Epic Literature in Comics by **Massimo Manca** (Ca' Foscari University, Venice, Italy)

1. Comics as a medium and comics as a literary genre. A foreword

Let us begin by an unrequested apology.(1) The survival of the epic tradition in comics is undoubtedly an interesting topic, but also a potential trap. This is the kind of research that fatally attracts criticism. It appears to be an 'easy' field of research, one you may view as a mere *divertissement*, but with few or no connections with the 'real' history of literature or classics. Ironically, the task is in fact more difficult than it might appear. "Topolino" (the Italian version of "Mickey Mouse") and "Alan Ford" are not usually indexed by *Gnomon* and the *Année Philologique*, and there are no such tools to investigate the huge amount of international comics that has been produced up to today. Thus, the *recensio* must absolutely be carried out by means of non-standard methods, and many formal rules must be carefully weighed or questioned, which sometimes leads to slightly parodist effects, such as the *Batrachomyomachy* compared to Homer ("Topolino" is a 'magazine'; *Io, Topolino*, a monograph, etc. (2) sounds a little odd).

Most of the sources for this research are the result of an extensive Google-based Web-search, an old-style indexation of my private collection (some thousands of items, most of which date from the Seventies and Eighties), which I never expected to become useful for my professional life, from suggestions of fellow philologists, who, when I told them what I was looking for, showed a remarkable, sometimes surprising, knowledge of the field. (3)

A third issue regarding this paper is the risk of 'directorification', i.e. reducing it to a mere list of titles. In an attempt to avoid, at least partially, some of these pitfalls, I would like to point out a couple of basic notions about the status of comics, limiting myself to what can be useful for this paper.

First of all, comics are not, strictly speaking, a literary genre; or better, they are a literary genre if we see them in terms of the classificatory rules of the ancient *grammatici*, who used to build literary taxonomies on the basis of formal criteria. However, if we think in modern terms, which necessarily entails a degree of semantic analysis, we can easily notice that comics are, in fact, a communicative *medium* capable of containing highly diverse genres, as well as countless levels of expression and target audiences. In other words, Mickey Mouse, the Italian Western strip Tex, Bat-Man (and even its Italian parody, Rat-Man), do not belong to the same category. Blurring all of them into one big *pastiche* would be a perspective mistake, which could be made by just those people who are scarcely, or not at all, familiar with the peculiarities of this medium, and are not completely aware of its underlying structure – just like people who are not accustomed to Baroque, or techno, or heavy-metal music perceive different pieces of Baroque, techno, and heavy-metal music as "all the same stuff".

Obviously, despite this infinite diversity and its infinite combinations, we can still identify some general trends. It is true, for example, that comics are often designed for a teenage audience. Empirically, we can agree that at least three quarters of the published production in the field of comics is addressed to people between 12 and 20 years - and even though, in Italy, some comics are explicitly marked as *per adulti* – literally "for adults", this in fact translates as "adults only / X-rated". A consequence of this teen-oriented market is the comic's narrative style: packed with adventures, plot-focused, and rarely showing ekphrastic pauses – these can be done away with, thanks to the presence of illustrations, as opposed to an aniconic text.

Another consideration involves the formal shape of comics. All *media* can be classified as more or less explicit, depending on how much they force themselves on the mind of the audience, or, conversely, how much they leave the audience to actively 'create', or integrate. Television is an extremely *explicit* medium, especially in its extreme form, known as *reality-show*. Here, what you see is (or at least that's what you're told) what *really* happens. On the other hand, a novel is an *implicit* way of communicating: during the reading process, the reader creates, through his imagination, the images evoked by a purely phonic sequence. Often, but not always, a break in the action allows the author to describe characters and landscapes, like a 'blind spectator', as it were.

All this considered, comics turn out to be a strange hybrid, both implicit and explicit at the same time. From a visual point of view, they are, we could say, half-explicit: characters are in fact more or less explicitly sketched, ink-on-paper. On the other hand, because sketches are static, they cannot explicitly reproduce motion, which is conventionally, and artificially, simulated by means of kinetic lines. (4) On the other hand, comics are rather implicit if seen from a textual point of view: in comics, the characters' words are written down, but it is the reader's responsibility to create for himself a corresponding 'inner voice'. This discordance between an implicit image and an explicit text is brought to extremes in the photo novel, a genre that still has no hope of expiating its b-genre stigma, whereas we often speak about comics as an art form. Note that it is possible to make a comic strip more explicit by turning it into a cartoon, adding motion and sound. However, this process usually leads to failure, because it 'freezes' one of many possible 'authentic interpretations' of sound and motion, which rarely matches what readers thought up for themselves. Most people are annoyed by the 'ducky' voice of Donald Duck in cartoons, but then again, a normal human voice would be equally annoying. Donald Duck's voice is impossible to reproduce, like the Sirens' song. (5) A third feature of comics is that their iconicity, although explicit, allows for a high degree of metaphor and suspension of disbelief. Donald Duck and his little nephews often eat turkeys or chickens - in a somewhat cannibalistic way from their point of view, and, in the same universe, we can find biped cows (Clarabelle) and quadruped cows (in Grandma Duck's farm). Now, all this is unconsciously transparent to the reader, who, accustomed as he is to the rules of the game, does not even notice these strong discrepancies.(6) Generally speaking, all explicit genres, because they require a passive user, are regarded - not always wrongly - as morally harmful, and although nowadays the anathemas the teachers of my generation pronounced on comics are no longer to be heard, certainly comics are still regarded as a minor, if not lesser, genre. Therefore, because epic poems are instead celebrated as the highest product of literary imagination in the maître-à-penser's top-tens, it is certainly interesting to watch what happens when heaven and hell meet, producing epic comics.

