

OUR MYTHICAL CHILDHOOD

OUR MYTHICAL HOPE

The Ancient Myths
as Medicine for the Hardships
of Life in Children's
and Young Adults' Culture

Edited by
Katarzyna Marciniak



OUR MYTHICAL HOPE

“OUR MYTHICAL CHILDHOOD” Series

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**The following volumes contain the research results of the first stages
of the Our Mythical Childhood Programme (est. 2011)**

Loeb Classical Library Foundation Grant (2012–2013):

Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, vol. 8 in the series "Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity", Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016, 526 pp.

Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Alumni Award for Innovative Networking Initiatives (2014–2017) and ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2022):

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Our Mythical Hope: The Ancient Myths as Medicine for the Hardships of Life in Children's and Young Adults' Culture, edited by Katarzyna Marciniak (University of Warsaw, Poland)
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The image used: Zbigniew Karaszewski, *Flora and Our Mythical Hope* (2017), based on the fresco: *Primavera di Stabiae*, phot. Mentnafunangann, National Archaeological Museum of Naples (inv. no. 8834), Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Primavera_di_Stabiae.jpg (accessed 21 March 2021); user: Mentnafunangann / Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.en>.

Typesetting

ALINEA

The content of the book reflects only the authors' views and the ERCEA is not responsible for any use that may be made of the information it contains.

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202 (2016–2022), *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant led by Katarzyna Marciniak.



This volume was also supported by the University of Warsaw (Internal Grant System of the "Excellence Initiative – Research University" and the Statutory Research of the Faculty of "Artes Liberales").

Project's Website: www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl

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ISBN (hardcopy) 978-83-235-5280-2 ISBN (pdf online) 978-83-235-5288-8

ISBN (e-pub) 978-83-235-5296-3 ISBN (mobi) 978-83-235-5304-5

University of Warsaw Press

00-838 Warszawa, Prosta 69

E-mail: wuw@uw.edu.pl

Publisher's website: www.wuw.pl

Printed and bound by POZKAL

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PART V

Brand New Hope



IMAGES OF HOPE: THE GODS IN GREEK BOOKS FOR YOUNG CHILDREN

In recent years, illustrated children's books about the classical world in Greek and other languages have become prolific in bookstores and in museum and souvenir shops in Greece.¹ Yet, there are few, if any, social analyses of the books' prevalence and impact. Mythology can be a necessary first step in learning about the classical past. Stories about mythical actors – gods, demigods, heroes, monsters, and other creatures – have inspired ancient and later generations of writers, artists, and craftsmen, as well as modern marketers. The project *Our Mythical Childhood* and this volume's focus on finding hope in myth offer a unique opportunity to examine classical mythology's present-day resonance. In this chapter, I discuss how the visual language of children's books about the gods may convey messages about group identity, and how these messages could give hope to children and adult readers in Greece and beyond.

Greece between Global and Local Identity

Greece has been on the international spotlight for some time now. In 2004, the Athens Olympics were a success. The people of Greece performed well in organizing and staging the Games, projecting a confident and euphoric country image to the rest of the world. Alas, the euphoria was not bound to last. A few years later, Greece's economy needed rescuing by European and American lenders. The economic crisis that started in 2010 is still ongoing at the time of writing,

¹ I am indebted to Katarzyna Marciniak for inviting me to the conference *Our Mythical Hope* in May 2017, for the opportunity to contribute to this volume, and for her patience with my manuscript. I am most grateful to Susan Deacy and to Katarzyna Marciniak for reading and commenting on an earlier version. For useful discussion, my thanks extend to Eirini Dermizaki, Euaggelia Desypri, Elaine Harris, Natalia Kapatsoulia, Amy C. Smith, as well as Pietra Palazzolo and other participants of the *Myth Reading Group* at the University of Essex, where I presented this paper in December 2017. The views I discuss here are my own and they do not necessarily coincide with the authors' and illustrators' intentions.

and the austerity measures have had social, political, and environmental repercussions.² Lately, Greece's problems have been compounded with the refugee crisis. An exodus of Middle-Eastern, Asian, and African populations, often from war-stricken lands, has brought thousands of families with their children to Greece, where they have settled temporarily or permanently. Human stories arising from economic and other troubles in Greece have hit the national and international headlines on multiple occasions. People within and outside Greece have become increasingly compassionate, identifying with and voicing the concerns of diverse groups of suffering individuals, such as the working poor, the unemployed, the homeless, and, of course, the refugees.

In this climate of widespread hardship and continuing uncertainty, finding hope has been of paramount importance. Perhaps aiming to gauge the levels of hope in Greece, Dimitris Tziouvas of the University of Birmingham has led a recent academic study on how the crisis has affected literary and artistic output.³ One of the study's findings was that the crisis has unleashed a new wave of creativity for writers, poets, television and theatre producers, photographers, graffiti artists, and others. This hive of fruitful output has been affecting constructions of group identity, by both Greeks and non-Greeks. The crisis, then, has brought to the fore the issue of Greece's relation to the world, and the world's expectations from Greece.

This issue is old and it implicates Greece's classical heritage and narratives of nationalism.⁴ In the eighteenth century, the German intellectual Johann Joachim Winckelmann searched for an aesthetic ideal in Classical Greece.⁵ Winckelmann's legacy has shaped Western modernity through a valorization of classical

² For the years 2008–2015, see Thomas W. Gallant, *Modern Greece: From the War of Independence to the Present*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016, 310–317. For environmental issues, see, e.g., Rita Calvário, Giorgos Velegrakis, and Maria Kaika, "The Political Ecology of Austerity: An Analysis of Socio-Environmental Conflict under Crisis in Greece", *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 28 (2017), 69–87.

³ Dimitris Tziouvas, *Greece in Crisis: The Cultural Politics of Austerity*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2017.

⁴ See, e.g., David S. Ferris, *Silent Urns: Romanticism, Hellenism, Modernity*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000, 1–15; Yannis Hamilakis, *The Nation and Its Ruins: Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 290–291; Peter Mackridge, "Cultural Difference as National Identity in Modern Greece", in Katerina Zacharia, ed., *Hellenisms: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity from Antiquity to Modernity*, Aldershot: Ashgate Variorum, 2008, 319; Vassiliki Kolocotroni, "Still Life: Modernism's Turn to Greece", *Journal of Modern Literature* 35.2 (2012), 1–24; Dimitris Tziouvas, "Introduction: Decolonizing Antiquity, Heritage Politics, and Performing the Past", in Dimitris Tziouvas, ed., *Re-Imagining the Past: Antiquity and Modern Greek Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 1–28; George Tolia, "The Resilience of Philhellenism", *The Historical Review / La Revue Historique* 13 (2016), 60.

⁵ See Amy C. Smith, "Winckelmann, Greek Masterpieces, and Architectural Sculpture: Prolegomena to a History of Classical Archaeology in Museums", in Achim Lichtenberger and Rubina

texts and antiquities. Ancient Greece, and primarily Periclean Athens, is thought to have influenced Western values, including democracy and freedom of artistic expression. President Barack Obama referred to this influence when he visited the Athenian Acropolis in November 2016 and made a statement before the Parthenon.⁶ At that moment, the Parthenon, for all its architectural grandeur, mattered as an iconic image of a shared Western identity, reflecting the United States' and other countries' journey of some 300 years towards political and social justice. The President's allusion to group identity seemed to convey messages about the Parthenon's global relevance, over and above the monument's significance at national level.⁷

The distinction between global and local identity may have become blurred in today's highly mobile, interconnected, and multicultural world. In particular, in crisis-plagued Greece, people seem to embrace globalization as an opportunity for overcoming hardship, mostly by using Internet platforms to reach out to more, and to more international, buyers of goods and services, which can range from agricultural produce to tourist accommodation. It is within Greece's globalizing context that children's literature has been used to alleviate pain. On International Book Day, 23 April 2017, Eugenios Trivizas, one the best-known Greek authors of children's books, such as *The Three Little Wolves and the Big Bad Pig*, gained public acclaim by reciting his works to refugee children in Greece.⁸ Being creative, staying positive, and showing solidarity all seem

Raja, eds., *The Diversity of Classical Archaeology*, "Studies in Classical Archaeology" 1, Turnhout: Brepols, 2017, 23–45.

