

A review of
**Drakon: Dragon Myth
and Serpent Cult
in the Greek and
Roman Worlds**

Jacqueline Simpson

Professor Daniel Ogden's *Drakon* is a work of awesome scope and thoroughness, and is also remarkably lively and entertaining to read. Moreover, he won my heart by opening the discussion not with any Classical story but with a quote from Richard Lane's description of England's one surviving processional dragon, Snap of Norwich – a creature which, says Ogden, 'neatly encapsulates the engaging paradox of the dragon ... the ultimate terror, safely distanced from the real world both by its own death and by its confinement to the realm of fantasy, yet living on to flourish as an object of fascination, indeed as an object of love.'

It is indeed remarkable to observe how often the world of Graeco-Roman mythology mirrors, and is mirrored in, that of international folklore. We tend to assume, for example, that a given myth – say, that of Heracles slaying the hydra – exists in a single, stable, 'classic' form, but by the time Professor Ogden has laid out in scrupulous detail every one of its textual and iconographical presentations over several hundred years, we can see that a myth (just like a folktale) exists in multiple versions, where a stable core is surrounded by a haze of variable details. Furthermore, many of the narrative details in the myths are similar, even identical, to those in local legends of our own culture. Heracles defeats a sea-monster by tricking it into swallowing him, and then either cutting his way out through its belly or destroying its liver; a less famous hero, Menestratus of Thespieae, goes into battle against a *drakon* wearing a breastplate studded with fishhooks – and Ogden's footnotes point out the similarity to the slaying of the Orkney Stoorworm and the Lambton Worm.

However, the chief purpose of this book is not to situate the Graeco-Roman myths in the wider contexts of international folklore and Near Eastern mythology, but to closely examine the ample evidence provided by poets, dramatists, topographers, vase-painters and sculptors as to what the myths in all their variations have to tell us about *drakontes*. Essentially, a *drakon* in its pure form is simply a very large snake, a 'worm' (wings and feet are a medieval European development), but one which is so closely linked to the gods or to the Underworld as to be itself a semi-supernatural being. Many *drakontes*, however,
Gramarye: The Journal of the Sussex Centre for Folklore, Fairy Tales and Fantasy,
Winter 2015, Issue 8

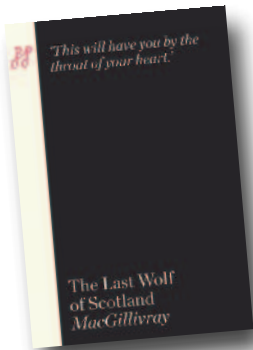
are composite in form, generally by being human from the waist up but with a snake's tail (or a pair of tails) below. Several gods, Titans and giants are *anguipedes* of this type.

The *drakon* is not always a fierce foe. It can be a protective guardian, a giver of wealth, and a healer. Asclepius the Healer; a highly popular deity in late antiquity, sometimes took the form of a huge, golden, crested hissing serpent, and in art he is often shown accompanied by a snake; actual snakes were kept in the sacred groves of certain temples.

All these aspects, and many others, are discussed in this fascinating book, a major contribution to the history of Classical religion. We have reason to be grateful to Professor Ogden, and indeed to his publishers, Oxford University Press, who have made it a pleasure to read. It is particularly welcome to see that the extensive footnotes are placed where they are of most use to a reader; namely at the foot of the page, *not* hidden away at the back of the book.

Author: Prof. Daniel Ogden.
Oxford University Press (2013), 496pp.

Jacqueline Simpson



A review of **The Last Wolf of Scotland**

Niall McDevitt

The talented poet/musician/artist MacGillivray has published a debut collection which offers readers the literary equivalent of a shamanic initiation. The disturbing starting point of the book is the self-penned story of Robert McGee, who as a boy in 1864 was scalped by Sioux warriors, speared, tomahawked, shot, and left for dead, but who later recovered to make a living in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Circus. A terrifying photo of McGee accompanies his terrifying text, and the poems which follow are imagined as the inner swansong of the quasi-dismembered Scottish 13-year-old. You expect an epic, but the book unfolds as a cycle of lyric poems, each with an elusive episode cocooned within its linguistic silk.

But there is a second leitmotif. The book's title is taken from a story told by the Victorian wildlife author/artist Ernest Thompson Seton. The prose-poem preface explains:

... McGee's twilight cinema runs on spools of dust,
a zoopraxiscope encounter with Ernest
Seton, tracking, bullying, burying and becoming the great wolf
Lobo in the limits of the
Currampaw valley. And who shall say the last wolf of Scotland was
not stripped here from
beast into human?

