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Comic Books vs. Greek Mythology: the Ultimate Crossover for the Classical Scholar

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COMIC BOOKS VS. GREEK MYTHOLOGY: THE ULTIMATE CROSSOVER FOR
THE CLASSICAL SCHOLAR

by

ANDREW S. LATHAM

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in English
Department of Literature and Languages

Paul Streufert, Ph.D., Committee Chair

College of Arts and Sciences

The University of Texas at Tyler
May 2012

The University of Texas at Tyler
Tyler, Texas

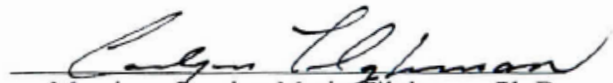
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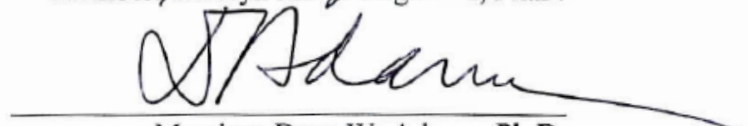
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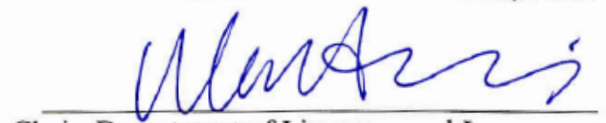
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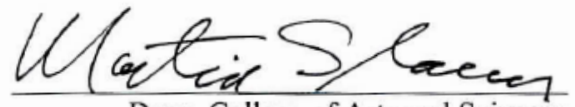
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This thesis is dedicated to my mother and father, Mark and Seba, who always believe in me, despite all evidence to the contrary.

This thesis is dedicated to my family and friends for their unwavering support, constant encouragement, and their ceaseless badgering for me to finish.

This thesis is dedicated to my lady, without whom I would be curled in the fetal position staring at a blank page.

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This thesis is dedicated to the men and women who publish comic books. May the fine tradition of superheroes in tights punching villains continue forevermore.

This thesis is dedicated to my grandfather, Valerios Paipetis, the man who fights boats. It was he who first introduced me to Greek mythology and, unlike his passion for tennis, my interest in Greek mythology will always stick with me.

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Without further ado, dear reader, enjoy. Excelsior!

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Abstract

COMIC BOOKS VS. GREEK MYTHOLOGY: THE ULTIMATE CROSSOVER FOR
THE MODERN SCHOLAR

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May 2012

The modern, serialized comic book is one of the most underutilized genres of literature in literary criticism today. While it is true that some graphic novels such as Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* receive scholarly criticism, many monthly titles such as *Action Comics* or *Batman* are neglected by most of the scholarly community. The reason for this neglect cannot be traced to one single source, but it is unfortunate considering how valuable serialized comic books can be to modern scholars, particularly classical scholars studying Greek mythology. The similarities between the superheroes of serialized comic books and the heroes of Greek mythology result in an interesting genre of literature that can allow classical scholars to observe how modern writers reinterpret the classical texts of Greek mythology. It is the purpose of this thesis to examine various intersecting similarities between mythological heroes and modern superheroes in the hopes of encouraging further discussion of modern serialized comic books in the scholarly world.

Introduction

In his work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell proposed the theory of the monomyth, or that the stories and mythologies of civilizations, from ancient times to modern depictions, have an overarching structure and inherently resemble one another. That is why the suggestion that the comic book superheroine Wonder Woman has her roots in Greek mythology is neither a groundbreaking nor recent realization. In almost all of her depictions in the Golden, Silver, and even Modern Ages of comic books, Dianna of Themyscira has always been portrayed as a member, and sometimes leader, of the Amazons, a tribe of female warriors that recur in several works of Greek mythology. Wonder Woman is one of the multitudes of examples of Greek mythology influencing the modern American comic book. For instance, from 2008-10, Marvel Comics ran an ongoing series entitled *The Incredible Hercules* starring a new interpretation of the mythological figure Hercules. Comic books have a variety of influences, but Greek mythology has a tendency to be one of the most noticeable, particularly in western countries such as the United States which have a historical connection to ancient Greek civilization.

However, despite the influence that Greek mythology can command on superheroes, the literary canon often overlooks the field of modern, monthly serialized comic books. That is not to say that some graphic novels, such as *Watchmen* or *300*, have not been subjected to analyses by scholars, but in general modern serialized comic books such as *Detective Comics* or *The Amazing Spider-Man*, which feature releases each

month, are often not given the same critical respect and recognition that other forms of American literature like prose and poetry receive.

But why is that? Why is it that, for whatever reason, the scholarly community chooses not to go to comic book stores and publish critiques of such texts? One argument might suggest that perhaps comic books are not scholastically viable enough to be worthy of canonical research and reception. There is certainly the stereotype of the comic book nerd, the perpetual juvenile which flocks to such texts, granting modern serialized comic books a reputation for childishness. There is also the assumption that visual text is somehow easier than prose. Another, perhaps even more important reason lies in the above demonstration of Wonder Woman as an Amazon, which could be construed as her texts being derivative of older pieces of literature already established in the canon. Yet while these examples do show explanations as to why modern serialized comic books have not received as much consideration from the canon as other forms of literature, neither opinion has much merit in the light of the fact that other texts in literature similarly derive from older pieces of literature. In *Teaching the Graphic Novel*, Stephen E. Tabachnick even speculates that scholars overlook modern comics, and as a result comics “simply replaced the penny dreadful as the most transient class of literature,” as comics “detract from ‘real’ reading” that such scholars reserve for canonical literature (9). These real texts scholars analyze do not seem to have the same drawbacks of comics, such as accusations of being derivative and juvenile, that scholars tend to perceive in the modern serialized comic book. Yet, in many cases, canonical works exhibit at least one of these drawbacks.

For instance, an example of a canonical derivative work is *A Midsummer Night's*

Dream from William Shakespeare, a celebrated and important part of British literature. Shakespeare's work is also heavily influenced by Greek mythology, and even plays around with the traditional structure and placement of several of its characters. Theseus is depicted as a Duke of Athens, despite his marriage to Hippolyta occurring after his coronation in traditional mythology. And there is the transformation of Nick Bottom to consider, almost certainly influenced by Greek deities such as Pan. Shakespeare adapted Greek mythology throughout *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to suit the new story, much like how modern serialized comic books reinterpret older source material.

But comic books still contain a certain stigma of childishness, even ignoring the fact that several works beyond *A Midsummer Night's Dream* pay homage to Greek mythology. This in part comes from the fact that modern comic books are, more often than not, marketed towards an adolescent, sometimes-immature audience composed of young men. However, it is important to never judge a text simply based on its target audience. After all, there are several texts within the canon that were once thought to cater exclusively to a younger audience. Take for example *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Similar to modern comic books, it also originated as a childish piece of literature, yet Lewis Carroll's contributions to the canon are still examined by scholars to this day. Carroll's work continues to be celebrated among the scholarly community, despite the fact that *Alice* was primarily written as young adult literature, much in the same way that modern serialized comic books are written primarily for adolescent males. Comic books should be allowed the same consideration as children's literature, especially since modern serialized comic books allow a glimpse into the continuing evolution and adaptations of Greek mythology in modern culture.

Perhaps the most important point of this thesis is that modern serialized comic books are incredibly important assets to the world of classical literature because, unlike Shakespeare's work, they allow a glimpse into how modern audiences interpret Greek mythology, showing the evolution and adaptations of mythical heroes in modern works. Naturally, while no disrespect is intended to Shakespeare, the fact remains that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was created for a sixteenth and seventeenth century mindset. Modern American comic books, on the other hand, are capable of showing how Greek mythology is reinterpreted over two millennia after their inception.

This study is designed to demonstrate links between Greek myths and modern comic books, with a particular emphasis on heroes such as Perseus, Heracles, and others. In addition, this study was also designed to reflect the most modern interpretations of modern American comic book superheroes. Recently, publisher DC Comics relaunched fifty-two titles featuring the most modern interpretations of classic superheroes such as Batman, Superman, and others. These interpretations will be used to analyze how elements of Greek mythology have influenced the modern American comic book and the superheroes therein. The aspects of the superhero, such as the relationships the superhero builds with supporting characters such as love interests and wards will be examined, along with the personal motivations of superheroes and how they were influenced by classical texts. Aesthetic rhetoric, or the portrayal of physical beauty, will also be considered as the study takes into consideration how superheroes are drawn in modern comic books and how those artistic styles were influenced by statuesque depictions of Greek mythology. The following discussions are meant to show the influence of Greek mythology had on comic books, and how scholars can use comic books as a resource to

learn how modern writers continue to find inspiration from mythological heroes such as Heracles, Perseus, and others.

