Centaurs and Snake-Kings

Griffins, centaurs and gorgons: the Greek imagination teems with wondrous, yet often monstrous, hybrids. Jeremy McInerney discusses how these composite creatures arise from the entanglement of humans and animals. Overlaying such enmeshment is the rich cultural exchange experienced by Greeks across the Mediterranean. Hybrids, the author reveals, capture the anxiety of cross-cultural encounter, where similarity and incongruity were conjoined. Hybridity likewise expresses the instability of identity. The ancient sea, that most changeable ancient domain, was viewed as home to monsters like Skylla, while on land the centaur might be hypersexual yet also hypercivilized, like Cheiron. Medusa may be destructive, yet also alluring. Wherever conventional values or behaviours are challenged, the hybrid gives that threat a face. This absorbing work unveils a mercurial world of shifting categories that offer an alternative to conventional certainties. Transforming disorder into images of wonder, Greek hybrids, McInerney suggests, finally point to other ways of being human.

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Hybrids and the Greek Imagination

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This book is dedicated to Pamela Zinn, with love and gratitude.

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Preface

> In fact, when I was very little, I wanted to marry a horse. I'd heard of an Englishwoman who had married her dog because she didn't like humans. So I thought, Why can't I marry my horse? But I grew out of that.
>
> (Interviewer): That was probably for the best.
>
> My father said to me, 'You do realize your children will be centaurs, don't you?'
>
> Prue Leith, *New Yorker*, 23 October 2022

This is a book that grew out of a slightly less charming episode than Prue Leith's memory of girlish naiveté, but one that also involved centaurs. In 2013, while teaching in Athens, I had occasion to visit the Argos Museum before it closed for remodelling. In a vitrine devoted to Archaic material I saw a figurine that was really eye catching: a terracotta centaur about 30 cm tall, unmistakeably equipped with human genitalia (see Figure P.1).

It soon turned out that my colleagues in art history were familiar with this composition, and that the Argive centaur was not especially noteworthy to experts, but to someone coming to the object from the point of view of human/animals relations the idea of a centaur that was human all the way to its feet was a revelation. A thousand questions, most of them imponderable and unanswerable, arose, and the centaur began to assume a decidedly less familiar mien in my mind's eye. I was aware that they were a part of the mythic stratum that underpinned Greek culture, depicted on vases and referred to in stories, but the Argive centaur prodded me into asking questions about what fits and what doesn't, about harmony and discordance, about what we expect and what we take for granted and, most of all, about the place of monsters and their less threatening cousins, hybrids. This book grew out of a somewhat inchoate investigation of these categories until, in the course of being written, it became more of an investigation into the very idea of categories, their boundaries, their purpose and their function.

Figure P.1 Centaur. Terracotta. Argos, 6th century BC. Photo: J. McInerney

Since my 'road to Damascus' moment in Argos, I have presented some preliminary forays into the topic at various venues. A talk at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens early on alerted me to some truly significant dangers. A too-casual reference to the threat of bestiality making the threat of rape worse once centaurs became genitally equine – centaurs are never far from these threats – elicited a firm corrective from a friend who observed that one couldn't talk about degrees of rape. A conference on animals held at NYU in the middle of a snowstorm and hosted imperturbably by Phil Mitsis soon followed, as well as a colloquium on animals and the sacred held at St Andrews, hosted by Sam Newington and Sian Lewis. Also during these early investigations, a panel at the annual meeting of the Classical Association gave me a chance to rehearse ideas and refine them still further. Anyone who has spent years on a book will understand how important these try-outs were, even if at the time the presentations were patchy and undercooked. All of these were among the most satisfying scholarly experiences I have enjoyed, thanks to the participants, speakers and interlocutors who all played a vital part in helping me to refine and develop the theses of the book. Something about centaurs and other

hybrids seems to excite just about every audience. As the blurb for a recent exhibition ('Animalistic! Animals and Hybrid Creatures in Antiquity') in Basel modestly claimed, 'Monsters, beasts and chimaeras have always inspired the human imagination.' That excitement has continued to propel me further into the subject. Why do they matter so?

