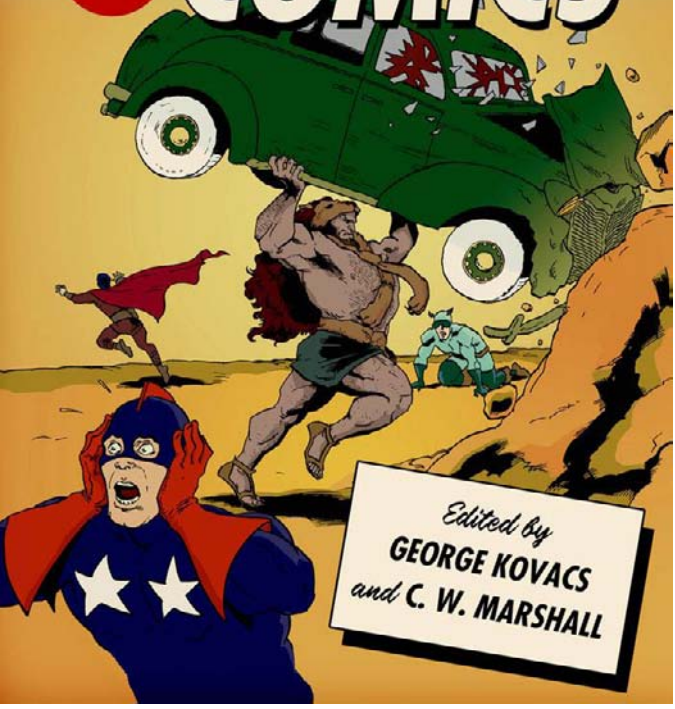


# CLASSICS *and* COMICS



*Edited by*  
**GEORGE KOVACS**  
*and C. W. MARSHALL*

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## Classics and Comics

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## CLASSICAL PRESENCES

*General Editors*

Lorna Hardwick James I. Porter

The texts, ideas, images, and material culture of ancient Greece and Rome have always been crucial to attempts to appropriate the past in order to authenticate the present. They underlie the mapping of change and the assertion and challenging of values and identities, old and new. Classical Presences brings the latest scholarship to bear on the contexts, theory, and practice of such use, and abuse, of the classical past.

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# Classics and Comics

EDITED BY

George Kovacs and C. W. Marshall

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# Introduction

C. W. MARSHALL AND GEORGE KOVACS

The helmeted gladiator swings his blade across the comic book cover, forcing Daredevil, “The Man Without Fear,” to dive beneath the arc carved by the sword (figure 0.1). The contrasting trajectories in David Mazuchelli’s image suggest opposite movements: The *gladius* overlaps the title logo and seems to leap out at the viewer; the blind hero, Daredevil, is about to enter into a shoulder roll and seems clearly outclassed by his foe. The simplicity of this cover and its evocation of Roman themes stand out. The story, “Warriors” (*Daredevil* 226, January 1986) was cowritten by Frank Miller and Denny O’Neill, both important names in American comics. Miller was to revolutionize American comics in 1986 by focusing on more adult-oriented themes, and O’Neill had introduced important mature themes to *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* and *Batman* in the 1970s. The Daredevil story should have been better than it was, then, and part of the disappointment for the aspiring classicist was that the Gladiator was not an ancient Roman at all but was Melvin Potter, a villain who owned a costume shop in New York City (and who had in fact been introduced twenty years before, in *Daredevil* 18, July 1966). A popular classical model was being used to sell a superhero comic, and even though the connection was not quite as integrated as we might have wanted, here was an intersection of the ancient world and modern comics.

Classics and comics: In this volume, we document many of the ways that the two have intersected. Like cinema, comics are a medium that developed and flourished in the twentieth century. Unlike cinema, however, comics have always languished in pejorative associations of low culture, categorized with or as pulp fiction. These implications of para- or sub-literary value stem from the medium’s origins in American newspapers, where comics were printed to increase circulation among European immigrants with limited literacy in the English language. Later associations with juvenile delinquency in the popular psychiatry of the 1940s and 1950s galvanized comics’ low position in public esteem. Labels such as “graphic novel” or “sequential art” have been applied in recent decades by creators and fans alike to connote a more mature medium, and yet no concrete distinction—whether in content or in form—can be made between these terms and the more traditional label, “comics.” For our purposes, the popular appeal of comics, so disturbing to critics of high culture, presents an opportunity. In terms of the history of the reception of the ancient world, comics represent an important and underexplored corpus





FIGURE 0.1 Daredevil battles the Gladiator. *Daredevil* 226 (Marvel, Jan. 1986): "Warriors." Cover art by David Mazzucchelli.

of material that reflects popular conceptions of antiquity. In four colors stamped on newsprint (with higher production values outside North America), comics present countless new worlds to the reader.

