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## The Role of Mythology in the World of Comics

*Just as in antiquity, mythology is also an integral part of the everyday life of the modern man. Myths of the past have been reshaped, leading to the creation of new myths and new mythologies. This is demonstrated by the reappearance of some mythological figures. I will examine the way in which the Heracles myths have been adapted through popular culture, with a particular emphasis on the world of comic books. Among the comic book publications, I would like to highlight The Incredible Hercules, in which, in addition to the heroisation of Hercules in the modern age, I will examine the relationship between comics and mythology.*

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

### Popular culture

Popular culture is an integral part of the everyday life of the modern man. The concept can be approached from several angles, but according to Storey: “popular culture is simply culture that is widely favoured or well-liked by many people.” Based on this perspective, I would thus define the term of “popular culture” as a set of practices, beliefs and objects that are prevalent among a large segment of society, embodying the tastes and values of the common populace.<sup>1</sup> The popular culture research maps out the relevance of this content in the everyday life of today’s society.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> STOREY (2009: 5).

<sup>2</sup> SZIGETI (2014).

The study of popular culture can provide very useful insights. Heracles, or also known as Hercules is well known in popular culture due to the exposure the audience have to movies or television series as opposed to classical sources. They will witness Hercules for example in *Hercules: The Thracian Wars* by Brett Ratner, *The Legend of Hercules* by Renny Harlin or *Hercules* by Ron Clements and John Musker. Mapping these appearances can help us understand how mythological adaptations are perceived and useful in contemporary society. Those who consider modern myth-making in any form, must take into account the world in which we live. We must not only adapt to contemporary social norms but also find a place for the necessity of mythology. The use and study of mythology is no longer required for our society since it is no longer holds the religious significance like in the antiquity, although we still have many links with classical culture.<sup>3</sup>

The adaptation of classical texts has been greatly influenced by the role of the contemporary media. The great epics and tragedies were disseminated and subsequently went through transformations from commentaries to illustrations, and even musical settings. This process of adaptation was followed by sequels, and with this development the trajectory has extended to encompass film versions, sound recordings, re-translations and then finally the emergence of fan fiction on dedicated websites.<sup>4</sup>

As is the case today, there was no sharp dividing line between 'high' and popular culture in Roman society either. Due to the ambiguous nature, it became possible to expand myths and create new myths by shifting the parameters of the *interpretatio Romana*<sup>5</sup> so that content from other cultures could be woven into the stories. This mechanism

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<sup>3</sup> WALDE (2016: 362).

<sup>4</sup> WALDE (2016: 365).

<sup>5</sup> *Interpretatio Romana* is a term used by Tacitus in *Germanium*, cap. 43, which means Roman interpretation.

and approach laid the foundations for later national literature and is a fundamental part of our culture.<sup>6</sup>

### **Comic book representations**

It is indisputable that ‘high’ culture in western society 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. Comic books are one of those forms in which our ideas about classical antiquity can be preserved nowadays. The superhero genre is undoubtedly one of popular culture’s most internationally influential medium.<sup>7</sup> Modern comic books have a particular mythological significance, and as official myths no longer fit into modern values, we are witnessing the reformation of old myths. In different media, ancient heroes are being revived in a modern guise, different and yet similar to their classical predecessors.<sup>8</sup>

Comics is a medium, not a genre, and this medium is defined by the formal artistic elements (the combination of word and image), not by its often printed format.<sup>9</sup> The most distinctive feature of modern American comic literature is that it is not purely text-centered literature, but shown as being episodic in appearance.<sup>10</sup> Magazines with adventure stories are so widespread that they are now being adapted for film. It’s no wonder, as it’s hard to find a person these days who has not heard of at least one iconic character, such as Superman or Spider-Man.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> WALDE (2016: 367).

<sup>7</sup> GÓMEZ (2020).

<sup>8</sup> CARUTH (1966).

<sup>9</sup> KOVACS (2011).

<sup>10</sup> LATHAM (2012).

<sup>11</sup> KONING (2020).

