

The War of the Frogs and the Rats
The *Batrachomyomachia* in Marvel's *The Mighty Thor*

© Nicholas Newman (Veritas Classical Academy, Marietta, Ohio)

INTRODUCTION: THE THOR STORY ARC

The Mighty Thor 363, "This Kurséd World" begins on a note of triumph, but one tinged with sadness. Thor, the defender of earth and the Norse god of thunder, has returned from Hel, the Norse underworld, and restored the "mortal souls once stolen by Malekith the Accursed"¹ to their proper bodies. His triumphant return to Midgard, earth, is marred, however, by the terrible wounds he received to his face battling in the underworld, which cause him to cover his face with bandages.² Another sorrow overshadows the victory, Odin, king of Asgard the realm of the Norse gods, has disappeared, and the gods gather in Asgard to choose a new king at the Althing, a gathering of the people of Asgard. Before being able to return to Asgard, however, Thor is attacked by Kurse, a nearly indestructible foe; it is only through the assistance of other heroes, Beta Ray Bill and the Powerpack, that Kurse is defeated. Even after this victory, however, Thor is unable to return to Asgard as Loki, the god of mischief and a rival of Thor, enchants a human woman to kiss Thor, just as he is about to depart for Asgard, turning him into a frog.³

The story continues on two levels in *The Mighty Thor* 364, "Thor Croaks." In Asgard, the Althing convenes without Thor, and Loki puts his plot to convince the assembled Asgardians to elect him king into motion.⁴ Thor's absence makes the god Heimdall, the guardian of the gates of Asgard, suspicious.⁵ In Asgard as well, a group of children make a startling discovery, the sword of Surtur, the fire demon, a relic of great power seems to be powering a machine. On earth, Thor the frog makes his way to Avengers Mansion to find help, but is shooed out by Jarvis, the butler.⁶ From here Thor makes his way to Central Park, where he meets another frog named Puddlegulp as they both come to the rescue of the frog king, driving off the rats who have attacked him. Unfortunately, the frog king is mortally wounded in the fight, and Puddlegulp invites Thor to the safe haven of the frogs, before the rats return.⁷ Meeting with the other frogs, Puddlegulp tells them the sad news and they try to convince Thor to assist them in their war against the rats.⁸ Thor agrees and comes up with a plan, to use "dragons," that live in the sewer against the rats. The story ends as Thor completes his journey down to the sewer, where he comes across a large number of alligators, being controlled by a man playing a pipe.⁹

The Mighty Thor 365, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner or It's Not Easy Being Green" picks up where *The Mighty Thor* 364 left off. Thor overcomes the piper and takes his pipe, taking control of the alligators in the sewer.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Southside, the leader of the rats attempts to poison the reservoir with rat poison, but is ambushed by an army of frogs.¹¹ The frogs are defeated by the rats, and just as all hope is lost, Thor leads the alligators out of the sewers, who feast on the rats.¹² Returning to the stronghold of the frogs, Thor is asked to remain and become king, but he demurs.¹³

The story arc comes to a head in *The Mighty Thor* 366, "Sir!"¹⁴ In this issue, Thor returns to Asgard. Here, Loki has been manipulating the Althing to proclaim him king but Thor, snatches him up and brings him out of the city, pursued by the other Asgardians.¹⁵ Meanwhile, one of the Asgardian children that discovered the sword of Surtur has grown ill with fever. Her father, Volstagg the Vast, one of Thor's companions, sets out to find out what happened. He too finds the sword and accidentally destroys it and the machine it is powering. The destruction of the sword ends the spell keeping Thor a frog and allows him to return to his true form. When the

other gods arrive at the scene, Thor is hailed as the new king, but again demurs, suggesting Balder in his place.¹⁶

THOR AND THE *BATRACHOMYOMACHIA*¹⁷

While part of a larger, continuing, story arc in the *Mighty Thor* comics, his adventures as a frog form a self-contained episode that finds its end in the destruction of the sword of Surtur and the end of Loki's spell, releasing Thor from his frog form.¹⁸ This episode is the focal point for a number of issues and allows Simonson to explore a possibility within his source material from Norse mythology, which the gods of Norse myth were never faced, what could happen if Odin disappeared? Loki's use of the sword of Surtur to power his magic spell exemplifies the complex relationship in comics between magic and science, or at least pseudo-science.¹⁹ Thor himself faces a crisis, which causes him to think about giving up his place as the defender of Midgard. This episode too, is an excellent example of the "quality of the genre" which can be seen in its link to myth and belies the "popular and academic perception that comics are for children and comics are a weak cousin to both literature and visual art."²⁰ Simonson layers this episode with allusion: mythological allusion to Norse myth and literary allusion to stories from the brothers Grimm,²¹ other German fairy tales²² and even urban legends²³ meet historical allusions to the Icelandic *Althing*. This variety of allusion is unsurprising, as intertextuality plays a vital role even in the creation of comic books: "Jones explains that Batman creators Kane and Bill Finger put their superhero together out of elements taken from 'the Mask of Zorro...superman...Doc Savage...the Green Hornet...the Shadow and the original Phantom."²⁴ Even Thor's journey to Hel plays into the discussion of deicide in comics and film and their interpretation as Christian imagery. While Thor does not actually die, his descent into Hel, to the underworld, is a type of death, from which he returns to earth with the souls of mortals, as a Christ like figure.²⁵ These allusions themselves do not, however, just stand alone, instead Simonson makes them interact, using this interaction to create something new in his narrative.

