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Heather Alexander , Meredith Hamilton

A Child's Introduction to Greek Mythology

United States (2011)

TAGS: Aphrodite Apollo Arachne Ares Artemis Atalanta Athena Bellerophon Daedalus Demeter Echo Eros Hades Helen Hephaestus Hera Heracles Hermes Hestia Icarus Midas Minotaur Narcissus Odysseus / Ulysses Orpheus Pandora Persephone Perseus Phaethon Poseidon Psyche Theseus Zeus





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	A Child's Introduction to Greek Mythology
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	Worldwide
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2011
First Edition Details	Heather Alexander, *A Child's Introduction to Greek Mythology: The Stories of the Gods, Goddesses, Heroes, Monsters, and Other Mythical Characters.* New York: Black Dog and Leventhal Publishers, 2011, 96 pp.
ISBN	157912867X
Genre	Adaptations, Fiction, Illustrated works, Myths
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Creators



Heather Alexander (Author)

Heather Alexander is an American children's author and children's book editor. She studied English at Cornell University. Books she has edited include R.L. Stine's *Goosebumps.* Currently, she lives in Los Angeles with her husband, two daughters and dog, although she has spent most of her life in New York City and New Jersey. Her website states that as a child she enjoyed doodling and figure skating in sparkly dresses and loved the works of Judy Blume, as well as the *Nancy Drew* and *Little House on the Prairie* books. (see here accessed: August 21, 2018).

She has written over fifty children's books, many of them non-fiction. Recent examples include books about space, dinosaurs and the ocean, an *Across the USA* activity book, and introductory works on natural history and art. She has also worked on children's books with a feminist theme, e.g. a biography of Hillary Clinton and works on the contribution of women to sports, space and medicine. Her children's novels include fairy tale retellings. *A Child's Introduction to Norse Mythology* comes out in October 2018. Alexander's website features a word search game for children with the names of the Olympian gods.

Bio prepared by Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, RSD253@student.bham.ac.uk



Meredith Hamilton (Illustrator)

Meredith Hamilton is an American freelance illustrator and UX designer. She has designed apps and interfaces for various companies and was former art director at Newsweek and Time. She studied literature at Brown University and has an MFA in Illustration from the School of Visual Arts. Her illustration work includes ethnographic illustrations based on photographs, information graphics and the

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illustration of various children's books. She is the illustrator and cover illustrator for the entire A Child's Introduction to series of which this anthology is part.

She lives in New York with her three children and husband. She says of her work: "The common thread between my illustration and UX work is my ability to observe people without a preconceived outcome in mind." (see official website, accessed: December 16, 2019).

Bio prepared by Robin Diver, University of Birmingham, RSD253@student.bham.ac.uk

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Additional information

Summary

The book is divided into an introductory section of character profiles and short stories – 'Who's Who and What's What', taking up almost half the book, and a second section of full-length mythology retellings.

Who's Who and What's What

- Introduction – Why Greek mythology is still being told; why we have different versions; the story of Cronus and Uranus; the war between the Titans and Olympians; a chart showing Titan marriage pairings.
- Titan Children – Short stories of Prometheus, Epimetheus and Atlas.
- The Twelve Olympians – How Zeus and his brothers divided power; how Zeus married Hera; the Olympian council.
- Meet the Olympians – Olympian character profiles (as well as one for Hades), giving each god's job, nicknames, symbols, weapons, powers, home, family, attitude and a bonus 'did you know' section.
- Gods Galore! – Very short profiles of minor gods.
- Down in the Underworld – A guide to the Underworld and the story of Sisyphus.
- Supernatural Creatures and Beasts – Very short profiles for nature spirits and monsters.
- Hooray for the Heroes – Very short profiles of heroes (many of whom will feature in the full length retellings later).
- When in Rome – An explanation of how Rome and Greece relate to each other. A chart showing the Roman names of each deity. A guide to the planets. A chart explaining the ancient Greek alphabet.

The Myths

- The War of Beauty and the Trojan Horse – (And the judgement of Paris).
- Pandora's Box.
- The Chariot of the Sun – (Phaethon).
- Atalanta and the Great Race.
- Odysseus Escapes the Cyclops.
- Greedy King Midas.

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- Perseus and Medusa – (And Acrisius and Danae).
- Persephone and the Four Seasons.
- Orpheus and Eurydice.
- The Twelve Labours of Heracles – (And his enmity with Hera and murder of his family).
- Echo and Narcissus.
- The Flying Horse – (Bellerophon and Pegasus).
- The Tangled Web of Arachne.
- Eros and Psyche.
- Daedalus and Icarus.
- Theseus and the Minotaur.

End Material

- How to Say the Greek Names: A Pronunciation Guide.
- Index.
- Read More About It – Other anthologies and websites looking at Greek myth.

