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Ancient Memories in the World of Comics

The adaptation of classical texts is greatly influenced by the media today, which is why many heroes appear in different cultures and bear striking resemblances to each other: these heroes are largely from the Greco-Roman tradition. As far as literature is concerned, the great classical genres are reworked and revived by popular culture, sometimes unconsciously taking on new forms. It is indisputable that high culture in the West is inextricably linked to classical antiquity, or at least to its ideas, an era about which every age has developed certain expectations for cultural or social reasons. Given the many ways mythology can be presented, comic books are one of the more recent forms that preserve our ideas about classical antiquity. Within the comic book appearances, The Incredible Hercules stands out, with several interesting stories involving the hero transforming into a superhero while he is brought into the modern world, albeit retaining his classic form and virtuosity. This work provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between comics and mythology. Consequently, in addition to the deities and the hero, many reminiscences are recalled in the comic books, many of his exploits, along with his twelve labours. These recollections provide an opportunity to examine how classical texts are reinterpreted and applied in contemporary narratives.

Keywords: Hercules, superhero, comic books, popular culture, classical reception

Reception

From their earliest literary appearances in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Greek heroes and demigods have been active in our daily lives, but the

last century has seen the emergence of a new breed of hero, the superhero, who has taken over comic books and movie screens alike.¹

American comic book fans over the past decades could be described as one of the most dedicated and active communities in what we call fan communities. This was recognized by Hollywood in the early 2000s, and as a result, the film industry recently began producing comic book adaptations in a new form.² The film adaptations embody several innovations that both interconnect these works and allow them to exist independently. This is accomplished through the implementation of various techniques such as postcredit scenes,³ easter eggs,⁴ crossovers⁵ and a lot more.⁶ However, not only cinema, but comics as a medium, also evolved in the twentieth century, but also in many cases, they have not received the same recognition as movies and have been labeled as sub-literature.⁷ A primary factor contributing to the occasional recession in the popularity of comic books is the escalating complexity of superheroes and their narratives, which has resulted in a more limited audience primarily composed of the most dedicated readers.⁸ Two of the biggest companies in the comics industry are the DC Comics and the Marvel Comics, and these publishers mostly focus on characters, continuity,

¹ ROGERS (2011: 73).

² PERREN-FELSCHOW (2018: 309).

³ In certain instances, postcredit scenes are used to direct the viewer's attention toward a future sequel of a film or series, or to introduce new characters. Conversely, in other situations, these scenes are utilized to meet the demands of fans. BEATY (2016: 322).

⁴ Easter eggs are half-hidden visual references. These can also be directed at future plots or serve as foreshadowing for the introduction of new characters. However, the biggest difference to the postcredit scenes is that their appearance is very brief and, in many cases, only the most dedicated readers will be able to recognise them and to reward them for their commitment. BEATY (2016: 322).

⁵ The commercial attractiveness of crossovers plays a significant role in enhancing audience engagement with other films by incorporating appearances of additional characters. BEATY (2016: 322–323).

⁶ BEATY (2016: 321–322).

⁷ MARSHALL-KOVACS (2011: vii–viii).

⁸ BEATY (2016: 318–319).

and collection building. They aim to engage the reader with other stories based on an interest in a particular character, using methods such as guest-starring comic book characters and creating superteams (thus the Justice League, and Avengers) that allow the reader to meet other characters.⁹ In the case of popular culture, the audience is not simply a consumer of the media, but in many cases also a modifier.¹⁰ The same is true for the incorporation of mythology into popular culture, where people do not simply consume and treat the content as a finished object, but see it as a cultural resource.¹¹ Similarly, the function of the storyteller in mythological narratives has evolved when compared to ancient times, which frequently influences the narrative itself. Consequently, this forms a novel foundation within the realm of modern media.¹²

In addition, the medium of comic books is permeated with references and images from Greco–Roman mythology and history, which are intentionally or accidentally used by the creators. Reception Studies explore the links between modern culture and the ancient world. Comic book fans are often characterized by an obsession with collecting, organizing, rereading and reinterpreting material frequently, trying to discover new connections. This activity is slightly similar to the philologists, except that they develop new methodological tools and work with a more limited, smaller, static body of material.¹³

⁹ PERREN–FELSCHOW (2018: 311–313).

¹⁰ As the media industry tried to reach a wider audience, film versions, theatrical adaptations, re-translations, comic books, and other modern adaptations of the stories appeared. This has encouraged fans to create certain fan fiction, becoming not just consumers, but creators as well. WALDE (2016: 365).