## The classical reception in comic books

Classical motifs, characters, and storylines have always played an important role in comics, especially in the superhero genre.<sup>12</sup> The superhero genre has begun in 1938 with the appearance of Superman<sup>13</sup> in *Action Comics* #1.<sup>14</sup> The heroes of the early comics were largely copies of mythological figures. For example, if firstly we look at the most popular hero, Superman, we can see many similarities with mythological figures. He is close to Apollo in appearance and beauty, Hercules in strength and Hermes in speed, thus embodying many of the traditional qualities of mythological heroes and gods. Therefore, it is not surprising that Superman is so popular.<sup>15</sup> Another hero, Captain Marvel is also worth mentioning, who was renamed as Shazam later on. This character was also portrayed as a mythological hero. The name of the reincarnated hero is a mosaic word containing the names of the heroes and gods that inspired him, namely Solomon, Hercules, Atlas, Zeus, Achilles, and Mercury, and each character possesses a different trait for the modern hero.<sup>16</sup> In addition to all this, other characteristics of superheroes can be found in myths, such as the presence of a uniform or mask (like Heracles' iconic lion's coat and his wooden club) or a younger companion (the Achilles–Patroclus) such as the Batman and Robin duo or Superman and Supergirl duo, bringing today's man closer to ancient iconography.<sup>17</sup> The similarity between the superheroes of comic books and the heroes of Greek mythology makes for an interesting literary genre through which it is possible to examine the way modern writers interpret the classical texts of Greek mythology.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> KONING (2020).

<sup>13</sup> GREENBERGER–WALLACE (2008).

<sup>14</sup> GÓMEZ (2020).

<sup>15</sup> CARUTH (1966).

<sup>16</sup> KONING (2020).

<sup>17</sup> GÓMEZ (2020).

<sup>18</sup> LATHAM (2012).

The ancient world is represented in various ways in the world of comics. The first example is the use of classical elements in comics or passing references that do not require extensive knowledge of mythology, such as Daredevil's<sup>19</sup> fight with a gladiator or Lois Lane's<sup>20</sup> transformation into a centaur. A second characteristic category is stories that take on locations or characters in addition to classical motifs, as in the case of Wonder Woman<sup>21</sup>. The third category, on the other hand, includes those that are one-to-one adaptations of ancient stories in comic book form, or that take place in ancient times, such as 300<sup>22</sup>. This triple division is extremely useful in the ever-widening range of comic books.<sup>23</sup>

There are some more elements which are used in these stories too. First of all, one of the most important element, is the origin story. This is useful in mythology, not only as a plot device but also to show the origin of the hero, to understand their motivation, and to allow the audience to like the character. It is also a method that comic books use to explain the motivation of the superhero and to show his moral code. By showing similar use of origin stories, it can be inferred that mythological heroes and comic superheroes find similar motivations for their heroism. This similarity allows classical scholars to see how myths and their archetypes have been reshaped by the development of Western civilization.<sup>24</sup>

### **The hero's comic book appearances**

Heracles' first individual appearance in the Marvel Universe was in *Journey into Mystery Annual #1* (1965), the work of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby

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<sup>19</sup> DEFALCO-FORBECK (2006).

<sup>20</sup> GREENBERGER-WALLACE (2008).

<sup>21</sup> JIMINEZ (2008).

<sup>22</sup> MILLER (1998).

<sup>23</sup> KONING (2020).

<sup>24</sup> LATHAM (2012).

after which he became integral part of the Marvel Universe. He is often portrayed as the eternal rival and competitor of Thor, one of the Avengers. Between 2008 and 2010, Marvel Comics ran a comic book series called *The Incredible Hercules*, which exemplifies the similarities between ancient gods and modern heroes, as the booklets are interspersed with flashbacks that give us a better understanding of the hero's mythology.<sup>25</sup>