Having these allusions for the reader to fix upon allows for the use of the concept of intertextuality and the "implied reader"²⁶ in the interpretation of this episode of *The Mighty Thor*. The idea, then, of the audience is of paramount importance. The "implied reader" as the "ideal recipient" of this text is able to understand not only these more obvious references, but search through the text for more intertextual allusions as well.²⁷ Through the interaction of this intertextuality and the interpretation of the readers the author creates a multi-layered narrative in which every scene can be interpreted as alluding to a wide variety of other texts.²⁸

One such text, which seems to have served as source-text here, is the *Batrachomyomachia*. This satirical take on the *Iliad*,²⁹ although much shorter than the *Iliad*, a mere 300 lines, is written in epic meter and uses epic vocabulary and imagery, especially in the battle scenes.³⁰ This text was very popular in antiquity and the Byzantine period,³¹ and was attributed to Homer. The *Batrachomyomachia*, remained very popular and was already translated into English in the early seventeenth century as part of the Homeric corpus.³² Despite its traditional placement within the Homeric corpus, the text is almost certainly Hellenistic, with a definite date *ante quem* of the first century A.D.³³

No matter how popular, it is certainly less well known than the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*. By choosing a text with which many of his readers would be unfamiliar, Simonson avoids the natural conflict between text and source-text(s) for priority in the mind of the reader. This type of textual relationship, the struggle between text and source text is even referred to as "Oedipal" by Whitmarsh.³⁴

This choice of allusion to the *Batrachomyomachia* puts Thor into an epic, heroic, environment, to which he is suited, while simultaneously being able to satirize the concept of heroism. The choice of a text that the majority of his audience would not be familiar with presents Simonson with the

freedom to work without his text being overshadowed by the source-text. The Classical allusions in Japanese popular culture are made with for much the same reason:

“...Western ‘classical’ allusions—references to the ancient Mediterranean world of Greece and Rome, as opposed to references to Japanese classical literature and lore from the period before 1600 CE—carry a different significance in Japanese popular culture from what they might carry in America or Europe. Rather than bearing the venerable weight of centuries of tradition and resonating with immediate recognition, they represent a set of stories and concepts more likely to be experienced by the reader as exotic and unfamiliar”³⁵

Using a less well known Classical text also mitigates outcry by “those self-appointed individuals who seek to defend the integrity of Greek myth against non-canonical intrusions (albeit rather ignorantly).”³⁶

The parallels between the two texts, both in the storyline itself, and in the narrative style, are striking, and a few of these are illustrated in the following tables:

Table 1: Some of the Intertextual Connections in the Storyline

INTERTEXTUALITY IN THE STORYLINE	
THE MIGHTY THOR	THE BATRACHOMYOMACHIA
The episode in central park begins by Thor and Puddlegulp meeting, and Puddlegulp inviting Thor to the stronghold of the frogs.	The story begins with the meeting of Crumb-thief, the mouse prince, and Puffcheek, the king of the frogs, and Puffcheek inviting Crumb-thief to his palace. ³⁷
Thor is thrust into the war of the frogs and rats when he and Puddlegulp come upon the assassination of the frog king by rats.	The catalyst for the war is the death, albeit accidental, of the prince of the mice at the hands of the frog king. ³⁸
The rats develop a scheme to kill the frogs by dumping rat poison in the reservoir.	The frogs develop a plan to kill the mice by grabbing hold of them and jumping into the water, drowning them. ³⁹
The ruse fails and the two sides join in hand to hand combat.	The ruse fails and the two sides join in hand to hand combat. ⁴⁰
Thor, on several occasions, intervenes in the war and defeats larger parties of rats as the most powerful warrior among the frogs.	Bit-thief, the most powerful warrior among the mice, intervenes in the war after first holding back, defeating many frogs. ⁴¹
Thor intervenes by bringing reinforcements to the frogs in the form of alligators, defeating the rats.	Zeus intervenes by sending reinforcements for the frogs in the form of crabs, defeating the mice. ⁴²

Table II: Some Intertextual Connections in the Narrative Style.

INTERTEXTUALITY IN NARRATIVE STYLE	
THE MIGHTY THOR	The Batrachomyomachia
The frogs and rats are given appropriate names such as: Puddlegulp, Glugwort, Southside and Ratso,	The frogs and mice are given appropriate names such as: Crum-thief, Bit-thief and Puffcheek.
The animals are given human institutions and motivations: kingships, revenge etc...	The animals are given human institutions and motivations: kingships, revenge etc...
The frogs and rats fight in a manner appropriate for the <i>genre</i> , going at it hand to hand with many a largely written sound effect.	The frogs and mice fight in a manner appropriate for the <i>genre</i> , arming themselves with shields and spears and battling like Homeric champions.

SATIRICAL PARALLELS

This episode of the Thor comic begins with descent. Thor, as an Asgardian himself, and on Asgardian business, returning the stolen mortal souls to Midgard and defeating Kurse, begins the episode on a divine level. Once he is turned into a frog, however, he does not immediately begin his adventure with the other frogs, instead he goes to Avengers Mansion for help, a human level. Finally, after being shooed out by Jarvis, he proceeds to Central Park and finds the other frogs, an animal level. The *Batrachomyomachia* too begins on a divine level in which the author calls upon a χορὸν ἐξ Ἑλικῶνος, a “choir from Helicon,” the home of the muses. This choir is to: ἐλθεῖν εἰς ἔμὸν ἦτορ, “come into my heart,” a human level, and it is only then that the story, on an animal level begins. The descent through the human level puts all the more emphasis on the fact that both texts are marked by a lack of humans, the only human to be found is in the Thor text, the piper, who has no direct interaction in the war himself.⁴³ It is revealed too, at the end of the war, that Puddlegulp is also a human that has been turned into a frog, but his origins do not sway the course of the war. The removal of the human level of narrative allows for the two other levels to move into this void. The movement of the animal level into the human allows for the animals to take on human traits: systems of government, speech, warfare etc..., conversely by raising the animal level to that of human, humans are reduced to that of animals, creating an amusing satirical image for the reader.

The epic language and imagery used when battle is joined between the frogs and the mice in the *Batrachomyomachia* creates the illusion that these are the heroes of the *Iliad*, battling once again, an illusion broken by the names of the frogs and the mice, and the reader almost cannot help but chuckle at Achilles being turned into a mouse. In *The Mighty Thor* text too, it is especially in the warfare that the satirical nature shines through. The combat is done as a superhero would fight, with exaggerated sound effects, but as the frogs charge into the ranks of the rats, the leading frog shouts: “Come on, fellows! Let’s take ‘em like the Steelers took the Rams in Super-bowl XIX [sic]!”⁴⁴ Like the heroes of the *Iliad*, the football players are reduced to frogs and rats. That this reference to football is said by Puddlegulp, he is a human and, as we find out in *Lockjaw and the Pet Avengers #1* was once a football player, embodying a literal example of this satiric reduction.

The effect this descent has on Thor himself seems, at first to also fit this vein of comic reduction, the proud hero, fresh from dealing with Hela and Kurse,⁴⁵ solving issues of global importance,⁴⁶ is now a frog, and is involved in a war that the humans of New York are not even aware.