¹¹ FISKE (2010: 112).

¹² WARD (2002: 1).

¹³ The fandom, which denotes the community of fans, is often concerned with comparing the differences between the different versions of stories in comics and the versions presented in movie adaptations. The same activity can be repeated with the relationship between classics and comics. KOVACS (2011: 5–7).

In this context, we can talk about the reception of the classics, which focusses on the emergence of ancient Greek and Roman traditions in the culture of later periods. New readings and reinterpretations take many forms, but even if they are erroneous or deviate from the original form, they do not become illegitimate since they always enrich our understanding of the ancient sources. The medium of comics also draws heavily on ancient myths, as comics published over the decades are divided into similar periods.¹⁴ Mythological adaptations frequently garner mixed reviews, as they either fall short in achieving absolute fidelity to the original works or make no attempt to do so. Consequently, creators may produce a purportedly hybrid or mixed version; however, this does not imply that these adaptations fail to impart new moral values, akin to those conveyed in their original context.¹⁵

As before, another similar phenomenon can be observed: in comics, the relationship between image and text functions as a visual element, similar to how vase painting functions in Greek and Roman culture. Comic books have their iconographic language. For example, in American comics, horizontal lines behind a character indicate his/her rapid movement, while wavy vertical lines above him/her may suggest that the character is stinky, and these symbols are usually referred to as *emanata*. Here, we can draw another parallel with the vase painters.¹⁶

¹⁴ Such as the Golden-/Silver-/Bronze Age, as we can see in the work of Hesiod at the beginning. Comic books, and especially North American superhero comics, can be classified into different eras, just like mythology, mainly according to the time of publication. The first is the Golden Age, which began in the early 1930s and lasted until the mid-1950s, followed by the Silver Age, and then the Bronze Age, which lasted from the early 1970s until the mid-1980s. The present era is called the Modern Age. BRYANT (2010: 12–14) In any case, it is worth noting that this division is primarily the result of the work of fans and the industry and is not based on academic principles or the view of the creators. For this reason, its use is often unclear, as it may differ from one publisher or publication to another. DUNAI (2024: 15–16, 39).

¹⁵ WARD (2002: 79–80).

¹⁶ As in ancient iconography, there were numerous occasions when instead of visualizing an entire temple, the representation of an altar was sufficient enough to depict a

The comic book version of mythology

The mythological heroes had to suffer and travel to achieve glory. The greatest heroes often traveled the furthest, perhaps the most unyielding of whom was the Panhellenic hero Heracles.¹⁷ The figure of Heracles has always stood out, and even during the *Iliad*, he was an example of solidarity and perseverance, even though he is not in the story, since he belongs to an earlier generation of heroes. However, he has also always been a unique figure, for he is very often portrayed as alternating between his demigod and divine status, and it is this variability that makes him most suitable for being presented as a paradigm of the mythical Panhellenic ideal, for he has enjoyed huge popularity in the Greek world.¹⁸ This diversity of character makes him suitable for the canonical hero/antihero portrayal that is common in comics. Heracles himself is an ambiguous hero, whether we consider his ancient or modern figure. Although he rids the world of monsters, as he is a hero, on the other hand, he plunders cities, captures beautiful women, and above all, fights the madness imposed on him by the gods.¹⁹

The classic world not only inspires the story of comics, but it also has a huge influence on the superhero genre.²⁰ This can be seen in the fact that the first superhero, Superman, was created based on characters such as Samson and Hercules and was inspired by other Greek and Roman deities, who have once again become active characters in contemporary narratives. Another perfect example of this phenomenon is the figure of Shazam, whose name is an acronym made up of the names of

whole rite. KOVACS (2011: 8–10).

¹⁷ STEWART (2013: 67–68).

¹⁸ BÄR (2021: 3–10).

¹⁹ MARSHALL-KOVACS (2011: vii–xii).

²⁰ LESHEM (2019: 19).

