JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

17/2023

Amanda Potter &
Hunter H. Gardner (eds.)

Classics and the Supernatural in Modern Media

www.thersites-journal.de

Imprint

Universität Potsdam 2023
Historisches Institut, Professur Geschichte des Altertums
Am Neuen Palais 10, 14469 Potsdam (Germany)
https://www.thersites-journal.de/

ISSN 2364-7612

Contact
Principal Contact
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de
Support Contact
PD Dr. Christian Rollinger
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de

Layout and Typesetting
text plus form, Dresden

Cover pictures:
Left – Art from InSEXts™ by Ariel Kristantina. Used by permission of AfterShock Comics, LLC.
Right – Used by permission of Brading Roman Villa

Published online at:
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

17/2023

Contents

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

17/2023 | p. 1

AMANDA POTTER & HUNTER GARDNER

Classics and the Supernatural in Modern Media

In 2020 we planned to hold a conference in July on the topic of Classics and the Supernatural in modern media. The aim was to bring scholars together to celebrate a milestone birthday for one of the organisers, and to hold the conference on the Isle of Wight on the site of the Roman Villa at Brading. Everything was booked, and then the world changed. The COVID 19 pandemic swept across the world like a plague that, if not supernatural, seemed like something from science fiction. The conference was replanned for 2021, then for 2022. When it was finally held in the summer of 2022, most participants were only just resuming international travel. After two years of Zoom meetings and virtual conferences, it was great to engage with colleagues and friends face-to-face again: the museum's staff and facilities, the sunshine, and the setting of an ancient villa on an island off England's coast were perfect. After the conference some participants got infected with the virus, reminding us of the risks now inherent when meeting up and spending time in a room with others. But we are happy to report that all recovered, and many have chosen to develop their papers in the present volume.

This collection of papers from the conference covers a wide variety of methodologies across a wide range of media (television, film, comics, novels), showcasing the different directions scholars take in classical reception studies. At the same time, the contributions find common ground in demonstrating how modern media consistently use tropes of magic, divine power, and ritual practices from Greco-Roman antiquity to articulate supernatural events to (often sceptical) audiences of the twenty-first century. We are pleased to share them with you in this special issue of *Thersites.*

URL https://thersites-journal.de
DOI https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.256

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

17/2023 | pp. 2 – 31

MARGARET M. TOSCANO
(University of Utah)

Varieties of Supernatural Depictions

Classics in Contemporary Media

Abstract This article proposes several conceptual frameworks for examining the widespread use of classical intertexts depicting the supernatural in popular media. Whether the supernatural is viewed as reality or simply a trope, it represents the human capacity and desire to explore worlds and meanings beyond the obvious and mundane. Representations of classical gods, heroes, and monsters evoke the power of mythic stories to probe and explain human psychology, social concerns, philosophical questions, and religious beliefs, including belief about the paranormal and supernatural. The entertainment value of popular media allows creators and audiences to engage with larger issues in non-dogmatic and playful ways that help them negotiate tensions among various beliefs and identities. This paper also gives an overview of the other articles in this journal issue, showing overlapping themes and patterns that connect with these tensions. By combining knowledge of classical myths in their original contexts with knowledge about contemporary culture, classical scholars contribute unique perspectives about why classical intertexts dominate in popular media today.

Keywords Myth Theory, Classical Mythology, Supernatural, Paranormal, Afterlife

URL https://thersites-journal.de
DOI https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.249

INTRODUCTION

This essay explores four questions: Why do narratives, images, and characters from the classical world continue to infiltrate popular media's representations of the supernatural to such a large extent? How are these depictions related to popular beliefs about the supernatural today? What types of supernatural realms and experiences are highlighted in contemporary media that reflect the ancient classical world? And what can classical scholars add to discussions about the presence and meaning of the supernatural in popular media?

I will argue that classical intertexts in popular media provide important ways for audiences and creators to negotiate tensions they feel about the supernatural – between belief and disbelief, between mixed goals and intentions, between private and public identities, and between the past and the present. My engagement with the other articles in this journal issue will further demonstrate the importance of the intersection between classical texts and the supernatural.[1] While many people tend to think of popular media mostly as a vehicle for providing entertainment and escapism, scholars like Suzanne Keen in her 2007 *Empathy and the Novel* have asserted the importance of fictional narratives for promoting thoughtful understanding of the self and the other that works toward better social and personal relationships.[2] Though more work has been done on the value of literary fiction over other genres and media such as comics or video games, Keen and others believe it is a mistake to limit the kinds of fictional narratives that serve this important societal function only to those with high literary value.[3] This debate intersects with arguments about how to define 'popular culture', which in turn overlap with discussions about the genres and nature of

1 My paper is influenced by all the participants at the Classics and Supernatural Conference that took place at the Isle of Wight in July, 2022: Dan Curley, Frances Foster, Lynn Fotheringham, Hunter Gardner, Javier Martínez Jiménez, Helen Lovatt, Lisa Maurice, Maxwell Teitel Paulie, Amanda Potter, Stacie Raucci, Janice Siegel, Connie Skibinski, Emma Stafford, Anise Strong, Chiara Sulprizio, Guendalina Taietti, and Rocki Wentzel. Thank you to each of them for their thoughtful papers and fruitful discussions, along with the extended papers in this volume.

2 Keen (2007) ix–xi. For an argument why the fantasy genre should be taken seriously, see Stephan (2016) 11–4.

3 As each new medium/genre has come to the attention of scholars since World War II, the importance of popular media for understanding societal patterns and interests is evident: in film and TV, see Braudy/Cohen (2016); for comics, Hatfield/Beaty (2020); for ani-

'popular media'.[4] While postmodern critics have broken down the categories between 'high' and 'low' art in the last several decades, Marxist theorists still dominate discussions about mass and popular culture, focusing on issues of hegemony and class structure, which ignore to a large extent why the supernatural appeals to mass audiences, though this question is crucial for understanding the prevalence of this phenomenon.[5] Six dominant functions emerge for the use of the supernatural in popular media in both the texts discussed in this journal issue, as well as in other current favorites: (1) providing entertainment; (2) probing the human psyche – our fears, desires, etc.; (3) examining social concerns and problems; (4) explaining philosophical or religious truths; (5) putting forth and also questioning popular beliefs about the paranormal and supernatural; and (6) exploring other possible constructs of reality and the mystery of the unknown.

MYTH, RELIGION, AND THE SUPERNATURAL

Surveying and organizing the functions of the supernatural in popular media for this project makes apparent how these categories overlap with the ways myth functions, especially in connection with the classical myths and mythical figures explored in this journal. My interest in classifying supernatural depictions in popular media relates to my long-time fascination with theories about myths, their origins, forms, functions, contexts, and content. In 'Medusa and Perseus, and the Relationship between Myth and Science', I briefly outline a history of myth theories and definitions as background for exploring why science cannot replace mythmaking, even in a secular world.[6] In this paper, I look at the other

mation studies, Dobson et al. (2018); for video games, Wolf/Perron (2003). For popular genres such as science fiction and fantasy, James and Mendlesohn have Cambridge handbooks for both (2003, 2012); and other speculative fiction genres are important for highlighting ecological, Latino, and African narratives (Wolf-Meyer (2019)).

4 For an overview of definitions and interpretive theories of popular culture, see the 9th ed. of Storey's seminal textbook (2021).

5 For an exploration of why most discussions of popular culture are inadequate since they come from narrow ideological and historical perspectives, see Parker (2011).

6 Toscano (2016).

side of perennial questions raised about myths' origins and purposes, exploring how stories containing supernatural elements highlight questions about the intersection of myth and religion to show how recent retellings of classical myths provide mechanisms for addressing contemporary religious questions outside of traditional frameworks and institutions.[7] Richard Buxton, in his 2004 *The Complete World of Greek Mythology,* states the cultural importance of myth succinctly: 'A myth is a socially powerful traditional story.'[8] Importantly, the most influential new 'literary' myths with a potential for a lasting influence, such as *Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, Harry Potter,* or *Twilight* are permeated by the supernatural, whose functions in these contemporary stories overlap with the functions of traditional myths in significant ways.

In a concise and thought-provoking 2005 book, *A Short History of Myth,* Karen Armstrong situates the origin of mythology at Neanderthal gravesites that 'suggest some kind of belief in a future world that was similar to their own.'[9] From this evidence, Armstrong extrapolates 'five important things about myth': (1) it is 'rooted in the experience of death and the fear of extinction'; (2) it is accompanied by ritual and sacrifice; (3) it is about the limits of human experience; (4) it 'puts us in the correct spiritual or psychological posture for right action'; and (5) it speaks of 'another plane' or 'invisible' realm of the gods or the supernatural.[10]

It is helpful for this analysis to compare Armstrong's list of myth's characteristics with Rollo May's list of myth's contributions set forth much earlier in his 1991 *The Cry for Myth.* There he outlines how myths (1) give us 'our sense of personal identity', helping form our sense of self; (2) 'make possible our sense of community'; (3) 'undergird our moral values'; and (4) deal with the 'inscrutable mystery of creation'.[11] While there are several overlapping features in these assessments of myth and its functions, the idea that mythic stories deal with the 'limits of human experience' and 'the mystery of creation' is striking. It may be the presence of the supernatural in imaginative works that leads to the edge of

7 See Segal (2004) for another overview of the history and nature of myth theories.

8 Buxton (2004) 18. Cf. Burkert's classic definition of myth (1979) 23: 'a traditional story with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance.'

9 Armstrong (2005) 1.

10 Armstrong (2005) 3–4.

11 May (1991) 30–1.

the metaphysical abyss, the boundary of the underworld, of the subconscious, of the psyche, urging the contemplation of existential questions. It does not matter whether the supernatural is viewed as reality or simply a metaphorical trope; in either case, it represents the human capacity and desire to explore worlds and meanings beyond the obvious and mundane. While Sarah Iles Johnston, in her 2018 *The Story of Myth,* resists the scholarly tendency 'to define 'myth' in any absolute and final way', still she is willing to assert that 'stories' in general 'can coax us to look beyond the witnesses of our five senses and imagine that another reality exists, in addition to the reality that we experience every day.'[12] She goes on to argue that only stories 'can produce the *effect* of reality whether what the stories say is real or not.'[13]

Both Armstrong's and May's books are directed toward a popular, if educated, audience with the purpose of persuading people how myths are still vital for today's world, and not just false stories. This may be the reason why both writers want to explain what myths contribute to the general populace on both personal and societal levels, focusing more on the functions of myths than their interpretations. In contrast, scholars dealing with theories about myths focus more on contexts and approaches for interpretation. Though Robert A. Segal's 2004 *Myth: A Very Short Introduction,* which is part of the extensive Oxford Short Introduction series, also could be described as more popular, still he focuses on the intersection between myth and other disciplines, showing the ways myths have been interpreted.[14] There is also a significant overlap between Segal's approach to myth and John Storey's approach to examining popular culture. After an introduction showing the difficulty of defining 'popular culture', Storey's remaining chapters deal with theories of interpretation, such as Marxism, Structuralism, Post-structuralism, Psychoanalysis, Feminism, Race Studies, Material Culture, etc.[15] All these theories obviously can be helpful in analyzing the supernatural in popular media as well. However, for this study my purpose is to look at the functions of classics and the supernatural as outlined above, because these thematic categories seem more helpful in explaining why the supernatural

12 Johnston (2018) 6, 10.

13 Johnston (2018) 10.

14 Segal's chapter headings show his approach: Myth and Science, Philosophy, Religion, Ritual, Literature, Psychology, and Structure. For other scholarly approaches, see Csapo (2005) and Lincoln (1999), who both focus on myths as ideologies of dominant cultures.

15 Storey (2021).

is so dominant in popular media today and why classical tropes and stories remain at the forefront.

In their 'Introduction' to their 2015 *Ancient Magic and the Supernatural in the Modern Visual and Performing Arts,* editors Filippo Carlà-Uhink and Irene Berti explore the intersections of magic, religion, myth, and the supernatural in the reception of ancient texts. While Christian and Enlightenment thinkers have wanted to create a strong barrier between 'primitive' magic and 'rational' religion and philosophy, Carlà-Uhink and Berti show how this dichotomy is slippery and ignores the complex history of Greek and Roman traditions where magic is embedded in religious beliefs and practices. They argue that the modern 'reception of ancient magic and the supernatural is quite independent from the ancient concepts connected to them, and is a product of the visions of the receiving culture.'[16] Carlà-Uhink and Berti further argue that myths are also embedded in ancient Greek and Roman religions as 'experienced' phenomena that 'were therefore an important part of the collective consciousness of the supernatural.'[17]

THE SUPERNATURAL VS. THE PARANORMAL

To explicate the varieties of supernatural depictions in contemporary media, the supernatural should be differentiated from the paranormal, which is a commonly employed term in media studies. While the terms 'supernatural' and 'paranormal' are sometimes used interchangeably, they arise with different histories and contexts. 'Supernatural' is a word medieval in origin, appearing around 1425; whereas 'paranormal' first appears in 1905, according to the OED, which defines supernatural as: 'Belonging to a realm or system that transcends nature, as that of divine, magical, or ghostly beings; attributed to or thought to reveal some force beyond scientific understanding or the laws of nature; occult, paranormal'. In Christian contexts, the OED states that 'supernatural' is used 'with reference to the divine', while 'paranormal' is defined as: 'Designating supposed psychical events and phenomena such as clairvoyance or telekinesis whose operation is outside the scope of the known laws of nature or of normal scientific understanding; of or relating to such phenomena'. Accordingly, the supernatu-

16 Carlà-Uhink and Berti (2015) 7.

17 Carlà-Uhink and Berti (2015) 11.

ral encompasses the paranormal, while the paranormal extends the meaning of supernatural to render it more compatible to many in the contemporary world, whose imaginations are influenced, and sometimes limited by, the reigning paradigm of scientific materialism. For these reasons, supernatural phenomena are more often linked with 'fantasy', whereas paranormal experiences are seen as possible, even if unlikely.

Before explaining why the term 'supernatural' is better suited than 'paranormal' to examine classical intertexts, it is helpful to see how scholars are dealing with the upsurge in contemporary paranormal depictions. In her 2011 book, *Paranormal Media: Audiences, Spirits and Magic in Popular Culture,* Annette Hill asserts that scholars should take the paranormal seriously, to see it as more than a current fad. She observes that the 'paranormal has gone mainstream' and explores how it is not simply a fringe phenomenon. People over a wide range of ages and educational backgrounds participate variously in ways that overlap with paranormal beliefs and practices: astrology, tarot readings, hauntings, psychic healings, and shamanism, to name just a few. Hill argues: 'What is different today is that paranormal beliefs, ideas and practices are less associated with religious thinking and more about lifestyle trends.'[18] Hill's study expands the frame of reference from the mere psychological to the sociological/cultural by looking at popular media in broader contexts. Her focus on audiences shows the interplay between consumers and producers because market demands create revenue streams for content creators in various media, encouraging an ever-increasing number of depictions and products that borrow from paranormal phenomena.[19] The attractiveness of both supernatural and paranormal depictions in popular media marks the topic as socially significant.

The statistics on the acceptance of paranormal beliefs show that it is 'on the rise' over the last two decades with 'almost half of the British population, and two-thirds of Americans, claiming to believe in extrasensory perceptions and hauntings', as well as in witchcraft, according to Hill.[20] This accords with the conclusions of more recent studies such as the Chapman University Survey of Americans' 'fears' that traced the rise of American beliefs between 2016

18 Hill (2011) 12.

19 Whether it is the forces of capitalism that are creating the interest in popular media or whether it comes from the grass roots, the argument is circular in nature, according to Parker (2011) 153–8.

20 Hill (2011) 1.

and 2018, as well as the British 'Statista' study of 2021.[21] Both these polls reinforce an earlier Gallup survey that documented the four dominant paranormal beliefs: haunted houses, ghosts, communication with the dead, and witches. The Chapman 2018 study also shows a rise in the belief that aliens have come to earth in both ancient and modern times; more people now believe in creatures like Bigfoot and werewolves. The recent British study also shows that the age group between 18–34 is more likely to believe in the paranormal than the group of 55+.[22] Hill notes that gender plays a part in which types of beliefs are more common. 'Women reported more beliefs in astrology, extrasensory perception, new age practices, psychic healing, and superstitions. Men reported more beliefs in UFOs, extraterrestrial aliens, and extraordinary life forms'.[23] All of this is happening while traditional religion and traditional science are being questioned.

Hill explains that right along with a rising belief in the paranormal is an upsurge in skepticism. This has been true for a long time in what I refer to as the Scooby Doo effect. *Scooby Doo* is the title of an animated cartoon series that originated in 1969 and ended in 1976 with later spin-offs, movies, and reboots that are still running. The basic premise of each episode was always a variation on a single theme; namely, that for every conjectured, havoc-causing, supernatural phenomenon (e.g., a ghost, a haunting, a monster, a witch, etc.), the canine hero, Scooby Doo, comes to the rescue to reveal that it is not supernatural at all, but a rationally explainable hoax.[24] A similar pattern can be found in the popular British who-done-it television series, *Midsommer Murders,* with its 20 seasons. This

21 Watt & Wiseman note that surveys around the world reveal similar statistics: 'about fifty per cent of people hold one or more paranormal beliefs' and about half of these people claim they have had a 'genuinely paranormal experience' (2009) 12.

22 Chapman (2023), Statista Report (2022), and Gallup (2023) (accessed January 16, 2023).

23 Hill (2011) 41. A longer list of paranormal beliefs discussed in Hill is helpful for the larger issues in this study: telepathy, angels, aliens, clairvoyance, remote viewing, psychokinesis, psychic healing, precognition, altered states, extrasensory perception, divinatory arts (astrology), esoteric systems of magic and magical spells, new age therapies like crystals, spirit communication, reincarnation and other Eastern 'mystico-religious' beliefs, angel communication, legendary monsters, time-travel, deus ex machina, the uncanny, monsters, hybrid creatures, devils, occult, horoscopes, astrology, faith healing, gods, ghosts, afterlife, underworld: Hill (2011) 38–44.

24 Though the 2023 animated series *Velma* is based on the character from the original Scooby Doo franchise, it eliminates the famous dog and the typical plot. It has received bad reviews from critics and audiences alike.

show sometimes presents villains who stage deaths as if caused by the occult but that are later exposed by inspector Barnaby and his constable as common murders committed by natural means resulting from malignant human motives. Of course, it would not be a murder mystery if the crime committed could not be detected and solved rationally. Nevertheless, these episodes present the persistent question that haunts the contemporary imagination about whether the supernatural or paranormal constitutes a genuine element of reality.

Hill documents the concurrent rise in skepticism alongside the rise in paranormal belief. Many important scientists, psychologists, journalists, and stage magicians have made public critiques of paranormal beliefs and their dangers.[25] Hill argues, in reply, that if scholars simply dismiss belief as a sign of gullibility, delusion, and ignorance, they will fail to see how belief engenders new systems of understanding the world.[26] Hill explains: 'new forms of cultural practices emerge which emphasise personal experience as proof of the paranormal. And in the cycle of culture, new products, services and events connect with a never-ending search for unique experiences.'[27] Hill's focus on audience shifts the argument to what the paranormal in popular media allows audiences to do and how it gives them permission to explore and play with beliefs. Some studies show that people do not want to be perceived either as an 'extreme believer' or as an 'extreme sceptic', which are dual and often rival identities for many people today. Through popular culture, 'people learn how to play with paranormal concepts as related to, but also separate from, paranormal beliefs in society.'[28]

As rational academics, we may feel uneasy about the rise in paranormal beliefs as a sign of the rise of irrational forces in society that have the potential to increase chaos and mayhem. But paranormal and supernatural interests may also indicate a contemporary desire to find new paradigms for creating existen-

25 Hill lists the following critics: the late American professional skeptic James Randi, psychology professor Richard Wiseman, journalists Ben Goldacre and Jon Ronson, psychology professor Chris French, and illusionist Derren Brown (2011) 10.

26 Wiseman (2017) is skeptical and sees the danger, but he is also involved in the scholarly study of paranormal claims. Academic researchers at the University of Virginia argue that it is non-scientific to ignore the thousands of paranormal reports and that some objectivity about the reality of such claims must be retained by scholars. See Kelly & Kelly (2007) xvii–xxi, 1–46.

27 Hill (2011) 64.

28 Hill (2011) 43

tial and religious meaning in a world that feels unmoored from the past and from traditional religious structures.[29] As the poet W. B. Yeats predicted 100 years ago, 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; … And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?'[30] Depictions of the paranormal and supernatural in popular culture explore what that "rough beast" may be that is challenging traditional belief structures.

CLASSICS AND THE SUPERNATURAL

Hill's study is a good framework for exploring how classics and the supernatural function in popular culture. Art in general, and storytelling in particular, allow people to explore beliefs and to play with identities in a way that is non-dogmatic, fluid, and evolving. The term 'supernatural' seems better suited for defining and examining the use of classical myths and tropes in contemporary media than does the term 'paranormal', because it encompasses the paranormal and also includes gods and divine figures that dominate classical myths and extend the meaning of the supernatural.

Classical culture as revealed in popular intertexts is a natural bedrock for reimagining the supernatural for four reasons: (1) It contains ready-made and often recognizable images and stories that are multivalent and thus ripe for new interpretations. (2) It avoids strictly Christian religious materials with their attendant baggage. But importantly, classical and Christian references often intertwine in popular culture (as seen in this journal issue) with the result that the presence of the classical recontextualizes Christian images to expand toward broader contexts and meanings. (3) With its inherent polytheism, classical culture lends itself to an eclectic, syncretic mixture of mythologies from many cultures that is so appealing to contemporary audiences: Classical, Celtic, Egyptian, Finnish, Norse, Native American, Asian, etc. (4) It provides a framework for exploring the inter-relationship of the natural and supernatural realms in a broader way than the paranormal. Even for those who do not literally believe in the supernatural,

29 Statistics show the rise of the 'nones', both non-believers but also those who may see themselves as spiritual on some level but do not connect with any institution. See Pew (2021) (accessed January 16, 2023).

30 Yeats (1994) 158–9.

it remains the perfect trope for exploring possible new worlds and new ways of thinking. It also interrogates whether the tension between metaphor vs. reality is a helpful construct. Where does the supernatural or the paranormal take place? Can either be psychological states that possess some species of mental reality? And, in either case, how do they relate to the uncanny?[31]

The next section of this essay explores how the supernatural, mythic, and paranormal function in classical intertexts by explicating the plots, themes, and characters that appear in the texts examined in this journal issue (with some additions from popular media not discussed). These examples can be categorized thematically in the following ways: (1) the afterlife, including the classical underworld, ghosts, and katabatic journeys; (2) the eclectic interplay of Christian, classical, and other mythological characters and tropes from various cultures; (3) ancient gods and figures in mythic fantasies; (4) monstrous females, superhuman and otherwise, with feminist critiques; (5) and clearly modern paranormal representations, including belief in extraordinary and hybrid creatures. The fact that all the texts in this journal issue involve more than one of these categories illustrates intertwined themes that show present beliefs and concerns about the supernatural.[32]

THE AFTERLIFE, THE CLASSICAL UNDERWORLD, GHOSTS, AND KATABATIC JOURNEYS

Because the most common beliefs today about the supernatural or paranormal involve haunted houses, ghosts, and communication with the dead, it should be no surprise that depictions and connections to the underworld or afterlife head the list of topics explored in this journal issue, and perhaps in a wider survey of classical intertexts too. Armstrong's assertion that myth is 'rooted in the experience of death and the fear of extinction' reinforces the prevalence and centrality of this concern.[33] Whether a person believes in the afterlife or not, underworld images explore the fear of death and connections between other

31 For a scholarly overview of theories about *The Uncanny*, see Royle (2003).

32 While I focus on thematic topics, the genre and medium of each text discussed also shape the nature of the reception.

33 Armstrong (2005) 3.

worlds, past and present, the inner and outer realms. The underworld can represent the unconscious, the inner self, and the exploration of the dark side of existence, including the alter ego and the human shadow. It is no accident that the term 'underworld' can refer to criminal cabals that stand opposed to lawful society. In a comic book like *Aquila,* which is an historical horror fantasy, the underworld can also represent a world of torment where the dead gladiator Aquila collects souls for the Devourer goddess.[34]

The dominant presence of dark heroes or anti-heroes in popular media today also draws on underworld imagery from the classical corpus that complicates the dichotomy of good and evil. The recent and growing interest in Hades as a dark hero in popular romance (like Scarlett St. Clair's *A Touch of Darkness*), in musicals (like Anaïs Mitchell's *Hadestown*), and in video games (like *Hades* and *God of War*) indicates the complexity of underworld meanings. It is significant that all the papers in this issue evoke some aspect of the underworld, showing its symbolic dominance: e.g., Eugenides in the Thief series must enter into a 'mysterious underwater temple' to complete his quest,[35] and the ship Argo must be resurrected by divers plunging into a frozen lake, 'an underwater hell-scape'.[36]

Anise Strong's paper, 'The Persistence of Memory: Classical Underworlds, *Damnatio Memoriae* and the Ghosts of Loved Ones', focuses on the underworld as a way of both remembering and forgetting our dead. One of the reasons for the journey to the underworld in classical myths is to communicate with or rescue a loved one, as seen in the katabatic stories of Orpheus, Psyche, Odysseus, and Aeneas. By focusing on the immigrant experience and subsequent 'familial traumas of separation, cultural shock, and loss of ancestral memories', Strong explores why people might want to erase the past and ignore the ghosts of dead ancestors in her six main examples: the 2017 Pixar film *Encanto,* the 2021 Disney film *Coco,* the video game *Hades,* the 2022 film *Turning Red,* the Oscar award-winning 2022 film *Everything Everywhere All At Once,* and the 2022 TV series *Ms. Marvel.*[37] By comparing these texts to the multi-cultural, imperial world of the first centuries of the Roman Empire, Strong highlights both the pros and

34 Thank you to Lynn Fotheringham for bringing the richness of *Aquila* to my attention at the 2022 Isle of Wight conference.

35 Foster (2023) 12.

36 Lovatt (2023) 15.

37 Strong (2023) 2.

cons of cultural assimilation, concluding that we do not necessarily have to forgive the past, but we should not forget it: 'Intergenerational harmony can only be achieved through the preservation of both painful memories, tolerance of new ideas, and maintaining cultural traditions.'[38] Confronting ancestral ghosts and taking katabatic journeys, imagined and real, are necessary to negotiate these conflicts between the living and the dead, between the past and the present.

The papers of both Lisa Maurice, 'From Olympian to Christ Figure: *Lucifer* (2016–2021)', and Janice Siegel, 'del Toro's *Hellboy:* a kinder, more human Heracles', show how the TV series and the film draw from both the classical underworld and from the extensive imagery of the traditional Christian hell. It should be no surprise, then, that the eponymous characters in both *Lucifer* and *Hellboy* mix Christian and classical imagery to interrogate the values of each worldview and the nature of heroism itself. The intersection of the old and the new acts as a crucial site for interrogating religion, constructing new meanings, and reconfiguring value systems in a contemporary context.

Maurice argues that the TV character Lucifer transitions from a trivial, immoral, immortal Olympian to a compassionate divinity, morphing from a Satan figure to a Christ figure in his psychological journey of self-discovery in the series plot arc. Through this dramatized transformation that leads at the end of the series to Lucifer's return to hell as a healer, the nature of evil and justice is explored, as is the nature of the heroic and the monstrous. Thus, Lucifer reflects and reimagines past texts, like Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost,* the lonely figure who, to many readers, is more appealing than God (as also seen in Neil Gaiman's prototype for this series). Maurice argues that Lucifer in this series is a postmodern devil who refuses to take the blame for sin but transfers the responsibility to humans themselves. The journey of the character Lucifer shifts from a focus on the afterlife and immortality to the mortal world, the place where meaning and purpose can be found, which elevates humans above celestials and challenges traditional religious beliefs. Maurice concludes that the values promoted by the TV series paradoxically promote both self-sacrifice for others and self-acceptance that focuses on the importance of the individual: 'By exercising their free will for good, and taking personal responsibility for their actions, mortals are elevated into superior and even supreme beings, creatures with the potential for great power.'[39]

38 Strong (2023) 12.

39 Maurice (2023) 19–20.

Like Lucifer in the TV series, Hellboy is another redeemed devil figure in del Toro's 2004 film, which plays with Christian images of hell while incorporating Jewish apocalyptic monster figures like Samuel and the Behemoth. Siegel shows how Hellboy's appearance, characteristics, and story arc are similar to those of the classical hero Heracles. But in the end, Hellboy's superior motives and ethics, in contrast to Heracles', reveal a more enlightened and admirable character. Siegel recounts the ancient stories about Heracles to show the similarities of the two heroes: they are both sons of two fathers, pulling them between the mortal and immortal worlds; they both have phenomenal strength and power, enabling them to confront and kill supernatural monsters; and they both have powerful enemies working to undermine them. Siegel argues that it is the differences between the two heroes that mold them into very different heroes: 'Heracles' self-interest versus Hellboy's altruism, Heracles' arrogance versus Hellboy's compassion, and Heracles' embrace of his god-given destiny versus Hellboy's difficult decision to pave his own way forward' lead them to different fates, though each receive what they desire. Heracles becomes a god, and Hellboy becomes a man.[40] Both Siegel and Maurice show how the reworking of classical and Christian images and texts in popular media act as critiques of traditional religious ideas and beliefs, creating new heroes for postmodern, twenty-first century sensibilities.

ECLECTIC INTERPLAY OF CHARACTERS AND TROPES FROM CHRISTIAN, JEWISH, CLASSICAL, CELTIC, FINNISH, EGYPTIAN, NORSE, NATIVE AMERICAN, ASIAN, AND OTHER MYTHOLOGIES

Such critiques of traditional Christian beliefs are also facilitated by the eclectic intertextuality in most of the texts discussed in this volume. Strong's six texts combine Christian, Roman, classical, Native American, Chinese, and Pakistani traditional beliefs about the supernatural and afterlife that broaden frames and meanings for the examination of intergenerational conflict, which also emphasizes the similarities and differences of multiple cultures coming into contact. Lovatt explores the interplay of classical, Arthurian, Finnish, and Celtic tradi-

40 Siegel (2023) 19.

tions. The prevalence of such examples illustrates how audiences favor eclectic representations in popular media today. The historical element of the comic book *Aquila* gives a sense of the ancient context for classical and Christian interactions and borrowings, but it also shows the eclectic mixing of Egyptian, Phrygian, and other gods from the ancient world that are so appealing in popular culture today. The interaction of classical, Norse, and Celtic mythological figures in video games like *God of War* and *Final Fantasy* are illustrative of this same trend. Permeable boundaries between realms and traditions are at play in all the examples in this volume. The interconnections among the intertwined layers of various cultures not only favors diversity; it also generates questions about the distinctions between good and evil. Immoral trivial gods from the ancient world create a basis to reject a belief in God and the divine realm here and now. Hierarchies are questioned and diverse traditions are valued, showing the current postcolonial rejection of colonial appropriation.

ANCIENT GODS AND HEROES IN MYTHIC FANTASIES

The fantasy genre uses classical mythology to create magical realms and to explore the relationships and distinctions between gods and heroes and between supernatural and superhuman characters, questioning identities and complicating boundaries between the human and divine, between old and new worlds. The ongoing popularity of Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson* novels (2005–2009), along with the film franchise (2010, 2013), have introduced new generations to the appeal of classical mythology (with modern variations); while J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter books with their film versions revive classical figures like the centaurs and use the Latin language to evoke a world of magic and the supernatural.[41] Fantasy and the supernatural also facilitate the interrogation of the nature and power of religion, religious individuals, and institutions that can both illuminate and injure.

Frances Foster's paper, 'Gods and Magic in Megan Whalen Turner's *The Thief*', explores how the supernatural and magical elements of the story intertwine with the political, and how the novel incorporates classical elements that are both like and unlike ancient Greek texts. For most of the characters in Turner's

41 For an analysis of the classical beasts in the Harry Potter novels, see Hofmann (2015).

fantasy, religion is merely institutional practice; but for Eugenides, the Thief, the old gods arise from their cult statues to interact with him and dominate the landscape in the real world in transformative ways. In the world of the Thief, the new gods represent everyday religious practices, whereas the old gods are merely visible in obscure traditional myths. It is only when Eugenides enters the underground, underwater temple that he encounters the old gods in person in the otherworldly realm. At this point, 'the gods bring the supernatural out of mythological legends and into the narrative action.'[42] It is the 'supernatural power of the gods' that 'transforms the narrative from political adventure to mythical fantasy.'[43]

Helen Lovatt's paper, 'Resurrecting the Argo: Supernatural Re-makings in Robert Holdstock's *Merlin Codex*', shows how the first novel in this trilogy, *Celtika,* juxtaposes the classical with other mythological traditions (Arthurian, Finnish, and American re-makings by Nathaniel Hawthorne and the filmmakers of the 1963 *Jason and the Argonauts*) to demonstrate the polymorphous nature of mythmaking. In *Celtika,* the immortal Merlin recalls sailing with Jason when he hears of a sunken ship in a northern lake, where he then goes to resurrect the ship and the hero Jason. Holdstock uses the ship Argo 'as a metapoetic image for the challenges and complexities of adapting a well-known story' and bringing multiple traditions together.[44] Drawing on ancient sources, Holdstock depicts the Argo as a female divine figure who is key to the narrative arc of the novel in mediating between the characters, divinity, and liminal spaces. 'The supernatural Argo in her union with the Finnish goddess Mietikki symbolizes the renewal of myth by hybridization.'[45] Since the character Medea is also linked with the ship, she too is a site of supernatural re-making. Holdstock reimagines Medea not as the traditional child-killer but as a clever enchantress who created the illusion of her sons' deaths to take them away from their father. When Merlin and Jason encounter Medea at the end of the novel, Jason feels betrayed, and Merlin is left alone to contemplate the failure of their quest and heroism itself.

42 Foster (2023) 12.

43 Foster (2023) 17.

44 Lovatt (2023) 1.

45 Lovatt (2023) 37.

MONSTROUS FEMALES, SUPERHUMAN AND OTHERWISE, WITH FEMINIST CRITIQUES

The fear of women like Medea, as reflected in their monstrous and witch-like incarnations, is an ancient theme that never seems to grow old. Writings with feminist leanings by such notable authors as Mary Shelley, Christa Wolf, Margaret Atwood, and Anne Sexton, to name a few, have been re-presenting Greek myths for generations. But the recent proliferation of similar works by lesser-known authors shows a desire to retell Greek myths from the point of view of female characters, both making them central and redeeming those who have been seen as weak or monstrous. Jennifer Saint's 2021 *Ariadne* has a growing fanbase, while Madeline Miller's 2018 *Circe* is an international blockbuster.[46] It should be no surprise that Medusa has become a central focus for contemporary women and authors for re-making this female 'monster' from antiquity, as in the current 2023 bestselling and critically acclaimed novel, *Stone Blind,* by Natalie Haynes. Supernatural realms and divine females from the classical world provide ample characters for rethinking gender and gender roles in today's world.

Amanda Potter explores the complexity of female monsters in more obscure texts in her paper, 'Classical Monsters and Hero(ines) in *InSEXts, Eros/Psyche* and *Porcelain*'. She shows how three lesbian comic books by two women authors/artists refigure male-centered myths, examine erotic love between women, and explore the question of female monstrosity and heroism. The intersection of myth, gender, and the supernatural is a pivotal site for the breakdown of traditional categories. Using both monster theory and queer theory, Potter shows how 'comic writers can explore the blurring of boundaries between hero(ine) and monster, overturning patriarchal cultural norms as represented in classical mythology.'[47] Set in nineteenth-century London and Paris, Marguerite Bennett's 'horror' comic *InSEXts* (2016–2017) tells the stories of Brahmin-heritage Lady Lalita Bertram, who has the power to turn into a winged, butterfly-like creature that is both beautiful and monstrous, and Mariah, her Irish maid and lover, who has the power of witchcraft to defeat enemies. In both volumes of Bennett's

46 Tartar analyzes and explores retellings of mythic and fairytale heroines in her feminist critique of Joseph Campbell. She notes the ongoing interest in classical heroines and the explosion of new tellings in the last few years, (2021) 59–78.

47 Potter (2023) 3.

comic, brothel women in London and female artists in Paris defeat their male oppressors through graphic violence and magic to define their own lives and tell their own stories, refusing the barriers of class, race, and gender. In Marie Llovet's comic *Eros/Psyche,* the author relates the story of two schoolgirls who fall in love at a strange boarding school where they are left in a paradise world of deceit. As their tale unfolds, the girls re-enact the story of Cupid and Psyche, not knowing where or how their story will end. In contrast, Llovet's other comic, *Porcelain,* describes how the heroine Beryl breaks through a monstrous deception to become her own person as an artist. Potter concludes that these comic book retellings of classical myths and female figures blur the line between monstrosity and heroism: 'the monster is becoming the hero (or the hero is becoming the monster).'[48]

In her article, '"Crazy Man-Killing Monsters": the Inimical Portrayal of the Amazons in Supernatural's "Slice Girls"', Connie Skibinski revisits the ongoing dual identities of the Amazons, which moderns – as did the ancient Greeks themselves – love and hate, or at least fear and admire, for their power and their sexuality. In contrast to the dominant scholarly focus on positive representations of the Amazons in figures like Wonder Woman and Xena, Skibinski examines the often overlooked, monstrous depictions of Amazons as hostile women, especially as they appear in the episode 'Slice Girls' in the very popular TV series *Supernatural.* Skibinski argues that the Amazons in 'Slice Girls' are pictured as 'brutal, blood-thirsty warriors operating within a male-dominated narrative' to challenge and subvert 'the dominant contemporary trend in which Amazons are role models and aspirational figures.'[49] While the Amazon figures in 'Slice Girls' overlap with ancient Greek representations that show them as subverting patriarchal norms with their all-female societies, *Supernatural*'s Amazons are man-haters and man-killers who use their superhuman and supernatural power to destroy all men. They move from ancient female warriors to supernatural monsters (involved in occult worship and cannibalism) that the Winchester brothers must destroy to save both themselves and humanity. The 'Slice Girls' episode ends with Sam killing Emma, Dean's biological daughter from his unsuspecting union with another Amazon, before Emma can kill her own father in a bloody rite of passage. In focusing only on negative images of Amazons from

48 Potter (2023) 23.

49 Skibinski (2023) 5.

antiquity, this *Supernatural* episode reinforces a pattern that critics have observed in this popular series: women as polarized between 'damsels in distress' and 'dangerous seductresses'.[50]

MODERN PARANORMAL REPRESENTATIONS, INCLUDING HYBRID CREATURES

The papers in this journal issue dealing directly with typical paranormal phenomena add a significant counterpoint to the more mythical fantasies, illustrating the intersections between the supernatural and the paranormal. Siegel's paper on *Hellboy* not only presents a figure that comes from the Christian concept of hell, but this character, along with Abe and Liz in the film, are paranormal subjects restrained and studied by government agencies. Strong's study shows dominant beliefs about the paranormal: conjuring the dead, hauntings, and reconciliations with ghosts. But the connection between the classical world and the paranormal goes beyond the examples examined in this volume, as can be expected. For example, the "Upside Down" dimension in the popular series *Stranger Things* (since 2016) evokes the classical underworld and katabatic journeys.[51]

Hybrid creatures can also be categorized as paranormal since werewolves and other mythic monsters show up in lists of objects of current beliefs. But they are connected to motifs in ancient Greek myths as well, especially as depicted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. These stories deal with issues of identity and what it means to be human, as well as what it means to be monstrous and how labels can marginalize and demonize – a theme evident in the retellings of female monsters too. In the animated American cartoon *Danny Phantom* (2004–2007), the eponymous teenage hero meets hybrid monsters like the Minotaur as he struggles to save his town from ghost attacks.[52]

Javier Martínez Jiménez's paper, 'Lycaon and the classical *versipelles* in MTV's *Teen Wolf*', shows how classical references both enrich the plots in the

50 Skibinski (2023) 13.

51 Thank you to Rocki Wentzel, whose paper at the Isle of Wight conference made these connections clear.

52 Thank you to my student Aurora Francone for bringing this text to my attention in her paper on classics in animated cartoons.

series and also work toward intertwining the monstrous and the human as they do in classical mythic transformations. He observes that the world of Graeco-Roman myth is more central in this TV series than in other werewolf depictions. Martínez Jiménez argues that while the creators of the *Teen Wolf* series consciously incorporate legends from the ancient world into their series to 'create a rich mythos as part of their world building', by doing so the 'result is surprisingly different from other works of supernatural fiction.'[53] Werewolves in the twenty-first century are a mechanism to explore basic human conflicts and identities: what it means to be human, the relationship between wildness and reason, and how an individual can fit into a community successfully. All these tensions also relate to issues of class, race, and minority identities.[54]

THE RELEVANCE OF MYTH AND THE SUPERNATURAL

Why is myth still relevant in a post-enlightenment and postmodern secular world? Why are stories with supernatural elements more than entertainment, imbuing the supernatural with mythic and religious functions? My list of uses of the supernatural in popular media show the wide range of reasons the supernatural still appeals to audiences: as entertainment; as explorations of the human psyche – our fears, desires, and identities; as examinations of social concerns and problems; as explanations of philosophical or religious truths; as presentations of popular beliefs about the paranormal; and as considerations of possible other worlds and the mystery of the unknown. No one of these purposes excludes the others since the more multivalent a text, the more levels of interpretation are relevant. Because the first four categories can also be said to apply to fiction in a realistic mode, this raises the question of what the supernatural adds and how it involves a mythic function. The presence of the supernatural always pushes levels of meaning beyond everyday concerns toward larger existential questions because of its crossovers with magic, myth, and religion. Whether the supernatural is proposed as a possible reality or as a mere trope, it allows for imaginative ways of thinking about the richness of human experiences and dilemmas in multiple ways, thus leading in scope toward the mythic realm.

---

53 Martínez Jiménez (2023) 22.

54 Martínez Jiménez (2023) 8.

Freudian psychoanalyst Rollo May lamented the loss of common myths in our society in his 1991 book, *The Cry for Myth,* because he saw them as the essential language through which individuals and communities form identities.[55] May, who died in 1994, was premature in concluding that contemporary society is myth deficient. The problem is not that myth is absent in the contemporary world, but that myth is often considered in too limited a way. There is ample evidence of an ongoing interest in mythic characters, images, and narratives, classical and otherwise, as this journal issue illustrates by providing a look into an enormous catalogue of texts produced since May's book came out over thirty years ago. Films, comics, cartoons, video games, novels, and an abundance of other genres and subgenres show the importance of myth and the supernatural in popular media that serve as mechanisms for the exploration of identities and beliefs. As stated by both May and Armstrong, mythic stories deal with the 'limits of human experience' or 'the mystery of creation' and death. The classical world offers a complex mixture of heroes, gods, monsters, and both earthly and unearthly elements to supply an ongoing treasure trove of supernatural or paranormal material from which to draw the broad landscape of human experience. This is illustrated in the scene on the Greek vase in Figure 1, which depicts Heracles reaching out to entice Cerberus into his chain so this hero can complete his Twelfth Labor. With Athena on the left, Heracles in the middle, and Cerberus on the right, the world of gods on Olympus above, heroes in the earthly realm, and monsters in the underworld represents the full panoply of classical allusions. And the tree and classical column incorporate both nature and culture in a cosmic framework for mythical stories.

55 May (1991) 30–62.

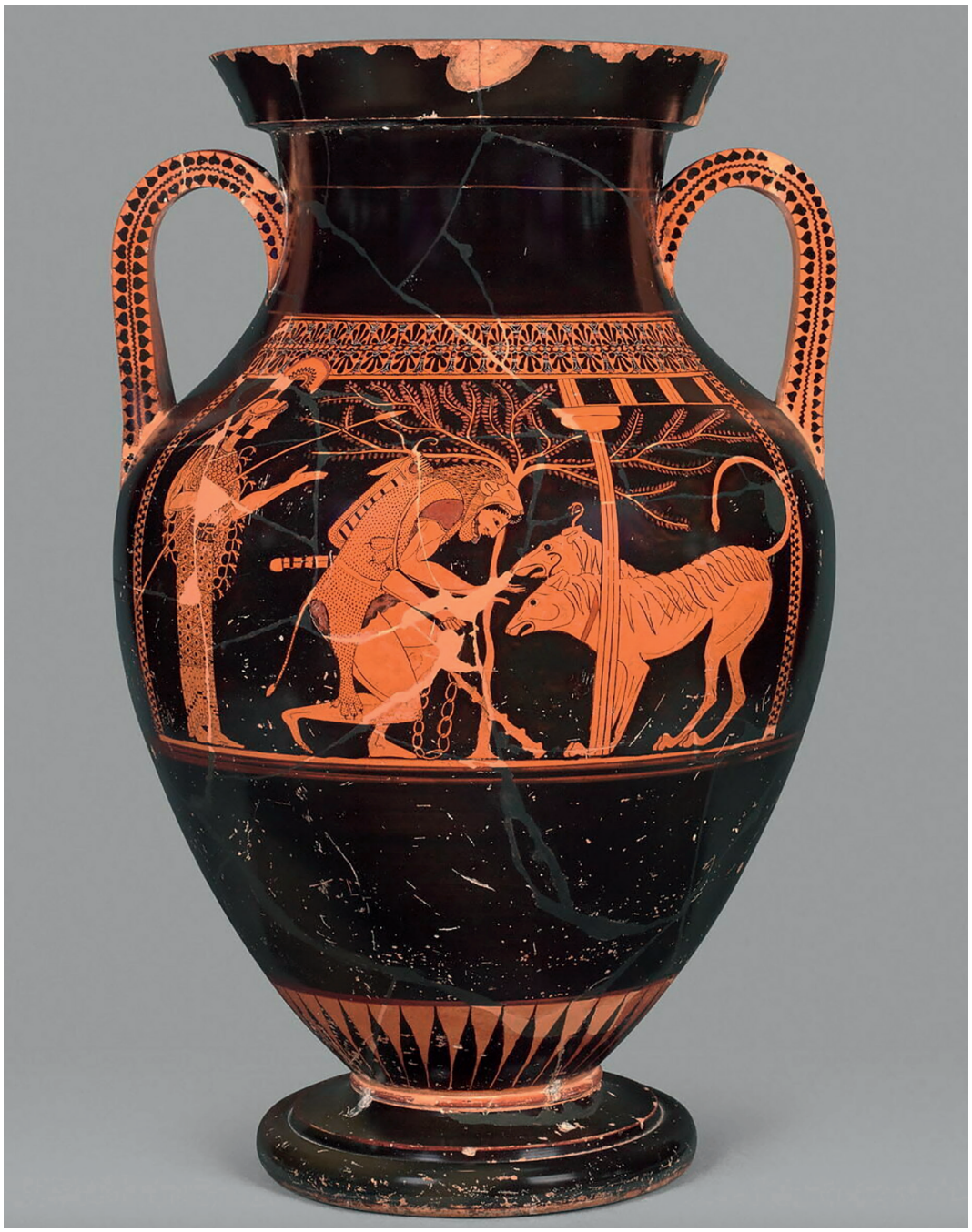

Figure 1 Amphora (515–510 BCE, Red-figure Amphora, Andokides Painter, Musée du Louvre F204, Paris, https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/clo 10269614)

TWO CONTRASTING VIEWS OF CLASSICS AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN POPULAR MEDIA

To show how the concern with the big human questions manifests itself in two very popular contemporary novels with classical intertexts, I will contrast the use of gods and the supernatural in Madeline Miller's *Circe* with Megan Whalen Turner's *The Queen of Attolia,* the second novel in her Thief series. Both books deal with the problem of evil or violence and the misuse of power, but their approach is very different, evoking different responses. Both books are set in mythic worlds influenced by Homer, Hesiod, and other Greek writers. Amazon lists Miller's book under literary fiction, but categorizes Turner's book as young adult fantasy, not just affecting rankings, but also showing the tensions involved in how seriously fantasy or the supernatural are taken as literary productions. Both books pull readers into alternative realities – fantasy worlds if you will. At the same time, both books use those fantasy worlds to explore deeper existential questions about how we should live in the real world.

While Miller draws upon the world of Homer's *Odyssey* directly, she reworks the characters, themes, and plots in a subversive way to challenge the value system of Greek gods and heroes. Miller critiques the supernatural power of these divinities as dangerous and the status of immortality itself as the basis of their abusive treatment of mortals because the immortals live on and on with few limits or consequences for their selfish desires and actions. As Circe says to Telemachus toward the end of Miller's novel, 'Gods are ugly things.' Telemachus responds with something Circe herself told him: 'We are not our blood'.[56] In the end, Circe decides to give up her magical power and change her blood to make herself mortal, thus asserting that growing old and dying is better than immortality. She explains, 'I thought once that gods are the opposite of death, but I see now they are more dead than anything, for they are unchanging and can hold nothing in their hands.'[57] In spite of the rich texture of Miller's compelling book, her gods – except perhaps Hermes and of course Circe – are one-dimensional characters; of course, the story is told from the point of view of Circe, who sees nothing good in the gods at all. Miller presents Circe with an almost modern distaste for divinity, but that depiction is simultaneously reminiscent of Ovid's

56 Miller (2018) 375.

57 Miller (2018) 385.

critique of power through his cynical depiction of the Greek gods in his *Metamorphoses.*

In contrast, Megan Whalen Turner creates a world in her Thief series that looks at the supernatural and the gods in a complex and nuanced way. Though Turner's fantasy world resembles classical mythology and history in many ways, it also deviates from it significantly. As the narrator of her sixth and most recent book says, 'People are no less mysterious than the gods.'[58] In the second book of the series, Eugenides, the Queen's Thief of Eddis, is in the process of wooing the Queen of Attolia, whom he loves deeply, though she had cut off his hand under pressure because he was a foreigner spying on her country. While most people in Attolia 'did not invest much belief in their religion' but give lip service through sacrifices and festivals, Eugenides has seen the gods in person and felt their presence and favor.[59] So, when he thinks they have betrayed him, he demands to know why and refuses to accept the goddess Moira's assertion that the gods are not accountable to humans.[60] When Eugenides persists and asks if he has offended the gods, the answer is 'No'. At this point, all the glass in the temple where he is praying breaks, and he sees the Sacred Mountain explode in a volcanic vision of the future.[61] Another goddess asks him, ''what would you give to get back your hand?'' ''Your eyesight?'' ''Your freedom?'' The Queen?[62] She then tells Eugenides he has his answer, which may seem like no answer at all to moderns because it hangs enigmatically. But her statement connects with how she frames her answer: 'no god is all powerful, not even the Great Goddess.'[63] The convoluted tapestry of fate, choice, and necessity could not give Eugenides both his hand and the queen. He is caught between rival forces (affected by both human and divine wills). Suffering cannot be avoided without the loss of freedom and growth, even by the gods, which reflects the Homeric worldview in which the gods suffer and are not all-powerful. The limitations of Turner's gods make them believable and sympathetic, while the lack of limits for Miller's gods' renders them unsympathetic and unbelievable. Both novels show the power of

58 Turner (2020) 314.

59 Turner (2000) 349.

60 By using the name Moira for the goddess, Turner evokes classical notions of fate.

61 Turner (2000) 352.

62 Turner (2000) 356.

63 Turner (2000) 356.

retelling classical myths for rethinking contemporary issues about power and identity. And they demonstrate the non-dogmatic and fluid ways popular media explore serious questions through entertainment.

CONCLUSIONS

The title of this paper, 'Varieties of Supernatural Depictions: Classics in Contemporary Media', is an homage to the American philosopher William James, who published his groundbreaking book over 120 years ago in 1902, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*. Often called the 'Father of American psychology', James was one of the first scholars to use a psychological lens to explore the nature of religious experiences, which is apropos for this essay's exploration of the ways the supernatural functions in contemporary culture. A proponent of a pragmatist approach to truth and religion, James felt that truth can be verified to the extent that it corresponds with actual things and with observed results.[64] As a founding member of the American Society for Psychical Research, James participated in seances and was open to the possibility of paranormal abilities such as telekinesis and telepathy, though he did not feel they had been substantiated. For these reasons, James is re-emerging as an admired figure for his openness to various possible realms of experience beyond the strictly material.

Contemporary philosophers of religion, such as Wesley J. Wildman, also view religious experience from both a pragmatic and philosophical standpoint. In his 2018 book, *Effing the Ineffable: Existential Mumblings at the Limits of Language,* Wildman says that 'our species is obsessed with trying to eff the ineffable – to limn the liminal, to conceive the inconceivable, to speak the unspeakable, to say the unsayable.'[65] Wildman continues James's project of opening possibilities beyond the merely molecular and sees language about the supernatural and divine as essential to this project. Wildman believes that liminal situations often 'drive us to the very limits of language in search of ways to say what ultimately matters to us'.[66] Other contemporary philosophers of religion, even those who

64 See Martin Marty's 'Introduction' to James (1985) vii–xxvii.

65 Wildman (2018) 1.

66 Wildman (2018) 3–4.

define themselves as atheists, or at least agnostics, decry those labelled 'new atheists' for creating a false dichotomy, or at least an oversimplified distinction, between religion and science.[67] Like Wildman, they see questions of 'ultimacy' and the human search for meaning revealed in the traditional language and practices of religions. Likewise, the images and stories of myth and the supernatural provide tools for working through the basic questions of what it means to be human and how to act ethically. Good art and powerful myths are the best ways of wrestling through such questions without dogma or pretension.

What do we classicists have to add to conversations about the supernatural? We can avoid the trap of thinking of myth and the supernatural as either true or false. Rather we can emphasize myth's symbolic power to deal with vital questions of the contemporary world in complex ways as illustrated in the papers in this journal issue. We can contribute historical perspectives that broaden discussions about the nature of popular media away from a focus on post-industrial technological societies to show the importance of understanding the longer and broader histories of popular culture in pre-industrial societies. Likewise, the wide-spread presence of classical intertexts in popular media today illuminates the multi-level functions of the supernatural in the current world. Classical scholars can bring historical tools into play by examining how mythic and supernatural intertexts have changed over time to reflect both common concerns and ever-changing perspectives. Knowledge of classical myths in their original contexts combined with knowledge about contemporary culture illuminate the ways in which the juxtaposition and interplay between the old and the new can act as a catalyst for rethinking and reimagining current human problems and possible new futures.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Amarasingam (2012). – Amarnath Amarasingam (ed.), *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal* (Chicago: Haymarket Books 2012).

Armstrong (2005). – Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Cannongate 2005).

67 For an examination of debates about atheism and belief, see the edited volume by Amarasingam (2012).

Braudy and Cohen (2016). – Leo Braudy & Marshall Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* 8th ed. (Oxford & London: Oxford University Press 2016).

Burkert (1979). – Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1979).

Buxton (2004). – Richard Buxton, *The Complete World of Greek Mythology* (London: Thames & Hudson 2004).

Carlà-Uhink and Berti (2015). – Filippo Carlà-Uhink & Irene Berti (eds.), *Ancient Magic and the Supernatural in the Modern Visual and Performing Arts* (London & New York: Bloomsbury 2015).

Chapman (2023). Chapman University Survey, https://blogs.chapman.edu/wilkinson/2018/10/16/paranormal-america-2018/ (accessed January 16, 2023).

Csapo (2005). – Eric Csapo, *Theories of Mythology* (Oxford: Blackwell 2005).

Dobson et al. (2018). – Nichola Dobson, Anabelle Honess Roe, Amy Rotelle & Caroline Ruddell (eds.), *Animation Studies Reader* (London & New York: Bloomsbury 2018).

Foster (2023). – Frances Foster, 'Gods and Magic in Megan Whalen Turner's *The Thief*', *Thersites 17* (2023) 32–54.

Gallup (2023). – Gallup Survey, https://news.gallup.com/poll/16915/three-four-americans-believe-paranormal.aspx (accessed January 16, 2023).

Hatfield & Beaty (2020). – Charles Hatfield & Bart Beaty (eds.), *Comic Studies* (London & New York: Rutgers University Press 2020).

Hill (2011). – Annette Hill, *Paranormal Media: Audiences, Spirits and Magic in Popular Culture* (London & New York: Routledge 2011).

Hofmann (2015). – Dagmar Hofman, 'The Phoenix, the Werewolf and the Centaur: The Reception of Mythical Beasts in the Harry Potter Novels and their Film Adaptations', in Filippo Carlà-Uhink and Irene Berti (eds.), *Ancient Magic and the Supernatural in the Modern Visual and Performing Arts* (London & New York: Bloomsbury 2015) 163–75.

Irwin (2009). – Harry J. Irwin, *The Psychology of Paranormal Belief: A Researcher's Handbook* (Hertfordshire: Hertfordshire Press 2009).

James & Mendlesohn (2012). – Edward James & Farah Mendlesohn (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012).

James & Mendlesohn (2003). – Edward James & Farah Mendlesohn (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003).

James (1985). – William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York: Penguin Classics 1985).

Johnston (2018). – Sarah Iles Johnston, *The Story of Myth* (Cambridge MA & London: Harvard University Press 2018).

Keen (2007). – Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* (Oxford & London: Oxford University Press 2007).

Kelly & Kelly (2007). – Edward F. Kelly & Emily Williams Kelly (eds), *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* (Lanham: Roman & Littlefield 2007).

Lincoln (1999). – Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1999).

Lovatt (2023). – Helen Lovatt, 'Resurrecting the Argo: Supernatural Re-makings in Robert Holdstock's *Merlin Codex*', *Thersites 17* (2023) 55–95.

Martínez Jiménez (2023). – Javier Martinez Jimenez, 'Lycaon and the classical *versipelles* in MTV's *Teen Wolf*', *Thersites 17* (2023) 212–244.

Maurice (2023). – Lisa Maurice, 'From Olympian to Christ Figure: *Lucifer* (2016–2021)', *Thersites 17* (2023) 245–272.

May (1991). – Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth* (New York & London: W.W. Norton 1991).

Miller (2018). – Madeline Miller, *Circe* (New York, Boston & London: Little, Brown & Company 2018).

Parker (2011). – Holt Parker, 'Toward a Definition of Popular Culture', *History and Theory* 50.2 (2011) 147–170.

Pew (2023). – Pew Research Center, 'Nones', https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/website (accessed January 16, 2023).

Potter (2023). – Amanda Potter, 'Classical Monsters and Hero(ines) in *InSEXts, Eros/Psyche* and *Porcelain*', *Thersites 17* (2023) 96–124.

Royle (2003). – Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press 2003).

Segal (2004). – Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford & London: Oxford University Press 2004).

Siegel (2023). – Janice Siegel, 'del Toro's *Hellboy:* a kinder, more human Heracles', *Thersites 17* (2023) 143–182.

Skibinski (2023). – Connie Skibinski, '"Crazy Man-Killing Monsters": The Inimical Portrayal of the Amazons in Supernatural's "Slice Girls"', *Thersites 17* (2023) 183–211.

Statista Report (2022). – Statista Report, https://www.statista.com/statistics/935178/paranormal-beliefs-in-britain/ (accessed May 9, 2022).

Stephan (2016). – Matthias Stephan, 'Do you believe in magic? The Potency of the Fantasy Genre', *Coolabah* 18 (2016) 3–15.

Storey (2021). – John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction,* 9th ed. (London & New York: Routledge 2021).

Strong (2023). – Anise Strong, 'The Persistence of Memory: Classical Underworlds, *Damnatio Memoriae* and the Ghosts of Loved Ones', *Thersites 17* (2023) 125–142.

Tatar (2021). – Maria Tatar, *The Heroine with 1,001 Faces* (New York: Liveright 2021).

Toscano (2016). – Margaret M. Toscano, 'Medusa and Perseus, and the Relationship between Myth and Science', in: Stefano Goffredo & Zvy Dubinsky (eds.), *The Cnidaria, Past, Present and Future: The world of Medusa and her sisters* (New York: Springer 2016) 815–21.

Turner (2000). – Megan Whalen Turner, *The Queen of Attolia* (New York: Greenwillow Book 2000).

Turner (2020). – Megan Whalen Turner, *Return of the Thief* (New York: Greenwillow Book 2020).

Watt &Wiseman (2009). – Caroline Watt & Richard Wiseman, 'Foreword', in Harry J. Irwin, *The Psychology of Paranormal Belief: A Researcher's Handbook* (Hertfordshire: Hertfordshire Press 2009) 6–12.

Watt & Wiseman (2017). – Caroline Watt & Richard Wiseman, *Parapsychology* (London & New York: Routledge 2017).

Wildman (2018). – Wesley J. Wildman, *Effing the Ineffable: Existential Mumblings at the Limits of Language* (Albany: SUNY 2018).

Wolf & Perron (2003). – Mark J.P. Wolf & Bernard Perron (eds.), *Video Game Theory Reader* (London and New York: Routledge 2003).

Wolf-Meyer (2019). – Matthew J. Wolf-Meyer, *Theory for the World to Come: Speculative Fiction and Apocalyptic Anthropology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2019).

Yeats (1994). – William Butler Yeats, *Complete Poetry* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Poetry Library 1994).

Margaret M. Toscano
University of Utah
255 South Central Campus Drive
Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, 84112
margaret.toscano@utah.edu

Suggested Citation
Toscano, Margaret M.: Varieties of Supernatural Depictions. Classics in Contemporary Media. In: thersites 17 (2023): Classics and the Supernatural in Modern Media, pp. 1–31.
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.249

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

17/2023 | pp. 32–54

FRANCES FOSTER
(Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge)

Gods and Magic in Megan Whalen Turner's *The Thief*

Abstract Megan Whalen Turner's series *The Queen's Thief* (1996–2020) centres on the political intrigues in a group of countries which are at once very like – but also very unlike – Bronze Age and archaic Greece threatened by a powerful Persian Empire. The first book in the series, *The Thief* (1996), begins as a political adventure haunted by stories of the gods. When those gods directly influence the action, the narrative changes from present political intrigue to a fantasy from the distant past. The mythology in *The Thief* reflects, imitates and distorts archaic Greek creation myths – stories about how the earth and sky were formed, the divine pantheon and heroes. I examine the presentation of this divine pantheon against the narratives about the gods in Hesiod, the Homeric hymns and Homer's epics. I evaluate how the supernatural element interacts with the largely political narrative of *The Thief*. In so doing, I explore how the text blends a 'classical supernatural' with a world that is like – but in many ways very unlike – Bronze Age and archaic Greece.

Keywords Greek gods; Mythology; Young Adult literature; Fantasy; Magic.

URL https://thersites-journal.de
DOI https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.242

THE WORLD OF *THE THIEF*

Megan Whalen Turner is an American author of young adult fantasy literature, best known for her series *The Queen's Thief* (1996–2020). This six-part series centres on the political intrigues in a group of countries which both resemble and contrast the ancient Mediterranean world of the second and first millennium bce, such as Bronze Age Hellenic societies, archaic Greek city states and the Persian Empire. The narrative focuses on the complex political relationships between these fictional countries and their powerful rulers. However, the narrative is also permeated by legendary stories about the gods and heroes from a rich mythology which forms a supernatural element behind the main action. The first book in the series, *The Thief* (1996), is largely a political adventure, in which the main characters are disguised to each other, to the narrator and to the reader, but reveal their identities as members of the royal elite at the end of the narrative. The story is told in the first person by one of the characters – the eponymous Thief – and he is an unreliable and manipulative narrator. When his identity becomes clear towards the end of the book, it is a startling surprise to the reader as well as the other characters.

However, despite its focus on political intrigue, *The Thief* is a fantasy. Halfway through the text the gods appear directly to the narrator, and they change from being distant figures of mythology situated in legend to become influencing forces in the present day, directly affecting the action and manipulating events. This changes the narrative from current political intrigue to a fantasy from the distant past. The mythology in *The Thief* reflects, imitates and distorts archaic Greek creation myths – stories about how the earth and sky were formed, the divine pantheon and heroes. I examine the presentation of this divine pantheon against the narratives of the gods in Hesiod's poems, the Homeric hymns and Homer's epics. I evaluate how the supernatural element interacts with the largely political narrative of *The Thief.* In so doing, I explore how the text blends a 'classical' supernatural with a world that is both like – and very unlike – Bronze Age Hellenic societies and archaic Greek city states.

THE LITTLE PENINSULA

The action of *The Thief* takes place in the Little Peninsula, which echoes the Hellenic peninsula both geographically in its position to the eastern side of the Middle Sea and in the names of the countries, places and people within it. Behind the action in *The Thief* lurks the powerful empire of the Mede, poised to take over any remaining independent states, including those in the Little Peninsula. The Mede empire features more prominently in the later books in the *Queen's Thief* series, where its divergences from its namesake country Media as well as its cultural and linguistic similarities to the expansive Assyrian and Persian empires become clearer. The map which was first published in the 2017 edition of *The Thief,* some 20 years after the text's initial publication, diverges significantly in its proportions from the map focusing on the Mede included in the fifth book of the series, *Thick as Thieves,* also published in 2017. The Little Peninsula is depicted as proportionally larger in the map from *The Thief* than the same landmass in the map published in *Thick as Thieves,* suggesting both maps represent local interpretations and perspectives of the landscape in relation to its neighbours.

The Little Peninsula itself comprises three independent states, each with its own monarch: Sounis in the northwest of the peninsula, Attolia in the south and Eddis in the northern mountains. The names of the three independent states are closely evocative of real places in (or near) the Hellenic peninsula – Attolia echoes both Aetolia and Anatolia, Eddis is reminiscent of Elis, and Sounis recalls Sunium, perhaps with a touch of Salamis. Equally, most characters from the Little Peninsula have names which are distinctly Greek, such as Sophos, Eugenides, Ambiades, Helen and Irene. Despite the phonetic resonances, the countries and their key characters bear no direct similarities to their Greek namesakes. The label indicating the land of the Magyar at the north eastern side of the peninsula hints at the tribes who populated modern Hungary, although the historical tribes did not arrive in Europe until the ninth century ce. There is a strong prehistory to the Little Peninsula, and the characters encounter walls and roads which appear to have been constructed long ago, such as a road 'paved with giant stones laid perfectly evenly'.[1] They claim that no one knows how the road was built since it was too long ago, but they know a legend suggesting these were built by Polyfemus, 'the giant with one eye'.[2] This giant, despite the similar-

1 Turner (1996) 76.

2 Turner (1996) 77.

ity of his name to the cyclops Polyphemus, appears to have been more civilised than his Greek variant, creating buildings for humans rather than eating them. This hidden history, with its accompanying legends, forms a rich backdrop to the ways in which the cultures of the countries develop.

Unlike their classical Greek counterparts, the states of Sounis, Attolia and Eddis are ruled by a monarch – Sounis has a king, while Attolia and Eddis each have a queen. Sophos is the nephew of the otherwise unnamed King of Sounis, and in a subsequent book, Sophos becomes the King of Sounis. Irene is the Queen of Attolia, while Helen is the Queen of Eddis. The existence of unmarried female monarchs marks out the social and gender hierarchy of the world of *The Thief* as different from fifth century Athens, but also unlike the more familiar structures from the Bronze Age as represented in the Homeric epics. Characters drink 'coffee that was thick with sugar'[3] and eat oranges, treating these foods as local, rather than imported, produce. However, the narrative provides no information about colonial lands where coffee and sugar extraction methods might have been developed, or an eastern emperor who might have bred orange citrus fruit from the naturally occurring yellow varieties. Equally, mechanical timepieces, stirrups and gunpowder all feature in this society, although it is otherwise technologically premodern and these technologies do not play a significant role in the plot. Thus, in spite of the existence of gunpowder, fighting still commonly involves swords in hand to hand combat, and those characters who fight have been trained in sword fighting.