⁶ See The Obama White House, "Behind the Scenes: President Obama Visits the Acropolis in Athens, Greece", Medium, 17 November 2016, <https://medium.com/@ObamaWhiteHouse/behind-the-scenes-president-obama-visits-the-acropolis-in-athens-greece-190d048daa8f> (accessed 30 June 2021).

⁷ For Classics in American foreign policy, see Thomas E. Jenkins, *Antiquity Now: The Classical World in the Contemporary American Imagination*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 97.

⁸ Illustrated by Helen Oxenbury, London: Heinemann Young Books, 1993. See, e.g., Lissi Athanasiou-Krikelis, "Picture-Book Retellings of 'The Three Little Pigs': Postmodern Parody, Intertextuality, and Metafiction", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 44.2 (2019), 173–193. Christos Karabelas, "Παγκόσμια Ημέρα Βιβλίου: Ο Ευγένιος Τριβιζάς διαβάζει παραμύθια στα προσφυγόπουλα" [Pagkósmia Íméra Vivlíou: O Evgénios Trivizás diavázei paramýthia sta prosfygópoula; International Book Day: Eugenios Trivizas Reads Folk Tales to Refugee Children], *News 24/7*, 23 April 2017, <http://news247.gr/eidiseis/politistika-nea/pagkosmia-hmera-vivliou-o-eygenios-trivizas-diavazei-paramuthia-sta-prosfygopoula.4637682.html> (accessed 30 June 2021). In this chapter, transliterations of Modern Greek follow the system proposed by the Hellenic Organization for Standardization (Ελληνικός Οργανισμός Τυποποίησης; Ελληνικός Οργανισμός Τυποποίησης – known as ELOT); see Ελληνικός Οργανισμός Τυποποίησης, *ΕΛΟΤ 743, 2η Έκδοση* [ELOT 743, 2i Ekdosi; ELOT 743, 2nd ed.], Athína: ELOT, 2001.

to play a greater role in defining collective identity than any feelings of pride that arise from admiring Greece's classical past. Concerns for survival are immediate, and they make contemporary life count more than the distant legacy of either an Ancient Greek or an eighteenth-century Western heritage. The disciplines of Classics, archaeology, and history may seem of little relevance. The classical world, nonetheless, continues to play a role in identity formation and to speak to people's hearts and minds, not least because of its alignment with popular culture.

One item of popular culture that has not received substantial scholarly attention in discussing identity formation in Greece is the illustrations of children's books about the classical world. With my chapter, I aim to make a contribution towards filling this gap. I have chosen two illustrated books for children aged four and above published by Εκδόσεις Παπαδόπουλος (Ekdóseis Papadóπουλος; Papadopoulos Publications), the oldest Athens-based publisher specializing in children's literature.⁹ The first book, by Philippos Mandilaras, is entitled *The Twelve Gods of Olympus* (hereafter *The Twelve Gods*; see Fig. 1). I study the English version of the Greek original from 2008 (*Οι 12 Θεοί του Ολύμπου* [Οι 12 Θεοί του Ολύμπου]), published in 2016.¹⁰ The plot is an adaptation of Hesiod's *Theogony*, starting with Gaia and finishing with Zeus' and the other Olympians' supremacy.¹¹

The second book, by the same author, is called *Διόνυσος, ο κεφάτος θεός* [Diónysos, o kefátos theós; Dionysos, the Merry God; hereafter *Dionysos*], and I use the original in Greek, which was published in 2013 (see Fig. 2).¹² The story, once again, follows a biographical pattern, covering episodes from Dionysos' birth from Zeus' thigh to Dionysos' establishment within the Greek pantheon, and the god's favourable influence on ancient and modern viticulture.

⁹ See "Profile", *EPBooks*, <https://www.epbooks.gr/en/profile/> (accessed 30 June 2021).

¹⁰ Philippos Mandilaras, *The Twelve Gods of Olympus*, ill. Natalia Kapatsoulia, Athens: Papadopoulos, 2016; for the book's website, see <https://www.epbooks.gr/shop/paidika-neanika-biblia/eikonografimena-biblia-gia-paidia/the-twelve-gods-of-olympus/>; for the first Greek edition, see <https://www.epbooks.gr/shop/paidika-neanika-biblia/eikonografimena-biblia-gia-paidia/oi-12-theoi-toy-olympoy-2/> (accessed 30 June 2021).

¹¹ For Hesiod's *Theogony*, see, e.g., Ken Dowden, "Telling the Mythology: From Hesiod to the Fifth Century", in Ken Dowden and Niall Livingstone, eds., *A Companion to Greek Mythology*, Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014, 48–49; Mark P.O. Morford, Robert J. Lenardon, and Michael Sham, *Classical Mythology*, Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015, 61–63.

¹² Philippos Mandilaras, *Διόνυσος, ο κεφάτος θεός* [Diónysos, o kefátos theós; Dionysos, the Merry God], ill. Natalia Kapatsoulia, Athína: Papadopoulos, 2013; for the book's website, see <https://www.epbooks.gr/shop/paidika-neanika-biblia/eikonografimena-biblia-gia-paidia/dionysos-o-kefatos-theos/> (accessed 30 June 2021).

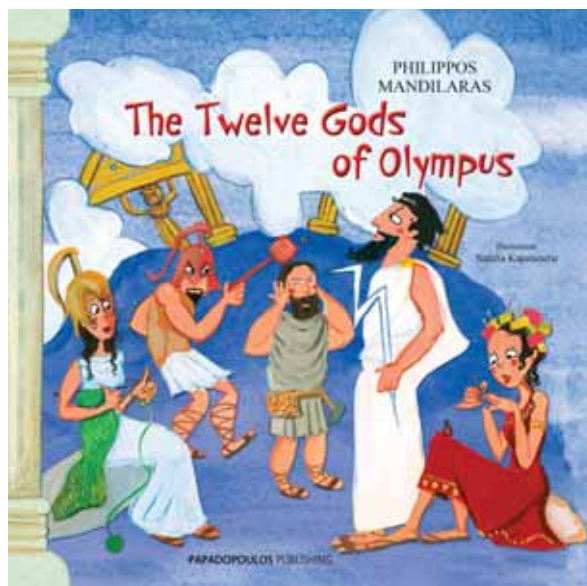


Figure 1: The cover of Philippos Mandilaras, *The Twelve Gods of Olympus*, ill. Natalia Kapatsoulia, Athens: Papadopoulos, 2016 (English ed.). Image © by Papadopoulos Publications. Used with the Publisher's kind permission.



Figure 2: The cover of Philippos Mandilaras, *Διόνυσος, ο κεφάτος θεός* [Dionysos, the Merry God], ill. Natalia Kapatsoulia, Athina: Papadopoulos, 2013. Image © by Papadopoulos Publications. Used with the Publisher's kind permission.

My discussion consists of three sections. Firstly, I offer an overview of illustrated children's books in Greece and I contextualize *The Twelve Gods* and *Dionysos*. Secondly, I investigate the extent of Greekness in the illustrations by comparing them with ancient and modern images.¹³ Thirdly, I expose a possible metanarrative that emerges from the gods' comfortable lifestyle, since the illustrations' humorous aspects could parody (upper) middle-class living in the Western world. I conclude that the illustrations showcase a mirage of a good life. The gods may look modern, but they do not serve as credible models of happiness. Classical myth is cast back in the realm of a fantasy world, giving hope to readers as fiction and entertainment. Readers may find additional hope as they build a sense of belonging to a global community, sharing but also criticizing a Western consumerist lifestyle.

