When Superman smote Zeus: analysing violent deicide in popular culture

Joel Gordon*

What does it mean to be a god? What is immortality? When compared with the ancient Greeks, modern popular culture offers a different perspective on these matters. In particular, violent deicide has recently emerged as a narrative possibility for interacting with ancient Greek myth. Here, I offer an examination and analysis of the earliest and most prominent examples of this trend within modern popular culture. In doing so, I question how deicide has become a narrative option, given the source materials' aversion to such a phenomenon. My analysis focuses upon two themes: the paradigm-shift within visual media regarding the identification and definition of the divine and the re-mythologizing of the gods which coincided with the creation of the superhero.

ἀθάνατοι θνητοί, θνητοὶ ἀθάνατοι
Immortals are mortal, mortals are immortal.
(Heraclitus *DK* 22 B62)[1]

When this statement is considered within its original philosophical context, the exact nature of what Heraclitus is referencing remains hidden from modern scholars.[2] However, should we appropriate Heraclitus' assertion to the more contemporary setting of Western popular culture, then it can be seen to accurately describe a narrative trend which was to emerge millennia after its author's death.[3] Modern mass media is rife with examples of dying immortals, while mortals, particularly

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* Correspondence: Department of Classics, Otago University, PO Box 56, Dunedin 9054, New Zealand. joel_gordon@hotmail.co.nz

[1] Text is from Diels and Kranz (1952); translation is my own.

[2] Cf. Graham (2008: 172; 2010: 192); Kirk, Raven and Schofield (1983: 208 n.1); McKirahan (2010: 135); Robinson (2008: 494).

[3] I follow Nisbet (2008: xi–xii) and Winkler (2001: 4) in defining modern popular culture as synonymous with mass media. Further, in following Nisbet (2008), I have limited my discussion to Western examples, avoiding potential cross-cultural contaminations. In order to assist with readability, references will adhere to the following format: only initial references to films and games will be supplemented with the year of release in parentheses; comics will consistently include volume, issue number and date of release in order to provide necessary context. I have included timings (0.00.00) and page numbers (#v.i.pp) when quoting specific examples.

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those dubbed superheroes, have begun to take on the trappings of these divine figures.

Deicide is a concept foreign to ancient Greek myth. Divine nature demanded the gods be ἀθάνατοι (literally, 'undying').[4] This can be seen in the Iliadic episode of Aphrodite's wounding by Diomedes (Hom. *Il.* 5.318-425). In order to console her daughter, Dione offers three mythic paradigms which each emphasize that while gods can suffer, they can never die: the imprisonment of Ares (385—91), Heracles' wounding of Hera (392–394), and Heracles' wounding of Hades (395–402).[5] While a minority of Greek evidence suggests the contrary, these examples conceal themselves within obscure cults or philosophies, hiding away from mainstream Greek thought.[6] Further, these unusual theologies are often attributed to external (orientalizing) influences such as the mythologies of Egypt or Asia rather than a decisively Greek origin.[7] It is safe to suggest that, on the whole, the 'popular culture' of the ancient Greeks perpetuated this concept of undying immortals.

Standing in sharp contrast to antiquity, modern popular culture depicts the ancient Greek pantheon in a radically different manner. Film, television, comics, and gaming, some of the more prominent (and visual) examples of mass media, have recently embraced deicide as a narrative option.[8] Such 'emphatically modern addition[s]' are all too often denounced by those self-appointed individuals who seek to defend the integrity of Greek myth against non-canonical intrusions (albeit rather ignorantly).[9]

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[4] On defining the gods by way of contrast with human mortality see, among others, Endjsø (2009: 38–45); Rohde (1925: 57, 253–55); Vermeule (1979: 121–22); and Vernant (1991: 32–35).

[5] Contra Garcia (2013: 159–229, especially 174–87) and Loraux (1986) who suggest that the gods' wounding illustrates their potential mortality. I follow the traditional interpretation that immobility is the closest state to divine death: e.g. Tomasso (2015: 148); Slatkin (1991: 68). For further bibliography on 'immortal death' see Garcia (2013: 161 n.5).

[6] Tomasso (2015: 147–48). E.g. Dionysus' birth–death-resurrection (Burkert 1985: 296–98; Harrison 1909: 314–15) and the Cretan grave of Zeus (Burkert 1985: 127; Ustinova 2009: 245–46).

[7] Burkert (1985: 127, 296–98); López-Ruiz (2010); West (1997: 54–59).

[8] While deicide also features within other media—e.g. literature such as Simmons' *Olympos* (2005)—I have limited my discussion to this selection for several reasons. Firstly, it would simply be too unwieldy to include all forms of media. These visual media, however, are predisposed towards being considered collectively. Not only do they utilize a shared approach in depicting the gods' death—via 'graphic' violence—but they demonstrate high levels of intertextuality with one another, allowing them to be considered together despite their differences in modes of production, histories, etc.

[9] E.g. Sagers (2012), a review of *Clash of the Titans* (2010) and *Wrath of the Titans* (2012), states: 'To significantly alter [the myths] is to toy with the source material many of us came to love in our childhood... Myths that lasted for millennia may not withstand a century or so of cinema.' Cf. Tomasso (2015: 148) addressing Ebert (2012).

Rather than receiving condemnation, such features deserve praise since they honour the fluidity of classical tellings.[10] Yet despite this being acknowledged by contemporary scholarship, the concept of deicide has suffered from considerable neglect with only a single examination to date—and then only in film and television: 'The Twilight of Olympus: Deicide and the End of the Greek Gods' by Vincent Tomasso.[11]

Tomasso traces the phenomenon of deicide within film and television in order to 'make sense of what [these films] communicate about how the West wants to view the legacy of classical antiquity'.[12] He deduces that the rise of deicide parallels the critical rendering of pagan deities by the early Church fathers—figures whose attitudes and ideas became highly influential in founding Western culture.[13] This conclusion makes logical sense in light of the evidence Tomasso provides; I have no interest in undermining it. The discussion could be, however, far broader.[14] For example, Tomasso distinguishes between 'vanishing' and 'violent' deicide. The former describes films in which the gods simply no longer exist in the world of the narrative since 'humanity has progressed beyond them';[15] the latter, those which expose audiences to the gods' murder, both on-screen and (often) in a brutal fashion.[16] This distinction could be relabelled as 'historic' and 'modern': vanishing deicide occurs exclusively prior to the early 1980s while violent deicide occurs only after the early 1990s. Tomasso alludes to this chronological distinction only briefly, commenting '[these new texts (post-1990)] radically reframe what antiquity, via the gods, means to the present'.[17] For the most part, his conclusion assumes a continuity between the two types. However, just as he argues that the presence of this 'twilight motif' offers insight into modern reflections of antiquity, so too with this change in the theme's formal presentation.[18]

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[10] Tomasso (2015: 148). Cf. Winkler's concept of neo-mythologism (2009: 15–16, 70–71); Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011: 125–29); Nisbet (2008: 45–86).

[11] Tomasso (2015).

