

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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CONTENTS

Katarzyna Marciniak, *What Is Mythical Hope in Children's and Young Adults' Culture? – or: Sharing the Light* 11

Notes on Contributors 47

List of Figures 59

Part I: Playing with the Past

Véronique Dasen, *Playing with Life Uncertainties in Antiquity* 71

Rachel Bryant Davies, "This Is the Modern Horse of Troy": *The Trojan Horse as Nineteenth-Century Children's Entertainment and Educational Analogy* 89

Part II: The Roots of Hope

Katarzyna Jerzak, *Myth and Suffering in Modern Culture: The Discursive Role of Myth from Oscar Wilde to Woodkid* 131

Marguerite Johnson, "For the Children": *Children's Columns in Australian Newspapers during the Great War – Mythic Hope, or Mythic Indoctrination?* 145

Jan Kieniewicz, *Bandar-Log in Action: The Polish Children's Experience of Disaster in Literature and Mythology* 159

Simon J.G. Burton and Marilyn E. Burton, *Mythical Delight and Hope in C.S. Lewis's Till We Have Faces and Chronicles of Narnia* 179

Part III: Holding Out for a Hero... and a Heroine

N.J. Lowe, *How to Become a Hero* 193

Robert A. Sucharski, *Joe Alex (Maciej Słomczyński) and His Czarne okręty [Black Ships]: A History of a Trojan Boy in Times of the Minoan Thalassocracy* 211

Michael Stierstorfer, *From an Adolescent Freak to a Hope-Spreading Messianic Demigod: The Curious Transformations of Modern Teenagers in Contemporary Mythopoetic Fantasy Literature* (Percy Jackson, Pirates of the Caribbean, The Syrena Legacy) 219

Markus Janka, *Heraclēs/Hercules as the Hero of a Hopeful Culture in Ancient Poetry and Contemporary Literature and Media for Children and Young Adults* 231

Susan Deacy, *Hercules: Bearer of Hope for Autistic Children?* 251

Edoardo Pecchini, *Promoting Mental Health through the Classics: Hercules as Trainer in Today's Labours of Children and Young People* 275

Krishni Burns, *La Fontaine's Reeds: Adapting Greek Mythical Heroines to Model Resilience* 327

Part IV: Hope after Tragedy

- Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts, *New Hope for Old Stories: Yiyun Li's Gilgamesh and Ali Smith's Antigone* **345**
- Edith Hall, *Our Greek Tragic Hope: Young Adults Overcoming Family Trauma in New Novels by Natalie Haynes and Colm Tóibín* **371**
- Hanna Paulouskaya, *Turning to Myth: The Soviet School Film Growing Up* **387**
- Divine Che Neba and Daniel A. Nkemleke, *Ayi Kwei Armah's Two Thousand Seasons and Osiris Rising as Pan-African Epics* **413**

Part V: Brand New Hope

- Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer, *The Utopia of an Ideal Community: Reconsidering the Myth of Atlantis in James Gurney's Dinotopia: The World Beneath* **433**
- Elizabeth Hale, *Mystery, Childhood, and Meaning in Ursula Dubosarsky's The Golden Day* **451**
- Babette Puetz, *When Is a Robot a Human? Hope, Myth, and Humanity in Bernard Beckett's Genesis* **471**
- Helen Lovatt, *Hungry and Hopeful: Greek Myths and Children of the Future in Mike Carey's Melanie Stories* **491**
- Lisa Maurice, *Percy Jackson and Israeli Fan Fiction: A Case Study* **511**
- Katerina Volioti, *Images of Hope: The Gods in Greek Books for Young Children* **531**
- Ayelet Peer, *Growing Up Manga Style: Mythological Reception in Yoshikazu Yasuhiko's Arion Manga* **555**
- Anna Mik, Et in (Disney) Arcadia ego: *In Search of Hope in the 1940 Fantasia* **577**
- Elżbieta Olechowska, *Between Hope and Destiny in the Young Adult Television Series Once Upon a Time, Season 5, Episodes 12–21 (2016)* **593**

Part VI: Behold Hope All Ye Who Enter Here...

- Jerzy Axer, *Kotick the Saviour: From Inferno to Paradise with Animals* **613**
- Krzysztof Rybak, *All Is (Not) Lost: Myth in the Shadow of the Holocaust in Bezsenność Jutki [Jutka's Insomnia] by Dorota Combrzyńska-Nogala* **629**
- Owen Hodgkinson, *Orphic Resonances of Love and Loss in David Almond's A Song for Ella Grey* **645**
- Katarzyna Marciniak, *"I Found Hope Again That Night...": The Orphean Quest of Beauty and the Beast* **669**
- Bibliography **721**
- Index of Names **807**
- Index of the Main Concepts and Mythological Figures **819**

PART IV

Hope after Tragedy



NEW HOPE FOR OLD STORIES: YIYUN LI'S GILGAMESH AND ALI SMITH'S ANTIGONE

Myth may be conceived of and retold as a source of hope for children and young adults, providing them with alternative worlds to live in or ways of working through their own perplexities and sorrows. But children may themselves be envisioned as myth's best hope: fresh readers whose engagement with these stories will grant them continuing life. This investment in children as readers is at the heart of the "Save the Story" series, which offers rewritings of canonical literary works by noted contemporary authors, targeted to child audiences. The series, a venture of the Scuola Holden in Turin, a school for storytelling founded by the writer Alessandro Baricco, is described as "a mission in book form: saving great stories from oblivion by retelling them for a new, younger generation".¹ Originally published in Italian beginning in 2010 and translated into numerous languages, the books have been issued in English since 2013 by Pushkin Children's Books.²

¹ This description appears in a brief account of the series at the end of each volume; see Yiyun Li, *The Story of Gilgamesh*, ill. Marco Lorenzetti, London: Pushkin Children's Books, 2014 (ed. pr. in Italian: *La storia di Gilgamesh*, Roma: Gruppo Editoriale L'Espresso, 2011), 102, and Ali Smith, *The Story of Antigone*, ill. Laura Paoletti, London: Pushkin Children's Books, 2013 (ed. pr. in Italian: *La storia di Antigone*, Roma: Gruppo Editoriale L'Espresso, 2011), 94. For additional information about the series, we are indebted to Edoardo Pecchini, who made inquiries at the Scuola on our behalf.

² Titles in the series, which has now concluded, include: *The Story of Don Juan* (2013, ed. pr. in Italian 2010) by Alessandro Baricco; *The Story of the Betrothed* (2014, ed. pr. in Italian 2010) by Umberto Eco; *The Story of Cyrano de Bergerac* (2014, ed. pr. in Italian 2010) by Stefano Benni; *The Story of the Nose* (2014, ed. pr. in Italian 2010) by Andrea Camilleri; *The Story of Crime and Punishment* (2014, ed. pr. in Italian 2011) by A.B. Yehoshua; *The Story of Gilgamesh* (2014, ed. pr. in Italian 2011) by Yiyun Li; *The Story of Antigone* (2013, ed. pr. in Italian 2011) by Ali Smith; *The Story of Gulliver* (2013, ed. pr. in Italian 2011) by Jonathan Coe; *The Story of Captain Nemo* (2013, ed. pr. in Italian 2011) by Dave Eggers; *The Story of King Lear* (2014, ed. pr. in Italian 2011) by Melania G. Mazzucco; and not yet available in English, *La storia de La nave dei bambini* (2013, based on Marcel Schwob's *La croisade des enfants*) by Mario Vargas Llosa.