Chapter One: Benvenuto Cellini and the Aesthetics of the Modern Superhero

The modern American comic book differs from most forms of literature in one key area: it is not a purely text-driven type of literature. In fact, the average new customer going into a comic book store would not be persuaded to buy a title based solely on the writer's text, as there is rarely any text on the outside of the book beyond the title on the cover, as the back of a comic book often contains advertisements. Instead, when a customer looks around in a comic book store to decide which titles to take home, often times it is the cover art which convinces that reader to pick up a new title. The difference between an energetic cover featuring exciting, interesting artwork and one with static, less interesting artwork can often be the difference between a new customer trying out a book or ignoring it for something more appealing.

That is why, when analyzing an American comic book, it is important to consider the artwork of the titles in addition to the text that accompanies them. The usage of aesthetic narration, or how comic books use the visual medium to strengthen the narrative, showcases a realistic comparison between comic books and mythology for classical scholarship. Because of the similarities between how superheroes are drawn and how mythological heroes were depicted in sculpture, classical scholars can infer that modern serialized comic books were inspired by the artistic tastes of classical works. This resemblance is important, not just to the canonicity of modern serialized comic books, but also to those classical scholars who can look to comic books as a medium showcasing the continuing adaptation of classical works. Mythological heroes and superheroes are

portrayed, both in text and aesthetic narration, with greater strength and power than the common man. These similarities can be seen in the depiction of the archetypical superhero, standing tall over his city. This depiction greatly resembles artwork featuring heroes in Greek mythology. The sculptures of Greek heroes, from their stances to their aesthetic beauty, share some semblance with the ways modern American comic books present their heroes.

Benvenuto Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa* displays how Greek mythology influenced Renaissance sculptures in the same way mythological archetypes influenced the manner in which modern serialized comic books portray superheroes.



Figure 1. Benvenuto Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa*

The statue's importance lies not only in its resemblance to the stance and pose characteristic of several superheroes, but because the statue's inspiration serves as an allegory to one of the most iconic superheroes of all time, Superman. The myth of Perseus contains numerous parallels to Superman's origin story. For instance, the golden shower that Zeus became to impregnate Perseus' mother resembles Superman descending from on high in a rocket ship. Both heroes display similar powers, as Superman's ability to fly and eye-based superpowers mimic Perseus' flying sandals and usage of Medusa's head. Both the myths involving Perseus and the series featuring the modern superhero Superman contain inherent similarities, such as how their origins are presented and their portrayal in their respective texts, which make them an excellent basis for comparing Greek mythology to its modern-day successor, American serialized comic books. Because artists display Superman and Perseus with comparable artistic depictions, they show qualities favored by both classical sculptures and modern-day artists.

As a result, this section will primarily focus on Perseus and Superman, discussing that often overlooked aspect of comic books, the artwork, and how it can be interpreted as being inspired from sources of classical literature and artwork. Cellini's work is a useful piece to explore this issue, as it is one of the most famous depictions of Perseus. *Perseus and Medusa* also bears striking similarities, in its stance and its build, to Superman, whose resemblance to Perseus in many depictions of the character make both heroes counterparts. As stated before, the goal of this discussion is to show how classical scholars can benefit from looking critically at modern American comic books, and it is thus impossible to discuss these similarities without first considering how the aesthetics of ancient Greek myths influenced sculptors such as Cellini, sculptures which

subsequently influenced the way in which superheroes are depicted in modern comics such as *Action Comics* and *Superman*, which often depict the Man of Steel in Cellini's archetype: strong, dominant, and the perfection of aesthetic beauty.

Benvenuto Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa*, constructed from 1545-54, showcases the inherent similarities between depictions of classical mythology and the artwork of modern comic book superheroes. Perseus's appearance gives an observer the ability to note links between the *Perseus and Medusa* statue and subsequent artwork depicting Superman, as the two heroes are not just related through similarities in their stories, but also through the methods that various media have chosen to portray them. In *Perseus and Medusa*, it can be seen that the hero has vanquished his foe and conquered his surroundings, much in the same way that Superman territorially guards the streets of Metropolis in a promotional piece designed by Jim Lee for *Superman* #201 (2004).

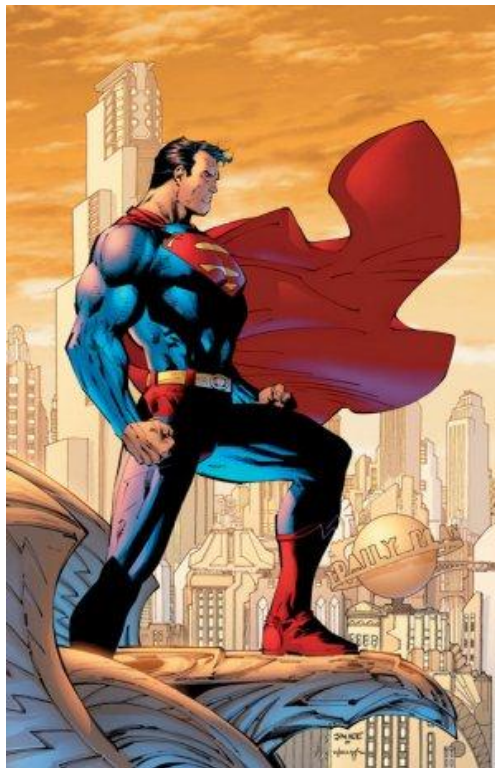


Figure 2. Jim Lee's *Superman*

In Lee's work, Superman dominates his surroundings in a territorial display, which is revealed through an examination of Cellini's sculpture. Perseus dominates Medusa, as evidenced by him standing on top of her, in much the same stance that Lee draws Superman in. This drive both heroes demonstrate to protect and dominate what is perceived to be their territory creates a connection between Perseus and Superman that not only transcends artistic mediums, but also centuries in time.

The primary connection between the two pieces comes from their aesthetics. Both Cellini and Lee designed Perseus and Superman to appear as the aesthetic perfection of the human form. Note the care in Cellini's work, in particular the shape of the statue. Perseus stands poised, with much emphasis on his muscles, over the fallen Medusa, creating a sense of heroism and accomplishment for Perseus. Perseus follows the classical tradition of aesthetic perfection, portrayed as tall, triumphant over his foe, demonstrating the ideal form of a demigod. In addition to these features, Perseus also has neither scars nor sweat on his body, in spite of having just taken part in the vigorous activity of slaying Medusa. While this depiction may be artistic license from Cellini, Perseus' notable lack of injuries further demonstrates the perfect body that the son of Zeus would naturally have in Greek mythology, examples of which can be seen in numerous sculptures and imagery stemming from the times of the ancient Greeks to modern recreations.

These perfect bodies would later serve as the inspiration for the modern American superhero, who is frequently depicted as the apex of beauty for modern society. Men are often depicted as overly muscular, much like Grecian statues of their heroes, to demonstrate their strength and power to the audience. Women are shown in much the

same way, with full breasts much like those in classical sculptures, to draw the attention of potential buyers to the comic. The *Venus de Milo* serves as an apt example of classical sculpture's influence on the depiction of super heroines. Much like how Lee's artwork mimics *Perseus and Medusa*, the stance of the *Venus de Milo* influenced the extreme femininity of female comic book protagonists. The methods in which artists draw characters such as Supergirl and Wonder Woman both infer influence from the *Venus de Milo*, as both characters are drawn with perfect skin and feminine features meant to appeal for the desire in readers for aesthetic perfection. It is in fact a rarity to see female comic book protagonists who lack these perfect features.

Similarly, the depiction of Superman in modern comic books has always tended to display the Man of Steel in styles very similar to Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa*. Lee's artwork, as an example, shows Superman in the exact same position that Perseus himself is placed in. Superman stands tall over Metropolis, essentially using the artwork as a way to mark Superman's territory, a subject elaborated on later in this study. Much like Perseus, Superman has been drawn very heroically, with a great deal of attention given to Superman's physique. Superman is muscular, conveying power simply by standing over his surroundings. Lee's choice to place Superman above much of Metropolis also harkens back to the demigods of Greek mythology, in that because Superman embodies such aesthetic perfection, he transcends the imperfections seen in the world, similar to Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." Like, true beauty, Superman is outside the cave and outside the limitations that humans are subjected to in terms of beauty, resulting in the perfect form that is the superhero.

