

**SAYING 'SHAZAM': THE MAGIC OF ANTIQUITY IN SUPERHERO COMICS**

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INTRODUCTION: COMICS, CULTURE AND THE CLASSICS

Nine episodes into the third season of the NBC TV drama *Heroes*, Hiro Nakamura finds himself in a predicament.<sup>1</sup> Like many of the characters on the show, Hiro has recently discovered that he has superhuman powers—in his case, the ability to bend space and time. However, an enemy has just wiped the last eighteen years of his memory. Hiro now has the knowledge and persona of a ten-year old. How is he to go about rediscovering what he has lost and regain his sense of his mission?

Hiro's friend Ando suggests that they should go to some place that will help him remember. Hiro eagerly agrees, and teleports both of them to somewhere he thinks can do this: 'the source of all knowledge',<sup>2</sup> the sort of locale where wise men gather, like 'the Greek oracle at Delphi, the Library at Alexandria'. Ando is disconcerted when he discovers that his friend has whisked him to a comics store.

Geekiness is a prominent part of Hiro's character. Nonetheless, *Heroes* in general, and Hiro's quest to recover his identity through comic books in particular, illuminate the position that comics hold in contemporary popular culture. In the first place, the show exemplifies the extent of the 'cross-fertilisation' that can now take place between comics and higher-profile forms of cultural production, such as TV shows, films, and novels. *Heroes* is implicated at all levels with the comics industry: its plot (as we have just seen), often includes them; comics-related in-jokes abound,<sup>3</sup> until November 2008, the comic book writer Jeph Loeb was one of its co-executive producers; and one episode featured a cameo appearance from the former president of Marvel Comics, Stan Lee.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, *Heroes* is a show about people with super-powers. A close connection here with the comics industry is unsurprising. However, the cross-fertilisation between comics and other creative media which it represents is easy to parallel elsewhere. Big-budget adaptations of comics as feature films are now a regular occurrence.<sup>5</sup> Graphic novels that tie into successful TV shows are likewise a fixture.<sup>6</sup> Writers who initially attained prominence in the field of comic books have turned their attentions to TV, film, or novels, and vice versa.<sup>7</sup> And original graphic novels such as Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* have attained prominence in their own right.

Hiro's quest prompts some more subtle observations as well. His immediate recourse to comics when he tries to regain his sense of identity and mission demonstrates the increasingly self-conscious relationship which popular culture has developed with regard to theories of the hero. Indeed, in the next episode, he reacts excitedly to the discovery that he and his colleagues have suddenly lost their powers by explicitly identifying this loss as a trope, a stage on the 'hero's quest'.<sup>8</sup> This engagement with not just prior notions of the heroic, but prior attempts to *theorise* the nature of the hero (most notably Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*) has increasingly characterised the productions of popular culture.<sup>9</sup> Hiro, we note, happily absorbs comic books into the mix as he tries to reconstruct his personal grammar of the heroic.

There is a further element to the deployment of comics in Hiro's search for his identity. As he frantically rereads them in the store, he shows surprise at events which are now old news to readers of comics in his audience: 'Captain America died!

Spiderman revealed his secret identity! The Hulk is red!' The show presents the deletion of Hiro's knowledge of developments in comics as a critical part of the deletion of his own history.

This moment in *Heroes* neatly reminds us that comics are a diachronic phenomenon. For Hiro, the dedicated consumer, the twists and turns of developing plot-lines down the years in his favorite medium are implicated in his sense of personal history. Some novels have developed this insight further, using specific comics like Marcel's madeleine to evoke a sharp particular moment of lost time for a character.<sup>10</sup> Comics can, in fact, be valuable indices to fluctuating cultural values and *mentalités* across the decades that the industry has been active.

Their value rests on a number of factors. Like detective stories, the sociology of which Colin Watson analysed in a famous study,<sup>11</sup> comics represent an interestingly 'non-elite' mode of creative production. Their main target readership, in most cases, has been rather different from more 'high-brow' genres such as literary novels. Moreover, the relationship between comics and the values and attitudes of their readership has been a question at the forefront of popular responses to the medium almost since its inception.<sup>12</sup> The notorious controversy over Frederic Wertham's 1954 work *Seduction of the Innocent* and the subsequent adoption of the Comics Code are a case in point.<sup>13</sup>

It comes as no surprise, then, that students of classical reception in the twentieth century have turned their attention to depictions of the ancient world in comics. In particular, scholars have done intriguing work on examples of the medium which depict classical mythology and myth. *300* and *Age of Bronze* are obvious examples.<sup>14</sup>

Nonetheless, comics devoted to the ancient world are not the be-all and end-all of classical reception in this medium. After all, the Victorian reception of antiquity is not limited to *Marius the Epicurean* or *The Last Days of Pompeii*. It can be just as interesting when comics (or related media) set in more recent times allude to the classical world. Note that Hiro, in the case examined above, grabs at the Delphic Oracle and the Library of Alexandria as exemplary sites of wisdom and knowledge.

This article therefore examines one particular aspect to the developing reception of antiquity in superhero comics. As we shall see, appropriations of classical antiquity in this medium have an interest beyond those cases where the whole plot or character concept is derived from the classics, as, for example, in Marvel's *Hercules* or DC's *Wonder Woman*. In comics, as in novels or any other mode of artistic production, the incidental or background use of classical history and literature can be as illuminating as an actual account of Troy or Thermopylae.

#### THE MAGIC OF THE PAST

What underlying themes, then, do the classical allusions of superhero comics display? We should note at the outset that any treatment on the present scale must be rather reductive and schematic. The output of DC comics alone represents more than seven decades of creative endeavour by thousands of individuals.

