Angelina Gerus, "Entry on: The Mysteries of Heraclitus [Les Mystères d'Héraclite] by Yan Marchand, Donatien Mary ", peer-reviewed by Katarzyna Marciniak and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2021). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1381. Entry version as of November 04, 2026.

Yan Marchand , Donatien Mary

The Mysteries of Heraclitus [Les Mystères d'Héraclite]

France (2015)

TAGS: Ancient Religious Practices Ancient Temples Artemis Demeter Eleusinian Mysteries Eleusis Ephesus Greek Philosophy Greek Religion Heraclitus (of Ephesus) Immortality Mysteries



Courtesy of the Publisher.

General information	
Title of the work	The Mysteries of Heraclitus [Les Mystères d'Héraclite]
Country of the First Edition	France
Country/countries of popularity	worldwide

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood… The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

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Official Website	The book's page on the official website of the publishing house (Accessed: November 5, 2021).
Available Onllne	Available for purchase on the official website of the publishing house (Accessed: November 5, 2021).
Genre	Fiction, Illustrated works, Philosophical fiction, Short stories
Target Audience	Crossover
Author of the Entry	Angelina Gerus, University of Warsaw, angelina.gerus@gmail.com
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Creators



Courtesy of the Author.

Yan Marchand , b. 1978
(Author)

Yan Marchand, born in 1978, is a writer of books for young adults, based in Brest. Holding a PhD in philosophy from the Université de Rennes 1, he offers philosophy workshops for children and teenagers from 5 up to 17 years. He also runs trainings and lectures for teachers and childcare professionals wishing to incorporate philosophy into their practices. In cooperation with the Paris-based publishing house, “Les petits Platons”, Yan Marchand authored several children's books including *Diogène l’homme chien* (*Diogenes the Dog-Man*, 2011), *Le rire d’Épicure* (*The Laughter of Epicurus*, 2012), *Socrate sort de l’ombre* (*Socrates Comes out of the Shadows*, 2012), *La révolte d’Épictète* (*The Revolt of Epictetus*, 2014), *Les mystères d'Héraclite* (*The Mysteries of Heraclitus*, 2015), *Socrate président !* (*Socrates the President !*, 2017).

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Questionnaire

1. What drew you to working with Greek and Roman

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philosophy?

— The encounter with Antiquity occurred, as it does for many children, through mythology. Digging to the right, to the left I ran into a book of Sophocles. It fascinated me, and, mixing up pretty much everything at the time, I put all the Ancients in the same basket; so I began to read Aeschylus, Horace, but also Seneca, Lucretius, Epictetus, Plato, not knowing yet that it was philosophy. And that captivated me: finally, books that did not tell stories but proposed ways of living in connection with a better understanding of the world and our finitude.

2. As you have a background in philosophical education holding a PhD in philosophy from the Université de Rennes 1, may you point out any particular books that made an impact on your writings?

— My writings interact with Heraclitus, the pre-Socratics in general and the philosophies of asceticism: cynicism, epicureanism, stoicism mainly. It's hard to point out any books. But more recent authors have influenced my writing, I believe. Heidegger and Levinas. But unfortunately, I cannot suggest a specific title.

3. I have an impression that in your stories the ancient texts are interwoven so closely with new authorial elements that it is sometimes difficult to separate them from each other. What sources are you using? How concerned are you with 'accuracy' or 'fidelity' to the original?

— There is always the lie of art! Indeed, in writing for the youth there are two often incompatible issues: the exposition of an often complex thought, and the proposal of a motivating narration. Sometimes it is necessary to adjust either the narrative or the exposition of concepts, so that there may arise some inventions which serve the story rather than the history of philosophy, and moments when the story weighs a bit more as it becomes more philosophical. But as far as possible, I create a plausible framework. I work on the biography, the historical and psychological context of the epoch and I try to see in what way the concepts of this or that author could make sense at that time, in

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that particular context. This gives ideas for plot twists. Therefore I try to be faithful to the century and to the spirit of the philosopher, but sometimes in order to give a bit of energy I can modify a fact without ever inventing it from scratch. It's a bit like a puzzle with a missing piece: I cut a new one but to make it fit, I have to tap on it with a fist.

