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New Gods for Old: Jack Kirby and Classical Mythology from *Mercury* to The *Eternals*

For Steve

Abstract. In American superhero comics, there are few bigger names than Jack Kirby, who helped to make Marvel Comics famous. One of the earliest pieces of work he did for Marvel’s predecessor, Timely, was *Mercury in the 20th Century*. The themes Kirby explores, particularly the clash of gods and their presence upon Earth, would recur throughout his later work.

This paper will explore those, addressing the following areas:

1. Influences from earlier strips such as *Superman* and *The Flash* to be found in *Mercury*, and their relationship to Classical reception.
3. Possible influence of *Mercury* upon other comics, such as *Wonder Woman*.
4. Recurrence of themes and visual motifs in Kirby’s later work, in *Captain America*, *X-Men*, and especially *Thor*.
5. Kirby’s use of Classical themes in the Fourth World books and *Eternals*.

Introduction

As is no doubt obvious from elsewhere in this volume, the prime genre of the American comic is the superhero story. Superhero comics form the vast majority of comics published in the United States; most big name comics creators (Frank Miller, Alan Moore, Grant Morrison) made their mark through superheroes. 2

In this world, artist and writer Jack Kirby (1917-1994) is legendary. In the 1940s Golden Age (like Hesiod’s Ages of Man and Latin literature, American comics have Golden and Silver Ages), with his partner Joe Simon, he created many memorable characters, including the iconic Captain America. In the early 1960s Silver Age, he teamed up with Stan Lee to create the Marvel line, and more icons, such as the Fantastic Four, Iron Man, the Hulk, etc. Through the rest of the 1960s and 1970s he produced comics that, if never as commercially successful as his early Marvel work, nevertheless often embodied breathtaking concepts.

*Mercury in the 20th Century*

*Mercury in the 20th Century* 3 was Kirby’s first work for the company that would become Marvel, conventionally referred to in its 1940s incarnation as Timely. 4 The eight-page strip (a fairly typical length for comic stories of the time) was published in *Red Raven Comics* #1, cover-dated August 1940, 5 and credited to Martin A. Bursten. Bursten is a misspelling of Martin A. Burstein, the usual letterer for Simon and Kirby. 6 When republishing this story in *The Complete Jack Kirby* 1, comics historian Greg Theakston suggested that it was written by Burstein, but by the introduction to *Marvel Visionaries: Jack Kirby*, he had changed his mind, 7 and now thinks the story was written, pencilled

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1 This is based in part on ‘A Flash of Quicksilver: Mythology and Anti-Nazism in Jack Kirby’s *Mercury*’, presented at the 2007 Classical Association Conference, part of a panel entitled ‘Bringing the Gods Down to Earth: Representations of the Classical divine in modern popular media’. I was fortunate to be helped with comics history by fan, artist and scholar Steve Whitaker; he also supplied me with Kirby’s *Hurricane*. Steve died in February 2008, and I dedicate this to his memory.
2 On the genre, see now Kaveney (2008).
4 The name was only used by publisher Martin Goodman for three months in 1942 (Goodman used a multiplicity of names to exploit tax laws); see Jones (2004), 198.
5 As usual with comics, it will have actually appeared a few months beforehand, in May or June; see Nevins (1998b). All dates for comics in this chapter are cover dates.
and inked by Kirby, seemingly without any direct help from Simon (though they possibly discussed the story). On stylistic grounds alone, the latter view seems more probable.

The story is straightforward, the premise self-explanatory. Jupiter is concerned about the machinations of the evil Pluto, god of the dead, who is encouraging war and destruction on Earth. Jupiter sends his son Mercury to resolve the problem, which Mercury does in a non-violent way, stealing all orders so that all troops stop fighting.

**Mythology in Mercury**

Kirby appropriates the Roman pantheon. Jupiter runs through a selection of deities whom he might send against Pluto, rejecting them for various reasons – Vulcan because he is himself of a violent temperament, Aeneas because he is, literally, an old windbag. Diana because she may succumb to Pluto’s sexual wiles, and Apollo because he too may be seduced by Pluto’s hedonistic offers (Plate 1). This list shows a grounding in Graeco-Roman mythology. Kirby may even play with the reader subtly. At Jupiter’s side as he muses is Minerva, goddess of wisdom and war, wielder of the aegis, who initially brought up the possibility of sending someone against Pluto. The reader with knowledge of Roman mythology can easily suspect that, behind her neutral statement of ‘there must be someone’, Minerva is actually dropping hints that Jupiter should pick her.

