The incredible Hercules: prince of power

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CHAPTER 9

The Incredible Hercules: Prince of Power

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American comics are integral to any understanding of popular culture. From their birth in the 1930s, countless pulpy magazines filled with adventure stories featuring all kinds of (super)heroes have been sold for low prices to millions and millions of people and, after almost a century of numerous developments, the genre continues to be popular, its translation to film attracting millions to its stories at the box office.[1] It would be hard to find anyone on this planet who has never heard of Superman or Spider-Man.

Classical motifs, characters, and storylines have always played an important part in comics, and especially in the genre of the superhero comic. Nonetheless, this medium has only recently become an object of study for classicists, one of the main reasons being the large (perceived) gap between the comic's undisputed ascription to low culture and the sacred aura of classical studies. As is becoming increasingly clear, however, there is much to be gained from a comparison between comics and classics (as discussed in relation to Hercules in §4).[2] This chapter briefly looks at some of the most striking similarities between comics and (classical) mythology, and between superheroes and pagan gods (§1), before focusing on an interesting case study: the recent Marvel comics series on Hercules (§2) and its twenty-first century reception of the hero (§3).

1 Comics and Classics

From their beginning,[3] comics have undergone a complex and turbulent development. Nowadays, they exist in all kinds and sizes, and differ extravagantly

1 During the last decade, Marvel heroes have been most successful in filling movie theatres. Marvel's elaborate series of interlocking superhero movies, known as the Marvel Cinematic Universe, has so far grossed more than twenty-two billion dollars, making it easily the best-earning film-series ever (source: https://www.boxofficemojo.com, consulted 10/06/2018).

2 See especially the two volumes on classics and comics by Kovacs and Marshall 2011 (on which see also below) and 2016.

3 For a brief discussion of the birth of the modern comic book see e.g. McCloud 1993, 9–20; Gifford 1984, 14–15; and the first chapters in Waugh 1947. For sequential art in antiquity, see Nisbet 2011 and Johnson 2011.

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in terms of content, production and style.[4] Though easily recognizable, comics are hard to delineate, and definitions are often vague and impractical.[5] The almost inexhaustible versatility of the medium and the impossibility of providing a compact definition can be explained in part through the more-or-less separate and very different development in the three cultures that witness the largest popularity of the graphic novel: the United States, Europe,[6] and Japan.[7]

This chapter will focus on the American comics, and more particularly the best-selling superhero comics. One characteristic of expressions of popular culture, like movies and comics, is that the medium is a mirror to the spirit of the time: what is on offer should always be attractive (and so, in one way or another, recognizable as well) to a large audience.[8] The American superhero comic has seriously evolved since the birth of Superman in 1938,[9] and it is common to describe its development in terms of a metallic scheme.[10] The present paradigm of the superhero-genre is generally known as the Modern Age, characterised by mature plotlines, a complex and nuanced world view, rounded characters, a realistic style, a high degree of generic consciousness and rich intertextuality.

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4 Cf. Kovacs 2011, 10.

5 An example is McCloud's definition (1993, 13): 'Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer'; cf. Eisner's definition (1985, 5): 'the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea'. As part of the medium's coming of age, the narrow scope and rather childish connotation of the word 'comics' have given rise to the terms *graphic novel* and *sequential art*.

6 The European branch of graphic novels is distinguished from their Japanese and American sisters by a more grown-up audience and a less-rigid production process. Cf. Kovacs 2011, 12.

7 The relatively independent development of Japanese comics, better known as manga, is one of the main reasons for their relatively small engagement with classical antiquity; cf. Theisen 2011. For some case studies, now see chapters 4, 5 and 6 in Kovacs and Marshall (2016) and Peer in this volume. The last decades have witnessed more overlap between manga and Western visual art, especially caused by the increase of the production of video games and animated movies and series.

8 This was already demonstrated by Waugh's groundbreaking 1947 study. Cf. Knowles 2007 and Morrison 2012 for a history of the comic book hero as a reflection of society.

9 *Action Comics* #1, published by DC. For two different aspects of Superman's relationship to Hercules, see chapters by Allan and Summers in this volume.

10 Even though the scheme is compared to the Hesiodic Ages by Marshall and Kovacs (2011, xi), critics only agree on the terms Golden Age and Silver Age (cf. on the creation of the Silver Age, Dethloff 2011). Some allow for a Bronze Age (as do Marshall and Kovacs), which is by some complemented with a Chromium Age; others adopt other sequences, e.g. Golden-Silver-Dark-Modern (or 'Renaissance') in Morrison 2012.

The maturing of the genre and the growing interest in popular culture by scholars in classical reception led to the publication of *Classics and Comics* (2011), a collection that offers a broad exploration of the meeting-point between the two.[11] In the first chapter, one of the editors provides a (necessarily incomplete) overview of the reception of antiquity in comics, as well as a tool to categorise types of influence. Briefly put, Kovacs distinguishes three ways the ancient world manifests itself in comics: '(1) passing references and cosmetic borrowings; (2) appropriations and reconfigurations in which classical models are displaced from their original context; and (3) direct representations of the classical world'.[12]

