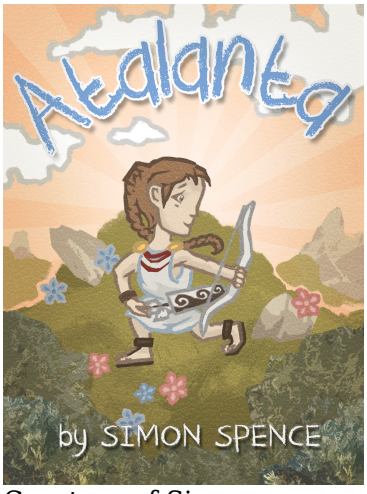
Sonya Nevin, "Entry on: Atalanta by Simon Spence", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Hanna Paulouskaya. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/170. Entry version as of November 07, 2026.

Simon Spence

Atalanta

United Kingdom (2016)

TAGS: Aphrodite Architecture Argonauts Argos / Argus (Constructor of "Argo") Centaur(s) Divination Golden Fleece Greek Art Greek History Homer Jason Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Mycenae Peleus



Courtesy of Simon Spence.

General information	
Title of the work	Atalanta
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	English-speaking countries
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2016
First Edition Details	Simon Spence. *Atalanta*. Early Greek Myths (Series, Book 4), Createspace (Independent Publishing Platform), 2016, 36 pp.
ISBN	9781523259533
Official Website	earlymyths.com (accessed: July 31, 2018)
Awards	2016 – a silver medal at the Moonbeam Children's Book Awards; 2016 – a bronze award at the Wishing Shelf Children's Book Awards.
Genre	Illustrated works, Myths, Retelling of myths*
Target Audience	Children (c. 3–8)
Author of the Entry	Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk

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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Creators



Portrait, courtesy of the Author.

Simon Spence (Author)

Simon Spence studied at University College Dublin before completing a PhD at the University of Nottingham. An adapted version of his PhD thesis is available as *The Image of Jason in Early Greek Myth:An Examination of Iconographical and Literary Evidence of the Myth of Jason Up Until the End of the Fifth Century B.C.* (self-published via Createspace, 2010). Simon Spence launched the *Early Myths* series in 2013.

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Additional information

Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs	Previous book: *Odysseus*

Summary

Atalanta offers a retelling of the myths of Atalanta the huntress for a young audience. The retelling takes a biographical form, opening with Atalanta's early childhood and ending with her living out "the rest of [her] days." This retelling might be considered a feminist retelling of the myths, as the narrator encourages the reader to approve of Atalanta's skills and independence of mind and to disagree with those who wish to limit her actions because she is female. This has the effect of drawing the reader's attention to the possibility of differences in values between antiquity and the present while bridging that gap through the character of Atalanta herself, who appears to have quite modern views on gender equality while living in the ancient past. The story includes violence, but extreme violence and sex are avoided to suit a young reader or listener. The book has been published through Createspace, Amazon's self-publishing platform. The spine of the book is more pamphlet-style than typical book style, but nonetheless, the quality of the book's production is in-keeping with more conventionally published works, with attractive full-page colour illustrations and well-laid-out text. An information section, "Some interesting notes for grown-ups" accompanies the work at the back of the book.

Analysis

The book opens with Atalanta as a very young girl, learning to use a bow and arrow and enjoying active pursuits in defiance of her father's expectations. She is cast out to live in the woods and told not to return unless she changes her ways. This adapts the ancient tradition slightly, moving away from her being abandoned as a baby because she is female, rather than as a child and because she does not conform to familial expectations. In that sense, the book softens antiquity's patriarchal violence. Atalanta becomes friends with two bears, rather than being raised by bears (Apollodorus, *Library*, 3.9.2; Aelian, *Varia Historia*, 13.1), which is perhaps an attempt to soften the impact of her abandonment (it is as if she no longer needs to be raised). This element also brings in the animal friend trope that is familiar with

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children's literature.

In the next episode, Atalanta defends herself and the bears from centaurs who are determined to steal Atalanta's food. This introduces the fantastic figure of the centaur (body and head of a man and the legs and tail of a horse) and replicates the common trope of their lawlessness without the familiar threat of sexual violence that is associated with centaurs. This episode is based on ancient traditions (e.g. Callimachus, *Hymn 3, To Artemis*, 215–224; Apollodorus, *Library*, 3.9.2; Aelian, *Varia Historia*, 13.1). Spence's Atalanta then tries to join the Argonauts to enjoy adventure, but she is turned away because "some of the men said that girls weren't allowed!" This follows the tradition in the *Argonautica* (Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica*, 1.769-773). The rejection is used as an opportunity to emphasise Atalanta's self-belief; the Argonauts are presented as being at fault and Atalanta does not need their validation "to tell her she was the best!" Atalanta's success bringing down the Calydonian Boar with a spear and her receipt of the hunting prize follows, acting as a counter to the Argonauts' rejection of her skills (on which see Euripides, *Phoenician Women*, lines 1105–1109, referring to Atalanta bringing down the boar with arrows; Philostratus the Younger, 15, *Meleager,* Atalanta brings it down with bow and arrow). When some are angry that Atalanta receives the hunting prize (as in Diodorus of Sicily, *Library*, 4.34.1–7) the narrator foregrounds the sexism of their complaint: "they still thought that a girl wasn't as brave as them and they wanted the prize for themselves." This clarifies that their complaint is groundless and influenced by envy. Other traditions were available, such as that in Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, 8.299–546) where the other hunters were angry because Meleager awarded the prize to Atalanta although Meleager himself struck first; or those in Callimachus (*Hymn 3, To Artemis*, 215–224) and Pausanias (Arcadia, 41.2–3), where there are more positive accounts of Atalanta's receipt of the prize. The use of the Diodoran tradition takes the more common route (the other hunters were envious) but renders them unjust, highlighting Atalanta's ability and success in difficult circumstances. This episode is followed by Atalanta's success wrestling Peleus at "a wonderful sports contest" (on which see Apollodorus, *Library*, 3.9.2, with numerous ancient pottery representations).