Hercules's previous appearances in Marvel Comics before, as Thor's adversary, as an Avenger, as the leader of a super-team, or in future comic books, where he travelled in a space chariot in the Andromeda galaxy. His individual series, *The Incredible Hercules* is unique, since this series was the longest run-in which Hercules' was the main protagonist and has a separate storyline from the hero's other appearances in the Marvel universe, with mythological monsters interspersed with Greek gods. In addition to the mythological treatment, the comic book series also features humor, which seems to confirm the ambivalent place Hercules occupied in the public consciousness of fifth-century Athens, where his characteristics included heroism, drunkenness, and gluttony, which are also abundantly present in the countless stories in the ancient times about him.<sup>26</sup> Comic book writers turned to ancient stories for inspiration to give the character more depth, and above all they found Euripides' Heracles, the world's most fearsome hero, with a "massive guilt complex", riddled with human flaws, and so it was this impulsive character, forced to control his powers, that Marvel began to develop.<sup>27</sup>

The world of *The Incredible Hercules* is set in the modern age, where the gods no longer live on Olympus or in the celestial spheres, but on Earth, among humans, where the mythologies of all cultures are intermingled. In the struggle for power between the gods, Hercules' primary

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<sup>25</sup> KONING (2020).

<sup>26</sup> MARSHALL (2016).

<sup>27</sup> MARSHALL (2016).

goal is to restore Zeus to his former reign, even though the arch-god is not there anymore, so the hero attempts to bring him back from Hadés. The superhero Hercules is multi-layered and complex at the same time, and the comics' creators attempt to incorporate classic mythological stories into the Marvel universe. This Hercules is presented similarly to his ancient counterpart,<sup>28</sup> as a hero of great strength and temperament, almost indestructible, motivated by honor and friendship, but not averse to drinking and partying, and with a keen interest in women. Interestingly, according to the ancient myth's malleability and complexity make it a very suitable vehicle for the world of comics, but it is rather used as a narrative to make us reflect on our own lives. In issue #115 we can observe the complexity of the myths, as Hercules tells the Euripides story of his return from his last job, where he believed his family to be his enemies and killed them, but this is in contrast to the more common narrative in which he atoned for the murder of his family with his labours, which is pointed out in the comic by Hercules' partner Amadeus Cho, but the hero interrupts him: "... You're not listening. This is a myth I'm telling you. Myths aren't some collection of dates and biographies you bicker over like a clerk with his ledger. Myths are stories that only have the meaning you give to them so listen."<sup>29</sup> In addition to Hercules, the myth of the gods is indispensable, so that in the course of the story we meet several major gods and goddesses, and as in mythology, none of them is omnipotent, thus creating space for the intrigues familiar from the Homeric epics.<sup>30</sup>

Putting mythological and theological issues aside, it is worth pointing out that the authors of *The Incredible Hercules* have managed to bring the hero into the modern age, with wit and irony. The latter is most

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<sup>28</sup> KONING (2020).

<sup>29</sup> PAK-LENTE (2008–10) #115 17.

<sup>30</sup> KONING (2020).

evident in the *Dark Reign*<sup>31</sup> complex storyline. It is worth noting the meticulous work of the comic writers, as the famous underworld motif of the Eleusinian mysteries<sup>32</sup> is also included in the story, albeit only tangentially. A more obscure parallel is created when the hero, upon entering the Underworld with his companion, is advised by Athena not to look back. This advice is reminiscent of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice,<sup>33</sup> when the only other time this point is mentioned is at the end of the adventure, when, upon leaving Hadés, the hero is abandoned by his companion, and as Hercules cries out in vain is told in reply, “Do not look back.”<sup>34</sup> Returning to the beginning of the story, it is highly unusual that the entrance to Hadés is in a casino in Atlantic City, and since it corresponds to the structure of the Hadés mythological description it is obvious that Kerberos, the guardian of the Underworld, will also appear, and the hero must also pass by Charon, since his father is not only in the Underworld but in its depths, in Tartarus<sup>35</sup>. With this and similar earlier paradigms, the authors give the story a deeper reading, and this provides a more satisfying experience to readers who are more open to ancient references.<sup>36</sup>

If we take a closer look at the figure of Zeus in the comics, an interesting scene may catch the readers’ attention. After his death, the arch-god is put on trial by his brother Pluto, and Zeus’ victims testify against him. Kronos<sup>37</sup>, who is the first to appear, accuses him of fraud, poisoning, ethnic cleansing, and patricide. In contrast, the other witness, Semele<sup>38</sup>, refuses to accuse Zeus, saying that it was Hera who deceived

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<sup>31</sup> PAK–LENTE (2008–10) #127–131.

