

Benvenuto Cellini,
"Perseus with
the Head of Medusa,"
Florence



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KATARZYNA MARCINIAK

THE MODERN ARGONAUTS

Myths link us all together, across countries and generations. That is why classical mythology is being incorporated into an educational curriculum designed to better equip young people to navigate the challenges of today's world.

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The ancient Greeks held that in front of Zeus' palace on Olympus stood two large amphorae, from which the king of the gods alternately dispensed happiness and tragedy down to Earth. This

myth explains why life is such a mix of tremendous joy and profound despair, of overwhelming doubt and unflagging hope, of horror and beauty. Mythology was an ancient tool for making sense of human destiny. It also held up the figure of one who, through his courage and readiness for sacrifice, helped to avert the severe, divine verdicts – the titan Prometheus.

Over the millennia that have passed since our forebears gathered around Hestia's sacred fire to recount myths, the realm of science has advanced to levels that now rival the unbridled visions of science-fiction authors. However, the fundamental questions

about human destiny and our place on Earth remain as pertinent as ever – perhaps even more so today. Mythology continues to guide us in seeking answers, not as a relic of the past but as a vibrant element of cultural expression running through all ages, including our own times that are reflected in the mirror of the reception of myths.

This is notably illustrated by the recent Oscar-winning film *Oppenheimer* (2023) directed by Christopher Nolan. The film draws from the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (2005) by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin, who pay homage to mythology right in its very title. Prometheus is mentioned also in an early scene of the movie, thus encouraging viewers to engage in critical thinking. The Greek titan, whom we know from basic school education as humanity's benefactor, here shows us another face. The ancients saw it too, and – despite their highest respect for Prometheus from their human perspective – they recognized the significant risk posed by his gift of fire to the world. This view of the Prometheus myth interprets his act of giving humankind the divine flame as an act of hubris, crossing the lines drawn by Zeus without heed for the consequences. This angle on the classic story was previously explored by Mary Shelley in her novel *Frankenstein* (1818), which she subtitled *The Modern Prometheus*, cautioning against the perils of scientific advancement without ethical consideration. Dr. Victor Frankenstein's creation of a living being, whom he then fails to take responsibility for, results in tragedy. Similarly, Prometheus-Oppenheimer endows humanity with a technology capable of world annihilation. Through such reinterpretations of ancient tales, mythology guides and aids our understanding of contemporary dilemmas within a broad, timeless framework, enhancing our grasp of their implications and inspiring us to take steps towards ensuring a more hopeful future.

Mythical Childhood

For more than a decade, I have had the privilege of leading “Our Mythical Childhood,” an international team program based at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales,” University of Warsaw. This program focuses on the study of the reception of classical antiquity in the culture for children and teens, but also for adults, as they too reach for works considered to be aimed at younger age groups. Against this backdrop, youth culture plays a crucial role in how we perceive antiquity, largely because our first encounters with ancient stories, particularly mythology, happen in our early formative years through school education and popular culture. This phase is critical also for the development of our identities, thus emphasizing the importance of the cultural heritage we pass down to subsequent gen-

erations. For instance, neglecting to introduce young people to the myth of Prometheus would mean not only that they would miss out on the chance to engage deeply with works like *Frankenstein* or *Oppenheimer* as (more or less) adults, but also that they would have a limited awareness of the *longue durée* of humanity's most vital dilemmas. What consequences this would have – that is a question we can all hope will forever remain unanswered.

The “Our Mythical Childhood” program studies the strategies used by creators and educators to bring the ancient world to life for young minds, thereby connecting them to our shared past through the lens of reception. The ways in which myths and historical stories are adapted often reflect not just the societal and cultural shifts of antiquity but also those of the modern era, serving as a tool for discussing pressing contemporary issues. Throughout all the stages of this program, we challenge the predominantly Western European narrative that has long dominated the popular, mainstream interpretation of antiquity.



Eduard Müller,
“Prometheus Bound
and the Oceanids,”
Berlin

Diana Wersalska,
installation, Royal Garden
of Lights at the Museum
of King Jan III's Palace
in Wilanów, Warsaw



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The importance of considering diverse geographical and cultural perspectives was underscored by early research into Old Polish culture from a Central European viewpoint, initiated at the Centre for Studies on the Classical Tradition – my home institution (now a permanent unit of the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” at the University of Warsaw), established by Prof. Jerzy Axer in 1991, when classical reception studies started gaining ground. Studies into youth culture require us to take into consideration different, even those most remote regions of the world, thus allowing for a holistic understanding of how the reception of antiquity functions across varied historical and cultural contexts.

For the first two stages of the “Our Mythical Childhood” program, I received support in the form of a Loeb Classical Library Foundation Grant (2012–2013) and an Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Alumni Award for Innovative Networking Initiatives (2014–2017). This allowed me to create a team of experts from several continents, working in various disciplines – from classical philology and archaeology to modern languages and child neuropsychiatry. The next stage of the program – the project “Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges” (2016–2022), for which I received an ERC Consolidator Grant – permitted us to test the new experimental realms and develop our research. Its added value turned out to be educational resources tied to scholarly pursuits,

including activities designed for autistic children and animations of Greek vases from the collections of the Polish National Museum in Warsaw.

