

In the Mirror of Antiquity



KATARZYNA MARCINIAK

Faculty of "Artes Liberales"
University of Warsaw
kamar@obta.uw.edu.pl

Katarzyna Marciniak is a Classical & Italian philologist, associate professor, and the Director of the Centre for Studies on the Classical Tradition at the Faculty of "Artes Liberales," University of Warsaw. A student of Professor Jerzy Axer. Winner of numerous grants and fellowships, including from the Alexander von Humboldt-Foundation, as well as of the Scientific Award of *Polityka* weekly. Member of the Academy of Young Scholars of the Polish Academy of Sciences.

What can we learn from children's literature inspired by Classical Antiquity? Why do we read novels about Cicero? Two research projects are scrutinizing ancient culture as a key to understanding the contemporary world

Ever since Prometheus brought to Earth a spark from Helios' chariot, we have been shaping the world around us in our own image. We have advanced in leaps and bounds, and in recent decades our progress has started to surpass all predictions and even the visions of science fiction authors.

However, we are no closer to finding answers to many fundamental questions. And several recent spectacular discoveries have made those questions ring especially true today, even though, because of their ancient origin, they might seem obsolete in our modern world. What is Man? How do we build our identities? Do we even need them today at all? What is the purpose of our sundry ventures? What measure should be applied to evaluate human life?...

It is difficult to discuss these issues, and to examine them in an objective way. The views of various participants in this dialogue, including scholars, are shaped by diverse personal and common experiences. But we must not allow ourselves to be indifferent to these issues. Every opinion deserves our attention, because – whether we like it or not – given the right set of circumstances, each has the potential to shape our future.

The common heritage of Antiquity

An opportunity to conduct dialogue in which the voices from many sides will be heard is offered by Classical Reception Studies. This field refers to Antiquity understood as a cultural experience, being a common heritage, wherever civilization

rooted in Graeco-Roman tradition has reached down through the ages. Even if this heritage was once imposed by force, and rejected since, traces of contact with it remain. Thus in Reception Studies we focus on how ancient culture is interpreted in later epochs. In this sense, it is not strictly essential to know what Cicero "really" thought or wrote. It is more important to focus on how he was understood by 17th-century Polish nobles, by the French revolutionaries of 9 Thermidor, or by our contemporary commentators criticizing politicians in India, Zimbabwe, or the United States using the words of his most famous "First Catilinarian Oration." It is enough to Google the well-known phrase "*Quousque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra?*" ("How long, o Catiline, will you abuse our patience?") to see which politicians have acquired the title of "the Catiline of our day."

The ancient tradition is a mirror in which humankind has looked upon itself for over two millennia, allowing scholars to compare and analyze its changing reflections to elucidate the views and behaviors of individuals and groups in different eras, regions, and situations.

Grateful for the invitation to present my research here in *Academia*, the Magazine of the Polish Academy of Sciences, I would like to present two projects I am involved with at the Faculty of "Artes Liberales" at the University of Warsaw – for in them I make use of the phenomenon of Antiquity as a reflective mirror.

Antiquity in children's literature

In the life of every man and woman there is a blessed time. This is the time when our dreams and identity are being shaped and when we acquire the strength (not only physical) we later draw on as adults – namely, childhood. This blessed time is not always peaceful or free from evil and sufferings – although we believe it should be. Looking back at our childhoods so many of us tend to associate that period with our happiest memories, in spite of anything else we might have experienced.

We receive special help with how to overcome difficult experiences and to preserve the good ones. This help is offered by childhood literature, one of the kinds of which is common in nearly all the national literatures – the books for children and young adults inspired by Graeco-Roman Antiquity – both ancient myths and history. These books form an interesting research subject in the frame of Reception Studies for two reasons. Firstly, Antiquity is one of our common reference points, one vital and understandable nearly all over the world. Secondly, children's literature fulfills an important formative



Matylda Tracewska

Matylda Tracewska, "Our Mythical Childhood..."; painting created by the artist especially for the research project

function – it touches fundamental themes in trying to explain the world in the most simple, albeit not simplistic way.

It is remarkable that this kind of literature did not lose its value with the demise of the idea of a canon. This fact offers consolation and hope to all lovers of ancient culture. Even though it is increasingly difficult to conquer a place for Latin in schools, thanks to children literature, Cicero's language (even if in a slightly "barbarized" form) gets a chance to fascinate new generations and in consequence – to survive. In recent years during recess at school, scores of children have been waving pencils as make-believe wands and exclaiming "*Expecto patronum!*" This presents, by the way, a great opportunity to classical scholars: a syllabus for middle school under the banner "Latin with Harry Potter" would enchant young readers and prompt them to demand lessons in this undeniably magical language.

J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels (written between 1997 and 2007) – which have not incidentally, been translated into Latin and Ancient Greek by Peter Needham and Andrew Wilson – are not the only evidence of the popularity of Antiquity in 21st-century culture. There are many more books with such appeal: for example, the readers of Percy Jackson's adventures (2005-2009) by Rick Riordan take lessons from centaurs, and the lovers of the "Inkheart Trilogy" (2003-2007) by Cornelia Funke come to know how strong is the magic of Orpheus' words.