The narrative is told by Eugenides, who is in fact the official Thief and cousin of the Queen of Eddis (his title is Queen's Thief), but he spends most of the narrative pretending to be a boastful uneducated street thief from Sounis. Thus, the narrative is told from a hidden perspective – Eugenides's real identity as an educated Eddisian royal is a perspective only available on a second reading of the text. Eugenides tells the story of how, in disguise as a Sounisian street thief, he orchestrated his own arrest and became a prisoner in the city. As part of Eugenides's prearranged scheme, the Sounisian King's magus subsequently hauls him out of prison and takes him on a quest to locate a legendary stone. Eugenides planned his arrest as a street thief because he knew that the magus needed a skilled – but politically powerless – thief to undertake this task.

3 Turner (1996) 111.

RELIGIONS: THE OLD GODS AND THE NEW

At the start of his story, Eugenides describes the city of Sounis and its history with the benefit of his educated perspective. He focuses on the ways the city has changed over time as he outlines how it is arranged from his viewpoint in his prison cell located in the city centre. He states that the prison stands at the summit of the hill on which the city was built, and that the 'only other building there was the king's home, his megaron', which had once been 'a true megaron, one room with a throne and a hearth' (*The Thief,* 4). Eugenides's historical account of the king's megaron recalls the structures used by Mycenaean rulers in the Bronze Age, where 'a major function of the Mycenaean megaron was to provide a throne room for a male ruler, the *wanax* attested in the linear B tablets'.[4] This image of a palace consisting of a single throne room differs from the more urban and complex structure of the city as Eugenides experiences it. He constructs a careful contrast between the historical and the contemporary city, where the agora has become the prison and the temple has been replaced by a basilica. He claims that by the time he ended up in the prison, most people had forgotten that the prison building had ever been anything else. His narrative alerts us to a religious change, as Eugenides informs us that the 'temple to the old gods [...] had been destroyed' in the past by invaders who in turn built 'the basilica to the new gods'.[5] Turner's choice of words echoes a change in religious architecture in antiquity. The Latin *templum* indicates a place or structure dedicated to a particular deity,[6] while *basilica* describes a building with double colonnades.[7] In the fourth century early churches were built with double colonnades and so *basilica* indicates a religious building in late Latin. Turner builds an unseen history into Eugenides's account of the religions and their practices through these word choices.

Nonetheless, we learn relatively little about the new gods. On their journey to locate the legendary stone, Eugenides claims to his companion Sophos that religion has nothing to do with belief. As he does so, he gives the reader a brief glimpse of the new gods who supplanted the old gods in Sounis and Attolia (but

4 Rehak (1995) 95.

5 Turner (1996) 4.

6 Lewis/Short (1879) 1850.

7 Lewis/Short (1879) 223.

not Eddis) when invaders came to the peninsula at some unidentified point in the past. The pantheon of the Nine Gods 'won the Earth in a battle with the Giants',[8] recalling stories of the battle between the Olympians and the Giants in the Gigantomachy. Since Eugenides is actually from Eddis, where the religion of the old gods continues, his perception of these new gods is unsympathetic: 'the First God spawns godlets left and right and his wife is a shrew who is always outwitted'.[9] His depiction of the First God's behaviour in creating many illegitimate children ('godlets'[10]), is reminiscent of Zeus, since he sired many minor gods and heroes. Equally, his description of the First God's wife recalls Hera's annoyance at Zeus's promiscuous behaviour. Eugenides gives a pragmatic rationale for religious practices, asserting that people enjoy feast days at the temple and that they pretend that a god 'wants the worthless sacrificial bits of a cow' so the people can eat the rest – 'it's just an excuse to kill a cow'.[11] This perspective echoes the views of scholars who reflect on the practicalities of sacrifice, since it is an 'economic calculation as well as a ritual obligation',[12] which importantly allows 'killing for eating' in addition to functioning as a social and communal act.[13] Eugenides provides an unusually analytical perspective on religions. His commentary on religious customs serves to distance them from the reader, making these practices feel like they belong to a distant past, meaningless for the present. This reflects our own reception of ancient cult practices as objects of study which may enhance our understanding of earlier societies and their world views. Within the narrative of *The Thief*, the narrator's emphasis on the practical and economic aspects of cult practice lures the reader into understanding the story world as ancient history. This makes the moment the gods appear feel more startling and unexpected.

Although these new gods are part of the contemporary religious practices of both Sounis and Attolia, they are never named in the narrative. We are told that they were imported by unidentified foreign invaders, and the people of Sounis

8 Turner (1996) 83.

9 Turner (1996) 83.

10 Turner (1996) 83.

11 Turner (1996) 84.

12 Bremmer (2007) 134.

13 Bremmer (2007) 144.

and Attolia 'converted to the invaders' religion' long ago,[14] honouring these gods in their city basilica. The new gods remain shadowy figures because they are not part of Eugenides's Eddisian culture. Instead, the old gods underpin the narrative. They feature both in the stories that Eugenides and his companions tell each other on their travels and in the narrative as a whole when they appear to Eugenides in dreams or directly, influencing the action at key moments. The old gods appear to be unrelated to the new gods, but they are very closely connected with the creation of the Little Peninsula and its landscape. The magus calls them the gods of the 'mountain country',[15] Eddis. He explains that the old religion contains 'an almost infinite pantheon, with a deity for each spring and river, mountain and forest'.[16] This echoes the way in which many lesser Greek deities 'personified specific features in the landscape or phenomena in the environment',[17] and they were often geographically limited to a particular settlement or region. The magus then describes a 'higher court of more powerful gods', presided over by a central divinity, Hephestia, the 'goddess of fire and lightning'.[18] His description makes this 'higher court' at first sound like the Olympian pantheon in relation to the localised minor divinities of specific geographical features. However, the old gods are not related to the Nine Gods from the new pantheon, and they borrow different aspects of Greek religious cultures and related near eastern traditions. Hephestia is the most powerful goddess of this pantheon and governs all the others including her parents who are the oldest divinities, the Earth and Sky. Larson points out that all Greek gods were connected with natural phenomena in some way, and so they were all 'nature deities'[19] to some extent. In this sense the new gods diverge abruptly from the old gods, since the former's relationship to the landscape is never explicitly stated.

14 Turner (1996) 69.

15 Turner (1996) 69.

16 Turner (1996) 69.

17 Larson (2007) 56.

18 Turner (1996) 69.

19 Larson (2007) 56.

HEPHESTIA AND CREATION MYTHS

The goddess Hephestia is a composite figure. She resembles several Olympians – her position of power equates her with Zeus and Poseidon, while her name echoes both Hephaestus and Hestia. However, her parentage of the Earth and the Sky situates her alongside the Titans, whose parents were similarly the earth Gaia and the sky Ouranos. Ken Dowden observes that the Olympians are a 'relatively new regime' in mythological history,[20] in contrast to Hephestia's position among the old gods. The Olympians are preceded by the Titans, whose parents in turn arise from either the Ocean (according to Homer[21]) or from Chaos (according to Hesiod[22]). Dowden suggests that, since Zeus is not a creator god, narratives of creation arising from Ocean or Chaos were themselves 'probably Near Eastern imports'.[23] Like Zeus, Hephestia is not a creator god, since her mother, Earth, takes on that role in creating both celestial bodes and geographical features. The Eddisian pantheon contrasts the male-orientated Olympians, since the supreme deity is a goddess. This is a reminder that the world of *The Thief* is not quite like the Hellenic peninsula in the archaic period. Hephestia also reflects, authorises and empowers the presence of unmarried female monarchs, the queens of Eddis and Attolia.

Ancient near eastern myths describing how a primordial being (usually a personified element of the cosmos) created other cosmic components and deities are widespread. For example, the Babylonian Epic of Creation (*Enuma Eliš*) describes how the Ocean Tiamat mingled with the freshwater Apsu to generate various pairs of gods.[24] The Egyptian god of the air, Shu, breathes (or sneezes) the cosmos and its components into existence. Greek cosmogony follows a similar pattern in the *Theogony,* as Hesiod describes how Gaia created Ouranos:

> Γαῖα δέ τοι πρῶτον μὲν ἐγείνατο ἶσον ἑωυτῇ
> Οὐρανὸν ἀστερόενθ', ἵνα μιν περὶ πάντα καλύπτοι,
> ὄφρ' εἴη μακάρεσσι θεοῖς ἕδος ἀσφαλὲς αἰεί.

---

20 Dowden (2007) 46.

21 Hom. *Il.* 14,201.

22 Hes. *Theog.* 123

23 Dowden (2007) 46.

24 Foster (2005) 439.

> Gaia first gave birth to the starry Ouranos, equal to herself, to cover her all around, so that he would always be a steadfast abode for the blessed gods.[25]

Gaia creates Ouranos as an equal and a protector, even though this relationship does not last. In *The Thief,* Eugenides tells a creation story about the old gods which partially echoes Hesiod's version. His narrative makes Earth into the primordial being who has no companion and is therefore the creator god. In his story, Earth first created the Sun, who sent light during the day but 'at night [Earth] was alone'.[26] She then created the Moon for the night, but the Moon 'sent only part of her light and sometimes forgot entirely'.[27] Finally, Earth made the Sky:

> So [Earth] breathed out into the firmament, and she made the Sky. The Sky wrapped himself all around her and was her companion. He promised to stay with her always and Earth was happy.[28]

The behaviour of the earth in the two accounts is similar, although Eugenides's Earth creates other celestial bodies before creating the Sky. In Hesiod's narrative the purpose clause (ἵνα) explains the reason why Gaia creates Ouranos, but the verb καλύπτω (I cover) also contains more sinister meanings, suggesting that Ouranos conceals or hides Gaia, hinting at the later conflict between the two. By contrast in *The Thief,* the Sky spontaneously 'wrapped himself' around the Earth. The verb 'wrapped' suggests a more comfortable and supportive relationship, qualified by the Sky's promise to stay with the Earth. However, the Sky's promise is foreshadowed by the broken promises of the Sun and the Moon, also pointing towards a future conflict and their ultimate separation.

Graf notes that myths about the separation of earth and sky are widely attested in ancient cultures from Mesopotamia to Egypt, and that this separation usually involves violence.[29] Thus, when Tiamat is defeated, her conqueror splits

25 Hes. *Theog.* 126–8. All translations from Greek are my own.

26 Turner (1996) 80.

27 Turner (1996) 80.

28 Turner (1996) 80–1.

29 Graf (2007) 48.

her body in half to create the earth and the sky.[30] The Egyptian air god Shu lifts the sky goddess Nut high above the earth god Geb (for example, in the *Coffin Texts*[31]) and images often show Shu standing between Geb and Nut so that they cannot interact. In Hesiod's *Theogony*[32] Kronos violently separates Ouranos from Gaia after Ouranos hides monsters within her, and his actions enable the Titans to take over from the earlier generation of divinities. In the narrative Eugenides tells, the Sky and the Earth, like their Greek counterparts, argue violently and cause destruction, the Sky with thunderbolts, the Earth with earthquakes. However, the resolution of their argument does not result in their permanent separation. Instead, their eldest child Hephestia intercedes, taking over both powers to create peace: 'Earth gave Hephestia her power to shake the ground, and the Sky promised to give her his thunderbolts'.[33] This results in making Hephestia into the most powerful divinity and head of the divine pantheon, including her rule over her parents.

While Hephestia's parentage parallels her to the Titans, in many ways she resembles the Olympians far more closely. She gains control of both lightning and earthquakes, and this places her in a uniquely powerful position since it gives her supremacy over both her parents. Her dominion over the realms of earth and sky symbolises her ability to intercede, but it also allies her to several Olympian gods, making her more powerful than any single Olympian. The *Homeric Hymn to Poseidon* announces, 'Ἀμφὶ Ποσειδάωνα θεὸν μέγαν ἄρχομ' ἀείδειν|γαίης κινητῆρα' (I begin to sing of Poseidon, great god, shaker of the earth[34]). In the Homeric corpus Poseidon is frequently known by the epithet naming him as 'Earth Shaker', 'ἐνοσίχθων' (for example, in the *Iliad*[35]). When Hesiod lists the children born to Rhea and Kronos, Poseidon is only named as 'ἐρίκτυπον Ἐννοσίγαιον', the loud sounding Earth-Shaker.[36] This contrasts to Zeus, whose power lies in the sky, rather than in the earth and sea. Hesiod lists Zeus directly after Poseidon: 'Ζῆνά τε μητιόεντα […] | τοῦ καὶ ὑπὸ βροντῆς

30 *Enuma Eliš,* Tablet 4, 138–40

31 *Spell* 76 II,2; De Buck (1938); Faulkner (1973) 77.

32 Hes. *Theog.* 178–81.

33 Turner (1996) 100.

34 Hom. *h.* 22,1–3.

35 Hom. *Il.* 7,445.

36 Hes. *Theog.* 456.

πελεμίζεται εὐρεῖα χθών' (Zeus, wise in counsel, [...] by whose thunder the wide land is shaken[37]). However, the juxtaposition of the two powers suggests a conflict between them since Zeus's thunder shakes the land as much as Poseidon's earthquakes. Hephestia combines the powers of Zeus and Poseidon through her control of both earth and sky, thus resolving the rivalry between her two Greek counterparts. She is also linked to a volcanic mountain range, the Hephestial Mountains, and the Sacred Mountain in that range contains Hephestia's fire.[38] Through this volcano Hephestia is allied to the Olympian her name most closely reflects, Hephaestus. Hephestia's links to fire and peacemaking are also reminiscent of the other Greek divinity her name reflects, Hestia the goddess of the hearth. The various skills and dominions of the goddess Hephestia reflect the composite nature of the Greek gods and their counterparts from neighbouring ancient Mediterranean societies. These divinities have complex interrelationships with each other and with the cosmos.

Turner has described the way in which she draws on stories and objects from ancient cultures (such as earrings from Crete and the lion gate at Mycenae) to create places and objects in her fantasy world which echo the ancient stimuli.[39] This evocation presumes an audience who may have some familiarity, however basic, with ancient Greece, perhaps from their primary education. The composite nature of Hephestia draws on a reader's (perhaps half-remembered) awareness of Zeus, Poseidon, Hephaestus and Hestia, relying on the reader to make these connections. Each of these divinities carry associations of weight and power, conferring an impression of Hephestia as part of a similar pantheon. For readers less familiar with the Greek pantheon, Hephestia may even appear to be from the same pantheon, while other readers are rewarded for recognising her composite nature and its implications.

37 Hes. *Theog.* 457–8.

38 Turner (1996) 277.

39 Turner (2008) 149.

HEROIC CLEVERNESS

Specific archaic Greek values permeate the world of *The Thief,* drawn from mythological stories of gods and heroes. The *Homeric Hymn to Hephaestus* invites the Muse to sing of "Ἥφαιστον κλυτόμητιν', Hephaestus famous for skill[40]). The first half of the word κλῠτόμητις indicates fame or renown, but the second half signifies a quality which is a common attribute of Greek gods and their favoured heroes. Zeus in particular is 'μητιόεντα' (wise in counsel) in the *Theogony,*[41] literally, he has 'μῆτις'. This word indicates 'measure, skill and craft'[42], and is also the name of the goddess *Mētis* (Thought), the mother of Athena who was swallowed by Zeus while she was pregnant. In the *Hymn to Hermes,* the eponymous god of thieves has these qualities from birth as Zeus sires a shifty, wily child 'πολύτροπον, αἱμυλομήτην'.[43] Both words are compounds: πολύτροπος, literally 'much-turnings', comes to mean shifty or wily when applied to Hermes. There is no other recorded use of αἱμῠλομήτης in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* database – it is a compound word formed from αἱμύλος (wily) and μῆτις (thought), suggesting the cunning and changeability of the god. Hesiod describes both Kronos and Prometheus using a similar compound, ἀγκυλομήτης (crooked thoughts): 'θαρσήσας δὲ μέγας Κρόνος ἀγκυλομήτης' ('crooked thinking great Kronos had no fear'[44]) and 'μιν ἐξαπάτησε Προμηθεὺς ἀγκυλομήτης' ('crooked thinking Prometheus deceived him'[45]). In both cases, the word ἀγκυλομήτης still retains the key quality of μῆτις (thought) but is modified by ἀγκύλος, meaning bent or crooked,[46] suggesting that there is something devious and negative about their ingenuity. Prometheus deceives Zeus, while Zeus deceives Kronos, just as Kronos deceived Ouranos before him, but in the mythological narrative Zeus is more justified than Kronos or Prometheus. Nonetheless, an admiration of this type of cunning, craftiness and deceit is very typical in archaic Greek literature and mythology.

---

40 Hom. *h.* 20,1.

41 Hes. *Theog.* 457.

42 Beekes (2010) 948.

43 Hom. *h.* 4,13.

44 Hes. *Theog.* 168.

45 Hes. *Erg.* 48.

46 Beekes (2010) 12.

The societies in the Little Peninsula value similar qualities of cunning and deception, both in their mythology and in the ways in which their royals behave. We learn that Hephestia has a half-brother demigod called Eugenides, who shares his name with the protagonist of the novel and later becomes the god of thieves. In the mythical stories, the demigod Eugenides is particularly renowned for the quality of 'cleverness', which enables him to disguise himself, hide and deceive the gods. These skills form an essential part of the narrative, since the Sky god promised to give his thunderbolts to Hephestia, but he breaks that promise by delaying and making excuses. Therefore, Hephestia and the Earth ask the demigod Eugenides to help retrieve (essentially, steal) the Sky's thunderbolts. We are told that the Earth had given cleverness to all mortals, but most especially to the demigod Eugenides, and she tells him that 'he must use his own cleverness if he was to acquire the attributes of the gods'.[47] Eugenides successfully disguises himself as a mole and a bird, deceiving the Sky and a nearby lake goddess, thereby acquiring the Sky's thunderbolts. He then uses his cleverness to bargain with the Sky, insisting that he would only reveal the location of the thunderbolts if the Sky allowed him to drink from the wellspring of immortality, enabling him to become a god himself. Eugenides thus becomes a god as a result of his cleverness, through theft and deceit.

In *The Thief,* 'cleverness' implies not only intelligence, but also trickery and cunning, qualities notably embodied by Odysseus through his epithet πολύμητις, another compound made up of πολύς (much) and μῆτις (thought). This quality allows Odysseus to maintain numerous disguises as well as to obtain or steal valuable items. Odysseus conceals his identity for much of his adventures in the *Odyssey,* for example, calling himself 'Οὖτις' (Nobody)[48] in the cave of Polyphemus, and pretending to be a beggar from Crete after he arrives in Ithaca. He steals sheep from Polyphemus, gains (and loses) a bag of wind from Aeolus, and acquires considerable treasure from the Phaeacians, because he is πολύμητις[49]. Odysseus embodies qualities of cleverness, cunning and deceitful thinking to such an extent that there are several Greek words signifying these traits in the text. He shares the skills of βουλή (ingenuity) and κέρδεα (cunning arts) with his

47 Turner (1996) 118.

48 Hom. *Od.* 9,366.

49 Hom. *Od.* 8,152; 9,1; *passim.*

patron Athena (Zeus also displays βουλή at *Theogony*[50]), and these skills are the ingenuity, cunning and craft which enables them to get what they want. When Odysseus arrives in Ithaca and meets Athena, they both initially maintain their own disguises until Athena reveals she recognises Odysseus. Athena acknowledges their shared skills when she talks to him:

> εἰδότες ἄμφω
> κέρδε', ἐπεὶ σὺ μέν ἐσσι βροτῶν ὄχ' ἄριστος ἁπάντων
> βουλῇ καὶ μύθοισιν, ἐγὼ δ' ἐν πᾶσι θεοῖσι
> μήτι τε κλέομαι καὶ κέρδεσιν·
>
> Both of us understand cunning arts. You're the best of all mortals in ingenuity and stories; among all the gods I'm famous for thought and cunning arts.[51]

Athena parallels their abilities in κέρδεα (cunning arts) while granting Odysseus βουλή (ingenuity) and μῦθοι (stories) in contrast to her own μῆτις (thought), although these words are linked to both characters elsewhere in the epic. Odysseus has a particular skill in telling stories, whether true or fabricated, since this is one of the ways in which he conceals his identity in several situations.

In *The Thief*, Eugenides the god becomes the god of thieves as a result of his cleverness, and – like Hermes – his skills are deceit and theft. These are two of the skills that *The Thief*'s narrator Eugenides shares with his namesake divinity, and other characters admire him for these skills. But he also shares with Odysseus the skill of ingenuity and the ability to tell stories. Like Odysseus, Eugenides spends the majority of the narrative in disguise, fooling the King's magus and his travelling companions as well as the reader. As he tells his story, he leads the reader to believe that he is an uneducated thief from Sounis who is arrogant and boastful. We learn that the magus of Sounis has selected him for his usefulness as an unknown local thief in order to steal the legendary stone (called Hamiathes's Gift) for him. However, only towards the very end of his narrative do we finally discover that Eugenides is in fact the famous Thief of Eddis, and cousin to the Queen. Then we understand that he boasted about his abilities as a thief because he intended to be caught by the magus and wanted the magus to use him to steal the stone. He engineered this because he wanted to steal the

50 Hes. *Theog.* 465.

51 Hom. *Od.* 13,296–9.

stone himself for the Queen of Eddis, but he needed to manipulate the magus for his own ends since only the magus knew where the stone lay hidden. Eugenides describes how he stole the stone from a mysterious and secret underground temple, and when he came out of the temple, he was required to hand it over to the magus. Towards the end of his narrative we learn that he took an early opportunity to steal it back from the magus:

It had hung by my hair since I'd braided it there after the first fighting in the Sea of Olives. As soon as I'd seen the riders attacking, I'd moved my horse, never far away from the magus's, until I could cut the thong around his neck with the penknife I'd stolen the first or second day out of prison. He'd been too distracted to notice and had assumed later, as I'd known he would, that the thong had been sliced by a sword stroke and that the [stone] had dropped into the stream.[52]

Eugenides reveals the extent of his planning, from stealing a penknife early in the journey to calculating an opportunity to steal the stone back, and finally managing to keep the stone hidden and ensuring that the magus thought it was lost in the fight. Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson note that 'Eugenides's strategy is consistently to masquerade as a weaker and less able being than he actually is'.[53] In this instance, for example, he pretends to know nothing about sword fighting, although he is actually a skilled swordsman. Put together, these instances of deceptive behaviour reflect the qualities which Odysseus, Athena and Zeus display, and those characteristics which the ancient texts praise as 'ingenuity' and 'cunning arts'. However, it is the skill Eugenides displays as a storyteller which perhaps most likens him to Odysseus. He presents such a convincing false persona to the other characters within the narrative that they believe his disguise, even though they know about the real Queen's Thief – the magus declares, 'I think the current Thief is named Eugenides. Maybe you're related'.[54] His greatest skill in storytelling is through the narrative which we read, since he is able to fool the audience about his identity, actions and motivations, even more than Odysseus does.

52 Turner (1996) 260.

53 Morey/Nelson (2019) 228.

54 Turner (1996) 86.

THE GODS AND THE SUPERNATURAL

For the first half of the narrative, the gods feature only in the mythical stories which the characters tell each other in the evenings, and which provide the reader (and some of the characters) with important background about the purposes of their quest to find the stone. The gods start to enter the narrative more directly when Eugenides the Thief dreams briefly about Moira, the goddess of Fate and the gods' record keeper, each time he is about to enter the mysterious underwater temple to search for the legendary stone. On his third and final visit to this strange temple he encounters the gods in person, and from this point on the gods bring the supernatural out of mythological legends and into the narrative action.

The temple itself is a strange place, since it lies hidden under the river Aracthus for most of the year. Only in the summer, when the water in a reservoir upstream is too low does the river stop for four consecutive nights, revealing the ancient doors of the temple. The party have to wait until nightfall for the temple to be revealed, and Eugenides the narrator explains that the moment the river vanished 'was as if a giant tap somewhere had been turned off by the gods'.[55] This 'magical'[56] moment leads up to the supernatural state of the temple itself, since this is the place where Eugenides the Thief meets the gods. Eugenides spends his first two nights in the temple exploring the many corridors and false turnings of the maze, since he cannot find the treasure room, altar and *naos* (the main room in a Greek temple containing the cult statue) that he expects to see there. He locates a secret room with a staircase and climbs up until he reaches a room which appears to be filled with people, only they are absolutely silent and ignore him. At first Eugenides assumes that they are painted statues, noticing that 'their perfection made them unreal' as he walks among them.[57] This image draws on the fact that marble statues were painted in antiquity. However, he finds himself in the court of the gods rather than in a familiar temple constructed by mortals to praise the gods:

> There was no altar. There was a throne, and sitting on it was the statue of the Great Goddess Hephestia. She wore a robe cut from deep velvet, its reds darkest in the

55 Turner (1996) 154.

56 Turner (1996) 171.

57 Turner (1996) 185.

> heart of its folds and brighter along the edges [...] I watched the pattern of light on the velvet robe shift with the movement of breath.[58]

Hephestia's red clothing identifies her with her sacred volcano. However, the slight movement of the goddess's breathing that the narrator observes marks the shift in the narrative to the supernatural. Yet the divine world is set apart from Eugenides, since when he looks at Hephestia, she looks 'beyond' him, 'not unaware' of his presence, but 'unmoved by it'.[59] She holds a tray on which the stone lies, and while it is easy for him to reach and take it, she does not interact with him, either to prevent him from taking it, or to invite him to take it, emphasising the distance between divine and human.

Klöckner has observed that in architectural sculpture, figures of the gods 'are frequently separated from humans, for example through architectural elements, and they hardly ever take notice of' each other.[60] This distance or separation is evident in visual displays, but it is also explicit in literary narratives. The scene in the *Odyssey* where Odysseus meets Athena after he arrives on the Ithacan shore is unusual because goddess and mortal communicate openly and as equals, although at first they both disguise themselves and tell lies about their identities, each trying to outdo the other. Odysseus acknowledges that it is difficult even for a skilled mortal to recognise the goddess on meeting her.[61] More commonly, the gods occupy a different sphere to mortals in heroic epic, and they interfere with human actions without direct interaction. This distance, present in Greek art as well as literature, is evident in the way Eugenides the Thief encounters the gods, moving among them but not interacting with them directly. The only god who does speak to him is his namesake, the god Eugenides, who instructs him to take the stone from Hephestia's tray, although the narrator is unable to reply to the god. This god, the narrator reminds us, 'had once been mortal',[62] and this puts him closer to the human sphere.

Eugenides the god assures the Thief that the gods condone his actions and that he will not offend them if he takes the stone. Nonetheless the influence

58 Turner (1996) 186.

59 Turner (1996) 187.

60 Klöckner (2010) 107.

61 Hom. *Od.* 13, 312–3.

62 Turner (1996) 187.

and power of the gods permeates the Thief's adventures after he obtains the stone and for as long as he is in possession of it. In *The Thief,* the supernatural remains just beneath the surface since Eugenides the Thief cannot normally see the gods in the way that he can see and interact with other human characters. But he observes – and is very unnerved by – the effects of their power on him while he carries the stone. While Athena supports Odysseus during his adventures, the hero is unaware of her help at the time, since he is surrounded by strange supernatural characters and occurrences. By contrast, Eugenides expects to operate in a world where the supernatural remains firmly in legends and myths, rather than in the everyday. His concerns, as the Eddisian Queen's Thief, are to bring the stone to his own Queen while preventing the magus of Sounis from delivering it to his King, and simultaneously preventing his other companion Ambiades from betraying both Sounis and Eddis to Attolia. The magus asks Eugenides to steal fresh horses so that they can escape back to Sounis more quickly after the first fighting during which the magus believes he lost the stone (while Eugenides has actually stolen it). Eugenides worries that horses are noisy, making them difficult to steal, so he offers up his customary prayer to the gods to help him in his theft. Unexpectedly, as he leads the first of the five horses out of the stable, he notices that 'the iron shoes on [the horse's] hooves struck the flagstones soundlessly'.[63] He finds that he appears to be under a spell of total silence as nothing makes any noise at all – and he states that the 'silence of the horses had been immeasurably more unnerving than the gods in their temple'.[64] He realises that this means he is no longer operating within the everyday world where he can control and manipulate others by his cunning arts and 'cleverness' to achieve his political aims. Instead, he finds that he is under the gods' control, and the strange things that happen to him situate him in a mythological context in which he has limited power.

Eugenides observes that the silence with which the gods enshroud him allows the divine world to leak into the everyday, since 'the stables had been part of [his] world and the temple had not'.[65] This mixture frightens him, since he can no longer control events in the ways that he expects to in the everyday world. As a result, he discovers that he is 'eager to divest [himself] of the gods' atten-

63 Turner (1996) 211.

64 Turner (1996) 212.

65 Turner (1996) 212.

tion as quickly as possible',[66] in order to regain his autonomy in the political intrigue which he believes he has engineered. He acknowledges that there is a gap between mythology, religion and the gods, since the mythological stories about the gods and the religious rituals which honour the gods do not resemble the figures of the gods he sees, silent and motionless in their hidden temple. He admits that he did not expect that the gods 'might still be taking an interest' in him[67] after he stole the stone, and he feels uncomfortable in their spotlight. The contrast between the gods' disinterest in him when he walks among them and their attention on him as he acts in the mortal world is striking and indicates a shift in the narrative.

The supernatural elements of the story situate the narrative within the fantastic. This is a genre frequently rich in worldbuilding and fictional history, such as the appendices accompanying Tolkien's stories set in Middle-earth and Ursula Le Guin's *Tales from Earthsea,*[68] both of which develop the histories of their fantastical worlds. The supernatural elements in *The Thief* serve also to bring the mythological and magical out of the distant past and into the narrative present, as fits the genre of the fantastic. Although the fantastic is by no means limited to works targeted at younger readers, it is one of the elements which may attract a young adult readership. Eugenides needs to learn to operate within the divine as well as within the human and political environments, and in so doing, he must re-evaluate his understanding of the world. The presence of the supernatural in the everyday forces Eugenides to connect the divine and mortal worlds, and to understand the relationship between them. For the reader, the inclusion of the supernatural reinforces the idea that they are reading an adventure from the mythical past.

In the novel, it is the divine power of the stone that specifically enables Eugenides unwillingly to straddle the two worlds – the everyday and the divine – and this is particularly evident when he receives a fatal sword wound during a surprise attack by Attolian soldiers:

> I'd felt my life dragged out with the sword, but in the end my life wouldn't go. It had stretched between me and the sword. I think that only the power of the gods

66 Turner (1996) 212.

67 Turner (1996) 211.

68 Le Guin (2001).

> could have kept me alive, but my living was at the same time an offence to them. I should have died, but instead the pain went on and on.[69]

Possessing the stone bestows on him an immortality which prevents him from dying when he is mortally wounded. As he carries the stone while he is wounded, he straddles an uncomfortable boundary between the mortal and the divine, between the living and the dead. While he lies wounded and feverish in the Attolian stronghold, both Moira and the god Eugenides visit and talk to him, telling him that he will not die. Carrying the stone enables him to interact with these gods directly, although he remains in the everyday world as the stone gives him only a temporary power. While he carries the stone, he remains impossibly alive and strong enough that he manages to escape from the stronghold, walking up the mountains and back to Eddis. But the Thief of Eddis is not a god, and he carries the stone only until he can bring it to the Queen of Eddis – therefore the injury hurts, and after he hands the stone over to the Queen, he collapses unconscious. He recovers from his injuries, but his recovery process takes time and the gods are absent from his dreams since he is no longer in possession of the stone.

CONCLUSION

The world of *The Thief* feels very much like a part of the ancient Mediterranean world of the second and first millennia bce. However, this resemblance goes beyond the similarities of characters' names or the urban and religious structures we encounter. It permeates the characteristics which the societies of the Little Peninsula value, such as the skills of cleverness, ingenuity and cunning. This leads to the hereditary office of Queen's Thief in Eddis and the respect afforded to the holder of that position, even though the Thief must deceive people and steal from them. These qualities are mirrored in the stories of the gods, since – like their Greek counterparts – the gods also value cleverness and cunning over strength. The characters of the main narrative take part in complex plots which change the political relationships between the countries, but at the same time their actions and adventures resemble those of legendary heroes. The

69 Turner (1996) 225.

Thief Eugenides enters a mysterious temple which leads to the court of the gods, and he walks among the gods to take the legendary stone. While he carries the stone, his prayers to the gods are answered, so that a spell of divine silence enables him to steal provisions and horses. The stone protects him from death, enabling him to survive a mortal wound and recover enough strength to make a long journey on foot up the mountains to Eddis. Aspects of his adventures mirror those stories told about his divine namesake, the god Eugenides. While the narrator's heroic status is amplified by the gods' interest in him, he emphasises that it is the stone that prompts this interest. He complains that the stone makes him into the gods' 'instrument, used to change the shape of the world'.[70] In this sense, Eugenides has a different relationship with the gods than Odysseus, who is favoured and enhanced by Athena's patronage.

The gods remain shadowy supernatural forces in the narrative, visible in form or effect only to the Thief while he is in possession of the stone. The myths about the creation of the world connect Hephestia's divine pantheon to the mountains and rivers of Eddis. However, the Thief Eugenides senses a disjuncture between the myths and what he has seen of the gods, which leads him to 'doubt all of the stories'[71] he has heard about them. He muses:

> If the gods were incarnations of the mountains and rivers around us, or whether they drew their power from those sources, I couldn't say. They had greater power than any mortal.[72]

The gods belong to a supernatural level which lies beyond human understanding, and we learn that they governed the Thief's actions for longer than he initially realised. Just as Athena points out to Odysseus that she kept watch over him even though he did not know,[73] Eugenides discovers that 'the gods must have arranged'[74] the many coincidences which enabled him to complete his quest successfully. Ironically, this ensures the gods' direct involvement with the human sphere, since their supernatural intervention enables the political connections

70 Turner (1996) 278.

71 Turner (1996) 261.

72 Turner (1996) 261.

73 Hom. *Od.* 13, 299–301.

74 Turner (1996) 262.

between the countries of the Little Peninsula to develop. The supernatural power of the gods transforms the narrative from political adventure to mythical fantasy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Beekes (2010). – Robert Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2010). (Two volumes).

Bremmer (2007). – Jan Bremmer, 'Greek Normative Animal Sacrifice', in: Daniel Ogden (ed.), *A Companion to Greek Religion* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell 2007) (= *Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World*) 132–44. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996911.ch9

De Buck (1938). – Adriaan De Buck, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts II: The Text of Spells 76–163* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1938) (= *Oriental Institute Publications 49*).

Dowden (2007). – Ken Dowden, 'Olympian gods: Olympian Pantheon', in: Daniel Ogden (ed.), *A Companion to Greek Religion* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell 2007) (= *Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World*) 41–55. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996911.ch3

Faulkner (1973). – R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts: Volume 1, Spells 1–354* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips 1973).

Foster (2005). – Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (3rd edition) (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press 2005).

Graf (2007). – Fritz Graf, 'Myth', in: Sarah Iles Johnston (ed.), *Ancient Religions* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2007) 45–58. https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674039186-008

Larson (2007). – Jennifer Larson, 'A Land Full of Gods: Nature Deities in Greek Religion', in: Daniel Ogden (ed.), *A Companion to Greek Religion* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell 2007) (= *Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World*) 56–70. https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470996911.ch4

Lewis and Short (1879). – Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1879).

Klöckner (2010). – Anja Klöckner, 'Getting in Contact: Concepts of Human–Divine Encounter in Classical Greek Art', in: Jan M. Bremmer & Andrew Erskine (eds.), *The Gods of Ancient Greece: Identities and Transformations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2010) 106–25. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748642892-011

Monro and Allen (1963). – D.B. Monro and T.W. Allen, *Homer: Iliad* (two volumes) (3rd edition) (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1963) (= *Oxford Classical Texts*)

Monro and Allen (1963). – D.B. Monro and T.W. Allen, *Homer: Odyssey* (two volumes) (2nd edition) (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1963) (= *Oxford Classical Texts*)

Monro and Allen (1963). – D.B. Monro and T.W. Allen, *Homer: Hymns, etc* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1963) (= *Oxford Classical Texts*)

Morey and Nelson (2019). – Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson, *Topologies of the Classical World in Children's Fiction: Palimpsests, Maps and Fractals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 2019). https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198846031.001.0001

Rehak (2001). – Paul Rehak, 'Enthroned Figures in Aegean Art and the Function of the Mycenaean Megaron', in: Paul Rehak (ed.), *The Role of the Ruler in the prehistoric Aegean* (Liège: Université de Liège 2001) 95–118.

Solmsen, Merkelbach and West (1990). – Friedrich Solmsen, R. Merkelbach and M.L. West, *Hesiod: Theogonia, Opera et Dies, Scutum, Fragmenta Selecta* (3rd edition) (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1990) (= *Oxford Classical Texts*)

Turner (1996). – Megan Whalen Turner, *The Thief* (2nd edition) (New York: Greenwillow 2017).

Turner (2008). – Megan Whalen Turner, 'Particles in Suspension', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 32.2 (2008) 148–54. https://doi.org/10.1353/uni.0.0002

Frances Foster
Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge,
184 Hills Road, Cambridge, CB2 8PQ, UK
fjf20@cam.ac.uk

Suggested citation

Foster, F.J.: Gods and Magic in Megan Whalen Turner's *The Thief*. In: thersites 17 (2023): Classics and the Supernatural in Modern Media, pp. 32–54.
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.242

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

17/2023 | pp. 55–95

HELEN LOVATT
(University of Nottingham)

Resurrecting the Argo

Supernatural Re-makings in Robert Holdstock's *Merlin Codex*

Abstract This paper analyses the relationship between the figure of the Argo (ship and character) and the supernatural in the mythic fantasy of Robert Holdstock's *Merlin Codex*. It shows how Holdstock's re-writing of the *Argonautica* draws on various versions from the Argonautic tradition, including Euripides' *Medea,* Apollonius, Valerius Flaccus, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Treece and the 1963 film *Jason and the Argonauts.* It sets Holdstock's Argo alongside other representations, as divine herself, possessed by divinity, and a channel of communication with the divine, and in the context of Holdstock's previous work, particularly *Mythago Wood, Lavondyss* and *Merlin's Wood.* The paper argues that Holdstock uses the Argo as a reflection of myth itself, a version of the forest in *Mythago Wood,* as well as a metapoetic image for the challenges and complexities of adapting a well-known story, bringing multiple mythological traditions (Arthurian, Finnish and Argonautic) together. It reflects on Holdstock's relationship to the ancient genres of epic and tragedy, as well as Argo as plot facilitator and mechanism of transformation and transition. Holdstock's relationship with ancient literature is richer and deeper than previously acknowledged; his self-conscious plays reveal a deep understanding of the polymorphous nature of mythical traditions.

Keywords Holdstock, *Merlin Codex,* Argonauts, Argo, myth

URL https://thersites-journal.de
DOI https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.254

INTRODUCTION

Robert Holdstock was well-known for his powerful *mythopoiesis*, particularly in his breakthrough novel, *Mythago Wood* (1984), and its sequel, *Lavondyss* (1988), in which an ancient British woodland enables and activates the mythic archetypes of those living in the vicinity, bringing them to life as 'mythagos'. His much later trilogy, *The Merlin Codex* (2001–2006), melds Arthurian legend with Greek mythology, and uses the Argo as an alternative image for the woodland, a vector of myth.[1] This paper outlines Holdstock's portrayal of the Argo in the first volume of the trilogy, *Celtika.* By looking at the process of searching, diving, raising, reanimation and revival, it shows how Holdstock uses the Argo to reflect on the process of rewriting myth. The paper puts *The Merlin Codex* into the context of his earlier writings, and gives some indication of which versions in the Argonaut tradition shape Holdstock's Argo-myth. It compares the focus on British mythology and history in *Mythago Wood* and *Lavondyss* with the encounter between Celtic, Finnish and Greek mythological figures (among others) in *Celtika.* Overall, it shows the richness and complexity of Holdstock's metapoetic mythological self-fashioning and his engagement with complex ideas about genre, belief and the power of story.

The paper will begin by introducing Holdstock, then give a brief survey of the representation of the Argo as divine or supernatural in several influential versions of the Argonaut story, show how the trilogy starts from the ending of Euripides' *Medea* but with strong echoes of Hera in the 1963 Ray Harryhausen film, and continue with a detailed reading of the sections of *Celtika* in which the Argo is rediscovered, raised, resurrected, rebuilt and reanimated. The paper finishes with a brief summary of the Argo's supernatural agency later in *Celtika,* demonstrating how the Argo becomes gradually divorced from her material identity, operating as threshold between spiritual worlds and narrative locations, and enabling a generic shift from epic quest narrative to tragic recognition, reversal and destruction. Argo and her divine sponsors guard transitional moments, allowing movement from one scene or narrative level to another, not unlike the gods of ancient epic. The importance of ancient texts and genres (particularly Greek epic and tragedy) in shaping the narrative mechanics of Holdstock's fantasy has not been fully recognised.

1 Holdstock (2001); Holdstock (2002); Holdstock (2006).

INTRODUCING ROBERT HOLDSTOCK AND THE MERLIN CODEX

The British science fiction and fantasy writer, Robert Holdstock (1948–2009), is well-respected in the SFF community but as yet not much studied by academics.[2] The *Mythago Wood* cycle is called 'a central contribution to 20th-Century fantasy' by John Clute, co-editor of the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy.*[3] Holdstock's work won numerous awards, especially for *Mythago Wood.*[4] The *Merlin Codex* trilogy, also award-winning, consists of *Celtika* (2001), *The Iron Grail* (2002) and *The Broken Kings* (2007).[5] This trilogy continues to draw on the mythology of the Mythago sequence, looking at it from a different angle: where the central character of *Lavondyss,* Tallis, carves ten masks that represent Holdstock's key mythological archetypes, Merlin of the *Merlin Codex* embodies one of these archetypes and looks at the human world through his extremely long-lived but forgotten experiences. The *Merlin Codex* weaves together two key quest narratives, the *Argonautica* and the Holy Grail, via the historical encounter between Celts and Greeks in 279 BC (Brennus' raid on Delphi). The quest is primarily focused around the resurrected Jason, who comes back to life in order to find his sons, who have been hidden in time by Medea, one of Merlin's fellow-travellers along the paths of immortality. Alongside him, crew member Urtha, king of Alba,

2 Holdstock died suddenly at 61. A memorial issue of *Ansible* is available online at: https://news.ansible.uk/a270supp.html (accessed 30. 12. 2022). Obituary from the Guardian: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/dec/02/robert-holdstock-obituary (accessed 30. 12. 2022). The edited volume *Morse and Matolcsy* (2011) is the main study to date; Manwaring (2018), accessible at https://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/wip-editions/articles/ways-through-the-wood-the-rogue-cartographies-of-robert-holdstocks-mythago-wood-cycle-as-a-cognitive-map-for-creative-process-in-fiction.html (accessed 30. 12. 22), deals with Holdstock's topography in the *Mythago Wood* cycle as a metapoetic landscape. Kincaid (2022) is an excellent introduction to *Mythago Wood,* as well as reflecting on Holdstock's oeuvre, although the section on the *Merlin Codex* is relatively brief.

3 Manwaring (2018) citing Clute and Grant (1999) 475.

4 *Mythago Wood:* BSFA Best Novel (1984), World Fantasy Award (1985); *Lavondyss:* BSFA Best Novel (1988).

5 Holdstock's work also achieved wide international recognition, and the awards for the *Merlin Codex* included the Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire 2004 for *Celtika,* and the Czech Academy of SFF and Horror Award 2002 for *The Iron Grail.*

seeks to find out why his kingdom is under threat, and to restore it, while Merlin himself is seeking his own forgotten past. The supernatural plays a key role both in Holdstock's overarching mythology (the beliefs of communities shape archetypes which can manifest as mythagos and aid communities in times of threatened survival) and in the *Merlin Codex* in particular (motifs of *katabasis* recur, alongside prophecy, and wider interest in the religious beliefs, folklore, magical practices and mythologies of various European countries, not just Britain).[6]

THE DIVINE ARGO

Where Ryhope Wood, the wood of the novel *Mythago Wood,* contains and enables the mythological narratives of the *Mythago Wood* series, shaping, expanding, powering, crossing borders and historical periods, engulfing and threatening the people it draws into itself, but remaining located in the British countryside and imagination, the Argo plays something of this part in the *Merlin Codex,* enabling the narrative to go beyond the boundaries of the British imagination but take something of Britain with it. In this, Holdstock draws on ancient traditions about the Argo as embodiment of myth, *numen* and poetry, as well as wider traditions about the Argonauts as founders and vectors of identity, in British as well as other retellings. Reviewers have seen the importance of Argo as a character: Keith Brooke at calls the Argo 'One of the central mysteries in *Celtika*', 'alive and very much a character in this novel – a wild and unpredictable presence.'[7]

The Argo is frequently used as an emblem for the Argonaut story and features in artistic representations from very early in the surviving materials, for

6 In *Mythago Wood,* there is a reference to a similar ancient mythological woodland in France, encountered when Harry is shot down during World War 2, which implies that the phenomenon of Ryhope Wood is not purely British, but the focus is squarely on local mythology (Roman Britain, the Civil War, prehistory). The *Merlin Codex* broadens to include characters from Ireland, Wales, Finland, Romania and Germany, as well as Greece. The implication remains, however, that there is a special connection between British and Greek mythology.

7 Keith Brooke in an online review at http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/nonfiction/celtika.htm (accessed 31. 12. 2022).

instance in the metopes of the Sikyonian treasury.[8] Circe in the *Odyssey* calls the Argo *'pasi melousa'*, 'well-known by all'.[9] Apollonius represents the Argo as the subject of former poets:

> As for the ship, the songs of former poets still tell how Argos built it according to Athena's instructions.[10]

The relationship between Argo and the divine is also early: Athena either designs or actually participates in building the Argo.[11] A first century CE relief from Porta Latina, now in the British Museum, shows Athena and Argos working together on the ship. The Argo is frequently represented as an innovative or transitional ship, allowing new types of travel; in Latin poetry Argo becomes an image of the beginnings of marine travel, the first ship.[12] In his catalogue of heroes, Apollonius credits Athena with inspiring Hercules to join the crew, and describes the Argo as the most outstanding (*proferestate*) of ships that have challenged the sea.[13] This divine construction explains the Argo's importance, but does it also give the ship its own transferred divinity?

Another ancient element of representations of the Argo is the incorporation of a prophetic branch from the Oak of Dodona, which allows the ship to speak and communicate the intentions of the gods. This is likely to be an early part of the myth, because there is early evidence: a fragment of the tragedian Aeschylus, from a play entitled either *Argo,* or *Kopastai* (Oarsmen), refers to the ship's voice and its associations with the gods: 'The holy speaking beam of the Argo groaned aloud'.[14] The context in which this fragment is quoted, by Philo, gives a stronger

---

8 Metopes of the Sikyonian treasury, Doric frieze, ca. 570–550 BCE, Delphi Archaeological Museum. For details see the useful information at http://data.perseus.org/artifacts/sculpture/Delphi%2C+Sikyonian+Treasury+%28Monopteros%29+Metopes (accessed 26 April 2023).

9 Hom. *Od.* 12.70.

10 Apoll. Rhod. *Arg.* 1.18–9.

11 On Argo and the gods, Gaunt (1972) sees Apollonius as removing magical elements associated with Argo in earlier traditions, and instead substituting dignified Olympian interventions in a Homeric manner.

12 On Argo as first ship, see Jackson (1997); in Latin poetry, Fabre-Serris (2008).

13 Apoll. Rhod. *Arg.* 1.113.

14 Aesch. Fragment 20, Sommerstein.

sense of an ancient idea of the ship itself as a character with agency and intentionality: Philo says that the Argo, 'being endowed with soul and reason, would not allow slaves to step aboard her'.[15]

Key versions in the intervening Argonaut tradition show that the Oak of Dodona and the ship's role in communicating divine will remain a popular part of nineteenth and twentieth century retellings. One of the most widely read children's versions, *Tanglewood Tales* by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1853), returns more than once to the voice of the Argo.[16] In this version, when Jason is initially confronted with the quest of the Fleece, he turns to the Oak of Dodona for advice,[17] and it tells him to commission Argus to build the ship. There is no mention of Athena, and when the ship is finished, Jason returns to the Oak which instructs him to cut off a branch to use as figurehead.[18] The carver 'finds that his hand was guided by some unseen power' and produces an image of a beautiful woman, with a helmet and a shield, on which is displayed 'the head of Medusa with the snaky locks', essentially an image of Athena. Later, when Jason cannot work out how to launch the Argo, he turns to the 'galley's miraculous figurehead', which he calls 'daughter of the Talking Oak',[19] and which instructs Orpheus to play his harp '(for it had known what had ought to be done from the very first, and was only waiting for the question to be put)'.[20]

> At the first ringing note of the music they felt the vessel stir. Orpheus thrummed away briskly, and the galley slid at once into the sea, dipping her prow so deeply that the figure head drank the wave, with its marvellous lips, and rising again as buoyant as a swan. [...] the vessel seemed to dance over the billows by way of keeping time to it.'[21]

15 Philo, *That Every Virtuous Man is Free* 143. The Oak of Dodona is also mentioned by the probably fifth century BCE mythographer Pherecydes at 3F111. On early Greek mythography, see Fowler (2000).

16 Hawthorne (1950 [1853]).

17 *Tanglewood Tales* 222–5.

18 *Tanglewood Tales* 226.

19 *Tanglewood Tales* 232.

20 *Tanglewood Tales* 232.

21 *Tanglewood Tales* 232–3.

Throughout Hawthorne's retelling, Jason frequently appeals to the figurehead for help.[22] Later Medea claims to be the one who was watching him and speaking to him through the figurehead (245), inserting herself into the position of Hera and Athena as his advisers. This version thus plays complex games with causation, where Hera, who in Apollonius motivates the expedition in order to bring Medea back to Greece and punish Pelias, is over-written by Medea herself. Hawthorne's version was very popular and widely read, and I would argue that children's versions encountered early in development can become unconscious influences on adult creators.[23]

The prominence of Argo's role as communicator of divine will is cemented in the twentieth century by the 1963 *Jason and the Argonauts* film (dir. Chaffey, legendary special effects by Ray Harryhausen), the most influential version of the story in that period. The film also features a figurehead carver driven by unseen inspiration to create an image of a beautiful woman with ringlets but makes it clear that Hera is the goddess concerned. The figurehead has a strong resemblance to Honor Blackman, echoing her hairstyle, braided around the head and descending into ringlets, and her prow-like crown. The figurehead is located on the stern, allowing Jason to consult her more easily. The influence of the 1963 film can be seen in the prominence of a figurehead that looks like Hera in various later versions. Two children's picture books show the cultural pervasiveness: Yomtov and Sandoval's 2009 graphic novel, *Jason and the Golden Fleece,* includes a double-page scene at Dodona, and a figurehead which visually recalls the 1963 image of Hera, with its golden hair and position in the stern;[24] Malam and Antram's 2005 picture book also has a figurehead clearly located in the stern, although the ship itself looks more like Noah's Ark as it is pictured during construction.[25]

An alternative way of portraying the Argo's divine connections and communication is exemplified by Robert Graves' 1944 novel *The Golden Fleece.* His telling of Jason's visit to Dodona and the gift of the branch closely resembles that

---

22 *Tanglewood Tales* 229 (how to find a crew), 232 (how to launch), 237 (for help with the Stymphalian birds).

23 On Argonauts in children's literature as influential on the wider tradition: Lovatt (2020); Lovatt (2021).

24 Yomtov and Sandoval (2009), *Jason and the Golden Fleece* 18–9.

25 Malam and Antram (2005), *Jason and the Argonauts* 14.

of Hawthorne,[26] and the branch is incorporated into the prow during his detailed description of Argus' building process.[27] The Argo influences the direction of the narrative at least twice: when the Argonauts quarrel after accidentally abandoning Hercules, Mopsus the soothsayer resolves the disagreement by listening to the branch and relaying its instructions ('The branch says').[28] After Jason's killing of Apsyrtus, the crew are anxious to avoid pollution: 'The creaking voice of Ascalaphus of Orchomenos broke the long silence. "I hear a strange singing sound from the prow"'.[29] Again, Mopsus listens intently and relays the instructions of the gods, that Jason and Medea should leave the ship and travel back by land (here Graves uses the divine message to introduce his own tendentious variant on the usual wanderings of the whole crew). So Graves incorporates the supernatural beliefs and motivations, but allows a rationalising interpretation in which the prophets are manipulating those around them into following their own preferred course of action. As the paper will show, these versions are also influential for Holdstock's interpretation of the Argo in the *Merlin Codex*.

EPIGRAPHS OF GROWTH AND DISTANCE

The two epigraphs of Holdstock's *Celtika* assert the importance of *Argo* and her importance in shaping ideas of heroism and masculinity addressed in the series (she is called 'Ship of Heroes' in the 'Afterword'[30]).

> It was so old a ship – who knows, who knows?
> – And yet so beautiful, I watched in vain
> To see the mast burst open with a rose
> And the whole deck put on its leaves again.
>
> From *The Old Ships* by James Elroy Flecker

26 Graves (1944), *The Golden Fleece* 63.

27 *The Golden Fleece* 73.

28 *The Golden Fleece* 195.

29 *The Golden Fleece* 350.

30 *Celtika* 326.

The age of the ship creates its beauty, as with the age of the Argonaut story, but the desire of the poet is to renew it, bring the wood itself back to life, not just rebuild the ship. The idea of connecting with a life force through ancient story is central to Holdstock's poetics. He pairs this with a quotation from Tennyson's *Ulysses,* which emphasises the distance between ancient heroism and later achievement, but also asserts continuity.[31] Holdstock sets himself in a long tradition of adopting and drawing power from Greek myth, suggesting that he, like Tennyson, operates with the same striving as Homer in connecting with greater men of past ages.

ARGO, HERA AND EURIPIDES' *MEDEA*

In an interview with Paul Kincaid, Holdstock describes why he decided to write about Jason and Medea.[32] He was at the theatre watching ('the delectable' *sic*) Diana Rigg play Medea, a performance so good it left him 'shaking with delight'. After Medea murders her children, however, the two child actors were 'talking and giggling' and he has the idea for a continuation of the story in which the killing was an illusion: 'And I thought, what a great idea! That she didn't kill her sons at all, she just sham-killed them, hid them in time – back to time – and then Jason himself finds out what she's done.' Later, he points out that a key relationship in the trilogy is that between Medea and Argo.

The prologue of Holdstock's trilogy begins from the end of Euripides' *Medea,* with what is traditionally the death of Jason, as predicted by Medea: 'And you as is proper for a bad man, will die badly, hit on the head by a remnant of the Argo.' (Eur. *Med.* 1386–7) This is also the last moment of Henry Treece's 1961 novel, *Jason,* which ends with the death of its narrator.[33] Holdstock starts from this moment of ending, setting it at a plausible historical date of 978 BCE, in 'Iolkos'. Jason has been living on the rotten hulk of the Argo, when the ship orchestrates his death:

---

31 Importance of war context: Kincaid (2022) 30–51.

32 Kincaid (2011), included in the 2011 memorial booklet posted out to members of the British Science Fiction Association, 'The Memory of Stories', and kindly sent to me in pre-publication form by Tony Keen.

33 Treece (1961), *Jason* 336.

> As if his words had broken a charm, a rotten spar cracked away from Argo's mast, crashed down to the deck of the ageing ship, striking the hero who sat there in a dream. The wound was mortal, by the sounds of the cracking bones and the sudden flow of blood and pain from Jason's mouth.
>
> Tisaminas turned to run, to raise the call, but a voice whispered to him, 'Stay here. Remember what you see.'
>
> He glanced behind him. A dark-eyed girl stood there, wrapped in a green cloak. She smiled at him, then drew his attention back to Argo.[34]

The Argo seems deliberately to kill Jason, while the girl evokes the appearance of the goddess Hera at the beginning of the 1963 film, as Pelias kills Jason's sisters, violating the statue of Hera where they beg for protection. There, too, she is wrapped in a dark cloak, and seems initially to be an anonymous slave girl.

Holdstock's beginning death scene gathers the Argonauts back together to send off their dead comrade; it is the ship that has called them. Readers might initially assume that the girl, too, represents the Argo, but Jason's friend Tisaminas reveals that she is Hera: 'the goddess who had protected Jason for the better part of his life.'[35] The Argo's decomposition is only partial and she takes him 'to a safe place of burial'.[36]

The prologue shows the importance of Argo for Holdstock, the complex relationship between goddess and ship, the starting point from Euripides' *Medea* and the influence of the 1963 Argonauts film. The ship itself begins in *Medea* and moves to its new narrative context, taking charge of stage-managing *Celtika.*

34 *Celtika* 3.

35 *Celtika* 3.

36 *Celtika* 4.

DIVING: THE SEARCH FOR ARGO

The Argo is a ship of quests, which itself inspires quests.[37] The first section of narrative proper in Holdstock's *Celtika* skips forward to the time and space of the main narrative: 'The Northern country of Pohjola [Finland], 700 years later'. This is the historical setting, the 'reality', from which the characters will venture into various supernatural times and spaces.[38] The central focalising character, currently going by the name of Merlin, is immortal, has forgotten much of his past, but remembers his journey as Antiokus, a crew-member of the Argo. He has had an epiphany that Medea's murder of Jason's children was a theatrical and magical illusion, and now he is deep in a Finnish forest, searching for the Argo, 'only half remembering'.[39] Merlin's initial purpose is unclear to the reader and perhaps to the character. We know he is on a quest, but not why and what for. The sense of reaching into a mysterious past about which our understanding is fragmentary is characteristic of Holdstock's mythopoiesis, and of both ancient history and the study of early Greek myth.

Merlin is an avatar of the author, who also had an epiphanic experience about Medea's murder of her children, and has also decided to resurrect the Argo along with Jason in order to find them. Kincaid points out how the initial scenes echo the imagery associated with the primal myth-generating forest in *Mythago*

---

37 *In Search of the Argonauts* – title for Lovatt (2021), chosen by Alex Wright of I. B. Tauris) – packages mythological research as quest; the book tells the cultural history of various episodes of the Argonaut myth, showing how complex and multiplicitous this particular tradition was from its beginning, and still remains. Holdstock's conception of myth equally emphasised multiplicity: in *Mythago Wood* the material of myth interacts with each character's absorption of and response to it, producing unique *mythagos* (myth-images).

38 Kincaid (2022) 111 argues that the *Merlin Codex* puts into practice the theory of mythology developed in *Mythago Wood,* although he acknowledges that Holdstock was 'uncomfortable' with this idea. I see the *Merlin Codex* as operating in the same storyworld but at a different temporal point, with central characters that have different understandings of the relationship between 'myth' and 'reality', because they come from different cultural contexts. Holdstock's model of myth amd myth-making becomes more complex and subtle during his career; for instance, he rejects any straightforward embrace of 'archetypes' or the Jungian collective unconscious, and moves on from 'racial memory', perhaps focalised through the early Twentieth century context of George Huxley, towards cultural memory, less bound by the unconsciously Anglo-centric framework of his earlier books.

39 *Celtika* 4.

Wood and the other novels of the cycle;[40] I note its special affinity with the winter sequences in *Lavondyss*. What seems to have changed, as Holdstock moves further into his mythical storyworld, is the closeness of the focalising character to the arguably divine figures at the centre of that world. The Huxleys study the primal myth and are drawn into it; Tallis creates her masks and is able to use them; but Merlin is part of the mythic world and always has been. As Holdstock grows in confidence and commitment to his world, so he allows his avatar to identify more strongly with it. While George Huxley's immersion leads to his wife's suicide and the destruction of his family life, Merlin's refusal to immerse himself, to use his magic as part of the story, is characterised as selfish and self-limiting.

At the same time the scope of the material and of the journeys has increased: Holdstock always maintained that his mythopoiesis was European, not just British, and Kincaid has well outlined the anti-nationalist thrust of *Mythago Wood*.[41] The *Merlin Codex* reflects on similarly complex and problematic British appropriations of historical epic mythology from other traditions (Finnish and Greek). Merlin, as immortal prehistoric archetype, is an outsider to all of these traditions, Celtic Britain, Hellenistic Greece and Pohjola, but the crew of the resurrected Argo are noticeably more multi-national than the original.

In this section I argue that Merlin's search for and raising of the Argo, like the journey into and attempts to map Ryhope Wood in Holdstock's earlier books, is a metapoetic representation of the writing process, in which first the forest, then the lake and finally the ship itself embody the stuff of *mythos* ('story').[42]

---

40 Kincaid (2022) 111: 'For instance, the first novel in the codex, Celtika, opens with an extended scene that could almost have been lifted from any of the Mythago novels.'

41 In Kincaid (2011), Holdstock mentions a convention in the US, where he was gently questioned about the Eurocentric nature of his storyworld, at which he took no offence, and seemed interested in learning about and incorporating other cultures. On Holdstock's anti-nationalism, see for instance Kincaid (2022) 82, on George Huxley: 'Holdstock allows us to step back in time, only to demonstrate that the old traditions and customs are crueller and more brutal, and precisely not an illustration of the pride and nobility of the nation.'

42 Kincaid (2022) argues that Ryhope Wood itself functions as the protagonist in the *Mythago Wood* cycle. Manwaring (2018) makes a strong case for its metapoetic nature as model of creative writing praxis.

Merlin's search takes him through a series of barriers or tests, a liminal or initiatory process, which has both mythological and metapoetic resonances.[43] The first threshold is the 'barrier of grim-faced wooden statues', which are implied to be local religious artefacts, but also reflect the immortal figures that recur throughout the *Mythago Wood* cycle. It is the Pohjolans, however, who control the barrier, and have to choose whether or not to admit him past the thorn gate. The imagery of initiation is intensified by the event taking place at the same time: the initiation of the character Niiv, who turns out to be his descendant, as a sorcerer or shaman.

Once he has been accepted, somewhat reluctantly, as a guest by the Pohjolan community, he faces further challenges in reaching the Screaming Lake and finding Argo: an arduous journey, ice and extreme cold, the difficulty of physically entering the lake and surviving in the cold temperatures, dangerous spirits and mysterious monsters that inhabit the water (*voytazi* and *Enaaki*), numerous corpses of failed questers, and a time limit imposed by the approach of summer. More unexpected, perhaps, is the crowd of competing wannabe-shamans, which perhaps reflects Holdstock's awareness of the well-travelled nature of Greek mythology retellings, even as he takes an unusual route to it, via the far North.[44] Uncertainties and risks dog Merlin's tasks, mirroring authorial anxieties: Is he in the right place? Is Argo actually there?[45]

Merlin's fear of imposture and exposure is manifested in the description of the lake, with its multiple layers of inaccessibility, dangers and challenges:

> The centre was guarded by ice statues, ten in all, [...] that stared towards the encircling forest through melting features. [...] holes to the water below had been carved, scraped, boiled and burned, but they closed up [...] below the lid of ice the lake was

43 On thresholds and polders (contained special spaces, with anachronistic temporality) in Holdstock, see Ekman (2013) 99–128.

44 The Argonaut story does have an association with the far North: the *Orphic Argonautica* (edition by Vian (1987), probably written in the fifth century CE) brings the Argonauts back from Colchis via a hazy Northern route, which may refer either to the English channel or the North of Scandinavia. Graves (1944) and Treece (1961) were both fascinated by a theory that the Clashing Rocks represented ice bergs that had floated South. On traditions of the Clashing Rocks, see Lovatt (2021) 96–104.

45 The antagonist of *Mythago Wood,* George Huxley, is modelled on the father of John Middleton Murry, Jr., who wrote as Richard Cowper, a novelist friend of Holdstock, whose father dismissed with scorn his first novel. See Kincaid (2022) 18.

> fish-belly white with the naked dead, mostly visitors to the area, drawn by legend rather than applying local magic. Pohjolan men used long poles to reach through narrow holes and haul the corpses to the surface. Below the dead, though, were those who had managed to control their bodies. They floated as if suspended in the lake, arms crossed on chests [...][46]

The melting features of Holdstock's ten archetypes, here ice statues, represent both the threatening time limit and the instability and ephemerality of tradition. Penetrating the lake's ice is equally temporary, and the 'fish-belly white' corpses create a contrast between fertile fishing for food and futile fishing for power (and stories?). The danger of immersion and initiation can only be survived by authentic understanding of the local context and sufficient self-discipline.[47]

Powerful bodily imagery describes immersion, diving as if into a watery underworld:

> Prepared for the spirits that inhabited the water, [...] the cold was not just shocking it was almost predatory. I screamed as I plunged downwards, wasting breath for a moment, convinced that a thousand teeth were ripping my flesh. I watched as my body grew extensions of ice. It was all I could do to remember my purpose here as I hung, suspended in the lake, among the slowly turning shapes of shamans and priests, their bodies eerily illuminated from above, where the ice was alive with torchlight. Below, there was a stranger glow, but even my young man's body was being defeated by the pure, hellish chill.[48]

The cold shock is expressed through imagery of violence, fragmentation and surrealism: the teeth evoke piranhas, while ice growths suggest uncontrolled interpenetration with the landscape. Purpose lost, the creative project is either

46 *Celtika* 37.

47 Merlin's brief reference to this Finnish setting in *Merlin's Wood* is a first tentative step into this cultural context, while Holdstock and Merlin both go much deeper in during *The Merlin Codex*. In *Merlin's Wood,* Merlin is immersed in a shaft grave, buried in soil and trapped by the enchantress Vivien (an avatar of Niiv and Medea in *The Merlin Codex*). The novella ends with the resurrected Merlin possessing the body of the narrator Martin, who is searching for his lost wife and child. In story-time *The Merlin Codex* comes before this, and explains it further, like a prequel. In writing-time, it comes afterwards, and operates as a development or sequel.

48 *Celtika* 37.

devoured into nothingness or distorted into unrecognisable baroque excess. The accretions and fragmentations of myth are only made more uncanny by attempts to illuminate them. The shock of the alien threatens Merlin's conservation of his own power (here represented by his continuing youth: using his magic ages him).

Archaeological imagery emphasises the layered nature of past tradition:

> There were ruins below me, [...] and faces that watched me, [...] I saw the glitter of gold, the gleam of bronze and the sheen of iron, a wasteland of trophies, offerings and secrets cast into the lake over the ages. And the masts and prows of ships that had sunk here and lay at all angles, weed-covered and broken, ransacked for their timbers.[49]

The underwater hell-scape is inhabited by hostile watchers; the treasure acts as lure. The multiplicity of myth is represented by the layers of shipwrecks, as in a notorious shipping danger zone. The 'trophies, offerings and secrets' repeat the imagery of small archaeological finds in the shaft graves of *Merlin's Wood,* covering a range of different motivations for keeping, abandoning or hiding treasured objects. 'Secrets' emphasises the underlying desire for knowledge. The ruined ships and timber re-use encapsulate the constant reappropriation and transformation of myth.

> I had prepared for this descent for three days [...] I had sung and chanted in the groves, and I followed carefully the instructions of the young shaman [...]
>
> Now I felt a certain confidence, and at last I put a name to my quest. Air bubbling from my lungs, I called to the old ship, the grave ship, the ship that screamed [...] 'Argo!' I called [...][50]

The density of the described ritual and its sensory details insist on the authenticity and commitment of both Merlin and Holdstock. Merlin's refusal to name his quest mirrors the way Steven Huxley circles around Ryhope Wood, hesitates, initially refuses even to read his father's journals, in *Mythago Wood.* The act of naming goes unheard, but Merlin reveals that the screaming of the Screaming Lake is that of the Argo: the circularity of the attribution of supernatural power

49 *Celtika* 37–8.

50 *Celtika* 38.

(the lake makes the ship powerful, the ship makes the lake powerful) reflects ironically on the self-generated narrative energy of Merlin's quest and Holdstock's reworking, a repetition powered by dislocation.

