

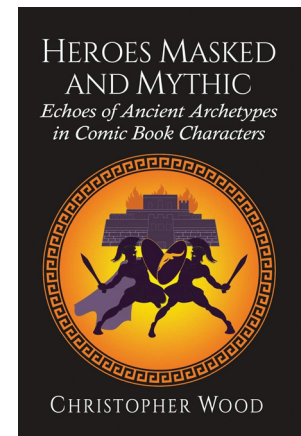
### *Heroes Masked and Mythic: Echoes of Ancient Archetypes in Comic Book Characters*, by Christopher Wood



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Christopher Wood. *Heroes Masked and Mythic: Echoes of Ancient Archetypes in Comic Book Characters*. McFarland, 2021. Paperback. 264 pg. \$39.95. ISBN: 9781476683157.

In *Heroes Masked and Mythic*, Christopher Wood performs a detailed analysis of the parallels between the heroes of Ancient Greece and comic book superheroes of the modern era. From Achilles to Captain America, Paris to Hawkeye, Troy to Gotham, Wood demonstrates that the concerns which informed the works of Homer and Virgil are alive and well in the works of Stan Lee, Bob Kane, and Kevin Feige. These concerns include, among others, the tension between personal honor and duty to family or community; the temperance of power with wisdom; and the dangers associated with being stronger, faster, more skilled than your contemporaries. Over the course of the book, Wood draws on various examples both from antiquity and today to establish and argue his central thesis.



Wood's book arrives when it has become almost a cliché to describe superheroes as modern myths. Batman, Superman, Spider-Man and their ilk have proved highly malleable, adapted by various creators to different media as well as different periods, reflecting changing social, cultural and political concerns as well as industrial, aesthetic and technological developments since the late 1930s. As Wood might say, this adaptability echoes the oral traditions of the Greek epic, stories that could be and have been told and retold by multiple tellers over the centuries. Comic books and superheroes have a prominent role in contemporary popular culture, largely due to the multi-billion-dollar film franchises that dominate cinemas as well as streaming services. In response to this prominence, superhero studies is a growing area of academic research, both in terms of scholarly studies and student work. Wood therefore offers a timely intervention with this in-depth study of long-standing discourses that influence the construction of narratives and characters, whether they wear tunics and brass or capes and face masks, vulnerable either in the heel or to kryptonite.

Wood's conceit allows him to consistently perform detailed analyses of his various case studies. Over the course of fourteen chapters, with such evocative titles as "Wonder Woman: Echoes of the Amazon Warrior" and "The Hand of Fate: The Infinity Gauntlet and the Moirai," Wood delivers some striking insights. Early on, he traces the history of myth itself, including the

Ancient Greek understanding of the term and the importance of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell on our (and Wood's specifically) contemporary understanding of the term. He also argues that the term "hero," while seeming self-explanatory, is also highly contingent on historical, social and political context: "Heroes, multi-faceted as they generally are, serve to define our society" (Wood, 6). As Wood identifies, what it means to be a "hero" is something that many a 'hero' based text has explored over time.

In "Chapter I: Captain America: An Achilles for the Modern Age," Wood draws attention to both heroes being the most noble warrior, identified by their shields and close relationships with their male comrades. Furthermore, Wood highlights the importance of both characters being "out of time" (46). This is an interesting notion that speaks to the centrality of heroes being outsiders and also liminal, a point Wood returns to in "Chapter VI – He Who Commands The Sea: Proteus, Scamander and Denizens of the Deep." Here Wood expands the discussion beyond individual figures, demonstrating that the epic/superhero tale relies also upon physical and social spaces. The hybridity of the aquatic warrior manifests in the home of Proteus in Greek myth, "the island of Pharos, a liminal zone, neither completely on land nor beneath the sea" (Wood, 118) as well as Marvel's Namor, the Sub-Mariner, who "bridges the physical realms of land and ocean" (Wood, 122). The attention to location continues in "Chapter VIII – Defending the Epic City: Gotham and Troy." In this chapter, Wood highlights moral decline in tension with architectural strength, the strong structure of Troy juxtaposed against the waning nobility of its inhabitants. Despite the sturdy walls, mighty gate and lofty towers, Wood identifies that decadence and lavishness have made the people of Troy "weak" (Wood, 147) and indeed vulnerable to violation. Wood's argument that the siege and ultimate sacking of Troy is a form of "sexual innuendo" (Wood, 148) is persuasive and intriguing.