"Our Mythical Childhood..." project

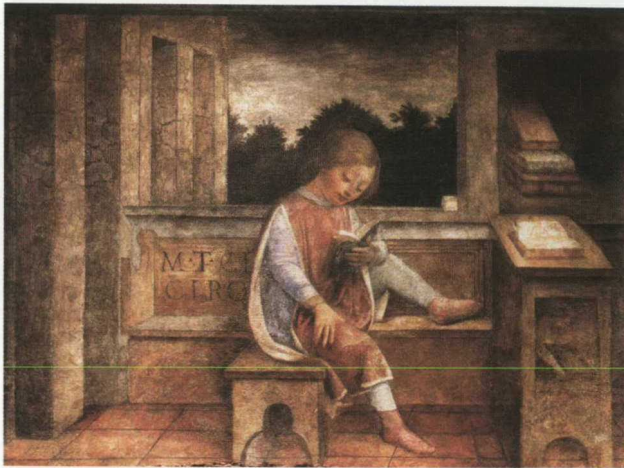
Research on the reception of Antiquity in children's literature has been carried out only since very recently and mainly

in the context of English-language books. I wanted to look at the issue from regional perspectives, where "region" does not have the pejorative implication of being provincial, but rather creates an opportunity to use the mirror of Antiquity to view changes that have been key for our civilization, occurring at different times and locations around the globe. This is how the project "Our Mythical Childhood... Classics and Children's Literature Between East & West" arose, and for which I was awarded the Loeb Classical Library Foundation Grant, Harvard University.

I hereby wish to extend my thanks to Prof. Krystyna Bartol from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Prof. Mark O'Connor from Boston College, USA, and Prof. Bernd Seidensticker from the Free University of Berlin for recommending the project, and to Prof. Jerzy Axer and Prof. Jan Kieniewicz from my Faculty for their ongoing support of my ideas.

I am carrying out this project in cooperation with Dr. Elżbieta Olechowska, classical philologist with experience in new (sic!) media and with two doctoral students as scientific secretaries: Joanna Kłos is a winner of the Diamond Grant in the first edition of this ministerial programme, while Michał Kucharski is currently finalizing his interdisciplinary thesis on the links between Ancient Roman poetry and politics. This is a team project, and we feel privileged that our invitation to collaborate was accepted by the most eminent scholars in Reception Studies all over the world, from the United States, Europe, Asia, Australia, and New Zealand – representing such diverse disciplines as classical philology, modern philologies, archaeology, linguistics, philosophy, and psychology.

Classical Reception Studies



Wikipedia

Vincenzo Foppa, "The Young Cicero Reading"; fresco from c. 1464, Wallace Collection in London

At the same time our team has also been joined by young faculty – researchers at the early stages of their academic paths. Moreover, students also participate in the project, preparing poster presentations and a catalogue of references to Classical Antiquity in Polish literature for children and young adults. I strongly hope that together, over the boundaries between lands, disciplines, and stages of scholar development, we will be able to discover something new, to surprise and inspire one another with broad-ranging scientific subjects, from school compositions of Poland's King Jan III Sobieski, through the reception of Aesop's fables in Japan, to the latest cultural phenomena associated with the Internet.

Creating a community

Since the written word in children's literature is frequently accompanied by illustrations, we will also try to examine the subject through the prism of the visual arts. The challenge of how to help literature scholars understand the power of the image has been taken up by Prof. Zygmunt Januszewski from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw; together with his students he is preparing an exhibition to accompany the project. Since the very beginning we have also been accompanied by a picture painted specially for the project by the young and much-appreciated artist Matylda Tracewska – one that symbolically reflects the essence of our venture.

The culminating point of the project is our international conference (23-26 May 2013), under the Honorary Patronage of Anna Komorowska, the Spouse of the President of the Republic of Poland. The conference will be combined with a cultural programme, including a concert organized by talented students. The final day will conclude with a panel discussion on the role of the classics in children's and young adults' literature. With this occasion we want to cross another boundary and invite for discussion not only students and researchers, but also children, parents, authors, translators, illustrators, teachers, and so on – regardless of their experi-