Interestingly, the frogs and rats seem to be aware of the human world. The frogs, for example, reference the 1985 Super-bowl XIX as they are attacking the rats. This reference, as well as the periodic views of the city skyline in the distance, returns the human world into the narrative. The frogs, however, mistakenly claim victory for the Steelers over the Rams, neither team played in Super-bowl XIX, in which the 49ers defeated the Dolphins, the Steelers defeated the Rams in Super-bowl XIV. While it is possible, perhaps even probable, that this is a merely a misprint, this mistake re-isolates the frogs in the mind of the reader, the frogs may know about human culture, but it is very separate. Nevertheless, as the narrative progresses the reduction seems less and less. Since the human level has been removed from the narrative, the transformation into a frog does not change Thor's nature; he is still the defender of Midgard, despite his inner turmoil and his questioning this status, and fights for those who are oppressed. The danger, too, which at first seems a trivial thing, increases in urgency, in the absence of humans. Without humans, the threat to the frogs becomes an existential threat, one which would end with the triumph of evil over good. This becomes clear in the plan concocted by the rats, to poison the reservoir, which is a danger not only to the frogs, but an existential danger to the whole city.⁴⁷ Thor, then, is never truly diminished, but remains as much a hero as a frog, as he is as an Asgardian. This lack of reduction serves, as a type of reduction itself, if Thor is as much a hero as a frog, then a frog hero is as good as Thor.⁴⁸ Simonson plays then on an inherent dichotomy in what it means to be a comic book hero. On the one hand: "superheroes stand as a metaphor for freedom—the freedom to act without consequences and the freedom from the restrictions of gravity, the law, families, and romantic relationships."⁴⁹ Being cut off from the society within which he normally operates, Thor seems now to be truly free. He has no responsibility for the frogs and could, instead of getting involved in a war with such little apparent consequence, spend his time attempting to return to his true form, as he is attempting to do when he goes to the Avenger's mansion. This is precisely what Thor does not do and he fights for the frogs even before the stakes of this war are made clear. Thor has no choice, but to act as a hero and help the frogs: "...are superheroes really free? While they may seem to leap and bound with freedom, superheroes in fact move within a limited range of actions and narrative patterns."⁵⁰ No matter what shape he is, Thor must act within these limitations, which is what ultimately leads to his transformation back into a hero, since he is still worthy of the power of Thor.⁵¹ Despite his new form, Thor, who could now truly "leap and bound with freedom," is still bound to act within the proscribed format for a hero.

The same comic element of reduction is evident in the divine narrative level, which moves down to fill the void left by the human level. In the *Batrachomyomachia* this satirical reduction of the gods is especially seen in the long response given by Athena when Zeus asks which side she will take in the war:

Ὡς ἄρ' ἔφη Κρονίδης· τὸν δὲ προσέειπεν Ἀθήνη·
 «ὦ πάτερ, οὐκ ἂν πῶ ποτ' ἐγὼ μῦσι τειρομένοισιν
 ἐλθοίμην ἐπαρωγός, ἐπεὶ κακὰ πολλὰ μ' ἔοργαν
 στέμματα βλάπτοντες καὶ λύχνους εἶνεκ' ἐλαίου.
 τοῦτο δέ μοι λίην ἔδακε φρένας οἶον ἔρεξαν -
 πέπλον μου κατέτρωξαν ὃν ἐξύφηνα καμοῦσα
 ...
 ἀλλ' οὐδ' ὡς βατράχοισιν ἀρηγέμεν οὐκ ἐθελήσω·
 εἰσὶ γὰρ οὐδ' αὐτοὶ φρένας ἔμπροσθεν, ἀλλὰ με πρῶτην
 ἐκ πολέμου ἀνιοῦσαν ἐπεὶ λίην ἐκοπώθη,ν,
 ὕπνου δευομένην οὐκ εἶασαν θορυβοῦντες
 οὐδ' ὀλίγον καταμῦσαι· ἐγὼ δ' ἄϋπνος κατεκείμην
 τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀλγοῦσα, ἕως ἐβόησεν ἀλέκτωρ.
 ἀλλ' ἄγε παυσώμεσθα θεοὶ τοῦτοισιν ἀρήγειν,
 μή κέ τις ὑμείων τρωθῆι βέλει ὀξυόεντι·
 εἰσὶ γὰρ ἀγχέμαχοι, εἴ καὶ θεὸς ἀντίον ἔλθοι·
 πάντες δ' οὐρανόθεν τερπώμεθα δῆριν ὀρώντες.»
Batr. 178-196.

So spoke the son of Cronos; then Athena responded:
 “Father, I would never come to the aid of the mice if they are in distress,
 for they have done me much wrong, disturbing garlands and lambs for the oil.
 This too they do, which exceedingly troubles my mind –
 They ate my peplos, which I wove, wearing myself out
 ...
 But in no way do I wish to help the frogs;
 they are unsound in their thoughts, for yesterday
 returning from war, and being extremely worn down
 and in need of sleep, they did not let up making a ruckus
 nor did they let me sleep even a little. I remained sleepless,
 with a headache, until the rooster crowed.
 Come now, let us gods hold off on giving aid to either side,
 lest one of us is struck by a sharp missile;
 for they fight hand to hand, even if it is a god who comes against them.
 Instead, let us all be glad watching this battle from the heavens.⁵²

Despite being one of the most powerful members of the Greek pantheon, Athena is unable to keep her own temple and her own weaving safe from the mice, and she cannot even get a good night's sleep because of the noise made by the frogs. All her vaunted power, wisdom and skill and she is no better able to deal with an infestation of mice, or the incessant noise of frogs outside her window than any human would be able to. The gods are reduced not just in power, but even in courage, refusing to fight against the frogs or the mice in hand to hand combat.

