Wonder Woman Revisited

Increasing the Drama with Classical Reception in New 52*'s Justice League*

Scott Manning

Geoff Johns has tackled ancient Greek history and mythology on numerous occasions both as a comic book writer and, more recently as a screenwriter; sometimes head on, as he did with his graphic novel *Olympus* (2005). Yet, even when ancient history is not his source material, Johns often finds a way to incorporate the classics. During his over 50-issue writing stint on *New 52*'s *Justice League* (2011–2016), Johns was responsible for some of DC Comics' biggest storylines, including the Darkseid War—an event that longtime DC Comics editor Robert Greenberger ranked among the team's 100 greatest moments (Greenberger, 2018). With accomplished artist Jason Fabok penciling most of the issues, *Justice League* featured one of the strongest comic book teams to convey dramatic, larger-than-life events in the company's flagship title filled with top-tier characters. Fans predicted that, when the timing was right, two of the most powerful entities across the Multiverse—Darkseid and Anti-Monitor—would fight. However, on three different occasions, Johns took such an event one step further by aggressively incorporating the aforementioned classics.

Wonder Woman plays the narrator for these climatic, often perilous moments as she recounts flashbacks of similar scenes from ancient Greek tales, exposing readers to classical authors such as Homer and Thucydides, along with stories such as the Strait of Messina and the Plague of Athens. The tone remains serious and sometimes incorporates dates, cuing the reader that this is a different sort of classical reception that is meant to educate rather than appropriate. Such a flashback technique ensures that readers know they are encountering "real history," even in the mythical tales from Homer, as opposed to the invented metanarrative of Wonder Woman as a literal descendant of Zeus. Geoff Johns has established an

approach to increase the drama of any moment with classical incorporation, even in a comic book world rife with classical appropriation. Johns' approach follows in the footsteps of classical historians, poets, and playwrights, who often evoke history and myth to add legitimacy to their stories. Further, Johns has successfully incorporated and will continue to incorporate this technique on the big screen.

Classics and Comics

Although classical reception—the interpretation of the ancient world through any medium—is by no means a new field, the "intersection of the ancient world and modern comics" has become a niche field established by George Kovacs and C.W. Marshall in their edited volumes *Classics and Comics* (2011) and *Son of Classics and Comics* (2016). Editors and contributors demonstrate that understanding the sources used by comic book writers and artists and their interpretation enrich our comprehension of ancient sources in question. Marshall and Kovacs fully admit that their edited volumes are "only the beginnings of what can be said about the interaction between the medium of comics and the Classical world" (2011, p. xi), encouraging further exploration.

Kovacs presents three possible ways in which a comic book reader can encounter the ancient world: "(1) passing references and cosmetic borrowings; (2) appropriations and reconfigurations in which classical models are displaced from their original context; and (3) direct representations of the classical world" (2011, p. 15). The metanarrative of Wonder Woman typically falls into the second method, as her earliest storylines involve Hercules and other such figures. As with any myth, her exact origins have changed with new creative teams over the years, but she is always an Amazonian. George Perez and Greg Rucka explored these ancient roots in depth, crafting detailed backstories with the Greek gods in the form of "appropriations and reconfigurations" that have become "a serious, even defining component of Wonder Woman's psychological profile" (Kovacs, 2011, p. 16). Names, places, and some events will be familiar to classicists. Yet stories and motivations vary dramatically, and they are meant to entertain rather than educate. The "direct representations of the classical world" remarkably appear rarely in the early Wonder Woman, at least not in a way distinguishable between entertainment and education. That changed with *New 52*'s *Justice League* run during the Darkseid War.

In the span of eight *Justice League* issues, three moments allow Johns to incorporate the classics using Wonder Woman: the pandemic of the Amazo Virus, the battle between Darkseid and Anti-Monitor; and

finally, at the realization that Justice League members have transformed into gods. Johns' methods for evoking classics are consistent: the letterer incorporates narration boxes to indicate these are thoughts rather than spoken words, and the boxes are stylized so that the reader knows they are reading Wonder Woman's thoughts—each box is red and the first in any sequence is prefixed with a "W" drop cap. Where the event is historical (not mythical), Johns includes a date. Some scenes are drawn for the reader. Finally, Wonder Woman's narration always spans multiple pages and overlaps with the events happening in real-time, creating a direct correlation between Wonder Woman's told tale and the current event. Johns establishes the classical incorporation approach in issue #39, using all the methods described above. Though this approach is established in our first encounter, Johns loosens the approach in latter issues, stringing readers along a path of education under the implied understanding that he is speaking "real history," thereby allowing for a more seamless read.