The research material is not lacking. In comics literature Homer, above all, is an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Although it is impossible to record all the information, we can empirically note that the *Odyssey* has been given more attention than the *Iliad*, no doubt because it contains more action. The word *odyssey* has been lowered to the status of a common noun – but this did not happen with *iliad* -, and in comics the noun *odyssey* can be found even in titles not directly related to the Homeric text: *L'Odissea di Astérix* (7), *Odissea americana*, *Odissea nel futuro* (8), and so on. We could say that the brand has become popularized, so that the main character of *Animali* (9) is called Homer, the title of one of Miyazaki's masterworks refers to a *Nausicaa (10)*, an episode of the visionary series *Tankgirl* is entitled *The Odyssey* (11), a special issue of DC Comics is a *Cosmic Odyssey (12)*, and an episode of *Madman* is *The Oddity Odyssey*. (13)

Before proceeding to review some of the occurrences, it is also interesting to note some rather important absences. What is particularly interesting is the almost total lack of classical imagery in Marvel comics, which show Hercules as a supporter of the Avengers. He is, however, a rather marginal character, and has never been adequately developed, whereas, for example, German mythology is amply represented in the Stan Lee sagas of Asgard and in the Mighty Thor, which became a spin-off of the Avengers' series.

Another noticeable omission can be found in Bonelli's publications. This lack of mythical subjects can easily be explained for *Nathan Never*, *Zagor* and *Tex* - their literary universes are obviously incompatible with Greek myth (14), but it is harder to justify it in the adventures of 'nightmare investigator' Dylan Dog, where only one episode out of about 250, the 167th, *Medusa*, is devoted to a mythological character. What is even more anomalous is the absence of mythological references in the series *Martin Mystère*, whose protagonist is an Archaeology professor, and therefore someone close to the world of Classics. In fact, Antiquity is rather mistreated in this series, especially when we think that its most evident incarnation is Professor Giulio Cesare Rosenberg, (15) the inventor of an 'ELF waves transmitter' that forcibly spreads classical culture all over the world.

Now let us analyze some occurrences, trying to identify at least some key themes in such a *mare magnum*.

2. Educational comics.
Since comics are intended, as we said, for a young audience, teachers naturally feel tempted to use them as

edutainment, as a sort of Trojan horse, a way of lightening the burden of Homer's epic. Therefore, in a significant number of cases, comics are regarded as little more than a didactic tool, and often show a rather artificial superimposition of subject and medium.

A strong commitment to educational comics can be found in the Edizioni Paoline. Two products will be presented here, one well-made, the other – in my opinion, a little less successful. The first one is the 30-year-old, often reprinted, *Eroi in pantofole* (16) (*Heroes in slippers*) by Gavioli and Tomaz, a delicious vintage-flavored book. It is not exactly a comic, but a series of strips accompanied by couples of octosyllabic rhyming verses, as in the Italian tradition of the *Signor Bonaventura* or *Sor Pampurio*. The book retells the adventures of several heroes of history or epics - the most interesting being those of Priam, Achilles, Ulysses, the Trojan Horse, and Polyphemus (17). There is no attempt at keeping the stories close to the myth. The aim is rather to accustom an audience of children to the onomastics and *ethos* of the characters. Tomaz explains that the 'mythological truth' will be heavily interpolated, winking at the intellectual audience with words that recall Lucianus' style: *questa storia è storia vera / raccontata a mia maniera* (this is true history – told my way). A completely different work by the same publisher is the *Odissea* (18), a comics adaptation clearly designed for educational purposes and for schools: the characters' names are all latinized (*Ulysses*, *Jupiter*, *Juno* instead of Odysseus, Zeus, Hera etc.), the language is very literary and hypotactic - and therefore hardly suited to comics, and the account of the facts follows the Homeric narration pedantically. (19)

The *ad usum Delphini* style of this work is evident in its downright exaltation of good feelings, and in the censorship of sexuality and violence (20). On the other hand, from an educational point of view, the text has some positive aspects – above all, it is completely self-contained, for it does not require any prior basic knowledge to be understood. The plates are very beautiful, as can be expected from illustrator Paolo Piffarerio. I would like to attract the reader's attention towards the image of the arrow between the axes, which explains the dynamics of Odysseus' final action better than many words.