Throughout Merlin's dive, the difficulty and uncertainty of the project of revival remains central: first there is no response, and he wonders if Argo is there, then he is rejected, pushed back against the ice; he has to repeat the summoning and bargain by offering information in order to gain a reaction:

> Perhaps she had not come here after all but lay elsewhere in the deeps, in another lake or a hidden sea, guarding her captain's remains.
>
> But then: that whispering voice with which I had become so familiar in my time with Jason, [...] the voice of sentience that was the ship herself:
>
> 'Leave us in peace. [...]'
>
> 'Argo?' The water below me pulsed. The lake seemed angry. I could see a shattered vessel, dark and indistinct, its hull fringed by twisted branches that reached out like tendrils. The branches of the sacred oak that formed her keel, I realised – she had kept on growing![51]

Merlin's uncertainty recalls the Argonauts' quest in many versions, and the uncertainty about many aspects of the myth (was Colchis really located in Georgia?).[52] The distance of time and space, the secret nature of the location, is presented as a deliberate way of honouring and guarding human remains. The Argo's voice is either over-intense (a scream, a roar) or intensely quiet (a whisper), both extremes emphasising the difficulty of understanding and communication. Argo's rejection emphasises the violation in digging up remains, reviving the dead. Retelling myth becomes a sort of necromancy. The lake and the ship are identified with each other; in her divinity, Argo becomes one with the landscape. The ruined state of the ship ('shattered') is offset by the living nature of the sacred oak (the Oak of Dodona here is envisaged as keel). The growing 'tendrils' bring out the supernatural speed of growth, similar to the threatening, overwhelming encroachment of the forest in *Mythago Wood,* both symbolising the continuing vitality of mythical tradition.

---

51 *Celtika* 38–9.

52 The association between Aea, city of Aeetes, and Colchis, in the Black sea, is uncertain in early evidence: see West (2005), and Braund (1994).

Merlin is pushed back against the underside of the ice by the hostile spirits, almost loses breath control and has to be fished out of the ice alongside the corpses. The passage into the ice, 'feet first through the tunnel' (37) figures birth, alongside death, surrounded as he is by corpses. Holdstock is fascinated by *katabasis,* and frequently sends his characters into underworlds or lands of the dead. Arguably the whole *Mythago Wood* cycle is katabatic, and the *Merlin Codex* too contains numerous underworld visits.[53]

This section, with its emphasis on underwater archaeology, shows the way Holdstock engages with myth as a dangerous quest into an uncertain landscape, itself supernatural. It shows that the forest is only one image for this, that the frozen lake further intensifies it, and that landscape, artefacts, stories and beliefs are all woven together to reflect on the process of storytelling as a magical act of power and creation.

SUMMONING, PERSUASION, RUPTURE

After his rescue, Merlin himself is resuscitated, and his determination is modelled through repetition and perseverance, an avatar of Holdstock approaching deep time through multiple stories and images:

> [...] revived from my lazy, arrogantly ill-prepared excursion downwards, I lay on the ice, [...] and again called to Argo [...]
>
> 'It's Antiokus. You must remember me. I was with you when you sailed on the quest for the fleece of gold. Jason, please hear me. Your sons are not dead! [...] Argo, tell him what I've said.'
>
> I kept trying. [...] staring down through the hole, which was already beginning to melt at its edges as the sluggish sun crept, worm-like, above the southern ho-

53 The topographical vagueness of Ryhope Wood, its constant transformations, layers and pockets of time, is perhaps most like Virgil's underworld in *Aeneid* 6, which itself is entered through woodland, with the golden bough. On Virgil's underworld and its reception, see Gladhill and Myers (2020); on katabasis imagery in classical reception more generally, see Fletcher (2019). The importance of the river crossing as a boundary between the edge zones and deeper ones reinforces the Classical imagery, with Sorthalan featuring as a sort of Charon.

> rizon. Pike-faced voytazi taunted me, […] teasing me with the threat to drag me down.
>
> 'Argo!' I persevered. 'You must believe me! The world has changed in a very strange way. But the news is good for Jason. Argo! Answer me!'[54]

The emphasis on Merlin's lack of preparation augments the epic difficulty of his katabatic quest ('excursion downwards'), as well as modelling authorial anxiety. Intense meteorological phenomena often accompany epic beginnings: the storm in *Aeneid* 1 is the classic example, taken up by later epic poets (Valerius Flaccus, Statius *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*) as a way of generating, avoiding or making ambivalent, the energy needed to start a literary enterprise of this magnitude and ambition; other examples include the flood and destruction by fire in Ovid *Metamorphoses* 1 and 2.[55] Other epics start with the immobilisation of the protagonist: Achilles' withdrawal, Odysseus' detainment by Calypso. Holdstock combines these tropes with Merlin overwhelmed by the power of ice and Jason literally frozen, while Argo retains the energy to scream, grow and burst free.

Communicating through the hole in the ice, Merlin attempts to persuade, or perhaps seduce, Argo into giving up her hold on Jason. The melting ice hole and the 'worm-like' sun suggest the sluggishness of narrative progress. Merlin remains at risk of becoming the Argonautic Hylas, dragged down for ever into a supernatural realm. His insistence on the strangeness of modernity in the Hellenistic age creates further temporal complexity and dislocation but acts a lure for Jason the explorer.[56]

Finally, Merlin's pitch succeeds in gaining attention:

> And then at last the voice, again, whispering to me from the icy depths. 'He does not wish to return. His life ended when Medea killed his boys.' 'I know,' I said to her. 'I was there. […] The blood on their bodies was just illusion.' I felt the ice shake beneath me, as if the whole lake below had pulsed with shock.

---

54 *Celtika* 39.

55 On Virgil's storm and epic energy, see Hardie (1986) 90–7; on winds and narrative in Homer, see Purves (2010).

56 The Argonaut tradition often plays with complex temporal perspectives: both Gardner's *Jason and Medeia* – Gardner (1973) – and Christa Wolf's *Medea* – Wolf (1996) – suggest character awareness of times beyond their own, and a far-reaching prophetic awareness of deep future, as with Valerius Flaccus' Jupiter and his worldplan; on which, see Manuwald (2002).

> There was only silence from Argo, but I intuited that she was puzzled, and that my words were seeping through the wood of her hull and into Jason. [...]
>
> A moment later, the ice below me bucked. Then cracked open with a sound like a whiplash [...][57]

Argo polices the boundaries of the story, tries to impose closure and refuse Holdstock the use of the mythical material. However, Argo is also connected to, or part of, Jason, and Jason too hears Merlin's message. Character, divinity, artefact, landscape, and author blur together. Holdstock's revelation about Euripides' *Medea* becomes Merlin's decoding of the trickery of Holdstock's Medea. The metalepsis of renewal takes powerful physical shape in the rupture of the ice, as Argo bursts out. Beginning becomes a violent outbreak of energy.

RAISING, EMERGENCE, COST

The marvellous in Holdstock always comes at a cost, sometimes an unexpectedly horrific one. Merlin pays for his use of magic by ageing. In *Merlin's Wood,* he is mutilated and buried alive. George Huxley loses his identity and dies, becoming only his son's monstrous memory. Tallis Keeton becomes a tree and lives through millennia of pain. Argo, like the *Mary Rose,* must be raised, but the act of raising is itself destructive.[58] The image of building a ship can reflect both identity formation and the creation of a narrative programme. When Odysseus creates his raft on which to escape from Calypso, he remakes himself.[59] Valerius Flaccus' Argo features an ekphrasis of images which tell stories featured in his key poetic predecessors, Peleus and Thetis from Catullus 64 and the Lapiths and Centaurs from Ovid.[60]

The violence of Argo's emergence continues, tempered by the dawn, which had been a source of time pressure, but is now a symbol of hope for renewal:

---

57 *Celtika* 40.

58 The raising of the *Mary Rose* was a key cultural event of the early 80s (1982): see Rule (1983) and Marsden (2003).

59 Hom. *Od,* 5.234–61, with Christensen (2020) 9–14.

60 Ov. *Met.* 12.210–535. On Valerius' ekphrasis of the Argo at 1.130–48, see Heerink (2014).

> The rising of Argo was coinciding with the first true passage into dawn. Even as we stood, the brightness grew stronger over the bleak forest to the south, dawn fire rising in a steady arc.
>
> And then she struck the ice. The surface of the lake exploded upwards, a fountain of glittering shards falling around the dark hull as the old ship, mast-shattered and weed-wracked, nosed up from the deeps, the tall prow draining water, rising with solemnity, almost dignity, branches snapping off like oars, until it had half stretched out from the lake [...] then falling back, the stern coming up, the crouching figure of the goddess draped in longfronded weed, the whole boat shuddering like a waking beast on the cold water, then settling and becoming still.[61]

The explosion of ice is at once destructive, terrifying and inspiring. The compound words give a flavour of oral epic ('mast-shattered', 'weed-wracked', 'longfronded'). The still growing wood parodies ship-building, as the protruding branches evoke oars, fragile and friable. The Argo is personified as a water creature tentatively emerging ('nosed', 'shuddering like a waking beast'), characterised by 'solemnity' and 'dignity'. Argo brings with her the equally ruined figure of Jason, presented as if he were a figurehead or a statue on a crucifix:

> Hanging from the mast in a web of ropes and weeds was the shape of a man, his head stretched back as if he had died screaming to the heavens. [...] Dawn light caught the living glitter of his eyes. Even from the edge of the lake I sensed that he was watching me.
>
> 'I knew you would survive [...]' I whispered to him. [...] He wasn't dead, but he was in deep cold.[62] (*Celtika* 41)

Between life and death, Jason embodies anguish. The water pouring from him replaces or extends the screams of his long tragic grief and apparent death. However, the light touches him too, and Holdstock makes clear that he is not fully dead. Even in cryonic fugue, he remains threatening.

> But something was wrong with Argo. She was too still, now, too quiet for the vibrant, urgent ship. When she had been launched she had strained at the ropes. More than sixty men had been needed to hold her on the slipway. She had writhed and

61 *Celtika* 40.

62 *Celtika* 41.

> wrestled to get free, to find the ocean, and when she had finally been released she had struck the water of the harbour with such speed and energy that she had sunk for a moment before surfacing and turning to open water. The argonauts had been hard-pressed to get aboard her, swimming out and crawling up the ropes to find their benches and their oars, to slow the impatient ship and turn her back to the docks.
>
> She had been such a strong ship. So alive! But now [...]

Merlin's remembered ship, the one from the 'original' journey, was full of energy, life and power. Rather than needing to be pushed, she needed to be held back. This is an intensification of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Argo, who cannot be pushed in by anyone, even Hercules, but only moves when Orpheus plays, figurehead drinking from the waves.[63] In Holdstock, fifty Argonauts striving to push her in become sixty men holding her back; the dipped figurehead becomes a complete dive underwater. The Argonauts are not in place waiting to row but instead become like insects themselves, swimming and crawling over the Argo to catch up. However, the intense life of the mythical Argo is introduced to mourn the energy and life completely expended by the explosive emergence from the frozen lake and the re-animation of Jason.

> 'She's dead. The ship is dead.'
>
> Poor Argo. She had sailed so far with her precious cargo. She had taken Jason to the deepest grave she could find, a place of memory and magic. She had not expected to rise again, but my voice, my message, had set the heart in the oak at work once more and she had striven to return to the surface. The effort, it seemed, had been too much, and she had perished even as she passed life back to the captain.
>
> 'I'm sorry,' I whispered. 'I didn't know how hard it would be for you.'[64]

The ship has the power to bring the character to life and re-animate the story. However, the cost of restarting the story is not paid by Merlin, or Holdstock, but by the previous Argo. This new Argo must overwrite the old ones.

Jason is revived, 'his words rambling and incoherent, his mood occasionally violent', and still bearing the wound caused by the falling spar of the ship.[65] He

---

63 *Tanglewood Tales* 232.

64 *Celtika* 41.

65 *Celtika* 43.

embodies continuity: the scars are pale 'but he was otherwise as burnished as when I'd last seen him alive, in Iolkos';[66] his eyes are 'as sharp as ever'.[67] His hands shake but 'his smile was as beguiling and ambiguous as ever'.[68] Holdstock clearly signals the tension between continuity and change, making his Jason recognizable but also shaped by the experience of coming back from the dead.

The ship gave her vitality for Jason, but her generosity contrasts with the self-absorption of Jason and Merlin, both conserving their energy for their own objectives. Merlin uses a little of his life force to show Jason magically what Medea really did with his children. This reanimation, a recreation of Medea's illusion, allows Jason to see through it. This enables a divine perspective, not just re-living the past, like a traumatic flashback, but seeing it differently.

Holdstock is fascinated by the cost of power, and the balance of one life, or story, against another. Argo raises herself, but in beginning of the new story, loses her divine power. The description reverses Hawthorne's divine launching while transferring life force to Jason and requiring Merlin to make difficult decisions about investment of power.

RE-BUILDING AND RE-ANIMATING: RIVERS AND BOATS OF MYTH

The second section of *Celtika,* entitled *The Spirit of the Ship,* begins with a description of the (mostly) dead Argo. Argo, and the reinvented story, retain a spark of life. Here, Holdstock evokes Valerius Flaccus' ekphrasis (1.130–48) of the newly built ship:

> I had never forgotten Argo's beauty. Even now, as she lay listless on the lakeside, rotting, weed-wracked, her slender hull streaked with bright colour and images of the gods and elementals of Jason's Greek Land, she was wonderful to witness. [...] from the sharp prow to the elegant curve of her stern, rising to the split and quiet-eyed wooden image of Hera. She almost shuddered when touched, a memory of life,

66 *Celtika* 43.

67 *Celtika* 43.

68 *Celtika* 43.

> and seemed to whisper […]: build me back. Build me better. Build me for the quest. I've been dying too long.
>
> I had thought the ship had died […] I felt the final spark of life still glowing, […] as she had held on for nearly a thousand years.[69]

The phrase 'gods and elementals' suggests Valerius' description of the images on Argo's hull, especially Thetis and the sea nymphs accompanying her to her wedding (VF *Arg.* 1.130–9), but also perhaps the centaurs in battle with the Lapiths (1.140–8). However Holdstock's phrase allows a looser interpretation, suggesting wider and more complex connections with the divine, Greek and beyond. The wooden image of Hera marks the connection with Harryhausen's figurehead, the split symbolising Holdstock's decision to move away from her guardianship.

The trade-off between life force and supernatural power, vitality and the sublime, encapsulated in Merlin's central tragic dilemma (magic or ageing?), operates for the Argo. The effort to break out of the lake and revive Jason from suspended animation (or resurrect him: it is not wholly clear which) cost the ship her own supernatural sentience:

> 'The ship is dead. Argo is dead. The goddess has left her.'
>
> 'I know. The effort of resurrection was too much.'
>
> […] 'Perhaps Medea had blinded the goddess as much as she had blinded us.'
>
> […]
>
> 'But the ship is still useful. […] we'll tow Argo to the shore and rebuild her. […] perhaps we can call the goddess back.'
>
> […] 'But if not, we'll have to sail without her.'[70]

Jason blamed Hera/Argo for their failure to intervene against Medea's killing of his children. Here, instead, he accepts that there are limits to the divine power of Argo. Argo is not straightforwardly identified with the goddess but inhabited by her for a time. Jason's attitude to the divine sentience of Argo is bluntly opportunistic: he wants to use her. Divine sponsorship is a tool, but dispensible.

The narrator presents his attitude without comment, but displays greater reverence and emotional engagement: 'I had never forgotten Argo's beauty […] she was wonderful to witness.' (67) Merlin feels both wonder and regret: he empha-

69 *Celtika* 67.

70 *Celtika* 52–3.

sises the beauty even in dissolution ('slender', 'bright', 'wonderful', 'sleekness', 'flowing', 'elegant'). The echo of sentience ('listless', 'quiet-eyed', 'almost shuddered', 'whispering') may be Merlin's denial, but, as with Jason, suggests a continuing life even in apparent death. The story is both a reworking and a new life. No matter how distant, broken and fragmentary, a myth can always come back to life. The gendered representation of both ship and story material suggests a rape victim recovering from trauma ('almost shuddered when touched'). Holdstock often sexualises his story material: Guiwenneth in *Mythago Wood* is a prime example. As the love interest of George Huxley and both his sons, she also symbolises the desire to enter the mythology itself She also forms the subject matter of one of the key stories, that of Peredur.[71] In Holdstock's myth-making, taking ownership of a story does not just risk cultural appropriation, but can even feel like violation. The fantasy is that myth will consent, will actively aid the storyteller. The fear is that the myth will take vengeance for the violation.

Jason's initial indifference to Argo's sacrifice represents denial or bravado. When he orders the local shipbuilders to take her to pieces before they rebuild, he expresses loss, grief and love, as well as hope for the future:

> 'Goodbye, Old Ship. Goodbye, Old Swan. But now I will see you put on flower again. I will see leaf spring from your deck. New life to this great old ship. I loved you once, Argo, when you were guided by Hera, greathearted Hera. I will love you again with a new guardian spirit. I promise this with my life!'
>
> Then he turned to Lemanku and Jouhkan and said, '[...] Break her down to the inner ribs and inner ship. But stop there. We start again from there. Don't touch anything of the old ship inside.'[72]

Holdstock combines bird metaphors ('Old Swan') with plants ('flower again', 'leaf spring') to suggest a cyclical temporality which arises from the natural world, as well as love poetry. Divine power remains animistic in Holdstock's understanding of ancient religion. Jason's instructions to Lemanku and Jouhkan indicate a sort of skeletal humanity to Argo, in addition to the multi-layered nature of myth, religion and culture. We might, however, be suspicious of Jason's

71 Tallis Keeton's obsession with Scathach in *Lavondyss* complicates the gendered structures of Holdstock's stories, in which protagonists are mostly men, and objects of desire (sinister, unreliable, uncanny) are usually women.

72 *Celtika* 68.

promise, given the Euripidean tradition. Argo as goddess remains vulnerable to changeable human emotions.

When Merlin recounts the building of Argo, from the Greek myth, he implies that Argos himself was an incarnation of a god:

> I had seen nothing of the construction of Argo, those centuries ago in Greek Land, when Jason had first ordered it and the boat-builder Argos had emerged from the night and nowhere and offered his services. […] The silent boat-builder had finished his work; the rotten and ancient hulk that always lay at Argo's heart had been encased in fine new wood and bright paint, decorated with symbols of sea and sky and the protecting gods. Jason himself had gone to Zeus's oracle at Dodona and cut a branch from the sacred oak for Argo's new keel.[73]

Argos, who 'emerged from night and nowhere', preserves his mystery by remaining silent, and the prehistoric 'heartwood' of Argo remains unseen. In this version, the oak of Dodona is not the determining aspect of Argo's sentience, forming only the keel, not the heart. Holdstock implies that Greek myth is only one layer in a tradition of storytelling and building that goes back as far as the existence of hominids, perhaps even before. The supernatural is not Greek in particular, but comes closer when people go further back in time.

Later, Merlin remembers his first encounter with the sacred heart of the ship:

> […] this was no ordinary vessel. There was nothing that I could identify, and I was not prepared to open my soul to a deeper understanding, but below the deck, somewhere to the fore, there was an older heart than the massive oak beam that had been shaped to form her keel.
>
> I ducked down into the bilges, started to move forward, and was *warned away!* I could think of it in no other terms than that. Not a voice, not a vision, just the most intense feeling that I was entering a place that was not just private or out of bounds, but was *forbidden.*[74]

Merlin, who shares Argo's temporal continuity and longevity, is aware of the ship's deeper heart. As with the human protagonists and Ryhope Wood in the *Mythago* series, he is 'warned away'. Deep time is for initiates only, forbid-

73 *Celtika* 68–9.

74 *Celtika* 72.

den to others. This passage shows Argo acting as a microcosm of the primal forest, incorporating its layers in her various construction materials. The ship too has *penetralia,* sacred inner areas or parts, another aspect of the sexualisation of supernatural spatio-temporality in Holdstock.

The danger of attempting to enter or even understand this secret depth is made clear:

> Mystified, thrilled, I decided to go back on to land, intending to find Argos, the shipwright who had constructed this galley, and ask him about his creation. But as if she sensed my curiosity, and had been made angry by my presence, Argo began to strain at the rope tethers. [...] The ship twisted and slid about on the mud ramp, like a throat-cut pig thrashing in its own blood. [...] Argo bucked and protested below my feet.
>
> *Launch me,* she seemed to be saying. *Test me in the water. Hurry!*
>
> The air was filled with a sound like Furies screaming. [...]
>
> Released, Argo streaked down the ramp, stern-first into the harbour water, plunging deep below the surface, almost drowning me. When she came up she shuddered, an animal refreshing itself after a cold swim.[75]

Holdstock intensifies still further the imagery of the launch scene: Argo is not just like an animal but 'like a throat-cut pig thrashing in its own blood'.[76] Again she 'shuddered', but this time the sexual implications are displaced onto further animal imagery. The urgency to depart becomes a way of protecting herself from Merlin's curiosity, or even becomes a threat to Merlin ('almost drowning me'). The 'sound like Furies screaming' connects with the 'Screaming Lake'. The female supernatural transforms from divinity to terrifying chthonic personification.

The re-building of Argo in Finland requires dangerous exposure, and there is a specific sacrifice, paid by the builder. The process of stripping down and reconstruction reveals the deep structures of the mythic vessel:

---

75 *Celtika* 72.

76 He does not go as far as Henry Treece, who uses child sacrifice to get his Argo launched. Hercules tells Jason later that he greased the rollers with the blood of a child: Treece (1961) 106. Lemanku's reference to greasing the logs for hauling ships overland with fish guts may be a tangential side-swipe at Treece.

> Argo was not one ship, but many, and a fragment of each, even the oldest, was locked in the prow, the ship's heart, hidden in the slender double hull. Hera had been only the latest in a long line of guardians of this Otherworldly vessel. To crouch in her prow was to feel the flow of rivers and seas that had persisted through time, to smell old wood, old leather, old ropes, shaped and stretched into vessels that had drifted, sailed, rowed and ploughed beyond the known worlds of their builders.
>
> So much life in one cold hulk.
>
> Now, lifetimes later, the skin was ripped from the rotting remnant of that proud and vigorous ship. In the frost-sheened, rosy dawn, and under Jason's supervision, Lemanku tore away the planks of the hull to expose part of the hidden heart of Argo. I watched in fascination as the ship-shaped cage of branches was revealed, a tangled network of growth from the old oak that had been laid by Argos, filling the hull like veins. The growth had split the planking, but held it together too, in a protecting embrace.[77]

Holdstock's mythical landscapes included from the beginning rivers that shifted shape and boats that travelled through time as well as space: the Sticklebrook flows through *Mythago Wood* and transforms from stream to enormous stately river. A small wooden boat, which the Huxley boys send through it, becomes figuratively the barge which Sorthalan, the Charon figure, steers. The river acts as a passage deeper in as well as a crossing point from one level to another. Here Holdstock expresses clearly his conception of bodies of water and water vehicles as images of temporality: lakes, rivers and seas, barges, ferries and ships, all reflect the fluidity and instability of time and story, as well as being places of refuge and rescue.[78] The emphasis on growth (and later ropes) as both constraining, splitting, veining and protecting reflects a similar ambivalence about the structures of storytelling. The changes of myth, its new growths, can both energise, and if they go too far, obliterate. Barthes replaces the Ship of Theseus with the Argo, and the idea of the ship that can be completely reconfigured and replaced

77 *Celtika* 73.

78 Holdstock and Kincaid discussed the importance of rivers in American culture: Kincaid (2011). Holdstock's treatment of rivers as boundaries and escape routes, sites of challenge and threat, as well as hope and escape, are similar to those of Black American readers and scholars, for whom rivers are both sites of danger (rape, drowning) and salvation (baptism, escape, travel to non-slave states).

lurks under Holdstock's description of reconstruction.[79] At what point does the myth become a new story altogether? Is *The Merlin Codex* an *Argonautica* or something else? Holdstock wants to hold onto the power of ancient story while making room for his own creativity, agency and innovation.

A symbol of this creativity, linked to the temporality of the seasons, is the reanimation of Argo with a goddess from a new culture:

> Life came back to Argo suddenly and unexpectedly, when the spark of the new sun was at its brightest.
>
> Lemanku and two others were working inside the hull. The new keel had been laid, a fine piece of Pohjolan birch, beautifully carved and trimmed, part of it hollowed to contain the stub of the old Dodonian oak whose strength had taken Jason on his earlier voyage. Lemanku had gone to the spirit grove of Mielikki herself, the Lady of the Forest, and after a long ceremony, and the involvement of much drumming and singing, had cut down one of the tall ancestor birches. Mielikki would be our new protectress.[80]

The unexpectedness of Argo's reanimation indicates the shipbuilder/creator's lack of final control. In the end, only a reader can bring a text to life in their mind. Argo's new keel, incorporating the remains of the Oak of Dodona in its hollow interior, symbolises belonging to a new place and time: now she is built around the sacred birch from the 'ancestor' trees of the Finnish goddess Mielikki, goddess of forest and hunting.[81] This, too, comes at a cost:

> Everything stopped, all movement, all sound, when Lemanku's howl of pain and fear split the cold air. Startled, I stared at the half-hull of the ship. Lemanku came tumbling over the side, still howling. His eyes were raw, bloody pits.[82]

---

79 Maggie Nelson's memoir *The Argonauts* uses Barthes' image of the Argo as a version of the ship of Theseus, and hence renewal, discussed in Lovatt (2021) 183–4; Nelson (2015) 5; Barthes (1977) 46.

80 *Celtika* 86.

81 Holdstock's Mielikki resembles the Mielikki of the Finnish epic *Kalevala;* there are resemblances to the translation of Crawford (1888): Holdstock calls her 'Lady of the Forest', portrays her in bear fur, and with a lynx, for instance at *Celtika* (196), cf. 'Mistress of the Woods', Crawford (1888) 140; association with bears, 498.

82 *Celtika* 86.

Lemanku, the Finnish boat-builder, is blinded. Either the ship punished him for violating her inner space, or Mielikki punished him for cutting down her tree. He must complete the project without sight. Blindness as punishment inevitably evokes Oedipus, but also Phineus, who in the Argonautic tradition was best known through Apollonius' version, in which he was punished for revealing too much, helping people too much.[83] Where Apollonius' *Argonautica* shows Athena and Hera taking charge of building and recruitment, following Hera's desire for vengeance against Pelias, and Zeus' plan to open up the Bosphorus, here Jason seems to coerce the gods into cooperating with his plan. Holdstock's gods are more distant, capricious and threatening, but his human characters also have more agency.

Lemanku later clarifies what happened. Her lifespark has been exchanged for the spark of his vision:

> 'The spark has gone,' he whispered, shuddering, as he sipped a bowl of broth. 'She was so fast. She came out of nowhere. Such shimmering, brilliant woods. She came out of nowhere and took the spark away. Only night. Only dark. She'll kill me if I go back aboard [...]'
>
> She? Did he mean Argo? Gentle, protecting Argo had done this terrible thing? I couldn't believe it, but Lemanku added, 'I must go to her grove. I must beg for my life [...]'
>
> 'Whose grove?'
>
> 'Mielikki. Mielikki is in the ship, now. Jason wanted such good wood, and birch from that grove is the finest. [...] I thought I'd done everything right. I'll pay for that mistake with my life as well as the dark. You all will. You'll need gentle gods to help you if you sail in that ship now.'[84]

The potential vengeance and anger of Mielikki hangs over the Argo, and the negative prophecy of Lemanku's own death and that of others matches those of Idmon and Mopsus in Apollonius and Valerius. Propitiating and atoning to Mielikki, building a new relationship between Argo and the divine, now becomes

83 Kincaid (2022) discusses the 'Oedipal conflict' in his chapter on war, but does not connect his Freudian reading to Oedipus tragedies. On the tragic and epic ancient Phineus variants, destructive father in the former, victim of the gods in the latter, see Lovatt (2021) 88–95.

84 *Celtika* 87.

a central structuring aspect of the rest of this first volume. Where the Hera of the 1963 film is benign but limited in her ability to counteract Zeus, Holdstock's Mielikki is powerful but uncertain in her loyalties.

When Jason and Merlin discuss the dangers of the ship's new divine sponsor, they reflect on the traditions of divine intervention in the Argonaut myth:

> 'Capricious? They're all capricious! Tell me something I don't know. Do you think we couldn't have sailed to Colchis, stolen the fleece and returned to Iolkos in less than a season and without loss? We could have done it easily if the goddess had been so inclined to let us. She wanted her fun. She was playing an elaborate game with other gods, other spectres, other shadows on the mountain! I learned about such games before I even had my beard. It's a risk we take on any voyage, and the reason why so few among us are born suited to the challenge. How old did you say you were, Antiokus?'
>
> 'Very old.'
>
> 'So don't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about.'
>
> I knew very well what he was talking about. I murmured, 'Odysseus shared your view.'[85]

Jason is typically bitter and 'dismissive' of the dangers. His reference to Hera as 'playing an elaborate game' evokes the 1963 film once more, with its table top game board, on which Jason features as a live game piece, also ironically referencing the unusually bearded 1963 Jason. Merlin, and Holdstock, also enjoy connecting Jason with Odysseus, who he increasingly resembles: old, experienced, wily and ruthless. Merlin also invokes the Trojan Horse, which he envisages as a repurposed ship, compared to Argo herself:

> He had been young, when he had quested for the fleece; and Odysseus had been older and wiser and more arrogant. Now Jason was older still, and angry. He had aged, but like wine in a wreck on the sea bed, without sampling life, or being sampled by it. He was a man in two parts: still young for the fight, yet old with thought and cunning. His middle years were hollow, like that broken but cunningly hollowed ship, tethered to horses, which the Trojans had dragged through their walls, only to have it spill out murderous Greeklanders from between its double hull; hollow, perhaps, like Argo herself, with her secret space that so far was denied to us, yet

85 *Celtika* 88.

> which contained a ghost in a ghostly world of brilliant forest, that could strike and blind any man or woman who came too close.[86]

Merlin suggests that Jason has outgrown Odysseus. The image of wine aging on the sea bed suggests the complexity of myth, growing deeper and more valuable with time, but also a directness in Holdstock's engagement with the past, which is ironised by the references to the 1963 film. Holdstock also gives an interpretation of the Trojan horse as a ship with a double hull, which further associates Argo's rebuilding with the layered reception of Greek myth, itself becoming a kind of treachery or betrayal. He implies that the doubleness of the hull gives room for spatial complexity, like the Tardis of *Doctor Who,* which is bigger on the inside. Holdstock uses the Argonaut story to draw readers into his own imaginative world, where, he warns, violence awaits.

The Argo's re-dedication and re-animation is accompanied by an animal image that evokes epic similes as well as Hawthorne's children's version, which compares the launched Argo to a swan (see p. 5 above):

> The rebuilding of Argo was finished, though she had not yet been dedicated to her new, protecting goddess. And as if aware of this moment of transition from dead wood to new ship, the first flights of swans came, emerging from the glow of the slowly rising sun itself, silent but for the murmur of their wings. They passed over us, wave after wave of them, black-throated, redbilled, circling out over the frost-speckled forest then gliding in formations back towards the lake. Hundreds of them, aerial spirits signalling the coming of spring. They continued to come down on the water for an hour or more, fighting, squabbling, noisy, waiting for fish and spirit-fish to rise, so that they might feed.[87]

The sublime impact of the glories of the natural world, bathed in dawn light, evokes traditions of swan imagery, complete with vivid compound epithets, connecting the divine Argo with bird migration.[88] Argo as wild creature is both beautiful and able to transport herself with apparent supernatural power.

---

86 *Celtika* 89.

87 *Celtika* 90.

88 On bird imagery in epic, see Manolaraki (2012). On the sublime in Holdstock's *Mythago Wood,* see Oziewicz (2008).

The act of propitiation, the ritual ratification of Mielikki's sponsorship (or perhaps possession) of Argo, demonstrates Holdstock's multicultural European refashioning of Greek myth. Jason has used tales of his miraculous ship to gather a new miraculous crew of heroes from many different European traditions. The difficulty is that each needs their own launch ritual:

> I sympathised with him. 'Since there's no question that you're leader and captain, why not pull rank and just sacrifice to Apollo and the Lady of the Forest? She'll be our protecting goddess, after all.'
>
> 'Each of them needs his charmed guardian,' Jason sighed. 'Rubobostes wants to sacrifice to someone who is bringer of fire, guardian of travellers, and healer of wounds taken in battle [Istarta]. He needs a living bat and the front paws of a wolf! The Cymbrii want to sacrifice to Indirabus, warlike watcher over the traveller and bringer of eloquence. They won't sail unless we can find a piglet. The Germanii want a snow hare for their fire-god and protector. The Cretan, Tairon, is proposing we sacrifice an infant by roasting it alive inside a metal urn! What madness!'[89]

Jason first suggests that Argo herself contains everything needed to unify them:

> 'Argo herself, of course. She has fragments in her that are so timeless I can hardly bring myself to think of those long gone days. If the world began in fire, there is still a spark in her prow. If it began in flood, there is mud and moisture down below the deck. If it began in winter, we'll find a shard of ice deep in her heart! She has been there all the time and I hadn't seen it.'[90]

Jason brings his crew together, on Merlin's advice, by using Argo herself as a symbol of unity, through the artefact of an oar, which 'whispers *eloquently* through the water',[91] carved and blooded by every Argonaut, and burnt on a sacrificial fire.[92] Argo thus functions as a symbol of wider European culture, history,

---

89 *Celtika* 92.

90 *Celtika* 93.

91 *Celtika* 93.

92 This oar evokes celebratory oars that symbolise victory in rowing races, but might also draw on Herakles' breaking of his oar and his unfinished attempt to make a new one in Apollonius' *Argonautica,* where the oar-making process is interrupted by the loss of Hylas.

religion and mythology, as well as incorporating uncountable chronological layers of divine guardianship, alongside symbols of apocalypse and creation.

The moment of launch is marked by the swans taking to the air again, and apparently this time Argo will remain calm. But fog rises, the lake begins to freeze. Jason has refused the Finnish sorcerer, Niiv, the right to join the voyage, as Apollonius' Jason refused Atalanta (Apollonius *Argonautica* 1.768–73). Now they bring her aboard, thinking the resistance to leaving is her doing. But she tells them it is the local spirits, *Voytazi,* trying to prevent them removing Mielikki.

This moment confirms that the goddess is actually aboard, part of the ship. While Merlin concentrates on magically melting the ice, Jason throws Niiv overboard, as retaliation against her trickery. Merlin rescues her; it seems that everything is freezing; Jason, Merlin and Niiv will all die and the story will stop in its tracks.

But Mielikki as Argo intervenes to rescue them all, relenting her anger because of Merlin's self-sacrifice on behalf of her servant Niiv. Afterwards, Merlin approaches the dangerous sacred inner part of the ship:

> 'No closer,' whispered Mielikki.
>
> 'You blinded her uncle, you tried to kill the girl, you tried to kill us all. Is this what we can expect from Mielikki, Argo's new protector?'
>
> 'The man was blinded because he came too close,' the whispered voice came back. 'The girl belongs to me. Yes, I tried to kill you all; why would I want to leave my land? What are you all, if not just cold spirits from cold lands? […] So I have let you go. […] And one more thing: I am at the edge of the world this ship contains, not within it, and someone deeper is aware of you, and wishes you dead. This for the girl's life; the rest I will decide as we sail.'
>
> […] We were on our way, but it was clear to me, now, that we were as much in danger from Argo as under her protection.[93]

The first hundred pages of *Celtika,* then, function as an extended metapoetic relaunch of the Argonaut myth, with Holdstock reflecting on the costs, difficulties and rewards of adapting myth, and the complexities of representing the supernatural. Holdstock's adaptations are alive to multiple cultural constructions of supernatural activities and communications with the supernatural, both sanctioned by communities (religion) and unsanctioned (witchcraft). He builds

93 *Celtika* 100.

drama from live disputes around, dangers and risks of ritual activity, and emphasises the blurred boundaries between gods, mortals and other supernatural entities. He succeeds in combining the mystical, the ominous, the terrifying and the joyful, presenting a powerful experience of the supernatural, as well as a penetrating analysis of it.

ARGO IN THE REST OF *CELTIKA:* AGENCY AND RELATIONSHIP

The rest of *Celtika* features Argo, Mielikki and Niiv in various ways, as the initial emphasis on the ship's agency, power and danger has led us to expect. The Argo's first port of call is Alba, Urtha's kingdom, where Argo helps Merlin go to the Otherworld to find out what happened to Urtha's family, by 'shedding a ghost' from 'the time of the stone sanctuaries'.[94] Mielikki welcomes them and guides them into this shadow world:

> 'This is my place,' Mielikki said from behind the dark veil. 'The threshold place. I keep it as I like it. Walk on and you will have entered the land of your own shadows, and your children are there, Urtha.' She was young. Her eyes gleamed from behind the thin veil. This was not the sinister crone who watched over the deck of Argo.'[95]

Later she shows Merlin some of his own deep past by allowing him into her secret inner sanctuary:

> I couldn't focus; I couldn't see clearly. Had I been home, albeit briefly?
>
> Or just seen a glimpse of home, a world within the world, made possible by passing through Argo's spirit heart?[96]

Argo mediates between worlds and times, becoming psychopomp and narrative facilitator. She also encourages Merlin's relationship with Niiv, speaking through her and taking them to a private space for lovemaking:

94 *Celtika* 144.

95 *Celtika* 145.

96 *Celtika* 150.

> The oak barge slid into that hull as easily as dye into water, mist into a forest, absorbed and devoured, leaving Niiv and me wrapped together in the hold of the bigger ship, among the bales and sacks and stowed oars.[97]

We see Argo's multiplicity in a different way, not as layers, but as avatars or detachable parts, which nevertheless also carry her intelligence and awareness, rather like a space ship with shuttles connected to the ship's central computer. There is also conflict, however: Jason becomes angry that Argo does not help him the same way she did during Hera's sponsorship, and urinates in the sacred heart of the ship (166–7). Mielikki also gives information about the relationships between Argo and her divine sponsors:

> 'The one who was here before,' she said, 'only visited. She was not always here. She came at her whim, or when this one you call Jason summoned her.'
>
> Mielikki was referring to Hera; Hera had only promised limited advice to Jason, on that voyage. She had been part of a bigger, tighter game being played beyond the mortal realm.[98]

As they undertake the Argonauts' Northern wanderings in reverse and Holdstock has to negotiate the difficulties of the journey (how did the Argo get from one unnavigable river to another?), Argo offers a miraculous solution, in which Niiv channels Mielikki's power, and they sail through a tiny stream, perhaps miniaturised, as Merlin looks out for predators and is worried about a crow.[99] This refracts the effects of the Sticklebrook in *Mythago Wood* which changes size dramatically and facilitates travel as well as psychological development of characters. Argo as ship of song is engaged in all aspects of the story, particularly the spiritual.

When they arrive in Greece and need to go overland, Mielikki instructs Jason to hide the carcase of the ship, and extract and bring with him the key parts: 'the figurehead of the forest lady' and the heart:

---

97 *Celtika* 158.

98 *Celtika* 198.

99 *Celtika* 170–3.

> Jason alone entered the Spirit of the Ship and under Mielikki's guidance hacked out the heart. The chunk of blackened wood looked no more than a lumpy raw-edged piece of shipwreck as he carried it to the wagons, but it echoed with ancient days.[100]

At Delphi, when Medea disappears into the labyrinth of caves, also apparently connecting to the Otherworld or underworld, and distracts Jason with dead men raised and shaped to look like his sons, Jason calls on Apollo, Mielikki and Argo to grant him passage into the underworld.[101] Merlin cannot follow, the Argonaut Tairon, the Cretan with the special ability of labyrinth walking, follows some of the way, to recognise the scent of Dodona. Jason's connection to Dodona and to the oak branch in Argo is fundamental, like a son:

> The oak that had been crafted so carefully into the ship had claimed her captain as its son. There were a thousand spirits wandering inside Argo and Jason was one of them.[102]

This passage suggests that Argo embodies the Otherworld, is the inner space of mythological history, as well as being an offshoot of the forest of Dodona (itself another primal forest like Ryhope Wood?). At 310–1 Merlin asks Argo for passage to Dodona, and Mielikki obliges, taking him again into her threshold place, and emphasising her feeling of wrongness and separation. Like Medea in Euripides, she is out of place, in the wrong landscape, or anxious about imminent threats: 'This place is too strange. I am out of my world.'[103]

At Dodona the final confrontations of the first volume take place: Merlin and Medea; Jason and his first son, Thesokorus. Merlin remembers that he had loved Medea, Medea recognises and remembers Merlin; Thesokorus, taught by or even enchanted by Medea to hate his father, attempts to kill him, but at the last minute Medea releases him from the compulsion and he leaves. Jason rejects Merlin as a betrayer, who did not warn him of Medea's presence, and hobbles away, badly wounded. Merlin is left to return to Mielikki/Argo, who like him has been

100 *Celtika* 218.

101 *Celtika* 308.

102 *Celtika* 309.

103 *Celtika* 311.

watching unable to intervene, and who offers to take him home. Arbitrarily he chooses Alba, the country of Urtha (and Holdstock).

Merlin as narrator and character feels unmoored: 'Nothing has turned out right. [...] I don't know where to go next. I've lost the Path.'[104] Mielikki/Argo is no *deus ex machina,* and offers only potential for further instalments: 'You can't know that. Not yet. Not until everything is finished.'[105] Argo and her goddess provide Merlin and the reader with solace, comfort and hope for the sequel ([The Forest Lady] 'embraced me gently', 'soothed me', 'held me',).[106] The stream shifts shape, the landscape changes, and the 'small, beautiful ship', a 'spirit from Argo', appears, leaving Merlin, Holdstock and us 'Free for a while, to breathe and dream'.[107]

Over the course of *Celtika,* Argo and her sponsoring goddesses have performed a wide range of narrative functions. The ship of myth, created from the fabric of forest, becomes a central character in the plot, with close emotional connections to Merlin as well as Jason, and operates as both plot space and mechanism.

GENRE AND MEANING

A central tension in Holdstock's work is that between epic and tragedy, glory and kin-killing, making a name for oneself (creating and preserving a reputation as king, hero, sorcerer, historian, musician) and caring for or protecting one's family.[108] George Huxley in *Mythago Wood* abandons his family in his obsession

104 *Celtika* 324.

105 *Celtika* 324.

106 *Celtika* 324.

107 *Celtika* 325.

108 This is to some extent simplified: it can be an imaginary family trumping the needs of a real one (Christian and Steven's love for Guiwenneth in *Mythago Wood*), or the desire to recreate or mend a family that sends a character away from their broken and flawed family (Tallis Keeton in *Lavondyss,* who is motivated both by her desire to help Scathach, and to find Harry and to satisfy her curiosity), or the desire to bring a family back to life (Martin in *Merlin's Wood,* where his wife and child have been possessed and destroyed by the spirits of Merlin and Vivien respectively). However, all three characters also desire to prove themselves and develop self-knowledge in the process.

with his research, as does Edward Wynne-Jones. This tension becomes more important in the *Merlin Codex,* perhaps because of its prominence in the *Argonautica* tradition (Jason abandons his mother, Medea abandons her family and even kills her brother, both Jason and Medea betray and bring about the death of their own children). Merlin's obsession with Jason and his family seems ultimately to be driven by his loss of connection to his own siblings. Urtha's trip away from Alba leads to the loss of his family. The epic journey, into the woods, into the deep, into distant lands or supernatural realms, otherworlds or underworlds, with its connotations of transcendence, initiation and the achievement of renown, contrasts with the difficulty of staying at home, keeping connections, having a meaningful life with close family. The tragic matter of family conflict both drives epic alienation and creates meaning in the process of striving for knowledge and achievement (Jason's quest for his sons, Merlin's rediscovery of his own past). Holdstock has a profound suspicion of heroism both epic and tragic; however, family relationships also provide little comfort or security. The sublimity of suffering and survival against the odds alongside the power of intense experience are the rewards of his worlds.

The joy of the *Merlin Codex* comes in the resurrection of old stories, the creation of new life from dead wood. In this, Argo is central. The intensity comes from multiplication of tragic models, refracted through an epic framework, in which Argo acts as the divine apparatus. At key moments the ship mediates between the mortal characters and the supernatural, not the only character to do this, but one of the most important, both viewing divinity, acting as liminal space, and ritual instructor. The supernatural Argo in her union with the Finnish goddess Mielikki symbolises the renewal of myth by hybridization. The ship is a site of generic crossing, as well as multiplication: the ancient genres of epic and tragedy compete with and intensify each other, underlying Holdstock's play on modern genres of fantasy, horror, historical fiction and romance. The ship is in some ways an outcropping, a new offshoot of Holdstock's earlier work, in which the forest performs a similar role, but in others a new development, more complex, varied and flexible to enable a multiple tragedy that takes on and becomes a worthy successor to both Apollonius' *Argonautica* and Euripides' *Medea.*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barthes (1977). – Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1977).

Braund (1994). – David Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity. A history of Caucasus and Transcaucasian Iberia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1994).

Christensen (2020). – Joel Christensen, *The Many-minded Man: The Odyssey, Psychology and the Therapy of Epic* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 2020).

Clute and Grant (1999). – John Clute and John Grant, *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (London: Orbit 1999).

Crawford (1888). – John Crawford, *The Kalevala: The Epic Poem of Finland Into English* (New York: J. B. Aldenkin 1888).

Ekman (2013). – Stefan Ekman, *Here Be Dragons: Exploring Fantasy Maps and Settings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press 2013).

Fabre-Serris (2008). – Jacqueline Fabre-Serris, *Rome, l'Arcadie et la mer des Argonautes: essai sur la naissance d'une mythologie des origines en Occident. Mythes, imaginaires, religions* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion 2008).

Fletcher (2019). – Judith Fletcher, *Myths of the underworld in contemporary culture: the backward gaze* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2019).

Fowler (2000). – Robert Fowler, *Early Greek Mythography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000).

Gardner (1973). – John Gardner, *Jason and Medeia* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1973).

Gaunt (1972). – David M. Gaunt, 'Argo and the Gods in Apollonius Rhodius'. *Greece and Rome* 19.2 (1972) 117–126. Stable url: https://www.jstor.org/stable/642666

Gladhill and Myers (2020). – Bill Gladhill and Micah Young Myers (eds.), *Walking Through Elysium: Vergil's Underworld and the Poetics of Tradition.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2020).

Graves (1944). – Robert Graves, *The Golden Fleece* (London: Hutchinson 1944).

Hardie (1986). – Philip Hardie, *Virgil's Aeneid: Cosmos and Imperium* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1986).

Hawthorne (1950 [1853]). – Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Tanglewood Tales* (London: Dent 1950 [1853]).

Heerink (2014). – Mark Heerink, 'Valerius Flaccus, Virgil and the Poetics of Ekphrasis', in Mark Heerink and Gesine Manuwald (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Valerius Flaccus* (Leiden: E. J. Brill 2014) 72–95. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/9789004278653_006

Holdstock (2001) – Robert Holdstock, *Celtika* (London: Simon and Schuster 2001).

Holdstock (2002) – Robert Holdstock, *The Iron Grail* (London: Simon and Schuster 2002).

Holdstock (2006) – Robert Holdstock, *The Broken Kings* (London: Gollancz 2006).

Jackson (1997). – Steven Jackson, 'Argo: The First Ship?'. *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 140.3/4 (1997) 249–57. Stable url: https://www.jstor.org/stable/41234283

Kincaid (2011). – Paul Kincaid, 'The Memory of Stories: Robert Holdstock Interviewed', *Into the Woods: Robert Holdstock Remembered* (Warton, nr. Tamworth: BSFA 2011) 9–19.

Kincaid (2022). – Paul Kincaid, *Robert Holdstock's Mythago Wood. A Critical Companion* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2022).

Lovatt (2020). – Helen Lovatt, 'Didactic heroes: masculinity, sexuality and exploration in the Argonaut story of Kingsley's *The Heroes*', in: Rachel Bryant Davies and Barbara Gribling (eds.), *Pasts at Play: Childhood Encounters with History in British Culture, 1750–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2020) 71–95. https://doi.org/10.7765/9781526128904.00012

Lovatt (2021). – Helen Lovatt, *In Search of the Argonauts: The Remarkable History of Jason and the Golden Fleece* (London: Bloomsbury 2021).

Manolaraki (2012). – Eleni Manolaraki, 'Aeriae Grues: Crane Migrations from Virgil to Statius'. *The Classical Journal* 107.3 (2012) 290–311. https://doi.org/10.5184/classicalj.107.3.0290

Manuwald (2002). – Gesine Manuwald, 'Die Argonauten in Kolchis. Der Mythos bei Valerius Flaccus und Corneille. Argonautica oder Iason und Medea in Iuppiters "Weltenplan"'. *Antike und Abendland* 48 (2002) 43–57. http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9783110241600.43

Manwaring (2018). – Kevan Manwaring, 'Ways Through the Wood: The Rogue Cartographies of Robert Holdstock's Mythago Wood Cycle as a Cognitive Map for Creative Process in Fiction'. *Writing in Practice* 4 (2018).

Malam and Antram (2005) – John Malam and David Antram, *Jason and the Argonauts* (Brighton: Book House 2005).

Marsden (2003). – Peter Marsden, *Sealed by time: the loss and recovery of the Mary Rose* (Portsmouth: Mary Rose Trust 2003).

Morse and Matolcsy (2011). – Donald Morse and Kálmán Matolcsy (eds.), *The Mythic Fantasy of Robert Holdstock: Critical Essays on the Fiction.* (London: McFarland 2011).

Nelson (2015). – Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press 2015).

Oziewicz (2008). – Marek Oziewicz, 'Profusion sublime and fantastic: Robert Holdstock's *Mythago Wood*'. *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 19. 1 (2008) 94–111.

Purves (2010). – Alex Purves, 'Wind and Time in Homeric Epic'. *TAPA* 140. 2 (2010) 323–50. http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/apa.2010.a402236

Rule (1983). – Margaret Rule, *The Mary Rose: the excavation and raising of Henry VIII's flagship* (London: Conway Maritime 1983).

Treece (1961). – Henry Treece, *Jason* (London: Sphere 1961).

Vian (1987). – Francois Vian, *Les Argonautiques Orphiques* (Paris: Budé 1987).

West (2005). – Martin West, 'Odyssey and Argonautica'. *Classical Quarterly* 55. 1 (2005) 39–64. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/cq/bmi003

Wolf (1996). – Christa Wolf, *Medea* (London: Virago 1996).

Yomtov and Sandoval (2009) – Nel Yomtov and Gerardo Sandoval, *Jason and the Golden Fleece* (Minneapolis: Stone Arch Books 2009).

Helen Lovatt
University of Nottingham
Department of Classics and Archaeology, Humanities Building, University Park,
Nottingham, NG7 2RD.
helen.lovatt@nottingham.ac.uk

Suggested citation

Lovatt, Helen Verini: Resurrecting the Argo: Supernatural Re-makings in Robert Holdstock's Merlin Codex. In: thersites 17 (2023): Classics and the Supernatural in Modern Media, pp. 55–95. https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.254

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

17/2023 | pp. 96–124

AMANDA POTTER
(Open University and University of Liverpool)

Classical Monsters and Hero(ines) in *InSEXts*, *Eros/Psyche* and *Porcelain*

Abstract This paper applies Monster Theory to the use of Greek mythology in three creator-owned comic series by female writers: *InSEXts* (2016–2017) by American comic writer Marguerite Bennett and Indonesian artist working in America Ariela Kristantina as well as *Eros/Psyche* (2021) and *Porcelain* (2021) by Maria Llovet, a comic writer and artist from Barcelona. In the first volume of *InSEXts,* set in Victorian London, there are allusions to the Furies and Pandora, linked with the discourse of the repression of women. In the second volume, set in the late nineteenth century Paris art world, the representation of classical subjects in art becomes a means to repress women, and a goddess with a Gorgon-like appearance takes revenge on the male repressors. In *Eros/Psyche* the story of Eros and Psyche and broken statues forms the backdrop and context for a tale of love and deception at a girls' school, and in *Porcelain* a girl is faced with a choice of paths towards Eros or Thanatos, like Herakles at the crossroads choosing between the paths of virtue and vice. With reference to Cohen's seven theses of Monster Culture I examine how Bennett and Lovett subvert the idea of the monster and the hero.

Keywords Comics, Eros, Psyche, Pygmalion, Medusa

URL https://thersites-journal.de
DOI https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.247

CLASSICS, COMICS AND MONSTERS

Some of our best-known Western comic book heroes have their roots in mythology, a world of gods and heroes with supernatural powers: Wonder Woman the Amazon, Superman with his god-like (or Herculean) superhuman powers,[1] Thor the Norse god of thunder – the list goes on. Originally created by male writers but also adapted and reinvented by female writers, the adventures of these heroes sometimes take them directly into the mythological worlds from where they originate, in terms of theme, location or storyline. The adversaries of these heroes can also originate from ancient myths: Wonder Woman and the Amazons are faced with Medusa, and Cheetah's human surname is Minerva, an anthropologist who, in an incarnation by Greg Rucka, searches for evidence of the Amazons.[2] In the world of the X-Men, Proteus has the power to shapeshift (like the god whose name he takes), and Cassandra Nova's mental abilities outmatch those of The Trojan princess, as she has the powers of telekinesis and telepathy. Some notable examples from the broader world of mythology are Loki from Marvel and Lucifer Morningstar from Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* universe.

The lines between hero and villain/monster can be blurred, so that Cheetah can team up with Diana, for example in the *Wonder Woman: Dead Earth* series from 2020,[3] and we might prefer the mischievous Loki, as played by Tom Hiddleston in recent film and television incarnations, compared with his rather bland brother Thor (Chris Hemsworth). In Graeco-Roman mythology we might similarly be more attracted to the monster over the hero, where Medusa offers more possibilities than the uninteresting Perseus, like Liz Gloyn, who ends her book *Tracking Classical Monsters in Popular Culture* with the affirmation to the reader that 'We *can* be tired of heroes. We *can* turn to the monsters'.[4] However monsters are slippery; they evade categorisation, even when we attempt to classify them. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, in his 'seven theses towards understanding cultures through the monsters they bear', posits that 'the monster is the harbinger of category crisis' (thesis three), as monsters are 'disturbing hybrids', resisting 'classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition', and 'the monster

1 See Dethloff (2011).

2 Rucka (2016).

3 Johnson (2020).

4 Gloyn (2020) 196.

dwells at the gates of difference' (thesis 4), it is 'difference made flesh', the personification of the 'Other', where 'monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual'.[5] But ultimately, in Cohen's final, seventh thesis, the monster is on the verge of 'becoming' something else,[6] and this could mean the monster becomes the hero, or vice versa.

In their introduction to the exhibition catalogue for *Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK* at the British Library in 2014, curators Paul Gravett and John Harris Dunning state that comics can 'question conventions, challenge acceptability, provoke debates and sometimes court controversy. For this can be a subversive genre'.[7] In a world of comics where difference reigns, a world that is, according to literature and popular culture scholars, queer theorists and writers Ramzi Fawas and Dariek Scott, inherently queer,[8] comic writers can explore the blurring of boundaries between hero(ine) and monster, overturning patriarchal cultural norms as represented in classical mythology. With respect to my examples of creator-owned comics by female writers Marguerite Bennett and Maria Llovet I argue that patriarchal, heteronormative myths are switched to become stories of female power and lesbian desire, and the idea of the female monster is subverted, so that the heroine and monster are merged. As George Kovacs states in *Classics and Comics,* fulfilling the potential for 'deeper and more meaningful levels of engagement between the classical world and comics'[9] than is found in the mere naming of superheroes and villains.

American writer Marguerite Bennett's *InSEXts,* with artwork by Ariela Kristantina, is a story of metamorphosis, where lesbian women change into monstrous insects. The first volume is set in nineteenth-century London, where real monstrosity is revealed behind a façade of virtue, and the second volume is set in the male-dominated Paris art world, where male artists use an ancient monstrous female to silence women, until she returns to her origins as a benevolent goddess. Comic writer and artist from Barcelona Maria Llovet's *Eros/Psyche,* published in a new English edition in 2021, is set in a girls' boarding school, where the girls are left alone at a school with expansive grounds, presided over

5 Cohen (1996) 3–7.

6 Cohen (1996) 20.

7 Gravett and Dunning (2014) 6.

8 Fawas and Scott (2018).

9 Kovacs (2011) 5.

by headless statues of Eros and Psyche. The new girl falls in love with an experienced schoolmate, but as they continue to complete strange tasks and their schoolfellows disappear one by one, the monstrosity and deception inherent in the Eros and Psyche story in the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius breaks into this seemingly idyllic world.[10] Llovet follows this comic with *Porcelain,* also published in English in 2021, which can be read as a journey to the underworld, where the heroine must face an outwardly beautiful yet inwardly monstrous version of death, like Herakles in Euripides' *Alcestis,* after first navigating a crossroads, like Herakles' choice between the easy path of vice or the difficult path of virtue. This monster can be defeated when she is revealed to be a mirror image of the heroine herself. Samantha Langsdale and Elizabeth Rae Coody state that 'in patriarchal cultural contexts, wherein men are assumed to be representative of the normative, universal subject [...] women frequently become monsters'.[11] However, in the hands of female comic writers and artists interested in depicting queer female characters, female monsters can become female heroes.

MONSTROUS WOMEN AS HEROINES IN *INSEXTS*

Marguerite Bennett worked for DC and Marvel before she created *InSEXts,* her first creator-owned comic published by Aftershock from 2016–2017, but her work in the field of superhero comics also includes female-centric stories about diverse female characters. For example, in an interview about *DC Comics: Bombshells,* first published in 2015, Bennett states:

> I wanted queer characters, women of color, women of different faiths, women of different nations, women of all ages and from all places in life. In so many teams, there are only one or two women and their experiences must stand for the experiences of *all* women. In the world of "Bombshells," we have enough female characters that no one has to be the role model, the romantic interest, the badass – an archetype. No woman has to be everything. No woman, indeed, has to be anything.[12]

10 The story of Eros and Psyche is embedded within books 4–6 of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses.*

11 Lansdale and Coody (2020) 3.

12 Barksdale (2015).

As Ramzi Fawas states in *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* from the 1960s onwards 'the ecstatic visual culture of women's and gay liberation' has left its mark on mainstream Western comics, so that 'superhuman powers' could become 'an expression of female sexuality, pleasure and agency'.[13] Bennett, then, is writing within a subversive superhero tradition. For Fawas and Dariek Scott the 'alternate mutant kinships of superhero stories' is 'the epitome of 'queer worldmaking', and independent comics offer 'queer antinormativity', so that in *InSEXts* Bennett can further her project beyond the boundaries imposed by DC. *Bombshells* is set in an alternative universe 1940s, in a wartime society where options for women were limited, and *InSEXts* takes us back further to nineteenth-century London and Paris, and societies where women were even more constrained. Bennett chose this period as she wanted to 'corrupt the imperialist narrative' and show diversity: 'London in the Victorian era was a tremendously diverse place, and queer people were not invented in the 1980s'.[14] *InSEXts* can be read as a lesbian horror comic, a story of monsters, and also as a superhero comic, with the heroines, Lady and Mariah, coming to terms with their growing powers: Lady with the strength and ability to kill that comes with her transformation into her mutant insect form, and Mariah with her psychic/witchcraft and transformational powers that enable her to control others. Fawaz's term 'fluxability',[15] coined to describe the ever-changing nature of modern superheroes as they negotiate their evolving (monstrous) powers and identities, together with Cohen's thesis that monsters resist categorisation and highlight that difference 'is mutable',[16] show us that monsters and (super)heroes are interchangeable. In *InSEXts* we are confronted with monstrous interiors and exteriors, and the female monster and the heroine coalesce.

The first volume of *InSEXts,* originally published as seven issues, is a story of repression, love, horror and metamorphosis, set in London in 1894, in a divided world of society parties and brothels, three years after the last recorded murder by Jack the Ripper. As Keri-Crist Wagner states in her chapter on *InSEXts* in a collection of essays on *Monstrous Women in Comics,* the 'narrative is outside the typical comic book or horror storytelling conventions in its displays of un-

13 Fawas (2016) 10.

14 Carroll (2016).

15 Fawas (2016) 11.

16 Cohen (1996) 3–12.

checked power, violence by women, and same-sex relationships'.[17] The beautiful British-born Brahmin-heritage dark haired and skinned Lady Lalita Bertram (who chooses to be called Lady), gains the ability to transform into a winged creature, both beautiful and butterfly-like as well as monstrous. Indonesian artist Ariela Kristantina's artwork is gorgeous, erotic and horrific, drawing on classical and art nouveau tropes, with cupids, flowers and butterflies, and naked beautiful female bodies in acts of lovemaking, which are juxtaposed with monstrous creatures, severed heads and bloody bodies. In the introduction to the second volume of *InSEXts,* Kristantina comments that she 'love[s] drawing backgrounds and environments', and these stand out in the comics, and she finds the story Bennett wrote to be 'tender, sensual, emotional, intense, ingenious, violent and powerful',[18] which she matches and complements in her artwork, so that story and image defies the categories of beauty and beast.

Transformation occurs after Lady is bitten by a winged insect and has a round ball of pus-like substance transferred into her mouth by her maid and lover, the Irish redhead Mariah, as they make love. Mariah has the power of witchcraft and promises Lady that this will give them a child, and so Lady transfers the ball of pus into the mouth of her abusive husband, after pretending to initiate sex. As Lord Bertram becomes sick and Lady bemoans the double standard whereby he could use and abuse slum girls while his wife must act with decorum, Mariah vows 'we will be the revenge' that they and all the girls abused by such men 'could not take'.[19] Lord Bertram dies as a monstrous egg bursts out of his stomach, revealing the baby who is Lady and Mariah's son. The image is a horrific one, reminiscent of the birth of the alien in the *Alien* film franchise, and the comic intersperses scenes of love and beautiful images with exotic flowers and butterfly wings with scenes of monstrosity and horror. In this monstrous, queer birth scene the human host is the monster, for his abuse of women, and the egg produces the perfect child of Lady and Mariah's love. If we return to Cohen's seven theses and the monster as a harbinger of category crisis, then this birth, creating a new type of family, questions the 'norms' of heterosexual marriage, and posits an alternative. Queer feminist theorist, J. Jack Halberstam, in *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender and the End of Normal,* published in 2012, writes of a fem-

17 Crist-Wagner (2020) 101.

18 *InSEXts* Vol. 2 introduction.

19 *InSEXTS* 1.15.3.

inism that 'examines how new forms of family, intimacy, and belonging emerge, slowly and surely from the wreckage of marriage [and] the nuclear family'.[20] Mariah, Lady and their son Will personify this new feminism, as the women refuse 'the categories that have been assigned to them',[21] refusing the barriers of class (mistress/servant) and race (Brahmin/Irish) as well as heteronormativity and patriarchy.

In her introduction to the volume Bennett states that she is writing 'erotic body horror' because 'to be a woman is to live a life of body horror' and goes on to explain the many ways in which women are constrained and punished by and because of our bodies. She concludes that *InSEXts* is 'a story all about the horror and power and sensuality and rage of the bodies of women, metamorphic'.[22] Through Mariah and Lady, Bennett is writing a *Metamorphoses* where the seemingly monstrous transformation of women finally makes them powerful, counteracting the transformation of female victims of gods and men in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* into powerless trees, or birds, or spiders, or monsters, like Medusa, whose power is eventually curtailed by a male hero. Classicist Helen Morales has highlighted the subversive power already inherent in Greek myths, including Ovid's retellings,[23] but Bennett's story takes this idea further by examining the prejudices in the myths then rewriting the story completely to put women front and centre, and valorising their monstrousness. To quote from Amy Richlin's seminal article on Ovid's rape narratives, Bennett is able to 'speak the blood off' the names of the women victims through appropriation, resistance and the spilling of the blood of the male characters who would repress, hurt and silence the women.[24]

The comparison of Lady with a vengeful winged and Gorgon-like fury from Greek tragedy is hinted at by her spiteful, bigoted sister-in-law Sylvia, who calls Lady a 'dog-faced bitch',[25] like the 'dog-faced' (*kunōpides*) Furies in Euripides' *Elektra* nd *Orestes.*[26] However, the real monster here is the seemingly virtuous

20 Halberstam (2012) xv.

21 Halberstam (2012) xiv.

22 *InSEXts* Vol. 1 introduction.

23 Morales (2020).

24 Richlin (1992) 179.

25 *InSEXts* 2.19.2.

26 Eur. *El.* 1252 and *Or.* 260.

and religious Sylvia, in a heterosexual relationship with Lady's dead husband's brother, who is revealed to be host to a female monster, the Hag, who has enslaved the city's prostitutes. Sylvia uses patriarchal discourse on the nature of women to chastise Lady and Mariah, blending the Victorian ideal of woman as an 'angel in the house' from Coventry Patmore's mid-nineteenth century poem about an idealised marriage with a diatribe against women that could have come from Hesiod, using Pandora as an example of bad women, alongside the biblical Eve, Delilah and Jezebel.[27] However, it is the physically attractive, blonde Sylvia who is Pandora-like, *'kalon kakon'*,[28] with a beautiful exterior and a monstrous interior. Sylvia's hidden monster, the Hag, feeds on pain and hatred, and she teaches her female victims 'to hate themselves and each other'.[29] As the Hag transitions into her fully monstrous form, she grows black wings and her mouth widens, filled with sharp teeth, resembling a Harpy in Kristantina's artwork. As a monster the Hag is amorphous and no longer specifically female, all teeth, eyes, claws and tentacles. In the end she is no match for Lady in her mutant insect but still female, monstrous form, a 'better monster' who does not 'prey on the weak and the wounded'.[30]

Another type of monster included in the story are the Cynocephali, an ancient brotherhood of men who can change into wolves and hunt monsters in the name of 'the Lord'. Lady and Mariah join forces with them to defeat the Hag, but then Asher, leader of the brothers, turns on Lady and Mariah, ordering his men to kill 'the monstress' (Lady), the 'witch-woman' (Mariah) and 'the whores, for they were servants of sin'.[31] It is his supposedly Christian hatred of women that makes him monstrous, not his ability to change into a dog, and his brothers kill him, as they see the good in the women, and invite the women to join them in their quest as there are 'many more monsters to hunt'.[32] Monstrosity in this story is defined as hatred of and violence towards women, something that can be perpetuated by women and men, and seemingly monstrous insect women and

---

27 *InSEXts* 3.12.1. For the story of Pandora, followed by a diatribe against women, see Hes. *Theog.* 570–610, and more on Pandora in *Op.* 59–105.

28 Hes. *Theog.* 585.

29 *InSEXts* 6.14.1.

30 *InSEXts* 7.8–9.

31 *InSEXts* 7.11.2–3.

32 *InSEXts* 7.17.4.

wolf men can do good, so long as they respect and include women. It is monstrous intent, and not monstrous appearance, that defines the monster. At the end of the volume the theme of the second volume of *InSEXts,* the silencing of women, is also subtly introduced. Elsie who 'do[es] not speak much', shares with Mariah that she 'was told it was my most charming quality among the men'.[33] Elsie and Mariah agree that the only way to defy those in power who would bring suffering is to 'speak', and 'sing'.[34] Female monsters and female (rape) victims may be silenced in Graeco-Roman mythology; Medusa, who is both, is not given her own voice in Ovid's *Metamorphoses;* but *InSEXts* insists on the female voice being heard.

