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**Fantastic antiquities
and where to find them:
ancient worlds in
(post-)modern novels**



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Introduction

“A glance through Muggle art and literature of the Middle Ages reveals that many of the creatures they now believe to be imaginary were then known to be real. The dragon, the griffin, the unicorn, the phoenix, the centaur – these and more are represented in Muggle works of that period, though usually with almost comical inexactitude.”

(‘Newt Scamander’: *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, p. xiv)

J. K. Rowling’s fictional expert on magical creatures in the world of *Harry Potter*, Newt Scamander, is almost comically inexact in consulting Muggle art and literature of the Middle Ages for his handbook on creatures like the griffin, unicorn, phoenix and centaur – even though these beings have far older origins.¹ Yet, in doing so, Rowling addresses a fascinating phenomenon of reception: By making Scamander suggest that these creatures’ appearance in earlier literature is not just fictional but actual evidence of Muggle knowledge of their existence, this draws attention to the ever-shifting nature of interpretation. While some elements, such as mythical creatures, may persist in literature over time, their meanings are continuously reexamined and renegotiated by both authors and readers.

¹ These mythic creatures are already attested in early stages of the antiquities: The griffin is already known in the ancient Near East from at least the fourth millennium BCE onwards; the unicorn is regarded as a real animal in the Greco-Roman world, cf. e.g., Aristot. *hist. an.* 2,1, 499b20 or Plin. *nat.* 8,76; the phoenix seems to stem from Egyptian cult (as portrayed in Hdt. 2,73); the centaurs appear as early as in Hom. *Od.* 21,295 sqq. and Hes. *theog.* 542.

This dynamic interplay between interpretation and reinterpretation finds a natural extension in the novels of the postmodern age, where we see a vibrant resurgence in the reception of antiquities. Consequently, scholars of different literary disciplines have eagerly examined, e.g., the world of *Harry Potter*. We, too, selected the famous wizarding heptalogy and its spin-offs such as *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (2001) as our very first starting point. Ironically, the outcome is a volume without a single article dedicated to *Harry Potter*. Instead, what emerged after the international call for papers in March 2023 was a collection of essays organized around broader topics of reception, reflecting the multifaceted ways in which postmodern literature – or, considering recent shifts, post-postmodern – reinterprets and transforms antiquity.

This never-ending reception process can be understood as a form of ‘retelling’ in the broadest sense. Therefore, *Section 1* is aptly and simply titled ‘Retelling Ancient Myth’. Its contributions circle around ‘voice’ – both in the sense of giving voice to figures hitherto marginalized or even ‘silenced’ and of critically revisiting ancient narratives under the perspective of feminism and criticism of masculinity. So, Briana King contrasts the different strategies used by Natalie Haynes and Pat Barker in their Trojan novels to grant ‘compensating’ visibility to the war-stricken women (Andromache, Briseis), therefore inviting us to revisit the classical texts under this perspective. In the same way the contribution of Tiago de Melo Cordeiro and Luiz Fernando Ferreira Sá tackles criticism of heroic masculinity, claiming Achilles as a model of hegemonic masculinity and examining its consequences for identity and self-destruction. Then, Orestis Karavas’s article on Christos Chomenidis’ *Her King* (2020) presents a compelling counterpoint to the feminist-focused retellings of the Helen-myth by imagining her betrayed husband Menelaus as the central narrator. Finally, after an interpretation of Madeline Miller’s popular novels *The Song of Achilles* (2011) and *Circe* (2018), Michael Fischer takes a step back to examine the economic conditions behind the vast number of mythological rewritings in the 21st century, reframing them in the concept of ‘midcult’.

Section 2, ‘Socio-Political Readings of Antiquity’, is even more occupied with the ‘contemporariness’ of the novels analyzed. Francesca Cichetti describes how two disturbing novels – *Llâmenme Casandra* (2019) by the Cuban Marcial Gala and *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* (2023) the Italian Igiaba Scego – evolve around protagonists (one of them male) identifying themselves with Cassandra, the ancient seer and war victim, thereby voicing a mesmerizing criticism of war and displacement. By presenting the contemporary Croatian novel by Ivica Ivanišević (*Sutra je novi ručak*; 2020), Anđelko Mihanović explores how Croatian identity

is shaped by its real or imagined historical ties with Rome. This puts into focus how stereotyped and oversimplified portrayals of Rome are used in modern political discourse with a contemporary agenda as dubious arguments of legitimation. Both articles, presenting us with novels presumably not well known either to classicists or a wider public, show how the reference to antiquities serves as an interface of entangling personal narratives with wider political contexts. Thus, it offers a critical reflection on both the potential and limitations of using antiquity in contemporary contexts.