The Plague of Athens and the Amazo Virus Pandemic

The first encounter with Johns' educational approach comes during the peak of the Amazo Virus pandemic. The Justice League find themselves unable to contain the plague, which affects humans and metahumans in fantastical/horrific ways, ultimately killing its victims. Superman and Wonder Woman are immune, being an alien and a demigod, respectively; thus, they are on the front lines, looking for a cure.

At the peak of their desperation, Wonder Woman evokes a similar situation from Ancient Greece. *Justice League* #39 (2015) starts with the Amazonian telling us,

> The Plague of Athens hit in 430 BC
>
> And as the plague spread, so did fear. The Law was ignored as much as the sick. Those tending to either risked their lives.
>
> Beyond the contagion and the disease, the outbreak poisoned minds and hearts.
>
> In the heat of death, panic and depravity ruled Athens.
>
> Compassion and decency collapsed.
>
> Most believed the gods had abandoned them.
>
> That was true.
>
> The gods had [p. 1].

In a few panels, Wonder Woman succinctly describes one of the most infamous plagues in history. At the beginning of a three-decade-long war between Athens and Sparta that became known as the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BCE), the plague brought Athens to its knees. Thucydides,

a survivor, describes its effects in gruesome detail, concluding: "Nothing afflicted and damaged Athenian strength more than [the plague]" (Thucydides, ca. 3rd century BCE/1998, 3.87.2) as it "inflicted a very great amount of suffering on the Athenians, destroying the army" (2.58) and killed "an untold number of the general population" (3.87.3). Modern historians estimate the plague killed one-third of the city's population, as it ebbed and flowed for years (Buckley, 2010, p. 342; Tritle, 2010, p. 48).

Likewise, Wonder Woman explains in *Justice League* #39: "Most believed the gods had abandoned them. That was true." Divine plagues appear often in the Greek imagination. Homer's *The Iliad* opens with Apollo firing arrows at the Spartans, inflicting them with a plague (Homer, ca. 8th century BCE/2015, 1.74–83). After the first year of the Athenian plague, playwright Sophocles depicted a ravaged city in *Oedipus Rex*, in which a character lamented:

> The buds are blighted and do not ripen
> to fruit, the cattle are blighted too, and our women
> birth dead babies. The god who carries fire
> has visited the house of Cadmus and all Thebes [Sophocles, 429 BCE/2007, p. 61].

In the play, Ares, the god of war, inflicts the plague, further associating it with current events of the time. These would not have been lost on the audience (Kagan, 1991, p. 249). For his part, Thucydides is clear that doctors were initially clueless, and appeasements to the gods had no effect (2.47). He also points to the manner in which a Delphic prophesy was misinterpreted to reveal that the gods favored Sparta over Athens since the former was comparatively spared from the plague (1.118.3, 2.54.4). However, Thucydides proved more rational, brushing aside fantastical origins of the plague, instead tracing its spread from Ethiopia, then Egypt, Libya, and finally the Persian Empire before reaching Greece (2.48). As for those misinterpreting the prophecy, Thucydides believed that "men shaped their memories in accordance with what they experienced" (2.54).

Wonder Woman similarly explains in *Justice League* #39: "The outbreak poisoned minds and hearts. In the heat of death, panic and depravity ruled Athens. Compassion and decency collapsed," which echoes one of Thucydides' more brutal passages:

> The plague was the starting point for greater lawlessness in the city. Everyone was ready to be bolder about activities they had previously enjoyed only in secret ... whatever was pleasant immediately and whatever was conducive to that were deemed both noble and useful. Neither fear of the gods nor law of man was a deterrent, since it was judged all the same whether they were pious or not because of seeing everyone dying with no difference, and since no one anticipated that he would live till trial and pay the penalty for his crimes, but that the much greater penalty which had already been pronounced was

> hanging over them, and it was reasonable to get some satisfaction from life before that descended [2.53].

