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Mythology in Children's Animation

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Mythology in Children's Animation

Abstract

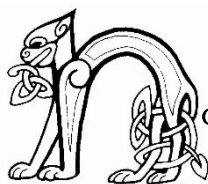
In recent years, there have been several animated films, ostensibly for children yet appreciable by adults as well, which have made attempts to incorporate various mythologies of the world into their settings and plots. There is considerable variation in the amounts of mythology included, from offhand mentions to integral components of the story. There is also a wide range of the degree of faithfulness to the mythologies being depicted. This note gives an overview of some of the most well-known and readily available animations from 1992 to 2017, and show how the mythologies of many different cultures are represented. Some questions will be raised as to the educational value of such films in terms of introducing children to myths, legends, and folklore.

The cultures whose myths, legends, and folklores being examined will include:

- Greek, via Disney's *Hercules* (1997);
- Arabian, via Disney's *Aladdin* (1992);
- Irish, via *The Secret of Kells* (2009) and *Song of the Sea* (2014);
- Mexican, via *The Book of Life* (2014) and *Coco* (2017) ;
- Pacific Islands, via *Moana* (2016);
- Japanese, via *Kubo and the Two Strings* (2016) .

Additional Keywords

Animation; World Mythology



NOTES: CHILDREN'S MYTHOPOEIC LITERATURE

MYTHOLOGY IN CHILDREN'S ANIMATION

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INTRODUCTION

CHILDREN LIKE CARTOONS. CHILDREN WATCH A LOT OF CARTOONS, from short clips embedded in *Sesame Street* episodes, to Saturday morning TV shows, to full-length animated films. Given the preponderance of visual media in our current culture, and the extent to which stories are consumed in the form of film and television, any study of mythology in children's literature should consider animated films as an inseparable segment of the field of children's fantasy.

In the last few decades, there have been several examples of animated feature films presenting mythological themes. While some fairy tale movies, like *Beauty and the Beast* or *The Little Mermaid*, may have subtle mythological resonances, they do not involve overt representations of the mythologies of the cultures in which they take place, so the current discussion is not applicable to that kind of film.

A BIT OF HISTORY, AND FIRST MAJOR INSTANCES

With the release of *Snow White* in 1937, followed in the next few years by *Pinocchio* (1940), *Dumbo* (1941), and *Bambi* (1942), the Walt Disney studio established a precedent of full-length animated films being intended primarily for children, although enjoyment by adults was usually an added benefit. For decades, Disney animations were based on either fairy tales (*Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*) or classic children's stories (*Peter Pan*, *Alice in Wonderland*), with occasional forays into original stories such as *The Aristocats* in 1970.

Finally, in 1997 Disney turned to Greek mythology as a source and released their animated version of the story of Hercules.¹ Modestly received at the box office and by critics ("Hercules [1997 film]"), *Hercules* fulfilled a function of introducing at least some concepts and characters of Greek mythology to children via an amusing adventure-comedy. Even though the Roman form

¹ Elements of Greek mythology had been used in 1940 to illustrate Beethoven's 6th Symphony in Disney's *Fantasia*, but that was only one sequence out of many. *Hercules* was their first use of Greek mythology for an entire feature.

"Hercules" is used instead of the true Greek "Heracles," other Greek gods, demigods, and mythological people and places are named specifically, such as Zeus, Hades, Olympus, the Muses and the Fates, centaurs, nymphs and satyrs. There are allusions to other stories from Greek myth, such as Pandora, Jason and the Argonauts, Achilles, Odysseus, and the Trojan Horse. In Hercules's own story, one would expect the Twelve Labors to feature prominently, but the only labor actually depicted is the fight against the Hydra; the others are merely alluded to.