As you approach the work you are signposted to both meta-narratives. The twofold book ends up containing a myriad of books. The McGee scalp maps a visionary past-present-future Scotland in which the Scottish-parented Seton is one of a *dramatis personae* that also includes poet Hugh MacDiarmid, singer Jim Morrison, and fashion designer Alexander McQueen. If MacGillivray were Jeremy Reed, she might have devoted a whole book to each of these characters, but Scotland is her main concern, even as it was approaching last year's referendum. Perhaps this poetry was contributing at a magical level to the struggle for independence? Perhaps *Last Wolf* is a lament for a domesticated, unfree nation? But this is not a politicised book. In fact it is miraculously apolitical, in that while many apolitical books lay themselves open to political critique, this doesn't. Scotland is the star; the protagonist, the theme, Scotland contemporaneous and archaic, Scotland adorned with a witchdoctor's necklace of Americana. This Scottish-American axis adds a cinematic quality; the words swirl on reels.

Elsewhere, the invocation of James Macpherson, whose hoax Scottish epic *Ossian* was a favourite of Blake, implies that MacGillivray is channelling a new *Ossian* attesting to the updated culture-heroics of Scotland. The two devices the poet uses are an incantatory language and centring of text. The lyrics vary in length from one line to several pages, and some are sequenced, but all part of a myth-tapestry. It is a book, rather than a collection. Some of the poems have mini-prefaces and others have a glossary to translate from Scots and other dialects. MacGillivray's specialness is that she seems to write as easily in a Macpherson/Burns/MacDiarmid lineage as she does in a Basil Bunting/Barry MacSweeney/Maggie O'Sullivan; there's a Jock/Geordie interface. This makes her Anglo-Scottish poetry different to the many other practitioners, say, the avant-garde Tom Leonard or the mainstream Don Paterson. There is something of the thesis in the research behind the poem, but the findings are unacademic. The lyric-epic songflow and heroics of *The Last Wolf of Scotland* lift up from the soap operatics of too much contemporary verse, dragging the reader by the jaws to where a badly wounded imagination lies.

He whose ancestor
fought and bit
the last one of Scotland
to death.

He comes penumbral
skidding down
the apprentice hour
all is shaken here into wonder

pattern of vulvic claws
pads of powdered chalk,
graffiti scatologian
of absolute rejection

Author: MacGillivray.
Pighog (2013), 92pp.

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Niall McDevitt



A review of
**Disability,
Deformity and
Disease in the
Grimms' Fairy Tales**

Seana Kozar

Whilst the old wisdom has it that one should never judge a book by its cover, I regularly and wholeheartedly do, generally in the book's favour. In the case of Ann Schmiesing's *Disability, Deformity and Disease in the Grimm's Fairy Tales*, I was struck by three initial impressions: how the image of the Handless Maiden in proximity to tree branches and roots reminded me of the tragic figure of Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*; how difficult the Handless Maiden was for me to tell as a storyteller with a fine motor disability that often leaves me feeling 'handless'; and a memory of one of my Folklore

professors expressing one of his pet hates of modern scholarship: "A pox on alliterative titles!" Because storytellers know that 'the one that really bugs you might be the one you need to tell', and as reading it might also irritate my professor, I was off.

Schmiesing's project is to explore 'the manner in which the narrative constructs difference as disability' (5). To do this, her corpus of material encompasses over seventy stories across all editions. These are subjected to various levels of discussion and scrutiny, according to how each narrative embodies disability and editorial intervention, which tends either to foreground a character's disabling features or to minimise them in the pursuit of restoration or wholeness. Her incisive analysis, based around the concept of *prosthesis*, provides another way of looking at the constellation of cumulative editorial decisions that helped to shape successive publications of the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. From the outset, she distinguishes between *narrative* and *editorial prosthesis* as, on the one hand, the extent to which a story is about disability versus, on the other, the extent to which the Grimms' additions and changes made it so. Her explorations provide a wider cultural and personal context in which the brothers' operations to shape and refine particular stories may be understood. Throughout their working lives, both brothers were affected at different times by various physically limiting ailments and underwent expensive, ineffective and sometimes deleterious treatment. Also, the disabling effects as consequences of war would have been a common sight. Schmiesing's comprehensive and sensitive investigation of this topic lends a particular poignancy to even humourous tales dealing with amputation and misplaced medical intervention, such as 'The Three Army Surgeons' and 'Brother Lustig'.

One of the key strengths of the book for me is the fact that the author does not spend time trying to diagnostically decode narrative descriptions into actual disabilities, since figuring out what ails a character in real-world terms does nothing to advance the story's significance in the self-referential world of each fairy tale. Meanings are created in and through the stories by tellers, listeners and readers for whom superimposed medicalised exactitude may merely provide an unhelpful label. If I have any real criticism of the book, it relates to Schmiesing's inclusion of deformity and disease under the umbrella of 'disability'. Although deformity and disease may be socially and physically disabling in many respects, by considering them all together, I think she casts her net too wide and spreads herself too thin, to use a decidedly mixed metaphor. She does not, and indeed cannot, give equal attention to all of the tales she identifies within her analytical purview. And, by including them under 'disability' as a superordinate concept, she blurs the ways the stories deal with each in order to fit them all into her model of prosthesis. Although chopping off one's nose to cure one's cold sounds like a particularly *märchenhaft* response, we need to question any theoretical model that might be taken as either cure, cast or crutch for the necessarily challenging themes in these tales.