The "Save the Story" series is further identified as "a library of favourite stories from around the world" – a familiar description, versions of which may be found in countless anthologies of tales of different kinds.³ But the list of books in the series is somewhat unusual, reflecting the editors' conviction that children can appreciate any story as long as it is strong, coherent, and well told. Although a few of the stories are rooted in popular tradition, most of them are best known as canonical literary texts. Furthermore, few of them seem to have been chosen with an eye to their obvious appeal to modern children. *Gulliver's Travels* and the novels of Jules Verne are longstanding crossover texts, though children nowadays are less likely to have read them, and they appear in the series as *The Story of Gulliver* and *The Story of Captain Nemo*. But *The Story of King Lear*, *The Story of Crime and Punishment*, *The Story of Don Juan*, and *The Story of the Betrothed* (after *I promessi sposi* by Alessandro Manzoni, ed. pr. 1827) – either because of their grimness or because of their decidedly adult themes – are more surprising in a list ostensibly for middle-grade readers, aged eight to twelve.

In this respect, the "Save the Story" series may seem to resemble other contemporary projects designed to expose children to works of high culture very early: parents can now purchase "BabyLit" board books, such as a version of *Moby Dick* for ages three to five,⁴ and "KinderGuides", which provide illustrated "Early Learning Guides" for children four to eight years old with "story summaries" of works from the *Odyssey* to *On the Road* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.⁵ But while both "BabyLit" and "KinderGuides" stress the educational value of cultural literacy, "Save the Story" puts the pleasure afforded by stories first and makes the children happy instruments of a broader cultural mission.⁶

Seeking to save books by rewriting them is a familiar feature of the history of reception; ancient and medieval allegorization, for example, has provided

³ Li, *The Story of Gilgamesh*, 102; Smith, *The Story of Antigone*, 94.

⁴ Mandy Archer, *Herman Melville's Moby-Dick*, ill. Annabel Tempest, Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2017; "BabyLit" storybooks also include versions of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Huckleberry Finn*, and there is a "BabyLit" series of "primers" apparently for even younger children (e.g., Jennifer Adams, *Little Master Shakespeare: Romeo & Juliet. A Counting Primer*, Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2011).

⁵ Fredrik Colting and Melissa Medina, *KinderGuides Early Learning Guide to Homer's The Odyssey*, ill. Yeji Yun, Los Angeles, CA: Moppet Books, 2017.

⁶ This concern with the survival of stories is distinct from (although it may coincide with) the use of traditional stories to reinforce cultural norms for children, cited as the primary function of re-told stories in John Stephens and Robyn McCallum, *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature*, New York, NY: Garland, 1998.

such diverse works as Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the *Song of Songs* with morally and theologically acceptable meanings, enabling their survival and their place in a particular canon. In most such instances, to save the story from rejection or oblivion is also to save the reader from unappealing or potentially harmful content. And no readers are so likely to be seen as requiring this kind of protection as child readers, for whose sake traditional stories of all kinds have not only been simplified but have regularly been rewritten to avoid or obscure content that adults feel children should not be exposed to. In the case of "Save the Story", the goal is rather to make literary Classics as accessible and appealing as possible to the child readers who are envisioned as their saviours, who will play the redemptive role often attributed to children by saving these books from the effects of time rather than from their unacceptable contents. Inevitably, the results are often similar, as many of the changes introduced by the retellers reflect an obvious and familiar adult impulse to shield children from distressing outcomes or explicit sexuality. But because the authors recruited for this series are not otherwise children's writers, and because they have the particular goal of turning their readers into storytellers, the "Save the Story" books do not always follow predictable patterns of children's literature.⁷

In this chapter, we discuss the two books in the "Save the Story" series that retell ancient myths: *The Story of Gilgamesh* (2014, Italian ed. 2011) by Yiyun Li and *The Story of Antigone* (2013, Italian ed. 2011) by Ali Smith.⁸ Even in their earliest versions, these myths have associations with distinct literary genres, epic in the case of *Gilgamesh* and tragedy in the case of *Antigone*, which determine the kinds of children's stories they lend themselves to and the particular revisionary strategies adopted by their authors.

⁷ The authors in the series were left free to retell the stories as they wished and in their own voice, subject only to restrictions of length: every book is approximately 9,000 words and is divided into ten chapters, each suitable for five minutes of bedtime reading.

⁸ Yiyun Li (b. 1972) is a Chinese-American writer, the author of novels, short-story collections, and a memoir; her work explores experiences of loss, of complex and often damaged connections with other people, of failed expectations, and of our relationship to language and to literature. In one of her novels, *Where Reasons End* (2019), a mother speaks with the son she has lost to suicide. Ali Smith (b. 1962) is a Scottish playwright, novelist, and short-story writer whose intricately structured, non-linear narratives play with the boundaries of time and place and the line between life and death. Her most recent works, *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), and *Summer* (2020), form a series that probes the current state of British life and politics.

Gilgamesh as Special Child

Gilgamesh is the oldest story in the “Save the Story” series, but it entered the Western canon only after its discovery in the middle of the nineteenth century, and has become a part of the tradition of myths retold for children more recently still, with a number of illustrated storybook versions in the past fifty years.⁹ Li does not, therefore, evoke (as retellers of Graeco-Roman myth have regularly done) the importance of the myth in the European cultural tradition or its long familiarity, and she is in any case careful not to assume any particular cultural context for her audience: “Gilgamesh”, she says, “lived in a different time and possibly a different place than you and I”.¹⁰ Instead, Li seeks to carry out her mission by showing that what appears to be “old and foreign” (7) is actually familiar – by treating *Gilgamesh* as the story of a child who (as he grows up) gradually learns to control himself, to make friends, and to confront violence, loss, and death;¹¹ by instructing her young readers in how to understand the story and addressing them directly and personally; and by making them partners in the story’s transmission.

Li’s version leaves the narrative itself – if it is fair to speak of such an entity given the original’s multiple and fragmentary sources – essentially intact, and follows a standard version of the epic.¹² Gilgamesh is a young king with partly divine parentage whose unconstrained power dismays his people and leads them to appeal to the gods; in response, the gods create Enkidu, a wild man who is gradually civilized and becomes first Gilgamesh’s rival and then his beloved friend. Together the two of them journey to the Cedar Forest, where they fight and kill the monster Humbaba, who curses them before he dies. The goddess

⁹ See Bernarda Bryson, *Gilgamesh: Man’s First Story*, ill. Reg Down, Sacramento, CA: Pied Piper Press, 2012 (ed. pr. 1967); Ludmila Zeman’s volumes: *Gilgamesh the King*, Toronto: Tundra, 1992; *The Revenge of Ishtar*, Toronto: Tundra, 1993; *The Last Quest of Gilgamesh*, Toronto: Tundra, 1995; Geraldine McCaughrean, *Gilgamesh the Hero*, ill. David Parkins, Grand Rapids, MI, and Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002; Ann-Margret “Maggie” Yonan, *Gilgamesh*, ill. Linda Kass, trans. Youab I. Yonan, ed. Tobia Giwargis, n.p.: Xlibris, 2008; Nate Phillips, *King Gilgamesh and the Cedar Forest: An Adaptation of the Epic of Gilgamesh*, n.p.: Amazon Kindle, 2017.

¹⁰ Li, *The Story of Gilgamesh*, 7. All the quotations in this chapter are from the 2014 English edition.