Demonstrating this knowledge allows Kirby to make changes and blend in elements from other mythological systems. In Roman mythology Mercury is Jupiter’s son, and is in some instances sent by Jupiter on missions (e.g. killing Argus in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1.668-721). But he is not the favoured son that Kirby presents him as. The idea of a god sending his son to save humanity has more in common with Judaeo-Christian tropes than Graeco-Roman ones. This is emphasized by Pluto’s satanic appearance.

**Antecedents**

When the first superhero, Superman, appeared in *Action Comics* #1 (June 1938), he was so far beyond ordinary mortals that it was only a small step to the notion of a god as a superhero – the archetype of the superhero can be traced back to the deeds of the gods and demigods of Mesopotamian, Classical, and Norse mythology (e.g. Gilgamesh, Hercules and Thor, all of whom have been used as superheroes). Kirby had been interested in history at school, so using mythology appealed. But why choose this deity?

The general recognition factor explains the use of a Roman god. Many readers in 1940 would have had at least a basic idea of the Roman gods. But Mercury was perhaps chosen because of antecedents within comics. When someone hit upon a successful formula, others wanted to copy it. This happened repeatedly in 1940s comics, with creators altering a successful character just enough to avoid legal action. National’s Superman was imitated by Fox’s Wonderman and Fawcett’s Master Man and Captain Marvel (all of which National did take legal action over), Timely’s undersea Atlantis-based Sub-Mariner was followed in late 1941 by National’s undersea Atlantis-based Aquaman; Simon and Kirby largely used MLJ’s The Shield as the basis for Captain America, whose success spun off further red-white-and-blue-clad imitators.

Kirby’s Mercury is probably inspired by All-American’s The Flash, created by writer Gardner Fox and editor Sheldon Mayer, who first appeared in *Flash Comics* #1 (January 1940). The Flash was the first of a class of hero described as ‘speedsters’, whose main power is the ability to run very fast. In the opening caption of the first Flash story, Fox describes the Flash as ‘reincarnation of the winged...

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8 As the Simon/Kirby partnership progressed, Kirby took on more of the creative side, leaving Simon to handle the business; see Harvey (2002 [1994]), 65. Theakston (cited in The Grand Comics Database Project entry on Red Raven #1, [http://comics.org/details.lasso?id=951](http://comics.org/details.lasso?id=951) [accessed July 2008]) also believes that the lettering in this case was also by Kirby (which might explain the misspelling of Burstein’s name). Exactly why Burstein’s name was put on the strip is a mystery.

9 Minerva was originally a goddess of handicrafts, only becoming a goddess of war when identified with Greek Athena and acquiring Athena’s iconography (Rose & Schied (2003 [1996])). As a result, Minerva has a slightly less aggressive and forceful air to her than Athena.

Mercury’, but this reincarnation is more symbolic than actual, going not much further than the winged helmet and sandals the Flash adopts, for reasons not very well explained, but which are in imitation of Renaissance depictions of Mercury.11

Speed is a defining characteristic of Kirby’s Mercury, described as ‘the fleet’, and as moving ‘with a speed too fast for the human eye to detect’. Kirby gives the god Classical garb, reminiscent of some Roman depictions,12 complete with a winged headband and winged sandals. He could not depict the god nude, but Mercury wears the bare minimum required for decency. This appearance is reminiscent of one of Timely’s leading lights, Bill Everett’s the Sub-Mariner, who first appeared in Marvel Comics #1 (October 1939). Like Mercury, the Sub-Mariner wears nothing but a pair of swimming trunks. And the Sub-Mariner too has wings on his heels, though in this case they are actually part of his body.

Mercury’s association with speed was established in another superhero strip, Captain Marvel. The ‘Big Red Cheese’, as he became known, first appeared in Whiz Comics #1 (February 1940). The Captain gains his powers by speaking the word ‘Shazam!’ This is an acronym of a number of mythological characters, all but one of them Classical, who grant Captain Marvel certain powers. ‘M’ is for Mercury, and Mercury grants speed. (Kirby and Simon later worked on Captain Marvel in 1941.)

Anti-Nazism

The strip is strongly anti-Nazi. ‘Rudolph Hendler’ of ‘Prussland’ is plainly German dictator Adolf Hitler, and no-one would not have realized this.

In mid-1940 anti-Nazism was not universally popular in America. Though very broadly a position of the American Right, isolationism had supporters across the political spectrum, from industrialists happy to trade with the Nazis, through liberals concerned to avoid the slaughter of the First World War, to Communists automatically supporting Stalin’s every act, at this point including the non-aggression pact with Germany. Potential controversy, and hence lost sales, led to executives wary of any artistic work tackling the issue. Charlie Chaplin’s The Great Dictator was first shown in September 1940, and like Mercury, disguises Hitler under a pseudonym (a humorous one, Adenoid Hynkel). This film was controversial while in production, with speculation that it would not be released; production company United Artists sent Chaplin messages that alarmed him, presumably suggesting they were about to pull out.