In the first volume of *InSEXts,* there is a small number of allusions to the classical world (namely to the Furies and Pandora), and these are linked with the discourse of the repression of women. The Christian brotherhood of Cynocephali is also given an ancient name, from the Greek *kynokephaloi,* dog-headed, rather than the more familiar name of werewolf, and their ancient shapeshifting ability can be used for good, it is only through twisting Christian doctrine against women that one of their number becomes monstrous. In the second volume, first published in six issues as 'The Necropolis' and set in the Paris art world, the representation of classical subjects in art becomes a means to repress women, and questions about what constitutes monstrosity, and specifically the use of ancient monsters, continue to be asked. The comic primarily engages with the stories of Pygmalion and Medusa, and Natalie Swain has argued successfully that these stories are retold 'through a feminist, Cixousian lens', with Hélène Cixous' 1976 article 'The Laugh of the Medusa' as intertext.[35]

The story starts in a cemetery in Paris in 1897 with male grave robbers stealing jewellery from a corpse. As a head is toppled from the statue of an angel, blood squirts from the severed neck, and in the place of the stone angel's head a woman's head with snakes for hair appears. Then her full body is revealed; she has green skin, four arms, discernable breasts covered by a vaguely classical white top, and from the waist down she has a snake-like tail. Readers familiar with the monstrous, serpent-tailed Medusa created by Ray Harryhausen for *Clash of the Titans* (1981), which has been influential on later depictions of

33 *InSEXts* 7.14.2–3.

34 *InSEXts* 7.15.5.

35 Swain (2023) 145.

Medusa,[36] including in *Clash of the Titans* (2010), are now likely to be reading this female character as a Gorgon, and when she tells one of the grave robbers 'Thou Shalt Live Forever',[37] we expect the man to be turned to stone. The robber appears as a statue outside Lady and Mariah's house, an unusual 'gift'.[38] The necklace he had stolen is made large around his arms, resembling stone chains, perhaps mixed with his own innards, in a visual display of the crime that he has been punished for. In classical terms the Gorgon-like creature is adopting the role of a Fury, rather than a Gorgon, in punishing the guilty and maintaining the natural order (the robber was caught stealing and desecrating a grave).

The monstrous female has made her home in a necropolis and has created an 'army' or a 'cult' of living female statues, once women who have been turned to stone on the orders of the male artists, or as she calls it, 'a gallery'.[39] Within this realm Lady addresses her as 'ancient queen', and Phoebe reveals she was a smuggled 'relic', but the female creature says that she is 'No relic. No parasite. No monster… I am a god. A goddess of protection from a distant land. And sometimes a goddess of revenge'.[40] The goddess speaks of her capture from Java at the hands of men in terms of colonisation and the Greek and Roman world:

> They took me for a Medusa. A statue of their own pantheon. Pillaged art. The spoils of empire. Carried me away like a Sabine woman. Brought the Trojan Horse into their city.[41]

Like the classicising art the male artists have used to dominate women, they have also made the goddess into a classical monster, denying the multiplicity of roles she held as a goddess. As Swain states, this female monster, at the hands of men, threatens 'to become all that she had once opposed and to become a weapon to serve a patriarchal white-supremacy that once made "Medusa" a victim'.[42]

---

36 See Gloyn (2013) and (2020) 144.

37 *InSEXts* 8.5.3.

38 *InSEXts* 8.20.1.

39 *InSEXts* 10.20.1.

40 *InSEXts* 11.5.1–3.

41 *InSEXts* 11.6.1–3.

42 Swain (2023) 142.

Alongside this Gorgon figure we are introduced to another powerful female, in Phoebe de Azais, Will's new governess, an attractive black artist. Phoebe is called 'witch' and 'Haruspex' by three white male artists who threaten her with knives as she leaves Mariah to fetch her possessions, after accepting the position as governess in the first issue of Volume 2.[43] These terms are used as insults, marking Phoebe out as unnatural and monstrous, and as 'Haruspex' she is linked with the ancient world and the Roman practice of divination using animal entrails. It is later revealed that as an artist she is a taxidermist, and she is also a prophetess, with supernatural abilities.

It is in the male world of art that true monstrosity can be found. The theme is introduced with a bedtime story Mariah tells to Will:

> Pygmalion was a sculptor, and carved of ivory a snow-white girl, perfect in his eyes and pristine in his heart… He loved the statue more than any living woman, and prayed to Aphrodite, goddess of love, to make her as real as you or I.[44]

Mariah then pauses and asks 'Do you like this story, Will?' Will replies 'No, Mama' and Mariah realises 'Nor do I, my heart, now that I read it again'.[45] The classical story of male subject and female object, as told by Mariah, jars with the world of Mariah, Lady and Will. In the simplified story told by Mariah, Pygmalion the artist loves the 'perfect' and 'pristine' silent statue rather than women of flesh and blood.[46] For many modern readers this is a 'creepy' story, highlighting the moral question of creating a perfect partner, and dismissing the unnamed statue/woman's character and opinions as irrelevant. A participant in my research on a televisual representation of the creation of the perfect woman read the Pygmalion passage from Ovid for the first time and found that 'her own identity doesn't appear to be an important factor in the story; to the author and the protagonist, her importance is only in the fact she represent an "ideal" form of womanhood in all the ways she is different from the Propoetides', the promis-

43 *InSEXts* 8.10.1–3.

44 *InSEXts* 8.13.1–2.

45 *InSEXts* 8.13.3.

46 *InSEXts* 8.13.1.

cuous local women.[47] As classicist Paula James states, 'Pygmalion is motivated to make himself a life partner because of his revulsion to real women with their innate vices'.[48] The comic turns this idea around, so that when Mariah awakens Lady with blood from one of Phoebe's captured assailants, Lady, complete with her butterfly wings, awakes and emerges from h chrysalis, a mobile, active naked figure reaching for the arms of her lover, compared to the static, naked, unnamed Pygmalion's statue coming to life a few panels earlier.[49] Lovemaking between these two women is pictured as a beautiful mutual act, and not a female 'vice'.

The gendered hierarchy set up by the story of Pygmalion is promulgated by the white male artists in Paris, although instead of creating silent, perfect women from statues, they are subduing unruly women by turning them into statues. The next issue, number 9, is entitled 'Pretty Pictures' and the opening panels contain images from 'Le Musée Silencieux', the silent museum, where a male artist is admiring a white statue of a naked Persephone being abducted by Hades.[50] Holding Persephone's white stone face in his hand he says to himself 'Perfect. Pale and pure and perfect. Silent. Still. Beautiful. Seen and never heard. Tender, wilting – chaste. […] The perfect woman'.[51] Like Pygmalion he looks for chaste perfection, and like Pygmalion's statue in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* she is silent and passive.[52] For this artist that is part of her perfection. He moves to a statue of the three Graces, again all naked, 'a harem of perfection'. Suddenly the three Graces get down from their plinth, source weapons from the museum, and run after the fleeing curator, with the words 'Silent…? Still…? Seen and never heard… Tender, wilting…Chased'.[53] A snake speaks from the plinth it shares with the statue of a bearded male figure: 'Do not run'.[54] The goddess in female snake-headed, ser-

47 From viewer and reader responses obtained in 2009, which fed into a podcast available at https://archive.org/details/podcast_pygmalion-meets-buffy-vamp_pygmalion-popular-culture_1000411473845 (accessed 9 April 2023).

48 James (2013) 13.

49 Swain (2023) 136 finds that this image is based on a painting by Gérôme.

50 *InSEXts* 9.1–3.

51 *InSEXts* 9.1–3.

52 Ovid *Met.* 10.243–97.

53 *InSEXts* 9.3.2–6.

54 *InSEXts* 9.4.1

pent-tailed Medusa shape appears and tells him 'I shall not kill thee… Indeed I shall give thee what thou desirest… I shall give thee…The perfect woman'.[55] The man pleads that he only 'watched' and 'touched',[56] and so was not the real perpetrator of whatever crime against women had been committed. His pleas go unheeded, and the statue of Persephone reaches out to hold his face in her hand, calls him 'my love', kisses him, then eats his face so that a bloody mess remains, called 'a pretty picture' by the snake-haired goddess.[57] This inversion of the Pygmalion story could be read as a cautionary tale for men, like Pygmalion, who look for the woman who is perfect according to their own criteria, or aim to silence women. The silencing man is the real monster here, hiding his monstrosity behind a human face, which is peeled back in order to match the horrifying inside with the outside.

The second part of the issue follows Lady, Mariah and Will on their visit to the gallery at Le Jardins des Violets, a salon presided over by Phoebe's mother, Dorothée de Azais, which is filled with very different works of art. Instead of white marble the gallery is filled with paintings of colourfully-clothed women brandishing swords and holding up severed bearded heads, perhaps Judith and Holofernes, together with less-recognisable images of other myths, partially obscured within their panels. These paintings feature mobile, active, colourful female subjects, unlike the passive white statues of women in Le Musée Silencieux (until, of course, they became active as members of the goddess' army). The artists at work here are women and men, of different ethnicities. Dorothée explains that her pupils at the salon are not 'permitted entrance to the grand academies of the arts' and they cannot exhibit at the 'great museums'.[58] Phoebe reveals to her friends that artists from the salon who protested against their exemption from these institutions have been going missing, but their images have been discovered within paintings to be exhibited at Le Musée Silencieux, 'stalked, hunted and transformed' into art by the men who would deny them as artists.[59] Art, then, is being used to silence real women, as Pygmalion used art to bypass real women in creating his perfect artificial woman.

---

55 *InSEXts* 9.4.2–5.

56 *InSEXts* 9.5.1.

57 *InSEXts* 9.5–7.

58 *InSEXts* 9.10.3.

59 *InSEXts* 9.15.2.

Three of the female artists discuss a new sculpture by Dorothée of Artemis and Acteon, so that the female subject is the hunter, rather than the hunted, and a scene of female action replaces one of male voyeurism:

> While everyone else depicts Artemis naked and bathing while Acteon leers from the bushes [...] Madame's statue had the hounds tearing Acteon limb from limb while Artemis drew her bow to –[60]

Like some of the other images in Dorothée's gallery, this unseen sculpture depicts a scene of violence, but the active female characters are not seen as monsters for their violent acts. It is the men who deserve to be killed for their crimes against women, or for assuming that females only exist for male voyeuristic pleasure. This simplistic view of Artemis as depicted by male artists works within Bennett's story, but there are examples of male artists who chose to paint different aspects of the myth of Actaeon, just as Ovid concentrates on Artemis as hunter as well as viewed object.[61] Perhaps most famously Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* (1556–59) shows the scene where Acteon is discovered spying on the bathing Diana, but his *The Death of Acteon* (1559–75) depicts an active Diana drawing her bow in the foregound, with Acteon being torn apart by his dogs to the right of the goddess (both at the National Gallery in London).

The women are accosted by men, drugged with chloroform, and wake up to find themselves chained up and naked in Le Musée Silencieux, where the 'artist' Monsieur Roderick tells them that 'we are going to help you serve your true purpose'.[62] As a candle goes out and Roderick holds up a lamp the three naked women have become part of a painting; three classicised naked female figures holding hands in a landscape, another version of the three Graces, with Roderick's comment: 'Silent. Chaste. Perfect'.[63] For the reader these words (and actions) against women condemn the artist as monster. In the first panel of the next issue a crowd of admirers, men and women, cluster before the painting, describing it as 'beautiful', 'classical', 'clean', 'silent', 'elegant', 'perfect'.[64] The

60 *InSEXts* 9.16.1.

61 Ovid, *Met.* 3.231–52.

62 *InSEXts* 9.18.3.

63 *InSEXts* 9.20.1–2.

64 *InSEXts* 10.1.1–3.

classical woman, then, is a silent woman, and this is the woman the patriarchy prefers. None of the viewers seem to notice that one of Adrienne's empty eyes is shedding a tear, they see only the art, not the woman. Mariah quietly swears revenge on Roderick in horrific terms: 'Roderick will hold his guts in his hands before he dies. He will pop his own eyes between his teeth and feel the jelly run, salt-sweet, down his throat'.[65] More publicly, Lady chastises him for not valuing 'women of flesh and bone',[66] but he believes that women's 'voices are unnecessary'.[67] His views mark him out to be a monster, deserving of the monstrous revenge Mariah envisages for him.

Lady, Mariah and Phoebe join forces with the goddess, and destroy the mirror that Roderick is using to trap the women as art, and he and his men are pursued by the living female statues. They tell him that he could not make the perfect woman as 'there is *no* perfect woman. There are only *women*'.[68] As they tear him to pieces, the women reclaim the classical past, which thus far has been aligned to the male purview in silencing women:

> All the many monsters who women became… *Gorgons* not Graces. *Witches and Bitches and Banshees… Maidens* like *Maenads,* who reveled, wild in the woods. Maidens *turned* Maenads, when they would not dance upon command. Whose parties grew so *wild,* they killed the starry-eyed dreamers who crossed their paths. *Hags and Harpies and Whores. Sirens. Succubi. Furies. Fates.*[69]

Throughout the comic the male artists have used some of these words to describe Lady, Mariah and the female artists, and they are claimed by the women, fulfilling the need articulated by Phoebe to 'tell our stories as our own' so that 'unquiet women' and 'deviant women' are no longer 'reduced to monsters'.[70]

However, once the men are destroyed, the goddess turns on Phoebe to complete her revenge, as Phoebe had helped Roderick in the past. She turns Phoebe to stone, but Phoebe's mother Dorothée uses magic to swap places with her

65 *InSEXts* 10.2.2.

66 *InSEXts* 10.4.2.

67 *InSEXts* 10.5.2.

68 *InSEXts* 12.1–2.

69 *InSEXts* 12.2–4.

70 *InSEXts* 10.17.4–5.

daughter, and Phoebe is reborn from the stone in a white robe, with a spear in her hand, surrounded by an army of animals brought to life again from taxidermy. Phoebe has become a classical goddess, or an earlier deity, the Minoan and Mycenaean mistress of the beasts. The goddess is also transformed, losing her snake-haired form, the 'monster' that men had made her, instead appearing as a beautiful woman. She says that 'our lives are our stories, are they not? …and our stories are our lives. We shall be made better than before',[71] made for themselves as women, not as what men want or expect them to be, so neither monster nor angels in the house. The art in the museum has also been transformed, so that Mariah finds 'the lady smiling in the portrait now stands and commands… The maidens devoured now fight back… The nymph being carried off… *Now she shoves the satyr away*'.[72] Women are finally being given an active role in art and myth. The goddess, no longer the monstress Medusa, leaves with the words 'The story changed. We shall be so much better than before'.[73] As Swain argues, 'through Phoebe's artistic agency (her "writing her self "), she returns "Medusa's" confiscated body to her, a body that has been made a stranger through her kidnapping, thus rescuing "Medusa" from becoming little more than an icon of rage'.[74] It is not monstrous rage, but art and co-operation between women, and goddesses, that will bring about a positive future, where women are free to create their own stories and own their bodies.

At the end of the comic, Lady, Mariah and Will board a ship to take them to a new life in America. The final panels show Lady and Mariah making love in their cabin, but a man has tried to steal their jewels and spies on their lovemaking. Mariah's witch powers come to the fore in a series of panels showing the faces of the two women, the man unseen, as Mariah speaks:

> I scent something. I can see it in the air… *A trespasser… With prying eyes.* Oh, did you think we were *for you*? Did you think we were for your pleasure? All for your enjoyment? Here, the comb in my hair, my lady, it's as sharp as a hatpin… Tell me – do you think that what is ours was *yours to take.* Oh *sir. You were wrong.*[75]

71 *InSEXts* 13.9–10.

72 *InSEXts* 13.10.5.

73 *InSEXts* 13.14.1.

74 Swain (2023) 145.

75 *InSEXts* 13.19–20.

The final image of the comic is of a stylised butterfly, symbolising the duality of the women as monsters and heroines, asserting their right to lesbian desire and their right to own their property, without interference from the men who are human on the outside and monstrous on the inside.

In the second volume of *InSEXts,* Marguerite Bennett uses the classical world, and specifically the story of Pygmalion, to set up the male ideal of the perfect, passive, silent women, muse to the male artist, in direct contrast with the active heroines. Lady and Mariah, and the goddess, are depicted as beautiful in their monstrosity, in panels of artwork filled with flowers and butterflies alongside blood and gore, while the men who would silence women are the real monsters hiding behind their art, which is an illusion. The women use violent means, killing the male artists who spy on them, to use their blood, first to wake Lady from her chrysalis, and later to help Phoebe with divination. However, this violent behaviour is justified rather than monstrous, and only perpetrated against those who would harm women and uphold the patriarchy. This justified female violence was also seen in the first volume of *InSEXts,* where a sisterhood of women bands together to oppose the men and the female monster supporting the patriarchy who would abuse and constrain them. The brothel girls of London and the female artists in Paris work together to defeat their oppressors, and to write their own stories. These stories are a reclamation of the active, monstrous females of Graeco-Roman mythology, who, like Lady and Mariah, can be both *monsters* and *heroes.*

DECEPTIVE MONSTERS AND THE HERO'S CHOICES IN *EROS/PSYCHE* AND *PORCELAIN*

Maria Llovet is an artist and writer from Barcelona who grew up reading European comics and also manga,[76] and the influence of manga is evident in *Eros/Psyche* in the portrayal of girls in school uniforms as protagonists of the story. She is also interested in mythic subjects, so in an interview on her comic *Luna,* set in the 1960s and featuring characters who are gods, and influenced by 'Egypt' and 'Alchemy texts', Llovet comments: 'about Greek mythology, I remember asking my parents to buy me a book about it when I was quite young, I thought

76 Llovet interview with *Grimoire of Horror* (2021).

it was fascinating'.[77] A book of Greek myths, including the story of Apollo and Daphne, is also read by schoolgirl Sara in the comic, leading to her learning about the story of Eros and Psyche, which is retold by her female lover Silje.

After working with comic writers as an artist, *Eros/Psyche* was Llovet's first creator-owned comic. Originally issued in French and Spanish in black and white in 2011, Llovet created a coloured English version published by Ablaze in 2021. She describes the comic as 'the story of two girls who fall in love in a very strange and surreal boarding school.'[78] As Sara Palermo notes, the story of Eros and Psyche is used by Llovett to structure the comic, via images and words. While Bennett created and wrote *InSEXts* while artist Ariela Kristantina created the artwork, Llovet is both writer and artist, and while *InSEXts* relies heavily on text to tell the story through the speech of the protagonists, *Eros/Psyche* is text-light, often relying on the pictures to tell the story, which adds to the mysterious and ambiguous nature of the tale. As Palermo states:

> *Eros/Psique de Maria Llovet es una obra que podríamos definir como "en equilibrio": en equilibrio entre dos géneros – el manga y la novela gráfica –, entre un mundo real y un espacio mágico, entre la amistad y el amor, entre el blanco y el negro, entre lo acabado y lo inacabado, que deja al lector con una serie de preguntas que requieren de una segunda lectura atenta para encontrar respuestas.*[79]
>
> *Eros/Psique* by Maria Llovet is a work that we could define as "in balance": in balance between two genres – the manga and the graphic novel –, between a real world and a magical space, between friendship and love, between white and black, between the finished and the unfinished, which leaves the reader with a series of questions that require a careful second reading to find answers.

Readers are alerted to the story of Eros (or Cupid) and Psyche from Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* in the title of the comic, but the story is not told until it is narrated by Silje in issue 2. Up until this point clues are oblique, and readers may see the images of two partially headless statues of naked male and female forms with wings as merely part of the background, until Sara remarks on them, prompting Silje to relate the story. The statues are standing apart, and both have wings, un-

77 Cordas (2021).

78 Cordas (2021).

79 Palermo (2021) 494, translation is author's own with assistance from *Google translate.*

like most images of the pair where they stand close together. Also only Cupid usually has wings, as in the famous Canova statue of *Psyche Revived by Cupid's Kiss* in the Louvre Museum.[80]

In addition to this visual clue, there is also another link with the theme of the story of Eros/Psyche, that of Beauty and the Beast. The tale of Eros/Cupid and Psyche is seen by folklorists as an early version of this folktale, where

> [t]he girl accepts a monstrous husband, but loses him: she must seek him out and with the final confiscation of his bestial outfit or the like they can live happily ever after.[81]

From the beginning of the comic, those familiar with this story may be alert to the name of the school Sara is to join, 'the Rose'. It is the rose stolen from the Beast's garden by Beauty's father, which leads to her voluntary imprisonment in the Beast's castle. The Rose, then, is set up to be a prison, even though it is a seemingly pleasant one, and Sara narrates that she was 'very happy' there.[82] And if Sara is set up to be Beauty, who is the Beast? As Beauty falls in love with the Beast, so Sara falls in love with 'key student' Silje,[83] but both Sara and Silje are attractive young girls on the outside; it is the hidden, monstrous inside that we as readers should beware of.

Silje is the first person Sara meets at the Rose school, after she has consumed pills printed with the word 'god', and their meeting place is in front of the two unnamed winged statues. Silje's unusual and unexplained name is a Scandinavian form of Cecile, from the Latin word for blind, *Caecus*. Like other emblematic words and images in the comic the knowledgeable reader may speculate on Psyche's enforced blindness to Cupid's outward appearance, hidden to her as he comes to her in the darkness. Cupid uses the dark to disguise his form as a god, though to the curious Psyche he could be disguising a monstrous appearance. The strange and seemingly meaningless tasks the school girls have to complete,

80 Palermo (2020) 496 also compares the statue to the famous headless statue of Nike from Samothrace, also at the Louvre; however, this statue is of a clothed rather than a naked figure, and Cupid and Psyche are naked in the Canova statue and most other representations.

81 Anderson (2000) 68. See also Bottigheimer (1989).

82 *Eros/Psyche* 1.6.3.

83 *Eros/Psyche* 1.20.2

such as threading coloured beads and placing stones in a field, also seem to be like the tasks Aphrodite sets Psyche (sorting grains and collecting golden wool and black water).[84]

In issue 2, as Sara starts to fall in love with Silje, they sit together on a bench in front of the statues, and holding a book Sara says 'I love the story of Daphne and Apollo',[85] and she wonders if the statue is of Daphne. This is an unusual story for a girl to 'love'; the story of a rape thwarted by a nymph being turned into a tree. Silje says her favourite story is that of Eros and Psyche, which is not in their book. Her favourite story was told to her 'a long time ago'. In the largest piece of text in the comic, Silje tells the story of Eros and Psyche to Sara:

> Psyche was the youngest daughter of the king of Anatolia and the most beautiful among her sisters. Jealous of her beauty, the goddess Aphrodite sent her son Eros to sling a golden arrow that would make Psyche fall in love with a hideous and detestable man. However, Eros fell in love with her, threw the arrow into the ocean, and once she slept, took her up to his palace. Eros kept his identity a secret to avoid the wrath of his mother and only visited his beloved at night. But Psyche, deceived by the envy of her sisters, decided to find out about who he was. One night she lighted a lamp of oil while her lover slept. One drop of the boiling oil fell on his skin, awakening him and he fled, and though she tried to pursue, he flew away leaving her despondent. Not knowing what to do, Psyche asked Aphrodite for help. She tasked Psyche with four impossible missions. If she could accomplish them then she would see Eros again. In the last of her missions, Psyche had to go down to hell to collect a chest belonging to Persephone for Aphrodite. Psyche, again tempted by curiosity, opened the chest and fell into an eternal dream. But Eros searched without rest, finally found her, and managed to wake her and so they remained together on Olympus forever.[86]

This summarised version of the story highlights themes of monstrosity, deception and love. Aphrodite wants Psyche to fall in love with a monster, a 'hideous and detestable man',[87] but instead she falls in love with Eros, who deceives her in

84 Apul. *Met.* 6.10–6.

85 *Eros/Psyche* 2.8.1.

86 *Eros/Psyche* 2.10.1.

87 *Eros/Psyche* 2.10.1.

order to keep their love secret, and Psyche is deceived again by her sisters, and by Aphrodite. Is Sara (and also the reader) being similarly deceived?

New girls arrive and leave until finally only Sara and Silje are left at the school. They take the exam to find out who the next key student will be, and Sara is surprised to find that it is her, not Silje. Silje finally reveals that she has been at the school for twenty years, but aging is stopped by the 'god' pills the girls take.[88] It has now become clear that Silje has deceived her lover through her deceptively young outside, compared with her older monstrous inside, with Sara marked out as her replacement even before they met. Silje leaves, and Sara hopes she will find her lover again, as Eros and Psyche found each other. She says to herself 'Silje, will we meet again some day? Will we meet again like Eros and Psyche? I firmly believe it'.[89] Silje has been Eros all along, hiding her identity from her lover, and also the Beast, who has hidden his true identity as a Prince from Beauty, but the roles of Eros and Psyche are interchangeable in *Eros/Psyche.* For Sara the Rose has been a paradise, a world of gardens and lakes where she can feel free, while Silje felt like a prisoner. Finally it is Sara who must take the active role once she leaves the Rose in order to find her lover, as Eros does; 'I'll search for you. I'll wait for you. I love you'.[90]

In Apuleius' version of the story of Eros and Psyche, the female character Psyche twice almost fails to reach a happy conclusion through acting on her curiosity, encouraged by the jealousy of other female characters. First her sisters encourage her to shine a light on her enigmatic lover, who she has only met in the dark, and then Aphrodite sends her to obtain a beauty potion from Persephone, which is actually a substance that will send Psyche to sleep. Conversely, Sara's seeming inability to act on her own curiosity means that she only learns the truth about Silje and the Rose school when it is too late for her to do anything about it. Instead of directly asking questions of Silje, Sara always 'respected her silence'. While Psyche becomes an active heroine on her own quest narrative, first trying to find Eros when he leaves her, then taking on the tasks assigned by Aphrodite, finally to be reunited with Eros after he seeks her out, there is no similar resolution to Sara's story.

We do not know whether or not Sara and Silje will be reunited, or even if Silje wants this, even though she does seem to regret having to pass on the role

88 *Eros/Psyche* 5.13–4.

89 *Eros/Psyche* 5.27–30.

90 *Eros/Psyche* 5.25.2.

of key student to her lover, saying 'I wish it wouldn't have been you who came into the garden' and 'I hope you forgive me someday'.[91] I agree with Palermo that to read Silje as the deceptive Eros and Sara as Psyche is problematic, and instead these roles appear interchangeable. Silje implies she was taught the story of Eros and Psyche by a previous student who the reader infers to have been the previous key student and her lover, and so in this relationship it seems that the unnamed previous student took the Eros role and Silje the Psyche role. This is reversed with Silje and Sara, and will be reversed again as Sara chooses a future student to be her Psyche, when she moves into the Eros/Beast role. While the stories of Cupid and Psyche in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* and the story of Beauty and the Beast end happily for the united heterosexual couples, the lesbian students are not granted an unambivalent conclusion in *Eros/Psyche.* However, if we agree with Palermo that the story of Eros and Psyche is here used as a paradigm for any loving relationship, whether lesbian or heterosexual, then perhaps we should read the end of the comic as the general impossibility of a conclusive fairy tale happy ending.[92] Sara looks at her reflection in an elaborately framed mirror, and this mirror, empty of any reflection, is the final image of the comic. Sara and Silje are both the hero(in)es and the monsters of this story, whereas the mirror is the blank space, the unwritten future. Sara as the hero and monster of the future 'stands on the threshold of becoming' something new.[93] Llovet's primary intention in creating *Eros/Psyche* may not have been to 'ask us to re-evaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression',[94] in line with Cohen's thesis 7, however it may prompt the reader to do so.

Llovet followed up her English language colour edition of *Eros/Psyche* with another comic, *Porcelain,* also featuring a threshold-crossing heroine. Published earlier in Spanish in 2012, and again with Ablaze in 2021, then collected as a hardback edition without issue breaks in 2022, this beautifully drawn horror comic mixes ideas from classical mythology, deceptive exteriors and monstrous interiors as well as a katabasis-like journey with the journey of Dorothy from

91 *Eros/Psyche* 5.11.3 and 5.18.3.

92 Palermo (2020) 17.

93 Cohen (1996) 20.

94 Cohen (1996) 20.

The Wizard of Oz, and motifs from *Alice in Wonderland.*[95] The comic starts with a montage of images of blood and doll parts, followed by an epigram; '"There are always two choices, two paths to take. One is easy. And its only reward is that it's easy." – Anonymous'.[96] This parable is familiar to classicists from the choice of Herakles between the paths of virtue and vice, reported in book two of the *Memorabilia* of Xenophon and attributed to Prodicus, and picked up by later writers and artists.[97] Llovet does not specifically mention this, and her heroine, Beryl, is a figure drawing on Dorothy, rather than Herakles, leaving her Aunt Milly's house in the desert and taking a winding path with her cat, Raubritter, in tow, on a journey with the dark undertones of *Return to Oz* (1985), one of Llovet's favourite films, which she finds 'scary and weird' and 'revered' as a child.[98]

Returning from an errand for her aunt, Beryl hears music coming from a moving life-size 'dollhouse' with a massive, monstrous female head as the entrance. A huge tongue appears from between a set of pointed teeth, and this tongue pulls Beryl and Raubritter inside. We can read this head as 'the mouth of hell' with *'vagina dentata',* as described by Barbara Creed in her seminal work on the Monstrous Feminine in film, with Beryl as the potential 'final girl' who must destroy the cannibalistic mother.[99] Creed links the cannibalistic mother with Medusa, but Beryl as hero is set up initially as Herakles rather than Perseus. The great mouth leads into a chamber surrounded by archways, two of which are named, one with the sign 'Eros' above it and the other 'Thanatos'.[100] Beryl is now faced with the choice between love or death. In the chamber is a table surrounded by monstrous doll figures, some with the heads of animals and bodies of women, others wearing masks, who instruct Beryl to 'eat, please'.[101] Like Alice in Wonderland and Persephone on the cusp of being tricked into staying in the underworld, Beryl takes a cupcake, but as she bites she finds this is filled with

95 Janice Siegel drew some interesting comparisons between *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and Greek mythology in an unpublished paper presented at the Celtic Conference in Classics in Dublin in 2016.

96 *Porcelain* 2.

97 See Stafford (2017).

98 Llovet interview with *Grimoire of Horror* (2021).

99 See Creed (1993) 105–21.

100 *Porcelain* 15–6.

101 *Porcelain* 18.1–4.

maggots. One gestates inside her body and a butterfly appears, followed by a beautiful young woman who introduces herself as 'Valentina, the Sculptress'.[102]

In another inversion of the Pygmalion story that we saw in *InSEXts,* Valentina wants to turn Beryl into a sculpture, a 'beautiful' porcelain doll.[103] However, here it is the female character/artist, Valentina, who is hiding the monster behind her beautiful human exterior. Escaping Valentina, Beryl is faced with a room full of shards of broken mirrors, followed by a dream-like sequence. Panels containing images drawn in red on a white background reveal Valentina as a young girl, alone and crying, asking for a companion to 'stay with me'.[104] The mirrors have shown Beryl that Valentina could have been a hero rather than a monster and that it is the choices made that make all the difference. The powerful monster within Valentina has fed on her fear and loneliness, choosing to 'harm others' rather than the 'wonderful things' Beryl suggests she could have done.[105] Beryl must have the courage to choose the path of Thanatos, despite warnings from Axel, the androgynous boy in a cat mask and her would-be helper, who has survived in the dollhouse by hiding and evading Valentina. Axel takes Beryl through the door of 'Eros', but she does not find love here, only sculptures of Valentina's previous victims. While Axel warns Beryl against taking the path of Thanatos as 'it's the closest path to the sculptress, to her heart',[106] Beryl realises that 'sometimes the risky option is the only one possible, the only one that really means choosing'.[107] Readers familiar with Euripides' *Alcestis* may now infer that Beryl must fight with death, or Thanatos, personified by the sculptress/Valentina, by taking the difficult path, just like Herakles fights Thanatos to bring Queen Alcestis back to life.

Valentina adopts different guises in order to capture Beryl, none of them outwardly monstrous. She appears Aphrodite-like, rather than death-like, naked and swathed in roses. She also takes the role of Aphrodite when she sends Beryl to sleep, as the goddess sends Psyche to sleep once Psyche opens the box from

102 *Porcelain* 23.2.

103 *Porcelain* 23.3.

104 *Porcelain* 55.3.

105 *Porcelain* 97.2.

106 *Porcelain* 34.3.

107 *Porcelain* 56.3.

the underworld. Beryl wakes up on a cross attended by skeletons, confronted by Valentina, now dressed in underwear and wearing an eye patch emblazoned with a red cross, knife in hand. Valentina's face is still that of a young girl, but she and Beryl now wear matching green underwear, monster and hero as mirror images. Beryl recognises the monster within Valentina, who fed on the fear of Valentina the little girl and the fear of all the children that have followed her and been turned to stone statues or macabre living dolls within the dollhouse. When Beryl takes Valentina's knife and stabs her opponent, swathes of matching green cloth frame both of the girls, like Medusa's snakes appearing out of their bodies. Their previous clothes appear beneath, reframing their separate identities; Valentina in the dress she had worn as a young girl, and Beryl back in her own black top and red shorts. Valentina falls and is impaled on the spire of a dolls house, turning to stone and crumbling into pieces. Beryl uses the power of a classical monster to defeat the new monster, and as the sculptress becomes stone, her dolls become children again. Axel tells Beryl 'you left the easy path, you chose to face the obstacles that the sculptor wove into your mind, looking her in the eye, you fought for what you wanted until the very end!'[108] Axel then reveals that his limbs are jointed, like the limbs of a doll. He had not evaded Valentina, and his path to love was just as illusory as the rest of the dollhouse. Axel and the children are left behind. Only Beryl, the final girl, and Raubritter the cat are able to leave.

In the epilogue Aunt Milly receives a letter from Beryl, who has moved to the city, leaving the desert as her aunt had urged her to do. The last panel shows Beryl surrounded by smiling young helpers and two cats with a newly created statue. It appears to be a metallic, steampunk version of a statue of Psyche, with the same hair and wings as the Psyche statue at the Rose school in *Eros/Psyche,* but this time complete with her head. Beryl writes that this 'project [...] has a good chance of being chosen for the capital city'. Beryl, who has taken the roles of Dorothy, Persephone, Alice, Psyche and Herakles in turns, finally takes the right path and becomes the artist herself, with her group of friends as helpers and fellow artists, not subjects. Better than Pygmalion, Beryl has found a real life with real people, boys and girls, men and women, with different skin tones and clothes. She does not need to create her own version of perfection, as humanity is variety. Difference need not be monstrous. Although Beryl has lost her potential love, Axel, she has found a fulfilling life for herself by choosing the difficult

108 *Porcelain* 112.4.

path towards death. By returning to the image of Psyche, this offers an upbeat ending to both *Eros/Psyche* and *Porcelain.*

CONCLUSION

The story of Pygmalion and the artist's wish to create a perfect, silent, chaste woman when he despised the real women for their vices is interrogated by Marguerite Bennett in *InSEXts.* This disturbing myth is replaced by a story of women who love and support each other, where love and sex between women is portrayed as a beautiful thing, and where the violent female monster succeeds against her male adversaries, so that hero and monster are one and the same. Maria Llovet takes a myth where the female character, Psyche, is both victim of Aphrodite and active heroine, completing her own quests and finding happiness with her male lover, and makes this into a more ambiguous love story. Living in a paradise-like world of deceit where time has been stopped, love may be real, but monstrous lovers cannot be trusted, despite their beautiful outsides. However, while Silje is deceived and left alone in the school in *Eros/Psyche,* in *Porcelain* Beryl breaks through the monster's deception and takes the right path to become an artist in her own right, both a mirror image of what the monster could have been, and brave heroine. By applying Monster Theory to these texts by female comic writers written in our current times of category crisis, where difference may be the new normal, we can see how the lines between monstrosity and heroism are blurred. Moving beyond Cohen's seventh thesis that 'the monster stands at the threshold of becoming',[109] we could say that the monster is becoming the hero (or the hero is becoming the monster).

109 Cohen (1996) 20.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson (2000). – Graham Anderson, *Fairytale in the Ancient World* (London and New York: Routledge 2000).

Barksdale (2015). – Aaron Barksdale, 'DC Comics *Bombshells* is a Blast form the Past but with Queer Characters', *Huffington Post,* 20. August 2015, online at https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/dc-bombshells-queer-super-hero_n_55d35c10e4b055a6dab18890 (accessed 7 January 2023).

Bennett and Kristantina (2016). – Marguerite Bennett and Ariela Kristantina, *InSEXts Volume 1: Chrysalis* (Sherman Oaks, CA: Aftershock Comics 2016).

Bennett and Kristantina (2017). – Marguerite Bennett and Ariela Kristantina, *InSEXts Volume 2: Necropolis* (Sherman Oaks, CA: Aftershock Comics 2017).

Bennett and Sauvage (2016). – Marguerite Bennett and Marguerite Sauvage, *DC Comics Bombshells Volume 1: Enlisted* (Burbank, CA: DC Comics 2016).

Bottigheimer (1989). – Ruth B. Bottigheimer, 'Cupid and Psyche vs Beauty and the Beast: The Milesian and the Modern', *Merveilles & Contes* 3.1 (1989) 4–14.

Carroll (2016). – Tobias Carroll, '"I Wanted to Corrupt the Imperialist Narrative": An Interview With *InSEXts & Animosity* Writer Marguerite Bennett', *Paste,* 2016, online at https://www.pastemagazine.com/comics/marguerite-bennett/i-wanted-to-corrupt-the-imperialist-narrative-an-i (accessed 1 October 2023).

Cohen (1996). – Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)', in: Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed.), *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 1996).

Cordas (2021). – Jacob Cordas, 'INTERVIEW: Maria Llovet talks now 1960s-set comic, LUNA', *Comics Bookcase,* 2 February 2021, online at https://www.comicsbookcase.com/interviews-archive/maria-llovet-luna (accessed 15 January 2023).

Creed (1993). – Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Abington, Oxon and New York: Routledge 1993).

Crist-Wagner (2020). – Keri Crist-Wagner, 'Interrogating Power, Sex and Gender in *InSEXts*', in: Samantha Langdale and Elizabeth Rae Coody (eds.), *Monstrous Women in Comics* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press 2020) 99–192.

Dethloff (2011). – Craig Dethloff, 'Coming up to Code: Ancient Divinities Revisited', in: George Kovacs and C.W. Marshall (eds.), *Classics and Comics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011) 103–14.

Fawas (2015). – Ramzi Fawas, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York and London: New York University Press 2015).

Fawas and Scott (2018). – Ramzi Fawas and Dariek Scott, 'Introduction: Queer About Comics', *American Literature* 90.2 (2018) 197–219.

Gloyn (2013). – Liz Gloyn, '"The Dragon-Green, the Luminous, the Dark, the Serpenthaunted Sea": Monsters, Landscape and Gender in Clash of the Titans (1981 and 2010)', in: Steven Green and Penny Goodman (eds.), *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies: Conference Proceedings Volume One. Animating Antiquity, Harryhausen and the Classical Tradition* (Milton Keynes: The Open University 2013) 64–75, online at https://fass.open.ac.uk/sites/fass.open.ac.uk/files/files/new-voices-journal/proceedings/volume1/Gloyn-2013.pdf (accessed 1 October 2023).

Gloyn (2020). – Liz Gloyn, *Tracking Classical Monsters in Popular Culture* (London and New York: Bloomsbury 2020).

Gravett and Dunning (2014) – *Comics Unmasked: Art and Anarchy in the UK* (London: The British Library 2014).

Halberstam (2012). – J. Jack Halberstam, *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press 2012).

James (2013). – Paula James, *Ovid's Myth of Pygmalion on Screen: In Pursuit of the Perfect Woman* (London and New York: Bloomsbury 2013).

Johnson (2020). – Daniel Warren Johnson, *Wonder Woman: Dead Earth* (Burbank, CA: DC Comics 2020).

Kovacs and Marshall (2011). – George Kovacs and C.W. Marshall (eds.), *Classics and Comics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011).

Kovacs and Marshall (2016). – George Kovacs and C.W. Marshall (eds.), *Son of Classics and Comics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016).

Langsdale and Coody (2020) – Samantha Langsdale and Elizabeth Rae Coody, 'Introduction', in: Samantah Langdale and Elizabeth Rae Coody (eds.), *Monstrous Women in Comics* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press 2020) 3–12.

Llovet (2021a) – Maria Llovet, *Eros/Psyche* (Portland, OR: Ablaze 2021).

Llovet (2021b) – Maria Llovet, *Luna* (Los Angeles, CA: Boom 2021).

Llovet (2022) – Maria Llovet, *Porcelain* (Portland, OR: Ablaze 2022).

Llovet interview with *Grimoire of Horror* (2021). – 'Interview with Maria Llovet – *Return to Oz,* Sexuality and Psychology', *Grimoire of Horror,* 22 August 2021, online at https://www.grimoireofhorror.com/the-banshee/interview-with-maria-llovet/ (accessed 12 January 2023).

Morales (2020). – Helen Morales, *Antigone Rising: The Subversive Power of the Ancient Myths* (London: Headline 2020).

Palermo (2021). – Sara Palermo, '*Eros/Psique:* un amor lésbico entre magia y mito', in: Julio Andrés Gracia Lana, Ana Asión Suñer and Laura Ruiz Cantera (eds.), *Dibujando historias: el cómic más allá de la imagen,* (Zaragoza: Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza 2021) 493–502.

Richlin (1992). – Amy Richlin, 'Reading Ovid's Rape', in: Amy Richlin (ed.), *Pornography and its Representation in Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992) 158–79.

Rucka (2016). – Greg Rucka, *Wonder Woman Rebirth #8* (Burbank, CA: DC Comics 2016).

Stafford (2017). – Emma Stafford, 'Hercules' Choice: Virtue, Vice and the Hero of the Twentieth-Century Screen', in Eran Almagor and Lisa Maurice (eds.), *The Reception of Ancient Virtues and Vices in Modern Popular Culture: Beauty, Bravery, Blood and Glory* (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2017) 140–66.

Swain (2023). – Natalie J. Swain, 'Pygmalion and Medusa as Cixous' Writing Women in *InSEXts:* "I Write Woman"', *Classical Receptions Journal* (2023) 130–48. https://doi.org/10.1093/crj/clac017

Amanda Potter
Open University and University of Liverpool, UK
amandapotter@caramanda.co.uk

Suggested citation
Potter, Amanda: Classical Monsters and Hero(ines) in *InSEXts, Eros/Psyche* and *Porcelain* In: thersites 17 (2023): Classics and the Supernatural in Modern Media, pp. 96–124. https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.247

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

17/2023 | pp. 125–142

ANISE K. STRONG
(Western Michigan University)

The Persistence of Memory

Forgiveness, Forgetting, and Cultural Assimilation

Abstract The 2017 Pixar film *Coco* and the 2021 Disney film *Encanto* form a small part of an increasing modern wave of media focused on parent-child conflicts caused by intergenerational trauma and rejection. Other recent works in this genre include the video game *Hades,* the films *Turning Red* and *Everything Everywhere All At Once,* and the television series *Ms. Marvel.* The traumas in all these films, some directed explicitly at a younger audience and some pitched more broadly, serve as a distinct set of meditations on the immigrant experience, even while not necessarily focusing on literal immigration. They also all invoke imagery of ghosts and death, both echoing specific classical Mediterranean motifs and tropes and incorporating a wide variety of other cultures' supernatural traditions. These works' concern with familial traumas of separation, culture shock, and loss of ancestral memories and connections contrasts sharply with the individual-focused myth of the American Dream common to earlier generations of American media, in which a lone individual typically emigrates, assimilates, and succeeds in a new culture, forming a new family and set of myths. However, themes of assimilation and questions of cultural imperialism also form a bridge between ancient Roman and modern North American anxieties and traditions.

Keywords Classical Reception, Coco, Immigration, Ancestors, Underworld

URL https://thersites-journal.de
DOI https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.255

INTRODUCTION

Many families have stories of a lone black sheep who is not accepted by the rest of the family.[1] Often the outcast has loved or married against their parents' wishes; sometimes their location was simply lost after emigration to a new land or assimilation into a different culture. A recent wave of modern media in multiple genres ranging from animated films to video games interrogates this theme of familial erasure and dislocation through diverse ancient rituals of honoring or dishonoring deceased ancestors. They utilize both stories of a literal or metaphorical *katabasis,* or journey to the underworld, and ritualized encounters with ancestral spirits as metaphors for literal emigration from one homeland to a new, theoretically superior country. As a result, these works adapt ancient traditions of maintaining relationships with dead ancestors to explore timeless anxieties about recurring familial conflicts regarding assimilation and estrangement. Ultimately, they all argue that only through renewed communion with disinherited or lost kin can interfamilial harmony and the preservation and adaptation of ancestral traditions – reception studies, in other words – can a truly happy ending be achieved. While these are sometimes adventure stories, they are less odysseys home – *nostoi* in the ancient Greek context – than mythic integrations of two communities, the past and present, in which physical or spiritual journeys remain centered around a specific familial unit and its interrelationships.

The 2017 Pixar film *Coco* and the 2021 Disney film *Encanto* form a small part of this increasing modern wave of media focused on parent-child conflicts caused by intergenerational trauma and rejection. Other recent works in this genre include the video game *Hades,* the films *Turning Red* and *Everything Everywhere All At Once,* and the television series *Ms. Marvel,* as well as other examples not fully discussed in this essay like the recent *Star Wars* sequel trilogy and *Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom.* The traumas in all these films, some directed explicitly at a younger audience and some pitched more broadly, serve as a distinct set of meditations on the immigrant experience, even while not necessarily focusing on literal immigration. They also all invoke imagery of ghosts and death, both echoing

1 This chapter is dedicated first and foremost to my two eldest children, Mclevy and Robert, who introduced me to many of the texts discussed here and shared their insights and interpretations. It is also in memory of the lost branch of my own family, the Keyssars who rejected my grandfather's plea for rescue from the Nazis in 1939, whom he never again acknowledged as family. With the grace and perspective offered by time, I hope they made it safely to Israel and that their descendants are alive and well.

specific classical Mediterranean motifs and tropes but also incorporating a wide variety of other cultures' supernatural traditions.

These works' concern with familial traumas of separation, culture shock, and the loss of ancestral memories and connections contrasts sharply with the individual-focused myth of the American Dream common to earlier generations of American media, in which a lone individual typically emigrates, assimilates, and succeeds in a new culture, forming a new family and set of myths. However, themes of assimilation and questions of cultural imperialism also form a bridge between ancient Roman and modern North American anxieties and traditions, even if not directly inspired by the classical works. Both the common anxiety and the reliance on myth and fantasy as a means of expressing cultural tensions allows for productive dialogues between all these disparate genres and works as they muse over the relationships between death, memory, and immigration.

ANCESTRAL IMAGES

Since ancient times, the images and names of dead family members have been used to evoke and pay respect to their memories, sometimes figuratively, as in the case of sarcophagi, and sometimes with the belief or practice that such images enable the dead to return to the land of the living. Elite Roman families chose to feature the wax masks, or *imagines,* of specific honored ancestors who had achieved the political rank of aedile or higher in their atria. Those ancestors appeared symbolically again at family funerals, when actors who resembled the dead family members wore their masks and displayed appropriate signifiers of rank while reciting the ancestor's most famous quotations.[2] While Harriet Flower does not view this latter use of ancestor masks as religious or magical in nature, Pollini convincingly argues that the presence of these masked actors at public sacrifices and their symbolic resurrection of these ancestors at later funerals is itself highly supernatural in nature.[3]

This use of images of the dead as supernatural ghost summoners is, of course, not unique in any way to the ancient Romans, being common in, among many

2 Pol. 6.54.3–4; Flower (1996) 110–4.

3 Flower (2006) 64; Pollini (2012) 28.

other cultures, the Nahuas of Central America, the Yuma nation of Colorado, and the West African Nupe people, all of whose descendants have contributed to and shaped the complex mythologies of North America.[4] Summoning ancestral spirits into artifacts is fundamentally distinct from the Pygmalion or Frankenstein tradition in which male creators, sometimes aided by goddesses, breathe life into new sculptures or bodies that they have created.[5] In those cases, the entirely new beings are generally represented as the children or possibly romantic interests of their creators. In contrast, memorial artworks, most frequently portraits, serve as channels for loved ones to celebrate their dead kin, rather than as wish fulfillment fantasies for single men.

Within American cinematic culture, the use of portraits as evocations of the lost beloved dead features prominently in Gothic film noir of the 1940s and 1950s, especially in horror or suspense films. In Alfred Hitchcock's 1940 *Rebecca,* for instance, based on the novel by Daphne du Maurier, the heroine, the second Mrs. De Winter, is persuaded by the passionately obsessed housekeeper Mrs. Danvers to dress herself as an echo of the earlier Mrs. De Winter, herself imitating a portrait of an even earlier mistress of the house. Her invocation of these past ghosts shocks and horrifies her husband Maxim, who is already haunted by Rebecca's memory; this leads to disastrous consequences and the ultimate destruction of the portrait and Manderley itself.[6] In Otto Preminger's 1944 film noir *Laura,* a detective becomes obsessed with the portrait of the apparently dead victim, the eponymous Laura, until she mysteriously returns and their romance can become mutual. Within the more specific context of classical reception, many cinematic depictions of the murder of Julius Caesar accurately feature the statue of his rival Pompeius Magnus looming over Caesar's corpse, while statue busts of the murdered Marcus Aurelius play an important symbolic role in Ridley Scott's 2000 *Gladiator* in reminding the audience of the film's model of a good and just ruler.

Meanwhile, the recent *Star Wars* sequel trilogy, which like its predecessors draws strongly on allusions to the Roman Republic and Principate, prominently features the evil Kylo Ren (formerly Ben Solo) waxing eloquently to the charred mask of his grandfather, Darth Vader (formerly Anakin Skywalker), which he

4 Connerton (1989) 68; Tatje and Hsu (1969) 154–6.

5 Weiner, Stevens and Rogers (2018) 21.

6 Calabrese (2018) 78–9.

worships on an altar-like pillar.[7] Throughout the *Star Wars* movies, the honored dead Jedi, such as Yoda and Obi-Wan, become Force Ghosts who can continue to inspire and communicate with their students, whereas the mask of Vader remains a hollow silent mockery that contradicts the spiritual redemption of the Force Ghost of Anakin Skywalker. Communion with ancestors, as in the Roman tradition, thus depends on the virtue of both ancestor and descendant.

MEMORY SANCTIONS

While such evocations of the dead through portraiture in both ancient art and modern movies have been extensively studied, the deliberate erasure of the dishonored dead or living members of the family and any connections to ancient practice have not been well analyzed.[8] The general study of Roman memory sanctions, or, to use the popular modern term, *damnatio memoriae,* is extensive, but has predominantly focused on the erasure of publicly prominent figures like unpopular Emperors and Empresses, such as Nero and Agrippina Minor.

At the same time, this type of censorship could and did also exist in more ordinary families. For instance, D. Junius Silanus was censured and then symbolically cast out by his birth father, T. Manlius Torquatus, in 140 BCE, after being convicted for extortion in a private familial trial and then committing suicide.[9] Notably, Torquatus carried out both the trial and his subsequent deliberate rejection of his son's funeral while facing his own ancestral mask of Torquatus Imperiosus, suggesting that this act was both done with the full support of the ancestors and so as not to disgrace them. However, while Valerius Maximus was sympathetic to Manlius Torquatus's strict parenthood, other ancient writers like Cicero and Pliny were more critical and this did not in fact repair the Torquati's reputation, instead casting them as harsh ideologues. As is often the case with stories of *damnatio memoriae,* ultimately the repudiation itself was more remembered than the actual crimes of the child involved or the other more heroic deeds of his family. The blank space on the wall shaped a ghost that haunted

7 *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015); Charles (2015) 290–2.

8 Hanson (2007) 83–91; Flower (1996) 110–4; Fejfer (2009) 70–2.

9 Flower (1996) 64; Val. Max. V.8.3.

and condemned the family. Similarly, Augustus's exile of his scandalous daughter Julia and her own daughter Julia Minor may have symbolically erased them from the virtuous model of the harmonious imperial Julio-Claudian clan, but such actions left gaps in both the power structure and the basic functionality of their actual family.[10]

This story of Manlius Torquatus and his son is echoed in the more modern works that form the focus of this paper. One of the distinguishing features between these works and the more common literary trope of rebellious teenagers is their emphasis that the parent or grandparents' abusive or repressive decisions stem from their own childhood traumas. However, an even more significant commonality lies in the very diversity of these characters, unlike the previously mentioned White Skywalker family: these 21st century media families are Mexican, Colombian, Pakistani, Chinese, and Greek. I will briefly summarize the memory sanctions in these films before turning to a comparative analysis of their classical receptions.

The 2017 Pixar film *Coco* reveals an ancestral trauma: Hector, the great-great-grandfather of Miguel, the child protagonist, had left his rural Mexican family to seek his fortune abroad as a musician, a young Orpheus, but never returned home. As a consequence, Hector's descendants left behind in Mexico have become insular and reject all music as a symbol of their anger over his abandonment. Familial reconciliation is only achieved when Miguel learns in the Land of the Dead that Hector had been about to return home when he was murdered by his colleague, who was focused only on individual success. Classical and Mesoamerican motifs both abound in this film: Hector's body is literally been dragged around by his rival, echoing the climax of Homer's *Iliad,* and the boy Miguel, like Astyanax, is thrown off a cliff into a volcanic oubliette. While Hector's wife, Imelda, eventually does rescue both of them, she refuses to look at or acknowledge Hector during their flight out of the deep pit of the underworld, gender-bending the Orpheus and Eurydice myth.

In the 2021 Disney musical *Encanto,* the Madrigal family of Colombia has fled violence in their birth city for a new homeland, only for the matriarch Abuela (Spanish for grandmother) to be consumed by an obsession of serving their new village at the expense of the mental and physical health of her own family. When her son Bruno and then her granddaughter Mirabel are insufficiently helpful to the village and family, they are critiqued or berated by Abuela. As a result,

10 Milnor (2005) 88.

Bruno literally disappears into the walls of the house and Mirabel is excluded from family photos and told to absent herself from family occasions, to permanently remain a child in the nursery, and to stay silent. The two characters are written out of the story of their family; Mirabel's opening song introducing the varied members of the Madrigals omits herself, because she does not have any supernatural powers, and the rest of the family and the community refuse to talk about Bruno (while singing at length about their mistrust of his prophecies). As unsufficiently heroic, these characters are denied a role in the narrative, much like the Greek tragic character Elektra is exiled to the border by her mother Clytemnestra, labeled a *phygas* or wanderer, and disinherited from her role as a royal princess of Argos in Sophocles' *Elektra,* as well as in other narratives of her tale.[11] Ultimately, their superhero siblings lose their powers and the entire magical house collapses as a magical result of Bruno and Mirabel's exclusion, much like the fall of the House of Atreus in Greek tragic narratives. Healing and rebuilding only becomes possible once Abuela has confessed the dark truths of her own past as a refugee from violence and acknowledged the abuse of her family members that resulted from her own trauma. Unlike the Greek tragedies, a happy ending then becomes feasible, although this film is unusual in the classic Disney canon for not ending with the kind of wedding that marks the triumphant finale of a comedy.

The 2022 film *Everything Everywhere All At Once,* written and directed by Dan Kwan and Daniel Scheinert, known as "the Daniels," directly questions the idea that its Chinese protagonist has chosen wisely in her decision to emigrate to the United States and live a life of economic struggle, anxiety, and cultural alienation. Her current life is represented as her worst possible timeline in the multiverse, while she encounters other superior timelines in her struggles with her queer supervillain daughter, who wishes to erase all the pain of her past traumas. Similarly, the 2022 Disney animated film *Turning Red* focuses on the conflict between the teenage girl Mei-li, who feels drawn to modern Canadian culture and her diverse friend group as well as the ancestor worship of her mother's family, and her traditionally focused adult mother, who has buried her own anger at her mother's mandates regarding adherence to Chinese culture. In *Ms. Marvel* (2022), the teenager Kamala Khan rebels against her Ammi, who fled the mythical traditions of Djinn celebrated by her own mother in Pakistan in favor of a more rational, honorable life in the U.S., only to find her own daughter obsessed

11 Kasimis (2021) 12–3.

with new American myths in the form of superheroes. In all these stories, a happy ending does not come through a triumphant solitary Hero's Journey but through difficult conversations and uneasy truces among children and women of different generations. In doing so, they offer a 21st century understanding of immigrant experiences, in which the costs of cultural loss and strained familial connections are emphasized as much as the potential individual economic gains of emigration.[12]

HADES AND IMMIGRANT STORIES

The connections between these works and memory sanctions, the role of ghosts, or the ancient Mediterranean world may at first seem more tenuous than transparent. The creators of *Coco* or *Encanto,* while drawing from a deep cultural wellspring of stories about erased relatives and the underworld, were not necessarily intending to invoke explicit connections to Greek and Roman religious and mythical patterns. In some cases, however, the parallels or direct invocations of the ancient afterlife seem very direct and obvious. In the RockStar 2020 video game *Hades,* the protagonist Zagreus initially constantly attempts to emigrate from the ancient Greek underworld, ruled by his father Hades, into the surface world of ancient Greece, which he imagines to be a perfect utopia. However, he inevitably dies and returns back to his claustrophobic underworld home, oppressively patriarchal father Hades, and complicated familial structure. The gameplay, described as "rogue-lite," thus enacts a cyclical quest in which Zagreus learns new information and can unlock new items in each iteration but also never achieves his initial dreams, always eventually dying either in the underworld or from the harsh light of the world above. He is a failed immigrant trying to cross the border to flee his own trauma and reinvent himself as a skilled individual hero. Yet, in the course of his repeated Heroic Journeys, it becomes clear that Zagreus's relatives in the surface world, the Olympian gods, are themselves relatively selfish and greedy, sending him gifts while trying to reshape him in their own image, as acts of divine cultural imperialism. They are uninterested

12 These are only a small fraction of this increasingly popular theme in modern media; other examples include *The Mandalorian* (Disney, 2021–), *Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* (Nintendo, 2023), and *Umma* (Shim, 2022).

in a demigod who claims both worlds, preferring to ignore his underworld ties in favor of their own prejudices about godhood and the world above.

Portraits also play a key role in the gameplay of *Hades;* Zagreus discovers a hidden portrait in his father's bedroom and eventually is able to find the image of his erased mother, Persephone, learn of her own familial trauma and conflicts with her mother Demeter, and bring her story back into the main cyclical narrative. In the primary ending of the game, Zagreus finally brings his mother back home to Hades. The three (and their dog Cerberus) form a reconciled family back in the underworld symbolized by a new familial portrait, while Zagreus becomes a trusted lieutenant in the family business at home. Although the game can continue past this point in a further quest to restore harmony among all the Olympian Gods, the character arc of Zagreus himself largely concludes with the reunification of his family.

By working over many iterations of the game to slowly develop his relationships and friendships, Zagreus is able to overcome his generational family trauma and realize that emigration to a mythical surface utopia is not in fact the answer to all his problems. He also finds a new purpose in healing the broken relationships of others, reuniting Orpheus and Eurydice as well as Achilles and Patroclus while also potentially fixing past relationship drama with his own lovers, Megaera the Fury and Thanatos the god of Death. Zagreus learns, echoing the *Wizard of Oz*'s own *katabasis* and the 2017–2020 television series about morality and the afterlife, that the real *Good Place* is the friends he made along the way.[13]

Catherynne Valente notes that major modern works of children's literature and media, such as *The Wizard of Oz, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* and *The Nutcracker,* feature young girl heroines on their own problematically feminist journeys of self-discovery. She associates these modern fantasies with the ancient myths of the Sumerian goddess Inanna and Greek goddess Persephone, who become trapped in the underworld while focusing on regaining their previous familial ties.[14] All these girls also share a task of fixing male characters' broken or dismembered bodies, whether the Nutcracker's injury or the Scarecrow's brain. Zagreus in *Hades* not only shares a close relationship to Persephone but, as the game progresses, focuses more and more on these prototypically feminine *katabasis* goals of restoring familial harmony and healing others and the

13 Valente (2008), 135.

14 Valente (2008), 126.

landscape, rather than on becoming an adult man or finding permanent satisfaction through killing monsters.

Like Dorothy, Alice, Clara, or Peter Pan, Zagreus in fact can never actually grow up; he will always remain a rebellious teenager with posters of his favorite deities on his wall. This blurring of traditionally gendered heroic journeys both reflects more modern attitudes towards masculine and feminine prototypical virtues and also uses the genderfluidity and same-sex relationship tolerance of ancient Greek mythology and history to promote such values. Zagreus of *Hades* can both fight Theseus in a gladiatorial arena and offer Achilles relationship advice, while pursuing relationships with both male and female romantic prospects. The liminal aspects of a cyclical *katabasis* thus become a means for breaking new grounds in heroic representation in video games.

COCO AND RELIGIOUS SYNCRETISM

The Pixar film *Coco* takes place entirely on the *Dia de los Muertos,* a Mexican festival that weaves together Aztec and Nahua traditions, the Tlaxochimaco and Miccaihutl rituals of honoring and inviting their departed ancestors, with the Mediterranean and Catholic traditions of All Souls' Day and the Roman festival of the Parentalia. According to 15th and 16th century records, the Aztecs celebrated the Tlaxochimaco ritual over the course of a month in late August and September, including altars featuring images of dead ancestors, the ritual sharing of food and drink with the deceased, and the decoration of these altars with marigold flowers.[15] Modern Nahua ritual, the Miccaihuitl or Festival of the Dead, drawing from varied ancient indigenous traditions, prescribes the construction of an altar on October 30th, featuring the favorite foods and drinks of the honored dead. Friar Pedro de Gante in Mexico in the 16th century worked to deliberately syncretize indigenous rituals with those of Catholic Spaniards.[16] The festival of All Souls' Day – Todos Los Santos or Tous Saints – in the southern and Western Mediterranean was not institutionalized by the Catholic Church until the 13th century. It was already a reluctant compromise by a church which had attempted to stamp out the echoes of the Roman Parentalia in mid-February,

15 Carmichael and Sayer (2003) 25–7.

16 Kroger and Granziera (2012) 137–9.

the traditional pagan practices of bringing food and drink to ancestors' graves to celebrate with them.[17] Ausonius, St. Augustine, and Ambrose of Milan had all attempted to restrict such celebrations on the grounds that they were too pagan, or redirect them solely to the celebration of martyrs. But this attempt had largely failed and Spaniards, French, Italians, and North Africans continued to honor their ancestors in fashions very similar to the Parentalia and, once they encountered Mesoamerican peoples, Tlaxochimaco.

In the Roman *Parentalia,* the living family members shared food and drink with the dead, even pouring it down specially designed tubes at certain tombs in Roman North Africa.[18] They also decorated their ancestors' graves with roses and violets, both on this occasion and especially at the summer *Rosalia* and spring *Violaria* festivals. Relevantly for *Coco,* and unlike the traditional Tlaxochimaco rituals, Romans also faced negative consequences if they failed to properly honor their ancestors. The Roman poet Ovid references a time during war – possibly the Caesar-Pompey civil wars – when people forgot to make offerings at the *Parentalia* and "ghosts wandered everywhere and filled the streets with shapeless souls."[19] The *Lemuria,* a festival which followed soon after the *Parentalia,* was devoted specifically to exorcising these dishonored ancestors; the paterfamilias would offer them black beans at midnight while the rest of the family clashed bronze pots and chanted "Ghosts of our ancestors, be gone!"[20]

In *Coco*'s elaborate mythic representation of Dia de los Muertos, Hector, whose head has been torn off the family photo for purportedly abandoning the family, now as a ghost cannot cross the marigold bridge to celebrate with his family. His descendants suffer as a result; they are forced into the alternate family occupation of shoemaking and forbidden from performing or celebrating music, as Miguel wishes to do. Meanwhile Hector's spirit lives in the barren underworld ghettos and is in imminent danger of being dissolved into shapelessness due to a lack of appropriate honors and memories from the living. Only through a visit from his great-great-grandson – and the power of music – can Hector be redeemed and reunited with his family, restored to the familial *ofrenda,* the ceremonial temporary altar honoring their ancestors, and saved from dissolution.

---

17 Dolansky (2011) 149.

18 Dolansky (2011) 133.

19 Ov., *fast.,* 550; Dolansky (2011) 143–4.

20 Ov., *fast.,* 550.

Thus *Coco* mixes indigenous Mexican traditions, Christianized Roman festivals and beliefs about the dead, and a substantial dollop of original storytelling to tell a story about the importance of remembering those who have emigrated from the home village and the value of family.

OCTAVIA, ENCANTO, AND VENGEFUL GHOSTS

The notion that the dishonored or forgotten dead can serve as actively vengeful or hostile spirits is brought to life most clearly in Latin literature in the play *Octavia,* originally wrongly attributed to Seneca but now generally agreed to have been written by another author shortly after Emperor Nero's death.[21] In the *Octavia,* Nero's murdered mother, the Empress Agrippina Minor, appears as a vengeful Fury. While she is understandably upset about her son having attempted to explode a boat under her and then having sent soldiers to stab her, the ghostly Agrippina focuses her particular wrath on Nero's erasure of her memory: "The fierce tyrant rages against his mother's name, wants my services obliterated, throws down the images and inscriptions that bear my memory throughout the world – that world which my unlucky love gave him as a boy to rule to my own harm."[22] As Lauren Donovan Ginsberg phrases it, "Agrippina is a woman who will not be forgotten and who will not allow us to forget."[23] Nero's unfilial erasure of his mother's memory – indeed, of a woman who had the title of Mother of the Nation – brings down his own destruction in the *Octavia* and his haunting by Agrippina herself. Agrippina explicitly imagines that Nero's downfall will come in the form of his exile and exposure to everything – to being cast out of his *domus* and his familial tomb. The author, who almost certainly survived Nero's rule based on textual references to later works, would have known that Nero was both subject to *damnatio memoriae* himself and buried with his birth family, the Ahenobarbi, rather than with the other Julio-Claudians in the Mausoleum of Augustus. Similarly, Agrippina herself was buried in a modest tomb near the site of her murder.

21 Ferri (2003) 5.

22 Pseudo-Seneca, *Octavia,* 605–10.

23 Ginsberg (2017) 39.

This erasure of disfavored family members and subsequent catastrophic consequences is echoed in the 2021 Disney film *Encanto.* In *Encanto,* the prophet son, Bruno, has faced endless rebukes for his unfavorable predictions of dire futures from his family and his community, much like many ancient Mediterranean prophets such as Teiresias or Calchas. As a result, while they believe him to have fled or died, he has instead hidden himself inside the walls of his own family's house, occasionally appearing briefly in the background wearing a mysterious hooded green ruana or making noises like a ghost. The family has responded to Bruno's disappearance by banning any discussion of him, although they are willing to tell the stories of his disastrous prophecies.

Bruno's niece Mirabel, who apparently lacks a magical gift unlike her sisters and cousins, is excluded from family portraits and told to absent herself from major family festivals and occasions or remain silent. As a consequence, their magical house, or Casita, ultimately cracks and collapses, only being rebuilt once the family has reconciled and reintegrated the stories and memories of Mirabel and Bruno. Similarly, the House of Hades in the game *Hades* cannot be completed or fully reconstructed until Persephone's story has been reclaimed and retold and she has been brought back to her strange family. The moral of the danger of denying harsh truths and disrespecting unconventional family members again suggests a metaphorical linkage between the afterlife and the home country of immigrants. Intergenerational harmony can only be achieved through the preservation of both painful memories, tolerance of new ideas, and maintaining cultural traditions.

