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Joe Caramagna , Travel Foreman , Derek Fridolfs , Len O'Grady , Michael Avon Oeming

Ares. God of War

United States of America (2006)

TAGS: Achilles Alexander the Great Apollo Architecture Ares Argonauts Asclepius Athena Gods Greek Art Hades Hera Heracles Hermes Homer Iliad Immortality Jason Katabasis Mars Odysseus / Ulysses Olympus Trojan War Troy Zeus



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

General information	
Title of the work	Ares. God of War
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Country/countries of popularity	United States of America; United Kingdom; Canada
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2006
First Edition Details	Michael Avon Oeming and Travel Foreman, *Ares. God of War.* New York, USA: Marvel Publishing, 2006, pp.120 (contains material first published in magazine form as *Ares* #1–5).
ISBN	9780785119913
Genre	Graphic novels
Target Audience	Crossover (teens, young adults, adults)
Author of the Entry	Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk
Peer-reviewer of the Entry	Susan Deacy, University of Roehampton, s.deacy@roehampton.ac.uk Lisa Maurice, Bar-Ilan University, lisa.maurice@biu.ac.il

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Creators



Joe Caramagna (Illustrator)



Travel Foreman (Illustrator)



Derek Fridolfs (Illustrator)



Len O'Grady (Illustrator)

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Right to Left: Michael Avon Oeming and Brian Michael Bendis by Gage Skidmore, 2015. Retrieved from flickr.com, licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0 (accessed: January 5, 2022).

Michael Avon Oeming (Author)

Michael Avon Oeming has had an extensive career as a graphic novelist and comic-book author. He is perhaps best known for work for Marvel Comics and DC Comics, on titles such as *Thor*, *Red Sonja*, *Superman*, and *Batman*. He is based in Portland, New Jersey, in the USA.

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Bio prepared by Sonya Nevin, University of Roehampton, sonya.nevin@roehampton.ac.uk

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Additional information

Summary

Part 1.

Ares opens with a repeat of the cover image in which a Mohican-haired Ares looks down reflectively amidst a battlefield strewn with bodies. The opening text quotes Zeus in Homer's *Iliad* declaring Ares the most hateful of the gods. A second scene of devastation accompanies Ares' account of how the other gods called on him long ago to halt Hades' attack on Olympus. He recalls that even as Hades' hellish demons swarmed about them Hercules discouraged Zeus' appeal to Ares, critical of his extreme violence. Ares owns Hercules' description of him, with a chilling account of who he is "...annihilation is the art of Ares, and this is my name." (p. 3). Scenes of horror accompany his words. He sits on the corpse of his dead horse and carves his name (in Greek) into the head of a massive fallen robot. He then recalls how the gods turned on him after the battle, criticising him and dismissing him like an animal. He left Olympus in sorrow and anger.

The scene moves to the mortal realm years later. Ares is living under a long-haired mortal disguise raising his son, Alexander, alone. He has been called into a school where the teacher is concerned that Alexander is "a bit aggressive." (p. 8). Ares responds that the boy is not aggressive, simply "not weak"; he adds for the benefit of the reader that he is rearing his son without knowledge of his mother so that the boy will be strong. There are scenes of Ares with his young son, enjoying an affectionate, playful relationship, albeit one focused on physical rough-housing. At home, Ares turns the television off when scenes of war in Iraq come on, despite the fact that Alexander likes having it on in the background.

Hermes, disguised as a young skateboarder, visits Ares at his work as a carpenter. He calls Ares to return to Olympus telling him that Asgard has fallen and Olympus is under threat. Ares rejects him roughly, but at home, it becomes clear that he cannot resist the call. News arrives that Alexander has gone missing from school. Scenes of Ares opening a weapon stash and arming himself are intercut with news reports of massacre sites in Iraq being uncovered. A Mohican-haired Ares bursts out of his house, scattering the surrounding police.

Part 2.

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The next section opens with a map of Greece. Zeus looks down upon an invading army and recalls the many conflicts between gods that have gone before in which "father turned upon son and son slew father." Now "Eastern gods" are approaching (p. 25). Achilles enters the fray, decapitating a demon in samurai armour. Meanwhile, other Greek warriors are standing watch over the sleeping form of Alexander. Ares is causing havoc on earth. A deeply scarred Achilles appears before him and calls him to the Myrmidon stronghold to protect Alexander. They return to find that it has fallen and the boy is missing.