The comics industry, however, was almost entirely staffed by Jews, and young Jews from working-class backgrounds. Everyone had known since Kristallnacht in 1938 what the Nazis would do to the Jews (in broad terms, if not the specifics of the Final Solution). These writers and artists thought America should stop it. So they tried to promote this through their stories.

However, some senior industry figures had an eye on possible lost sales if their comics became controversial, and took appropriate action. Superman’s co-creator Jerry Siegel was told to tone down the political concept of his strip Red, White and Blue,13 and that strip’s publisher, All-American, was for the most part pro-isolationist in its stance.14 Martin Goodman, whilst presiding at Timely over one of the more anti-Nazi series of comics, nevertheless changed the villainous dictator in the Marvel Boy story in Daring Mystery Comics #6 (September 1940, published in June) from Hitler to ‘Hiller’. He was right to have some concerns. In December 1940, when Simon and Kirby unleashed the highly anti-Nazi Captain America, they received hate mail and death threats, and were menaced outside their offices.15

Interesting is the position of Superman. All-American’s joint owner, Jack Liebowitz, was also a

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11 For instance, ‘Mercure attachant his winged sandals’ (1744), by Jean-Baptiste Pigalle (currently in the Louvre), or ‘Mercure ou le Commerce’ (1780) by Augustin Pajou. The hat is a development of the winged Greek travelling hat Hermes is shown with in e.g. the fifth-century BC Sarpedon vase by Euphronios (Beazley Archive no. 187; New York Metropolitan Museum, 1972.11.10). Early classical versions are seen on the Hermes Logios, now in the Palazzo Altemps in Rome, and the Hermes de Xilxes, from a villa in Spain.
12 E.g. an example in a Pompeian fresco, now in Naples Archaeological Museum, or the Gosbecks Mercury from Colchester (now in Colchester Castle Museum).
13 Jones (2004), 165.
15 Gravett (2005), 74.
major shareholder in Superman’s publisher National. Liebowitz ensured that Superman stayed out of commenting on the European war, to the extent that arms dealers seeking to profit from involving America were portrayed as villains. This was partly out of concerns for lost sales, but partly because Superman was so powerful that he could not get involved with fighting Nazis without breaking any connection with reality. Superman’s creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster produced a strip for Look magazine entitled ‘How Superman Would End the War’, published in the 7th February 1940 issue (Plate 2). Superman simply flies to Berlin and Moscow, kidnaps Hitler and Stalin, and takes them to the League of Nations. The war is then over. Superman aside, National tended towards interventionism.

Where does Mercury fit into all this? The date at which the material was produced needs to be considered, a question which is not easy to answer. A comic was generally created three to four months before it appeared on newsstands, a month or two before the actual cover date (though precise publication dates are all but impossible to establish for most 1940s comics). So Red Raven, cover-dated August 1940, should have been written and drawn some time between February and May, appearing on the newsstands between May and June. But the story is a bit more complicated. Red Raven seems to have been hurriedly put together in May or June to give Timely another successful book alongside the flagship Marvel Mystery Comics, as their other titles, Daring Mystery Comics and Mystic Comics, were not doing well. But the nature of the way in which it was assembled may mean that it used material that had been hanging around as yet unpublished and unused, possibly commissioned by Simon, who was the editor, when he was still working for Fox Feature Syndicate in early 1940. On the other hand, Mark Evanier suggests that the material was all completed after Kirby had become a full-time employee of Martin Goodman.

Internal evidence probably points to an earlier date rather than later. Though one might see the storyline as reacting to the resumption of active ground fighting in Europe with the invasion of Denmark and Norway at the beginning of April, the inactivity of troops, explained in the strip by Mercury’s interception of communications, is probably a reference to the ‘Phoney War’ period of October 1939-March 1940. The depictions of land combat in the comic seem based on WWI trench warfare; this supports a composition date before the blitzkrieg attack on France in May. It was no doubt considered unwise to directly name Hitler or Germany, hence ‘Hendler’ and ‘Prussland’, which I suspect Kirby used after consultation with Simon or Goodman.

A panel on the final page is interesting. The soldiers shown are not identifiably British or German or French, as elsewhere in the strip. Instead, their uniforms and equipment (especially the helmets) make them look like Italians and Greeks. Italy did not enter the war until June 1940, and it would be October before its forces invaded Greece. But ever since Italy occupied Albania in April 1939, there were concerns about Mussolini’s further ambitions in the Balkans, with Britain and France guaranteeing Greece’s sovereignty. Perhaps Kirby makes reference to this.

