

Deborah ROBERTS

From Fairy Tale to Cartoon: Collections of Greek Myth for Children

In the preface to his 1851 collection, A Wonder-Book for Boys and Girls, Nathaniel Hawthorne declared that he had "long been of the opinion that many of the classical myths were capable of being rendered into very capital reading for children." Readers and reviewers agreed; the book was a great success, and was soon followed by a sequel, Tanglewood Tales (1853), and by Charles Kingsley's anthology The Greek Heroes, or, Greek Fairy Tales for my Children (1855). There have been many other such re-tellings since, with over a dozen fairly recent versions currently in print, from D'Aulaire's Book of Greek Myths (1962) to Sara Fanelli's Mythological Monsters (2002).

Evidently we continue to think that there is a place for anthologies of myth in children's literature. But what do we mean by this? Children's literature is a notoriously problematic category, since it is defined not by content, form, or authorship but by implied or actual readership. And this definition is itself problematic, since it takes account neither of the history of reading, with many famous crossover books in both directions, nor of the dual implied readership of many works of children's literature. Even if we limit ourselves to books intended primarily for children, we need to bear in mind (as current theory in the field has stressed) that the child reader, like the child in the text, is inevitably the construction of the adult writer, who was a child once, but is one no longer.

What, then, is it that the various anthologists of myth for children see in myth that makes it appropriate to children, and what conception of childhood does this view entail? How does this conception work to determine the selection of myths, the versions used, the omissions or additions, the style adopted by the author?

In this paper I explore the presentation of Greek myth for children in a series of anthologies from Hawthorne to the present. Of particular interest are shifts in the generic affiliations of the text and its chief focus; Hawthorne and Kingsley both suggest a reading of myth as fairy tale, and concern themselves largely with heroes, while a number of our most recent versions are cartoon-like and preoccupied with monsters. Throughout these collections two questions persist, although they take different forms and are differently answered: why and how should children read stories from so long ago, and why and how should they read stories that belong to a religion in which no one any longer believes? Not surprisingly, since children's literature more than adult literature manifests a continued presumption that books should combine instruction and pleasure, anthologists of all periods suggest that children may learn something from Greek myth, but here too we can see a partial shift of emphasis, from moral education to the pursuit of general knowledge.