The first, least engaging, category contains stories that incorporate elements from the classical world in a rather loose way, in an attempt to provide 'depth and added meaning'.[13] Some ancient curse, for instance, could turn Lois Lane into a centaur, or Daredevil may be forced to do battle with a gladiator.[14] There is no structural engagement with antiquity, and the elements taken from it do not affect the story in a systematic way; furthermore, the story does not ask for a great deal of knowledge of the ancient world. In the second category are stories in which classical motifs, settings or characters are transported wholesale to another, often modern, context. The connection to antiquity is upheld in terms of structure, and it is up to the audience to keep looking for clues and references. Good examples are the *Bacchus* series,[15] which has the seriously aged god dish out mythological stories, and the rather extravagant *Ulysses*,[16] a psychedelic odyssey that has its main character experience various erotic encounters in his search for home. The third category is made up of tales that either (a) tell ancient stories in the medium of comics, or (b) are set in antiquity. The most famous example of this category is the *Astérix*-series, but there are many more.[17]

Kovacs' tripartite division offers a very useful tool to map the enormous and broadening field of classics in comics. Apart from categorisation, it is also

11 The excellent collection has recently been followed by *Son of Classics and Comics* (2016), which offers a further, widening, range of case studies, and a very useful bibliography.

12 Kovacs 2011, 15.

13 Kovacs 2011, 15.

14 These examples are taken from Marshall and Kovacs 2011, viii and Kovacs 2011, 4 and 15.

15 By author and artist Campbell; for the publication history, see Kovacs 2011, 18.

16 By authors Pichard and Lob, originally published in Italian in 1968. For the rather complicated publication history, see Jenkins 2011, 222.

17 *Alex, Murena, Age of Bronze* and *The Eagles of Rome* are some other examples. There is a whole section devoted to *Astérix* in Kovacs and Marshall (2016). For Hercules in *Astérix* (on page and screen), see Almagor in this volume.

useful to point to a rather natural affinity between the shaping and understanding of stories in comics on the one hand, and the birth and interpretation of stories in the most important classical source of those comics, i.e. Greek mythology. I would like to point out three of these similarities here.

The most important similarity is the fact that both the world of comics and that of classical mythology consists of an endless number of tales and characters that are connected in many, difficult, and shifting ways. The term usually applied to such a huge and incomprehensible ball of string in comics is the 'universe', as in 'the Marvel universe' or 'the DC universe'. The concept resembles the term 'mega-text', as developed by Daniel Bernardi, a 'relatively coherent and seemingly unending' narrative that exists in multiple media.[18] As Blanshard notes: 'in its sprawling complexities, numerous potential inconsistencies, and multi-vocal nature, the contemporary mega-text shares many features with mythological systems'.[19] In such a mega-text,[20] authors, be they Euripides or Stan Lee, can choose to connect their new tales to a greater narrative framework that is already in existence, a process called 'retroactive continuity' or 'retconning' in comics. This activity, however, is not solely the author's: it is also something the audience must do. New developments 'must meet the exacting expectations of cross-referencing and consistency demanded by a readership that ascribes value to recherché allusions not only within a series but also within the larger megatext (…)'.[21] Publishers can also choose a different path and decide to reboot series and 'realign overly complicated macronarratives'.[22] The growing competence at dealing with the mega-text and its many contradictory narratives has created a 'multiworld level of reality', where 'subworlds' are to be seen as 'rather fully parallel, equally actualized realities'.[23]

18 Bernardi 1998, 7. Bernardi applied this term to the *Star Trek* franchise. The adventures in the *Star Trek* universe exist in television series, movies, cartoon series, comic books, novels, compendia, etc. Added to this is the enormous amount of text written by fans, who not only discuss *Star Trek* on official and other platforms online but also produce original stories. One can compare the many genres and visual media in antiquity that dealt with mythology.

19 Blanshard 2018, 35. An additional factor in the medium of comics is that artists can shape their heroes after their own taste and style. For instance: in 1984, Marvel-icon Spider-Man appeared in a black-and-white costume for the first time, and fans were so outraged that the writers, in 1988, finally turned this suit into an alien symbiote, that subsequently had to be beaten (a battle that created one of Spidey's most dangerous enemies, Venom).

20 Marshall 2011, 90 also refers to the use of the term by Segal 1986, 52–3, which is, however, also concerned with the subconscious patterns or 'deep structures' of myth.

21 Marshall 2011, 90.

22 Kovacs 2011, 10.

23 Kukkonen 2013, 156. The recent Marvel movie *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse* (2018) plays with this idea as it connects different manifestations of Spider-Man from different realities with each other.

A second significant similarity is the conscious application of Campbellian story-structures to comics plotlines, which gives a certain mythic resonance to the adventures of superheroes. Rogers elaborates on the model function of Campbell and uses the *Ultimate Spider-Man* series to illustrate the often strict and loyal adherence to the blueprint of Campbell's monomyth.[24] Naturally, the use of the monomyth is not restricted to the medium of comics; it was a great source of inspiration for filmmakers as well.[25] Moreover, following Campbell's model does not necessarily imply a specific connection to antiquity or Greek mythology in particular, since Campbell based his monomyth on a large number of traditions from all over the world, the classical tradition being only one of them. Nevertheless, the emulation of the monomyth points to a strong connection between the experiences and adventures of superheroes on the one hand and mythical heroes and gods on the other.

