

Studien zur europäischen Kinder- und Jugendliteratur/
Studies in European Children's and Young Adult
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Herausgegeben von / Edited by
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Ein zentrales Anliegen dieser Buchreihe besteht darin, literatur- und kulturtheoretisch anspruchsvolle Studien zur Geschichte und Theorie der Kinder- und Jugendliteratur (inklusive anderer Kindermedien) zu veröffentlichen. In ihrer Ausrichtung vertritt die Reihe dezidiert eine europäische Perspektive, d.h. sie versteht sich als Publikationsorgan für Forschung zu den Kinder- und Jugendliteraturen unterschiedlicher europäischer Sprachräume. Auch Studien, die sich mit dem Einfluss außereuropäischer Kinderliteraturen auf die europäische Kinder- und Jugendliteratur befassen, sind willkommen. Die Forschungsperspektive kann komparatistisch geprägt sein oder sich auf eine Einzelphilologie konzentrieren. In dieser Serie können sowohl deutsch- als auch englischsprachige Monographien und Sammelbände veröffentlicht werden. Eingereichte Buchprojekte und Manuskripte werden anonym von zwei ausgewiesenen Fachwissenschaftler/innen begutachtet.

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Political Changes and Transformations in Twentieth and Twenty-first Century Children's Literature

Edited by
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FARRIBA SCHULZ

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Make Peace, Not (the Trojan) War: Transformation and Continuity in the Mirror of the Myth of Troy – with a Focus on Polish Children’s Literature

Katarzyna Marciniak (University of Warsaw)

The heritage of Ancient Greece and Rome blends ostensible opposites, which explains why classical mythology offers a perfect ground for reflecting on transformation and continuity.¹ On the one hand, this heritage is often perceived as a petrified legacy of the past – a set of fixed concepts and values to be transmitted to ever new generations in order to preserve a certain cultural continuum extending across the ages of humankind. On the other, the ancient myths have always been malleable and thus adaptable to the changing needs of societies worldwide. Channeled through the imagination and sensibility of talented artists, they have responded to the challenges of differing epochs. Therefore, studies into the reception of classical mythology, its adaptations and evocations, offer an exceptional opportunity to gain deep insight into key mental, political, and cultural transformations – both in the global perspective and in regional contexts.

Interestingly enough, the potential for research on the phenomena of reception and adaptation has been emphasized in 21st-century scholarship nearly simultaneously both in reference to Classical Antiquity, with Lorna Hardwick’s focus on the new versions of ancient sources “developed for a different purpose”

¹ I had the opportunity to test in this context the potential of the myth of Troy owing to the kind invitation from Amy Smith, the curator of the Ure Museum of Greek Archaeology. I was pleased to present the results of my research in a lecture on the Autumn 2021 Seminar Series, accompanying the British Museum Spotlight Loan, *Troy: Beauty and Heroism*, on display at the Ure Museum from September to December 2021. I wish to thank the organizers and participants for the inspirational discussion that prompted me to prepare the present chapter on the Trojan war. My research has been conducted at the Faculty of “Artes Liberales” of the University of Warsaw with the ERC Consolidator Grant project (681202) *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children’s and Young Adults’ Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, funded under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Program, see <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/> (all links accessed 5 January 2022).

(2003, 9), and to cultural studies, with Linda Hutcheon's observations on the complex process of retelling stories that "change with each repetition, and yet they are recognizably the same" (2006, 177), and thus engage the audience in an "ongoing dialogue with the past" (116).²

This potential is all the greater when referred to children's culture, not least literature, whose authors use myths to guide their young readers through the identity-building process, education in values, and learning about the world – all with current societal issues in the background.³ The theme of war and peace is especially relevant in this context. As noted by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (1999, ix; 2012), the 20th century was expected to usher in a new Golden Age – a period free of bloodshed and conflicts. The "Century of the Child" – this is how the Swedish educator Ellen Key (1909; first ed. 1900) had dubbed that dreamed-of era, one also linked to the mythical Golden Age understood as the childhood of humankind. The intense interest in children's education and the development of literature for young audiences was meant to help peace flourish. And indeed, many great authors responded to its call (Murnaghan and Roberts 2016; Marciniak 2016, 6). The two world wars, the use of nuclear weapons, the Cold War, and environmental disasters quickly dispelled the "Century of the Child" illusion, yet the dream of making peace not war remains as compelling as before, with ever new generations of authors adapting the past to make this dream our future.⁴

This is also the case of the myth about the most famous war of Classical Antiquity. We all think that we know Troy story. But "there is no one story", as Jim Henson's *Storyteller* observes.⁵ The reception of the Trojan mythical cycle differs, and – as I demonstrate in this chapter via selected examples from children's literature of the 20th and 21st centuries – the resultant differences, when

² It should however be noticed that the origins of classical reception studies may be traced back as far as Tadeusz Zieliński's (1897) seminal work on Cicero's *Nachleben*, with the modern theoretical foundations posed by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960), Wolfgang Iser (1978), and Hans Robert Jauss (1987).

³ Additionally, in periods of censorship and limited freedom, or, paradoxically, when the adult culture is not mature enough to confront some of these issues, mythological references can serve as components of an "Aesopian language" – encoding and transmitting particular messages otherwise impossible to voice directly in the official grown-up stream of discourse. We will see this phenomenon also in the subsequent sections of the present chapter.