Nonetheless, certain patterns do emerge. In particular, it becomes clear that references to the ancient world cluster in particular contexts and story-types. Some of these are predictable. It is unsurprising that references to the ancient world in the universe of DC comics cluster around the person of Wonder Woman, whom the gods shaped from clay to be the daughter of Hippolyta the Queen of the Amazons and the champion of Pallas Athene. Others are less obvious. Perhaps the most striking of these clusters occurs around the concept of magic.

The popular consciousness more readily associates superhero comics with science-fiction than with the occult. There is justice in this perception. Superhero comics usually go to some trouble to establish a scientific or pseudo-scientific basis for the powers of their major characters. Marvel's X-Men derive their abilities from genetic mutation; the alien cell structure of DC's Superman is a natural transducer for the energy from Earth's Sun. Also common are heroes who enhance their capabilities through advanced technology. Witness Batman's utility belt, or Iron Man's suit of powered armour.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, the realm of magic is an important element in the universes of DC and Marvel comics. Sorcerers and magically empowered heroes appear from the very earliest days of the medium. Indeed, the oldest character still appearing in the modern universe of DC comics is the magician Doctor Occult, first seen in *New Fun Comics #6* in October 1935.<sup>16</sup>

References to the ancient world tend to congregate around these mystically inclined characters. Magical power in superhero comics commonly has its roots in the ancient world. The most potent spell-book in Marvel Comics, Dr. Strange's Book of the Vishanti, first appears in a temple of Marduk in ancient Babylon.<sup>17</sup> The item which empowers the DC magician Doctor Fate is a helmet, discovered in a pyramid, that contains the essence of the Babylonian deity Nabu.<sup>18</sup>

In itself, the link between antiquity and magical power in superhero comics is unsurprising. Real-world occult and magical traditions have repeatedly stressed their authenticity and authority by claiming access to the secret wisdom of a remote past. Occultists used the texts of Vergil and Homer not just for fortune-telling (the *sortes Vergilianae*), but as the basis for actual incantations.<sup>19</sup> Beyond comics, contemporary culture continues to make the connection between ancient lore and magical power. Joss Whedon's Buffyverse is an oft-cited example of the popular linkage between antiquity and occult potential,<sup>20</sup> whether for weal or for woe.<sup>21</sup>

It is the patterns of these allusions in comics, and the way they change through the decades, which show interesting features. From the earliest days of the medium, it was common for magic in superhero comics to validate itself in terms of reference to the ancient world. But for many years, it was not *Greco-Roman* antiquity that comics referenced.

Dr. Strange's book of spells, as we have already seen, first appears in a Babylonian context. A Babylonian deity empowers Dr. Fate. As the fictional metaphysics of Marvel magic developed in the 1960s, it drew upon Cabbalistic concepts such as Adam Qadmon and the Ancient One.<sup>22</sup> The cultures of the Ancient Near East are thus well-represented in the background of comic-book magic.

Until comparatively recent times, however, the classical Greeks or Romans rarely entered this picture. DC Comics, it is true, had the paradigmatic classical witch, Circe.<sup>23</sup> She, however, was developed as a nemesis for Wonder Woman, whose classical back-story we have already noted. Where comics had not already established a classical context in this fashion, they very rarely used the Greco-Roman side of the ancient world as an authenticating strategy in depicting magic until the early 1990s—a development we shall explore below.

#### THE POWER OF SHAZAM

There was one significant exception to this general trend. 1939 saw the debut, in Fawcett comics, of Captain Marvel, a magically-empowered hero with strong ties to Greco-Roman antiquity.<sup>24</sup> In his first appearance,<sup>25</sup> Billy Batson stumbles upon the wizard Shazam. Shazam imbues the youngster with the characteristics of six

archetypal figures when he speaks the wizard's name: the wisdom of Solomon; the strength of Hercules; the stamina of Antaeus; the power of Zeus; the courage of Achilles; and the speed of Mercury.

Of course, the needs of the relevant acronym largely determine the figures used here. The first letters of the six names Solomon, Hercules, Antaeus, Zeus, Atlas, and Mercury form the word SHAZAM. This becomes even clearer in the case of Batson's sister Mary. Six similarly cruciverbalist 'goddesses' empowered her, which accidentally included the male Zephyros. For all that, both the provenance of the figures and the distinctly mixed company are instructive. The power of Shazam happily mixes Roman and Greek divinities and heroes, the heroic adversary Antaeus, and the Biblical patriarch Solomon. Why did the comics press Greco-Roman myth into service alongside the Old Testament to validate Captain Marvel's powers, when most superheroic magic of this period seems to avoid it?

The explanation here lies, perhaps, in the desired ambience. This, in turn, illuminates changing perceptions of the classical world in popular culture over the course of the twentieth century. The key thing to notice about Captain Marvel is that he is, even by the standards of 1940s comics, outstandingly wholesome—a true All-American superhero. He is brave, straightforward, and moral.

This wholesomeness and innocence is an enduring and important aspect of the portrayal of the 'Marvel Family': Captain Marvel, his sister Mary, and their friend Captain Marvel Jnr. Indeed, subsequent authors have used the Marvels as a sort of 'double mirror' (to borrow François Hartog's useful metaphor)<sup>26</sup> for the DC super-hero community. As super-heroes are (often) impossibly braver, nicer and more moral than normal people, so super-heroes have tended to perceive the Marvels as innocent, wholesome, and nice to an extent which even they find faintly excessive.

A particularly good example here is Peter David's treatment of Mary Marvel as a guest character during his run on *Supergirl*. In the course of this plot-line, Mary helps a somewhat depowered Supergirl to regain her former status. The latter, however, perceives her with some resentment and jealousy as an 'ideal' superheroine who throws Supergirl herself into the shade. In an extended sequence (Figs 1 and 2),<sup>27</sup> Supergirl's ambivalent interior monologue focalises Mary's actions: 'I know I shouldn't feel that way, but she's just so... so damned nice!... She's smart, she's efficient... She feels compassion for all things... It's not fair that my life should be such a mess and she's so... so damned perfect'.).