At this moment wherein Wonder Woman evokes the Plague of Athens, the Justice League also faces terrible odds with hospitals full of dead and dying people and the streets filled with lawlessness. Thucydides also describes the dead and dying lying on top of each other and full sanctuaries; bodies were burned or tossed into mass graves (2.52). As for the survivors, "their minds reduced to despair on every count" (2.59).

Wonder Woman eerily blurs the lines of fictitious and historical desperation. Artist Jason Fabok aids this by interlacing panels depicting classical Athens and modern Metropolis, both in turmoil. If this is too bleak for readers who despair at the thought of gods abandoning diseased people, the Amazonian concludes her monologue in *Justice League* #39 (2015): "This god won't. My name is Diana. I am the daughter of the Amazons. I am Wonder Woman." This first use of Johns' educational approach with classical reception in *Justice League* incorporates the following reusable methods—narration with a "W" drop-case and red boxes to indicate Wonder Woman is speaking, a date, visual depictions of the ancient event, and finally the interlacing of a classical story with the current moment. With the approach established, Johns employs it again four issues later.

The Strait of Messina and Darkseid vs. Anti-Monitor

The Darkseid War provided the largest event of DC Comics' *New 52* run, lasting a full year and incorporating virtually every title with some sort of tie-in to the lead-up, occurrence, and aftermath of the saga. The climax featured a battle between two of DC Universe's most powerful villains: Darkseid and Anti-Monitor. Both arrive on Earth with super powered entourages; the characters loom larger than life and fight each other, while surrounding humans, metahumans, gods, and aliens seemingly have little impact on the outcome.

Wonder Woman acts as the reader's narrator for the conflict. Rather than describing any of the scenes in the panels of *Justice League* #43 (2015), she evokes Homer:

> There were once two sea monsters that guarded the Straight [sic] of Messina.
>
> Charybdis hid in the darkness of the sea, its mouth formed a whirlpool on the surface, lined with rows of razor-sharp teeth that would tear a man to shreds.
>
> On the other side of the straight [sic] there was Scylla. A six-headed monster whose heads would fight over the men it caught.
>
> Odysseus had to pass through the Straight [sic] of Messina between the two monsters.

> But they were too close to avoid both of them.
> So he had to make a choice.
>
> What was the lesser evil?
>
> Which monster did Odysseus choose? [pp. 19–23]

Wonder Woman's story comes directly from Book 12 of Homer's *The Odyssey*. The protagonist—Odysseus, a.k.a. "Ulysses"—recounts that 10 years after the Trojan War, he still attempted to make his way home to Ithaca. After blinding a Cyclops, surviving Hades, bedding a goddess, and withstanding sirens, his men yet had to sail through the Strait of Messina. Before Odysseus arrived at this impasse, the goddess Circe provided intelligence on the awaiting monsters. Charybdis resides under fig trees with thick foliage and

> ...sucks black water down.
> Three times a day she spurts it up; three times
> she glugs it down. Avoid that place when
> she is stalling the water. No one could
> save you from death then, even great Poseidon [Homer, n.d./2018, 12.104–107].

On the other side is Scylla who

> Has twelve dangling legs and six long necks
> with a gruesome head on each, and in each face
> three rows of crowded teeth, pregnant with death.
> Her belly slumps inside the hollow cave;
> she keeps her heads above the yawning chasm
> and scopes around the rock and hunts for fish.
> She catches dolphins, seals, and sometimes even
> enormous whales ... [12.89–96]

If Odysseus thought he could elude Scylla, Circe emphasizes that "no sailors ever pass that way unharmed" as "she snatches one man with each mouth" (12.88–89). Although Wonder Woman presents Odysseus' situation as a choice between two evils, Circe counsels that there is no choice. Odysseus must face Scylla because "it is better if you lose six men than all of them" (12.109–110). When Odysseus questions whether he could fight Scylla, Circe mocks him: "No, you fool! Your mind is still obsessed with deeds of war. But now you must surrender to the gods" (12.116–177)—emphasizing that men in his crew will die.