¹¹ In Phillips, *King Gilgamesh and the Cedar Forest*, Gilgamesh and other characters are depicted as children throughout; Ishtar is a “neighbor girl” (17) who wants to play, and Enkidu’s descent to the Underworld is “known to most kids as ‘grounded to his room’” (21).

¹² See Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982; *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, ed. A.R. George, 2 vols., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

Ishtar falls in love with Gilgamesh, who rejects her; furious, she sends the Bull of Heaven against him, but he kills it too. Soon after, Enkidu falls ill and dies; Gilgamesh is overwhelmed both by grief and by the fear of death, and sets forth on a quest for immortality, travelling to visit Utnapishtim, the survivor of the great flood, and the only mortal ever made immortal. This quest is fruitless, and Gilgamesh returns home to Uruk.

Li's version includes predictable modifications for its young audience; she rids the text to some extent of taboo elements and puzzling narrative or linguistic features. The prostitute who is the chief instrument of Enkidu's initial acculturation is here described as a priestess, and she and Enkidu do nothing more than walk hand in hand and kiss "as lovers do" (21).¹³ The odd genealogical arithmetic that makes Gilgamesh two-thirds god and one-third man is omitted, and the repeated formula in which his face is "like a traveler's from afar"¹⁴ has been replaced by less mysteriously evocative comparisons. The narrative provides more explanations, and characters' emotions are more fully described and explicated than in the original. Gilgamesh's mother does not just predict the coming of a powerful friend who will rescue him and whom he will love like a woman; she describes in distinctly modern terms what a friend is:

A true friend, Ninsun said, shares your joys and happiness, and comforts you when you are sad. He helps you clear your mind when you feel indecisive, and he protects you when dangers catch you unprepared. A true friend is a companion of your heart. (15)

And when she later adopts Enkidu, we are given not just the significant fact of the adoption but also Enkidu's emotional response:

Tears came to Enkidu's eyes. As an orphan, he had never known a mother's warmth, but now he no longer felt like an abandoned child. He had a mother and a brother. (34)

It is in the opening sections of the book that Li most strikingly configures her story for child readers, first replacing the prologue of the epic with a quite different prologue of her own. The *Gilgamesh* epic simply tells, and does not explain:

¹³ In other versions for children she is a priestess (Bryson, *Gilgamesh: Man's First Story*); a singer (Zeman, *Gilgamesh the King*); a dancing girl (McCaughrean, *Gilgamesh the Hero*); and "the priestess of love" (Yonan, *Gilgamesh*).

¹⁴ Trans. after *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, ed. and trans. Benjamin R. Foster, New York, NY, and London: Norton, 2001, 72.

He who saw the wellspring, the foundations of the land,
Who knew [...], was wise in all things,
Gilgamesh, who saw the wellspring, the foundations of the land,
Who knew [...], was wise in all things,
[He ...] throughout,
Full understanding of it all he gained,
He saw what was secret and revealed what was hidden,
He brought back tidings from before the flood,
From a distant journey came home, weary, at peace,
Engraved all his hardships on a monument of stone,
[Description of the city]
[Search out] the foundation box of copper,
[Release] its lock of bronze,
Raise the lid upon its hidden contents,
Take up and read from the lapis tablet
Of him, Gilgamesh, who underwent many hardships.¹⁵

Li carefully frames the story for young modern readers, identifying time and setting:

This is a story about how a child with an extraordinary yet destructive power became a man of wisdom and strength. This child, like you, had a very special name: Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh lived in a different time and possibly a different place than you and I: he lived about 4,800 years ago, which makes his story sound old – ancient, even. He lived in a city called Uruk, which, if you look on a map, you will find in Iraq, a country full of stories that are never-ending. But if you think that Gilgamesh's story is an old and foreign one, I can guarantee you that it's not. Read on, and you will find that his story is not unlike the stories of your parents and grandparents, your aunts or uncles, or your favourite teacher. One day you yourself, as a grownup of wisdom and strength, may remember Gilgamesh's story; you may realize then that it is not unlike your own or your best friend's, and you may want to tell the story to your children, just as I am doing now. So here we begin. (7)

Li not only presents the ancient epic as an account of maturation from childhood to adulthood, thus transforming the story of a man into the story of a child, but also at once acknowledges and denies the exoticism and antiquity

¹⁵ Ibidem, 3.

first of the hero's name and then of his story. The name Gilgamesh is described not as foreign or antiquated but as "special"; it is, however, no more special than the reader's own. Gilgamesh lived about 4,800 years ago, but his story is neither old nor foreign; it resembles the stories of adults close to the reader. Li's "read on" recalls the closing words of the epic's prologue, in which readers are told to "take up and read from the lapis tablet", and similarly points to the perpetuation of Gilgamesh's story, but here both the lapis tablet and the act of reading itself are displaced by the familiar childhood scenario of storytelling: readers may eventually come to realize that this story is "not unlike" their own, and may want to tell it to their own children, as Li (we now learn) is telling it to hers. This last supposition – that the author-narrator is addressing her own child as well as children in general – is, of course, a longstanding trope in children's fiction, found (for example) in Charles Kingsley's *The Heroes* (1855), one of the earliest retellings of myths as children's stories, which like Li's book is dedicated to his own children, and which begins with the words "My Dear Children".¹⁶

We find another evocation of the familiar in the opening of the story proper, which sounds far more like a fairy tale or a classical myth retold for children than like the beginning of the story in our sources, which plunges directly into formulaic praise of the hero: "Surpassing all kings, for his stature renowned / offspring of Uruk, a charging wild bull".¹⁷ Li begins: "In a great old city called Uruk there lived a young king, Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh's father was King Lugalbanda, and his mother was the goddess Ninsun, so divine blood flowed through Gilgamesh's veins" (11). After introducing Gilgamesh as a "young king", Li again describes him as a child:

As a special child (*but what child is not special?* you may ask, and it is very true that all children are special), so – like you and your friends, Gilgamesh was smart and handsome and strongly built, a perfect child in his parents' eyes. (11)

Here Li transforms Gilgamesh's notable qualities in the epic, where he is "perfect in strength" and "uncannily perfect"¹⁸ into the characteristics of a "special

¹⁶ Charles Kingsley, *The Heroes, or, Greek Fairy Tales for My Children*, Cambridge: Macmillan, 1859 (ed. pr. 1855), vii. This trope mimics those instances in which a book actually has its origin in stories told to the author's child or to a child known to the author (e.g., Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*).

¹⁷ *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

child", who is, after all, no more special than he is foreign or ancient, since all children – like their names – are special, and perfect only in their parents' eyes. She thus makes of Gilgamesh not only a child, but any child, or every child: his unique qualities and his quasi-divinity are subordinated to the need to connect him with the young reader.

In what follows, the arrogant and violent behaviour that upsets the people of Uruk at the outset of the epic is assimilated to a child's temper tantrum:

[S]ometimes things go wrong at playtime: a boy will hurl his favourite robot across the room, or a girl will tear her favourite paper princess into pieces. This is not because they don't love their possessions. [...] Often, children's minds are not experienced enough to know when their egos are growing out of bounds and harming others and themselves. (11–12)

Just as children who cannot control themselves may destroy their favourite possessions, so Gilgamesh, even when he is no longer a child but a young king, feels "something wild and unruly expanding in his heart"; unable to identify or express what he lacks, he throws tantrums, "kicking or trampling on anything that is in his way" (13). The illustrations by Marco Lorenzetti complement this vision of the hero: we first see Gilgamesh as an angry child (Fig. 1), dismaying an adult by dropping and breaking a toy horse, and then as an older but still beardless young king (Fig. 2), to whom adult citizens must now bow down, but who is still acting like a child, pulling a cat's tail so that it knocks over a bucket of water.