Lee's depiction of Superman is also important when considering the territorial

aspects of the character. After all, Superman is historically grounded in Metropolis for most of his canonical depictions and, much as Batman is considered Gotham City's hero and Spider-Man New York's, Superman's constant defense of his territory is characteristic of not only most superheroes, but many mythological heroes as well, including Perseus. While it is true that most superheroes are written with innate desires to protect the public, they are also usually written in distinct locations. For instance, it is unusual that Superman would appear in Star City, the home of Green Arrow, simply because that location is Green Arrow's territory, and vice versa. The appearance of a superhero in another city is often the result of a crossover, or a meeting between two heroes that would otherwise not normally intersect. For that reason, while Superman is obliged to protect the public, he primarily does so in his territory. That is why, when Lee's Superman stands atop Metropolis, he surveys his surroundings with a domineering expression that can be interpreted as a sense ownership of his surroundings. Superman dominates his territory, and that domination can come from a variety of sources, such as his desire to protect Lois Lane, his defense of the innocent, or more obviously his defeats of any villains that attempt to wrest his territory away from him. Superheroes, as a group, tend to be very territorial, a trait that first originated from the methods artists use to portray the characters. Lee draws Superman to command his environment, and everything from his muscles to his posture conveys his territorialism. The same can be said, and has been said by other scholars such as Yael Even, for Cellini's *Perseus and Medusa*.

Even's article, "The Loggia dei Lanzi: A Showcase in Female Subjugation," serves as an excellent example of other scholars noting the territorial nature of the

Perseus and Medusa. Even makes the suggestion that the territorial drive exhibited by Cellini's Perseus comes from his domination of woman. Following the arguments of Melina Warner, Even suggests that "not only does Cellini's portrayal of Medusa attest to Perseus's prowess, it also encapsulates the male desire to overwhelm women" (Even 11).

Even offers the following:

Cellini placed the figure of the defeated Gorgon at the bottom of the composition. Consequently, his interpretation deviates from earlier versions of the myth, most of which also show the valiant hero with the Gorgon's head in his hand but give no hint of the body from which it was severed (10-11).

Note that, while Even does concede the fact that Cellini has adapted his work somewhat differently from earlier versions, the fact remains that Cellini's Perseus does show ownership over his surroundings. By deciding to display the entire Gorgon's body, Cellini showed to greater effect what Perseus had conquered. Medusa's dead body, and the positioning of Perseus on top of it, is no different from how Lee portrays Superman standing over Metropolis. Superman has displayed over decades of stories his domination of Metropolis. He stands over what is his, much like Perseus does in Cellini's sculpture. Even offers that Perseus is only triumphant through the subjugation of woman, but it is important to consider Medusa's status as a true 'woman'. Medusa is a monster, not unlike the *cetus* Perseus would later slay to win Andromeda, and while Even is correct that Cellini's statue does portray Medusa in a sensual form, it should also be taken into consideration that, in Greek mythology, monsters were vanquished by heroes. Perseus does not conquer Medusa due to her gender, but rather what she stands for. She is the key that will free Perseus' mother, who is someone that Perseus wishes to protect, similar to how Superman defends Metropolis, so like Superman Perseus must do what is required to save his loved ones.

The current volume of *Superman* (2011) similarly addresses this issue of the hero determined to rescue his loved ones. Writer George Pérez creates a similar situation in the character of Heather Kelley, who becomes a super villain that Superman must naturally vanquish to retain his territory and protect his friends. Much like Medusa, Kelley becomes a monster that must be excised and, after she is seemingly murdered, Superman laments that he “didn’t want to kill,” indicating that though he needed to use lethal force, Superman laments the death of a woman, though their conflict is not centered on Kelley’s gender, despite her feminine aesthetic depiction. The conflict between Superman and Kelley has everything to do with her identity as a monster. Superman does not stop her to assert his domination over a gender, but because it was what had to be done (*Superman #3*).

Perseus is similarly not motivated by gender, as noted in “Benvenuto Cellini: The Man and His Art” by Gerald Jackson Pyle. Pyle analyzes the statue through an objective viewpoint, noting the statue’s errors and stylistic problems, but primarily notes that Cellini’s statue is “cold,” lacking all of Michelangelo’s “grandeur as well as his restraint” (Pyle 240). This analysis is in part due to Pyle’s suggestion that *Perseus and Medusa* demonstrates a “suicidal effort of [Cellini’s] imitation of Michelangelo” (239). Pyle characterizes the entire statue, including Medusa, as cold, suggesting that there is no vibrant sexuality to the corpse of Medusa. Instead, the *Perseus and Medusa* merely seems to contain sensuality because the grotesque head, designed with little of the aesthetic femininity seen in the *Venus de Milo*, is severed from the body. The complete body itself is not feminine, and only appears to be so because the inspiration for the piece, the mythological Medusa, has been separated into a feminine form and the grotesque head

Perseus carries. In addition, the comment that Perseus is cold may be an attack by Pyle on Cellini's abilities as an artist, but Perseus being cold suggests that, in Cellini's work, Perseus takes no joy in killing a female as Even asserts, and rather does so merely because it is required of him, much as Superman does to the character of Heather Kelley.

It is important to take from these examples that both Greek myths and modern American comic books portray heroes and superheroes, respectively, in a similar style, which is the result of Greek myths such as Perseus influencing artists up until the present day, from original Greek texts to Cellini in the sixteenth century to modern day artists such as Lee. This stylistic effect of portraying the superhero as aesthetic perfection extends beyond Superman to such characters as Spider-Man. Peter Parker, whom comics portray as meek when outside of his uniform, showcases the "Allegory of the Cave" in his transformation into Spider-Man. As Peter Parker, the character is within the cave, and retains his anonymity because it is inconceivable to his friends that he could embody the aesthetic perfection of Spider-Man, showing the same aesthetic beauty as Superman and Batman. The notion of the 'secret identity' even reinforces Plato's allegory, as the beauty in modern superheroes is reached in modern American comic books only after the secret identity is discarded. Peter Parker (Spider-Man) is certainly not the idealized standard of beauty, and the same can be said for Clark Kent (Superman), primarily because attributes such as muscles and super-strength must be hidden for the superhero identity to be concealed. As a result, secret identities hide the superhero within the cave until their transformation causes characters such as Clark Kent to surpass the limitations of the cave and reach the apex of aesthetic beauty. This transformation, this ascension to beyond the human and toward the demigod state of being such as Perseus and Hercules, makes the

similarities between the depictions of Greek mythological heroes and the artwork present in serialized American comic books even more noticeable.

The similarities between how modern serialized comic books are drawn and how ancient Greek myths have been depicted suggest a field of study for classical scholars have not fully explored, and could benefit from. As stated above, the goal of this study is to present a comparative study between the two cultures in an effort to observe the evolution of classical mythology in modern society. Due to the fact that the modern comic book does indeed use an art style that resemblances sculptures also influenced by Greek mythology, it therefore becomes necessary to examine other aspects of American superheroes to further demonstrate the connections between the two cultures and the benefits of examining the evolution of Greek mythology in modern interpretations.

As a result, the following sections will detail multiple textual aspects of the modern superhero, and how they may have been influenced by Greek mythology. For instance, it is no secret that superheroes rescue damsels in distress, usually the love interest, but that type of story is hardly an original invention of the modern comic book. Numerous examples, such as Lois Lane and Superman, Batman and Catwoman, and even Spider-Man and Gwen Stacy, can be shown to bear more than a passing resemblance to Greek mythological heroes, who themselves were often called upon to rescue women. The next section discusses the similarities of these relationships, and how both Greek myths and comic books have storylines that can be greatly impacted through these similar uses of damsels in distress. Both mythological heroes and superheroes have a drive to protect what is theirs, as shown above through artwork, but this drive is also present through text, and will be explored as well.

But, because Benvenuto Cellini is such a noticeable example of Greek mythological sculpture, it is necessary to consider other sources when analyzing the texts of both Greek mythology and modern American comic books. The study will therefore focus on the *Metamorphosis* by Ovid, which contains numerous examples of classical literature, many of which pertain to Greek heroes such as Perseus, Hercules, and others. Ovid's text contains numerous parallels found in modern comic books, parallels which influenced the characterization and depiction of several superheroes in modern serialized comic books.

Chapter Two: Perseus and Andromeda- The Modern Superhero and their Territory

When a scholar is discussing a comic book, it is important to remember that the modern serialized comic book is composed of two halves, the visual aspects of the text and the verbal. Previously, it was asserted that due to the inherent similarities in both comic books and artistic endeavors, such as those of Cellini, it was possible that the two artistic styles complimented one another, and Greek mythology may have in fact inspired the methods in which many modern comic books are aesthetically designed. Here, and for the remainder of this analysis, it will become necessary for focus to move away from the first half of modern comic book design, the visual aspects of the superhero, and move towards the second half and focus on the written, or literary side, of comic books.