4. What challenges did you face in selecting, representing, or adapting particular texts or ideas?

— The challenges are often the same: to open a complex world to a reader without boring him. I therefore choose authors who often have a life on which I can base my concepts and who provide images, models and amusing examples that I steal without remorse. The other challenge concerns the length: it is not possible to produce a thousand pages, and yet our author has said many things. It is therefore necessary to reread everything and to make an important summary while remaining silent about other elements. For Heraclitus it is still fine, but for Heidegger it becomes a complex task. And the biggest challenge is this one: on the one hand you want to produce arguments and leave the fiction, or else you get caught up by the fiction and the text becomes weakly philosophical.

5. You have written children's books about different philosophers of Antiquity: who was the hardest and easiest to tell the story about?

— In general, these short books demand a huge amount of time from me. There is something of poetic writing, because it is necessary to contain the author, to write the text ten or twenty times before finding the fulgurance which will hold on a few dozens of pages. All the writings I proposed to “Les Petits Platons” were reworked several times. They were all difficult to write. The one that seemed to me the most obvious to work on was *Diogène l’homme chien* (Eng. *Diogenes the Dog-Man*, 2011), because I had been maturing it for a long time, and he’s a very visual philosopher. I really struggled to draft *Thalès et le trône de la sagesse* (Eng. *Thales and the Throne of Wisdom*, 2021), because I wanted to talk about Thales but at the same time about the birth of a new way of thinking about things. So there was a greater philosophical intention.

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6. Why do you think Classics continue to resonate with young audiences?

— The Ancients speak about thought that discovers a way of looking at things, and I believe that this touches on something of childhood, which also awakens to a way of thinking that becomes capable of grasping the relationship that exists between things. Aristotle said that in order to undo a knot, one must understand how it is made. Ancient thought patiently unties knots, it manipulates, it sees the areas of friction, the points of contact, plays at that. Children too, perhaps. I also think that ancient thought is not just a thought, it proposes a life, or rather a powerful feeling of existence. Children often say that these lives are too risky, but at the same time they admire these incarnations of freedom.

7. Would it be a coincidence that the protagonists of your books in the "Les Petits Platons" series are characters coming-of-age? If it is not by chance, why do these situations become the core of the story?

— Pindar said: become who you are. Indeed my characters are in search of who they have to be and often this new life is not far away, but right there, in a decision, an act, a taking of freedom, right now and not tomorrow. I didn't realise this recurrence in my texts, and you are not the first to point it out to me. But isn't philosophy the proposal of another way of living, freer, more lucid. I therefore like to imagine stories in which the minds undergo a kind of metamorphosis; moreover, I think that young readers rather enjoy this dimension, since isn't their task to grow up?

8. Did you think about how Classical Antiquity would translate for young readers, especially in France?

— I don't know in what sense we should consider the word translation. But if we have to pass on an ancient text, there are passages that can attract young readers, especially those stories about freedom, openness, independence; in a word: autarkeia. And for young people who are in search of emancipation this makes sense. However, something also disturbs me in this ancient thought, because I don't

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want children to be nourished by this very male vision, which explains to a large extent the hypnotic relationship we have with power, with mastery and the negation of those who need to be accompanied. This freedom as a synonym for autonomy is very pronounced in France, so to think about how we got there is also to recast the concept in order to make it more open to the idea of interdependencies. So in my way of presenting the Ancients, I also try not to caricature them, as a great white-bearded sage and autonomous, but to present complex individuals, sometimes uncomfortable with the concepts of their time, which I think they were, most of them having lived through exile and being put to death or to exile.

9. You offer philosophy workshops and also run different philosophical trainings and lectures. Do you turn to Antiquity in this practice? If so, how often does it happen and how are these references particularly useful and valuable to you as part of your educational activities?