Lorenzetti's illustration actually mitigates the violence of Li's text, in which the continuation of the playroom metaphor leads to an image of horrific but surreal and almost cartoonish cruelty:

Worse, he took small boys from their fathers and threw them around like a child throws his toy robots. This hurt the children, but their crying and screaming only made Gilgamesh bolder and crueler, and he began snatching young girls from their mothers, taking them home with him and ripping them apart like helpless paper princesses. (13–14)

In the opening sequences of the book, then, Li has used several strategies to bring the story closer to her imagined child reader: she familiarizes the ancient and foreign; she provides a storybook opening; she makes the young king a child, special to his parents like all children, but given to tantrums



Figure 1: Gilgamesh as an angry child dismaying an adult, illustration by Marco Lorenzetti from Yiyun Li, *The Story of Gilgamesh*, London: Pushkin Children's Books, 2014, 10. Used with the Publisher's kind permission.

of a destructive kind that persist into young adulthood. In what follows, Gilgamesh will grow up, find the friend who fulfils the need he did not understand, love and lose that friend, and ultimately learn to live with death and loss, rule wisely, and treat his people "with love and fairness" (89). But Li does not simply leave it to the reader to understand this archaic story – slightly transformed – as a hopeful account of maturation, friendship, and self-mastery: she frames her account by letting the reader know from the beginning just how it is to be understood, in what is almost a kind of allegorization.

The guidance Li offers the reader is associated with another strategy: her narrator regularly addresses the child reader as an individual, sometimes suggesting that the two of them are engaged in a conversation. This conversation begins in the prologue with the words: "This child, like you, had a very special name", and continues as the narrator links herself with the reader by the words "you and I" and speaks to the reader of "your" family members and friends (7).



Figure 2: Gilgamesh as young king, illustration by Marco Lorenzetti from Yiyun Li, *The Story of Gilgamesh*, London: Pushkin Children's Books, 2014, 13. Used with the Publisher's kind permission.

In a passage from the opening section of the story, quoted above, Li then stages a dialogue between narrator and reader, followed by a further declaration of resemblance between Gilgamesh and “you”, the reader:

As a special child (*but what child is not special?* you may ask, and it is very true that all children are special), – so, like you and your friends, Gilgamesh was smart and handsome and strongly built, a perfect child in his parents' eyes. (11)

Finally, as Li embarks on her comparison between Gilgamesh and a small child given to tantrums, she again suggests a conversation between narrator and child reader. The narrator asks questions (“Have you ever seen a small child exploring the same toy chest with fresh interest every day?”, 11); offers explanations (“That is because in a child's mind the toys don't grow old”, 11); anticipates and responds to a question from the reader (“[I]f you don't know the meaning of the word *ego*, it comes from Latin, and it means self”, 12); and implies that she is in cahoots with the listening child (“Here's a secret for you: even some grownups don't know how to control their egos”, 12).

As the story continues, such interaction diminishes, but on two more occasions the narrator addresses the reader both directly and affectionately, once when the elders of Uruk try unsuccessfully to dissuade Gilgamesh from attacking Humbaba ("Now here's something you may or may not know, my dear reader", 32), and once at the conclusion of the story ("Now my dear, this is the story of Gilgamesh", 90).

This kind of direct address, with the occasional suggestion of dialogue, is a familiar if old-fashioned feature of children's books.¹⁹ In places, however, Li's way of talking to children seems to reveal a kind of slippage in the addressee between child and adult. When in the opening of the story the narrator envisions the child as asking "what child is not special?", this seems a rather unchildlike question, not only in its wording but in its content: children are arguably quite ready to believe they themselves are special – or, conversely, that other children whom they admire or envy are special. It is adults who issue formulae of the sort in which Li's narrator concurs: all children are special.

We find a similar slippage in the explication of children's tantrums. Although the narrator is ostensibly addressing the child reader, she seems rather to be talking *about* children to someone who is not a child – or at least, not a small child. And although the explanation of the word "ego" may recall Lemony Snicket's recurrent definitions ("a word which here means..."), it is not at all clear what the term "ego" – simply defined as self – has to offer a child reader presumably ignorant of any larger context of use.

In these passages Li seems both to address readers as children and to ascribe to them or share with them adult views of children, thus granting them a kind of precocity, or distinguishing them from *small* children, or treating them as adults: these moves suggest a strategic crossing of boundaries that combines a kind of flattery (underscored by the parenthetical shared secret with which the second of these passages concludes) with a nudge in the direction of adulthood.

Such a strategy would be in keeping with a reading of children's literature (articulated, for example, in Perry Nodelman's *The Hidden Adult*)²⁰ as regularly incorporating adult perspectives on childhood, in part to change child readers and move them towards a more adult understanding. But the slippage in Li's

¹⁹ On changing relationships between narrator and addressee in children's fiction, see esp. Barbara Wall, *The Narrator's Voice: The Dilemma of Children's Fiction*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991.

²⁰ See Perry Nodelman, *The Hidden Adult: Defining Children's Literature*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, esp. 206–214, on readers' double awareness and their experience of being both implied child reader and implied adult reader.

rhetoric also reflects a complication she herself introduces into this project. Consider again the end of the prologue:

Read on, and you will find that [Gilgamesh's] story is not unlike the stories of your parents and grandparents, your aunt or uncles, or your favourite teacher. One day you yourself, as a grownup of wisdom and strength, may remember Gilgamesh's story; you may realize then that it is not unlike your own or your best friend's, and you may want to tell the story to your children, just as I am doing now. (7)

It is not at all obvious what it means to say that readers will see the story of Gilgamesh as "not unlike" the stories of the adults in their lives, but the implication seems to be that as children – in spite of Li's efforts to make the story child-friendly, to portray Gilgamesh as a child, and to explicate his story as a story of growing up – they will see this as a story about adults, and thus not fully theirs. It is not until they are themselves adults (or rather, since Li maintains the child's point of view here, *grown-ups*) of wisdom and strength like Gilgamesh that they will actually be able to understand the story as "not unlike" the story of their own life. We find a similar acknowledgement of deferred understanding in a passage that precedes the journey to the Cedar Forest:

Now here's something you may or may not know, my dear reader. Many times in life, others have wise things to say to us, but knowing how to listen requires special wisdom. This special wisdom cannot be given as a gift by others, but has to be gained from experience. Gilgamesh, being young, did not have that wisdom yet. (32)

The point here is not simply that there is wisdom we cannot learn from others, but only from experience, an idea Li repeats in her afterword ("Where Did This Story Come From"):

Gilgamesh's pursuit of immortality leads to little success, though his journey to find the secret of perpetual life from Utnapishtim makes him grow into a wise man. The same journey has been repeated in generations of individual lives, a quest that each one of us has to go through rather than relying on others' wisdom and teaching. (22–23)

Instead, the narrator is sharing with her "dear reader" the somewhat more complicated idea that the capacity to learn from others is *itself* the product

of experience and thus not available to the young. This calls into question the possibility that the very wisdom shared here can be understood by child readers, who must grow up as Gilgamesh did before they can really understand the story they are reading.