Ares fights beside Achilles, "As I did at Troy" (p. 39), using ancient and modern weapons to slay Eastern demons. In the halls of Olympus, Hera apologises to Ares, but he rejects the apology and threatens her. Hercules wrestles Ares off Hera; their fight is interrupted by a lightning bolt from Zeus. Ares strikes Zeus, who retaliates with more lightening before kneeling before Ares and asking for his help. Meanwhile, Alexander awakens in the East. A geisha-like demon offers to protect him and gives him a potion. Alexander calls for his father and the demon tells him that he should be concerned with "who" he is, not "where" he is. Alexander experiences visions as the demon-geisha tells him of his terrible family legacy of fathers battling sons. Further visions reveal the monstrous form of Ares in battle. The boy wishes to die and the demon tells him that he will be reborn.

Part 3.

Zeus continues to request Ares' help; Ares agrees in order to rescue Alexander. Hercules reluctantly updates Ares on the situation: Most of the Myrmidons are dead. Odysseus is dead. Apollo, Athena, Patroclus, Theseus, Ajax, Jason and the Argonauts, and Perseus are continuing the fight. They are interrupted by the Eastern demons who burst through the walls of the palace of Olympus. They are followers of the Japanese god of evil, Amatsu Mikaboshi; the reader discovers that Mikaboshi is the geisha-like demon who has drugged Alexander. The fight continues. The scene switches to an old school assignment of Alexander's, which praises his father for his strength, love of history, historic weapons' collection, and honesty. Gradually the references to history are merged with an increasingly terrifying face of Ares, who laughs harder and harder at bloody disasters of human history – the wars of Rome, the crusades, the Conquistadors, Napoleon's campaigns, the decimation of the Native American tribes, and the rise of Nazism. The boy screams for his father but his mind is filled with an

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endless pile of bloody skeletons. Mikaboshi tells him that he must become his father in order to destroy him. Mikaboshi dresses Alexander in a samurai suit and tells him that he will be the new god of war. The fight on Olympus continues. Hercules cooperates with Ares, although to himself he says that Ares is mad. Zeus' power begins to fade. There are more lines from the *Iliad* relating to the passing of generations. Zeus meets Alexander and embraces him as his grandchild. Alexander skewers him with demon blade-fingers shouting, "I love you... to death!!!" (p. 75).

Part 4.

Alexander continues to drink the mystery potion. He is torn between disgust for the violent ways of his family and the urge to commit his own acts of violence. Ares and Hercules see off Mikaboshi. Asklepios attempts to save Zeus, but the gods are already in mourning. Hera urges her sons, Ares and Hercules, to fight together once more. Hermes announces the arrival of a strange figure. An old man dressed in Japanese clothes is sitting amidst the ruined halls of Olympus. He explains that he is Inari, once the messenger of the gods of the East. The other gods of the East are too proud to ask the gods of the 'barbarian west' for aid, but they will come if the Greek gods ask for help as they too wish to stop Mikaboshi. Apollo indignantly rejects him. Ares is more open but still suspects deceit. He will not ask for help. Hercules is frustrated and rebukes his lack of trust. Inari asks for a cup of water and receives one before he departs. Later, Achilles joins Ares who is thinking about the Trojan War and worrying about Alexander. Five years pass as the war continues. Alexander appears on the battlefield, older now, bare-chested, armed with a samurai sword and ready to face his father.

Part 5.

The concluding section of *Ares. God of War* opens with more quotations from Homer and a close up of Ares' screaming head against a blood-red background. The narrator informs us that none of Ares' many manifestations matter to him now save that of 'father'. He approaches the gates of 'Japan's hell' and demands the return of his son. Meanwhile, on a mountain top, Inari presents the Japanese gods with the cup of water - a gift, he says, from the gods of the West who offer it "in consideration" for their assistance (p. 100). The gods are pleasantly surprised. In Japanese hell, Mikaboshi fights Ares and then summons Alexander, who declares he will kill Ares as so many in their

