Susan Deacy, "Entry on: Theseus and the Minotaur & Arachne versus Athene 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/670. Entry version as of November 06, 2026.

Marcia Dorothy Williams

Theseus and the Minotaur & Arachne versus Athene

United Kingdom (2017)

TAGS: Aegeus Arachne Ariadne Athena Athens Crete Metamorphosis Minos Minotaur Naxos Theseus





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

General information	
Title of the work	Theseus and the Minotaur & Arachne versus Athene
Country of the First Edition	United Kingdom
Country/countries of popularity	United Kingdom
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2017
First Edition Details	Marcia Dorothy Williams, *Theseus and the Minotaur & Arachne versus Athene,* Mini Greek Myths. London: Walker Books, 2017, 64 pp.
ISBN	9781406371567
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

Like other books in the set of retellings of ancient Greek myths taken from Marcia William's 1991 collection *Greek Myths for Young Children*, the current volume is divided into two sections. The first contains Williams' retelling of Theseus and the Minotaur. The second, shorter, section, derails with Arachne's' contest at spinning with Athene.

In the first section, divided into short chapters, Theseus sails from Athens to Crete as one of the set of young men and women who made up that year's offering to the Minotaur in reparation for the killing of Minos's son, Androgenes, after the latter's victories in the 'Athenian Games.' Minos' daughter, Ariadne, falls in love with Theseus and enters the prison to provide Theseus with a ball of string and a sword - having first gained a promise from Theseus that he will marry her. Theseus kills the Minotaur after a ferocious struggle and escapes as planned, marries Ariadne when the ship stops off on Naxos then leaves the sleeping Ariadne behind. Because Theseus fails to replace the ship's black sails with the white ones which would have signalled victory, Theseus' grief-stricken father, Aegeus, throws himself into the sea. Theseus is crossed king.

In the other story, Arachne, a young woman from a modest family who is 'not a very beautiful girl, or a very nice one' (p. 40), boasts that her skills at weaving surpass those of Athene. The goddess, disguised initially as an old woman, challenges Arachne to a contest at weaving. When Athene sees that Arachne's expertly-crafted tapestry depicts the gods as 'silly drunken fools' (p. 51), she rages against Arachne, who hangs herself. After Arachne's father begs Athene to save his daughter, the goddess agrees but, to the horror of the father and of Arachne herself, her rope is transformed into a thread, and as for Arachne, she becomes a spider.

As with Williams' other books in the series, the text is accompanied with comic-book style illustrations.

Analysis

Like Williams' other books in the same series, the world of ancient Greek myth involves murder and violence. This one goes deeper in some respects into the dark and unpleasant side of ancient Greek

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myth with the suicide of Arachne, and Theseus's abandonment of Ariadne. For instance, Williams zooms in on the dying Arachne who 'swayed back and forth… as the life was slowly squeezed out of her' (p. 57). This focus on a dying young woman is perhaps intended to be understood as less horrific because, firstly, Arachne does not actually die, and, secondly, the metamorphosed Arachne is going to dangle from a thread just like the human Arachne.

Like Daedalus in one of the other books in this series, Arachne brings her fate upon herself. (In a sense, Ariadne, too, deserves to suffer, having betrayed her father by helping Theseus.) Furthermore, as in the case of the story of Daedalus as narrated by Williams, it is Athene who makes the transformation of someone who would otherwise die – but with one key difference. There, the goddess transformed the spirit of Talos out of pity; here, Athene transforms Arachne as an act of revenge.

The characters in Williams' retellings tend, as in the present book, to be depicted as handsome, if they are male, and beautiful, if they are female. The children picked as tribute to be sent to Crete are described as physically attractive. The good looks of Theseus appeal to Ariadne, who is herself described as so beautiful that 'even if she had offered him neither wool nor ball of thread he would have agreed to marry her anyway' (p. 20). In contrast, Arachne is 'not a very beautiful girl' (p.40). This aspect of the physical appearance of Arachne is conveyed in the text by several illustrations where, reflecting presumably contemporary western society's view of teeth that are not straight, Arachne's mouth is open showing crooked teeth; her teeth have gaps between them too.

The decision by Theseus to abandon Ariadne is depicted as Theseus's own decision rather than, as in ancient sources, as the result of Athena's intervention. Rather, Williams depicts the abandonment of Ariadne as coming out of Theseus's concern for his wife, whose welcome in Athens would, he thinks, be a hostile one. This concern on Williams' part to portray Theseus's act as carried out in his abandoned wife's best interests is perhaps backed up by the accompanying illustration (p. 33), which shows a boat anchored close to the sleeping woman, suggesting that Theseus has provided the means for Ariadne to leave the island. Why she would not be able, then, to pursue him to Athens in the vessel is not made clear, especially as Williams does not include any hints of what happens to Ariadne in other versions of the myth, namely marriage to Dionysos).

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	While the book is presented comparably to Williams' other retellings in the *Greek Myths* series, 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.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aegeus Arachne Ariadne Athena Athens Crete Metamorphosis Minos Minotaur Naxos Theseus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Abandonment Adversity Animals Appearances Character traits Conflict Death Emotions Humour Invention Journeys Loss Love Murder Parents (and children) Punishment Relationships Success and failure Violence
Addenda	First published in *Greek Myths for Young Children,* London: Walker, 1991.

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