The contributions of *Section 3*, ‘Restaging Antiquities’, though on the surface heterogeneous in content, have as a common denominator that they analyze the strategies of transforming and visualizing historical figures, events, settings and even ‘philosophies’ in order to endow them with relevancy for our contemporary societies. Diego De Brasi’s analysis of Mariangela Galatea Vaglio’s novels on the Byzantine Empress Theodora (2018/2022) shows how reimagining ancient figures in terms of modern notions of gender and power hierarchies leads to a better understanding also of the ancient texts. Alicia Matz takes her starting point from the modern phenomenon of fanfiction, identifying it as determining strategy in Elodie Harper’s *The Wolf Den* trilogy (2021–2023). This series blends material evidence and canonical texts with a certain ‘democratizing’ effect to challenge traditional portrayals of Roman life. In analyzing Jo Walton’s *The Just City* (2015), Sonsoles Costero-Quiroga and Marina Díaz Bourgeal discuss a special form of fanfiction, as the novel imagines that the gods Athena and Apollo turn Plato’s *Politeia* into reality, thereby touching the raw nerve of social justice, fair socio-economic organization, and exploitation of marginalized groups (e.g. women and robots).

Section 4, ‘Integrating Antiquity into Children’s and Young Adult Literature’, deals with the adaptation of ancient myths and stories for a special public, the younger audiences. They share a key question: how can the often-violent narratives of antiquity be retold in age-appropriate versions for children of today? The contributions in this section are arranged chronologically by the year in which these novels were published. Emma Ljung maps out how C. S. Lewis in his *Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–1956) engages with multiple layers of tradition simultaneously, including not only Christian literature, medieval cosmology, and mythology in general, but on a more subtle, formal level of reception even narrating patterns used by Ovid. Thais Rocha Carvalho demonstrates the prominent reuse of Persephone’s myth as the dominating paradigm in two novels (Sarah J. Maas: *A court of mist and fury* [2016] and Stephenie Meyer: *Midnight sun* [2020]). Similarly, Babette Pütz analyzes how New Zealand author Sabrina

Malcolm in *Zeustian Logic* (2017) models her young protagonist's identity with Zeus and his 'superpowers' as points of reference. Finally, looking at Alexandra Bracken's novel *Lore* (2021), Avishay Gerczuk shows how contemporary values are reshaped in a modern, feministic reformulation of ancient archetypes.

Section 5 on 'A Different Kind of Imagination: Antiquity in Graphic Novels' widens the generic horizon by introducing graphic novels, even if they are not 'novels' in a strict sense. But without doubt they are a contemporary form of storytelling, combining literary strategies with visual ones. They provide a unique avenue for engaging with classical themes as they present seemingly predefined visual elements, stimulating the reader's imagination and interpretation. These visual components help to recycle certain aspects of ancient worlds and ideas, providing the readers with more immediate access, as the two case studies show: Ronald Blankenborg examines how Eric Shanower's graphic novel series *Age of Bronze* (1998–2019) risks idealizing classical antiquity by presenting a cohesive and visually appealing retelling of the Trojan War that blends literary and visual sources from various historical periods. While the series aims to still be faithful to these different traditions, the product is ultimately a fantastical version of ancient Troy, influenced by both heroic epic storytelling and modern visual standards. Pietro Vesentin traces the editorial evolution of Milo Manara's erotic adaptation of Apuleius' *Golden Ass* (*L'asino d'oro*; 1999) examining how the artist reinterprets the 'original' through his unique blend of structure, imagery, and language in an enormously powerful way.

The sixth and last section rounds off the volume by taking a rather different perspective: While the contributions of the previous sections are focused on different interpretations of various texts that draw on antiquities in some way, 'In the Author's and Publisher's Workshop' we get a glimpse of the composition and the publishing process of such novels: Due to her own close involvement into the publishing process of the late Diane Middlebrook's *Der junge Ovid* (2012) and *Young Ovid* (2015), Sonja Schreiner is able to provide a colorful account of the circumstances how it came about that first the German translation and – only later on – the original English novel were published. Richard Seltzer, author of various novels based on the Homeric epics, offers fascinating insights into his individual creative approach to the ancient texts; his contribution comes with a preview of his latest publication, *Let the Women Have Their Say* (2024).