Her rival's behaviour during this monologue (the action-hero motif of snatching wild-life that threatens a more vulnerable associate) brings out this point. Visuals and character type, too, add to this construction of Mary Marvel as a foil for Supergirl. They have (at this point) similar heights and physiques. Both wear capes (not *quite* as universal amongst super-heroes as people sometimes assume), boots, and short skirts. Both enjoy in common the powers of superhuman strength, flight, and invulnerability, and both share 'super-heroic' physical mannerisms—Mary's stance with her hands on her hips at the bottom of the second page, mirrored in a later frame by Supergirl, is a motif which is most famous from renderings of Superman. On the other hand, in a familiar contrastive trope, the brunette Mary mirrors the blonde Supergirl—ironies accrue once one realises that the *brunette* is the idealised one here,<sup>28</sup> and also that the depowered Supergirl is herself currently a brunette wearing a blonde wig to conform with the stereotypical depiction of her powered identity. David thus deploys Mary Marvel as something like the Platonic ideal of superheroic virtue and innocence. It is not surprising, then, that when DC comics announced 'The seduction of the innocent' (itself a sardonic reference to Wertham's 1954 work, mentioned above) as a major

theme in its 2007 limited series *Countdown*, the archetypal innocent at the centre of that story-line turned out to be Mary Marvel.

The Marvel Family ideal of wholesomeness and innocence is something of a contrast to the ways in which superhero comics usually portrayed magic and those who practiced it. Magicians in comics could certainly be heroes. The three Doctors, Occult, Strange, and Fate were among the earliest superheroes in their continuities. Yet an element of the exotic, the dark, and the sinister was inseparable from their character concepts.

#### STRANGE VISITOR

The first appearance of Dr. Strange, in 1963, is a case in point. The opening caption describes him as 'Dr. Strange—master of black magic'. His creators Stan Lee and Steve Ditko portray him from the first as uncanny and ambiguous,<sup>29</sup> focalising his first appearance through a protagonist haunted by terrible dreams.<sup>30</sup> This man, as a last resort, seeks out Strange, a name 'spoken in whispers'.

Strange does manifest in his first appearance some of the tropes which make for an authority figure in a comic (Fig. 3). He is tall, even for a superhero,<sup>31</sup> and shows the elegant greying at the temples which Marvel Comics in particular use to indicate gravitas (the other notable example being Mr. Fantastic, the leader of the Fantastic Four, whose fellow team-member The Human Torch was the subject of the other story in the same issue of *Strange Tales*). But the focalisation through the eyes of an intimidated narrator ensures that the reader, like the protagonist, perceives Strange from the first as an other-worldly enigma, who reveals only so much about himself as he wishes to be known. (It also sets up a narratological trick similar to that which Agatha Christie plays in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*; the focalising character, apparently an innocent in peril, turns out to be a criminal who unsuccessfully attacks Strange at the end of the story).

This technique of increasing Strange's air of mystery and otherness by focalising his behaviour through other characters is one that has persisted. Figs 4 and 5, from Kevin Smith's run on *Daredevil*, is a good example.<sup>32</sup> The eponymous superhero (who, despite dressing as an iconic devil, does not himself have any ties to the occult) is seeking advice from the great magician about his own current misfortunes. Throughout the opening frames of this issue (Fig. 4), Daredevil tells the story of Strange, not yet named, as a fable he heard from his father: 'it was about an ageless man, who lived in the Village, and practiced black magic'.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, the visuals tease with glimpses of Strange—tantalisingly incomplete, but identifiable to the informed reader through the sight of his trade-mark gold-trimmed cape and snakeskin gloves; the slow pace of the succession of frames, with a moment to moment delineation of what is happening slightly unusual in most comics of this period, also cranks up the anticipation.<sup>34</sup> It is only in the next splash panel (Fig. 5; one has to turn the page in the original comic), that the sorcerer, face still veiled in shadow, is revealed to all, while the continuing interior monologue continues to dwell on Daredevil's unease: 'When he speaks, the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I have to compose myself...'. If the Marvel family is a 'second mirror' of innocence and virtue to superheroes, Strange is clearly a 'second mirror' of the uncanny—someone even super-powered individuals meet with trepidation. This is a long way from the high-profile heroism of a Superman or a Fantastic Four.

A hypothesis suggests itself. The dearth of reference to Greco-Roman antiquity in the portrayal of most comic-book magicians arises because, for most of the twentieth century, the classical world seemed insufficiently exotic and mysterious.<sup>35</sup> Comics could deploy the classical divinities to empower a reassuring and square-jawed hero

like Captain Marvel. For more ambiguous figures such as Doctor Strange, they appeared a little too cosy.

#### ALIEN WISDOMS

The image of the classics in the context of comic-book magic fits with general trends in how popular culture perceived antiquity across the twentieth century. For much of this period, allusion to classical Greece and Rome rarely created contexts which stressed the numinous, exotic, or mysterious. Such an ambience was the preserve of the cultures of the Near and Middle East instead—or, indeed, of entirely fictional cultures such as Atlantis.<sup>36</sup>

The reasons for this can be seen in the person of Merlyn, as portrayed in T. H. White's *The Sword in the Stone* (first published in 1938, the same year as Superman's debut in *Action Comics #1*). Merlyn's incantations are indeed sometimes based on Latin,<sup>37</sup> but the effect is not esoteric or arcane. Rather, they parody the teaching practices of the English public school and university system (White himself taught English at Stowe from 1932 to 1936)<sup>38</sup> including garbled snatches of schoolboy Latin grammar.<sup>39</sup> This pedagogical atmosphere continues throughout the novel. When Sir Ector and Sir Grummore Grummersun discuss the question of the young Arthur's tuition, the 'Future Simple of Utor', and the declension of 'hic, hac [*sic*], hoc' are much on their minds.<sup>40</sup> Merlyn himself has a 'gold medal for being the best scholar at Eton',<sup>41</sup> and produces as testimonials for his employment tutoring the young Arthur 'some heavy tablets... signed by Aristotle, a parchment signed by Hecate, and some typewritten duplicates signed by the Master of Trinity, who could not remember having met him'.<sup>42</sup>