[12] Ibid., 147.

[13] Ibid., 149, 155.

[14] I am not criticizing Tomasso as this reflects the focus of the edited collection. Rather he should be applauded for his occasional reference to other media (see ibid., 147, 157 n.32).

[15] Ibid., 149. This is fully realised only in *Star Trek*'s episode 'Who mourns for Adonais?' (1967): After the Enterprise attacks Apollo's temple, the god simply fades away, having realized that mankind has progressed beyond him (Kovacs 2015: 199–212; Winkler 2009: 86–90). Although Tomasso attributes similar vanishings to both *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) and *Clash of the Titans* (1981) these predictions are not achieved by the films' close (Tomasso 2015: 149–51).

[16] Tomasso (2015: 149).

[17] Ibid., 151–52.

[18] Vanishing deicide must always be viewed as the direct antecedent for violent deicide. However, I am presently interested in the differences between these two themes, rather than their similarities.

Furthermore, examining samples of deicide found only within film and television cannot possibly exhaust this theme's prominence within modern popular culture. Other media must also be allowed to inform the discussion. Any conclusions based on such limited data may otherwise be skewed.[19] Studies of reception have recently begun to extend their borders, recognising the value of both gaming and comics – media to be considered here due to their shared nature as visual 'screen texts'.[20] What insights might be gleaned from the *God of War* gaming franchise (2005) or DC Comics' *Wonder Woman* franchise (1942)?[21] This also allows for broader concepts underlying this discussion to be brought to light: e.g. how does visual mass media portray divinity, an otherwise abstract concept? Indeed by exploring this question in particular, an additional connection between the gods and popular culture begins to emerge, one which has been previously undervalued: the concept of the superhero. Thus the purpose of this article is not only to demonstrate the existence of a 'super-hero connection' in the modern reception of the Greek gods, but to place this firmly within a context of their mortality.

Gods Just Don't Die Quietly Anymore

The 'violent death' trope appears frequently throughout modern mass media. Tomasso provides an extensive description of the television serials *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995-1999) and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995-2001), delivering a blow-by-blow commentary (hereafter *HTLJ* and *XWP*).[22] There is no need to reiterate his account. In comparison, he only briefly addresses blockbuster films such as *Immortals* (2011) and *Wrath of the Titans* (2012) and does not comprehensively address other media.[23] I will begin my discussion by briefly elaborating upon these blockbusters before journeying into previously uncharted territory.

[19] Cf. Nisbet (2008: xi).

[20] Carlá and Freitag (2015: in particular p. 242); Ghita and Andrikopoulos (2009); Kovacs and Marshall (2011, 2015); Lowe (2009).

[21] *God of War* and *Wonder Woman* do not represent the only examples of deicide within their respective genres but rather the most prominent and oldest versions. Many recent gaming titles are simply re-imagnings of *God of War* (e.g. *Blood and Glory: Immortals*, 2015, or *Apotheon*, 2015). *Smite* (2014) is an exception: a MOBA ('Multiplayer Online Battle Arena') which allows players to choose a god and fight against others in combat. Likewise with comics: cf. below on *Sandman: The Kindly Ones* (#57-69, 1994–95) and *The Sandman Presents: The Furies* (2002). I wish to thank the reviewers for highlighting *God Is Dead* (#1-6, 2013–14) and *Rage of Poseidon* (2013) which, although not exclusively focused upon ancient Greek deities, do include them within their narratives.

[22] See Tomasso (2015: 151–53).

[23] See Ibid., 153–54). Although Tomasso includes *Clash of the Titans* (2010), I have excluded it since, strictly speaking, none of the deities die. Tomasso's claim that the gods' demise is preceded by their portrayal as manipulative and cruel requires him to read *Clash of the Titans* (2010) and its sequel *Wrath of the Titans* as a narrative whole.

It is ironic that a film entitled *Immortals* would feature in a discussion about dying gods. The narrative tells of Theseus, a mortal, and his struggle to save humanity from the warlord Hyperion, a ruthless villain who seeks to release the Titans from Tartarus. During the film's 110-minute running time audiences witness the murder of Ares, Athena, Poseidon, Apollo and Heracles.[24] At the close of the film Zeus is the only god who remains.[25] These slayings are not without deep meaning since, as implied by the film's title, the gods' presence is a highly significant one. Although they spend much of their time on-screen simply observing the world, rather than interacting with it, the gods' relationship with humanity is a central theme. Early on, Zeus forbids the gods from intervening in the affairs of mortals, supposedly because he has 'faith' in Theseus (1.02.03). This creates an innate tension between humanity and the divine. Both the hero and villain display a deep distrust of the gods because of the horrible fates that overtook their own families.[26]

The portrayal of the gods in this film was a deliberate one. Director Tarsem Singh has confirmed in numerous press releases that he deliberately sought to 'make a statement about the gods'.[27] Tarsem chose to feature young and beautiful actors within his pantheon – e.g. Kellan Lutz (Poseidon) and Isabel Lucas (Athena), both of whom are known for their suave portrayal of other contemporary pop culture icons.[28] This choice reflected Tarsem's personal philosophical questioning, 'If you had to live [forever] and you had to have a physical appearance, what do [sic] you want to live as?' - a challenge to pop-culture's default supposition that gods must be 'bearded, crusty old men'.[29] An even more interesting departure from the expected, however, is found in Tarsem's confession that he had no interest in creating 'a Greek

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[24] Zeus slays Ares as punishment when Ares interferes in the realm of man (1.02.00). The Titans kill the others in an epic battle at the film's climax (1.24.28-1.33.56).

[25] I interpret the final sky-battle scene, in which the gods and Theseus are shown continuing to battle the Titans, as a form of afterlife (1.37.22ff). It is clear that the battle does not occur in any earthly realm (including Mt. Olympus) as the physics are uniquely different—i.e. the figures fight as if in zero-gravity.

[26] See Hyperion at (0.05.58); Theseus at (0.25.12).

[27] DeSaulnier (2011); Eisenberg (2011); Ford (2011). Tarsem's statement is rather superficial since he demonstrates no consideration for other elided aspects of divinity (e.g. sacred space, ritual or prayer). However, this is not surprising given Tarsem's visual emphasis; his deliberate acknowledgement of a lack of 'period' authenticity; and the general anti-religious trends within Hollywood (see Greeley 1976).

[28] Cornet (2011). E.g. Kellan Lutz as Emmet Cullen in the *Twilight* Saga (2008–12); Isabel Lucas as Tasha in *Home and Away* (2003–06) and Alice in *Transformers Revenge of the Fallen* (2009).

[29] Cornet (2011); DeSaulnier (2011); *Iamrogue* (2011). Cf. *Wrath of the Titans* for this 'typical' portrayal.

film' or adhering to any sort of classical perspective.[30] It is instead his own faith, or rather the questioning of this, that influenced the shape of the film and its gods.[31] Pseudo-Christian theology underpins a large part of *Immortals*.[32] Although Tomasso acknowledges this in his brief analysis, highlighting Theseus as a Christ-figure and the film's apocalyptic ending, he fails to associate this directly with the gods.[33] Consider this statement by Zeus and its clear Christian echoes: 'If we are to expect mankind to have faith in us, then we must have faith in them. We must allow them to use their own free will' (0.26.57). We are left, therefore, with a film which places much emphasis upon its Greek gods, but one which freely adapts them.