IMMIGRATION AND ASSIMILATION

Why are these themes and tropes so popular at this particular moment in American history – and why did they resonate at the time of Ovid and Nero? In both cases, two different strands are resonating with each other – and this is likely less a case of direct classical reception than of a common cultural metaphor responding to similar needs. The early Roman principate was a time of constant and frequent immigration, both voluntary and, perhaps even more commonly, through slavery that led, in some cases, to freedom and a new life in Roman cities. Tombstone inscriptions and letters tell us hundreds of stories of these new Roman citizens trying to forge new identities or to make connections between their birth families and cultures and their new homelands. For instance,

the Egyptian-Roman sailor Apion wrote home in one papyrus letter to tell his father that his new Roman citizen name was now Antonius Maximus, while simultaneously invoking the favor of the Graeco-Egyptian god Serapis. In another letter, many years later, the same man told his sister, still in Egypt, about his new Italian wife and child and signed his name only as Antonius Maximus, suggesting gradual assimilation and acceptance of the new name over time.[24] In other echoes of such newly forged identities, some tombstone inscriptions of freed women establish foundations for fellow guild-members to honor them at the *Parentalia,* because they lack biological descendants or ancestors of their own.[25]

Similarly, our own global 21st century waves of voluntary and involuntary immigration, especially in the United States, are occurring at a time when communication with and travel to ancestral homelands is easier and more possible than ever before. The same questions that Antonius Maximus, formerly known as Apion, might have pondered about whether to keep worshiping Serapis now that he lived in the Italian port of Misenum are echoed in Pixar's *Turning Red* character Mei-li's initial ambivalence about maintaining the temple to her theoretically mythical red panda spirit ancestor. Like so many immigrants, whether voluntary or coerced, both these figures address the question of how someone might adopt a "yes, and" rather than an"either/or" approach to a new home.

The early Roman principate was also a time of tremendous political and social upheaval in which people like the author of the *Octavia* would have seen their universal parental figures – the symbolic fathers and mothers of the country – repeatedly dishonored, erased, and then potentially returned to honor and commemoration depending on the particular needs and connections of whoever was currently Emperor. From a religious perspective, it must have been traumatizing and confusing to be told to pray for the spirit and memory of Agrippina or Julia Domna, one day, to spit on her image and erase her name the next, and then celebrate her return to favor a few years later. Furthermore, given the customs of Roman religion, there would be a constant fear that those dishonored spirits, especially powerful ones like those of the imperial family, might come back to haunt you in the Lemuria.

Harriet Flower begins her book on Roman memory sanctions with a quote from Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis,* her graphic novel memoir about life in Iran in

24 Viereck (1898), 2.423.

25 Dolansky (2011) 146–8.

the 1970s and 1980s: "One can forgive but one should never forget."[26] For Satrapi, this moral emphasizes the importance in her work of telling the mostly truthful family legends about the personal consequences of the Shah's coup, the Iranian Revolution, and the Iran-Iraq War. She argues that tales of intergenerational traumas need to be passed down not as part of a revenge cycle but in order to preserve their culture and understand past injustices. In other words, Satrapi considers some haunting of the present by the past's ghosts to be emotionally and culturally necessary.

This conjunction of "forgiving and forgetting" traces its roots in English back to Shakespeare's *King Lear,* whose patriarch protagonist ultimately asks Cordelia, the emigrant daughter whom he disinherited and erased from the family tree, to "forgive and forget" the injuries he has done her.[27] Similarly Agrippina and Drusus' ghosts come back to haunt later writers and beg for their images and stories' resurrection as they do in the *Octavia,* because, for them, *damnatio memoriae* is a form of permanent exile from both their families' traditions and from Rome itself.[28] Without these erased ancestors or descendants, the story and the images are permanently marred and distorted; the family cannot be whole and further trauma and pain will occur.

The movie *Coco* ends with virtually the same quote, but with quite different resonance, suggesting that the screenwriters Adrian Molina and Matthew Aldrich might have been familiar with at least the cinematic version of *Persepolis,* which premiered in 2007, ten years before *Coco.* At the climax, the young Miguel pleads to his Abuela on his Abuelo's behalf: "You don't have to forgive him but we shouldn't forget him."[29] Here, the specific forgiveness is requested but not assumed; the remembering is collective. For Miguel, no one deserves to be forgotten regardless of their choices; it is perhaps not coincidental that among the figures we see in the ghetto of *Coco*'s Forgotten are groups of arguably queer women, who might not have had descendants to remember them. Both immigration and homecoming – free travel across the border checkpoint of the Underworld – are required for a happy ending and justice, just as Zagreus' father Hades eventually lets him cross briefly into the surface world only for Zagreus

26 Satrapi (2003), 14.

27 Shakespeare, *King Lear,* IV.7.

28 Pseudo-Seneca, *Octavia,* 605–10.

29 Pixar (2017).

to willingly return home every time. One of the initial crises of *Everything Everywhere All At Once* is caused by the granddaughter Joy's difficulty in speaking to her grandfather, sharing no fluent common tongue or knowledge of a word like "same-sex partner". Without such active maintenance and border-crossings, the past continues to haunt and traumatize the present and future, and their families, houses, and in some case entire multiverses will self-destruct.

We live, in the United States and in many other nations, at a moment of profound cultural conflict in which many dominant elites wish to retain control over a monolithic cultural narrative and to erase all the uncomfortable truths of the past and anything or anyone that might seem different or less admirable, just as various Roman elites sought to construct a "Good Emperors" patchwork version of history that omitted the Caligulas, Domitians, and Elagabaluses from the story. In her recent work on the current removal of Confederate and imperialist monuments from American spaces, Erin Thompson noted with regard to Native American and immigrant narrative erasure that "Even the most vigorous attempts to scrub away all traces of a history will not work if people are unwilling to forget."[30] These are stories both then and now of the need to connect with actual or metaphorical ghosts coming to reclaim their stories and bridge those divides. They are collective acts of cultural rebellion against such a narrow, positivist view of the past. It is unsurprising that myths of transitions, erasures, forgetting, and haunting of the multiethnic, multicultural world of the Roman Mediterranean are being used to interpret and understand these current traumas, while at the same time engaging in dialogue with the traditions of many other human societies. Roman *damnatio memoriae* was fundamentally rarely successful; if anything, modern people are more likely to remember the Neros or Caligulas than the dull if respectable Nervas and Vespasians. These modern stories also warn of the dangers of collapse and ongoing trauma if the repressive erasure is maintained. We don't have to forgive, but we should never forget.

30 Thompson (2022) 171.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Calabrese (2018). – John A. Calabrese, The Power of Art: Hitchcock's Disturbing Use of the Portrait in His Films, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 35 no. 1 (2018) 78–84.

Carmichael and Sayer (2003). – Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloe Sayer, *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico* (Austin 2003).

Charles (2015). – Michael B. Charles, Remembering and restoring the republic: Star Wars and Rome, *Classical World* 108.2 (2015) 281–98.

Connerton (1989). – Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge 1989).

Dolansky (2011). – Fanny Dolansky, Honouring the family dead on the Parentalia: ceremony, spectacle, and memory, *Phoenix* 65 (2011) 125–57.

Fejfer (2009). – Jane Fejfer, *Roman portraits in context.* Vol. 2. (Berlin 2009).

Ferri (2003). – R. Ferri, *Octavia: a play attributed to Seneca* (Vol. 41) (Cambridge 2003).

Flower (1996). – Harriet Flower, *Ancestor masks and aristocratic power in Roman culture* (Oxford 1996).

Flower (2006). – Harriet Flower, *The art of forgetting: disgrace & oblivion in Roman political culture* (Durham 2006).

Ginsberg (2017). – Lauren Donovan Ginsberg, *Staging Memory, Staging Strife: Empire and Civil War in the Octavia* (Oxford 2017).

Hanson (2007). – H. Hanson, *Hollywood Heroines: Women in Film Noir and the Female Gothic Film* Bloomsbury 2007).

Kasimis (2021). – Demetra Kasimis, Electra Lost in Transit, *Ramus,* 50(1/2), 11–24.

Kroger and Granziera (2012). – Joseph Kroger and Patrizia Granziera, *Aztec Goddesses and Christian Madonna: Images of the Divine Feminine in Mexico* (Farnham 2012).

Milnor (2005). – Kristina Milnor, *Gender, domesticity, and the age of Augustus: inventing private life* (Oxford 2005).

Pollini (2012). – John Pollini, *From republic to empire: rhetoric, religion, and power in the visual culture of ancient Rome* (Tulsa 2012).

Satrapi (2003). – Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The story of a childhood,* Vol. I. (New York 2003).

Tatje and Hsu (1969). – Terrence Tatje and Francis L. K. Hsu. "Variations in Ancestor Worship Beliefs and Their Relation to Kinship," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology,* 25(2), 153–72.

Thompson (2022). – Erin L. Thompson, *Smashing Statues: The Rise and Fall of America's Public Monuments.* (New York 2022).

Valente (2008). – Catherynne M. Valente, Follow the Yellow-Brick-Road: *katabasis* and the female hero in *Alice in Wonderland, The Wizard of Oz,* and *The Nutcracker,* in L. Timmel Duchamp and Eileen Gunn (ed.), *The WisCon Chronicles,* Vol. 2 (Seattle 2008), 122–46.

Viereck (1898). – Paul Viereck, "Letter of Antonius Maximus", BGU II 423, in Fabian Reiter, ed., *Berliner Griechische Urkunden* Vol 2 (Berlin 1898).

Weiner, Stevens and Rogers (2018). – Jesse Weiner, Benjamin Eldon Stevens and Brett M. Rogers (ed.), *Frankenstein and its classics: The modern Prometheus from antiquity to science fiction* (Bloomsbury 2018).

Anise K. Strong
Western Michigan University
4414 Friedmann Hall,
Kalamazoo, MI, 49008, U.S.A.
Anise.strong@wmich.edu

Suggested citation

Strong, Anise K.: The Persistence of Memory: Forgiveness, Forgetting, and Cultural Assimilation. In: thersites 17 (2023): Classics and the Supernatural in Modern Media, pp. 125–142. https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.255

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

17/2023 | pp. 143–182

JANICE SIEGEL
(Hampden-Sydney College)

Guillermo del Toro's Hellboy: A Kinder, Gentler, More Modern Heracles

Abstract In *Hellboy* (2004, Sony Pictures), Guillermo del Toro presents a mythic hero (half human/half demon) seemingly made from the same mold as the classical hero Heracles (Hercules). Hellboy's modern world is shaped by a cosmology not unlike that of Greek mythology, and as is true for Heracles, his unique pedigree and superior physicality empower him to mediate between the forces of supernaturality and humanity. Hellboy's experiences evoke comparison with most characters and exploits in the Heraclean mythological corpus; his good character precludes comparison with others. Hellboy must contend with his own versions of Hera, Eurystheus, and a Nemean Lion/Hydra-like monster. He, too, relies on his own superhuman strength, innate cunning and an Athena-like protector to be successful at his job. Both heroes navigate a difficult path to their very different destinies. But in the end, Hellboy's compassion, humility, unerring moral compass, and genuinely altruistic motivations make him both a better man and a better mythic hero, one worthy even of being loved.

Keywords Hellboy, Heracles/Herakles/Hercules, Classical Reception, Reception of Mythology, Mythic Hero

URL https://thersites-journal.de
DOI https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.253

INTRODUCTION[1]

This essay explores the many resonances between the titular hero of Guillermo del Toro's film *Hellboy* (2004, Sony Pictures)[2] and Heracles, the quintessential hero of Greek mythology.[3] While there is no reason to assume direct influence, the many narrative, dramatic, and thematic points of intersection between their stories help illuminate the shared mythic aspect of these heroes and illustrate how their adventures reveal certain universal truths that transcend time and space and culture, all of which can teach us something about what it means to be human, the purpose of mythology writ large.

Del Toro's *Hellboy* is a chaotic bricolage of Nordic mythology, Russian folklore, Dracula trivia, occult magic, Lovecraftian imagery and lore, and Christian apocalypticism. Members of the film's production team even identify certain scenes deliberately designed to evoke classic films.[4] There is a lot of extra-refer-

1 The arguments developed in this essay benefitted from the many nuanced discussions I enjoyed with the Hampden-Sydney College students enrolled in my Fall 2021 experimental course, "The Mythic Hero in Film." Collegial suggestions after my presentation at the Classics and the Supernatural in Contemporary Media conference on the Isle of Wight, UK in July 2022 led to further improvements. I remain grateful for the generous consideration shown to me by Hunter Gardner, Amanda Potter, and the editorial staff and anonymous readers at *Thersites*.

2 Guillermo del Toro's *Hellboy* (2004, Sony Pictures), starring Ron Perlman, is a live-action film dramatizing the adventures of the comic book character created by Mike Mignola (*Dark Horse Comics,* 1993 – present) that spawned a trans-media franchise. Del Toro had originally envisioned *Hellboy* as the first of a trilogy of films starring Perlman but made only one more: *Hellboy II: The Golden Army* (2008, Universal Pictures). The 2019 reboot *Hellboy: Rise of the Blood Queen* (Lionsgate) is directed by Neil Marshall and stars David Harbour. Plans for a second reboot entitled *Hellboy: The Crooked Man* (Millenium Media) were announced in February 2023.

3 Given the complex nature of the sprawling mythological corpus related to Heracles, I have taken special care to cite specific sources for the material provided. Greek sources are favored over Roman (hence "Heracles" rather than "Hercules"). Visual representations of Heracles in ancient art or architecture are referenced when appropriate. Dialogue from the film, generally presented in italics within parentheses, is transcribed from the Director's Cut DVD; stage directions or descriptions are cited from the original screenplay as published in Allie (2004).

4 As noted in Allie (2004), Abe's goggles "echoed the vampire Ninja goggles created for [del Toro's] *Blade 2*" (71); the hall of spikes leading to Kroenen's lair was a "visual nod to the hall of razor blades in the film *Tales From the Crypt*" (176); and Hellboy's "restraint yoke" deliberately evokes the monster's bonds in James Whale's *Bride of Frankenstein* (184).

ential material to be found in *Hellboy,* but not a hint of Greek mythology.[5] Yet the Hellboy universe and the world of classical mythology share the similar conceit of an overarching cosmology in which men and gods co-exist on different planes of existence that occasionally intersect, causing humanity and supernaturality to collide in ways that call for mediation by mythic heroes.

As mythic heroes, both Hellboy and Heracles have similarly unusual birth stories. Each suffers the interference of a divine figure determined to manipulate his path to his destiny. Each is a magnificent, confident and nearly invincible warrior directed by an inferior authoritarian to dispatch creatures with surprisingly similar traits that pose comparable physical and mythic threats to humanity. Both Hellboy and Heracles are aided in their tasks by their super-human strength, innate cunning, and the assistance provided by both supernatural and human actors. But while essential to this study, such shared narrative elements prove to be only a springboard to the more important contrasts of character – as shaped by their widely divergent motivations, appetites, and behavior – that inspire the heroes to seek their very different goals.[6] For while Heracles wishes to become a god, Hellboy wants to become a man.

5 Before the theatrical release of *Hellboy* in 2004, the only character drawn from Greek mythology that appeared in Mignola's *Hellboy* universe was the witch Hecate. But in December 2006, the worlds of Hellboy and Hercules intersected in Mignola's short story, "The Lion and the Hydra" (*Dark Horse Book of Monsters*), in which Hellboy visits Hercules' grave and with the help of a Lion-girl dispatches the Hydra. And in May 2022, Mignola and co-writer Olivier Vatine published "Hellboy and the B.P.R.D: Night of the Cyclops" (*Dark Horse Comics*), whose cover art features a toga-clad Hellboy striking a heroic pose amid pieces of Greek statuary and clutching a Greek-style shield emblazoned with the B.P.R.D. logo. The publisher's website offers this enticing hook: "Join Hellboy in a strange hidden land of treachery and togas as he takes on the wrath of a jealous god" (Dark Horse Comics, n.d.).

6 Contrast the comparative method of myth interpretation as popularized by Joseph Campbell in *Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949, Princeton) and later repackaged as a manual for screenwriters by William Vogler in *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* (1998; 2020, Studio City, CA), which flattens out essential differences in stories by hyper-focusing on such shared narrative elements at the expense of character development. See Curley (2018) 175–7 for "the impact of Campbell's work on print and screen texts from the 1960's onward."

COSMOLOGY AND KEY PLAYERS OF HELLBOY

The film's opening title card quotes a purportedly sacred alien text that introduces the events of the dramatic opening scene:

> In the coldest regions of space, the monstrous entities Ogdru Jahad – the Seven Gods of Chaos – slumber in their crystal prison, waiting to reclaim Earth…and burn the heavens. (*Des Vermis Mysteries,* page 87)

The film begins in 1944 on a remote island off the coast of Scotland. A rain-drenched platoon of American GIs enters the remains of Trondham Abbey, littered with stone fragments of grinning demons and embattled angels. The platoon leader scoffs at the rosary proffered by the mission's leader, Professor Trevor Broom. Cresting a slope, they find themselves looking down on dozens of Nazi soldiers swarming the thick Romanesque passageways now festooned with swastikas. In a center clearing in front of a broken altar, German soldiers assemble a large, strange, electric-powered gyroscope, dubbed the "Hell-Hole Generator" by the film's production team.[7] The activity is directed by Karl Rupert Kroenen, a Nazi identified by Broom as Hitler's top assassin and head of the Thule Occult Society, "a group of German aristocrats obsessed with the occult."[8] Grigory Yefimovich Rasputin, onetime mystic advisor to the Romanovs, prepares to take his place near the central altar as Nazi officer Ilsa von Haupt reverentially robes him. These, then, are the key players in the cosmic conflict that propels the plot of the film.

Because the Abbey is built on an intersection of Ley Lines (*the boundaries between our world and the other*), there is every reason to believe Rasputin will be successful in bringing about this prophesied Apocalypse (*…I will open a portal and awaken the Ogdru Jahad, the Seven Gods of Chaos…*). Kroenen fits him with an oversized, mechanical glove connected with thick cables to the Hell-Hole Generator. The glove activates, Rasputin points at the empty space above the altar, and a fire-rimmed hole appears in mid-air, a door to that other dimension where those imprisoned Gods of Chaos can be seen writhing restlessly in their crystal prison. At Prof. Broom's urging, the American forces attack. The machine is damaged and a malfunction causes Rasputin to be sucked into the vor-

7 Allie (2004) 14.

8 Allie (2004) 60.

tex, his body pulled to pieces by the tremendous forces at work. The portal closes but not before a bright-red demon infant with a great stone hand is transferred to Earth. In the group photo taken later that day, rosaries can be seen hanging from soldiers' guns.

After the opening credits, the film catches up to the present day (2004). Sixty years on, a now grown Hellboy works closely with his foster-father Prof. Broom, the classically educated, devoutly Catholic, "foremost authority, outside Germany, on Nazi occultism," and founder of the American government's secret Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense (B.P.R.D.).[9] The agency's motto is "In the absence of light, darkness prevails."[10] Its mandate is to discover and neutralize paranormal and occult threats around the world (*There are things that go bump in the night...and we are the ones who bump back*). And there is much to guard against, for Rasputin has returned to earth to finish the job Prof. Broom interrupted in 1944 – but only Rasputin knows that the fate of all humanity hangs on Hellboy, whose great stone hand turns out to be a powerful ancient relic called the Right Hand of Doom, the key to the door of the prison holding the Ogdru Jahad, those who would unleash the Apocalypse on earth.[11]

HERACLES AND HELLBOY AS MYTHIC HEROES

Conception, Birth, and Education

It is a common trope in Greek mythology for heroes – mortals with one divine parent – to experience unusual conceptions and births. According to Apollodorus, the human Alcmene gives birth to twin boys of different fathers: Iphicles is the son of her human husband Amphitryon, and Alcides (Heracles' birth name) the son of divine Zeus, who impregnated her at about the same time. Heracles grows up in Amphitryon's home, but after he murders his music teacher (and is

9 Allie (2004) 12.

10 The Latin inscription is painfully incorrect: *In absentia luci, tenebrae vinciunt.* Hellboy will later also use a non-sensical Latin incantation to re-animate a corpse: *animam edere, animus corpus...*

11 A great stone hand also happens to be the only surviving fragment of a colossal cult statue found in the first century B.C.E. Temple of Hercules in Amman.

acquitted of the crime), his mortal father ships the young hero off to the cattle farm out of fear he might do something like that again.[12]

Hellboy has two fathers, too. Like Heracles, the Hellboy of Mignola's graphic novel is born to a human mother and supernatural (demon) father.[13] Soon after his birth, Hellboy's father chops off his infant son's hand and replaces it with the Right Hand of Doom. Incarcerated for this crime, he ceases to be a part of Hellboy's life. In the film, Rasputin is presented as Hellboy's surrogate father (complete with memories of Hellboy from the time he was born). Presumably, had Rasputin not been sucked into the vortex in the same accident that delivered Hellboy to earth, he would have raised Hellboy to know that he had been chosen to be the destroyer of humanity. In an ironic twist of fate, Hellboy is instead adopted and raised by Prof. Broom to become humanity's protector.

As "the mortal son of Zeus of the house of Amphitryon,"[14] Heracles is provided with the kind of education, training, and treatment suited to a hero son of Zeus. As a youth he receives specialty training by experts in such areas as chariot-driving, wrestling, archery, light arms, and music.[15] He is also the beneficiary of certain gifts imbued with divine power, including bow and arrows, sword, breastplate, robe, and horses.[16] But while Heracles lives in a culture with a monolithic belief system, Hellboy's human foster-father Prof. Broom has raised Hellboy to believe that there are many roads to Truth: science, religious faith, the paranormal, the occult. Just as his father always carries a rosary and is just as likely to put his trust in a tarot card reading as in his doctors' medical opinions, Hellboy supercharges the bullets of his big gun, "The Samaritan," with capsules containing his own eclectic concoction of magical ingredients (*Holy water, silver shavings, white oak: the works*) and hands out Catholic reliquaries to his fellow

12 Apollod. 2.4.8–9.

13 In Mignola's comic, Hellboy's demon father kills his pregnant mother by burning her alive and then removes the full-term baby demon from her charred body. This scenario is somewhat reminiscent of how Zeus plucks Dionysus from the body of Semele, whom he unintentionally incinerated.

14 Hes. *Theog.* 317–8 [Evelyn-White].

15 Different texts identify different experts as Hercules' instructors (e.g., Apollod. 2.4.10 and Theokr. 24.105–33).

16 His divine gifts and the gods by whom they are bestowed differ according to author (e.g., Apollod. 2.4.11, 2.5.6, and 2.7.4; Diod. 4.13.3; and Hesiod's *Shield of Heracles* 14–38, where Heracles' other armaments are mentioned before the poem turns its focus to his shield).

paranormals to protect them from the evil it is their job to dispatch (*I think it's a pinkie*). Most importantly, Hellboy lives by his Catholic father's moral code: to believe in God and in himself, to respect the sanctity of human life, to show compassion for others, and to exercise his own free will.

Destiny and Divine Adversity

On the day Alcmene was preparing to give birth, Zeus proudly announced, "Today the goddess of birth pangs and labor will bring to light a human child, a man-child born of the stock of men who spring from *my* blood, one who will lord it over all who dwell around him."[17] Annoyed at her philandering husband, Hera delighted in the inexact phrasing of his proclamation and cajoled Zeus into swearing an "inviolate oath" she could exploit: "that he shall lord it over all who dwell around him – that child who drops between a woman's knees today, born of the stock of men who spring from Zeus' blood."[18] Hera then abused her divine position and powers to prevent Alcmene's son from winning that honor: she persuaded Eileithyia to delay Alcmene's labor, and at the same time caused Eurystheus, son of Perseus' son Sthenelus, to be born two months prematurely.[19]

At every opportunity, Hera causes Heracles trouble. When he is just an infant, she sends two serpents against him, but he strangles them with his bare hands.[20] And then there is the madness she inflicts on him as a young man, leading him to kill his wife and children. After these murders, Heracles visits the Oracle of Delphi to ask the Pythia where he should live.[21] "And she told him to dwell in Tiryns, serving Eurystheus for twelve years and to perform the ten labours im-

17 Hom. *Il.* 19.103–5 [Fagles lines 119–22].

18 Hom. *Il.* 19.109–11 [Fagles lines 128–9].

19 Apollod. 2.4.5; cf. Hom. *Il.* 19.132–57.

20 Apollod. 2.4.8.

21 Apollod. 2.4.12. While Hera's infliction of madness on Heracles is well-attested in classical literature, the popular belief that Heracles' labors serve as penance for his crime depends on a rather tenuous textual connection. For discussion, see Hsu (2021) 15–6. Here, Apollodorus reports that Heracles sought and received expiation for this crime elsewhere. In Euripides' *Heracles,* the hero kills his family *after* completing his labors.

posed on him, and so, she said, when the tasks were accomplished, he would be immortal."[22] Hera's earlier intervention in Heracles' fortunes now bears its fruit, but there is textual evidence that her early plotting against Heracles didn't end there. According to Hesiod, Hera herself had nurtured the first two beasts Eurystheus would command Heracles to dispatch – the Nemean Lion[23] and the Lernaean Hydra – the latter specifically because she was "angry beyond measure with the mighty Heracles."[24] Hera will be a constant thorn in Heracles' side: sabotaging his visit to Queen Hippolyte,[25] afflicting Geryon's cows with a gadfly to disperse them,[26] and even after he successfully concludes his labors, whipping up a storm as he sails home from Troy.[27] Plus, she gets the added satisfaction from knowing how much it pains Zeus to be reminded of how she bested him.[28]

Rasputin will interfere in Hellboy's life too, but to facilitate the fulfillment of his destiny, not to thwart it. He too will abuse his "divine" powers, acquired when he took into his own body one of the evil gods he worships. And like Hera, he plays the long game. Rasputin has returned to earth to ensure Hellboy's presence in the secret chamber he built for this purpose long ago under his empty tomb in Moscow. In one week's time, when the Apocalypse Clock counts down to the moment the Prophecy of Doom is to be realized, Rasputin will command Hellboy to perform his "heroic" task of unleashing the Apocalypse on earth. To bring Hellboy into his sphere of influence, Rasputin sets the demon Sammael loose in the hero's home city, knowing he will come to dispatch it.

Rasputin then magically appears in the psychiatric hospital where Liz Sherman, Hellboy's longtime love and fellow paranormal, has been keeping herself isolated and drugged with high doses of thorazine to quash her destructive pyrotechnic powers, which she cannot control. Much like Hera inflicts madness on Heracles, Rasputin implants a dream in Liz's mind that activates her powers,

---

22 Apollod. 2.4.12.

23 Hes. *Theog.* 329.

24 Hes. *Theog.* 314–5 [Evelyn-White].

25 Apollod. 2.5.9.

26 Apollod. 2.5.10

27 Apollod. 1.3.5; cf. Hom. *Il.* 14.249 ff. and Hom. *Il.* 15.24 ff.

28 Zeus rued having been deceived by the goddess *Ate* (and Hera) "whenever he saw Heracles, his own dear son, endure some shameful labor Eurystheus forced upon him" (Hom. *Il.* 19.132–3 [Fagles lines 156–7]).

causing her to burn down the hospital. This tragedy leads her back to the B.P.R.D. and to Hellboy, whose feelings of love for her Rasputin sees as a weakness he is prepared to exploit to get Hellboy to do his bidding. For despite his rhetoric, Rasputin seems to understand that what he keeps referring to as Hellboy's "destiny" is not, in fact, his inescapable Fate. Heracles' is a true destiny, pronounced by oracles, seers, and gods, all purveyors of Truth in the Greek belief system.[29] When Hellboy's father grafted that enormously powerful relic of a bygone age onto his infant son's arm, all he did was impose his own will on the hero, who will turn out to have much more to say about his own "destiny" than even the gods of his native world, and their mortal agent on earth, know.

Physical Attributes

Both Heracles and Hellboy boast a striking, intimidating physicality that betrays their supernatural nature. About Heracles, Apollodorus says, "Even by the look of him it was plain that he was a son of Zeus; for his body measured four cubits, and he flashed a gleam of fire from his eyes."[30] Hellboy is six and a half feet tall with a right hand literally chiseled from stone, red skin etched with alien runes, golden eyes deep-set under an over-arching brow, and a large prehensile tail. He wears a long, sweeping, leather trench coat that evokes the signature full-body lion skin worn by Heracles.[31]

Heavily-muscled, indefatigable, and impossibly strong warriors, both Heracles and Hellboy can endure physical punishment that would kill an ordinary mortal. Heracles even seems invulnerable: in only one instance is he reported to

---

29 In addition to the Pythia's pronouncement in Apollod. 2.4.12, Heracles is also prophesized to be granted immortality once he completes his labors by Apollo (Diod. 4.10.7) and by the sea god Glaucus (Apoll. Rhod. 1.1315–20). An apotheosized Heracles himself confirms the truth of it after the fact to Philoctetes in Sophocles' play of the same name (lines 1418–20). Tiresias (in Pind. *N.* 1) prophesies immortality for Heracles as a newborn, right after he strangles the snakes sent by Hera, without specific reference to his labors to come.

30 Apollod. 2.4.9. Aulus Gellius begins his *Attic Nights* by providing Plutarch's (lost) account of how Pythagoras determined that Heracles was taller than an ordinary man from the size of his foot (itself an extrapolation). Pythagoras' maxim of proportionality, known as *ex pede Herculem,* has been adapted by a variety of scientific disciplines.

31 Apollod. 2.4.10.

have been wounded in a battle, from which "Zeus snatched him away, so that he took no harm."[32] Hellboy, on the other hand, emerges from every fight bruised, battered, and bleeding. Once, he even faints from loss of blood. But even when an entire subway mezzanine falls on his head – concrete, steel, glass, and all – his understated, matter-of-fact acknowledgment of his hurt (*ow*) reassures that he will persevere. The fact that he *can* be hurt makes him more relatable than the inhumanly indestructible Heracles.

Motivation

Determining the "true" character of the mythic hero Heracles poses certain problems for those who seek to synthesize the vast amount of source material related to him into a coherent whole. His many dozens of exploits take him to the farthest reaches of both physical and mythological space. Most problematic for scholars has been the task of explaining the apparent contradictions in his character as revealed by his storied actions, for even more than most heroes of classical mythology, Heracles' persona was "manipulated by authors at different time periods and in varying texts to create appropriate figures for particular audiences."[33] The early fifth century poet Pindar, whom Emma Stafford identifies as one of the first to try and "'clean up' Herakles' image," rebrands the terrifying dragon-slayer and sometime madman of the archaic tradition as "a paragon of piety and punisher of evil-doers."[34] Subsequent treatments of Heracles as tragic hero, comic buffoon, allegorical exemplum of physical perfection and moral virtue, model for political leaders, and cult hero/god craft new stories about Heracles or re-interpret old ones by cherry-picking and manipulating details from established narratives either to justify his many despicable acts or to attribute altruistic motives to selfish ones.[35]

Such re-interpretations of Heracles' record have led him to be celebrated as "a culture hero who purged the earth of monsters and tamed the uncivilized

32 Apollod. 2.7.1.

33 Augoustakis/Raucci (2018) 4.

34 Stafford (2012) 121–2.

35 See Stafford (2012) chapters 3–6 for full discussions of each.

world, making it safe for the spread of Greek culture."[36] Even Apollodorus, who unblinkingly reports all sorts of shameful deeds of Heracles, specifically notes that the communities terrorized by, for example, the Lernaean Hydra,[37] the Erymanthian Boar,[38] and the Mares of Diomedes[39] all become safer after Heracles either dispatches or relocates the beasts. But Heracles' motive for performing these heroic acts is to fulfill his divine mandate so that he can win immortality for *himself.* The fact that his actions are sometimes also good for *others* is a happy but unintended consequence. Heracles is also celebrated as a defender of Greek culture for killing a number of nasty characters he comes across in the course of his *parerga.* But again, any benefit to the affected communities is incidental to his own personal interests, for numerous classical authors (including Apollodorus) report that Heracles takes no action against any of these terrorizers of innocents, despite their infamy, until they dare to challenge or target him personally.[40]

Such self-centeredness is typical of Greek mythic heroes and leads to acts of entitlement and excess. Heracles's astounding sexual promiscuity and potency is legendary.[41] His appetites for food, water and alcohol are similarly out-sized.[42] He objectifies women: his wives, for example, are all rewards or prizes won in

---

36 Quotation from Felton (2021) 196. Cf. Stafford (2012) xxv and 3–4; Hsu (2021) 24; Hunter (2021) 202; Mitchell (2021) 90; and Pache (2021) 11. Heracles struggles to reconcile the contradictory aspects of his own character and actions in Euripides' *Heracles.*

37 Apollod. 2.5.2.

38 Apollod. 2.5.4.

39 Apollod. 2.5.8.

40 The list includes Emathion (Diod. 4.27), Lityerses (Diod. 4.31.6), Saurus (Paus. 6.21.3), Bousiris (Apollod. 2.5.11), Cycnus (*Schol. Pind. Ol.* 2.82; Apollod. 2.7.7), Antaeus (Pind. *Isth.* 4.3; Apollod. 2.5.11), and Cacus (Verg. *Aen.* 8.190–272; cf. Prop. 4.9.1–20 and Ov. *Fast.* 1.543–82).

41 Apollodorus (2.7.8) numbers his children at sixty-six, including the fifty-one he sires with the daughters of Thespios. Pausanias (9.27.7) even claims that he accomplished this feat in a single night.

42 One of the Hesperides tells how a thirsty Heracles kicked a hole in a rock to create a fresh-water spring (Apoll. Rhod. 4.1445–6). Apollodorus twice relates the tale of how a hungry Heracles "loosed one of the bullocks from the cart of a cowherd…sacrificed it and feasted" (2.5.11 and 2.7.7). See Stafford (2012) 104–17 for the common tropes of a drunken and famished Heracles in literature and art.

contests.[43] Other women he rapes, such as Auge and the unnamed daughter of King Amyntor.[44] Heracles also lays claim to an outrageously high body count. He kills a number of men just for having the audacity to try to steal from *him* the cattle that *he* stole from Geryon.[45] Unbridled Fury drives him to kill his music teacher Linus and his herald Lichas.[46] He dares even to wound several of the immortal gods.[47] He reveals a disturbing sadistic streak when he mutilates several tributes he meets on the road, sending them home with their cut-off ears, noses and hands hanging from their necks by ropes.[48] Accompanied by an army, Heracles later re-visits those who dare renege on their promise to pay him for his services.[49] These are presumably some of the many "arrogant deeds" for which the *Homeric Hymn to Heracles* claims he was celebrated before he was made a god.[50]

Greek mythic heroes are not admirable human beings. They often cause injury and pain to others with little or no provocation or acknowledgement. They

---

43 Megara, as a reward from her father Creon for helping him to win a war (Apollod. 2.4.11); Deianara, as the prize for beating Achelous in a wrestling contest (Ov. *Met.* 9.4–7); Iole, taken forcibly after her father Eurytus denies her to Heracles as his promised prize for winning an archery contest (Apollod. 2.6.1); and Hesione, whom Heracles hands off to Telamon because his own promised reward for rescuing her from the sea monster Cetus – her father's immortal horses – is a prize he holds in higher esteem (Apollod. 2.6.4).

44 Apollod. 2.7.4 and Diod. 4.37.4.

45 These include Poseidon's sons Ialebian and Dercynus and King Eryx of Sicily (Apollod. 2.5.10). The Romans add the monstrous Cacus to that list (see note 40 above). Hercules even fills the River Strymon with rocks to make it unnavigable, punishment for obstructing his attempts to round up the cattle after Hera dispersed them with a gadfly (Apollod. 2.5.10).

46 For Linus, see Apollod. 2.7.8; for Lichas, Ov. *Met.* 9.216–8. Heracles also murders his family in a madness sent by Hera, but no explanation is provided for why he throws his guest-friend Iphitus from the walls of Tiryns (Apollod. 2.6.3; cf. Hom. *Od.* 21.22–30). For these crimes, Heracles is sentenced to enslavement first to Eurystheus and then to Omphale, circumstances that ironically provide him with the opportunity to accomplish the very feats that win him immortality.

47 Hera (Hom. *Il.* 5.392–4), Hades (Hom. *Il.* 5.395–9; cf. Apollod. 2.7.3), and Ares (Hes. *Shield of Heracles* 362–4).

48 Apollod. 2.4.11.

49 See Apollod. 2.7.2 for his war against Augeus, and Apollod. 2.6.4 for the one against Laomedon.

50 Hom. h. 15.6.

are amoral. They care first and foremost about themselves.[51] And because they tend to put their own need for glory first, they rarely make good husbands/lovers/partners or sons or friends/teammates.[52] But these are the very things the hero Hellboy yearns to be: a good romantic partner to Liz, a good son to Prof. Broom, and a good teammate and friend to his B.P.R.D. colleagues.

Unlike Heracles, Hellboy – a demon raised by a Catholic father, a monster with the moral imperative to keep humanity safe from monsters – is a legitimately conflicted soul. Hellboy celebrates his demon physicality that allows him to protect people but hates being marginalized for it. So he self-consciously styles himself as human, most notably by grinding down his horns to stumps (*Don't stare…he hates when people stare*). His cocky bravado, sarcastic wit, and expressions of disdain and revulsion for the monsters he fights give him a brutish bully vibe, but his genuine expressions of compassion (to loved ones, to strangers, and notably, to cats) cast him as charmingly human. He is genuinely altruistic. His sense of duty doesn't allow him to expect or receive payment for his heroic services. He even dismisses expressions of gratitude from those he saves (*It's my job*). Keeping humanity safe from otherworldly terrors is all the motivation Hellboy needs. His only larger-than-life appetite is literally for food: in scene after scene, we see his six meals a day delivered on carts towering with meat, mashed potatoes, pancakes, chili nachos. Shows of over-confidence and protestations of self-sufficiency are not always successful attempts to hide his emotional insecurities: his doubt about his ability to win Liz's love and his fear that he may not be worthy of his father's. Although his unresolved frustrations do occasionally lead him to lose his temper, his outbursts never generate casualties. Hellboy kills only two human beings during the course of the film, both righteously, as we shall see.

---

51 Apollonius shows how detrimental human sentiment can be to a classical mythic hero's career: in the *Argonautica,* Heracles' despair over Hylas' disappearance leads him to abandon his heroic quest.

52 See Stafford (2012) 84 on how even the "loving" Deianara's comments in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* "indicate that Herakles is hardly the ideal husband: he never sees his children (ll. 31–3), he has countless lovers (ll. 459–60), and of course he is now threatening the stability of the household by introducing a second 'wife' (ll. 427–9 and 536–42)."

Humility

Jon Solomon's description of Heracles could just as well be applied to Hellboy: "a semi-divine, monster-slaying strongman who is susceptible to suffering but ultimately triumphs and re-emerges to fight another battle."[53] But Hellboy understands that the B.P.R.D. can only be effective if he remains a legend, not a reality. So he voluntarily lives locked away in the deepest levels of an underground complex hidden under a non-descript "Waste Management Services" building in Newark, N.J. When called to scenes of paranormal disturbance, this hero suffers the indignity of being transported in a high-tech lab disguised as a garbage truck (to Machen Library) or inside a sealed crate marked "Live Cargo" hoisted into the bed of a pick-up truck (in Moscow). He shows a humility inconceivable in a mythic hero like Heracles, a son of Zeus who sails the seas in the great ship Argo and returns from his far-flung adventures comfortably nestled in the golden cup of Helios. But Hellboy chafes at the restrictions that prevent him from being with the girl he loves (the walls of his room are lined with screens playing videos of Liz on a loop), or from attending his father's funeral (he can only watch from afar, a gargoyle perched on the edge of a nearby roof). He understands that sneaking out of the B.P.R.D. compound puts its mission at risk (*you got yourself on tv again*). Then FBI Director of Special Operations Tom Manning must do the morning talk show circuit to debunk the legitimacy of any Hellboy sightings (*Why are these photos always blurry?*).

For a mythic hero like Heracles, fame is currency. The cult of Heracles was the most widespread of any hero cult in the Greco-Roman world. His feats are everywhere immortalized with shrines and eponymous cities; in classical art, architecture, and literature; and on innumerable everyday items.[54] Heracles also works to expand his own cult, such as by establishing both the Olympic and Nemean Games and by erecting "as tokens of his journey two pillars over against each other at the boundaries of Europe and Libya."[55] But ironically, Hellboy's rogue outings have inspired a kind of modern cult worship of him, too.

53 Solomon (2018) 26.

54 See Stafford (2012) 17 for the monumental buildings whose artwork depicts Heracles' heroic feats and Stafford (2012) 18 for the wide range of everyday items decorated with Heracles' image in antiquity. For discussions of specific items organized by topic, see Gantz (1993) 374–466. For source catalogues of vase paintings, see Stafford (2012) 246, n. 9 and n. 10.

55 Apollod. 2.5.10.

Even Myers is a fan of the *Hellboy* comic book series that circulates in his popular culture (*He's real???*).[56] But flattered or not, Hellboy is careful to warn a young, star-struck fan he meets on a rooftop (*You're Hellboy!*) to keep his secret (*Shh. I'm on a mission…don't tell, ok?*).[57]

But Hellboy and Heracles both discover that a father's punishment for a son's violation of house rules can be extreme. When Agent Myers first meets Hellboy, Agent Clay explains that he is locked in his room behind doors made of twelve-inch steel because Prof. Broom has grounded him for violating protocol by sneaking out of B.P.R.D.'s secure compound to visit Liz. This situation is comparable (given the appropriate contextual adjustment) to a similar scenario in Heracles' life. For the crime of murdering his guest-friend Iphitos[58] – the ultimate violation of house rules (Xenia, the Laws of Hospitality) – his father Zeus arranges for Heracles to be sold into slavery to Queen Omphale,[59] who dresses him in women's clothes and sets him up with loom and spindle.[60] In both scenarios, fathers punish their equally rebellious and reckless adult hero sons by denying them personal freedom and agency (grounding ≈ enslavement) and subjecting them, for a limited time, to comparably humiliating circumstances (infantilization ≈ feminization).

---

56 Del Toro's commentary on the Director's Cut DVD supports making such a connection: "All my life, comics have remained as important an artform in my mind as film, theater, painting, anything…" Del Toro further observes that the most iconic scenes in the film perfectly re-create illustrations from Mike Mignola's comic book, a genre equally dependent on words and images. Classical poets use literary ekphrases to paint equally evocative pictures with words (e.g., the description of Heracles' exploits on his son Eurypylos' shield in Quintus Smyrnaeus' *Fall of Troy* 6, and on the shield of the Argive warrior Capaneus in Statius' *Thebaid* 4).

57 Introducing the *Hellboy* comic into the film in this way is not only a nice metapoetic touch, but also helps focus the film on Hellboy's character development. In Mignola's graphic novel, Hellboy works out in the open and is respected, not feared, by the public.

58 Hom. *Od.* 21.22–30.

59 Apollod. 2.6.2 and 2.6.3.

60 Ov. *Epist.* 9. Because Heracles' infidelity propels the plot of Sophocles' *Trachiniae,* his storied enslavement to Omphale is presented in that play as an elaborate lie fabricated to hide his affair with Iole.

Supernatural Allies

Even among Greek heroes, Heracles may indeed have "experienced more hardships, more tortures, and faced more monstrous creatures than any of the others, partially because the goddess Hera bore an unusually strong grudge against him."[61] But he also enjoys protection, guidance, and gifts from other gods, most notably Athena. Such divine assistance, along with access to knowledge inaccessible to ordinary mortals, allows Heracles, like all mythic heroes, to fulfill his mythic mandates. For example, Athena gives Heracles bronze noise-makers made by Hephaestus so he can more easily flush out the Stymphalian birds,[62] and she effortlessly helps Heracles hold the world on his shoulders while Atlas fetches the Golden Apples of the Hesperides (as depicted in one of the extant metopes from the Temple of Zeus at Olympia).[63] In vase paintings, Athena and Hermes are often depicted standing by Heracles' side as he performs such tasks as routing the Centaurs from Pholos' cave,[64] wrangling Cerberus in the Underworld,[65] and dispatching Cycnus.[66] In expression of a typical mythic hero trope, Heracles holds down the shape-shifter Nereus until the god reveals the information he needs to fulfill his heroic task(s): how to acquire the Cup of Helios to cross Oceanus, how to get to Erytheia (so he can steal Geryon's cattle), and how to find the Garden of the Hesperides, where he follows Prometheus's divine advice to have Atlas retrieve the apples for him.[67]

Hellboy, too, has access to arcane knowledge necessary to bring down evil beasties, and the guidance and help of paranormal advisors to get the job done. Just as Heracles is guided and inspired by the goddess of wisdom, Hellboy is advised by the sentient water-breather Abe Sapien, of the genus *Icthyo Sapiens.* This "wise fish" provides Hellboy with the same kind of information out of reach of ordinary humans but necessary to his success. Just by touching something, Abe can divine "the past, the future, whatever this object holds," much like Pro-

61 Felton (2012) 115.

62 Apollod. 2.5.6.

63 Apollod. 2.5.11.

64 Gantz (1993) 391.

65 Gantz (1993) 414.

66 Gantz (1993) 422.

67 Apollod. 2.5.10–1.

teus (a stand-in for Nereus) knows "what is, what has been, and what soon will come."[68] Abe can then replay recently transpired events (as if a video) for others to see. This is how Prof. Broom learns of Rasputin's return to earth and the nature of the threat posed by Sammael. Like Athena, Abe also does field work, but Abe is only paranormal, not divine, and suffers grievous injuries when he is attacked while attempting to ferret out the water demon Sammael's nest.

Human Allies

While Heracles more often than not defeats his adversaries in single combat, he does accept the assistance of human players whenever necessary to achieve his goals. For example, Iolaus is identified as Heracles' charioteer when he goes up against Cycnus[69] and he helps Heracles dispatch the Lernaean Hydra, an encounter central to this study.[70] Heracles even brings "a band of volunteers" to help him accomplish two of his labors: fetching Diomedes' mares[71] and the belt of Hippolyte.[72] Iolaus is Heracles' nephew by blood, the son of his twin brother, Iphicles. As Myers learns from Agent Clay, the B.P.R.D. is Hellboy's family (*Well, come on in and meet the rest of the family*). Myers is incredulous when Hellboy is allowed to enter the first scene of paranormal disturbance without any back-up (*it's the whole lonely hero thing*). Hellboy rejects Myers' offer of help as a point of pride even when he is wounded (*No one ever helps me. It's my job*). But Hellboy will only start thinking of himself as part of a team when he sees that his insistence on going it alone actually brings harm to his fellows.

68 Verg. *Georg.* 4.393 (*quae sint, quae fuerint, quae mox ventura trahantur*).

69 Hes. *Shield of Heracles* 78.

70 Apollod. 2.5.2.

71 Apollod. 2.5.8 and cf. Diod. 4.13.3.

72 Apollod. 2.5.9.

Human Adversaries

As mentioned earlier, mythic heroes are often regarded as culture heroes who defend civilization from savagery and order from chaos. Their usual adversary is a monstrous beast not able to be dispatched by ordinary men. But like all heroes, Heracles also kills humans (or half-humans). Some are simply cruel and opportunistic criminals who prey on innocents, such as Lityerses[73] and Saurus.[74] But others might as well be monsters, for they do more than just disrupt the lives and works of men. These villains throw the world out of balance by dehumanizing human beings.[75] One such man killed by Heracles is Egypt's King Bousiris,[76] who sacrifices men instead of animals on Zeus' altar, roasting them alive slowly inside a bronze bull. Two others are Cycnus, son of Ares, and Antaeus, son of Poseidon, who Pindar claims decapitate their innocent victims and then use their skulls to adorn temples built to honor their divine fathers.[77] Heracles also kills Cacus, a man-eater Roman poets say nailed to his door the decaying heads of his victims, whose fresh blood and bones litter the floor of his cave.[78]

In *Hellboy,* Rasputin and his apostles Kroenen and Ilsa are the horrific humans who threaten not only human life, culture, and civilization, but the core tenets and continued existence of humanity itself. They are far more dangerous than the typical cartoon villains who also dress head-to-toe in black leather and latex and spend their time plotting world domination and their enemies' destruction. The savageness with which they kill and the carnage they wreak on human society certainly mark them as enemies of culture, but equally disturbing are the ways they transcend the natural limitations of their own humanity. It is of course apt that Kroenen and Ilsa are Nazis, the standard of evil to

73 Diod. 4.31.6.

74 Paus. 6.21.3.

75 See Felton (2021) esp. 183.

76 Apollod. 2.5.11.

77 Pindar's unique portrayal of Cycnus (*Schol. Pind. O.* 2.82) and Antaeus (*I.* 4.3) as such outrageous violators of cultural taboos may be part of his campaign to rehabilitate Heracles' image as a defender of culture. Apollodorus makes no mention of any skull-collecting by either Cycnus (2.5.11) or Antaeus (2.7.7).

78 See note 40 above.

beat in human history.[79] However, Rasputin allies with the Nazis only to exploit their resources for his own purposes. Ushering in the Apocalypse constitutes a far greater mythic threat to humanity than the puny aspirations of evil mortals. Even Nazis.

Imbued with all the powers of the god living inside him, Rasputin can violate the laws of nature in the same ways as the Olympian gods. He can travel through space instantaneously, know and share visions of the future, command supernatural creatures to do his bidding, and infiltrate the minds of mortals. Further, Rasputin has become immune to aging and death, those inescapable sorrows for all mortal creatures. Prof. Broom insinuates that Rasputin was famously able to survive being "poisoned, shot, stabbed, clubbed, castrated, and finally drowned" in 1916 because as the mortal agent on earth of the Ogdru Jahad, he was even back then already no longer wholly human. One quirky aspect of Hellboy's supernaturality is that his aging process is significantly retarded (*Sixty years old by our count. But he doesn't age like we do – think dog years: he's barely out of his teens*). In accordance with divine prophesy, when Heracles completes his labors, he will ascend to Mt. Olympos where he will live "amongst the undying gods, untroubled and unaging all his days."[80] But Rasputin's immortality and agelessness is an abomination, one he also ritualistically confers to Ilsa in the opening scene of the film (*I grant you everlasting life, youth, and the power to serve me*).

Now sixty years later, a still youthful Ilsa fulfills her promise to Rasputin (*I will never leave you*) by using his rune-filled notebook to guide her and Kroenen to a "sacred space" hidden deep in a mountain pass in Moldavia. Here they will welcome Rasputin back to earth. In the center of a vast chamber lies a large, circular, deeply grooved labyrinth. At her nod, Kroenen skewers their local sherpa guide as he bends down to pick up his reward of Nazi gold. They watch raptly as his blood follows the path of the grooves to the central basin, creating a bloodbath from which Rasputin's form silently rises. This blood sacrifice ritual is vaguely reminiscent of how in Homer's Underworld, shades of the dead must drink the blood of a sacrificed animal before interacting with the living. It is telling that a human sacrifice is necessary to reanimate Rasputin.

Kroenen is an even worse abomination. In his quest to keep aging and death at bay, he has introduced so many mechanical parts into his body that hardly a

---

79 According to his biography provided in Allie (2004) 103, Kroenen was the Commandant of Auschwitz.

80 Hes. *Theog.* 954–5 [Evelyn-White].

whisper of his organic self remains. Now a steampunk-style clockwork cyborg, Kroenen has deliberately transformed himself into the kind of liminal creature regularly dispatched by Greek mythic heroes (such as the many centaurs killed by Heracles). Just like all liminal creatures, Kroenen is a threat to culture – by bringing violence and disorder to society – and to the natural order of things – by blurring the boundary between animate and inanimate. He no longer has the human capacity for speech. Even his mechanical laugh lacks any vestige of humanity. Prof. Broom comes to realize the extent of Kroenen's horrific body modifications only when he observes him naked on the autopsy table: eyelids and lips surgically removed, heart replaced by a turnkey, living limbs swapped for prostheses. Dust, not blood, poured from bullet holes made by desperate men ill-equipped to protect themselves against such monstrosity. Like Rasputin, Kroenen chose to sacrifice his humanity in order to transcend it. "And Del Toro is a good enough storyteller, or a moral enough fabulist, that these human creations are not only dangerous, not only alarming, but so surprisingly pitiable."[81]

Supernatural Adversaries

Hellboy's primary monstrous adversary in the film is the demon Sammael. Sammael introduces chaos and savagery into the world by killing people, terrorizing the community, and destroying the works of man, but he also inspires humanity's most primal fears. Sammael shares the traits that monsters needing to be dispatched by Greek heroes tend to have in common: he is "incredibly strong," "imbued with malice," "inherently destructive, exhibiting tremendous hostility toward humans," "closer to mere abstractions of frightening concepts [than] identifiably animal," in short "a creature unlike anything anyone has ever seen before; a creature that evokes revulsion."[82] This perfectly tracks with the vision for Sammael expressed by Wayne Barlow, one of the illustrators on the film's production team: "Our goal was to scare the audience with a nightmare creature unlike any they had seen before."[83]

81 Gray (2018).

82 Felton (2012) 104.

83 Allie (2004) 86.

Together, the subjects of Heracles' first two labors – the Nemean Lion and the Lernaean Hydra – provide a perfect double model for understanding the depth and breadth of the different mythic threats posed by this monster Sammael. They are the only two mythological beasts Heracles is required to kill outright rather than catch and deliver to Eurystheus alive. And the Lion[84] and Hydra,[85] both darlings of Hera,[86] are also siblings: the offspring of Typhaon, the fiercest representation of violent nature, and the immortal, man-eating, viperous Echidna. Sammael is conjured into existence when Rasputin exhales a sickly green fog onto a pile of salt crystals (*gathered from the tears of a thousand angels restraining his essence*). He then makes the beast virtually unkillable by giving it the power to regenerate itself two-fold after death (*for every one that falls, two more shall rise*).

Abe Sapien's reference book identifies Sammael as "a dark entity…evil, ancient, and hungry." Hesiod's Hydra is "evil-minded".[87] Sammael is the Harbinger of Pestilence; according to Hesiod, Hera placed the Lion in Nemea as a "plague to men."[88] Sammael is the Seed of Destruction; Alcman calls the Hydra the "Destroyer of Men."[89] And Sammael is the Hound of Resurrection; Euripides twice calls the Hydra a "dog."[90]

Sammael also has physical qualities of both Lion and Hydra. His oversized head, mane (of tentacles), slim hips, carriage, and well-muscled legs give the demon a vaguely leonine look, which illustrator Barlow confirms was intentional: "We came upon an inspiring picture of a lion's skull, and worked around that, shriveling skin, draping tentacles, adding eyesockets, and layering in the director's beloved nernies [large, wart-like appendages]."[91] Those same thick tentacles crowning Sammael's head also evoke the multiple snaky necks that sprout from the Hydra's central trunk.

---

84 Apollod. 2.5.1.

85 Hes. *Theog.* 313–5.

86 See notes 23 and 24.

87 Hes. *Theog.* 313 [Evelyn-White].

88 Hes. *Theog.* 329 [Evelyn-White].

89 Alcman, fr. 815.

90 Eur. *Herc.* lines 420 and 1274.

91 Allie (2004) 89.

By settling both the Lion and the Hydra in populated places, Hera ensures the future heroic intervention by Heracles.[92] Heracles fights both monsters outside in the natural landscape, in spaces "untamed by culture."[93] Rasputin looses the amphibious water-demon Sammael on a rampage inside the limits of the hero's city, making an encounter between the demon and Hellboy equally inevitable but all the more dangerous for human beings.

Hellboy's first encounter with Sammael occurs when the B.P.R.D. is called to a scene of paranormal disturbance at the city's Machen Library, current sponsor of a special exhibit aptly named "Magick: The Ancient Power." Before Sammael even appears on screen, we see evidence of the kinds of threats he poses that require the intervention of a mythic hero. Hellboy enters the Exhibit Hall to find the floor littered with smashed art treasures (threat to culture) and the half-eaten bodies of security guards (threat to humanity). Anthropophagy is perhaps the paramount fear of humankind represented in world mythologies, as it threatens not only death but the very erasure of an individual, a race, a culture…in the most gruesome manner imaginable. Most classical mythic heroes, including Heracles, are called upon to dispatch at least one man-eating monster.[94]

Hellboy is quizzically inspecting a sodden mess of still-clothed body parts covered in goo when another slimy clump splats on the floor in front of him. Hellboy looks up to find the demon hanging from the ceiling above. (Just as Heracles' adversaries Periclymenus and Achelous are shape-shifters, Sammael can transform his right ulna into an extendable "bone blade" strong enough to pierce stone or metal and bear his own weight). This scene evokes the grisly interior of the monster Cacus' cave.[95] Having such a scene play out so incongruously in an exhibition hall of a city's cultural center, though, makes the threat all the more terrifying. Not even Hellboy's dry wit can dilute the horror of this looming threat still gorging himself on the remains of men (*Six library guards, raw? Plus belts and boots? Man, you're going to need some heavy fiber to move that out*).

---

92 Hes. *Theog.* 315 and 329.

93 For natural spaces as the typical haunts of Greek monsters, see Felton (2012) 105.

94 Man-eaters dispatched by Heracles include the mares of Diomedes (Apollod. 2.5.8; Diod. 4.13.4), the sea monster Cetus (Ov. *Met.* 11.211–2), and according to Pausanias (8.22.4), the Stymphalian Birds.

95 See note 40 above.

Initially, each hero attacks from a distance using his favorite ballistic weapon. For Heracles, that weapon is his bow, a gift from Apollo.[96] Hellboy puts just as much faith in his big gun. But even Heracles' divine gift of unerring aim[97] doesn't help him since his arrows just bounce off the Nemean Lion's impenetrable hide.[98] And even Hellboy's "really big bullets" fail to stop Sammael because of his supernatural ability to heal instantaneously. Realizing his superior position, Sammael launches Hellboy across the room, crashing him through case after glass case of valuable library holdings (a dramatic illustration of the threat Sammael poses to human culture).

Heracles will end up wrestling with the Lion until he eventually strangles it to death with his bare hands.[99] Scholars have noted that "attempting to lift an opponent prior to throwing him to the ground is a standard device of ancient wrestling"[100] and that "the objective of an ancient Greek wrestling match…was to throw your opponent to the ground three times without first suffering three falls yourself."[101] On one Athenian red-figure amphora c. 6th B.C.E.,[102] Heracles is depicted holding the Nemean Lion stretched to its full length straight above his head as he prepares to smash it to the ground.[103] This is the very technique Sammael uses against a comically out-matched Hellboy: he lifts the hero high over his shoulder, his feet pointing to the ceiling, and in a blurred flurry of action smashes him from one side to the other over and over and over on the marble floor. He then tosses the limp Hellboy out an upper story window.

---

96 Apollod. 2.4.11.

97 Apollod. 2.4.9.

98 Bakchyl. 13.46–54 and Apollod. 2.5.1.

99 As a wrestler, Heracles is unequalled. He kills or grievously injures a number of opponents in high-profile matches including Polygonus and Telegonus, sons of Proteus (Apollod. 2.5.9); Antaeus (Apollod. 2.5.12); Eryx, son of Poseidon (Apollod. 2.5.10); Menoetes, servant to Hades (Apollod. 2.5.12); and the river god Achelous (Apollod. 2.7.5 and Ov. *Met.* 9.31–88).

100 Gantz (1993) 417.

101 Felton (2021) n. 9.

102 BM 1839, 1109.2.

103 Gantz (1993) 384: "The Nemean Lion is the most popular of all Herakles' exploits in art, with hundreds of representations, almost always displaying variations on basic wrestling poses."

As each hero contemplates the ineffectiveness of his weapon of choice (bow/gun), he considers alternative tactics to neutralize his opponent's advantage. Heracles chases the Lion inside a cave with two entrances, blocking one end of it. Hellboy can only follow his stronger, quicker, and more agile prey into the New York City subway system, the urban equivalent of a cave with two openings. After wrestling the Lion to the ground (and in some accounts, bashing it over the head with his club),[104] Heracles chokes the beast to death[105] and then skins its otherwise impenetrable hide with its own claws.[106]

Before Hellboy can catch up with his adversary in the subway tunnel, though, he must first endure another comical attack by a valiant train engineer who mistakes him for an evil monster and pummels him with a fire extinguisher (*Hey! I'm on your side!*) until he is pushed beneath the wheels of the speeding train. With only his pride hurt, Hellboy brushes himself off and goes further into the subway tunnel. When Sammael sees Hellboy, he scampers towards him at great speed on all fours, roars and screams, and leaps at him in a way reminiscent of how the Lion attacks Heracles, according to a first-hand report by the hero himself: "his spine bent like a bow as he gathered his length below his flanks and midriff…so the terrible lion arched himself and sprang from far upon me, raging to taste my flesh."[107] A well-known Attic red-figure stamnos illustrates how Heracles holds open the Lion's jaws with his bare hands to avoid being bitten.[108] Hellboy takes this tactic to the next level by violently breaking Sammael's upper and lower jawbones apart at the joint, only to gape in surprise as they instantly fall back into place and reknit.

Sammael also has much in common with the Hydra. The biggest problem the Hydra poses for Heracles is its ability to regenerate itself two-fold after death. For every head that Heracles bludgeons (or cuts off), two new heads immediately grow in its place.[109] Together, Heracles and Iolaus make short shrift of the mon-

104 E.g., Ps.-Theokr. 25.221–7.

105 Apollod. 2.5.1; Bakh. 13.45–50.

106 Ps.-Theokr. 25.240–2.

107 Ps.-Theokr. 25.212–9, *passim* [Rist 1978: 239]).

108 Philadelphia L-64–185.

109 The nine-headed Hydra is just one of Heracles' many adversaries made more formidable through multiplicity of form. Other such creatures dispatched by Heracles include triple-

ster once they realize it is conquerable by fire: as Heracles lops each head, Iolaus sears the wound with a firebrand, preventing the budding of new ones.[110] Hellboy learns that Sammael, too, is conquerable by fire. This first encounter with Sammael ends when Hellboy, pinned by Sammael on the subway tracks, deliberately touches the third rail, sending electricity surging through his own body into the demon's, incinerating him (*I'm fireproof. You're not*).

But it is a different detail from Heracles' fight with the Hydra that leads to a deeper connection with Hellboy's story. Heracles first attacks the Hydra with his bow, but his arrows are as useless as they were against the Nemean Lion. Apollodorus reports that "by pelting it with fiery shafts he forced it to come out" of its den and "it wound itself about one of his feet and clung to him."[111] Then a crab sent by Hera to torment him bites him on the foot. Hellboy finds himself in a similar predicament. When his big gun does not make the expected big impression, Sammael gets close enough to shoot out his "arm-thick," seven-foot long tongue and wraps it around Hellboy's human wrist. After Hellboy gets free, he removes the wriggly stinger left embedded in his flesh, throws it to the ground, and squishes it with his foot (*it pops like a ripe grape*) as disdainfully as Heracles stomps on Hera's crab.[112]

When Abe Sapien examines Hellboy's wound, the team learns two things. First, Hellboy was "burned by some organic acid" in Sammael's saliva. This is impressive, given that Hellboy is fireproof. But the gall produced by the Hydra

---

bodied Geryon (Hes. *Theog.* 287) and his two-headed dog Orthos (Apollod. 2.5.11); conjoined twins Eurytus and Cteatus (Apollod. 2.7.2); "the immortal dragon with a hundred heads" that Apollodorus says guarded the tree in the Garden of the Hesperides (Apollod. 2.5.12), and Cerberus, described as having fifty heads in Hesiod (*Theog.* 312) before the standard number becomes three. For the benefits to monsters of such anatomical superfluity, see Felton (2012) 104.

110 Apollod. 2.5.2. Heracles just lops off the ninth, immortal head of the Hydra and buries it beside the road. The catastrophic consequences of such an undying evil being unearthed later is in fact the jumping off point for the 2019 *Hellboy* reboot. The film begins with the discovery of the dismembered and discretely buried body parts of the evil, immortal Blood Queen Nimue, buried long ago by King Arthur to prevent her from unleashing a humanity-ending plague on Earth. Made whole, she poses a mythic threat of the kind only the mythic hero Hellboy can dispatch.

111 Apollod. 2.5.2 [Frazer].

112 Ps.-Eratos. *Catast.* 11.

is said to be even more toxic, so poisonous as to render any wound incurable.[113] Second, the team learns that the creature laid eggs in the wound. What they have yet to learn is that Sammael has laid a lot of eggs, and that every time Hellboy kills a Sammael, he triggers the release of two eggs from his underwater clutch that grow into full-size Sammael-clones in seconds. Just like the hydra's re-growing heads, Sammael's prodigious fertility and regenerative abilities pose a grave threat. Although understood to be male, Sammael thus evokes the destructive potential of uncontrolled female power inspired by a host of female monsters in Greek mythology.[114] The engraving on an illustration of Sammael in Kroenen's lair – "Death becomes the fertile ground"[115] – echoes the description given the Hydra by the Roman playwright Seneca: "made fertile by death" (*morte fecundum*).[116]

Heracles never fights the same monster twice, but his encounter with the Hydra will come back to haunt him. After he kills the beast, he dips his arrows in its gall to give himself an edge over future adversaries. It is with one of these poison-tipped arrows that Heracles will kill the centaur Nessus for attempting to abduct and rape his new wife Deianara. But Heracles will not learn until it is too late that even after he dispatched the monster, it still remained a danger. For in the time it took Heracles to cross the river and retrieve his bride, the centaur had convinced her to collect some of his blood as a love potion to use on Heracles if his attentions ever strayed. And when that time comes, in her own ignorance of the true nature of the love potion (tainted by the poison that tipped the arrow that killed the centaur), Deianara sends the robe that burns Heracles' skin so badly that he takes his own life.[117] Heracles' arrogance and ignorance has terrible consequences, but true to form, the hero has little concern for others, including Lichas, the herald he kills for bringing Deianara's gift, and Deianara, who

113 Diod. 4.11.5. With these arrows dipped in this gall, Heracles brings down Ladon, dragon guardian of the Tree of the Hesperides (Diod. 4.38.1; cf. Apoll. Rhod. 4.1603); Chiron (Paus. 5.5.9) and a number of other centaurs including Pholos (Apollod. 2.5.4); Nessus (Soph. *Trach.* 572–7; Ov. *Met.* 9.130); and Geryon (in a Stesichoros fragment from Oxyrhynchus, 15 *SLG*). The arrows Philoctetes inherits along with Heracles' bow are also imbued with that poison (Quint. Smyrn. *Fall of Troy* 9.392 ff.).

114 Felton (2012) 105.

115 Allie (2004) 128.

116 Sen. *Ag.* 835–6.

117 See Soph. *Trach.* 770–1; Diod. Sic. 4.38.1; and Ov. *Met.* 9.157–272.

kills herself when she learns of the tragedy her gift has wrought (as dramatized in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*). And after his mortal essence is burned away, Heracles leaves his troubles behind to live eternally on Mt. Olympus with, it should be noted, a new wife.[118]

In a comparable plot escalation, Hellboy's second encounter with Sammael, too, causes everything to go wrong for him and everyone else. The team embarks on a mission to find and destroy Sammael's nest of eggs in the flooded subway tunnels. Surprised to see Sammael there (*Didn't I kill you already?*), Hellboy impulsively chases the monster, leaving his team unprotected. When he returns triumphant, he learns that in his absence Agent Clay was mortally wounded by Kroenen (whose "dead" body they transfer to B.P.R.D. headquarters) and that two Sammaels devoured two other FBI agents and grievously wounded Abe Sapien. Only now does Hellboy come to understand that the birth of these two monsters was magically triggered by his killing of the Sammael he chased and dispatched. Hellboy acted in an attempt to prove his heroic worth rather than out of arrogance. But like Heracles, his ignorance of his adversary's ability to continue to cause harm even after being killed has dire consequences. This disastrous series of events brings to a boil long simmering tensions between Hellboy and Tom Manning, Director of the B.P.R.D.

