

Greek Mythology as Children's Literature: Humour and Fantasy in Retelling the Greek Literary Anthology to Primary School Students

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Griechische Mythologie als Kinderliteratur: Humor und Phantasie in der Nacherzählung griechischer Literaturanthologien für Volksschulkinder

Mythenadaptation für Kinder ist keineswegs auf die Erstellung einfacher(er) Versionen beschränkt. In Lesebüchern für den Gebrauch in griechischen Volksschulen dient sie vielmehr dazu, psychologische Probleme von Kindern abzumildern. Auch wenn Kinder den Schutz durch Erwachsene brauchen, empfinden sie zuweilen Widerstand gegenüber ihren erwachsenen Gegenübern. Dazu kommt, dass körperliche Unreife so manches Kind frustriert. Generell wollen Kinder starke und reife Körper wie Erwachsene, können gegen ihre Unterlegenheit aber nichts ausrichten und müssen sie akzeptieren. Die für Kinder charakteristische Rebellion gegenüber Erwachsenen sollte in einem sicheren Umfeld ausgedrückt und deren Frustration abgemildert werden. Mythologische Charaktere können in dieser Hinsicht hilfreich sein. In adaptierten Versionen griechischer Volksschullesebücher sind Gottheiten – wie Kinder – naiv und fehleranfällig. Wenn die kindlichen Göttinnen und Götter sich als allmächtig erweisen und Überwachung und Autoritätsausübung durch andere ablehnen, erhalten Kinder ‚Superkind-Phantasien‘, die ihren Sehnsüchten in dieser schwierigen Situation entsprechen. Die physische Stärke von Monstern ist oft übertrieben, um deren Anziehungskraft zu reduzieren. Denn die übersteigerte Darstellung der Körper von Ungeheuern generiert Humor, der die Attraktivität erwachsener Körper herabsetzt und Kindern dabei hilft, ihre Minderwertigkeitsgefühle abzulegen.

Schlagwörter: griechische Mythologie, Humor, Fantasy und Phantasie, Kinderliteratur, Mythenadaptation

The adaptation of mythology for children is not restricted to producing simplified versions. In the literary textbooks of Greek primary schools, the adaptation of mythology focuses on mitigating children's psychological problems. Although children need adults' protection, they sometimes feel like resisting their grown-up counterparts. In addition, physical immaturity frustrates children. Children generally want to attain strong and mature bodies like adults but cannot help accepting their own inferiority. Children's typical rebelliousness towards adults should be expressed safely, and their frustration should be assuaged. Mythological characters can help in this regard. In adapted versions of Greek primary school textbooks, gods are like children – naïve and mischievous. When the childlike gods turn out

to be omnipotent and defy supervision and authority from others, children find 'super-child fantasies' that satisfy their furtive desires to engage in such defiance. In the case of monsters, their physical strength is exaggerated in order to reduce their appeal. The exaggeration of monsters' bodies generates humour, which devalues the appeal of mature bodies and relieves children of feeling inferior to adults.

Keywords: Greek mythology, humour, fantasy, children's literature, adaptation of mythology

1. Introduction

Mythology is widely acknowledged as important for children's mental growth. Learning mythology leads to the acquisition of archetypal symbols recurring throughout the canon of literature and arts. Mythology also develops children's creativity by leading them to explore abundant imaginary thoughts and expressions rooted in a long-standing inquiry into human nature.

Introducing children to the world of mythology is frequently accompanied by adaptation. Authors of children's books commonly adapt versions of mythology that are interesting and easy for children to understand. Numerous stories from Greek mythology have been adapted for young readers. The adaptation of classical stories for children is not only for crafting simpler versions. They are the result of efforts to create new stories focused on children's needs and dispositions.

The textbooks of Greek primary schools contain various examples of this type of adaptation. Because Greece has a long history of mythology and its teachings, noteworthy models of mythological adaptations can be found in the literary textbooks of Greek primary schools. Such textbooks include mythological texts adapted by children's book authors. Researching the features and effects of modified texts enables the identification of effective and appealing versions of modified myths for children.

Researchers on the originality of children's books have pointed out that children harbour their own problems and need stories to help them cope with them. For example, Breger (1974, 211) discovered that children are attracted to certain fantasies because they realise their furtive desire to be equal with adults. Wolfenstein (1978) explored what children find funny by analysing humour in children's stories. She found that they like stories that help them mitigate stress deriving from their feelings of physical inferiority to adults. Since adaptations of mythology for children frequently include elements of fantasy and humour, attending to the original utility of such adapted texts is essential in developing children's books.

