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INTERTEXTUAL ECHOES OR CULTURAL UNIVERSALS? REASSESSING THE INFLUENCE OF ANCIENT GREEK POETRY IN THE MIGHTY THOR SERIES (ISSUES 363–6)

ABSTRACT. Zbądzki Jakub, *Intertextual Echoes or Cultural Universals? Reassessing the Influence of Ancient Greek Poetry in The Mighty Thor series (issues 363–6)*

The purpose of this article is to reexamine the interpretation of comics 363–6 in Marvel's *The Mighty Thor* series as a retelling of the Hellenistic mock epic poem *Batrachomyomachia*, a view expressed by scholars such as Nicholas Newman in his paper entitled *The War of Frogs and Rats. The Batrachomyomachia in Marvel's The Mighty Thor*. The article proposes an alternative approach to reading these comics outside of the antique context, interpreting the similarities between the two works through the lens of cultural universals theory.

Keywords: *Batrachomyomachia*; Homer; Marvel; intertextuality; reception studies

Batrachomyomachia, commonly known as *The War of the Frogs and the Mice*, stands as an example of the Hellenistic mock epic, addressed to a sophisticated audience, well-acquainted with Greek literature. The majority of scholars agree that the poem exhibits a complex web of intertextual references. Prevailing interpretations predominantly associate it with the *Iliad*, parodic literature, the works of Callimachus or Aratos, fables featuring similar plotlines, and other extant ancient mock epics, although partially preserved (Hosty 2020; Bauer 2020; Christensen and Robinson 2018; Hosty 2014; Kelly 2014; Kelly 2009). Alternative theories propose viewing the poem or its parts as a subversive rendition of the *Odyssey* (Fonseca 2010), an expansion of Homeric hymns (Teixidó 2015), or an epic continuation of *topoi* drawn from Aristophanes's comedies (Errecalde 2018). Intriguingly, certain researchers examining the poem's reception have posited its presence in literature for young readers. This is exemplified in analyses of Walt Simonson's *The Mighty Thor* series, which acknowledge *Batrachomyomachia* as a significant influence on issues 363–6. This connection has been extensively explored in Nicholas Newman's paper, *The War of the Frogs and the Rats* (2020: 78–94), as well as in various blogs and

podcasts dedicated to popular culture (Harmony and Blaylock 2022; Stokes and Allie 2017). In this paper, I aim to delve into the details of this discussion and ascertain whether the aforementioned comics genuinely drew inspiration from ancient literature, or whether the nature of their similarity is different.

Let us begin by examining the historical context. The *Batrachomyomachia* has been erroneously attributed to Homer almost since its inception. In *Vita Homeri (Life of Homer)* by Pseudo-Plutarch, it is claimed that the poem was crafted by Homer as a literary exercise (West 2003: 413). This supposition laid the foundations for *scholia* asserting that he adapted epic poetry for a younger audience through this work and possibly influenced the poem's later reception. It has been widely posited that *Batrachomyomachia* was a part of the literature curriculum in Byzantine schools even as early as the 9th century. This belief has become sufficiently widespread despite the lack of robust evidence to substantiate it. The challenge lies in the limited number of manuscripts available and the ambiguous context of its use at that time, as highlighted by Stroh (2016: 227). The poem was probably incorporated into schools from the 12th century onwards. Although direct testimonies of its use still were quite scarce, the paucity of evidence does not necessarily imply the absence of the poem from the culture. As Lorenzo Ciolfi notes, works with an even sparser manuscript tradition were widely known in Byzantium (2015: 39–54). Matthew Hosty contends that a scholarly reception is very likely, citing the variability of successive text versions and the formulaic nature of the *scholia* that emerged during this time (2020: 60–2.) Various passages might imply that the *Batrachomyomachia* was employed as material for literary exercises in the form of rewrites, while the rudimentary explanations, written in demotic, suggest that they were intended for students rather than philologists.¹ The context of individual copies of the poem may also provide valuable information. The *Batrachomyomachia* was not exclusively located alongside the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but was often included in anthologies of Greek texts featuring works by Aristophanes, Euripides, Theocritus, summaries of the *Iliad* or Aesop's fables, which may have been useful for students and teachers (Teixidó 2016: 49). Since then, more definitive evidence has emerged that supports the more frequent use of this poem in educational settings. It became one of the most popular didactic texts (Marciniak