⁴ The faith in this dream is attested for instance by the activities of the International Board on Books for Young People (IBBY), established by Jella Lepman (1891–1970) after World War II with the desire to nurture peace via literature. It is also present in the endeavors of educators who promote children books with a pacifist message, like "War & Peace in Children's Literature" by the Instructional Materials Center (IMC) at the Appalachian State University (<https://imc.library.appstate.edu/book-lists/war-peace-childrens-literature>).

⁵ See Henson (1990). On *The Storyteller* TV series, see Marciniak (2020).

analyzed in reference to the 'fixed' version, become a fascinating testimony to the transformations within Europe, and Poland in particular, over the last decades.

First, I explore the paradoxical potential of the Trojan myth: I explain why it is not a story for children and why it is exactly a perfect story for them, and how it is generally approached by children's writers. Next, based on a choice of books from Polish literature as case studies, I filter Poland's history across the 20th and 21st centuries through the reception mirror,⁶ highlighting the country's struggle for independence marked not only by the tragedy of World War II, but also by the uplifting Solidarity movement waged against the totalitarian regime trying to build a brave new world for captive minds. I also take into consideration the societal changes that make us face again today the ancient question – the same faced by the young Achilles – on what is important in life. Finally, I outline a research path toward framing the current reception of the Trojan myth in children's literature in a comparative approach. By gazing upon this part of the reception mirror and comparing the images emerging therein, we have a chance to better understand the transformations of our world – and maybe even to look into the future with hope.

Troy Not for Children?

'Childhood' is the key word to the Trojan myth in many respects. First, there is the layer that we would wish never to associate with young people. That is: children as victims of the gods' and the adults' playgrounds, starting with Helen – the infamous cause of the Trojan war. The part of her myth I point to here is less often recalled, even in adult elaborations, but it sheds a sinister light on her life story and offers much to reflect on. Namely, before Helen grew up to become the most beautiful woman in the world, she was a little girl who suffered a traumatic experience. She was abducted by the hero Theseus who had decided that he should have a divine wife, and Helen as a daughter of Zeus fit his insane plan perfectly. At the moment of her kidnapping, she was barely ten years old, as Diodorus of Sicily attests (IV, 63). Some sources make her seven. But the Trojan myth is related to the suffering of many children in the shadows of its heroes' glory: Helen's daughter Hermione abandoned by her mother, Telemachus left by Odysseus bound to take part in the war, Iphigenia sacrificed on the cusp of maidenhood, and Orestes – an infant witness to that event – kidnapped in Aulis by the wounded Telephos, whose own childhood had been a series of sufferings, too. Last but not least is the child-symbol of the cruelty of the Trojan war and of all the wars in human history: the beloved son of Hector and Andromache – Astyanax, so touchingly depicted by Homer in the *Iliad* – the boy who could not live.

⁶ This term alludes to the title of the novel by Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (1978), in which the author uses the setting of the 14th century to talk about the atrocities of World War I.

Second, there is the myth of Achilles inscribed in the Trojan war. This myth is crucial, as the ancient sources allow us to follow the hero from his infancy. We see him being bathed by his mother Thetis in the river Styx, which was to grant him superhuman resistance to all injuries. Next, we meet him at Chiron's where he is taken care of by the wise centaur and his wife Chariclo – a perfect foster family, immortalized by Apollonius of Rhodes in his Hellenistic epic *Argonautica* (I, 553–558; see Marciniak 2021, 11). Then, in various mythological configurations, we observe Achilles as he grows up, with his youthful friendship or love for Patroclus. We also meet him on the island of Skyros. Achilles is hidden in girls' clothes on the island by his mother, as Thetis is aware of the dire prophecy of his premature death, against which not even the bath in the waters of the Styx can guarantee full protection, especially in that it had not been a full immersion, as his heel had not gone under the surface. What is interesting about this prophecy, however, is the fact that Achilles did have a choice, in contrast to many other mythical heroes: he could live a long and happy life and be forgotten – or die young, but remain in human memory for ever. And so Achilles chooses war. Tricked by Odysseus into revealing his identity, he leaves his childhood behind and goes to Troy. And here in the midst of the bloody battles – his heroic deeds and displays of manhood – Homer makes us stop and listen to Achilles crying after Agamemnon has violated his honor. We then witness a highly emotional scene: Thetis emerges from the sea, her heart breaking at seeing Achilles' tears. And she asks the famous question – one that throws us off balance at the *Iliad's* very beginning: τέκνον, τί κλαίεις; – “Why are you weeping, child?” (I, 362). In the end, we meet Achilles, or rather his shadow, when he comes to Odysseus from the Underworld (Hom. *Od.* XI, 465–491). Praised by Odysseus for greatness and fame, Achilles interrupts him and makes the bloodcurdling confession that in giving up on life in his youth, he had made the wrong choice. Such scenes do not seem “apt” for the young public. Or do they? We shall see soon, as they will come back to us through the phenomenon of reception.

And indeed, the third and final aspect regards the importance of the Trojan myth in culture and its amazingly rich content, encompassing elements vital and suitable for all ages, like the ancient sessions of storytelling by Homer and his descendants. The Trojan myth is one of the foundational stories of Antiquity. It has also become a foundational story worldwide, due to the global circulation of the Classics supported by various factors, both positive and negative ones, over the last couple of centuries and – over the last couple of decades – also owing to popular culture: movies, TV series, various Internet phenomena, computer games, etc. Together these factors give new life to the ancient myths, the Trojan myth included. As a result, this myth is widely present in our surroundings, with children being exposed to Troy story from their earliest years, even if often unconsciously and in humorous contexts. For example, we meet Ajax, one of the greatest heroes

of the Trojan war, at home among our cleaning products,⁷ and in Warsaw there is an orthopedic salon called *Achilles*, where parents can choose footwear that meets the special needs of their children's feet. The amusing side of reception is always a desirable supplement for both young and old as belonging to the species *homo ludens* (Huizinga 1955), in need of entertainment to maintain balance in life. Yet first and foremost, the Trojan myth, by exploring the issues of good and evil, friendship and love, family and honor, war, death, and sacrifice, is a perfect tool shaping the value system of young people. Thus, no wonder that the whole hosts of authors the world over have answered the question *Is the Trojan cycle for children?* in the affirmative.