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line have killed their father's. Ares tries to explain why he never told Alexander his true identity, but Alexander lashes out and cuts his throat. Apollo is impaled in the fighting and Athena is beginning to be overwhelmed. A blood-soaked Ares reminds Alexander that their line includes many fathers who kill their sons as well as sons who kill fathers. When Alexander answers that Ares' son is dead now that he has become the new god of war, Ares answers that that only makes it easier for him. He grabs the boy around the neck and chokes him. Alexander struggles to say that he will never give in; a flash-back frame reveals that he has used the words that he always used in play-fights with Ares on earth. Ares will fight Alexander no more and prepares to die. Apollo and Hercules are killed in battle. Zeus feels his sons' pain and prepares "one last act of magic" (p. 111). Through his act, Alexander is freed from the poisonous hold Mikaboshi has had over him. The other gods of the East arrive and finish the battle with Mikaboshi's demons. Alexander cuts Mikaboshi down, calling him an "animal," adding, "together fathers and sons have broken your spell on me.!!!" (p. 114) Together the water gods of East and West sweep the battlefield clean. Time passes and Alexander and Ares are together in rural Africa. Ares explains what has happened; Zeus was his grandfather but the god's body has never been found. He promises to be more open in future; Alexander will meet his mother and learn about his family. Above all Alexander wishes for a chance to be a child again. The story closes with a Massai warrior looking on at Ares and Alexander playfully racing each other across the landscape as a male elephant and calf race the other way.

Analysis

Exploring the character of Ares amidst a clash of gods creates a story that is more violent than is typical for Marvel comics. The violence is not gratuitous, however, as the story dares to touch on difficult topics such as the origin of violent atrocities of war and struggles between fathers and sons. As in other comics from the Marvel Universe, the gods are treated much like other comic-book superheroes; they look like them, act like them, speak like them, they are even vulnerable to violent death. The Greek gods seem more approachable for being like superheroes, yet gods and superheroes both provide a testing ground for ideas that is a comfortable distance from day-to-day human existence. As such, themes such as genocide and parricide can be addressed from the safety of a fantasy environment.

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The look of the graphic novel combines aspects of the modern world with elements that are decidedly ancient Greek. A Greek key frames the front cover of each edition of the comic. Ares sports a lion-head shoulder-piece that is reminiscent of the should-piece worn by Achilles on Exekias' Achilles-Ajax vase (Vatican Museum 344) and ancient drain-spouts. Many of the gods wear ancient-style robes and armour. Olympus is a world of soaring white stone pillars, white statuary, and great friezes (although, in a common mistake, the map puts Mt. Olympus at Olympia). In a striking set of scenes, the history of Ares is told to his son through a series of visions rendered in the style of ancient Greek pottery. Ancient pottery is the direct route back to the 'real' story of the gods. When the gods are on earth, however, they dress in modern guise, and this adds to the fantasy of the gods persisting in the contemporary world. Ares is at his most violent with a modern haircut; the long hair popular amongst males in antiquity is presented as an element of the soft human disguise.

Apt passages from the *Iliad* are frequently included and as the poem is named readers can follow-up and read more if they choose. Characters also refer frequently to the Trojan War. They recall it as a shared experience and as a turning point of history; it is something they appear to take pride in yet also a source of sorrow and pain. It is explicitly stated that while the Trojan War was fought for a woman, the current war is being fought for a boy. In the context of Greek mythology that could sound homoerotic, however Alexander is not presented in a sexualised manner. Ares and Achilles are represented as having fought on the same side at Troy, although Ares was an ally of the Trojans. This is perhaps to simplify the narrative; Greek gods fighting on behalf of the Trojans would take some explaining when it is not particularly relevant to the current story. The foregrounding of the Trojan War establishes it as a definitive war, one that all later wars may be compared to – both human wars and the current clash of gods. Indirectly it informs the reader of Troy's cultural importance and invites them to find out more about it.

Initially there is an implication that this is a new Trojan War and an East-West struggle in which 'East' is a force for evil. This is eventually deconstructed, however, and Mikaboshi is presented as a 'problem' god in the style of a devil-like Hades – a god who has given the Greek gods similar problems in the past. Ares pursues a *katabasis* down to Japanese Hell in the manner of heroes proving themselves by heading to the Greek underworld. The gods of East and West ultimately act as allies to one-another, each keen to end the chaotic forces which

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trouble them both. Messenger god cooperates with messenger god and the water gods act together. Although the point is not laboured, there is an implied message that the gods (for which read 'people') of East and West have more in common than they sometimes care to admit and benefit from collaboration.

