

BOOK REVIEW

Mythical Monsters in Classical Literature. By PAUL MURGATROYD. London: Duckworth Publishing, 2007. Pp. x + 200. Paper, \$31.00. ISBN 978-0-7156-3627-5.

The title of Murgatroyd's (hereafter M.) new book announces the volume's twin aims: it serves both as an introduction to one of the most interesting aspects of classical mythology—those fearsome monsters that grew out of the Greeks' and Romans' active imaginations—and as a primer to classical literature itself. Bringing to bear both his considerable literary powers and experience drawn from years of teaching introductory classical mythology (whence this volume), M. has produced an eminently readable, informative book that will be a useful addition to introductory myth courses, while being engaging enough for the general reader interested in ancient stories and those who told them.

The primary aim of the book is neither to provide a comprehensive catalogue of monsters nor to discuss their origins, although the short bibliography and notes will point those interested in pursuing answers to such questions in the right direction. Nor does M. devote much energy to defining exactly what he means by "monster." This is hardly surprising, given that any such attempt is bound to be open to criticism for being either too narrow or too broad. Indeed, as M. informs us, "the definition of 'monster' is a tricky business," and he notes that attempts to classify them by type often do "not work too well, because monsters notoriously cross boundaries" (p. 1). In the end, M. opts for a broadly inclusive definition: "the word will cover mythical, fabulous and imaginary creatures which are extraordinary, alien and abnormal." Thus, all of the usual suspects (e.g. the Chimera, the Gorgons, the Harpies, the Sphinx, Cerberus, etc.) make their obligatory appearance, but we also meet some lesser known and sometimes more frightening monsters, such as the blood-sucking Keres; the seductive Empousae, who consume men both sexually and literally; and the Bronze giant Talus, who circled the island of Crete three times daily to prevent visitors from putting into port, at least until Medea got to him. Those looking for a specific monster can usually find it by consulting the index, although more than a few names are lacking (e.g. Cranae, goddess of hinges, pp. 9–10; Cercyon and Sciron, p. 72).

M. is not so much interested in the monsters themselves, however, as in how classical authors deploy them in the service of their broader literary aims. In fact, his primary goal (pp. ix, 2–3) is to introduce literary appreciation and literary criticism gradually to readers who have little experience looking closely at literature (read: most under-

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graduates). This is a laudable and ambitious goal, and one that is not easy to pull off. But M. has carefully molded his presentation and has chosen perhaps the most captivating of topics—mythical monsters—as the medium to impart these ideas. Although each chapter may be read on its own, M. has worked into the book a series of lessons on how to read, appreciate and analyze literature, first introducing basic concepts like narrative pace and description, then progressing to more sophisticated approaches, such as Propp’s functions (Chapters 10 and 11, “Fighting with Monsters”). He has also built in suggested “assignments” to practice the concepts introduced in the chapters, presumably so that instructors can build them into their syllabuses as writing assignments or topics for discussion. For instance, at the end of Chapter 2 (“Impact”) M. provides a bare passage from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (3.26–49, describing the serpent that guarded the grove of Ares) so that students can study on their own the techniques Ovid employs for impact. Similar exercises are found at the end of all other chapters except the first and last (p. 12).

Despite the consistent didactic thread woven into the book, the subject matter of the individual chapters is less consistent. Thus, after Chapter 3 (“Laocoon and the Sea-Snakes”), devoted entirely to Vergil’s account of Laocoon’s demise in *Aeneid* 2, we find in Chapter 4 a wide-ranging survey of the Sirens in literature, from Homer all the way up to Derek Walcott’s *The Odyssey* (1993). Chapter 5, in turn, is a general survey of “Other Winged Monsters” with less attention to literary accounts. Other chapters are wholly devoted to comparisons of ancient accounts: take, for instance, the analysis of the different portrayals of Theseus by Bacchylides, Catullus and Ovid in Chapter 6, and the discussion of the figure of Polyphemus throughout ancient literature (in Homer, Euripides, Vergil, Theocritus and Ovid) in the twelfth and final chapter. M. does not privilege the traditional canon of ancient authors: alongside Homer, Vergil and Ovid stand Manilius, Valerius Flaccus, Statius, Philostratus and Quintus Smyrnaeus, among many others.