The story of Troy in the culture for children and young adults proves to be a never-ending story, and hence the materials for study are incredibly rich.⁸ In short and with a certain simplification, writers usually choose to focus on the general course of the war, on the Trojan Horse episode, or on Odysseus and his *nostos* to Ithaca. There are several reasons for such choices. First, the educational value – authors wish to introduce their readers to the famous myth, one present and important for global cultural heritage, including via a number of phraseological expressions living in many languages. Second, this content can be altogether easily adjusted to young ages by merely omitting the motifs deemed taboo for a certain age group. And third, these parts of the Trojan myth display fascinating motifs that appeal to all: fantastic creatures, divine ‘magic’, journeys, etc. Let us beware of generalizations, however, as there are also authors who choose an unbeaten path and, for instance, present us with the distant background to the Trojan war, or offer insight into the fates of the heroes after the war, or focus on less popular episodes or points of view, even inventing their own scenes and protagonists.⁹ We will see various aspects of this kind in practice further in this chapter.

Again, with a certain simplification, the most popular types of arrangement of this rich material merit brief review. First, there are accounts of the Trojan war, its cause, and its consequences in the collections we call ‘mythologies’, where the beauty of Helen, the Trojan Horse, and Odysseus' journey are reported alongside

⁷ In the 1940s, when this detergent was created, Ajax was in the canon of school education and evoked associations with formidable strength, hence the advertising slogan: “Stronger than dirt”, replaced sometimes with: “Stronger than grease”. Especially the latter version raised the aural connection to Greece. See also Dugan (2018).

⁸ See, for example, *Our Mythical Childhood Survey*, which is a kind of database of interesting study cases of the reception of Classical Antiquity in youth culture – created within the *Our Mythical Childhood* project. Many of these texts have yet to be studied, thus we learn to boldly go where no Google search had gone before, also to unexplored parts of Troy – there and back again. Some of the texts discussed in the present chapter have already their entries in the *Survey*, see <http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey>, see ad loc.

⁹ On the female perspective in this context, see Burns (2021).

other famous myths. These authors usually try to keep close to the sources or to the versions deemed ‘classical’, that is, the most widespread in culture. Also here the exceptions are more frequent than it may seem, and they shed new light on the meaning of the given mythical thread. However, as the readership of the mythologies is mostly that of children (for whom these books constitute their first or one of the first contacts with the myths), for the time being this new light may be beyond their perception. Yet it guides them, despite their unawareness, sometimes to be acknowledged and appreciated in adulthood.¹⁰ Second, there are re-narrations, usually in the form of novels, with the action set in the times of the Trojan war, but retold with a focus on issues crucial for our contemporary reality. For example, in 2016 the growing awareness of animal rights and empathy for their feelings spawned not just one, but two retellings of the *Odyssey* for children from the perspective of Odysseus’ dog Argos.¹¹ The third approach consists in literally conjoining the present and events from the Trojan myths. In this group we find for example various time-travel novels offering the perfect opportunity to juxtapose in a particularly clear way the continuity and the transformations underway within the human mind across the ages, with a ‘subliminal’ invitation for readers to reflect on these issues.

In sum, as typical for the phenomenon of reception, books referring to the Trojan cycle permit us not only to know bygone times better, but also and above all to see – through the ancient myth – the values, priorities, and the problems of our own societies, while the broad grasp offered by many an author makes the message of the given text vital for all generations, including adult readers, even if the indicated target is defined as youth.¹²

¹⁰ For the Trojan myth, see also the animation created within the *Our Mythical Childhood* project by Sonya Nevin and Steve K. Simons based on the Sappho vase from the collection of the National Museum in Warsaw, <https://www.panoply.org.uk/sappho>. The animation – one of the whole series that changes our approach to the ancient artefacts and their use in education – shows the Poetess singing a song of Troy, *Fragment 44*, with the music reconstructed by Armand D’Angour and with the voice of Aliko Markantonadou. This is not a song of war, but of one of the happiest moments in the Trojans’ life – Hector and Andromache’s wedding. The animation comes with a set of creative activities for children of all ages, and with challenging questions to reflect on: Why did Sappho choose this particular episode instead of the most famous ones connected with the Trojan war and how does her choice deepen our understanding of this myth? It is worth repeating similar questions also through this chapter, in the context of the books offering original approaches to the Trojan cycle.

¹¹ See Hardy (2016) and Simpson (2016). A year later an Italian novel from Argos’ perspective was published, Sgradoli (2017). On the first two, see the analysis by Hodgkinson (2023).