The Modern Argonauts

Since the outset of this program, I have worked closely with schools. With kind support from both school administrations and their parents, pupils join in our ventures and take their first steps in scholarly research, under the enthusiastic tutelage of their teachers. This collaboration has borne fruit in various forms, including two books, numerous workshops, presentations, and artistic creations. Such outcomes have reinforced my belief in the transformative power of education paired with cutting-edge research. Motivated by this conviction, I applied for an ERC Proof of Concept grant. This kind of support, reserved for recipients of the long-term ERC grants, enables the exploration of the societal impact of their research results. My proposal was for an international educational initiative titled “The Modern Argonauts: A Multicultural Educational Programme Preparing Young People for Contemporary Challenges through an Innovative Use of Classical Mythology.”

Antiquity is crucial to education, I feel, for three primary reasons: ancient questions and dilemmas remain very much relevant today (as illustrated by the above examples), myths create a universal cultural code that is understandable almost all over the world, and journeying through the land of mythology gives rise to a sense of community that is a source of hope for the future. The ERC Proof of Concept grant, which I received for the years 2023–2025, allows us to pursue this vision.

We therefore extend an invitation to young people to join us in an exceptional academy, under the banner of mythology. We are preparing a textbook incorporating role-playing game elements – its users will transform into Modern Argonauts and embark on a quest in search of our shared mythical heritage. They will discover myths through ancient sources, learn about how various mythological themes have been received in different regions of the world, and solidify their knowledge through creative tasks that foster teamwork and other essential soft skills. More importantly, mythology will serve as a tool for teachers and students to discuss pressing modern issues – for instance, the myth of Prometheus can spark debate on the responsibilities of scientific advancement, the tale of Aeneas can be a springboard for discussing migration, Hermes’ story raises the issue of fake news, and the legend of Medusa challenges us to rethink notions of monstrosity, while the myth of Artemis touches on the topic of protecting woodlands and that of Poseidon draws attention to the problem of polluting the seas and oceans.

The project is non-commercial. The textbook will be published in open access, along with an interactive version to support inclusive education, e.g., providing audio recordings of the entire material for the blind and visually impaired. Already now, users with dyslexia can choose a more accommodating font on the project's website.

Such an endeavor can succeed only as a team project, hence the individual lessons are being prepared by experienced researchers and dedicated doctoral students, all passionate about education. They come from a variety of countries: Andorra, Australia, Austria, Belarus, Cameroon, Estonia, Germany, Greece, India, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Malta, New Zealand, Poland, Slovenia, Switzerland, the Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In addition to classical myths, students will also learn about tales from other cultures, such as Japanese, Cameroonian, and Maori stories, thus enriching the educational experience with a deep respect for cultural diversity.

Each lesson undergoes real-world testing in schools. So far, 21 institutions from around the world have gotten involved from a range of countries, from the United States, through Cameroon, to Ukraine, and representing diverse profiles: from *licei classici* in Bologna and Turin to the School Complex for Motor Vehicles in the Polish town of Koszalin.



Markus Lüpertz,
"Mercury," Bonn

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Due to the project's potential for social impact, the following important institutions involved in research and popularization of classical antiquity have declared their support for its dissemination: the Fédération Internationale des Associations d'Études Classiques, Société Internationale des Amis de Cicéron, the Cambridge School Classics Project, Advocating Classics Education, the Associazione Italiana di Cultura Classica, and the Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology at the University of Reading.

Myths connect us all, across countries and generations. In the "Modern Argonauts" project, we strive to leverage this extraordinary potential to implement research-driven education, in the conviction that knowledge of the past can support young people in shaping the present and making plans for the future.

Despite humanity's vast technological progress, certain aspects of life remain beyond our control. The ancient myth of Zeus' amphorae, mentioned at the outset of this article, continues to symbolize this truth. Simultaneously, Prometheus' legacy reminds us of our capacity for agency, a force that is as dangerous as it is wonderful. For it can either destroy or salvage the world. It is my hope that, through the ERC Proof of Concept grant, this educational endeavor will not only enrich students' understanding of mythology's role in culture but also better equip them to confront the challenges humanity continues to face. Owing to this, they will be able to draw strength from the power of myth, *quod felix faustum fortunatumque sit!* ■

Abraham van den Blocke,
"Neptune's Fountain,"
Gdańsk



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Further reading:

Marciniak K. (ed.), *Our Mythical Childhood... The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults*, Leiden–Boston 2016.

Marciniak K. (ed.), *Chasing Mythical Beasts: The Reception of Ancient Monsters in Children's and Young Adults' Culture*, Heidelberg 2020.

"Our Mythical Childhood" – publishing series from the University of Warsaw.