2. Theoretical Perspectives – Humour and Fantasy in Children's Literature

Mythology is often approached from psychological, historical, ritual, and comparative theoretical perspectives. Readers in educational contexts are led to identify

with characters in mythology and figure out their own psychological problems through them. For example, Diel (1980, 1-24) stated that Greek mythology is the result of symbolising the inner conflict of the human mind between the desire for degradation and the will to spiritual elevation. This struggle is frequently found in stories where a hero fights against monsters and takes adventurous voyages to reach the world of gods. Campbell (2009, 186-227) also emphasised that mythological characters struggling to overcome their inner conflicts and achieve their destiny offer readers a precious opportunity to contemplate their own inner states.

However, such psychological interpretations are not easy to understand for young readers. Since children have their own psychological problems, mythological characters and stories should be modified to reflect them. As Wolfenstein stated, being a child is a predicament fraught with special difficulties (Wolfenstein 1978, 12). Children require measures for expressing the frustration and anxiety that they derive from their relationships with the adults who impose rules on them.

Wolfenstein provided crucial suggestions about child psychology as it relates to humour. She investigated students in New York City, aged 4 to 12 years, and found that they expressed contradictory attitudes towards adults when telling jokes. She found that the children had experienced considerable inner conflicts regarding adults, and that humour had functioned as a method for resolving such conflicts. In addition, she claimed that humour plays a more important role for children because they have fewer methods for coping with stress than adults do.

According to Socha and Kelly (1994, 244), children in Grade 4 (aged 9 to 10 years) generally begin to defy conventions established by adults. However, as Wolfenstein (1978, 138-147) mentioned, children at this stage also start to compete for adults' praise. These two conflicting statements show that children aged 9 to 10 years typically confront a severe inner conflict between familiarity and hostility towards adults.

McGillis (2009, 260-268) focused on children's self-awareness about their powerlessness. According to McGillis, children are conscious of their physical incompleteness, which leads to their particular interest in humour related to the body. His examples allude to children's experiences of conflict between their body and mind. In analysing Melvin Burgess's *Lady: My Life as a Bitch*, McGillis noted the character Sandra, who turns into a dog. Sandra keeps her identity as a member of her family even after transforming into a dog. Her body and mind are in discordance thereafter.

I cried all the way home, but when I got there I had no idea what to do. Run up to my mum and sniff her bum? Lick her hands? I was a dog. I didn't even have lips that could kiss.¹

The rift she feels between respect for stability, which the adults offer, and the inevitable desire for activities that are more instinctive is symbolised in the contrast

1 Burgess, Melvin (2015): *Lady: My Life as a Bitch*. Kindle edition. London: Andersen Press, 1696.

between her body and mind. McGillis, however, explained that readers would not take such a conflict seriously, because Sandra's story is described humorously. In *Lady: My Life as a Bitch*, humour functions as an outlet for safely expressing the stress that children typically experience because of discordant self-images.

Nodelman (2003, 312-314) interpreted 'animals in clothes' as symbols of children's ambivalent tendency towards reason and instinct because such symbols offer a direction for growing up while remaining untamed. He explained that such binary opposition is a distinct feature of children's literature. Bettelheim (2010, 151) stated that 'independence-orientation' and 'dependence on parents' coexist in tales read to children.

If children suffer confusion in their relationship with adults, children's literature should properly function as a medium for communicating such confusion. Stories for children should address such issues with humorous touch, so as to relieve children's stress and tension due to their ambivalent relationship with adults. Stories that encourage children to laugh away the discordance between their body and mind, instinct and reason, intimacy and heterogeneity towards adults can help them recover positive self-identity and self-respect.

Therefore, adapted versions of mythology for children are expected to exhibit features that are more humorous, especially those related to discordant self-images. The physical and mental features of mythological characters are unique. Gods have exceptional physical power and monsters have large and powerful bodies. Such characters, without any humorous discord, do not easily elicit children's genuine sympathy. The superior physical forces of god and monsters need to be described in a ridiculous and funny way through the contrast of their ordinary, everyday actions and feelings. If adapted mythological texts are to be recognized for their value as a genre of children's literature, then the humorous modification of characters is expected to be one of the most apparent features of this genre.