White's wry satire illustrates the sort of cultural resonances which made it hard for Greco-Roman antiquity to convey much of the numinous and uncanny in the popular culture of the middle of the twentieth century. The popular association of Latin with the grammar-grind of traditional pedagogy, and with the Gauls who troop phlegmatically through the pages of Searle and Willans' *Molesworth* books,<sup>43</sup> did not produce the atmosphere of the exotic and faintly sinister that the background of superhero magic generally required. The focus of Classics teaching in schools was predominantly grammatical and linguistic;<sup>44</sup> it did not spotlight the alterity of the cultures in which Greek and Latin were originally used.<sup>45</sup> This focus served to naturalise and domesticate the Classical languages as a mundane part of a mid-twentieth century education.<sup>46</sup> Greece and Rome, or a particular version of them, seemed too familiar to be a viable source for (to adopt Momigliano's evocative phrase) alien wisdom.<sup>47</sup> Hence the widespread recourse to Babylon, Egypt, and other cultures of the ancient Near East to evoke the desired effect.<sup>48</sup>

In this respect, then, superhero comics act as an index to fluctuations in the popular perception of ancient cultures through the twentieth century. In the first decades of the industry, they reflect the somewhat safe, cosy view of the Greco-Roman world characteristic of popular culture in the period. In later comics, however, a clear shift has become apparent. Just as in recent decades increasing academic interest in the unsettling and alien characteristics of Greco-Roman culture has diffused into the popular consciousness, so contemporary comics have found a place for a grimmer, weirder view of the classical world in their presentation of superheroic magic.

#### A NEW PERSPECTIVE

On 4 September, 1880, a long review of volumes X and XI of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* appeared in the *Athenaeum*.<sup>49</sup> This review criticised the *Britannica*'s articles on Greek history and literature, which had been supplied by Richard Jebb. In particular,

Jebb was tasked with presenting a partial view of Theocritus. The editor of Sophocles had entirely omitted any reference to the *Pharmaceutria*, which 'for fiery colour and splendid concentration of passion is only equalled by the Attis of Catullus in the whole range of ancient literature'.

This review was the work of the young Oscar Wilde. It represents a confrontation between opposing views of antiquity. As E. R. Dodds remarked, the review is 'an early example of the romantic reaction against the orthodox Victorian assumption that the hallmark of all the best Greco-Roman literature was its serenity and balance. Jebb was throughout his life an exponent of this view. Wilde is quite justified in citing against it the 'Pharmaceutria' of Theocritus and Catullus's 'Attis', two splendid poems which no-one could call serene or balanced'.<sup>50</sup>

For our present purposes, what interests in the review is the text which Wilde deploys in his objection to Jebb's classicism. The *Pharmaceutria* of Theocritus is one of the most significant literary treatments of love-magic extant from Greco-Roman antiquity. A view of the ancient world that privileges serenity and balance has significant difficulty accommodating it.<sup>51</sup>

An intriguing paradox arises. We have suggested that treatments of magic in superhero comics avoided the Greco-Roman world as seeming too cosy and familiar. However, actual texts about Greco-Roman magic can replace this perception of the classical world with a stranger, more troubling one.<sup>52</sup>

In the academic sphere, of course, Dodds himself was instrumental in achieving such a shift via his work *The Greeks and the Irrational*.<sup>53</sup> Awareness of the darker possibilities of the Greco-Roman occult was by no means altogether absent from the popular culture of the earlier twentieth century. The erudite horror writer H. P. Lovecraft, whose influence on subsequent work across several genres has been considerable,<sup>54</sup> placed the stories of transformation magic in Petronius and Apuleius at the fountain-head of the tradition of 'weird tales' in his 1927 essay 'Supernatural Horror in Literature'.<sup>55</sup>

Lovecraft's influence notwithstanding, the gradual 'defamiliarisation' of Greco-Roman culture in the later twentieth century took some time to percolate through to comic-books. Percolate it did, however (though the erosion of classics from school curricula no doubt contributed to the defamiliarisation as well). A key figure here is Thessaly, a character who first appeared in Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* comics in 1991.<sup>56</sup>

Thessaly represents a strong contrast with the patterns we have seen in earlier comics. She is a character deeply rooted in Greek antiquity, but one whose ambience is profoundly unsettling. Once again, the details of the character's introduction reward scrutiny. Gaiman focalises the opening glimpses of Thessaly through the other inhabitants of the New York apartment block where she lives. They know no more about her than does the reader at the beginning of the story, and Gaiman sets the scene for later shocks by having the other characters repeatedly mention how dull she is.<sup>57</sup>

As the story unfolds, it emerges that Thessaly is in fact a classical witch who has survived into the modern world. It is Gaiman's attention to detail in Thessaly's recreation of Greco-Roman magic that makes her so disturbing. Quite apart from the fact that she comes from a region famous in antiquity for witchcraft,<sup>58</sup> she performs, in the course of her first appearances, such trademark feats of classical magic as necromancy,<sup>59</sup> the harvesting of body parts,<sup>60</sup> and the calling down of the moon from the sky.<sup>61</sup> The first exhibition of her magic (Figs 6 and 7)<sup>62</sup> foregrounds its disturbing characteristics, and explicitly links these characteristics to its antiquity. The frames

switch between a clinical depiction of Thessaly cutting off a corpse's face and the nervous discussion of her housemates; the two strands come together with the significant exchange: 'Witchcraft? You mean, like New Age stuff?' 'New Age? No. Quite the opposite really'.<sup>63</sup> Even the narrator seems to view Thessaly from the outside, as something alien and hard to interpret: 'Perhaps she takes pride in her competence, perhaps not'.