Taken together, the seventeen case studies of this volume showcase the vast spectrum in which the novels in question interact with the antiquities, ranging from modern retellings of ancient texts and myths to more distant and fragmented reuse. This mirrors to some extent the wide range of contributors va-

rying by age and career stage and comprising practically everyone imaginable from MA and PhD students, independent scholars to full professors; university affiliations and citizenships are not restricted to Europe (Austria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Scotland, and Spain) but also include scholars from Brazil (Minas Gerais and Sao Paulo), Israel (Bar-Ilan) and the United States of America (Boston). This is an index not only of the vivacity of classical and reception studies all around the world but also of the fact that novels as well as other media productions with a strong classical background are a truly international phenomenon that, having left behind academic circles and niche audiences, has captured the mainstream: It is impossible to keep up with the new publications all around the world. The significantly increased popularity and production of novels engaging with antiquity in future will need a deeper analysis – a meta-study – regarding their economic and cultural conditions. Despite the literary richness and variety of these contemporary retellings, the role of capitalism in dominating the book market cannot be overlooked. The resurgence of classical themes is not just a reflection of literary potential. It is also shaped and influenced by market trends. The title of our volume, *Fantastic Antiquities and Where to Find Them. Ancient Worlds in (post-)modern novels*, thus, on the one hand, encourages readers to consider the artistic merit or lack of quality of these works as well as the economic and cultural contexts in which they were produced. On the other hand, it addresses this widespread boom in reception studies of all disciplines, inviting readers to consider the approaches taken by practitioners and scholars of literary studies when dealing with antiquity's rich reception across various genres and forms.

One of the central challenges we faced in assembling this volume was the multifaceted nature of ancient reception. As editors, coming from two different generations, each of us is influenced by his/her own preconceptions; nevertheless, we can speak with one voice when answering in the affirmative the question whether reception studies should be an obligatory part of Classical Studies. This makes necessary a widening of one's horizon in sense of trans- and interdisciplinarity and engagement in one's own contemporary contexts. As the contributions in this volume demonstrate, the study of antiquity in post-modern literature is anything but static. It encompasses a wide array of genres, methods, and motivations, from deep academic dedication to active engagement in reducing social injustice. The diversity of ancient receptions in novels today moves boundaries of traditional literary studies, suggesting that scholars must be equally open to examining so-called high literature alongside more pop-cultural forms, acknowledging the impact of both on how antiquity is perceived

and retold. This will and must have reverberations on our own approaches to classical texts, too.

In a way, this also answers the question why we centered the volume around novels. Novels as the generic successors of the ancient epic remain a uniquely flexible and immersive medium. Yet, the novel's relationship with other media – particularly in the age of digital storytelling – can't be ignored: There is classical reception in visual media (films, video, photos, paintings, sculptures etc.) – and even in board or video games, on social media (e.g. the questionable influencing 'Book Tok'), in fashion and music. However, while these media offer fast-paced and visually stimulating reinterpretations of fragments of antiquity, novels through their literary nature provide a more reflective space for revisiting and immersing in these new versions of antiquity. The reading process allows for a slower, more contemplative reception, enabling readers to deeply engage with the nuances of character, context, and narrative. This extended autonomous engagement offers a rich, more layered exploration of ancient themes, inviting readers to ponder their contemporary relevance in a way that rapid visual media do not allow.

Choosing the images for the appropriate cover illustration proved quite challenging, as we were fully aware that selecting one or two mythological scenes would fail to capture adequately the breadth and multiplicity of the volume's content in its full scope. In the end, after long discussions, we turned to AI-generated images: We leave it to our public to interpret the result, a fusion of the ancient and the contemporary, but we hope that we were able to encapsulate the very essence of this volume's exploration of how antiquity is continuously renegotiated and integrated in today's (literary) worlds.

In conclusion, we extend our gratitude to *thersites*, the journal that made this volume possible. We would especially like to thank Annemarie Ambühl (Mainz) for her invaluable assistance in organizing and funding the publishing process, and Concetta Finiello (Basel), who supported us by discussing all the contributions during an earlier stage of the project. We hope this collection will contribute to the ongoing expansion of classical reception studies and enrich the dialogue on antiquity's place within (post-)modern literature. The discussion must go on and we are looking forward to being part of it.

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