Ethnic Identity in Illustrated Children's Books

The production of children's books in Greece continues to thrive, despite the financial problems of many publishing houses and bookshops.¹⁴ Printed books are by far more popular than e-books.¹⁵ This may relate to Greece's strong gift-giving culture. It is customary for parents, friends, and relatives to give presents to young children at certain times during the year (on name days, birthdays, and public holidays). With few exceptions, such as Eugenios Trivizas's work, Greek children's books are little known beyond Greece's borders, since

¹³ For ancient and folk art influencing the illustrations of children's books, see Alexandra Zerovou, "Historicity and Nature – Text and Image: The Game of Oppositions in Greek Illustrated Books", *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 40.1 (2002), 6–15.

¹⁴ For an overview of the latest trends in Greek children's literature, see Triantafillia Natsiopoulou, "Children's Books for 1–6 Year Olds in Greece", *International Journal of Early Childhood* 33.1 (2001), 57–62; Tassoula Tsilimeni, "From 1945 to the Present", in Peter Hunt, ed., *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, London and New York, NY: Routledge: 2004, 1069–1071; Dominique Sandis, "Children's Literature Research in Greece: The Situation Today", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 33.3 (2008), 306–320; Yiannis S. Papadatos and Dimitris Politis, "Raising the Profile of Today's Greek Children's Literature", *Review of European Studies* 4.4 (2012), 23–28; Dimitris Politis, "Between Modernism and Postmodernism: Greek Literature for Children and Youth in the Last Decades of the Twentieth Century", *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature* 56.2 (2018), 52–56.

¹⁵ Dominique Sandis, "Greek Children's Literature in the Digital Age: An Overview", in Bridget Carrington and Jennifer Harding, eds., *Beyond the Book: Transforming Children's Literature*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, 222.

they do not tend to be translated into foreign languages.¹⁶ On the whole, literary critics, within and outside Greece, pay little attention to children's books and even less to illustrations.¹⁷ There could be a wider trend of mistrusting illustrated books in Greece, including photo books for adults.¹⁸ Consequently, most credit for authorship goes to authors, and not to illustrators. As is the case for the two books that I examine here, however, authors and illustrators collaborate closely, and it is their long-lasting relationship that shapes the books' appeal to children and adults.

The visual language of children's books has been analysed predominantly from the perspective of pedagogy. Angela Yannicopoulou's work, in particular, has emphasized the pedagogical salience of images.¹⁹ Educators have investigated how image and text work together or independently in the book's story and how the illustrations address children's developmental needs, such as the acquisition of emotional maturity.²⁰ The social impact of the illustrations has received less academic attention. There have been discussions, however, of the ideology that underpins the books' themes and images. Scholars have identified a polarity between two dominant ideological strands, traditionalism and progressivism.²¹ Both strands reflect distinct standpoints towards Greece's classical past.

Traditionalists employ the classical legacy to promote high artistic and moral ideals, and to instil a sense of glory in the achievements of Ancient and Modern Greeks. Assumptions about continuity have been important

¹⁶ Maria Nikolajeva, "Introduction", *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 33.3 (2008), 304–305; Melpomeni Kanatsouli, "Ξαναδιαβάζοντας το παρελθόν μέσα από τα βιβλία για παιδιά: ελληνικότητα ή/vs παγκοσμιοποίηση" [Χαναδιανάζοντας το παρελθόν μέσα από τα βιβλία για παιδιά: ελληνικότητα ή/vs παγκοσμιοποίηση; Re-Reading the Past in Children's Books: Greekness or/vs Globalization], *Δια-Κείμενα* [Dia-Keimena; Inter-Texts] 14 (2012), 66.

¹⁷ Papadatos and Politis, "Raising the Profile of Today's Greek Children's Literature", 26.

¹⁸ Eleni Papargyriou, "Textual Contexts of Consumption: The Greek Literary Photobook", in Philip Carabott, Yannis Hamilakis, and Eleni Papargyriou, eds., *Camera Graeca: Photographs, Narratives, Materialities*, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Farnham and Ashgate, 2015, 193–197.

¹⁹ See Angela Yannicopoulou, "Visual Aspects of Written Texts: Preschoolers View Comics", *Educational Studies in Language and Literature* 4.2–3 (2004), 169–181.

²⁰ See Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott, "The Dynamics of Picturebook Communication", *Children's Literature in Education* 31.4 (2000), 225–239; Martin Salisbury, "The Artist and the Postmodern Picturebook", in Lawrence R. Sipe and Sylvia Pantaleo, eds., *Postmodern Picturebooks: Play, Parody, and Self-Referentiality*, New York, NY, and London: Routledge, 2008, 25; Maria Nikolajeva and Carole Scott, *How Picturebooks Work*, Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2013 (ed. pr. 2001); Maria Nikolajeva, "Picturebooks and Emotional Literacy", *Reading Teacher* 67.4 (2013), 249–254.

²¹ See Melpomeni Kanatsouli, "Ideology in Contemporary Greek Picture Books", *Children's Literature* 33 (2005), 209–223.

in constructing ethnic identity, customarily through nationalistic political and educational agendas.²² Reacting against traditionalism and its potential for nationalism, the exponents of progressivism break away from any references to Greece's past, exploring topics that are uncontroversial, such as the natural world, familial relationships, and city life. In the last few decades, children's books in Greece have been influenced greatly by Westernizing and globalizing tendencies in world children's literature.²³ When it comes to antiquities, authors have aimed to bypass local politics. In *Alice in Marbleland* (1997), Alki Zei – a famous author of children's literature – adapted the title and plot of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) to internationalize Greece's claim for the Parthenon Marbles.²⁴

Mythology is perhaps less ideologically laden, by contrast to history and archaeology, which have been instrumental in educational and cultural politics in Greece.²⁵ As there are no state guidelines for teaching mythology at nursery school, the style of illustrations in books for preschoolers is unlikely to reflect any top-down attempts to construct national identity. Classical mythology, nonetheless, affects the shaping of collective identity because it opens up Greek children's literature to the world. While readers outside Greece may not read Greek books, they are knowledgeable about classical myths through schooling, leisure reading, and popular culture.

Image has taken over from text as a form of communication in the twenty-first century, especially with the advent of social media. Classical mythology's ubiquitous visual presence in Western popular culture, including cartoons, comics, and advertising, could promote the feeling that its characters and stories

²² See Theodore G. Zervas, *The Making of a Modern Greek Identity: Education, Nationalism, and the Teaching of a Greek National Past*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2012; Theodore G. Zervas, "From Ottoman Colonial Rule to Nation Statehood: Schooling and National Identity in the Early Greek School", *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación* 4.1 (2017), 1–21.

²³ Kanatsouli, "Ideology in Contemporary Greek Picture Books".

²⁴ Alki Zei, *Alice in Marbleland*, ill. Sofia Zarabouka, Athens: Kedros, 1997; Greek ed.: Alki Zei, *Η Αλίκη στη χώρα των μαρμάρων* [Ī Alíki stī chóra tōn marmárōn; Alice in Marbleland], ill. Sofia Zarabouka, Athína: Kedros, 1997. See also Petros Panaou and Tasoula Tsilimeni, "International Classic Characters and National Ideologies: Alice and Pinocchio in Greece", in Kit Kelen and Björn Sundmark, eds., *The Nation in Children's Literature: Nations of Childhood*, New York, NY, and London: Routledge, 2013, 200–206. For an analysis of Zei's book, see Przemysław Kordos, "A Child among the Ruins: Some Thoughts on Contemporary Modern Greek Literature for Children", in Katarzyna Marciniak, ed., *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, "Metaforms: Studies in the Reception of Classical Antiquity" 8, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016, 127–142.