In the case of Thessaly, then, precise allusion to the magical practices of ancient Greece, as opposed to the reassuring resonance of well-known mythology or the Latin of the schoolroom, produces a powerful vision of the classical world made strange and sinister. Gaiman extends this treatment into *The Books of Magic*, where unsettling visions of mysticism in the ancient past place Classical Greece (and an allusion to Petronius) beside the magic of ancient China.<sup>64</sup> These texts are as compelling a document of the defamiliarisation of Greece and Rome in the popular culture of the late twentieth century as Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*,<sup>65</sup> or other much-cited instances of contemporary classical reception.

#### CONCLUSION

Magic is only the tip of the iceberg where classical reception in superhero comics is concerned. This article has not even touched upon such matters as structural allusion to classical literature in comic-book plotlines, or the reception of key historical figures (especially Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great)<sup>66</sup> in their pages. What we have seen here, however, here is a demonstration of the possibilities for future studies in the classical reception of comics beyond graphic novels explicitly set in the world of Greco-Roman myth or history.

Some instructive points have emerged. The most significant, perhaps, has been the importance of a nuanced and above all *diachronic* reading of what comics have to offer. Superhero comics are *not* 'timeless', even though bravura structuralist readings of their myth-making can certainly be illuminating.<sup>67</sup> We have seen this through the ways in which the treatment of Greece and Rome within the super-heroic portrayal of magic has shifted over the decades. Comics are in fact deeply implicated in the evolving cultural history of the periods that produce them.<sup>68</sup>

As such, superhero comics offer intriguing evidence for the study of developing trends in the reception of antiquity across the twentieth century (and beyond). The sheer bulk of available evidence here is very useful. It is entirely understandable that scholars have tended thus far to focus upon classical reception in discrete graphic novels about the ancient world. Works like *300* and *Age of Bronze* have the great advantage for scholarly purposes of being comprehensible on their own terms without reference to an intimidating weight of prior continuity; the student does not have to be conversant with the different properties of the many, many different colours of Kryptonite before dipping a toe in their waters. However, the quantity of data at our disposal where superhero comics are concerned enables us to ask rather different questions from them about the popular reception of antiquity, if we are prepared to undertake the investigation. The shift in reception of the ancient occult would be hard to discern across a less expansive medium.

We have also, I hope, seen another side to superhero comics—one which should not now need emphasis but which still receives too little attention. This is their narrative subtlety, and creative use of the possibilities inherent in the medium. One should exercise caution before deploying superhero comics simply as artless and unsophisticated foils for the graphic novels which recent academic work has tended to favour.<sup>69</sup> In particular, the cases of divergent focalisation which we have observed (Mary Marvel through the eyes of Supergirl; Doctor Strange through the blind eyes of



Daredevil; Thessaly through the eyes of her housemates), show an interesting self-reflexiveness in superhero comics, as characters meditate upon the strangeness of their own world. Comics, it turns out, have a fondness for spotlighting the processes of their own reception.

The combination in superhero comics of these two characteristics—an imposing weight of prior tradition and sophistication in handling it, has the potential to be particularly interesting to the student of classical literature, who has learnt to see creativity rather than 'baggage' in the rhetorical moves of texts that carry such a weight.<sup>70</sup> Like Hellenistic Greek and Roman poetry, superhero comics often revisit stories, themes, or even phrases that are already familiar from previous tellings, and are capable of exploiting an informed audience's awareness of prior continuity to make particular effects. A comics writer can use the familiarity of certain key phrases and story patterns to some of the readership to set up a subversion or a surprise: when the erudite Scarecrow, a villain in DC comics, reflects 'They are a cowardly and superstitious lot.... The faithful, that is', he is maliciously inverting a famous sentence from the origin story of his arch-enemy, Batman, where 'a cowardly and superstitious lot' describes the criminals whom Batman opposes.<sup>71</sup> The techniques of the 'metacomical', as recent scholarship has described it,<sup>72</sup> bear more than a passing resemblance to the ways in which Hellenistic Greek and Roman poetry appropriates predecessor texts, and are susceptible to similar analysis.<sup>73</sup>

As it happens, magic in comic books, as in earlier literary texts, can constitute not just an element of the plot but a site for metatextual and intertextual manoeuvres in its own right. In comics, the features which make the practice of magic an obvious analogue for the creative process itself (starting in antiquity with the frequent usage of the same lexis to denote poetic and magical activity) receive an impetus from the fact that magicians are often amongst the earliest characters extant in their fictional universes. Hence, the use of these venerable characters in a later comic represents a two-fold engagement with tradition: the character interfaces with the historical past when (s)he calls upon historical mystical traditions to work magic, as the writer interfaces with the past of the comics book medium by making use of the character.<sup>74</sup> Doctor Strange has been a recipient of this trope,<sup>75</sup> as has Dr. Occult.<sup>76</sup>

In short, then, the possibilities for continuing study in the domain of classical reception in superhero comics are considerable. The researcher will need to be sensitive to the subtleties of which the genre is capable and the variety and bulk of the material available. But these characteristics are also what render study of the medium so endlessly fascinating.<sup>77</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Heroes* Season Three Episode Nine, 'It's Coming', written by Tim Kring, directed by Greg Yaitanes, first screened 17 November 2008.

<sup>2</sup> The original dialogue quoted here and later in this paragraph is actually in Japanese. I have taken the English version from the show's subtitles.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Kirby Plaza, the site of the final confrontation at the end of Season One of *Heroes*, alludes to Jack Kirby, co-creator of the Fantastic Four, the X-Men, and the Hulk.

