This book is an instructive and inspiring read for anyone who might wish to learn more about the teaching of Classics and Ancient History in British universities during the second half of the twentieth century. But at the heart of it there is the human interest prompted by a remarkable personality. This is a story of great intellectual achievement, a profound and warm intelligence, and an outstanding sense of public duty. It is also a story of social mobility. And, in that connection, this book speaks to us about a set of conditions and opportunities that are mostly no longer within reach in 2020s Britain.

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General

It is perhaps a sign of the times we live in that there is an increased academic interest in weirdness, hybridity, and monstrosity. Just recently a colleague of mine from the English Department here at the University of Virginia mentioned in a casual conversation that he's been drafting a syllabus for his new course entitled 'Weird'. Noticing my surprise, he patiently introduced me to the world of Weirdcore literature ('Think Lovecraft on steroids minus racism and xenophobia'), and aesthetics ('Norm violating hybridity is the key, representations of human-mushroom bodies, rainbows with eyes, fish with human feet, surrealism meets low resolution anime and 80s video games graphics, basically'). The reason why Weirdcore is popular among Zoomers (the generation born between 1997 and 2012) became clearer to me after a while. What more suitable recourse does this brilliant (judging by my UVa students) generation of digital natives have, having been raised in a politically, environmentally, and economically volatile world, but to embrace the incongruity and celebrate the absurd?

Let us turn to the question of what made the Greeks and Romans develop fondness for weird and scary hybrids and creatures. The substantial *Oxford Handbook of Monsters in Classical Myth*[1] comprises forty chapters and provides an up-to-date, highly readable, and often entertaining overview of the variegated world of the more fantastic denizens of Greek imagination. More or less everyone you might expect to find, including humans, make an appearance in this well-produced and helpful handbook, from underworld menaces, over sea monsters, to terrestrial and avian creatures. The volume is organized in four unequal sections: the first and the most substantial part is a sort of a who-is-who among monsters typically encountered in hero-quests and creation narratives (from Cerberus to Harpies and most of the creatures in between); the second section, dealing with folklore and ethnography, features blood-suckers, ghosts, revenants, monstruous animals and 'monstruous', that would be somatically non-normative, humans. The

[1] *The Oxford Handbook of Monsters in Classical Myth*. Edited by Debbie Felton. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. 602. Hardback £130.00, ISBN: 978-0-19-289650-6.

third section, to my mind somewhat imprecisely entitled 'Interpreting the monsters', falls in fact into two parts: the first part contains three chapters on visual representations of monsters, while the remaining chapters provide an exercise in testing theoretical approaches to monsters and monster narratives (feminist, psychoanalytical, cognitive, disability studies; some of these chapters come with greater pay-off than others). Reception of classical monsters is the focal point of the final section, and here one finds a colourful motley of case studies ranging from Old Norse literature to fan-fiction and analysis of the 'Centaur AI'. The proclaimed aim of the volume was not just to plug a long-standing hole by producing a theoretically informed, detailed, and comprehensive account of ancient monsters and their manifold receptions, but also to provide an overview of the material which would be accessible to wider audiences. This has been successfully achieved, by and large, and nearly all contributions are written with admirable clarity and genuine intention to facilitate access to this exciting material. Many chapters are bursting with weird yet fun information (I appreciated the nugget on the ways in which creative misunderstanding in antiquity made Greek one-legged people become Latin one-eyed people), and cumulatively the volume delivers an intriguing litmus test of our own and ancient thinking about self, identity, alterity, the centre, the margin, and the border.

Jeremy McInerney's new book on hybrids in Greek culture and imagination,[2] itself 'a bountiful supply of the weird and the wonderful' (103), is a rigorous and inspired study, mobilizing the notion of hybridity to cast a fresh look on Greek culture. McInerney is an excellent writer and a spirited, admirably learned, and entertaining guide through complex material, regularly recognizing big issues arising from seemingly innocuous details, be it that he is talking about an advertisement for shoes, annoyance of hybrid-conferences, hooves of a centaur, an irascible self-cannibalizing pudding, or staggeringly complex issues of intercultural cross-pollination of ideas. When thinking of hybridity, McInerney's places focus on human-animal somatic 'contrafactuals' which mirror deep entanglement (one of McInerney's key terms) between humans and other animals. An exploration, rather than a sustained history of ancient Greek hybridity, the book nevertheless continuously ruminates on broader cultural dynamics and complex cross-cultural encounters in the Mediterranean basin (and beyond) that have shaped Greek imagination. Remarkably, what the handbook discussed above treated as monstruous and terrifying is in McInerney's study often re-configurated as an object of wonder: somatic composites as violators of borders and fixity may lead to abjection, but beyond abjection, the hybrids fire up our imagination and stimulate reflection. In other words, ancient Weirdcore – satyrs, gorgons, snake-kings, and the rest – forces us to rethink our classificatory systems and nudge us to adopt alternative perspectives on what it means to be human; hybrids are 'dislocators of certitude' which remind us that 'classes and categories are rarely as secure in reality as in theory' (292). On the whole, McInerney makes a convincing and often brilliantly argued case for Greek hybrids as mirrors of the biological, cultural, religious, economic, and socio-political anxieties of the Greeks and others. Written in highly readable prose, with a well-balanced and sensible deployment