²⁵ See Sofia Voutsaki and Paul Cartledge, eds., *Ancient Monuments and Modern Identities: A Critical History of Archaeology in 19th and 20th Century Greece*, London: Routledge, 2017.

matter as global heritage. The Greek gods, especially in comics, are favoured cross-culturally.²⁶ International readers can use their familiarity with popular culture to recognize the gods in any odd depiction in print or online. Thus, children and adults approach mythology's visual language with prior knowledge, irrespective of the ideological trends within Greece.²⁷

Philippos Mandilaras and Natalia Kapatsoulia's Gods

The Twelve Gods and *Dionysos* are by the same author and illustrator, Philippos Mandilaras and Natalia Kapatsoulia. Mandilaras is a renowned and award-winning author of children's and young adults' literature. Mandilaras's interest in the hardship of contemporary life is apparent in his novel *Υπέροχος κόσμος* [*Ypérochos kósmos*; *Wonderful World*, 2016], which recounts the story of teenagers living in a multi-ethnic deprived Athenian district.²⁸ In the two books under discussion here, Mandilaras has turned stories about the gods into rhyming verses, dialogues, and succinct statements, all appropriate for young children's learning at nursery school and at home, under the guidance of teachers, parents, and other guardians. Mandilaras's language is simple and the ample use of colloquialisms facilitates memorization by children.

Kapatsoulia is a professional illustrator of children's books, and her prolific output numbers over 300 book projects.²⁹ To date, Kapatsoulia has authored one picture book: *Η μαμά πετάει* [*Ī mamá petáei*; *Mom Wants to Fly*, 2016],³⁰ which has appeared also in Spanish: *Mamá quiere volar* (2015).³¹ Kapatsoulia's degree in French Literature at the University of Athens was followed by studies

²⁶ George Kovacs and C.W. Marshall, "Introduction", in George Kovacs and C.W. Marshall, eds., *Son of Classics and Comics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, xxv.

²⁷ Compare to Perry Nodelman, "Decoding the Images: How Picture Books Work", in Peter Hunt, ed., *Understanding Children's Literature*, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2005, 131, on knowledgeable and less knowledgeable viewers of picture books.

²⁸ Philippos Mandilaras, *Υπέροχος κόσμος* [*Ypérochos kósmos*; *Wonderful World*], Athína: Patakis, 2016. See "Εκδόσεις Πατάκης" [*Ekδόseis Patákis*; Patakis Publications], <https://www.patakis.gr/product/503929/vivlia-paidika-efhvika-logotexnia-cross-over/Uperoxos-kosmos/> (accessed 30 June 2021).

²⁹ βιβλιονet: The Greek Books in Print, <http://www.biblionet.gr> (accessed 30 June 2021).

³⁰ Natalia Kapatsoulia, *Η μαμά πετάει* [*Ī mamá petáei*; *Mom Wants to Fly*], Athína: Diaplasí, 2016.

³¹ Natalia Kapatsoulia, *Mamá quiere volar*, Alagón: Apila Ediciones, 2015, <https://www.apilaidiciones.com/tienda/mama-quiere-volar/> (accessed 30 June 2021).

in Design, Illustration, and Comics at the famous studio of Spyros Ornerakis.³² Her drawing style is humorous, and it is marketed as such by Papadopoulos Publications.

The purpose of *The Twelve Gods* and of *Dionysos* is to educate preschool (and preliterate) children by offering a “who is who” guide to mythology. The books are relatively cheap, priced at 4.49 and 7.19 euros for *The Twelve Gods* and *Dionysos* respectively, and affordable for a broad customer base.³³ For two short books, of some twenty-five pages each, the information provided is exceptionally rich, especially in terms of names of mythical characters and places. The content is informative, but it is also a creative adaptation of ancient myth. I would classify these books as “fiction-nonfiction”, which is a term used by Yannicopoulou to describe books that give facts by means of storytelling.³⁴ The books are part of a best-selling series called “Η πρώτη μου Μυθολογία” [Ἰ πρώτη μου μυθολογία; My First Mythology].³⁵ Studying these books allows us to assess mythology’s reception. The series consists of twenty-six books that cover the gods, the heroes, the Trojan War, the Argonautic Expedition, the Odyssey, and stories about gods and mortals.

I have singled out two books about the gods for three main reasons. Firstly, representations of the gods form the essence of classical art, architectural and free-standing sculpture, and vase iconography. The gods are associated in art with key visual attributes.³⁶ For example, Zeus carries a thunderbolt, Athena wears armour, and Dionysos holds a drinking cup. It becomes pertinent to examine the extent to which the gods’ portrayal in popular children’s books is inspired by ancient images, as this could signal the construction of identity with reference to Greece’s classical past. Secondly, *The Twelve Gods* has been the most commercially successful book in the series, with sales of over 400,000 copies and

³² Ορνεράκης Εφαρμοσμένες Τέχνες [Ornerákis Efarmosménes Téchnes; Ornerakis Applied Arts], <https://www.ornerakis.com/> (accessed 30 June 2021).

³³ For buyers turning to cheap books during the crisis, see Anna Karakatsouli, “The Greek Book in Crisis: Structural Deficiencies and Challenges”, *International Journal of the Book* 11.3 (2014), 5.

³⁴ Angela Yannicopoulou, “The (Non)Fiction Book for Young Children: An Interesting Case in the Greek Publishing Market”, *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children’s Literature* 41.1 (2003), 28–32.

³⁵ For a passing reference to the e-book version of the series, see Sandis, “Greek Children’s Literature in the Digital Age”, 224.

³⁶ For identifying the gods in classical art, see, e.g., Jenifer Neils, “Reconfiguring the Gods on the Parthenon Frieze”, *Art Bulletin* 81.1 (1999), 6–8, and Susan Woodford, “Displaying Myth: The Visual Arts”, in Ken Dowden and Niall Livingstone, eds., *A Companion to Greek Mythology*, Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014, 174–175.

translations also into French, German, Korean, Russian, and Spanish.³⁷ As the illustrations of this book reach out to a wide audience, messages about group identity have the potential to become international. Thirdly, the word *κεφάτος* (*kefátos*; merry) in the title of *Dionysos* could highlight the necessity to transmit optimism during difficult times. Specifically, *κεφάτος* points to the attainment of a joyful spirit through socialization, feasting, and entertainment, all of which resonate with finding hope in crisis-ridden Greece.

A Visual Language for Sharing Greekness

In *The Twelve Gods* and *Dionysos*, the mythical actors have large emphatic eyes, pink cheeks, and big smiles, resembling characters from cartoons, comics, and puppet shows. As suited for preschoolers, most characters exhibit and solicit positive emotions. We encounter also baby and infant gods, with whom young children can relate easily. Gaia emerges out of nothing as a baby, and the tone contrasts between her body and the deep blue background could create the impression of a baby in her mother's womb. Gaia looks familial and human-like in *The Twelve Gods*. The pictorial narrative differs greatly from Gaia's unnatural birth in Hesiod's *Theogony* and in related Near-Eastern and Indian creation myths.³⁸ The gods are young, beautiful, and happy. All goddesses, not just Aphrodite, parade their female allure with their Barbie-looking slim figures and long hair. A question may arise: how Greek are these gods? To address this, I consider how the representations of the gods take cues from both ancient and contemporary visual registers of Greekness.

The gods look Greek, wearing chitons and sandals. Yet the dress code remains generic, and visual references to Greek art are only tentative. The long white robes worn by Zeus and Dionysos, as noted also on the two books' covers (see above, Figs. 1 and 2), are atypical of these gods' ancient portrayals. A remote connection might be made with the charioteers' long white robes in depictions of horse races on late Archaic black-figured vases (see Fig. 3).³⁹ In the

³⁷ Eirini Dermitzaki, personal communication, 30 August 2019.