One such method is to compare superheroes to mythological heroes from a written standpoint. The motivations and desires that writers instill in a superhero, along with how a superhero operates, greatly resemble archetypes in Greek mythology. This semblance can be seen in a number of examples. For instance, it would be possible to compare Theseus to Aquaman, considering that both of them have ties to the sea. Yet that would be too generic a relationship for scholarly comparison, and certainly not something worth mentioning if it was not possible to more closely connect the two characters. Fortunately, there is a way to make such a connection, as both Theseus and Aquaman are heroes blessed by the sea, yet both choose through personal motivations from their father-figures to remain on shore and protect cities. Theseus has Athens, and Aquaman has Mercy Reef. The two can be easily compared, and it can be shown that Theseus' myths

appear in adapted form in serialized issues of *Aquaman*, displaying the importance of analyzing these comic books for the continuing adaptations of classical literature.

However, Aquaman is not the superhero that best serves to properly display this relationship between superheroes and the mythological heroes that inspired them. For that, it is important to once again revisit the relationship between Superman and Perseus. Both characters, as established in the previous section, can be shown to be depicted similarly in artwork and can be shown to have similarities when their texts are analyzed together. Both Superman and Perseus, beyond having a similar range of powers and abilities, share not only a similar origin story, but also display examples of one of the most important recurring motifs of modern American comic books: the damsel in distress.

As an iconic damsel in distress of Greek mythology, the character of Andromeda relates just as neatly to the character of Lois Lane as Superman does to Perseus. Both women develop romantic relationships through being rescued in their respective narratives by the hero. Indeed, the very nature of the modern day love interest in comics bears strong similarities to the introduction of Andromeda in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In addition to the successful relationship of Lois Lane and Clark Kent, alternate examples of the damsel in distress motif exist from a variety of comic book titles, suggesting that the damsel in distress plays a significant role in shaping the furthering development of multiple modern superheroes. The influence for these developments dates back to the *Metamorphoses*. The similarities between Superman and Perseus do not end in their shared use of the damsel in distress character, as other similarities between Superman and Perseus correspond, from the portrayal of their more-than-human abilities to their birth.

The importance of this section, fundamentally, is to establish a link between the hero as written by Ovid and the superhero as interpreted today. By doing so, the monthly serialized superhero will become interpretable to the scholarly community, particularly classical scholars. Therefore, it is important that the superhero in this portion of the study, Superman, be immediately comparable to Perseus, to best demonstrate these links that can allow scholars to research serialized comics as living history of how modern day writers continue to rewrite the classics of Greece.

The relationship between Superman and Lois Lane is iconic, almost to the point that a discussion of the relationship is redundant. Lane is, and has for many years, been the template for the damsel in distress/love interest that is often used in comics for a variety of reasons. Sometimes love interests are brought onto a serialized comic series in order to attract female fans to the title, such as the series *Spider-Man Loves Mary Jane*, a series designed to appeal to female readership through an intense focus on the romantic relationship of Spider-Man and Mary Jane. Commonly, however, love interests are used to develop super heroes and give them more of a personality outside of their role as protector of their territory. In many cases, particularly in long-term love interests such as Lois Lane, the damsel often becomes another piece of territory for the superhero to defend, as inevitably some sort of villain will use the damsel as bait during a crime to anger the superhero, naturally causing the superhero to defend and reclaim their territory, thus rescuing the damsel in distress and stopping the removal by the villain of what the superhero perceives to be theirs.

The relationship between Superman and Lois Lane is one that finds itself paying homage to a much older story of a damsel in distress: the tale of Andromeda in Book IV

of the *Metamorphoses*. In *Action Comics*, and its subsequent adaptations, Superman is constantly territorial of what he perceives as his, including Lane, who in many versions is depicted as his wife. Because of this perceived closeness that Lane shares with Superman, she is often made a target by villains, as stated above. Traditionally, these kidnappings generally result in a rescue sequence during which Superman saves the girl, defeats the villain, and Metropolis is at peace once more by the end of the book. While this description may seem to be distant from the Perseus archetype, the fact of the matter is that without Perseus, the damsel in distress scenario described above might not have developed in modern serialized comic books, primarily because it is based on the Perseus archetype of the rescue.

In Book IV, Ovid describes Perseus' first sighting of Andromeda with the following passage:

When Perseus noticed the maiden tied by the arms to a
jagged
rock-face (but for the light breeze stirring in her hair and
the warm tears
coursing over her cheeks, he would have supposed she
was merely
a marble statue), unconscious desire was kindled
within him. (Ovid 164)

In Ovid's description, Perseus feels much the same way Superman does upon seeing Lois Lane in danger. Perseus feels an unconscious desire, which causes him to immediately fly to Andromeda's parents and decree that, were he "courting this maiden, [he'd] be the suitor you surely preferred for her husband-to-be" (166). Following her parents' assertion that he may marry Andromeda if he can slay the beast, Perseus proceeds to defeat the monster and claims his bride. Perseus saves Andromeda because of the archetype he influenced in Superman: the damsel in distress becomes a part of his territory that must

be defended. As Andromeda is part of his territory, Perseus is territorially driven to rescue Andromeda and assert his claims over his new territory.

Meanwhile, in the comic book, a very similar scene takes place. Despite the fact that both of the newest incarnations of *Action Comics* and *Superman* (2011) do not portray Superman and Lois Lane as a married couple, the two characters do behave in a similar fashion and Superman certainly rescues damsels in distress, including Lois Lane, at every opportunity. Like Perseus, Superman protects what is his. When Perseus accepted the burden of slaying the monster to rescue Andromeda, he accepted responsibility for Andromeda's safety. In a sense, Andromeda became part of Perseus' territory, territory that was his to defend. Comparatively, Superman's love interest to Lane has always resulted in him going to great lengths, regardless of the circumstances. A famous popular instance of Superman's desire to protect Lane can be seen in the 1978 film *Superman*, in which Superman spins the world back around to rescue Lane from death. Though it is a non-canon depiction, the spirit of the Superman character was portrayed in the same manner as his comic book counterpart: loyal, brave, and willing to face incredible odds for his damsel, much in the same way that the Perseus archetype faces a monster to rescue the territory that is the damsel in distress.

This drive to protect others does not just extend to the damsel in distress for either Superman or Perseus. While the love interest is certainly important to the development of the character, heroes of both Greek myth and serialized comic books showcase a territorial drive to protect, which has been discussed earlier as a territorial need to defend surroundings and those that the hero classifies as part of those surroundings. As a result, Superman's desire to protect Lois Lane inevitably spreads to the surrounding Metropolis

and Smallville. This need to protect also brings up an important discussion point: Perseus' drive to protect, which originally derives from his wish to prevent his mother's marriage. Because Perseus' mother is classified as his territory, he sets off the chain reaction that leads him to acquire his powers and obtain Medusa's head. Perseus, despite his demigod status, begins his journey with nothing and gains the powers of flight, invisibility, and the stone powers of Medusa's eyes through his journey to protect his territory. Similarly, because Superman wishes to protect Lane and Metropolis, his powers are shown to develop because of a pattern that grows and develops in the same method that Perseus' does. At the beginning of *Action Comics #1* (2011), for instance, Superman is shown without his traditional uniform and unable to fly, but by the time of *Superman #1* (2011), set several years in the future, he gains this ability and others by protecting Metropolis, a territory which initially grew from a desire to protect the love interest to a city. The only difference between the Perseus archetype and Superman is that Perseus' original territory was his mother rather than his love figure.

In addition to the parallels in how Superman and Perseus obtained their territory, there is also an unusual symmetry between the powers the two heroes use, as well as their origin. While Superman's origin is perhaps not unfamiliar to most Americans, it is important to mention his origin so that Superman may be better connected with Perseus. As detailed in *Action Comics #5*, Superman's origin remains unchanged from that of his previous incarnation. Superman, born Kal-El, is rescued from a dying Krypton by his parents and escapes via a space shuttle, programmed to target "worlds with younger, fiercer suns, where [Superman] will grow strong. Worlds where the gravity is weak so he will seem to fly" (Morrison). Superman then descends from on high where he meets his

adoptive parents, Jonathon and Martha Kent, a detail that serves to further relate him to Perseus.