[2] *Centaurs and Snake-Kings: Hybrids and the Greek Imagination*. By Jeremy McInerney. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. 368. 83 illustrations. Hardback £30.00, ISBN: 978-1-00-945905-1.

of theory, this rich, eye-opening, and thought-provoking book will greatly appeal to all scholars of ancient studies, and far beyond.

In her own piece in the *Oxford Handbook of Monsters*, Debbie Felton also discusses 'AI Centaur', which refers to a hybrid model combining human and artificial intelligence. As a keen chess player myself, I remember well the first time a computer won a match against a chess world champion – in the late 90s, IBM's Deep Blue defeated none other than the great Garry Kasparov. In the aftermath, Kasparov came up with the idea of a completely new way of thinking about the game of chess: what if there were to be a synergy and collaboration between the human and a machine, with the former providing strategy, intuition, and creativity, while the latter was to prevent blunders, ensure precision, and provide analytics; the blended player was to play 'centaur chess'. A new book on technological animation[3] explores this very nexus of a human and a machine, and their blended agency in antiquity, by sketching out: a) the evolution of technical knowledge and, relatedly, practices, b) tracing the development of necessary materials, and c) investigating historical reception of the products of technological animation. Stemming from a 2019 conference held at the University of Exeter, the volume comprises nineteen papers split over three sections: the section entitled 'Theories' bundles together discussions of ancient views on animation as represented by Homer, Aristotle, and Hero of Alexandria; section 'Contexts' features papers on speaking objects, articulated figurines, various objects owned by Petronius' Trimalchio, and on an ancient self-driving vehicle of sorts (this paper was one of the highlights: while some of the author's technical explanations flew over my head, I was greatly impressed by the fact that the author actually made an automaton, a vehicle powered by sinew torsion inspired by Aristotle's murky and Hero of Alexandria's even murkier remarks); and finally, the papers in the 'Audiences' section engage with ancient perceptions of and reactions to animated objects from Homer onwards. Here, several papers intimate an idea similar to what McInerney has argued for hybrids: encounters with automata, too, incite the sense of wonder and inspire us to think of alternative ways of understanding humanity. I reported here last year on Gerolemou's and Roby's books on technical automation and Hero of Alexandria respectively[4] (both feature also in this volume, the former both as a contributor and a co-editor). When it comes to automata, this volume represents a step in an interesting direction and delivers a timely intervention: the recasting of the notion of automation to include animation, as many papers in this collection do, chimes well with current appetites for post-human perspectives and, relatedly, eco-critical and New Materialist approaches.

On that note, Cordovana's study[5] of environmental thought in Greco-Roman antiquity offers stimulating insights into the ways in which Greeks and Romans thought about their environment, the possible threats to it, its exploitation, and its preservation. Studies of environmental history and historical ecology have become prominent in

[3] *Technological Animation in Classical Antiquity*. Edited by Tatiana Bur, Maria Gerolemou, and Isabel A. Ruffell. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. 406. 73 illustrations. Hardback £119.00, ISBN: 978-0-19-285755-2.

[4] *G&R* 71.1, 2024, pp. 177–80.

[5] *Environmental Thought in the Graeco-Roman World*. By Orietta Dora Cordovana. Berlin, De Gruyter, 2024. Pp. 270. 13 illustrations. Hardback €99.95, ISBN: 978-3-11-115204-2.

Classics for obvious, if joyless, reasons, and Cordovana contributes to them by focusing on ancient responses to real or perceived environmental crises, with the aim of reconstructing the 'environmental sensitivity' of the ancients ('ecological', Cordovana posits, 'is wrongly applied to the ancient world': 22, 212). In the end, this sensitivity is parsed out as inevitably manifold, variegated, and historically conditioned, but in a generalizing move Cordovana nonetheless proposes 'three different levels of environmental consciousness' in antiquity (212–13): 'negative passive' present in a commoner's everyday life; through 'unconscious eco-friendly practices' (e.g. reuse and recycling of pots, vessels, materials); and 'positive active', which characterizes governmental and intellectual approach to environment – legal measures and ethical reflection respectively. This rich study is certainly a welcome addition to a burgeoning subfield of study.