On the other hand, children can also resolve their inner conflicts through fantasy. According to Breger (1974, 211-213), a super-child fantasy entails an imaginary narrative in which a weak child is temporarily transformed into a supernatural being that avenges on adults who impose unfair duties on him or her. To be precise, children enjoy imagining themselves doing what is prohibited by adults. Such a fantasy functions as an outlet through which children can relieve themselves of negative feelings against their parents or teachers.

Breger stated that children normally try to obey adults, but they also tend to regard adults' authority as unfair. Because children usually cannot find a way to express such frustration, a fantasy is necessary for disposing negative feelings. Breger explained that the more successfully children identify with parents and teachers, the more stress they experience from negative feelings towards adults. Therefore, boys are attracted to fantasies such as 'Superman' and 'Batman', who are originally powerless but eventually become powerful. Usually accompanying child comrades, these superheroes also form an important component of super-child fantasies.

In Greek mythology, the gods have the characteristics of super-children. In general, some of the gods of Greek mythology are curious and impulsive like child-

ren, but they can exert physical force when necessary. Such narrative reminds one of super-child fantasies in that the childlike protagonist suddenly exerts power and defeats the antagonist who is stronger than the protagonist. In this regard, Greek mythology takes advantageous position in realising the subconscious fantasies of child readers. Children can be immersed in mythological texts more effectively by identifying with gods that have attractive super-child characteristics.

3. Characters Represented as Childlike: Super-child Fantasy

The literary textbooks of Greek primary schools assume the form of an anthology. Greek primary schools provide three volumes of literary anthology to students.



Figure 1. Anthologies of literary texts (from left, for grade 1-2; 3-4; 5-6)

Among the three volumes, the second one, for Grades 3 and 4, includes two stories derived from mythology: *The God Dionysus* (Ο θεός Διόνυσος) and *The Wooden Horse* (Το ξύλινο άλογο). The final volume, given to Grades 5 and 6, contains two stories related to mythology: *Europa and the Bull* (Η Ευρώπη κι ο Ταύρος), and *The Beauty with the Snaky Body* (Η καλλονή με το φιδίσιο κορμί).

As shown in Table 1, the texts examined in this study are four stories adapted for children by authors of children's books.

Volume (Grade)	Adapted Mythological Texts	Author
2	The God Dionysus (Ο θεός Διόνυσος)	Charis Sakellariou
(Grades 3–4)	The Wooden Horse (Το ξύλινο άλογο)	Kalliopi Sphaellou

3 (Grades 5–6)	Europa and the Bull (Η Ευρώπη κι ο Ταύρος)	Charis Sakellariou
	<i>The Beauty with the Snaky Body</i> (Η καλλονή με το φιδίσιο κορμί)	Eirini Marra

Table 1. Mythological texts adapted for children in Greek literary textbooks

Many factors influence how a text is modified for children. Changing characters to be child-friendly is one of them. A character who thinks and acts like a child can be a critical factor in making a story more child-oriented. In the case of mythology, gods and heroes described as childlike may appeal to children.

In the literary works of Greek textbooks, Zeus and Dionysus are represented as boys who are naughty, a characteristic that can be typically found among children. Zeus and Dionysus live under the rules of the Olympian world and are watched by other gods despite their high status and power. Even when they sometimes deviate from the rules and join nymphs and humans out of curiosity, they are careful not to be detected. The curiosity and anxiety of the gods contribute to them becoming childlike characters and to generate humour from the contradiction between their omnipotent power and childlike mind.

In *Europa and the Bull*, Zeus is portrayed in the manner of a curious boy. Wondering what Europa looks like, he devises a method to approach her, and Zeus' curious mind is revealed when he approaches Europa. The author describes Zeus' mind in detail so that readers can get an insight to everything he thinks. Zeus steals away from his palace at night to see Europa and explicitly admires her beauty upon finding her. Here, he is not depicted as the dignified god, Zeus, who abducts Europa and confines her to Crete.

Zeus seems to be continually watched by the other gods, including Hera. Nevertheless, he is incessantly curious about Europa and yearns to escape from his palace. Lacking self-control, Zeus behaves like an impatient boy. For young readers, he is also a super-child who can achieve what he wishes. His deviation from the routine is audacious enough to appeal to children. He can make children laugh and restore their self-respect since he behaves like a naughty child even though he is the most authoritative adult of all.

