Susan Deacy, "Entry on: The Twelve Tasks of Heracles & Arion and the Dolphins by Marcia Dorothy Williams", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Daniel A. Nkemleke. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2019). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/665. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Marcia Dorothy Williams

The Twelve Tasks of Heracles & Arion and the Dolphins

United Kingdom (2017)

TAGS: Arion (Poet) Cerberus Corinth Dolphins of Poseidon Erymanthian Boar Eurystheus Hera Heracles Hydra Mycenae Nemean Lion Periander Snakes Twelve Labours of Heracles Zeus





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

General information	
Title of the work	The Twelve Tasks of Heracles & Arion and the Dolphins
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2017
First Edition Details	Marcia Williams, *Mini Greek Myths (series): The Twelve Tasks of Heracles & Arion and the Dolphins.* London: Walker Books, 2017, 64 pp.
ISBN	9781406371598
Genre	Adaptations
Target Audience	Children (esp. of primary school age)
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Creators



Marcia Dorothy Williams , b. 1945
(Author, Illustrator)

Marcia Williams is a British author and illustrator. As a young child, she lived in several different countries with her mother (a writer), her stepfather (a diplomat) and her nanny. She was then sent to the UK where she attended several boarding schools. After working at several jobs, including as an interior designer and a nursery school teacher, she studied art at Richmond upon Thames College in Twickenham, London. She later went on to do an MA in Children's Literature at the University of Surrey, Roehampton in London. Williams is the author-illustrator of a number of books for children on mythological, historical and biblical topics including a number of retellings of classical myths and retellings of works of Shakespeare and Dickens. She began retelling classical myths to entertain her son when he was young. She continues to find out what entertains her young readers via regular visits to schools. She has won several awards including the UKLA Children's Book Award and The English 4–11 Picture Book Award.

According to the *Brief Biographies* entry on Williams, her 'mother, also a writer, had a passion for books, and when the two were together she would often read her daughter excerpts from classics and mythology. "I found Marcel Proust and the Greek myths a little hard going," the author recalled. "I was delighted, therefore, to discover later that many of these stories were exciting and amusing. I think this is why I enjoy making classic tales accessible to young children."'

Sources:

marciawilliams.co.uk (accessed: January 22, 2019).

walker.co.uk (accessed: January 1, 2019).

biography.jrank.org (accessed: January 1, 2019).

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Additional information

Summary

The main body of this short book is taken up with the labours of Heracles. Williams starts off with his origins as the child of Alcmene and Zeus, and the jealousy of Zeus's wife, Hera, at her husband's infidelity. Williams tells how, having failed to kill the baby Heracles by sending snakes to his cot, she turns the adult Heracles mad so that he kills his many children by an unnamed wife. After his wife sends him away due to his actions, he consults with a priestess who tells him that he must do penance for the infanticide by carrying out twelve tasks for King Eurystheus of Mycenae who is described as 'his old enemy'. The king is so afraid of Heracles that he jumps into a large pot when the hero arrives at his court.

Williams recounts how Heracles succeeds in the tasks: sometimes via cunning, sometimes via strength and on one occasion after being gifted the things that he was seeking. Through all these tasks, Eurystheus remains inside the jar. After Heracles completes the final task, bringing up the multi-headed dog Cerberus from the underworld, the priestess is satisfied that the gods will be able to forgive him for killing his children. Hera, however, remains ill-disposed towards Heracles.

The other, shorter, story concerns the adventure of Arion, the court musician of Periander of Corinth. When Arion goes to Sicily to take part in a musical contest, he wins every award. On the return voyage, the sailors plan to kill him and steal his prizes. To escape the sailors, Arion jumps into the sea. Some dolphins who have been delighted by his singing while on the ship rescue him and carry him to Corinth. After he is reunited with Periander, the sailors are banished and Arion resumes his role as the king's musician.

Analysis

This book narrates some of the most violent incidents in ancient Greek myth. For example, a father, Heracles, kills his many children (though not – unlike in ancient versions – his wife as well). Once he embarks on his labours as reparation for killing his children, the violent behaviour of Heracles is repeatedly stressed. The violent behaviour of Heracles is depicted in the comic-book style illustrations as well as in the text. In one illustration, for instance (p. 12), bloody weapons stick out of the bodies of two of Heracles' slain children. In another (p. 19),

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several severed heads of the Hydra lie on the ground, while another is in the process of falling. Heracles' sword has blood on the tip and blood spurts from the Hydra's remaining stumps.

In ancient Greek myth as presented here, unpleasant things happen, sometimes to innocent people – but the violence and suffering is presented humorously. For example, after Heracles kills the Nemean Lion, Williams has Heracles call out in triumph, 'Ha! … I always wanted a lion cloak!' (p. 17). The book's emphasis on violence, above all in the actions of Heracles, is typical of how the author approaches presenting ancient Greek myth for young children. In a Q&A at Roehampton University in November 2018, Williams stressed that, far from shying away from the violent and darker elements of the material she covers, she makes these key to her work. Indeed, she stressed that, in her experience, children typically seek out the darker elements in myth. She emphasised that her approach is to present material in a humorous way, violence and all, both in her text and her illustrations.

For the most part, the characterisation is not very deep. There are exceptions, however, with some characters (the sailors of Arion's ship; Hera) who are motivated by jealousy, while Arion's employer, Periander, is prone to feelings of gloominess, from which only the music of Arion can offer respite.

Williams makes an inventive use of a recurrent feature in ancient versions of the myth. This is where a terrified Eurystheus gets into a jar when Heracles returns with the Erymanthean Boar. In Williams' version, however, Eurystheus leaps into the jar when he first sees Heracles and remains in it throughout. One illustration conveys this response of Eurystheus by showing a vase with legs and arms coming out of it (p. 32). Then, in an innovative variation on ancient versions of the myth, when Heracles arrives with the boar, it is not that the boar scares Eurystheus; rather, the boar is so scared of Heracles that the animal leaps into the jar alongside Eurystheus.

While the book is presented comparably to Williams' other retellings, there is nothing in the book to indicate that it is part of a series; nor is there any further reading for any readers who might want to delve further into classical myth.

Arion (Poet) Cerberus Corinth Dolphins of Poseidon Erymanthian Boar

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Eurystheus Hera Heracles Hydra Mycenae Nemean Lion Periander Snakes Twelve Labours of Heracles Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Adversity Animals Childhood Conflict Death Depression Emotions Family Humour Journeys Loss Murder Punishment Relationships Resilience Success and failure Violence
Addenda	First published in *Greek Myths for Young Children,* London: Walker, 1991.

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