In the last three decades in particular, conscious literary sophistication has improved the quality of comics' narratives overall. Simultaneously, practitioners began developing theoretical approaches to comics that provided writers and artists—and their fans—with the critical vocabulary to better explain their own creative instincts. Comics also found a greater role in the public awareness as they began crossing into other media more regularly. This had always happened to some extent—Superman was on the radio in the 1940s, and Batman on television in the 1960s—but since the late 1980s Hollywood has discovered that considerable financial rewards are to be harvested from introducing comics-generated superheroes to other media.

All of this is very far from the academic study of Greece and Rome, of course. Classics is a discipline that embodies, even in its name, the high-culture associations and aspirations of Western culture. The discipline of Classics has also changed in recent decades, however, expanding its purview to include academic discussion of the uses to which antiquity has been put in more recent times. The reception of Classics (itself a refiguring of a concern for “the Classical tradition”) looks at the place of Greece and Rome and at times at the idea of Greece and Rome in later cultures. However, it also recognizes that any audience for a text is a legitimate one and that our interpretation of an ancient source is itself mediated by those receptions and interpretations that have accumulated over the centuries. If any reading is an interpretation (and therefore a reinterpretation), our understanding of an ancient source will be enriched by looking at how that moment has been understood and read by others. Sometimes those readings will be poorly or mistakenly informed. That does not make them illegitimate, however. Plenty of operas and theatrical adaptations (to take examples from so-called high-culture appropriations) are undertaken without an interest in understanding how the source text originally created its meaning.

What matters is the decision to use the past to make sense of the present. Sometimes these rereadings can point to something that lies dormant in the text that has not yet been isolated. A dozen years after “Warriors,” Frank Miller wrote and drew *300*, his five-part comics vision of the battle of Thermopylae. While mainstream appraisals of the story were generally positive, some Classicists balked at what were perceived to be historical inaccuracies. These certainly existed, but they matter less than the impact of a mass media presentation of this crucial event for Western history, an impact that was expanded when it became a film in 2007. Actual Spartans may not have fought with as few clothes as Miller depicts, but the resonances created with (the modern understanding of) heroic nudity, familiar from Greek (Athenian) vase painting, help create a valorization of the central events that would have been familiar to a fifth-century Greek.

Comics narratives can be articulated in terms of smaller units: panels on a page, pages in an issue, issues in a series. The serial format was especially important in the development of American comics: Readers were constantly encouraged to purchase the next issue through narrative techniques well known in other episodic media such as television dramas or eighteenth-century serialized novels. Cliffhangers, promised crossovers in which favorite characters guest-star in other titles, and macronarratives spanning multiple issues and titles are all designed to sell the next issue but also have important consequences on how readers are trained to interpret and reconstruct the narratives.

The space that exists between panels (“the gutter,” as Scott McCloud has termed it) is a crucial means of creating narrative momentum. These are the grammatical units of a comics narrative, the sentences and paragraphs that articulate the overall structure. One convention in comics equates a single panel with a whole page—a splash page—to arrest the reader’s progress and show something momentous. Sometimes these occur at the beginning or the end of an issue, and sometimes they even extend over two pages. The reader of *300* is struck by the frequent use of large panels that push the bounds of the page. Some of these are splash pages, some merely oversized or irregular. Speech bubbles (and thought balloons) exist within panels but sometimes escape as a line of dialogue leads the reader from one panel to another, bridging the gutter.

Reading *300* as an example of an individual artist’s understanding of a defining moment of Western culture, one can see that Miller has attempted to impart an epic scope to his storytelling. Every double page in the series includes at least one panel that crosses the issue’s center staplefold. Miller suggests that his story cannot be contained within the constraints of the standard comic-book size: The panels must somehow be larger than the medium itself. This particular aspect of the storytelling is lost in the collected edition of *300*, which presents each double-page spread in a long, landscape format. Collected, *300* no longer looks like a comic, and something is lost of the experience of having the fold interrupt at least one panel every time a page is turned. We’re not saying that you should fold your own copy of *300* down the middle. However, it does add to the experience of reading the story to realize how Miller has experimented and innovated with the medium in order to lend a grandeur to his narrative. Nor is this the only way that reading *300* has changed. Since the war in Iraq (which began after the comic but before the film), the story of a militarily superior force invading an underarmed country with superior numbers and military technology finds resonances that overshadow the simple East-vs.-West binary that the mainstream media presented in the story after 9/11.