Europa's reputation for beauty had reached Olympus, thus sparking Zeus's curiosity. 'Do they say so?', he thought. Then one day, Hera was away from Olympus to attend a celebration in her honour. Seizing the opportunity, Zeus took his sceptre and, without the other gods knowing about it, escaped his palace and reached the land of Agenor. He was headed straight for the capital, but stopped for a while to think about how he would approach the palace of Agenor without anyone recognising him. (Η Ευρώπη κι ο Ταύρος, 246)

In *Europa and the Bull*, the narrator illuminates Zeus' furtive mind. The narrator chases Zeus all day long, from the moment he plans to escape his palace. The narrator bestows a sense of secret adventure to all of Zeus' actions. As a result, Zeus is depicted ambiguously as both a solemn adult and a cheerful child, not as a seducer or rapist. This ambiguity relieves the tension children suffer in their relationship with adults and alleviates the strong hierarchy between children and adults.

In *The God Dionysus* (Ο θεός Διόνυσος, grades 3–4), Dionysus steals away from his house and withdraws to a secret place, reminding readers of a child who eludes parental supervision and seeks a private space.

Many times, Dionysus left his joyful companions, travelled to a deserted wilderness to sit for a while and think on his own. One day, he found himself on a deserted beach. He lay down in the warm sand and slept as the waves from the sea gently nibbled at his feet. (Ο θεός Διόνυσος, 53)

In the passage above, Dionysus is like a boy who seeks adventure. He belongs to Olympus and has his own duties, similar to typical children under the protection and authority of their family. Likewise, in the manner of children who sometimes try to escape their parents' supervision, he also sometimes dares to break away from the monotony of daily life. He is more like a mischievous child than a fanatical god of wine and frenzy in this text. The super-child fantasy is realised when Dionysus, who looks innocent and obedient, suddenly shows his power.

The sailors pleaded with terror to take them ashore. But in the meantime, God disappeared in front of them, and in his place was a lion roaring fiercely. The sailors backed off to the amulet, but in the middle of the ship, they saw a giant bear standing on its hind legs and staring at them, ready to grab them. The poor sailors were out of their mind and they did not know what to do anymore. They gathered all around the steering wheel. They called on the gods to save them. But the lion leaped with a huge step, swooped on them, and grabbed the Captain. The sailors all jumped into the sea and became dolphins. (Ο θεός Διόνυσος, 55)

As shown above, Dionysus overpowers all the sailors who harass him. The sailors are instantly turned into dolphins by Dionysus' authority. After all this, Dionysus sneaks back to his quarters instead of showing off his dignity to those left there. He is rather like a mischievous boy enjoying his brief secret adventure than a frightening god displaying his competency.

In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, by contrast, Dionysus is described as dreadful. In Ovid's narrative poem, the narrator is a sailor who relates his own experiences at sea and expresses his fear and admiration of Dionysus. Dionysus authoritatively demands that a helmsman immediately redirect the ship to Naxos, and the helmsman follows Dionysus' command in fear.

[...] I was the last man left, senseless and shaking with chilled fear, and, as if to pacify me, the god said, 'now strike swift, set sail for Naxos.' And when we landed, I was priest of Bacchus.

In the story adapted for children, however, Dionysus is friendlier. Dionysus reassures the panicked helmsman and quietly returns to his colleagues in Olympus:

He embraced the steering wheel and said: 'Do not be afraid, my helmsman. I am the god Dionysus, son of Zeus and Semele. When bitterness and sadness find you, call on me and everything will change in your life. Everything will be fine, like a sweet dream.' Then the god left the ship and disappeared into the forest again. (Ο θεός Διόνυσος, 55)

The narrator follows Dionysus closely and reveals how Dionysus spends an amazing day without his absence being noticed by his superiors. With an anonymous narrator secretly observing Dionysus' entire day from departure to return, the episode is framed as a cheerful and covert adventure of a playful boy, rather than an unaccountable act of a terrifying god.

The illustrations of the literary textbooks are mostly from the ancient sculptures or pottery. Mythology is also taught as a part of History in Greek primary schools, with pictures from the ancient times reinforcing the historical ground of the texts. The illustrations are not as colorful or bright as in modern children's books, but carefully selected to depict main characters and scenes of the texts. In case of the story of Dionysus, the illustration is from the frieze of Monument of Lysicrates, which was built in the 4th century BC.