The compelling similarity between superheroes and gods is the third significant similarity between comics and mythology. In both types of mega-text the status of the protagonists is largely comparable, and Knowles' 2007 study of the esoteric roots of the superhero-genre demonstrates that the heroes in comics enjoy a divine status, in more ways than one. Apart from the obvious similarities between comics heroes and mythological gods, such as the fact that heroes possess superhuman capabilities (which they have usually acquired in a mysterious, non-rational fashion),[26] and the fact that the heroes are essentially 'saviour figures', he also points out that comics-fans display an almost religious adoration for their heroes, and come together in organised cult-like meetings called comics-conventions; indeed, during such conventions, some fans usually dress up (ritually?) as their idols. In *The Incredible Hercules*, the similarities between ancient gods and modern heroes are even made explicit, when the

24 Rogers 2011, 78–9; Rogers also points out that in recent years, artists have come to see Campbell's monomyth more as a *de*scriptive than *pre*scriptive model. Interestingly, the comics' debt to Campbell is made explicit in *Incredible Hercules* #133, when Hercules' sidekick Amadeus Cho finds a small book devoted to Campbell's *Hero's Journey*, and finds remarkable similarities between events that are described and his own experiences. Naturally, he reads on to see what the future has in store for him. Even though the character eventually throws the book away with a 'whatever', the passages on the follow-up of the journey do contain flashbacks. At a later point in the plotline, however, the events deviate from Campbell's model, cf. also Marshall and Kovacs 2016, xxi.

25 Cf. e.g. Voytilla's *Myth and the Movies*, which takes the Campbellian monomyth as the main tool to investigate the 'mythic structure' of '50 unforgettable films' (Voytilla 1999). The notion of the monomyth is deeply embedded in popular culture; there are many discussions of the Campbellian nature of movies in online forums.

26 For the god-like qualities of superheroes, see also Morrison 2012, especially chapters 1 and 2.

goddess Athena explains that 'we "gods" are as much reflections of the hopes and fears of collective humanity as anything else' (#138). Many of Marvel's heroes, she continues, 'have usurped the primary function of myth…' She then compares Spider-Woman to Kali, Spider-Man to Anansi and Wolverine to the Celtic god Cernunnos.

Of greater interest, perhaps, is Knowles' focus on the origin of the superhero, which he locates in occultism, mysticism and nineteenth-century *Übermensch*-theory.[27] According to Knowles, it was 'secret sects' that first imagined 'a new race of god-men that could transcend the weaknesses, sins, and corruption of the society they saw around them',[28] using ancient mythology and religion as an inspiration. Freemasons like Edward Bulwer-Lytton and the Theosophical Society, headed by Blavatsky, popularized the notion of the super-human. Nietzsche further propagated the idea, focusing on an individual instead of a species as a saviour turned super-hero. According to Knowles, Jerry Siegel, the creator of Superman, probably encountered the term in Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spake Zarathustra*).

Furthermore, Knowles demonstrates that heroes in the history of the comics-genre are continually fighting those social fears that are most urgent: corruption, drug gangs, communism, technology, aliens, etc.[29] Comics heroes are, in many respects, *New Gods*.[30] And, according to Knowles, we still need them:[31]

> The daily political and economic bad news and the constant drumbeat of war and terrorism are making superhero fantasies more relevant and visceral, as well as more comforting and reassuring, than at any time since World War II.

The similarities between the medium of comics and the ancient world thus go deeper than one would at first surmise. But even in cases of very explicit borrowing from classical mythology, references can be sophisticated and often subtle. To illustrate this, the chapter now focuses on the Marvel series *The Incredible Hercules*, with special attention to episode #126 to #131, which were collected under the title *The Incredible Hercules: Dark Reign* (2009).

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27 See Knowles 2007, 37–62. See also Gavaler 2015 for the importance of *Übermensch*-theory in the early history of superheroes.

28 Knowles 2007, 37.

29 Cf. Morrison's continued effort to demonstrate how 'the superheroes caught the mood of the times' (2012, 103).

30 The title of a famous comics-series by author and illustrator Jack Kirby (first episode in 1971).

31 Knowles 2007, 217.

2 *The Incredible Hercules*: Reviving the Ancient Hero

The history of Hercules as a comics hero goes back a long time.[32] In fact, he was a fundamental inspiration for the creation of both Superman (1938) and Captain Marvel (1940). It so happened that the creator of Superman was lying in bed 'when all of a sudden it hits me. I conceive a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I have ever heard tell of rolled into one'.[33] Likewise, unremarkable paperboy Billy Batson can turn into Captain Marvel whenever he utters the magical word SHAZAM, an acronym for Solomon, Hercules, Atlas, Zeus, Achilles, and Mercury.[34] Hercules first appeared in person in the *Journey into Mystery Annual* #1 (1965), created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby,[35] and played several guest roles in numerous corners of the Marvel universe, especially as one of the Avengers, and as the perennial rival of Marvel character Thor (whose attitude to Hercules was always framed in some form of competition).[36] In the 1980s, the hero starred as the protagonist of two successful limited series.[37] In 2008, he got another outing as a main character, in *The Incredible Hercules*, which continued in 2010 under the name *Prince of Power*, both series authored by Greg Pak and Fred Van Lente.[38]

The Incredible Hercules amounts to a total of twenty-nine episodes (#113 to #141), plus one prologue; about seven-hundred pages in total. The title was framed as a sequel to *The Incredible Hulk*, and Marvel intended Hercules to 'take over' when Hulk disappeared after a series of events somewhat beyond

32 Potentially, to antiquity itself; for a precursor of the modern comic on papyrus, featuring images of Herakles that illustrate the story of the twelve labours, see Nisbet 2011.

33 Jerry Siegel, cited by Fingeroth 2004, 13.

34 Hercules being named as the legendary force inspiring strength (Solomon was there for wisdom, Atlas for stamina, Zeus for power, Achilles for courage and Mercury for speed).