Even the history of comics as a medium is often articulated in terms inspired by the Classics. Fans talk of the Golden Age of comic books or of the Silver Age: periods that define in Hesiodic terms the development of the comics medium and point to key moments of its history. The Golden Age lasts from the 1930s to the 1940s. Some tie it to the debut of Superman in *Action Comics* 1 in 1938 or even earlier to the first comic books in 1933, which use the familiar shape and format still current today. Following World War II, for a variety of reasons, social pressures in the United States led to the cancellation of many superhero comics. Some historians recognize an interregnum of “Atomic Age” comics, but a new landmark is heralded with the publication of *Showcase* 4 in 1956, which introduced a new secret identity for the Flash. When Barry Allen became the Flash, assuming the mantle previously worn by Jay Garrick in the Golden Age until the title was canceled in 1949, superheroes were shown to be greater than the specific narratives that contained them. They could be universalized, rewritten, mythologized: The scope of what was possible became universal. Subsequent ages are sometimes articulated, though historians disagree about where the boundaries lie. Generally speaking, the Bronze Age includes comics in the 1970s until the work of Miller and Alan Moore in 1985–1986. This period is then followed by the Modern Age, which among other things has bestowed upon the industry a general cultural acceptance of comics in North America through the marketing of trade paperbacks (lagging behind Europe and Japan, where comics had not been so stigmatized).

Like the Hesiodic ages (*Works and Days* 109–201), the nomenclature is cluttered, and interlopers disturb patterns. Hesiod's Heroic Age (which falls between Bronze and Iron) corresponds to the time most frequently described in Greek myth. The idea that things are devolving, however, gradually getting worse, is interrupted by the Heroic Age, which improves on what has gone before, leaving the present Iron Age a crucible in which human action can determine the future. Later versions of these ages (e.g., Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.89–150) do not have such breaks in the metallic periodization, and this perhaps points to an earlier understanding that happens to be attested only late in the literary record. For Ovid, though, the ages are all in the past, removed from our experience of the world. In a similar way, the periodization of comics history can be done only in retrospect, and the precision of the dividing line matters less than the overall movement, which is progress despite the metallic debasement in the terminology. The outer-space and time-travel fantasies of the Silver Age have given way to careful examination of social problems that have relevance for readers of any age. And always, to some small extent, Classical antiquity is part of that conversation.

The chapters in this volume represent only the beginnings of what can be said about the interaction between the medium of comics and the Classical world. Even so, they consider a very disparate reading list. It will be a rare reader who comes to this volume having read all of the comics discussed here. It is our hope that even readers with less experience with comics will find much of value, just as comics fans will discover new levels on which to appreciate their favorites. Especially for those readers new to comics, at the end of this volume we provide a reading list of those that we feel are important points of contact with the ancient world. We also include several key works in scholarship on comics and a list of significant superhero comics, the genre that receives the most attention here. Kovacs's initial survey provides both an overview of many examples and categories that help us think about the ways comics can use Greece and Rome.

We have divided these chapters into four sections. In the first, "Seeing the Past through Sequential Art," the contributors outline some of the parameters of this intersection. At times an understanding of comics can enable a better understanding of antiquity, reversing the expected directionality of the reception process. Nisbet and Johnson demonstrate how the techniques of reading comics can be applied to ancient texts, as they provide new understandings of a papyrus fragment and a key passage in the *Iliad*. Theisen considers the nature of literary allusion and discusses how much the reader brings to the analysis of a text as he examines the Japanese manga *Apollo's Song*. Rogers shows that the techniques used by Classicists to understand how myth works are equally applicable to comics narrative, as he considers a crucial story arc in Spider-Man comics.

The remaining three sections each offer a test case for the nature of the intersection between Classics and comics. The second section, "Gods and Superheroes," continues the emphasis on superheroes, who for some readers help define the overall medium. Marshall examines how the Furies are represented in *Wonder Woman* and *The Sandman*, both comics published by DC (which with Marvel is one of the two largest publishing houses for comics in North America). Likewise, Dethloff traces the representation of Greek gods in comics from the 1930s to the 1970s. Simms then examines a 2006 vision of Ares in Marvel Comics. The section concludes with Stevens's examination of biblical imagery in the 1996 series *Kingdom Come*.

The third section, "Drawing (on) History," looks to the past. Tomasso and Fairey consider Frank Miller's use of Thermopylae in *Sin City* and *300*. Roman history is featured in the next

two chapters: Strong considers the presentation of a well-known crux of Augustan biography in a single issue of *Sandman*, while Dinter surveys representations of Rome in European comics.

