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Editors

Apl. Prof. Dr. Annemarie Ambühl (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)
Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink (Universität Potsdam)
PD Dr. Christian Rollinger (Universität Trier)
Prof. Dr. Christine Walde (Johannes Gutenberg-Universität Mainz)

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Contact

Principal Contact

Prof. Dr. Filippo Carlà-Uhink
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de

Support Contact

PD Dr. Christian Rollinger
Email: thersitesjournal@uni-potsdam.de

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ANASTASIA BAKOGIANNI & LUIS UNCETA GÓMEZ
(Massey University, New Zealand | Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Spain)

Greek Antiquity in Lockdown

An Interview with Illustrator Jonathan Muroya about his *Greek Quarantology* series (2020)

Abstract This is an interview with Jonathan Muroya, an illustrator based in the San Francisco Bay Area. His *Greek Quarantology* is an animated cartoon series that offers a peek at figures from Greek Mythology as they navigate life in lockdown.

Keywords Jonathan Muroya, Greek Mythology, Classical Reception, Cartoons

Jonathan Muroya (JM) is an illustrator based in the San Francisco Bay Area. Currently, he works as a freelance character designer and has contributed to the storytelling at several studios including Pixar Animation. His illustration style and the topics he addresses are wide-ranging and diverse. Only a few of them deal with classical themes, but his *Greek Quarantology* series (2020) really caught our attention.

We came across Muroya's work during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, while searching the Internet for relevant Classical Reception material for our online teaching (and probably also as an outlet for the stress we were all under). His GIFs were fresh, sharp, and made us smile during this challenging time. Under the appealing title of *Greek Quarantology*, Muroya gave us a cartoon series that offers a peek at animated figures from Greek Mythology as they navigate life in lockdown. This kind of re-elaboration, re-casting and re-interpretation of classical material is what Classical Reception is all about. Muroya's flexible and rich creative response to the Classics marks another episode – characteristic of the digital age – in our ongoing relationship with Graeco-Roman Antiquity.

Jonathan, we were really impressed by your *Greek Quarantology* series and used it in our teaching. Finding ancient mythical characters like Hercules, Medusa and Prometheus coping with situations we ourselves were undergoing in our respective lockdowns in Auckland and Madrid provided us with some much-needed light relief, but also with food for thought as Classical Reception scholars. Could you tell us what drew you to use these ancient figures in your work as an illustrator?

I appreciate your kind words! *Greek Quarantology* was done as an assignment during my last year at art school, which happened to be the spring of 2020. We were asked to make a series, in any illustrative form, that engaged with the isolation of lockdown in some way and tapped into the cultural moment we were all experiencing.

Credit to my wonderful partner, Angie, who helped me to land on the initial concept after a week of failed attempts. Once that seed was planted, the ideas began to flow rapidly, and within another week *Greek Quarantology* was finished.

How familiar were you with these ancient gods, goddesses, heroes, heroines, and monsters before you began work on the *Greek Quarantology* se-

ries? Did you encounter the Classics over the course of your education? And/or is it a personal interest developed over time?

In high school I took four years of Latin, and it was by far my favorite subject. Studying Latin helped me cultivate a deeper appreciation for the structure of language and literature. I even briefly considered going to college to study Classics instead of Art. Even now, I still find myself making occasional references to Classical literature in my illustrations – there’s just something so irresistible about it. But by no means would I consider myself any kind of expert on the subject!

I also remember encountering Classical Mythology through books like the Percy Jackson series and the d’Aulaires’ *Book of Greek Myths*¹ as well as in movies like Disney’s *Hercules*. I noticed among my peers a certain amount of common knowledge associated with Greek Mythology. Almost anyone could be shown a picture of a bearded guy holding a thunderbolt and assume that it’s Zeus. I think that baseline level of common cultural knowledge is in part what makes *Greek Quarantology* such an accessible concept to a Western audience.

Did you consult any specific sources for the ancient figures, and/or did you draw inspiration from popular media, including films, television series, video games, comics, etc.?

I tried to take a sort of universal approach with the way I illustrated the characters. They had to be recognizable in an instant. I wasn’t concerned with drawing everything with historical accuracy or putting a fresh spin on the design. It was all about asking, ‘What do we, as a culture, recognize about these characters?’, and I made all my decisions from there. It sounds uninspired, but treating the characters almost as icons was necessary for the humor to land.

What were your artistic sources of inspiration? Is there any specific style of art or artist(s) that you really admire? How have these influences shaped your own work?

