

Collage, Hybridity, and Sara Fanelli's *Mythological Monsters of Ancient Greece*

For copyright reasons I won't reproduce any of Sara Fanelli's images in what follows, but some are available online at:

www.amazon.com/Mythological-Monsters-Ancient-Greece-Fanelli/dp/0763619078

(images of the cover, Sirens, Harpies)

www.waterstones.com/book/mythological-monsters/sara-fanelli/9781844285600

(images of the cover, Argus, Medusa)

www.theguardian.com/childrens-books-site/gallery/2011/mar/31/childrens-books-7-and-under

(images of the Harpies, Hydra)

Though I hope to write in a way that will make sense even if you haven't seen any of the actual images, I also hope you'll look at the ones available at these links, check a copy of Fanelli's book out of the library, or order a used copy (the book seems to be currently out of print in the US at least).

I first encountered Sara Fanelli's *Mythological Monsters of Ancient Greece* at a conference focused on the reception of Classics in children's literature. The presenter who discussed it seemed skeptical, even a bit critical, of the book's aesthetic and wondered if children would find its distinctive postmodern collages appealing. The talk was a survey and moved to a different book pretty quickly after characterizing *Mythological Monsters of Ancient Greece* mostly as a conundrum or curiosity that may miss its mark. I, however, was taken with the book, and it seems to me that Fanelli's use of collage is particularly apt. Meditating on the book's

medium, with its inherent hybridity, has been a productive way for me to approach some aspects of Fanelli's book and its overall project.

Collage lays open its constructedness. One doesn't only see the final image; one sees the parts that have been assembled to make it. Traces of the process may remain, as, for instance, in Fanelli's cut-outs of Argus' eyes (1-2), which often show the not-entirely-curved work of the scissors, or one of the heads of Cerberus, whose outline seems to have been partially achieved by ripping (16). Fanelli's disparate material sources, including drawings, paintings, photographs, and patterned papers, make viewers ever-aware that they are seeing a creation, a made thing. Fanelli's use of collage to depict monsters seems fitting, since monsters in general are also made things, human social, cultural constructions (Mittman 1, Felton 103). Fanelli's form thus fits her content and reminds us that monsters are human concoctions.

In bringing together diverse pieces to make a new whole, collage is inherently hybrid. Fanelli again matches form and content because Greek monsters are often marked by their hybridity (Felton 104), whether the hybridity is the result of the combination of different kinds of beings, of the multiplication of attributes, or both combination and multiplication. Fanelli's collages relay and in some instances expand the hybridity of the mythological monsters they depict. Argus has human eyes and a furry animal body (1-2). Medusa has snakes for hair, an anthropomorphic body, human eyes, and a hairy face (3-4). Pegasus is a winged horse given a human eye (5-6). The Sirens and Harpies have faces with human female features but birdy bodies (7-8). Scylla has multiple heads with human eyes, an animal body, and feet shod with human shoes (9-10). The Minotaur has a bull's head with human eyes and a human body with a bull's tail (13-14). Cerberus has three heads, two canine and one mechanical, and all with human eyes (15-16). The Centaurs combine man and horse (17), while the satyrs combine man

and goat (18). The Hydra has multiple snaky heads, some of which are given human eyes (19-20). The Sphinx has a woman's face and breast, but a lion's body and tail plus wings (21-22). Echidna also has a woman's face as well as breasts and arms, but a snaky body (23-24). Her offspring include the Chimaera, part lion, part goat, part snake, each part with human eyes, and Orthus, a two-headed dog with human eyes (23). The only monster featured in Fanelli's collection that isn't a hybrid via combination and/or multiplication in Greek mythology is the Cyclops. In myth, his corporeal monstrosity is the result of both subtraction (one eye not two) and addition (anthropomorphic form but more-than-human size). Fanelli, though, makes her Cyclops a hybrid by giving him a painted animal body and single photographic human eye (11-12). Fanelli's collages convey monsters' hybrid natures, an ontological condition, in an aesthetic register.

As a practice, collage illustrates the activity of reception. An artist takes pieces from the world, then rearranges and assembles them to make something new. Myth seems to me to work in a similar way, with each teller and adapter reshaping and reusing traditional stories, motifs, and characters in new ways. Collage seems to me to be a good visual analog for myth because both operate on the principle of selective repurposing to express one's own meaning. For us now, the raw materials for Classical myth are both ancient and modern—and Fanelli too makes this manifest in her hybridizing combination of Classical and contemporary components.

As a picturebook, Fanelli's *Mythological Monsters* shows hybridity in other senses. A picturebook's combination of words and images makes it an "inescapably plural" "generic hybrid" (Lewis in Beckett 2, Beckett 309). The manifold nature of the picturebook makes reading one inherently active, with each reader toggling between words and images to synthesize them and make for themselves a holistic experience. Readers thus participate in the

picturebook's hybridity with their own blending of its visual and verbal modes. Although people often associate picturebooks with the very young, picturebooks have the capacity to reach wide audiences spanning generations (Beckett). The aesthetic and sensibility of Fanelli's book give it crossover potential—and perhaps its address to a hybrid audience, both child and adult, is part of what puzzled the presenter from whom I first learned about this picturebook.

Collage can be seen as the creative management of the world's plurality and the challenges of that plurality. It attests multiplicity as well as the possibility of working with that multiplicity to make meaning. We might consider collage both a marker of and response to the “irreducible *heterogeneity* of the ‘postmodern condition’” (Brockelman 11, emphasis his). Similarly, we might see monsters as both a recognition of and reaction to the potential chaos of existence; indeed, Felton identifies chaos as a hallmark of Greek monsters in particular (103, 111). Fanelli's book suggests to me that the very creation of monsters is—in a sense—also their taming: in assembling these hybrid creatures we control the chaos they represent and strike at least a temporary peace with a multifarious, unpredictable world. For me, Fanelli's collaged, hybrid monsters are a concrete manifestation of a multi-faceted world and demonstrate a dynamic way of making meaning with and within its diversity.

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