Chapter VIII also highlights the main problem with *Heroes Masked and Mythic*. While Wood's analyses of the classical texts are insightful, modern comic book texts and their adaptations do not receive the same level of attention. Wood argues that DC's Gotham City is comparable to Troy in terms of its corruption, but his choice of evidence seems to contradict that. Citing *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight*, Vol.1 #27 (February 1992) and *Gates of Gotham*, Vol.1 #2 (August 2011), Wood quotes the line, "I wished to lock evil out of men's neighborhoods and hearts. I fear that instead I have given it the means to be locked in" (150). An analysis of Gotham, whether that be in comic book, film or TV form, reveals an insular environment with only minimal connection to the outside world. Gotham seems, therefore, very different from the role played by Troy in the Iliad, a city defined by its relationship to the invading forces of the Greeks. The protector role parallel between Hector and Batman is therefore dubious, since Hector, the literal prince of Troy, defends it against the external threat, while Batman, a vigilante, defends Gotham against its "home-grown criminal forces" (250). The forces at work within a Batman story seem distinct from those in the Iliad, including the "feminine and motherly" (151) aspects of the respective cities. While Troy is to be protected but ultimately violated, Gotham degenerates and regenerates, giving "new life to both heroes and villains within her realm" (151). Wood's own argument suggests that

Gotham is far more resilient than Troy, making his parallel between the two cities as well as their respective guardians unconvincing.

Wood's tendency to pay greater attention to the historical than the contemporary texts undermines much of his argument. This problem is exacerbated by the book being rather one note: Wood establishes the parallel and then reiterates it across his chapters. The different case studies and contexts demonstrate a wide area of research, but the critical attention to the comic book texts and their adaptations is often superficial, describing the parallels rather than exploring possible unique qualities of the different media. Furthermore, Wood's principal type of analysis is narrative, with the basic tenets of superhero stories identified and some storylines discussed briefly. Although some panels are reproduced (pp. 52, 67, 77, 97, 109, 166-7), analysis of these visual elements is limited at best, neglecting the unique qualities of the comic book medium. Furthermore, there is very little audio-visual analysis, which would be less of a problem if the book only focused on the comic book iterations of these characters. When a crucial scene in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) receives only a narrative summary (p. 48), it seems remiss to exclude discussion of mise-en-scene, cinematography and editing.

This omission leaves Wood's arguments incomplete. The media forms of comic books, film and television, not to mention animation and video games, rely as much on their visual and indeed audio composition as the narrative structures, character construction and use of archetypes. When Wood does perform visual analysis, it is of antiquarian relics, such as vases, mosaics, palace reliefs and figurines (see 41, 56, 73, 89, 105, 108, 117, et al). Wood's analyses of these ancient artefacts are effective and likely to open many a reader's eyes to ways of understanding these materials. However, within the context of the book the very strength of this analysis is frustrating because of the unexplored avenues of different forms of visual storytelling. Arguably, the comic book format itself is a continuation of the embossed shield and painted vase, a point made in the postmodern and highly referential superhero film *Unbreakable* (2000):

I believe comics are our last link... to an ancient way of passing on history. The Egyptians drew on walls. Countries all over the world still pass on knowledge through pictorial forms. I believe comics are a form of history... that someone somewhere felt or experienced.

To discuss ancient visual representation but to omit contemporary forms, is a missed opportunity for Wood, especially since he demonstrates great analytical skills and draws together different examples to support his arguments. Imagine what he could have done with more attention to comic book and cinematic visual representation.

The different types of attention to different sources highlights Wood's position as a classical scholar, here trying his hand at contemporary media discussion. His critical framework serves to highlight the continued relevance and indeed influence of ancient history and art. *Heroes Masked and Mythic* is certainly useful in this regard, and Wood's committed study is likely to be useful for scholars and students of classicism looking for ways to trace historical developments and

archetypes. For scholars of contemporary media, the book may work in dialogue with studies of comic books, film and television, but on its own it serves as little more than an introduction to classicism through the gateway of contemporary superheroes.

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