¹² As the studies by Barbara Wall (1991) and her continuators show, the phenomenon called the “double address” is typical of works for youth: these works transmit messages both

The Case of Jan Parandowski: Transformation and Continuity in the Context of the World Wars up into the 21st Century

Nearly all children in Poland learn about the Trojan myth from two small booklets: *Wojna trojańska* [The Trojan War] (ca. 1927) and *Przygody Odyszeusza* [Odysseus’ Adventures] (ca. 1935) written between the two world wars by Jan Parandowski, called the “Alchemist of the Word” – a great stylist of the Polish language (he was even a candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature), professor at the Catholic University of Lublin, and, as the Vice-President of the PEN International, an acquaintance of many artists, including Jean Cocteau and James Joyce. These booklets were preceded by his collection of myths published in 1924 – *Mitologia: Wierzenia i podania Greków i Rzymian* [Mythology: Beliefs and Legends of the Greeks and Romans]. He had intended it for an older audience, especially teachers, but its importance for Polish culture exceeded all that could have been expected. For many decades an obligatory school reading at various levels,¹³ Parandowski’s *Mythology* can be compared only with the Bible and the Polish Romantic epic *Pan Tadeusz* [Master Thaddeus] (1834) by Adam Mickiewicz in terms of its formative role for whole generations.¹⁴ His original method in presenting myths – through references to Polish literature and the iconography of previous epochs – has resulted in making young readers aware of the continuity of the ancient tradition and Poland’s ‘Mediterranean identity’, despite the country’s geographical position and historical entanglements. At the same time, Parandowski was a keen observer of the world’s transformations and his empathy resulted in reflections that sound alarmingly valid today, as they make us aware that what we perceive as a crisis of our own times is in fact a process set into motion already centuries ago, albeit now accelerating and threatening devastation unless stopped immediately. But to stop it, as Parandowski demonstrates, we should know its primordial roots, for only then can a true mental change take place in society. This is the case of the destruction of forests in Poland – a practice condemned by Parandowski in the section on satyrs, where their

to children and adults who, as Perry Nodelman demonstrates in his seminal book *The Hidden Adult* (2008), are inscribed in texts of this kind *a priori*. See in this context also the study on the phenomenon of ‘crosswriting’ by Bettina Kümmerling-Meibauer (2008).

¹³ On Parandowski’s place in Polish education, see Marciniak (2015) and Marciniak and Strycharczyk (2021). Today his *Mythology* is no longer obligatory in terms of the ministerial curriculum, however, as the choice of a collection of myths depends on teachers, they nearly all require that their students read Parandowski’s version. The book is also deemed to belong to the “canon of the Polish intelligentsia”.

¹⁴ Parandowski is recommended for example by Andrzej Sapkowski (the author of “The Witcher” cycle). In the present chapter I give only the basic information on Parandowski. For more on his biography and works, see Studencki (1972–1974), Tomkowski (2013), and Marciniak (2015).

images in Greek art are discussed, along with the paintings by Jacek Malczewski, the father of Polish symbolism at the turn of the 20th century, and the 16th-century ironic poem (“Satyr albo Dziki mąż” – “Satyr or a Feral Man”, 1564) by the greatest author of the Polish Renaissance, Jan Kochanowski, who gave a satyr his voice to criticize – let us emphasize this: way back in the 16th century! – the devastation of nature by people and their “stupid pursuit of money” (Paradowski 1989, 97; Marciniak 2015, 64–65). This ‘ecological’ thread is becoming ever more relevant in our times as it appeals to contemporary youth, deeply engaged in efforts on behalf of the climate.

Paradowski’s view of the Trojan cycle, as presented in his booklets for children, reflects his traumatic experiences during the Great War (World War I), when he had been a civilian captive in Russia. In fact, this prefigured the next tragedy he went through – World War II. In the opening of *The Trojan War*, he alludes to Kochanowski once again – namely, to his famous drama *Odprawa posłów greckich* [Dismissal of the Greek Envoys] (1578), an obligatory school reading. Hence, even if these allusions are not quite clear to the youngest readers of the booklet, they are surely understandable to their parents or older siblings. In the footsteps of Kochanowski, Paradowski calls for peace. He condemns the war caused by the “national pride”. He feels pity for its victims. At the same time, however, his knowledge and his personal experience of history make him observe bitterly that “the voice of reason is rarely heeded” (Paradowski 2017, 74).¹⁵ He displays also a strong moral backbone and when war cannot be avoided, he expresses support for those who defend a just cause. After World War II, while his vision of the Trojan myth was shaping the minds of school children in Poland, Paradowski intensified his activities as a writer and lecturer both in the country and abroad, paying special attention to youngsters in the belief that the popularization of ancient culture could be a tool for promoting peace and healing hatred for the sake of future generations (Marciniak 2015, 61–63).

The Case of Anna M. Komornicka: Transformation and Continuity Behind the Iron Curtain

Paradowski inspired Anna M. Komornicka, a classical philologist, professor at the University of Łódź and – like her eminent predecessor – at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. For a decade (1994–2004) she was also the editor-in-chief of *Meander*, a scholarly journal established after World War II with the aim of supporting classical values in the country mutilated by war and pulled into the orbit of the USSR, with the Iron Curtain meant to sever the ties with Mediterranean civilization, that is, the West. In the 1980s, marked by Martial Law

and the Solidarność movement (and Komornicka’s aristocratic roots along with her strong Catholic faith made her a natural supporter of the transformations leading to the recovery of civic freedoms; the Catholic Church was one of the centers of opposition then), she wrote a collection of shorts, *Historie nie z tej ziemi* [Stories Not from This World] (1987), illustrated by the famous satirist artist Jerzy Flisak. The collection initiated what would later develop into the trilogy entitled “Dziedzictwo antyku” [The Legacy of Antiquity]. Komornicka made use of her personal experiences and created the figure of a scholar-Mom of three children bearing the real names of her offspring: Krzyś (Chris), Elżbietka (Betty), and Stefanek (Stevie). As they represent various age groups, the reader target is broad and the knowledge of mythology is transmitted not artificially, but in a natural way. For instance, many a piece of information is given by Chris who, as the eldest, is presented with Paradowski’s *Mythology* by their Mom. The myths stimulate the children’s imagination and they begin to notice mythological characters in their surroundings.¹⁶