The cutting, shaping and working out of one's ideas are the stuff of writing a book, but I also found there was a parallel experience that complemented the formal procedures of research in ways I hadn't expected: hybrids are everywhere, and are easy to take for granted. A walk through a Dallas airport took me past a clothing store where the mannequins were human bodies with bulls' heads. Well, it was Texas, I suppose. A catalogue in the mail declared the arrival of hybrid shoes that could be worn at work and on the weekend. And, as ever, one of the ghastly after-effects of the coronavirus pandemic was the rise of hybrid teaching and, worse, hybrid conferences. As I began to take stock of these casual encounters, where hybrids seemed ubiquitous and increasingly part of the background hum of daily life, hybridity, ironically, came to assume a greater significance than I had previously suspected in my engagement with the ancient Greeks. The shock of this recognition was similar to the experience of encountering childhood stories and fairy tales as an adult. When I introduced my children to Norman Lindsay's *The Magic Pudding*, an Australian classic, I was at first as delighted as I had been thirty years earlier by the wild imagination that could conjure a world in which a pudding, 'always anxious to be eaten', could magically renew itself. But the adventures of Bunyip Bluegum and his mates in search of their stolen pudding, Albert, become increasingly weird and, for the adult reader at least, disturbing. Albert's taste for self-cannibalization (and his irascibility) are unsettling and defy comprehension, while Lindsay's amusing Aesopic world, in which wombats and koalas dress in top-hats and sport Victorian whiskers, occasionally veers off in very strange directions; in one episode, Sam the Penguin saves the 'Hearl of Buncle' in a shipwreck and gets to marry his very lovely (and very human) niece. It may be, as Bruno Bettelheim believed, that children learn to handle their fears by being exposed to the cruelty and malice woven into fairy tales, but very little in *The Magic Pudding* would really terrify a child. Instead, the ingredients are peculiarity and oddity, and they leave a slightly 'off' taste. The odd hybrids of the Greek imagination work in a similar way: sphinxes, gorgons, centaurs and snake-kings are everywhere, and by their ubiquity they seem unremarkable, yet once you really start to pay attention they appear to be anything but ordinary. Their significance masquerades behind a taken-for-

grantedness. Collectively, they mark a culture that was alert to the possibility that the stuff of daily life might also contain traces of other ingredients, with the potential to cause a more violent reaction than expected. It is that tension – I won't exaggerate by calling it a paradox, or even a contradiction – that I hope to explore in this book: a tension between the familiar and the unexpected that was so crucial to the shape of the culture of the Greeks.

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I have benefitted from strong institutional and collegial support that I must recognize here. The American School of Classical Studies, where I served as Whitehead Professor in 2013–14, is in a real sense the cradle in which this project was nurtured during its infancy. The Department of Classical Studies at the University of Pennsylvania has been my academic home for my entire career and I offer my sincerest thanks to the colleagues who have always shared their intelligence and knowledge with such unfailing generosity. They, and the many, many students, undergraduate and graduate, who have suffered through this book's slow growth to maturity, have been its nurses, for better or for worse. The University of Pennsylvania also generously contributed to the project by granting two dean's leaves and supplementing my sabbatical time. These proved invaluable.

Most importantly, I must thank the two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press, who took a shamefully self-indulgent manuscript and provided the necessary guidance for rewriting it top to bottom. What is good in the rewritten version you hold in your hands is due to their unmatched professionalism. All else is my sole responsibility.

Spelling and Orthography

I generally prefer spelling that stays close to the Greek: hence, 'Sikyon' not 'Sicyon' and 'Kleisthenes' not 'Cleisthenes'. Sometimes this is mildly jarring, as in 'Herodotos' which I prefer to 'Herodotus'. When hypercorrect forms render familiar names unfamiliar or unrecognizable to an English-speaking reader, I stick to the recognizable forms: hence, 'Circe' not 'Kirke', 'Thucydides' not 'Thoukydides', 'Aeschylus' not 'Aiskhylos' and 'Plato' not 'Platon'. In Chapter 8 this means that readers will encounter (Latin) Salmacis, when I am treating Ovid's nymph and her love for Hermaphroditus, but they will also have to cope with Salmakis and Hermaphroditos when I discuss the episode's roots in Greek/Karian Halikarnassos. My aim has been intelligibility, not consistency. If the result is an odd hybrid, so much the better.