The passages on which we have focused here, prominent in their placement, though insignificant in proportion to the narrative as a whole, both offer to assist the reader's understanding and question the possibility of such understanding before adulthood. Li's version of this story encourages the reader to see Gilgamesh as a child and thus to identify with him, and to read the epic as a children's storybook, but also to develop an adult's awareness of the need to become something other than a child in order to understand Gilgamesh's story and to retell it. At the end of Li's prologue, identification with Gilgamesh as child and as a "grownup of wisdom and strength" gives way to a prospective identification with the author: "you may want to tell the story to your children, just as I am doing now" (7).

But Li's Gilgamesh is himself an author, and one of the central points of elaboration in her narrative comes at the conclusion of his story, after his return to Uruk as a "mature man, with calm wisdom in his eyes and a steadiness in his body":

[W]hen he had accomplished all he wanted, he sat down and wrote out his life's adventures on twelve tablets made of lapis lazuli. He told the story of his youth, not concealing the wrong he had done to his people; he told the story of his adventures with Enkidu and, while doing so, he smiled through his tears because the memory once again warmed his heart. He recounted his suffering over losing Enkidu and his fear of death: and he told of his quest for immortality and eternal youth, which did not bring him what he had been looking for, but had given him something better. Wisdom he had gained from his experiences, and wisdom he shared on these tablets for all to read. (89–90)

Other retellers of this story for children mitigate Gilgamesh's failure to escape death by drawing the reader's attention to his fame, his many accomplishments, or the children through whom he lives on, or (most outlandishly) by having him marry Ishtar and live "happily ever after".²¹ For Li, what Gilgamesh gains in compensation ("something better") for his failure is wisdom, but

²¹ Bryson, *Gilgamesh: Man's First Story*; Zeman, *The Last Quest of Gilgamesh*; McCaughrean, *Gilgamesh the Hero*; Yonan, *Gilgamesh*.

storytelling is central to both the acquisition and the sharing of wisdom. Gilgamesh thus joins Li in writing and interpreting his story, and in modelling for the reader not only maturation but also authorship, the two further entwined in Li's closing words to the reader: "One day, when you are old enough, would you do me a favour and tell this story to your children?" (90).

In her emphasis on the deferral of understanding Li reminds her young readers that there are things in this story that they cannot yet grasp. But when she makes her final request, she seems to hope that rather than turning as adults, now equipped to understand, to the assembled fragments of the *Gilgamesh* epic, her dear readers will grow up to tell the story she has told them. This vision seems rooted in a childhood desire Li describes in her 2017 memoir, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*, a work preoccupied with relationships between writers, readers, and books. As a twelve-year-old, Li tells us, she became infatuated with a particular book, and longed to be a contemporary of the writer, someone who lived in the writer's own day, "as though it would have changed the course of the book's life, or, even, the poetess's life". With what she now envisions as "bravery and naïveté", she wished "to find a place in an author's life and make a difference to a book's fate".²² In *The Story of Gilgamesh*, Li engages in a kind of dual fulfilment of this wish. She herself finds a place in the unknown author's life and distant times by taking that author's place, and thus changes the course of the book's life; at the same time, she befriends her child readers, addressing them both as children and as the adults they will become, and invites them to join her in making a difference to this book's fate.

Greek Tragedy for Modern Children

Ali Smith's *The Story of Antigone* aims to save a story that can hardly be considered endangered, coming as it does from a canonical Greek tragedy – Sophocles' *Antigone* – that has been frequently read, referred to, and reworked in modern and contemporary culture. Like a number of books in the series, this adaptation aims to secure the particular durability of stories first met in childhood for a work that is well known but not, in any conventional or straightforward sense, suitable for children. *Antigone* offers the possibility of a young protagonist, but her cruel

²² Yiyun Li, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*, New York, NY: Random House, 2017, 86.

and unjust early death means that she can hardly serve, as Gilgamesh does in Li's retelling, as a model for a child reader on the path to adult understanding. Another of the "Save the Story" authors, Melania Mazzucco, articulates her sense of the incompatibility between a young person's tragic death and a story for children in the afterword to her *The Story of King Lear*. There she explains why she has chosen to tell a version of the Lear story, reminiscent of the adaptation by Nahum Tate that was regularly performed from the late seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth century, in which Antigone's Shakespearean counterpart, Cordelia (Lear's loyal daughter who is cruelly murdered by his enemies), is allowed to live. The author explains that she has learned this "truer" alternative version from Edgar (the thoughtful young man who is one of the play's few survivors and who marries Cordelia in Tate's version); he has persuaded her to tell it by insisting that "growing up – in other words, gaining experience and understanding human nature – is the point of life", and therefore it is essential to relate that "Cordelia grows up, just as I do. She suffers and struggles, and eventually she becomes a woman".²³

With its themes of incest, kin-killing, and suicide in addition to the early death of its heroine, *Antigone* could be said to epitomize the unsuitability of Greek myths found in tragedy for child audiences. This issue was highlighted by the pioneering American author Nathaniel Hawthorne at the outset of the long tradition of retelling Greek myths for young readers. In a programmatic statement in his 1853 collection *Tanglewood Tales*, Hawthorne lays out the problem:

These old legends, so brimming over with everything that is most abhorrent to our Christianized moral sense – some of them so hideous, others so melancholy and miserable, amid which the Greek Tragedians sought their themes, and moulded them into the sternest forms of grief that ever the world saw; – was such material the stuff that children's playthings should be made of! How were they to be purified? How was the blessed sunshine to be thrown into them?²⁴

²³ Melania G. Mazzucco, *The Story of King Lear*, London: Pushkin Children's Books, 2014 (ed. pr. in Italian: *La storia di Re Lear*, Roma: Gruppo Editoriale L'Espresso, 2011), 100.

²⁴ Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Tanglewood Tales for Girls and Boys", in Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Tales and Sketches*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce, New York, NY: Library of America, 1982 (ed. pr. 1853), 1310. On Hawthorne, see Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts, *Childhood and the Classics: Britain and America, 1850–1965*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 22–45.

Even though Antigone represents an especially sympathetic and memorable young protagonist, she rarely appears in the countless versions of Greek mythology suitably purified and infused with sunshine for child audiences that have been produced since Hawthorne's time. Hawthorne himself makes no use of her, despite the fact that he goes out of his way to introduce girl characters into the myths, inventing a young daughter for King Midas and turning mythical grown women like Persephone and Pandora into girls. Notably, it is myth retellers with a strongly Christian bent who find Antigone most congenial, because she can be portrayed as a self-sacrificing, proto-Christian martyr. She figures prominently in this way in several mid-nineteenth-century British texts: J.M. Neale's *Stories from Heathen Mythology and Greek History: For the Use of Christian Children* (1847) and two works by Charlotte Yonge, *A Book of Golden Deeds* (1864), where she is paired with Alcestis, and *Aunt Charlotte's Stories of Greek History for the Little Ones* (1876). Both writers stress Antigone's devoted service to her old father, Oedipus, whose terrible acts are vaguely glossed as "a grievous crime"²⁵ or "the sins of his youth",²⁶ and both introduce the idea that by burying Polynices Antigone makes it possible for his soul to enter the Underworld and find eternal rest. Neale especially stresses that she too finds eternal rest as she joins him there. Her death is a willing sacrifice for the sake of lofty principles, which shows that – as Yonge puts it – even the heathens "saw and knew the glory of self-devotion".²⁷ A pagan myth is salvaged by making it a story about salvation.