Another factor that connects the character of Superman to Perseus is that of Superman's origin. Superman's origin bears great similarity to another origin story and, once more, his origin story connects him to Perseus. The origin of Perseus is also recounted in Book IV, detailing how Acrisius, Perseus' grandfather, "didn't accept that his grandson Perseus, conceived in the shower of gold by his daughter Danae, was Jupiter's son" (Ovid 161). In both instances, the heroes descended from a shower on high. Perseus again sets the standard for his archetype, conceived from a rain of gold descending from on high then being cast adrift in the ocean. Superman also descends from on high, though he does so in a rocket ship, and traverses a sea of sorts through space to arrive at his adopted home, Earth. Both are also of noble, otherworldly descent, with Perseus being the son of Zeus and Superman being a Kryptonian. Both Superman and Perseus have origin stories that run parallel to one another with little distinction beyond how the Perseus archetype was adapted by modern comic book writers. In fact, it could be argued that both origins mimic Joseph Campbell's first step of the departure, the call to adventure, in that both heroes are "carried or sent abroad by some benign or malignant force" (48). Perseus connects to Superman due to Campbell's monomyth, in that Perseus is sent away by his grandfather and Superman carried away to safety by a rocket ship.

Finally, another area to consider is their super powers. Both Superman and Perseus have the ability to fly, Superman through the sun's rays and Perseus through his winged sandals. They are also two heroes which have powers involving vision. Superman

has a number of different vision based superpowers, included X-Ray, infrared, even heat vision. However, Perseus also has powers that fall under this category, with his mirror-polished shield which allowed him to slay the Gorgon, and of course the Gorgon's head, which still required Perseus to point it so it stared at the person he wished to have turned into stone. The case can be suggested, again, that the archetypical hero in myth of Perseus was adapted when Superman is characterized by writers to have similar attributes with a hero from millennia prior to Superman's creation.

The superhero is influenced by the society that created it, and because much of the modern serialized comic book industry is published in the United States, societies that influenced the United States naturally influence the artistic output of the country, and in that mind Greek mythology can certainly be suggested to having an impact on the entertainment industry, as seen in these modern serialized comic books. Mythological heroes influenced the origins of a variety of superheroes, and not just Superman. While it is true that Campbell's theories on the hero's journey can serve as an underlying influence, the fact remains that superheroes and mythological heroes have too many similarities to view as mere coincidence for adhering to Campbell's monomyth.

Spider-Man certainly serves as an example of a superhero following in the footsteps of a figure in Greek mythology. The candidate for this resemblance that springs quickest to mind is Odysseus, considering both characters express reluctance to understand the will of fate at the beginning of the Trojan War and *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Peter Parker (Spider-Man) did not want to be a hero, and only chose to be one after the death of his Uncle Ben. Similarly, Odysseus did not want to leave Ithaca, wanting to stay with his son, only agreeing to go under duress. Both become reluctant heroes, setting

aside their personal desires for the greater good. As is Spider-Man's mantra, "with great power comes great responsibility," and that statement is certainly true amongst reluctant heroes such as himself and Odysseus.

In addition to this, the ultimate fate of the love interest is one that often alters the superhero, for better or worse. A positive example was demonstrated in Lois Lane, but that is only one example. Another, one of failure, is Gwen Stacy, Spider-Man's infamous first girlfriend. Gwen Stacy was one of the first modern consequences of a superhero failing to save a damsel in distress, and she was murdered by the Green Goblin, altering Spider-Man for the worse. The love interest always weighs heavily on the superhero, one of the main reasons the hero must constantly keep the love interest out of harm's way. This, also, is why some superheroes remain anonymous, so that they may guard their territory without the territory even knowing the hero's identity. Batman and Catwoman follow this example as well, serving as a middle ground that shows a love interest that is not a damsel in distress, due to Catwoman's status as an example of the *femme fatale* archetype.

For the remainder of the study, it is important to move away from Superman and Perseus, as the subjects covered in subsequent sections benefit from the observation of different mythological heroes and superheroes. In addition, the subject of researching serialized comic books as a window through which to study modern influences and adaptations of classical literature is too broad a subject to confine to just Superman, and because of that scope there are multitudes of mythological archetypes and modern superhero examples discussable in this study. As a result, the remainder of the study primarily analyzes Batman in an effort to diversify the information that has been accrued.

Due to the fact that Perseus is incompatible for comparisons with Batman, the Dark Knight will be analyzed alongside Hercules, a mythological hero more compatible with analyzing Batman.

The next sections continue the theme of analyzing modern serialized comic books with the literature in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, concurrently with discussions of Euripides' texts on the character of Heracles. It is important to consider the darker and more personal aspects of a superhero, and the cost of superheroes recruiting young wards to the cause, as both serve as equally important examples of the relationship between Greek mythology and the modern world of the comic book industry.

Chapter Three: Hercules and Batman, the Tragic Heroes

Origin stories are a crucial aspect of any piece of literature, from mythology to fiction to modern comic books, because it is paramount that the audience sees where the characters in the text have come from and why they behave the way they do through the narrative. For instance, it is relevant that the audience see Orpheus and his life before Eurydice's death to better understand why he would be so motivated to descend into the underworld to plead with Hades for her life. The origin story in mythology is necessary, not only as a plot device, and also better shows the hero's lineage; Theseus is, as another example, at the beginning of his myth is only the son of the king of Athens, until it is revealed he is really Poseidon's son, creating a greater sense of his lineage and granting him, by extension, the respect and admiration that regular mortals grant the actual god. The origin story allows the audience to see Theseus as a man, and appreciate his transformation into the hero. Likewise, modern American comic books use the origin story as a focal point to explain the motivations of the superhero to the audience. The moral code of the superhero will also frequently be defined in the origin story, and the chain of events that caused them to become a hero will be shown. It is because of these factors that most adaptations of modern comic books will primarily focus on the origin story in order to better introduce the audience to the character of the superhero.

The origin of Superman is perhaps one of the most adapted stories in the history of comic books. In modern comic books, writers often revise or adapt origin stories to re-introduce superheroes to new readers, or perhaps modernize the character. DC Comics

continuously revises the origin story of its superheroes every few years, and Superman has had his origin story reinterpreted by numerous writers throughout the decades. For instance, there was a time in the last century where Superman was not born on Krypton, but rather grown in an artificial womb in the spaceship that brought him to Earth. This origin was replaced by one closer to the original, wherein Superman as a child escapes Krypton. As an example of these revisions, the most modern changes to the origin story, published in *Action Comics #5* (2011), show that Jonathon and Martha Kent are deceased by the time Clark Kent becomes Superman, changes that as a result again drastically alter how the character is portrayed.

Unlike Superman, the origin of Batman has had little alteration over the decades, resulting in a very consistent origin story that largely remains unrevised. Batman is always portrayed in his canonical depictions as Bruce Wayne, a man whose parents were murdered at gunpoint when he was a young boy, creating the desire to seek justice and other traits characteristic of the character, as a result creating abhorrence to the use of firearms. The identity of the shooter may change, but Batman's origin remains mostly the same. Because Batman is not born into heroics, unlike Superman, his design showcases a different type of character archetype in comic books: the reluctant hero, who assumes his role in response to a need, in Batman's case a need for redemption.

This need for redemption makes it possible to compare Batman's origin to the drives of one of the most famous figures in Greek mythology: Hercules. One of Hercules' most adapted stories, the twelve labors, begins with a similar premise to Batman's origin, and is also based on the concept of redemption through personal sacrifice. This notion of Batman as the modern-day Hercules, as well as other superheroes that also find their

motivations in personal redemption, is important to the connection of Greek mythology and comic books. By showcasing the similar usage of origin stories, it becomes possible to infer that mythological heroes and comic book superheroes find similar motivations for their heroics. This similarity would allow classical scholars the opportunity to see how these archetypes have evolved through the development of western civilization, creating a chain of influence that extends from ancient mythology written in Greece to modern serialized comic books with themes reinterpreted from those ancient myths by modern writers.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* does not specifically address the labors of Hercules, but it is now known that much of Hercules' story is the result of personal tragedy. Hercules' life is mired with hardships, many of which are brought upon him by Hera, Zeus' vengeful wife. These difficulties are demonstrated as early as his birth, as recounted by Ovid in Book 9's "Alcmena and Galanthis." The text describes Alcmena's labor, wherein "for seven whole days and seven whole nights [she] was wracked with torture" (Ovid 352) due to Hera's interference, showcasing the difficulties that Hercules caused his loved ones, even before his birth. Alcmena mentions that "Lucina arrived, but [Hera] had bribed her beforehand and she was willing to sacrifice me to the spite of the goddess" (352). Due to the simple crime of Hercules' conception, Hera's ongoing hatred of him almost caused his mother's death, and certainly caused a longer-than-expected delivery, only alleviated by the trickery of Galanthis. Despite the fact that "Alcmena and Galanthis" primarily uses a "humorous tone," the text does remind the reader that, even in humorous anecdotes, the story of Hercules is mired in difficulty and hardship, primarily through Hera's torture of the hero for the crime of being born (337). In his

introduction to Euripides's *Heracles*, William Arrowsmith even notes that "Heracles has no visible *hamartia*; if he falls, he falls for no flaw of his own nature or failure of judgment, but as the innocent victim of divine brutality" (292).

