

## BOOK REVIEW

*Epic Echoes in The Wind in the Willows*. By GEORGIA L. IRBY. Routledge Focus on Classical Studies. London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2022. Pp. x + 140. Hardback, \$59.95. ISBN: 978-1-032-10510-9.

In this book, Georgia Irby lays out in full what scholars have previously explored only on a piecemeal basis, namely, that Kenneth Grahame's children's classic, *The Wind in the Willows* (*WW*), is profoundly indebted to Greco-Roman epic and especially Homer's *Odyssey*. This debt should not surprise anyone. Grahame was something of a phenom at Greek and Latin. But, for better or worse, his ambitions for further study at Oxford were frustrated by a stingy uncle and thus possibly sublimated in his literary works, which feature a large number of classical references. In *WW* in particular, Grahame recycles episodes, tropes and themes found in Homer (and Virgil and, in comic form, in the *Batrachomyomachia*) including the themes of home, travel, hospitality, heroism and bardic metapoesis.

Some may question the need for a book that examines, in great detail, epic reception in *WW*. I would offer three responses: First, that Irby's book, as a study in reception, is a worthy companion to the several volumes and projects on the reception of classical culture in children's literature that have appeared in recent years. Second, as a study in intertextuality, Irby reveals Grahame's intense, granular engagement with his ancient sources. Finally, *WW* is, simply put, a beloved literary masterpiece whose fans ranged from Theodore Roosevelt to original Pink Floyd front man Syd Barrett. For all these reasons, this reviewer believes that Irby's specialized study is well merited.

The book's contents fall into nine chapters. The first two zoom out from the text to address the broadly classical nature of Grahame's writings and its underpinnings. Thus, in Chapter 1, we learn about Grahame's classical education, knowledge of Greek and Latin and his literary interests, ancient and otherwise. We also get a preliminary survey of evidence for his engagement with the classics in *WW* and elsewhere. Irby's discussion here is good and her bibliography up-to-date, though an even more in-depth discussion of Grahame's "classical"

biography would be of interest and could serve as a ripe topic for a future article. Chapter 2 assists in the transition to the close-readings conducted in the later chapters by surveying the classical and, in particular, epic elements found in *WW*. The content of this chapter is diverse to the point of sometimes feeling a bit scattershot, but does provide food for thought and is returned to from time to time in the material that comes afterwards.

The remaining chapters provide examples of intertexts organized according to major themes that will be familiar to any student of ancient epic and the *Odyssey* in particular, e.g. heroic traits and behaviors, the clever hero, wanderlust, *kleos/aristeia* and return/*nostos*. Though organized into theme-based chapters, Irby's analyses have a list-like quality that will convince the reader of the depth of Grahame's engagement with his classical sources partly through the sheer number of parallels that she identifies. In this sense, Irby's text feels fundamental, like it's exploring a literary relationship in depth for the first time.

To her credit, Irby is aware that there are many possible explanations for Grahame's engagement with classical epic: biography, history, parody, literary/aesthetic reverence and the productive dissonance generated by the inclusion of simultaneously adult and childlike material. As mentioned, Irby offers some explanation for Grahame's inclusion of classical material based on his biography and historical milieu in her opening chapter, relating it in particular to the rapid technological progress of his age and the need for Odysseus-like heroes to navigate societal change (e.g. 8, 22). In the close readings themselves, however, Irby does not commit as much to a particular vantagepoint for explaining or interpreting the intertexts she identifies. This has the benefit of allowing Irby to include more material than she could have in a more aggressively argued text, but also the drawback of being less meaningful. In other words, the many connections that Irby establishes between epic and *WW* are undeniable, but how this ultimately benefits the reader is not always obvious.

In one of the most passionate moments in the book, Irby speaks of the Callimachean relationship of *WW* to its sources: "... like Callimachus (and other Hellenistic authors), Grahame subverted grand Homeric values, unconsciously mimicking Hellenistic diminuendo. *The Wind in the Willows* is an introspective Homer writ small, in an escapist minor key" (22). (This complements my own view of a Virgil-to-Homer type relationship as signaled by Grahame's use of an *Aeneid*-esque 12-chapter structure.) Irby's observation is powerful in that it recognizes the aesthetic complexities involved in explicitly acknowledging an important prior literary culture while trying to evolve a new one. Her sensitivity to

the musical aspects of this process adds to the poignancy of the insight, which I think is worth pursuing. Put differently, Irby has done the legwork required to identify Grahame's rich engagement with classical epic in *WW*, but more thought should be given to what kind of new aesthetic has been established in *WW* vis-à-vis the classical past and what compelled Grahame to adopt such an aggressively intertextual approach in writing his masterpiece. Such a study would serve as a meaningful sequel to Irby's foundational treatment of this important book and author, and their connection to antiquity.

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