Afterwards – the 1940s and 1950s

Red Raven was cancelled after a single issue (though the numbering continued in The Human Torch); none of its strips continued. With Red Raven widely seen as a failure, it is hard to see any lasting influence of Mercury on other comics of the time. When Quality introduced a speedster in National Comics #5 (November 1940), he was called Quicksilver, an early name, of course, for the metal which later became referred to as mercury (because the qualities of quicksilver were felt to be those of the god). But this is a fairly obvious name for a super-fast hero, and no link should necessarily be

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16 So Jones (2004), 165.
21 Steve Whitaker, pers. comm.
23 Nothing to do with the publisher National Comics, though probably Quality hoped to steal some of that publisher’s reputation through using that title.
drawn with Kirby’s strip – indeed it’s possible that Kirby’s strip had not appeared when the first Quicksilver strip was drawn.

Over a year after *Mercury*, another classically-inspired character, Wonder Woman, appeared (in *All-Star Comics* #8, December 1941-January 1942). An Amazon, daughter of Queen Hippolyte, sent into the world of men at the behest of Aphrodite and Athena, Wonder Woman is described as having ‘the speed of Mercury’. There are similarities between *Mercury* and *Wonder Woman* in the portraiture of the gods, and both combine Classical influences with anti-Nazism. However, Wonder Woman’s creator, William Moulton Marston (writing as Charles Moulton), had also studied classical mythology at school, and in 1932 wrote *Venus With Us*, a quasi-erotic historical novel about Julius Caesar. The classical elements of Wonder Woman derived from Marston’s own interests. The Kirby influence on Wonder Woman comes from *Captain America*, with Wonder Woman as one of a series of heroes clad in variations of the American flag, in response to *Captain America*’s success.

*Mercury* could not be copyrighted by Timely. So he turned up in other companies’ comics, such as a 1944 Superman story, in which he calls himself ‘the Quicksilver Kid’ (*Superman* 26, January-February 1944). He also appeared in Timely’s *Venus* #7 (November 1949). *Venus* began as a romance series, albeit one with a Roman goddess as central character, but then developed into more of an superhero adventure comic, introducing mythological elements.

Kirby himself revisited *Mercury*’s themes. At about the same time, Jupiter turned up in another Simon and Kirby collaboration, *Marvel Boy in Daring Mystery Comics* #6, mentioned above. Marvel Boy was largely a retread of Captain Marvel, but gained his powers from having the soul of the hero Hercules, whom Jupiter had allowed to manifest on Earth, to face the oncoming threat of war. This is the same messianic motif of a father sending his son to Earth to fight warmongers (i.e. Fascists) as found in *Mercury*, scaled down somewhat.

*Mercury* did not continue in that exact form, but was transformed a few months later into a new strip, *Hurricane*, which again Kirby wrote and mostly pencilled alone (though Simon inked the second story, which also supposedly had art assistance from Al Avison). Hurricane is no longer son of Jupiter, but son of Thor, and the ‘last descendent’ of the ancient Greek immortals. But speed is still his defining characteristic, his costume changes only slightly, he still fights Pluto’s schemes, and he goes by the pseudonyms of Mike Cury or Michael Gray (someone in Kirby’s second *Hurricane* strip calls him ‘Michael Jupiter’, for no apparent reason, having been introduced to him as ‘Michael Gray’).

Missing is anti-Nazism – Pluto’s schemes pit Hurricane against gangsters and wicked Amazonian tribes. Kirby had not backed away from anti-Nazism. The *Hurricane* strips appeared in *Captain America Comics*, the first issue of which (March 1941) carried the most overtly anti-Nazi image yet seen in comics; Captain America beats up Hitler, who is named. More likely, Kirby had the same problem with Mercury/Hurricane that others had with Superman. Someone so powerful that he could just end the war in moments if he wanted (this is more-or-less what he did in the first story) – so it was best not to bring the matter up. Kirby may also have felt that Captain America could now do all the anti-Nazi work. Kirby only drew two *Hurricane* strips before turning over the task to Charles Nicholas, who continued to draw the strip until it stopped in *Captain America Comics* #11 (February 1942).

Captain America himself may have a link with Mercury. The design of the costume (which Simon claims to have designed alone, though Kirby disputed this), is largely based on The Shield, incorporating some elements that seem drawn from Fox’s Eagle (both of whom first appeared in 1940). On the cowl are wings, meant to represent the American eagle. But they also bear a close resemblance to the wings on Mercury/Hurricane’s headgear.