The Overseer

The fraught relationship between Manning and Hellboy has much in common with the one between Eurystheus and Heracles. Homer's Heracles expresses his resentment at having had to obey Eurystheus' orders when he sees Odysseus in the Underworld: "Son of Kronion Zeus or not, how many days I sweated out, being bound in servitude to a man far worse than I, a rough master."[119] It is equally apparent that Eurystheus feared and hated Heracles. After Heracles appears before Eurystheus draped in the skin of the Nemean Lion, the king makes some changes to increase his security, including having a bronze pithos made for himself to hide in.[120] Numerous vase paintings depict Eurystheus div-

118 Pind. *N.* 71–2.

119 Hom. *Od.* 11.620–2 [Fitzgerald lines 11.738–40]).

120 Apollod. 2.5.2.

ing into this jar when Heracles brings back alive both the Erymanthian Boar[121] and Cerberus.[122]

For his part, Manning has always considered the paranormals to be no different from the monsters they are called upon to dispatch (*These freaks, Trevor, they give me the creeps*). And like Heracles, Hellboy considers himself superior to his unworthy overseer. But then Manning places the blame for the murdered agents squarely on Hellboy. Hellboy is equally distraught at the loss of men he considered his friends, but Manning condemns him, along with the whole concept of the B.P.R.D., in words Eurystheus might have directed at Heracles: *"This whole thing is a farce, because in the end, after you've killed, after you've captured every freak out there, there's still one left. You."*

Manning's accusation that Hellboy is not a "man" but a "freak" taps into Hellboy's deepest insecurities, and he reacts in anger, ripping a heavy metal canister from its mounting and holding it aloft. Perhaps Heracles felt the same pleasure from watching his oppressor Eurystheus dive into his pithos as Hellboy does from watching Manning cower in fear on the floor. Halfway through the scene, the camera abruptly shifts point of view to the exterior hallway to catch the moment the canister crashes through the glass wall, startling Myers and Broom as they welcome Liz back into the B.P.R.D. fold. Manning steps gingerly through the hole in the wall and yells, "I want that thing locked up, starting now! Now, you hear me?!" When Hellboy, now perfectly calm, steps into the hallway, Manning scurries away in fright. If only there had been a giant pithos for him to dive into.

Abe Sapien had once warned his fellows, "If there's trouble, all us freaks have is each other." And now the unthinkable happens: Kroenen rises from his autopsy table and murders Professor Broom. Manning takes charge of the team, with the promise that after they return from Moscow (pursuing a clue left by Rasputin for them to find), he plans to "close this freak show for good." But the threat posed by Rasputin turns out to be much greater than they could ever imagine.

121 Gantz (1993) 389.

122 Gantz (1993) 415.

CONFLICTS RESOLVED AND THREATS NEUTRALIZED

The setting, action, and imagery of the film's final extended sequence is replete with the motifs of *katabasis,* a metaphorical conquest of Death dramatized by a journey to the Underworld and back. Virtually every classical mythic hero undertakes a *katabasis.* Heracles has three to his credit.[123] Once the team arrives in the Moscow cemetery, Hellboy uses his typical combination of occult magic, technology, and a Latin incantation to find and re-vitalize a half-decomposed corpse to act as their Sibyl and lead them through the catacombs to where Rasputin awaits them. The underground labyrinth they must navigate is a hellish landscape of treacherous pathways complete with a crumbling bridge that spans a bottomless pit. A number of team members fall to their deaths, including their erstwhile Sibyl. A harrowing close call temporarily separates Hellboy and Manning from Liz and Myers.

Neutralized: The Threat of Kroenen

Since arriving in Moscow, Manning and Hellboy have been bickering non-stop, each jockeying for position as team leader. Now they find themselves alone together in the dark catacombs, cut off from the rest of their team. Hellboy signals for quiet as faint strains of Wagner come wafting down the passageway. Manning eagerly follows the music, with Hellboy reluctantly in tow…as they walk right into Kroenen's lair. This mistake of equating signs of human culture with the absence of savagery is yet another popular trope in classical myth. Odysseus' men, for example, assume they are among civilized people because they see smoke coming from the chimneys of the Laestrygonians who will devour them, and then later, from the abode of Circe, who literally turns them into animals. Hellboy and Manning now find themselves in equivalent peril. Manning is off his guard when Kroenen attacks, but Hellboy moves in to protect him. A violent scuffle ensues. When Hellboy is momentarily put on the defensive, Manning rather comically comes to his rescue by pitching one small, steel gear after another at Kroenen's metal-encased face, giving Hellboy a chance to regroup. But then Kroenen trips a trap door that opens under their feet, and

123 Apollod. 2.5.12.

Hellboy and Manning narrowly escape falling into the spear pit below. Hellboy throws in Kroenen, instead. Transfixed by one of his own swords, Kroenen looks up helplessly into Hellboy's eyes as the hero takes his vengeance by crushing him to death with a giant metal gear (*You killed my father! Your ass is mine!*).

Resolved: Hellboy's Conflict with Manning

Even after Heracles' death, Eurystheus continues to persecute the hero's mother and children until he is slain by Heracles' son Hyllus.[124] But Manning and Hellboy reconcile their differences. For the first time, Manning sees that Hellboy is not just a demon monster-killer but also a man of good character who risked his own life to save someone who had only ever shown him disrespect. Hellboy is grateful not only for Manning's assistance during the fight, but also for teaching him to use a wooden match to light his cigars (*preserves the flavor, you see?*). They exchange thanks and together enjoy that uniquely human ritual, a celebratory smoke. Their reconciliation is a watershed moment in Hellboy's journey toward becoming – and being accepted as – a man. Hellboy leaves Manning in the relative safety of Kroenen's empty lair as he continues alone to face his destiny.

Neutralized: The Threat of Sammael

Meanwhile, Liz and Myers stumble into the demon's egg chamber deep in the bowels of the catacombs. The place is crawling with dozens of Sammaels, in much the same way that all sorts of horrid creatures, including the Lernaean Hydra, mill about before the entrance of the Underworld.[125] When Liz calls out for Hellboy, he dramatically crashes his way through the ceiling and is immediately beset by rabid Sammaels. The epic battle that follows is akin to another Gigantomachy, an elemental battle pitting fire-demon Hellboy and pyrotechnic Liz (≈ the Olympians) against an army of slithering, leaping, shrieking, snaky water demons (≈ Giants) hellbent on overturning the cosmic order. Heracles

124 Apollod. 2.8.1; cf. Euripides' *Heraclidae.*

125 Verg. *Aen.* 6.285–8.

was indispensable to the Olympians' victory over the Giants.[126] But even though Hellboy has a plan (*We have to nail 'em all at once. And the eggs*), the beleaguered hero is no match for these Sammaels whose number only increases with his every successful kill. As Hellboy disappears from sight under a growing pile of Sammaels, Liz exhorts Myers to strike her to induce the fearful pyrotechnic fury she had for so long struggled to suppress. The terrible raw power she unleashes completely incinerates every Sammael and every one of his eggs: the beast is dead, never to rise again. Rasputin and Ilsa arrive to survey the damage. Liz is left unconscious by her effort, Hellboy is knocked out by Ilsa, and a shell-shocked Myers, human witness to a battle of the gods, has barely survived.

Neutralized: The Threat of Apocalypse

The penultimate scene of the film is set in a chapel-like chamber presided over by a giant stone Angel (*and in his hand the key to the bottomless pit*). The Apocalypse clock counts down to the looming blood eclipse, the celestial sign of the Prophecy of Doom fulfilled. Hellboy is on his knees, his hands locked into a massive wooden yoke set around his neck. Just as the Pythia required Amphitryon's son to adopt a new name (*Hera* + *kleos* = Glory of Hera) before performing the heroic labors that would win him his prophesied apotheosis,[127] Rasputin commands Hellboy to recite the name Anung-un Rama – his true demon name – so that he can fulfill his "destiny" of unleashing the Apocalypse.

It is only now that Hellboy learns from Ilsa the purpose of his "Right Hand of Doom," whose dimensions exactly match the circular impressions on the great stone door the Ogdru Jahad wait to be opened. After Hellboy refuses, twice, Rasputin exploits his love for Liz to manipulate him into obeying his order. He approaches the unconscious Liz and sucks her soul right out of her body, an action he claims Hellboy can reverse if he capitulates to Rasputin's demand (*Her soul awaits on the other side. If you want her back…Open the door and claim her*). Will Hellboy turn out to be the incarnation of Rasputin's Dark Angel, the terrible Destroyer of Humanity? Or is he a tormented Christ-figure pinned to a make-

126 Apollod. 1.6.1 and 2.7.1.

127 Apollod. 2.4.12.

shift cross, the Protector of Humanity his adoptive father Prof. Broom raised him to be?

Although he has spent his entire life denying his demon nature, now Hellboy surrenders (*for her*). He intones his true demon name and his locks spring open. As he shrugs off his yoke, Hellboy physically transforms into a full-on demon: horns grown out to their full length and ringed with fire, breath like red smoke, his now fearsome countenance purged of every trace of humanity. Hellboy has almost completed the unlocking process when Myers makes one last appeal to his human nature (*Remember who you are! You do have a choice! Your father gave you that!*). In fact, moments before Rasputin had him killed, Prof. Broom had refused to bow to his demand to acknowledge Hellboy's demon name (*I call him son*) and rejected this very outcome – shown to him in a vision by Rasputin – as Hellboy's inescapable "destiny." Myers tosses Broom's holy rosary to Hellboy, who instinctively catches it. Horrified that he is now so devoid of humanity that the rosary's cross burns his demon flesh, and empowered by the reminder of his father's faith in him, he roars and snaps off his horns: the cosmic sequence falters, the monsters recede from the sky, and every trace of Anung-un Rama leaves Hellboy.

Rasputin despairs (*What have you done? Now you will never know your destiny!*). But Hellboy celebrates his expression of free will (*I chose!*).[128] And just as he had earlier killed Kroenen for murdering his father, Hellboy now punishes Rasputin for stealing Liz's immortal soul by stabbing him in the belly with one of his own broken-off horns.[129] As Rasputin falls to the ground, a vaguely squid-like creature slithers out of the wound in his belly, growing larger by the second. By the time Hellboy moves Myers and the still unconscious Liz into the corridor, Rasputin and Ilsa – true believers to the end – are unceremoniously flattened by a flick of their uncaring god's monstrous tail.

128 This scene plays out in the film exactly as it appears in Mignola's comic, but choice and disobedience are hallmarks of character for del Toro as well. In his film *Pan's Labyrinth,* as the hero Ofelia prepares to make her own fateful choice, she passes under an archway bearing the Latin inscription *"in consiliis nostris fatum nostrum est"* ("our destiny lies in our own decisions"). For discussion, see Siegel (2020) 429–31.

129 This scene is reminiscent of how Heracles wrenches off the horn of Achelous during a wrestling match for which Deianara is the prize (Apollod. 2.7.9; Soph. *Trach.* 10–1).

Resolved: Hellboy's Inner Conflicts

Aware that he was dying of cancer, Prof. Broom chose Myers to be Hellboy's new liaison because he knew Myers was "pure of heart" and that Hellboy would need his guidance to realize his full potential (*Have the courage to stand by his side after I'm gone. Help him find himself. Who he must be. He was born a demon…he can't help that. You will help him become a man*). And with Myers' urging, Hellboy was able to stare down his own inner demons and emerge from his identity crisis purged of distractions. Now Hellboy willingly entrusts Liz's safe-keeping to Myers and gruffly expresses his fondness for him, his petty jealousy forgotten. Now he graciously accepts the help Myers offers, even if it is only a damaged grenade belt that can no longer be detonated remotely. He is ready to fulfill his hero's duty to dispatch Behemoth with characteristic confidence and wry humor, but he barely has time to crack a joke (*How big can it be?*) before a huge tentacle snakes around the corner and yanks him back into the main chamber.

Neutralized: The Threat of Behemoth

Behemoth, Rasputin's god made flesh, is an absolute monster, now grown almost too huge to fit inside the cavernous chamber. When Hellboy wrenches a steel sword from a nearby stone statue and lops a thick, sinuous tentacle from its bulbous body, we are again reminded of Heracles' fight against the Hydra. But the gargantuan Behemoth repeatedly smashes the helpless Hellboy, tiny in its grasp, against the cavern wall and then slams him to the ground. Hellboy's strength and weapons are useless to him. All he has left is his cunning. Hellboy grabs the fully charged grenade belt just seconds before Behemoth scoops him up and swallows him whole. After a beat, the beast's belly begins to glow and writhe and then with an enormous boom, a goo-covered Hellboy is thrown clear by the exploding grenades that shred Behemoth from the inside out.[130] This scene resonates in several ways with Heracles' conquest of the sea monster Cetus – also a large, tentacled sea creature – who comes to devour Hesione, set

130 Cf. Pausanias' story (9.26.7–8) of the Boeotian youth Menestratus, who wore a breastplate festooned with fishhooks designed to rip apart the insides of a dragon to which he had volunteered to be sacrificed in his lover's stead.

out as a human sacrifice by her father, King Laomedon of Troy. In some tellings of the tale, Heracles himself even enters Cetus's body through its mouth and then cuts his way out.[131]

Resolved: Hellboy's Inter-Personal Conflicts

Hellboy rushes back to where he left Myers and Liz to find that Liz has no pulse and isn't breathing. With infinite gentleness, Hellboy embraces her and whispers something in her ear. After a long beat, Liz revives. Having just returned from dispatching Behemoth, described earlier by Rasputin as "guardian of thresholds, destroyer of worlds," Hellboy does not share Myers' surprise at Liz's miraculous recovery. Now restored to life, Liz asks, "In the dark I heard your voice…what did you say?" Hellboy replies, "I said 'Hey, you on the other side, let her go because…'" and his voice breaks… "'for her I'll cross over and you'll be sorry.'"

Only mythic heroes can journey to the Underworld and come back alive. Rarely can they bring anyone else back with them. Heracles once bridged the liminal space between the worlds of the living and the dead to bring another still living mythic hero, Theseus, back to earth.[132] But Orpheus is the only classical hero who, like Hellboy, attempts to retrieve an immortal soul already removed from its body. Both Virgil and Ovid tell how Orpheus cajoles the Underworld gods into releasing Eurydice's soul.[133] Ovid's Orpheus even resigns himself to an early death should his request be denied. Hellboy does not negotiate. He threatens war, not surrender, if his demand for Liz's soul is not met. Earlier in the film, Hellboy soothed Liz's anxiety by pledging his undying love (*I won't give up on you, ever*). Now he has proven true to his word.

The film closes with the two lovers at last sharing a romantic embrace, safely engulfed in Liz's blue fire. Both the screenplay's final stage direction – *Liz looks at Hellboy for the first time as what he is: the man she loves* – and Myers' concluding voiceover celebrate Hellboy's evolution of character:

131 See Gantz (1993) 401 for attestations of this version in both literary and artistic sources.

132 Apollod. *Ep.* 1.24; Eur. *Herc.* 619.

133 Verg. *Georg.* 4.467–84; Ov. *Met.* 10.11–48.

> *What makes a man a man, a friend of mine once wondered. Is it his origins? The way he comes to life? I don't think so. It's the choices he makes. Not how he starts things, but how he decides to end them.*

When Heracles chooses to end his mortal life to escape the insufferable pain of the Hydra's poison, his divine father Zeus rewards him with the prophesied destiny he has always wanted. Hellboy makes the impossibly hard decision to live with the insufferable pain of losing Liz rather than forfeit his own humanity and unleash the Apocalypse, a "destiny" imposed by his surrogate father Rasputin, one he doesn't want and cannot abide. In his moment of crisis, each hero stays true to the principles that have guided his life. Hellboy ends up saving his girl, saving humanity, and saving the world. Heracles saves only himself.

By the end of the film, Hellboy comes to accept the love of those he loves, and to love himself for who he really is: both man *and* demon. By the end of the film, he comes to understand that his demon nature doesn't *prevent* him from being human: rather, it *allows* him to transcend the limits of humanity so he can preserve and enjoy the benefits of being human for himself and others. It is his hybrid nature that enables him to be humanity's protector, to be a good teammate to his fellows at the B.P.R.D., to be the man Liz always knew he was and the man his father always hoped he would become. And for all these reasons, Hellboy is the very model of a modern mythic hero.

EPILOGUE

In this essay, I have explored the ways in which del Toro's *Hellboy* (2004) resonates with the literary and artistic record of the quintessential classical mythic hero Heracles, even as the ancient and modern heroes turned out to be of very different character. A reasonable next step in expanding the parameters of this reception study would be to consider the similarities between del Toro's Hellboy and the modern presentation of Hercules in television and film.[134] For example, while Mike Mignola claims that Hellboy's "restraint yoke" is "a nod to

134 The evolution of Hercules on screen has long been of interest to classicists. See the essays by Blanshard, Chiu, Curley, Potter, Solomon, and Stafford in Augoustakis/Raucci's *Epic Heroes on Screen* (2018). Also see Blanshard/Shahabudin (2011) 58–76 and 194–215.

Frankenstein chained into the chair in James Whale's classic, brilliant *Bride of Frankenstein*" (1935), and I myself compare Hellboy's pose to Christ's on the cross, this image of Hellboy with outstretched arms locked in place at shoulder height also evokes the "'famous lateral spread' struck by [Steve] Reeves in *Hercules* (1958) [and reprised in 2014 both by Kellan Lutz in *The Legends of Hercules* and by Dwayne Johnson in *Hercules*], a pose in which the hero is chained with his arms outstretched in such a way as to emphasize his lateral, pectoral, and deltoid muscles."[135]

Also of interest is how the modern screened versions of Hercules (those produced during and after the 1990's, the same era that saw Mignola create Hellboy) duplicate Hellboy's "everyman" heroic aesthetic, perhaps the most significant way that Hellboy diverges from the profile of the classical Heracles, a true stand-alone hero. For example, in much the same way that Hellboy works as part of a team under the aegis of the B.P.R.D., the modern Hercules on screen is more often than not presented as a member of a "heroic collective…which speaks to modern principles of collaboration and coalition."[136]

Further, there are notable patterns of reciprocity of reception and cross-pollination connecting the presentations of these two heroes on screen. For example, in my essay I discuss how del Toro's Hellboy tries to win social acceptance and reduce his sense of isolation by minimizing his differences. When Agent Clay first brings Myers to meet the hero, he advises: "Try not to stare. He hates when people stare…at his horns. He files 'em. To 'fit in.'" Later, Hellboy's outsider status is dramatized in his run-in with Manning, who berates Hellboy for his differences: "This whole thing is a farce, because in the end, after you've killed, after you've captured every freak out there, there's still one left. You." And when Hellboy appears to lose control in response, Manning barks orders to his team: "I want that thing locked up, starting now! Now, you hear me?!" A scene with remarkably similar elements occurs in Disney's animated *Hercules* (1997). When the young, undisciplined hero accidentally destroys the town's marketplace, the potter speaks for the whole community when he tells Amphitryon, "I'm warning you! You keep that, that, that freak away from here!" Young Hercules woefully admits, "They are right. I am a freak. I try to fit in. I really do. I just can't. Sometimes I feel like I really don't belong here." Even if the mirrored circum-

135 Blanshard (2018) 29.

136 Quotation at Curley (2018) 185, from a discussion of *Hercules* (2014); cf. Chiu (2018) 65–70.

stances and repeated key words and phrases in these scenes do not prove direct influence, the similarities point to the fundamental comparability of the two heroes.

Other examples of repeated visual narrative elements may simply amount to similar expressions of an over-used trope. In my essay, I observe that Hellboy's method of dispatching Behemoth – by killing the monster from the inside after being swallowed by it – is not unlike the way some ancient sources say Heracles killed the monster Cetus. Similarly, the young hero of Disney's *Hercules* (1997) is swallowed by the Hydra (in a marked departure from classical source material) and escapes by using his sword to cut himself out. An earlier scene from the same film shows the infant hero dispatching the serpents sent to attack him by tying them together in a knot (another dramatic departure from any classical telling of the tale). Nine years later, Mignola publishes "The Lion and the Hydra" (*Dark Horse Book of Monsters,* 2006), a short story in which Hellboy – for the first time expressly linked with Hercules' story – ties the Hydra's snaky necks together to facilitate its transfer to B.P.R.D. headquarters.

Another crossover example seems to suggest a scene from *Hellboy* (2004) as the inspirational link between how one of Heracles' exploits is illustrated in classical art and how it is presented on screen in *Hercules* (2014). In my essay, I note that in some ancient vase paintings, Heracles holds open the jaws of the Nemean Lion with his bare hands to avoid being bitten until he can strangle the lion to death. I then explain how "Hellboy takes this tactic to the next level by violently breaking Sammael's upper and lower jawbones apart at the joint, only to gape in surprise as they instantly fall back into place and reknit." In the 2014 film starring Dwayne Johnson as Hercules, the hero does to the Nemean Lion what Hellboy does on-screen to Sammael in 2004.

Such modern examples of *contaminatio,* possibly unintentional and perhaps even unrecognized by the artists responsible, add a delightful and unexpected dimension to classical reception studies such as this one. But since "filmmakers continue to use the ancient world as a means to explore issues relevant to modern society, issues that speak to a twenty-first century viewer,"[137] it is worth noting that since the character of Hercules in television and film started to become more relatable to a wider demographic and more attractive to modern sensibil-

137 Augoustakis/Raucci (2018) 2.

ities, the hero became more and more divorced from his divine nature.[138] In short, it seems that Hercules can only be a truly *modern* hero if he ceases to be a *mythic* one. The wonder of Hellboy is that he manages to be both at the same time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allie (2004). – Scott Allie (ed.), *Hellboy: The Art of the Movie* (Milwaukie, OR 2004).

Augoustakis and Raucci (2018). – Antony Augoustakis and Stacie Raucci, Introduction, in: Antony Augoustakis and Stacie Raucci (eds), *Epic Heroes on Screen* (Edinburgh 2018) 1–9.

Blanshard (2018). – Alastair J. L. Blanshard, Hercules: The Mythopoetics of New Heroism, in: Antony Augoustakis and Stacie Raucci (eds), *Epic Heroes on Screen* (Edinburgh 2018) 28–42.

Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011). – Alastair J. L. Blanshard and Kim Shahabudin, *Classics on Screen: Ancient Greece and Rome on Film* (London 2011).

Chiu (2018). – Angeline Chiu, Heroes and Companions in *Hercules* (2014), in: Antony Augoustakis and Stacie Raucci (eds), *Epic Heroes on Screen* (Edinburgh 2018) 60–73.

Curley (2018). – Dan Curley, The Hero in a Thousand Pieces, in: Antony Augoustakis and Stacie Raucci (eds), *Epic Heroes on Screen* (Edinburgh 2018) 173–90.

Dark Horse Comics (n.d.). – Hellboy and the B.P.R.D.: Night of the Cyclops. Accessed July 8, 2022. https://www.darkhorse.com/Comics/3009-152/Hellboy-and-the-B-P-R-D-Night-of-the-Cyclops.

Evelyn-White (1914). – Hugh G. Evelyn-White (trans.) *Hesiod:* Theogony (Cambridge, MA 1914).

Fagles (1990). – Robert Fagles (trans.), *Homer:* The Iliad (New York 1990).

138 As seen in the made-for-television *Hercules* (2005), through much of *The Legend of Hercules* (2014), and at its nadir in *Hercules* (2014). On these "all-too-mortal Herculeses," see Blanshard (2018) 40; cf. Solomon (2018) 23–6.

Felton (2012). – Debbie Felton, Rejecting and Embracing the Monstrous in Ancient Greece and Rome, in: A. S. Mittman and P. J. Dendle (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Farnham, UK 2012) 103–31.

Felton (2021). – Debbie Felton, Brigands and Cruel Kings, in: Daniel Ogden (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Heracles* (Oxford 2021) 183–97.

Fitzgerald (1961). – Robert Fitzgerald (trans.), *Homer's* Odyssey (Garden City, NY 1961).

Frazer (1921). – James George Frazer (trans.), *Apollodorus,* The Library (Cambridge 1921).

Gantz (1993). – Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth; A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources. Vol. 1.* (Baltimore 1993).

Gray (12-March-2018). – Duncan Gray, The Human Monsters of Guillermo del Toro. Accessed April 10, 2023. https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/the-human-monsters-of-guillermo-del-toro.

Hsu (2021). – Katherine Lu Hsu, The Madness and the Labors, in: Daniel Ogden (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Heracles* (Oxford 2021) 13–25.

Hunter (2021). – Richard Hunter, The Argonauts, in: Daniel Ogden (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Heracles* (Oxford 2021) 198–208.

Mitchell (2021). – Fiona Mitchell, Labor V: The Augean Stables, in: Daniel Ogden (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Heracles* (Oxford 2021) 80–94.

Pache (2021). – Corinne Pache, Birth and Childhood, in: Daniel Ogden (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Heracles* (Oxford 2021) 3–12.

Potter (2018). – Amanda Potter, The Changing Faces of Heroism in *Atlantis* (2013–15), in: Antony Augoustakis and Stacie Raucci (eds), *Epic Heroes on Screen* (Edinburgh 2018) 125–40.

Rist (1978). – Anna Rist (trans.), *The Poems of Theocritus* (Chapel Hill, NC 1978).

Siegel (2020). – Janice Siegel, Undertones of Apuleius' *Cupid and Psyche* in Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth,* in: Regine May and Stephen Harrison (eds), Cupid and Psyche: The Reception of Apuleius' Love Story since 1600 (Berlin 2020) 415–432.

Solomon (2018). – Jon Solomon, Hercules and the Millennial Generation, in: Antony Augoustakis and Stacie Raucci (eds), *Epic Heroes on Screen* (Edinburgh 2018) 13–27.

Stafford (2012). – Emma Stafford, *Herakles* (London 2012).

Stafford (2018). – Emma Stafford, Hercules, Putin, and the Heroic Body on Screen in 2014, in: Antony Augoustakis and Stacie Raucci (eds), *Epic Heroes on Screen* (Edinburgh 2018) 43–59.

Janice Siegel
Hampden-Sydney College
Hampden-Sydney, VA USA
jsiegel@hsc.edu

Suggested citation
Siegel, Janice: Guillermo del Toro's Hellboy: A Kinder, Gentler, More Modern Heracles. In: thersites 17 (2023): Classics and the Supernatural in Modern Media, pp. 143–182.
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.253

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

17/2023 | pp. 183 – 211

CONNIE SKIBINSKI
(The University of Newcastle, Australia)

'Crazy Man-Killing Monsters'

The Inimical Portrayal of the Amazons in *Supernatural's* 'Slice Girls'

Abstract The Amazons have a long legacy in literature and the visual arts, extending from antiquity to the present day. Prior scholarship tends to treat the Amazons as hostile 'Other' figures, embodying the antithesis of Greco-Roman cultural norms. Recently, scholars have begun to examine positive portrayals of Amazons in contemporary media, as role models and heroic figures. However, there is a dearth of scholarship examining the Amazons' inherently multifaceted nature, and their subsequent polarised reception in popular media.

This article builds upon the large body of scholarship on contemporary Amazon narratives, in which the figures of Wonder Woman and Xena, Warrior Princess dominate scholarly discourse. These 'modern Amazon' figures epitomise the dominant contemporary trend of portraying Amazons as strong female role models and feminist icons. To highlight the complexity of the Amazon image in contemporary media, this article examines the representation of the Amazons in the *Supernatural* episode 'Slice Girls' (S7 E13, 2012), where their portrayal as hostile, monstrous figures diverges greatly from the positive characterisation of Wonder Woman and Xena. I also consider the show's engagement with ancient written sources, to examine how the writers draw upon the motifs of ancient Amazon narratives when crafting their unique Amazon characters. By contrasting the Amazons of 'Slice Girls' to contemporary figures and ancient narratives, this article examines how factors such as feminist ideology, narrative story arcs, characters'/audience's perspectives and male bias shape the representation of Amazons post-antiquity.

Keywords Amazons, Warrior women, Classical reception, *Supernatural*, Monsters

URL https://thersites-journal.de
DOI https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.240

INTRODUCTION

Stories of the Amazons – an all-female tribe of formidable warrior women – have been told for millenia, from pre-Homeric times to the modern day.[1] Though they are featured only briefly in the *Iliad,* the Homeric epithet ἀντιάνειραι ('equal-to-men')[2] captures the ancient audience's interest in the Amazons as transgressive figures, challenging the expected behaviour of ancient women. Not only were the Amazons of Greco-Roman myth highly skilled fighters, but their military proficiency rivalled that of the Greeks, and they fought fiercely with the renowned heroes, Heracles, Theseus and Achilles.[3] As well as excelling in the traditionally masculine realm of warfare, Amazons challenged patriarchal norms by operating as a 'nation ruled by women', a female-only society capable of conquering neighbouring territory and founding colonies in distant lands.[4] Their military prowess and exclusively female society represented the antithesis of the Greco-Roman patriarchal system and is a key reason for the widespread interest in the Amazon image throughout antiquity.[5]

Diodorus' account of the Amazons in his *Bibliotheca Historica,*[6] composed in the 1st century BCE, provides the most comprehensive written account of the Amazons' legacy throughout antiquity, describing multiple generations of Amazon queens. Diodorus' account of the Amazons is teleological in nature, presenting a narrative of their decline from greatness into obscurity. He begins with a preamble on two generations of unnamed Amazon queens, whom he

1 This research was generously funded by the Australasian Women in Ancient World Studies (AWAWS) Research Grant. All translations are my own.

2 Hom. *Il.* 3.189 and 6.186 See Mayor (2014: 23) on the possible alternative translations of ἀντιάνειραι as 'opposites of men', 'against men', 'opposing men', 'antagonistic to men' and 'man-hating'. I adopt Mayor's premise that the term is best translated as meaning 'equals of men' with the *anti* prefix denoting 'equivalent' or 'matching'.

3 See Mayor (2014) for her comprehensive analysis of a wide range of written and visual representations of hero quests featuring Amazons, including: Hippolyta and Heracles (249–59); Antiope and Theseus (259–87) and Penthesilea and Achilles (287–305).

4 Diod. 2.45.1.

5 See Merck (1978) and Tyrrell (1984).

6 Diod. 2.45.1–46.6.

praises for their 'prowess', 'bodily strength', 'excellence' and 'popular repute'.[7] Diodorus elaborates on the queens' military and imperialistic feats, noting that the first queen subdued the neighbouring peoples and founded the 'great city' of Themiscyra, while the second extended Amazonian territory by conquering Thracian lands, subduing the majority of Asia, and extending into Syria.[8] Notably, Diodorus includes reference to the Amazon queens' heroic deaths in battle, foreshadowing later narratives in which Amazon queens are consistently killed in one-on-one combat with a renowned Greek hero. Diodorus' account then skips forwards several generations to the reign of Hippolyta, where he describes her battle against Heracles, resulting in the Amazons' defeat and the destruction of their homeland.[9] Diodorus marks this as the turning point in the Amazons' legacy, from which their reputation for 'excellence' became one of 'weakness'.[10] Diodorus closes his account by describing Penthesilea's feats in the Trojan War, specifically her success against the Greeks prior to her heroic death at Achilles' hands.[11] Penthesilea is presented as 'the last of the Amazons to win distinction for bravery', since 'in the future the race diminished more and more and then lost all its strength'.[12] Diodorus' final comment – 'thus in later times, whenever any writers recount their prowess, men consider the ancient stories of the Amazons to be fictitious tales'[13] – indicates the Amazons' continued legacy as well-known mythic figures, whose once great civilisation continued to inspire storytelling among his contemporaries. The Amazons' legacy continued further beyond Diodorus' time, as Penthesilea features in Quintus Smyrnaeus' *Posthomerica* dated to the late 4th century CE. While Diodorus' account is pessimistic in its outlook – as it attempts to account for the Amazons' decline from real historical warrior women to mythical fictional characters – it nonetheless indicates that the Amazons' legacy throughout antiquity was inex-

7 Diod. 2.45.1–46.2.

8 Diod. 2.45.1–46.1.

9 Diod. 2.46.3–4.

10 Diod. 2.46.4.

11 Diod. 2.46.5.

12 Diod. 2.46.6.

13 Diod. 2.46.6.

tricably connected to their feats in battle, particularly their combat with Greek male warriors.[14]

Tales of the Amazons continue to be a popular subject for contemporary storytelling, as Amazons and Amazon-like figures have a long tradition in contemporary comics, film and television. As symbols of self-sufficiency and female autonomy who transgress the patriarchal status quo, the ancient Amazons have become recontextualised as feminist icons, exemplified through the figures of Wonder Woman and Xena, Warrior Princess. Much scholarship on the Amazons in contemporary film and television examines these case studies exclusively, concluding that the 'modern Amazon' figure serves as an aspirational role model for women and girls.[15]

While this trend of positive representation dominates scholarly discourse on the 'modern Amazon' image, it is not the sole trajectory in the reconfiguration of ancient Amazons in contemporary media. A notably different mode of representation is evident in the television series, *Supernatural,* a series that loosely adheres to a monster-of-the-week format where the heroic male protagonists, Sam and Dean Winchester defeat supernatural threats over the span of 40-minute-long episodes. Adhering to the show's overarching premise, 'Slice Girls' (7.13, 2012) portrays the Amazons not as feminist icons, but as supernatural monsters who pose a direct threat to society and must be destroyed to protect the innocent.[16] Since *Supernatural* is a cult classic, with season 7 grossing an average viewership of 1.7 million, the representation of the Amazons in 'Slice Girls' is worth considering when discussing the modern Amazon image, as it shapes viewers' responses to the ancient Amazons and their contemporary counterparts. Overtly challenging the mode of representation typified by Wonder Woman and Xena, the Amazons in 'Slice Girls' form a distinct category in the modern reception of ancient Amazon mythology, highlighting that the modern Amazon figure is more complex and multifaceted than traditionally assumed.

---

14 Though Diodorus presents tales of the Amazons as 'fictitious tales' (ἀρχαιολογία), it is worth noting that not all ancient authors perceived the Amazons in this way. For instance, Strabo's account (11.5.3) makes a case for the Amazons' historicity, acknowledging a balance between 'the mythical and the historical' (τὸ μυθῶδες καὶ τὸ ἱστορικὸν) elements in ancient sources.

15 See, for example, Whalley (2010) and Potter (2018).

16 The team behind the creation of 'Slice Girls' includes Eric Kripke (creator), Eugeine Ross-Leming and Brad Buckner (writers) and Robbie Thompson (executive story editor).

THE AMAZONS IN POPULAR MEDIA

Amazon warrior women have a long legacy in popular media, with the most well-known and influential early example being William Moulton Marston's refashioning of the Amazon image through the figure of Wonder Woman. Since Wonder Woman's debut in *All Star Comics #8* (1941), Amazons have been featured in many comics, television shows and movies, culminating in the widespread dissemination of Amazon mythology and the creation and perpetuation of the 'modern Amazon' archetype.[17] Much scholarship on the Amazons in contemporary media is rooted in the paradigms and modes of representation embodied by the Wonder Woman franchise and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001), which have shaped scholarly discourse on the transmission of Amazon iconography from antiquity to the present day. A cursory summary of scholarship on Wonder Woman and Xena is a necessary starting point for examining the representation of the Amazons in 'Slice Girls', since these earlier portrayals of Amazons in film and television form part of the matrix of texts within which the *Supernatural* episode operates.[18]

Jo Whalley's (2010) study of Amazons in contemporary media attests to the enduring fascination with the Amazon image in 20th and 21st century television and film, examining the portrayal of Amazons in the television series, *Wonder Woman* (1975–79) and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) and how these characters are paradigmatic examples of the Amazon archetype employed in films such as *Alien* (1979), *The Terminator* (1984) and *Kill Bill* (2003). Whalley's overarching argument is that the contemporary Amazons serve as an 'affirmative model of female heroism', embodying feminist ideals and challenging the male bias and patriarchal gaze underlying ancient accounts of the Amazons.[19] As Whalley notes, the ancient Amazons – despite putting up formidable fights against legendary Greek heroes – are ultimately defeated by the male hero. By contrast, Wonder Woman's success against her male and female opponents sub-

17 For scholarship on Amazons in contemporary comics, television and film, see Passman (1991); Connock (1999); Early and Kennedy (2003); Blondell (2005); Mainon and Ursini (2006); Stuller (2010); Whalley (2010); Spieldenner (2012); Frankel (2018); Potter (2018); Scherzinger (2019); and Poorman (2021).

18 On the network of textual relations surrounding individual texts, a key premise in Reception Theory, see Allen (2001); Frow (2008) and Willis (2018: 39–42).

19 Whalley (2010) 2.

verts 'the ancient idea that Amazons are never victors, and that they must be vanquished in order to maintain the status quo and reinforce patriarchal norms.'[20] Whalley also considers the portrayal of the Amazons in *Xena: Warrior Princess* and Xena's role as a quasi-Amazon figure, arguing that the Xenaverse Amazons serve as a 'positive exemplar of the independent, strong warrior woman', in large part due to show's rejection of heteronormative paradigms demonstrated through Xena's bond with the Amazon Gabrielle.[21]

Other scholars likewise treat contemporary Amazons as positive female role models and LGBTQIA+ icons. Amanda Potter's article (2018) on the Amazons in contemporary film and television provides detailed insight into the feminist underpinnings of Xena and Wonder Woman, illustrating the significance of ideology on the refashioning of the Amazon image in reception texts. Potter situates the Xenaverse Amazons within the context of third-wave feminism, as their portrayal as empowered and self-reliant women reflects the growing focus on individuality and sex-positivity in the 1990s.[22] Potter likewise situates the figure of Wonder Woman from the 2017 film within a feminist framework, viewing her as 'a feminist role model for the present day [...] who can love a man, but her power is not reduced nor is she defined by her relationship with him'.[23] As well as being feminist icons, the Amazons of the Wonder Woman and Xena franchises serve as icons for the LGBTQIA+ community. In his (2012) study on Wonder Woman's large gay male fanbase, Andrew Spieldenner argues that the Amazons' same-sex society, as well as the focus on 'fighting intolerance, finding one's place and thriving in transformation' resonates positively with many members of the LGBTQIA+ community.[24] Similarly, the close relationship between Xena and her Amazon companion, Gabrielle 'transmitted some message of self-worth, deservedness, and honour to people who felt very marginalized', promoting LGBTQIA+ representation on screen and providing a safe community of support and acceptance.[25] Actresses Lynda Carter (star of *Wonder Woman* 1975–1979) and Lucy Lawless (star of *Xena: Warrior Princess* 1995–2001) also cel-

20 Whalley (2010) 145.

21 Whalley (2010) 184.

22 Potter (2018) 44.

23 Potter (2018) 49.

24 Spieldenner (2012) 2.

25 Randell-Moon (2019) 6.

ebrate their characters' status as 'queer rights icons', publicly calling out homophobic readings of Wonder Woman and Xena, while promoting the messages of tolerance and acceptance that they deem as key facets of their characters' representation.[26]

James William Poorman's (2021) study on the Amazons in popular culture provides additional insight into the dominant 'modern Amazon' image, through recourse to the superhero genre. Poorman's central thesis is that the ancient Amazons were constructed as antagonists and threats to Greek societal norms, a stark contrast to Wonder Woman's construction as 'a just hero(ine) in a society that was rife with male driven conflict, war, and injustice'.[27] Xena also has an interesting connection with warfare and justice, as a former warlord on a search for redemption. She consistently chooses to fight for justice, standing up for those suffering injustices at the hands of male feudal warlords, including but not limited to the Amazon communities she encounters during her travels.[28] Elaborating on Wonder Woman's affinity with justice, fairness and honesty as well as her driving desire to 'protect those who cannot protect themselves', Poorman interprets Wonder Woman as 'a heroine in modern American society [...] a positive symbol, or protagonist, for the equality of women within 20th and 21st century America'.[29] The same can be said of Xena, who is likewise a feminine counterpart of the masculine American superhero, reclaiming the ancient Amazon image and transforming her from the object of a male hero quest to a victorious hero in her own right. According to this dominant scholarly framework on the Amazons in contemporary media, self-reliance, independence and victory against male opponents form the quintessential hallmarks of the modern Amazon image.

The *Supernatural* episode, 'Slice Girls' acknowledges these positive associations surrounding the Amazon figure in contemporary media, consciously sit-

26 See, for example, the June 2nd 2022 variety.com article on Lynda Carter's perspective on Wonder Woman (Sharf (2022)) and the March 20th 2021 collider.com article on Lucy Lawless' view on Xena as a queer rights icon (Nemiroff (2021)).

27 Poorman (2021) 92.

28 See, for example, 'Hooves and Harlots' (1.10, 1995) where Xena liberates the innocent Centaur Phantes (framed for the murder of the Amazon Queen Terreis), outing the warlord Celano as Terreis' murderer. See also 'Endgame' (4.20, 1999) where Xena helps the Telaquire Amazons fight against the Romans, after Pompey kidnaps Amazon women to sell them into slavery.

29 Poorman (2021) 68 and 111.

uating its own portrayal of Amazons within a broader textual network. When protagonists Sam and Dean Winchester discover that they are pursuing Amazons, Dean comments 'what, like Wonder Woman?' in a highly dismissive manner. Professor Morrison (whose role in the episode is examined shortly) matches Dean's tone of contempt when he replies: 'no, like, a tribe of warriors. They actually existed. The comic books, they're just silly perversions.' This exchange acknowledges and undermines the positive portrayal of the Amazons as feminist icons in popular culture, signalling that the episode will follow a starkly different trajectory of representation. With the Wonder Woman archetype being dismissed as a 'silly perversion' of ancient Amazon lore, the Amazons of 'Slice Girls' are set up as her antithesis. Rather than embodiments of peace and justice, these Amazons are constructed as brutal, bloodthirsty warriors operating within a male-dominated narrative. Accordingly, I posit that the Amazons in 'Slice Girls' deliberately subvert the modern Amazon image typified by Wonder Woman, as the *Supernatural* episode explicitly challenges the dominant contemporary trend in which Amazons are role models and aspirational figures.

As explored further throughout this article, the episode's deliberate departure from the contemporary trope of aspirational Amazons aligns with the overarching premise and narrative constraints of the *Supernatural* series, where folkloric and supernatural creatures function as antagonists for the male protagonists to defeat. Within this framework, the Amazons cannot take on the role of victorious female lead, as Wonder Woman and Xena do, thereby necessitating a radically different construction of the Amazon image that has more in common with ancient sources than contemporary media.

THE AMAZONS, ACCORDING TO *SUPERNATURAL*

In 'Slice Girls', the writers explicitly draw upon the image of the Amazon in Greco-Roman myth, both aligning with and diverging from ancient material to construct unique Amazon characters who subvert the dominant 'modern Amazon' archetype. The episode's direct, explicit engagement with ancient written sources is a useful starting point for analysing how the Amazons are initially constructed as hostile, inimical figures in 'Slice Girls'. Following the conventional plot structure of a *Supernatural* episode, the pre-credits scene depicts a gruesome death inflicted by an unidentified supernatural adversary, with the episode itself centred around the Winchester brothers' attempts to track down

and defeat the monster. This process typically involves Sam and Dean enlisting the help of mythology and folklore professors or experts of local lore, who use the fragmented information provided by the brothers to identity the relevant supernatural being. From there, the Winchesters conduct their own independent research (usually by reading their deceased monster-hunting father's journal, consulting their esoteric library, or researching online) to learn more about the monsters' strengths and weaknesses, using this information to protect themselves and defeat the supernatural threat. Scenes where the enlisted expert explains the ancient origins of the supernatural antagonist provide vital insight into the dynamics of reception and transmission at the heart of the episode.

In the 'Slice Girls' pre-credits scene, a man is fatally stabbed by an unseen attacker, who carves a symbol into his chest, resembling a cave painting or crude rendering of hieroglyphic script. In a close-up shot, the glyph appears to depict the outline of a woman, as the inverted triangle at the figure's base evokes both womb and external genitalia. Under the correct assumption that the symbol can provide insight into the killer's identity, the Winchester brothers visit Professor Morrison from the local university's Department of Anthropology to see if he can shed light on its origins.

After conducting extensive research, Professor Morrison identifies the glyph as 'a variation of a symbol associated with the Temple of the Goddess Harmonia'. He then posits that the symbol originated with the Amazons, speculating that they used it as an 'occult talisman' to worship Harmonia. Professor Morrison's identification of the Amazons' lineage aligns with the extant ancient material, as the Amazons were believed to be the semidivine offspring of Harmonia and Ares.[30] However, there is a substantial difference in emphasis between Professor Morrison's account and the extant ancient sources. While the former focuses on the Amazons' matrilineal descent, the latter prioritise their paternal line.[31] The focus on Harmonia activates a relatively marginal aspect of the Amazon narrative, compared to their more mainstream connection with Ares, who appears as a key figure in the Wonder Woman franchise and the Xenaverse.[32] It

30 Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 2.987–91

31 Lys. 2.4; Quint. 1.55; 1.461; 1.640.

32 It is worth noting that Ares is not depicted as the father of the Amazons in these contemporary adaptations. In *Wonder Woman* (2017) he takes the role of antagonist, and throughout *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) he is an antagonist turned love-interest. Nonetheless, the association between Amazons and Ares is maintained throughout popular culture.

also satisfies the narrative constraint of brevity by making the Amazons immediately identifiable, since Ares fathered several deities and demigods, while Harmonia is associated with the Amazons only.

Foregrounding Harmonia and backgrounding Ares also has implications for the show's portrayal of the Amazons. The emphasis on femininity and motherhood foreshadows the episode's engagement with the 'monstrous feminine' trope (a point I return to later when examining the Amazons' worship of Harmonia through their initial rituals).[33] Moreover, by backgrounding their descent from Ares, the show de-emphasises their connection to warfare. While the ancient Amazons were renowned for their bellicosity and military prowess,[34] 'Slice Girls' retains their preoccupation with violence but focuses predominantly on a different aspect of their characterisation, namely, their matriarchal social structure.

When explaining the Amazons' key traits, Professor Morrison describes them as members of 'an exclusively female culture [with] no need for men, except procreation'. Though this description is brief, it provides information on the episode's engagement with ancient sources, as well as the functional differences and similarities between the ancient Amazons and those in *Supernatural.* Professor Morrison's statement succinctly paraphrases Strabo's account of the logistics of the Amazons' all-female society, which states that the Amazons and the neighbouring all-male Gargarean tribe meet on an annual basis 'for the purpose of begetting, unseen and in darkness, with whoever happens to be there'.[35]

While there is a superficially strong parallel between Strabo's account and Professor Morrison's, the divergences between the two provide a useful frame of reference for understanding the episode's use of Amazon mythology more generally. Strabo goes on to explain that the Amazons raise their female offspring and give any male infants to the Gargareans,[36] thus allowing the all-female Amazons and all-male Gargareans to sustain their demographics. This explanation provides a rationalisation for the Amazons' unique societal makeup, in line with Strabo's purpose of uncovering how 'an army of women, or a city, or

33 See Creed (1993) *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* on the representation of monstrous women in horror films.

34 Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 2.987–91; Lys. 2.4; Hdt. 4.114.3; Mel. 3.34.

35 Strab 11.5.1.

36 Strab. 11.5.1.

a nation, could exist without men'.[37] Professor Morrison makes no reference to the Amazons raising or nurturing future generations of women, instead claiming that they kill the father of their children after impregnation. There are no extant ancient sources attesting to Amazons killing their sexual partners, and this divergence from antiquity encapsulates the show's portrayal of the Amazons as hostile, inimical figures.

Professor Morrison's focus on the Amazons' all-female society and intercourse rites illuminates the gendered Othering underlying the portrayal of the Amazons in 'Slice Girls'. Here we can see a functional similarity between the role of the Amazons in *Supernatural* and the function of Amazons in ancient Greek mythmaking. The scholarly consensus, first proposed by Mandy Merck, is that the Amazons' all-female society was constructed to represent the 'catastrophic alternative' to the Greek patriarchal system, hence justifying the subordination of women in antiquity.[38] From this, Merck concludes that Amazon narratives encapsulate male anxieties regarding female power, and that this tension is resolved when Amazons are defeated at the hands of Greek male warriors.[39] William Blake Tyrell likewise interprets the Greeks' construction of the matriarchal Amazonian society as a tool for justifying patriarchal practices, thus treating the Amazons as a 'foundation myth [that] explains patriarchal marriage as the optimal means for controlling female sexuality and rashness'.[40] Building upon the significance of the Amazons' rejection of patriarchal marriage customs, DuBois argues that the Amazons' society represents a 'distorted alternative to the culture of the Greeks', since 'ideas of marriage and endogamy were crucial in defining the limits of the *polis*'.[41] Clearly, in antiquity, the Amazons' all-female society stood as a subversion of Greek patriarchal norms, threatening the conceptual order of the male-headed state and presenting the Amazons as Other figures operating outside of Greek society and culture.

By drawing attention to the Amazons' exclusively female society as their defining characteristic, 'Slice Girls' likewise constructs the Amazons as transgres-

37 Strab. 11.5.3.

38 Merck (1978) 108.

39 Merck (1978) 110.

40 Tyrrell (1984) 125.

41 DuBois (1982) 39–41.

sive figures threatening the patriarchal status quo.[42] This is brought to the fore when Sam Winchester momentarily interrupts Professor Morrison's explanation to note that all the victims in the case are male. The episode's depiction of the Amazons as man-hating man-killers takes the gendered Othering to the extreme, presenting them as not only a subversion of patriarchal norms (as they were in antiquity), but as an active threat to men, making them direct antagonists for the Winchester brothers.

AMAZONS AND THE SUPERNATURAL

While Professor Morrison's summary of ancient Amazon lore largely aligns with the extant ancient material, the episode's construction of Amazons as monstrous supernatural adversaries necessitates substantial deviation from ancient sources. Though the Amazons in antiquity are formidable opponents capable of causing great destruction in battle, their proficiency in combat is a result of their dedication to hunting and war training, not any superhuman characteristics. By contrast, the Amazons in 'Slice Girls' perform feats that are not humanly possible, and their supernatural status is well-established from the very beginning of the episode, long before it is revealed that the man-killers are Amazons.

In the pre-credits scene, we see a man lifted and thrown to the other side of the room, demonstrating the Amazons' superhuman strength. This is not merely a careless scene designed to create intrigue and enhance the intensity of combat scenes, but a core aspect of the Amazons' supernatural construction in the episode. It is the strength with which the male victim's body is thrown, rather than the corpse mutilation, which initially prompts the Winchester brothers to investigate the case. When Sam describes the unfolding case to Dean, attempting to justify a supernatural connection to necessitate their involvement, he points out that 'four men [were] thrown so hard they went through walls'. This sufficiently persuades Dean to look further into the case, establishing a tangible link between the Amazons and the realm of the supernatural, manifested by their superhuman strength. The Amazons' association with the supernatural is further reinforced when the Winchester brothers meet the forensic pathologist in

42 See Merck (1978), Tyrrell (1984), Keuls (1985) and Roque (2017) on the Amazons as subversions of the ancient Greek patriarchal norms and threats to the male-headed state.

the morgue, attempting to find any clues as to the killer's identity. The Amazons' strength is reiterated, with the pathologist noting that the corpse was 'thrown against the wall so hard it buckled'. When one of the brothers asks if any DNA was left at the crime scene, it is revealed that the victim bit the attacker, but the genetic markers 'don't match anything human'. While the Amazons' identity and backstory is yet to be explored, these early scenes clearly portray them not only as figures whose strength surpasses that of ordinary humans, but as genetically non-human. This satisfies the narrative constraints of the show as a whole, since the Winchester brothers only investigate violent crimes committed by supernatural or folkloric entities, so the emphasis on the Amazons' superhuman nature justifies their inclusion in the episode.

The Amazons' supernatural characteristics are outlined and explained after Professor Morrison's initial overview of Amazon lore, when Sam conducts his own independent research. Sam first uncovers the cause of the Amazons' supernatural abilities:

> 'Apparently, there was this long, bloody war. The Amazon population was decimated so they made a bargain with Harmonia to replenish their ranks and make them stronger. Well basically, they became more than human. Harmonia turned them into monsters.'

Sam's words provide a direct link between the Amazons' superhuman strength and their monstrous nature, by presenting Harmonia as an active progenitor of monsters. Moreover, the teleological nature of Sam's description accounts for the shift in portrayal from Amazons as warrior women to supernatural monsters, thus acknowledging their legacy in antiquity while simultaneously highlighting the new trajectory established in the episode. Sam's teleological account also calls to mind Diodorus' account of the Amazons' decline, though while Diodorus' Amazons merely faded into obscurity, the *Supernatural* Amazons are transformed into monsters to remain powerful. While there are no extant ancient accounts of Harmonia intervening in the Amazons' affairs and transforming them into superhuman figures, this addition furthers the gendered Othering employed throughout 'Slice Girls' by presenting Harmonia as a 'monstrous mother' figure, one of the 'monstrous feminine' tropes embedded in the horror genre.[43]

---

43 See Creed (1993: 16–31 and 139–51) for analyses of monstrous mothers in the horror film genre. See also Goc (2007: 149–65) for an in-depth analysis of the 'monstrous mother' trope in contemporary media.

In his research, Sam also discovers an additional facet of the Amazons' supernatural abilities, separate from their superstrength. He explains that they 'reproduce quickly [...] after mating they give birth within 36 hours. The babies grow incredibly fast, then the aging process becomes normal.' As well as serving as a marker of the Amazons' supernatural mode of being, the rapid aging is indicative of the show's preoccupation with the Amazons' procreation customs, reinforcing the transgressive nature of the Amazons' non-traditional child-rearing practices. The Amazons' accelerated aging is unique to *Supernatural* and exemplifies the effects of narrative constraints on the show's refashioning of the ancient Amazon image. Early in the episode, Dean is seduced by a woman named Lydia, unaware that she is an Amazon using him for the purposes of procreation. The next day, Lydia gives birth to their daughter Emma, who quickly reaches adolescence, at which point she is inducted into the cult of Harmonia and instructed to kill her father, putting Dean's life in direct danger. This plot – which relies on Emma being old enough to seek out and attack Dean – necessitates the inclusion of accelerated aging, as otherwise the events of the singular episode would span several years, substantially altering the narrative timeline of season 7.

Clearly, the monstrous construction of the Amazons in 'Slice Girls' hinges on the supernatural elements that are incorporated throughout the episode. Within this overarching framework, there are two core facets of the Amazons' inimical portrayal, which I now consider in turn: their role as seductive temptresses, and their association with the occult.

MONSTROUS AMAZONS: MAN-EATING MOTHERS AND MAN-KILLING DAUGHTERS

Supernatural 'Slice Girls' draws upon contemporary tropes from the detective fiction and horror genres to portray the Amazons as destructive, monstrous antagonists for the show's male protagonists. This is apparent in the portrayal of both Lydia and the Amazon youth, presented as *femme fatales*/maneaters and occult worshippers respectively. By examining these two modes of representation in turn, this section examines how genre conventions, narrative story arcs, characters' perspectives and male bias shape the 'modern Amazon' image as constructed in *Supernatural.*

Given that Lydia's primary role in the plot is to seduce Dean and carry a child destined to kill him, her portrayal calls to mind the *femme fatale* trope, epito-

mised by the portrayal of dangerous and sexually alluring women in the *film noir* detective fiction genre.[44] The *femme fatale* figure – also referred to as 'man-eater' or 'spider woman' for her propensity to seduce, use and discard men by catering to their sexual fantasies – ultimately embodies both seduction and destruction.[45] Elisabeth Bronfen's study of the *femme fatale* trope provides a useful framework for situating the Amazon Lydia within the broader context of textual representations of seductive, dangerous women. As Bronfen notes, the *femme fatale* is not a passive recipient subjected to the male gaze, but rather she is the active agent 'who manipulates the outcome of their fatal meeting'.[46] In this way, a *femme fatale* is characterised by her uninhibited sexuality, independence and ruthless ambition, and her 'ability to dupe the men who fall for her [...] merciless in manipulating them for her own ends'.[47] Accordingly, in Bronfen's model, such women function as 'figure[s] of male fantasy, articulating both a fascination for sexually aggressive women, as well as anxieties about feminine domination'.[48]

From Lydia's first on-screen appearance (mid-way in conversation with Dean in a bar), she appears confident, mysterious and seductive, as is typical of the *femme fatale* figure. Though it is unclear who initiated the conversation, Lydia's agency is demonstrated throughout the conversation, which she manipulates for the sole purpose of seducing Dean. Lydia establishes a connection with Dean over their shared disinterest in 'settling down', and Dean is pleasantly surprised with her preference for non-exclusive, non-committed flings. Lydia then praises Dean's suit and asks him about his work, with Dean lying and pretending to be a wealthy investment banker to impress her. Both Lydia and Dean flirt with the intention of seducing the other, though Lydia is more calculating and deliberate in her approach. Although her interest in Dean's career first appears as innocent flattery, we find out over the course of the episode that all the male victims of the case have been wealthy businessmen she met at the same bar – as Sam and Dean later realise, Amazons 'hook up with decent looking, successful guys' be-

44 For the *femme fatale* figure in detective fiction, see Doane (1991), Stables (1998), Grossman (2003), Bronfen (2004) and Dennon (2017). For cross-cultural and transnational analyses of the *femme fatale* trope in contemporary media outside of traditional detective fiction, see Hanson and O'Rawe (2010) and Lindpop (2016).

45 See, for example, Place (1998) 47–9, Grossman (2003) 41–4 and Lindpop (2016) 322–31.

46 Bronfen (2004) 106.

47 Bronfen (2004) 106.

48 Bronfen (2004) 107.

cause they are 'picky about the gene pool'. Once she is satisfied that Dean is a suitable partner with which to procreate, she initiates casual sex by inviting him to her place. She is sexually dominant, including throwing Dean against a wall with superhuman fervour while kissing him, but he is too caught up in the heat of the moment to properly register what happened. Overall, Lydia's deliberate orchestration of her initial encounter with Dean, as she had presumably done previously with the other male victims, fits the model of the *femme fatale* manipulating her male partner for her own ends. By catering to Dean's male fantasy but ultimately putting his life in direct danger as a result of their sexual union, Lydia's narrative arc encompasses Dean's fascination for sexually liberated and uninhibited women, as well as an underlying anxiety about powerful women.

By presenting Lydia in this mode, *Supernatural* reconfigures the ancient Amazon warrior women into seductresses, in line with the episode's backgrounding of the Amazons' martial prowess. Nonetheless, this mode of representation aligns with the Amazons' overarching portrayal as powerful women in both antiquity and contemporary media, although in 'Slice Girls' their power derives from the leveraging of sexuality rather than military strength. The Amazons' portrayal as seductive temptresses is not attested in antiquity, despite the ancient audiences' interest in their sexual customs. The hypersexualised portrayal of the Amazons in 'Slice Girls' calls to mind the dangerous, sexually alluring women of Greco-Roman mythology such as Circe, Medusa, and the Sirens, identified by scholars as ancient examples of the *femme fatale* figure.[49] In this way, it appears that 'Slice Girls' conflates other female threats from antiquity when constructing their image of the Amazon, further demonstrating how *Supernatural* presents the Amazons as a threat to the patriarchal status quo.

This pejorative treatment of Amazon women as dangerous *femme fatales* is indicative of the show's treatment of women characters more generally. As Susan Cosby Ronnenberg notes in her study of gender representation in *Supernatural,* the show tends to 'present women as dichotomous props: damsel in distress or dangerous seductress'.[50] Though there are some notable exceptions of women who break this dichotomy, the representation of Lydia clearly fits within the model of dangerous seductress.[51] Elaborating on her claim that women char-

49 See, for example, Pollock (2010: 9–31) and Johnston (2017: 1–8).

50 Ronnenberg (2019) 132.

51 Notable positively portrayed women who challenge traditional gender roles throughout the show include Jody Mills, Donna Hanscum, Charlie Bradbury and Jo and Ellen Harvelle, all

acters function as props within the narrative, Ronnenberg states that 'the focus is never on the female characters' depth or development, but that of the male leads.'[52] This is true of the portrayal of Lydia, as she is not granted any character development, and the limited insight into her emotions and personal plight results in an absence of depth and complexity. Lydia serves the sole narrative purpose of birthing Emma, and the Emma sub-narrative ultimately centres around Dean and the threat that she poses to him, aligning with Ronnenberg's premise that women characters typically serve subsidiary roles where the focus lies on the Winchester brothers.

A similar sentiment is echoed in Jacob Clifton's article on gender in the *Supernatural* universe, which he views as 'a universe of Otherised and fetishised femininity that surrounds the narrative's all-male viewpoint'.[53] Lydia is fetishised through Dean's male gaze, shown literally through the extreme closeups capturing Dean's lingering and flirtatious gaze, and also captured in dialogue when Dean expresses approval and surprise at Lydia's preference for non-monogamy. As an Amazon, Lydia is also Otherised by nature, as her superstrength and ability to give birth within 36 hours of procreation mark her as distinctly non-human. As Lydia can be neatly situated within the wider paradigm of gendered representation throughout the *Supernatural* series, it is apparent that 'Slice Girls' does not provide a mere retelling of the ancient Amazon tales, but rather, the show embeds Amazon characters within the show's overarching framework and narrative constraints.

The role of genre and narrative arc in shaping the portrayal of Amazons can also be seen when examining the show's representation of Amazon daughters, specifically their association with occult practices. The *Supernatural* series is predicated on an 'occult world view' comprising demons, witches and various other supernatural monsters, where 'occultism formulates the aesthetics of the other world with which the Winchester brothers communicate.'[54] A key way that occultism is expressed throughout the show is the use of sigils and other pictorial symbols used for ritual purposes, such as protection against dangerous

---

of whom assist the Winchester brothers in defeating supernatural adversaries. For scholarship on the representation of these empowered female characters, see Borsellino (2009), Clifton (2009) and Calvert (2011).

52 Ronnenberg (2019) 132.

53 Clifton (2009) 139.

54 Nosachev (2020) 3.

supernatural forces.[55] In 'Slice Girls', Professor Morrison identifies the symbols carved into the victims' chests as 'pictographs meant to pay homage to Harmonia – occult talismans, if you will', establishing an initial connection between the Amazons, their worship of Harmonia, and the realm of the occult. This initial association with occult practices is brought to the fore when the adolescent Emma is abducted by Amazon elders and taken to an abandoned building with other Amazon youth, where they are initiated into Amazonian society.

The Amazons' talismanic imagery is apparent during this scene, as the Amazon elders wear a necklace in the shape of the symbol. Their worship of Harmonia is also made explicit at the beginning of the initiation, when the lead elder explains the purpose of the rituals that will take place:

> 'On this special night you join an exceptional family [...] This is a tribute to the one who created and protects us. We hunt for her. We kill for her.'

Towards the end of the initiation ceremony, the Amazon youth are branded with the talisman, permanently marking them as devoted followers of Harmonia. This practice is presented as an act of courage exemplifying the Amazons' determination and aptitude for physical combat, as the overseer explains that a true Amazon must know 'how to endure pain and how to inflict it'.

As well as presenting the Amazons as occult worshippers, the initiation scene reinforces their portrayal as monstrous man-killers. The first rite that the initiates participate in involves ritual cannibalism. The Amazon youth, all dressed in modest white dresses, are handed individual glasses of milk while a tray displaying a cut up male corpse is passed around. Building on the premise that Amazons kill men to worship Harmonia, the Amazon youth are instructed to 'consume that kill, as a symbol of unity with those who completed their blood missions and furthered the life of the [Amazon] tribe.' Reluctantly, the young Amazons consume the milk and corpse, realising that the ritual cannibalism is an essential step in their rite of passage to adulthood, and that they have not been given an alternative. This scene jarringly juxtaposes the Amazons' youth and innocence (denoted by the white dresses and milk) with their inevitable destiny to become savage, man-killing monsters. The ritual also calls to mind the First Communion rite, where young girls wear white dresses and consume bread and wine representing the body and blood of Christ, as part of their initiation into

55 Nosachev (2020) 5.

Catholicism. By having the Amazons consume an actual corpse of an unknown victim – rather than a food item representing Christ's willing sacrifice – the initiation ritual in *Supernatural* perverts the traditional religious ritual to highlight the Amazons' monstrosity, in particular the threat that they pose to their unsuspecting male victims. Since perversions of Catholic doctrine conventionally serve as shorthand for occult practices in popular culture, this initiation rite further reinforces the Amazons' association with the realm of the occult.[56]

After engaging in ritual cannibalism, the Amazons are told that they are 'close to fulfilling [their] tribal destiny', and that their initiation to Amazonian society will be completed once they 'take the final glorious step into adulthood'. This final step is in the initiation process is ritual patricide, which is revealed when Sam returns to Professor Morrison and learns that the Amazons' 'ritual of initiation requires that the child born of the mating process must kill her own father'. While Sam is at Professor Morrison's office, Emma visits Dean's accommodation and explains that she has to kill him, insisting that she doesn't have a choice.

Cannibalism and patricide are not attested as rites-of-passage for Amazons in any extant ancient sources, further illustrating the show's divergence from ancient material for narrative purposes. In antiquity, the Amazons' transition from girlhood to womanhood was marked through puberty rites, with first intercourse serving as the rite-of-passage into adulthood.[57] According to ancient authors, an Amazon can only 'set aside her virginity' (ἀποπαρθενεύονται) when she has killed an enemy man in battle – in Herodotus' account an Amazon can cease to be a virgin once she has killed a single man,[58] though Hippocrates claims that they must kill three men in battle and then perform the sacred marriage rites.[59] Pomponius Mela provides a similar account of the Amazons' intercourse rites, noting that virginity serves as a 'punishment' for the women who fail to demonstrate their prowess on the battlefield, since 'killing the enemy is the [Amazon] woman's military duty, so much so that it is considered a shame-

56 See, for example, Chambers (2021) and Kapp (2022).

57 See Leach (1976: 77–9) on 'rites of passage' as rituals which mark the 'movement across social boundaries from one social status to another', and pp. 34–5 on puberty rites in particular. See Vernant (1980: 23–4) on the Amazons' rites of passage.

58 Hdt. 4.117.1.

59 Hippoc. *Aer.* XVII.

ful act to not strike down an enemy'.[60] Once an Amazon has relinquished her virginity, her daily life is radically different, marking first intercourse as a significant rite-of-passage within Amazonian society. Hippocrates explains that non-virginal Amazons must cease hunting and warfare, unless they are 'seized by the necessity of a compulsory military campaign'.[61] Since war training and armed combat were central to the day-to-day lives of the ancient Amazons, the banning of non-virginal Amazons from military activities (with the exception of dire circumstances) signifies a radical change in their daily customs as they progress into adulthood. Diodorus further expands on the expected roles of a non-virginal Amazon, outlining that they devote their time to nurturing and raising their female offspring, as well as implementing administrative state matters.[62]

There is some point of connection between the Amazons' initiation rites in antiquity and *Supernatural,* as in both cases the Amazon must kill a man as the crucial step in her right of passage. The ancient Amazons' requirement to kill an enemy in battle highlights their militaristic nature, showing that Amazons must contribute to and protect their community from antagonistic outside forces in order to have the right to procreate. By stark contrast, since the *Supernatural* Amazons kill their own fathers, they are reconfigured from skilled warriors to taboo-breaking murderers, committing patricide as an act of worship to Harmonia. The introduction of ritual patricide also makes for a compelling narrative that distinguishes 'Slice Girls' from other *Supernatural* episodes. While the Winchester brothers often face supernatural adversaries, having Dean's life be threatened by his own biological daughter creates additional intrigue, tension and conflict. Despite the small moments of empathy that Dean feels towards Emma throughout the episode, his final comment at the episode's conclusion – 'she really was [my daughter], she just also happened to be a crazy man-killing monster' – unambiguously reinforces the monstrous portrayal of the Amazons in 'Slice Girls'.