35 In fact, the first appearance of the character Hercules is in 1964 (*Avengers* #10), but there he features as the side-kick of the bad guy, Immortus. This appearance is corrected in a later plotline (*Avengers Forever* #1–12, 1998–99), where this 'evil Hercules' turns out to have been an alien impostor.

36 Hercules appeared regularly in *The Mighty Thor*. The superhero rivalry is of course sparked by their similarity, which is played out in the ironic *Mighty Thorcules* story-arc in the *The Incredible Hercules* (#132–137).

37 *Hercules: Prince of Power* (1982 and 1984) and *Hercules: Full Circle* (1983, 1987, 1988 and 1990; collected in 2009), both written and drawn by Bob Layton. The series is set in the twenty-fourth century, and presents a Hercules who is banned from Olympus, adventuring as a space traveller. In 2010 Layton published *Twilight of a God* as a stunning finale to the series *Incredible Hercules*.

38 The story of Hercules is continued in the shorter series *Chaos War* (5 episodes, 2010–2011) and *Herc* (11 episodes, 1–10 and 6.1, 2011–2012), both written by Pak and Van Lente. A useful summary of all of Hercules' exploits in the Marvel Universe appears at the end of the *Herc* collection.

the scope of this chapter. What was meant to be a four-issue arc to wrap up the Hulk tale became a popular franchise.[39]

At the start of the *Incredible Hercules* series, Pak was well-versed in Hulk-lore since he had co-authored the Hulk-series that ended in *The Incredible Hercules*, making him an obvious choice for the Marvel editors. Van Lente was less known but had studied Greek philosophy and mythology for some of his comics series *Action Philosophers!* (co-authored with Ryan Dunlavey), which featured ancient and modern philosophers,[40] perhaps inspiring Marvel editors to partner him with Pak. The authors decided to go back to antiquity for inspiration, finding the Hercules from the 1980s Layton-series too one-dimensional and looking for more depth and possibilities. They found what they sought first and foremost in Euripides' *Herakles*: the world's most awesome hero, formed by a 'massive guilt complex' and riddled by all too human flaws.[41] So this is the hero's character in a nutshell: 'He's an impulsive person with a basically good heart, but he's so strong he can't even restrain himself, and it causes him to lash out and hurt the people he loves'.[42] The authors read more and more on Hercules as they wrote, researching the labours, other deeds of Hercules and Greek mythology more generally.[43]

Much can be said about the reception of Hercules in the series, but this chapter will concentrate on a few of the most important themes: the continuity of the character of Hercules; the blending of the mythical and the contemporary;

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39 Reviews of *The Incredible Hercules* have been generally good to great (the influential forum IGN, for instance, credited #114 with a 9.4, critic Bryan Joel admitting that is remarkable for a 'C-lister' replacing an 'A-lister': Joel 2008/2012), and sales have been strong and consistent (see www.comichron.com/monthlycomicssales for overviews of revenues and copies sold). In an email interview with Fred Van Lente on the series I asked if the reception of *The Incredible Hercules* had exceeded the authors' expectations. He replied:

"The *Incredible Hercules* was thrown together in such slapdash fashion that none of us really had time to think about expectations, which is almost always a good thing. We had a very strong, simple storyline – Herc and Cho trying to escape the authorities – and some very strong characters."

40 The series comprises 9 issues, self-published from 2004 to 2009. #1 features Plato (among others), #3 Jung and Campbell (among others), #9 has Diogenes (among others) and #7 is solely dedicated to Greek philosophy (Pre-Socratics, Aristotle and Epictetus). Dark Horse Comics published a deluxe collection of all issues (including some new material) in 2014.

41 Van Lente (2018, email interview) identified the primary source of inspiration as *Grief Lessons*, Anne Carson's translation of four Euripidean plays (2006, New York: *New York Review of Books* 2006). The Euripidean take on the labours is obvious, see below.

42 Van Lente 2018, email interview.

43 Van Lente went on to author the *Hercules* volume in Osprey's Myths and Legends series (see Van Lente 2013 and Osprey Publishing 2013).

and the ways in which the comics helps us to understand the ancient figure of Hercules better.

3 *The Incredible Hercules*: Modern Myth

The world of *The Incredible Hercules* is set in modern times. The Olympian gods no longer abide in celestial spheres but live on earth, since in the wake of the comics' version of Ragnarok (the devastation that killed many of the Norse gods) most pantheons have fallen. Zeus has been killed by a Japanese demon called Mikaboshi, and the power of the Greek gods has been consolidated into a company on Wall Street, called the Olympus Group; a specialised technology and weapon industry. Hera controls most of the stock, and, disillusioned and embittered by Zeus' death, aims to destroy the world and everything in it (or so we learn as the narrative proceeds). However, Athena, temporarily active as a security consultant with the Atlas Foundation, is challenging Hera's domination. The struggle for power eventually concentrates on Hercules, Athena's primary instrument (or so it seems) to reinstate the rule of Zeus. In the narrative arc of *Dark Reign*, she sends Hercules, together with his sidekick Amadeus Cho, into Hades to bring back Zeus.

As may be gleaned from this brief summary, the mega-text featuring the superhero Hercules is both layered and complicated.[44] The authors try their utmost to include the classical, i.e. mythological, tales within the Marvel universe. The Marvel Hercules is presented as essentially the same as the Hercules from antiquity, and to clarify and promote this continuity (always important in comics),[45] Hercules, or some other character, regularly remembers or retells his ancient adventures in what the authors call 'myth backs'.[46] Perhaps the

44 And far more complicated than can be rendered in such a brief summary. The Hercules-narrative is also connected to that of the Hulk, Iron Man, Thor, S.H.I.E.L.D., and much more.