However, even with the plethora of elements of Greek mythology strewn throughout the film, much of it is highly inaccurate. As the TV Tropes web site declared:

Even looking past the many anachronistic gags, the movie plays so fast and loose with the original myth, and Greek mythology in general, that it would be far, *far* easier to list the things they did get accurate. The writers *did* read up on Greek mythology when doing research for the film, but deliberately changed elements around and were often forced to change the more unpleasant elements of the myths due to their inherent values dissonance and the film having to be acceptable to kids [...], resulting in a movie that's less an adaptation of the myth and more like a mash-up of *Superman: The Movie* and *Rocky* set in a burlesque of the Greek myths. ("Sadly Mythtaken/Hercules")

Further, this Hercules is portrayed as somewhat of a buffoon, conceited and oafish. His story arc here is one long attempt to find a way to get into Olympus, where he believes he rightly belongs, so most of his actions are self-serving towards that end. Only when he actually does something truly unselfish, almost by accident, does he attain his reward; but he doesn't seem to have learned much from that one action.

While *Hercules* definitely draws (however badly) from mythology, a slightly earlier Disney film might also be said to present mythological elements, depending on one's definitions. Are the stories of the Arabian Nights mythology, folklore, or fairy tales? The legends found in the Arabian Nights may be myth or folklore, depending on one's definitions, but they are definitely part of Western cultural awareness; if their fantastic elements are included in a broad definition of mythology, then 1992's *Aladdin* would also be an example of animated mythology. But this film does not fare much better than *Hercules*. Even though it contains the basic elements of the Arabian Nights stories—the lamp with a genie in it, a forbidden cave, a flying carpet, etc.—the sense of wonder is overshadowed by the comedic aspect of the genie as portrayed by Robin Williams, whose impressive skills of improvisation and impressions enable the animators to run wild with visual interpretations of Williams's manic rantings.

As Jessica Tiffin says in *Marvelous Geometry*, "Disney's genie [...] abandons all sense of an awe-inspiring, otherworldly power [...] to represent instead a cuddly commodity impresario" (222). She further dismisses the film as "an essentially superficial and patronizing view of a culture effectively defined in terms of being non-American, and therefore exotic and interesting, if not to be taken seriously" (214). I can't disagree with her.

So, especially with all these inaccuracies, are these films really serving any educational function, or doing more harm than good? Some children might come away thinking these are the actual stories of Heracles and Aladdin, and be satisfied with that. Some might have their imagination and curiosity kindled to the point of wanting to explore further, and discover more reliable sources for this information. What percentages of these films' audiences are represented by these alternatives is unknown.

However, in more recent years, there have been several presentations of mythology that are more faithful to their original sources. Interestingly, none of them are based on the two mythologies most familiar to Americans—Greco-Roman and Norse. Also, the stories they tell are not myths in themselves, but involve children of our world interacting with gods, demigods, demons, and other figures from mythology and folklore.

IRISH

Two films from Tomm Moore of the Irish studio Cartoon Saloon incorporate elements of traditional Irish (Celtic) mythology. *The Secret of Kells* (2009) is a fictionalized account of the creation of the illuminated manuscript *The Book of Kells*, which posits that the method of creating such tiny, intricate detail in the illustration must have involved a special crystal to be used as a magnifying lens. This being a fantasy, the crystal turns out to be one of the eyes of the demon Crom Cruach. In actual pre-Christian Irish lore, Crom was said to be serpentine or draconian in form, and appeased by human sacrifice (Smyth 40, Ellis 70). The main character in the film, a boy named Brendan who lives in a monastery, makes friends with a forest spirit named Aisling, who helps him in several instances, ultimately leading him, against her better judgement, to the lair of Crom Cruach. Aisling is probably based on the Tuatha Dé Danann of Irish mythology.²

Moore's follow-up work, *Song of the Sea* (2014), incorporates the myth of the selkie, as well as other spirits from Irish folklore. A young boy named Ben lives with his lighthouse-keeper father Conor and his little sister Saoirse on an island in the sea. Ben's mother, a selkie, disappeared right after Saoirse was

² Daragh Smyth notes, "It is thus the Tuatha Dé Danann [...] who have become the fairies of today and as such survive in popular folklore." (177)

born, turning back into a seal and going back to the sea. Saoirse inherited her mother's nature and became half-selkie herself, but Conor kept her seal coat locked away so that she could never return to the sea and leave him like his wife had.

Set in the present day, the story nonetheless incorporates an Irish attitude that magic is still always around (commentary track 0:16:11–17:05). Ben tells Saoirse of a giant named Mac Lir who was turned into an island nearby, by his mother Macha the Owl Witch. At first Ben thinks these stories are just fairy tales his mother told him, but he later learns that they are true, and the gods, demons, spirits, and fairies of Irish myth are all real; he and his sister encounter several of them in their subsequent adventures.