3. Disney and Antiquity

A comprehensive research on comics cannot avoid tackling the Disney 'metaverse', (21) which offers a lot of occurrences, as well as a number of complex notions that call for a specific taxonomy. First of all, it is necessary to make clear that the Disney universe is in fact a 'metaverse', formed by a series of parallel hypo-universes, which the reader, accustomed as he is to the Disney code, accepts without noticing either its external or - as mentioned above - internal inconsistencies. Let us make some clarifying examples: in some episodes, Donald Duck is engaged in lower-middle class activities, like sleeping in the garden, shopping, or cooking cakes with Daisy Duck, arguing with his neighbor about the mower's noise or the barbecue's smoke: in other stories, instead, he becomes the hero of Indiana Jones-style adventures with Uncle Scrooge. These (at least) two versions of the same Donald Duck are in fact completely separate dramaturgical characters, who do not share much more than their face and clothes, and we might not be far from the truth if we suggested that, to a degree, Donald Duck lacks a definite psychology, and could almost be thought of as a sort of actor, who is asked to impersonate a different character each time, of course consistently with his basic qualities and features (but this is also true of human actors: Danny de Vito would hardly be engaged for a dramatic role, and Bela Lugosi never succeeded to take off Dracula's clothes).

Following the wave of the recent revival of historical and mythological movies, some episodes related to antiquity have been reprinted in the collection «Supermiti» Mondadori, in the volume *Il Papero di Troia(22)* (*The Trojan Duck*). But the Disneyan interest for Antiquity is remarkable, as is shown by titles such as *Topolino e il naso di Cleopatra(23)* (*Mickey Mouse and Cleopatra's Nose*), *Topolino e la Leggenda delle Amazzoni(24)* (*Mickey Mouse and the Legend of the Amazons*), the paradoxical adventures of the *Mercoledì di Pippo* (25) (*Goofy's Wednesdays*), *Topolino e l'Atlantide, continente perduto(26)* (*Mickey Mouse and the Lost Continent of Atlantis*), *Zio Paperone e il tesoro degli Sciti* (27) (*Uncle Scrooge and the Scythians' treasure*), *Paperino e le papere del Campidoglio* (28) (*Donald Duck and the gooses of the Capitol*), *Paperasia e l'Oracolo di Delfi* (29) (*Paperasia and the Delphic oracle*), *Zio Paperone e il caprone aurifero di Re Mida (30)* (*Uncle Scrooge and King Mida's Golden Goat*), *Il Club dell'archeologia (31)* (*The Archaeology Club*), *Zio Paperone e l'età del ferro (32)* (*Uncle Scrooge and the Age of Iron*), *Le sette meraviglie dei paperi (33)* (*The Seven Wonders of the Ducks*).

But even if we only consider the episodes that are closest to the Homeric tales, the bibliography remains huge and requires classification criteria. We could simply choose to group on the one hand the stories based

on the Duck universe and on the other hand the ones based on the Mouse universe. What is more interesting, anyway, is to differentiate them according to the notions of *first-* or *second-level Homerisms*. We can describe as *first-level Homerisms* those episodes where the Disney character impersonates an epic, or at least ancient, hero, and therefore plays a first-person role in a mythical adventure; we define as *second-level* Homerisms the adventures where Disney characters are somehow involved with the ancient world, although they remain modern characters (for example, they take part in an archaeological expedition or read the *Odyssey*).

4. First-level Homerisms
When a Disney character acts as a historical or literary hero, he does not annihilate himself, like a human actor trained at Stanislavsky's school (theoretically) does, but retains, at least in part, his own qualities and features, resulting in a symbiotic hybrid of both the acting Disney character and the role he plays. This also explains the commonplace of onomastic warping (a Goofy-Ulysses will probably be named 'Goofysses' or 'Uloofy'). A paradigmatic example of this is the *Pippodissea (34)* (*Goofy-odyssey*), which, despite its unavoidable transgressions, is perhaps the most faithful to the Homeric archetype among the stories we are considering here. Ulippo (Uloofy) of Pippitaca (Goofythaca) wins the chess championship of Topoloia (Mousoy), which is disputed every ten years (=intertextual reference to the ten-year-long siege of Troy in the *Iliad*'s account). As the plot unfolds, it turns out that chess matches are 'live', as in the Italian Marostica tradition. Ulippo wins by a smart knight move, just like in Camilleri's or Maurensig's novels. From one of his fans, Eolus, Ulippo receives the windskin of the winds, which he opens in order to make his way through the crowded ships of spectators coming back from the championship. He then reaches Musicaa's (Clarabelle Cow) island, and proceeds to the Sirens' rock. The Sirens, upset by the hero's rudeness, deafen him with a mechanic loudspeaker. Subsequently, Ulippo reaches the island of the Cyclops, who plans to reduce him and his men to slavery. To him Ulippo immediately reveals his name, falling victim to his own 'goofy' nature - completely different from the original Ulysses character he antiphrastically embodies. The adventure goes on, and Ulippo meets a witch dressed as a modern astrologist, who wants to turn him and his men into animals (Ulippo, not entirely disagreeing, would accept to become a giraffe), and then tries to make him drink a potion that, as his servant Mickey Mouse (35) finds out, makes people forget «home and the way back home». This character is, apparently, a mix between the episodes of Circe and the Lotophages. Finally, our heroes manage to survive the dangers of monsters Priscilla and Cariniddi (pun: in Italian "carino" means "nice"). Once they land at Pippitaca, Ulippo discovers that the human pieces of his chessboard have been replaced by the suitors, guided by Gambanoo (Peglegpetous), but, as everyone knows, only the man who can draw the enchanted bow can ascend to the throne. Coup de theâtre: not even Ulippo can do it, he has always lied about it. Thus, the mixed character of Ulippo takes its ingenuity from Goofy and his attitude to lying from Ulysses. In order to bring the episode to a happy end the authors must evoke a *deus ex machina*.