The final section, “The Desires of Troy,” examines the centrality of the Trojan War in comics, which corresponds to the centrality it held in the popular imagination of Greece and Rome. Shanower has produced an original comic for this volume that details his process as he writes and draws his monumental re-visioning of the Trojan War, *Age of Bronze*. This is complemented by Sulprizio’s examination of love and sex in *Age of Bronze*. In the final chapter Jenkins considers two European versions of the *Odyssey*.

All of these chapters make claims for the meaningful connection between comics and Classics. In offering a variety of theoretical models touching a range of texts, we risk appearing selective. In no way does this represent all that comics have to say about the ancient world. But it is a start. Our hope is that this volume will encourage other considerations of comics in the overall project of Classical Reception and that it will provide a foundation for further work. Moreover, in turn, we hope that an understanding of comics will enhance our appreciation and understanding of Greece and Rome.

## A Note on References

The nature of the comics industry is such that many stories are frequently reprinted, recycled, or repackaged. The stories discussed in this volume are cited according to the first printed issue in which they appeared. Comics issues are listed in footnotes, not in the bibliography. Citations list writer (w.) and artist (a.), which usually means the penciler who drew the images but may also refer to the inker or colorist. The dates given are the cover dates: Comics issues frequently appear months ahead of these dates. Specific citations refer to page and (if applicable) to panel. Thus, “Neil Gaiman (w.) and Sam Keith (a.), *The Sandman* 2 (Vertigo, Feb. 1989) 18.3” refers to the third panel on page eighteen of the second issue of *The Sandman*. Later reprints (such as trade paperbacks, which collect multiple issues for resale) may have different page numbers. Efforts have been made to contact copyright holders. Several publishers have acknowledged that the use of a single page or panel as an academic citation constitutes fair use.

## About Our Cover

Comics fans will recognize in our cover image an homage to *Action Comics* 1 (June 1938), the first appearance of Superman. This issue not only inaugurated the superhero genre, with which many of the papers in this volume are engaged, but also established the comic book, distinct from the comic strip, as a popular medium. In the original image, Superman destroys a car while several men flee. One must open the comic book to discover whether the caped man is friend or foe; his status as hero is initially ambiguous. In our image, Superman has been replaced by Heracles, one of the figures who inspired Superman’s creators. Like Superman raising the car, Heracles is an ambiguous hero by both ancient and modern standards: He rids the world of threatening monsters but is himself monstrous. He sacks cities to seize pretty girls, and is victim to fits of heaven-sent madness.

The artist is George O’Connor, whose series *Olympians* began to appear after the chapters in this volume were completed (First Second Books; see the series website [olympiansrule.com](http://olympiansrule.com)).



Each 80-page volume in *Olympians* is dedicated to a different Olympian god; as of this writing, the Zeus and Athena volumes have been released. We are grateful to O'Connor for our cover, which was done especially for this volume, and are pleased to be able to incorporate his vivid and dynamic artistic style in this way.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Mary-Kay Gamel, Barbara Gold, and Judy Hallett for their exceptional support and encouragement in the early stages of this project and particularly for supporting an Outreach panel on Classics and Comics at the 2008 American Philological Association meetings. At OUP, we are grateful to James Porter and Lorna Hardwick, series editors of *Classical Presences*, and to Stefan Vranka and Deirdre Brady and the anonymous reviewers, whose comments have improved many of the chapters. Our contributors have proven passionate about their subjects, yet were always willing to accept our (occasionally obsessive) suggestions. We have learned a good deal from them and have appreciated the support given by many others who were not able to contribute to this volume. Andrew McClellan proofread drafts and helped with indexing. We would also like to acknowledge the research funding offered by the H.S.S. Large Grants Program at the University of British Columbia and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

C. W. Marshall and George Kovacs

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## Classics and Comics



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# Comics and Classics

## Establishing a Critical Frame

GEORGE KOVACS

In 1939, the adventuring caveman Alley Oop showed us that the best way to experience the ancient world is to use a time machine. In April of that year Oop, along with his girlfriend, Ooola, and Dr. Elbert Wonmug (an Einstein caricature), used a time machine to travel back to the time of the Trojan War. The writer of the long-running comic strip *Alley Oop*, V. T. Hamlin, introduced the time machine as a device to allow his characters a greater range of possible adventures, and the first place they went was Troy. Hamlin's send-up of the world of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid* is clearly a loving tribute, and his work "presupposes a newspaper-reading public that is knowledgeable about Troy."<sup>1</sup> In subsequent decades, most of the major superheroes of American comics were making regular sojourns to ancient Rome, Pompeii, or Egypt.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the ancient world would visit them.<sup>3</sup> In the modern academy, we do not have time machines. This is perhaps what most differentiates the classical scholar from the superhero. We also do not wear capes—most of the time.