Wrath of the Titans, by comparison, executes a nuanced version of the violent death theme. This sequel continues the story of our hero Perseus, begining approximately ten years after the events of *Clash of the Titans* (2010). Mankind's devotion to the Olympians has waned and, in an attempt to save their own skins, Ares and Hades betray Zeus to Kronos, the leader of the Titans, in exchange for a guarantee of their own immortality. The mortal Perseus quells the threat posed by Kronos and thus while humanity has been saved, the gods come off second-best: none remain to be worshiped. Poseidon is mortally injured by Hades' *makhai*, while Perseus defeats Ares in a one-on-one duel (0.17.09; 1.15.42). Zeus almost expires several times as Kronos drains his 'life-force', before finally perishing in a touching moment at the film's conclusion (1.23.02). It is safe to assume Hephaestus is also slain—off-screen by Ares during the ambush at Tartarus' entrance—as his heroic sacrifice is what ensures Perseus' safe entry into the underworld (0.49.48). In a particularly interesting twist, even Hades does not escape death. After the climactic battle against Kronos and the death of Zeus, Hades admits to Perseus that he has become a mortal. His weary statement 'All my power is spent. Who knows, I may be stronger without it' alludes to the film's major theme, that humanity—not the gods—are the stronger race (1.23.27). While Hades is not dead by the film's close, his words leave no doubt as to his eventual fate.[34]

Unlike *Immortals, Wrath of the Titans* specifically addresses this paradox of dying gods. In a poignant moment midway through the film, Hades delivers a brief monologue in defence of his betrayal of Zeus. While standing guard over his suffering brother, Hades confesses his fear of the unknown—of death: 'I'm afraid brother. . .

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[30] Eisenberg (2011) quotes Tarsem: 'It's not really a Greek movie. . . we went close to Greek, but no period stuff is true of anything [*sic*]'. DeSaulnier (2011) and Ford (2011) both cite the direct influence of Renaissance art.

[31] Eisenberg (2011).

[32] In much the same manner that Greek myth has been adapted, so too with its Christian theology.

[33] Tomasso (2015: 154). Tomasso also notes the 'crypto-Christian' rendering of the film's opening Socratic quote (cf. Pl. *Phdr.* 245C).

[34] Cf. 'vanishing deicide' (ibid., 149–51).

I'm a god and I'm afraid… When your precious humans die, their souls go to another place. When a god dies, it isn't death. It's just absence. It's nothing. It's oblivion' (0.45.02ff). It is somewhat perplexing that Hades, the god of the underworld, appears to know more about the fate of dead gods than that of the mortal soul—which simply goes somewhere. This is best read as a tolerant approach to what is otherwise a rather complicated religious matter in contemporary thought and an acknowledgement of the more 'important' thematic concern—the death of gods, not mortals. Once again, pseudo-Christian overtones are at play in this depiction. Zeus forgives Hades for his sins in a manner akin to Christ on the cross (0.59.11),[35] while the gods' self-sacrificing actions to save humanity also hark back to a Christ-paradigm. Thus just as with *Immortals*, we find this film happy to adapt the gods' nature and, in doing so, to draw upon pseudo-Christian themes.

In moving now to consider other media, the highly successful *God of War* gaming franchise provides an excellent starting point. It is telling that even with Tomasso's exclusive focus, he cannot help but briefly mention *God of War* as a 'screen text' which has 'reinforced the importance of the Greek gods in modern popular culture'.[36] Such a claim is easily substantiated. This video game series was first released in 2005 by Sony Computer Entertainment for the PlayStation 2 console and continues to have a formidable presence within contemporary popular culture—to date it spans seven separate gaming titles and four collections/remasterings, having collectively sold over 21 million copies by 2012.[37] These releases are supported by numerous adaptations within other media: two documentary films;[38] a six-issue comic book series;[39] a graphic novel cum online social experience;[40] two official novels;[41] the *God of War: Blood and Metal* EP (2010); a potential motion picture;[42] and, most recently, a series of inspired movie posters.[43] The franchise's narrative is rather simple: Kratos, a Spartan warrior, seeks to kill all of the gods as revenge for their various slights against him. Numbered as victims amongst the large death toll are Ares (*God of War*); Athena (*God of War II*); Persephone (*God of War: Chains of*

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[35] Cf. Luke 23.34.

[36] Tomasso (2015: 147, 157 n.32).

[37] Sony (2012). *God of War* (2005); *God of War II* (2007); *God of War: Betrayal* (2007); *God of War: Chains of Olympus* (2008); *God of War Collection* (2009); *God of War III* (2010); *God of War: Ghost of Sparta* (2010); *God of War: Origins Collection* (2011); *God of War Saga* (2012); *God of War: Ascension* (2013); *God of War III Remastered* (2015).

[38] *God of War: Game Directors Live* (2010) [hereafter *GDL*]; *God of War: Unearthing the Legend* (2010) [hereafter *UTL*].

[39] *God of War* (#1-6).

[40] *Rise of the Warrior* (2012–13).

[41] Stover and Vardema (2010) *God of War*; Vardema (2013) *God of War II*.

[42] Despite *IMDb* labeling the film as 'in development' (sv. 'God of War' [last accessed July 2015]), the film is unlikely to be completed (see Davison (2005); Parker (2012)).

[43] Doaly (2015); Malavia (2015); Rugg (2015). Note Rugg's envisioning of Kratos as a comic book superhero.

Olympus); Poseidon, Hades, Helios, Hermes, Hephaestus, Zeus (*God of War III*); and Thanatos (*God of War: Ghost of Sparta*). These deaths are often bloody and violent affairs, reflected in the franchise's mature audience rating.

While Greek mythology certainly played a vital role in inspiring the characters and setting of *God of War*, the final product displays many more formative influences. David Jaffe, the Game Director for *God of War*, describes his inspiration thus: 'I always wanted to do a game that felt like you were going on a big adventure – and so that and my initial love of Greek mythology were sort of the initial ideas'.[44] However, unlike with cinema, television or even comics, the creation of a video game requires a far more holistic approach to design—a side effect of the limiting nature of animation.[45] The hack'n'slash genre plays a prominent role here since, as death is an obvious prerequisite for such games, it required the mechanics of immortality to be re-written:[46] '[gods are] unable to die by the passage of time, immune to all human and supernatural diseases, and able to survive damage that would easily destroy a mortal... being immortal in the *God of War* universe means safety only from natural death'.[47] Despite the original vision and Santa Monica Studios' attempts to promote the franchise as having 'true ties with Greek mythology',[48] it is telling that Marianne Krawczyk, the writer for *God of War I, II* and *III,* has confessed the narrative is 'more of a contemporary tale than a classical one'[49]—a sentiment echoed by popular culture deeming the franchise only 'loosely based on Greek mythology'.[50] There is, however, a noticeable lack of Christian themes, contrasting with the previous filmic examples.[51] The explicit violence and emphasis

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[44] *GDL* (0.14.26–0.14.40).

