of thinking about classical material. Presenting the Theseiad from the perspective of Ariadne or the Minotaur, or offering a Gorgon's-eye view of the Perseus myth, storytellers for young readers grapple with ideas about heroism, gender roles, the roles of the gods, the balance between morality and the harshness of life, and more. Even as they continue to find inspiration in the myths, changing social attitudes, creative attitudes, and adaptations and revisions continue to influence the modifications that occur in new tellings.

That inspiration can be seen in other ways, such as in adaptations that move the mythical figures into new settings, configurations, times, and places. Young adult fiction in particular seems to revel in bringing myth into contact

¹³ Sulari D. Gentill, *Chasing Odysseus*, "Hero Trilogy" 1, Seaforth: Pantera Press, 2011, 298.

¹⁴ For the story of Scylla, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 14.1-74.