The frieze of the monument is composed of many parts describing Dionysus' life, one of which represents his power transforming the sailors into dolphins. In Figure 2, the sailor on the left is just being turned into a dolphin. Dionysus is being chased (on the right) and bullied (in the middle) by the sailors, but he finally exercises his power to surprise the sailors. The illustration once again appeals to the children's imagination by compressively summarizing the dramatic development of Dionysus' story.

In adapting this story, the author conveys the original ambiguity of Dionysus, which has attracted mythology researchers. As Moreau (1992, 298-308) pointed out, Dionysus is 'the one whose essential nature is the hardest to define' of all the gods in Olympus, and 'the god of metamorphoses, the indefinable'. Born of a god and a human, Dionysus shares both divine and human qualities. He is described as venturing outside Olympus longer than other gods do, frequently visiting the human world.

Dionysus is sometimes depicted as a child and sometimes as an adult. Various sculptures of him range from a naïve child to a Machiavellian man. He is also rendered as an effeminate adolescent with curly hair, exhibiting both masculine and feminine features. He even freely transforms into various types of animals and plants, refusing to be restricted to a single character (Moreau 1992, 298).

Nonetheless, as Lévy (1992, 309-316) mentions, Dionysus has generally been portrayed as a cruel character. According to Lévy, such a portrayal might be due to his worshipping ritual, in which worshippers ripped animals alive and drank their blood. His sensual and cruel image was reinforced by Nietzsche's *Die Ge-*



Figure 2. An illustration of *The God Dionysus*

burt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik (The Birth of Tragedy, 1872), which emphasised the passion and catharsis entailed in Dionysus' ritual.

In the adapted story, however, Dionysus' dual character stands out again. He is both omnipotent and naïve, transforming between two extremes at will. He avenges on the sailors who kidnapped and threatened him but remains childlike and friendly. Such ambiguity of a character might appeal to children since it elicits the 'super-child fantasy' mentioned by Breger (1974, 211-213).

Neuß (2006, 18-19) argued that children laugh at adults' mishaps and thus recover their self-esteem, especially when adults are in a position of authority. Children feel relieved when they learn that some adults are similar to them. Dionysus' episode at sea reveals that there may be no difference between a god and a human, or an adult and a child. The notion that an adult is not markedly different from a child amuses children and helps relieve them of the persistent idea that adults are always superior to them.

The Wooden Horse (Το ξύλινο άλογο, grades 3–4) also entails a main character that is tweaked to act like a child. Odysseus defeats his physically stronger enemies by devising a delicate strategy. His actions are similar to those of a child defying an adult. Thus, his triumph can be regarded as the fulfilment of a super-child fantasy because the narrator leads readers to concentrate on Odysseus' cleverness and to admire him.

With two of the eminent leaders missing, what hope could they have of continuing to occupy Iliia with the power of the weapons? But the strongest of weapons is cunning. He went to Agamemnon and suggested building a huge, hollow, wooden horse with a hidden hatch under the belly. Thus, they prepared to leave this wooden horse. The Trojans would surely come to collect this offering to their god and bury it within their city walls. At night, the Achaeans enclosed in the belly of the horse would emerge and open the gates of the walls for their comrades. (Το ξύλινο άλογο, 84)²

The narrator directly quotes Odysseus' explanation about his tactics, allowing Odysseus to emphasise the intricacy of his plan by speaking meticulously and concretely in the future tense. The inner structure of the famous wooden horse is also described in detail. Children may sympathise with the narrator's affirma-

2 Kalliopi Sphaellou (2012): The Wooden Horse. In: Ministry of National Education, Research and Religion (Eds.): Anthology of Literary Texts for grade 5 & 6. Athens: Diofantos Publications, 84.

tive perspective of Odysseus' sagaciousness because it promotes their own self-esteem, which is often threatened by adults' physical superiority.

4. Humour Related to Characters' Bodies

Humour is an integral part of children's literature because it releases the tension of learning about the dark side of reality. As Mallan (1998, 20) pointed out, children's book authors depend on humour to make their stories manageable for children. A humorous touch helps children tolerate undesirable reality more comfortably, without ignoring or escaping it.