[45] See 'Conversations with Creators'; *GDL* (0.15.16ff). Cf. Ghita and Andrikopoulos (2009).

[46] The influence of genre within gaming is an understudied phenomenon–particularly the hack'n'slash genre. Lowe (2009) has some general discussion on the theme of play and specifically addresses hero-based video games–similar to the hack'n'slash genre—with a brief mention of *God of War* (pp.79–82). Any further exploration of the influence of the hack'n'slash genre here would require an investigation of non-western gaming styles since the Japanese gaming industry was the world leader in this genre during *God of War*'s initial development and is mentioned by its creators as highly influential ('Conversations with Creators' 0.01.04ff; *GDL* 0.14.48ff, 0.21.45ff). Thus it falls outside of the scope of this article.

[47] *Wikia.com* (2015).

[48] *UTL* explores themes such as hamartia and hubris, the animosity of Ares and Athena, and the cycle of divine sons deposing their fathers.

[49] *UTL* (0.04.25ff).

[50] *Wikipedia.com* (2015a), (2015b).

[51] There is some speculation amongst fans as to a potential Christian connection: a mural of 'three wise men' in *God of War II* has been interpreted as prophetic announcement of the end of the pagan gods and the birth of Christianity (e.g. *Playstation.com*, 2009; *Wikia.com*, 2015b). There is, however, no confirmation of this from any authoritative source.

upon nudity and sexuality has only served to distance this franchise from any Christian associations—Kratos is no saint and neither are his gods.[52]

The *Wonder Woman* franchise also toys with the ideas of divinity and deicide and, in comparison to *God of War*, boasts an even greater contemporary presence. Historically, the character of Wonder Woman has appeared in many different comic serials, although her most longstanding and canonical appearance has been in her self-titled series (1942). As a testament to Wonder Woman's identity as a pop-culture icon, she also boasts additional appearances in film and television, video games, novels and various action figures.[53] As the Wonder Woman mythos drew heavily upon antiquity for inspiration—as emphasized by the three separate reiterations of her origin story: *All Star Comics* #1.8 (1941), *Wonder Woman* #1.1 (1942), and *King Features Syndicate* (1944, 8 May)[54]—it is not surprising that the gods regularly feature. Yet only recently have these narratives depicted deicide. The latest example occurred in 'God Down' (*Wonder Woman* #4.23, 2013) as shocked readers witnessed Wonder Woman kill Ares—identified simply as War—and become the god of war herself. Although this act was not a direct attack on Ares but a heroic self-sacrifice, such a distinction is trivial: a god has still died.[55] A similar event, although one which followed more traditional lines with Ares as the main antagonist, occurred in DC Universe's animated film *Wonder Woman* (2009). Here Wonder Woman beheaded Ares in a desperate attempt to halt his attack on humanity, after which he appeared as a zombie in Hades' underworld (1.03.59; 1.05.23).

Nor has deicide been limited to the hand of Wonder Woman. In 'The Bronze Doors' (#2.215-17, 2005) Ares killed Hades to become the god of the underworld, while in 'God War' (#2.147-150, 1999), the Titans and their leader Cronos destroyed entire pantheons including Greek, Hindu, and Pax Dei (the Heavenly Host). The earliest instance of deicide, dating well prior to examples in any other media, occurred during DC's 1991 cross-over series *The War of the Gods*.[56] Prior to this

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[52] The franchise is infamous for its visual displays of nudity and sexual acts, including a 'quick-time sex mini-game' with Aphrodite and her handmaidens in *God of War III*.

[53] Some of the more prominent examples include: *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), *The Lego Movie* (2014), *Wonder Woman* (2009) [motion pictures]; *Justice League* (2001–2006), *Wonder Woman* (1975-79) [television serials]; *Infinite Crisis* (2015) [gaming]; Byrne (1998) *Wonder Woman: Gods and Goddesses – A Novel* [literature]. For a more extensive summary, although also not exhaustive, see *IMDb* (sv. Wonder Woman – character [last accessed July 2015]).

[54] Dethloff (2011: 107 n.16).

[55] The exact nature of this event is a complicated mix of deicide and dei-suicide. In the DC Universe, one can kill a god in order to receive their position and powers—the reason why the Firstborn sought to kill Ares. Ares, however, permitted his ally Wonder Woman to kill him, thwarting the Firstborn's scheme.

[56] This cross-over was primarily told in *War of the Gods* (#1.1-4) and *Wonder Woman* (#2.58-61) but also included an additional seventeen titles in fourteen different serials: *Superman: Man of Steel* (#1.3); *Hawkworld* (#2.15-16); *Starman* (#1.38); *L.E.G.I.O.N.*

event, Wonder Woman's adventures had often involved fighting against general injustice, saving the Air Force pilot Steve Trevor and/or defeating Nazi villains.[57] Yet this rather complicated cross-over depicted various pantheons—notably Greek and Roman but also Egyptian, African, and Norse—utilizing superheroes to attack and kill each other while under the sway of the witch Circe. Hermes was the most notable and longstanding casualty for, after being slain in 'Casualties of War' (*War of the Gods* #1.3, 1991), he was not seen again for almost fourteen years.[58] Unlike with the majority of cross-overs, which tend to focus upon a collective of characters rather than any sole individual, this story arc emphasized Wonder Woman as its central figure. Not only did the *Wonder Woman* serial receive an equal number of issues as the title-release, more than twice that of any other figure, but the series was also actively promoted as a celebration of her fiftieth anniversary. This prominence is no mere co-incidence. Other well known occurrences of deicide within the larger DC Universe—e.g. Dream in *Sandman: The Kindly Ones* (#57-69, 1994–1995) or an entire pantheon in *The Sandman Presents: The Furies* (2003)—also display a connection with Wonder Woman.[59] While Wonder Woman does not explicitly appear within these narratives, Lyta Hall—a central figure within *Sandman*—is both the daughter of Wonder Woman and a crime fighter clearly styled on her mother's Amazonian legacy.[60]

Wonder Woman's distinctive standing within the golden-age of superheroes has provided some rather unique influences for examination. The comic book industry has often been dominated by masculine figures and concepts of identity. One witty reviewer for the *Times Colonist* aptly summed up this paradigm with his headline: 'Why Superpowers Increase Breast Size'.[61] As William Marston, Wonder Woman's creator, had envisioned her as an advocate for gender equality, it is not surprising to find feminist influences—and even anti-feminist reactions—playing a prominent role in the comic's development.[62] The centrality of feminist themes is evident from

(#1.31); *Hawk and Dove* (#3.28); *Doctor Fate* (#2.32-33); *Flash* (#2.55); *Justice League of Europe* (#1.31); *Batman* (#1.470); *Animal Man* (#1.40); *Captain Atom* (#1.56-57); *Suicide Squad* (#1.58); *Demon* (#3.17); *New Titans* (#1.81).