The *Pippodissea* is the only case of first-level Homerism I managed to identify in the Italian series of the Mouse-world. The Duck universe has a greater importance in this field. In the *Paperiade (36)* (*Duckiad*), which contains very clear references to Epic literature, the opening scene is accompanied by a verse comment in ottava rima. In this episode, the characters lose most of their coherence, and the story is characterized by a cruelty that is rather uncommon in Disney comics – e.g. during the siege, pigeons are captured and eaten – and by an excessively evil Gladstone. The latter, in collaboration with the Beagle Boys, steals from Uncle Scrooge a magic checkerboard, which allows its owners to multiply grains of rice following the geometric progression of the well-known anecdote. A misunderstanding about the word *dama*, which in Italian means both 'lady' and 'checkers', leads Donald Duck to think that Daisy Duck has been kidnapped. In this episode, Donald Duck acts more as Menelaus than Achilles – the plot includes a duel fought to decide on the 'war', a reference to the events narrated in the third book of the Iliad. The special guest is Tiresias, well-portrayed by Goofy, who, in the well-known attic filled with his ancestors' stuff, finds a magic blindfold which gives the gift of clairvoyance to whomever wears it. The Trojan horse here is merely hinted at by a horse disguise worn by Donald Duck and Goofy (37). The besieged Gladstone allows them to enter, hoping to eat (!) the horse. Very funny, in this otherwise badly conceived episode, is the *cameo* of the native witch doctor, whose ironic humor shows some analogies with the savages described by Pascarella in *La scoperta de l'America*.

The *Paperodissea (38)* (*DuckOdyssey*) is not the sequel to the *Paperiade*, but a completely different work (39), inspired by *Gone with the wind*, and set in the scenario of the 'war against Indians'. While Sergeant

Donald Duck is away, involved in war's duties, his creditors invade his house. A good idea is the variation on Penelope's theme: Daisy Duck, waiting for her boyfriend, is working on a sweater, which she must periodically undo and knit again, because over those ten years the vogue changes continuously. Another variant, based on the contemporary world, is *Paperino e il cavallo di Troia (40)* (*Donald Duck and the Trojan Horse*), a rather ordinary plot: on a desert island, the Ducks are besieged by a bunch of mysterious savages - they are, in fact, the Beagle Boys, who try to use the old stratagem of the Trojan Horse.

5. Second-level Homerisms

Even when Disney characters act as themselves, occasionally they are involved in epic adventures set in ancient times. A good example of this kind of story is *Topolino e il ritorno del Cavallo di Troia (41)* (Mickey *Mouse and the Return of the Trojan Horse*): Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse and Goofy are on a secret archaeological mission in Greece to retrieve the Trojan Horse, which, after the Trojan war, was not destroyed, but used as a container for Priamus' treasure. Black Pete is, naturally, the evil character of the episode, whose storyboard is rather weak, whereas the plates are magnificently drawn.

Sometimes Disney characters, even contemporary ones, may interact with Antiquity through the narrative strategy of time traveling. In *Topolino e la guerra di Troia (42)* (*Mickey Mouse and the Trojan War*), Mickey Mouse and Goofy enter a time machine to save the disappeared Professor Zapotek (a character created by Massimo de Vita for the Italian edition of *Topolino*, and missing in the original series). In the past, they meet Professor Zapotek, who has become Priamus' counselor. He wants to discover where the Trojans are hiding the treasure that was not found by Schliemann, and bring back to the future/present some precious 'parchment manuscripts' (*sic*!). This comic is slightly euhemeristic: Helen is in fact ugly, but very appreciated for her cooking skills. The episode is especially amusing for its overview on Greek heroes: Ajax Oilaeus is a body-builder, Neoptolemus is a narcissist, and Ulysses loves rocking horses. Our heroes, imprisoned by the Trojans, announce an imminent danger for Troy, but are not believed – here, therefore, they embody the tragic role of Cassandra – almost a first-level Homerism.

Topolino all'inseguimento dell'anacronismo multiuso (43) (*Mickey Mouse in search for the multi-purpose anachronism*) is based on the same plot, although the intersection between different planes of reality makes it more complex. In the year 1991, three issues of "Topolino" gave, as a freebie, the components of the 'topobinocolo' ('mousebinocular'), a multi-tool that included a binocular, a compass, a torch, and a magnifying glass, and was related to the three-episode mini-saga where the gadget was mentioned in the plot. Due to an accident during a time travel, the multi-tool is lost in ancient Troy, and is found by Little Troilus and Hector, who is frightened by it. Mickey Mouse travels again back to the past to neutralize the out-of-place object, and thereby to prevent time paradoxes. Finally, he persuades Priamus to give him back the tool, and Priamus finally declares, in a solemn tone, that Trojans will never accept suspicious gifts again...

It would be difficult to draw exact boundaries in this kind of overview. We can include at least Dante's Ulysses, evoked in the masterwork *L'inferno di Topolino (44)* (*Mickey Mouse's Hell*). The duplicity of the tips of Dante's 'fiamma antica' here are represented by the double face of a schizophrenic Donald Duck, fighting with himself for the victory of the Good side against the Evil side.