The myth of Troy is crucial for the story “Kto znajdzie Achillesa?” [Who Will Find Achilles?]. While on holiday at their grandpa’s house in the middle of the forest in the Mazury region, Chris and Stevie arrive at a mysterious lake where several years earlier they had seen a strange woman with seaweed-like hair. She had held a baby boy by his heel and dipped him into the water. This time, the brothers suddenly hear a distant voice, as if coming from the radio, with the weather forecast and a warning of gusty winds. The program is interrupted by a male speaker who presents himself as Boreas and broadcasts a message about a lost boy named Achilles, very much missed by his mother. The brothers decide to help find him. In the course of the ensuing action, they encounter Odysseus and sail with him to Skyros. The boys are shocked at their discovery of a host of rowers under the deck – they are emaciated, in ragged clothes, chained to their places, and brutally beaten by the foreman. One has a bleeding wound on his hand, caused by the grueling effort. Chris and Stevie assume they are suffering for their crimes, only to learn that the rowers are slaves of Odysseus, who loses in their eyes over his responsibility for such inhuman treatment of other people. While the motif of the condemnation of slavery was typical for books on Classical Antiquity in the communist countries, Komornicka does not use it to support the ideology of the Party. She increases the empathy of her protagonists and readers in purely human terms and she creates a negative image of Odysseus as a tyrant who has no concern for the lives of those commended to his care. He is a leader who fails and cannot be trusted, just like so many other leaders in history. Hence it is supremely important for children to be encouraged to develop critical thinking, learn to assess

¹⁵ All translations are mine unless stated otherwise.

¹⁶ For more on Komornicka and her series “The Legacy of Antiquity”, see Marciniak (2015).

situations on their own, and act according to these assessments based on ethical values.

The story also contains some reminiscences of the economic crisis in the Poland of the 1980s. They are visible in the scene of the dinner at the palace of Lycomedes – the king of Skyros. He is presented through the prism of hospitality considered typical of the ancient Greeks. Chris and Stevie remark that the Poles are also famous for their respect for guests. Here, however, the similarities end, as the sumptuous meals at Skyros far exceed the possibilities of Polish families suffering from the serious shortages caused by the imposition of Martial Law, when even the most basic products were hard to obtain and were bought if so with ration coupons or on the black market. Foreign goods remained out of reach for ordinary people. Chris and Stevie, devouring olives served by Lycomedes' servants, know them at all only because their Mom had brought them the Greek delicacy from one of her scholarly trips abroad.

After the dinner, the boys encounter and recognize Achilles, who is hiding on Skyros as Pyrrha. They make friends with him and race about together and play. The very scene of their *anagnorismos* merits particular attention, as it follows the *Iliad*. Chris and Stevie see him on the shore – he cries out of exasperation over his female disguise, and his mother Thetis (the same strange woman with hair like seaweed whom they remember from earlier holidays) approaches him from the water and bespeaks the words that older readers will immediately recognize as Homeric, thereby enjoying the intertextual play: “Why are you weeping, child?” (60).¹⁷ The younger ones may suspect a quotation here, as the words have a metric scheme. When they arrive at the *Iliad* later at school,¹⁸ they will discover that their childhood introduction has prepared them for the encounter with this foundational epic of Western civilization.

Further in the story Chris and Stevie discover that the radio message was a trick by Odysseus who, though he referred to Achilles' mother, in fact wanted to find Achilles against Thetis' will, in order to take him to the Trojan war. Odysseus' image, already damaged by the 'slavery context', deteriorates further still. When he displays the gifts for the royal daughters, one of the boys remarks ironically, that Odysseus “is playing the uncle from America” (72),¹⁹ which is again an allusion to the 'lack of everything' in Poland at that time and to the 'myth' of America – a place of emigration for many citizens in the 1980s, while those who had remained could only count on the famous 'parcels'. Anyway, the brothers decide to protect their new friend and they stand up bravely to Odysseus. Chris is even ready to attack him, which realistically displays youthful recklessness, but

¹⁷ Komornicka quotes two verses and the metrical format is kept – this facilitates the recognition of the quotation.

¹⁸ Fragments of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* belong to the required reading in the first class of high school in Poland.

¹⁹ The term in Polish is the diminutive 'wujaszek', which has an ironic undertone.

also the moral need to defend a just cause. However, 'making peace', at least in this scene, prevails, for Achilles accepts his destiny and goes to Troy at his own will. The boys are relieved and remain happily unaware of the consequences of this decision, but the author treats the readers seriously and does not spare them the truth. They are confronted with the narrator's comment that places this seemingly happy ending in a completely new light: “Fortunately, neither of the boys knew that their new friend had died under the walls of Troy, shot with a deadly arrow” (74). Yet finally the tension is released by the humorous coda to the story. The brothers are on their way back to their grandfather's home when they hear a radio message about... their own disappearance and the effort to rescue them. They start running as fast as during their earlier playful contest with Achilles, as they do not want to worry their Mom, whom they call now “Our poor Thetis”.