The plot hinges on the concept that the fairy world is in danger of dying and disappearing unless the last selkie (i.e. Saoirse) can recover her seal coat and sing the song of the sea. Ben is told of this when he stumbles upon a comic trio of *sidhe* (fairies) named Lug, Spud, and Mossy: a “tip of the hat to the whole idea of leprechauns and little people” as the director calls them (commentary track 0:33:00). Ben follows her through the lands under the hill, meeting an ancient storyteller named The Great Seannachie, and then Macha herself. “Seannachie” is merely a name meaning “storyteller,” but Macha is from Irish mythology, and is sometimes associated with the Mórrígan.³

JAPANESE

Kubo and the Two Strings (2016) is a feature from the animation studio Laika—less well-known than Disney, Pixar, and Ghibli, but they had previously produced Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride* (2005) and an adaptation of Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2009). *Kubo* tells the story of the eponymous boy who loses his mother, is attacked by his supernatural aunts at the command of his grandfather, the god of the moon, and goes in search of three magic weapons that are said to have the power to defeat the Moon King. The Moon King is possibly a representation of Tsukuyomi, “the moon god in Shinto and Japanese mythology” (“Tsukuyomi”), although not a very close resemblance (Monji).

Along the way, he is aided by a monkey, which was a wooden charm brought to life by Kubo's mother's magic. Their quest is joined by a samurai who has been robbed of his memories and transformed into a rhinoceros beetle. The character of Hanzō, Kubo's missing father, is a real figure in Japanese legend; and one of the perils that Kubo and his companions face is a giant skeleton, a traditional Japanese monster known as a gashadokuro, inspired by

³ Daragh Smyth says of Macha: “Together with Badb and the Mórrígan she makes up the Mórrígná, a trio of war-fertility goddesses [...]” (106).

Utagawa Kuniyoshi's woodblock print, "Takiyashi the Witch and the Skeleton Spectre" (*Kubo* commentary track 0:43:16).⁴

MEXICAN

The Book of Life (Twentieth Century Fox, 2014) and *Coco* (Pixar, 2017) both deal with the customs of the Mexican *Día de Muertos* or *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), and the implied mythology behind those customs. They take the beliefs that the spirits of one's ancestors draw near to the earthly plane on this day, and extrapolate the world(s) of the departed from that, creating a mythological aspect to this cultural ritual.

In *Coco*, the Land of the Dead is like a parallel dimension that the protagonist accidentally slips into. The spirits of the dead are seen on their way to visit their descendants by passing through a bureaucratic process somewhat like Customs & Immigration, and crossing over a bridge of flowers. In *The Book of Life*, however, the Land of the Dead is only reached by actually dying; it is separated into the festive and colorful Land of the Remembered, ruled by the goddess La Muerte, and the drab and gray Land of the Forgotten, ruled by the god Xibalba. These "gods" are invented, but make sense within the culture: "La Muerte" basically means Lady Death; the name of the character Xibalba is not that of an actual god, but of a place, the underworld in the mythology of the Mayans, precursors to modern Mexicans (Cartwright).

PACIFIC ISLAND

The 2016 Disney film *Moana*, set on a remote South Seas island, features mythological figures from the legends of Pacific Island cultures. The title character Moana, daughter of the tribal chief, is drawn to the sea, despite her people's reluctance to sail any farther than the island's barrier reef. This reluctance is found to be due to a cultural trauma inflicted generations ago, which Moana resolves to find a way to overcome.

After her grandmother reveals that her people used to be sea-faring, and relates a creation myth featuring the goddess Te Fiti, Moana yields to her attraction to the sea and sets sail alone in an attempt to right a centuries-old wrong. Along the way she encounters the god Maui, a trickster figure who can change his shape and who brags about the epic feats he has accomplished. She convinces Maui to join her quest, and the two face and overcome various enemies and obstacles in their journey. At last Moana confronts the fire demon Te Kā, and using a combination of observation, logic, courage, and compassion, tames the demon and makes the sea safe once again for her people to reclaim their culture of sailing.