[57] This excludes the slaying of two minor personifications (Decay and Deimos) in the second volume of *Wonder Woman* (#2.4-5, 1987). However, these figures are not presented as gods but rather created minions.

[58] Hermes' return occurs in *Wonder Woman* #2.215-217 (2005) when Wonder Woman rescues him from Hades.

[59] Marshall (2011); Warren (2014).

[60] Lyta Hall was also first introduced within the *Wonder Woman* serial (#1.300, 1983). Marshall describes her as '[a hero] fighting crime in a red-and-gold costume with a distinct Amazonian flavour' (2011:91).

[61] Reid (2013). Cf. Morrison (2011: 40). On feminism within the comic industry see Robbins (1996, 1998).

[62] On Wonder Woman's development see Robbins (1996 especially pp. 3–14, 116–20, 156); Stanley (2005: 146–60). On her feminist connections see Dietrich (2006); Stanley (2005).

the origins of Wonder Woman: the struggle between Aphrodite (love, femininity) and Ares (war, masculinity) undergirds Wonder Woman's aetiology.[63] Likewise, Wonder Woman's thorough grounding within the Greco-Roman mythic world was equally unprecedented. Thus with such formative influences already at work this left little room for pseudo-Christian traditions to directly impact the gods' portrayal.

In pausing to survey the scene thus far, several motifs begin to emerge. Firstly, these 'violent deaths' are a distinctly contemporary phenomenon, having emerged during the early 1990's—although an earlier antecedent can be found in the 'vanishing death' trope. Initial examples of violent deicide were intimately associated with the *Wonder Woman* comic book franchise. This trope was then popularized by its inclusion within the television serials *HTLJ* and *XWP*, proving the viability of violent deicide within mainstream media. By the end of the 2000's, violent deicide had begun appearing within the blockbuster genre (*Immortals* and *Wrath of the Titans*)—the greatest testimony yet to its acceptance by contemporary popular culture. If Tomasso's conclusions regarding the 'twilight of the Greek gods' are to be applied specifically to violent deicide, one would expect to see the paralleling of Christian ideals. Although not immediately present in *Wonder Woman* or *God of War*, an argument for these themes' existence could be made via the 'Christianizing' of pagan gods. Perhaps violent deicide is the result of associating them with the (violent) crucifixion of Christ? Or alternatively, the death of pagan deities is a necessary step in allowing for a more 'acceptable' Judeo-Christian style of divine figure.[64] Yet the latter view in particular does not adequately explain why the change from vanishing to violent deicide was necessary—pagan deities need not die bloody deaths in their fading away. While the crucifixion of Christ may help in this regard, this too is problematic: consider the manner in which *God of War* revels in its deliberately unsanctified deities—a far cry from any Christ-figure. Furthermore, pagan gods (often) do not return from the grave, or, if they do, this is never associated with a fuller manifestation of their divinity as in the biblical tradition.[65] Thus we are left still questioning the change in this theme's formal presentation.

To be clear, William Marston was himself a complex figure and at times he proves to be a difficult feminist figure (see Lepore 2014).

[63] The origin story in *Wonder Woman* #2.1 (1987) provides a clear example of these themes. See Stanley (2005: 162–63); Stuller (2010: 87–104). Cf. Dietrich (2006: 216–17).

[64] E.g. the '3 wise men mural' in *God of War II*.

[65] While *Wonder Woman* has occasionally 'resurrected' dead gods—e.g. Hermes in #2.215-217 (2005)—the gods remain passive figures and require 'rescuing'. In contrast, *God of War* has permitted dead gods to reappear as 'ghosts'—e.g. Athena in *God of War II*. A distinction should also be made between 'resurrections' and 'rebootings'—e.g. Hades' presence in *Wonder Woman*'s fourth volume (#4.5) is distinct from his death at the end of the second (#2.17).

Feminism: guilty as charged?

Since Wonder Woman has played such a central figure in introducing violent dei-
cide to popular culture, perhaps her feminist roots should be held responsible for
this thematic change? Not only does *Wonder Woman* present the first expression of
violent deicide within modern mass media ('War of the Gods', 1991), but her char-
acter has directly influenced later depictions—e.g. Xena and Lyta Hall are both
styled as fellow feminists and Amazonian figures.[66] Furthering this, it was Xena—
not Hercules—who first committed deicide on television, killing Bacchus in 'Girls
Just Wanna Have Fun' (*XWP* #2.4, 1996)—an act which appeared far more prom-
inent within her own serial than *HTLJ*.[67] A potential link between feminism and
deicide could be found in the movement's clash with traditional notions of God—a
figure of masculine identity and patriarchy.[68] Through challenging these tenets, the
feminist movement has become guilty of deicide—at least metaphorically speak-
ing.[69] Thus there should be little surprise when strong fictional feminist figures
display this sentiment literally. However, caution must be urged against being too
hasty in passing judgment. Not all feminist heroines—even those originating within
comic books—share this intimate association with deicide. Consider Marvel's Red
Sonja: this 'She-Devil with a sword' has both a strong feminist back-story and shares
many similarities with Wonder Woman.[70] However, deicide does not feature within
Red Sonja's original narrative, even though deities form a vital part of her world.[71]
Likewise, *God of War* demonstrates how deicide might be approached from an
androcentric perspective—Kratos' treatment of women is anything but feminist.

[66] Graf (2015: 79); Kennedy (2003); Marshall (2011: 90–92); Stanley (2005: 158); Warren
(2014).

[67] Xena also kills most of the pantheon in 'Motherhood' (*XWP* #5.22, 2000) while Hercules
only commits deicide—killing Zeus—within the *XWP* serial ('God Fearing Child'
#5.12, 2000). *HTLJ* features deicide only in 'Armageddon Now: Part 1' (#4.13, 1998)
with Callisto killing Strife. See Tomasso (2015: 151–53).

[68] Barker (1999); Byrne (1996).

[69] The nature of the feminist movement (and its various waves) is far more complex than
what can be explored presently—some strands of the movement have been perhaps less
sympathetic to deicide than I have suggested here (e.g. the third wave). I find a precedent,
however, in the broad definition of feminism offered by Karen Offen: '[a movement and
ideology which] offers a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social control and
control mechanisms. It seeks to destroy masculinist hierarchy' (1988: 151; cf. Offen
2011).

[70] Red Sonja's origin story was related in 'The Day of the Sword' (*Kull and the Barbarians*
#1.3, 1975; *The Savage Sword of Conan* #1.78, 1982). It tells how Sonja was raped by
bandits at a young age and, having been unable to defend herself, appealed to the goddess
Scathach for vengeance. Scathach granted Sonja fighting skills, provided she not sleep
with a man unless he defeats her in combat.

[71] The recent rebooting by Gail Simone (2014) has removed Red Sonja's feminist backstory
and has also begun to include deicide.