In *The Mighty Thor*, the reduction of the gods is twofold: first of all in the literal reduction of Thor into a frog himself, and second of all in the confusion amongst the gods in Asgard, where questions about the missing Thor, false Thor, magic spells etc... nearly lead them to choose Loki as their new king. These gods are further reduced by their inability to intervene in the war of the rats and the frogs. Their power is comically reduced not by cowardice, but through ignorance, even Heimdall who can supposedly see all things, is not able to locate Thor as a frog in Central Park. This is underscored by the Piper in the sewer, an allusion to the *Pied Piper of Hamelin* story,⁵³ who is in the sewer controlling the alligators. The frogs are not saved by the intervention of the Asgardian gods, or even by the power of Thor, but by the alligators broken free of the control of the Piper, who comes in at the end of the battle, having regained his pipe, and leads the rats and the alligators away.⁵⁴ This reduction of the gods addresses the problematic place the gods have in the comic book genre. Superman may have his origin in “a character like Samson, Hercules, and all the strong men I have ever heard tell of rolled into one,”⁵⁵ but gods, like Hercules himself, were initially difficult to parlay into a viable comic book characters: “clearly there was a disjuncture between how gods and goddesses acted among human beings in the literature of the ancient past and how they could be portrayed as doing so now in a manner that would be acceptable to audiences.”⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the world of the Greek and Roman gods, among others, were eventually adapted to play a central role in comic books.⁵⁷ It is in this problematic context that the dichotomy of Thor as a character (as well as the other Asgardians) lies: “Superman may have been a superhero born from stories about gods, but Thor was a god born from stories about superheroes.”⁵⁸ The mixture of allusions to Norse mythology and the superhero is played on by Simonson, these are both gods and not gods, the epitome of the: “examples of dying immortals, while mortals, particularly those dubbed superheroes, have begun to take on the trappings of these divine figures.”⁵⁹ While these immortals are not physically dying, their reduction in scope and power puts them in the place where falling god meets rising hero.

The problem of the use of magic in this narrative plays on this same reduction of the gods. Magic is by no means foreign to the world of comic books: “the realm of magic is an important element in the universe of DC and Marvel comics...indeed the oldest character still appearing in the

modern universe of DC comics is the magician Doctor Occult...⁶⁰ The association of the Norse gods with magic is deep seated, Odin himself introduces magic, and here, in this tradition, Loki uses his sorcery to turn Thor into a frog, by magically coercing a woman to kiss him. This spell, however, is cast using what looks like a particle weapon.⁶¹ The addition of a magical weapon with which Loki is able to focus his spell and send it across space to Midgard, reduces the mystical quality of the spell, playing on the fact that (although this is not as much the case for Thor and the other Asgardians): “superhero comics usually go to some trouble to establish a scientific or pseudo-scientific basis for the powers of their major characters.”⁶² The magic is further reduced by the engine Loki builds to siphon the energy he needs for the spell from the sword of Surtur, and when this machine is destroyed the spell fails.⁶³ If the spell requires the use of machinery and energy, then this is more a form of alien technology than divine magic. The source of the energy, however, is the sword of Surtur, which returns this spell again into the magical sphere. This back and forth of magic and science, like the comic reduction of the Asgardians, underscores the tension between god and hero.

REVERSING THE MIMĒSIS

Choosing a less than universally well-known source text is not the only way in which Simonson avoids the encroachment of the source text on his own. It is possible for a text to break out of this model. The means by which a hypertext can make this break is discussed in the context of an author of the Second Sophistic, Lucian of Samosata, by Ni-Mheallaigh.⁶⁴ By creating interplay of text with source-texts an author can develop “self-awareness in negotiating a fruitful balance between past and present.”⁶⁵ By consciously reversing aspects of the source-text and by indicating his understanding of the influence the source-text has,⁶⁶ an author creates what Ni-Mheallaigh calls the “reversal of *mimēsis*.”⁶⁷ This allows an author to break out of the cycle in which “source-texts encroach, parasitically, upon posterity” and to instead use the source-text to create something new.⁶⁸ Looking at how Simonson adopts imagery from the *Batrachomyomachia* is, then, only the first part of understanding how he plays with the reception of the text. The ideal reader would also recognize the ways in which Simonson “reverses the *mimēsis*” and how Simonson develops this reversal and creates a narrative that goes beyond the source-texts, bringing in new themes.

After defeating Kurse at the end of *The Mighty Thor* #363, Thor is surprised by a woman who comes, seemingly out of nowhere, and kisses him. Immediately, he is transformed into a frog.⁶⁹ This is the culmination of Loki’s spell, to keep Thor from interfering in the election of the next king of Asgard. The descent into the world of the frogs and the rats, then, happens not in an allusion to the *Batrachomyomachia*, but in an ironic reversal of the motif of the princess kissing a frog.⁷⁰ This reversal, a prince becoming a frog rather than a frog becoming a prince, bypasses the revulsion felt by the princess for the frog.⁷¹ This allows Simonson to reverse the expected side of the war for which the reader feels sympathy, as rats are less than beloved by most. In the *Batrachomyomachia*, it is the frog king who causes the death of the prince of the mice, and it is he who suggests the less than honorable plan to drown the mice, rather than face them in combat. By beginning with a reference to a popularized Grimm story, Simonson points to other children’s stories that are in play here as well. Aesop’s Fables, with which the *Batrachomyomachia* has long been associated, even appearing in school texts together,⁷² for example, have several examples of frogs, which are usually depicted as bumbling and helpless, but not wicked, the perfect candidates for requiring the help of a superhero.⁷³ Other influential children’s stories, such as Arnold Lobel’s *Frog and Toad* show frogs in a good light as well, while in Kenneth Graham’s *The Wind in the Willows* there are no frogs, but a toad and forest creatures like weasels are portrayed as wicked. In *The Mighty Thor*, it is the king of the frogs who is killed by the rats, necessitating the election of a new king, a parallel to the foolish frogs in Aesop’s story *The Frogs Who Desired a King*. The rat king too, comes up with the plan to poison the reservoir. This conscious “reversal of *mimēsis*” creates a chiasmic structure to the intertextual relationship of

the two texts revealing a focus on structure that allows Simonson to both adopt narrative themes from the *Batrachomyomachia* as well as weave new themes into the structure.

Due to the removal of the human level, the functional narrative levels in both works are the divine and animal. In the *Batrachomyomachia* there is no direct interaction between the divine and animal narrative levels, until Zeus intervenes to bring the war to an end, instead, the interaction is limited to the gods looking down on the action of the frogs and mice and deliberating what role they should take in the war, their unwillingness to act functioning as part of their satiric reduction. Here again Simonson is able to create a conscious “reversal of *mimēsis*” by breaking from the model of the *Batrachomyomachia*. Again there are two narrative levels, divine and animal, but the gods in Asgard are unaware of the war being waged in Midgard. Instead of their refusal leading to a satiric reduction, it is the actual reduction of Thor to the form of a frog that brings absurdity into this scene. Narrative interaction is also found in the gathering of the frogs following their defeat of the rats: “Would you stay, Thor, and rule the frogs with me?”⁷⁴ the frog princess asks Thor, but, in a moment that parallels and foreshadows Thor’s return to Asgard,⁷⁵ he refuses the crown and offers advice instead: “There are many who would stand beside you and help you rule wisely and rule well...give them your trust as you gave it to me.”⁷⁶ Another connection between the Asgardians and the world of the frogs is seen when Thor is first brought to the frog stronghold, he meets a frog named Bugeye, whose accusations remind Thor of Loki.