<sup>4</sup> *Heroes* Season One Episode Sixteen, 'Unexpected', written by Jeph Loeb, directed by Greg Beeman, first screened 19 February 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Amongst many recent examples, compare the recent film adaptations of Batman, Superman, Iron Man, The Incredible Hulk, The X-Men, and the Fantastic Four. Even more obscure figures such as Marvel's Ghost Rider have received cinematic treatment.

<sup>6</sup> As well as the tie-in comics to *Heroes* itself, obvious examples are the recent comics continuations of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel*.

<sup>7</sup> Again, an obvious example here is Joss Whedon, the creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, who as well as authoring comics related to his TV series (see previous note) has recently worked on Marvel's *Astonishing X-Men* and *Runaways*. An example from the film director Kevin Smith's run on *Daredevil* appears below. In the other direction, note the work of Brian K. Vaughan, the creator of the comics *Y: The Last Man* and *Runaways*, on the TV show *Lost*, and the novels of Neil Gaiman and Alan Moore.

<sup>8</sup> *Heroes* Season Three Episode Ten, 'The Eclipse, Part 1', written by Aron Eli Coleite and Joe Pokaski, directed by Greg Beeman, first screened 24 November 2008.

<sup>9</sup> For the influence of Campbell (1968) on *Star Wars*, see Larsen and Larsen (2002: 541). For an analysis of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in terms of a response to Campbell's theories, see Bowman (2002) and Wilcox (2005: 99). See also Roger Zelazny's introduction to the collected edition of Neil Gaiman's *The Books of Magic* (London: Titan, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> As for example with the use of *Fantastic Four* in Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (Little Brown, 1994), *Wonder Woman* in Alasdair Gray's *Old Men in Love* (Bloomsbury, 2007), and the pulp character The Shadow at the beginning of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (J. P. Lippincott, 1966). Umberto Eco's *La Misteriosa Fiamma della Regina Loana* (RCS Libri, 2004), takes the trope one stage further by having its amnesiac hero consciously investigating comics of his youth in the Italy of the 1930s and 40s to reconstruct a lost *mentalité*.

<sup>11</sup> Watson (1987: especially 13–14).

<sup>12</sup> For the Frankfurt School and its critique of early comics, see Introvigne (2002).

<sup>13</sup> For a study of Wertham's work and its impact on the comics industry, see Nyberg (1998: 85–103).

<sup>14</sup> For studies of *300* across various media, see Fotheringham (forthcoming), Nisbet (2008: Ch. 4), Nisbet (forthcoming), and Turner (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup> Comic book heroes (and, less often, heroines) in powered suits make for an interesting case of the 'cyborg', as studied at Haraday (1991: 149–81).

<sup>16</sup> For the early history of *New Fun Comics*, see Wright (2003: 4f.). On Dr. Occult and his early reception, see Introvigne (2002: 12).

<sup>17</sup> *Strange Tales*, 116 (January 1964). 'As of this writing, no standard manual of style has provided a format for the citation of comic books', as Wright (2003: xviii) puts it. I have adopted a simplified version of the format used by Savage (1990) and Wright (2003), giving the title and number of the comic and its date of publication. For further issues in the bibliography of comics, see Savage (1990: 143–4), although the situation has improved over the last decade.

<sup>18</sup> The connection with Nabu was established in *More Fun Comics*, 67 (May 1941). Later versions often play up the helmet's sinister characteristics, as in Neil Gaiman's *The Books of Magic* mini-series (1990–91). Charlton Comics' relaunch of the Blue Beetle (originally a technological hero) in the 1960s also empowered its hero with a magical artefact, this one from Egypt.

<sup>19</sup> Collins (2008: 104f.).

<sup>20</sup> For the treatment of magic and its relationship to antiquity in the Buffyverse, see Winslade (2001: especially 8) and Pomeroy (2008: especially 25, which neatly characterises Latin in this context as an 'undead language'). For analyses of how the Buffyverse often links magical power and threat to the spillage of the history and tradition of the Old World (Europe) into the New (the USA), see in particular Hammond (2004: 156–7) and Neville Morley's 'History as Nightmare in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*' (<http://seis.bris.ac.uk/~clndgm/History%20as%20Nightmare.doc> . Accessed 13.05.09).

<sup>21</sup> Both Hammond (2004) and Morley (n20) observe that the magical power of the European past can be resource as well as threat in the Buffyverse – note, too, the role which the witches of the Devon Coven play in helping the American Willow to control her magic for good purposes at the beginning of Season Seven.

<sup>22</sup> Adam Qadmon: *Strange Tales*, 138 (November 1965); The Ancient One: *Strange Tales* 110 (July 1963).

<sup>23</sup> First appearance in *Wonder Woman*, 1/37 (September–October 1949).

<sup>24</sup> On Captain Marvel, see Wright (2003: 18–19).

<sup>25</sup> *Whiz Comics* 2 (printed with a publication date of February 1940, but actually distributed in 1939).

<sup>26</sup> Hartog (1988: 49–57, 216–24). See also Pelling (1997).

<sup>27</sup> *Supergirl*, 4/74 (November 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. perhaps the most famous contemporary construction of female heroine and her foil: the blonde 'good girl' Buffy and her dark-haired, anti-heroic foil, Faith.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Wright (2003: 213): 'Though dedicated to protecting humanity from evil forces in this and other dimensions, Strange remains aloof from society – a mysterious outsider who emerges in times of crisis and withdraws into the shadows once his work is done... Inspired by the pulp-fiction magicians of Stan Lee's childhood as well as by contemporary Beat culture, Dr. Strange remarkably predicted the youth counterculture's fascination with Eastern mysticism and psychedelia.' For the impact of Steve Ditko's innovative designs in producing this effect, see Wolk (2007: 159–60).

<sup>30</sup> *Strange Tales*, 110 (July 1963).

