George O'Connor

Hermes: Tales of the Trickster (Olympians, 10)

United States (2018)

TAGS: Aesop Aesop's Fables Afterlife Aphrodite Apollo Architecture Ares Artemis Athena Centaur(s) Cerberus Dionysus / Dionysos Divination Egypt Egyptian Mythology Fable Faun Gods Greek Music Hephaestus Hera Hermes Hydra Mercury Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Nymphs Olympus Ovid Pan Penelope Phaedrus Zeus

We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Hermes: Tales of the Trickster (Olympians, 10)
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States, Canada, United Kingdom, other English speaking countries
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2018
First Edition Details	George O'Connor, *Hermes: Tales of the Trickster.* New York: First Second (an imprint of Roaring Brook Press, part of Macmillan Publishers Ltd), 2018, 77 pp.
ISBN	9781626725256
Official Website	olympiansrule.com (accessed: October 24, 2018)
Genre	Action and adventure comics, Comics (Graphic works), Graphic novels, Mythological comics, Myths
Target Audience	Young adults (teens)
Author of the Entry	Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk

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Creators

George O'Connor, photo uploaded by Nxswift. Retrieved from Wikipedia, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0 (accessed: January 5, 2022).

George O'Connor , b. 1973
(Author, Illustrator)

George O'Connor (1973) is an author, illustrator, cartoonist, and graphic novelist from the USA, based in Brooklyn, New York. His work is predominantly aimed at young people and frequently contains historical subjects and themes. O'Connor has cited Walt Simonson's mythology-rich editions of Marvel's *Mighty Thor* as a significant early influence on his own work. His first graphic novel, *Journey into Mohawk Country*, was based on the journal of a 17th century trader. He illustrated Adam Rapp's adult graphic novel *Ball Peen Hammer* (2009). He contributed to First Series' *Fable Comics* (2015, ed. Chris Duffy), a collection of myths retold by cartoonists. Between 2010–2022 O'Connor published the *Olympians* graphic novel series.

In an interview (see here, accessed: April 17, 2015), George O'Connor has said that he wanted the series to be educational. He also said that he spent a long time researching for each title by reading ancient literature to access different versions of myths, and that he consciously tried to avoid reading modern "people's retellings because everybody puts a spin on it. I purposely put spins on the stories too, but I don't want to accidentally steal somebody else's spin".

Sources:

Official website (accessed: October 24, 2018).

Former Author blog (blog no longer updated; accessed: October 24, 20018).

Twitter (accessed: October 24, 2018).

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Sonya Nevin, "Entry on: Hermes: Tales of the Trickster (Olympians, 10) by George O'Connor", peer-reviewed by Susan Deacy and Elżbieta Olechowska. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/565. Entry version as of July 27, 2025.

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Additional information

Summary

This enjoyable graphic novel is the most humorous one of the *Olympians* series to date. The novel takes as its frame the myth of the killing of Argus Panoptes. A traveller and his dog arrive at the field that the giant, Argus, guards, where he keeps his many eyes on a lone white cow. The traveller begins to tell the giant stories:

The first is the story of the dogs' complaint. Hermes arranged for dogs to make their complaint to Zeus about being under human bondage. But they "voided their bowels all over Olympus", so a furious Zeus decrees that they should remain under human control. This is told as an amusing tongue-in-cheek aetiology for why dogs sniff each other (namely to find the dog who was to blame).

The traveller goes on to tell the story of the birth of Hermes, the longest story of the collection. Hermes' mother has given birth to him secretly in a cave for the safety of both of them. The precocious baby sneaks out and steals Apollo's herd of cattle. The text omits Hermes' next plan, to steal from Apollo by robbing Delphi, and moves on to Hermes being found by an angry Apollo. Hermes flees to Olympus for security. Apollo pursues him, enraged, but the two make peace when Hermes offers Apollo his new invention – the lyre.

As a gesture of friendship, Apollo gives Hermes his signature staff. In subsequent scenes the reader sees Hermes adding the two snakes to the staff to complete his caduceus. Zeus gives Hermes many jobs in order to keep him out of mischief. Hermes lists them, with an image depicting each. He is god of: peacemakers, astronomy and calendars, writing, thieves and liars, language, politicians, merchants and trade, hospitality, travel, athletes and gymnasiums, home and guard dogs, rustic divination and gambling, flocks and shepherds, and he is the god who brings dreams and who brings the spirits of the dead to the Styx.