In May of 1969 Superman was stunned to see his girlfriend, Lois Lane, gallop away, transformed into a centaur, apparently forever (figure 1.1).<sup>4</sup> Despite the claims of the cover image, Lois makes it out okay: Comics covers of the day were frequently and deliberately misleading in their attempt to sell comics. The cover image actually references the second story (of two) in this issue,

1. *Alley Oop* seems to be the first comic strip to portray the ancient world; see Levine (1994, 365–86). Levine's article on *Alley Oop* is, appropriately, one of the first studies of classics and comics. Bound volumes of *Alley Oop* are available through a number of publishers. Of interest are two volumes collected by Dragon Lady Press, *Alley Oop No. 2: Enter the Time Machine* (1987; includes Oop's *Iliad* adventures) and *No. 3: Oop vs. Hercules: Is This Homer's Odyssey?* (1988), as well as Kitchen Sink Press, *Alley Oop*, vol. 2: *The Mystery of the Sphinx* (1991).

2. An exhaustive search for stories of this type is difficult, even with electronic databases. Nevertheless, searching for famous figures from antiquity (such as Julius Caesar and Cleopatra) reveals that Superman (in both the *Superman* and *Superboy* titles), Batman, Iron Man, Dr. Strange, and the Human Torch all made such trips to the past.

3. A personal favorite is a one-page Captain America story that appeared in a number of Marvel titles in 1978, "Captain America and the Time Warp!" an advertisement sponsored by Hostess (writer and artist unknown). Captain America investigates a disturbance in Central Park to discover (presumably Julius) Caesar and his troops eating Hostess Twinkies after wandering into a time warp. As Captain America also enjoys delicious Twinkies, the two warriors are able to part friends. The earliest appearance of the ad seems to be in *Marvel Team-Up* 77 (July 1978).

4. Leo Dorfman (w.) and Curt Swan (a.), *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane* 92 (May 1969).



FIGURE 1.1 Lois Lane horses around. *Superman's Girl Friend, Lois Lane* 92 (DC, May 1969): "The Unbreakable Spell!" Cover art by Curt Swan.

“The Chestnut Mare Ain’t What She Used to Be!” in which Lois is turned into a superhorse by the evil wizard, Maldor, when she rebuffs his romantic advances. Lois is in fact a centaur for only a single panel as she transforms into the horse and then one more as she changes back. The story is balanced with the issue’s lead tale, “The Unbreakable Spell!” in which Lois encounters Comet the Super-Horse (Supergirl’s flying pet horse, making a guest appearance). In this story, Comet is briefly transformed into a human and tells Lois his own origin tale. He was himself a centaur named Biron until he fell in love with the witch Circe, a regular antagonist of Wonder Woman, who, like her model in the *Odyssey*, specializes in the transformation of humans and animals. In attempting to grant Biron a fully human form, she transforms him into a horse. Circe is unable to reverse the change and, as compensation, grants the new horse superpowers.<sup>5</sup> The story is hardly atypical: Images from Greco-Roman mythology and history permeate the comics medium. Sometimes the connection is casual, as with Lois Lane’s new body: Centaurs, male and female, are a popular image in the Western world.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes the connection requires further effort on the part of the reader: Young readers may not immediately understand DC comic book sorceress Circe’s connection to the *Odyssey*. These readers may appreciate her only for her magic skills (and scanty clothing), but there is nevertheless a classical paradigm functioning. Understanding that connection enriches our appreciation of the comic book. It also tells us something about the place of centaurs and Homeric witches in modern popular culture. However, deeper and more meaningful levels of engagement between the classical world and comics exist, and it is with these that this volume is concerned.

Though it is our hope that *Classics and Comics* will appeal to a range of audiences, our target demographic is the capeless classical scholar. Our engagement with comics, and that of our contributors, is specifically informed by—and seeks to develop—traditions of classical scholarship. Our intent is to help situate the modern medium of comics as literature within existing genres of world art and fiction. Our contributors bring to bear established methodologies of philology, historiography, philosophy, and archeology in order to understand comics and classics in new and meaningful ways.

With this approach, we are positioning ourselves within the rapidly increasing field of Reception studies. Scholars have opened up many new avenues of exploration as they begin tracing ways in which modern culture engages with the ancient world. Such reception-oriented scholarship has been around for a long time but until recently existed only in occasional case studies.<sup>7</sup> In recent years, however, studies in Reception have flourished and consolidated, with Hardwick’s *Reception Studies* (2003), which serves as something of a watershed, defining and codifying this new subdiscipline. In the first decade of this millennium, works on Reception have appeared with increasing frequency and sophistication.<sup>8</sup> In addition to

5. The story is first told by Leo Dorfman (w.) and Jim Mooney (a.) “The Secret Origins of Supergirl’s Super-Horse!” *Action Comics* 293 (Oct. 1962), reprinted in *Action Comics* 347 (March 1967).