45 On the importance of continuity (and briefly on *The Incredible Hercules* as well), see Marshall and Kovacs 2016, xviii–xxi. Van Lente and Pak regularly add brief authorial comments to clarify the strands of continuity, though always within the Marvel universe rather than between the comics and ancient myth.

46 There are many such flashbacks in the *The Incredible Hercules* series. Most episodes feature at least one ancient story, although the stories centering on Hercules are concentrated in the first narrative arcs. The later episodes do still contain myths, but not necessarily relating to Hercules. The order of Herculean adventures recalled is: #112 the murder of Megara and his children, the Stymphalian birds; #113 the hydra of Lerna, the death of Nessos, Deianeira dressing Hercules with the poisoned cloak; #114 the destruction of Troy; #115 the capture of Cerberus, Hercules killing his wife and children after saving them from

most obvious (and certainly the longest) example can be found in #126, a flashback covering no less than twenty pages telling us how Hercules defended Thebes against a horde of Minyans and lost his mortal father in battle, right after Amphitryon told Hercules that Zeus was his real father.[47] This flashback also offers depth to the tale (a regular function of flashbacks) and serves narrative economy, as it provides some necessary background information for when Hercules encounters both Amphitryon and Zeus in Hades in #130–31, and fatherhood is a dominant theme (see further below). Another example of a flashback offering a deeper layer and a more intimate connection with antiquity can be found in #117, where the device is used to explain why Hercules is hesitant to become the leader of an *ad hoc* team of gods to stop an alien invasion: he was not the leader when the team of Argonauts were created and still remembers why: 'Leaders … true leaders … inspire, like Captain America, or sweet-talk gold out of its lustre, like Jason, when he gathered together the greatest heroes in all of Greece…'. In #118, a flashback reveals Hercules' greatest nightmare, the loss of his 'arms-bearer' Hylas, a nightmare that is re-enacted when Amadeus Cho appears to die in the battle against the alien gods.[48]

With so much attention given to the continuity of the character, it does not come as a surprise that the Hercules from the comics strongly resembles the one we know from ancient sources. He is massively strong, nearly indestructible, has a huge temper, is generally cheerful and generous with his affection, and is motivated by honour, kinship and friendship. He is certainly not averse to drinking and celebrating, and his interest in women gets the better of him sometimes. He detests trickery and magic, and most of all, he likes a good, honest fight: when charging into an enemy, he often talks of bestowing 'the gift' of battle. He is decidedly Hulk-like in his talent for massive destruction and

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Lycus; #116 Hercules kills Kyknos, the Augean Stables; #117 Hercules being led by Jason; #118 the story of Hylas; #119 the fight with the shapeshifting Achelous; #121 the apples of the Hesperides; #122 the girdle of Hippolyta; #126 the origin story of Hercules; #133 the Nemean lion.

47 Instead of 'flashbacks', the term 'myth back' works both on the level of narratological technique (as another way to indicate analepsis) and on the level of content, as the mythical content 'backs' the hero and his character in the comics.

48 At least once, such a flashback is also employed to establish continuity the other way around. In the elaborate flashback in #126, Amphitryon and Alcmene consult Teiresias on the fate of their son. The ancient seer then shows them Hercules' future greatness, conjuring up an image of the hero doing battle with the Hulk – cleverly connecting ancient Hercules to modern Hercules, instead of *vice versa*. In the same flashback, his parents give him a suit to replace the (classical) lion-skin, which is the suit that he is still wearing in the comics, as a visual confirmation of continuity.

single-mindedness in the face of heroic challenges:[49] 'I punch stuff, it falls down. That's the only "strategy" I've ever needed'.[50]

It may seem that the picture of an 'all brawn and no brains' monster-killer is somewhat of a caricature, and the dumbness of Hercules is at times somewhat over-emphasised.[51] This is caused, in no small measure, by Hercules teaming up with Amadeus Cho, a small boy whose superpower is his 'hypermind'.[52] But things are rather more complicated than that: at the end of the series, we find out that Athena has paired the two because she wanted to train a new kind of hero for a new age. Apparently, she had once tried herself to train a hypermind, but the goddess of wisdom and strategy (naturally, a hypermind herself) put on too much pressure and the boy in question went dangerously insane. By pairing Amadeus with Hercules, who may be dumb but who nevertheless counts as the very personification of heroism, the boy can grow to be an actual hero. This process is nowhere more explicit than in #115, where Amadeus is on a (digital) rampage born out of childish anger, and Hercules manages to stop him by teaching him about the devastating consequences of giving in to blind rage: it made him lose his family. Hercules is uniquely equipped to teach such lessons, because he is not only a monster-killer but somewhat of a monster as well; as he tells his Hades-bound alter-ego in #131 (for discussion, see below), he 'has spent [his] days erasing man's memory of our past mistakes'. More bound by social ties like honour and friendship than the Hulk, and more fallible and human than Athena, he is the best possible choice to guide the modern-age mental superhero-to-be Amadeus.

As is clear from the example given above, the myths featuring in *The Incredible Hercules*, even when told by the hero himself, can serve 'to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities',[53] which is an important function of myths in general. Interestingly enough, the fluidity,

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49 The similarities between Hulk and Hercules are obvious and at times made explicit; as was mentioned above, at the end of World War Hulk, Hulk disappears and so passes the baton as warrior supreme to Hercules, who takes over the 'Incredible' epithet. Van Lente, however, prefers to compare Hercules to Superman: 'he's got his own inner Clark Kent, that frailty, but it's not a separate identity, he carries it always with him' (2018, email interview).