But for subsequent writers seeking to depict ancient girl heroines who are not martyrs, Antigone is not a promising subject. This point is made by Virginia Woolf in her novel *The Years* (1937), in which she uses Antigone as a way of commenting on the stifled nature of girls' lives in Victorian and Edwardian England in general, and their exclusion from classical learning in particular. In an episode set in 1907, Sarah Pargiter sleepily leafs through Sophocles' play, in a translation made by a male cousin who has the advantage of knowing Greek. She arrives at the end:

She was buried alive. The tomb was a brick mound. There was just room for her to lie straight out. Straight out in a brick tomb, she said. And that's the end, she yawned, shutting the book.

²⁵ J.M. Neale, *Stories from Heathen Mythology and Greek History: For the Use of Christian Children*, London: Joseph Masters, 1847, 98.

²⁶ Charlotte M. Yonge, *A Book of Golden Deeds of All Times and All Lands*, Glasgow and Bombay: Blackie & Son, 1864, 13.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 11.

As Sarah goes to sleep in her comfortable bed, she too is buried alive:

She laid herself out, under the cool smooth sheets, and pulled the pillow over her ears. The one sheet and the one blanket fitted softly round her. At the bottom of the bed was a long stretch of cool fresh mattress. [...] The book fell on the floor. She was asleep.²⁸

It is only in recent decades that developments in children's literature have created a context in which the story of Antigone can easily find a place. As many of the works discussed in this volume attest, it is now increasingly assumed that "melancholy and miserable" subjects should be faced rather than avoided in children's literature and especially in the relatively new category of young adult literature, which takes on formerly taboo topics involving sexuality, violence, and unconventional family circumstances, with the idea that adolescents should be given ways of thinking through tragic themes rather than being shielded from them. Meanwhile, literature for children and young adults has increasingly engaged in forms of revisionist myth-making: traditional stories are reappropriated and the inner lives of ancient characters – particularly characters, like girls, who are marginalized in the ancient sources – are freely imagined, in ways that resonate with contemporary values. So a number of recent versions of Antigone's story deliberately set themselves against Sophocles' version while assimilating the experiences of Antigone and her sister, Ismene, to those of modern girls. For example, Coreena McBurnie's *Prophecy* (2015, the first volume in the series "Antigone: The True Story") is a tell-all first-person narrative that begins with Antigone critiquing the poetic tradition, in which "inconvenient facts are overlooked or buried as irrelevant details" and going on to explain that "[t]he all-powerful Olympian gods inspired the brilliant playwright Sophocles to write about me in a way that would distort the truth and protect their vanity".²⁹ She tells instead a story in which she is an independent spirit, gifted with prophecy, who has difficulty meeting conventional expectations for girls and falls in love with Haemon instead of the approved husband selected for an arranged marriage; this instalment ends where *Oedipus the King* does, with Antigone setting off with her father, disillusioned with the gods for what they have done to her family, and parting from Haemon, who declares his love and promises: "I'll always be here for you" (227). In Natalie Haynes's *The Children*

²⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Years*, ed. Hermione Lee, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992 (ed. pr. 1937), 130–131.

²⁹ Coreena McBurnie, *Prophecy*, "Antigone: The True Story" 1, n.p.: Flaming Nora Press, 2015, 7.

of *Jocasta* (2017), a recent work for adults that is also well suited to young adult readers, as Edith Hall discusses in her contribution to this volume, the author grants subjectivity and agency to Jocasta and Ismene while, as she herself puts it, “playing extremely fast and loose with [the] story”.³⁰

With its goal of saving rather than dismantling Sophocles’ classic version, Ali Smith’s retelling does not involve any such wholesale revision. Smith preserves not only Sophocles’ story, but also his form. Far from entering into the minds of Antigone or Ismene, she exposes her readers to those characters in the same way that Sophocles does: they are seen from the outside, known only through what they say out loud, in the same sequence of scenes that makes up the play. Smith loosely translates Sophocles’ dialogue into a less formal, more contemporary idiom. So when Antigone and Ismene first appear, they are already in the middle of a conversation:

“Because we’re *sisters*,” the younger one was saying. “Because of us being the same *blood*.”³¹

Antigone’s words here convey the same stress on sisterhood and family solidarity and the same expectations of Ismene as does the more stylized address with which she opens Sophocles’ play: ὦ κοινὸν αὐτάδελφον Ἴσμήνης κάρᾳ (v. 1), or, in Robert Fagles’s translation, “My own flesh and blood – dear sister, dear Ismene”.³²

But however closely Smith follows the contours of Sophocles’ original, her book is nonetheless very much an adaptation, which transforms the original through innovations that are both modernizing and designed to make a Greek tragedy into a story for children – although not necessarily with Hawthorne’s goals of purifying the ancient myth and making it sunnier. This discussion will highlight in particular three ways in which Smith gives *Antigone* the characteristics of a children’s book while aligning it with themes that she also pursues in her fiction for adults: the use of animals as focalizing intermediaries between the human actors and the book’s audience; parodic lampooning of serious features of classical culture; and the close integration of text and illustrations.

³⁰ Natalie Haynes, *The Children of Jocasta*, London: Mantle, 2017, 331; Edith Hall, “Our Greek Tragic Hope: Young Adults Overcoming Family Trauma in New Novels by Natalie Haynes and Colm Tóibín”, 371–385.

³¹ Smith, *The Story of Antigone*, 15. All the quotations in this chapter are from the 2013 English edition.

³² Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles, London: Penguin, 1984 (ed. pr. 1982), 59.

Smith's most striking innovation is to present Sophocles' play as a series of human actions observed by animals. Her main character is a sharp-eyed crow, who has been following the doings of the Thebans for many years and who helps to explain what is going on to a less well-informed young dog. The book opens with the she-crow flying across the early morning sky, settling on one of the seven gates of Thebes, and looking down on the battlefield; both her thoughts, which are reported, and her explanations to the dog provide the contextualizing information that a modern reader needs to understand the events of the play. So once Antigone appears, we enter the crow's mind: "Well, well. Princess Antigone. She'd been the one who was so kind to Oedipus, the blind man. The man who'd once been king. Her father. She'd been her father's eyes, that girl, till he died" (16).

By using animal protagonists, Smith gives her adaptation a feature that is widespread in children's books and rare in books for adults, but these animals are not the innocent and cuddly child stand-ins of much children's literature, but rather representatives of the dogs and birds to which Polynices' corpse is consigned by Creon in a gesture of punitive dishonour.³³ Smith's crow (who owes her origin in part to the Scottish ballad "Twa Corbies", in which two crows discuss their plans to eat a fallen knight) is a matter-of-fact, unapologetic scavenger of human flesh. The reflection on Antigone quoted above continues: "She'd been her father's eyes, that girl, till he died (after which point, of course, eyes are nothing *but* food specifically for crows)".

Smith's animal focalizer introduces a defamiliarizing perspective on human behaviour that calls into question a central tenet of the world in which Antigone's story unfolds: the clear boundary between human and animal that makes Polynices' exposure to animal predators so demeaning. From Smith's posthuman perspective, that is just one of several boundaries that should be seen as fluid and permeable, along with those between past and present and between the living and the dead. Her crow resembles the dead observers of the living who figure in several of her adult novels; she even shares with one of them a term for living people: "the still-alives".³⁴ In a programmatic "interview" between herself and the crow with which the book ends, Smith claims to take this point from Sophocles, who "lets us see a special relationship between humans and

³³ For the prominence of animals in children's literature, as well as the potential for such portrayals to destabilize conventional human–animal hierarchies, see David Rudd, "Animal and Object Stories", in M.O. Grenby and Andrea Immel, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Children's Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 242–256.