Despite 'Hercules' meaning 'glory of Hera,' Hera's ongoing feud with Hercules continues beyond his birth and throughout his life, but the most damage Hera causes to Hercules also results in the myth most modern readers recognize: the twelve labors. Unfortunately, there exists no full original text of the labors; however, it is possible to discuss the circumstances that lead to Eurystheus employing the hero for the labors. Hera's hatred for Hercules results in her decision to place a shroud over Hercules' eyes to make his family seem to be monsters, and in a fit of madness he slaughters them. These circumstances eventually lead Hercules to the Oracle at Delphi, who orders Hercules to Eurystheus. Now, because Hercules goes to the oracle not to seek absolution, but redemption, he displays a character trait most often shown in modern comic books as the tragic, or reluctant hero. Arrowsmith speculates that, though Euripides moved the labors prior to Hercules's madness, "Heracles at the very moment of his fall is at his greatest," and becomes utterly repentant in his question for redemption (294).

It is this difference that allows Hercules to be considered an archetype of the reluctant hero. Hercules undertakes the twelve labors as a way to repent for his sins, a character trait which clearly distinguishes him from other heroes such as Perseus. The two share some similarities, in that Perseus is also tasked with seemingly impossible labors to rescue Andromeda and his mother. Where the two differ, however, is that Perseus undertakes these challenges to rescue his loved ones and, by extension, what he perceives to be his from a territorial standpoint. Hercules, having lost that which was his,

gains a different motivation in his own salvation. There is also the fact that Perseus, unlike Hercules, was given much of his powers. Many of Perseus' myths verify that his powers came from the gods, such as Hermes' sandals, Athena's shield, and Hades' helm. All three grant him strength beyond that of normal humans, which allowed him to slay Medusa and rescue his loved ones.

By contrast, Hercules receives nothing like the favors granted to Perseus, which is especially odd considering the two heroes were sons of Zeus. He gains only his strength from Zeus, and Hera's hatred of him follows him throughout his life. In "The Death of Hercules," the hero laments:

Now feast on my ruin
 Saturnian [Hera]!
Feast, cruel goddess! Look down from above on this
 scene of destruction
and glut the desires of your brutal heart! Or else, if my
 plight
cries out to be pitied even by you, my inveterate enemy, racked as I am by
harrowing torture, relieve me of life, the life that I hate, the life that was destined
for
 nothing but labors,
Death will now be a boon and a worthy gift from my
 stepmother (348).

Hercules' life, as shown above, was nothing but tragedy, a fact that even the hero himself acknowledged. His entire life was a search for redemption, beginning from the crime that Hera never forgave him for, his birth, to his labors.

Superficially, it would appear that the characters of Hercules and Superman are comparable. It is true that the two share similarities, but the way that Hercules is portrayed makes a comparison to Superman difficult for many reasons, the most important of which being that, unlike Hercules, Superman's superpowers are given to him naturally from the Sun, much like Perseus receiving his gifts from gods.

Furthermore, the tragedies that follow Hercules make him far more viable as an archetype for another DC Comics character, Batman.

Batman's character can be compared with Hercules through the use of the archetype of a tragic hero, one which is drafted into fighting through forces outside his own control. In Hercules' case, this force surfaces in the form of Hera, whose constant hatred for Hercules creates such conflict that he experiences survivor's guilt, such as the example of the death of Hercules' children. Batman's driving force comes from the death of his parents. At a young age, Bruce Wayne witnesses the deaths of Thomas and Martha Wayne, traumatizing the child to seek justice. This tragedy is further compounded by the fact that, in many canonical depictions, Bruce is himself responsible for his parents being in Crime Alley and murdered during a robbery. Though the event can be interpreted as not being his fault, like Hercules Batman feels responsible and must seek redemption through heroic acts. In Hercules' case these acts come in the form of the twelve labors, and in Batman's case these acts come in the form of his war on crime in Gotham City.

Another point to consider is how each character receives the message to become a hero. Batman's origin story can serve as a parallel to Hercules specifically because of its relatively unchanged canonicity. In many of Batman's depictions in modern comic books, Bruce Wayne receives his inspiration from seeing a bat; in the original origin story published in *Detective Comics #33*, the bat crashes through the window in his study and startles him. Inspired by the animal, he adopts this mantle in order to use intimidation, as Batman is frequently portrayed as failing his first attempt at crime fighting due to a lack of a symbol, or meaning, to fight behind. The bat in this case could be interpreted as a signal from on high, not unlike the Oracle of Delphi. In a fashion

similar to Hercules, Bruce Wayne follows the advice of the on high sign, speculating that because “criminals are a superstitious, cowardly lot...[his] disguise must be able to strike terror into their hearts.”

This redemption on the part of Bruce Wayne continues even into the modern depictions of the character, and showcases how his desire to repent for the loss of his parents motivated him to become Batman. In *Batman and Robin #1* (2011), Batman has the combination to the Batcave’s entrance as 10:48 on a grandfather clock, the time his parents were murdered, showing that their death heavily influenced his desire to fight crime. Furthermore, the character makes the decision to honor “their wedding anniversary and not their final night on this planet,” suggesting that his entire career as Batman was meant to do just that: honor the memory of his family, which he caused the loss of, not unlike how Hercules was made responsible for the death of his own family. *Detective Comics* also demonstrates Batman’s desire to honor his parents’ death through crime fighting, as he mentions that he will “be doing what [he] vowed to do after [his] parents were murdered. Fixing this hellhole.” The character’s portrayal fits the tragic hero archetype that originated in Greek mythology and continued throughout literature until its incorporation into the modern serialized comic book.

It has been demonstrated, both in the cases of Superman and Batman, that an origin for their character archetypes can be located and produced in Greek mythology. For Batman, the characteristics of a tragic hero can be seen in the tragic life of Hercules, and for Superman, the descent of a hero from on high gifted with supernatural powers finds its ideal archetype in Ovid’s portrayal of Perseus. Yet they are not the only comic book superheroes that demonstrate archetypes found in Greek mythology.

For example, consider Aquaman, a character that bears significant resemblance to the mythical hero Theseus. Both have strong ties to the ocean, with Theseus being the son of Poseidon and Aquaman hailing from Atlantis, but what makes the two so similar comes from how they renounce those claims and adopt the surface as their home. For Theseus, this comes from his love for Aegeus and his mother's world and, while Theseus does not deny he is Poseidon's son, he attaches himself to Athens rather than the ocean, exhibiting territorial claiming that expands his circle of territory beyond his family to his entire country. This is not only mimicked, but very closely replicated, by the recent portrayals of Aquaman. Much like Theseus, Aquaman is also by birthright heir to great power below the sea, and by the time of the current volume of the series has even refused the title of King of Atlantis, preferring to remain on land due to being raised by his father and, thus, wanting to protect his father's land.

As shown above, this relationship between superheroes and mythological heroes can be demonstrated in multiple pairings, and only serves to further connect American comic books with the stories of Greek mythology. Again, it is important to consider modern serialized comic book superheroes as continuations of the archetypes created through Greek mythological heroes, in order to best allow classical scholars the opportunities to analyze classical texts recreated by modern writers. Examining the influences mythological heroes had on the origins of modern superheroes allows the evolution of the purpose of the hero character to be discussed.

Finally, in the relationships between comic book superheroes and Greek mythological heroes, it is important to also consider how each group of heroes interacts with one another, specifically the way that the role of the mentor is portrayed in each

adaptation. As a result, for the purposes of the next section, it will become necessary to discuss sidekicks and how they impact the superhero, such as Batman and Robin, and how the wards of mythological heroes are used, such as Hercules and Iolaus. The character Chiron can also be considered a mentor, given that many mythological heroes were brought under his tutelage, and the comparative effects of the sidekick on the superhero will be considered in a final example of Greek mythology's effects on the modern American comic book.

Chapter Four: Iolaus, Icarus, and the Creation of the Modern Sidekick

There have been five canonical depictions of the sidekick Robin in the *Batman* comic books: Richard “Dick” Grayson (1940-83), Jason Todd (1983-89), Tim Drake (1989-2009), Stephanie Brown (2004), and Damian Wayne (2009-). The codename is synonymous with the role of sidekick in modern serialized comic books. In comics published by DC Comics, the usage of sidekicks is more frequent than in Marvel Comics, with examples ranging from Aqualad, Speedy, and others, all of which were apprenticed to more experienced superheroes, differing from Marvel Comics, who since the introduction of Spider-Man have largely not used sidekicks in most of their series. While originally sidekicks were portrayed as prepubescent children, modern comic books have a tendency to use older sidekicks, usually teenagers.