The sight of the monsters is more horrifying than Circe, or even Wonder Woman describes Charybdis:

> with a dreadful gurgling noise
> sucked down the water. When she spewed it out,
> she seethed, all churning like a boiling cauldron
> on a huge fire. The froth flew high, to spatter
> the topmost rocks on either side. But when

> she swallowed back the sea, she seemed all stirred
> from inside, and the rock around was roaring
> dreadfully, and the dark-blue sand below
> was visible. The men were seized by fear [12.236–243].

Heading instead toward Scylla, who predictably snatches up six men from the crew, Odysseus watches helplessly, as he

> saw their feet and hands up high, as they
> were carried off. In agony they cried
> to me and called my name—their final words.
> As when a fisherman out on a cliff....
> ...so those men gasped as Scylla
> lifted them up high to her rocky cave
> and at the entrance ate them up—still screaming,
> still reaching out to me in their death throes [12.248–251, 255–257].

Odysseus confesses that it "was the most heartrending sight I saw in all the time I suffered on the sea" (12.258–9).

The origin stories of the monsters and Odysseus' encounter with them have gone through countless appropriations by classical writers and poets such as Virgil, Ovid, Apollonius of Rhodes, Hecate, Aeschylus, and Propertius, to name a few. Through the proliferation of Homer and many of these interpretations, the expression "between Scylla and Charybdis" continues today, offering "a sophisticated way to refer hyperbolically to alternative hazards" (Hopman, 2012, p. 232). In her translation of *The Odyssey*, Emily Wilson appropriately titles Book 12 "Difficult Choices."

Meanwhile, back in *Justice League* #43 (2015), Wonder Woman is every bit as hopeless as the Greek hero and she leaves Odysseus' decision nebulous.

> What Odysseus decided doesn't matter.
> Six of his men died getting through that straight [sic].
>
> Sometimes there is no escape.
> Sometimes whatever you choose, you lose.
> Those are the lessons of the gods.
>
> They are far from perfect. They're anything but.
> They will turn on you.
> They will turn on their own family.
> On themselves.
>
> The gods are at war.
> And not all of us will survive [pp. 23–25].

In this case, Johns foregoes any dating of the story; classicists have not settled on an exact date when Odysseus may have crossed the strait—let alone whether it happened. The letterer still stylizes the narration with a "W" drop-case and red boxes to indicate that Wonder Woman is narrating.

Though there is no visual depiction of Odysseus' peril, a clear interlacing of the ancient and modern occurs as Wonder Woman's narration overlays panels depicting Darkseid and Anti-Monitor confronting each other. In addition, a small panel depicts the Amazonian with a thousand-yard stare as she begins her story, emphasizing the helplessness she feels in this predicament.

Ino, Odysseus, and the Justice League's New Odyssey

By *Justice League* #46 (2015), Darkseid is dead, and the Multiverse is dealing with the fallout. Each member of the Justice League, save Wonder Woman, has gone through a massive transformation that afforded each with new powers and altered their personas, leaving readers wondering if they are still "good." The situation proves so transformative that Wonder Woman again escorts the reader through it all by evoking the classics: "Gods aren't always born. Sometimes they're made. Raw clay given purpose. Sculpted by destiny. Touched by the divine. Or so go the tales some children are told" (Johns, 2015, p. 1).

The notion of clay forming a hero is a reference to Wonder Woman's more common origin story in which her mother sculpted her from clay and gave her life. The *New 52* run of *Wonder Woman* alters this dramatically by dismissing it as a cover for the Amazonian being a descendant of Zeus. In Greek myth, such affairs always infuriated the god's wife, Hera; this established the backbone of Wonder Woman's own plot through her series during *New 52*. In *Justice League* #46, Wonder Woman indirectly makes this connection as she continues her narration with the story of Ino of Thebes, whose sister also gave birth to a son of Zeus. Unaware of the boy's demigod nature, Ino agreed to raise him as her own. When Zeus' wife, Hera, discovered the lovechild and Ino's role, she "went into a rage" and "took revenge." Wonder Woman's narrative continues in gruesome detail:

> First she drove Ino's husband mad enough that he took his own life—
> —then Hera struck Ino with that same madness.
>
> Blinded by Hera's infection, Ino boiled her own son in a cauldron.
> When her sanity returned, Info was so horrified by what she had done she took the body of her son and leapt off the cliffs and into the sea [p. 1].