³⁸ See Ian Rutherford, "Hesiod and the Literary Traditions of the Near East", in Franco Montanari, Antonios Rengakos, and Christos Tsagalis, eds., *Brill's Companion to Hesiod*, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2009, 9–35; and Nicholas J. Allen, "The Indo-European Background to Greek Mythology", in Ken Dowden and Niall Livingstone, eds., *A Companion to Greek Mythology*, Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014, 350–352.

³⁹ See Peter Schultz, "The Iconography of the Athenian Apobates Race: Origins, Meanings, Transformations", in Olga Palagia and Alkestis Choremi-Spetsieri, eds., *The Panathenaic Games:*

two books, the mythical females' simple attire and the paucity of any jewellery point to primitive times, possibly even before the Bronze Age.⁴⁰ Wall paintings from Bronze Age Thera depict more elaborately dressed and adorned women.⁴¹ The weak links with Greek art become apparent also when we contrast the illustrations with iconic works of art. I shall discuss a statue and drinking cup.

A well-known classical statue is the Artemision Bronze, an original in the severe style from approximately 460 BCE that shows either a fearsome naked Zeus or Poseidon preparing to strike the viewer.⁴² In *The Twelve Gods*, however, Zeus and Poseidon are rather naive and childish. Infant Zeus is joyful in the company of nymphs, even though he grows up parentless on a Cretan mountain. The young god, shown without a beard and described as "big and strong", may recall any hero who is eager to help others and bring justice. That Zeus is driven by justice may resonate with *φιλότιμο* (*filótimo*) in Modern Greek culture; that is, with one's sense of pride that motivates them to succeed.⁴³

Ancient and modern registers could function complementarily here. Thus, young Zeus stands tall and handsome as he frees his small and helpless siblings from Cronus' stomach, emulating a quintessential modern (Greek) hero who has *filótimo* and can be likened to Heracles or Theseus. Old Zeus, having defeated the Titans, has a beard. Nothing in Zeus' slim figure and appearance, nonetheless, sets him apart from the other Olympians to justify his leadership. Child Poseidon steps out of Cronus' stomach with a trident in hand. Old and bearded

Proceedings of an International Conference Held at the University of Athens, May 11–12, 2004, Oxford and Oakville, CT: Oxbow Books, 2007, 62.

⁴⁰ Compare to representations of prehistoric archaeology in comics. See, e.g., Thanasis Kougoulos, "Η ιδεολογική χρήση της προϊστορίας στα κόμικς" [*Ī ideologikí chrísī tis proistorías sta kómiks*; The Ideological Use of Prehistory in Comics], in Evángelos Gr. Avdíkos, ed., *Από το παραμύθι στα κόμικς. Παράδοση και Νεωτερικότητα* [*Apó to paramýthi sta kómiks. Parádosi kai Neoterikótita*; From Folk Tales to Comics: Tradition and Modernity], Athína: Odysséas, 1996, 726–741.

⁴¹ Note the fitted, patterned, and colourful garments, the earrings, necklaces, and bracelets, and the intricate coiffures of the painted women from Xeste 3 at Akrotiri, Thera; see Andreas Vlachopoulos, "Detecting 'Mycenaean' Elements in the 'Minoan' Wall Paintings of a 'Cycladic' Settlement: The Wall Paintings at Akrotiri, Thera within Their Iconographic *Koine*", in Hariclia Brecoulaki, Jack L. Davis, and Sharon R. Stocker, eds., *Mycenaean Wall Painting in Context: New Discoveries, Old Finds Reconsidered*, "ΜΕΛΕΤΙΜΑΤΑ" 72, Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation and Institute of Historical Research, 2015, 38–41, Figs. 1a–b; 58–59, Figs. 14a–c.

⁴² Athens, National Archaeological Museum 15161; Nikolaos Kaltsas, *The National Archaeological Museum*, Athens: EFG Eurobank Ergasias S.A. and John S. Latsis Public Benefit Foundation, 2007, 276–279; Mark D. Stansbury-O'Donnell, *A History of Greek Art*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2015, 240.

⁴³ See Theodore Peridis, "Cultural Mythology and Global Leadership in Greece", in Eric H. Kessler and Diana J. Wong-Mingji, eds., *Cultural Mythology and Global Leadership*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2010, 115.

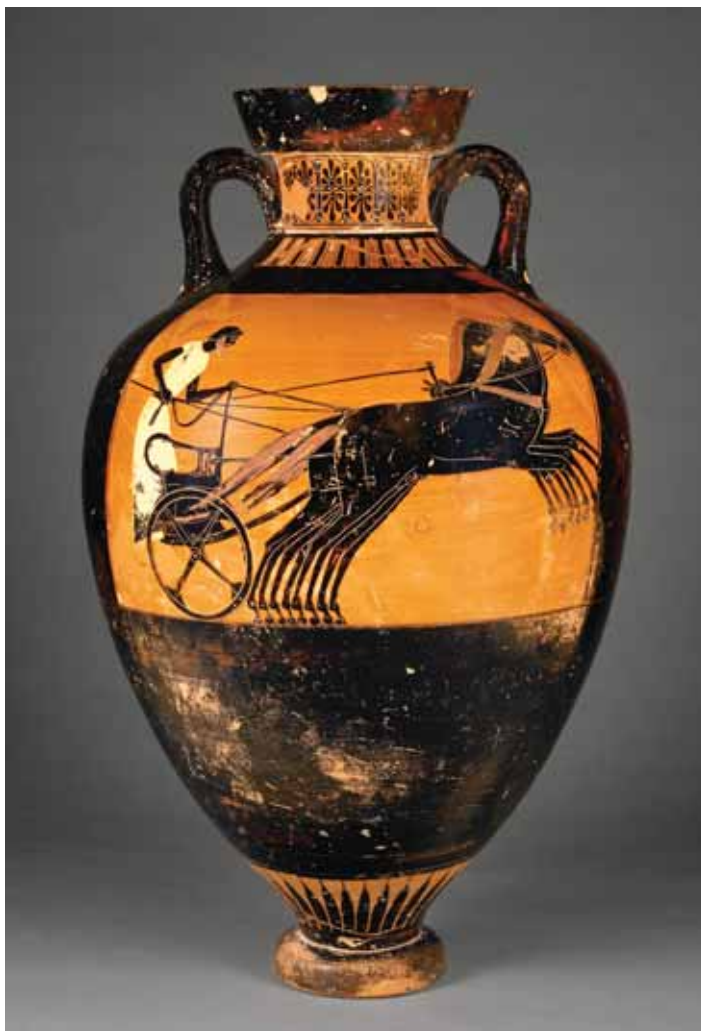


Figure 3: The Kleophrades Painter, *Attic Panathenaic Amphora*, 500–480 BCE, terracotta (65 × 40.3 cm), J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Villa in Malibu, California, inv. no. 77.AE.9, photograph © by the J. Paul Getty Museum. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

Poseidon, who wears a long white robe, smiles happily as he assumes responsibility for the seas. On one occasion, there is no trident, Poseidon's identifying attribute in Greek art, but instead a humorous depiction of an octopus around his arm. Poseidon's blondness, which is unknown in ancient texts, probably aims to make the illustrations appealing to a wide audience via contemporary standards of beauty associated with blond hair. Evidently, the depictions of Zeus

and Poseidon counter the seriousness of Greek art in terms of both style and meaning. The gods in the illustrations are light-hearted, and have little, or no, capacity to instil authoritarian awe in the readers.