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25 Some sources describe him as Hermes, but I believe that they have been brought into line with current Marvel continuity, where Hermes is the god’s correct name. *Venus* is very difficult to get hold of, and I have not seen this issue.
26 Stangroom (2003), 713.
The Marvel Age

Kirby spent the 1940s and 1950s working in a variety of genres, including co-creating romance comics with Simon. Towards the end of this period he revisited his Roman interests through an adaptation of Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii*, for Gilberton’s *Classics Illustrated* series (#35, March 1961).  

Kirby returned to epic mythological themes when, in collaboration with Stan Lee, he was instrumental in the success of a new line of superhero titles from Marvel Comics (the company Martin Goodman’s publishing empire had become), beginning with *Fantastic Four* in 1961. When Kirby co-created a speedster with Lee in *Uncanny X-Men* #4 (March 1964), he was named Quicksilver. As noted, this is an obvious name for a speedster, but in this case, Marvel already had a name, the Whizzer, not used at that time. True, the old Whizzer was a hero, and Quicksilver a villain; but a villain with scruples, who would reform and join the Avengers in little over a year – and the next time the Whizzer was used, in *Avengers* #70 (November 1969), it was on a villain. Perhaps more apposite is that Quicksilver is a better name than the Whizzer. But Lee and Kirby were revisiting 1940s themes – the Sub-Mariner had returned in *Fantastic Four*, and in the same month as Quicksilver appeared, Captain America was revived in *Avengers* #4 – so Kirby may have meant with the name to refer to *Mercury*. Perhaps also noteworthy is that Quicksilver’s strange flyaway hair seems reminiscent of the wings on Mercury’s headgear.

Kirby had returned to the theme of a superhero god two years before the creation of Quicksilver. In *The Mighty Thor* (debuting in *Journey into Mystery* #83, August 1962), the Norse God of Thunder becomes a superhero.  

Motifs from *Mercury* and *Hurricane* can be seen. *Thor* revisits the father-son relationship between divine hero and chief deity, though any messianic element is downplayed in early stories (as Thor has developed in the hands of other creators, that element has re-emerged). The chief villain is another god (in *Mercury*, Pluto, in *Thor*, Loki). And the second incarnation of Mercury, Hurricane, had been son of Thor. Also noteworthy is that, in place of the horns traditionally (if apocryphally) associated with Viking helmets, Thor’s helmet has two wings. True, the winged helmet is another incorrect Romantic vision of the Viking helmet (and was revived in its Gallic version for *Asterix the Gaul*), but there may be a reference to *Mercury*.

A controversial problem is who actually created Thor. In *Origins of Marvel Comics*, Lee gives an account that makes it all Lee’s idea, inspired by a radio interviewer’s comment. Lee also implies that this was the first time a mythological deity had become a superhero.

Kirby, for his part said:

I came up with *Thor* because I’ve always been a history buff. I know all about Thor and Balder and Mjolnir the hammer. Nobody ever bothered with that stuff except me…

Stan Lee was the type of guy who would never know about Balder and would never know about the rest of the characters. I had to build up the legend of Thor in the comics.

This is part of a wider dispute about who created the classic Marvel characters. Lee has always presented them as emerging from his own head, and then being farmed out to appropriate artists. Kirby stated that Lee was more of an editor than a writer; Kirby would come up with the plots, and draw the comics, leaving Lee to add dialogue (often according to notes added by Kirby). Lee himself admitted in 1968 that this was how Kirby was working at that point, with the occasional idea from Lee. The question is about how much input Lee had when the various series began.

Most critics generally accept that on titles created by Lee and Kirby, the ideas were at least fifty

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28 Not a happy experience for Kirby, as he constantly had to redraw pages, for no extra fee; Evanier (2008), 109.

29 It is key, for instance, to the version of Thor in the Ultimate Universe, first introduced in *Ultimates* #4 (June 2002).

30 Though Loki does not appear until the third Thor story (*Journey into Mystery* #85, October 1962).

31 Lee (1974), 178-9. His account was unchanged thirty years later (see Mair & Mair (2002)).

32 Quoted in Groth (2002 [1990]), 38-9, 45. Groth comments on the interview overall (19) ‘most observers and historians consider Kirby’s claims here to be excessive’.

percent Kirby – *Fantastic Four*, for instance, derives many ideas from a strip Kirby wrote (with Dave Wood) and drew for DC (the former National), *Challengers of the Unknown*. This is not to deny Lee’s input; many critics acknowledge Lee had a superior ear for dialogue, and there are independent accounts of brainstorming sessions suggesting that Lee brought creative notions into the mix.\(^3\mathbf{4}\)

Lee’s notion that the ‘super-god’ was his novel idea cannot stand without qualification, as there were precedents; Kirby’s *Mercury*, of course, which Lee should have been aware of, as he had himself written some of the later *Hurricane* strips. And the first deity to get their own comic book, in 1948, was *Venus*. Lee edited and wrote this as well. In one story (which may have been written by Lee), Venus confronted the Norse god Loki (#6, August 1949).