In *The Beauty with the Snaky Body* (*Η καλλονή με το φιδίσιο κορμί*, grade 5-6), Typhon and Echidna, the two strong monsters, are leading a vastly ordinary life. Typhon's mannerisms, like yawning, stretching, and hanging around to soothe boredom, break the stereotype of monsters and make the readers laugh. When Typhon picks a flower to present to Echidna and waits nervously for her reaction, his huge body and sensitive mind are incongruent, creating a comic effect.

Typhon stretched out, lazily lifted his hundred heads, and yawned with his hundred mouths. The hundred yawns shook the mountains. Rocks began to fall from everywhere and some pine trees were uprooted. Dust arose. 'Oh!', Typhon sighed deeply, and a new flood of torrents slammed into the hillside with a scary noise. (*Η καλλονή με το φιδίσιο κορμί*, 261)³

He cut a poppy and tenderly offered it to her. Echidna passed it on to her ear and became even more beautiful. Then she cut a daisy and began to scrape it off:

"He loves me, he doesn't love me", and she threw a glance at Typhon. For hours the two of them sat by the fountain. They plucked flowers, listened to the birds, chatted, smelled the herbs, sang, laughed, and dreamed. At dusk, Typhon made the big decision. – So, what do you think? Do you want to become my mate? (*Η καλλονή με το φιδίσιο κορμί*, 262-263)⁴

The adapted representations of Typhon and Echidna are examples of a type of humour which is easily detected in children's literature. In *The Beauty with the Snaky Body*, Typhon is not a scary monster, but a naive young man. Since the narrator of *The Beauty with the Snaky Body* describes what Typhon thinks and feels in detail, readers can recognise the gap between his ingenuous mind and enormous body.

Such dissonance between body and mind can be identified with the developmental state of the young readers who just began to suffer rapid physical growth. For children in Grades 5 and 6, who experience difficulty in adjusting

3 Eirini Marra (2012): *The Beauty with the Snaky Body*. In: Ministry of National Education, Research and Religion (Eds.): *Anthology of Literary Texts for grade 5 & 6*. Athens: Diofantos Publications, 261.

4 *Ibid.*, 262-263.

to rapid physical change and feel unfamiliar with their own bodies, monsters in Greek mythology can be an object onto which they project their anxiety about their growing bodies. Park (2014, 81-84) argued that the huge bodies and unusual appearance of monsters in fairy tales symbolize the confused identity of children who go through difficulty in catching up with their own physical growth. In this regard, *The Beauty with the Snaky Body* is similar to *Alice in Wonderland*. As Ostry explained, (2003, 37-39), Alice's struggle to control her growth to fit her desires reflects the anxiety and concern of children during a rapid growth period.

The adapted story of Typhon and Echidna implies that stories of monsters can be used to relieve children's stress related with their physical change. If monsters' dissonance between body and mind are depicted with a humorous touch as in *The Beauty with the Snaky Body*, young readers will be helped to resolve the anxiety they derive from changing bodies and to accept their physical development rather pleasantly.

Meanwhile, children begin to establish different developmental standards based on gender. For example, boys commonly desire bigger and stronger bodies, and girls sometimes happen to fancy the ability to deliver babies. They become frustrated when they find that they cannot yet realise such desires. Humour can help at this point. Boys imagine a body too large to function properly, and then its appeal is reduced. Girls imagine a mother giving birth to so numerous babies as to create trouble. Such an exaggeration amuses children because what they once wanted so eagerly suddenly has less value. In other words, children pursue humour that devalues what is unobtainable to them. As Wolfenstein stated, this type of humour runs in contrast with fantasy because the former transforms the pathos of the unobtainable into the absurdity of the improbable, whereas the latter offers an imaginary opportunity to obtain it.

The exaggerated description of Typhon's movement makes children laugh. The humour is derived from Typhon's body, which is too large to function properly. He is similar to *Alice in Wonderland* getting into trouble because of her own tears flooding a house. The illustration of this story is also from a painting carved on an ancient ceramic. In Figure 3, Zeus (on the left) is throwing a thunderbolt at Typhon (on the right), whose body portion and facial expression is described as humorous rather than fearful.