¹A second, parallel interpretation posits that the variability of passages within the poem stems from its oral background. This view is advocated by Hansjorg Wölke, and to some extent by Massimo Fusillo and Ramon Teixidó. However, I find this perspective less convincing, as the modifications observed in successive versions of the *Batrachomyomachia* do not align with the characteristics typically associated with oral works. The changes primarily consist of the addition of individual lines containing specific references to Homer, alterations in their sequence, or minor corrections. Furthermore, these modifications are not uniformly distributed throughout the poem but are primarily concentrated in the battle scene, which is considered the most striking from a literary perspective and, according to several early readers, the most Homeric (see Gleii 1993: 33).

and Warcaba 2018: 99). It is exemplified, among others, by the famous *scholion* attributed to Manuel Moschopoulos,² in which he praises the poem. His key arguments in favour of reading it include its hexameter and engaging narrative, which serve as an excellent introduction to epic poetry, as well as the presence of literary references and moral undertones (Ludwich 1896: 198). The awareness of the diets of frogs and mice in the text has also been regarded as a merit, despite its predominantly erroneous nature.³ During the Renaissance in Europe, the practice of reading *Batrachomyomachia* as an introduction to Homer's work became widespread. As Massimo Zaggia suggests, interlinear translations featuring Greek and Latin texts side by side were especially beneficial in educational settings, assisting students in learning epic poetry (Zaggia 2013: 36). Various editions directly praise the didactic qualities of the poem. In the preface to one such work, Leonhart Lycius asserts that the poem is well suited to students, not only maintaining their existing enthusiasm for learning but also fostering a genuine appreciation for Greek literature (1566: 4). The use of the *Batrachomyomachia* by Hieronymus Osius in schools during the canicula, a period conducive to lighter reading, demonstrates its dual purpose of providing enjoyment, *delectare*, and instruction, *docere* (1566: 2–3). This pattern was repeated frequently at later times. Consequently, the poem, which was initially conceived as an engaging but intricate literary work due to many intertextual references, has evolved into a text for both children and adolescents. Therefore, there is no obstacle, at least theoretically, to its permeating modern literature for young people, including comics, and serving as a source of continued inspiration.

Taking this into account, we can now examine the potential connections between *Batrachomyomachia* and issues 363–6 of the *Mighty Thor* comics. To facilitate understanding of the issues analysed, let us delineate the key events of both texts. In the *Batrachomyomachia*, the mouse prince Psicharpax meets the

²The conventional attribution of authorship for this and other *scholia* has been questioned by John Keaney, who highlights a few aspects that cast doubt on their traditional origins. These include Manuel Moschopoulos's unconventional citation methods, the range of cited texts, and the presence of errors within the *scholia*. See Keaney 1979: 60–3.

³In the *Batrachomyomachia*, the portrayal of rodents' food is accurate. However, the depiction of amphibians' diet, featuring items such as beetroot or cabbage, is far from realistic. There are three possible explanations for the author's choice: a lack of knowledge in this area, Psicharpax's ignorance (since he is the character recounting the tale of frog delicacies), or the use of poetic license, potentially to create a more distinct contrast between the two animal species. Hosty proposes the first explanation, suggesting that frogs were not well known in antiquity. Gleii considers the second explanation but expresses doubt, as Physignathos could have corrected any errors. Fusillo suggests the third explanation. I am inclined to support the idea of the creator's ignorance. When examining Paweł Zaborowski's translation of *Batrachomyomachia*, one can notice his adaptation of the mice's equipment to fit the author's surroundings and the unchanged portrayal of the frogs. It may be evidence of being familiar with the life of the former animals. It seems plausible that this lack of knowledge persisted from antiquity through the Renaissance.