As noted, *Thor* features themes already found in Kirby’s work, notably *Mercury* and *Hurricane* (and he had used the name Thor for a monster in *Tales to Astonish* #16, February 1961, one very like those fought by the god Thor in his first appearance). The same themes recur in his later work, after his partnership with Lee ended. This can never be settled fully,\(^3\mathbf{5}\) but my own view is that of all the Lee/Kirby creations, *Thor*, even more than *Fantastic Four*, is probably the one that is most Kirby and least Lee. This is not, again, to deny Lee a role in shaping the series (especially as for a time Kirby wasn’t the regular artist).\(^3\mathbf{6}\) Early *Thor* stories downplay the Norse mythology in favour of more conventional earthbound superheroics, and this may be down to Lee. It may also have been Lee that suggested downplaying the messianic element. Kirby was credited as co-creator from *Thor* #134 (November 1966) onwards (and from the previous issue for the back-up *Tales of Asgard* feature). It seems likely that he was the main driving force behind the title from at least that point, if not from when he returned to the book full time with *Journey into Mystery* #102.

Why choose the Norse pantheon, rather than return to Graeco-Roman gods? It may have been Lee’s preference, though if one believes Kirby’s comment that Lee knew nothing of Norse mythology, this seems unlikely. Perhaps Kirby did not wish to repeat himself (this was a feature of Kirby’s method).\(^3\mathbf{7}\) The Graeco-Roman pantheon was part of the supporting cast for *Wonder Woman* (by now published by DC), and was in any case familiar. It may not be true, as Lee later asserted, that no-one had done anything with the Norse pantheon in comics, but they were underused.

There is also the ambiguous morality of Graeco-Roman gods. They are capricious, and often self-centred. Acting out of purely noble motives is not a general characteristic. Hermes/Mercury is perhaps one of the least capricious, less inclined to turn rivals into spiders, as Athena does to Arachne, or pursue nymphs so relentlessly that they would rather be turned into shrubbery, as Apollo does with Daphne. But he is still the patron deity of thieves.\(^3\mathbf{8}\) Such ambiguity did not really suit the black-and-white morality of 1960s American superheroics. Thor is a much more straightforward figure.\(^3\mathbf{9}\) It is possible to portray him as a drunken boor,\(^4\mathbf{0}\) but he can project an uncomplicated heroism. Odin is much more convincing as a leader of the gods guided primarily by wisdom than the philandering Zeus/Jupiter (despite Kirby’s later attempts to present Zeus in this way). Kirby may already have recognized this when he made Hurricane son of Thor.

As Kirby (and Lee) developed Thor, the Greek pantheon was reintroduced, first in *Journey into Mystery Annual* #1 (1965), where Thor fights Hercules (*Plate 3*).\(^4\mathbf{1}\) A brief appearance from Zeus also featured. Then, in a story running from *Journey into Mystery* #124 (January 1966) into *Thor*...

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\(^{34}\) For an account of the issue, see Wells (2002 [1995]). At 75-8 he gives a balanced account of the evidence, though his subsequent argument that Lee was the prime creative force on the basis of differences in attitude between the Marvel comics and Kirby’s subsequent Fourth World work seems overstated. For a statement of the consensus, see Harvey (2002 [1994]), 69.

\(^{35}\) Even Evanier (2008), 124, is undecided.

\(^{36}\) Between *Journey into Mystery* #89 (February 1963) and #102 (March 1964), both drawn by Kirby, he only drew additionally #93 (June 1963) and #97 (October 1967); in addition he drew the *Tales of Asgard* back-up that began in #97, and drew the covers throughout.


\(^{38}\) See various entries in March (1998).

\(^{39}\) On Thor, see Orchard (1997), 351-4.

\(^{40}\) As Neil Gaiman does in *Sandman* #24 (March 1991) & #26-#27 (May-June 1991), consciously riffing off his readership’s familiarity with the Kirby/Lee Thor.

\(^{41}\) Hercules, brought from the past by the time-traveller Immortus, made a very minor appearance in *Avengers* #10 (November 1964), by Stan Lee and Don Heck, but that was forgotten.
#131 (August 1966), more of the pantheon appear. Pluto returns, redesigned, but still looking quite satanic. The Messenger of the Gods also reappears, now called him Hermes, and given a chariot more appropriate to Helios the Sun God. Ares, Atlas and Hippolyta also feature.