6. Female centaurs were rare in ancient art and literature and likely unknown in the Archaic period but are attested by the fourth century BCE; see Gantz (1993, 146).

7. The earliest consideration of Classics and modern media that I know of is an editor’s letter by B. L. Ullman for *Classical Weekly* in 1918 on the drawing power of cinema: “Moving pictures are an excellent means of showing that the Classics are not dead”; see Winkler (2001, 5–6), who quotes Ullman further.

8. In addition to Hardwick, the works of Martindale and Thomas (2006), Kallendorf (2007), and Hardwick and Stray (2008), to say nothing of the countless articles in recent years, have resulted in the coalescence of Reception studies into a recognizable and respectable (if often difficult to define) field of study.

these, studies focused on specific genres and authors have become very popular. Homer and Greek theatre have dominated the field most recently, although Virgil and Ovid are also popular subjects.<sup>9</sup>

The appeal of these reception-oriented studies is obvious. There is satisfaction in seeing that ancient myths, texts, history, and artifacts still have power to move contemporary audiences. There is also the chance, ordinarily unavailable to the classicist, to engage with a wide—sometimes daunting—range of contemporary responses to the works under study: background information on productions, comments by participants, responses, reviews, and commentaries (Gamel and Blondell 2005, 111–126). Of modern media, the cinema was the logical first focus for Classicists interested in popular reception. It is performance based, far reaching (often global in its scope), and diverse in its approaches, and it has long been recognized as a legitimate medium by which serious intellectual engagement with high culture can be transmitted and explored. Starting in the early 1990s,<sup>10</sup> much has been written on the subject, exploring, by and large, either the use of Greek myth or Roman history.<sup>11</sup> Comics are another natural step in this ever-increasing field.

It is our hope that other readers will find value in these studies as well. Comic book fans are more than welcome. We are pleased to acknowledge a growing overlap between these two sets of readers, a congruence that is hardly surprising. The comics fan is typically obsessive about a specific corpus of material, closely and frequently rereading it, and situating it within an ever-expanding, multimedia megatext. Classicists see where this joke is going: They, too, obsess about a comparatively small and static corpus of material, constantly rereading and reinterpreting their artifacts according to new and evolving methodologies. Among both groups, the degree of enthusiasm is frequently equated with the success or status of the fan or scholar.<sup>12</sup> As literature, comics frequently recall the task of classical mythographers and historians who pore over book fragments, papyrus scraps, and inscriptions in an attempt to reconstruct a consistent narrative (or at least establish the variant traditions). Dedicated readers of comics spend vast amounts of energy attempting to reconcile contradictory versions, retconned (revised) histories, and changes required by transference from one medium to another (e.g., film adaptations). See Stevens and Marshall in this volume for examples of how comics can engage with their own intertext, as well as with intertexts external to their own medium. As artwork, the interaction

9. The bibliography for these is large and particularly multilingual. On Homer, Burgess (2008) is a useful meditation. Revermann (2008) does the same for Greek drama. For bibliographies on the reception of Virgil and Ovid, see Ziolkowski and Putnam (2008) and Kennedy (2002).

10. Two notable pioneers are McDonald (1983) and MacKinnon (1986), both of whom feature the films of Michael Cacoyannis as key elements of their studies.

11. The literature is growing quickly. Some highlights include Solomon (2001), Wyke (1997), Cyrino (2005), and the series of film-specific volumes published by Blackwell on *Gladiator* (2005), *Spartacus* (2006), and *Troy* (2007), all edited by Winkler, and *Whither Quo Vadis?* (2008), by Scodel and Bettenworth.

12. The obsession of the comics fan has resulted in something of a hierarchy within comics culture, parodied most succinctly by Comic Book Guy, owner and operator of the Android's Dungeon and Baseball Card Shop on the television show *The Simpsons* (Fox Broadcasting Company, 1989–present). For a study of these power dynamics and how they have evolved, see Pustz (1999, 66–109): “The variety in this popular culture audience is important, helping to make comic book culture an important site for the study of audiences and the cultures they create around themselves and their favored texts” (66).

between text and visual element in comics is not unlike that of Greek and Roman visual art, notably vase paintings.<sup>13</sup>

We anticipate this volume will attract the attention of students early in their academic careers—whether or not they continue to pursue classical studies (which of course they should). Instructors have been using popular culture, particularly film, to help generate interest in the field for some time now. I have already noted the scholarly interest in the interaction of film and the Classics, and serious attention has been paid to how film might enhance the classroom experience (Clauss 1996; McDonald 2002). By their very nature, mass media provide the most widespread and effective means of disseminating knowledge and culture. Whether or not these media are having a detrimental effect on society has long been a subject of debate (renewed by the swift growth of the Internet). For good or ill, however, we must acknowledge that students are most likely to have had their first exposure to the ancient world through some expression of current media.