³⁴ Ali Smith, *Hotel World*, London: Hamish Hamilton, 2001, 11 and *passim*.

creatures and something even more powerful" through the intervention of Tiresias, "a kind of magic priest, through whom both the natural and spiritual worlds can express themselves, both at once, without any borders in between. He can bring messages from the birds *and* the gods" (99). And Smith goes on to base her innovation on her own reading between the lines of the play:

And through the whole play, the whole story of Antigone, there are questions which, though they are unspoken, are still there nonetheless, about the borders of things [...]. So it seemed to me that you both were there, very present in the story, the dog and the crow, when it came to adapting something so full of questions about loyalty and nature and truth [...]. (99)

Smith's foregrounding of a crow's perspective underlies her strategy for dealing with the sensational and taboo elements of the Oedipus legend. Instead of perpetuating the taboo around Oedipus' actions through vaguely worded euphemisms (as in the examples quoted above by Neale and Yonge), she presents that taboo as a questionable human hang-up. This emerges as the crow fills the dog in on the play's backstory:

"Because listen, this Oedipus," she went on, "he'd been cursed at birth, and the curse was that he'd kill his father and marry his mother."

The dog shrugged.

"I know," the crow said. "Makes no difference to me either. But it's the kind of rubbish that preoccupies the still-alives. Scandal. Fate. Gods. Curses. They wear them like clothes. It's because they've no feathers. Or fur."

"Arf," the dog said. (28–29)

With that dismissive "arf", Smith brackets many of the specifically Greek concerns of the play as arbitrary human constructs, while she foregrounds the ideas she most wants to impress on her readers, especially the insidiousness of borders, artificial divisions that are as superficial as clothes.

Another of Smith's innovations is that, despite her commitment to Sophocles' play, she takes a dim view of one of its definitive elements, its chorus of Elders. Her treatment of them is broadly parodic, and in this respect her book resembles a number of contemporary retellings for children that use parody to combat the perceived drawback of classical myth's remote origins and off-putting high cultural status: for example, Kate McMillan's "Myth-O-Mania" series (2002–2014), in which jokey versions correct a dreary *Big Fat Book of Greek Myths*, or Michael Townsend's *Amazing Greek Myths of Wonder and*

Blunders (2010), or Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* series (2005–2009).³⁵ Smith introduces the chorus with an emphasis on their age, their ineptitude, and their dubious authority: "Fifteen very old men arranged themselves in a semicircle. They fell over their own feet. They argued a bit among themselves" (35). Then, when "out of nowhere" they start singing, their song is an example of ridiculous sing-song versifying – a kind of dreadful version of poetry that might be written for or even by children:

*How lovely it is to see it, the sun. Now that the
terrible battle we've won!*

*War flew over the city like a great big bird. It was
because of Polynices that it occurred.*

*And for the whole time of fighting none of us
could rhyme. Which was making us all go crazy and
should be classed as a capital crime. (35)*

When they get to the famous first stasimon – the ode that begins *πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ* ("there are many wonders", v. 332) and celebrates humanity's many achievements before also naming its limitations – Smith's Elders produce a species-ist mouthful of wonder and blunders:

Man is a wonder, a wonder of worth.

He sails the wide sea and he ploughs the wide earth.

He tames the wild birds and he catches the fishes.

He makes all the animals do what he wishes. (48)

By making fun of the chorus' poetry, Smith not only introduces an element of silly humour designed to appeal to children but also distances herself from aspects of Sophocles' play that she finds less congenial than its story: its dense and stylized poetic idiom and its searching reflections on fate, curses, and the gods, which contrast with her own preferred style with its down-to-earth, colloquial language and brief, declarative statements. For her, the power of the play clearly lies in dialogue that can be distilled into such punchy exchanges as the concluding words of Antigone's debate with Creon:

³⁵ On this trend, see Sheila Murnaghan, "Classics for Cool Kids: Popular and Unpopular Versions of Antiquity for Children", *Classical World* 104 (2011), 339–353; Sheila Murnaghan and Deborah H. Roberts, "Myth Collections for Children", in Vanda Zajko and Helena Hoyle, eds., *A Handbook to the Reception of Classical Mythology*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017, 99.

"Well, you'll be quiet too, soon," the King said. "I think you'll enjoy being dead, since you love the dead so much. And you forget. He was a traitor, your brother."

"He was my brother, your traitor," the girl said. "It's not me who's forgetting." (53)

Smith's surprisingly ageist portrayal of the chorus (she makes a point of reporting that the youngest of the elders is ninety-seven) also helps to skew sympathy towards the play's youngest characters, especially Antigone and Ismene, in keeping with the intensified allegiance to Antigone that almost every modern reader brings to the play, as well as her particular orientation to young readers. The challenging, complicating outlook of Sophocles' Theban elders, who express sympathy for Antigone but not unconditional approval of her actions, is discredited.

Smith's vision of the play is reinforced in Laura Paoletti's subtle, atmospheric illustrations. The presence of ample illustrations reflects both the status of the work as a children's book and the particular mission of the "Save the Story" project, which promotes its chosen stories in part by presenting them in appealing, stylish formats – printed on high-quality paper and given visual expression in distinguished, well-reproduced images. Paoletti's depictions of Antigone variously stress her isolation and her close but also fraught relationship to Ismene – a theme of particular importance to Smith, whose own fiction explores the intricate bonds between women, in some cases sisters. In this vein, Smith introduces a small but eloquent material detail, which she and Paoletti collaborate in developing. When Ismene enters the scene and finds her sister in chains, "[s]he bent and tore a piece of soft pink material off her own pretty dress, then wound it round Antigone's wrist, under the chain, so the chain wouldn't chafe" (57). Paoletti brings out the significance of this gesture through her placement of the strip of material halfway between the two figures and through the contrast between the life-affirming deep pink of Ismene's dress (and the piece torn from it) and the pale colourlessness and shroud-like transparency of Antigone's dress (see Fig. 3).

The strip of pink fabric only binds the sisters momentarily; when Ismene tries to tell Creon that she too was involved in the burial, Antigone repudiates her gesture of solidarity by shaking her arm until the piece of torn dress falls out and settles on the ground. But it comes to stand for a different kind of connection and continuity when, after Antigone has been led off to be buried alive, the crow snatches it up and carries it home, then uses it as a lining for her nest. That is the last we hear of it in the text. But the story has an epilogue, set a year later, in which the crow is raising a new set of fledglings, maintaining the continuity