Hercules is a well-established character within the Marvel Universe. Here he appears more moderate than he sometimes is in his own stories, largely because he acts as a contrast to Ares' extremity. The long history of conflict between the brothers is established in which the choice between Hercules' desire for moderation has clashed with Ares' preference for unlimited violence. Hercules also presents a more stable relationship with his parents, horrified when Ares attacks first Hera and then Zeus. Yet for all that Hercules is presented as the more stable, the story is more interested in exploring Ares' perspective. Ares is the narrator, and as narrator he stresses how hurt he has been by his parents' rejection. His parents then acknowledge this perspective by apologising to Ares for their former behaviour. Ares and Hercules must learn to cooperate, but while Hercules continues to be horrified by Ares, ultimately it is Ares, not Hercules, who does most to defend Olympus. Hercules therefore provides a lens for criticising Ares but the text overall is more ambivalent. Ares' embodiment of extreme violence is established as a thing of horror, yet we are encouraged to be understanding. He insists that he does not initiate conflict or genocide, merely nurtures what humans unleash. His savagery is explicitly linked across time, from Troy through all manner of historical wars, including the genocide of Native Americans and the rise of Nazism. The reader is in no way encouraged to celebrate these atrocities; they are part of what makes Ares a difficult figure. By the end, Ares has apparently become a 'better' god, creating some hope that things could be better in the future. Interestingly Alexander the Great is not included amongst the examples of historical wars although one must wonder if Ares has named his son after this exemplary war-maker.

The arrival of the gods of the East helps to finish off the war, but the major turning point is Zeus' monumental act of self-sacrifice. The death of a god is made shockingly possible (although the body is never found), and his death is framed as a deliberate act of self-sacrifice carried out to save his sons. This gives his death a Christian-like quality, although here it is the father who dies, not the son. This is the act required to break the chain of parricide and filicide, although the first step of this sort is taken by Ares, who accepts death rather than

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kill Alexander, and the reader has been prepared for it by Zeus' humble apology to Ares. Alexander's own violence is softened by its presentation as a product of a magic potion even while his emotional turmoil is depicted in a raw and troubling way. From the perspective of modern psychology, it is appropriate that it is the father figures who make the effort to heal the bonds with their sons rather than the work lying with the sons (especially with a child). Nonetheless, the story is bold in dealing with parent-child antagonism. Ares, as a father figure, is confronted with his child's loss of innocence, the prospect of the child's inevitable separation from his parent, and the possibility of being replaced by his son – an extension of the renewed sense of his own limitation and mortality. Alexander as a child figure is confronted with the realisation of his parent's imperfections and his father's identity beyond the parent-child nexus; he feels an urge to destroy his father in order to make his own passage into maturity. These are profound crises, yet they reach some peaceable resolution. The young reader is presented with a message that while antagonism between father and son may exist, the son should try and respect the father and understand them as a person, while the father should show their child love and support, not feel threatened by them, and be the best role model that they can. The ultimate message is that familial conflict can be halted and intergenerational strife healed; it is better for fathers and sons to support each other than to clash. The presence of the elephants in the final scene (a bull elephant and calf) naturalises this father-child bonding. The Massai warrior acts as witness and connects the father-son bonds back to real human warrior culture.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Achilles Alexander the Great Apollo Architecture Ares Argonauts Asclepius Athena Gods Greek Art Hades Hera Heracles Hermes Homer Iliad Immortality Jason Katabasis Mars Odysseus / Ulysses Olympus Trojan War Troy Zeus
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Abandonment Adolescence Adventure Adversity Authority Boys Character traits Child, children Childhood Child's view Christianity Coming of age Conflict Death Emotions Family Gaining understanding Gender, male Good vs evil Heroism Hierarchy Identity Innocence Masculinity Maturity Morality Parents (and children) Sacrifice Superheroes Values Violence War

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Addenda

Illustrators:

Pencil: Travel Foreman,

Ink: Derek Fridolfs,

Colour: Len O'Grady,

Letters: Joe Caramagna.

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