The next section explores Hermes' offspring. He is the father of Priapus, Hermaphrodite, and possibly of Eros; they are introduced with a frame each. Then, at greater length, the reader is told the story of the birth of Pan. Hermes arrives at his lover's cave to find a shocked nurse fleeing. He enters, concerned, but then smiles at what he sees (but the reader cannot see) wrapped and cradled in the mother's arms. Hermes begins to laugh, and carries the baby, still laughing, all the way to Olympus. Still clearly very amused, he introduces his son to the

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other Olympians. The reader sees the baby at last, half-goat, half-humanoid. The Olympians find him cute and funny, even – perhaps especially – after he urinates all over Zeus.

There follow brief stories of Pan: inventing Pan Pipes and having the power to cause panic, particularly in flocks and dogs. The myth of the rise of Typhon then follows at greater length.

Typhon is created by Gaea to challenge Zeus, who has imprisoned her other children. Typhon and Echidna create the monsters Cerberus, the Sphinx, the Nemean Lion, Ladon, the Lernaean Hydra, and the Chimera. Typhon bursts forth. The Olympians take shelter in Egypt, except for Zeus, who remains to fight. Typhon surprises Zeus by wielding the Sickle of Kronos, a god-defeating weapon. Zeus falls, defeated. Pan hears his grandfather cry out in pain and races to his father, Hermes, in Egypt. The gods are assembled there, in their Egyptian forms (Apollo as Horus, Artemis as Bastet, Hera as Hathor, Hephaestus as Ptah, Aphrodite as Astarte, Dionysus as Heryshaf, and Herms as Thoth). Hermes retakes his Greek form to talk to Pan. Together they return to Greece and find that Typhon has stripped out Zeus' sinews. They trick the monster and rescue the sinews, restoring them to Zeus. Zeus destroys Typhon and buries him under Mt. Etna.

Argus then tells a story of his own, the myth of Baucis and Philemon. He gets as far as the point where the old couple are spared destruction by Hermes and Zeus. Argus reveals that he has guessed that the traveller is Hermes and that Hermes knows that the cow Argus is guarding is Io (last seen in *Hera: The Goddess and her Glory*). The traveller claims to be surprised, until the dog speaks up. The *dog* is Hermes in disguise; the traveller is Aesop, who has learned all his tales from Hermes. Hermes kills Argus reluctantly and releases Io.

In an epilogue, Hera sends a gadfly to pursue Io and places Argus' many eyes in the tail of a peacock. She notes to herself that Zeus was wise to send Hermes to release Io as she, "just can't stay mad at that guy".

There is an Author's Note on the writing of the text. There are summary pages for Hermes, Argus Panoptes, Pan (which notes his appearance in "classic children's literature": in Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, and Peter Pan in J.M. Barrie's work), and Typhon.

G(r)eek Notes are endnotes giving more information on the text and

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images. There are eight questions *For Discussion*, a bibliography and Recommended Reading.

Analysis

Even before the main stories have begun, the opening frame has Aesop/the traveller, singing the song of the Seikilos Epitaph, and the second to fourth frames allude to Aesop's *Hermes and the Dog* (the dog urinates on a herm). At the end of the story, it is revealed that Aesop learned his tales from Hermes, a tradition straight out of Philostratus. This sort of detail, and the direct explanation of it in the notes section, demonstrates the author's deep engagement with ancient material and desire to encourage others to explore it. The connection between Hermes and Aesop has been brought out further by this author in another work, *Fables Comic* (see the entry in this database). Other interesting aspects of reception include reworked versions of classicising art within the graphics of the graphic novel, including a recreation of Hermes' pose in Antonin Idrac's sculpture *Mercury Inventing the Caduceus* (1878), and a reworking of Diego Velázquez's *Mercury and Argus* (c.1659).

The main tales in the stories are drawn largely from the *Homeric Hymns*. The story of Hermes' birth retells the events of the *Homeric Hymn 4, To Hermes*, with elements of *Homeric Hymn 18, To Hermes*. The funny story of the birth of Pan is based on *Homeric Hymn 19, To Pan*. The story of Pan includes the tradition that Penelope, Icarius' daughter, is Pan's mother. This tradition is found in Herodotus, *Histories*, 2.145 and elsewhere, but not in the *Homeric Hymn*, where his mother is one of the nymphs. The author introduces a compromise, stressing in the notes that this Penelope is *not* Icarius' daughter, although Herodotus and Apollodorus say it is.