frog king Physignathos, who invites him to his dwelling. On the way there, they are ambushed by a snake and Physignathos inadvertently casts Psicharpax into the water while attempting to flee. Interpreting this as a betrayal, the mice declare war on the frogs, resulting in the gods' reluctant intervention. To help the frogs, Zeus dispatches crabs that eventually repel the mice and end the conflict. In issues 363–6 of *The Mighty Thor* comics, the god Loki uses sorcery to transform Thor into a frog, who subsequently encounters toad named Puddlegulp while navigating Central Park. Together, they strive to fight off a rat invasion against the frog king. Then Thor resolves to aid the amphibians in their struggle against the rodents. Using enchanted alligators, he drives the rats away and is presented with the option to marry the princess and govern the frogs, an offer he declines. Upon his return to Asgard, Loki's machinations are exposed and Thor is restored to his original form, once again celebrated as a hero.

We can now proceed with the actual analysis, focusing on Newman's interpretation. He astutely characterises comics as contemporary forms of expression that heavily rely on intertextuality (2020: 79). This premise renders the possibility of *Batrachomyomachia* serving as a source for the *Mighty Thor* comics at least plausible, an idea that should not be dismissed outright. Furthermore, Newman contends that the typical reader of comics, often young, is familiar with the concept of intertextuality, albeit not necessarily in a nuanced, scholarly context. Such a reader is simply aware of the various types of references and playful interactions that can occur in comics and is eager to explore them.

However, as Newman points out, *Batrachomyomachia* is a relatively obscure poem in modern times, which implies that most of us, except for a select group of philologists, particularly those specialising in classical studies, would not recognise the intertexts. Newman considers this lack of recognition advantageous. Employing a lesser-known story should exclude any potential conflict between the primary text and the source text that might complicate the reading experience for the audience. In this scenario, references would serve to exoticize the narrative, evoking a sense of foreignness. Although readers may not identify the source material accurately, they would become aware of the distance between the Thor series and their own culture through its concealed presence. Newman suggests that this phenomenon may be akin to references to Greek or Roman literature in contemporary Japan, which, in his view, fulfil similar functions (2020: 80).

Several objections could be raised against this line of argumentation. Utilising *Batrachomyomachia* as a source may lose its purpose if it remains unrecognisable by the virtual reader or, at most, can be understood only by the ideal one. Nevertheless, let us entertain the notion that we are dealing with a sophisticated intellectual game intended for comic book enthusiasts (preferably, but not necessarily well-versed in ancient literature). Whether Simonson deliberately crafted such a work is a topic of debate among podcasters. However, as Roland

Barthes proposes, the ultimate meaning should not be sought in the author's intention, particularly when we are dealing with a complex network of potential allusions (Barthes 1977: 146). Therefore, let us examine this issue from the perspective of the text and its readers. It is reasonable to assume that specific cognitive difficulties may arise when reading works saturated with intertexts, particularly for younger readers, who may struggle with interpreting the text when references remain unrecognised (Sever Serezli 2023: 1–17). Having said that, it is not immediately evident that the Thor series will elicit this sense of unfamiliarity in its audience. Predicting the impact of a work on its audience is, naturally, a challenging endeavour, and although certain response patterns may be foreseeable (Fish 1970), such analyses represent an averaging that can be misleading in many instances. However, assuming a typical interpretation, owing to the prevalence of fairy-tale motifs in Western culture, such as transformation through kissing or animal enchantment by a flute player, the battle between frogs and rats in the comics may frequently be read within a similar context. Anthropomorphised animals, even at war with each other, are archetypal images found in virtually every culture and time for thousands of years, from scenes of cats fighting mice in ancient Egypt (Brunner-Traut 1954: 347) to modern analogous stories from China or Japan (Idema 2019). Most comic book readers will be familiar with the numerous variations on this theme, ranging from children's stories like *The Ugly Duckling* or *The Tortoise and the Hare* to more complex narratives that present conflict and social and political issues, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* or *Animal Farm*. Consequently, the potential context of *Batrachomyomachia* may not influence the readers, and its function cannot be compared to that of Western myths and stories in Eastern literature.