50 #119; this scene shows the god squad discussing a strategy to attack the alien pantheon.

51 Cf. the particular re-telling of the labour of the Augean stables, the success of which depends at least to a certain degree on insight as well as strength. In the #116 version , however, Hercules 'shoveled for hours' on his 'hopeless' task, and is saved by the rivers streaming through the stables by 'divine intervention'.

52 As Van Lente briefly explained: 'Herc and Cho, brains and brawn, were a natural buddy team' (2018, email interview).

53 Eliade 1963, 8.

complexity and polysemy of myth is very well-suited to be incorporated in the comics' megatext. As the authors know well, myth is not history and there is no point in using it to reconstruct a lost historical reality. Rather, myths serve as a narrative that can be used to reflect on one's own life and how to lead it. In short, myths are good 'to think with'.[54] This nature and function of myth is once made explicit, in the section from #115, already mentioned above, where Hercules explains how he returned from his final labour, found his family condemned to death by his enemy Lycus, became enraged and killed them because he lost control. This chronology of events, taken from Euripides' *Herakles* (and even then twisted around, because the tragic plot still blames Hera for the madness),[55] clashes with the (more) usual narrative of the labours as Hercules' atonement for the murder of his family. When Amadeus notes the inconsistency, Hercules replies:

> Shut up. 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 a ledger. Myths are stories that only have the meaning you give to them.[56]

In this particular situation, it is this version that has power and significance for Hercules and Amadeus; its import is realised, internalised, and subsequently acted upon. Myths are not history and should not be subjected to its laws of logic and chronology – they should be lived to acquire meaning and bring inspiration.

Apart from myth and its nature, the authors also have to deal with myth's main protagonists, the gods. Next to Hercules, whose divine status is dubious (on which see further below), there are appearances by Zeus, Hera, Typhon, Ares, Aphrodite and numerous other gods and goddesses. Their divinity may seem problematic for modern-day storytellers in general, given the dominance of Judeo-Christian paradigms for thinking about divinities. In the universe of

54 A phrase commonly used by mythologists. It was coined by Lévi-Strauss (to explain the speculative function of animals in totemism) and first applied to myth by Detienne 1977, 136.

55 For another interesting twist of mythology, see the tale of 'Pandoro', an inverted version of the misogynistic Pandora myth; *this* tale, told by women, the ruling class in the alternative reality presented, is centred on the pernicious influence of men (#125).

56 Hercules continues this interesting tale thus:

"That's how I killed my family. Not because of a curse or bloodlust instilled from an invisible heaven. Those who loved me blamed old enemies, like Hera. And I was too ashamed to contradict them. Eventually, to give the look of truth to the lie, I took the Romans' name for me to distance me from my hated stepmother."

the comics, however, such problems hardly exist. As was stated earlier, gods and superheroes strongly resemble each other, a fact also indicated by the superhero U.S. Agent in #138, who refuses to believe he is dealing with actual gods and remarks that they are 'no different than any other superhuman'. This remark is of interest because it demonstrates, as Knowles and others have also stated, just how blurry the line between god and superhero/human has become.[57] Modern Western individuals (naturally) refuse to believe in the Greek gods, but we read and watch the stories of superhero/humans with great interest and admiration. Without his knowing it, U.S. Agent makes a comment that offers food for thought.

In comics, as in Greek mythology, there is no room for an actually omnipotent god, of a sort in which the U.S. Agent presumably believes. A hero with ultimate power is ultimately boring. In *The Incredible Hercules*, therefore, the gods are incredibly powerful but nonetheless limited, as in myth. None of the gods is omniscient, allowing for the same Olympian manipulation, factionalism and mutual deceit that we know from the Homeric poems onwards. Lesser gods are naturally assumed to be less powerful than more important or more primal gods (so it need not surprise us that Hera can easily take out her daughter Hebe, for instance). Although there is a certain hierarchy in place, 'the only master we gods serve is our own essential nature' (Zeus, #131). This means, for instance, that Aphrodite will not join Athena to do any actual fighting but helps her nonetheless by keeping Ares in bed, so that he will not oppose Hercules in a crucial battle (#138). These dynamics of power and weakness, familiar from mythology, are natural to the world of superheroes, where even Superman has his kryptonite, and it makes perfect sense to readers of comic books. As Hercules himself explains: 'Even we gods merely struggle each day to do our best' (#134).

Questions of mythology and theology aside, it should be pointed out that the authors of *The Incredible Hercules* manage to transplant the ancient hero into our modern world with a good deal of wit and irony. For one, Hercules seems to be more up-to-date than some of his friends and enemies expect. The cape, for instance, a common attribute of modern superheroes, is criticized by Hercules as old-fashioned and clumsy; that is why he has said good-bye to the lion-skin more than three thousand years ago (#128). Hercules' *alter ego* from the Underworld is rebuked for his archaic speech, characterised as 'old-timey Shakespeare talk': 'We're from Greece! From two thousand years before

57 Cf. Van Lente: 'In superhero comics gods are functionally just a race of superheroes' (2018, email interview); cf. Gordon 2017, 226–9.