For both editors of this volume, early exposure to the ancient world was occasioned by viewings of *The Mighty Hercules*, the Canadian animated series that, from 1963 to 1966 (and thereafter in syndication), told of the adventures of the son of Zeus. Hercules naturally gained superpowers by donning the magic ring given to him by his father (the token of power is a device common to comics and other popular media), and he traveled the land with his companions, Newton the centaur and the verbally challenged Tewt the satyr. He fought classically inspired villains and monsters (including Daedalus, though he, like the others, often deviated greatly from his classical model), saving ancient Greece repeatedly in five-minute episodes.<sup>14</sup> This initial mode of exposure to the Classics has become almost guaranteed with the recent spate of Hollywood blockbusters based loosely on classical material (however derivative). Numerous comics have been developed with specifically pedagogic agenda, from short public-service announcements to more sustained attempts at introducing elements of high culture to young audiences; some of these are discussed later.

Furthermore, the mass media have become a crucial element in the development of our ability to make sense of the world about us, and this development extends to our ability to understand history and literature. Students take not only their narratives from popular culture but also their understanding of how those narratives are constructed and how they operate. Children who read comic books, for example, are well trained in postmodern techniques of constructing narratives from nonlinear fragments. They swap individual issues with each other, reading them out of sequence, allowing for chronological and interpretative gaps, and are happy to accept narrative continuities that extend from one title to another, as characters are given cameos and guest spots in other titles to boost overall sales. Character typologies are also imported directly from the traditions of Hollywood and comics. As any instructor of an introductory mythology course knows, many students enter the classroom with preconceived

13. Marshall (2001, 59–64) examines two vases depicting the mysterious “Goose Play” using principles unique to comics (text and image, relationship of images between “panels,” condensation of time in a single image) as outlined in Eisner (1985) and McCloud (1993). A shorter but equally effective use of McCloud’s ideas with a more traditional classical subject can be found in Marshall (1999, 189).

14. Johnny Nash’s theme song sets the tone: “Hercules! People are safe when near him! / Hercules! Only the evil fear him! / Softness in his eyes, / Iron in his thighs, / Virtue in his heart, / Fire in every part, / Of the Mighty Hercules!”



notions of the hero, which must be dismantled before true understanding of Greco-Roman myth can begin. Hercules, for example, is not Batman and does not follow his mantras: He is not concerned with righting wrongs, he has no compunctions against killing, and he is driven by his own desires and needs rather than an internalized moral compass (see Rogers in this volume, who applies to comics means of analysis typically applied to classical sources).

The reader of *Classics and Comics*, regardless of academic or literary background, will find here new integrations of methodologies and media. Because of space constraints, we have limited this volume to comic books (excluding even the closely related comic strip) and have received much encouragement from colleagues. Nonetheless, we have already received suggestions on how other modern media might be profitably analyzed against classical models and subjects. Among these are animated children's cartoons, Japanese anime, and political cartoons. These we have reserved for future volumes: *Son of Classics and Comics* and *CC<sup>3</sup>: Gutters of Diké*.

For those who are not yet "true believers" (Stan Lee's address to comics fans), this must be said: Comics is a medium, not a genre. This medium is defined by its formal artistic elements (the combination of words and image), not by its print format. These artistic elements must be evaluated in combination, not separately, as manifestations of either text or visual art. For many, the term *comics* invokes the comic strip found in the funny pages of the newspaper or the comic book, approximately twenty-two pages (in its popular American format) of brightly colored newsprint. It is true that most of the chapters in this volume are concerned with manifestations of the latter format, in particular focusing on Western or American comic books that present elements of antiquity. However, some of the chapters are more free ranging, looking to non-American comics or engaging comics-generated theory.