The general message of the story evokes universal values associated with Mediterranean culture filtered through contemporary history. War as such is not glorified. The readers are offered a glimpse of the imminent tragedy through the perspective of a mother who would lose her son. During the conversation with the boys, Achilles recalls also his studies at Chiron's and cites the principles of the wise centaur: to spurn the things “that bring profit only to us, while they hurt everyone else”, to worship the gods, and to respect nature (65–67). This rather traditional outlook, known also from Parandowski's approach, permits Komornicka to strengthen the ties between Poland and the Western world²⁰ and offers young readers the famous 'Norm of Decency' – so vital especially in times when the political situation puts adults to the test.²¹

We meet Chris, Stevie, and Betty²² together in the second part of “The Legacy of Antiquity” series, *Niś Ariadny, czyli po nitce do kłębka* [The Thread of Ariadne, or Finding Your Way] (1989), where Komornicka explains the meaning of mythological expressions used in Polish language. Besides the roots of the expressions, she provides readers with scenes in which the siblings apply or witness the application of this kind of phraseology in contemporary, every-day context. Like Parandowski, Komornicka refers to the ancient sources, in particular Homer, Hesiod, and Vergil, and she quotes various fragments. The famous Apple of Discord contest is transferred into the school reality of the children, as is Achilles' heel with Stevie's weak point – physics. The new 'Beautiful Helen' also

²⁰ On Chiron's literary figure as a perfect educator of the whole generations of youth, see Hall 2020.

²¹ Antoni Słonimski (1895–1976), a Polish poet, satirist, and writer, coined the saying repeated also later by many a dissident: “If you don't know how to behave, behave decently”.

²² Betty was absent in the story about Achilles, as it was a 'men's adventure'. Such an approach was also conforming with the realities of ancient Greek culture that Komornicka wanted to make her readers aware of.

attends the school of the siblings and is a love interest of the boyfriend of Betty's best friend who has to learn to cope with emotions. There are also many references to Polish history: from bygone times to the contemporary reality of the siblings. Some are based on the author's memories, including the tragedy of WWII. The chapter on the Trojan Horse evokes images of Warsaw destroyed by the Nazis after the Warsaw Uprising, when ca. 85% of the city was razed to the ground. And we read:

In the city, the awakening was terrible. The whole lot of Trojan chivalry fell, the rich treasures of temples and palaces fell prey to the victors. The aged King Priam was struck down at the altar of his ancestors. Hitherto invincible, Troy now stood in the glow of fires and slowly collapsed into rubble. There was no stone left of it. The Trojan Horse has done its job. (66)

The burden of World War II is evoked further in the context of the expression 'Faithful Penelope', used to define a woman from the siblings' family who waited (however, in this case in vain) for the return of her husband who had been imprisoned in the Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp. The post-World War II transformations offer the background for the use of the expression 'odyssey'. It denotes the tortuous course of life of another relative of the siblings – an emigrant to the United States who had served in the Polish army during the World War II campaigns in Hungary, Norway, France, and Great Britain. This time 'the uncle from America' is recalled without irony, as happened to Odysseus at Skyros, but with respect for his devotion to the motherland and with sadness that the political situation in Poland had forced him to emigrate (see also Marciniak 2015, 78).

Komornicka makes young readers look at the ancient myths through the eyes of their peers – the siblings-protagonists of the stories. Owing to this, Classical Antiquity takes on vivid colors and is naturally referred to the present-day experiences of the children, who at the same time gain knowledge of mythology. They learn about the heritage of the past along with the history of later epochs, the 20th century included; they expand their language skills in Polish; and last but not least, they discover the power of reception, where the mythical code permits them to belong both to the millennia-old world community and speak about their current situation. In sum, transformation and continuity in practice. And this practice also offers precious lessons in such universal values as friendship, truth, and loyalty.

Troy for the Post-Millennials

With Poland's recovery of freedom, the political potential of the Trojan myth lost its importance. Instead, the values took the lead. This can be observed via the example of the interactive novel of 2008 by Eliza Piotrowska, *Franek, Hela, Bobas i koń trojański* [Franek, Hela, Baby, and the Trojan Horse] in her "series

highly criminal". When Baby disappears, followed by Hela and their dog, the oldest brother Frank goes to their rescue, equipped by his mother with a notebook, candies, water, soap, and... a book on ancient mythology (no title is offered, but one may bet it is Parandowski's elaboration, still being the first association with the term 'mythology' in the minds of the Polish readers at least at the threshold of the 21st century). On their way, the siblings meet Paris (as Hela stands for Helen of Troy, of course) and some evil antagonists whom they manage to defeat. The children overcome all obstacles owing to their loyalty and collaborative effort. They learn in the process that they truly love each other, the dog included, and they are loved by their parents just as much. They also discover – as the mother and the father reveal to them – that "true beauty hides not in silky hair, not in the color of the eyes, not in a perfect figure, but in the heart" (17). The interactive form of the book mirrors the needs of the new generation of children – ones born after 2000 ('post-millennials'), brought up in the freedom of mind and encouraged to pursue their interests. Piotrowska's book offers her readers the feeling of participating in the story and engaging in the discovery of its message – one that maintains continuity with the vision of Komornicka (an ethical code based on family values), but at the same time responds to the transformation underway within society after the democratic breakthrough.