6. Homer and Alan Ford: The 'Number One' in the Trojan war

In the mainstream Italian comics, most of the space dedicated to epic poems is to be found in the monthly *Alan Ford*. Thanks to his longevity, the 'Numero Uno' (The Number One, chief of the secret organization called 'T.N.T.'), has lived the whole world history in the first person. Thus the author Max Bunker - pseudonym of Luciano Secchi, is able to contrive a first-level Homerism, transgressive and structurally well-integrated, without the need to alternate plans of reality nor to use primitive storytelling devices such as the time machine. The episodes appeared as flashbacks, interrupting the main adventure in issues 66-70 (1975). In 1993, the single episodes were then stitched together into one continuous tale and published in the volume *La storia rivisitata dal Numero Uno (45)* (*History Revisited by the Number One*). Max Bunker's account stresses, more intentionally than in similar Disney episodes, the transformation process from history to myth, unveiling the squalid, bourgeois behind-the-scene stories that were later overemphasized by paid singers. In the Alanfordian universe, it is Menelaus who, having nearly gone bankrupt due to beautiful Helen's extravagant shopping, pushes her into Paris' arms. The event that propels the tragic plot of the *Iliad* is no more encouraging - a drunk Patroclus drowns in a river and dies, but the Number One, Homer's press-agent,

offers Hector to embroider a heroic tale on the accident. The Cyclopes are in fact inoffensive dwarfs (not unlike the Amazons in *Topolino e la leggenda della Amazzoni*) who immediately surrender to Odysseus. The latter, too, is ready to pay his press-agents for an epic version of this cheap tale. Sometimes the literary play is subtler: Nausicaa is actually very ugly; Homer described her as very beautiful because this is what the Number One and Odysseus led the blind poet to believe, for king Alcinous had blackmailed them to make one of them marry her. The faithful Penelope in fact gives of herself very generously to the rich executives of the 'Suitors Inc'. The epic tale revisited by Alan Ford shows a rare philological and antiquary sensitivity: centuries later, the Number One becomes Virgil's manager; let us look at this dialog a bit closer:

Numero Uno: *Ohè, brindisino bucolico, quello [Cesare] non scuce mica per sentire le tue rimette, ma perché vuole un bel blasone. Quindi vediamo di essere ancora più chiari. Hai già fatto il pezzo dell'Averno?*

Virgilio: *Nell'Averno? Ma l'ha già fatto Omero con Odisseo e non voglio fare dei plagi o lavorare di carta carbone.*

Numero Uno: *Ma ingenuone, non c'è mica ancora la legge sul copyright! Che te ne importa? Lo schiaffi nell'Averno, qualcuno gli fa la predizione bella e chiara che dalla sua stirpe nascerà la stirpe cesarea… che un giorno governerà Roma…* (46)

Number One: Hey, bucolic man of Brindisi, that bloke [Caesar] doesn't pay to hear your cheap rhymes. He wants a pedigree. So, let make it clear: did you already write the Avernus' stuff?

Vergil: Avernus? But Homer did it yet, I do not want to be a plagiarist and work making carbon copies.

Number One: But dude, none has yet invented the copyright law! Make no bones about it! You put him in the Avernus, someone tells him the prediction that from him will raise the Caesarean nation... which one day will rule Rome...

There is also a 'professionals only' hint at the last trip of Odysseus, who is finally exiled on the seas, while the Number One remains in Ithaca with a sexy Penelope (47). In Alan Ford's account we can notice a curious iconographic coincidence with *Topolino e la guerra di Troia*, i.e. Odysseus' representation on a rocking horse. Alan Ford's episode is ten years older, and I do not know whether Pezzin and Asteriti knew the Mickey Mouse issue, or if they simply happened to have the same idea. Among the mainstream comic production, Max Bunker's version is probably the best, thanks to its polysemy, which makes it suitable for a non-professional audience, although it can also be appreciated by a professional philologist, who will find some deep reflections on the role of performance, and an interesting equation between rhapsody and modern press.

7. Recovering eros
Another positive aspect of the Alanfordian Ulysses is its lack of censorship of epic eros, which was instead the biggest mistake in the books published by Paoline, and also in the Disneyan puritan comics (48). In fact, sexuality is an important factor in the Homeric world, so much so that, on the opposite side, we even find some comics that aim at underlining it. Here we can identify two main trends. The first one is rather sophisticated, and was initiated by Milo Manara, the author of *L'Odissea di Bergman (49)* (*Bergman's Odyssey*). A teacher, accompanied by two charming girls, experiences a series of Odyssey-inspired adventures, based on Homer and Joyce, thanks to a magic helmet. The richness of the paintings overshadows the text, as often happens in Manara's comics. The same author is also the provocative illustrator of an *Iliad (50)*, which anyway is not a real comic, but a gallery of plates illustrating some verses of the Homeric poem. Manara's glamour is not the only example of Homeric eros recovered. We may mention at least the soft-core series of Edifumetto, specializing in erotic b-comics, entitled *Odissea*, where a she-Ulysses is the main character in a series of erotic adventures. The series had no luck – it ended after only 6 issues; the title of the pilot episode, *I froci (51)*, would hardly be regarded as a masterpiece of allusive art.