<sup>31</sup> This trait has remained constant. Current Marvel canon ([www.marvel.com/universe/Doctor\\_Strange\\_%28Stephen\\_Strange%29](http://www.marvel.com/universe/Doctor_Strange_%28Stephen_Strange%29). Accessed 25.11.08) gives his height as six feet two and a half inches. My researches have not uncovered in the Marvel Universe any other taller human superhero who does not also possess super-strength.

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<sup>32</sup> *Daredevil*, 2/5 (March 1999).

<sup>33</sup> 'The Village' here is Greenwich Village in New York City, the site of Strange's home and place of power. Smith neatly deploys the common abbreviation of this name to 'The Village' to bring out the story-like quality of Daredevil's narration.

<sup>34</sup> For the different modes of transition between frames in sequential art and some (approximate) statistics as to their relative frequency, see McCloud (1994: 70–4). 'Moment-to-moment' transitions, the hallmark of 'decompression' in comics, attained mainstream prominence in American comics with *The Authority* (beginning in 1999).

<sup>35</sup> Greco-Roman antiquity itself used a similar manoeuvre. Workers of magic in ancient Greek and Roman texts are often exotic barbarians, Lucian's *Lover of Lies* being a case in point. On the implications of this 'cultural distancing', see Gordon (1987: 73–80).

<sup>36</sup> The myth of Atlantis holds an important place in the magic of superhero comics. In DC Comics, it is sometimes stated that only descendents of Atlantis have the potential to wield magic. While the myth of Atlantis is of course Platonic, comic-book appropriations of it owe more to nineteenth and twentieth century 'Atlantology' than to the idea's classical origins. For the reception of Atlantis, see Nesselrath (2002).

<sup>37</sup> At one point, however, he casts a spell by simply saying a sentence with all the words spelt in reverse (*The Sword in the Stone*, 1971 Collins Lions edition, Ch. 5:53). Working magic in this fashion was also the hallmark of the DC Comics magician, Zatara, who first appeared in the same year as White's novel (in *Action Comics*, 1, June 1938, the same issue that saw the debut of Superman). Another backwards-speaking sorcerer, who called himself 'Merlin the Magician' as a stage-name, debuted in *National Comics*, 1, July 1940.

<sup>38</sup> Warner (1967: 57–84).

<sup>39</sup> *The Sword in the Stone*, Ch. 7:90. On the enduring resonance of grammatical mantras as a metonym for the school experience, see Stray (1994: 210)

<sup>40</sup> *The Sword in the Stone*, Ch. 1:7–10.

<sup>41</sup> *The Sword in the Stone*, Ch. 3:35.

<sup>42</sup> *The Sword in the Stone*, Ch. 4:45.

<sup>43</sup> Cf., e.g., Geoffrey Willans and Ronald Searle, *Down with Skool!* (Max Parrish, 1953). Like White, Willans had been a schoolmaster. On Molesworth and perceptions of Latin in the classroom, see also Stray (1994: 219).

<sup>44</sup> On the linguistic focus and its consequences, see Stray (1994: 202–4) and Stray (1998: 278–9)

<sup>45</sup> Stray (1998: 283–6).

<sup>46</sup> Stray (1994: 220), speaks of the 'everyday alienness' (my emphasis) of Latin grammar in this cultural context, as opposed to the 'alien everyday' of actual Roman culture with which subsequent pedagogy sought to supplant it.

<sup>47</sup> Momigliano (1975).

<sup>48</sup> For 'Egyptomania' in the twentieth century see for example Curl (1994: especially 195–210).

<sup>49</sup> *Athenaeum*, 4 September 1880, 301–2. The review is of multiple authorship, but the section of it from 'Mr. Jebb's article' to 'Athens' is identified as Wilde's work in the files of the periodical.

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<sup>50</sup> Dodds *ap.* Ellmann (1987: 103–4). For more on Jebb and his position in scholarly controversies, see Stray (2005).

<sup>51</sup> For the ongoing importance of 'serenity' and 'calm' in Victorian characterisations of ancient Greece, and the interpretative problems it caused, see Jenkyns (1980: 275). For Jebb's view of the defining characteristics of Greece, see Stray (2007: 81).

<sup>52</sup> For an evocation of Greek love-magic in popular culture, see Pomeroy (2008: 14–17).

<sup>53</sup> Dodds (1951). For Dodds's own view of this work in its historical context, see Dodds (1977: 180–1). Note too Stray (1998: 284): 'The potential to use Greeks as Others, as disconcerting means to self-knowledge, withered till Dodds and others revived it.' For the genesis of another, earlier text important in this shift, Dodds's edition of the *Bacchae*, see Henderson (2007: 158–60).

<sup>54</sup> In DC Comics, for example, Arkham Asylum, which incarcerates most of Batman's adversaries, is named after a New England town which Lovecraft created. See also Pomeroy (2008: 19).

<sup>55</sup> Lovecraft *ap.* Wisker (2005: 40): 'Most of the ancient instances [sc. of the uncanny in literature], curiously enough, are in prose; as the werewolf incident in Petronius, the gruesome passages in Apuleius'. For a study of Petronian allusion in Lovecraft, see Pitcher (forthcoming).

<sup>56</sup> Thessaly first appears in *Sandman*, 32 (November 1991).

<sup>57</sup> E.g., 'Thessaly, she's so vanilla' and 'Thessaly?... I always thought she was really dull'. By the time of the second statement quoted above, the reader has already seen Thessaly apparently killing a bird by beating it against a wall and visiting another resident with a knife behind her back.

<sup>58</sup> For Thessaly in ancient witchcraft, see Ogden (2001:203–4). 'Thessaly' is probably a pseudonym: Morpheus later addresses her as 'Thessalian', and in subsequent appearances she calls herself 'Larissa' (the capital city of ancient Thessaly). For unsettling use of classical Greece elsewhere in *Sandman*, see Potter (forthcoming) on the Eumenides.