Part of the reason why non-normative bodies were construed as monstruous (and terrifying), in antiquity and beyond, was the philosophically grounded conviction that one's facial and bodily features were indicators of character and personality – this is the basic premise of physiognomy. An interdisciplinary edited volume (part of the *Medical Traditions* series) explores physiognomy diachronically[6] and charts its development from antiquity to the present day, that is, from the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise *Physiognomonica* to cosmetic and corrective surgery, wellness, and sports. There is even an article on criminals who changed their facial features to escape detection (including an analysis of the well-publicized case of Ronnie Biggs). For classicists, two articles in particular will be of interest, both by Alain Touwaide: a survey of the earliest development of physiognomy, and a piece on the modes of facial transformation in antiquity. As a whole, the collection emphasizes physiognomy's development from various elements of magic, religion, and 'primitive' medicine, before evolving into a part of folk-psychology to become a pseudoscience. This volume is an interesting read and a valuable resource for scholars interested in ancient medicine and cultural history more broadly.

Continuing with the theme of bodies, of interest to both students of ancient medicine and religion will be Florian Schumann's analysis of disabled bodies of ancient myth.[7] Schumann primarily focuses on characters who are impaired visually and physically to study their representation and sound out the symbolic and cultural significance of blindness and lameness. The figure of Thersites is taken as a starting point, and a paradigm to an extent, of ancient disability representations in which physical impairments are intertwined with moral or character deficiencies. But, as Schumann shows in the remainder of his study, this is not the only aspect of their representation: through a series of careful close-readings of the figures of Teiresias, Oedipus, Hephaestus, Philoctetes, and Ploutos, Schumann uncovers the ways in which bodily

[6] *Physiognomy at the Crossroad of Magic, Science, and the Arts*. Edited by Massimo Ciavolella, Valeria Finucci, and Megan Tomlinson. Berlin, De Gruyter, 2024. Pp. 332. 84 illustrations. Hardback €109.99, ISBN: 978-3-11-121274-6.

[7] *Der Behinderung einen Sinn verleihen: Über die Interpretation von Seh- und Gehbehinderungen bei Figuren des antiken Mythos*. By Florian Schumann. Berlin, Boston, De Gruyter, 2024. Pp. 352. Hardback €114.95, ISBN: 978-3-11-138179-4.

impairments also served narrative purposes other than fostering antipathy towards a character, and could be employed to carry moral, symbolic, philosophical, or divine connotations. On the large scale, the study forefronts ancient constructions of meaning around physical differences and representations of differently abled bodies, and thus illuminates the intersection of disability, identity, and narration in antiquity.

From disabled bodies, on to unmanly men, outrageous sexual behaviour, and ancient twerking, of sorts: Tom Sapsford, a former professional ballet dancer and choreographer, and now a professional Classicist, has given us the first sustained, monograph-length discussion of the *kinaidos* (Lat. *cinaedus*),[8] that is, the figure of an effeminate man, figuring in both Greek and Roman cultures, and characterized by patent transgression of sexual, gender, moral, and, generally speaking, virility and masculinity-defining norms. The transgressive character of the kinaidos and his 'effeminate' nature were traditionally identified on the basis of his gender non-conforming clothes, elaborate hairstyling, liberal use of perfume, unmanly gait and bearing, insatiable sexual appetite, and passive role in exclusively homosexual intercourse (the last of these has been repeatedly debunked). As an author of a physiognomic treatise states, you can tell 'the deviant' even by the sound of his voice, since it is high-pitched, pliant, or broken, (70). While older scholarship (that is, prior to the 1990s) often cast the kinaidos as a pervert, Sapsford combs Greek, Roman, and Greco-Roman Egyptian sources from fourth century BC to late antiquity to uncover the *kinaidos*/*cinaedus* as a much more complex figure, both stigmatized and essential for understanding ancient gender dynamics. This book, 'a study of perversity in forms erotic, anatomical, and cultural' (3), a history occasionally written through a queer lens, argues that the kinaidos was not merely a sexual caricature but a performative figure – occasionally even a fairly well-paid occupation – associated with theatrical roles such as dancers, actors, or entertainers, whose behaviours were inevitably exaggerated for purposes of public spectacle. And in this sense, Sapsford connects disruptive, breathless, and steamy rhythms of the Sotadean verse ('the rhythmic beat of the kinaidos', 196) with the flamboyant physicality of the kinaidic dance (on undulating/shimmying/extorted buttocks, see 150 and 158): the big claim of the book – successfully argued to my mind and especially so when discussing documentary evidence from Egypt – is that 'the identity categories of the professional performer (i.e. entertainer) and social performer (i.e. pervert) were considerably enmeshed in Greco-Roman imagination' (22). Rather than a simple derogatory stereotype of a deviant, the kinaidos emerges from Sapford's book in a way analogous to McInerney's hybrids: they, too, as gender-liminal figures, or perhaps even gender composites, and certainly as disruptors of normative gender expectations, represent 'dislocators of certitude'. Much is to be gained from this remarkable study and it deserves interest.