8. Variations on the myth

So far, we have basically examined two kinds of comics. 1) Strictly educational comics, where the *medium* is viewed as not much more than an educational tool, with no artistic value. 2) Mainstream comics with an identity of their own, where the Homeric poems function as references or as the narrative themes of a specific adventure.

Anyway, there is also an epic production we could describe as *d'essai*, or experimental. The most ambitious among these projects is Eric Shanower's *Age of Bronze* (52). It includes 23 episodes collected in three volumes, forming a true epic cycle, with special emphasis on the private life of the Homeric characters. The supernatural element is abolished, as is nowadays rather commonplace, - just think of Petersen's Troy -, and there is an in-depth research on Mycenaean iconography, carried out for the sake of realism rather than for educational purposes. The same realistic project leads Shanower to a balanced description of ancient Greek bisexuality. We may end this overview with an Italian product, Carmine di Giandomenico's *Oudeis (53)*, where Ulysses' character is completely deconstructed in a cyberpunk scenario. The texts are pure stream of consciousness, and the drawings a true masterwork.

9. A conclusion: comics as contemporary performance.

The *recensio* of epic comics, which sometimes simplify myths for educational purposes, sometimes parodize, other times challenge them, shows that the performance of myth did not die with the last singer. Myths are always relevant for the present. Today, we could even venture to say, myths are in vogue. Many recent initiatives dealing with the modernity of Antique issues received their impulse from movies like *The Gladiator* and *Troy*, or the more recent *300*, which, interestingly enough, adapted Leonida's tale for the screen by filtering it through the schemata of comics. The debate that has developed around *Troy* is in fact very dependent on comics, and has a lot to teach to those who would judge the dignity of epic in comics. Exactly like comics, which are regarded as morally harmful if they fail to present a 'pedagogically correct' version, *Troy* may have been targeted too severely by philologists, sometimes professionals, sometimes amateurs, who have only hunted for mistakes, anachronisms, or bloopers in the movie, ignoring the very ancient notion of rewriting (54). Eleonora Cavallini (55) has recently pointed out that those mistakes were often intentional and documented, and has shed light on a truth we should all agree with: myths, like jokes, have no author, they are open-source and everyone can, and maybe must, rewrite them (56). Moreover, the truly viral power of myths to survive by mutating and reproducing themselves makes them resilient to time and, ultimately, immortal. Therefore, Ulysses playing chess, Helen cooking, Penelope betraying his husband with the Number One, are not the killers of the antiquity, but its savers. They keep these ancient, eternal stories alive in our life and, therefore, far from 'museified' forgetfulness.

Footnotes

1) Italian readers can see my *Omero a fumetti*, in E. Cavallini (ed.) *Omero mediatico. Aspetti della ricezione omerica nella civiltà contemporanea*, Bologna: Dupress 2007, 227-247. This online paper is not merely an English translation, but a hypermedia adaptation, more suitable for an international audience, which of course is not necessarily accustomed with Italian comics.
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2) At the end of my paper I realized that one of the main problems was to find a coherent method for organizing bibliographical data. It is often difficult to find out the name of the authors for individual episodes, especially in serial productions. Comics are often roughly reprinted or translated, and it is difficult to identify an *editio princeps*. The criterion I followed here is 'I did as best as I could', trying to provide readers with enough information and give the authors their credits. In any case, I chose to give approximate references than no references at all.
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3) In this English version of the paper, too, I would like to renew my thanks to Nicoletta Brocca, Eleonora Cavallini, Alessandro Iannucci, Giorgio Ieranò, Anna Marinetti, and Luigi Spina.
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4) I cannot discuss cartoons here, but I can at least remind the readers of the Simpsons episode *Homer's Odyssey* (an appropriate title).
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5) Not everything may be made explicit. A couple of years ago, in his lecture *Tra le sirene con le orecchie ben aperte* (Among the sirens with ears wide open), Venice, December 6, 2005, Luigi Spina talked about the great difficulties the cinematographic art has to face in its attempt to adapt the episode of the charming song of the Sirens for the screen.
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6) About this the Italian comedian Claudio Bisio wrote a monologue that could easily become an academic paper (see C. Bisio, *Quella vacca di Nonna Papera*, Milan 1994). The laughter originates from the audience becoming aware of discrepancies that, owing to our cultural conditioning, we usually accept as normal.
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7) Mondadori 1981, nearly a cheat. In fact, Astérix, with its status of antiquarian comic, would be ideally suited to host a Homeric tale. This, however, is a trip to India in search of oil.
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8) Nathan Never is a science fiction comic published by Bonelli..
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9) G. Mattioli, D. Toffolo, ***Animali, 1998***.
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10) Hayao Miyazaki, *Nausicaä della Valle del Vento*, in Italy it was often republished, see for example Planet Manga, Marvel Italia, 7 voll.
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11) On the actual relationship between *Tankgirl* and Homeric epos, through Joyce's mediation, see http://www.othervoices.org/1.2/tvogler/tankgirl.html
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12) Jim Starlin and Mike Mignola, *Cosmic* , DC Comics 1988.
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13) Mike Allred, *The oddity* ,Kitchen Sink 1992.
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14) *Odissea americana* (American Odyssey), «Zagor» 88 (1972), *Odissea nel futuro* (Odyssey *in the future*), «Nathan Never Gigante» 2 (1996), *Odissea nell'ignoto*(Odyssey *into the unknown*), «Jonathan Steele» 45 (2002) may be included in the 'logo vulgarization' we talked about
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15) *La diabolica invenzione* (*The devilish invention*), «Speciale Martin Mistère» n. 4 (1987). The character is modeled on the comics reviewer Giulio Cesare Cuccolini. We can find another minor hint at the classical tradition in the 82th episode, *Il canto delle sirene*, euhemeristically depicted as human-dolphin hybrids created by scientists.
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16) *Eroi in pantofole*. Illustrations by Gino Gavioli; rhymes by Lucio Tomaz, Rome 1970.
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17) Here is Poliphemus' account: «Tosto amici parleremo del ciclope Polifemo. / Con un occhio solamente ci vedeva egregiamente / Abitava un cavernone con sei pecore e un caprone; / per di più legato a un cavo