The gods, for the most part, have their Greek names. This may have been to distinguish Marvel’s Graeco-Roman gods from DC’s, where, for instance, the god of war is Mars. But perhaps Kirby preferred the Greek names as being more ‘authentic’. He would no doubt be aware that Pluto, though sometimes thought merely the Roman equivalent of Hades, is found in Greek literature (e.g. Aristophanes’ Frogs); so he could keep the name of his 1940s villain without being inconsistent.

Hercules retains his Roman name, no doubt for marketing reasons. The Italian Hercules movies were still being produced in 1965, so putting the name ‘Hercules’ on the cover would get a degree of brand recognition. More people knew who Hercules was, and therefore might buy the comic, than would recognize the name ‘Heracles’.

Hercules is carefully characterized to be distinct from Thor. Where the Norse god is driven by a sense of duty and justice, the Prince of Power (perhaps a reference to Marvel Boy, where Hercules’ epithet was ‘Son of Power’) is motivated by vanity and hedonism. Subsequently, Hercules became a more conventional superhero, joining the Avengers and the Champions, and has had his own solo series form time to time (he has just taken over The Incredible Hulk). But none of his series thus far have lasted long; he does not quite have the appeal of Thor.

**New Gods and Eternals**

Kirby’s partnership with Lee and Marvel ended in 1970, over a number of issues, one being Lee’s refusal to allow Kirby to bring about Ragnarök (the Twilight of the Gods) in Thor. Kirby departed for DC. There he pursued further mythological themes in the ‘Fourth World’ saga, of which the main books were Mister Miracle, Forever People and New Gods. This was the tale of two sets of gods, whose war was played out on Earth, as the evil ruler of Apokolips, Darkseid, sought the Anti-Life Equation.

In the Fourth World, Kirby set out to create a new mythology, much as J.R.R. Tolkien had in his Middle-Earth works; this period was the height of the popularity of Lord of the Rings on American campuses, and Kirby was influenced by Tolkien. There is little overt classical reception in the Fourth World. The most important of the New Gods is called Orion, and described as looking like a Greek statue, and there is a brief trip back to the withdrawal of the Romans from Britain and the dawn of the Arthurian age (in Forever People #7, March 1972). But mostly the Fourth World drew on Kirby’s work on Fantastic Four (especially the Inhumans, Doctor Doom and the Silver Surfer), and particularly Thor; though never explicitly stated, the Old Gods whose destruction is seen at the beginning of New Gods 1 (March 1971) were the Norse gods of Thor, undergoing Ragnarök. It also drew on Hebrew and Judaeo-Christian mythology (albeit filtered through the Greek language); the planets of the New Gods are New Genesis and Apokolips, and the leader of New Genesis is Izaya, who wields a shepherd’s crook, not unlike depictions of Old Testament prophets.

But the Fourth World saga is important for this paper. It stands in a line of descent that leads through Thor to Mercury, and is a link to Kirby’s next epic, a major use of classical iconography.

The Fourth World books were cancelled between 1972 and 1974, before Kirby had completed more than a quarter of his planned story. Kirby returned to Marvel in 1975, and in 1976 created The Eternals (amongst other titles). At various times in the past, Celestial Hosts have visited Earth. On their first visit, they created three strains of mankind, humans, the immortal Eternals, and the genetically unstable Deviants. Eternals tells of the arrival of the Fourth Host, who will decide the ultimate fate of Earth, and the re-emergence of the Eternals and Deviants to interact with humanity.

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42 Wonder Woman comics were inconsistent in using Roman or Greek names, so that, e.g., they had Aphrodite and Hera, but also Mars and Mercury. This was rationalized to always using the Greek versions in George Perez’ 1987 relaunch.

43 No-one, not even Kirby (see Evanier (2007), 390), knew why the saga acquired this overall title, which first appeared on the cover of Jimmy Olsen #139 (July 1971).

44 Evanier (2007), 389.

45 My thanks to Martin Hand for lending me some issues of Eternals.
Eternals draws heavily upon the Fourth World (it has been described as the New Gods played at a different speed), but also it also riffs off work Kirby was doing at the same time in a comic based on Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey, further aspects of his sixties work in Thor and the Galactus stories from Fantastic Four (as well as the Inhumans, the prototype for the New Gods), and the then-current ideas of Erich von Däniken. It also makes considerable use of mythology. Some is Graeco-Roman. But some is Graeco-Roman. There are Eternals called Ikaris, Ajak, Thena, Sersei, Makkari and Zuras (Plate 4). Makkari, who like Mercury possesses great speed, seems a direct reference back to the 1940s Mercury (whilst Kro, the most prominent Deviant, has similarities in appearance to Pluto, both as depicted in 1940 and in 1966). Sersei and Makkari are explicitly stated to be the beings humans have called Circe and Mercury. By implication, then, the others are actually Icarus, Ajax, Athena and Zeus. In issue #13 (July 1977) Kirby introduced the Forgotten One, said to have had many names amongst men; post-Kirby stories reveal him to have been mistaken at various times for Gilgamesh and Hercules.