Some additions to ancient versions of the myths work well to develop character and relevant conflict. For example, Artemis is included in the mystery of the stolen cattle. It is fitting that she would be there, as she is Apollo’s (and Hermes') sibling, and she is also a hunter and tracker. Humour is added with Artemis solving the mystery immediately but Apollo finding the answer to be too far-fetched, only to claim later that even Artemis was baffled. This has the intimate feel of gentle sibling rivalry that is typical of the *Olympians*' way of inviting the reader into the gods' world. Similarly, this retelling has Apollo chase Hermes to Zeus (instead of them going together for arbitration). Apollo arrives in disarray, distraught at the thought to the other gods laughing at him.

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Artemis offers gentle reassurance in another moment of sibling intimacy. This whole sequence adds conflict to the story, leading to greater impact when Apollo and Hermes resolve their differences. It is a well-chosen character-development for Apollo, drawing out his characteristic dislike of being slighted and expressing the sort of emotional vulnerability that makes these gods relatable. This element also intensifies the sense of the chaos that baby Hermes has caused in his first days, which in turn demonstrates how appealing he is – to the extent that the other gods find his mischief amusing. The gods assemble like a team of comic book hero team to admire the new addition. If readers have read the other volumes in the series, they will appreciate the detail of Hera's words to Zeus, "...this one. This one I like." There is a genuinely beautiful image of Apollo playing the lyre for the first time (based on *Homeric Hymn 4*, lines 416–428).

While much of the pleasure of the birth of Hermes myth comes from its domestic atmosphere, this is balanced with a dramatic account of the myth of Typhon, which includes several action-packed images of great creativity. The world of the *Olympians* encompasses all such extremes. The sequence in which the gods appear as Egyptian deities is also very striking and invites readers to think about cross-cultural factors.

It seems appropriate that the trickster god should be depicted as youthful and playful. He appears on the cover as he does frequently elsewhere in the series, with a sardonic smile upon his lips. He is nude but for a short kilt and cloak, a styling which emphasises his youthful physique but also his identifying equipment: the helmet, winged sandals, and caduceus. Hermes is fair-skinned and dark-haired, while there are a range of skin tones throughout the book. Aesop, for example, is dark-skinned, and the (African; Egyptian) Sphinx has the face of a black African. This use of varied skin-tones reflects an ethnically varied Mediterranean milieu and also discourages the reader from picturing antiquity as a white experience.

The use of a framing device for the storytelling has an Ovidian feel, typical of the *Olympians*. The story of Baucis and Philemon draws on Ovid directly (see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 8.619–729). The Ovidian structure also suits the over-arching story particularly well, being part of the trick that is perpetrated against Argus. Appropriately for the trickster god, a trick is also perpetrated against the reader, who, like Argus, is likely to guess (wrongly) that the traveller is Hermes. The author takes a Hermes-like glee about this in the notes, "Psych!"...Tricked you!". Given that Hermes is such a fun and friendly

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	figure, it sits awkwardly that he acts as Argus' assassin at the end of the book. O'Connor manages this by tackling it head on. He has Hermes apologise to Argus for the killing and noting that he is "usually nicer to those who show kindness to strangers." This softening of the impact continues in the epilogue. Hera appears, investigating what has happened to the cow (Io, continuing the story set-up in *Hera: The Goddess and her Glory*). She concedes that even she cannot stay angry with Hermes. If Hera cannot find fault in those circumstances, how could the reader? The book thus ends on a note of humorous indulgence for the god of tricks.
Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Aesop Aesop's Fables Afterlife Aphrodite Apollo Architecture Ares Artemis Athena Centaur(s) Cerberus Dionysus / Dionysos Divination Egypt Egyptian Mythology Fable Faun Gods Greek Music Hephaestus Hera Hermes Hydra Mercury Metamorphoses (Ovid's) Nymphs Olympus Ovid Pan Penelope Phaedrus Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Authority Child, children Childhood Child's view Conflict Death Desires Disobedience Family Good deeds Humour Identity Maturity Murder Parents (and children) Peers Reconciliation Siblings Talking animals Tricksters Truth and lies
Further Reading	Allan, Arlene, *Hermes*, London: Routledge, 2018. Kovacs, George, and Marshall, C.W., eds., *Classics and Comics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011. Kovacs, George, and Marshall, C.W., eds., *Son of Classics and Comics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.
Addenda	Series blog (accessed: October 24, 2018)

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