Content is another red herring, one by which comics have frequently been (mis)understood. Comics, as both art and literature, have often been derided as childish, catering to (and sometimes allegedly perverting) the desires of adolescent boys. There is certainly plenty of evidence to support this perception, but there are also many counterexamples. Wonder Woman may wear a skimpy costume, but Tintin dresses quite neatly and is generally a well-behaved boy. It was this pejorative understanding of comics that very nearly allowed psychiatrist Frederic Wertham's famous *Seduction of the Innocent* to obliterate the medium in the 1950s. Wertham convinced officials that comics constituted a fundamentally subversive medium, one that was corrupting American youth.<sup>15</sup> He provided selected examples of covers of horror comics, popular in postwar America (admittedly racy for young boys but still only a fraction of the available material), comics panels without context, and images of naked women he alleged the artists had hidden in order to reach readers subliminally, to demonstrate comics' "destructive influence" on the morals of America. However ill founded, the attack was pervasive and effective, and the stigma on the medium persists. The immediate result of Wertham's testimony was the Comics Code Authority (CCA), a system of self-censorship within the industry not unlike the so-called Hays Code in American cinema twenty years earlier.<sup>16</sup>

15. In 1953, Wertham was a star witness for the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency (Hajdu 2008, especially 245–73).

16. The Motion Picture Production Code was more popularly known for its creator, Will Hays. There is a long and healthy bibliography on film censorship. Doherty (2007) provides a thorough discussion keyed to the role of Joseph Breen, the first administrator responsible for enforcing the Hays Code.

The CCA forbade all but the most innocent content.<sup>17</sup> While certain genres suffered under the CCA, others flourished, particularly superhero and fantasy titles. Protagonists of these comics tended to favor a more innocent worldview, while their villains turned from the sinister to the absurd.<sup>18</sup> The creators of these new superheroes brought almost unbridled creativity to their narratives. Wertham and the CCA indirectly ushered in a new age of imaginative literature: the so-called Silver Age of comic books. A very different, long-range effect was the development of underground “comix,” in which independent creators, starting in the 1960s, began producing provocative, countercultural material, often with deliberately lower production standards. A subgenre of these comix was the “autobiographical” comic (though liberties in accuracy were a standard of the genre; Hatfield 2005, 108–127), well-known decedents of which include Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis*. The influence of the CCA began to wane in the 1970s, as even the major publishing houses began engaging with more serious themes and social issues.<sup>19</sup> Today, only Archie Comics and DC continue to submit select titles for approval.

However, just as the written word is found in the smuttiest romance novel and the loftiest epic poem, the sequential combinations of art and text are capable of detailing any subject. Content in comics, as with most modern art forms, defines not medium but genre. To use some very broad brushstrokes, the traditional American (and British) genres are those of the superhero (usually in comic *books*) and the funnies (usually in comic *strips*), but Westerns, as well as horror and romance stories, have all enjoyed popularity at various times. In Europe and Japan, comics have evolved differently, not only employing different styles of art and production but also foregrounding different genres of comics. An album format was often favored, with greater page counts and larger print size than the American issue format. Titles ranged from the light-hearted and humorous (the best known in America are *Tintin* and *Astérix*; see later discussion on the latter) to the more adult (such as *Métal Hurlant* or *Heavy Metal*).

The medium of comics is usually seen and understood as a hybrid: It is not art since it contains text, nor can it be literature since it contains illustrations. Neither is strictly necessary to the medium, but most comics (including all those featured in this volume) are a combination of art and text.<sup>20</sup> Several working definitions of the medium exist, but we are little concerned

17. Virtually every book on the history of comics and comics culture mentions Wertham and the CCA, a testament to the trauma felt by the industry at the time. Hajdu (2008) provides an analysis with further bibliography. Though the CCA was an American phenomenon, Lent (1999) examines the global ramifications of Wertham’s campaign.

18. Though not a comic book, the 1960s’ television series *Batman*, with Adam West and Burt Ward, characterizes this era of comics: often campy plots with buffoon villains meant only for the very young. Both this series and the era of comics it emulates retain huge fan followings.

19. Two notable examples from the major publishing houses include a Spider-Man story in which Harry Osborn, the son of Spider-Man’s archrival, Green Goblin, is revealed to be addicted to drugs (Stan Lee [w.] and Gil Kane [a.], *Amazing Spider-Man* 96–98 (May–July 1971), “And Now the Goblin!” “In the Grip of the Goblin!” and “The Goblin’s Last Gasp!”). Later the same year, Green Arrow discovers that his ward, Roy Harper (who was also his superhero sidekick, Speedy), was addicted to heroin (Denny O’Neil [w.] and Neal Adams [a.], *Green Lantern* 85–86 (Sept., Nov. 1971), “Snowbirds Don’t Fly” and “They Say It’ll Kill Me . . . but They Won’t Say When”).

20. Popular experiments exist. *Dinosaur Comics* by Ryan North (<http://www.qwantz.com>), a daily online strip, uses the same six-panel images derived from clipart every day, with only the text changing. After six years, the strip remains funny. Narrative continuities develop even within the formal limits North himself sets.



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