Yet the theme of war did not disappear from children's books, as it did not disappear from the world. On the contrary, the 21st century has brought new tensions and again the necessity has arisen to lobby for peace.²³ Hence the criticism of war and the motif of learning from the past find their way even into texts devoted to the youngest, like the volume from the series "Czytam sobie" [I Read to Myself] under the patronage of the National Library. The series offers a three-level program supporting the reading skills of children from 5 to 7 years old. The book for level 2 (800–900 words, longer phrases, elements of dialogue), written by Zofia Stanecka and illustrated by Piotr Fańrowicz, tells about Troy and its subtitle is *Historia upadku miasta* [The Story of the Fall of a City] (2017). On barely 50 pages the whole Trojan myth is presented along with its very distant background, that is, starting from the creation of the world and the birth of Gaia, through Hecabe's prophetic dream, the wedding of Peleus and Thetis, Achilles' childhood, Helen's kidnapping by Paris, the Trojan Horse trick, the capture of Troy, and on to Cassandra's handover to Agamemnon. Despite this sequence of rather horrific events, the book is devoid of brutal details, but the particular frame merits recognition. It may have been inspired by the family story of the author – the daughter of the eminent Polish language high-school teacher supporting the

²³ Polish school students are provided with an overall good knowledge of the contemporary wars and conflicts all over the world via the Integrated Educational Platform of the Ministry of Education and Science, section "Konflikty zbrojne we współczesnym świecie" ("Armed conflicts in the contemporary world"), see <https://zpe.gov.pl/a/konflikty-zbrojne-we-wspolczesnym-swiecie/DtXFbf0BZ> (accessed 15 May 2022).

Solidarność movement, Ireneusz Gugulski (1935–1990), persecuted by the communist Security Service in the 1980s. In the opening and closing of the book Stanecka gives an unequivocally critical diagnosis of war as such, not only the Trojan one: “War is like a hurricane. Like a tornado. Like a hungry dragon” (2, 47). Also her personal, metanarrative comment is worth mentioning. It is provided in a balloon alongside the author’s photo on the internal part of the cover. This gives the comment comic-book styling, something appealing to children, while its particular position – separated from the proper story and in small font – makes the author’s words directed also, or even in the first place, to the adults choosing this book for their children. She offers a historiosophical perspective: “And once again I reflected on the world in which a small dispute grows into a great war”. The internal part of the back cover complements the pacifist message. It is provided, again in a balloon, by Aleksander Wolicki, a professor at the University of Warsaw and well-known popularizer of ancient culture, who emphasizes a clear connection between the Trojan myth and our times: “[...] the praise of heroism is combined with reflection on the nonsense of war. And that is perhaps the most valid message of this story”.

“We Are All Trojans”: A Conclusion

The Polish journalist engaged in disseminating knowledge of Classical Antiquity, Agnieszka Krzemińska, wrote in one of her articles that “We are all Trojans” (2004). This thought is well rooted in Polish culture, especially in the context of Poland’s history (several writers from the previous epochs created strong parallels between the fates of the Trojans and the Poles, also deprived of their homeland, for example during the partitions of 1795–1918) and the old Polish legends (Poland was said to have been founded by a group of Trojan refugees). But in fact, this statement goes for all the people all over the world, as many of our experiences – whether collective or national, as well as purely individual – find their counterpart in the universal patterns of the Trojan myth. This opens new perspectives for international collaborative research both on this myth and the motif of peace and war in children’s and young adult literature.²⁴

Tadeusz Zieliński, the author of *Starożytność bajeczna* [The Fabulous Antiquity] (1930) – an amazing and highly original version of Greek mythology I

²⁴ An anti-war viewpoint in the presentation of the Trojan myth is visible in various language cultures and in differentiated genres – to mention only three recent examples: the German time-travel narrative *Jagd auf den Schatz von Troja* (2013) by Olaf Fritsche; the Italian educational book for early teenagers by Silvio Conte and Mariella Ottino, *La vera storia della guerra di Troia* (2013); and the French short novel *L’opération cheval de Troie* (2021) by Fabien Clavel. For more, see *Our Mythical Childhood Survey*, s.v.

could not discuss here for several reasons²⁵ – closes his narration with the story of Odysseus’ long journey home after the Trojan war. There a new bloody battle awaits him (the fight with Penelope’s suitors) and finally death comes to him from the sea, as the prophecy had warned him in the past (he dies at the hand of Telegonos – the son he had with Circe; the young man, unaware he was aiming at his own father, had a spear with a ray’s spike). Zieliński calls this sequence of events “the end of the fairy-tale kingdom” (ch. VIII). Since then, the dire and miserable clashes of humans with history have been taking place (464). But this end of the fairy-tale kingdom is also the beginning of a reception giving a more profound, metaphysical meaning to these clashes – through the myriads of works starting from Classical Antiquity up to the 2016 Nobel lecture by Bob Dylan (2017) and the whole library of books for young readers. As a result, still today our world looks at itself in the mirror of the Trojan myth.²⁶ And the child’s shard of this mirror is one of the sharpest and brightest. It permits us to gain a deeper understanding of the continuity of certain phenomena and of the key societal, political, and mental transformations underway at various locations, as we could see thanks to the several examples from Polish literature.

Of course, the Trojan myth is not the only one of such potential. The mirror of reception shines with a light reflected from various mythological tales. Yet, Troy story is somehow special, as in contemporary children’s literature it functions in overt contrast to the ancient hypotexts. This tragic myth becomes a basis for creating messages of love, family, and reconciliation. And what is of great importance, the potential of reception refers not only to the past and the present, as it also extends to the future. For the authors shape this myth in order to transmit to young people values with which they, as grown-ups, will shape the world – one in which, as we may hope and imagine, war will be no more. Rather, it will remain an important part of exhibitions in museums and a source of inspiration for writers to create ever new works and to motivate the next generations to cooperate and make not war, but peace.