Oh man, so many! With *Greek Quarantology*, I can directly see the inspiration from the comic strips I grew up reading: Calvin and Hobbes, Fox Trot, and Garfield were my favorites. In college I was introduced to cartoonists like Ronald

¹ Ingri and Edgar Parin d’Aulaire, an American couple of authors and illustrators of children’s books, originally published this popular version of the Greek myths in 1962. The book has been republished many times and has influenced generations of American children [AB and LUG].

Searle, William Steig, Quentin Blake, and Daumier. In all their work, there is both a simplicity and a depth to their observations that I find so inspiring.

One of Ronald Searle's images has been stuck on my mind for a long time now. The piece is titled *Al Fresco* (1977)² and in it, Searle depicts a museum night guard on duty hearing a noise around the corner. The viewer can see that it's an entanglement of classical figures who have seemingly emerged from the ceiling fresco into the real world and are falling to the ground. Searle renders them in that recognizable 'classical' way: beautiful contrapposto and delicate gesture, though here they are recontextualized as a comical visual gag, like the famous joke about slipping on a banana peel. Just a great example of an artist finding ways to play on our expectations of the Classical as it appears to our modern eyes.

Tell us more about your creative practice and why you chose to animate these illustrations.

When I made this series, I was brand new to animating (it probably shows). Once I began making animated GIFs, I realized the unique potential they had to grab a viewer's attention on digital platforms like Instagram, where animated content can be shared. I had no intention of publishing *Greek Quarantology* on anything other than my own social media to share with my friends and followers, making its widespread readership an unexpected and delightful surprise.

The series is available on your website and socials, but were there any other channels through which you disseminated your work and received feedback?

To my surprise, there have been a handful of other websites that shared *Greek Quarantology* with their readers, including NPR,³ which also published a short interview with me. But apart from the classroom and on my social media, I never posted the series on another platform. Once it took off and started being shared in various corners of the internet, it was very much out of my hands. I've been told by some people to whom I introduce my work that they recognize the series

2 <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/practice/culture/ronald-searle-at-the-cartoon-museum-by-louis-hellman> (accessed 09/12/2023).

3 <https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2020/10/25/913109242/drawing-on-greek-myths-as-inspiration-for-illustrating-life-during-the-pandemic> (accessed 09/12/2023).

from somewhere online – as an artist, I find it both delightful and surprising to have my work precede me in that way.

Three of our favourite GIFs from the *Greek Quarantology* series were ‘Medusa’ (Figure 1), ‘Narcissus’ (Figure 2), and ‘Prometheus’ (Figure 3). We think they encapsulate three key areas of human life that were severely affected by the lockdowns: self-care, social interactions, and family life. These contemporary associations really hit the mark, but they differ from the typical attributes of these three figures in Antiquity (monstrosity, vanity, and hubris, which roughly corresponds to “arrogance and excess”). Can you tell us a bit more about how and why you adapted Medusa, Narcissus, and Prometheus in such a fresh manner?

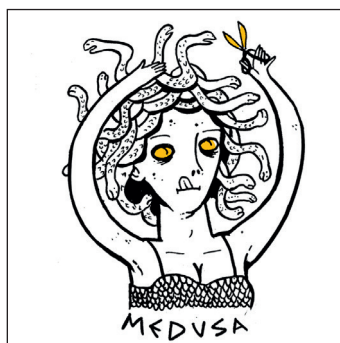


Figure 1 Medusa, 2020.
© Jonathan Muroya

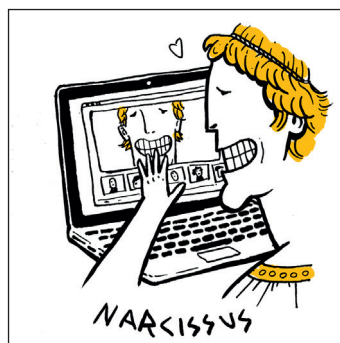


Figure 2 Narcissus,
2020. © Jonathan
Muroya



Figure 3 Prometheus,
2020. © Jonathan
Muroya

With these particular examples, much of the humor lies in contradicting how we traditionally think of these characters with the mundanity of pandemic life. I feel as though picturing these larger-than-life figures as reflections of ourselves makes them feel just like us, thus replacing the gravitas of their traditional dramas with the *levitas* of daily life (How was my Latin?).

It was great! Some of the ancient figures you referenced in this series are well-known – for example, ‘Dionysus’ (Figure 4), ‘Hercules’ (Figure 5), and ‘The Minotaur’ (Figure 6) – but some were perhaps less so, arguably ‘Jason’, ‘The three Fates’ and ‘Tantalus’. What principles guided your selection? And do you have a personal favourite?