— I plunge my roots in Antiquity. I always have an eye in the antique rear-view mirror, whether with children, adults in training or with expert colleagues. I must have been born in the wrong century, but this is certainly a fantasised Antiquity; however, I borrow a lot of techniques and concepts from Greece especially. I watch over friendship in a permanent conversation. I also insist on the gratuity of the exercise and on the thrill of a thought that divides itself to think what it thinks, let's call it a dialogic function. The knowledge of the Ancients is also precious to accompany philosophical conversations, because it offers elements to think about the genesis of concepts, their evolution in history and therefore their mortality, when we often think that the words of our time are immutable mountains, but which for a long time have not meant very much. They are mutations of the past that only require a retrospective glance to make flesh alive again.

10. Do you have a favourite book by an ancient author?

— Hard to say, but I remember the one that, when I was still a child, made me say: I want to become like that: the Handbook of Epictetus.

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11. And a favourite ancient philosopher?

— I hesitate between Heraclitus and Diogenes, am I allowed to merge the two persons into one and invent a Dioclitus? Or a Heragenes?

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Donatien Mary by Librarie Mollat, 2015. Retrieved from Wikipedia, licensed under CC BY 3.0 (accessed: February 8, 2022).

Donatien Mary , b. 1983
(Illustrator)

Donatien Mary graduated from the École Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs de Strasbourg in 2007. He is a comic book author, cartoonist, illustrator for the press and children's publishing, and engraver. In addition, he experiments with different forms of visual arts using such techniques as etching, aquatint, woodcut, and linocut.

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Additional information

Translation

Albanian: *Misteret e Heraklitit*, trans. Saverina Pasho, Tiranë: Papirus, 2017, 64 pp.

German: *Die Mysterien des Heraklit*, trans. Thomas Laugstien, Martine Hénissart, Zurich-Berlin: Diaphanes Verlag, 2017, 64 pp.

Russian: *Тайны Гераклита* [Tajny Geraklita], trans. Aleksandra Sokolinskaya, Moskva: Ad Marginem, 2017, 64 pp.

Summary

Young Heraclitus falls in love with Népias, the daughter of the wealthiest citizen of Ephesus. To gain favour with her father, Mélancontes, the young man, begins to actively participate in the life of the city: religious ceremonies and Assembly meetings. Being a descendant of Athenian kings, under whose direction are held the Mysteries of Demeter Eleusinia, Heraclitus departs for the ceremony of initiation, where he is to join the cult and realize that his soul is immortal. After drinking kykeon, a special ritual potion, the hero begins to have visions that uncover the true nature of things. The goddess of nature appears in the form of a monkey; from this vision, the hero concludes that gods do not resemble statues and do not only reside in their sanctuaries. After the Mysteries, Heraclitus returns to Ephesus, where a banquet is being prepared in his honour, with both Népias and Mélancontes among the guests. But the hero's consciousness has been altered, and he perceives everything differently: all his fellow citizens, even his father and beloved girl, appear to him as beasts, seeking only to satisfy their desires, reproducing their parents' lives without change and only wanting the good without the bad. Prayers in the temple and meetings in the Assembly seem vain to Heraclitus. On the agreed day, he does not go to his wedding but rushes off to the mountains. The philosopher abandons everything to remain his true self; he would write about it in a book deposited in the temple of Artemis in Ephesus.

Analysis

The book tells the story of the philosopher's youth and shows how he may have arrived at his ideas. Contrary to how Diogenes Laertius presents Heraclitus (D. L. IX.1), Marchand's book does not describe

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him as an arrogant and misanthropic person who expresses his thoughts in an obscure manner. His doctrine is not presented solely as a philosophy of nature, seeking for ἀρχή, the ultimate underlying substance, and finding it in fire, in the Sun or in smoke and fumes. For example, through the plot which develops the theme of the Eleusinian Mysteries and begins and ends in the temple of Artemis in Ephesus, Heraclitus' theological reflections are abundantly outlined; this allows us to conclude that, with respect to sources, the children's book is based on contemporary research and intends to reconstruct Heraclitus' treatise.

