

Book Review

Goddesses & Heroines: Meet More Than 80 Legendary Women from Around the World

Menzies (J.) Pp. 160, colour ill. London: Kindersley Ltd., 2023. Cased, £16.99. ISBN: 978-0-2416-0977-4.

Greek Myths: Heroes and Heroines

Menzies (J.) (ed.) Pp. xii + 240. London: Macmillan Collectors Library, 2023. Cased, £10.99. US\$14.99. ISBN: 978-1529093360.

Greek Myths: Gods and Goddesses

Menzies (J.) (ed.) Pp. xvi + 233. London: Macmillan Library, 2023. Cased, £10.99. US\$14.99. ISBN: 978-1529093346.

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2023 was an enormously productive year for Dr. Jean Menzies. And a delightful one in terms of not just Greek mythology, but capturing the folklore of significant female deities and heroines from across the spectrum of the human experience (within her beautifully illustrated hardcover volume, published by Dorling Kindersley). As Menzies introduces that work: ‘From the islands of the Caribbean to the mountains of Japan, and from the glens of Scotland to the shores of New Zealand, wherever you are in the world, at whatever period in time, you are sure to meet some remarkable women in the stories of every culture. Whether they are witches or warriors, goddesses or queens, these women continue to leave their mark

through the tales that are told about them.’ As the writer of that work, working with the gifted illustrator Katie Ponder, Menzies draws not just from her profound love of the mythology of ancient Greece, but from a dazzling array of disparate cultures under the content-divided rubrics of ‘Goddesses’, ‘Magical Beings’ and ‘Mortals’.

Where Menzies authors that work, ably assisted by some 13 academic consultants working outside of her speciality to convey a ‘canonical’ version of the folklore, legends or myths of these globally-renowned women, she acts as editor for the two macrominiature books she has had released on mythical Greek heroes and heroines and gods and goddesses. Both are equally delightful as the large, illustrated edition - which is primarily targeted towards a youthful, pre-teen audience - although these mini- or pocket-books are more scholarly fare, suitable as appetisers to the core myths of the ancient Hellenes. Where her work on gods and goddesses again deploys a rubric system (with the tales collected under such category-titles as ‘Creation’, ‘Lives’, ‘Anger’ and ‘Rewards’), the other literary handful of tales operates on a less collectivised, story-by-story basis. Herein we find the stories of Cadmus and Europa, Bellerophon, Perseus, Heracles, Icarus and Phaeton, amidst many others, with each being conveyed to us by a different, specialist contributor.

When I asked the editor of this journal if I could take on the task of simultaneously reviewing all three of Menzies’ 2023 released works, I did so not just to indulge my own love of Greek (and global) mythology, but because the career of this author-editor is remarkably interesting. Not only has Menzies collected a gong or two for her previous children’s books on Greek and Egyptian myths, but she produces a regular podcast and YouTube channel on such topics while also penning fantasy fiction under the name Jean Z. Menzies. The depths of this enthusiasm for all things ancient historical (and fantastical) are vividly on display within all three works being reviewed here.

Of these three works, it is that latter two (described immediately above) which will be of most interest to more senior educators. Introduced and edited by Menzies, their quite sophisticated but accessible re-telling of classic Greek myths is compelling. While lacking in references to the ancient sources, each contributing author has more than a nodding acquaintance with the Classics although Menzies has - quite remarkably - chosen writers who penned these tales between the Victorian and Edwardian eras to collect within both volumes. While not all are English writers (the German Carl Witt and American Emilie Kip Baker are notable), the moralising, evangelising and pronouncedly ‘Christian’ influence of these staunchly British eras certainly permeates their accounts. Given how Menzies deploys the concept of ancient religion to distinguish myth from other fictitious tales, (see her opening page, p.ix, of the introduction to *Greek Myths: Gods and Goddesses*) there is an entertaining symmetry - almost a thin-skinned syncretism - to this convergence of ancient and modern sacredness. Untangling these dual layers, the profane from the sacred (or vice versa), could prove as interesting a challenge for the reader-educator as the reader-student.

Also percolating within these collections of mythical retellings is a sensibility now mostly lost upon the modern-day reader - that reverence for the past once so powerfully associated with the

so-called Greek Revival. From the heroic, revolutionary support of a Lord Byron to the 'procurement' of the Parthenon Marbles, to that all-pervasive 18th and 19th century obsession with the art, architecture, history and mythology of the ancient Hellenes, these Victorian- and Edwardian-era writers convey such a degree of fondness for the 'wellspring of Westernism' that it takes on almost an imperial hue. That is hardly surprising given that those eras were so dominated by the spread of British imperialism and a reminder, once again, of how all writings of the past straddle (and are shaped by) their own milieu often as much as the distant lands, tales and adventurous characters they seek to capture and re-transmit. As Menzies puts it in the introduction (p.x) to her *Greek Myths: Heroes and Heroines*, 'Each time a myth is retold, traces of the period and culture in which it is told shine through, and this is equally true of this collection.'

In summary, Menzies has put forward two compellingly different ways of looking at Greek mythology within these three

books: in her pictorial work, she places these sacred tales alongside the myths of numerous other powerful women for the reader to contrast and compare (and, of course, to delight in); while her two macrominature works give us quite an extraordinary glimpse into the mindset of mythographers who were at the forefront of reviving the Greek world from its long period of somnolence in the English-speaking (and reading) world, with profound implications for how this revival would shape the contemporary and future West. *Omnia in omnibus*, Menzies has made a healthy contribution to the contemporary pleasure we still extract from the myths of the Greeks – and of those even more exotic – whether that reader should be youthful or one simply wishing to enjoy those eras when the fine art of storytelling was still in its youth.

The reviewer is also the author of *Olympia: The Birth of the Games* (2021/2024 – ill. edn.)

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