<sup>32</sup> KERÉNYI (1977: 213–218).

<sup>33</sup> KERÉNYI (1977).

<sup>34</sup> PAK–LENTE (2008–10) #131 24.

<sup>35</sup> Hes. *Th.* 720–723.

<sup>36</sup> KONING (2020).

<sup>37</sup> KERÉNYI (1977).

<sup>38</sup> Ov. *M.* 3.



him and caused her death. She goes on to say that if they had wanted to accuse Zeus of horror stories, they should have called Leda<sup>39</sup> or Europe<sup>40</sup> instead of her. Zeus' only defense is that his plans are inscrutable (especially to mortals) and that, although his actions are terrible, callous, and unjust, their existence is an empirical necessity, without which history cannot progress. Moreover, he explains to his son, what it means to be a god since it is necessary to kill and destroy, thus provoking anger and despair on the part of men, who do not see the horrors of the eternal perfection of the gods.<sup>41</sup> These make the modern reader wonder about their responsibility and whether the gods themselves are inherently perfect.<sup>42</sup> Hercules comes to his father's defense by arguing that a god cannot change or evolve because this is their essential nature, and while humans can do this, it may be that gods are less than humans, and therefore Zeus deserves pity.<sup>43</sup> Here we are confronted with the dual status of Hercules, as the ancient view is that he was first a hero and then became a god, and this duality is depicted in other ways in the Hadés scene.<sup>44</sup> The hero, defending his father, is stopped by another Hercules, called Heracles, who turns out to be a mortal counterpart of the hero, embodying his physical form, which fell (from above) when he died, while his soul rose.<sup>45</sup> This version has so far spent time in the Underworld after his death, suffering for his sins, while the other has rested with the nymphs in the celestial realm, and then on earth, he has masqueraded as a god and superhero. The latter claims to have dedicated his entire life to gaining forgiveness for their sins and erasing their past mistakes, thus increasing the glory of Olympus. The two versions of the character clash, however, and the

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<sup>39</sup> Ov. *M.* 2.

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<sup>41</sup> PAK-LENTE (2008–10) #130.

<sup>42</sup> KONING (2020).

<sup>43</sup> PAK-LENTE (2008–10) #130.

<sup>44</sup> KONING (2020).

<sup>45</sup> PAK-LENTE (2008–10) #129.

divine side wins, emphasizing the need to come to terms with the past, and the hero concludes, "I tried to change your mind, Heracles. I know now—you are the past. You cannot be changed."<sup>46</sup>

Yet, paradoxically, by this act Hercules is proving Zeus' claim to be true, for by being able to confront his past self and overcome his evil part, he has redeemed himself. By accepting the consequences of his actions and changing his divine nature, Zeus' claim that the gods are perfect creatures stands. It follows, therefore, that the universe of mythology and the universe of comics are very similar. This story is a perfect example of the validity of the claim that it is possible to find a balance between adapting myth and telling your own story since this adaptation is full of modern symbols but still follows some of the original storylines.<sup>47</sup>

## Summary

Based on the points I have made, I believe that there is a perfect balance to be struck between adapting mythology and telling new stories. Many mythological representations remains a strong presence modern culture such as comics since it can keep people interested, even if it's a re-enactment. This is because the authors are able to give a new look to the characters.

In the above I wanted to draw attention to this field of research, as its social relevance makes it a very suitable basis for further research. In the sense of the above, therefore, if one chooses to explore the medium of comics, one can find pleasure in the adaptation one chooses, despite its inaccuracies, and perhaps even learn something from the new perspectives.

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<sup>46</sup> PAK–LENTE (2008–10) #131. 19.

<sup>47</sup> KONING (2020)

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