Shakespeare! It makes absolutely … no! sense!' (#131).[58] Passages like these offer us insights into the way the authors themselves believe that a successful transfer from old to new should be given shape.[59]

A large part of what makes the 'transplant' successful is, in my view, the fact that Pak and Van Lente hardly ever explain references, either to Greek mythology in general or the myths surrounding Hercules in particular.[60] This practice is perhaps best illustrated by Hercules' and Cho's visit to the Underworld to rescue Zeus in the *Dark Reign* story arc. The entry to Hades is located in a casino in Atlantic City, which is one of the places where Pluto is hoarding and expanding his wealth.[61] Obviously, Cerberus is there (degenerated into some kind of a zoo animal), and Hercules must pass Charon, who is still moaning over Hercules' last visit, and hinders the passage by asking for a coin not just for Hercules himself but also for all the people that he has ever killed (so it is a stroke of luck that they pass through a casino). Once they are in Hades, we see, among many things, a man pushing a giant boulder up a hill, a boulder that gets incidentally destroyed by Hercules. 'I'm free!', the unidentified man exclaims, whereupon a new boulder appears, with a loud 'SISY-POOF' ('Oh, great').[62] When Cronus eventually shows up, he carries the sickle that is familiar to classicists, but the attribute is not explained. Amadeus, when on his way to the Elysian Fields to visit his family, is harrassed by a group of harpy-like monsters, identified as 'Penelope's parasitic suitors' in an unidentified reference to *Odyssey* 24.6–9, where these shades are only *compared* to bats. Even

58 On a meta-level, the authors here distinguish themselves from Layton, who in the 1980s *Prince of Power* series did have his Hercules speak Shakespearian English.

59 Hercules, moreover, turns out to be able to make references to modern-day culture. For instance, when he and Amadeus are changing into black tie for their trip to the Underworld, Hercules, to his friend's surprise, makes a reference to *Men in Black*: 'You know what the difference between you and me is? I make this look *good*' (#131).

60 As stated earlier, characters other than Hercules present (by way of flashbacks or not) parts of Greek mythology, from relatively well-known tales such as Hesiod's 'Myth of the Races' (*Assault on New Olympus* prologue) to more obscure stories, such as that of the hunter Cephalus (#139).

61 As Amadeus Cho remarks: 'Casinos are designed so you never notice the passage of time – no clocks or windows, sightlines to the exits are blocked and they're always lit like perpetual dusk' (#129).

62 The authors are great fans of explicit onomatopeia. There is little 'bamm' and 'crash' in *The Incredible Hercules*, but instead a SHATTAGLSSS when someone crashes through a windown, a DUBBAPOW when two heads are bashed together, and a PAPAKRAK when Zeus corrects Hercules with a blow. In the Underworld, we hear a loud IXION when a certain denizen's wheel is used as a bludgeon, and BOSCH when Hercules falls through a scene that resembles the right part of Hieronymus Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490–1510, Madrid, Prado).

more obscure, perhaps, is Athena's advice to 'not look back' before the two heroes enter Hades, advice that recalls the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice. When the heroes eventually save Zeus and get back to the Upper World, Amadeus decides to leave Hercules for a solo adventure; as he walks away, Hercules calls his name, but Amadeus walks on, whispering 'don't look back'; the Orpheus paradigm invites the well-informed reader to think about the relevance of the variation. By this technique, the authors offer a deeper reading and, perhaps, a more satisfying experience to those who are more willing, or better trained, to recognize references to antiquity.[63]

4 Re-interpreting the Hero

The chapter now briefly considers the 'reversibility' of reception, i.e. the way comic books may help us to better understand or appreciate the figure of Hercules, or other characters from mythology. If we stay in the *Incredible Hercules*' Underworld a little while longer, we find difficult questions of divinity and theodicy there that are equally relevant in antiquity and today.[64] Just when Hercules embarks on his (second) *katabasis*, Hades has initiated a large-scale prosecution against Zeus (#130–131). After Zeus' demise, the balance of power between the gods has shifted considerably, and Hades aims to take over the Upper World by having Zeus condemned at a trial. A jury of five-hundred-and-one denizens of the Underworld listens to the charges brought forward by some of Zeus' victims (such as Semele, testifying against her will, and Cronus, who speaks of 'fraud, poisoning, jailbreak, patricide, ethnic cleansing'), whereupon Zeus defends himself by stating that his plans are inscrutable to mortals.[65] He readily admits to being 'terrible', 'callous' and 'unjust'. Nevertheless, he claims that having a supreme god is an existential necessity. Without such a god, Zeus argues, history cannot move forward, and, moreover, 'every awful thing that happens to you – or by your hand – you will now only be able to blame on yourself'. Mankind can no longer beg or curse Zeus: if they wish to get answers to existential questions, they can only look in 'the ****** mirror'.

63 Cf. Van Lente: 'A very good rule of storytelling is to not burden the reader with anything more than he absolutely needs to know the story. If they pick up more, that's great, but not required' (2018, email interview).

64 The modern-day relevance is emphasized by Zeus formulating modern existential questions: 'Why your daughter was raped and murdered? Why your son's unit got blown up in that roadside bombing? Why mommy got cancer and died in her own filth?'

65 A common view in antiquity since Hesiod (cf. *Works and Days* 483–4).

The problem of theodicy and the responsibility of mankind is a theme that goes back to Homer, who has Zeus complaining that people are always blaming him for everything, even things that are obviously their own fault.[66] In the comic, the object of all complaints, curses and pleas, both ancient and modern, is now actually defending himself in court, claiming such mortal utterances are at the core of his being. It is, as he explains to Hercules, what being a god means. Apparently, a god must hurt, kill and destroy, incurring the anger and despair of mortals, in order to carry out the grand design that humans cannot fathom. The eternity and perfection of the gods come with dire consequences for humankind. And so, modern readers are stimulated to reflect on theodicy, fate, and our own responsibility. Could it be so that divinity is by its nature perfect and thus unchangeable?