<sup>59</sup> For analogous practices in Greco-Roman antiquity, see Ogden (2001: especially 202–17).

<sup>60</sup> For the harvesting of body parts, cf. Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 2.21, 2.30, and 3.17.

<sup>61</sup> Passages are collected with commentary at Ogden (2002: nos. 214–23). Ogden notes (p236) that 'the drawing-down of the moon is *the* characteristic activity of Thessalian witches' and cites Statius *Thebaid* 3.559, where it is described as the 'Thessalian crime' ('Thessalicumque nefas').

<sup>62</sup> *Sandman*, 34 (January 1992).

<sup>63</sup> For the play here between a perception of magic as 'New Age' (and so implicitly benign and pacifistic) and the ancient horrors of authentic witchcraft, compare this exchange between the newcomer Kennedy and the witch Willow from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Season Seven Episode Eleven, 'Show Time', written by David Fury, directed by Michael Grossman, first screened 7 January 2003: 'What's your story, Willow, I mean, witchcraft? Wow, that sounds new-agey.' 'No, it's safe to say that what I practice is definitely old-agey.' Unlike Kennedy, the informed viewer knows that Willow's magic has *inter alia* flayed a murderer alive (cf. n60).

<sup>64</sup> *The Books of Magic: Book One – The Invisible Labyrinth*: 'In the lands of olive and laurel/ Where the gods walk,/ We watch a soldier piss around his clothes,/Lope away a wolf.' Cf. Petronius 67.

<sup>65</sup> On which see, for example, Arkins (1995: 281–7).



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<sup>66</sup> E.g., *Sandman*, 30 (September 1991) [Julius Caesar and Augustus]; *Watchmen*, 11 (August 1987) [Alexander the Great].

<sup>67</sup> Eco and Chilton (1972). For an analysis of the polarity between Superman and Batman in terms of that between Achilles and Odysseus, see Hall (2008: 101).

<sup>68</sup> Wright (2003: xiii): 'Emerging from the shifting interaction of politics, culture, audience tastes, and the economics of publishing, comic books have helped to frame a worldview and define a sense of self for the generations who have grown up with them.' For analysis of an interesting case where a comics-based film points up its own historical embeddedness, see Rose (2001: 315).

<sup>69</sup> By contrast, Fotheringham (forthcoming) illuminatingly sets the treatment of Leonidas and Epialtes in *300* in the context of such paradigmatic superheroes as Batman and the Thing.

<sup>70</sup> The interesting narratological possibilities of a fictional continuity which has attained this sort of bulk, and its analogies to the 'megatext' of Greek myth, are explored in an unpublished paper by Nick Lowe, 'Xenaversions of Epic and Tragedy'.

<sup>71</sup> *Batman*, 564 (April 1999).

<sup>72</sup> Wolk (2007: 104–6).

<sup>73</sup> For treatments of this much studied topic, see Bing (1988) and Hinds (1998). For another case of popular culture attaining to the density of Hellenistic poetry or the Neoterics, see Pomeroy (2008: 17).

<sup>74</sup> The most extensive meditation upon comics, fictionality, and the occult is Alan Moore's *Promethea* (1999–2005), the scope of which puts it beyond this essay. Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen: Black Dossier* (November 2007) follows Shakespeare in using the magician Prospero to instantiate reflections upon the relationship between fiction and reality.

<sup>75</sup> For a case of Strange's metatextuality, see Wolk (2007: 165). Note too that the writing credits for *Daredevil*, 2/5 (Fig. 5), are apparently being written by a quill in an animated hand from inside the story itself.

<sup>76</sup> Doctor Occult's significant role in the 1985–6 mega-crossover *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, which aimed to reboot the entire DC Universe, was only his second appearance in any comics since 1938: there is an obvious metatextual frisson in having the earliest character from this universe officiate at its rebirth.

<sup>77</sup> I am deeply indebted to the anonymous referees for many valuable suggestions and corrections, to Lynn Fotheringham, Nick Lowe, Gideon Nisbet, Amanda Potter, and Susanne Turner for details on their forthcoming work, and to Laura Campbell and Eleanor Okell for discussion and comment.

35 Greco-Roman antiquity itself used a similar manoeuvre. Workers of magic in ancient Greek and Roman texts are often exotic barbarians, Lucian's Lover of Lies being a case in point. On the implications of this "cultural distancing", see Gordon (1987: 73-80). 36 The myth of Atlantis holds an important place in the magic of superhero comics. In DC Comics, it is sometimes stated that only descendents of Atlantis have the potential to wield magic. While the myth of Atlantis is of course Platonic, comic-book appropriations of it owe more to nineteenth and twentieth century "Atlantology" than to the Comic Heroes Comic Villains Comics DC Comics Art Comics Universe Superhero Comic Comic Book Characters Super Villains Cartoons Comics. Comics Fan Page on Instagram: "Who is the strongest Marvel character that Shazam could defeat? Comment below - Follow @snikt\_comics for the best in comic content!" 3,815 Likes, 54 Comments - SNIKT! Comics Fan Page (@snikt\_comics) on Instagram: "Who is the strongest Marvel character that Shazam could defeat? Comment below - Follow" Say The Magic Word some sketch of shazam! s. Donde subo cosas relacionadas con Shazam! work hard to laze. How would Marco react if Cressie said a swear word teehee He flip and prepare the royal swear jar in the castle from then on. Magical power in superhero comics commonly has its roots in the ancient world. The most potent spell-book in Marvel Comics, Dr. Strange's Book of the Vishanti, first appears in a temple of Marduk in ancient Babylon.17 The item which empowers the DC magician Doctor Fate is a helmet, discovered in a pyramid, that contains the essence of the Babylonian deity Nabu.18. In itself, the link between antiquity and magical power in superhero comics is unsurprising. Real-world occult and magical traditions have repeatedly stressed their authenticity and authority by claiming access to the secret wisdom o