⁴ For comparison, see "Takiyasha the Witch and the Skeleton Spectre."

The film makers visited Tahiti and Samoa, doing their best to portray Pacific Island culture and mythology faithfully. They employed linguistic consultants to make sure the names they gave their characters made sense and were respectful; they incorporated elements such as native artifacts and traditional dances. They even made use of less obvious facets of the culture, such as the implicit belief that the ocean is a living entity—there are several scenes which show anthropomorphic ocean waves behaving in purposeful ways. While the film makers may have exaggerated some aspects of Maui's character and downplayed others for an audience of children, the origin story they give for him is very close to one of the many Maui stories that actually exist. All in all, the mythology presented in *Moana* is truer to its original source than is the norm for Disney, or for Hollywood in general.

OTHER EXAMPLES

The films discussed above are representative but by no means exhaustive of the concept of mythology being featured in animated films for children. Some other films include:

- Chinese mythology: Disney's *Mulan* (1998), which included cameos of ancestor spirits, and the lesser-known film *Guardian Brothers* (aka *Little Door Gods*) from China's Light Chaser Animation Studios (2016), which featured guardian spirits;
- Judeo-Christian legend: *The Prince of Egypt* (1998) from Dreamworks;
- Native American (specifically Inuit) culture and beliefs: Disney's *Brother Bear* (2003);
- Hindu mythology: the 2015 Pixar short "Sanjay's Super Team" which accompanied the theatrical release of *The Good Dinosaur*;
- Studio Ghibli's *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* (2013), which is a retelling of an authentic Japanese fairy tale featuring lunar deities.

But don't bother looking at *How to Train Your Dragon* (Dreamworks, 2010) for Norse mythology—there isn't any, other than a couple of mentions of Thor and Odin in casual oaths, much like a Britisher saying "By Jove," a customary colloquialism that doesn't necessarily imply a worship system, or even belief in such gods. And don't be misled by the numerous names from Greek mythology in the Japanese anime *Applesseed* and its sequel films and series—the names are only metaphorical parallels (at best) for the characters and places in these futuristic action tales of advanced technology.

IMPACT

Now, looking at *The Secret of Kells*, *Song of the Sea*, *Kubo and the Two Strings*, *Coco*, *The Book of Life*, and *Moana*, there are a few questions we can ask of them all.

First, are these works mythopoeic? According to the *Mythlore* Statement of Editorial Purpose, mythopoeic literature "is literature that creates a new and transformative mythology, or incorporates and transforms existing mythological material. [...] The mythological elements must be of sufficient importance in the work to influence the spiritual, moral, and/or creative lives of the characters, and must reflect and support the author's underlying themes" (*Mythlore*). Since all of these films reference mythological material and base their stories upon their respective cultures' mythologies, and since the mythological elements directly affect the characters and their story arcs, it would seem that calling all of these films mythopoeic would be justified.

Do these films teach mythology? To varying degrees of success, yes. Some of the fantastic elements in these films may be considered more as folklore than as mythology in its strictest sense, but each of the films discussed has taken pains to present the beliefs of each culture as they pertain to supernatural elements. Inventions are based on true cultural beliefs and practices: e.g. the lands of the dead in the films set in Mexico are extrapolated from the *Día de Muertos*; the Moon King and other figures in *Kubo* are rooted in Japanese culture.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, what effect do these movies have on young viewers? One can consider that all these stories are manifestations of what Joseph Campbell called the Hero's Journey. They start with their young protagonists in the midst of their daily lives, who experience a triggering event that takes them into the world of myth, legend, and fairy tale. The children encounter helpers and enemies. At last, through their own actions they come through to the end of their adventures changed and matured, bearing boons for their family, community, and/or world. This aspect of these stories is especially important for children: not only do they learn that can they persevere through their own difficulties, but that they can also effect a positive change in the world through their own efforts.

The heroes of these films, while young, have passion, persistence, and a strong desire to right the wrongs of the past. They face difficulties, but they also discover that they're not alone in their attempts to do what they feel in their hearts is necessary, for themselves and for the world around them. All these movies are setting wonderful, mythical examples for the children of today, who may well turn into the heroes of tomorrow.

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