In *Dionysos*, the illustration of the god in a trireme with vines growing around its mast could recall a famous black-figure cup from the 530s BCE by potter-painter Exekias (see Fig. 4).⁴⁴ Inside the cup, and against a coral-red background, Exekias painted Dionysos sailing in a sea of dolphins. According to myth (*Hymn. Hom.* 7.35–53), Dionysos, the god of wine and transformations, turned pirates into dolphins.⁴⁵



Figure 4: Exekias, *Dionysus' Cup*, Attic black-figure drinking cup, 540–530 BCE, Vulci, terracotta (13.6 × 30.5 cm), State Collection of Antiquities, Munich, inv. no. 8729 (2044), photograph by Renate Kühling. Image © by State Collection of Antiquities and Glyptothek Munich. We wish to acknowledge the kind help of the State Collection of Antiquities Staff in obtaining permission.

⁴⁴ Munich, *Antikensammlungen*, 8729 (2044); Berthold Fellmann, *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum. Deutschland*, vol. 77: *München, Antikensammlungen ehemals Museum Antiker Kleinkunst*, vol. 13: *Attisch-schwarzfigurige Augenschalen*, München: C.H. Beck, 2004, 13–19, Pl. 2.1–2.

⁴⁵ See Robin Osborne, "Intoxication and Sociality: The Symposium in the Ancient Greek World", *Past & Present* 222.9 (2014): *Cultures of Intoxication*, eds. Angela McShane and Phil Withington, 34.

The illustration in Mandilaras and Kapatsoulia's book departs substantially from Exekias' cup. Dionysos and five pirates, all small, cartoon-like human figures, stand inside the ship (see Fig. 5). Frightened to have a god on board, the seamen are worried about lightning as if they had Zeus with them. No dolphins are shown in the page's blue background, but we read that the pirates ended up in the sea as dolphins. Text is needed here to complement the image's potential connections to ancient art.



Figure 5: Dionysos' ship from Philippos Mandilaras, *Διόνυσος, ο κεφάτος θεός* [Diónysos, o kefátos theós; Dionysos, the Merry God], ill. Natalia Kapatsoulia, Athína: Papadopoulos, 2013. Image © by Papadopoulos Publications. Used with the Publisher's kind permission.

While Greek art is far from the illustrations' prime source of inspiration, we encounter numerous pieces of ancient material culture. We note, for example, a helmet for Athena and Ares, a laurel for Demeter, a lyre for Apollo, a bow for Artemis, and a drinking horn for Zeus and Dionysos, as well as pillars, statues, and temple façades. These elements create a vague impression of Greek Antiquity, without pointing consistently to any specific period. We come to appreciate that the pictorial narrative is about mythology, rather than archaeology and history. Mythology allows the author and illustrator to present a quasi-(a)historical version of Greekness through the use of deep time combined with conflated timescales.

The depth of time is conveyed through material objects that definitely look pre-classical and through the abundant depictions of the natural world. In *Dionysos*, the god carries a golden goblet that is reminiscent of Mycenaean

cups rather than classical specimens.⁴⁶ Buildings, such as temples, palaces, and interior spaces, are less preponderant than natural backdrops, signalling, appropriately for mythical action, that events unfolded in the deep past, before archaeologically attested prehistoric and historic remains. There are depictions of meadows, mountains, the seas, as well as indications of sunny, cloudy, and stormy weather. All these may reflect modernity's environmental concerns.⁴⁷ Also to be noted are plants, flowers, and fruit, which are either decorative or used actively by the mythical characters. Pregnant Semele eats an apple, and there is a watermelon slice, a fig, and a bread loaf next to her, all suggestive of a healthy diet in early times. Although Greek locations are mentioned in the text, and these include Olympus, Crete, and Thebes, most of the action takes place in generic landscapes and, potentially, anywhere in the world.⁴⁸ The mobility of the gods, which is a remarkable feature in classical mythology, could mirror modern realities of international travel and connectedness.⁴⁹

References to contemporary life become more pronounced through the conflation of visual registers from recent and modern times. The recent past is celebrated through the embodiment of traditionalism, given visual elements of folklore and fairy tales. In *The Twelve Gods*, Athena wears a helmet, which is one of her typical characteristics in coinage, sculpture, and vase iconography. In classical art, however, the goddess is shown with additional attributes, such as a shield, a spear, and a chest garment, probably an animal skin decorated with snakes and Gorgon's head.⁵⁰ The illustrations offer a simplified version of Athena's warrior persona. Helmeted Athena, moreover, is depicted knitting

⁴⁶ For golden cups, *kántharoi*, and *kylikes* from Grave Circle A in Mycenae, see Kaltsas, *The National Archaeological Museum*, 102, 108.

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Clive Hamilton, "ReSet Modernity: After Humanism", in Bruno Latour and Christophe Leclercq, eds., *Reset Modernity!*, Karlsruhe, Cambridge, MA, and London: ZKM and MIT Press, 2016, 230–232.

⁴⁸ Contra the local relevance of heroes' and gods' cults in Ancient Greece; see, e.g., Leslie Kurke, "Pindar's Pythian 11 and the *Oresteia*: Contestatory Ritual Poetics in the 5th c. BCE", *Classical Antiquity* 32.1 (2013), 101–175. On the spatiality of Greek myths, see Greta Hawes, ed., *Myths on the Map: The Storied Landscapes of Ancient Greece*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

⁴⁹ For the mobility of goddesses in epic poetry, see Ariadne Konstantinou, *Female Mobility and Gendered Space in Ancient Greek Myth*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 156.

⁵⁰ Cornelius C. Vermeule, "Athena of the Parthenon by Pheidias: A Graeco-Roman Replica of the Roman Imperial Period", *Journal of the Museum of Fine Arts* 1 (1989), 41–60; Anne Ley Xanten, "Athena, Athene. Ikonographie", in Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider, eds., *Der Neue Pauly. Enzyklopädie der Antike*, vol. 2: *Altertum: Ark–Ci*, Stuttgart and Weimar: J.B. Metzler, 1997, 165–166; Noel Robertson, "Athena as Weather Goddess: The Aegis in Myth and Ritual", in Susan Deacy and Alexandra Villing, eds., *Athena in the Classical World*, Leiden: Brill, 2001, 29–30; Susan Deacy, *Athena, "Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World"*, London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2008, 7.

with needles, and not weaving as attested in ancient texts and vase scenes.⁵¹ Knitting may allude to grannies (γιαγιάδες; *giagiádes*), the prime storytellers in Greek folklore who are wise, perhaps like Athena. In *Dionysos*, the god dances under a vine with hanging grape clusters. A fox and a chicken are also present, although the two animals do not accompany Dionysos in ancient representations. Aesop's fable *The Fox and the Grapes* could come to our mind here, a story and an image that has become a world classic. Readers may also think of a well-known proverb in Modern Greek: *όσα δεν φτάνει η αλεπού, τα κάνει κρεμαστάρια* (*όσα den ftáneí ī aleπού, ta káneí kremastária*; sour grapes). The fox and the chicken further recall a multitude of other Greek folk tales involving foxes hunting down chickens.

An additional conflation of mythology with popular folk tales surfaces from Zeus' and Semele's depiction as a prince and princess. Semele is seated in a balcony, embroidering with a red thread, conforming to the role of a beautiful and chaste princess. On the one hand, we are reminded of world-renowned fairy tales with princes and princesses, and perhaps even of Romeo and Juliet. The red thread, on the other hand, could point to the Greek phrase *κόκκινη κλωστή δεμένη* (*kókkiniī klōstí deméniī*; a tied red thread), which denotes the start of commonly relayed fairy tales. The subtle references to both global and local culture may target, perhaps simultaneously, international and Greek readers.