Modern issues with divinity

A careful examination of genre provides a way forward. Although it must be acknowledged that genre is a fluid concept,[72] the examples discussed above can all be associated with fantasy.[73] This requires fantasy to be defined as broadly as possible: the appearance of elements which represent a believable departure from reality.[74] When applied to classically inspired narratives, these elements often express themselves through a tripartite formula: heroes/heroines as attractive, extraordinary figures who accomplish superhuman feats; creatures/monsters as figures of 'otherness'; and the divine.[75] Consider Peterson's *Troy* (2004): this pseudo-historical retelling of the Trojan War makes almost no visual reference to the divine or any creatures/monsters.[76] Thus despite utilizing a mythic narrative and heroic figures, *Troy* expresses this in an 'un-fantastical' manner. Of these three fantasy elements, the most problematic within modern mass media is the divine. While the inclusion of gods heightens the required sense of a departure from reality—acknowledging the modern cultural shift that God/gods are considered unrealistic[77]—this departure must also be believable so as to allow for the audience's suspension of disbelief. Yet immortality does not challenge this plausibility. Modern mythology is full of immortal–fantastical beings: Peter Pan, the boy who never ages; Dr. Who, the Time Lord who regenerates when mortally injured; and Dorian Gray, the man whose portrait suffers the consequences of his mortality—to name but a few such characters.[78] None of these figures, however, claim divine status.

Divinity is an abstract concept which, when paired with visual media, proves difficult to convey.[79] Consider the historic depictions of deities in film.[80] For the

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[72] Hardwick (2003: 76–77); Paul (2013: 1–35).

[73] I am thankful to the reviewers for highlighting Bost-Fievet and Provini (2014) and Rogers and Stevens (forthcoming)—both of which contain a wealth of scholarship exploring classical reception within fantasy and related genres. I am indebted to the foundation provided by these works.

[74] I am following Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011: 125–26); cf. Solomon (2001: 131).

[75] Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011: 128); Winkler (2007: 456–70).

[76] This was a deliberate decision by Peterson who has since stated: 'Homer would be the first to advise: "Get rid of the gods"' (see Winkler 2007: 457–58). While the gods are ritually present—e.g. Priam praying to Apollo (0.32.32ff)—this is to be expected of any film seeking to establish an ancient setting. By comparison, the only potentially-divine character is Thetis (played by Julie Christie) but her brief appearance emphasizes her role as Achilles' mother, ignoring her divinity (0.23.45-0.25.38).

[77] Jewett and Lawrence (2010: 667); Norris and Inglehart (2011).

[78] Peter Pan first appeared in J. Barrie's stage-play *Peter Pan* (London: 27 December 1904); Dr. Who, in the BBC science-fiction television series (1962–89, 2005); and Dorian Gray, in Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1981).

[79] Paul (2013: 109–10); Winkler (2007: 456).

[80] I have narrowed the present discussion to focus upon film due to its comparatively easier accessibility and its longevity as a visual medium.

majority of Hollywood's history, spanning from the origins of cinema until the period directly prior to the turn of the twenty-first century, visual displays of the divine were extremely limited.[81] Although this could be interpreted as a general aversion to religious material, as claimed by Father Andrew Greeley, the prominence of Biblical epic during the golden age of cinema (1927–63) demands an alternative conclusion.[82] Why were pagan deities excluded while Judeo-Christian ones were not? The dominant Christian influence upon the censorship of mass culture during this period certainly played a prominent role. This can be seen in the various 'codes' which personified contemporary fears regarding the corruption of youths: e.g. the Motion Picture Production Code (1930)—known colloquially as the 'Hays Code'—and the Comics Code Authority (1954).[83] These social anxieties were not centred upon the pagan gods' ability to provide a rival belief system but rather upon the interpretation that their pagan roots endorsed harmful behaviours including non-Christian morality, fascism and even Nazism.[84] However, even once significant changes within the collective values of society and a cooling of the political climate surrounding World War II allowed these codes to be relaxed and then removed altogether, pagan gods remained noticeably absent.[85] Zeus and the Greek pantheon may have become comfortable with the spotlight by the mid-1990's—e.g. *HTLJ* and *XWP*—but this was nearly 40 years after the Hays Code had been deemed officially irrelevant.

Biblical epic simply never faced the same challenges as Greco-Roman epic in depicting the divine.[86] Aside from its easier avoidance of censorship, its 'style' of revelation was unaffected by considerations of medium. At this stage, it is helpful to divide Biblical epic into two categories, derived from the films' primary narrative: the Old and New Testaments. The former includes the likes of Cecil DeMille's *Ten Commandments* (1956), based on the Exodus story (Exodus 1-20, 32). In contrast, New Testament examples focused upon the life of Christ, particularly the Passion narrative (Mark 14-15; Matthew 26-28; Luke 22-23; John 12-19), with films such as *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965). Although both types of epic share a theological continuity, their approach to the divine was radically different. This reflects their subject matter, as Jon Solomon has recognized: '[the former] revolves around the

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[81] Ahl (1991: 41); Greeley (1976: 71); Paul (2013: 107).
[82] Greeley (1976). Cf. Ahl (1991: 40).
[83] Dethloff (2011: 108–14); Kovacs (2011: 8–9); Vaughn (1990).
[84] E.g. Dr. Wertham's influential book: *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954).
[85] Dethloff (2011: 112–14); Kovacs (2011: 9); Vaughn (1990: 64–65). Films which featured the Greek pantheon were few and far between: *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), *The Illiac Passion* (1967), *Hercules in New York* (1969), *Clash of the Titans* (1981), *Hercules* (1983) and *Hercules II* (1985). Only *Jason and the Argonauts* and *Clash of the Titans* can be considered mainstream successes with the rest being either 'flops' or inaccessible to general audiences.
[86] I am only addressing direct manifestations of God, not metaphorical portrayals or concepts of God. Cf. Bergesen and Greeley (2000: 5–13, 125–35).

celestial, invisible deity generally known as Jehovah... [the latter] around the earthly, anthropomorphic Christ'.[87] Jehovah's invisible nature required no visual representation while allowing for a full scope of interaction via alternate manifestations: e.g. *The Ten Commandments* follows the biblical narrative in exploiting the burning bush (Exodus 3.2) and prophetic figures (Exodus 3.10) to act as Jehovah's mouthpiece. Similarly, as befitting *Immanuel*, 'God with us' (Isaiah 7.14, Matthew 1.22-23), Christ's persona emphasized his humanity rather than his divinity and so such issues simply did not occur.[88] However, as in the scriptures, Christ's divinity was expressed via miracles—supernatural feats no other mortal could achieve—such as the curing of the 'woman of no name' (portrayed by Shelley Winters) in *The Greatest Story Ever Told*.[89] In contrast to Jehovah and Christ, the divinity of pagan deities did not readily fit either paradigm. A potential exception was the semi-divine Hercules.[90] Not only was he incredibly popular—especially within the peplum genre—but, like Christ, Hercules presented an overtly human figure who could perform inhuman feats.[91] Strictly speaking, however, Hercules was never inherently divine in the same manner as either Christ or Jehovah.[92]