Newman's perspective on the presence of intertextual references in comics 363–6 suggests that these connections are explicit, as he provides various examples of a link between the series and *Batrachomyomachia*. Many of these might be considered inaccurate. For example, in the comics, the reason for the war is not the death of the king, as Newman claims (2020: 80–1), but rather the attempt of frogs to defend themselves from the planned poisoning of the river by rats. Moreover, the battle is not common, as it does not actually take place in the comics, and the rats only flee from the alligators they have attacked, without fighting the frogs. Naturally, it is important to recognise that a retelling does not necessitate strict parallels, so critiquing instances where Newman finds similarities despite evident differences may not be entirely productive. However, there are more areas where doubts can be raised. Some of the parallels indicated appear overly general, such as attributing human characteristics to animals or the occurrence of names referring to the animal world (Newman: 80–81). As research into zoonarrative demonstrates, texts featuring humanised main characters are common (Barcz 2017). Consequently, it is difficult to perceive a specific allusion to *Batrachomyomachia* based on such a foundation. Similarly,

the conventions of animal names in comics reflect literary conventions common to numerous works known best from children's literature. Naming them after characteristics related to their appearance, food, or habitat is as popular as, for example, naming them directly after their species, as seen in Alan Alexander Milne's books with characters like Eeyore and Rabbit. Therefore, it may be challenging to establish a direct, exclusive connection to *Batrachomyomachia* based solely on these aspects.

A more persuasive argument would require a closer examination of the unique or nuanced parallels between the two texts that go beyond general conventions or themes. Newman provides such examples. For example, he argues that the use of claws or paws in comics and weapons in *Batrachomyomachia* is common, asserting that both are consistent with the way of fighting in their genres (Newman 2020: 80–1). However, animals in comics do not always behave uniformly in this regard, as evidenced by other Marvel creations, such as Rocket Raccoon using firearms in *Marvel Preview #7* or *Project Brute Force's* characters employing laser weapons. Even within the Thor series, the title character, as a frog, uses a hammer in some instances. The style of combat is also not a stable feature in heroicomics. For example, in Ignacy Krasicki's *Myszeida*, which is considered the exemplary Polish implementation of the mock epic schema, mice and cats do not fight with weapons, even though they are presented as knights. Thus, while Newman's observations are worth considering, it is crucial to recognise the potential limitations of the examples provided.

The inconsistent treatment of characters and the omission of essential interpretive contexts also make conscious references to the poem less likely. For example, Newman draws a parallel between Zeus sending crabs against mice in *Batrachomyomachia* and Thor (as a frog) unleashing alligators against rats in the comic series. However, the handling of divine and earthly matters differs between the two texts. In *Batrachomyomachia*, the gods are initially reluctant to participate in the conflict, but later help the frogs to prevent their destruction. Generally, the gods in this text prefer to observe without interfering in earthly affairs unless necessary. In contrast, in the Thor series, divine and earthly matters are not as closely intertwined, and the gods do not watch the transformed hero. Additionally, although Thor tries to return to Asgard, he does not act as a god; but instead, as a frog, he takes part in the battle. As such, his intervention is challenging to classify as divine and to interpret this as a direct reference. Thor's enlistment of alligators enchanted by the flute player appears to allude to the Pied Piper story rather than serving as a subtle reinterpretation of the conclusion of *Batrachomyomachia*.