Abundant in the illustrations are also items of Western consumer goods. In *The Twelve Gods*, Uranus pushes a pram with spoked wheels that may date from the 1950s, possibly reflecting that vintage objects are fashionable lately. Hestia carries a saucepan. Crying Hera finds comfort in a teddy bear. Hades holds a torch that emits electric light so that he can see in the darkness of the Underworld. Ares chases away flies with a plastic swat. Hephaestus has his modern-looking tools strapped around his waist. Aphrodite makes herself beautiful with hair rolls, nail varnish, and lipstick. The mythical actors' interactions with all these modern commodities are utterly funny, especially for adults who can spot the incongruent elements and the anachronisms.

Modern culture is also ascribed value through visual references to comics and cartoons, with which (preliterate) children could be familiar before opening their first mythology book. Uranus is shown in mid-air with stars around his head. The stars lead us to believe that he has been punched by Cronus, his

⁵¹ For Athena's patronage of crafts, see Pierre Demargne, "Athéna Ergané", in *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae*, vol. 2.1: *Aphrodisias–Athena*, Zürich and München: Artemis Verlag, 1984, 961–964; Sheramy D. Bundrick, "The Fabric of the City: Imaging Textile Production in Classical Athens", *Hesperia* 77.2 (2008), 326.

son.⁵² Floating red hearts indicate Zeus' affection for Semele, as he kneels before "princess" Semele and confesses his love in a speech bubble. With her long hair adorned with flowers and sea stars, Gaia could resemble Disney's mermaid. On board Dionysos' ship, the pirates have flabby bodies, bald heads, and grim faces, indicative of villains in comics and cartoons (see above, Fig. 5). Clearly, an internationally understood visual language of comics and cartoons makes the story of classical mythology familiar. Four-year-olds are treated as informed and capable individuals, who have been tainted by metonyms of modernity, such as comics.⁵³

Given the visual dominance of contemporary culture in the illustrations, the extent of Greekness in the gods' appearance is rather limited. With an emphasis on consumerism, Greek features, such as chitons, sandals, and helmets, may point more towards commercial kitsch and souvenir reproductions rather than ancient art. The conflation with folklore and with modern material and entertainment culture creates possibilities for additional storytelling. In effect, the illustrations encourage children and adults to reinterpret the narrative of classical myth by inserting stories that matter to them, be it fairy tales or myths about modern life.⁵⁴ Perhaps a parallel can be made to Archaic Greece. Hesiod intended his students to receive knowledge self-sufficiently by recontextualizing excerpts of his poetry.⁵⁵ As the gods' Greekness is feeble, conflated, and subject to creative manipulation, Greekness is unlikely to lead to any concrete notions of national pride and ethnic identity formation. Instead, Greekness is aligned here with a shared (global) culture, especially as experienced by people following a Western lifestyle.

The oblique references to a classical past may facilitate further this disassociation of Greekness from any specific geography and time frame. Two main issues arise. Firstly, the books do not aim to prepare children for visiting museums and other collections of classical antiquities. An implicit message could be that the ancient visual language of the gods in sculpture and painting is difficult

⁵² See Neil Cohn, "Linguistic Relativity and Conceptual Permeability in Visual Narratives: New Distinctions between Language(s) and Thought", in Neil Cohn, ed., *The Visual Narrative Reader*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016, 323, Fig. 12.2.

⁵³ See Bart Beaty, *Comics versus Art*, Toronto, Buffalo, NY, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2012, 13; Kovacs and Marshall, "Introduction", xxix.

⁵⁴ For prompting schoolkids to liken stories about the Greek gods to children's literature, see Diana Kodner Gökçe, Dana O'Brie, and Lizanne Wilson, "A Learning Odyssey: Artistic Collaboration around a Greek Myth", *Schools: Studies in Education* 9.2 (2012), 147–159.

⁵⁵ Lilah Grace Canevaro, *Hesiod's Works and Days: How to Teach Self-Sufficiency*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 217.

to follow, since it necessitates an understanding of materials, techniques, and how style changed over time. The art of the classical era, such as on the Parthenon frieze, glorifies solemnity and the control of emotions. By contrast, the illustrations here emphasize humour, light-heartedness, and excessive happiness.

Secondly, the post-Winckelmann baggage of high aesthetics, imaginary constructions of Greece, and narratives of European and Greek nationalism are all bypassed. The illustrations suggest, and with good reason, that the story of mythology can be told (just as effectively) separately from that of Greek antiquities. The gods can play down any Greekness that either pertains to artistic evidence from the classical period or to scholarly and political interpretations of this period in the last 300 years. The gods' modern appearance seems to indicate that crisis-ridden Greece is inextricably linked with the rest of the world, participating in and contributing to a global popular culture. Group identity, therefore, is strengthened, as children develop a sense of being part of a large community, broader than Greece's history, borders, and economic and other troubles.

The Gods' Comfortable Lifestyle

Zeus and Dionysos, the protagonists in the two books, manage to survive and establish themselves, having been helped by others and favoured by good fortune. In fact, the gods do not do much to succeed, and they remain relaxed throughout. Zeus accepts the Cyclopes' help in fighting the Titans. Yet, the Battle of the Titans is comical, featuring also a female, perhaps Hestia, who fights with a spouted saucepan. Zeus smiles happily when responsibilities are split for the Underworld, the seas, and the heavens, and when the Olympians make him "their King". Consensual decision-making is implied, and Zeus does not emerge as a fearful leader. In the closing pages of *The Twelve Gods*, we have a panorama of the Twelve Olympians (see Fig. 6).

Zeus is part of the team, and not placed above the rest. He stands inactive, without thunderbolt in hand. In *Dionysos*, baby Dionysos, wearing a cap with a ladybird, is carried away from Olympus by a stork. Kybele cures Dionysos of madness. Dionysos' interaction with the ever-growing vine is amusing and suggestive of childish playing. The festive atmosphere continues as Dionysos discovers the effects of drinking wine. While on a mission to bring viticulture to everyone in the world, Dionysos dances in a flowered meadow alongside his rustic companions, two maenads, a satyr, and a silen. Neither Zeus nor

Dionysos can be taken seriously here. The gods seem to overcome adversity through excessive entertainment rather than hard work, supernatural powers, or charismatic leadership.⁵⁶



Figure 6: Panorama of the Twelve Olympians from Philippos Mandilaras, *The Twelve Gods of Olympus*, ill. Natalia Kapatsoulia, Athens: Papadopoulos, 2016 (English ed.), closing pages. Image © by Papadopoulos Publications. Used with the Publisher’s kind permission.

The absence of divine authority holds true also for the other gods. The Olympians personify confident and autonomous individuals with clear-cut roles only to a limited extent. In reality, the gods kill time and do not appear to be busy and laden with responsibilities. Hermes, the “god of trade”, performs a carefree pirouette, a bit like a jester. Aphrodite applies nail varnish. Hera, Hestia, and Demeter stand and chat with each other.⁵⁷ It becomes questionable how mortals

⁵⁶ Nothing points, not even remotely, to the Greek gods’ unique leadership styles, as popularized by corporate-management guru Charles Handy in his internationally influential book *Gods of Management*, which has seen multiple editions since first appearing in print; see Charles B. Handy, *Gods of Management: How They Work and Why They Will Fail*, London: Souvenir Press, 1978. See also Katerina Volioti, “Leadership in Children’s Books about Classical History and Myth” *Our Mythical Childhood Blog*, 3 parts, <https://ourmythicalchildhoodblog.wordpress.com/2020/05/18/leadership-in-childrens-books-about-classical-history-and-myth-part-1-by-katerina-volioti/>; <https://ourmythicalchildhoodblog.wordpress.com/2020/05/28/leadership-in-childrens-books-about-classical-history-and-myth-part-2-by-katerina-volioti/>; <https://ourmythicalchildhoodblog.wordpress.com/2020/06/29/leadership-in-childrens-books-about-classical-history-and-myth-part-3-by-katerina-volioti/> (all accessed 30 June 2021).

⁵⁷ This kind of reception could have a precursor in the gods resting and chatting on the Parthenon frieze.