Unfortunately, the simple answer is that I could only think of gags for some figures, and not others! I would go down a list of mythological figures and think: What is their most famous attribute? Is there a pandemic comparison? Is there a way to recontextualize their struggle in a way that says something about our current reality? Someone smarter than me could likely come up with something for every character in Greek Mythology.

My favorite is probably ‘Narcissus’. What does that say about me?



Figure 4 Dionysus, 2020. © Jonathan Muroya



Figure 5 Hercules, 2020. © Jonathan Muroya



Figure 6 The Minotaur, 2020. © Jonathan Muroya

It probably says that, unlike us, you are a digital native... When was the first time you used Classical Antiquity to play visual games with your audience? Could you tell us more about some of the other times when you drew on Classical Antiquity? For example, ‘The Bomb That Didn’t Explode: Why Our Fears About Population Growth Didn’t Come True’, your illustration of a litter of hungry babies suckling and gambolling over a she-wolf (reminiscent of the famous Lupa), a clever caricature on the famous Roman foundational myth of Romulus and Remus.

You did your research! The she-wolf was done as a school assignment for the same class as *Greek Quarantology*. I arrived here by thinking of a way of symbolically representing world resources and parodying it to convey overpopulation and the overconsumption. Maybe any animal could have conveyed this concept, but incorporating the Classical reference summons the idea of establishing and maintaining society and adds a layer of delight for those who are familiar with this statue or the story of Romulus and Remus.

We also loved your ‘The Question Everyone Should Be Able to Answer About Their Finances’ (Figure 7) that playfully adapts the Oedipus myth. Can you tell us more about how that came about?

Oedipus was a commission for the online journal *Fatherly*. Similarly, I sought to parody the existing drama – in this case, Oedipus must solve riddles, but instead of the Sphinx posing the questions, it’s a piggy bank. I love taking something that we as a culture know and understand and spin it in some way to give it a new meaning.



Figure 7 The Question Everyone Should Be Able to Answer About Their Finances, 2021. © Jonathan Muroya

Do you have any plans to return to Antiquity as a source of inspiration for your work? Maybe another series? Or individual, one-off cartoons?

I love Greek Mythology and would love to return to it someday, but I have no immediate plans or desire to do so. My tendency as an artist is to do one type of project and then want to do something completely different on the next. For now, I am happy to let the *Greek Quarantology* series exist as an artifact of its cultural moment.

I’ve been so delighted by the positive response this series has garnered. I certainly didn’t anticipate its international reach, especially now, coming up on three years since its inception. A great big THANK YOU to everyone who saw it and shared it.

Some concluding thoughts from the interviewers:

Transpositions of Greek myths into different historical periods and geographical locations have appeared down the centuries. Jonathan Muroya joins a long line of artists who have engaged with ancient Greece and Rome, making the most of modern technologies that made it possible for his work to reach a global audience during a moment of acute crisis.

Jonathan Muroya's *Greek Quarantology 2020* series appeals to us because it enables us to identify with the ancient Greek figures through the representation of their daily lives that bear striking similarities to our own, but also knocks them off their pedestals. Muroya's work in fact builds on multiple receptions and illustrates the importance of early encounters with Greek myths in our childhood. This common phenomenon of mediated reception (a reception of a reception) for Muroya, as for countless other young Americans, was the d'Aulaires' illustrated version of the Greek myths that shaped how he imagined and interacted with the protagonists of these stories. Growing up in Greece and Spain respectively, we had a different set of childhood cultural touchstones,⁴ but we are all united by our love of these ancient myths and our desire to ensure that they get passed on to the next generation. Jonathan Muroya's *Greek Quarantology* series certainly contributes to this goal.

Anastasia Bakogianni

Massey University, New Zealand

School of Humanities, Media, and Creative Communication

East Precinct Albany Expressway, SH17, Albany, Auckland, 0632. New Zealand

a.bakogianni@massey.ac.nz

⁴ We voraciously consumed the Japanese anime series *Ulysses 31* (<https://www.ulysses-31.com>) that was broadcast in both of our countries when we were growing up. In Greece Anastasia vividly remembers her father reading her award-winning children author and illustrator Sofia Zarabouka's *Mythology* series comprised of five books, originally published between 1980 and 1981, and still in print today (https://el.wikipedia.org/wiki/Σοφία_Ζαράμπουκα, both accessed 09/12/2023).

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Luis Unceta Gómez
Universidad Autónoma de Madrid
Departamento de Filología Clásica
Edif. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
Campus de Cantoblanco
C/Fco. Tomás y Valiente 1
Madrid, 28049. España
luis.unceta@uam.es

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