There are several reasons for the introduction of a sidekick into a comic book series. In many cases the sidekick is introduced to attract a younger audience, such as when Robin was introduced in *Detective Comics* to serve as an analogue for the audience, and as the comic book audience has matured and become marketed towards adolescents, the introduction of older, similarly matured sidekicks has been used to further serve as analogues for the audience. This is why, despite the fact that the newest Robin, Damian Wayne, is ten years old in *Batman and Robin* (2011), he is portrayed as an overly mature character due to his upbringing under Talia al Ghul and the League of Assassins. Sidekicks and superheroes such as Robin and Batman represent an interesting pairing of mentor and mentee that greatly resembles how heroes such as Hercules and Daedalus are

paired with younger characters to demonstrate the character development of mythological heroes. These wards, particularly those that Hercules and Daedalus trained, influenced the two primary archetypes of sidekick characters, the Icarus and Iolaus models.

However, the role of the sidekick serves another important function: continuing the character development of the superhero. Introducing the younger hero into the storyline of the modern superhero places the superhero in the positions of mentor and father-figure to the new sidekick, and results in the superhero learning and growing up. The superhero must now guide the young sidekick through the trials of becoming a superhero and prepare the sidekick for solo heroism. This natural evolution from child to adult can be seen in such characters as the adult Robins: Nightwing (Dick Grayson), Red Robin (Tim Drake), and Red Hood (Jason Todd); and Arsenal (Roy Harper), who apprenticed to Green Arrow. All four characters grow out of their sidekick roles and become full-fledged superheroes.

This introduction of the sidekick might seem, when thought about, to be a crude remnant of the Golden Age of comic books (c. 1930-50), especially considering the fact that children are being used by superheroes to assist them in their wars on crime, but in reality the inspiration for these sidekicks again can be seen in Greek mythology. Classical texts often reference young boys being used by mythological heroes for a variety of purposes, one of which being to assist them in combat. This can be seen in the character of Iolaus, who assisted the mythological hero Hercules in slaying the Lernaean Hydra. Iolaus, who becomes a hero in his own right in Ovid's tale "Iolaus and Callirhoe's Sons," can be seen as the representation of the ideal sidekick in Greek mythology. In addition to the Hercules and Iolaus models, another example of this relationship exists in Greek

mythology in the form of Daedalus and Icarus, forming an example of a failed sidekick. The centaur Chiron also demonstrates the mentor relationship, as he plays a role in the training of several heroes in Greek mythology such as Hercules and Jason.

This similarity between how both types of heroes handle and raise their sidekicks plays a significant role in showing the use comic books can offer to classical scholars. Previously, the analyses have compared superheroes solely to their mythological hero counterparts, but there is only so far a comparative argument such as that can be taken. Listing similarities between characters displays a pattern, but not necessarily a scholarly use for comic books for classical scholars. It therefore will be the purpose of this section to show how the relationships between comic books superheroes and sidekicks relate to mythological heroes and their wards. By doing so, classical scholars may revisit the relationships between heroes, not just heroes themselves, through serialized comic books.

The character of Batman has always leaned towards a solo style of heroism, so it is natural that unlike other sidekicks that strive to mimic their mentor's style, the character of Robin differentiates himself from Batman visually. Dick Grayson, the original Robin, had a costume that was, after all, designed to resemble circus performers, as it reflected the character's family legacy, coming from Haley's Circus as a member of the Flying Graysons. The result created a bright costume that served as a stark contrast to Batman's gothic uniform. This bright aesthetic on behalf of the Grayson Robin also lent itself to the character's personality, with Grayson serving as a jolly counterpoint to Bruce Wayne. In the miniseries *DC One Million* (1998), it is even speculated by a futuristic Robin that, much like the future's Batman, Wayne brought Grayson into his life to not descend into complete darkness.

Because the codename changed hands over the years, the Robin character behaves differently depending on who is Robin at that time, as does Batman's treatment of the character. Perhaps nowhere is this more apparent than when comparing the oldest Robin to the most recent: the jolly Grayson to the sullen Damian Wayne. Grayson, more than any other Robin, exhibits the ideal representation of Iolaus in serialized comic books, having outgrown his mentor and operating on his own. *Nightwing #1* (2011) even acknowledges that Grayson has used the identity of Batman during a period when Bruce Wayne was thought dead, displaying that Grayson has completely outgrown his role as sidekick.

In stark contrast the most recent incarnation of Robin, Damian, is shown to have a different relationship with Batman, unsurprising given the fact that Damian is Batman's biological son. Whereas Grayson is an adopted child and thus permitted a certain level of freedom by Batman, Damian is given no such leeway and is heavily controlled. Further compounding the relationship difficulties between Batman and Damian are Batman's skills as a parent. Because Batman prefers to be detached from his soldiers, Batman tells Damian his actions are "commendable" (*Batman and Robin #2* 2011), instead of saying he is proud of his son as suggested by Batman's butler, Alfred Pennyworth. This isolates Damian, who notes that "Pennyworth's been more of a father" than Batman (*Batman and Robin #5*).

Damian's negative behavior highlights the difference in the ideal sidekick represented by Iolaus, and the unsuccessful sidekick represented by such characters as Icarus. With the Iolaus model of the sidekick, the young hero becomes capable of handling himself, as demonstrated through Grayson's solo heroics and successful

transition into an adult superhero. Damian, however, represents the archetype of the Icarus sidekick, despite the fact that much of his anger and resentment can be traced to how he is parented. Part of the role of the mentor is to successfully nurture the young superhero into a responsible hero, and Batman has yet to do that with Damian. This is not the first time this has happened either. *Batman: A Death in the Family* (1988) marked the death of the second Robin, Jason Todd, as a result of Batman's failure to raise him properly. The failure on behalf of Batman to properly protect and raise an Iolaus sidekick eventually resulted in Jason Todd becoming a violent antihero in stark contrast to the heroic nature of the ideal Iolaus sidekick Grayson.

The Icarus sidekick is not just limited to Batman, and can be seen in a variety of forms across modern serialized comic books. Ovid writes that Icarus "ceased to follow his leader," and died for his insistence to fly closer to the sun, a failure on behalf of Daedalus to properly prepare his son for flight (305). By not listening to his father Daedalus, Icarus provides the reader with an example of the failed sidekick, one that does not heed the teachings given to them by their superhero, and falls from grace. Another example of this can be seen in the character of Roy Harper, who in 1971 was neglected by his superhero mentor Green Arrow and as a result became an Icarus sidekick by becoming addicted to heroin. Current portrayals of Harper base themselves off this addiction, with the Harper portrayed in the series *Red Hood and the Outlaws* (2011) displaying the violent tendencies seen in the second Robin, Jason Todd.

Of course, this dualism between Icarus and Iolaus heavily involves the rearing style of a superhero, as the sidekick will depend on the superhero they are apprenticed to for guidance. The sidekick/superhero relationship most closely resembles the father/son

relationship as seen in myths such as “Daedalus and Icarus,” as the superhero will often assume a parental role to fill the absence of the sidekick’s true family, such as in the case of Grayson where Bruce Wayne assumes the role of adopted father upon the death of Grayson’s parents. After the sidekick’s apprenticeship begins, however, it is the nature in which the superhero approaches raising the sidekick that ultimately determines whether the sidekick will become an Iolaus, or an Icarus instead.

There are, as a result, several avenues that superheroes can take in approaching the raising of their sidekick. Perhaps the most successful finds its influences in Hercules and Chiron, both of whom prove to be adept mentors and capably train new heroes. In particular, the character of Chiron is noted for being the trainer of several heroes in Greek mythology such as Jason and Hercules himself. Chiron succeeds as a mentor primarily due to his experience rearing multiple heroes over the course of his life to the successful Iolaus model. A comparison can be noted in how Batman approached the raising of Tim Drake, the third Robin. Having successfully raised Grayson into an Iolaus and learned from Jason Todd how to not raise an Icarus, Batman is able to successfully raise Drake into the mantle of Red Robin, who appears in the *Teen Titans* (2011) in a leadership capacity. It should be noted that Alfred Pennyworth can also be construed to assume the role of Chiron in the *Batman* comic books, serving as a father-figure to Bruce Wayne and guiding him. Pennyworth makes the relationship between him and Batman clear in “Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader?” (2009) saying to guests that he is not “all right” because his “son is dead.” To Pennyworth, Bruce Wayne is his son, and he had reared him in this mindset. Because Bruce Wayne grew up to assume the Batman mantle, much as Hercules grew up to fulfill his destiny, it can be said that Pennyworth, like

Chiron, serves as an additional mentor, a fact that, as stated previously, is even noted by Damian.