(in Antiquity) may have trusted, let alone venerated, such leisure-loving gods. At the end of *The Twelve Gods*, we read that ancient people dedicated statues and temples to their gods. Given the gods' playful demeanour, however, we may develop doubts that this ancient activity entailed strong beliefs.⁵⁸ The illustrations dilute, or even negate, any religious viewing of the gods. This distancing from religious concerns is appropriate for reaching out to a diverse audience. A parallel could be made, moreover, with twenty-first-century fantasy literature for children and young adults, which includes stories that refute the Olympians' power.⁵⁹

While the gods in the illustrations are not authoritative, they can still entice readers to enjoy life. A paradox may emerge. On the one hand, the joyful spirit generates optimism, and this promotes escapism from present-day reality through leisure. At the end of *Dionysos*, we see young people going out to snack bars and the theatre. Imbued with Dionysos' spirit, the youths raise their wine glasses and socialize merrily. Dionysos' legacy, then, is about having a good time with friends and family, and about developing a sense of group identity through socialization. On the other hand, as non-ideal entities, the gods seem to send out a broader invitation, asking readers to follow a prosperous Western lifestyle. To become joyful and carefree like the gods, readers need to embrace consumerism, achieve success easily, and have free time, all of which are feasible in (upper) middle-class living. Such a lifestyle can be out of reach for many people in crisis-ridden Greece, for whom visual allusions to a good life could result in negative sentiments, such as helplessness and resentment. People in Greece may feel nostalgia for better times, before the start of the austerity measures in 2010. Yet, the modern visual registers that collapse the boundaries between past and present, and between Greece and the rest of the world, could be universalizing hardship. From a postmodern perspective, the illustrations here might even be suggestive of dissatisfaction with the unfulfilled promises of modernity to offer opportunities to all in society.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ See Tim Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods: Atheism in the Ancient World*, London: Faber & Faber, 2016. For wider discourses on the relationship between the gods of Greece and Western thought, see Sara Lyons, "The Disenchantment/Re-Enchantment of the World: Aesthetics, Secularization, and the Gods of Greece from Friedrich Schiller to Walter Pater", *Modern Language Review* 109.4 (2014), 873–895, and Michael D. Konaris, *The Greek Gods in Modern Scholarship: Interpretation and Belief in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Germany and Britain*, Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford Classical Monographs, 2016.

⁵⁹ See discussion and examples in Sarah Annes Brown, "The Classical Pantheon in Children's Fantasy Literature", in Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin Eldon Stevens, eds., *Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 189–208.

⁶⁰ See Steven B. Smith, *Modernity and Its Discontents: Making and Unmaking the Bourgeoisie from Machiavelli to Bellow*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016, 347–348.

The visual language of the gods could parody Western life, especially its extensive commoditization and superficiality. As I discussed in the previous section, the gods point to images of generic ancients wearing chitons and sandals, as well as to characters from cartoons and comics. The illustrations may function as commodities per se, since the gods' visually standardized appearance recalls characters that are easily recognizable by a wide audience. The gods' comical performance could be far from genuine, not least because it is replicated from that of other popular characters. Readers can potentially see through this superficial happiness, mistrusting the gods as behavioural models. The modern-looking gods in the illustrations seem real and accessible, but their presence invokes the fake and the futile. As a result, myth is cast back in its fictional place.

Conclusions

The illustrations of *The Twelve Gods* and *Dionysos* interrogate the seriousness of the classical past, be it ancient art or modern rediscoveries of Greece for constructing collective identities based on high ideals. Kapatsoulia's humorous visual language mixes elements from the distant past with traditional folklore and contemporary consumerist culture. The valorization of ordinary objects, such as saucepans, torches, and lipsticks, treats Western modernity as a window into the classical world. The everyday and the mundane may succeed in rooting mythical stories in quotidian reality. Children and adults are not asked to negotiate their position in the world as heirs or admirers of an ancient culture. Instead, readers can develop a sense of belonging in a large community, regardless of geographic and national borders. Shared Greekness, also as a fun element of popular culture, can suit almost anyone in today's increasingly globalized world. If the classical past is something to laugh about, readers do not need to compete with their ancient counterparts' achievements.

Children and adults may appreciate the gods' comical portrayal differently. On the one hand, both children and adults may find it amusing that the gods of Ancient Greece recall puppets, characters from cartoons and comics, and humans that need to wear nappies, push prams, and carry torches. These familiar-looking gods are amiable, and learning about Greek myths becomes a pleasant experience. Mythology entices through optimism and entertainment.

On the other hand, especially for adults who read these books to (preliterate) four-year-olds, a metanarrative unfolds. The gods enjoy a comfortable and carefree lifestyle, accessible mostly to affluent individuals of the (upper) middle

class in Greece and other countries. The humorous drawing style, nonetheless, could make a mockery of such a lifestyle and of Western modernity more generally. The visual language seems to imply that a good life, and those who can afford it, can be trivialized and caricatured. The gods are meant to be received as comical figures. Readers may find this mockery empowering, seeing the fragility of allegedly strong personalities, such as Zeus the “leader of the gods and men” (see Fig. 6).

The illustrations may affect constructions of group identity in two main ways. Firstly, the dilution of Greek elements creates notions of a shared, cross-border visual culture, involving only a generic projection of Greekness. In readers’ minds, the gods’ white robes, sandals, and helmets can have a multitude of associations, ranging from ancient art to kitsch souvenirs. Readers, irrespective of their ethnic background, could be inspired to formulate their own cognitive connections, and their distinct understandings of Greekness. Secondly, the parody of a consumerist lifestyle opens up classical mythology to an even wider audience. The gods’ comical portrayal may prompt socially underprivileged individuals to question Western modernity for its failure to create equal opportunities for everyone. These individuals may identify with diverse communities of people, in Greece and abroad, who voice similar views about society.

Classical myth, then, is offered here as a medium that unites people, culturally and socially. More than the mythical hope that children and adults may find in the fantasy world of gods that emerge out of nothing (Gaia), out of Cronus’ stomach (Zeus’ siblings), and out of Zeus’ thigh (Dionysos), readers may develop a sense of a shared destiny in a global world. Such a global identity can give hope to overcome any ill-fated notions of nationalistic divisions and to see beyond the historic, geographic, and social contingencies that bring hardship.

The book is to be recommended for academics as well as graduate and post-graduate students working on the reception of Classical Antiquity and its transformations around the world.

David Movrin, University of Ljubljana
From the editorial review

Our Mythical Hope is the latest collection of articles by scholars participating in an ongoing collaboration to ensure that the beauty and profundity of Classical myth remain known, and (hopefully) remain part of our modern culture. The size of this compendium, the sweep of subjects considered, the involvement of leading experts from around the world, all testify to how important and extensive this initiative has become over the last decade. The project's continued commitment to engage all ages, especially the young, and to extend its outreach beyond the Academy merely, makes it a leading model for how research retains its relevance.

Mark O'Connor, Boston College
From the editorial review



Classical Antiquity is a particularly important field in terms of "Hope studies" [...]. For centuries, the ancient tradition, and classical mythology in particular, has been a common reference point for whole hosts of creators of culture, across many parts of the world, and with the new media and globalization only increasing its impact. Thus, in our research at this stage, we have decided to study how the authors of literary and audiovisual texts for youth make use of the ancient myths to support their young protagonists (and readers or viewers) in crucial moments of their existence, on their road into adulthood, and in those dark hours when it seems that life is about to shatter and fade away. However, if Hope is summoned in time, the crisis can be overcome and the protagonist grows stronger, with a powerful uplifting message for the public. [...] Owing to this, we get a chance to remain true to our ideas, to keep faith in our dreams, and, when the decisive moment comes, to choose not hatred but love, not darkness but light.

Katarzyna Marciniak, University of Warsaw
From the introductory chapter