c'era Ulisse reso schiavo. / Una sera l'occhio solo si gonfiò con l'orzaiolo / e per quanto la lanterna desse luce alla caverna / Polifemo son persuaso non vedeva il proprio naso. / Ora Ulisse, lì legato, disse: -"Sai, avrei pensato / che se fai qualche impacchetto puoi guarire quell'occhietto; / anzi, slegami un momento che ti fo il medicamento". / Polifemo, lusingato dal discorso equilibrato, / ritenendolo sincero liberò quel prigioniero / che impastato dal cemento glielo diede come unguento / e fuggendo urlò: "vedrai che tra breve guarirai". / Ma purtroppo in conclusione tolta via l'applicazione / trovò ancora l'occhio solo con intatto l'orzaiolo».

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18) C. Nizzi, P. Piffarerio, *Le avventure di Ulisse a fumetti*, Cinisello Balsamo 1994 (1 ed. 1991).

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19) For example, when Demodocus sings about the Fall of Troy, a footnote reminds that «la ricostruzione di questo episodio, che non esiste nei poemi omerici, è tratta dal secondo libro dell'*Eneide* di Virgilio, dove viene narrata per bocca di Enea» (the reconstruction of this scene, which does not exist in the Homeric poems, is taken from the second book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, where it is told by Aeneas).

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20) The censorship of violent scenes is obtained through the 'tragic' artifice of the indirect account. For example, Odysseus' friends crushed by Polyphemus, or Polyphemus himself blinded by Odysseus are not represented graphically: the "camera" frames Odysseus' face as he recounts "and we stuck the pole into his eye". Obviously, this technique cannot work in the erotic field, where the Homeric account is more heavily interpolated. Whereas in Homer Odysseus wakes up in the island of the Phaeacians completely naked, and begins to walk towards Nausicaa and her servant "like a lion", in the Paoline version Nausicaa finds Odysseus still sleeping and dressed enough to keep the key spots covered. Circe, vanquished by Odysseus, does not invite him to bed, but simply says, "let us become friends". At the end of the story, Penelope and Odysseus simply have "many things to tell each other".

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21) See the following paper on the Disney comics published in Germany and dealing with Antiquity: http://homepage.univie.ac.at/elisabeth.trinkl/forum/forum1200/17comic.htm

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22) *Il Papero di Troia*, Mondadori 2004.

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23) See also *Topolino e il naso di Cleopatra*, «Topolino» 1611 (1986), pp. 141-174. Mickey Mouse and Goofy, traveling through time, discover that Cleopatra had a big nose only in a metaphorical sense, referring to her flare for business.

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24) See also *Topolino e la leggenda delle Amazzoni*, "Topolino" 1589 (1986), pp. 5-38 (The Amazons are actually weak, but they spread the legend of their ferociousness to keep away their enemies).

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25) E. g., L. Salvagnini - L. Gorlero, *Con l'osso di Rodi* (*With the Rhode bone*), "Topolino" 2102 (1996), pp. 151-174. Pippo is looking for a bone guarded by a giant, Great Dane.

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26) S. a., *Topolino e l'Atlantide continente perduto,* "Topolino" 1638 (1987), pp. 5-76. As in the Martin Mystère episode, there is no reference to the myth of Plato.

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27) s. a., *Zio Paperone e il tesoro degli Sciti*, "Topolino" 1618 (1986), pp. 193-220.