Solomon, Hercules, Atlas, Zeus, Achilles, and Mercury.²¹ He not only takes on a name but also possesses attributes of heroes and gods, such as wisdom, strength, endurance, power, courage, and speed.²² Another example is Wonder Woman, whose characterization is also based on similar elements: her beauty is reminiscent of Aphrodite, her wisdom of Athena, her speed of action of Mercury, and her strength of Hercules. She is also one of the Amazons, who are familiar from Greek mythology, since her mother is the Amazon queen Hippolyta.²³

Finally, it is worth noting that there are different divisions and categorizations of the adaptation of classic themes in comics. According to the division of Leshem, the first category includes interpretations in which the narrative is based on or inspired by Greco–Roman events, as exemplified by the *300* comic book series, which is set in ancient Greece during the battle of Thermopylae. The second category includes the gods/goddesses of mythology, who can be found in their original form and appearance with their traditional attributes. The third category revolves around narratives that are inspired by the classical world in general and by specific mythological figures or events. The last and fourth category includes superheroes who are inspired by specific mythological gods or heroes, similar to the aforementioned figure, Shazam. The comic book series that I am discussing falls into the second category.

Recollections

In my research, I have paid particular attention to the comic book *The Incredible Hercules*, whose authors have looked to ancient mythology for inspiration, even though the hero lives in the modern age and in

²¹ DETHLOFF (2011: 105).

²² *Whiz Comics* Vol. 1. #2.

²³ *All Star Comics* #8.

this series is featured alongside the superheroes we know from Marvel Comics, such as Thor, Namor, or Black Widow. This reception places great emphasis on mixing the mythical and modern worlds. The central theme of the narrative concentrates on the fact that the gods have left the celestial spheres and are trying to establish their new power among mortals on Earth, but Zeus has been dethroned, and not only does a new leader have to be found, but also Hercules, a familiar figure to the audience, comes to the aid of the gods.²⁴ All this is, of course, accompanied by modern story threads better known to comic book fans, but there is also no shortage of mythological flashbacks, giving us the opportunity to compare them with the versions of the story handed down from antiquity. In the present research, I have focused primarily on the recollections of the twelve labours.

In the comics, we first encounter the twelve labours and their representation in the flashback in *The Incredible Hercules* issue #113, where we are introduced to his second task in the mythological tradition, the defeat of the Lernaean Hydra.²⁵ According to the task, the hero had to slay a huge aquatic monster living in the Lerna (or Lerné) swamp, whose characteristic was that its ninth head, the middle one, was immortal. The task was further complicated by the fact that a giant crab came to the aid of the beast, but Heracles was not alone, as he brought his nephew Iolaus (son of Iphicles) as a charioteer.²⁶ As soon as he found the monster, he lured it out with his fiery arrows. First, the hero had to fight the giant crab,²⁷ which attacked the hero and bit him in the leg. Then he had to turn his attention back to the Hydra, and according to some

²⁴ KONING (2020: 205–207).

²⁵ *The Incredible Hercules* #113 10–13.

²⁶ Hes. *Th.* 313–318.

²⁷ According to some stories, after Heracles killed the giant crab in gratitude for the beast's help, Hera put it among the stars as a constellation, and we know it today as Cancer. Hyg. *Astr.* 2, 23.

accounts, a wrestling match took place as the monster wrapped its body around the hero's legs and pinned him down while he tried to smash his head with his mace.²⁸ However, each time he knocked off its mortal heads, two more grew up to replace them.²⁹ Iolaus was ordered to set fire to the surrounding forest, and the place of the severed heads was burnt with fiery logs by his young companion,³⁰ when the hero reached the immortal head, he removed it as well and placed the body in a huge pit and rolled an enormous boulder over it. Before burying it, however, he cut the beast's body open and dipped its arrows in its bile, which was thus impregnated with the venom of the Hydra.³¹ Later, however, despite his success, King Eurystheus annulled this task since Heracles asked for help, so it could not be counted among his ten labours.³² In the comics, however, we learn the story not from the hero himself, but from another character, Ares, who is not even sure how many labours he has to do, and another character corrects his story since this was not the third task for Hercules, but the second.³³ The task is very similar to the mythological description we know. It is pointed out in the presentation of the story that, as in the modern comic, Heracles, – who in the modern story would be referred to as Hercules from now on – had already used the help of a young boy to overcome the Hydra, and that in the modernized story it is shown that it was Iolaus' idea to burn out the wounds, not the hero. In the story recalled, the Hydra has similar attributes to its mythological counterpart, in that its severed heads are replaced by new

²⁸ Apollod. II, 5, 2.

²⁹ D.S. IV, 11, 5.

³⁰ Apollod. II, 5, 2.

³¹ D.S. IV, 11, 6.

³² Apollod. II, 5, 2.