60 Mel. 3.35.

61 Hippoc. *Aer.* XVII.

62 Diod. 3.53.1.

DEFEATING THE AMAZON

In *Supernatural* 'Slice Girls', as in the ancient Greco-Roman material, the story ends with the defeat and death of the Amazon. Emma's final scene is intense and dramatic, alternating between clips of Emma threatening Dean while Sam races to the apartment. When Emma pulls a knife on Dean, he holds her at gunpoint but is unwilling to kill her, instead urging her to 'walk away' and live a normal life. Sam overhears this conversation from the doorway, and he shakes his head in disbelief that Dean is willing to let a supernatural monster go freely. When Emma insists that she has to kill Dean, Sam bursts in and shoots her in the chest, saving his brother without hesitation. Emma falls slowly to the ground, with sombre instrumental music playing while the camera pans to a closeup of her fatal wound. The Winchester brothers then head straight to the warehouse where the Amazons' initiation took place, in the hopes of finding and killing the remaining Amazons, though they find that all the Amazons have already fled.

In line with the typical ending of a *Supernatural* episode, we then transition to the final scene of the brothers on the road, debriefing their emotional response to the episode's events. Dean expresses annoyance at the Amazons' escape, wishing that they had an opportunity to torture them, but insisting that they'll be ready for the next time the Amazons resurface. Sam replies by chastising Dean for his hesitation with Emma, reminding Dean that their line of work requires them to 'kill the monster' no matter the circumstances. To reinforce his point, Sam reminds Dean of an earlier case where they hunted a kitsune (fox-like shapeshifter) named Amy, who subsisted on the remains of morgue patients and only killed humans to feed her dying son. Sam sympathised with her plight and let her flee, but Dean tracked her down and stabbed her in the heart, causing a rift between the brothers ('The Girl Next Door', 7.3). By reminding Dean of this case, Sam argues for the necessity of Emma's death, presenting the death of the Amazon as a victory in the fight against supernatural beings.

In this way, Emma's death scene is inextricably connected with the wider paradigm of the monster versus hero/hunter dynamic underlying the entire *Supernatural* franchise. Within this framework, it is Sam and Dean's prerogative to save the day by defeating supernatural threats, so monstrous adversaries such as the Amazons function as hero quests that ultimately demonstrate the strength, skill and courage of the Winchester brothers.[63] The attitude towards monsters

63 Borsellino (2009) 108.

in *Supernatural* – as epitomised in the second series but characterising the franchise as a whole – is summarised by Jessica George (2017) in her study of authorship and monstrosity in the show:

> 'Dean, the older brother, holds a black-and-white view of monsters, asserting, "If it's supernatural, we kill it" (2.03 "Bloodlust"). Sam, the younger brother, puts across a slightly more nuanced view, insisting that their "job is hunting evil. And if these things aren't killing people, they're not evil" (2.03 "Bloodlust"). For Sam, what makes a monster is the danger it poses to humanity.'

The Amazons in 'Slice Girls' suit these two criteria for monstrosity: they are more-than-human beings with supernaturally enhanced abilities; and they actively pose a threat to humanity by killing and mutilating the men that are unknowingly used to father future generations of Amazon women. However, in the case of Emma's death, we see a slight role reversal from the typical model outlined by George. Since Dean typically has a black-and-white attitude towards killing monsters, his unwillingness to shoot Emma is a notable exception. His choice to spare Emma's life can be accounted for by his inner conflict as her biological father, as well as his grief at recently losing his father figure Bobby Singer, resulting in an overwhelming sense of apathy and a loss of purpose. By contrast, Sam's uncharacteristically harsh response towards the adolescent Emma (who we would typically expect Sam to empathise with, due to her lack of control over her destiny) is explained by his overwhelming desire to protect his brother at all costs, as well as his anger over Dean's hypocrisy in killing the kitsune Amy but giving Emma the opportunity to flee.

Emma's death at the hands of protagonist, Sam Winchester, calls to mind the numerous ancient visual and written sources where Greek male warrior-heroes defeat and kill Amazon women. Since Amazons were renowned for their military prowess, they were frequently portrayed in one-on-one combat with skilled Greek heroes or fighting against the opposing Greek army – Penthesilea fought Achilles in Troy,[64] Hippolyta battled Heracles in her homeland[65] and Antiope's Amazons fought Theseus and his army on Athenian soil.[66] Though these Amazons put up a formidable fight and successfully slaughtered several enemy

64 Apollod. 5.1; Quint. 1.612–21.

65 Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 2.777; Diod. 2.46.4.

66 Plut. *Vit. Thes.* 27.2–4; Isoc. *Paneg.* 68–70.

Greeks, they are ultimately killed by the primary hero of the opposing side, conferring great honour and renown upon the hero capable of killing an Amazon. As Lorna Hardwick notes in her study of Amazons in ancient Greek epic, Amazons 'had a stock role as an index of heroic achievement' since 'they were worthy opponents, so they are worth defeating'.[67]

A similar dynamic is apparent in the *Supernatural* episode, as Sam's killing of Emma cements his position as a heroic protagonist. However, there is a substantial difference in the way that Emma's death confers heroism upon Sam. While the ancient Greek heroes use their strength and military skill to defeat Amazons in extensive combat scenes, Sam merely ambushes and shoots Emma. Sam's heroism is therefore not a result of his ability to defeat a worthy military opponent but is instead shown through his dedication to protecting his brother. This is indicative of the show's attitude towards heroism and heroic acts, as *Supernatural* consistently presents self-sacrifice, looking after one's family and putting oneself in personal risk to protect the innocent as key indicators of heroism. Sam and Dean's failed attempt to eradicate the remaining Amazons also illustrates the show's construction of Amazons as an index of heroic achievement. If the brothers had successfully eliminated the threat posed by the Amazons, they would have achieved their underlying goal to protect innocent citizens from supernatural threats, which serves as their driving motivation throughout the series. Sam and Dean view their inability to defeat all Amazons as a personal failing, noting that they 'screwed up' because of their lack of focus in the aftermath of Bobby's death.

Emma's death scene marks a strong point of contrast with the dominant modern Amazon image typified by Wonder Woman and the Xenaverse Amazons. While the latter are aspirational figures on account of their successful defiance of patriarchal norms and their ultimate victories in battle, Emma's defeat evokes the ancient narrative pattern where Amazon women are killed by men to resolve the threat they pose to the male-headed state. In this way, *Supernatural* draws upon the gendered Othering of the Amazons in antiquity but takes this to the extreme, transforming the Amazons from hostile warriors to supernaturally endowed beings who seduce men, engage in ritual cannibalism and kill their own fathers.

67 Hardwick (1990) 16.

CONCLUSION

In constructing the Amazons in *Supernatural* 'Slice Girls', the writers overtly challenge the dominant portrayal of the Amazons in contemporary media, as seen when characters Dean Winchester and Professor Morrison mock the image of Wonder Woman. While the conventional modern Amazon figure is an aspirational role model and feminist icon, the Amazons in *Supernatural* are hostile, inimical figures posing a direct threat to men. In constructing an original take on the modern Amazon image, 'Slice Girls' draws explicitly on ancient Amazon mythology, while introducing supernatural elements to depict the Amazons as monstrous adversaries for the Winchester brothers to defeat. The construction of the Amazons in 'Slice Girls' is best understood in relation to the narrative constraints of the *Supernatural* series, illustrating that the reception of classical figures is heavily influenced by the restraints of the media they appear in. The radically different construction of Amazons in *Supernatural* compared to the Wonder Woman franchise and *Xena: Warrior Princess* demonstrates how a range of factors such as feminist ideology, narrative story arcs, character's perspective and male bias (or lack thereof) influence the portrayal of the Amazons in reception texts. The shift in representation from empowered heroines to monstrous supernatural adversaries reaches back to ancient narratives where Amazons function as monsters for the Greek heroes like Achilles and Theseus to overcome. A similar narrative pattern exists throughout the *Supernatural* series, as the Winchester brothers are ultimately driven by their goal to defeat dangerous supernatural creatures, including Dean's Amazon daughter Emma.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Apollodorus, *The Library, Volume II.* Loeb Classical Library 122, trans, J. G. Frazer. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921.

Apollonius Rhodius, *Argonautica.* Loeb Classical Library 1, trans, W. H. Race. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History, Volume I.* Loeb Classical Library 279, trans, C. H. Oldfather. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933.

Herodotus, *The Persian Wars.* Loeb Classical Library 117, trans, A. D. Godley. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920.
Hippocrates, *Ancient Medicine. Airs, Waters, Places.* Loeb Classical Library 147, trans, W. H. S. Jones. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923.
Homer, *Iliad.* Loeb Classical Library 170, trans, A. T. Murray. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924.
Isocrates, *Isocrates Vol 1: 4. Panegyricus.* Loeb Classical Library 229, trans, G. Nolin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954.
Lysias, *Lysias 2. Funeral Oration.* Loeb Classical Library 244, trans, W. R. M. Lamb. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930.
Plutarch, *Lives, Volume I: Theseus and Romulus. Lycurgus and Numa. Solon and Publicola.* Loeb Classical Library 46, trans, B. Perrin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914.
Pomponius Mela, *De situ orbis,* tr. F. E. Romer as *Pomponius Mela's Description of the World* (Ann Arbor, 1998).
Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthomerica.* Loeb Classical Library 19, trans, N. Hopkinson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.
Strabo, *Geography.* Loeb Classical Library 49, trans, H. L. Jones. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917.

Secondary Scholarship

Allen (2001). – Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: 2001).
Blondell (2005). – Ruby Blondell, 'How to Kill an Amazon'. *Helios* 32.2 (2005) 183–213.
Borsellino (2009). – Mary Borsellino, 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Jo the Monster Killer: *Supernatural's* Excluded Heroines,' in Leah Wilson (ed.), *In the Hunt: Unauthorized Essays on Supernatural* (Texas: 2009) 107–18.
Bronfen (2004). – Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Femme Fatale: Negotiations of Tragic Desire'. *New Literary History* 35.1 (2004) 103–16.
Calvert (2011). – Bronwen Calvert, 'Angels, Demons, and Damsels in Distress: The Representation of Women in *Supernatural*', in Stacey Abbott and David Lavery (eds.), *TV Goes to Hell: An Unofficial Road Map of Supernatural* (Ontario: 2011) 90–104.

Chambers (2021). – Amy Chambers, 'Somewhere Between Science and Superstition: Religious Outrage, Horrific Science and *The Exorcist* (1973)'. *History of the Human Sciences* Vol. 34.5 (2021) 32–52.

Clifton (2009). – Jacob Clifton, 'Spreading Disaster: Gender in the Supernatural Universe', in Leah Wilson (ed.), *In the Hunt: Unauthorized Essays on Supernatural* (Texas: 2009) 119–42.

Connock (1999). – Dumouchel Connock, 'The Amazon in Antiquity and on Television: Deployments of a Figure Within Gender (Re)negotiations' (Masters dissertation: Concordia University 1999).

Dennon (2017). – Anne Dennon, 'The Emergence of the Feminist Fatale in American Film Noir' (Masters dissertation: Central Washington University 2017).

Doane (1991). – Mary Anne Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: 1991).

Du Bois (1982). – Page Du Bois, *Centaurs and Amazons: Women and the Prehistory of the Great Chain of Being* (Michigan: 1982).

Early and Kennedy (2003). – Frances Early and Kathleen Kennedy, *Athena's Daughters: Television's New Women Warriors* (New York: 2003).

Frankel (2018). – Valerie Estelle Frankel, 'Hercules, Xena and Genre: The Methodology Behind the Mashup', in Nicholas Diak (ed.), *Essays on Sword and Sandal Films and Television Programs Since the 1990s* (North Carolina: 2018) 115–34.

Frow (2003). – John Frow, 'Afterlife: Texts and Usage'. *Reception* Vol. 1.1 (2003) 1–23.

George (2017). – Jessica George, 'The Monster at the End of This Book: Authorship and Monstrosity in *Supernatural*' in Cristina Artenie and Ashley Szante (eds.), *Monsters and Monstrosity in 21st-Century Film and Television* (Montreal: 2017) 1–23.

Goc (2007). – Nicola Goc, 'Monstrous Mothers and the Media', in Niall Scott (ed.), *Monsters and the Monstrous Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil* (Amsterdam: Editions Radopi B.V. 2007) 149–65.

Grossman (2003). – Julie Grossman, *Rethinking the Femme Fatale in Film Noir* (New York: 2003).

Hanson and O'Rawe (2010). – Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe, *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts* (New York: 2010).

Hardwick (1990). – Lorna Hardwick, 'Ancient Amazons: Heroes, Outsiders or Women?'. *Greece & Rome* Vol. 37.1 (1990) 14–36.

Johnston (2017). – Elizabeth Johnston, 'Let Them Know That Men Did This: Medusa, Rape and Female Rivalry in Contemporary Women's Film and Writing', in Julie Chappell and Mallory Young (eds.), *Bad Girls and Transgressive Women in Popular Television, Fiction, and Film* (New York: 2017) 183–208.

Kapp (2022). – Tristan Kapp, 'The Satanic Panic: Exploring the Influence of Film in Formulating Narratives Surrounding the Lived Religion of the Occult and its Practitioners' (PhD Dissertation: University of Pretoria 2022).

Keuls (1985). – Eva Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus: Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens* (Berkeley: 1985).

Lindpop (2016). – Samantha Lindpop, 'Female Subjectivity, Sexuality, and the Femme Fatale in *Born To Kill*'. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* Vol. 33.4 (2016) 322–31.

Mainon and Ursini (2006). – Dominique Mainon and James Ursini, *The Modern Amazons: Warrior Women On-Screen* (New Jersey: 2006).

Mayor (2014). – Adrienne Mayor, *The Amazons: Lives and Legends of Warrior Women Across the Ancient World* (Princeton: 2014).

Merck (1978). – Mandy Merck, 'The Cities Achievements: The Patriotic Amazonomachy and Ancient Athens' in Susan Lipschitz (ed.), *Tearing the Veil: Essays on Feminity* (London: Routledge 1978) 95–114.

Nemiroff (2021). – Perri Nemiroff, 'Lucy Lawless on How 'Xena' Turned Her Into a Queer Rights Icon – And Why She Was Happy to Embrace It'. *Collider.com* (March 20, 2021). Available from: https://collider.com/lucy-lawless-interview-queer-rights-xena/.

Nosachev (2020). – Pavel Nosachev, 'Theology of *Supernatural*'. *Religions* Vol. 11.12 (2020) 1–14.

Passman (1991). – Kristina Passman, 'The Classical Amazon in Contemporary Cinema' in Martin Winkler (ed.), *Classics and Cinema* (Pennsylvania: 1991) 81–105.

Pollock (2010). – Griselda Pollock, 'Ecoutez la Femme: Hear/Here Difference', in Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe (ed.), *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts* (New York: 2010) 9–32.

Poorman (2021). – James William Poorman, 'From Mythology to Pop Culture: Myth, Representation and the Historiography of the Amazon Warrior Woman in Ancient Art and Modern Media' (Masters Dissertation: University of South Florida 2021).

Potter (2018). – Amanda Potter, 'Feminist heroines for our times: Screening the Amazon Warrior in *Wonder Woman* (1975–1979), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001) and *Wonder Woman* (2017)'. *Thersites* Vol. 7.1 (2018) 30–57.

Randell-Moon (2019). – Holly Randell-Moon, 'Queerying Subtext and Fandom in *Xena: Warrior Princess*' in Joseph Brennan (ed.), *Queerbaiting and Fandom: Teasing Fans Through Homoerotic Possibilities* (Iowa: 2019) 112–17.

Ronnenberg (2019). – Susan Cosby Ronnenberg, 'So Many Chick Flick Moments: Dean Winchester's Centrifugal Evolution' in Steven Gerrard, Samantha Holland and Robert Shail (eds.), *Gender and Contemporary Horror in Television* (Bingley: 2019) 131–47.

Roque (2017). – Maria-Àngels Roque, 'The Amazons: The Contribution of a Greek Myth to the Patriarchal Imaginary'. *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* Vol. 24.1 (2017) 39–47.

Scherzinger (2019). – Emily Scherzinger, 'Of Amazons, Humans, and Batmen: Superheroes and the Affectual Dynamics of Loneliness'. *Panic at the Discourse* Vol. 1.2 (2019) 51–61.

Sharf (2022). – Zack Sharf, 'Lynda Carter Shuts Down Homophobic Claim That Wonder Woman Isn't for Gays: You're Not Paying Attention'. *Variety.com* (June 2, 2022). Available from: https://variety.com/2022/tv/news/lynda-carter-wonder-woman-gay-icon-1235283768/.

Spieldenner (2012). – Andrew Spieldenner, 'Altered egos: gay men reading across gender difference in Wonder Woman'. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* Vol. 4.2 (2012) 235–44.

Stables (1998). – Kate Stables, 'The Postmodern Always Rings Twice: Constructing the Femme Fatale in 90s Cinema', in Ann Kaplan (ed.), *Women in Film Noir* (London: British Film Institute 1998) 164–82.

Stuller (2010). – Jennifer Stuller, *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology* (London: 2010).

Tyrrell (1984). – William Blake Tyrrell, *Amazons: A Study in Athenian Mythmaking* (Baltimore: 1984).

Vernant (1980). – Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece* J. Lloyd, Trans. (New York: 1980).

Whalley (2010). – Jo Whalley, 'On the Bravery of Women: The Ancient Amazon and her Modern Counterparts' (PhD Dissertation: Victoria University of Wellington 2010).

Willis (2018). – Ika Willis, *Reception* (New York: 2018).

Connie Skibinski
The University of Newcastle, Australia

Suggested Citation
Skibinski, Connie: 'Crazy Man-Killing Monsters'. The Inimical Portrayal of the Amazons in *Supernatural's* 'Slice Girls'. In: thersites 17 (2023): Classics and the Supernatural in Modern Media, pp. 183–211.
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.240

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

17/2023 | pp. 212 – 244

JAVIER MARTÍNEZ JIMÉNEZ
(Dept. of Prehistory and Archaeology, University of Granada)

Lycaon and classical *versipelles* in MTV's *Teen Wolf*

Abstract The modern conception of the werewolf is heavily influenced by Gothic reinterpretations of medieval European stories. This kind of werewolf is the one that has appeared on screen and written fiction for decades, but MTV's *Teen Wolf,* a re-boot of the 1980s film which aired between 2011–17, is different. In this young adult supernatural drama, werewolves descend directly from Lycaon, and a substantial proportion of the show's werewolf lore derives from Graeco-Roman stories about wolf-shifters and *versipelles.* This paper wants to explore the extent of the use in the show of the myth of Lycaon in particular, of Classical *versipelles* in general, the significance of these two references for the narrative, and the degree of innovation in modern supernatural fiction of this adaptation of Greek and Roman stories.

Keywords Teen Wolf, Werewolves, Versipelles, Lycaon, Television series, World-building

URL https://thersites-journal.de
DOI https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.248

INTRODUCTION

Between 2011 and 2017, MTV produced *Teen Wolf,* a supernatural teen drama loosely based on the 1980s film of the same name starring Michael J Fox.[1] The show follows the story of Scott McCall (played by Tyler Posey) and how his life changes overnight when he is assaulted and bitten by a werewolf. Throughout six seasons and 100 episodes, three comic books, a novel titled *On Fire,* one web mini series called *Teen Wolf: Search for a Cure,* and a new film that aired in January 2023, we see Scott trying to finish high school and live a normal teenage life despite the constant threats against him and his fiends. *Teen Wolf* is one of the first in a line of recent adaptations of teenage fiction with a supernatural element, like *Shadowhunters* (Netflix, 2016–19) based on *The Mortal Instruments* novels, or *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina* (Netflix, 2018–20) and *Riverdale* (CW, 2017–), both based on the Archie comics. Additionally, *Teen Wolf* it also is part of the larger body of television and written fiction aimed at teenagers and younger adults (usually shortened to YA) that includes werewolves as characters.[2]

The setting and themes of *Teen Wolf* are more mature and grittier than the original film,[3] and because of the format, and in order to create an adequate mythos for the story, creator and showrunner Jeff Davis (b. 1975) had a chance to develop an extensive intra-universe lore in which the Classical past plays a subtle and unexpected role.[4] References in the dialogues to Orestes are accompanied by the appearance of Cerberus, semi-divine twins with star-crossed fates, references to the ouroboros – the ancient symbol of the snake eating its tail – and the deciphering of Latin texts. Most surprising of all, however, is the key role played by Lycaon in *Teen Wolf*'s lore.

The Classical world was rich in werewolf-related folklore (creatures known in Latin as *versipelles*),[5] but most of those stories have not been preserved in

1 Fradegradi (2016); Neff-Strickland (2022).

2 Crossen (2019) 175–221.

3 Álvarez Trigo (2021); Brembilla and Checcaglini (2020); Drumm (2018); McMahon-Coleman (2014). Cf. Petridis (2021).

4 Martínez Jiménez (in press).

5 Less occasionally as *lycanthropi* or *lukanthropoi,* since this was a medical term, cf. below, n. 14.

the literary record. However, one of the stories about *versipelles* that has been transmitted is that of Lycaon of Arcadia, whose tale has gained prominence in popular and scholarly media.[6] Lycaon's story was repeated, retold, and reiterated many times between the 6th century BCE and the 9th century CE in Greek and Latin literature. It is from these (especially through Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Pausanias' *Description of Greece*) that a modern perception of the Classical werewolf has developed.[7] Classically-inspired shape-shifter stories in modern fiction are rare; *Teen Wolf* is an unusual example of classical reception in modern television.

In this paper, I want to address the importance of Lycaon's myth, especially in its Ovidian version, in the world-building of *Teen Wolf*. I will first give an overview of Greek and Roman attitudes to werewolves and Lycaon's story before briefly introducing the role of the werewolf in modern supernatural and Young Adult fiction. Then I will analyse the way in which *Teen Wolf* incorporates these stories into its narrative before concluding that, much like in Classical tales, *Teen Wolf* is a story about werewolves that, through a Classical lens, prompts the viewers to rethink their own attitudes towards humanity, monstrosity, doing good and making the right choices.

LYCAON AND THE CLASSICAL *VERSIPELLIS*

Dogs (κύων/*canis*) and wolves (λύκος/*lupus*) are essential creatures in the narratives and stories of ancient cultures, since they inspire both fear and admiration; the Graeco-Roman world is no exception.[8] From Cerberus, the three-headed guardian of the Underworld, to the she-wolf that nursed Romulus and Remus, and to Argos, Odysseus' faithful dog, canids of all types appear in Greek and Latin stories. The stories in which we encounter wolf (or dog) shape-shifters are also numerous.[9]

6 Stypczynski (2013) 19–21.

7 Ogden (2021).

8 Anderson (2012).

9 Gordon (2015); Ogden (2021).

Greek and Roman werewolf folklore

Greek and Roman stories of humans transforming into wolves fit only with difficulty in the established categories of 'werewolf' stories that appear in the literature about the supernatural,[10] because there are a range of examples where humans transform into wolves at will, forcefully, regularly, permanently, and temporarily. Some of the human-wolf transformation stories can be excluded from werewolf lore in the strictest sense, as they involve witches, sorcerers and herb collectors transforming themselves or other people. These include mentions of Circe turning men into wolves,[11] shamans deep in Scythia who could turn their people into wolves,[12] and witches and herb-collectors like Meroe who could change their shape whenever they wanted.[13] Similarly, 'lycanthropy' was considered to be a medical condition in later medical treatises; a melancholy of sorts that caused those who suffered it to walk around the streets at night with dogs (and wolves), bumping their shins against tombstones.[14]

However, at least nine stories of 'true' werewolves have come down to us in various forms, and they are a testimony to the rich werewolf folklore that once existed in the Classical world.[15] The most famous example in modern popular culture is the story-within-a-story about the soldier in the *Satyricon.*[16] In this story, during Trimalchio's dinner, Niceros tells a story about how he was travelling with a soldier who, during the night, took off his clothes by a monument in a graveyard, urinated around them, and turned into a wolf while his clothes turned to stone. The most widely-circulated story in Antiquity of werewolves, nevertheless, is that of Lycaon of Arcadia and the rites associated with the cult of Zeus Lykaios, which will be detailed below.

We cannot create a 'Classical werewolf archetype' that matches every story from these Classical stories about wolf shape-shifters. This is because were-

10 Ogden (2021) 7, n. 27, citing de Blécourt (2015).

11 Hom. Od. 10.210.

12 Hdt. 4.105.2.

13 E.g.: Apul. Met. 2.22–5; Verg. Ecl. 8–9.

14 Metzger (2015).

15 Following a folklorist definition of what a werewolf is; an individual who has the potential to turn oneself into a wolf. Ogden (2021) 206–7.

16 Petron. 61–2.

wolves were part of folklore, and their sole purpose was to be the focus of a story. Because of this, they were never part of a larger, structured narrative (or an educated one, Lycaon being the main exception), so the werewolf existed in the way and form required by the story it appeared in.[17] We can, however, highlight a handful of main werewolf characteristics that seem common across these tales.

Classical werewolves are all able to make a full transformation from human to wolf and vice versa, without it being possible to tell which one is the 'original' form. We can infer from this that these werewolves kept their human sense of self even while in wolf form.[18] This preservation of the human consciousness is key, because werewolves in wolf form had to make conscious decisions in order to shift back. Discarding their human clothes and recovering them were essential steps in the transition human-wolf-human, and the same could be said about avoiding human contact or interaction with other humans.[19] Additionally, the way one became a werewolf was not through a bite or a scratch,[20] but rather by breaking bread with a stranger,[21] an idea perhaps designed to warn travellers, as a moral within werewolf stories. Lastly, to signify their supernatural essence, we find that a werewolf's eyes glow, sometimes with fire.[22]

The stories about Lycaon are intrinsically connected with a series of religious rituals that existed in Arcadia and that were focused around the cult of Zeus Lykaios, with offerings that included human sacrifices, and rites of passage.[23] These were already discussed in Platonic texts and compiled by Herodotus,[24] but

17 Ogden (2021) 8–9, 210.

18 Ogden (2021) 7.

19 Ogden (2021) 82–4.

20 A trope that only appears in the mid-twentieth century, Priest (2017) 22.

21 Petron. 62. Niceros swears he would not share food with the man after finding out he was a werewolf: *nec postea cum illo panem gustare potui, non si me occidisses.* Cf. Ogden (2021) 99.

22 Ov. Met. 1.238: *oculi lucent,* Ov. Am. 1.8.15–6, Philostr. VA 4.10. Cf. the children of Helios and their radiant eyes as described by Apollonius (Apoll. Rhod. Argon. 4.726–9: πᾶσα γὰρ Ἠελίου γενεὴ ἀρίδηλος ἰδέσθαι ἦεν, ἐπεὶ βλεφάρων ἀποτηλόθι μαρμαρυγῇσιν οἷόν τε χρυσέην ἀντώπιον ἴεσαν αἴγλην).

23 Ogden (2021) 178–86.

24 Ps. Plato Min. 315b–c and Hdt. 7.197, as cited by Ogden (2021).

Pliny discusses these rituals and links them to werewolf folklore (*fabulae*), albeit if simply to underline the gullibility of the Greeks. Pliny and, later, Pausanias, mention how during the ceremonies linked to the temple of Zeus Lykaios, local young men went through a rite of passage in which, after de-robing and making the recommended offerings, they crossed a pond in the further reaches of the temple's territory from which they emerged, in the forests at the other side (away from sight) as wolves, and they lived in that wolf form for years (up to nine), only to return back home as men if they abstained from having contacts with other humans, eating human flesh, or staring into a man's eyes.[25]

These are not many defining characteristics, but are already very different from medieval perceptions of the werewolf – traits that are later adapted in nineteenth-century Gothic literature and later transmitted to modern fiction.[26] Classical werewolves do not 'shift' into wolf-human hybrids, nor do they become senseless monsters; and if they go on killing sprees, it is usually sheep that are the target, not directly other humans.[27] In some aspects they are similar to their Gothic counterparts, since werewolves follow deeply-rooted Indo-European tales of the dangers that lie beyond the known space, especially in the forest where wolves dwell,[28] and it is possible that the moon had an effect on their transformation,[29] but the werewolves of Classical folklore fail to match the modern expectations of werewolves in fiction.

The Ovidian Lycaon

The story of Lycaon appears repeatedly in Greek and Latin texts between the 6th century BCE (Hesiodic compilations) and the 9th century CE (Vatican Mythographer). The story, boiled down to its basics, tells us that Jupiter/Zeus punished Lycaon and his progeny for their hybris after offering the god human flesh as a sacrifice or as a meal. In all cases, Lycaon's crime is the epitome of hu-

25 Plin. Nat. 8.34; Paus. 8.2.6. Cf. Gordon (2015) 47.

26 Crossen (2019).

27 Gordon (2015).

28 Bernhardt-House (2006) 160.

29 Ogden (2021) 191–2.

mankind's wickedness that ends up prompting Deucalion's deluge, which was to bring the Bronze Age to an end. With this came the end of conviviality between humans and gods, and mortals were forced to re-think their relationship with the animals.[30] The human flesh that is offered is usually that of a young boy, sometimes a hostage, sometimes a son of Lycaon's, sometimes a random person. Lycaon's punishment is to be transformed into a wolf (hence the connection between his name and the Greek word for wolf, *lykos*), but this is not always specified.[31]

While there are many versions of the story, it is Ovid's version that is the most relevant for our current discussion, because it is the most complete and the one that had the greatest impact on later perceptions of the Classical werewolf – including *Teen Wolf*.[32]

Ovid's version specifies that Lycaon tried to determine Jupiter's true divinity by testing him with human flesh and the god, upon realising the ruse, unleashed his thunderbolts, which turned Lycaon and his children into wolves:

> {226} And not content with that, [Lycaon] took a hostage who had been sent by the Molossian race, cut his throat, and some parts of him still warm with life, he boiled, and others he roasted over the fire.{230} But no sooner had he placed these before me on the table than I [Jupiter], with my avenging bolt, brought the house down upon its household gods, gods worthy of such a master (*in domino dignos everti tecta penates*). The king himself flies in terror (*territus ipse fugit*) and, gaining the silent fields, howls aloud, attempting in vain to speak (*exululat frustraque loqui conatur*). His mouth of itself gathers foam, and with his accustomed greed for blood (*solitaeque cupidine caedis*) he turns against the sheep, delighting still in slaughter. {236} His garments change to shaggy hair (*villos abeunt vestes*), his arms to legs. He turns into a wolf (*fit lupus*), and yet retains some traces of his former shape. There is the same grey hair, the same fierce face, the same gleaming eyes (*oculi lucent*), the same picture of beastly savagery (*feritatis imago*).[33]

30 Ogden (2021) 167–74.

31 Ps. Apoll. 3.96–9. Cf. Hyg. Fab. 176.

32 Gordon (2015) 35–40; Martínez Jiménez (in press).

33 Overall, Ovid. Met. 1.219–39, transl. Miller (1916).

A very similar story is preserved in Pausanias and later compilers, including Augustine and Isidore.[34] Whereas Lycaon's story is a cautionary tale and an explanation for the almost-complete lack of human sacrifices in Graeco-Roman religion,[35] it also explains the origins of werewolves. Neither the Ovidian narration, nor any of the other versions of the story, explain how (or if) Lycaon turned back into a human, but the story, set in the distant past, gives a mythical explanation for the existence in remote, rural, liminal areas, of *versipelles* (werewolves). Pliny might consider these stories *fabulae,* but these lupine shape-shifters were part of the understanding of the natural versus the supernatural world. And this is the key aspect that is taken up in *Teen Wolf* that sets this series apart from depictions of other werewolves in modern fiction.

WEREWOLVES IN CURRENT FICTION

The presence of werewolves in literature continued long after Antiquity, with many new European and Christian perspectives added, over centuries, to Greek and Latin folklore. These post-Antique additions formed the core of the archetypical werewolf adopted by Gothic literature, which, in turn, has determined the way current fiction depicts these lupine shape-shifters.[36] The werewolf's popularity may be derived from its deep roots in Indo-European folklore and the associations between wolves, tricksters, violence, and intelligence. However, the duality of the werewolf (human-beast), its transitional undefined status, and its belonging to the liminal margins of society, means that werewolves can be adapted to tell many stories. In fact, there is an abundance of werewolves in modern media. This is, in turn, reflected in the interest shown in modern media studies, to the point that many publications state that there is too much material to classify or to consider in depth.[37]

34 Paus. 8.2.2–3. Cf. Aug. Civ. 18.17 and Isid. Hisp. Etym. 8.9.5.

35 Henrichs (2019).

36 Stypczynski (2013) 1–2; McKay and Miller (2017).

37 E.g., Frost (2003); Mann (2020); McMahon-Coleman and Weaver (2012); McKay and Miller (2017); Stypczynski (2013).

21st century werewolves

In the 21st century, the werewolf depicted in fiction has, to an extent, moved on from the idea of the medieval/Gothic monster.[38] There are still elements essential to the werewolf (wolf-transformation, inherent violence, influenced by the moon, etc.), but the context in which the werewolf exists has changed. The werewolf is no longer a lone individual cursed or afflicted with lycanthropy whose purpose is to add horror to a story.[39] Werewolves in the 21st century are used to discuss the conflict between the rational and the feral, but with new understandings of what it is to be human and an individual: controlling trauma and choosing how to live (and fit) in a community.[40] Werewolves are also used to tackle, indirectly, issues of class and race and to make allegoric references to the struggles of minorities in modern communities.[41]

Werewolves now belong in packs, much like real wolves.[42] The transition from the lone werewolf to the communal one begins in the 1990s, but this was originally linked to werewolves coming together, with patterns of behaviour closer to those of criminal gangs and still very much connected with the hypermasculine werewolf of the late-twentieth century.[43] It is not until the 2000s and 2010s that the werewolf pack begins to be perceived as an integrated community, a group of individuals with shared interests with familiar bonds and support networks of solidarity.[44] In *True Blood* (2008–14), *The Mortal Instruments* (2007–14) and *The Vampire Diaries* franchise – especially in *The Originals* (2013–18) – werewolves have their own neighbourhoods or settlements, something that also happens with the werewolves in *Twilight* (2005–08), where they try to live their own shape-shifting lives in isolation, usually at the margins of society.[45] In

38 Cf. Germanì (2012).

39 Stypczynski (2013) 11–3.

40 Germanì (2012).

41 Hudson (2013); McMahon-Coleman and Weaver (2012) 3–11.

42 de Blécourt (2014); McMahon-Coleman and Weaver (2012) 92–116.

43 Mann (2020) 166.

44 Cf. de Blécourt (2014) and Hudson (2013). For an introduction to community belonging, Delanty (2018). The werewolf pack as a threatening group of 'others' still exist (with added racist problematics) in *Twilight,* Bartosch and Caruso (2017)

45 Boyer (2017) 76–83.

these packs, hierarchies exist with an alpha at its apex, and while this structure can be imposed through violence and coercion, new alphas with new, kinder and less violent ways, usually emerge to lead their packs to a more civilised way of life.

Despite this, the characterisation of the werewolf as a violent thug when in human shape still exists as a trope, usually linked to lower socio-economic and marginalised environments, and partly derived from/caused by their secluded community life.[46] But werewolves who want to improve, break with their violent past, and move beyond it, are becoming more prominent, including Luke Garroway in *Shadowhunters* (the television adaptation of *The Mortal Instruments*) and Tyler Lockwood in *The Vampire Diaries.* This is also the case of Scott McCall in *Teen Wolf.* Much like in the Arcadian rite of passage, for many teenagers turned into werewolves in modern fiction (including and especially in *Teen Wolf*) a pack offers a chance to explore the transformative male experience with peers and to learn about himself in order to return to the community.

21st century werewolves are, moreover, no longer exclusively male. In the recent years there has been a growing revision of the female and the werewolf, giving increasingly larger roles and more agency to female werewolves, opening new avenues to address feminism and teenage angst.[47] Most of these female werewolves have emerged from YA fiction aimed at teenage girls, like *Dark Divine, Bitten* or *Wolves of Mercy Falls,* and it is in these contexts that we encounter supernatural female characters better-developed than those from screen adaptations.[48] In a similar fashion, werewolves have been used to explore themes of sexuality,[49] especially themes related to queerness and homoeroticism.[50] Even when the werewolf is not represented as queer (and, at points, even as homophobic) the popular reception seems to favour the queerness of werewolf characters, usually through Slash (male-male) fanfiction and fan art.[51]

---

46 Amador (2020); Jowett (2017).

47 McMahon-Coleman and Weaver (2012) 41–67; Williams (2021).

48 Priest (2018). A trend that does not change in Netflix's recent (2022) show, *Wednesday,* a coming-of-age supernatural show based on the *Addams Family.*

49 Williams (2021).

50 Cf. Bernhardt-House (2006).

51 Elliott (2016).

Most werewolf-related fiction in the twenty first century is, lastly, aimed at teenagers.[52] At least from the late 1950s (*I Was a Teenage Werewolf*, 1957), werewolves have been used to represent the intergenerational tension that exists between teenagers and adults,[53] and to represent the mutable and un-defined nature of teenagers themselves, but the popularity of the teenage werewolf has exploded in the last few years. Werewolves have become a perfect allegory for teenagers because of the intrinsic identity crisis, the physical changes, and the constant reborn-redefinition cycle.[54]

MTV's *Teen Wolf*

While there are no '*Teen Wolf* Studies' at present in the way that there were '*Buffy* Studies' or '*Xena* Studies',[55] there is a surprisingly large amount of literature on *Teen Wolf*.[56] This academic interest reflects a social interest, and the television series has attracted a lot of attention. In fact, while *Teen Wolf* includes the tropes and topics that have been highlighted for the 21st century werewolf, it is undeniable that the influence of the show has helped create this modern idea of the YA werewolf.

As briefly introduced above, *Teen Wolf* tells the story of Scott McCall, a teenager who lives in the small town of Beacon Hills in Northern California. One night he is assaulted by a creature that bites him, which transforms him into a werewolf. Throughout the six seasons, Scott spends most of his time trying to maintain normalcy in his usual life as a teenager (graduating, going to prom, dating a girl, playing lacrosse, maintain positive familial and social relationships,

52 McMahon-Coleman and Weaver (2012) 15–40; Crossen (2019) 175.

53 Mann (2020) ch. 3.

54 Crossen (2019); Franck (2016) and (2020).

55 Lavery (2004); Potter (2018).

56 This exists mostly in gender and queer studies: Elliott (2016), Elliott and Fowler (2018), Evans and Pettet (2018), Johnson (2016), Kendal and Kendal (2015) and Rocha (2018). Naturally, within fandom studies *Teen Wolf* has also received much attention: Ballinger (2014), Brembilla (2016), Espinoza (2015), Neff-Strickland (2022), Willard (2017). There are also other works that focus on other elements of *Teen Wolf*'s narrative: Andrianova (2016), Diviny (2016), Martínez Jiménez (in press), Pettet and Ellison (2019), Stamati (2022), Thomas (2017).

etc.) while dealing with all the supernatural circumstances he finds himself involved in. While he at first tries to search for a cure to his lycanthropy (the main objective of the short web-series, *Teen Wolf: Search for a Cure*), Scott learns to accept his 'werewolfness' and (later on) his true alpha status because it allows him to save his friends (his pack) from the many dangers that are drawn to their small city. Throughout the show, these include a hunter-werewolf war, hired assassins, rival werewolves, and mad scientists among others. All of these are elements that, as mentioned, characterise the modern, 21st century werewolf.[57]

The show focuses a considerable amount on the social dynamics of Scott and his human and supernatural pack members and his allied werewolves, placing the werewolves as the primary characters and the focus of the viewers' sympathy.[58] *Teen Wolf* underlines, through Scott's actions, the importance of making the right decision even when good intentions could prompt an easier (but wrong) route, and that compassion (and neither revenge nor violence) is the correct social action, with a core message that werewolves are not monsters.[59] In the words of Lydia Martin (played by Holland Roden), a member of Scott's pack, 'not all monsters do monstrous things.'[60]

Jeff Davis and his writing team created an extensive lore for *Teen Wolf,* one that expanded beyond werewolves to include supernatural creatures from various cultures: 'Viking' berserkers, 'Celtic' banshees and druids, Mesoamerican were-jaguars, Japanese kitsunes, and Native American wendigos and skin-walkers.[61] The mixture of various 'pagan' mythologies with Judeo-Christian figures appears very commonly in modern YA fiction, with *Supernatural* and *The Mortal Instruments* as the most typical examples of this use of demons and angels alongside magical and Gothic creatures. In general, it is very rare in these stories

57 Evans and Pettet (2018); Fradegradi (2016); Thomas (2017).

58 Elliott (2016).

59 Diviny (2016); Thomas (2017).

60 'Monstrous' (season 4, episode 10) 39:38–39:42. Cf. what Scott himself says earlier that season to Liam Dunbar (Dylan Sprayberry), a younger teenager who was forced to turn into a werewolf: 'You're not a monster; you're a werewolf, like me.' in *The Benefactor* (season 4, episode 4) 39:56–40:15. Cf. Thomas (2017).

61 In general, Stamati (2022). The use of Native American myths and folklore has been highlighted as insensitive and even problematic: Johnson (2022).

to adapt only one mythological tradition.[62] Moreover, Classical myths, leaving aside *Percy Jackson* and shows like *Xena: Warrior Princess* and *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys,*[63] are hardly as prominent as they are in *Teen Wolf.*[64]

In *Teen Wolf* we encounter creatures taken directly from Classical myths, including a hellhound shapeshifter who identifies himself as Cerberus[65] and The Mute, an *astomus* without a mouth.[66] We have references to myths mentioned in the dialogues, like Orestes and the furies,[67] Artemis and Actaeon,[68] and Hercules and the hydra.[69] Most important for this discussion, however, is the importance these references have in the story. More than once, Scott and his pack have to translate texts in Latin in order to defeat their opponents,[70] but one of the things they learn is that Greek myths hold truth, that Classical stories form part of the arcane body of knowledge that the teenagers lack (or do not understand) and that the older antagonists have access to – and can use this knowledge against them.[71] Jeff Davis has commented in an interview that he 'go[es] back to Greek myth quite a bit',[72] but where Classical myth plays a more determining role in *Teen Wolf* is its connection with the myths of Lycaon.

---

62 Brown (2017).

63 Morey and Nelson (2015). Cf. Walde (2016).

64 Martínez Jiménez (in press).

65 'A credible threat' (season 5, episode 17).

66 'Muted' (season 4, episode 3). A second astomus is seen briefly in a cell in Eichen House.

67 'Fury' (season 2, episode 10) 27:44–28:16.

68 'A promise to the dead' (season 4, episode 11); more anon.

69 'Frayed' (season 3, episode 5) 10:17–10:40.

70 Above all, the Argent family's bestiary: 'Abomination' (season 2, episode 4). Later in the show ('Said the spider to the fly', season 6, episode 11, 11:22–12:00), an antagonist posing as the school's counsellor, discourages, as part of her plan, one of the werewolves in Scott's pack from taking up Latin.

71 Pettet and Ellison (2019) 48. This inherent danger is specifically mentioned in dialogue when referring to Lead Hunter Gerard Argent, who 'knows all the stories. All the folklore. Everything written, and everything passed down' ('The sword and the spirit', season 5, episode 14, 27:55–28:00). Gerard Argent would be the one to mentor Tamora Monroe, the antagonist in season 6 mentioned in the previous foot note.

72 Ferrante (2012).

Modern werewolves, old myths?

Teen Wolf's use of Classical myths, limited as it is, incorporates Greek and Latin werewolf folklore in a way that no other recent supernatural or horror fiction does. A brief survey shows that, in most cases, intradiegetic explanations for the origins of werewolves look to demonic or magical causes. In these cases, lycanthropy is almost universally depicted as a 'curse', an illness, or a punishment. In a few cases we find the origin of werewolves described as mutations, adaptations, or accidental evolutions of mankind.[73] In one recent case (*The Order,* Netflix, 2019–20) Lycaon is mentioned as the first werewolf,[74] but only in the *Percy Jackson* novels and in *Teen Wolf* are werewolves directly linked to Zeus' punishment of Lycaon (table 1).

CAUSE OF LYCANTHROPY	EXAMPLES
Demonic illness/curse	1. *Warhammer Fantasy* (1983–2015) 2. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (the WB/UPN, 1997–2003) 3. *The Mortal Instruments* (2007–14) = *Shadowhunters* (Netflix, 2016–19) 4. *Being Human* (BBC, 2009–13)
Evolution/human mutation/ adaptation	5. *Twilight* (2005–08) 6. *True Blood* (HBO, 2008–14)
Magical illness/curse	7. *The Vampire Diaries* (1991–2012) = *The Vampire Diaries* Franchise (CW, 2009–) 8. *Harry Potter* (1997–2017) 9. *Wolves of Mercy Falls* (2009–14) 10. *Hemlock Grove* (Netflix, 2013–15) 11. *Bitten* (Syfy, 2014–16) 12. *The Order* (Netflix, 2019–20)
Created by Eve	13. *Supernatural* (CW, 2005–20).
Descendants of Lycaon	14. *Percy Jackson* (2005–09) 15. *Teen Wolf* (MTV, 2011–17, 22–)

Table 1

73 For the dangerous racial connotations of this, see Boyer (2017).

74 'Spring outbreak, part two' (season 2, episode 8).

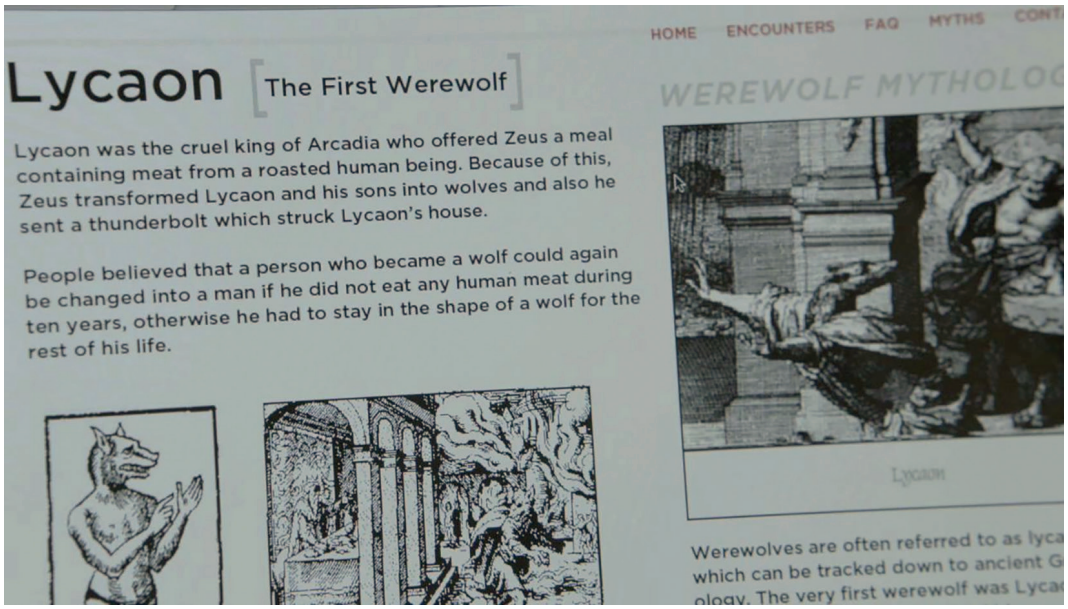

Figure 1 Prop-website consulted by Stiles Stilinski with information on Lycaon, where he is described as the 'first werewolf' and 'cruel king of Arcadia who offered Zeus a meal containing meat from a roasted human being [this is also mentioned by Ovid (Met. 1.229: *torruit igni*)]. Because of this, Zeus transformed Lycaon and his sons into wolves and also he sent a thunderbolt which struck Lycaon's house [cf. *everti tecta* (1.231)].' (*Teen Wolf,* 'Wolf moon' [season 1, episode 1], 26:47.)

In *Teen Wolf* this connection with Lycaon is mentioned three times. The first mention is in a prop in the pilot episode, when Stiles Stilinski (Dylan O'Brien) is doing research on werewolves and a webpage with Lycaon's name can be seen (figure 1).[75] The second connection appears in the first episode of *Teen Wolf: Search for a Cure,* when Dr Fenris (John Posey), a local academic who used to research the supernatural, mentions that '[t]he term lycanthrope is derived from the Greek myth of Lycaon, King of Arcadia'. This connection with the myth is, however, later revealed to be part of the body of unknown, supernatural knowledge that Scott and his pack lack. In 'Visionary',[76] Scott goes to visit former enemy and hunter leader Gerard Argent (Michael Hogan), seeking information

75 'Wolf moon' (season 1, episode 1) 26:47.

76 Season 3, episode 8, 22:56–23:40.

on how to defeat current enemy Deucalion, a powerful werewolf who leads a pack of alphas.

> Gerard: "Do you know the myth of Lycaon?"
> Scott: "I know it's where we get the word lycanthropy… [NB: this is described in *Teen Wolf: Search for a Cure*]
> Gerard: "According to myth, some Greek citizens believed they owed their lives more to Prometheus than to the gods of Olympus, and some followers even took names to honor the Titans instead of the gods."
> Scott: "… Like Deucalion."
> Gerard: [nodding] "The son of Prometheus."
> Gerard: "Lycaon didn't just refuse to honor the gods – he challenged them. He invited Zeus to a banquet and then tried to serve him the flesh of a human being. Angered, Zeus blew the place apart with lightning bolts and then punished Lycaon and his sons by turning them into wolves."
> Gerard: "The part that's lesser known is how Lycaon sought out the Druids to help turn him back to human."
> Scott: "Why Druids?"
> Gerard: "The belief was that the ancient Druids knew how to shapeshift. They couldn't make Lycaon and his sons human again, but they did teach them how to shift back and forth. And so, the Druids became important advisors to the packs."

This exchange is presented in between flashbacks, during which Gerard's narration is contrasted with images of what happened. Gerard is, by these means, revealed to have been an unreliable narrator, lying about his relation to Deucalion and how he destroyed his vision of peaceful habitation among Californian werewolf packs. However, this does not mean that we should doubt Gerard's explanation for the origins of werewolves – after all, all the other information the hunter gives about the relationship between druids and packs corresponds to what we see on screen, and gods of other pantheons (Tezcatlipoca,[77] the Anukite,[78] Odin,[79] even Cerberus) are shown in the show to directly interfere with the

77 'Monstrous' (season 4, episode 10), 'Parasomnia' (season 5, episode 2).

78 Cf. 'Pressure test' (season 6, episode 15).

79 Odin's presence is indirectly implied through his Wild Hunt, first hinted at in season 5, but central in season 6.

affairs of the supernatural. From this we can assume that what Gerard is explaining is the actual in-universe truth.

It is noticeable how Gerard's story follows quite closely the Ovidian version of the myth quoted above, including 'testing' Zeus' divinity, human sacrifice (figure 2a), destruction of Lycaon's palace with thunderbolts, and the ultimate wolf transformation (figure 2b). Hollywood creators are not necessarily Classical scholars, so it is more than likely that whatever research they made into Classical myths on werewolves pointed them to Ovid or an Ovid-derived adaptation first.

Moreover, the way werewolf hunter Kate Argent (Jill Wagner) taunts Scott with Actaeon's myth[80] is yet another example of a reference to the *Metarmophoses.*[81]

> Kate: "They ever teach you the myth of Artemis and Actaeon in school?"
> Kate: "No? I didn't think so."
> Kate: "Well, Artemis was a goddess, and Actaeon was a hunter that happened to see Artemis bathing naked one day. This did *not* make the goddess too happy. In fact, she was so angry, Artemis turned Actaeon into a deer and sent his own hounds into a frenzy. He was actually torn apart by his *own hunting dogs.*"
> Scott: "What are you doing?"
> Kate: [chuckling] "I'm not gonna turn you into a *deer*…"
> Kate: "But you *are* about to become something unrecognizable to your friends. They won't know what they're fighting… or *killing.*"

In this case, Kate turns Scott into a bone-clad berserker who cannot talk to his friends. This is something that Ovid underlines both for Actaeon (Met. 3.201: *me miserum! dicturus erat: vox nulla secuta est!*) but also for Lycaon (Met. 1.233: *exululat frustraque loqui conatur*). By removing this one aspect of humanity, Kate expects Scott's pack to mistake him for an enemy in the same place they had chased off berserkers earlier that season (cf. 3.228: *ille fugit per quae fuerat loca saepe secutus*).

80 'A promise to the dead' (season 4, episode 11) 39:29–40:40; Spikeface (2022).

81 Ov. Met. 3.138–252.

Figure 2 a) King Lycaon, with the trick feast for Zeus, as depicted in an image from Gerard Argent's bestiary; b) Zeus transforming Lycaon and his sons into wolves and destroying the palace with thunderbolts, as represented in the Argent bestiary (*Teen Wolf,* 'Visionary' [season 3, episode 8], 23:32–23:35).

Considering these two direct Ovidian inputs into *Teen Wolf*'s mythos,[82] it may be the case that more supernatural elements in the show are consciously taken from Classical myths and folklore.

TEEN WOLF: CLASSICAL WEREWOLVES?

The Ovidian version of Lycaon's myth, combined with the presence of an unexpected number of Classical references throughout the show, opens up the possibility that the concept design for the *Teen Wolf* werewolves was conceived with various aspects of the Classical *versipellis* in mind. Three characteristics highlighted above encapsulate these aspects: full-wolf transformations, glowing eyes, and the preservation of the human sense of self while in wolf form, plus a fourth one that could be a direct adaptation in the show of the Ovidian narrative: the thunderbolt. It should be noted, however, and as it happens with many other works of modern fiction, that this use of Classical elements is never done with an aim to recreate, deconstruct, or analyse the Greek or Roman story, but rather as a way to add legitimacy to the show's lore.[83]

1) *territus ipse:* the person in the wolf

The main defining element of Classical inspiration in *Teen Wolf*'s werewolves, I argue, is the preservation of the werewolf's sense of human self while in wolf form.[84] Contrary to proposals of the Ovidian werewolf as a bloodlust-blinded cannibal,[85] Ovid's Lycaon preserves some of his own personal qualities once he is turned into a wolf (1.237: *veteris servat vestigia formae*), one of which is bloody sadism, but only because he had it before; besides he was not at any point a can-

82 In the interview mentioned above (Ferrante 2012), Davis makes a point of comparison, describing Stiles as Perseus, whose story also appears in Ovid (Ov. Met. 4.753–803), although this is a much less direct connection.

83 Lindner (2017).

84 Franck (2016) 196.

85 Stypczynski (2013) 19–21.

nibal in Ovid's story. Other werewolves in Greek and Latin folklore, as mentioned above, also remain aware of their human selves even in their wolf form.[86]

The werewolves of *Teen Wolf,* as other werewolves in modern fiction, must struggle to gain control over their base impulses, but they remain themselves throughout.[87] This is best exemplified with Scott's erratic behaviour during his first weeks as a werewolf in season 1, which included trying to save a man from being murdered by the (at that point) unknown alpha[88] and his inability to resist being kissed by Lydia despite knowing that his best friend Stiles was in love with her:[89]

> Stiles: [exasperatedly] "You kissed her, Scott! Okay? You kissed *Lydia.* That's, like, the *one girl* that I ev–"
> Stiles: "And, you know, the past three hours, I've been thinking, it's probably just the full moon, you know? He doesn't even know what he's doing, and tomorrow, he'll be totally back to normal. He probably won't even remember what a complete *dumbass* he's been – a son of a *bitch,* a freaking *unbelievable* piece of *crap* friend –"
> Scott: [interrupting] "She kissed me."
> Stiles: "…What?"
> Scott: "I didn't kiss her – she kissed me. She would have done a lot more, too. You should have seen the way she had her hands all over me. She would have done anything I wanted. *Anything*!"

In this scene in question, Stiles wants to justify Scott's actions, blaming them on the effect the full moon has on werewolves, but by that point the key to Stiles' anger is that both he and Scott understand that werewolves are conscious of what they do while they are in wolf form, even if they are more prone to act on instinct than on reason. This is better seen in other scenes in the show, especially in those where shape-shifters have changed to their full animal form (more on this below). The way in which *Teen Wolf*'s Lycaon and his sons sought the druids so they might help them learn how to shift back into humans further underlines this Classical understanding of shapeshifters as human minds in animal bodies.

---

86 See above, n. 18.

87 Andrianova (2016).

88 'Pack mentality' (season 1, episode 3).

89 'Lunatic' (season 1, episode 8) 29:12–30:00.

2) *oculi lucent:* visual tell-tales

Another characteristic that has Classical connotations is the glowing eyes (figure 3), something that all shapeshifters share in *Teen Wolf.* Each type of supernatural shapeshifter, including werewolves, has glowing eyes of a specific colour: red for alphas, yellow for betas who have not taken an innocent life, blue for betas who have, orange for hellhounds, etc. This echoes the Ovidian description of *oculi lucent,* and other descriptions of 'fiery eyes' in other shapeshifters in Greek and Latin folklore.[90]

Glowing eyes are so intimately connected to the essence of being a werewolf that, in many occasions in the series, we see werewolves revealing themselves to each other by making their eyes glow. Sometimes this is done on purpose, but sometimes this is an unconscious reaction of mutual recognition, as it happens when Scott first discovers that Isaac is the new werewolf in his lacrosse team[91] or when Scott recognises that the coyote living near an eight-year old car wreck is Malia Tate (Shelley Hennig), a missing child who happens to be a coyote shapeshifter trapped in her animal form.[92] A key feature in the 2023 *Teen Wolf* movie is how young werewolf Eli Hale (Vince Mattis) cannot fully transform and Scott needs to teach him by making their eyes glow in response to one another.

Pliny mentions in his description of the Arcadian rites that a *versipellis* who wanted to return to his human form had to stay away from humans (Plin. Nat. 8.34.81: *si homine se abstinuerit, reverti ad idem stagnum et, cum tranaverit, effigiem recipere*). The expectation there being to being able do so, one had to avoid eye contact, although Pausanias suggests that not eating human flesh would be another determining factor.[93] In the context of *Teen Wolf,* werewolves' supernatural glowing eyes need to be concealed from humans, lest the secret of the supernatural is uncovered,[94] however, it is the mutual recognition between

90 Above, n. 22.

91 'Shape shifted' (season 2, episode 2) 16:42–16:50.

92 'Anchors' (season 3, episode 13) 40:13–40:20.

93 Paus. 8.2.6 and see above, n. 25.

94 A central theme in season 5, partly shown when Cerberus takes over his non-supernatural alter ego Jordan Parrish (Ryan Kelly) to burn the bodies of dead supernatural creatures. Cf. when druid-turned-veterinarian Alan Deaton (Seth Gilliam) tells the Sheriff to keep quiet about the body of a dead supernatural 'unless [he's] prepared to hold a press conference an-

Figure 3 Isaac Lahey (Daniel Sharman), a secondary character in the early seasons of the show. His eyes glow yellow even while not fully shifted, indicating he is a beta werewolf who has not taken an innocent's life. (*Teen Wolf,* 'Venomous' [season 2, episode 5], 36:01).

the supernatural beings that allows them to change back into their human form, restoring their humanity, a conscious inversion of Pliny's proposal.

3) *fit lupus:* full transformations

The glowing eyes (together with claws, fangs, and extra facial hair) characterise the 'wolf shift' of most *Teen Wolf* werewolves. This is a subtler transformation than the hybrid, bipedal, furry, anthropomorphic werewolves that appear in other television and film productions – the kind of creatures that seem closer to the Etruscan 'wolfman' (figure 4). However, in *Teen Wolf* some individuals achieve a 'full shift'. This is something that only a few characters, like Talia

nouncing the presence of supernatural creatures in Beacon Hills' in 'Condition terminal' (season 5, episode 4) 9:50–9:59.

Figure 4 Etruscan Black Figure Plate with the wolfman (centre) and Herakles pursuing the centaur Nessos in the presence of Deianira (sides). Found at Vulci, Osteria Necropolis, Tomb 177 (Hercle Society excavations), ca. 540–510 BCE, currently in the Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia, Rome. (Photograph by Dan Diffendale [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0]).

Hale, Derek Hale, Laura Hale, Theo Raeken (Cody Christian) and Malia Tate have achieved, although a clear explanation for this is never given. While this shift is not the default transformation for most werewolves, from Derek Hale's arc[95] we know that it is possible for any werewolf to become a full wolf with glowing eyes in the way of Classical werewolves like Lycaon or the soldier in the *Satyricon.*

In the few examples we see of fully-shifted werewolves changing back into their human shape, including Talia Hale,[96] Malia Tate,[97] and Theo Raeken,[98] they go back to the place where they left their clothes. Naturally, this is done in order not to show full nudity in a young adult-oriented television show, but it resembles the way werewolves must return to their human clothes in Pliny's account of the Arcadian rites and what the werewolf would have done in the *Satyricon.*

Lastly, and going back to an earlier point, these fully-shifted were-creatures retain their human sense of self throughout, a characteristic that defines Classical *versipelles.* Talia Hale entered a werewolf meeting in her wolf shape; Derek, her son, consciously attacked enemies in his wolf form during the season 4 finale; Malia, her niece, walked around a crime scene sniffling for clues that might help the pack solve it in her coyote form.[99]

4) *vindice flamma:* lightning and electricity

One of the key weaknesses werewolves have in *Teen Wolf* (a werewolf weakness which seems unique to this show) is electricity. A strong shock is capable of sending a werewolf into hospital, preventing them from using their supernatural healing abilities, as it happens to Isaac when he steps in a puddle in which a high-voltage cable had been thrown.[100] Isaac himself, together with Derek and

95 Cf. 'Smoke and mirrors' (season 4, episode 12).

96 'Visionary' (season 3, episode 8).

97 'Memory lost' (season 6, episode 1).

98 'Parasomnia' (season 5, episode 2).

99 'Visionary' (season 3, episode 8), 'Monstrous' (season 4, episode 10), and 'Memory lost' (season 6, episode 1).

100 'Letharia vulpina' (season 3, episode 19).

Vernon Boyd (Sinqua Walls) tried to use that same tactic against the alpha pack earlier that season.[101] This weakness is something that werewolf hunters are aware of, and something that they use to their advantage, usually using tasers and cattle prods to stun werewolves and knock them out. In fact, hunters know that a controlled current is capable of keeping a werewolf human, as we see them doing to captured werewolves, including Peter and Derek Hale, Erica and Boyd, or Jackson and Ethan.[102] In the words of Chris Argent (JR Bourne):[103]

> You know, my family has done this for a long time – long enough to learn that a certain level of electric current can keep you from transforming. At another level, you can't heal. A few amps higher, and no heightened strength. That kind of scientific accuracy makes you wonder where the line between the natural and the supernatural really exists. It's when lines like that blur… you sometimes find yourself surprised by which side you end up on.

This vulnerability is not a usual characteristic in werewolf lore in other works of fiction, and it is not evidently connected with Classical ideas about *versipelles*. However, *Teen Wolf* is known for subverting certain tropes and concepts. In *Teen Wolf,* werewolves are not vulnerable to silver (as it is usual in most stories) per se, but to the French family of hunters that bear that name. Quoting Jennifer Blake (Haley Webb), a druid in season 3: 'Argent… the French word for silver. Interesting how truth becomes altered by legend… when it's not actually the metal silver that kills werewolves, but the family.'[104]

Considering this, perhaps we can re-read Jupiter's rage against Lycaon in *Teen Wolf*'s mythos under a different light. The thunderbolt was essential in the representations of Zeus Lykaios, and the lightning strike essential in many versions of the human-wolf transformation.[105] In Ovid's version, it is Jupiter's avenging *flamma* (which can be read as thunderbolt in this context) that destroys Lycaon's

101 'Currents' (season 3, episode 7).

102 Respectively, in episodes 'More bad than good' (season 3, episode 14), 'Master plan' (season 2, episode 12), and 'Werewolves of London' (season 6, episode 17).

103 'Master plan' (season 2, episode 12) 12:32–13:11.

104 'Alpha pact' (season 3, episode 11) 17:22–17:48.

105 Ogden (2021) 175.

palace,[106] and in Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca* it is a lightning strike (ἐκεραύνωσε) that blasts Lycaon and his sons.[107] As we have seen, this is also highlighted in *Teen Wolf*'s narration (fig. 2a), so it is possible that the choice of electricity as a werewolf vulnerability was conceived with Lycaon's story in mind.

***

In modern fiction, the use of Classical elements serves to adapt those stories into a neo-myth, perhaps because fiction is meant to entertain, not to educate. *Xena: Warrior Princess, Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and *Percy Jackson* (or films like *Immortals, 300,* or *Troy*) are not direct narrations of Greek or Roman stories, but rather adaptations for modern audiences. Despite the overabundance of references to gods, heroes, and creatures, modern examples of 'swords and sandals' fiction form a new, timeless rendition without expecting modern viewers to have the insider/emic social and cultural understandings that an Ancient audience might have had.[108]

Then again, *The Hunger Games* dystopian trilogy (2008–10) offers a completely different approach to reworking of the Classical past in its world-building.[109] In the books (later films), the privileged elites (who use ancient names like Caesar, Cinna, or Plutarch) have appropriated the Roman past and its myth-building paraphernalia as part of their political discourse. Circus-like parade grounds are filled with quadrigae. Moreover, the main character, Katniss Everdeen, is chosen alongside other teenagers to go to the Capitol as a tribute to secure peace, much like Theseus was part of the youths demanded by Minos to appease the Minotaur in Crete.

In *Teen Wolf* the inclusion of Classical elements is more limited and less evident. The story of Lycaon adds flavour and depth, but it is not essential to the understanding or the development of the plot. That the way in which lycanthropy works in the *Teen Wolf* universe takes some key aspects of Greek and Latin folklore may pass unnoticed to most viewers. But still, the inclusion of adapted Classical myths in the dialogue and the visual elements adds in-universe *gravi-*

106 Ov. Met. 1.230.

107 Apollod. 3.8.1.

108 Cf. Morey and Nelson (2015) and Augoustakis and Raucci (2019).

109 Makins (2014 and 2015).

tas and authenticity to the story-telling, while incorporating Graeco-Roman elements into twenty-first century werewolf lore,[110] helping to change the werewolf paradigm away from the Gothic monster of the twentieth century.

CONCLUSIONS

When describing the way modern fiction tends to imitate Classical epic patterns, Laurel Bowman said that '[w]here the Greeks had a rich oral tradition as a basis of their work, the Californian film-maker has a theoretical model.'[111] While it is true that many stories in film and television give main characters narrative arcs that follow the 'hero's journey', the comparison can also be applied to *Teen Wolf*'s world-building. On the one hand, the show is indubitably a result of the innovations in the depiction of the werewolf that characterize the 21st century version – which are in part a consequence of the 1985 *Teen Wolf* film. On the other hand, the show creators went out of their way to create a rich mythos as part of their world-building. And yet, by engaging with Classical folklore, the final result is surprisingly new and substantially different from other works of supernatural fiction.

Of course, druids (or witches) helping werewolves, werewolves who fully turn into wolves, or werewolves who keep their human consciousness and have glowing eyes, cannot be claimed to be original innovations in *Teen Wolf;* they are part of the 21st century werewolf lore, which has deliberately moved on from its 20th century predecessor. Even if these elements in particular look back to the *versipelles* of Ovid and Petronius, the distinction between elements that pertain to the 'Classical werewolf' and those from Medieval/Gothic werewolves is not clean-cut any more. However, the recurrent way in which other Greek and Roman elements appear in *Teen Wolf* may indicate a series of conscious choices. These werewolves exist because of Lycaon's curse, after all.

Curious as it might have been to see Scott McCall (or any other of his packmates) transform into wolves only after shedding their clothes and urinating around them, the werewolves of *Teen Wolf* are not Classical *verispelles.* But not even the werewolves that appear in *Percy Jackson* are Classical *versipelles.* An-

110 Weiner (2017).

111 Bowman (2002).

cient myths are not repeated in modern fantasy because they do not belong in the same context. Their aesthetic appeal and themes make ancient werewolves attractive to script writers who want to add flavour to their shows, but these will always be adaptations.