Echidna is in a similar situation. The ability to deliver a baby is what some girls envy in their mothers. As Klein (2002, 186-198) argued, young women's anxieties are often derived from unconscious envy of their mothers: Daughters, according to Klein, even covet their mothers' fertility and imaginarily attack them. This causes guilt and fear, which resurface later when they become pregnant themselves. Langer (1958, 139-143) explained that such negative feelings among young women about pregnancy might even lead to infertility. These arguments support the so-called 'womb envy' of daughters towards their mothers with mature bodies.

Finding that they cannot yet have babies, young girls sometimes feel frustrated and become interested in humour related to delivering babies. Echidna delivers a number of monstrous babies, and none of them are easy to care for.



Figure 3. An illustration of *The Beauty with the Snaky Body*

Her situation, following Klein’s and Langer’s approach, may elicit laughter from girls because it devalues women’s ability to bear babies.

The happy couple bore many babies, each one more terrifying than the last. They gave birth to the nine-headed Hydra of Lerna. They also gave birth to the dragon that guarded the apples of Hesperides. They bore Cerberus, Orthrus, Chimera, the Sphinx of Thebes, the Nemean lion, and also the eagle that ate Prometheus’ liver. (Η καλλονή με το φιδισιο κορμί, 263)⁵

In sum, this story appeals to children because it alleviates their fear of larger bodies. When Typhon and Echidna are represented as funny, their huge bodies lose their dreadfulness and become friendly. Because huge and mature bodies yield funny results in Typhon and Echidna’s story, the expected hierarchy between adults and children suddenly disappears. The story implies that physical strength does not necessarily accompany authority. But it is regrettable that the portrayals of Typhon and Echidna are divided into dichotomous gender roles. While Typhon is described as a character with a strong body, Echidna is described as a character with strong motherhood. Such dichotomous depiction of characters may cause a biased view about gender. Nevertheless, *The Beauty with the Snaky Body* is meaningful in that it effectively utilizes humour to relieve the confusion and anxiety that children might feel during their growing years.

Moreover, Echidna’s new designation is humorous as well. Despite her monstrous body, she is called a ‘beauty’. Through verbal humour such as this, the

5 Eirini Marra (2012): *The Beauty with the Snaky Body*. In: Ministry of National Education, Research and Religion (Eds.): *Anthology of Literary Texts for grade 5 & 6*. Athens: Diofantos Publications, 263.

standard of beauty is reversed. The verbal humour implied in Echidna's ironic designation is interpreted as a suggestion for changing perspectives on beauty considering that girls easily become preoccupied with physical beauty. Readers are prompted to laugh at first when they find that Echidna is called a 'beauty'. As the narrative proceeds, however, Echidna and Typhon's love story reveals to readers that she is indeed a beauty. In this context, humour functions as a means to help readers reflect on their own prejudices about beauty.

Humour and fantasy are general features of many literary works written for children, assuaging their frustration and promoting the recovery of their self-esteem. Greek mythology, however, has its own value as a resource of humour and fantasy for children. The gods of Greek mythology share qualities that refer both to divinity and humanity, as well as adulthood and childlikeness. Authoritative gods with childlike features relieve children of inferior feelings. Further, peculiar monsters, with huge bodies and enormous power, appeal to children since they can be a source of humour, alleviating the stress stemming from the physical immaturity of children.

5. Conclusion

Greek mythology has been adapted to maximise its potential in children's literature. The use of adapted mythology for children is not restricted to merely bringing them closer to mythology. Cramming more information about mythology into children cannot be the main purpose of such adaptation. The educational potential of Greek mythology lies in the peculiarities of the characters themselves, which can contribute significantly to children's mental growth.

The literary textbooks of Greek primary schools contain mythological texts adapted specifically for children in which the world of mythology meets that of children. Childhood inevitably entails coping with the difficulties of forming a social identity and developing independence. Mythological characters can contribute towards overcoming these challenges. Gods and monsters offer objects through which children can project their inner conflicts with adults. In addition, they help children dispose negative self-images and regain self-esteem. Therefore, the mythology in Greek primary school textbooks is worthy of careful consideration by teachers and authors interested in bringing to life the cultural inheritance of children's education.

In future studies, texts more diverse than those in school textbooks should be examined. Since many children in Greece begin learning mythology at home before attending schools, adapted stories in picture books or animated films are also effective materials for maximising the educational potential of mythology. Children at early developmental stages might require a different way of adaptation because they depend more on adults and also trust them more. Adaptors need to consider such difference between reader groups when they modify characters and narratives of mythology and future research should address these concerns.

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