As technology progressed into the realm of special effects, new possibilities emerged. The divine 'otherness' of pagan deities was now visually represented by depicting them as much larger than their mortal counterparts. This technique was first coined by Ray Harryhausen in *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963): Hermes, having hidden his identity in the guise of an old man, reveals his true—and much larger— form to Jason at his temple (0.15.14); the entire Pantheon on Mt. Olympus appears as giants when Jason is made privy to their council (0.16.49); and a giant Triton holds back a cliff face, allowing the Argo to pass through (1.03.06). This technique not only provided the sense of realism required by fantasy, in keeping with contemporary special effects, but offered a physical commentary on the nature of the gods.[93] As Tomasso noted in his discussion of deicide, films of this period consistently portrayed mankind at the mercy of these larger-than-life deities.[94] This was reinforced through another recurring trope made famous by Harryhausen: Olympians literally 'playing' with the lives of mortals either via clay models or an elaborate game of chess.[95]

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[87] Solomon (2001: 134). Cf. Paul (2013: 110).

[88] For an in-depth examination of Christ in the cinema see Bakker (2009: 13–78).

[89] Cf. Luke 8.43-48.

[90] Cf. Safran (2015).

[91] E.g. *Hercules* (1959). On this film see Blanshard and Shahabudin (2011: 58–76); Nisbet (2008: 45–55, 64–66); Solomon (2001: 117–24). There are, of course, further similarities between the pair: cf. Safran (2015: 133–34).

[92] Safran (2015); Stafford (2012: 201–05).

[93] Ahl (1991: 50–52); Paul (2013: 113–17); Solomon (2001: 113–15).

[94] Tomasso (2015: 149, 150–51).

[95] *Jason and the Argonauts* (0.16.49ff); *Clash of the Titans* (1981, 0.12.55ff).

Modern film utilizes a different methodology again. While the larger-than-life trope occasionally appears, its present use is limited to a tributary gesture. Consider the opening of *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* (2010): a large Poseidon emerges out of the ocean before returning to his 'normal' human size so as to stroll through the streets of New York (0.01.25-0.02.03). Instead, modern film now denotes divinity through visual displays of power beyond that of mortals. *Immortals* (2011) provides a prime example for the gods move unrestricted by time and space and with the ability to manipulate matter.[96] The reason for this change in portrayal cannot simply be a lack of realism since the tributary references to larger-than-life gods prove that computer-generated-imagery is more than capable of maintaining this historical trope. Rather, this reflects other developments within mass culture.[97] Divinity has become synonymous with being superhuman, rather than being immortal in the strictest sense of the term—'undying'. Within such a paradigm deicide becomes not only permissible but a logical conclusion.

The superhuman link

In considering the synonymy of divinity and the superhuman, the 'missing link' between antiquity's immortals and modernity's gods becomes apparent. An immediate comparison can be drawn between the superhuman abilities of gods and contemporary superheroes. Both commonly display similar powers such as flight, super-strength and invulnerability[98]—quite different from the miracles of Christ. Tarsem has described his film *Immortals* as superhero film numerous times, claiming 'I just thought that if you want to make a superhero film, these [gods] are the original superhero guys and they seem to have much more problems than let's say that the superheroes that today [*sic*] you have';[99] '[I had an interest in] super-beings—they could be Batman and Superman interfering with us or if there was [*sic*] gods.'[100] While the majority of films may not be as explicit in connecting their portrayal of the gods with superheroes, *Immortals* is far from an exception.[101] This association is a deeply rooted one, demonstrated by the generally fantastical nature of superheroes and also—more importantly for the present discussion—the 're-mythologizing' influence of Greek and Roman deities in the creation of many superheroes.[102]

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[96] Consider the scene of Ares' attack upon Hyperion's men (1.00.21-1.02.00): Ares moves with such speed that the first man has not fallen before the last is slain; Athena 'teleports' two horses into the gorge; and Zeus manipulates fire into a whip.

[97] Cf. above regarding God/gods as fantastical.

[98] Pop (2013: 16–17).

[99] Ford (2011).

[100] Eisenberg (2011).

[101] I am grateful to the reviewers for highlighting the visual connection between the iconography of the superheroic body and those of *Immortals*' gods.

[102] Coogan (2006: 116–17); Dethloff (2011); Pop (2013: 16–17).

The link between superheroes and gods has become an integral part of their modern characterization. A prominent contemporary example is the blockbuster *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016). In three of its four promotional trailers, Superman is alluded to as a god figure: the climax of the teaser trailer reveals a statue of Superman defaced with graffiti labelling him a 'false god' (17 April 2015, 0.00.57); in both the 2015 Comic-Con trailer and the final trailer, Lex Luthor (played by Jesse Eisenberg) describes the battle between Superman and Batman as 'god versus man' (11 July 2015, 0.02.54; 14 February 2016, 0.01.05). The film in its entirety contains an even fuller expression of this theme which functions as a kind of superhero leitmotif within the larger thematic question of the (apparent) paradox between (divine) power and goodness:[103] e.g. Lex Luthor's climatic monologue on the nature of god blurs the line between divinity and superhero to the nth degree.[104] Another example, one with a clear historical precedent, is Marvel Comics' silver-age character Thor. Not only is Thor the Norse god of thunder but he is a superhero in his own right.[105] However, Thor also represents an anomaly. The majority of super-heroes are not actually gods but rather mortal beings—even if, like Superman, they are mortals from alternate worlds or universes.[106]

There are logical reasons why superheroes must remain distinct from the gods. The majority of prominent superhero figures were created in the golden age of comics (late 1930's-early 1950's) and shared certain foundational traits: they stood for justice and the liberation of the oppressed and required a secret identity and a crime-fighting costume.[107] Such traits do not align well with the portrayal of the

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[103] As *Batman v. Superman* was not cinematically released until the final draft stages of this article, I can only offer the briefest of comments (and am unable to cite any timings). While a Judeo-Christian perspective is clearly at play in the film's conception of god, emphasizing angelic and demonic imagery, there is also a clear Greco-Roman influence. There are several references to gods hurling thunderbolts (e.g. by Alfred to Bruce in a discussion of Superman's arrival on Earth and by Lex Luthor during his speech on philanthropy); Luthor references the myths of both Prometheus and Icarus (the latter via a comparison with General Zod: 'You flew too close to the sun. Now look at you.'); and Apollo features prominently in Luthor's list of mankind's various names for 'god'.

[104] In Luthor's monologue he explicitly addresses Superman as god/God: 'the problem of you – god – 'cause that's what you are'; 'and now god bends to my will. . . The Almighty comes clean about how dirty he is!'

[105] Thor first appeared in 'Thor the Mighty and the Stone Men from Saturn', *Journey into Mystery* #1.83 (1962). On Thor's creation see Reynolds (1992: 53–59).