For the end of this general review I move on to two books on religion, starting with a new *Guide to Classics and Cognitive Studies: Reviewing Findings and Results*.[9] As the title

[8] *Performing the Kinaidos: Unmanly Men in Ancient Mediterranean Cultures*. By Tom Sapsford. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. 240. Hardback £83.00, ISBN: 978-0-19-885432-6.

[9] *A Guide to Classics and Cognitive Studies: Reviewing Findings and Results*. By Anna A. Novokhatko. Berlin, De Gruyter, 2024. Pp. 210. 8 illustrations. Paperback £18.00, ISBN: 978-3-11-157696-1.

intimates, in this succinct volume Novokhatko attempts to take stock of some of the recent research, predominantly in the form of scholarly doxographies, and thus highlights select key perspectives from the past few decades (esp. material, sensory, and spatial 'turns'; the chapter on emotion studies, the longest of the five, takes the form of a transcription of Zoom interviews with three colleagues, well known for their more or less traditional work on emotions). The guide, designed explicitly for students and interested laypeople, has the ambition to be a foundational resource for navigating this vibrant, if ever more complex, field. For that reason, it understandably and justifiably differs from its obvious competitor, the pioneering and meaty *Routledge Handbook of Classics and Cognitive Theory*[10] in terms of its depth, method, exposition, and scope.

Speaking of complexity, perhaps it is time for another conference and an open discussion of ancient Greek atheism and, relatedly, belief. In an article published in the previous issue of *Greece & Rome*, Thomas Harrison has labelled, to my mind thought-provokingly ancient Greek atheism a scholarly mirage,[11] and has unpacked various ways in which our evidence for atheism is difficult, especially so if one attempts to make an argument for belief from atheism. In a stimulating and energetically argued book based on his PhD dissertation,[12] James C. Ford – incidentally, supervised by Harrison – takes a different view: for Ford, atheism was not just 'far from unthinkable', but also deeply embedded in the religious and intellectual fabric of Classical Greek society. In fact, atheism was 'perceived as part of a category of otherness that reinforced appropriate belief, alongside magic and superstition' (168–9), it was 'no more unthinkable than it is today' (170), and 'always a part of the imagined, intellectual, ritual and political landscape of the ancient world' (171). Ford's spirited plaidoyer for ancient atheism, argued on the basis of religious education, the nexus of atheism and morality, issues of agnosticism, unknowability, and theodicy is welcome, and I am sympathetic to some of his views. In particular, it seems to me that Ford is right to call for freeing atheism from the ideological burden the (older) scholarship has placed on it, and I'd be keen to find out to what extent cognitive science of religion can be mobilized for the study of ancient atheism more generally. But I am not certain that there is, as of now, a wider consensus among scholars of Greek religion on what distinctly *ancient Greek* atheism really was. Every (sustained) crisis of belief? Inability to believe? Unwillingness or refusal to believe? Occasional 'unbelief'? Much more needs to be said about various articulations of 'atheism' in Greek. For Ford, who prioritizes the adjective *atheos* (8–9), atheism represents 'the various forms of unbelief in the right gods and/or the failure to worship them in appropriate ways' (17 and 170), and the author is probably correct in assuming, as he does, that some might find the definition too broad. On the other hand, Ford seems to me to be correct in drawing sharp distinctions between doctrinal and non-doctrinal religions, and highlighting a fundamental difference between a doctrinal and non-doctrinal, and monotheistic and polytheistic, atheism. One may bicker about

[10] Peter Meineck, William Michael Short, and Jennifer Devereaux (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Classics and Cognitive Theory* (Routledge, 2018).

[11] *G&R* 72.1, 2025, pp. 88–108.

[12] *Atheism at the Agora: A History of Unbelief in Ancient Greek Polytheism*. By James C. Ford. London, Routledge, 2024. Pp. 209. Paperback £39.99, ISBN: 978-1-03-249303-9.

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various aspects of Ford's arguments, but this book is a welcome reminder that we need to continue the conversation.

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