The story avoids the traditions of oracles and prophecies which discourages Atalanta from seeking marriage (e.g. Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* 10.560ff). Instead, the narrative moves onto the race with Melanion, Atalanta's most famous myth (for which see Hesiod,

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Catalogue, bk.2 – although there she raced Hippomenes; Apollodorus, *Library*, 3.9.2; Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, 9.560–680 - also featuring Hippomenes). This section forms a significant percentage of the book. The narrator ensures that Melanion's interest in Atalanta is represented in a positive light; he has fallen in love with her and wants to "prove to her that he is good enough to be her husband." This emphasis helps to create a positive interpretive framework for their eventual relationship. This is continued through the narrator who informs the reader that Atalanta realises that Melanion loves her and that she was falling for him. The authoritative narrator intervention ensures that the reader has the impression that Atalanta marries someone who appreciates her as she is, in keeping with the narrator's positive account of her qualities.

Melanion forgets to return to Aphrodite with thank-offerings. Melanion and Atalanta are happy together and have a son. Although he is not named, the reader does learn that the son became a powerful hero who "went off to fight in a great battle." It is explicitly said that the son resembles his mother in bravery (see Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, 1320–1322; Euripides, *Phoenician Women*, line 150, Parthenopaeus introduced as the son of Atalanta, and at 1153–1162 notes that the mortally wounded Parthenopaeus will not return to his mother, Atalanta; also see *Suppliant Women*, 888–900; Apollodorus, *Library*, 3.9.2 cites Euripides for the tradition). The story concludes with Aphrodite morphing Melanion and Atalanta into lions; this is said to be in revenge for him forgetting the thank-offering, rather than the tradition of them being punished for sexual intimacy in a sanctuary (Apollodorus, *Library*, 3.9.2; Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, 9.681–704 combines the two; Philodemus, *On Piety*, has her transformed into a lion for seeing holy things she should not). According to Hyginus, (*Fab*. 185, cited by J.G. Frazer in his trans. of Apollodorus, *Library*), lions were chosen by Aphrodite because lions do not mate with each other, so the two would be separated and not repeat their lustful acts. In Spence's Atalanta, the morphing ending is softened by the assurance that the lions were "very much in love" as they lived out their days hunting; the final illustration depicts two love-struck lions watching their human son head off to adventure. Euripides' reference to Parthenopaeus' death does not indicate that he considered Atalanta to be a lion by then – she is still "of the bow"; the lion tradition may not have been prevalent in Euripides' day. The softening of the ending was presumably intended to make the story more suitable for a very young audience by finishing on a relatively positive note.

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The story is followed by "Some interesting notes for grown-ups." This section explains how the book has brought together two traditions about Atalanta – the boar-hunt, wrestling, racing Atalanta and the escaping to the mountains to avoid marriage Atalanta (of e.g. Theognis, 1283–1294). It also includes notes on the illustrations, noting Atalanta's depiction wrestling and hunting on ancient vases, the depiction of centaurs on vases, and the archaeological evidence for Mycenaean palaces that informed the depiction of Meleager's palace.

The book is laid out so that each pair of pages comprises one fully illustrated page and one pure text page, making the visual style of the book a dominant part of the overall impression of the work. The illustration style places the events in antiquity throughout, with tunics, spears, ancient style ships and similar physical indicators of antiquity. The figures are nonetheless stylised, appearing in a cartoonish naïve style that renders them childlike and unthreatening. There is some very beautiful and creative use of texture to render the natural environment in which the characters move. As mentioned in the "notes for grown-ups" some of the illustrations take their inspiration from artefacts, such as Atalanta wrestling Peleus and the appearance of the centaurs - the centaurs reflect the style of depiction that became popular in antiquity (lower part horse, upper part human), rather than the early experimental style (back part horse, upper body and front legs human). The series website (accessed: July 31, 2018) places significant emphasis on using the "oldest strands of the tales" and "original art such as surviving Greek vase paintings"; explaining that "The reason we go back so far is to try to find the original tale, the less spoilt version. There is something purer and more refined about these versions." This indicates that there was a specific, even ideological, approach at work in how the traditions were selected, with a clear message privileging the oldest traditions and a suggestion of corruption in later versions. The strong assertion of the ancientness of the source material is slightly belied by, for example, the choice of the name "Melanion" and the use of the familiar style of a centaur, although there was nothing wrong in that choice of representation. While elements from throughout antiquity feed into the creation of this work, it is the manner in which they have been selected and combined and softened which makes this a successful retelling for a young audience.