³³ This is presumably a reference to the fact that there were many variations of mythological stories. These popular themes included the birth and relationships of the gods, the creation of the world, the adventures gods and heroes. The origin stories of the heroes were told by later writers in a variety of ways. PINSENT (1969: 6–9).

ones each time, but here the whole monster is declared to be immortal, and it is not emphasized that it is only one of its nine heads. Finally, he disposes of the body of the monster by a similar method as we know it, by burying it and blocking the exit with a giant rock. In addition, he acquires the poison, which is anticipated to aid the hero in numerous ensuing scenarios and lead to his demise, being reputed as the most lethal toxin acknowledged by the gods.³⁴

His next labour, discussed in the following, was also later invalidated. His fifth task was to clean and manure Augean's³⁵ stables in one day. Heracles asked for a tenth part of his cattle as a reward when he came up with the idea for the king of Elis, and since the king did not believe it could be done in a day, he easily promised the reward. Phyleus, the king's son, was called as a witness to the wager.³⁶ Since Heracles found the labour too humiliating, to avoid disgrace and being unworthy of immortality,³⁷ the hero broke the foundations of the stables and diverted the two neighbouring rivers, the Alpheus and the Peneus, from their beds, washing the entire stables. However, when the hero went to the king for payment, he refused, saying that since it was one of Heracles' works from Eurystheus, he does not deserve payment, and he reneged on the whole bet. The case was brought before the judges in vain, and the king's son testified against his father, but before the verdict was given, both his son and Heracles were banished from the kingdom by Augean, and Heracles' work was subsequently annulled by Eurystheus, as he expected a reward for his heroic act.³⁸ In the comic, we can observe Heracles' modesty, for he says that the bet was made before he saw the

³⁴ *The Incredible Hercules* #113 10–13.

³⁵ The king of Elis by most accounts, was the son of Helios and was famous for his many herds of cattle. However, other accounts name him as the son of Poseidon or Phorbas. Apollod. II, 5, 5.

³⁶ Apollod. II, 5, 5.

³⁷ D.S. IV, 13, 3.

³⁸ Apollod. II, 5, 5.

magnitude of the task he was undertaking, as if to suggest that if he had known the impossibility of the task, he would not have offered to help. Although there is no mention here of breaking the bet or of invalidating the task, Hercules shows concern and admits that he thought the task was hopeless, and when it is mentioned that witnesses testified to having seen it. As the mythological story goes, he confesses that he believes that divine intervention was behind the events, which leads us to conclude that he did not carry out his task, but nothing else is said, so we do not learn any more details about the events.³⁹

The hero also performed many other feats, one of the most notable being the rescue of the titan Prometheus.⁴⁰ As a reward for his help, the titan taught Heracles how to carry out his eleventh task, which was to take a golden apple of the Hesperides for Eurystheus.⁴¹ The golden apple tree belonged to Hera, queen of the gods, and was a wedding gift from Mother Earth,⁴² was fiercely guarded by both the Hesperides⁴³ but also by Ladon, a serpent that never closed its eyes and made alarming noises. Near the garden of the Hesperides was the place where Atlas held the sky on his shoulders and was asked by the hero, on the advice of Prometheus, to bring him some of the fruits. The first obstacle was the guardians, but also if a mortal came into the garden, he thought he was on the Isles of the Blessed and did not wish to leave. In return for his help, he offered Atlas to take over his burden, and the titan complied, bringing three apples. He was delighted with his newfound freedom, and for this reason, did not wish to return to his old place but merely said he would gladly deliver the apples to King Eurystheus in place of

³⁹ *The Incredible Hercules* #116, 18.

⁴⁰ D.S. IV, 15, 2.

⁴¹ Apollod. II, 5, 11.

⁴² Apollod. II, 5, 11.

⁴³ The Hesperides are the children of Nyx (Night) and Erebus (Darkness) (Cic. *ND.* 3, 17.), or they are considered to be the children of Atlas. Hyg. *Astr.* 2, 3.

the hero, but his intention to leave was obvious. Although Heracles got advice for this scenario as well from Prometheus, he asked Atlas to give him only enough time to weave a pillow of rope over his head so that his burden would not be so heavy. The titan suspected no trickery, so he agreed, but upon gaining his freedom, Heracles abandoned Atlas and set off to do his labour. Some stories, on the other hand, say that Heracles entered the garden alone, and after killing the snake by himself, he took the apples, but variations of the earlier story are more common.⁴⁴ In the comics, Prometheus's role in the task is not mentioned at any level, and the guardians in the garden are merely the Hesperides. Atlas offers help in the same way as in the mythological narratives, but here he points out that he has brought three golden apples in exchange for three hours of freedom. However, during this account, he does not wish to take back his burden, and Hercules resorts to the same trick we are familiar with.⁴⁵