Analysis

One notable feature of this anthology is its depiction of Zeus as for the most part wise and benevolent ('the strongest, bravest god and usually a fair and wise ruler' p. 18). This would not be unusual for a twentieth century work (e.g. Kupfer 1997; Winder 1923; Price 1924; the D'Aulaires 1962) but is notably different from many twenty-first century children's anthologies. In such works as Deary (1998), Coats (2002), Napoli (2011), Riordan (2014) and Keith (2017), Zeus is shown to be some combination of malicious and foolish. Children's and YA novels, including Riordan's Percy Jackson series, McMullan's Myth O' Mania series and Bevis' Daughters of Zeus series, have also often followed this trend. Presumably, this reflects shifting attitudes towards authority figures and to what extent they should be questioned, particularly by children. It may also reflect a move away from a more Christianised version of Greek myth in which Zeus takes on elements of the loving monotheistic father. The wiser and gentler Zeus of Alexander's anthology makes the work perhaps quite reassuring about the order of the world compared to other recent publications, since the king of the gods here is good. It also means that Alexander's work, whilst using similar modernising references to those found in the works of Townsend, Riordan and McMullan, does not ultimately have the same anti-authoritarian elements found in those.

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Alexander's more benevolent depiction of Zeus is reflected in various retellings in the anthology. For example, in the story of the Trojan War, Zeus orders the other gods not to involve themselves any longer in the battles because gods are getting hurt. This is in contrast to his less kindly motivations in Homer. Zeus' adultery, meanwhile, is shown negatively but perhaps somewhat softened: 'He often got in trouble with Hera, because he easily fell in love with other women' (p. 18). The phrase 'got in trouble' sounds childish and silly, suggesting the situation is not really that serious. 'Fell in love with other women' also desexualizes the relationships and implies it is not really Zeus' fault since he cannot help easily falling in love. (Elsewhere in the anthology, there are hints Zeus does more than fall in love.) This can be contrasted to Deary, Coats and Riordan's anthologies, in which Zeus' adultery is comically played upon to make him appear both weak and unlikeable.

Alexander also follows traditions in children's anthologies of reversing the power dynamic in Zeus and Hera's relationship, so that he is afraid of, and to some extent bullied by, her. In earlier anthologies such as Kupfer (1897) and the D'Aulaires (1962), Hera was sometimes depicted as controlling and cruel towards Zeus. More recently, (e.g. in Deary, Coats and Riordan) the idea of Zeus being afraid of Hera has been played for laughs or (more questionably) as a commonplace gender dynamic to have in a marriage. Alexander states that Hera is 'the only god/goddess who scared him [Zeus]' (p. 18). Again, there is perhaps a concerning implication that being afraid of one's wife is healthy or at least normal. All of this, of course, is a stark contrast to Zeus' control, abuse and threats of violence towards Hera in Homer.

The anthology begins by justifying its own existence at some length ('Don't let the long-time-ago thing scare you – these stories are even more exciting and entertaining than most stories written today' p. 8). It makes the argument that the fact the myths have stood the test of time is evidence of their value. It then attempts to explain how these stories came to be in the first place, using a 'primitive science' argument similar to that found in Hamilton's 1942 anthology and reflecting ideas put forward in Frazer's *Golden Bough.* This theory is given as undisputed fact. It is also presented in a way that emphasises the child reader's superiority over historical societies due to our current greater knowledge of science. To this end, it seems to downplay how much scientific knowledge the classical Greeks, at least, actually had. ('Now pretend that it's thousands of years ago and people know hardly any science at all' p.9.) This impression is

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enhanced by illustrations depicting some humans and a cow standing around a small campfire in the wilderness listening to a storyteller whilst a volcano erupts and lightning strikes in the background. Both author and illustrator therefore seem to be following Hawthorne (1851) and Firth (1894) in depicting Greek myth as from a primitive but admirable childhood of the world.

In general, heroes are depicted quite positively, in contrast to their darker, more brutal portrayal in for example Napoli (2011). Alexander states in the introduction to her hero profiles 'Greek heroes weren't always nicer or better than everyone else. They weren't perfect, but they were loyal, brave, confident, and skilled' (p. 38). Incidents such as Heracles' slaying of the Amazons and deception of Atlas are removed from his story. Atalanta's father rather than Atalanta herself decides that the suitors who lose to her in the footraces should be killed. Alexander follows the version in which Dionysus takes Ariadne from Theseus, rather than having him abandon her as he does in most children's anthologies. Odysseus' foolish revelation of his true name to Polyphemus is also removed, substituted with Odysseus loftily declaring from the ship as he sails away that Polyphemus will no longer be able to eat Greek soldiers. As in other children's works, the ending to the stories is often slightly altered to make the tale happier or more didactic. (The deaths of Orpheus and Heracles, and Atalanta's transformation into a lion, are omitted, for example; compare Coats 2002 who includes all three of these endings.)

