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Where the Wild Things Are: Unnatural Territories in Classical Antiquity
University of Reading: Thursday 4th - Friday 5th September 2008

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The imaginative, and somewhat indescribable, creatures which adorned the welcome posters that greeted delegates upon their arrival to the 'Wild Things' conference aptly set the scene for what promised to be a day and a half of lively discussion and exploration of, as the literature advertised, 'the many "wild places" in the science and imagination of antiquity and their often scarcely human inhabitants'. Fortunately, delegates were not expected to present under similar 'wild conditions' and the conference was suitably located in the University's dedicated Graduate School for Arts and Humanities. This was a comfortable period building which, in its own way, seemed as remote from its surrounding environment, the concrete blocks of Reading's Whiteknights campus, as the mysterious caves and numinous groves which featured so frequently in the presentations of the speakers.

The first session, 'Spaces', was chaired by Dr. Emma Aston of the University of Reading and opened by the conference's keynote speaker Dr. Yulia Ustinova, a senior lecturer of the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Dr. Ustinova's paper, entitled 'Wild Caves: Immortal Dwellers and Mortal Visitors', sought to link the science and effects of sensory deprivation with the circumstances surrounding the visions and divine encounters that were so often experienced, and reported, by mortal visitors to caves in antiquity. After firmly establishing this potential link between modern day science and ancient practice, Dr. Ustinova then drew on the significance of this research in order to explain why caves, or similar subterranean sites, might have featured so prominently as the choice location for the enactment of the initiation rites and mystery religions of antiquity. As was the practice with each speaker, delegates had the opportunity to question Dr. Ustinova at the end of her talk. This paper served as fine introduction to the conference theme of 'unnatural territories' and was promptly followed by a range of equally diverse 'territorial' papers by the other session speakers.

Dr. Carmel McCallum-Barry from University College, Cork was next to present with a paper entitled 'On the Beach'. This interesting study focussed on the potentially unnatural character of the seashore and antiquity's examples of the encounters between the mortals and the monstrous creatures that frequented this location. After a short break, Dr. Amy Smith, a senior lecturer at the University of Reading and curator of the University's Ure Museum, continued this session with her presentation 'Locus Pocus: Local Personifications in the Guise of Nymphs and Maenads'. In this paper Dr. Smith argued that local personifications were not necessarily distinguishable from other beings with the same name but could, in fact, represent variants on a single personification. Finally Dr. Dunstan Lowe, also a lecturer of the University of Reading, closed this session with his paper 'Lucus a non Lucendo: Rustic Deities and the Wilderness in Roman Epic', which served as an examination of the religious and literary significance of the mysterious groves which so often appear in Latin literature.

A welcome tea and coffee break preceded the opening of the second, and much shorter, session 'Inside, Outside'. Chaired by Dr. Amy Smith, this panel was committed to expounding the notion that 'wildness' in antiquity was always located on the edge of society and within the 'mysterious spaces' that were explored in the previous session. On this theme papers were offered by Dr Bob Cowan, Fairfax Fellow in Latin Literature at Balliol College, University of Oxford and Deborah Kerr, a doctoral student of the University of Birmingham. Dr Cowan's presentation 'Wild at Heart: Juvenal's Peripheral Centre' explored the tendency of satire, and Juvenal in particular, to reverse the nature of Roman society so that the 'wild things' no longer live on the edges, but can be witnessed right at its centre. In keeping with this theme Ms Kerr's paper 'Bringing the Outside In: Wild Witches in City Settings' keenly sought to illustrate how classical authors such as Theocritus, Virgil and Horace succeeded in bringing witches out of their traditional 'otherworldly' dwellings and into the heart of the urban environment.

This session ended the day's proceedings and was followed by a change of venue to the Classics department where delegates were treated to a wine reception and the opportunity to look around the faculty. A speaker's dinner was later held at an Italian restaurant in Reading town centre.

A prompt start at the graduate school on Friday morning was initiated by Dr Dunstan Lowe, chair of the first panel of the day: 'Monstrous communities'. Dr Jacek Rzepka, Assistant Professor of Ancient History at the University of Warsaw, opened the session with his paper 'Monstrous Aetolians and Aetolian Monsters Between Folk Tales and History'. This presentation examined the nature of the semi-human heroes of Aetolia and the significance of their representation in literary accounts. Next to speak was the University of Reading's own Dr Emma Aston with a discussion on 'Centaur and Tribal Displacement'. This paper constituted an exploration of themes of expulsion and displacement in view of the geographical and political situation of the centaurs and their conflict with the Lapiths. Dr Aston was then followed by Dr Helen Van Noorden who asked 'Where are the *Really* Wild Things in Theopompus?' In response to this question, Dr Van Noorden, a Junior Research Fellow at Clare College, Cambridge, offered, with the aim of identifying the '*Really* Wild Things' in this text, a re-evaluation of a fragment of Theopompus' *Philippica* in view of the works of Hesiod and Plato. The final speaker of this session was Nick West, a doctoral student of the University of Reading. Mr West's presentation, entitled 'Manetho's Legacy: Aelian, Diodorus and Plutarch on Egyptian Sacred Animals', represented the conference's only dalliance with Egyptology. Through his paper Mr West attempted to establish evidence for a link between Egypt and the Greco-Roman literary tradition by comparing the accounts of Egyptian animal worship provided by Aelian, Diodorus and Plutarch with the information found in the surviving fragments of the Egyptian priest Manetho.

A lengthy tea and coffee break preceded Friday's second session 'Monstrous Animals', a panel which consisted of just two speakers: Professor Daniel Ogden and doctoral student, Ms Pauline Hanesworth, both of the University of Exeter. This session was chaired by Professor Graham Anderson. Professor Ogden's paper, entitled 'The Dragon Source', looked at the relationship between dragons and water sources in Greek mythology. Whereas 'The Shaping and Placing of the Hound of Hades' was the topic of choice for Ms Hanesworth who argued that a link between the portrayal of this beast and changing perceptions, in Greek thought, about the land of the dead could explain the inconsistent nature of the imagery that was used to represent the hound throughout Archaic and Classical literature and iconography.

This session was immediately followed by a buffet lunch that was served in the Classics department.

After lunch, and with Dr Cowan as Chair, the final session of the conference looked at 'Tragic and poetic monsters'. Lynn Kozak, a doctoral student at the University of Nottingham, was first to present with a paper entitled 'Crossing Centaurs: Deianira's Monstrosities in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*'. Here, Ms Kosak argued that the monstrous elements of Deianira's character made her a suitable complement to the character of Heracles in this play. Following this discussion was a presentation by Dr Andreas Michalopoulos, assistant Professor of Latin at the University of Athens. Dr Michalopoulos' paper, 'Wild Things in Seneca's *Phaedra*: Exploring the Boundaries Between Human and Monstrous' sought to examine why Seneca chose to emphasise the 'wild' in his version of this myth and his subsequent treatment of this theme throughout the text of the *Phaedra*. The final paper of both the session and the conference was given by Zara Naghizadeh, a doctoral student at Royal Holloway, University of London. Entitled 'Monsters in the Looking-Glass: Ovid's Geographical Uncanny', this presentation examined the use of physical space to reflect the monstrous within the tale of Phaethon in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

Closing remarks were offered by Dr Aston, who drew on the success of the conference as a mark that the themes touched upon are all still relevant considerations in the modern academic world. In this, the connection between real and imaginary places, a recognition and appreciation of the value of human experience and feelings, and the confident use of terms such as 'monsters' and 'liminality' can all continue to be recognised as important ways of discovering 'Where the Wild Things Are'.