And it is precisely from this perspective that the werewolves of *Teen Wolf* are just like Classical *versipelles;* like the hero of Temesa, the soldier who accompanied Niceros, or Lycaon himself. These werewolves are the centre of the tale, the heart to the story; they exist in a way that helps the creation of a narrative. In a way that mirrors Greek and Latin folklore, these werewolves exist to make us think about ourselves. If the werewolves are central to the story, and are not really the monsters of the show, perhaps us viewers do not have to be either.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Zofia Guertin, Coraima Gutiérrez, and Dennis Vetrovec for their comments on earlier versions of this paper, and Amanda Potter for organising the Isle of Wight conference where I first presented this proposal. Arran O'Neill has also listened and suffered my many werewolf rants.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Álvarez Trigo (2021). – Laura Álvarez Trigo, Mujeres en la pantalla: La bruja feminista en Chilling Adventures of Sabrina, *Clepsydra. Revista Internacional de Estudios de Género y Teoría Feminista* 20 (2021) 79–98.

Amador (2020). – Victoria Amador, Werewolves and white trash: brutishness, discrimination and the lower-class wolf-man from *The Wolf Man* to *True Blood,* in: Sam George and Bill Hughes (eds.) *In the Company of Wolves: Werewolves, Wolves, and Wild Children* (Manchester 2020) 129–44.

Anderson (2012). – John Kinloch Anderson, Dogs, in: *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford 2012). Retrieved 14 Sep 2022 from https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199545568.001.0001/acref-9780199545568-e-2265

Andrianova (2016). – Anastassiya Adrianova, Teen drama with a bite: human animality in Teen Wolf, *Supernatural Studies* 3.1 (2016) 65–84.

Augoustakis and Raucci (2019). – Antony Augoustakis and Stacie Raucci, 'Introduction', in: Antony Augoustakis and Stacie Raucci (eds.), *Epic Heroes on Screen* (Edinburgh 2019) 1–10.

Ballinger (2014). – Jenna Ballinger, Fandom and the fourth wall, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 17 (2014).

Bartosch and Caruso (2017). – Roman Bartosch and Celestine Caruso, The good, the bad, and the ubernatural: the other(ed) werewolf in *Twilight,* in: Robert McKay and John Miller (eds.), *Werewolves, Wolves, and the Gothic* (Cardiff 2017) 87–111.

Bernhardt-House (2006). – Phillip Bernhardt-House, The werewolf as queer, the queer as werewolf, and queer werewolves, in: Noreen Giffney and Mira Hyrd (eds.), *Queering the Non-Human* (London 2006) 159–84.

de Blécourt (2014). – Willem de Blécourt, The werewolf pack: a cinematic metamorphosis. *Contemporary Legend* 4 (2014) 59–74.

de Blécourt (2015). – Willem de Blécourt, The differentiated werewolf: an introduction to cluster methodology, in: Willem de Blécourt (ed.), *Werewolf Histories* (Basingstoke 2015) 1–24.

Bowman (2002). – Laurel Bowman, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Greek Hero Revisited.* Retrieved April 2020 from http://web.uvic.ca/~lbowman/buffy/buffythehero.html [NB: link broken and document unavailable as of 28 Oct 2022].

Boyer (2017). – Michelle Boyer, Postcolonial vanishings: wolves, American Indians and contemporary werewolves, in: Robert McKay and John Miller (eds.), *Werewolves, Wolves, and the Gothic* (Cardiff 2017) 65–86.

Brembilla (2016). – Paola Brembilla, The pervasive architecture of MTV's Teen Wolf, in: Klaus Zilles, Joan Cuenca and Josep Rom (eds.) *Breaking the Media Value* (Barcelona 2016) 51–8.

Brembilla and Checcaglini (2020). – Paola Brembilla and Chiara Checcaglini, "Iconic and beyond reproach": the socio-aesthetic relevance of *Riverdale. ZoneModa Journal* 10 (2020) 39–54.

Brown (2017). – Sarah Brown, The Classical pantheon in children's fantasy literature', in: Brett Rogers and Benjamin Stevens (eds.), *Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy* (Oxford 2017) 189–208.

Crossen (2019). – Carys Crossen, *The Nature of the Beast. Transformations of the Werewolf from the 1970s to the Twenty-First Century* (Cardiff 2019).

Delanty (2018). – Gerard Delanty, *Community,* 3rd edn. (London 2018).

Diviny (2016). – Clare Diviny, Supernatural teen television: spiritual lessons for teen viewers?, in: Antti-Ville Kärjä and Kimi Kärki (eds.), *Holy Crap! Selected Essays on the Intersections of the Popular and the Sacred in Youth Cultures* (Turku 2016) 25–30.

Drumm (2018). – Richard Drumm, Riverdale, *Irish Gothic Journal* 17 (2018) 192–5. Retrieved 20 Oct 2022 from https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/riverdale/d

Elliott (2016). – Jaqueline Elliott, Becoming the monster: queer monstrosity and reclamation of the werewolf in slash fandom; *Revenant* 2 (2016) 91–110.

Elliott and Fowler (2018). – Jaqueline Elliott and Megan Fowler, "Smile, Derek. Why don't you smile more?" The objectification of Derek Hale and queerbating in MTV's Teen Wolf, *Journal of Fandom Studies* 6.2 (2018) 145–66.

Espinoza (2015). – Joshua Espinoza, *Re-Examining Resistance: Fan-Produced Queer Readings and Teen Wolf.* MA Thesis (Texas-El Paso 2015)

Evans and Pettet (2018). – Tobi Evans and Madeline Pettet, The magical is political: deconstructing the gendered supernatural in *Teen Wolf, Fantastika* 2.1 (2018) 68–80.

Ferrante (2012). – A.C. Ferrante, Exclusive Interview: TEEN WOLF showrunner Jeff Davis talks Season 2 finale and Season 3, *Assignment X,* 13 August, 2012. Retrieved 26 Oct 2022 from https://www.assignmentx.com/2012/exclusive-interview-teen-wolf-showrunner-jeff-davis-talks-season-2-finale-and-season-3/

Fradegradi (2016). – Mauro Fradegradi, Teen Wolf. Licantropia e adolescenza. Temi e figure, *Brumal* 4.1 (2016) 79–106.

Franck (2016). – Kaja Franck, *The Development of the Literary Werewolf: Language, Subjectivity, and Animal/Human Boundaries,* PhD thesis (Hertfordshire 2016).

Franck (2020). – Kaja Franck, Growing pains of the teenage werewolf, in: Sam George and Bill Hughes (eds.) *In the Company of Wolves: Werewolves, Wolves, and Wild Children* (Manchester 2020) 163–77.

Frost (2003). – Brian J. Frost, *The Essential Guide to Werewolf Literature* (Madison 2003).

Germanì (2012). – Monica Germanì, Being human? Twenty-first century monsters, in: Justin Edwards and Agnieszka Monnet (eds.), *The Gothic in Contemporary Literature and Popular Culture* (London 2012) 57–70.

Gordon (2015). – Richard Gordon, Good to think: wolves and wolf-men in the Graeco-Roman world, in: Willem de Blécourt (ed.), *Werewolf Histories* (Basingstoke 2015) 25–60.

Henrichs (2019). – Albert Henrichs, Human sacrifice in Greek religion: Three case studies, in: Harvey Yunis (ed.) *Greek Myth and Religion* (Berlin 2019) 37–68.

Hudson (2013). – Dale Hudson, Of course there are werewolves and vampires: *True Blood* and the rights of other species, *American Quarterly* 65.3 (2013) 661–87.

Johnson (2016). – Michael Johnson, The homoerotics and monstrous otherness of *Teen Wolf, Studies in the Humanities* 43 (2016) 65–81.

Johnson (2022). – Francesca Johnson, A creature without a cave: abstraction and (mis)appropriation of the Wendigo myth in contemporary North American horror, *Reinvention: an International Journal of Undergraduate Research* 15 (2022).

Jowett (2017). – Lorna Jowett, White trash in wife-beaters? U.S. television werewolves, gender, and class, in: Kimberly Jackson and Linda Belau (eds.), *Horror Television in the Age of Consumption: Binging on Fear* (London 2017) 76–89.

Kendal and Kendal (2015). – Evie Kendal and Zachary Kendal, Consent is sexy: gender, sexual identity, and sex positivism in MTV's young adult television series Teen Wolf (2011–), *Colloquy* 30 (2015) 26–42.

Lavery (2004). – David Lavery, "I wrote my thesis on you": Buffy Studies as an academic cult, *Slayage: The Online International Journal of Buffy Studies* 4 (2004).

Lindner (2017). – Martin Lindner, Mythology for the young at heart, in: Arthur Pomeroy (ed.), *A Companion to Greece and Rome on Screen* (Hoboken 2017) 515–35.

Makins (2014). – Marian Makins, "Written in a language called Latin about a place called Rome": classical reception and resistance in *The Hunger Games* trilogy', in: Mélanie Bost-Fiévet and Sandra Provini (eds.) *L'Antiquité dans l'imaginaire contemporain: Fantasy, science-fiction, fantastique* (Paris 2014) 339–58.

Makins (2015). – Marian Makins, Refiguring the Roman Empire in *The Hunger Games* trilogy, in Brett Rogers and Benjamin Stevens (eds.) *Classical Traditions in Science Fiction* (Oxford 2015) 280–306.

Mann (2020). – Craig Ian Mann, *Phases of the Moon: A Cultural History of the Werewolf Film* (Edinburgh 2020).

Martínez Jiménez (in press). – Javier Martínez Jiménez, Lycanthropus adulescens: the Classical element in MTV's Teen Wolf (2011–17), *Classical Receptions Journal* (in press).

McKay and Miller (2017). – Robert McKay and John Miller (eds.), *Werewolves, Wolves, and the Gothic* (Cardiff 2017).

McMahon-Coleman (2014). – Kimberley McMahon-Coleman, "I was hoping it would pass you by": dis/ability and difference in *Teen Wolf,* in: Carlen Lavigne (ed.), *Remake Television: Reboot, Re-use, Recycle* (Lanham 2014) 141–53.

McMahon-Coleman and Weaver (2012). – Kimberley McMahon-Coleman, Roslyn Weaver, *Werewolves and Other Shapeshifters in Popular Culture: A Thematic Analysis of Recent Depictions* (Jefferson NC 2012).

Metzger (2015). – Nadine Metzger, Kynanthropy: canine madness in Byzantine late antiquity, *History of Psychiatry* 26.3 (2015) 318–331.

Miller (1916). – Frank Justus Miller (transl.), *Ovid. Metamorphoses* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1916) (= *Loeb Classical Library* 42).

Morey and Nelson (2015). – Anne Morey and Claudia Nelson, '"A god buys us cheeseburgers": Rick Riordan's Percy Jackson series and America's culture wars', *The Lion and the Unicorn* 39.3 (2015): 235–53

Neff-Strickland (2022). – Jaymen Neff-Strickland. *Non-Prestige Television is Worth Taking a Look at: MTV's Teen Wolf.* MA Thesis (Bowling Green State, 2022).

Ogden (2021). – Daniel Ogden, *The Werewolf in the Ancient World* (Oxford 2021).

Petridis (2021). – Sotiris Petridis, *The Netflix Vision of Horror: A Narrative Structural Analysis of Original Series* (Jefferson NC 2021).

Pettet and Ellison (2019). – Madeline Pettet and Elizabeth Ellison, The post-villain: Ambiguous villain meets comic relief in Teen Wolf, *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture* 8.1 (2019) 41–54.

Potter (2018). – Amanda Potter, Xena: Warrior Princess, in: Douglas L. Howard and David Bianculli (eds.), *Television Finales: From Howdy Doody to Girls* (Syracuse NY 2018) 454–9.

Priest (2017). – Hannah Priest, Like father like son: wolf-men, paternity and the male Gothic, in: Robert McKay and John Miller (eds.), *Werewolves, Wolves, and the Gothic* (Cardiff 2017) 19–36.

Priest (2018). – Hannah Priest, I was a teenage she-wolf, in: Hannah Priest (ed.), *She-Wolf. A Cultural History of Female Werewolves* (Manchester 2018) 129–47.

Rocha (2018). – Lauren Rocha, Fighting and feminist expression; the Argent family and the limits of female agency in Teen Wolf, in: Melissa Anyiwo and Amanda Hobson (eds.), *Gender Warriors. Reading Contemporary Urban Fantasy* (Leiden 2018) 71–83.

Stamati (2022). – Ioanna-Maria Stamati, *Αναπαράσταση πολυπολιτισμικών μύθων στην σειρά Teen Wolf* [Anaparastasi polypolitismikon mython stis seira Teen Wolf] MA Thesis (University of the Aegean, 2021).

Spikeface (2022). – Spikeface, Teen Wolf Meta: Scott and Actaeon. *Archive of Our Own.* 9 January 2022. Retrieved 27 Oct 2022 from https://archiveofourown.org/works/36303535

Stypczynski (2013). – Brent A. Stypczynski, *The Modern Literary Werewolf: A Critical Study of the Mutable Motif* (Jefferson NC 2013).

Thomas (2017). – Tracey Thomas, Spot the monster: pack, identity, and humanity in MTV's Teen Wolf, in: Cristina Artenie and Ashley Szanter (eds.), *Monsters and Monstrosity in 21st-Century Film and Television* (Montreal 2019) 91–105.

Walde (2016). – Christian Walde, Graeco-Roman Antiquity and its productive appropriation: the example of Harry Potter, in: Katarzyna Marciniak (ed.), *Our Mythical Childhood… The Classics and Literature for Children and Young Adults* (Leiden 2016) 362–83.

Weiner (2017). – Jesse Weiner, Classical epic and the poetics of modern fantasy, in: Brett Rogers and Benjamin Stevens (eds.), *Classical Traditions in Modern Fantasy* (Oxford 2017) 26–47.

Willard (2017). – Lesley Willard, From co-optation to commission: a diachronic perspective on the development of fannish literacy through Teen Wolf's Tumblr promotional campaigns, *Transformative Works and Cultures* 25 (2017).

Williams (2021). – Ashleigh Williams, *What Do You Think She's Gonna Do with a Set of Real Claws? Gender, Race and Sexuality in Onscreen Portrayals of Women Werewolves.* MA Thesis (New York 2021).

Javier Martínez Jiménez
Dept. of Prehistory and Archaeology
Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, University of Granada
javiermj@ugr.es

Suggested citation
Martínez Jiménez, Javier: Lycaon and classical *versipelles* in MTV's *Teen Wolf.* In: thersites 17 (2023): Classics and the Supernatural in Modern Media, pp. 212–244.
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.248

JOURNAL FOR TRANSCULTURAL PRESENCES &
DIACHRONIC IDENTITIES FROM ANTIQUITY TO DATE

thersites

17/2023 | pp. 245–272

LISA MAURICE
(Bar-Ilan University)

From Olympian to Christ-figure: *Lucifer* (2016–2021)

Abstract On the surface the television series *Lucifer* (2016–21) is a simple police procedural but, in actuality, the criminal cases in the show serve merely as window-dressing and structure for the deeper consideration of issues, such as guilt, shame, love, and even the meaning of life on both an individual and universal level. These topics are explored through the ever-developing character of Lucifer himself, who, like other recent anti-hero depictions, is initially presented in a manner that is very different from traditional portrayals of the Devil, and is, in fact, far closer to that of the Greek Olympian gods. Over the course of six seasons, the depiction of Lucifer alters, however, as he becomes a figure that is in many ways Christ-like, but with a 21st century twist that places the individual in an exalted position that is superior to that of divinity.

Keywords Lucifer, Devil, Olympians, God, Christ

URL https://thersites-journal.de
DOI https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.244

INTRODUCTION

At least since the dawn of Christianity, the relative perceptions of God and the Devil have been clearly delineated; God is the ultimate and absolute good, whereas the Devil presents his opposite, the personification of evil, the tempter to sin and a consummate liar who cannot be trusted to tell the truth. Such depictions have been challenged in recent products of popular culture, and the television series *Lucifer* continues this trend in a portrayal that puts a post-modern spin on the Judeo-Christian tradition with more than a nod to the Greek Olympians gods.

The TV series *Lucifer* is based upon a character created by Neil Gaiman, Sam Kieth, and Mike Dringenberg for the DC comic book series *The Sandman*. The latter was followed by a later spin-off comic book series called *Lucifer* written by Mike Carey, which was then adapted for television by Tom Kapinos in the form of an American procedural/urban fantasy series. The programme premiered on Fox on January 25, 2016, and ran for three seasons before being dropped. After a successful fan campaign tagged #SaveLucifer, the show was picked up again by Netflix for further, initially two, and then confirmed three, seasons. In format, the show is a police procedural, in which Lucifer works with Detective Chloe Decker to solve murders, but in practice these cases merely provide a framework and backdrop to the main narrative. In *Lucifer* the criminal cases serve merely as window-dressing and structure for the deeper consideration of issues, such as guilt, shame, love, and even the meaning of life on both an individual and universal level. Such topics are explored through the ever-developing character of Lucifer himself, whose circumstances present him as an extreme example of the questions faced on some level by all mortals.

Lucifer is suave and cynical, possessing an ironic sense of humour that lends a lightness to the programme that masks the deeper issues being raised. Although his British accent stands in contrast to the American accents of the rest of the cast and perhaps points him up as a villainous character in the tradition of Hollywood,[1] this is a far from traditional portrayal of the Devil, as the production traces Lucifer's struggle to understand the world and his consequent journey of self-growth in a manner that reveals a great deal about contemporary thought.

1 See e.g. Bleichenbacher (2008); Szentgyörgyi (2015); h2g2 (2003/2011). 'Why villains in movies have English accents'. The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy: Earth Edition. (12 September 2011). Retrieved from http://h2g2.com/edited_entry/A891155 (3 October 2023). The casting of the Devil as British may also in this case draw on the idea of the British 'stiff up-

This celestial being is supremely anthropomorphic, and, above all, depicted as a hero with qualities more godly than demonic. In fact, he is at the outset more typical of the Olympian gods than of any Biblical figure. Like the Greek gods, he is not only enormously handsome in the divine model, but he is, of course, also immortal, the significance of which affects him in a manner similar to that of the depictions of the Classical deities. In addition, his family dynamics echo those of the Olympians. Over the course of six seasons, he changes, however, into a character that is more in keeping with Christianity. Yet, he does that in the form of a Jesus figure, rather than a Satanic one.

METHODOLOGY

Before examining the series itself, it should be stressed that this paper falls within the purview of Classical Reception Studies, examining the series as an indirect reception of some elements of interpretation of the Greco-Roman past as filtered through the lens of Judeo-Christian Western society. While recognizing the difficulties with these terms, this approach does not intend to elevate the West over other cultural traditions, but merely to acknowledge the impact that such thinking has had over the past two millennia, particularly with regard to religion, of which the depiction of the Devil is an intrinsic part.

In recent years, classical reception theory has become increasingly sophisticated, moving away from positivistic ideas of models of classical influence or the classical tradition towards theories of intertextuality.[2] Classical Recep-

per lip', i.e. the repression of emotion, a characteristic that defines Lucifer, and a move away from which marks his development and journey of self-growth. In fact, the part was not originally intended to be played with such an accent; it was Ellis himself who made the alteration, since he 'realized that the character was coming off as rude, arrogant, and idiotic when he spoke with an American accent', and, as he explained on twitter, 'With a British accent, you can say pretty much anything and get away with it' (Guha, 2020). By these statements, Ellis was perhaps subconsciously channeling the stereotype prevalent in the United States of the British as having a sarcastic sense of humour (frequently incomprehensible to those from other cultural backgrounds), but also that of being classy and aristocratic – or more colloquially, 'posh' – perhaps as a result of the existence of the traditional British upper class as epitomized in the American mind by the royal family.

2 See e.g. Hardwick (2003); Hardwick and Stray (2008); Goldhill (2004, 2011); Hall; Hopkins (2010) 1–14.

tion Studies argue that the study of the reception of the ancient world provides another tool for understanding the receiving culture, in which the instances of reception are viewed as equally valid interpretations. As Martindale puts it in his ground-breaking article that in many ways was a trigger for the entire field of classical reception, 'Meaning is always realized at the point of reception.'[3] From such ideas arose further theoretical approaches that emphasise the contexts in which texts were produced. Such ideas have been explored in research by multiple scholars into the ancient world on screen, a subfield that has long been at the forefront of Classical Reception Studies.[4] This paper considers the series *Lucifer* within such a framework, arguing that, at the outset, the presentation of the Devil in the production strongly resembles ancient ideas about the Olympian gods, but that this alters over the course of the programme to present a reception of a Christ-like figure.[5] Finally, it analyses the two interpretations, demonstrating that both are representative of the contemporary culture in the 21st century of which they are a product.

THE PHYSICAL APPEARANCE OF THE DEVIL IN POPULAR CULTURE

In order to analyse the figure of Lucifer in the TV series, it is first necessary to outline the traditional physical characteristics of the Devil, as well as how *Lucifer* deviates from these. The Devil in Christianity is most commonly pictured with cloven hoofs, horns and a tail. Those are elements that were derived from the Greek god Pan. He is sometimes depicted with wings; he is sometimes also depicted with characteristics of the Celtic god Cerunnos, namely a goatee beard,

3 Martindale (1993) 3.

4 A full bibliography lies beyond the scope of this paper but see in particular Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011), Cyrino (2005, 2008, 2013, 2015), Cyrino and Augoustakis (2017, 2022), Cyrino and Safran (2015), Michelakis (2013, 2020), Michelakis and Wyke (2013), Nikoloutsos (2013), Paul (2013), Solomon (2001, 2016), Winkler (1991, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2015, 2017, 2020), Wyke (1997), Wyke and Wozniak (2020), as well as the *Screening Antiquity* series edited by Monica Cyrino and Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones and published by Edinburgh University Press (https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/series-screening-antiquity).

5 This paper therefore builds on my earlier work explored at length in Maurice (2019).

large phallus, big nose and wrinkled skin. In some depictions, he even has female breasts, probably derived from the Roman goddess Diana.[6] The Devil is also associated with the colours red and black, the former with its linkage to the fires of hell, blood and sexual lust, while the latter is the colour of evil, contrasted with the white, a colour that is often identified with purity.[7]

Over time the large number of disparate composite elements in his appearance have led to a similarly wide range of depictions. An exhibition entitled *Sympathy for the Devil: Satan, Sin and the Underworld* that was held at Stanford's Cantor Arts Center in the summer of 2014 reflected this by displaying representations ranging from a 'fanged, horned demon to a tailor of Nazi uniforms.'[8] There is, however, another tradition of satanic depiction which developed from the seventeenth century onwards. At that time there was a trend to move away from the horrifying demonic characterisation, in favour of a more attractive, suave and elegant figure, a portrayal that is connected to the idea of the Devil being a tempter and deceitful character, whose outward appearance is in opposition to his true nature. A contributory factor to such interpretations was Milton's *Paradise Lost,* which portrayed Satan as an almost tragic hero, struggling to overcome his own doubts and weaknesses. From this root, and also under the influence of works, such as Goethe's *Faust* and Mark Twain's *Mysterious Stranger,* this new depiction of Satan emerged. No longer a bestial creature, he became a stylishly smooth, cunning character, whose outstanding characteristics are deviousness and dishonesty, and who entices men to sin through temptation and persuasion, trapping them through attraction, rather than terror. The phrase 'devilishly handsome', evokes this characterisation, and, in the words of Bernard Barryte, curator of the Stanford exhibition,

> By the 18th century, he's ennobled, almost looking like an Apollo. […]. People interpreted the figure less as demonic creature and more as heroic rebel against the oppression of the paternal god.[9]

---

6 Russell (1986) 68; Levack (2013) 33.

7 Ogechukwu (2012) 54.

8 Dunne (2014.

9 Ibid. Quote is by Bernard Barryte, curator of the exhibition, explained, referring to Thomas Stothard's *Satan Summoning His Legions* from 1790.

This comment on Apollo strikes at an essential similarity between the Greek gods and this version of the Devil. Just as the Olympians are anthropomorphised, idealised beings, so too, this incarnation of Satan is one that is the epitome of beauty, and sublimely attractive, with an appeal that is irresistible to mortals and as overwhelming as divine theophany to the ancient Greeks. Although Lucifer is depicted as rather older than Apollo, in modern terms he is still young, and very much a man in the prime of his life. The fact that the name used for this Devil figure is Lucifer, the bringer of light, connects it further to the sun imagery of Apollo, who also is a giver of light in his role as sun god. However, Apollo is not the only Greek deity that can be seen in the portrayal of Lucifer. Often depicted with a glass in his hand, partially or totally nude, and involved in scenes of louche debauchery, Lucifer also contains elements of Apollo's opposite, Dionysus, who was frequently depicted in a similar manner in ancient statues and artwork.[10]

THE CHARACTER OF THE DEVIL

So much for the physical depiction of the Devil; but what about his nature? In the Old Testament, the Devil does not really feature significantly and is not distinguished from the noun 'Satan', meaning an obstructor, as in the case of Bilaam's ass, and that of King David addressing the sons of Zeruiah. It is only in the Book of Job that he seems to assume a definite personality. Later still, under the influence of Apocalyptic Judaism and Hellenism, the figure of the Devil was developed much more definitely by Christianity.

Satan in Christian theology is the personification of absolute evil. He is a fallen angel whose first sin was to rebel against God in a bid to overthrow him and seize power for himself. In this manner, he is the epitome of pride and arrogance and as a result of this insurrection, he was expelled from Heaven and has since remained in constant opposition to God.

The Devil is also the ultimate tempter of humans to evil. He is often identified with the snake in the Garden of Eden, whose tempting led to the situation that Christian doctrine calls original sin and for which it sees Redemption by Jesus Christ as the cure. In particular, in this role, it is the Devil who tempts Jesus, seen

10 See e.g. 1861,0725.2 in the British museum collection, viewable at https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1861-0725-2 (accessed 27 March 2023).

as a second Adam, in his attempts to induce him to abandon his redemptive mission.[11] Temptation is the Devil's primary weapon against humanity, encouraging people to sin, and enticing them to commit evil.

By the middle ages, the Devil had been widely accepted as the antagonist of Christ, attempting to thwart God's plan of salvation of mankind. Attended by a legion of demons, he is the antithesis of all things good. As Jeffrey Burton Russell stresses, 'the very definition of the Devil is that he is evil. To call the Devil 'good' is like calling a buzzing insect a horse.'[12] In this period he is also often associated with all the seven deadly sins (pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth), that are represented by demons doing his bidding.[13]

The idea that the Devil governs hell gained prominence partly as a result of Dante's *The Divine Comedy,* in which God created hell when he threw the Devil and his demons out of Heaven with such power that they created an enormous hole in the centre of the earth. Dante portrays the Devil himself as a grotesque, winged creature with three faces – each chewing on a devious sinner – whose wings blow freezing cold winds throughout Hell's domain.

It is also a matter of great importance that the Devil is a liar. This is so much so that the idea even gave rise to a recent book on the Devil by Dallas George Denery, which is subtitled, 'A history of lying from the Garden of Eden to the Enlightenment'. In this book he stresses:

> What the Devil had first done to Eve, he continues to do to each and every one of us, and what he continues to do is lie. The Gospels made it clear that lying was, for all intents and purposes, the Devil's unique contribution to God's Creation. The Gospel of John records a confrontation 'in the treasury of the temple' between Jesus and the Pharisees, in which Jesus accuses them of having strayed from the faith of Abraham, from faith in God. 'Why do you not understand what I say?, Jesus asks them. "It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the Devil, and you choose to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies'.[14]

---

11 Matt 4,1–11; Mark 1,13; Luke 4,1–13.

12 Russell (1992) 5.

13 See e.g. Taşdelen (2019).

14 Denery (2015) 25, quoting John 8,20–44.

THE PHYSICAL APPEARANCE OF LUCIFER

The whole gamut of depictions of Satan has, of course, been seen in representations of him on screen: the red horned creature with hooves, a forked tail and a pitchfork; a human but marked by some elements such as horns or blood-red eyes; and the elegant, urbane and handsome man.[15] Lucifer's appearance in the television series combines all three of these common tropes. Although in the graphic novel he was drawn to resemble David Bowie, in the television series he is played by Tom Ellis, whose dark good looks, charismatic charm and imposing height of 6'3" (1.91 m) make him a strikingly attractive figure.

In keeping with the tradition of elegance and sophistication, this Lucifer also places great emphasis on his own style. He is normally costumed in an expensive three-piece suit, usually in dark blue or black, complete with silk tie and handkerchief in his breast pocket, the epitome of chic sophistication according to Western beauty standards.[16] Even here there are some hints to his satanic side; the suits are occasionally purple or dark red in colour, but his demonic nature is also seen through his enthusiasm for more risqué garments, such as his 'orgy pants', made of black leather, and without back covering. It is also reflected in his fondness for nudity, an aspect obviously included for the audience's delight, but also strongly connected with Judeo-Christian ideas of shame, as evidenced by Adam and Eve's awareness of their nakedness in the garden of Eden after the sin; Lucifer's lack of such shame points him up as the opposite of moral goodness, and thereby Satanic.

Lucifer therefore seems to be thoroughly mortal in appearance, and even metatheatrically mocks the traditional Satanic elements of the depictions of the Devil when trying to convince Chloe, his detective partner and love interest, of his true nature:

> Lucifer: I'm afraid I can't offer anything obvious like a tail as proof.
> Chloe: And so no horns.

15 See Maurice (2019) 58.

16 The website *Hollywood Jackets* explains that 'You will always see Lucifer Morningstar in a well-dressed suit' and offers a 'Lucifer Morningstar costume' of a black suit, which is 'made up of a high-quality wool blend and has a soft inner viscose lining, […] a lapel collar with a front double buttoned closure […] full-length sleeves with buttoned cuffs and flap waist pockets […] and pants made up of the same high-quality material.' https://www.hjackets.com/blog/lucifer-morningstar-costume-guide/ (accessed 14 December 2022)

Lucifer: No, afraid not. That's the stuff of movies and TV.
Chloe: Mm-hmm.
Lucifer: They always get it wrong.[17]

Yet, despite the apparent lack of traditional Satanic elements, it emerges that Lucifer's true form is that of his 'Devil face'. An effect achieved by CGI, this visage features red glowing eyes and, as it was developed and improved over the series after the move to Netflix with its more generous budget, a dark red, scarred, gouged out face that has a leathery quality.[18] As the transformation of the face occurs, flames could be seen licking under the skin and spreading into the altered visage. The finale of season four extended the look to a full 'Devil body', similarly marked and with the flesh hardened and compressed to show the bones, in a bestial depiction. Such a portrayal draws upon traditional associations of the Devil with fire, the colour red and monstrosity.

Perhaps the most striking element of the physical depiction of Lucifer is, however, his wings, which draw on the tradition of his being a fallen angel, an aspect that is taken as fundamental in this characterization. The appearance of the wings themselves is unexpected; they are made of white feathers and glow with a divine light, and, in fact, contrast with those of the other celestials whose wings are grey or brown. In the first season, Lucifer has cut off his wings, which are then stolen, causing him to hunt for them but on recovering them, he burns them in front of Amenadiel, who had arranged for them to be stolen in an attempt to encourage him to go back to Hell. Then, in the final episode of the second season, Lucifer wakes up in the desert with his wings restored, and although he repeatedly cuts them off, they return on each occasion.

It also emerges that, along with the return of the wings, Lucifer has lost his Devil face, a situation that continues throughout season three. In the finale of this season, Lucifer uses his wings in battle, attacking and defeating Pierce's men with them, but he then fights Pierce, who is actually the Biblical Cain, without using his wings, killing him by twisting his wrist so that he stabs himself. At this point his Devil face returns, and from this juncture onwards, throughout season four, as he resumes a relationship with Eve and takes up his old, hedonis-

17 Season one, episode four.

18 The CGI team in interview explained that they 'made the eyes more prominent' and made 'gouges' and 'concavitie', in an attempt to 'take dibbets out of him… chunk him up'. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9czJKvJ7ZI (accessed 14 December 2022).

tic ways once more, his wings become more demonic and batlike in appearance, culminating in Lucifer's alteration into his more diabolical 'King of Hell' form. Eventually, in the finale to season four, after Lucifer and Chloe declare their mutual love for each other and Lucifer makes the choice to return to Hell in order to protect those he loves, Lucifer's wings recover their original angelic look. Lucifer then uses his wings to return to Hell so he can rule there once more and keep the Demons in line. Finally, in the sixth season, Lucifer attempts to use his wings to ascend to the throne in the Silver City, but they will not open, leaving him unable to do so, reflecting his internal feelings of unreadiness to take on the role of supreme deity. It is only after he purposely makes himself vulnerable, as a result of his love for his daughter, Rory, that he is able to extend his wings, at which point, choosing not to become God despite the fact that he is at last ready to assume the role, Lucifer furls his wings instead.

THE CHANGING FACE (AND BODY) OF LUCIFER

This rather detailed exposition of Lucifer's wings reflects their symbolic nature within the series. Lucifer's cutting off his wings at the beginning of the production is a rejection of his celestial, angelic side, and their repeated regrowth is figurative of his inability to escape his destiny, and to cut himself off from his divine paternity. His prolonged and desperate hunt for them when they are stolen indicates his ongoing connection and desire for this part of his being, despite his denial. As he himself later admits, burning the wings, emblematically destroyed with the essence of hell, provides him with catharsis. Their return, along with the loss of his Devil face, although he initially puts both down to the interference by God, indicates his growing self-acceptance; he finally does not feel that he is a monster, as he elaborates to Cain, in the pivotal final episode of season three:

> Lucifer: You know, when I first landed in Hell… I'd just led a rebellion against dear old Dad. I failed. Everyone hated me for it. Myself included, I've come to realize. I felt like a monster. And then, when I looked at my reflection, there was my Devil face.
> Cain: Your Father's punishment.
> Lucifer: So I thought, but… after speaking with a sleazy, murderous driver today, I realized I felt like a monster before I became one. I think I gave myself that face….
> Cain: And what about your wings?

> Lucifer: Well, I'd just saved Mum, hadn't I? And I'd decided to tell the detective the truth. I felt better about myself than I had in… well… ever. Maybe so much so that, deep down, I felt like I wasn't a monster anymore.

His act of protection, however, in saving Chloe in the finale of this season, involves his killing of Cain, an act which causes his Devil face to reappear. This is elaborated in the very first episode of season four in his conversation with Linda:

> Linda: Your Devil face has returned and you've refused to talk about it.
> Lucifer: There's not much to say, really. I killed a human for the first time, my Devil face returned.
> Linda: I don't think it's as simple as that. Killing a human is against your father's rules, not your own. And you've recently learned that angels self-actualise.
> Lucifer: So, you think… that I'm punishing myself for killing a human?
> Linda: I'm wondering if…you're punishing yourself for enjoying it.
> Lucifer: So, what if I did?
> Linda: Then perhaps that's why you see yourself as evil again.

With Chloe's inability to accept Lucifer for who he is, now that she knows he really is the Devil, this season also sees Lucifer's resumption of a relationship with Eve, and his subsequent return to his old ways as he morphs back into the Devil figure that she loves and takes pleasure in inflicting punishment on evil-doers. His older brother, Amenadiel, points this out to him, in a statement that reflects both Lucifer's original destructive nature and the change he has undergone:

> She came here for the old you, the one she remembers from the garden. The one who sowed chaos and destruction for his own amusement… I don't want her to turn you back into the Devil that you were.[19]

As he becomes more satanic, his body gradually alters until it is transformed entirely into his diabolical form. When Lucifer then makes the selfless choice of going back to Hell in order to protect those he loves, the wings return to their angelic white. Finally, when his wings refuse to unfurl in order to take him to heaven and assume the role of God, it indicates that Lucifer does not feel ready to

19 Season four, episode five.

take on the role. It is only when his conscious and subconscious minds are finally acting in tandem as a result of him finding peace of mind that he is able to control his wings, upon which he closes them, symbolically rejecting the position. Clearly then, Lucifer's physical appearance reflects his feelings about himself, a point that is stressed continually after Amenadiel's discovery that angels self-actualise, a central tenet of the programme, by which is meant that celestial beings can determine their physical appearance and gain or lose their powers as a result of how they perceive themselves, either on a conscious or subconscious level.

LUCIFER: A POST-MODERN DEVIL

The changing depictions of Lucifer's wings reflect his altering ideas and personal growth of character in a depiction of the Devil which is very different from the traditional stereotypes of that figure. First of all, Lucifer does not – indeed cannot – lie; his word is his bond, and this is a character trait that is constantly emphasised and is central to his own moral code. Secondly, Lucifer does not tempt people to sin. Although he has a special power, his 'Mojo', through which he can induce people to admit their secret desires, he does not push them to act on these or lead them on in any way, and he deeply resents the suggestion that he does so and is responsible for evil doing. As he sneers in the pilot episode: 'Oh, right, so the Devil made you do it, did he? The alcohol and the drugs, the topless selfies. The choices are on you, my dear.' In episode six of season one, he expands this further, complaining:

> As if I'd spent my days sitting on their shoulder, forcing them to commit acts they'd otherwise find repulsive. 'Oh, the Devil made me do it'. I have never made any one of them do anything. Never.

This refusal to accept responsibility for human wrongdoing is a constant theme:

> I – I can't be held responsible for what happens after I give someone a favour. I mean, if there's one thing the Devil knows, it's that people need to take responsibility for their own bad behaviour.[20]

20 Series one, episode five.

Such comments recur throughout the seasons; in the first episode of season four Lucifer declares: 'I refuse to be a scapegoat for something for which something I bear no responsibility. It's a theme in my life.' Thus, it is not the Devil who is to blame for the presence of sin, but humans themselves.

Thirdly, and perhaps most strikingly of all, is that Lucifer is not evil. Although on occasion he sarcastically refers to himself as such, he actually believes strenuously in his own innocence and that his reputation is unjust. This is affirmed by his therapist, Linda, who often provides the 'moral' 'human' perspective in the series, as she talks with Amenadiel, Lucifer's eldest angelic brother, who is at this point pretending to be a doctor himself:

> Amenadiel: If he's positioning himself as the Devil, right? He must see himself as evil.
> Linda: Mm! No. Actually, he's struggling. I think he thinks other people see him as evil.[21]

This is articulated later in the same episode, with Lucifer again resentful of being blamed for evil ('For all eternity, my name will be invoked to represent all their depravity'). Similarly, in a later episode, he expresses his frustration again:

> Chloe: You believe that everybody's out to get you.
> Lucifer: That's because they are! But trust me, I didn't choose it. Why would anyone choose to be vilified?[22]

He bitterly resents the idea that he is either evil himself or causes others to commit evil, and expands on this at greater length later in the same episode, when talking with corrupt homicide detective, Malcolm Graham:

> Lucifer: I'm not a monster. I'm not evil. I punish evil…
> Malcolm: Yeah, but, but you're, you know…
> Lucifer: The Devil, yes. And you think you know who that is, don't you? The whole world does. A torturer, maybe. An inflictor of just desserts, sure. But a senseless murderer, I am not.

---

21 Season one, episode six.

22 Season one, episode twelve.

Thus, in this version, the Devil has become an agent of justice, who punishes only those deserving of retribution, and takes no pleasure in the punitive acts. In fact, the opposite is the case; he hates and despises the enforced role of torture of the wicked, which he regards as his own punishment imposed by God for his rebellion. Lucifer continues:

> Where do I begin? With the grandest fall in the history of time? Or perhaps the far more agonizing punishment that followed? To be blamed for every morsel of evil humanity's endured, every atrocity committed in my name? As though I wanted people to suffer. All I ever wanted was to be my own man here. To be judged for my own doing. And for that? I've been shown how truly powerless I am.

In this way, Lucifer has been changed from a figure of unbridled evil, to an almost noble, and indeed tortured, character.

Such a rehabilitation in fact echoes other recent screen reinterpretations of heroes as anti-heroes, in movies like *Immortals, Alexander* and *Clash of the Titans,* where the traditional heroic elements are undercut or overturned.[23] Lucifer fits into the pattern seen in recent productions which reject supernatural elements of the ancient world and present a hero who is flawed, possessing shortcomings as well as many of the attributes of a traditional hero.[24] Anti-heroes may also be characters whose behaviour marks them as stereotypically 'villainous', or who may not hold values traditionally ascribed to heroes, but who are, nevertheless, charismatic figures.[25] These points certainly hold true of Lucifer, whose charisma, both within the programme and in a screen context of appeal to the audience, is in no doubt, but whose value system and behaviour patterns are questionable; indeed the investigation of these values is the central point of the production.

The idea of anti-heroism has been seen as a modern construct in reaction to feelings of helplessness in the face of the rise of the industrial and post-industrial society. Recent years have also seen a growth in popularity of the anti-hero in popular culture, as a result of post-modern disillusionment with politics, and the struggle to determine morally correct values. Thus, 'heroes in the traditional mold who never killed and always did the right thing were quaint relics of a by-

23 See Curley (2018).

24 See Suvin (1979) 9, along with Tomasso (2018) 207.

25 See Tomasso (2018) 209–10.

gone era.'[26] Lucifer, as a flawed individual in a society that perhaps most typified such thinking, namely contemporary Los Angeles, fits squarely int this category, and the programme is therefore an example of such elevation of antiheroes in a world that seems turbulent and uncertain. The case of *Lucifer,* in fact, presents a villain who becomes heroic over the course of the six series, while still, however, remaining far from an example of idealised perfection. This depiction is reflective of contemporary thinking in which frailty and fallibility are not to be condemned or denied, but rather accepted and even embraced as part of the human condition. Lucifer Morningstar's transformation and growth over the course of the series from callous Celestial to humanised selflessness puts a new spin on the trend seen in other productions, creating a Devil for the 21st century who is, in modern terms, ultimately heroic.

THE MILLENNIAL DEVIL AND HIS JOURNEY OF SELF DISCOVERY

Understood in this context, the story of Lucifer is rather a journey of self-discovery as he attempts to find resolution for his internal conflicts on a rather deeper level. Lucifer as a fallen and banished angel is immortal. On the one hand, immortality implies an ideal, a never-ending pleasurable existence. Yet, this also means that the serious nature of the business of existence is radically reduced. Lucifer initially regards humans as inferior because of their mortality. Yet, as becomes apparent, having a finite timespan conveys purpose and meaning to existence, spurring people on to excellence and to make the most of life in the short time available. It is not enough to be alive; there is also a need for life to have import, and for a person to feel that they contribute in some purposeful way to that life.

This question is at the heart of the Lucifer in the TV series, as he constantly searches for a meaningful existence. Although he has left hell ostensibly because he is bored and depressed as a result of ruling hell for thousands of years, and despite the fact that his life at first appears hedonistic, the show is ultimately a journey of self-discovery, and follows Lucifer on his quest to find significance in his life. In the first episode of season one he explains, 'I quit Hell because I was

26 Tomasso (2018) 210.

sick and tired of playing a part in his [God's] play', a statement that reflects his sense of helplessness and manipulation, but also his feeling that his existence has no meaningful purpose. This is an issue that has appears in other recent popular creations, notably in the fourth and final season of *The Good Place* (2016–2020), which similarly, amongst other philosophical and ethical issues, examines the issue of what constitutes a meaningful life, presenting an eternal existence in 'the good place' as ultimately unsatisfying due to its lack of purpose. The somewhat nihilistic solution proposed in this programme to the problem of the boredom of eternal bliss is endowing those who achieve entry with the ability to then reject it and to choose to leave the Good Place, and thus to cease to exist in any form.

In contrast, the solution provided by *Lucifer* is to remove the focus on the afterlife, and instead give meaning to mortal existence, as encapsulated by Lucifer's rejection of Hell and ascent to the world. Being present in the world is not enough, however; in order to find purpose, Lucifer must also overcome the emptiness of his existence, something of which he is aware without understanding its nature or cause. Such a lack, in this contemporary reception, is primarily an emotional one. As Linda suggests to him, 'all of this excessive partying may be your attempt to fill a void… A void in your emotional life.'[27]

One of the reasons for this loneliness is his inability to regard mortals as worthy of connection. Viewing humans with contempt as lesser beings, mere pawns and of no real value, the celestials assume that they have nothing in common with humans, and certainly nothing to learn from them. In this way, they resemble the Greek views of the gods, for, in the Greek mind, although the gods might intervene in the lives of heroes in order to advance particular divine agendas, there was a vast and unbridgeable distance between human and immortal. The gods could veto human action, and it was they who, as Homer repeatedly stresses, determined human success or failure,[28] but often the reasons for their support or its withdrawal were incomprehensible, and their remoteness unquestioned.[29]

Over time, however, the perspective of those Celestials who develop relationships with humans changes, and Amenadiel even eventually fathers a son with a mortal, the therapist, Linda; this child is the first human-celestial creature ever

27 Season one, episode nine.

28 E.g. Homer, *Iliad* 7.70–2, 14.110–2, 13.562, 15.472–3.

29 See Lanzillotta (2010) 82.

to be born. In so doing, he grows from a cold and calculating servant of God, to a creature who gradually becomes aware of and sensitive to emotions. In his transition to warm, caring and emotionally mature, Amenadiel changes and adopts human traits, in contrast to those of heaven, whose beings are cold, without feeling or emotion, and prepared to commit unspeakable acts in order to carry out their divine missions. Amenadiel's sensitivity is demonstrated for the first time as he cradles the dying Charlotte Richards, comforting her and calming her fear of returning to Hell. When she dies in his arms, Amenadiel at last regains his wings and uses them to fly up to Heaven, carrying Charlotte with him. Strikingly, it is becoming more human that enables Amenadiel to earn back his angelic wings. Thus, humanity is elevated not only to the equal of that of the celestials, but actually to a place of superiority; according to this philosophy, it is actually *better* to be a mortal than an angel.

Similarly, as humans are promoted as superior to celestials, so, it appears, divinity is shown to be inferior. Since the morally questionable acts of the angelic beings, as exemplified by Amenadiel in the first season, are carried out in the name of their heavenly father, this results in God being portrayed as cruel and merciless, and the angels who do his bidding as narrow-minded religious bigots. Throughout the earlier seasons, God is shown through the eyes of Lucifer in a negative manner; 'Dad' is cruel, unforgiving, unreasonable, manipulative, inconsistent and ultimately impossible to understand. Lucifer expresses this vocally towards the end of season one, when, after the murder of a priest, whom, against his initial opposition and better judgement, he has grown to admire, he attacks God, looking up to the sky, and rages:

> You…you cruel, manipulative bastard! Was this all part of Your plan? It's all just a game to You, isn't it? Eh? Well, I know punishment, and he did not deserve that. He followed Your stupid rules and it still wasn't good enough! So, what does it take to please You? Break Your rules and you fall! Follow them and you still lose?! Doesn't matter whether you're a sinner! Doesn't matter whether you're a saint! Nobody can win, so what's the point? What's the bloody point?[30]

His personal resentment of control therefore finds voice in his rejection of what he sees as the tyranny of God's rule. Through his fight against his heavenly father's manipulations, Lucifer becomes a figure representing freedom, indepen-

30 Season one, episode nine.

dence and individual willpower. By rejecting God and his seemingly mindless plans, this Devil therefore becomes a freedom fighter; it is better to be an honest rebel who defies God, than an obedient angel who is obedient to the heavenly creator.

Such a negative attitude towards God is reflective of a recent trend in movies, where antagonistic depictions of the deity have reached a peak over the past two decades. Both physically and ideologically, there has been a radical alteration in how God is portrayed, perhaps most strikingly in the two great Biblical epics of 2014, *Noah* and *Exodus: Gods and Kings.*[31] In *Lucifer,* in contrast, over the course of the later seasons, the attitude towards God changes. Whereas the first three seasons made much of the dilemma of believing in an unknowable and unfathomable deity, with Lucifer and Amenadiel trying to interpret God's wishes from his silence, this changed with the, perhaps most surprising, twist in the final season of *Lucifer,* in which God appears on earth, but then decides to retire, leading to a war between his angelic offspring over who is to succeed him. Lucifer eventually wins this war, and the second half of the final season is about his internal dilemmas as to whether and when to take on the role. It is only in the very last episode that matters resolve themselves, and Lucifer, realizing his true calling and purpose in life, exclaims, with regard to his divine father, 'Oh, you cheeky bastard… He said I'd figure it out, and I did', thereby accepting the correctness of God's approach and affirming his ultimate status. Nevertheless, God has now retired, replaced by a new order. Somewhat ironically therefore, God is somewhat rehabilitated by this approach, in contrast to many other contemporary productions, but also side-lined as irrelevant and with no place in the new modern theology.

MORALITY, VIRTUE AND VICE ACCORDING TO *LUCIFER*

What, then, are the actual ideals and values promoted by the production? Clearly, taking responsibility for one's actions is held up as of prime importance. Within the programme, this is cast in the form of Lucifer's own resentment at being blamed for things he did not do, but on a wider level, it actually expresses the notion that to blame a supernatural being is ridiculous and clearly shirking ac-

31 See Maurice (2019) 54–6.

countability. Somewhat paradoxically, the notion that such blame is a form of self-delusion and weakness is rooted in the assumption that the Devil does not actually exist. By identifying with Lucifer's insistence on culpability, the viewer is expected to ridicule the idea that anyone else might be responsible for one's actions, and to glorify accountability.

Another virtue that is lauded as the highest ideal is that of self-sacrifice. Linda states this openly, in a discussion about how Lucifer has been enjoying doing good:

> Linda: You've identified quite strongly with this man.
> Lucifer: Yes. Yes, a man of honour, principle.
> Linda: Hmm. You like the way being good makes you feel.
> Lucifer: Mm.
> Linda: But true good needs to come from a place of selflessness, authenticity.
> Lucifer: Well, of course. I authentically want people to applaud the real me. The Devil gets a terrible rap.
> Linda: So you care about image, how you look to others.[32]

Lucifer at the outset is depicted as narcissistic and incredibly self-absorbed, and his response reflects his lack of comprehension of 'true good', which is equated with 'selflessness, authenticity'. Over time he changes, however, coming to feel and respond in a much more selfless manner, as the altruistic message is rammed home through repeated examples throughout the programme. Charlotte Richards dies sacrificing herself by throwing herself in front of a bullet to protect Amenadiel and is rewarded with Heaven. Chloe is willing to sacrifice herself in order to save Lucifer, throwing herself on a bomb being defused. Lucifer himself makes sacrifices to save Chloe on at least three occasions: making a deal with God and then killing his brother Uriel in order to save her, and then sacrificing his own happiness, and on some level, his entire life, by returning to Hell to keep her safe. In the final season, Lucifer and Chloe rush to save their daughter, Rory, fully aware that by so doing they are sacrificing their own chance of a life of love and happiness. All of the major characters in fact make sacrifices to varying degrees in the name of love, and these examples of selflessness are held up to be the ultimate good deeds.

32 Season one, episode eleven.

Somewhat paradoxically, along with this idealised altruism, the message of self-acceptance is also emphasised. This is reflected in the psychological journey of maturation undergone by Lucifer but also in the philosophy underlying hell in this production. According to *Lucifer,* each person's hell is different and individualised, involving repeatedly reliving, on an eternal loop, an event from one's life for which one feels guilt. As Amenadiel comments, 'It's all based on humans' subconscious, what they think they deserve'.[33] Nor is this restricted only to mortals; as mentioned before, Amenadiel comes to realise that angels also self-actualise, and this is one of the things that persuades him that mortals and celestials have much in common. In order to achieve peace both celestials and humans must learn to accept themselves, and perhaps even love themselves as they are. Neither can ever hope for perfection, but if self-acceptance is achieved, peace will follow. This is emphasised by Linda's advice to Lucifer when he is struggling with his relationships with both Chloe and Eve:

> Exploring your caring, altruistic side with Chloe…and now being in a committed relationship with Eve, who expects you to be your…– old hedonistic Devil self at all times… When you bifurcate your life this way, good and bad, crime solver and… orgy host… you're effectively denying half of yourself all of the time.[34]

The message here is that not only self-acceptance, but also that honesty and sincerity are of paramount importance. For all his inability to lie, the lesson that Lucifer has to internalise is not only to speak the truth but also, in the words of Shakespeare's Polonius, 'To thine own self be true',[35] or perhaps, in ancient Greek terms, 'Know thyself'.

FROM OLYMPIAN TO CHRISTIAN DEITY

It is clear that the modern Western world is a secular one. No longer do the traditional Christian ideals and beliefs dominate society, and particularly not those of the entertainment industry. In the wake of the rejection of this religious system,

33 Season 3, episode 23.

34 Season 4, episode 6.

35 Shakespeare, *Hamlet,* Act 1, Scene 3.

with its comforting dogma of an afterlife in which the injustices of this world are corrected, and both the virtuous and sinners receive their just desserts, there is now a vacuum, and consequent attempts to fill the ensuing void and a struggle to find meaning in life. What then, has happened to the Devil in this 21st century mindset? How has he changed, what does he represent, and how does this fit into the wider social context of our time?

Initially, the depiction of Lucifer in the TV show is far from typical, and in fact, far closer to the depictions of the Greek gods than the stereotypical portrayals of the Devil. Like Lucifer, one of the principal defining characteristics of the Olympian deities was their immortality. Unlike in some other belief systems, and indeed in some recent depictions of the Greek gods in popular culture,[36] these deities could not die, an aspect that shapes their whole being and their attitudes towards both mortals and the world with which they interact.

> Timefulness, was a critical element in the Greek conception of what differentiated mortals from immortals and the basis of all intercourse between them. The gods were not merely deathless but ageless, beyond time, beyond change.[37]

Similarly, according to Sissa and Detienne, 'The Olympians…enjoy their time that is untouched by black mortality within the dimension of an 'ephemeral' continuity that is renewed day after day.'[38] As a result of their immortality, there is a lack of gravity to the Greek gods, and a tendency, at least in classical myth, for the gods to regard mortals as insignificant beings, tiny and worthless in comparison with their own great power. Thus, the portrayal of Lucifer at the outset of the programme seems far closer in nature to that of the Olympian gods than to the traditional portrayal of the Devil.

Presented as part of an extended family, Lucifer's turbulent relationships with his siblings, also recall the internal squabbles of the Olympians, who use humans as pawns, in a manner strikingly different to anything in traditional Judeo-Christian philosophy. Even more striking is the inclusion of a female goddess, who was co-creator of the world, the mother of the angels and ex-wife of God, a presentation that recalls the Greek pantheon, and in particular the antagonistic relationship between Gaia and Uranus, Chronos and Rhea, and, most of all, Zeus

36 Maurice (2019) 193–8.

37 Davidson (2007) 217.

38 Sissa and Detienne (2000) 43.

and Hera. The depiction of this Goddess (unnamed in the series) as sexually unprincipled and wanton, also recalls ancient discomfort with the idea of coupling between goddesses and human mortals.

Lucifer's physical appearance is also reminiscent of the Greek gods, who possessed exceptional physical beauty (Hephaestus and Pan being notable exceptions). Tom Ellis' Lucifer is, in fact, notable for its depiction as being one of almost divine physical perfection. His height recalls ancient ideas about the Olympian deities, who were invariably imagined as tall and imposing (the most obvious examples being the statues of Zeus at Olympia and Athena in the Parthenon). It should be stressed that there are intermittent layers of reception at work here, in that Lucifer responds not only to ancient Greco-Roman ideas about Olympians but also to the 21st century screen incarnations of these divinities. For the muscled and attractive body, frequently half (or more than half) naked fits in with recent modern portrayals of Greek gods on screen, as epitomized by movies such as Tarsem Singh's *Immortals,* where these deities are no longer bearded elderly men in white robes, but young, virile and definite 'eye-candy'. This depiction stems from Singh's belief, expressed in an interview at the time of *Immortals'* release, that 'if you're a god and you have all the power in the world, why would you want to be old? Why wouldn't you just keep yourself young, in great physical shape, being able to fight if you needed to?'.[39] Such a philosophy naturally reflects contemporary idealization of youth rather than age, and beauty, as opposed to wisdom, attitudes exemplified by the idolization of celebrities in modern Western societies, of which Lucifer is a product.

Lucifer, the beautiful, amoral, immortal being, who at the outset regards mortals as insignificant creatures, is strongly reminiscent of the Olympian gods. Nevertheless, he changes radically over the course of the six series of the programme. His journey of self-discovery, demonstrated through his altering appearance, introduces two main components. Firstly, it is clear that a major element of Christianity is predominant in this portrayal, namely the promotion of self-sacrifice as the ultimate virtue. This is by no means a universally accepted idea, but is a central tenet of Christianity as epitomized by the belief that Jesus sacrificed himself in order to save mankind from sin. Lucifer, epitomised at the outset by his self-absorbed attitudes, he transforms into the antithesis of his previous self, to a character who rejects these ideas and sacrifices himself for the woman he loves.

39 http://www.moviefone.com/2011/11/09/immortals-luke-evans-interview/ (accessed 10 May 2018, but page is no longer active), and also cited in Maurice (2019) 47.

He therefore changes, in fact, from a traditional concept of Satan into a figure that is actually Christ-like.

The transformation into a Christian deity goes further still in the final season, in which Rory comes back in time through a time loop caused by her own anger and grief at her father having, as she thought, abandoned her. It emerges by the end of the series, however, that Lucifer did so at Rory's behest, giving up staying with his beloved daughter and seeing her grow in order to heal the souls in Hell. In other words, Lucifer, sacrificing his own happiness for his daughter's sake and that of humanity, gives up his daughter, against all his desires. Moreover he does this in order to give the souls in hell a chance at healing, thereby closely echoing the words of the Gospel of John that, 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life.'[40] Thus, in the final episode of the programme Lucifer finally finds his vocation, namely to return to hell, not as a torturer but a healer. This comes about as a result of his understanding that his acts have helped others to leave Hell or find peace. In particular he persuades Rory to choose a different path from the one he had chosen, by not killing someone deserving of punishment.

In addition, in true millennial fashion, the series also preaches the doctrine of the supreme value of the individual. The fact that humans can, and do, sin and err, is a result of their having the freedom to act and choose their own destiny, and it is this that makes mankind superior, and their lives better than that of the immortals' existence. By exercising their free will for good, and taking personal responsibility for their actions, mortals are elevated into superior and even supreme beings, creatures with the potential for great power. But neither is perfection to be expected nor is failure a reason for shame in this post-modern worldview, which focuses, in a manner reflective of the 'I'-generation's emphasis upon the individual, on the need for people to love themselves, and even in some way to regard themselves as divine.

Alongside this stress on the individual stands a rejection of hierarchical structures; if celestials are reduced to the level of mortals, and human weakness lauded, the hierarchy immediately weakens, but *Lucifer* goes further than this in removing even God himself. Most tellingly, after Lucifer rejects the role of God, Amenadiel ascends the throne of heaven in a scene that vividly echoes Harryhausen's Olympus with Zeus on his throne. In both cases, the god sits majes-

40 *John* 3:16.

tically on his raised throne, dressed in white robes, looking down at the other gods in a pose of strength, legs spread dominantly, and with light rays above his head. Yet when the angels bow submissively to him, he descends and gestures to them to rise, implicitly rejecting Olympus in favour of a religion of equality, as he includes his brothers in the mission of ruling the world, or rather, helping mortals to make themselves and the world a better place.

Thus, over the course of the series, Lucifer transforms from an Olympian-style Celestial, aloof from humanity, to a Jesus figure whose purpose in existence is to save mortals from their natural tendency to sin, and its resultant path to Hell. Such a transformation takes place with a 21st century world view, however, in which humanity is supreme, and through recognition of this, anyone, even the Devil himself, can escape from Hell. As Lucifer himself states during the final scene of the series, 'If the Devil can be redeemed, then anyone can.' In keeping with 21st century sensibilities, the path to this redemption is through therapy. As the final scene of the series opens, My Chemical Romance's song, *The Black Parade,* with its beautifully apt chorus lyrics, is playing:

> He said, 'Son, when you grow up,
> Would you be the savior
> Of the broken
> The beaten and the damned',

before showing Lucifer finally having found his destiny, not as the ultimate evil, or the Antichrist or Prince of Lies, but as the Saviour of souls, in the form of the ultimate therapist.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011). – Alastair Blanshard and Kim Shahabudin, *Classics on screen: ancient Greece and Rome on film* (London 2011).

Bleichenbacher (2008). – Lukas Bleichenbacher, *Multilingualism in the movies: Hollywood characters and their language choices* (Tübingen 2008).

Curley (2018). – Daniel Curley, The Hero in a Thousand Pieces: Antiheroes in Recent Epic Cinema, in: Antony Augoustakis and Stacie Raucci (ed.), *Epic Heroes on Screen* (Edinburgh 2018) 173–90.

Cyrino (2005). – Monica Cyrino, *Big Screen Rome* (Malden, MA and Oxford 2005).
Cyrino (2008). – Monica Cyrino, *Rome, Season One: History Makes Television* (Malden, MA and Oxford 2008).
Cyrino (2013). – Monica Cyrino, *Screening Love and Sex in the Ancient World* (New York 2013).
Cyrino (2015). – Monica Cyrino, *Rome, Season Two: Trial and Triumph* (Edinburgh 2015).
Cyrino and Augoustakis (2017). – Monica Cyrino and Antony Augoustakis, *STARZ Spartacus: Reimagining an Icon on Screen* (Edinburgh 2017).
Cyrino and Augoustakis (2022). – Monica Cyrino and Antony Augoustakis, *Screening Love and War in Troy: Fall of a City* (London 2022).
Cyrino and Safran (2015). – Monica Cyrino and Meredith E. Safran, *Classical Myth on Screen* (New York 2015).
Davidson (2007). – James Davidson, Time and Greek religion, in: Daniel Ogden (ed.), *A Companion to Greek Religion* (New York 2007).
Denery (2015). – Dallas George Denery, *The Devil: a History of Lying from the Garden of Eden to the Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ 2015).
Dunne (2014). – Carey Dunne, The Changing Face Of Satan, From 1500 To Today, *Fast Company* (18 August 2014) at: https://www.fastcompany.com/3034309/the-changing-face-of-satan-artistic-depictions-of-the-Devil-1500-to-today (accessed 3 October 2023).
Goldhill (2004). – Simon Goldhill, *Love, Sex & Tragedy: How the Ancient World Shapes our Lives* (London 2004).
Goldhill (2011). – Simon Goldhill, *Victorian culture and classical antiquity* (Princeton, NJ 2011).
Guha (2020). – Surangama Guha, Lucifer: 10 Behind-The-Scenes Facts That Fans Must Know, at: https://screenrant.com/dc-vetigo-lucifer-series-behind-scenes-facts-trivia/ (11 September 2020), accessed 3 October 2023.
Hall (2008). – Edith Hall, Putting the Class into Classical Reception in: Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray (ed.), *A Companion to Classical Receptions* (Malden, MA and Oxford 2008), 386–97.
Hardwick (2003). – Lorna Hardwick, *Reception Studies* (Oxford, 2003).
Hardwick and Stray (2008). – Lorna Hardwick and Christopher Stray, *A Companion to Classical Receptions* (Malden, MA and Oxford, 2008).
Hopkins (2010). – David Hopkins, *Conversing With Antiquity: English Poets and the Classics, from Shakespeare to Pope* (Oxford 2010).

Lanzillotta (2010). – Lautaro Roig Lanzillotta, The So-Called Envy of the Gods: Revisiting a Dogma of Ancient Greek Religion, in: Jitse Dijkstra, Justin Kroesen, Yme Kuiper (ed.), *Myths, Martyrs, and Modernity: Studies in the History of Religions in Honour of Jan N. Bremmer* (Leiden, 2010) 75–93.

Levack (2013). – Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (Abingdon and NY 2013).

Martindale (1993). – Charles Martindale, *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (Cambridge, 1993).

Maurice (2019). – Lisa Maurice, *Screening Divinity* (Edinburgh 2019).

Michelakis (2013). – Pantelis Michelakis, *Greek Tragedy on Screen* (Oxford 2013).

Michelakis (2020). – Pantelis Michelakis, *Classics and Media Theory* (Oxford 2020).

Michelakis and Wyke (2013). – Pantelis Michelakis and Maria Wyke, *The Ancient World in Silent Cinema* (Cambridge 2013).

Nikoloutsos (2013). – Konstantinos P. Nikoloutsos, *Ancient Greek Women in Film* (Oxford 2013).

Ogechukwu (2012). – Nwaocha Ogechukwu, *The Devil: What Does He Look Like?* (Salt Lake City, Utah 2012).

Paul (2013). – Joanna Paul, *Film and the Classical Epic Tradition* (Oxford 2013).

Russell (1986). – Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer: the Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY 1986).

Russell (1992). – Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Prince of Darkness: Radical Evil and the Power of Good in History* (Ithaca, NY 1992).

Sissa and Detienne (2000). – Giulia Sissa and Marcel Detienne, *The Daily Life of the Greek Gods* (California, 2000).

Solomon (2001). – Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema* (New Haven, CT 2001) (2nd ed.).

Solomon (2016). – Jon Solomon, *Ben-Hur: The Original Blockbuster* (Edinburgh 2016).

Suvin (1979). – Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven 1979).

Szentgyörgyi (2015). – Szilárd Szentgyörgyi, Evil Brits against the World – Rp as an Evil Accent, *Topos: Journal of Space and Humanities* 4 (2015), https://angolweb.htk.uni-pannon.hu/images/Topos_journal/2015/11_szentgyorgyi_topos_2015_4_penyomda.pdf.

Taşdelen (2019). – Pınar Taşdelen, Allured by Satan, the World and the Flesh: Representations of Temptation in Medieval English Drama. *Selçuk University Journal of Faculty of Letters* 42 (2019) 149–62. https://doi.org/10.21497/sefad.675134

Tomasso (2018). – Vincent Tomasso, Ancient (Anti)Heroes on Screen and Ancient Greece Post-9/11, in: Antony Augoustakis and Stacie Raucci (ed.), *Epic Heroes on Screen* (Edinburgh 2018) 206–21.

Unattributed (2011). – Unattributed author, Why Villains in Movies Have English Accents, at https://h2g2.com/edited_entry/A891155#conversations (Sep 12, 2011), accessed 3 October 2023.

Winkler (1991). – Martin M. Winkler, *Classics and Cinema* (Lewisburg, PA, London and Toronto 1991).

Winkler (2001). – Martin M. Winkler, *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (Oxford 2001) (2nd ed.).

Winkler (2004). – Martin M. Winkler, *Gladiator: Film and History* (Oxford and Malden, MA 2004).

Winkler (2006). – Martin M. Winkler, *Troy: From Homer's Iliad to Hollywood Epic* (Oxford and Malden, MA 2006).

Winkler (2007). – Martin M. Winkler, *Spartacus: Film and History* (Oxford and Malden, MA 2007).

Winkler (2009a). – Martin M. Winkler, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: Film and History* (Oxford and Malden, MA 2009).

Winkler (2009b). – Martin M. Winkler, *Cinema and Classical Texts: Apollo's New Light* (Cambridge 2009).

Winkler (2015). – Martin M. Winkler, *Return to Troy: New Essays on the Hollywood Epic* (Leiden 2015).

Winkler (2017). – Martin M. Winkler, *Classical Literature on Screen: Affinities of Imagination* (Cambridge 2017).

Winkler (2020). – Martin M. Winkler, *Ovid on Screen: A Montage of Attractions* (Cambridge 2020).

Wyke (1997). – Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema and History* (London and New York, 1997).

Wyke and Wozniak (2020). – Maria Wyke and Monika Wozniak, *Quo vadis. The Novel of Neronian Rome and its Multimedial Transformations* (Oxford 2020).

Lisa Maurice
Bar-Ilan University
Ramat Gan, Israel, 5290002
lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il

Suggested citation
Lisa Maurice: From Olympian to Christ-figure: *Lucifer* (2016–2021). In: thersites 17 (2023): Classics and the Supernatural in Modern Media, pp. 245–272.
https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol17.244