Some elements of the philosopher's biography are woven into the narrative: such as the name of his father, Bloson (cf. D. L. IX.1.1), the origin of their ancestors, Kodros, a mythical king of Attica, and his son Androcles, which obligated them to assume functions in the cult of Demeter of Eleusis (p. 6, cf. Strab. XIV.3, Hdt. I.147), or the fact that Heraclitus deposited his book in the temple of Artemis (pp. 61, 63, cf. D. L. IX.1.6). His ancestry explains the special association with religion and law in Ephesus and the Eleusinian Mysteries and serves as a canvas for the story. To make it clear for the reader that he is connected with the cult of Artemis of Ephesus, the author calls her the daughter of Demeter according to the Egyptian tradition retold by Herodotus and Pausanias (cf. Hdt. II.156, Paus. VIII.37.6) according to Aeschylus. At the same time, such biographical data as, for example, the fact that he had a brother or how he fell ill or died are not mentioned in the text. On the other hand, fictional characters and events are included, not drawn from the ancient sources, but help in transmitting Heraclitus' philosophical ideas.
The story is structured as a first-person narrative by Heraclitus (which makes its tone trustworthy) often includes his reflections and expressions known to us as aphorisms: such as "personne ne se baigne deux fois dans la même eau" (p. 24, Eng. "no one bathes twice in the same water") or "tout s'écoule" (ibidem, Eng. "everything flows"). But next to the quotations, the text contains implicit references to Heraclitus' ideas. In particular, when the young philosopher falls in love with a girl called Nepia, she is a fictional character, whose name derives from an Ancient Greek adjective νήπιος (νήπια [nepia], in singular feminine form) and may be translated as "childish, silly". A Heraclitus' expression παῖδες τοκεώνων ([paides tokeonon], Eng. "children of their parents"), turns out to be semantically close, because it describes people's attachment to traditional beliefs and common opinion, as well as their inability to

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think for themselves*.

Among others key concepts of Heraclitus present in Marchand's book, there is the principle of constant flux and change (pp. 14, 24, 59), the idea of sleep as a state in which people cannot perceive reality, is juxtaposed to wakefulness (pp. 30, 39), the ides of the divine mind and non-anthropomorphic, faceless deity (pp. 20, 49), the principle of identity and unity of opposites (pp. 17, 41, 47, 61). Images usually accompany these concepts: for example, the idea of nature as an infinite movement between opposites is illustrated by children winning and losing during a game with black and white astragaloi, knucklebones of sheep and goats. By observing people and nature, the reader, together with Heraclitus, not only engages with the mysteries but, in the course of the story, arrives at the same conclusions as the young philosopher.

Marchand's book contains various cultural references which add an ancient flavour, such as descriptions of Artemision, Persian magi, political conflict between the Ephesians and the Persians, the Eleusinian Mysteries, etc. It provides additional information about the era and the local settings, makes the text plausible, and helps vividly illustrate Heraclitus' ideas.

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* Cf. pp. 54–55 in Лебедев, Андрей, *Логос Гераклита. Реконструкции мысли и слова* [*Logos of Heraclitus. Reconstructions of the thought and the speech*], СПб: Наука, 2014 [Lebedev, Andrei, *Logos Geraklita. Rekonstrukcii mysli i slova*, SPb: Nauka, 2014].

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts

Ancient Religious Practices Ancient Temples Artemis Demeter Eleusinian Mysteries Eleusis Ephesus Greek Philosophy Greek Religion Heraclitus (of Ephesus) Immortality Mysteries

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Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture

Adolescence Appearances Coming of age Communication Conflict Family Gaining understanding Historical figures Intellect Knowledge Learning Philosophy Religious beliefs Transformation

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Further Reading

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Addenda

This short story, issued by the French publishing house “Les Petits Platons” [The Tiny Platos], is part of the series adapting philosophical texts and ideas of all time for children and teenagers. Written in French, these books now are actively spreading worldwide, translated

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already into eleven languages. Along with *Les Mystères d'Héraclite*, the series presents various other books retelling classic philosophical texts or referring to ancient philosophy in another way.

Official website of the publishing house (Accessed: November 5, 2021).

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