The book is thus essentially a hodge-podge of literary scenes, but an instructive hodge-podge analyzed by a sensitive critic who intimately understands his audience and how to get through to them. This ability to relate to the untrained reader is doubtless owed, at least in part, to M.’s long career teaching classical mythology to undergraduates. M. often speaks the students’ own language, but he never talks down to them or underestimates their intelligence. On the contrary, readers must invest a great deal of energy to follow his careful analyses. But M.’s main virtue is his ability to communicate with modern readers. For instance, in order to drive a point home,

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M. often draws comparisons to modern cinema, building, as it were, a bridge from a medium with which students are deeply familiar to one that is unknown but fascinating nonetheless (and acting as a guide along the entire journey). After all, as M. claims (p. 102), “[c]inema is ... just another form of narrative,” one that can help the uninitiated appreciate the power of other kinds of narrative. Thus, in order to explain the abrupt change from a light-hearted story to the sudden appearance of screech-owls at Ovid *Fasti* 6.131–68, M. explains, “[t]his is the literary equivalent of the shock we get from the abrupt and unexpected appearance of a monster in a film (as in *Alien*)” (p. 10). Later, M. calls the sudden turn from the description of the sea-monster to the terrified look in Andromeda’s face at Manilius *Astronomica* 5.579–93 a “cinematic ‘reaction shot.’” Chapter 9 (“Jason and the Argonauts” pp. 119–30) is entirely devoted to analyzing Apollonius’ epic by comparison with the 1963 movie *Jason and the Argonauts*. Such comparisons to modern cinema, far from pandering to students, may be valuable avenues to introduce literary concepts. [n. 1]

On rare occasions M. misses an opportunity to introduce an important literary concept. For example, although he mentions that Dante “fabricates for allegorical purposes an arresting and intriguing Siren” (p. 49), readers have not yet been introduced to the meaning or purpose of allegory—a strange omission, especially since on the previous page Clement of Alexandria’s description of the Sirens’ song as “the lure of pagan Greek wisdom and culture,” as well as Hippolytus’ argument that Odysseus is “the good Christian sailing through the sea of heresy” (enticed by sin, i.e., the Sirens), are in fact allegory. M. only calls this “metaphor,” but this is a real opportunity to dig into the Church Fathers’ common practice of interpreting pagan myth allegorically (a common practice throughout antiquity generally, in fact). Likewise, just above on the same page, M. refers to “rationalizing” explanations of the Sirens, but does not fully explain what this means.

One also wishes that M. had been a bit more willing to discuss the differences in the literature of different periods, for example between the Classical and the Hellenistic periods. In his comparison of Bacchylides’ and Catullus’ depictions of Theseus, we are helpfully informed that “[t]he Latin poet’s depiction of him is more complex and critical. He concentrates on the female (Ariadne) rather than the male, and he puts the stress on pathos rather than glory, undercutting and souring Theseus’ triumph over the Minotaur” (p. 78). The ensuing analysis is good, but one wonders why M. is reluctant to introduce a discussion of Hellenistic literature, even a general

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one that notes the differences in tastes that develop after the death of Alexander. (This would also be valuable for the discussion of Theocritus' *Idyll* 11 regarding the Cyclops Polyphemus in Chapter 12). In fact, one of the book's faults is that it seems to treat all authors as operating in a timeless antiquity, and only occasionally do we learn when and in what context they wrote. Thus we are not informed that Hesiod stands at the beginning of Greek literature; Quintus Smyrnaeus is only "a later Greek poet" (i.e., later than Vergil); and Catullus is nothing more than "a Latin poet." The book is as poor at contextualizing the ancient authors themselves as it is good at introducing students to literary analysis of their works.

These minor faults, however, do not diminish M.'s contribution. This is a valuable addition to the books from which one can choose to fill out a classical mythology syllabus. Given its nature, it is less suitable for the large classroom—I would have a difficult time using it in my class of 200+ students—but I can see a myriad of uses for smaller classes where discussion of literature is possible. If more students read and studied M.'s book, our lives as instructors might be better for it, and we might be able to do more sophisticated things in our classrooms, even if that meant adding one more moderately expensive textbook to the semester's syllabus.

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[n. 1] As I was writing this review, an episode in my introductory classical mythology class reminded me of the centrality of cinema in the minds of today's students—indeed, cinema can rightfully be called the default medium. When discussing Zeus' revelation of future events in Book 15 of the *Iliad*, many students objected that "it ruined the story," because it removed all suspense. When I reminded them that (a) all Greeks would have known what was going to transpire, and (b) literature is often more about *how* than *what*, a sharp student immediately raised her hand and mentioned the movie *Titanic*, in which we all knew the ship was going to sink, yet the story was interesting nonetheless.