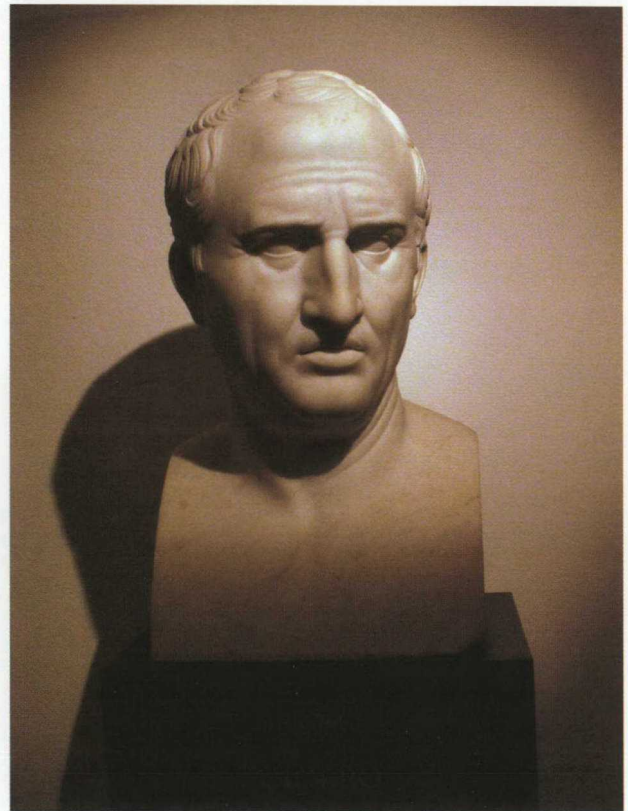
ence in the humanities. Thus, we would like to recall the "childhood" of the University, when the word *universitas* meant the community of all those who wished to learn.

The next stage of the project will be dedicated to studies into the initiation process of young recipients of culture through this culture into adulthood. In this context, we will take into consideration literature, visual arts, music, and new media (such as computer games) marked by Graeco-Roman tradition, which – as I can state with conviction already at this stage of research work – is still a source of joy and helps us make sense of the world around us by putting new generations in front of the mirror of Antiquity.

The "Cicero in Contemporary Literature" project

When, near the end of his long detective career, Hercule Poirot reveals that he never read the classics and that he got on very well without them, the indignant Doctor Burton exclaims, "It's not a question of getting on!" He adds, "It's not a man's working hours that are important – it's his leisure hours." This conversation between Agatha Christie's protagonists forms the motto behind the book I am preparing as part of the project "Romances with Cicero: Cicero's Afterlife and its Transformations in the Historical Fiction of the 20th and 21st Centuries."

This project stems from my research into the contemporary reception of the concept of the Roman Republic, initiated



Wikipedia

Bertel Thorvaldsen "Marcus Tullius Cicero"; copy of the Roman original; 1799-1800, Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen



Dawid Widzyk, "The Fox and the Crow" (fragment); illustration created at the workshop of Prof. Zygmunt Januszewski, Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw

with support from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. I am conducting it in Berlin with funds from the Mobility Plus programme of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education (2012-2014) on invitation from Prof. Ulrich Schmitzer from the *Collaborative Research Centre 644 - Transformations of Antiquity*, comprising three education and research centers: Humboldt University of Berlin, Free University of Berlin, and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science.

I analyze novels and novellas featuring Cicero written since 1945, including children's books, crime and romance novels, feminizing women's fiction, as well as amateur Internet fiction, both texts of refined artistic value and popular literature - everything that people enjoy reading in their free time. I study the interactions between the literary creation of Cicero's image and the socio-political context relevant to each author and his diverse readers. For Cicero is one of the most important personages of civilization rooted in Antiquity, still relevant today, as shown by the sheer number of novels in which he features (I have already gathered over a hundred).

It should be stressed that ever since Antiquity Cicero has held a special place in the discourse surrounding the essence of republican liberties, which is being carried on also today, for example in the context of the transformations in civil societies and the attempts to introduce their typical structures in regions of divergent traditions. The attitude to Cicero reflects the world view and the convictions of the participants to this discourse. For example, Thornton Wilder's "The Ides of March" (1948) resounds with echoes of coming to terms with fascism, Jacek Bocheński's "Trylogia rzymska" [Roman Trilogy] (1961-2009) recalls the history of Communist Poland and the condition of intellectual circles since the transforma-

tion, while Robert Harris' Cicero trilogy ("Imperium," 2006; "Lustrum," 2009; third volume in progress) discusses the Pax Americana political concept.

Looking into the Ciceronian mirror we have the opportunity to see important aspects of our contemporary reality from a distance, which allows us to reflect on how this reality is perceived by different authors and recipients of culture.

Perspectives

The projects presented here raise more questions than they answer; indeed this aspect of working in the humanities is also well-known to scientific scholars. However, by engaging in discussion on a platform of common heritage we are able to meet at a point where, instead of judging, we strive to examine and understand



Piotr Bednarczyk, "The Fox and the Crow" (fragment); illustration created at the workshop of Prof. Zygmunt Januszewski, Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw

the diversity of the world around us, which is not always easy to measure and describe - though we should keep trying - and which is not simply black and white. It even turns out that, when we polish the mirror of reception, the world is - or at least it happens to be every now and then - surprisingly colorful, just like in our childhood images. ■

Further reading:

- Kumaniecki K. (1959). *Cyceron i jego współcześni* [Cicero and His Contemporaries]. Warszawa: Czytelnik.
 Zieliński T. (1929). *Cicero im Wandel der Jahrhunderte*. Leipzig-Berlin: Teubner.
 Information on the *Our Mythical Childhood...* project: www.omc.al.uw.edu.pl