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aphrodite Architecture Argonauts Argos / Argus (Constructor of "Argo") Centaur(s) Divination Golden Fleece Greek Art Greek History Homer Jason Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Mycenae Peleus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Authority Child, children Coming of age Conflict Disobedience Family Friendship Gender expectations/construction Heroism Identity Love Morality Parents (and children) Race Relationships Violence
Further Reading	Barringer, Judith M., "Atalanta as Model: The Hunter and the Hunted", *Classical Antiquity* 15.1 (1996): 48–76. Boardman, John, "Atalanta", *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 10, The Art Institute of Chicago Centennial Lectures (1983): 2–19. Maurice, Lisa, "From Chiron to Foaly: The Centaur in Classical Mythology and Fantasy Literature", in Lisa Maurice, ed., *The Reception of Ancient Greece and Rome in Children's Literature. Heroes and Eagles*, Leiden: Brill, 2015.
Addenda	Twitter profile (accessed: July 31, 2018) Facebook profile (accessed: July 31, 2018) **Practitioner Experience** The present reviewer has found it extremely enjoyable to read *Atalanta* with pre-school 4 year-olds. Likewise, the children enjoy the book enormously. Part of what proved has successful about the book is the biographical format – going from very early childhood to events in adulthood. Many of the children enjoy tracing this change in the illustrations, pointing out where she gets older. The concept of ageing from toddler to child to adult is one that young children are keenly aware of, so they respond to seeing a character go through that and it

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has frequently led them to comment on what they will be like or what they will do when they are adults. Many children's books focus on a particular episode in someone's life; it is a strength of this work that it allows for the bigger picture, and the myths of Atalanta, with her eventful childhood, are particularly well-suited to that treatment.

The centaurs always grab the children's interest. They like to repeat that centaurs are half-human, half-horse. They find the illustration of Atalanta shooting a centaur in the bottom very amusing. In my opinion, the decision to amend an attempted rape to an attempt to take Atalanta's dinner is well-judged; the children recognise the situation as dangerous and "not kind," but would not be ready for or benefit from exposure to more adult material. This is similarly well-judged at the end of the story. The children can relate to the requirement to say "Thank-you" or to send a thank-you letter, so they can understand Aphrodite's angry response when she does not receive her thank-offering after helping Melanion. I would not welcome a conversation about what Atalanta and her husband were doing in the sanctuary that got them punished.

Atalanta herself is a popular character. The children are impressed by her active skills: using a bow and arrow, being fast at running, and being brave enough to tackle the centaurs and the boar. Although there are now more children's books featuring girls and women as protagonists with active abilities, they are still remarkably few and far between. Initially, the children found it surprising and peculiar that Atalanta was the fastest of the heroes (something that crops up early in the book). Some of the girls wanted me to repeat it over and over again, while some of the boys appeared confused. Both boys and girls would say things along the lines of "She is the fastest... and she is a girl?" or "She beat the king (Peleus)?" essentially asking me to confirm that they had understood this right when it went against their already-formed gender expectations. That a girl was doing these things in a story from "long ago" compounded their amazement - they vaguely understand this as an endorsement of the story's value and values. This response persisted through a few readings of the book and after that, they simply accepted that Atalanta has these skills and abilities. They recognised the "No girls allowed" principle behind Atalanta's exclusion from the Argonauts, and the text at this point is well-written in expressing Atalanta's disgust, which is supported by the narrator.

As with Theseus and Ariadne, there is some call to help children think about the dynamics of marriage in this story. Atalanta comes under

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sustained pressure from her father to marry. It is problematic to suggest to young children that people should get married or stay married if that is not what those people want. As many children experience parental divorce or may face difficult circumstances around marriage and relationships in the future, it should be made clear to them that marriage should be consensual. I found it constructive to be explicit with them that things were different "long ago," and that nowadays people do not have to get married if they do not want to. The text has been written carefully enough that the reader has the impression that Melanion really cares for Atalanta and that she has come to care for him too. When the text says that others wished to make Atalanta their "quiet wife" but Melanion was different, I tend to add, "He loved Atalanta just the way she was" or something along those lines, to help the children to understand what is meant by Melanion being "different."

Although the endnotes are aimed at adults, the children enjoy looking at the images and comparing them to the illustrations in the story. This has helped them to understand the idea that the story in the book comes from stories from an earlier time. Children of both sexes request to hear this book and they sometimes play running games in the garden shouting that they are Atalanta.

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