His ninth task was to obtain the belt of Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons. Eurystheus assigned this task to him since his daughter Admete had coveted the mythological belt. The belt was also given great significance because it was a gift from Ares, the god of war, to the Amazon queen, signifying that she was the most distinguished of her peers.⁴⁶ Heracles sailed to the island inhabited by the Amazons and, according to the most popular interpretation, the hero told his story to the queen, who promised to give him the belt as a gift. However, seeing the success of the hero, Hera decided to hinder the hero and took the form of an Amazon to spread the word among people that Heracles and his companions were planning to kidnap the queen. The commotion turned into a fight, and the hero killed Hippolyta and left the island as soon as he had

⁴⁴ Apollod. II, 5, 11.

⁴⁵ *The Incredible Hercules* #121, 8–9.

⁴⁶ D.S. IV, 16, 2

her belt.⁴⁷ There are other, less widespread accounts, one of which says that Heracles had taken the queen's sister and commander of the Amazons, Melanippe, captured earlier, and that the Amazons' leader had volunteered her belt,⁴⁸ while another says that Heracles himself, seeing the crowd already roused by Hera, thought he had been ambushed and attacked the queen in self-defense.⁴⁹ However, the comic book seems to adopt the widely accepted interpretation, which solely highlights Hera's rebellion. However, in this adaptation, the queen does not offer her belt merely out of kindness but because they are lovers with Hercules. The comic book version ends with the hero fleeing naked from the army of women, presenting a juxtaposition to the traditionally tragic outcome that is well known, thereby suggesting that the creators are endeavouring to highlight and create the comedic aspect. Nonetheless, the most significant disparity is the absence of any reference to the death of the queen. It remains uncertain whether the creators intended to omit the tragic narrative or aimed to maintain a potential romantic storyline.⁵⁰

Lastly,⁵¹ his first labour is also discussed in the comic book, namely the defeat of the Nemean lion, a beast sent by the gods to the countryside as punishment for the surrounding villages.⁵² In this task, King Eurystheus sent the hero to retrieve the skin of the beast, which in itself proved to be an impossible task. The beast was rumoured to be invulnerable, as the hero soon found out when he aimed his arrows in vain, and they just bounced off the animal's body. Having no other choice, Heracles pursued it with his mace and followed it to a cave, where he

⁴⁷ Apollod. II, 5, 9.

⁴⁸ D.S. IV, 16, 3.

⁴⁹ Apollod. II, 5, 9.

⁵⁰ *The Incredible Hercules* #122, 10–12.

⁵¹ The order of the labours presented above correlates to the order in which they appear in *The Incredible Hercules* comic book series and not their classical sources.

⁵² Apollod. II, 5, 1.

strangled it and took its corpse as prey.⁵³ In this part of the comic, instead of describing the task, the author quotes from Joseph Campbell's *'The Hero with a Thousand Faces'*, in the chapter *'The Road of Trials'*, where he shows the reader the typological stages of the hero's journey:

Once having traversed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials. This is a favorite phase of the myth adventure. It has produced a world literature of miraculous test and ordeals. The hero is covertly aided by the advice, amulets and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance to this region. Or it may be that he here discovers for the first time that there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage.

From the imagery, all we learn is that the task is similar to the mythological one, with the only difference being that the hero is advised by a goddess to try to kill the beast with his bare hands.⁵⁴

Summary

The aim of this study was to explore the extent to which reception theory fits into the world of comics, focusing on the figure of Heracles as observed through the medium. This form of reception theory, as outlined earlier, involves the emergence and reinterpretation of Greco-Roman culture.

The comic book series I am discussing highlights the fact that any modern rendering of mythical stories and characters, or their presentation in other media while differing in some respects, does not change

⁵³ D.S. IV, 11, 3–4.

⁵⁴ *The Incredible Hercules* #133, 13.

the basic work as a whole, but only complements it and presents the myth in a more accessible form for modern readers. In the course of the depictions, we have observed that five of the twelve labours of the mythical hero are presented in an accurate way, with modern elements. These entertaining mythological motifs persist within the modernised narrative, maintaining their most genuine form in alignment with contemporary standards. It is through these portrayals that the influence of classical culture on the modern genre becomes evident.

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