These parallels lead to a certain ambiguity in the text, a fluidity between the Asgardian and frog narrative levels, which is echoed in the artwork that accompanies the text. Until his release from the spell, Thor is never depicted as truly belonging to the level that he currently occupies:



Figure 1: Thor interacting with mortals in New York city. Art by Walter Simonson. *The Mighty Thor* #363 (January 1986), 5.

The majority of the narrative of *The Mighty Thor* #363 occurs before his transformation into a frog, but it is in this issue that some of the major themes explored in the story arc are set up, for example Thor’s disillusionment with the mortals of Midgard and his wish to leave them and return to Asgard permanently. Even his interactions with other heroes show his distance from Midgard in this issue, Thor defeats Kurse with the help of Beta Ray Bill, an alternate Thor, as it were, and the

Power Pack, a group of child superheroes. These stand outside the norm of superheroes, and are certainly not the Avengers, whose help he seeks in *The Mighty Thor* #364, or his warrior allies from Asgard. Thor's otherness is explored in the artwork of this issue as well. Especially in this image, Thor is juxtaposed in almost every respect to the mortals of Midgard, represented here by the man begging for money. Thor is not only physically far larger than the man, but their clothing is opposite as well, Thor's costume is bright whereas the man's clothing is drab. Even more than their clothing and physical characteristics, their stance and dialogue serve to separate the two: Thor is standing upright in the negative space between two buildings, drawing the eye of the reader to him, opposed to him is the human, who is slouched, leaning against a wall. This man speaks to Thor using very colloquial, informal language: "Hey, Mac, got any spare change?" Thor responds using formalized, almost archaic language, albeit his normal way of speaking: "I fear, my friend, that I have no currency of any kind with me." Thor's juxtaposition with this human serves to illustrate the growing separation between Thor and Midgard, there is little that they have left in common. Perhaps most emblematic of this are the bandages covering Thor's face. Practically, these cover the wounds he received while battling in Hel, but they also serve to remove Thor one more step from humanity. Generally, Thor looks like a human, albeit a large and heavily muscled one, covering his human features allows for a greater ambiguity in Thor's nature, he is no longer as human as he was before his descent to Hel and his conflicts there. Thor's transformation occurs at the end of *The Mighty Thor* #363, and initially the reader is unaware that there is anything special about the frog Thor has transformed into. In his interactions with the other frogs the reader sees that this is no ordinary specimen:

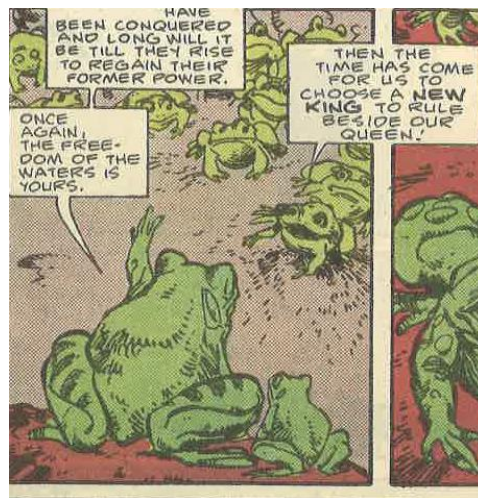


Figure II: Thor as a frog deliberating on the succession. Art by Walter Simonson. *The Mighty Thor* #365 (March 1986: 16).

He is a frog, but one of superamphibian dimensions, described as being "the size of Montana."⁷⁷ This helps to orient the reader, since otherwise the reader might be confused as to which frog is Thor, but it also helps to separate Thor from the frogs as he is separated from humanity, living among them and protecting them, but never really belonging to them. Thor returns to Asgard after realizing that even as a frog he is still Thor, and is still able to lift Mjolnir. Doing so returns Thor's power, but not his form, and in the final issue of this series, he is depicted as a humanoid frog, six foot six, wearing the normal Thor costume and wielding the great hammer:

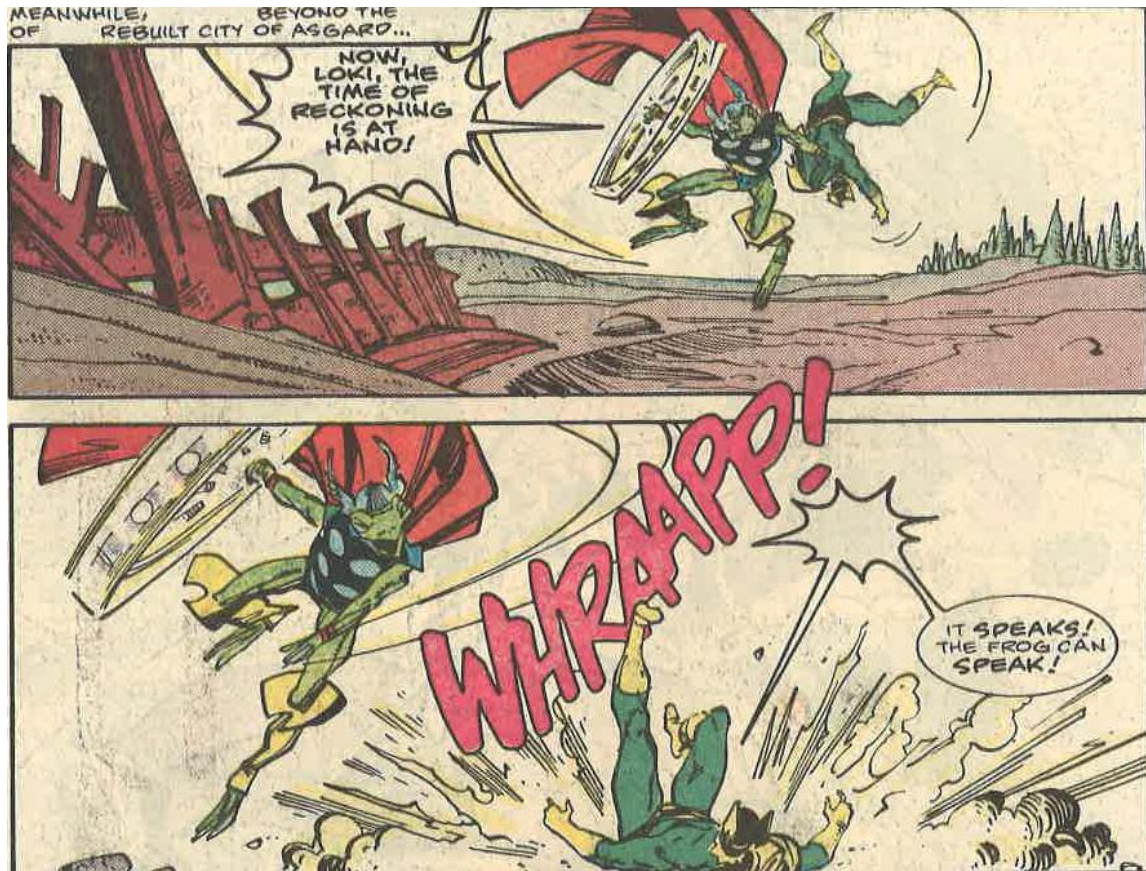


Figure III: The frog Thor wielding Mjolnir against Loki. Art by Walter Simonson. *The Mighty Thor* #366 (April 1986: 12).

This Thor sized frog, is as distinct in Asgard as the football sized frog was in Central Park, and the other inhabitants of Asgard initially mistake him for a demon who has abducted Loki.⁷⁸ Thor's shape becomes an artistic rendering of the internal struggle occurring within Thor, between his Asgardian and human loyalties, and plays to one of the central themes of this adventure, Thor struggling with understanding his place in the Marvel universe, torn between becoming the next king of Asgard, as many Asgardians want him to be, or being the defender of Midgard, where he seems to be taken for granted by the humans. There is an element of foreshadowing in the form Thor takes, however, as the giant frog is wearing Thor's usual costume. The costume is central to the identity of the superhero: "Costume functions as the crucial sign of super-heroism," Reynolds (1992) adds. The classic costumes of Superman and Batman are iconic, taking on a mythological power equal to the characters and stories themselves."⁷⁹ In taking up Mjolnir and receiving Thor's iconic costume hints that he will ultimately come out of his inner turmoil and remain the defender of Midgard.

This stylistic break with the hypotext allows Simonson to move beyond satirical reduction in his text, the parallelism between the frogs and Asgard is emblematic of the conflict within Thor concerning his identity, belonging wholly neither to Midgard nor Asgard. This inner conflict leads to an existential threat to the continuation of the Thor series: After returning the souls from Hel to Midgard, Thor decides to return to Asgard permanently, ending the adventures of Thor both independently and as a member of the Avengers. By threatening the end of a narrative Simonson again links his own narrative with the literature of Classical antiquity, and not only to the *Batrachomyomachia*, in which the initial invitation the king of the frogs makes to the mouse

prince threatens to stop the war of the mice and the frogs before it even begins. In both of these cases, however, something occurs to remove this obstacle and to force the narrative to continue, the snake in the *Batrachomyomachia* or the interference of Loki in *Thor*.

What seems to be a self contained episode in a broader story arc has a profound effect on Thor as a character in a broader context as well, since it is this episode that moves him to continue as a hero on earth. The final return to Asgard by Thor breaks with the satirical reduction in the *Batrachomyomachia*, this is not only movement downward, but then a return, creating a second, narrative, *katabasis*, following his journey to Hel and returning to Midgard. Where the first *katabasis* results in inner turmoil and threat to the continuation of the Thor this second *katabasis* resolves this confusion, allowing Thor to make the decision to refuse the crown of Asgard. It is the very experience with the frogs, and the realization that he acts as a hero in every possible situation, which Simonson uses as a satirical reduction, which proves transformative, letting Thor realize that it is not only ungrateful mortals he is protecting, but that his impulse to protect Midgard extends to other innocent creatures as well. This *katabasis* is instrumental not only in bringing Thor to the realization that there are others on Midgard whom he is also sworn to protect, but begins to heal the relationship between Thor and humanity as well. By developing a friendship with Puddlegulp, and standing beside him in battle against the rats, Thor realizes again that humans are able to be honorable when he reveals that he is, in fact, a transformed human. Simonson uses, then, this transformation into a frog not only to create an amusing, self contained scene, but to allow Thor to overcome the psychological effects of his first *katabasis*, to rediscover his lost connection to humanity, as well as coming to terms with his innate identity as a hero, bringing him to forswear the throne of Asgard and remain the mighty Thor, defender of Midgard.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Anz, T. 2007. *Handbuch Literaturwissenschaft*. Stuttgart: Metzler.
- Auerbach, E. 2003. Trask, Willard (trans). *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Blair, W. 1982. The Funny Fondled Fairytale Frog. In *Studies in American Humor* 1/1: 17-23.
- Booth, W.C. 1983. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Braund, S. 2011. Translation as a Battlefield: Dryden Pope and the Frogs and Mice. In *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*. 18/4: 547-568.
- Christensen, J.P. and Robinson, E, *The Homeric Batrakhomoumakhia: Introduction, Translation, Text and Commentary* (unpublished manuscript draft).
- Coogan, P. 2006. *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. Austin: Money Brain.
- Cyrino, M. and Safran, M. 2015 (eds). *Classical Myth on Screen*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Delgado, R.G. 2008. Los discursos militares de la *Batracomomaquia*. In *Talia Dixit* 3: 33-49.
- Dethloff, C. 2011. Coming up to Code: Ancient Divinities Revisited. In Kovacs, G. and Marshall 2011: 103-114.