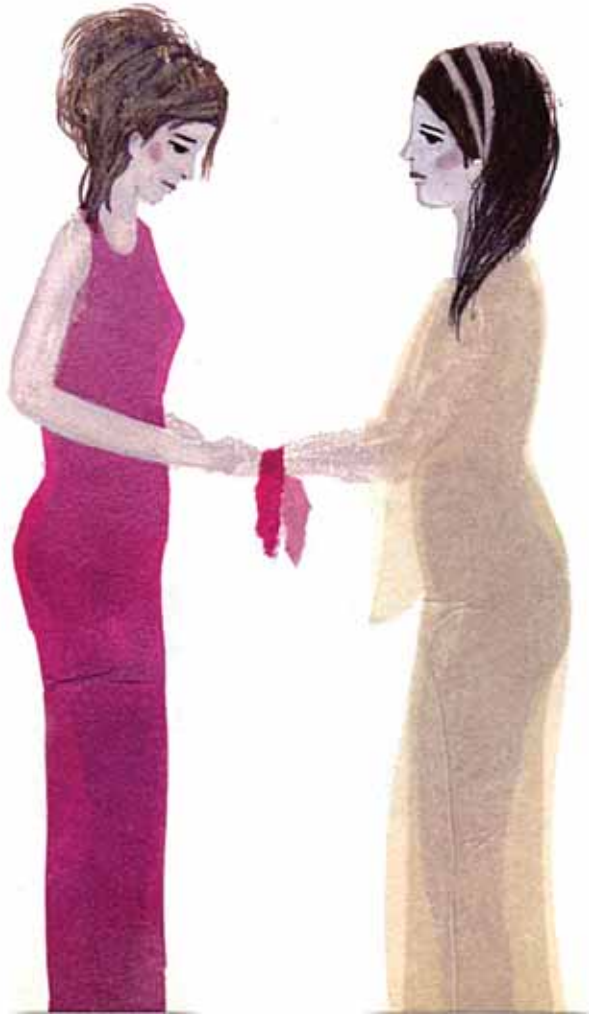


Figure 3: Antigone and Ismene, illustration by Laura Paoletti from Ali Smith, *The Story of Antigone*, London: Pushkin Children's Books, 2013, 57. Used with the Publisher's kind permission.

of life that is foreclosed in the main story by Antigone's death, and satisfying their clamorous demand to hear the story of "Antipode [...], no, Antigone" (90). In Paoletti's illustration (see Fig. 4) we see the strip of cloth lining the nest and connecting this new generation to the story they are hearing – its pink colour now echoed in their hungry throats, the same throats through which the story of Antigone will one day pass when they are grown and transmit what they heard when young to their own offspring.



Figure 4: Fledglings in the nest, illustration by Laura Paoletti from Ali Smith, *The Story of Antigone*. London: Pushkin Children's Books, 2013, 89. Used with the Publisher's kind permission.

In retelling the story of Antigone, Smith certainly encourages her readers to see Antigone and Ismene as sympathetic figures, and she goes out of her way to portray Antigone as close to them in age (“about twelve human years old”, 15). But she is not primarily interested in fostering lines of identification; unlike Yiyun Li retelling the story of Gilgamesh or Natalie Haynes reimagining Ismene and Jocasta, she does not present her readers with ancient avatars of themselves, whose dilemmas mirror their own personal struggles and whose ability to survive trauma provides them with a hopeful model. The hope that animates her version is her own hope that the story will stimulate new generations to think hard about the issues it raises and act accordingly. To borrow the terms that Edoardo Pecchini introduces in his chapter in this volume,³⁶ she is aiming for something more like cognitive than affective bibliotherapy. The special potential of children as saviours is solicited not just for the perpetuation of the story itself but also for broader forms of political action.

Through the framing of her narrative and through her comments in the supposed interview that follows, Smith makes it clear what she sees as the

³⁶ See Edoardo Pecchini, “Promoting Mental Health through the Classics: Hercules as Trainer in Today's Labours of Children and Young People”, 275–325.

important issues raised by this story. She assumes, as do most modern readers and retellers of *Antigone*, that Antigone is the play's undoubted heroine, and that the play is centrally concerned with political resistance and the need for the powerless to stand up to tyrants. She suggests that the story has endured because it was always about what modern readers have found there:³⁷

It's clear that Sophocles was very interested in the character of Antigone. Over the centuries, the powerful drama he made of her story, a story of what happens when an individual person stands against the rules and the politics of the city and country she lives in, or a small powerless girl stands up to an all-powerful-seeming king, or a single person refuses to do what a tyrant says she should, has been performed and rewritten and adapted and has never lost its relevance or its vitality. (96)

Here Smith's "what happens" seems to point forward to future possibilities of political change rather than back to Sophocles' original, in which there is no indication that Antigone's actions are warranted even to the gods or that they change anything. Further, as we have already seen, Smith finds in the play a call to question the artificial distinctions – both between different groups of people and between people and animals – through which humans seek to order and control their world.

In this respect Smith's book seems less like other contemporary versions of the Antigone myth for young readers and more like such projects as Bryan Doerries's *Theater of War* or the Aquila Theatre Company's *Ancient Greeks / Modern Lives* which use readings of ancient tragedies, especially Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, as springboards for potentially therapeutic discussions among combat veterans.³⁸ There the organizers' sense of what makes the plays relevant is evident enough, but the responses of individual audience members are idiosyncratic and unpredictable, sometimes personal, sometimes more broadly political – and often mixed with gratified surprise at seeing present-day struggles anticipated in revered classics of the past. This last is a response that is actively promoted in the "Save the Story" series through its treatment of classic

³⁷ For an overview of contemporary versions of *Antigone* leading to the conclusion that "[o]ur Antigone, whether in the theater or in contemporary thought, is a dissident", see Douglas Cairns, *Sophocles: Antigone*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, 122–154.

³⁸ On these projects, see Bryan Doerries, *The Theater of War: What Ancient Greek Tragedies Can Teach Us Today*, New York, NY: Vintage, 2016; Peter Meineck, "Combat Trauma and the Tragic Stage", in Victor Castan and Silke-Maria Weineck, eds., *Our Ancient Wars: Rethinking War through the Classics*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2016, 184–210.

stories as a precious heritage to be transmitted in distinguished physical books, and it resonates with Pecchini's observation that the young people he works with are especially happy to identify with well-known figures from myth as an antidote to thinking of themselves as sick or different.

Smith's success in inspiring young readers to use the story of *Antigone* to think about political issues can be measured by a review in the *Guardian* by Livloves2read, a "Guardian Children's books site young reviewer". Appearing on 5 July 2016, ten days after the Brexit vote, this review connects the story of *Antigone* to an exercise in boundary drawing that Smith herself may not have envisioned when she wrote the book:

Stories like *Antigone* are so important. They still seem fresh and modern and tackle concerns we still have about power struggles, laws of our society and how we treat outsiders and insiders. With all that has gone on this past two weeks in British politics, this tale continues to be really relevant.³⁹

Conclusion

With its aspiration of creating an audience of children for works that were not originally addressed to them, the "Save the Story" series openly embraces the paradox built into the classical tradition: in order for great works of the past to endure, they have to be changed, creatively adapted to the conditions and concerns of new audiences. As they rework their ancient models, Li and Smith adopt the optimistic agenda shared by most writers for children, producing stories they hope will help their readers grow into admirable adults, in Li's case by recasting *Gilgamesh* as a child whose spiritual journey is instructively glossed as progress towards adult understanding, and in Smith's case by using animal intermediaries and flashes of jokey irreverence to temper a story that she presents as "a kind of nourishment [...] even though it is full of terrible and difficult things" (95). They do this in the further hope that their readers will one day so value the stories that have made them who they are that they will themselves in turn preserve and perpetuate those stories, keeping them ever safe from oblivion.

³⁹ Livloves2read, "The Story of *Antigone* by Ali Smith – Review," *The Guardian*, 5 July 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/2016/jul/05/the-story-of-antigone-ali-smith-review> (accessed 27 April 2020).

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