Contrasting the successful Hercules and Chiron models is the Daedalus model of the superhero. This sort of superhero, as a result of neglect or a lack of focus, causes their sidekick to falter and never surpass their superhero father figure, as noted in Green Arrow's neglect of Roy Harper and, to some extent, in Batman's inability to properly protect Jason Todd. As a result, the sidekick fails to mature and is always subservient to the skills and prestige afforded to their superhero mentor. This failure, as seen in Todd, makes him subservient to the successes of the previous Robin, Grayson, and may be the reason that Todd was originally killed off in a popular vote. This vote, conducted among the readership and which resulted in the writers of *Detective Comics* killing off Jason Todd, also validates the fact that, to readers, the Icarus sidekick is not ideal. Similarly, the Daedalus superhero represents a failure on behalf of the superhero to properly mature from solo heroics to the mentor relationship needed to pass his skills on to the next generation.

The Daedalus superhero does not manage to gain the respect of his sidekick as a Hercules superhero might, resulting in an Icarus sidekick that does not learn from the lessons of their mentor. Hercules succeeded in rearing Iolaus because he was careful, letting the boy aid him in killing the Hydra only when he was sure Iolaus would be useful, and the two form a respect for one another. Hercules even bids his wife Hebe to restore Iolaus' youth in "Iolaus and Callirhoe's Sons" (Ovid 359). On the opposite side, many sidekicks who become Icarus models rarely associate with their Daedalus father-figures, as evidenced by Jason Todd distancing himself from Batman. Another example

can be seen in the television series *Young Justice* (2011-12), an adaptation in which the character of Roy Harper refuses to return to his role as Green Arrow's sidekick, Speedy, and distances himself from his sidekick past.

The relationship between the sidekick and the superhero is a unique pairing which certainly has some influences in how Greek mythology would pair younger characters with more experienced heroes in order to show the continuing character development of mythological heroes such as Hercules and Daedalus, both of which influenced the two primary archetypes of sidekick characters, the Icarus and Iolaus models. Batman, especially due to the multiple sidekicks that have trained under him, is an excellent example of both models of superhero, and his protégés excellent examples of both sidekick models. However, these models are not limited to examples from Batman. In addition to the Dark Knight, several modern serialized comic books and their adaptations utilize sidekicks in an effort to mature their superheroes, as evidenced by Green Arrow's sidekick Roy Harper.

The Daedalus model plays a significant role in the modern television adaptation of *Young Justice*. The series displays this model through the relationship between Superboy and Superman, the latter of which displays reluctance to raise Superboy because, though Superboy is his clone, he is not Superman's "son." As a result, Superboy exhibits traits similar to the Icarus sidekick due to the abandonment of his idol. The extent of this trauma is demonstrated in "Terrors," where Superboy notes that a supervillain has spent "more quality time" with Superman than he has. The portrayal of Superboy throughout the series continues to analyze this lack of connection, and as a result Superman demonstrates the behavior of a Daedalus mentor by refusing to aid in the

training and development of Superboy. As a result, Superboy exhibits the attitudes of an Icarus sidekick: brash and inattentive to orders. This behavior displays the fact that the Icarus and Iolaus models are used in a variety of mediums, from comic books to television, and reflects the characteristics of its source models.

The Batman and Robin relationship, and the differences in that relationship when the mantle of Robin changes hands, really helps showcase the differences between the Iolaus and Icarus sidekick models. In addition, Batman's differing treatment of each of his wards can be used to measure the success of both the Hercules and Daedalus models of mentorship. Batman's treatment of Grayson, for example, emphasizes the benefits of the Iolaus model and how important the mentor is to the superhero/sidekick relationship. On the other hand, Batman's failure to prevent the death of Jason Todd only showcases how that importance goes both ways, as it is equally important for the sidekick to mature and the superhero to protect the sidekick for mutual development.

Conclusion

The nature of the sidekick, and the ways that it influences the superhero community, is directly related to Greek mythology. The concept of heroes taking in youths and rearing them into the heroic community is directly analogous to how Batman took in the original Robin, Dick Grayson. Grayson, as a representative of the Iolaus sidekick, shows these sidekick models originated in the portrayal of youths in Greek mythology. The usage of sidekicks in modern American comic books could be construed as the continuing influence of Greek mythology on modern culture, much in the same way that origin stories play a focal point in both mythology and modern American comic books series, or how the mythological and superheroes similarly develop through the course of the monomyth archetype proposed by Joseph Campbell.

This influence Greek mythology holds on western culture is perhaps only natural, as Greek civilization and culture continue to influence society today. An excellent example of this influence is modern democracy, which is an evolutionary byproduct of the Greek culture that traveled through Western Europe, influencing American politics, much in the same way the Greek myth of Perseus influenced Benvenuto Cellini's sculpture *Perseus and Medusa*, a piece which in turn influenced the stance and style that artists depict modern comic book superheroes. Greek influence is but one long chain, stretching from the beginning of Greek civilization to modern times, and the effect that time has had on the stories and mythology passed along that chain is a subject worth considering, especially in the realm of scholarly criticism. The way that modern writers

and artists continue to incorporate older influences into modern American comic books only serves to highlight the benefit of studying such texts: they show how modern society perceives these myths and continues to be influenced by them.

It is for that reason scholars should introduce more research into modern American comic books. It is not enough to simply review graphic novels such as *Watchmen* or *The Dark Knight Returns*. Such titles are influential, yes, but both titles represent only a small sampling of the available subject matter that modern serialized comic books provide scholars. Comic book publishers produce tomes of literature each month, much of which has influential origins in not just Greek mythology, but many other genres of literature. A scholar could peruse *Frankenstein: Agent of S.H.A.D.E.*, to examine how Mary Shelly's eponymous hero Frankenstein was translated from a tragic villain in Romantic Gothic literature into a modern superhero. In another example, a scholar might examine how the works of American colonial writers influenced the overtly patriotic themes of *Captain America*. The fact of the matter is that modern serialized American comic books hold valuable points of discussion for modern scholars, if only they would look.

But, as noted previously, the modern serialized comic book is not looked at for its important adaptations of works already studied in academia. Rather than viewing the modern comic book is viewed as a novelty, a piece of entertainment, scholars should embrace the modern serialized comic book as a genre worthy of scholarly research. But why is that? If anything, the research conducted in this study suggests numerous avenues of scholarly potential. The study demonstrated no less than four examples of how modern serialized comic book series interact with the mythology of Greece, all four examples of

which dealt with not only different intersections of comparison, but also different mythological heroes and different modern superheroes, showing that these relationships are not as superficial as they would appear to the layman observer. A previous anecdote mentioned that Aquaman and Theseus could be traced superficially by their lineage as heroes of the sea, but both are narratively connected by their respect for their fathers and the homelands they adopted on the surface to honor those fathers. It is those deeper connections which drive the ability to connect Greek mythology and modern American comic books.

But again, however, the issue with researching modern serialized comic books is that they are continuously viewed as both juvenile and derivative, both of which are stereotypical criticisms for the introduction of modern serialized comic books into the canon. Again, as Tabachnick speculated, comics did replace the penny dreadful as the most transient class of literature (9), and to an extent it is true that modern American comic books have not broken free of these criticisms. However, scholars must note that the elimination of texts which are juvenile and derivative radically reduces the argument for canonicity in other works. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is certainly childish, and was developed for children audiences, but that does not stop the text from being one of the most celebrated novels of the English language. *Alice's* wordplay, combined with its rich characters and sublime use of English traditions, grant it a scholastic reception that transcends its original audience as a juvenile text. Similarly, many of the works of William Shakespeare are as derivative of older sources as modern comic books are, possibly more so, considering that many of Shakespeare's stories incorporate numerous heroes, myths, and stories from Greek mythology. The prejudice that transient works

such as derivative and juvenile comic books have no place in the canon cannot stand, considering how many works in the canon already utilize both juvenile literature and works that derive from older texts. It should be the text itself, and not its medium, that determines its value.

It is the hope of this study that scholars perceive the value that modern serialized comic books have, not just for classical scholars, but to the world of academia. Scholars have the opportunity to see the evolution of modern culture, and how older texts play a part in shaping the stories of modern times. Nowhere else is this opportunity more available than in comic books, an ever-evolving, ever-adapting genre of literature that spans decades of culture, always adapting to the tastes of the present, but always mindful of the traditions of old. It is comic books that tell the tales of modern gods, designed for the modern readership, but influenced by the literature of cultures past. They are a medium unlike any other, and like any other genre deserve their portion of the canon.

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