Hercules appears to think so. He tries to defend Zeus (much to his dismay) by explaining before the jury that Zeus cannot change, evolve or make choices. In the terms we have just seen, he serves his essential nature. Hercules immediately contrasts this condition with that of mortals, who can change: 'Once, I killed my wife and children. I atoned with twelve labors'. Hercules argues that in that sense, 'gods are less than men', and that Zeus therefore deserves the pity of the jurors. At this point, Hercules is hit on the chin by Zeus (PAPAKRAK), who does not want the charity of either the jurors or Hercules. But theological speculation continues, for Hercules has just brought up his own status in a rather problematic way, aligning himself with mortals.

In antiquity, Hercules enjoyed a double status as both a man/hero and a god, a doubling that was difficult to understand.[67] The Hades scene in *The Incredible Hercules* presents one way of picturing that double nature. Immediately after Hercules tries to defend his father, the hero is stopped by a second Hercules, visibly identical to 'our' Hercules except for the red gleaming eyes and the torn upper garments. This second Hercules (addressed as 'Heracles', Hercules' former and discarded name)[68] turns out to be the hero's mortal counterpart, who has been lingering in Hades while 'our' Hercules was deified. The second, mortal (deceased) Hercules is bitter and extremely hostile because he feels he has been suffering for 'crimes we committed together', while 'our' (divine) Hercules was allowed into the realm above, to relax with 'nymphs

66 See *Odyssey* 1.32–34.

67 See Stafford 2012, 171–5. For modern adaptions of Hercules that engage with this aspect, see Foster, and Salzman and Alvares in this volume.

68 For Hercules actively changing his name, see n.56 above. Using this former name may serve to further archaize the dead hero, rendering him obsolete.

and ambrosia'.[69] The deceased hero has renounced his father, who he claims had not helped him enough during his lifetime, and has joined the ranks of Hades. The divine Hercules counters the argument by claiming (while fighting) that he had devoted his whole life to erasing his former mistakes by performing heroic deeds and so adding to the glory of Olympus. The battle is balanced for some time, but eventually the divine Hercules manages to throw his opponent into what seems to be an even deeper circle of hell.

The victory is presented as a showdown with the past; a past that is static and unchangeable. As 'our' Hercules throws his mortal counterpart into the abyss, he says 'I tried to change your mind, Heracles. I know now – you are the past. You cannot be changed'. The deceased Hercules has become bitter and inert, whereas the deified Hercules has used his second chance in the Upper World to redeem himself by trial and hardship. When Hercules fights his evil twin, he is in fact looking in the 'mirror' Zeus was talking about during his defence. He has understood that he is, indeed, to blame and takes responsibility. What is truly paradoxical, of course, is that the hero has been able to make that change because he, or at least half of him, was turned into a god, a being that he had argued was unchangeable by its nature. So is Zeus right, and are gods perfect beings that serve as an existential back-up plan to ignorant, powerless mortals? Or should we believe that humans have their own kind of divinity in being able to change for the better? Whichever it is, Hercules, as in antiquity, is right in the middle of the mystery.

5 Conclusion

As argued above, and noted before, (Greek) mythology and the comics' 'multiverse' are very alike: they share the mega-text structure and its concomitant multiple versions, inconsistencies, differing viewpoints and 'retconning' activities by virtue of multiple authors working in different times and genres to meet different demands. They are also alike with respect to their protagonists: gods (from any pantheon) fit right in between the superhumans, mutants and

69 The situation is reminiscent of Lucian's *Dialogues of the Dead*, where Diogenes derides the phantom of Herakles in the underworld (Herakles' *eidōlon* seen by Odysseus in the *Odyssey* (11.601–2) being Lucian's inspiration): 'He palms you off upon Pluto, instead of coming himself. And here are you, enjoying his mortality!' (trans. Fowler and Fowler 1907). In this case, however, the phantom seems to be more annoyed by Diogenes trying to figure out the dual nature of Herakles than with his fate. (I thank Alastair Blanshard for pointing out this reference.)

'enhanceds' that have their homes in the pages of the superhero comic books. In *The Incredible Hercules*, the parallels are even explicitly drawn.

Pak and Van Lente merge the worlds of myth and Marvel in a way that suggests not only similarity but continuity as well. The elaborate and well-studied 'myth backs' make their hero's roots go back more than three thousand years, maintaining a balance between simply retelling the tale and adapting it to fit their own storytelling agenda. Hercules' modern struggles, strengths and weaknesses, fears and internal conflicts are thus made to resonate within a wider, mythological/literary 'universe'. The goal of creating a character of sufficient depth to carry his own series is achieved with the help of the ancient model.

Occasionally, the engagement with the sources from antiquity is deep enough for the modern tale to reflect on the ancient one, as in the case of the *Dark Reign* story arc, which explores questions of theodicy and the basically incomprehensible matter of Hercules' position between gods and men. In this case, comics, like myths, are 'good to think with'. When Zeus watches the fight between Hercules and his evil twin, he cannot help but be moved by Hercules' love for his heavenly father, which he notices is a break, a radical change from the usual father-son relationships of the Olympian dynasty: 'I wonder…', he murmurs. And so do we.

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