- Eagleton, T. 1983. *Literary Theory: an Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Fingertooth, D. 2004. *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society*. New York: Continuum.
- Glei, R. 1984. Die *Batrachomyomachie*: Synoptische Edition und Kommentar. In *Studien zur klassischen Philologie* 12. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH.
- Gordon, J. 2017. When Superman Smote Zeus: Analysing Violent Deicide in Popular Culture. In *Classical Reception Journal* 9/2: 211-236.
- Hess, J.J. 2012. Michael Chabon's Amazing Adventures with Dark Horse Comics. In Jakaitis, J. and Wurtz, J.F. 2012. 25-40.
- Holbo, J. 2012. Redefining Comics. In Meskin, A. and Cook, R.T. 2012: 3-31.
- Hosty, M. 2014. The Mice of Ithaca: Homeric Models in the *Batrachomyomachia*. In *Mnemosyne* 67/6: 1008-1013.
- Iser, W. 1974. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Jakaitis, J. and Wurtz J.F. 2012 (eds). *Crossing Boundaries in Graphic Narrative: Essays on Form, Series and Genres*. Jefferson NC and London: McFarland & Company.
- Johnson, S.R. 2016. Xerxes, Lost City in the Desert: Classical Allusion in *Fullmetal Alchemist*. In , G. and Marshall, C.W. 2016: 96-110.
- Kelly, A. 2014. Hellenistic Arming in the *Batrachomyomachia*. In *The Classical Quarterly* 64/1: 410-413.
- Kilgannon, C. 2017. Gators in the Sewer? 'I want it to be True.' In *The New York Times* (February 10th 2017).
- Kobler, J. 1941. Up, Up and Awa-a-y! The Rise of Superman, Inc. In *The Saturday Evening Post* (June 21st, 1941).
- Konstantakos, I. 2017. *Natura, finzione, satira: fiabe e favole di animali nel mondo antico* (presentation given at Nature in the Ancient World". Ufficio Scolastico per la Lombardia, Seminar for High School Teachers in the Classics, 5-9 Sept. 2017).
- Kovacs, G. and Marshall, C.W. 2011 (eds). *Classics and Comics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kovacs, G. and Marshall, C.W. 2016 (eds). *Son of Classics and Comics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Kovacs, G. 2011. Comics and Classics: Establishing a Critical Frame. In Kovacs, G. and Marshall, C.W. 2011: 3-24.
- Livo, N.T. 1976. Variations on a Theme: Frogs. In *Language Arts* 53/2: 193-196.
- Martin, P. 2014. *Identifying Parody and Parodying Identity in the Batrachomyomachia* (lecture given at Identity and Representation in Antiquity at King's College London June 2014)
- Meskin, A. and Cook, R.T. 2012 (eds). *The Art of Comics: A Philosophical Approach*. Malden MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Mieder, W. 2014. "You Have to Kiss a Lot of Frogs (Toads) Before You Meet Your Handsome Prince": From Fairy-Tale Motif to Modern Proverb. In *Marvels & Tales* 28/1: 104-126.
- Ni-Mheallaigh, K. 2014. *Reading Fiction with Lucian: Fakes, Freaks and Hyperreality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pitcher, Luke. 2009. Saying 'SHAZAM': The Magic of Antiquity in Superhero Comics. In *New Voices in Classical Reception Studies* 4: 27-43.
- Prince, G. 1973. Introduction à l'étude du narrataire. In *Poétique* 14: 178-196.
- Rogers, B. M. 2011. Heroes Unlimited: The Theory of the Hero's Journey and the Limitation of the Superhero Myth. In , G. and Marshall, C.W. 2011: 73-86.
- Schmid, W. 2007. Textadressat. In *Anz, T. 1* 2007: 178-181.
- Schmid, W. 2010. *Narratology. An Introduction*. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Shanower, E. 2011. Twenty-first Century Troy or How Do You Solve a Problem Like Iphigenia and Other Matters of Grave Import. In Kovacs, G. and Marshall, C.W. 2011: 195-206.
- Simonson, W. Jan. 1986. This Kurséd World. In *The Mighty Thor* 363.
- Simonson, W. Feb. 1986. Thor Croaks. In *The Mighty Thor* 364.
- Simonson, W. Mar. 1986. Guess Who's Coming to Dinner. In *The Mighty Thor* 365.
- Simonson, W. Apr. 1986. Sir!. In *The Mighty Thor* 366.
- Thomas, P.L. 2010. *Challenging Genres: Comics and Graphic Novels*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Tomasso, V. 2015. The Twilight of Olympus: Deicide and the End of the Greek Gods. In Cyrino, M. and Safran, M. 2015: 147-157.
- Vine, B. 1986. Towards the stylistic analysis of the *Batrachomyomachia*. In *Mnemosyne* 39: 383-385.

- Wackernagel, J. 1916. *Sprachliche Untersuchungen zu Homer*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Warkentin, G. 1969. Some Renaissance Schoolbooks in the Osborne Collection. In *Renaissance and Reformation* 5/3: 2-10.
- Whitmarsh, T. 2001. *Greek Literature and the Roman Empire*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wölke, H. 1978. *Untersuchungen zur Batrachomyomachie*. Meisenheim am Glan: Hain.
- Zipes, J. 2008. What Makes a Repulsive Frog so Appealing: Memetics an Fairy Tales. In *Journal of Folklore Research* 45/2: 109-143.

¹ *The Mighty Thor* #363 (January 1986: 4-5).

² *The Mighty Thor* #363 (January 1986: 4-5).

³ *The Mighty Thor* #363 (January 1986: 21).

⁴ *The Mighty Thor* #364 (February 1986: 1-3).

⁵ *The Mighty Thor* #364 (February 1986: 17).

⁶ *The Mighty Thor* #364 (February 1986: 4-6).

⁷ *The Mighty Thor* #364 (February 1986: 9-10).

⁸ *The Mighty Thor* #364 (February 1986: 14-16).

⁹ *The Mighty Thor* #364 (February 1986: 21-22).

¹⁰ *The Mighty Thor* #365 (March 1986: 1-3).

¹¹ *The Mighty Thor* #365 (March 1986: 4-5).

¹² *The Mighty Thor* #365 (March 1986: 9-10).

¹³ *The Mighty Thor* #365 (March 1986: 17-18).

¹⁴ This title is a response to a question posed on the front cover of the issue: "What do you call a 6'6" fighting mad frog?...Sir!"

¹⁵ *The Mighty Thor* #366 (April 1986: 8-9).

¹⁶ *The Mighty Thor* #366 (April 1986: 21).