[106] In an interesting twist, the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* has recently demoted Thor to a similar 'alien' status as Superman (see *Thor: The Dark World*, 2013). Marvel's *The Ultimates* (#1.1-13, 2002-2004) is perhaps a comic-precursor, although this particular narrative occurred within an alternative reality while Thor's primary serial continued to promote his divinity (e.g. *Thor: God of Thunder* #1.1, 2012).

[107] Coogan (2006: 200–04).

gods in Greek myth.[108] There are many (in)famous instances of the male gods' womanizing ways, actions which are considered—objectively speaking—to be oppressive abuses of power.[109] While the gods occasionally disguised themselves in order to achieve such conquests, neither can these be considered parallels to the superhero's secret identity.

This is not to suggest that there were no attempts at placing divinities within comic books. Hercules, Mars, and Mercury all appeared in various early serials under the guise of superheroes—or supervillains: *Mystic Comics* (#1.3-4), *Blue Ribbon Comics* (#1.4-8), *Red Raven Comics* (#1.1); *Hit Comics* (#1.1-21); and *Planet Comics* (#1.15-35).[110] The majority of these, however, were unsuccessful, being abandoned almost as quickly as they began. The two more successful outputs—Joe Hercules in *Hit Comics* (#1.1-21) and Mars God of War in *Planet Comics* (#1.15-35)—ran for several years but did so at the expense of the rich mythic history behind these characters. Joe Hercules was reduced to a simple strong-man who fought crime while Mars, representing the embodiment of evil, would possess villainous persons in a distinctly Satanic manner until beaten by the forces of good.[111]

Due to this hostile reception, divine figures began to appear covertly, imbuing mortal heroes with their abilities in what I have presently termed re-mythologizing.[112] Superman was originally conceived of by his creator Jerry Siegel as 'a character like Samson, Hercules and all the strong men I ever heard of rolled into one'.[113] Likewise, Jay Garrick—the golden age Flash—wore a winged helmet as part of his costume, paralleling the 'super-speed' and iconography of the god Hermes.[114] These subtle references to divine figures could also be more explicit, taking the form of a patron–client relationship between god(s) and hero. The earliest examples of this trope was Fawcett Comics' character Captain Marvel, who first appeared in February 1940's issue of *Whiz Comics* (#1.2).[115] Captain Marvel was the heroic persona of the young boy Billy Batson, who transformed into this alternate form by saying the magic word 'Shazam'—invoking the powers of Solomon (Wisdom),

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[108] Reynolds claims that golden age superheroes deliberately resembled the gods in order to achieve 'a degree of moral and intellectual uplift' (1992: 53). I disagree. Not only does this contradict the intent of the various codes but the gods' powers, not their morality or intelligence, is most often cited as influential in their creation.

[109] Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provides an excellent literary compendium describing many such incidents.

[110] Dethloff (2011: 104–07). Cf. 'Hugo Hercules' in Coogan (2006: 177–78).

[111] See Dethloff's analysis of Mars, God of War (2000: 106).

[112] This term is borrowed from Pop (2013).

[113] Quote from Coogan (2006: 117) and Reynolds (1992: 9–10).

[114] Coogan (2006: 117). Although some of Hermes' classical epithets remain ambiguous – particularly regarding his super-speed—this remains an innate part of his modern reception.

[115] Reynolds (1992: 53). Contra Coogan (2006: 200) which emphasizes Wonder Woman as the paradigmatic example of the 'mythology-based hero'.

Hercules (Strength), Atlas (Stamina), Zeus (Power), Achilles (Courage), and Mercury (Speed). In his origin story, a wizard explained to Billy how the 'gods' had each lent a particular aspect of themselves to create a powerful figure who would 'battle the forces of evil' (#1.2.4-5, 1940). DC Comics' Wonder Woman presents a similar tale. In her 'creation', Princess Diana was endowed with powers derived from various Greco-Roman deities: 'as lovely as Aphrodite – as wise as Athena – with the speed of Mercury, and the strength of Hercules' (*All Star Comics* #1.8.1, 1940). Unlike other past attempts to include the gods, the Wonder Woman narrative actively promoted the Greco-Roman deities as characters in their own right—thus achieving their first major (re-)appearance in the world of the superhero.[116]

But what of deicide? In the early 1980's comic narratives began to explore the humanity of superheroes in a way previously not possible—via their deaths.[117] This began in 1982 with the death of Mar-Vell (Marvel Comics' Captain Marvel), who was quickly followed to his grave by a host of others:[118] 1985 saw the deaths of Kara-Zor El (Supergirl) and Barry Allen (the second Flash);[119] 1989, the brutal murder of Jason Todd (the second Robin).[120] Perhaps the most shocking example was that of the Man of Steel himself—Superman in *Superman* #2.75 (1992)[121]—signalling the viability of superhero death as a narrative trope. At this point we should recall the earlier framing of the distinction between vanishing and violent deicide as historic and modern: pre-1980's and post-1990's. Superhero death neatly fits into this time-line. Once this trope had become established, the re-mythologizing relationship between superheroes and gods saw this now applied to the latter.

Conclusion: the return of the gods(?)

The gods' re-entry into modern popular culture was not straightforward. Hampered by significant challenges during the rise of mass media, substantial changes to the gods' characterization was required. Yet they managed to survive—a further testimony to the tenacity of myth. However, the gods of antiquity had to sneak in the proverbial backdoor of popular culture, leaving behind much of their traditional associations in the process. They achieved this through a partnership with super-heroes, providing the initial creative idea for super-human powers. Consequently, modern audiences now associate gods with these powers, rather than the specific

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[116] Dethloff (2011: 107–08). Cf. Coogan (2006: 200).

[117] While it would be interesting to explore further why superheroes only began dying in the 1980's, such a question lies outside of the scope of this article. On the complexities surrounding superhero death see Alanix (2014: especially pp. 158–281). I suspect the answer may lie within the enduring influence of the Comics Code, since this required good to always triumph over evil, making superhero death impossible.

[118] 'The Death of Captain Marvel', *Marvel Graphic Novel* #1.1.

[119] 'Beyond the Silent Night' and 'The Final Fate of the Flash', *Crisis on Infinite Earths* #1.7-8.

[120] 'A Death in the Family', *Batman* #1.426-29.

[121] Cf. *Batman v. Superman*.

traits which ancient audiences would have attributed to them—such as immortality. The ability to escape death was one power which superheroes never realized —theirs was a decisively mortal experience. Since immortality never became a superhero attribute, it has ultimately failed to make its presence felt in this re-mythologizing of the gods.

In returning now to Heraclitus's ambiguous statement, obviously he did not have the rise of modern superheroes in mind, yet at the same time this seems to be exactly what he was referring to: the gods are now suffering from the limits of mortality while a select few mortals have been elevated to the status of gods via their super-human powers. Yet, the death of these mythological divinities also culminates in their afterlife—and a particularly prosperous one at that. With mythology demon-strating once again its ability to adapt to the passages of time, the gods have simply traded in one form of immortality for another, one more befitting their now mortal status—immortal *kleos*.

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