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28) L. Proietti e A. Sisti – G. Cavazzano *Paperino e le papere del Campidoglio*, "Topolino" 2144 (1997), repr. in *Il Papero di Troia*, cit. pp. 205-240. The co-author of the text is the famous Italian actor Gigi Proietti. The Guardians of the Capitol decide to go on strike. Daisy Duck and her friends replace them for free, to save Rome's honour. This comic, which appeared to support scabs in a heated wrangle between the government and a union, raised a debate whose echoes still reverberate in the following webpage: http://www.fumetti.org/topoanti.htm .
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29) C. Salvatori - R. Ronchi *Paperasia e L'oracolo di Delfi*, "Topolino" 2030 (1994), pp. 133-161.
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30) R. Cimino - P. Mottura, *Zio Paperone e il caprone aurifero di Re Mida*, "Topolino" 1839 (1991), pp. 5-65. Again on Mida's theme, and by the same scripwriter, see R. Cimino - V. Held *Zio Paperone e la colazione aurea*, "Topolino" 1852 (1991), pp. 179-206.
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31) Staff di If, *Il club dell'archeologia*, "Topolino" 1839 (1991), pp. 147-160. Two stories set in ancient times (the other is *Il caprone aurifero di Re Mida*) in the same issue of "Topolino". The latter is set in the lower-middle class Duckburg. Daisy Duck studies hard in order to apply for Duckburg's academy of archaeology.
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32) R. Cimino - R. Racca, *Zio Paperone e l'età del ferro*, "Topolino" 2270 (1999), pp. 37-66.
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33) *Le sette meraviglie dei paperi*, «Topolino» 1800-1806 (1990). This series, consisting in seven episodes, includes: F. Michelini - G. Della Santa, *Il cubo di Paperubik*, 1800, pp. 5-40; *I giardini pensili di Paperlonia*, 1801, F. Michelini - G. Della Santa, *La statua di Giove Olimpio*, 1802, pp. 157-188; *Il tempio di Amelide*, 1803, pp. 5-36; F. Michelini - G. Dalla Santa, *Il Mausoleo di Papernasso*, 1804, pp. 161- 190; *Il Colosso di Paperodi*, «Topolino» 1805, pp. 5-32; F. Michelini - G. Dalla Santa *Il Faro di Paperandria*, 1806, pp. 5-44.
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34) F. Michelini - R. Vian, *Pippodissea*, "Topolino" 2399 (2001), repr. in "Il Papero di Troia", pp. 169-205.
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35) It is interesting to note this role reversal (usually it is Goofy who acts as Mickey's helper), which makes the story more lively.
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36) G. Martina - L. Bottaro, *Paperiade*, "Topolino" 202, 203, 204 (1959), in *Il papero di Troia*, cit. pp. 70-153.
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37) A recurrent *topos* in cinema: see for instance the parallel episode in Abrahams and Zucker's film *Top Secret* (1984).
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38) *Paperodissea*, "Topolino" 286 (1961), in *Paperodissea e altri grandi viaggi della letteratura universale*, Mondadori 1999, pp. 9-69.
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39) With some iliadic influence: Donald Duck celebrates in fact his own wrath.
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40) E. Missaglia - L. Capitanio, *Paperino e il cavallo di Troia*, «Almanacco Topolino» 68 (1962), repr. in «Le imperdibili» 22 (nov. 2005), pp. 187-208.
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41) B. Langhans – C. Ferioli Pelaez, *Topolino e il ritorno del cavallo di Troia* (*A volta do cavalo de Troia*), "Mega Almanacco 2000" 438 (1993), repr. in *Il Papero di Troia*, cit., pp. 153-169.
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42) Giorgio Pezzin - Sergio Asteriti, *Topolino e la guerra di Troia*, "Topolino" 1561 (1985), rist. in *Il Papero di Troia*, Mondadori 2004, pp. 9-70.
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43) Massimo Marconi - Roberto Santillo, *Topolino all'inseguimento dell'anacronismo multiuso*, «Topolino» 1859-1862 (1991).
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44) Guido Martina, Angelo Bioletto, *L'Inferno di Topolino*, "Topolino" 7-12 (1949-1950), in *Paperodissea...*, *cit.*, pp. 71-143.
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45) *Le storie del Numero 1. 3. I grandi poemi di Omero. L'Iliade e L'Odisea. Le gesta e le imprese di Achille, Ulisse ed Elena di Troja*, 1993
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46) *I tre Rock*, «Alan Ford»72 (1974).
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47) Another amusing reference to the "folle volo" can be found in L. Ortolani, *Sette giorni*, «Rat-Man» 39 (2003). Rat-man thinks about the risks of a dangerous adventure and finally says: "But did Ulysses stop before Hercules' columns?". The following sketches show the wreck.
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48) In Disney's comics, the taboo of sexuality comes so far as to erase all parental ties. There are no fathers and mothers, only uncles and aunts. When it is not possible to delete all references to sexuality, the authors' attention turns towards any potentially deviant behaviour. To remain in the field of antiquity, in the cartoon movie Hercules the hero is the son of Zeus and Hera.
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49) M. Manara, *L'Odissea di Bergman*, 2004.
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50) M. Manara, *Iliade*, 2005.
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51) Pun: in Italian Proci=pretenders, Froci=queers.
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52) Official site: http://www.age-of-bronze.com/aob/
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53) C. di Giandomenico, *Oudeis. Libro primo*, Saldapress, Reggio Emilia 2004.
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54) For example, in Petersen's movie we get to see some coins, which did not exist in Mycenean times. Note that this is precisely the sort of criticism classical philologists addressed to Homer, who *aliquando dormitat*.
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55) "Quaderni di scienza della conservazione" 4 (2004), 300-333.
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56) I think a mythical novel or movie should be viewed from a different perspective than a historical work, which requires some fixed points of reference, at least for those who think that history and myth are not the same thing. For example, if history tells us that Commodus was killed by the praetorians, the author should not be allowed to introduce a scene where he is killed in the arena by a gladiator.
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