The presence of references, as Newman suggests, should ideally serve a broader purpose beyond literary entertainment. Newman believes that they are essential in deciphering the meaning of the Thor story. However, in this case, the conclusion might be incorrect. For example, Newman proposes that the lack of

human presence in comics 363–6 (where only a piper appears) is emphasised by the wording of *Batrachomyomachia*'s invocation, Ἀρχόμενος πρώτης σελίδος χορὸν ἐξ Ἑλικῶνος / ἔλθεῖν εἰς ἐμὸν ἦτορ ἐπεύχομαι (Beginning of my first page, I call upon the chorus / from Helicon to come down into my heart, for the sake of the song⁴). In this phrase, the author asks the Muse to descend into their (human) heart (Newman 2020: 81). Although unique in its depiction of the descent of the deity into the heart,⁵ it also contains a conventional image of a human seeking supernatural help, which, given the humorous theme of the work, is imbued with playful overtones, as Massimo Fusillo highlights (1988: 88). Since the invocation of the Muses is typical in other epics where humans feature prominently, the alleged resemblance does not necessarily support the notion of animals holding a superior role in either the poem or the comics.

Newman also posits that *Batrachomyomachia* is a satire on heroism, which he uses to support his claim that *The Mighty Thor* comics share a similar satirical nature (2020: 80). He cites the transformation of animals to embody human or heroic qualities, such as Achilles, as evidence of this critical perspective: heroes like Thor might be reduced to the level of animals (2020: 81). However, this reasoning may not be entirely accurate since *Batrachomyomachia* was not typically considered a satire in antiquity (Hosty 2020: 18). Instead, it is a parody, which involves the transformation of a text to change its character, usually from dramatic or epic to comic, without any critical implications. The humour in the poem stems from animal heroes acting like genuine heroes despite their animal form, rather than from exalting or degrading anyone (Hosty 2020: 19–20). Although some scholars have speculated about a possible critical dimension of the poem, this could hypothetically pertain to archaising epics of the Hellenistic period (Fusillo 1988: 38; Most 1993: 33–38), not to Homer or heroism per se. Interpretations presenting certain elements of the poem as satirical only began to appear in the Renaissance. These readings depict the sides of the battle allegorically, for instance, Joachim Otto, the author of a 1564 translation of the poem, portrays the frogs as representing the aristocracy and the mice as symbolising the plebeians.⁶ Consequently, considering *Batrachomyomachia* as satire and applying this interpretation to the *Mighty Thor* series may not be justified. Reading comics 363–6 in isolation from the poem as a satire on the characters of the heroes could also be questionable since Thor retains all his heroic qualities and exhibits noble behaviour. It might be noted that Newman observes a departure from the (alleged) satirical tone in the comic, in connection

⁴Both the Greek and the translation comes from Hosty 2020: 87.

⁵As Hosty notes, a similar one appears only in the Sibylline oracles. Hosty 2020: 122.

⁶“Non dubium est, Homerum in Muribus ordinem plebeium seu ciuilem, in Ranis autem Superiorem seu Magistratum impiorum ab oculos nobis ponere” (It is not doubtful that Homer sets before our eyes the class of the plebeian in mice, while in frogs he shows the order of the superior or impious magistrates). Otto 1564: 1.

with the development of the main character, Thor, who is said to undergo an inner transformation following his descent from Asgard to the world of rats and frogs, based on the katabasis topos. However, this claim might not be well-supported, as Thor does not enter the land of the dead nor receive advice or prophecies from its inhabitants. It may be more appropriate to interpret this scene within the context of the hero's journey, with its necessary initiation and return to the community, as described by Joseph Campbell (2004).