However, Schmiesing's work respectfully and comprehensively advances our understanding of many of these stories within the analytical framework of disability studies, giving them another level of critical attention that they richly deserve. And, if there are other

ways of looking at those stories that fit less easily into Schmiesing's structure, then we must have the courage to be bothered and say so, to keep reading and telling and listening to what the stories say in the fairy-tale world about our responses to historical and cultural (dis)embodiment of health, normalcy and wholeness in the real one.

Author: Ann Schmiesing.

Publisher: Wayne State University Press (2014), 240pp.

Seana Kozar



A review of
**Defining Magic:
A Reader**
Marion Gibson

D*efining Magic* is an anthology that aims to offer an illuminating selection of texts, from the most ancient times to the present, which explain what magic was and is thought to be from various theoretical perspectives. It scrupulously avoids becoming a *grimoire* – indeed, there are few concrete examples in it of magical practices, spells, rites, objects etc. Instead, it focuses on passages in its chosen texts where authors describe and debate the meaning of the word 'magic', and related terms, their origin and significance in different cultures and times, and their contexts: lawfulness or unlawfulness, usefulness or frivolity, scholarly legitimacy or otherwise. As the editors of *Defining Magic* note, magic has often been seen as a term in dialogue with the idea(s) of religion, and this is one of the central hubs of the book, determining its selections and the focus of much of the commentary. Other important contexts are science, the growth of modern scholarly disciplines such as anthropology, and the return to magical lexicons and creative impulses in contemporary western societies. The book is thus a fascinating exploration of the theory of magic in truly interdisciplinary ways that inform, provoke new questions, and cast new light on old texts and debates.

Alongside this fearless interdisciplinarity, the historical sweep of the anthology is one of its most impressive features. It begins with Plato, Pliny, Plotinus and Augustine and ends with essays written specially for the book. It is not often that one hears from voices so diverse in their time periods, ideologies and professions in the short space of one volume.

It is just over 250 pages long, but incorporates both Aquinas and Blavatsky, both Agrippa and Frazer, both anthropologists and classicists. This makes *Defining Magic* a very exciting read. It is also a book that demands to be read slowly and more than once – by the end (indeed, before the end of the first section, ‘Historical Sources’) this reader’s mind was crammed full. There was not only a great deal of new knowledge to be processed, but also an entire theoretical debate of great complexity to be assimilated. This is summarised in the introduction, and continued in the concluding essays by Susan Greenwood, Christopher I. Lehrich, Jesper Sorenson, Kimberly B. Stratton and Randall Styers.

In the introduction, the editors lay out the groundwork for the discussions to follow. They rather engagingly approach magic and its many components as a ‘family’. And once they list the members of that family, the scale of the task that they have set themselves becomes obvious. Magic can encompass any and all of the following, and more: ablutions, alchemy, charms, exorcism, fumigations, healing, invocations, miracles, necromancy, signs, talismans, witchcraft. As the editors point out, there is no shared or agreed language for describing these phenomena, and even the idea that they are all linked by a common term, ‘magic’, is highly suspect and controversial. The term has often been used pejoratively, to mean ‘bad science’ or ‘bad religion’, that which can and should be dismissed and suppressed. In colonial contexts, this has had particularly problematic effects, and it has also led to executions for witchcraft and heresy throughout human history. These contexts make its definition a very sensitive matter, with important ethical implications. After a section filled with scare quotation marks, the editors decide on the term ‘magicity’ to help them overcome the problems of description. For them, magicity means something once thought to belong to a category called magic. That category is not endorsed by their book as a way of thinking about the world, but it has been so pervasive in cultural history that it cannot be ignored. In exploring it, the editors thus perform a valuable service for scholarship.

The title of this book, *Defining Magic*, indicates the vast scope of its ambition. It is probably impossible for a single volume to please all readers, or indeed comprehensively ‘define’ magic. The sources chosen concentrate, for example, on classical, Christian and Western esoteric texts, meaning that Jewish and Muslim traditions are largely omitted. Other texts, the editors candidly admit, could not be included because the permissions for reproduction simply cost too much. But despite restrictions in its selection, this book is an extremely useful one that goes a long way towards opening up new areas of scholarly thought. Otto and Stausberg are to be congratulated on an impressive achievement.

Editors: Bernd-Christian Otto and Michael Stausberg.
Equinox Publishing (2013), 281 pp.

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Marion Gibson