Wonder Woman then tells how Ino should have perished, but she was instead saved by Zeus who "transformed Ino and her son into gods of the sea." From there,

> Ino used her powers well.
> Without her, Odysseus would have never cross the sea.

> Meaning without Ino, there would have been no Odyssey.
>
> In the aftermath of Darkseid's death, some of my friends have been deified themselves like Ino.
>
> New gods have been born—
>
> —as another great odyssey unfolds (pp. 2–3).

This evocation of the classics is the lengthiest from Wonder Woman; she provides nearly as much detail on the story of Ino as have Homer and other surviving works.

Ino's story was so familiar to the Greeks that Euripides evoked her in his play *Medea* (431 BC), a tragic story in which the title character kills her children out of revenge rather than a mistake. While the audience can hear the screams of Medea's sons as she stabs them offstage, the chorus sings,

> I've heard of just one, just one other woman
> who dared to attack, to hurt her own children:
> Ino, whom the gods once drove insane
> and Zeus's wife sent wandering from her home.
>
> The poor woman leapt
> to sea with her children:
> an unholy slaughter
>
> She stepped down from a steep crag's rocky edge
> and died with her two children in the waves (Euripides, ca. 431 BCE/2008, 1323–1331).

As Rick M. Newton points out, the correlation of deeds by Medea and Ino, although performed with different circumstances and degrees of remorse, "serve[s] the important function of establishing in the minds of both chorus and audience precedents for the shocking deeds" (Newton, 1985, p. 497). In this sense, Johns follows in the footsteps of Euripides by evoking myth, adding legitimacy to his fictitious story.

Ino's tragic story also survives in the *Bibliotheca*, traditionally albeit incorrectly attributed to Apollodorus. This work provides a brief retelling of Ino's tragedy and many of the details recounted by Wonder Woman, adding that Zeus' son was none other than Dionysus and that Ino became Leucothea, a god known to help sailors (Apollodorus, ca. first/second century CE/1997, 3.4.3). However, it is necessary to turn back to *The Odyssey* to learn how Ino aids Odysseus with a scarf, which he wears to cross the sea while Poseidon fails to halt him (5.333–461).

Ino, like the newly enhanced members of the Justice League, is a created god. The first page of *Justice League* #46 (2015) performs a roll call of each member and their god-like status, as Wonder Woman retells the story,

> BATMAN: God of Knowledge
> SUPERMAN: God of Strength
> FLASH: God of Death

SHAZAM: God of Gods
GREEN LANTERN: God of Light
LEX LUTHOR: God of Apokolips [p. 1]

Again, Johns foregoes any visual depiction of Ino's story, relying entirely on narration; however, the reader will immediately recognize the same method from previous issues. In addition, using Odysseus again recalls the previous story of the Strait. By incorporating the classics in this manner, Johns successfully exposes the reader to classical myth and associates each new superhero-god with an ancient Greek god. The approach fits these created gods in the context of a 3000-year-old parallel story, adding legitimacy to Johns' new/original story.

Conclusion

Although Geoff Johns is not currently active in comic books, he continues working in film adaptations by incorporating the classics. In Warner Bros.' *Aquaman* (2018), written by Johns, the title character and Mera travel to Sicily, where they encounter ancient ruins featuring Greek and Roman statues. While unraveling an ancient Atlantian clue, Aquaman relies on his own classical education acquired on land to determine the next steps in their quest. The half-human, half–Atlantean easily identifies Roman general Marcus Agrippa and king Romulus. Mera, uneducated in the classics, watches in wonder. Although the Sicilian location featuring the statues is fictitious, the scene is successful in tying the "real" ancient history and myth that readers encounter through ancient historians, poets, playwrights, and satirists with the metanarrative of Aquaman, a bastard descendant of the royal kings of Atlantis. The statues and Aquaman's recollection of his classical education mimic the role of Wonder Woman's memory of such ancient tales.

As George Kovacs points out, "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" (Kovacs, 2011, p. 7). This is true for comic books and blockbuster films that incorporate the classics. Understanding how writers such as Johns use such traditional sources allows us to understand the way in which an audience may be first exposed to or reacquainted with such classics. In addition, it also enriches our understanding of the original sources and how they have proliferated throughout history.

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The DC Comics Universe

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