Exploring the relationship between *The Mighty Thor* series and *Batrachomyomachia* is undoubtedly captivating, although the results obtained are dubious. In the article cited some important contexts of the poem were omitted, there are confusions in the domain of classical philology, and the analysis may not address some questions that logically stem from the comparison.⁷ Despite the limitations in the comparison between *The Mighty Thor* series and *Batrachomyomachia*, there is still notable common ground between the two works that warrants further exploration. This similarity does not necessarily arise from intricate intertextual connections or from specific shared patterns. Although both texts feature simple narratives involving similar animals that appeal to young readers, as well as a blend of epic and comic elements, and motifs such as the presence of gods, warfare, or external assistance, these may not be the main connecting features. Marvel comics undoubtedly draw inspiration from a wide range of sources, including Norse mythology, fairy tales, and mythological themes such as animal transformations or metamorphosis through kissing, reminiscent of the Brothers Grimm's story of the frog king, which is somewhat subverted there. The war of frogs and rats in this series is one more of these themes, based on two cultural universals: anthropomorphism (Brown 1991), a literary device that bestows human-like qualities upon animals (Urquiza-Haas and Kotschal 2015: 167), and the motif of conflict and war between animals, which has been recurring in popular literature since ancient times, transcending geographical and temporal boundaries.

In this context, *Batrachomyomachia* may not have enjoyed the illustrious reception in Marvel comics that some may suggest, but they stand as something perhaps even more significant: a testament to the enduring appeal of animal stories, which continue to captivate readers across generations and cultures, and the endless variations of the theme that may be independently conceived by writers drawing from the vast treasure trove of human imagination.

⁷ For example, if Marvel's *The Mighty Thor* series retold the *Batrachomyomachia*, one would need to examine whether it was a parody of a parody. A case in point would be the *Katomyomachia*, which is a reworking of heroic epic, Greek tragedy, and the *Batrachomyomachia*, and was widely used in Byzantine schools, where both levels of meaning are scrutinized. See Marciniak and Warcaba 2018: 97–110.

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INTERTEXTUAL ECHOES OR CULTURAL UNIVERSALS? REASSESSING THE
INFLUENCE OF ANCIENT GREEK POETRY IN THE MIGHTY THOR SERIES
(ISSUES 363–6)

Summary

The analysis focuses on Nicholas Newman’s interpretation of the relationship between the *Mighty Thor* comics and the Hellenistic poem *Batrachomyomachia*. Newman posits that comics heavily rely on intertextuality and as such, the use of this obscure poem as a source is plausible. He believes that the typical comic book reader is familiar with intertextual references and the potential allusions in these works. Newman also contends that using an unpopular source like *Batrachomyomachia* might prevent conflicts between the primary and source text, exoticizing the narrative and creating a sense of distance from the reader’s culture. However, Newman’s interpretation draws criticism. While it might be an intriguing intellectual game for those well-versed in ancient literature, its

purpose might be lost if the majority of readers fail to recognize the references.. Additionally, there's skepticism about whether Thor comics would evoke the sense of unfamiliarity in readers that Newman suggests. Given that anthropomorphised animals and their conflicts are archetypal images in literature, the battle of frogs and rats may frequently be interpreted within this familiar context. Newman also provides multiple examples supporting the alleged link between the Thor series and *Batrachomyomachia*. However, some of these parallels are critiqued as overly general, such as attributing human characteristics to animals and the use of animal-world-related names, common elements found in many texts.. Newman's argument that both the Thor series and *Batrachomyomachia* share a satirical nature, reducing heroes to the level of animals, is also contested. Although *Batrachomyomachia* is humorous, it is not seen as a satire but a parody. The humor arises from animal heroes acting like genuine heroes, rather than from degrading anyone.. Therefore, the results of exploring the relationship between *The Mighty Thor* series and *Batrachomyomachia* may be questionable due to certain omissions and confusions. While both works share similarities such as simple narratives, similar animals, epic and comic elements, and motifs such as gods, warfare, and external assistance, these may not be the primary connecting factors. Marvel comics draw from numerous sources, including Norse mythology, fairy tales, and animal transformation motifs. The frog and rat war theme, based on anthropomorphism and the motif of animal conflict, is just another addition to this repertoire. Thus, Newman's perspective provides a unique but debatable analysis of the relationship between the *Mighty Thor* series and *Batrachomyomachia*.