As in other versions, feminist themes appear in the tale of Atalanta, but Alexander gives feminist dialogues an unusual prominence in this story. It opens with a highly emotive scene: "Get her away!" roared King Iasus, staring down at his baby daughter. "I do not want a girl!" (p. 49). The King and Queen shout at each other, whilst the Queen hugs her daughter, weeps and tries to hold onto Atalanta as the guards pull her away. Adult Atalanta's desire to avoid marriage is given as 'She feared that as a wife she would not be allowed to hunt and run. She couldn't bear being trapped in the palace, cooking and sewing all day. That was not the life for a free spirit like her' (p. 49). There is clearly engagement with contemporary feminist dialogues in this passage; after all, it is unlikely the only child of an ancient Greek king would spend all day cooking, but the kitchen is a space associated with modern day gendered dialogues. The tale ends happily, however, since 'Hippomenes always let his bride run and hunt' (p. 51).

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This anthology is also unusual in including myths of sexual violence as something invented by rejected women. The wife of Bellerophon's host in this version accuses him of trying to kiss her, rather than of rape. The sexual content of the myth is thus toned down, but the narrative of sexual violence as something invented by angry women is not.

The construction of consent in the story of Narcissus is also a little odd. Here, Echo races out of the woods to embrace him and he pushes her away, saying "Stop! I do not love you. Get off of me!" Alexander then states 'The gods were angry at Narcissus for throwing Echo aside so nastily' (p.75) and they punish him by making him fall in love with his own reflection and eventually wither away. However, since in this version all Narcissus has done is tell Echo not to touch him and assert (quite reasonably) that he does not love her, it is not clear why his actions are being termed nasty. There seems to be a concerning implication that sexual rejection and telling someone not to touch you is in itself a 'nasty' act. Narcissus is punished for it with effective death by the gods, who in Alexander's anthology are generally portrayed as just. This can be compared to, for example, McCaughrean 1992, in which Echo and Narcissus' interactions are more complex and he is genuinely verbally unpleasant to her (e.g. by mocking her appearance).

Like many other recent anthologies, Alexander's work uses modern slang and contemporary comparisons to draw the presumed child reader in. (Other examples of this include Deary 1998; Coats 2002; Townsend 2010; Riordan 2014; Keith 2017. In fiction this can be seen in such successful book series as *Goddess Girls*, *Percy Jackson* and *Myth O' Mania*.) The character profiles for the Olympian gods are somewhat reminiscent of the form of writing found on some fanfiction sites, where a work might start by giving character profiles for the major characters. (Compare this to the use of comic strip illustrations and comic superhero narratives in Williams 1991; Deary 1998; Smith 2008 and Townsend 2010 and the use of lego in Brack, Sweeney and Thomas 2014.)

Hamilton's illustrations do not tend as much towards gore as those found in the anthologies of Smith 2008 and Townsend 2010, but are sometimes quite disturbing in an understated way; for example in the illustration of Phaethon's tombstone at the end of his story. The cover illustration shows a collection of gods standing in front of Greek pillars in a pretty meadow. The podium on which their feet rest is surrounded by monsters – the Chimera, Cerberus and Medusa,

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although only the Chimera seems explicitly to be threatening in its body language. At the feet of the gods are five children, three girls and two boys, who are reading a book. Hermes examines the book over their shoulders with a benevolent smile. Persephone sits beside the children, her hands interlaced with a standing Demeter's, whilst Hades stands beneath the podium and seizes her by the legs, trying to pull her away. Her slightly rolled up skirt falling back from her raised knees and his hands seizing her just below the skirt give the scene a hint of sexuality. This cover perhaps suggests marketing towards girls more than in other recent anthologies. This can be seen in the greater number of girl than boy children and the dominance of colours often assigned to girls in the modern day: pink and purple dresses and the gentle green of the meadow background. (In contrast, the anthologies of Coats, Napoli, Smith, Turnbull Riordan, Brack, Sweeney and Thomas and Keith all feature blue as the predominant colour, often alongside scenes of violence that seem stereotypically geared towards boys.)

The title page also features an illustration of a 'cute' Cerberus licking a boy reading a book. This seems to relate to a tendency to depict Cerberus as to some extent a 'cute' dog for children to like in Hawthorne, Coats, McMullan, Riordan, Holub and Williams and many other works. However within Alexander's narrative, Cerberus is more of a stereotypical monster figure; therefore this appears to be an instance of the illustration reflecting a wider cultural narrative rather than one specifically found in the text to which the illustration is attached.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aphrodite Apollo Arachne Ares Artemis Atalanta Athena Bellerophon Daedalus Demeter Echo Eros Hades Helen Hephaestus Hera Heracles Hermes Hestia Icarus Midas Minotaur Narcissus Odysseus / Ulysses Orpheus Pandora Persephone Perseus Phaethon Poseidon Psyche Theseus Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Expectations Gender Gender, female Girls Heroism Pop culture references Rape Rejection

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Further Reading

Murnaghan, S. and Roberts, D.H., *Childhood and the Classics: Britain and America, 1850–1965*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

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