¹⁷ The interaction between the comic book *genre* and Classical literature has been of increasing interest in Classical Reception studies. It is the subject of two major recent studies: Kovacs and Marshall (2011) and Kovacs, and Marshall (2016). The interaction begins with some of the very earliest comics, and already in 1939 Alley Oop travels back in time to Troy. It does not stop there, however: "In subsequent decades, most of the major superheroes of American comics were making regular sojourns to ancient Rome, Pompeii, or Egypt." Kovacs (2011: 3). Kovacs goes on, in this discussion, to give a brief history of the development of comics, from the viewpoint of their interaction with Classical texts.

¹⁸ *The Mighty Thor* #366 (April 1986: 18).

¹⁹ Pitcher (2009: 28).

-
- ²⁰ Thomas (2010: 47).
- ²¹ *Der Froschkönig*, a fairy tale (also called *der eiserne Heinrich*) recorded by the brothers Grimm.
- ²² *Der Rattenfänger von Hamelin*, for example.
- ²³ The “dragons” inhabiting the sewer refer to an urban legend with its origins in the 1930’s in two New York Times articles one from 1932 and one from 1935. Kilgannon (2017).
- ²⁴ Hess (2012: 29).
- ²⁵ Tomasso (2015: 147-157) and Gordon (2016: 216- 218).
- ²⁶ A concept first coined in Booth (1983). C.f. Eagleton (1983: 84) and Iser (1974). Additionally see Schmid (2007: 171–81) and Schmid (2010).
- ²⁷ See Prince Prince (1973: 178-196) for “Lecteur idéal” (180).
- ²⁸ That is not to say, however, that it is not possible to read the text as is and understand and interpret it without knowing the various levels of allusion Simonson brings.
- ²⁹ The ways that the *Batrachomymachia* engages with the Homeric epics, as a “Homer parody” are discussed, for example, in Hosty (2014). Here again, however, there are multiple levels of allusion, dealing with Aesops’s fables (Konstantakos, (2017), Greek rhetoric (Delgado (2008: 33-49)) scenes of arming scenes in Hellenistic texts (Kelly (2014: 410-413)) even the “gastronomic parody” (Martin (2014)). The epics of Homer are a common choice for comics authors to deal with, most notably in the series *The Age of Bronze* by Eric Shanower, which retells the story arc of the Trojan war (cf. Shanower (2011: 195-206)).
- ³⁰ Following the argument of John Holbo, it may be possible to interpret the *Batrachomyomachia* itself as a “comic.” Holbo (2012: 14).
- ³¹ The name of the Byzantine author Theodoros Prodromos’ drama *The Gatomyomachia*, for example shows the influence of the *Batrachomyomachia* in Byzantium.
- ³² Braund (2011), 547.
- ³³ Cf. Wackernagel (1916: 188–196); Wölke (1978: 46–70); Glei (1984: 34–6); Vine (1986: 383–385); Christensen and Robinson (unpublished manuscript draft) 2-7.)
- ³⁴ Whitmarsh (2001: 57-71).
- ³⁵ Johnson (2016: 95)
- ³⁶ Gordon (2017) 212.
- ³⁷ *Batr.* 9-66.
- ³⁸ *Batr.* 67-86.
- ³⁹ *Batr.* 150-159.
- ⁴⁰ *Batr.* 147-159.
- ⁴¹ *Batr.* 210-216
- ⁴² *Batr.* 271-285.
- ⁴³ Other than as a type of *deus ex machina* at the end, leading the alligators and rats back down into the sewer
- ⁴⁴ *The Mighty Thor* #365 (March 1986: 5).
- ⁴⁵ *The Mighty Thor* #363 (January 1986).
- ⁴⁶ Returning the souls of mortals to Midgard (*The Mighty Thor* #363 (January 1986), 4).

-
- ⁴⁷ *The Mighty Thor* #365 (March 1986: 4).
- ⁴⁸ We see this very frog Thor in *The Mighty Thor* #366.
- ⁴⁹ Coogan (2006: 14). See also Rogers (2011: 74).
- ⁵⁰ Rogers (2011: 73).
- ⁵¹ Even as a frog, he is able to wield Mjolnir, which allows his return to Asgard and his confrontation with Loki.
- ⁵² Translation is my own.
- ⁵³ Whose presence in the sewer already foreshadows the destruction of the rats.
- ⁵⁴ *The Mighty Thor* #365 (March 1986: 14-15).
- ⁵⁵ Fingeroth (2004: 13), quoting Jerome Siegel. Cf. Kobler (1941:98).
- ⁵⁶ Dethloff (2011: 103). He goes on to discuss the particular difficulty of establishing Hercules as a comic book hero 104-105.
- ⁵⁷ Both directly and through proxies such as Captain Marvel (Dethloff (2011: 105)). Dethloff (2011: 113).
- ⁵⁸ Dethloff (2011: 112).
- ⁵⁹ Gordon (2017: 21)
- ⁶⁰ Pitcher (2009: 29).
- ⁶¹ *The Mighty Thor* #363 (January 1986: 4-5).
- ⁶² Pitcher (2009: 29).
- ⁶³ *The Mighty Thor* #366 (April 1986: 16-18).
- ⁶⁴ cf. also Auerbach (1968).
- ⁶⁵ Ni-Mheallaigh (2014: 216).
- ⁶⁶ Ibid.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid.
- ⁶⁹ *The Mighty Thor* #363 (January 1986: 22).
- ⁷⁰ This scene does not come from the *Grimm's Fairy Tales* version of *Der Froschkönig*, but is found in numerous "modern parodic adaptations" of the story. Mieder (2014: 104).
- ⁷¹ See also Zipes (2008: 109-143) and Blair (1982: 17-23).
- ⁷² Warkentin (1969: 2-10).
- ⁷³ Other such examples are discussed in Livo (1976: 193-196). Interestingly, and perhaps coincidentally, the same year as this series Brian Jaques' *Redwall*, with its evil rats attacking Redwall abbey, was released in Britain.
- ⁷⁴ *The Mighty Thor* #365 (March 1986), 16.
- ⁷⁵ *The Mighty Thor* #366 (April 1986), 21.
- ⁷⁶ *The Mighty Thor* #365 (March 1986), 16.
- ⁷⁷ *The Mighty Thor* #364 (February 1986: 7). A bit of hyperbole, but does convey the extraordinary size of Thor as a frog.

⁷⁸ *The Mighty Thor* #366 (April 1986: 9).

⁷⁹ Thomas (2010: 74).