Making peace is a challenge – possibly one of the most vital challenges that await young people after their entrance into adulthood. And here a less obvious power of children’s literature manifests itself. The ancient sources have passed on to us some heartbreaking and impossible to forget accounts of the suffering of children as victims of wars, the epitome of which is Hector’s baby son Astyanax, brutally killed after the sack of Troy. These accounts belong to myths, yet we know

²⁵ An analysis of Zieliński’s mythology would require a different approach, one going beyond the reasonable size of my text (it should be taken into consideration that the first edition of his book was in Russian, 1922–1923, it was based on Greek tragedies and less popular in Poland after WWII, as the scholar was ‘on the index’ during communist times). I offer an insight into this theme in Marciniak (2015).

²⁶ On the pacifist ‘incarnations’ of the Trojan Horse in 19th-century Victorian culture, see Bryant Davies (2021).

only too well that they are also true in universal terms regarding the fates of so many children in nearly every corner of the world across the ages, and today. While children's literature, for the sake of young readers' sensitivity, spares them the most cruel details, it does not spare them the cruelty of wars as such, and – unlike the ancient sources that focused on adult protagonists – it places young people in the center of the narrative and offers them a demanding lesson in freedom of mind and in responsibility, both being values so vitally needed to make peace. In this aim the young characters from children's books (and their readers, as well) are encouraged to act. So, as we could see in Komornicka's short-story, the boys have the courage to stand up to Odysseus in order to protect Achilles from forced participation in the Trojan war. Their chances are zero, of course, and Komornicka quickly extinguishes the tension by making Achilles willing to go to Troy at his own volition, yet the very introduction of this thread, one based on what is just, is of crucial significance for shaping the readers' value system. Moral reflection is present also in the adaptations by Parandowski, Piotrowska, and Stanecka. The authors seal the status of war as a universal catastrophe, with no winners, but at the same time they make their readers aware of the duty to defend the motherland, the family, and innocent victims. We hear the echo here of the ancient division of wars into just (in defense) and unjust (aimed at expansion) – a theory traceable also in Kochanowski's *Dismissal of the Greek Envoys*. This theory was famously elaborated in Polish tradition by Paweł Włodkowic, a lawyer and the rector of the Kraków Academy (Jagiellonian University), who presented it at the Council of Constance (1414–1418). The outline of his presentation is an obligatory element in the history curriculum as early as in 5th class of Polish elementary school. This means that children learn about it at the age of 11 – in the same 5th class, in which they study mythology – mostly as a choice of myths from Parandowski.

Such a solid background as is offered to children is important, for despite the efforts of many people who entered the 21st century with a similar hope as once did Ellen Key, there are still those who make war. On the Integrated Educational Platform of the Ministry of Education and Science of Poland, in the section “Konflikty zbrojne we współczesnym świecie” (“Armed conflicts in the contemporary world”), students can learn about the 20th- and 21st-century wars through maps, questions to reflect on, and interactive tasks. They get a chance to grasp the seriousness of the issue – they discover, for instance, that “According to some experts, the longest period without any conflict since the end of World War II was 26 days. Others claim that it was only 2–4 days”.²⁷

There is a cruel irony in the fact that right after I had submitted the primary version of this chapter, war broke out yet again – and on Poland's doorstep – when Ukraine was attacked by Russia on February 24, 2022. One of the first events of

²⁷ See n. 23, translation mine.

this war, and an act of truly mythical dimension, was the brave defense of Snake Island, a territory belonging also to the Trojan story as the place where the mourning mother Thetis had brought and buried the body of her beloved son Achilles.²⁸

Each day brings the news of further victims, among them children. Bombs are hitting Ukrainian cities, including Lviv, where nearly one-hundred years ago the 29-year-old Parandowski published his *Mythology* – the book that later permitted him to develop for himself and millions of his readers an idea of community among nations. This community is not an empty word, as the relationship between Poland and Ukraine attests today, in the current trial for humanity. Nor is my first conclusion of this chapter outdated – namely, my words on the hope that war will be no more. This hope is now only stronger still.

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²⁸ For a report on archaeological excavations on Snake Island, incl. Achilles' shrine, see Rusyaeva (2003).

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When Rabbits Get Scared: Exploring a Cognitively Challenging Picturebook about War

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We have seen terrible things. Terrible, says eight-year-old Bassam. There were tanks everywhere, and from our house we constantly heard the sound of rifles. MISURATA, Libya, May 8, 2018¹

Introduction

On February 24, 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. This violation of the international law of armed conflict and the resulting war have had dramatic political and cultural consequences for Europe as a whole. Russia's act of aggression is perceived as a threat to the security of all European nations, giving rise to a resurgence of the collective fear of war and nuclear weapons. In addition, Russia has been challenging the media landscape by waging a pervasive information war: The shocking images and videos on the news are consistently contradicted by Russian propaganda, which denies attacks on civilians, hospitals, and schools. The result is an increased amount of collective insecurity: What is the truth? Who can we trust? One month after the invasion, over four million Ukrainian refugees were on the move in Europe, and their numbers have been increasing steadily. Many of them are traumatized children.

Over the last decades, millions of refugees around the globe have been forced to flee their homes and seek a better future for themselves and their children. The worldwide impact of armed conflict specifically on children is immense; an estimated one billion children are facing a "brutal existence due to conflict, war, and the related effects of poverty" (Crawford and Roberts 2009, 370; UNICEF 2007; The State of the World's Children 2019 UNICEF). Furthermore, a vast number of children experience war indirectly, either through media or by interacting with directly affected people. These contemporary global challenges lead to cultural

¹ From Syria to Libya: Stalked by war UNICEF <https://www.unicef.org/stories/syria-libya-stalked-war>.