There was no conflict in Kirby’s mind with previous depictions of these characters in Thor or other Marvel comics (though, for the most part, he used characters that he had not featured before). He saw the Eternals as lying outside the normal Marvel continuity. Makkari in The Eternals had nothing to do with the Hermes seen in Thor #129. Marvel’s editors saw it differently, and were soon requesting that Eternals be tied into the main Marvel continuity. Kirby acquiesced, including a few references to various Marvel characters. But it was left to later writers, after Eternals was prematurely cancelled, through a process known as retconning (going back over previous continuity to reveal some hitherto unknown development), to connect Kirby’s Eternals with Jim Starlin’s Thanos (a character with many similarities to Kirby’s Darkseid), to state that the Forgotten One had only been mistaken for Hercules (Kirby, one suspects, would have made clear that he was Hercules), to conclude the Celestials storyline in Thor, to induct Eternals into the Avengers (where they fitted as well as the New Gods who joined the Justice League, i.e. not very), and to finally reveal Makkari had in fact been the 1940s Mercury and Hurricane all along.

Kirby’s return to Graeco-Roman mythology perhaps relates to a change in the tone of the comics he was producing. Already in the Fourth World, there had been a greater moral complexity than had been apparent in his Marvel comics. Orion is champion of New Genesis, but was born on Apokolips, son of Darkseid, and keeps hidden his true face, uglier than that which he usually shows to the world. He can display a savagery that Marvel heroes would never show (for an example, see New Gods #5, November 1971). The Eternals are similarly ambiguous. They are on the side of humanity, but their motives are their own, and Kirby presents them as if to suggest that they can’t fully be trusted. Sersei, in particular, treats humanity as a source of amusement. In that context, the ambiguities of Graeco-Roman mythology become once again something Kirby could use.

In the late 1970s, Kirby went to work in animation. In Kirby: King of Comics, Mark Evanier prints some character sketches Kirby did in 1981 for Hanna-Barbera Productions, one of which is of Mercury. This Mercury looks very like the handsome figure with blond flowing locks that Kirby had portrayed Orion (though he was ref-headed) and Ikaris as. Mercury has a simple classical-style tunic, and the winged helmet that the Golden Age Flash had worn, but which Kirby’s original Mercury had not. Unfortunately, Evanier gives no further information about what this figure was designed for.

46 Von Däniken (1969 [1968]). I don’t mean to suggest that Kirby believed in von Däniken, but that he found the ideas in Chariots of the Gods? useful for his work.

47 There was also a Fourth World character, one of Darkseid’s minions, called Mokkari (introduced in Jimmy Olsen #136, March 1971). But beyond the similarity in name, he shares nothing with any other Kirby version of Mercury.

48 Though later revisions to the character’s back story make Ikaris Icarus’ father.

49 Greenberger 2007. He had probably intended to do the same with the Fourth World, whose characters interact little with those of the main DC Universe, but had linked those stories with the main continuity when he was made (under protest) to take over Jimmy Olsen, and drew it into the saga.

50 In Marvel Universe #6 (September 1998).

51 Evanier (2002), 197.
In conclusion

This chapter has been intended to look at Kirby’s work both from the point of view of a Classical Receptions scholar, and also from that of a comics historian. The two perspectives, in this case, complement each other. Lorna Hardwick rightly identifies redirecting our attention back on the original source as a key element of reception studies. But it is not the only element.

So one can see how Kirby interacted with Graeco-Roman mythology, first adopting it because of its general recognizability, then discarding it because it did not suit the morality of the stories he was producing. Finally, he returned to it when his own writing had moved in a more morally complex direction. This says something about the ways in which classical elements can be appropriated in popular culture. And hopefully it will also encourage readers to check out some very entertaining comics.

Bibliography


52 Hardwick (2003), 4.
Plate 1: Page 2 of *Mercury in the 20th Century* (Red Raven Comics #1, August 1940), by Jack Kirby.
Plate 3: Cover to *Journey into Mystery Annual* #1 (1965), by Jack Kirby.

Plate 4: Cover to *The Eternals* #5 (November 1976), by Jack Kirby, showing Zuras (centre), Thena (left), Makkari (right), Ikaris (top left) and Domo (centre bottom).